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Staging and Performing in *Small Rooms*: Don DeLillo's *Libra*

Lino Belleggia

"Men in Small Rooms"

This article is focused on the idea of *men in small rooms*, and specifically on the recurring presence of *men in small rooms* in Don DeLillo's *Libra*, his novel of the Kennedy assassination published in 1988, as a metaphor for the marginalized role of the novelist in contemporary society. In *Libra* and in most of the novels by DeLillo it is possible to trace a long line of characters closed in cramped spaces where they desperately try to stage and perform their act with no success. "Often [DeLillo's] characters live in small, anonymous rooms from which they plot and project their fantasy of totality" (Kerridge, 190). But they fail, repeatedly. During an interview with Adam Begley, DeLillo said:

> What we finally have is a man in a small room, a man who has shut himself away, and this is something that happens in my work – the man hiding from acts of violence, or the individual reduced to

> silence by the forces around him. (Begley, 287)

In the age of technology and information, Don DeLillo's characters seem more and more reduced to a condition constructed of silence and fear which have forced them to look for protection in a cage, physical or psychological. In DeLillo's reading of postmodern world there is no space for a quest for meaning or goals to be accomplished. "In Don DeLillo's novels, the global village is presented as (and in fact is) an interlocked irrational system of the kind once reserved for religions" (Mottram, 51). The polymorphous nature of this era, which conveys just feelings of uncertainty and absence of meaning, is the distinctive trait of a society which neglects human beings. Their sense of belonging and commitment has been wrapped in a thick dark fog of indeterminacy, despair and powerlessness. And men and women in DeLillo's novels persistently ask themselves whether there is still a chance to be active in the world, whether they still have a chance to leave a sign, to act in the world they live in, and eventually whether their effort to do so is still meaningful in a world characterized by absence. His characters have definitely lost their grip on reality, since all previous sources of knowledge - history, art, ideology, religion, philosophy - have been replaced by reflections and reproductions, by sterility and the barrenness of simulacra. So, given the frightening nature of the 'outside', the only escape seems to be the 'inside': a shelter, four walls, a psychological condition, a place closed to the overwhelming signs of a dehumanised society. "Repeatedly, DeLillo polarizes the private terrain of the self against the vast, untraceable networks of the world" (Kerridge, 190). At first the *small room* seems to be a place where the act of observation is possible, where the observer can stand apart from the observed, perform the role and try to assemble the pieces into a systematic whole. But even this closed space proves to be deceptive, a source of disappointment, a cage of pain and emptiness

where it is not possible to find any answers to the meaning of life. In the postmodern universe ruled by the new science of systems theory and quantum physics, human beings are endlessly revolving in a loop which breaks the reassuring linear chain of causality. As Eric Mottram puts it, the eventual "choice is increasingly an illusion, even increasingly disliked and feared: 'Choice is a subtle form of disease'", says DeLillo in *Running Dog*, his novel published in 1978 (52). Deprived of any objectivity and of possible knowledge of data, his characters are left alone and uncomfortable either 'inside' or 'outside', they're just displaced in a helpless limbo where their perceptions are corrupted, reshaped and sold by the superior powers of the *state machine* which they will never be able to get to know or understand.

In this blindness of perception, the artist also seems forever trapped in a cage set for him by the superior powers of the *state machine*. This is what DeLillo wrote in an essay published in *The New Yorker* in 1997 with the title "The Artist Naked in a Cage":

> The total state wants to drain all convictions from the writer. It wants to absorb the dissident writer. In the West, every writer is absorbed, turned into breakfast food or canned laughter. But the more nearly total the state, the more vivid the dissident artist. The artist is so vivid and singular, so unassimilated into the state machine, that the state must find a way to make him disappear. (DeLillo, 7)

The idea of a society completely opened, globalized and informed conveyed by the superior powers of the *state machine* has proved itself to be just an illusion. The age of late capitalism has created a culture which, as Don DeLillo has noted, "tries to absorb and neutralize every threat to consumer consciousness," (DeLillo, 6) and the writer is one of the first victims of

this politics. In a way the superior powers of the *state machine* have more means to fight the voices of dissent since the culture they've created has built a thick wall between simulacra and reality. The culture of images which produces and delivers a second hand reality has declared war against, in DeLillo words, the "novel that tries to be equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture" (Begley, 290). As a consequence, since there are so many opposing forces the writer's role is blurred, indeterminate, "the role – argued Agostino Lombardo - attributed to him since the origins of the colony": "an outcast, a transgressor, a sinner", a victim "[of] an attitude of condemnation […] present, explicitly or implicitly, in all Puritan writings" (Lombardo, 356). And as a matter of fact, the writer in the age of late capitalism seems to be in a far more ambiguous and dangerous position towards society than ever. Literature can be easily "neutralized", the writer's voice easily "incorporated in the ambient noise," (DeLillo in Begley, 290) and their work assimilated by the cultural establishment.

More than ever, the writer has to go in the streets in order to absorb the *complexities and excesses of the surrounding culture* , and rip apart the paralysing entropy threatening both personal and collective consciousness. But at the same time, in order to perform their role, the novelist has to become isolated in their *small room*. As a postmodern Ulysses they have to avoid the false attraction of the music of sirens which would make them lose their way on this journey. Is the *small room* an escape from, or an observation post on, the world? Is the novelist, as DeLillo points out, "working in the margins, working in the shadows of the novel's greatness and influence" (Begley, 290) since there is no other way to carve the average postmodern subject from the hard material of cultural uniformity?

Eventually, their *small room* seems to be an antidote, a way of being in the margins and working inside, right within the culture in which the novel operates, avoiding assimilation. And what the writer can offer to their reader is a refuge, another *small room* where they can find consolation and a way to feel more comfortable in the world.

> This is why we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation. We're all one beat from becoming elevator music. (Lombardo, 356)

A crowded small room

> In one of his apartments in Dallas [Oswald] actually worked in a room almost the size of a closet. This seemed almost the kind of negative culmination of a certain stream that was running through my own work of men finding themselves alone in small rooms. (DeLillo in DeCurtis, 52)

DeLillo's *small rooms* – basement nook, closet, cell, motel room, TV set - are crowded with fictional characters struggling to write, stage and perform the narrative of their substantial presence in the margins of postmodern society. With their frustrated dreams and desires, with their paralysing conflicts and fears, they are all typical Americans, living in their *small rooms* and fighting the powerful forces which impede their creative efforts to be successful. These characters wish to be the directors of their own representations, but during the

staging of their plays a powerful group of producers rearrange their scripts and take violent possession of the scene. According to Frank Lentricchia:

> *Libra* dramatizes the experience of everyday life in a "world gone inside out," of life lived totally inside the representations generated in the print and visual media. (Lentricchia, 206)

In *Libra*, "DeLillo develops Oswald's conflicts and desires" - William E. Cain has noted – "as simply more terrible versions of those that define other characters in the novel and that afflict Americans in postmodern times." (Cain, 280) Oswald's life in *small rooms*, says DeLillo, is just "the antithesis of the life America seems to promise its citizens: the life of consumer fulfilment." (DeCurtis, 52) The voracious society chases its citizens, promising something it cannot give them; it violates everything, even the isolation of their *small rooms*, leading them towards a total annihilation which is the entrance to a room of violence and death. This is what DeLillo said about this explosion of violence:

> I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfilment in America. Again we come back to these men in small rooms who can't get out and who have to organize their desperation and their loneliness, who have to give it a destiny and who often end up doing this through violent means. (DeCurtis, 57-58)

The recurring motif of *men in small rooms* in DeLillo's novels is a metaphor for the claustrophobic condition of postmodern subjects in postmodern society. In some cases the *small room* turns out to be a place of existential realization where the characters comprehend and work on some issues haunting their lives. This does

not mean that they will be able to cope with these issues, but in a way the *small room* provides them with a chance to open their eyes on their world. After having experienced a *small room*, David Bell, in *Americana*, Don DeLillo's first novel published in 1971, takes tragic possession of the roots of his character, while Nick Shay, in *Underworld* (1997), makes a dramatic U-turn on the road of his existential journey.

As a teenager, David Bell sees his mother in the kitchen of his parents' house holding "a tray of ice cubes in her hands," "spitting on the cubes" and sliding "the cubes back in" the freezer (*Americana*, 195). After a cathartic "dreamless sleep" (195) he comes back into the kitchen and sees his mother in the "pantry." In this enclosed space, through this revealing moment about his mother, the living root of his disconnected presence in the world, David feels "a promise of fantastic release," that something is "going to happen" (196).

> Whatever would happen. The cage would open, the mad bird soar, and I would cry in epic joy and pain at the freeing of a single moment, the beginning of time. (196-197)

This moment in time brings about David's comprehension of his status as an adult: the beginning of his distorted formation and a reason, whatever it could mean, to his way of being. The echo of this event will be deafening but inevitable for him. As a matter of fact this episode will lead him to a looping repetition of the maternal pattern, during a party in the opening pages of the novel, when he appears as a married adult:

> Then I opened the refrigerator door and I took an ice tray out of the freezer. There were four ice cubes left. I brought up my phlegm from my throat and spat on each of the cubes, separately. Then I slid the

> tray back into the freezer and shut the refrigerator door. (10)

In his retrospective account of his life, the film he is shooting in one of the "hermetic rooms" (257) of a motel, David realizes the origins of his schizophrenia, but he is powerless both as a writer-director and as an ordinary man: comprehension and fragmentation are only part of an unbreakable loop.

In *Underworld*, a basement room is the *small room* where the teenager Nick Shay is introduced to another world created from isolation and despair, the world of addiction. In this room, his adult friend George plays solitaire and takes heroin. George's *small room* seems to be the predestined space where Nick's threatening life is leading him. Here he sees the reflection of his self-to-be, a dark and isolated *small room* in the *underworld*. In shooting George, Nick kills the self he's afraid of, and escapes his destiny by going towards another life which he reaches through another isolation, with the Jesuits, "at the wintry end of the world, somewhere near a lake in Minnesota" (*Underworld*, 512). No doubt Nick's life will continue to be as hard as the one he killed. The threatening garbage of his adolescence seems to return through his work at the Waste Containment and his wife's addiction to heroin. The loop is unbreakable, but at least he is able to escape the *small room* and become a man of open spaces - deserts transformed into huge landfills where all the deeds of the postmodern culture seem to converge: garbage, bomb waste, art and serial killers.

Nevertheless, the *small room* is mostly a stage where DeLillo's characters perform their plays, trying to put together the fragments of their shattered age. Eventually they realize that it is unsuccessful since the very principles of their interpretative system cannot work. There is no whole to come back to, their fantasy of totality is just part of the bigger illusion of reality.

Bucky Wunderlick, the rock star who goes underground in *Great Jones Street* (1973), abandons the glare and excitement of his cross-country tour to shut himself up in a poorly heated rented room in a forgotten part of New York. But the only thing he achieves, in his isolated *small room*, is shifting from an extreme self-awareness to childlike babbling. His isolation brings him to a no-man's-land where he loses even the ability to use the spoken word which had characterized his role in society along with his music.

As Adam Begley has noted, *Mao II*, the book that DeLillo published after *Libra* in 1991, seems to "come naturally out" of his previous work "from a thematic point of view – the terrorist and the man in the *small room*." [my italics] The room of the writer Bill Gray, and his whole house, operate "as a kind of filing cabinet for his work and all the other work it engenders" (DeLillo in Begley, 295). DeLillo introduces Bill Gray to the reader while the character is standing at the window, alone in his dark room, the symbol of the barrenness which has followed "his disappearance, his concealment, his retirement" (*Mao II*, 31). The writer "has been working on and off for twenty-three years" (51) on his new book, and what is worse is that a new contact with the outside is said to be "the end of Bill as a myth, a force" (52).

The writer in his *small room* is as powerless as the writer "held hostage in Beirut" (97). They are hunted men, reduced to silence. When Bill Gray, "the secluded writer, the arch individualist, living outside the glut of the image world," (DeLillo in Begley, 296), breaks his retirement, leaves the inside and returns to experiencing the outside, only to realizes that, as Don DeLillo has made clear, "the world has become a book. (296)"

> The world narrative is being written by men who orchestrate disastrous events, by military leaders, totalitarian leaders,

> terrorists, men dazed by power. World news is the novel people want to read. It carries the tragic narrative that used to belong to the novel. (296)

So the novelist, who escaped his *small room*, dies alone "lying in the bunk" (*Mao II*, 216) on a ferry, between Cyprus and Lebanon, in open sea far from the mainland which rejects him.

After the events of September 11, *Mao II* appears to be more a prophetic novel than the work of a paranoid writer since the world we're living in today is the same world experienced by Bill Gray. During the aftermath of the most famous defining moment in American history, the only way for the novelist to deal with those images of terror and death was to remain seated in his *small room* and watch actuality showing his art completely bare. And this is made clear when comparing *Libra* and *Falling Man*, DeLillo's 9/11 novel published in 2007: in *Libra* DeLillo was able to stage an outstanding creation that the Warren Commission could not even imagine, while in *Falling Man* the images of intimate fear and pain coming from "a world, a time and space of falling ashes and near night" (3) cannot compete with the breathtaking and compelling narratives of 9/11 Commission Report. "There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space" (39), DeLillo wrote in the essay published on *Harper's* soon after the attack with the eloquent title of "In the Ruins of the Future,"but the *world news*, dominated by terrorists and terrible events, has replaced the novelists in the only narrative the new crowd, the TV audience, wants to read.

Everything comes back to *the smallest of the smallest room*, TV, in front of which "the crowd broken into millions of *small rooms*" [my italics] (DeLillo in Begley, 296) watches while being watched, disappearing in the unbreakable loop of postmodern culture. The

novelist and their characters seem to be trapped, and condemned to the impossibility of recovering their lost consciousness in a life lived totally inside the representations generated in the print and visual media. The ultimate loop of observer and observed, watcher and watched, staging and performing, dramatically frames them in the flatness of multiple *small rooms*.

"A shadowed room": Win Everett

There are two main spaces in *Libra* where the conspiracy plot, or at least the conspiracy plot first intended to mount "a spectacular miss" (*Libra*, 51) on the life of the President, is drafted: one is Win Everett's "home basement," where "hunched over the worktable" (145) he devises "a general shape, a life" (50), and the other one is Win's "temporary office in the basement of the Old Main" (19) of the Texas Woman's University, where he teaches history and economics, and where he is supposed to "recruit likely students as junior officer trainees" (18).

Win's *home basement* is the artist's room. It is the place where he performs the multiple role of sculptor, painter and writer, a place where he feels "sure of himself" (145), "very much on top of things" (148) because he can manipulate reality using his tools and materials: "cutting instruments, acetate overlays, glues and pastes, a softer eraser, a travel iron" (145). Not only does Win create a narrative, a "gunman [who] would emerge and vanish in a maze of false names" (145), but as a modern Dr. Frankenstein he shapes physically his character, using the typical instruments of Pop Art: "household things, small and cheap" (145). As Daniel Aaron has noted, Win Everett "thinks of himself as a kind of supernovelist. After all, he has really invented Lee Oswald before the drifter comes to the plotters' focus" (Aaron, 80). But Win's *home basement* is also the place of memories, where he recollects the moments of

his active service in the CIA, adding a new level of narration to the novel. The reader gets to know the details of Win's life while he is shaping the life of the character who will be the protagonist of his plot. So the heart of the matter is not just Oswald's life, but also the portrait of an artist observed during the act of the narrative elaboration. But Win's protagonist turns out to be as marginal as his creator. Protagonist and creator will find themselves trapped in the huge net of contemporary reality.

If Win's *home basement* is the place of creation, where his artefact comes into being, his office on campus is the place of the spoken word where Win meets, or calls on the telephone, his former colleagues, Laurence Parmenter and T.J. Mackey. Win's "basement nook" is a place to work "patiently on his bitterness, honing and refining" (*Libra*, 178). On the other hand, the only place where he can stand being alone anywhere is his office on campus. It is "a place to sit and think, searching for a grim justice in the very recollection of what they've done to him" (178).

Win's *small rooms* are the headquarters of his personal revenge against the government, the President and his semi-retirement from the CIA. These *small rooms* are the space of his "silent struggle," where his "rage and determination" could create a new reality, places of his own where he does not want company since "the more people who believed as he did, the less pure his anger" (148).

Win is the playwright who writes the script, taking a particular care of the main character according to "a model" (50) that Mackey is in charge of finding. And the model is "the subject" (137), "the kid Oswald" (140), whose name, face and body are supposed to deliver directly to the investigators all the necessary answers to the attempt on the life of "Lancer" (137), JFK. Once having completed his work on the character,

Win would create for him a "shadowed room, the gunman's room" (78), the location of his play.

Like the greatest playwrights, Win knows very well that "we lead more interesting lives than we think" (78). But as soon as Win realizes, in his *basement nook* on campus, that, according to T.J.'s investigations, his character is more than a creation of his mind, that "Lee Oswald existed independent of the plot" (178) and "was real all right" (179), he feels "displaced" (179). Like the character of the playwright in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Win realizes, in the solitude of his *small room*, that his character is looking for Win and has eventually tracked him down. "The fiction he'd been devising" turns out to be "a fiction prematurely in the world" (179). All his preparatory fictional work becomes redundant, the living fictional character "already knew" about the weapons, the leaflets, the correspondence, about a journal, a booklet, a draft card, a passport, a membership card, about forms and variations of names. Even if, in Win's opinion, Lee's work is "sloppy," his reality reduces Win to being a baby playing "with scissors and paste" (180). Life has exceeded literature, the writer is powerless against the greater randomness of reality. If plot in narrative, as Hayden White has argued in his *The Content of the Form*, endows the individual events that comprise it with "a meaning by being identified as part of an integrated whole," (9) the components in the conspiracy to kill the president are drained of meaning as the plot that encloses them disintegrates into process (Olster, 47). In this looping play of individual events, Win is the *metteur en scène* of a spectacle which is supposed to find a huge success in a failure, in "a spectacular miss". But eventually the conspiracy plot, Win's script, becomes something else. Win is a quite skilful playwright but a modest *metteur en scène* since he is not able to guide the performers of his play. As a consequence of the difficulties he is going through in staging the play, his

plot extends from theory to practice when it engages its actors: two CIA agents, Laurence Parmenter and T-Jay Mackey, Cuban exiles, and the New Orleans mafia boss, Carmine Latta. As Stacey Olster points out:

> So many permutations does Everett's original plan undergo after it leaves the confines of his enclosed basement (and passes from Everett to Parmenter to T-Jay Mackey to shooters Raymo and Vásquez), and so many personae does Oswald sketch from himself (A.J. Hidell, O.H. Lee, H.O. Lee, D.F. Drictal, to name a few), that it finally is only a large degree of coincidence that brings together the two men's scenarios. (47)

Once the plot planned by Win leaves his *small room*, the playwright's room, his actors transform it into a mortal play. And Win is aware of it, and he is afraid that, since "plots carry their own logic" they tend "to move toward death" (*Libra,* 221). As a writer, he knows that a "narrative plot," "a plot in fiction," the tighter it is, "the more likely it will come to death" (221). He feels the danger but he is powerless since the narrative he wrote does not need him any more. The narrative plot has become independent from the narrator. According to T.J., the playwright's "obsession was scattered in technique" (219), and his play, plot or plan, "was anxious, self absorbed," it "lacked the full heat of feeling" (219). So the outer reality bursts into Win's *small room* and subverts his stage directions, and eventually his whole play. And the man who takes the planned play "all the way" (220) is "a man with no fixed address" (220), a man outside the *small room*, T.J.

"The room of dreams": Nicholas Branch

> This is the room of dreams, the room where it has taken him all these years to learn that his subject is not politics or violent crime but men in *small rooms*. [my italics] (*Libra,* 181).

Nicholas Branch is the connecting character of the novel. He is the subject outside the action, beyond the events, and the one who tries to put everything in its own place. He could serve as the objective observer of the facts, the ultimate writer of the story, as the typical omniscient narrator of the literary tradition, since he comes chronologically after Everett and Lee Oswald.

At the beginning of the novel, Branch performs the role of the character who, sitting in his "book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams" (14), "enters a date on the computer," April 17, 1963, and makes the re-telling of JFK's assassination begin. As a magic trick, all the names "with background, connections, locations" come to fill in the computer screen and everything seems to be potentially meaningful. But like Win Everett, Branch knows that "there is enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough of conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations" (58). So he thinks that for the writer there is no need to "invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot" (58). According to his staging technique, he believes the writer needs to absorb reality through an objective approach to his data and assemble them into a cohesive narrative, in the mode of a linear chain. But in the maze of technological culture, in the loop of new physics, he loses his way since the

data resist his paradigm. If once you opened a file, "it is just a matter of time before the material comes pouring in" (143), the data becomes an obstacle and not a help to the disclosure of the doors of reality. As William E. Cain puts it, "the more facts that are assembled, and the longer that each fact is scrutinized, the more the status of the fact grows precarious" (Cain, 283). The facts have no consistency, the plot evaporates in the fog of the profusion of data, and the narrative is doomed; as stated by the French critic Jean François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, today there is just "incredulity" towards *grand narratives*, typically characterised by some form of transcendent and universal truth:

> The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements--narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. [...] Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? (xxiv-xxv)

The character who most of the critics have identified as DeLillo's alter ego, Nicholas Branch, is threatened by the overflowing stream of "data-spews of hundreds of lives" (*Libra,* 15), information coming from the world outside his *small room*: "a roster of the dead […] all conveniently and suggestively dead" (57), the Warren Commission Report, photographs, books - all the material the Curator keeps on sending him. The isolation of his *small room*, as Paul Civello argues, "initially seems to suggest an objective distance from the assassination he is trying to piece together," (36) but soon he feels "stuck all right" (*Libra,* 181). "His isolation granting him no perspective on the assassination but

trapping him within the interpretative paradigm he brings to it" (Civello, 36). His data and paradigm lead him nowhere, through them he will "never construct a cohesive narrative that will render a 'true' picture of the event" (Civello, 36). He is caught in the illusion that "everything belongs, everything adheres," but, since there are no cohesive patterns to support him, he does not know how to subdue the ghostly stream of "a poetry of lives muddied and dripping in language" (*Libra,* 181). Eventually, both his performing role as the writer of a story and, consequently, his story are in jeopardy, since the story he is writing turns out to be, as in Win's case, just the narrative of a writer writing about an event.

After fifteen years, Branch has written very little and the past is even "changing as he writes" (301). Sometimes he "wonders if he is becoming bodiless" (14), if his "room of dreams" is just a "room of growing old," and "if he ought to despair of ever getting to the end" (59). His "limitations as a human being" and "his interpretative pattern" (Civello, 37) have led him to a total loss of knowledge and cohesion, to a greater uncertainty. Branch looks for an end that does not exist in the "looping pattern of interconnecting systems" (Civello, 37). So he feels like one of them, one of the "men in *small rooms*," [my italics] "self-watching" (*Libra,* 181), besieged by threatening paper in his "fireproof room" (183).

"The smallest of the smallest rooms": Lee Harvey Oswald

> Our postwar history has seen tanks in the streets and occasional massive force. But mainly we have the individual in the small room, the nobody who walks out of the shadows and changes everything. (Begley, 299)

The *small room* is the trademark of Lee Harvey Oswald's life. It is the birthplace of his hopes, dreams and narratives, but it is also their burial ground. Thinking of *Libra* as a *bildungsroman*, the reader can follow the formation, or better the deformation of the protagonist through the numerous different characters he performs, or that someone makes him perform, while he is wandering from one *small room* to another. Each *small room* seems to be the natural consequence of the other: "the first car [of the] subway train" (*Libra,* 3), the "small basement room" (4) in the Bronx, the "box rooms" (86) in Japan, "the cell" of "the brig in Atsugi" (95), his room in Dallas - "a kind of storeroom off the living room" (180), his last "cell in an isolated area of the country jail" (443) after the arrest, and eventually the TV "camera" shooting him while "he [is] shot" (447) by Jack Ruby.

The *small room* has shaped Oswald's character and understanding since the very beginning of his life, it is something he cannot escape no matter what he goes through or undertakes. It is his cage until the end of his last performance, until his last doubling. Oswald's *small room* is his own small world, or better a miniature of the real world refusing him. The same world in which, using Linda Hutcheon's words, "the ambivalence of doubling [will] prevent [him] from confirming [his] own subjectivity as coherent, non-contradictory spoken subject" (176). Rejected both in the North (Bronx, NY) and in the South (New Orleans) for "a question of adjusting" (*Libra,* 10), his *small room* becomes his isolated universe where his anger as an outcast grows bigger and bigger. Like the American small town in *Americana*, where "a scream seems immanent at every window," (*Americana*, 178) Oswald's *small room* is a pressure cooker where his frustrations cook slowly waiting to poison him and his dreams.

> Ever since he could remember, they'd shared cramped spaces. (*Libra*, 35)

The "cramped spaces" Oswald shares with his mother suffocate him. In the "basement room in the Bronx, the kitchen and the bedroom and everything together" (4), Marguerite is more than a person, she's a larger-than-life character whose presence pervades all the space and air with her "smell" (35). Her intrusion into Oswald's *small room* doesn't stop even after his death when, at the burial ground, she says: "I will write books about the life of Lee Harvey Oswald" (449), a character that "belonged to her now" (456). Her performance dispossesses her son of his private *small room*, the stage where he once performed one of his dearest characters, the writer.

In the *small room* in the Bronx, Oswald and his mother spend much time together watching TV as their window on the world. Sitting in their *small room*, Oswald "waits for national news on TV" (48). But their picture of the world outside the *small room* is even more deformed than the usual narrative provided by TV to its audience. Marguerite bought "a tinted filter for their Motorola" so "the top third of the screen was permanently blue, the middle third was pink, the band across the bottom was wavy green" (4). An effective vehicle used by the *state machine* in order to spread and reaffirm endlessly the American way of life, a sort of a unifier of the country, especially in the 1950s, television provides the Oswalds with a colour blind vision of social system where they are supposed to make their American Dream come true. According to Lee and Marguerite Oswald, television is just a source of frustration since they cannot achieve what it promises them as American citizens. Since the very beginning of the novel, it is clear that, in his *small room*, Oswald won't be able to "get a grip on the runaway world" (211).

Oswald tries to escape his cage through a parallel world he finds in books. He starts spending long periods of time at the library, using the books to put

himself "at a distance from his classmates" (33). The books are Oswald's first personal struggle, something that makes him feel part of a whole since books are "struggles to write, struggles to live" (34). He gets to know many names, "revolutionary names", of "men who lived in isolation," just like him, "in exile or prison, feeling history in the room" (34). Marx and Engels, Trotsky, Lenin, Stalin, he feels them "all around him, every day" (35). But just like these men in the books, the character Oswald intends to perform on the stage of history needs a "secret name" (47), the natural disguise of the fictional subject. A long list of names will follow to suit the contradictory characters Oswald will perform: Osvaldovic, Alek James Hidell, O.H. Lee, Hideel, H.O. Lee, D.F. Drictal, Leon.

With the supporting company of these men inside History, Oswald waits "for the moment when [history] would surge through the walls, taking [him] with it" (34). His first role is the one of a man waiting in his *small room* for the force of history to break the wall of his isolation, bringing him to the centre of the scene.

> They'd had taken away his American space. Not that it mattered. His space had been nothing but wandering, a lie that concealed small rooms, TV, his mother's voice never-ending. (85-86)

From the US to Japan, Oswald keeps on wandering in "places that swirled around the cramped rooms where he always ended up" (86). But in Japan he finds that "the smallness [has] a meaning," the *small rooms* seem to be "clear-minded states, forms of well-being" (86). Here, under the influence of Konno, a socialist revolutionary member of different societies and councils connecting Japan to the USSR and China, Oswald believes that "the struggle is to merge [his] life with the great tide of history" (87). So while he is convicted at the brig in Atsugi, he tries "to feel history" (100). But in this

small room - "a nearly bare place, simple objects, basic needs" (96) - he feels once again that the brig is "just another name for the stunted rooms where he'd spent his life" (100), just another exclusion, a cage which reminds him of his American life. Therefore the *small room* in Atsugi becomes a "great training for life in the U.S.," a place that could give him "that competitive edge" (108) he desperately needs, a formative experience that "invited larger questions" (99). He hopes to find "an artful old con," like "in the prison literature he'd read" (99), able to teach him invaluable lessons about life in order to transform the cell into an ideal school of life. But Bobby R. Dupard, his cellmate, is a character without a script who "could go either way and be convinced in [his] own mind" (98). This tragic teaching that Oswald learns from him is a sort of a flash-forward prophecy around which his life will swirl.

In his *small room* in Atsugi, Oswald makes up his mind: he will defect. He wants to escape the American *small room* – the capitalism ("we're a zero in the system," 106) - where he will "never be able to live" (110), and gets ready to perform another character: the dissident writer "working in the struggle" (110). On the "freighter SS *Marion Lykes*" (133) leading to the USSR, Oswald fills in an application form for a college in Switzerland and under "vocational interest" he writes: "*To be a short story writer on contemporary American life*" (134). As soon as he arrives in Moscow he finally feels like a "man in history" (149). But it is just another illusion, his saddest disappointment. "He'd made plans, he'd engineered a new life" (151), but he is neither a good playwright nor a skilful *metteur en scene*, so he finds himself alone on the stage of his life. There is no audience for him in the USSR, and he's frightened by the "blankness" (151), and by the fact that he cannot enjoy the excitement of the spotlight since "no one could distinguish him from anyone else" (151). Like capitalism, Communism makes of him a zero, an invisible man, since no one wants to

listen to his "side of the story" (153). So he tries a *coup the theatre*, the most tragic of the fictional devices and one of the most hackneyed from being so overused and melodramatic: he performs a suicide. Of course, even this act does not work, the theatre is empty and the only consequence of his performance is the invasion of his *small room* by the agents of the KGB:

> The room was theirs now. He wasn't sure how they'd taken it over so fast but he knew he felt like an intruder, some kind of bungling tourist (156).

His *small room* in Moscow is "twelve by fifteen with an iron bed, an unpainted table and a chest of drawers in a curtained alcove" (160), a faintly lighted stage where someone else is making him perform "a kind of Chaplinesque figure, skating along the edges of vast and dangerous events" (194). Oswald is "someone interesting, an American, a stranger with a story" (190), but ironically this is not the character he had wished to perform when he left the U.S.

> I left my country out of protest against the conditions there and now I'm the all-American boy to everyone (203).

He wanted to be a student, a scholar of the Communist system, the citizen Oswald, a man in history, but he turns out to be a helpless character: "stateless, word-blind, still a little desperate" (210), and he still is an American for the Soviet citizens. Once again Oswald performs the wrong role in the wrong play: in the U.S. he acts like a Communist, while in the USSR he is the typical American.

Craving a relationship with history beyond the present, in order "to explain himself to posterity" (211), Oswald goes back to literature. In his *small room* in Minsk, the kitchen, he performs the passionate writer who, in a devouring moment of flowing inspiration, writes his

"Historic Diary," (210) "in two sittings" (211), "The Kollective" with a forward, "The New Era" and "a sketch entitled 'About the Author'" (212-3). But Oswald is a writer who cannot "clearly see the picture that is called a word" (211), so his longing for a place in history does not go beyond the wall of his *small room*. It is just in his imaginative narrative that he is able to project his character outside the *small room* and see himself "in the reception room at Life or Look, his manuscript in a leather folder in his lap" (206). Oswald is still an actor performing in an empty theatre, alone on a desolate stage. So the theatrical relationship between performer and audience deteriorates into a powerless monologue: the actor watches himself performing the character in a loop of inevitable self-consumption. This is what DeLillo said about Oswald's performing attitude:

> Someone who knew Oswald referred to him as an actor in real life, and I do think there is a sense in which he was watching himself perform. I tried to insert this element into *Libra* on a number of occasions. (DeCurtis, 51)

After a long series of unsuccessful performances in badly directed plays, Oswald wants to "carry himself with a clear sense of role, make a move one time that [will not be] disappointed" (*Libra*, 248). In Dallas, after one of the numerous evictions, Oswald enters "a small additional room, the size of a walk-in closet" (276). In this "miniature room" (277), he will write the script for the murder of General Walker "creating a design, a network of connections" (277) which will frame him in a new kind of *small room*, the picture in which he poses with "the rifle" and "the magazines, the Militant and the Worker" (278-9). Oswald's new character is another flop, as, Marina says, "it impresses no one. It's pure and simple show" (278). But this time something meaningful happens. Framed in this *small room*, "his shadow" and

"his thin smile" are "carried forward by light and time into the frame of official memory" (279). This shifting of media, from the *small room* of the writer to the *small room* of the image, will assure Oswald the longed for place in posterity. Still the loop stays unbroken, and once again he sees himself performing his character, he imagines "the backyard photograph in Time" (281).

Failed murderer of the fascist General Walker, dedicated but confused leftist, "the only member of the Fair Play for Cuba chapter in New Orleans," in his "spare room at home" in New Orleans Oswald still believes that "a vision, a history" will be accomplished, that he is "done with isolation" (322). But entering his *small room*, he feels that something is "different, an invisible whispery difference, like when you know a thing deeply in a dream without knowing how or why" (322). In his *small room*, "a kind of storeroom off the living room" (180), where T.J. Mackey finds the materials that will eventually break into pieces the narrative of the original writer of the whole plot, there takes place an ideal meeting between Oswald and Everett. Their narratives overlap, and, as Paul Civello has argued, "their two systems intersect at the point of their one fiction, their self-invented destiny" (Civello, 48). The intersection is randomly devastating, and the explosion or, better, the implosion in their *small rooms* will lead to the assassination of President Kennedy. Oswald is framed in a character that someone else, "who knew all about him" (*Libra*, 336), has written for him, a role that he would have never thought to be able to perform. The stage manager of this new play is David Ferrie:

> You wanted to enter history. Wrong approach, Leon. What you really want is out. Get out. Jump out. Find your place on another level (384).

As Stacey Olster has noted, "Oswald's real motivating desire […] is not to merge with history, but

to stand apart from history" (50). So, performing his new character, the killer of the President, Oswald "walks out of the shadows" of his *small room*, jumps out of history and enters the "world gone inside out" (*Libra*, 227) of "the smallest of the smallest rooms," (Olster, 57) the TV screen. He gains his place in posterity through image: "the backyard photograph" (*Libra*, 280) and the camera shooting him live on TV as Jack Ruby shoots him. So the outcast, Oswald, is killed by a man, Ruby, who has the impression of being "off to the side" (350). In the plot written by the 'master playwrights,' Oswald, the prisoner of the *small room*, is killed by Ruby who, on the verge of bankruptcy, doesn't want to come back to the *small room* "in a cheap walk-up hotel," where he was forced to live during the period of his depression "over business failure" (342).

After the arrest, in his *small room*, "a cell in an isolated area of the country jail" (443), Oswald seems to have found the role of a lifetime, a character "called Lee Harvey Oswald" (435). Now the *small room* is something different for him, it looks like a place for "the reconstruction," for "the true beginning" (434). "He no longer [sees] confinement as a lifetime curse. He [has] found the truth about the room. He could easily live in a cell half this size" (435). But once again he's wrong. Eventually his framing within the narrative of the CIA's agents overlaps tragically with the frame of the TV set where his death takes place. In *the smallest of the smallest rooms* there won't be any reconstruction since this is the time for him to be a media star. In a displacing effect of a mirror reflecting reflected images, "through the pain [Oswald watches] TV" watching "himself react to the augering heat of the bullet" (439), and "the picture of the twisted face on TV." Everything takes place "in a darkish room, someone's TV den" (440). And once again he's both observer and observed, trapped in what Frederic Jameson has defined as *the grand theme of reification* in which the interaction between subject and object, as

dialectical gazes between observer and observed, could easily lead to the transformation of the subject into object under the gaze of the other, or after the overreaching action of the photographic device. In fact in *Libra*, DeLillo writes:

> There was something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera before he was shot, that put him here in the audience, among the rest of us, sleepless in our homes - a glance, a way of telling us that he knows who we are and how we feel (447).

Oswald's death enters live into millions of *small rooms*, where the audience feels "morally bound to watch" (446), taking "part of his dying" (447). He is the lacerating unifier of the American conscience, but since he's too frightening, he has to be erased.

However, this is not Oswald's last performance, since he keeps on performing even after his death. In the Warren Commission Report the role that Oswald comes to perform is the most suitable for him, the typical American. From the Report comes the idea that Oswald, as the outsider living in a *small room* with a desire to be a media celebrity, is not an exception in American society. Framed in his *small room*, this ordinary citizen lives at the margins, unaware of his marginal status and of the fact that every single attempt to write his personal narrative will be absorbed and reframed in another *small room*. DeLillo's "portrayal of the outsider Oswald as typical - as Stacey Olster has pointed out - suggests that all of us are marginalized figures now" (DeCurtis, 52).

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