Notes on Don DeLillo, *Point Omega*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

How Philosophical Fiction Works Against Fiction

Idea-driven novels have traditionally been regarded as precarious. (It would be good to know the history of this idea; it was in force in the reception of Kundera in the 1980s, but it probably derives from the reception of 19th century realist novels.) "Point Omega" is very brief -- cleverly set by the designers at Picador, with a large trim size and ample kerning, so that it scrapes by at 117 pages. That brevity points to its conceptual nature, and so do the opening and closing chapters (12 pages and 16 pages) that describe Douglas Gordon's "24 Hour Psycho," the slowed-down video of the Hitchcock film.

An idea-driven or conceptual or philosophical novel that is also brief runs a special risk, because the brevity declares that the resources of the full novel are not needed (no extensive character development, minimal psychological depth, minimal descriptive prose, a reduced capacity to be immersive absorptive). It announces, in effect, that the author has had an idea that needs to be put as fiction, but in such a spare way that it is only the novel’s freedom of invention and narrative that matter.

Here the opening rumination on Gordon’s video introduces themes of patience, of not knowing what meaning something has, of listening and looking without judging, of being alone in reflection. The same themes reappear in both principal characters. Human connections are programmatically absent: both men are apart from their wives; the narrator doesn’t quite connect with the only woman in the novel; in the end, the "anonymous" viewer doesn’t quite connect with a woman he meets in the Museum of Modern Art. The video piece makes the experience of film unreal, and the desert setting of most of the book makes ordinary city life unreal, and both places are unreal in themselves.

The book does sometimes behave like a longer, richer, less conceptually-driven novel, especially in the rare passages when DeLillo takes time to describe people or places other than the video screening room or the desert. The same effect, of the possibility of a different kind of novel, also surfaces when DeLillo inserts examples of alienated experience: a woman who walks downstairs backwards (p. 32), the extinct North American camel, the age of the universe. These function as condensed or tentative allegories of the book’s themes.

The widely distributed, apparently random moments of description and of allegory seem odd or imperfectly realized, just because there could have been many more of them: it seems DeLillo thought he had to be parsimonious because his book was short, but that also means every such passage attracts attention, and its placement, length, and motivation seem less secure.

Philosophically, philosophical novels are problematic because the ideas they offer seem (I
suppose mainly to philosophically-inclined critics) to be uninteresting as philosophy. In this case, the principal character has theories about how real life, real existence, is revealed when you attend to the low-level continuous sense that you're going to die. "Point Omega" proposes, in effect, that the temporal dilation of Gorgon's video, and the spatial and temporal dilation of the desert, can bring on that low-level awareness. In that state of mind, people become shells or tokens, their inner life inaccessible, their words unimportant, their physical existence insecure. Philosophically, it is not really news. And yet to say "Point Omega" "proposes" such-and-such a thing "in effect" is a way of saying it doesn't propose any such thing, because it doesn't propose anything, because it isn't about effect, because it's a novel.