Book Reviews

LeClair, Tom. *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel.* Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1987. pp. xiii, 244. $24.95.

In *In the Loop,* Tom LeClair sets Don DeLillo's fiction in the context of the "new science" of systems theory. He argues that DeLillo's work reflects the influence of systems theorists such as Ludwig von Bertalanffy and Gregory Bateson, that more "academically favored" novelists such as William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Coover have also been influenced by systems theory, and that DeLillo's "systems novels" are as impressive as theirs.

One aim of LeClair's study is to "open up . . . the loop of academic discussion" (xiii) which tends to privilege poststructuralist paradigms in its definitions of the postmodern. "Systems theory," he writes, "provides a new and influential set of ideas necessary for understanding much of our most original and valuable fiction" (9). Gaddis, Coover, Pynchon, and DeLillo all read and write the world in systems terms: they tend to oppose "open" (good) to "closed" (bad) systems, to deplore the "closed loops" of the systems planning establishment, and to advocate the creation of "reciprocal living systems" endowed with "negative feedback" capabilities that discourage "runaway" (55). And they tend to choreograph their fiction in terms of the looping trajectories traced by systems analysts. "The fundamental subjects of DeLillo's fiction," LeClair writes, are "communications loops ranging from the biological to the technological, environmental to personal, linguistic, prelinguistic, and postlinguistic, loops that are both saving and destroying, evolutionary spirals and vicious circles, feedback variation and mechanistic repetition, elegant ellipses and snarling complications" (xi).

LeClair challenges fashionable constructions of the postmodern in another way as well, by stressing the characteristically modernist features of ostensibly postmodern novelists such as Pynchon and DeLillo, their interest not only in systems breakdown — entropy, deconstruction, and pastiche — but also in systemic balance, reconstruction, community, and enchantment: "If postmodernism continues to be

defined as a deconstructive movement," he writes, "these 'systems novelists' would be more accurately termed 're-moderns,' to suggest their continuity with modernism" (9). Perhaps, but given the strong differences between LeClair's systems novelists and their modernist predecessors, and the ungainliness of his proposed counter-designation, I doubt that "re-moderns" will catch on. Would not it be better simply to open up the term "postmodern," as critics such as Hal Foster and Jonathan Arac have done, by showing that there are different tendencies at work in this historical moment, as in all others? Certainly LeClair's DeLillo, who celebrates open dialogue and makes "the ecosystem" his "fundamental model of value" (x) is aligned in these respects with the postmodern politics of the "New Movements" and the "Greens," a politics that is neither simply modernist nor simply deconstructive in its assumptions.

Questions of periodization aside, LeClair's efforts to open the academic loop seem to me to be most successful. His readings of DeLillo's novels amply confirm the role of systems ideas in their construction. And these same readings expose the prophetic element — the warnings and exhortations, the cries of pain and joy — embedded in DeLillo's dauntingly playful, over-coded and self-referential texts. But these are not the only pleasures of reading *In the Loop*. In each chapter, LeClair introduces us to some new aspect of systems theory and of DeLillo's vision: his exploration of the double bind in *Americana*, of "crowds and power" in *Great Jones Street*, of closed, logocentric systems in *End Zones*, and of language and mass communication in virtually every novel. He has interesting things to say, in addition, about what he calls "the art of excess," the aesthetic of the big "systems novel" as practised by Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* and DeLillo in *Ratner's Star*. And he begins the complex work of exploring DeLillo's relation to religion: Catholicism, American fundamentalism, mysticism, and negative theology.

An admirer of the giant systems novel, LeClair predictably finds less to like in DeLillo's minimalist works — *Players* and *Running Dog* — which are among this reviewer's favourites. Nevertheless, he provides a fascinating reading of *Players* as a Reichian meditation on the effects of mind-body dualism, faltering badly, I think, only when he comes to *Running Dog*. Perhaps his lack of appreciation for this work stems not simply from its elliptical sparseness, but also from his inability to discover, within it, any powerful meditation on the play of systems. Yet the novel is very much about systems, and in a way that LeClair's own explication of systems theory makes quite clear. Its subject is the American intelligence system in a state of "runaway": spinning off new espionage and covert-action units that then spin out of control and return, in destructive loopings, to undermine the very communities they were ostensibly designed to defend. This cata-

strophic looping back is summed up in the darkly comic image of Vietnamese assassins in cowboy hats chasing an American covert warfare operative through a Texas town full of Japanese tourists. If the once privileged cultural fields of the West, and the Western, are being creolized, DeLillo implies, the forces sponsoring the change are the very ones which also use the idea of the West, and the genre of the Western, to legitimate imperial adventures. Perhaps LeClair pays relatively little attention to such geopolitical themes because these themes have been only sketchily studied by systems theorists of the sort he admires. (Immanuel Wallerstein uses the language of systems, but not systems theory, to elaborate his influential theory of the "modern world system.") But the lack of any critical application of systems theory to the contemporary geopolitical situation makes DeLillo's explorations all the more worthy of attention and analysis.

I am troubled by one other aspect of *In the Loop*: its insistence that DeLillo's novels constitute "a coherent fictional system" and "a comprehensive critique of the ideologies" of our times (xi). At the very least, such a claim is premature. DeLillo is in mid-career: *Libra*, which many critics consider his most fully achieved novel, had not yet been published when LeClair completed his study. But I think the problem with such claims runs even deeper; DeLillo's work strikes me as correctly and courageously exploratory: tentative, unfinished, and "open," to use one of LeClair's favourite words. From whence, then, comes the impulse to turn the work into something like a "closed system"? Could it be that the holistic ambitions of systems theory collide with its celebration of openness? LeClair implies as much when he talks of the theory's "doubled or split relation to the idea of mastery, criticizing man's [*sic*] attempt to master his ecosystem and yet, in its own synthetic act, 'mastering' various specialities in large abstractions" (11). It is one sign of the strength of this rich and illuminating study that it can be mined for insights into its own limitations. But I wish LeClair had loosened his own loop a bit, and allowed DeLillo — whom he so successfully celebrates as a novelist of prodigious and protean energy — a little more room for play.

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Russell McDougall and Gillian Whitlock, eds. *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English: Comparative Perspectives*. Melbourne: Methuen Australia, 1987. pp. 247. $29.95 pb.

The Australian critics Russell McDougall and Gillian Whitlock have edited a book which, no doubt, will become a classic in the field of comparative studies of the two national literatures it examines. The ten essays included in this volume, together with the editors' lengthy introduction and Alan Lawson's useful bibliography, explore