"Brutal only from a distance"

War, sports and the limits of language in Don DeLillo's

End Zone

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B.A. Essay

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Summary

This essay explores the similarities in how war and sports are depicted in Don DeLillo's *End Zone* (1972). The use of football imagery in the portrayal of battles is common in many works of fiction. The opposite is also true, that many depictions of football, fictional or otherwise, rely on military imagery. DeLillo goes one further and equates football and war, nuclear war specifically. In doing so he employs many devices. Among these is the absence of specific jargon, the use of chaos vs. order, the untellable and the rejection of meaning. The novel's characters also engage in language games, where the different meanings of the same word are at odds. Even as the characters are playing games about meaning, language and the untellable, DeLillo is doing the same. *End Zone* is a novel greatly influenced by certain philosophical theories. Of these, those of Ludwig Wittgenstein are the most evident. Many references are made to his works within the novel and DeLillo's success in convincing the reader depends in no small part upon the way he applies this influence. The novel is set at the height of the Cold War and at a time when the prospect of losing the Vietnam War is undermining the United States' image as a superpower. With this in mind, I will examine, in the final section, how the main character, Gary Harkness, deals with the uncertainties of modern life and the perceived underlying lack of meaning. In the same context I will also compare him to Taft Robinson, an enigmatic character that only really appears in the novel's final pages.
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Introduction

"The game, after all, is known for its *assault-technology motif*, and numerous commentators have been willing to risk death by analogy in their public discussion of *the resemblance between football and war.*"¹

American football is a game that revolves around gaining territory, yards and inches, as much as it is about scoring points. When the two teams enter the football field, both are battling for every inch they can take from each other. Both teams want to defend the field that is behind them and invade the field that is in front of them. Ultimately, they both want to gain enough ground to score a field goal or a touchdown. Add to this the notoriously violent nature of the game and it is no wonder that parallels have frequently been drawn between football and warfare. The use of military imagery in describing football is nothing new. Julian Meldon D'Arcy points out that it was commonplace in match reports in American newspapers and magazines as early as the 1890's.² The similarities between the battlefield and the football field are obvious. These, however, apply mainly to the wars that were known long before *End Zone* was written, around 1970-1972. At that time wars were fought on the frontlines and every loss or victory revolved around gaining or losing ground. Modern warfare is different. There may not be any concrete frontlines and, of course, the proliferation of nuclear weapons has blurred and complicated war immensely. The time of *End Zone's* publication is therefore highly relevant. In 1972 and the decades prior to that, the United Stated had been locked in the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. The precarious balance

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¹ Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (1972; London: Picador, 2011), 105 (italics mine). All further references in the text are to this edition, abbreviated EZ.
struck, primarily through the deterrence of mutually assured destruction, was known as
the Cold War. Also of great importance is the fact that, at the time, the US were being
driven out of Vietnam, a conflict that itself was a source of great tension between the
superpowers. Of further note is the role played, both in the Cold War and in Vietnam,
by President John F. Kennedy. His death on November 22, 1963 was the first
assassination of a US president since the turn of the century. DeLillo has claimed that
this event shaped him as a writer, "for better or worse". 3

Much has been made of the 20th Century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's
influence on DeLillo in writing End Zone. An extraordinarily difficult philosopher,
Wittgenstein's output has often been divided into an early phase and a later one.
Wittgenstein, in his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 4 argued that language cannot
convey many of the things or concepts that exist. He maintains that all that can be said
can be said clearly. 5 This would seem to exclude many topics for instance ethics,
religion and metaphysics. They can be thought about but not conveyed through speech.
Later in his Philosophical Investigations 6 he amended his view. There, he argues words
can take on different meanings, depending on the "language game", roughly meaning
context. The two Wittgensteins have more in common than is usually thought. Both in
his earlier and later output, he is concerned with limiting the problems of philosophy by
advocating a precise use of language. DeLillo has stated in a rare interview, that during

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5 Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 3.

the writing of *End Zone* he was influenced by the language of the *Tractatus*, if not the formal logic.⁷

In *End Zone*, Don DeLillo himself risks "death by analogy" by likening football to war. This, however, is not all he does. In addition to the common notion of football as war, there is the altogether more alarming one of war as sport. DeLillo himself has stated that *End Zone* is about games: war, football and, tellingly, language.⁸ The fact that he is mostly successful in equating the first two in the novel is entirely dependent upon how he, the author, plays the third one. In *End Zone* there is a deliberate blurring of the distinctions commonly used to make sense of sports and war.

**Don DeLillo**

Don DeLillo was born in New York City on November 20, 1936. He grew up in a working-class Italian-Catholic family in the Italian-American neighbourhood of the Bronx. After finishing high-school in 1954 DeLillo attended Fordham University where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in Communication Arts in 1958. Shortly after, when he couldn't get a job in publishing, he got one in advertising, as a copywriter. After five years he quit and, as he himself has said: "embarked on my life, my real life."⁹

Further biographical information about DeLillo is not easy to come across, or as Tom LeClair, who was granted a rare interview with DeLillo in Greece in 1979 puts it:

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⁹ Passaro, web.
"DeLillo has not joined the literary auxiliary: he does not sit on panels, appear on television, judge contests, review books, or teach creative writing. He travels and writes. ...He does not like to discuss his work". In 1991 Vince Passaro interviewed DeLillo for The New York Times Books section. There DeLillo further elaborated on his private nature: "I've always liked being relatively obscure...I feel that's where I belong, that's where my work belongs." and on his influences: "I think more than writers, the major influences on me have been European movies, and jazz, and Abstract Expressionism."

In the interview DeLillo also "equates writing with "living and breathing"; he calls working on his novels "a life and death struggle."

What little more is known about DeLillo is that he married in 1975, but until then he had lived in a small spartan apartment in New York City. It was there he began to write his first novel Americana, using his savings and sometimes doing freelance work as a copywriter. Americana was roughly four years in the making and was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1971, the first publisher it was sent to.

DeLillo, a post-modern writer, has written sixteen novels, several short stories, essays and plays. He has written about very diverse subjects, such as: sports, nuclear war, the Cold War, global terrorism, language, mathematics, modern society, art, the music business and television. He has been nominated for, and won, many literary awards and at age 75 continues to publish new material.

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10 LeClair, 19.
11 Passaro, web.
12 Passaro, web.
End Zone

*End Zone* is Don DeLillo's second novel, published in 1972. The novel is a darkly comedic tour de force, depicting a young college football player's gradual descent, both mentally and spiritually, up and until his inevitable breakdown. The novel explores many themes, among others: modern warfare, the alienation of young people, mortality, sexuality, the responsibility of academia and the role that sports play in modern society. An underlying theme is the lack of meaning in modern life. *End Zone* explores all these themes within the setting of the typical sports novel. It has been called the first serious fiction about football.13

Set at a small fictional college, Logos College, in West Texas, *End Zone* follows the narrator Gary Harkness, who is a running back on the football team during the school's first integrated year and his first and perhaps only year there, although this is not entirely clear. Logos College is Gary's fifth attempt at college, not his fourth as has been claimed.14 He has been recruited there on a football scholarship by Coach Emmett Creed, who is there to resurrect the school's football team.

While at The University of Miami, Gary begins to read books on nuclear warfare. He soon becomes "fascinated by words and phrases like thermal hurricane, overkill...kill-ratio" (*EZ*, 20-21). At Gary's last school before Logos College, Michigan State, he and two other players cause a fatal injury during a football game (*EZ*, 22) after

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14 Gary Storoff, "The Failures of Games in Don DeLillo's End Zone," *American Sport Culture: The Humanist Dimension*, ed. W.L. Umphlett (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1985), 235. Gary himself says that he "received twenty-eight offers of athletic scholarship - tuition, books, room and board, fifteen dollars a month. There were several broad hints of further almsgiving." He first went to Syracuse University, then Penn State, followed by The University of Miami and then Michigan State, before he ended up at Logos College (*EZ*, 17-21).
which he takes a long hiatus. At Logos Gary spends much of his time in training, has a girlfriend of sorts and engages in philosophical discussions with the other players. Gary defines himself as an outcast or exile, making little distinction between the two. During his first season he starts to refrain from eating, first eliminating meat and ending in semi-starvation. He becomes increasingly obsessed with nuclear weapons and the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. Gary indulges in this obsession by getting permission to sit in on a class, "Aspects of Modern War", for the Air Force ROTC cadets about warfare, where he quickly emerges as the best student. Having read several books on the subject, he befriends Major Staley, the teacher of the course, and their discussions lead them to play tactical games, not unlike Risk, but based on modern capabilities of destruction.

Major Staley's counterpart is Alan Zapalac, a teacher in the exotic field of exobiology, who argues against patriotism and the notion of war as sport. Other characters of note are the Head Coach, Emmett Creed, a fading star of college football coaching and a man known to "create order out of chaos" (EZ, 9). Among Gary's co-students at Logos, many, if not all, are in some sense exiles or outcasts, just as he is. His girlfriend, Myna Corbett, is a pretty girl who rejects the responsibility of beauty, and is consequently overweight and defiantly declines to treat her own skin condition. She dresses in unbecoming clothes which she carefully mismatches. There is also Gary's room- and teammate Anatole Bloomberg, a 300 pound offensive lineman, trying to escape his cultural heritage, citing the historical Jewish guilt of being innocent victims. Finally there is Taft Robinson, a wide receiver on the football team, who represents Logos College's attempt at desegregation. Although they are the two best players, Taft
is in many regards portrayed as the opposite of Gary, but in the novel's conclusion their similarities are revealed.

Words Escape Their Meaning

"In everyday language it very frequently happens that the same word has different modes of signification - and so belongs to different symbols..."\textsuperscript{15}

What characterizes many of the conversations in \textit{End Zone} is a sense of detachment, remoteness and aloofness; the reader gets the feeling that each participant is engaged in a monologue interrupted only by another speaker's utterances. This is not merely a comic device, although it is so used in the first part of the novel. It has a deeper meaning, one essential to \textit{End Zone}. It can be viewed as if the characters are playing language games, but different ones. So, even if they frequently use the same words, they are not using them in the same way. Their meaning is different. So when one of the captains states to the other players that something is part of his function, another player gives the exact mathematical definition for functions (\textit{EZ}, 142). This lack of communication in \textit{End Zone}, even of a common language, is indicative of how great the divide between the players is. It stands to reason that if they, who after all supposedly have a shared purpose in common, have trouble communicating, there will be even more difficulty when trying to deal with people on the outside.

Gary maintains that his life means "nothing without football" (\textit{EZ}, 22). This seems not to be limited to his life in the sense most commonly used. After all he claims,

\textsuperscript{15}Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}, 18.
earlier in the chapter, to have made the sinister discovery that "words can escape their meaning" (EZ, 17). Thus he is not merely battling a lack of purpose. He finds no purpose or meaning in his life, because the world has no meaning. Gary, it turns out, is obsessed with words. It is through them he hopes to make some sense of the world. As his discussions with Major Staley about nuclear weapons plainly show, it is not merely death and destruction that so fascinate him. It is equally the shortcomings of the nomenclature used to describe such scenarios. To Gary the military jargon of nuclear exchange is grotesque in its shortcomings to describe what it is supposed to describe. The words do not explain or clarify. They merely abstract things to the point that they act as "painkillers" against the prospective reality they are supposed to denote (EZ, 80).

Having already discovered, at an early age, that words can escape their meaning, Gary is upset at finding a whole vocabulary that does not, and never did, correspond with the reality it is intended to describe. However, as Bloomberg asserts, the capacity for destruction far eclipses the actual violence being done (EZ, 205). This would seem to put Gary's objections to the pain-killing effect of military words in a different, and a slightly more benign, context. If the potential of nuclear warfare already eclipses the reality of violence, and thus desensitizes the mind to it, is it not fortunate then that the words fail, whether through design or accident, to "express thirty million dead"? (EZ, 79).

Following one of his conversations with Major Staley, Gary goes into the nearby desert and stumbles upon a piece of excrement, "simple shit" (EZ, 83). To him it is the only thing that does not "betray its definition" (EZ, 83). He seems to be momentarily comforted by this. Is this Gary attempting to reduce the world of words to a Cartesian foundation, one that can be built upon further? So it would seem, although he soon embarks upon a scatological tirade. He feels that words in general, and military
language in particular, is woefully inadequate. The only way do redeem the whole mess is to "reword the overflowing world". Only then is it possible to "call something by its name and need no other word" (EZ, 84).

In a bizarre parallel to the theme of words escaping their meaning, there is the rather clumsy retelling, by Myna, of a Mongolian science fiction story. Set on another planet in a nearby galaxy, the story deals with "Nautiloids", one of which by accident invents language. It is described as a doubling of reality, where each new word instantly absorbs what it is supposed to denote. In other words, the thing no longer exists, only the word. Therefore the words themselves refer to nothing. They have no meaning (EZ, 163). Here we have an extreme example of one of Wittgenstein's ideas, that the limits of language are also the limits of the world. In the story Myna recounts we see Gary's logocentrism taken to its logical conclusion. The words are the things they refer to, words are in fact the world.

As much as Gary objects to words that betray their meaning and seeks to "reword" the world, Gary is not above using the ambiguity of language, when it suits him. When Myna, having accepted the responsibility of beauty and lost 20 pounds, returns to Logos College after Christmas break, Gary uses language to conceal how he feels about her transformation. Myna's friend, Esther Chalk, promptly admonishes him for using words to avoid telling the truth (EZ, 216-18). Gary, having indulged in his obsession with words, knows full well that language can be used to disguise thought.

“What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”

16 Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 68.
17 Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 89.
In one of the novels' most playful references to Wittgenstein, Billy Mast, one of the football players in *End Zone* is taking a course in the untellable. The course is taught under the assumption that even though some things can not be said, they will eventually need to be expressed. Billy laments the fact that he is gradually picking up some German, in which the course is taught (*EZ*, 136). For him, the untellable is best studied in a language he does not comprehend. Once again, that which can not be said, still has to be expressed. There being no words to "express thirty million dead", a simple list of words: house, bridge, fountain (Haus, Brücke, Brunnen) will have to suffice. Understanding the language will only hamper the thought and make the statement nonsensical once again. Bing Jackmin, one of the football players on the Logos team, offers early on a metaphysical argument (of sorts) dealing with football and footballness (*EZ*, 35). Later he declines to elaborate, limiting himself to stating that there are more things happening on the field than mere football (*EZ*, 123). He too seems to have taken the lessons of the untellable to heart.

Wittgenstein famously argued that words have no fixed, intrinsic meaning. It follows, in his view that philosophical problems arise when "language goes on holiday".\(^\text{18}\) With this he means that all philosophical problems should disappear when language is used in the proper way. The lack of meaning that *End Zone* conveys, and its characters' battle, is not only a lack on a grand scale, it extends right down to our basic tools to understand and make sense of the world. At Logos College, logos ironically being a Greek word with many meanings, even words have failed.

It is asserted, not by Gary, but DeLillo himself, at the beginning of the frenzied description of the "big game" that football is unique among sports. It is the only sport

\(^{18}\) Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 16."
guided by language (EZ, 109). This refers to the fact that all football teams use, more or less, the same plays. Thus it is up to the aptly named Coach Creed, the godlike authority figure residing in the tower he had built for himself, to name the plays. The significance of this will be addressed in the following chapter.

Football as War

Football is a complex of systems. It's like no other sport. When the game is played properly, it's an interlocking of a number of systems. The individual. The small cluster he's part of. The larger unit, the eleven.

People stress the violence. That's the smallest part of it. Football is brutal only from a distance. (EZ, 190; italics mine)

Here the coach, Emmett Creed, could very well be talking about the Army and how it is structured. There are, of course, similarities between the structure of a military unit and that of a football team. Both stress discipline and the unquestioning following of orders. Likewise, each member has a defined role within the unit, one that is vital to the success of the entire group. All of this is fairly self-evident and common in the depictions of football. The second part of the above quote is much more interesting. The phrase "brutal only from a distance" refers to the impression that viewers of the sport often get, that it is violent. Coach Creed, of course, has a different view. For him the game is about tactics and strategies. However, the players experience the game first hand. For them football is indeed violent and brutal. It raises the question whether the public and the players might not be correct and the coaches mistaken. Perhaps they have
abstracted the game to the extent that it is mostly a cerebral exercise, a game of chess played against the other coach. Much like modern generals, they are not part of the action and do not experience any of the violence first hand.

The middle of End Zone is a chaotic 32-page description of a football game. It is, however, different from many other such descriptions in that it gives no scores and generally ignores the aspects of the game that would serve the reader as points of reference. Instead, we get a brutal description of collisions, dirty tricks and injuries, and above all, the feeling of being beaten by a far stronger opponent. It is, in essence, a description of a fight, a brawl, a battle. The reader is even informed of the various injuries each player of the team sustains (EZ, 139-41). Furthermore, at the very beginning of part 2, DeLillo states his intention to "unbox the lexicon", that he will give no statistics, numbers or idioms. Just as there are no words to describe adequately the death of millions, at any rate, none that do not betray their definitions, the "elegant gibberish" of football is suspended (EZ, 107). Although the sport is "guided by language" and he gives us the names of the plays, it is almost indecipherable (EZ, 106). It is primarily through this sleight of hand, or rather, absence of football jargon, that DeLillo recasts the game as a battle.

I was down and somebody was running right over me. I heard a lot of noise, pads hitting, men grunting and panting. Then it all came down on top of me. I smelled the turf and waited for all the bodies to unpile. My ribcage was beginning to ache...Somebody's hand was at the back of my neck and he put all his weight on it as he lifted himself up. (EZ, 115; italics mine)
If it weren't for the mention of "pads hitting" and perhaps "turf", this description could very well be from a battlefield. Later we get a peek into the mindset of the football players when Gary is sitting next to Raymond Toon, an aspiring sportscaster, and Toon says: "It looks like some of the guys got banged up pretty bad." and Gary replies "Nobody's died yet. But then the game isn't over." (EZ, 133). In the aftermath of the big game, there is no doubt that the players feel as if they have been fighting a war. Borrowing a military term, one of the player's injuries are attributed to "shrapnel" (EZ, 141). Later in *End Zone* Alan Zapalac, Logos College's "exobiology" teacher, lectures: "I reject the notion of football as warfare. Warfare is warfare. We don't need substitutes because we've got the real thing. Football is discipline" (EZ, 158). Even as Creed and Zapalac reject the notion of football as war, DeLillo goes to great lengths to establish how alike the two are. The reason for this is simple. If *End Zone* turns around the failure of football to have wider cultural resonance, as Peter Boxall claims, DeLillo must first pretend that it does have implications outside of its confines.

Another aspect of the big game is that it is not merely a battle between two teams. It is also, as Storoff points out, the battle between nature and technology. The Logos team, in their green and white attire, represent nature. Centrex's team, wearing red and silver, stands for technology, and specifically, within the novel, the technology of nuclear weaponry. Consequently, the Centrex players are mute, relentless and ruthless. Their quarterback is tellingly named Telcon and they are all much larger than the Logos players. Even when Gary and his teammates discuss them, they are not acknowledged as fully human. Rather, when discussing Centrex's player fifty-five, they refer to him as "one mean person, place or thing" (EZ, 120). The obvious solution, in the

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20 Storoff, 237.
mind of Ted Joost, echoing a sentiment expressed by Major Staley, earlier in the novel, is that the "whole game could be played via satellite." (EZ, 120). That would be the only way to beat Centrex, to beat their technology.

As stated before, we learn nothing about scores or rules in the chaotic middle part of *End Zone*. It can be useful to introduce the concept of "family resemblance" coined by Wittgenstein in the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*. Once again using the analogy of games, he admonishes the reader to look, rather than think, when assessing whether any two things or more are of the same kind. This is in fact what DeLillo does; he shows but does not explain. It is precisely because DeLillo does not explain, offers no clues - or at any rate, obscures them thoroughly, that his depiction of the big game is successful as an example of sport as war. The family resemblance between football and war has been established. When the reader looks at what DeLillo shows him, he sees brutality and violence. All the explanations and structure of rules are absent and all that remains is war.

There is, however, one single positive depiction of football in *End Zone*. The teammates decide to play an informal game of football, at the parade grounds, in the snow. Soon the rules are stripped from the game one by one, or rather plays are outlawed (EZ, 184-88). The fact that Gary describes the resulting "game", in which there are no plays left and therefore no choices, so positively is interesting. Mark Osteen argues that the game is purified by reducing it to bodily contact and violence. It could also be argued that this is what was needed to give the players, momentarily at least, the order many of them were seeking, an order so far impossible.

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23 Mark Osteen, "Against the End: Asceticism and Apocalypse in Don DeLillo's *End Zone*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 26:1 (1990), 150.
War as Sport

Another important aspect of *End Zone*’s take on warfare, and the parallels drawn between it and sports, is found in what, at first, seems to be a side story. Having such a fascination with modern warfare, or rather the potential of it occurring, Gary becomes friendly with Major Staley, who teaches the ROTC cadets at Logos College. At first they discuss modern warfare. Later they play tactical games based on the newest technology.

The resulting conversations between Gary and Major Staley show how many believe that war can be controlled with the right set of rules, be made more civilized. When Gary objects to the terms used in describing the various scenarios of nuclear warfare, Major Staley merely states that he doesn’t “make up the words”. Although that is certainly true, Staley has no trouble conceiving of “humane warfare” that includes the use of nuclear weapons. Such a war would be so civilized that there would practically be “a referee and a timekeeper” (*EZ*, 80). In other words, war is changed in order to be more like a sport. So, in *End Zone*, we not only have the idea of football as war, but also the much more alarming ideal of war as sport. It is not a notion DeLillo, or the reader, finds entirely plausible. It is therefore understandable that, while DeLillo himself largely makes the case for football as war, he has Major Staley making the case for war as sport or game. The words, acting as “painkillers”, are there to conceal the brutality and giving those involved distance from the horrific situations. Gary’s fascination with military terms, it turns out, is hypothetical. When pressed by Major Staley to join the cadet’s programme, he refuses, claiming that he does not want to get closer (*EZ*, 152). The implication is that he fears either that he would become further desensitized to the
brutality that is war, or that he would be unable to see past the fact that what is brutal from a distance, in this case can only be more so up close. The game devised by Major Staley fulfils Gary's hypothetical interest. Playing the game, Gary can keep the distance he feels is necessary, while simultaneously revelling in the subject.

In the beginning of part two, i.e. the description of the pivotal football game, the author says: "The exemplary spectator is the person who understands that sport is a benign illusion, *the illusion that order is possible.*" (EZ, 105; italics mine). Given the parallels drawn between war and sports, this directly contradicts the plausibility of Major Staley's proposed "rules in war". He seems to be under the illusion that order in war is possible. He does not, however, have history on his side. Mankind has tried to impose rules on warfare in various forms, but when it comes down to it, these rules are seldom, if ever, followed.

Major Staley's counterpart in *End Zone*, Zapalac says during one of his impenetrable lectures:

> Some of you in your nifty blue uniforms are here to learn about outer space and how to police it. Uniforms, flags, battle hymns. I offer you my only quotable remark of the entire fall semester. *A nation is never more ridiculous than in its patriotic manifestations.* (EZ, 154; italics mine)

This remark is indeed quotable. It is also the one insightful statement Zapalac, acting as the sole representative of academia, makes in *End Zone*. In fact he is mocked as a pseudo-intellectual by the author. Even here he is beaten to the point by Major Staley, who insists that ideology is redundant and is maintained only by a "grotesque sense of patriotism" (EZ, 78-79). What war is about today, Major Staley argues, is the
testing of "opposing technologies". Foreshadowing the big game against Centrex, Staley states that "technology isn't any good if it can't beat the enemy's" (EZ, 79). If Staley's words are taken at face value, it would seem that the one thing that was keeping the nuclear arms race going was the ever developing technology itself.24

As a part of Gary's quest for words, he learns a new one each day. One of these daily words turns out to be apotheosis. It is an obscure word that means "the glorification of a subject". He comes to view the word "militarize", that so unnerves Zapalac (EZ, 159), as an example of apotheosis. Apotheosis is also the appropriate term when Major Staley describes the implications of nuclear weapons. He likens them to a "kind of god" and calls the resulting theology one "of fear" (EZ, 75). Staley, it would seem, is confused about how to view nuclear weapons and their implications. Are they first and foremost state of the art technology that can finally make humane wars possible? Is the resulting war a game? Or is the bomb akin to a god, with the theology such a view necessarily brings about? His fractured views on the subject are further evidence of how untenable the whole proposition is. Perhaps it is, after all, Zapalac who gets it right with his tautological statement: "warfare is warfare" (EZ, 158). A tautology is a necessary truth, Zapalac has said very little, but he still manages to say rather more than Major Staley. Perhaps instead of meaning "warfare is warfare" in its most tautological sense, he means to say warfare is that, implying the thing the word points to. He means that warfare is warfare, that it is nothing else and that nothing else is warfare. So this tautology of Zapalac's, an empty speech act that according to Wittgenstein is meaningless, is the closest we get to actual meaning concerning war in

End Zone.

24 The novel is dated in that today even the relative simplicity of two opposing nuclear powers is obsolete. What we fear is not so much nuclear holocaust as that "failed states" or even organizations might obtain these weapons.
Just as we are given a positive alternative to conventional football in the informal game in the snow, there is a war game that has only positive connotations in *End Zone*. The team starts to play "Bang You're Dead". The game is appreciated by Gary, because it forces "cracks in the enveloping silence" (*EZ*, 32). It is a game that is created spontaneously by the players on campus, the rules unwritten and agreed upon without discussion. Moreover, it is silent. There are no words guiding it. The cracks in the silence are non-verbal, therefore there is no need to ponder their meaning; they just are. It is interesting to note that the chaos of football as shown in *End Zone* is made more structured in the impromptu game, while the highly deterministic nature of Major Staley's war game is offset by the seemingly random game of "Bang You're Dead".

DeLillo could even be accused of wanting to have it both ways, showing sports and war both as chaos and order. When Gary and Major Staley play the game of war, each new move leaves fewer options. There will always be the same outcome. What, then, makes it a game? Is it not a feature of games that outcomes can vary? In *End Zone* this is not the case. It is a game only in appearance. It is paralleled by the game in the snow. Fewer options make it less of a game, more of a rejection of games. Is DeLillo telling us that games are redundant? Here the author has given us a clue in the 1979 interview given in Greece. He insinuates that he questions the often stated ability of highly structured games to impose their order on the lives of those who play them. Just as warfare is warfare, football is just football, and it will not have any appreciable effects outside its own confines. He goes as far as comparing these structured games with the "free-wheeling street games" of his youth. The parallels between the childhood games DeLillo remembers so fondly and "Bang You're Dead" are obvious. No wonder then,

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25 LeClair, 21.
that "Bang You're Dead" emerges as the most profound game Gary plays in *End Zone*. It would seem that in each of the three other instances: the big game, the game in the snow and Major Staley's carefully designed scenarios, there is a failure of rules, chaos is replaced with inevitable outcomes and war is just a game. It is all an illusion.

The Haunting of *End Zone*: Gary and Taft

On the very first page of *End Zone* our narrator, Gary Harkness, tells us that Taft Robinson "no more than haunts this book" (*EZ*, 3). Although it is in many ways true that Taft haunts *End Zone*, another haunting presence in the novel is the young unnamed football player whose death Gary only mentions in passing at the end of chapter four: "We seemed to hit him simultaneously. He died the next day and I went home that evening." (*EZ*, 22). It is with this death that Gary withdraws. It is perhaps no accident that the dead player gets neither a description nor a name, he is merely referred to by his function in the opposing team. Gary, it seems, had a brush with the untellable. Feeling the guilt of accidentally killing the young opponent, he uses the least possible number of words in describing the event. Gary's guilt precludes him from going into details, the player becomes un-nameable. It seems that in this case Gary finds no words, to describe the death of one.

Strangely enough, even though the novel starts with two paragraphs on Taft Robinson, he rarely appears throughout the story. The reader gets a few descriptions of him playing football and how talented a player he is. He appears a few times in the cafeteria, usually sitting alone at one of the tables. Sometimes he is wearing sunglasses, which seems to bother some of the other players, and towards the end of the book he
shaves his head, which seems to annoy some of them even more. What he does not do is speak his mind; at least not until Gary visits him in the last chapter. The whole novel has been building up to this encounter. DeLillo cleverly disguises this fact from the reader throughout the novel, right from the playfully subversive first chapter. Here in the end of *End Zone* the reader discovers that just like Gary, Taft Robinson, who we had always been led to believe was more or less "normal", is also obsessed with atrocities, in his case the Holocaust. Taft too seems to practice self-punishment by forcing himself to read book after book on the Holocaust and he especially dwells on how the children were treated (*EZ*, 229-30). As he tells Gary, he likes "to read about atrocities" while at the same time saying it's the "worst thing there is" and that he can't stand it (*EZ*, 229-30). Of course, this raises the question whether it could be that perhaps others on the Logos team are as dysfunctional and self-destructive, that Gary's story and Taft's are merely two of dozens of potentially similar stories among their teammates.

Taft and Gary also have in common the way in which they were recruited. Creed did not promise them an easy ride or perks. He got them to sign on to the program, assuring them that there would be hard work and misery, but ultimately order. Here DeLillo is pointing out to the reader the ways in which young men surrender control to authority figures. Gary Storoff, writing about *End Zone*, makes a strong case for the view that it may be precisely this surrender of responsibility, to let others dictate what meaning your life has, that is for so many young men alluring. He goes on to point out the similarities between Gary and Taft and how games ultimately fail to bring meaning to their existence. Creed's words, that football is "only a game, but it's the only game" (*EZ*, 12) give us an insight into Gary's mindset. For Gary, it is easy to see the game as a

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26 Storoff, 236.
27 Storoff, 244.
substitute for the world. After all, he insisted that his life meant "nothing without football". Viewed in this light, and coupled with his ascetic tendencies, it could be argued that he suffers from a dual obsession, football to punish the body and the then perceived threat of nuclear holocaust to punish his intellect. Likewise, his fasting and asceticism can be seen as a way to purge himself of football, and as it is, within the context of End Zone, more or less the same thing, thoughts of war.

Jill Benton maintains that each of the four characters; Gary, Taft, Myna and Bloomberg fail to reinvent themselves, with the possible exception of Gary. On the contrary, it seems clear that it is Taft who may be the only one successful of the four characters. Myna grudgingly accepts the responsibility of beauty. Bloomberg's elaborate attempts to "unjew himself" (EZ, 44), to rid himself of the history of "being innocent victims" (EZ, 45), are not nearly as effective in divorcing him from his past as the murder of his mother at the hands of that least interesting of literary devices, the mad man. Gary, as a part of an atypically eloquent group of football players, has sought order and meaning in football, words, in the elimination of food groups. None of these attempts have been successful in alleviating his distress for any length of time, only creating small cracks in the silence. Gary's attempts are in the end shown to be a cul-de-sac where each new reduction or ascetic measure or "little word play" (EZ, 145) brings diminishing returns. Gary's end zone is about having no plays left. Taft on the other hand seems to follow the path of the untellable. Having realized the limitations of what order can be forced upon them by authority much sooner than Gary, Taft has retreated from the order imposed by Creed, imposing his own, on his own terms. He has become

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as Cowart rightly says "a connoisseur of silences". ²⁹ For him salvation, if it is to come, lies with silence.

Towards the end of the novel Gary is made co-captain of the football team, but upon further study the reader sees that he does not accept the position quite willingly;

Kimbrough graduates in the spring. You're offense captain." "I never expected anything like this," I said. "I'm not a senior. Doesn't it go to seniors?" "Frankly I thought I was here to be disciplined." "Maybe that's what it all amounts to. I'll be demanding extra. I'll be after you every minute. (EZ, 192)

It is clear that Gary has lost faith in Creed's ability to "create order out of chaos". No amount of extra work will help order his existence. But this is not the end of Gary trying to separate himself from football. At the very end of the novel Gary goes out into the cold without putting on a coat, an example of further self-punishment. The novel ends with his symbolic desertion from football. He removes himself from the team by escalating his self-imposed food deprivation:

In my room at five o'clock the next morning I drank half a cup of lukewarm water. It was the last food or drink I would take for many days...In the end they had to carry me to the infirmary and feed me through plastic tubes. (EZ, 231)

This last paragraph of the novel, while being very short, or only five lines, is very telling. In this one short, unexpected paragraph the inevitable happens; Gary finally self-destructs. So, in desperation, self-punishment turns to self-destruction. He has committed the ultimate act of self-sabotage. He has made sure that he won't be playing football again anytime soon, if at all. It is a very passive-aggressive way to get out of his situation, but it is, in its own way, also courageous. It takes self-discipline and willpower to not eat or drink anything for days. Even here, DeLillo has unravelled the mystery of his own fiction. He states that Gary stops eating, coyly adding that he himself does not know why.\(^{30}\) This is DeLillo saying, in his own enigmatic way, that Gary is reaching for the untellable.

As earlier stated, DeLillo himself steps forward in the middle of the book and argues further for the view, so prevalent in the novel, that order and meaning are hard, even impossible, to come by. He calls sport "a benign illusion, the illusion that order is possible." (EZ, 105; italics mine). The intricate rules and the tactics are there to make sense of the violence and chaos. It is obvious that he is not merely making the point about football. This is football as life. All attempts to order our random existences and give them meaning are doomed to fail. We are all spectators and have little influence over how things play out. The exemplary spectator, according to DeLillo, is the person who understands this (EZ, 105). Towards the end of the novel, we see that Gary and Taft have both seen through the illusion. The spell of football has been broken.

\(^{30}\) LeClair, 24.
Conclusion

In *End Zone*, DeLillo paints a bleak picture of modern society. As a novel set in one of the most tumultuous eras of American history, *End Zone* tells us much about the way that even the most simple of us, the football player being the stand-in for all of us, have had thrust upon us a complexity that ultimately is more than we can bear. The literally unspeakable scenarios that the characters are faced with, because of the threat of nuclear apocalypse, are so offensive to the intellect that a substitute is sought in other areas. However, the order sought can not be fulfilled by any of the substitutes used in the novel. Football, although on the surface an appropriate alternative, ultimately cannot help us to bring meaning to what is, in essence, meaningless. Any search for meaning is bound to uncover only violence. The notion of football as war, and conversely the one of war as sport, must ultimately break down. But then DeLillo does not expect these to appeal to, never mind convince, the reader. The analogy breaks down because it is meant to, because it is ludicrous. When dealing with the prospect of the end of the world, Gary seems misguided in trying to find the right words. When faced with the unspeakable, the right approach lies with the untellable.
Works cited


