

Crisis and Literature: Future Imperfect, or the Case of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*¹

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In his afterword to *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (2008), Joseph M. Comte makes a strong case for positioning the author as a writer of historical liminality, and citing DeLillo himself, he claims that *Cosmopolis* is a text “poised liminally ‘between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the Age of Terror’” (183). Not yet aware of the shift taking place in the author’s interest from all matters historical to his previous preoccupation with corporeality and writing,² Comte goes on to argue that DeLillo’s novel of 2003 stages how “[c]yber-capital and terrorism contend within the singularity of global power” (185), inasmuch as the text is preoccupied with what commentators usually identify as “the technological sublime” (186) in DeLillo’s *oeuvre*, in this case representing the “interaction between technology and capital, the inseparability” of the two (23). Comte and other scholarly commentators praise *Cosmopolis* exactly for what it was criticized for at the time of its publication, its witty handling of academically embedded ideas,³ thereby somewhat downplaying how the text, as I will argue, discusses, or indeed embodies, some of these ideas in relation to the white male body and terrorism in a curious temporal structure: written after 9/11, but presenting what one may call reverse *déjà vu* of the terror attacks. Comte’s estimation is, therefore, in line with the contemporary reviews of the book at the time of its publication, and stresses the intellectual achievement and poetic qualities of the text.

A similar kind of attention present in the reception of *Cosmopolis* can be illustrated by how Walter Kirn of *GQ*, for example, in *The New York Times* made the following comment about how the novel, in his reading, is intent on driving home various ideas associated with postmodern theory:

Beware the novel of ideas, particularly when the ideas come first and all the novel stuff (like the story) comes second. *Cosmopolis* is an intellectual turkey shoot, sending up a succession of fat targets just in time for its author to aim and fire the rounds he loaded before he started writing. When a presidential motorcade materializes to hamper Packer’s odyssey, we know we’re about to be treated to an essay on the illusion of political power in an age of borderless international commerce.

1 The writing of this article was supported by the Bolyai János Research Grant.

2 DeLillo’s ultimate late work on the topic is *The Body Artist*, but as Lilla Farmasi suggests this is only a return to his previous, modernist sensitivity present in such texts as “The Ivory Acrobat.” On the connection between writing and corporeality in DeLillo’s fiction, see Farmasi.

3 On DeLillo’s moral take on postmodernism, see Paul Giaimo 1-21.

Kirn and others also find fault with the way in which DeLillo “empties out” language, as his conversations in *Cosmopolis* read “like an unholy collaboration between Harold Pinter and Robby the Robot.” Others, like Updike in *The New Yorker*, appreciated his “fervent intelligence and his fastidious, edgy prose.” In what follows, I will be suggesting that *Cosmopolis* is, indeed, wrestling with language and ideas, but not in ways suggested by the novel’s immediate critical reception or within the confinements of the technological sublime, as Comte would seem to suggest, but in a creative effort to engage with the attempt to grasp and negotiate the critical conditions of the liminality brought about by capital, terror and technology. Thereby, in my view, he provides a fundamentally carnal national allegory in the strenuous temporal structure of the novel, breaching the border between the intra- and extradiegetic.

As reviewers are bent on summarizing, *Cosmopolis* recounts the one-day voyage of prodigy asset manager Eric Packer in his tomb-like limousine through Manhattan to have his hair cut in the salon of his childhood, while he is busy betting against the Japanese yen and losing his own fortune as well as that of his wife, theorizing about local and world events of the day and making decisions by way of meeting and having sex with various people along the way—all these amidst news of a credible threat against his life. Hence the title for Walter Kirn’s review, “Long Day’s Journey into Haircut.” The events of this long day also include a televised assassination of Arthur Rapp, the fictional managing director of the IMF on the Money Channel, the death of Eric’s friend and rival, Nikolai Kaganovich, the self-immolation of an unknown man in the middle of an anti-globalist protest taking place in town, the ceremonial burial march of Brutha Fez, the fictional Sufi rap star, the presidential motorcade to an official function, and a host of others on a minor scale. DeLillo’s third-person point of view narration uses these incidents as pretexts to meditate on contemporary conditions, and unfolds as a richly *poetic* text—as testified by the reviews—often working against *narrative* expectations. These narrative expectations are further undermined by how DeLillo weaves a reverse plot: the billionaire is quick to lose against the best of advice he can get from his colleagues, and in the self-fulfilling prophecy of Eric Parker’s self-destructive voyage it is not the assassin chasing his mark, but the target serving himself willingly up to his murderer. Any of these events, in the spirit of contemporary politics and entertainment, would in itself be worth making the headlines, and some of them indeed do in the course of the narrative. The fact that reviewers often complain about how “nothing happens” in *Cosmopolis* may testify not only to how contemporary (re)viewers are made insensitive by the mass media and how their literary expectations, in turn, are shaped by their daily consumption of mediated images of events, but how the novel itself favors commentary over event, interpretation over action, at the same time insisting, as I will argue, that the two cannot be separated from one another adequately.

This inherent connection between primary and secondary, surface and some supposed deep structure, between the different forms of agency, is elaborated on in the novel in a memorable passage describing Eric’s fascination with the flow of data, in his view not only a metaphor for life, but, rather, a part of it:

He understood how much it meant to him, the roll and flip of data on a screen. He studied the figural diagrams that brought organic patterns into play, birdwing and chambered shell. It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. In fact, data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole. (24)

The control-crazed Eric Packer's reading in poetry and science (5), combined with his insomnia and self-indulgence culminate in a heightened sense of sensual presence and *of the present*, and induce a false impression of omniscience and omnipotence, as in the memorable expression "our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole" (24). Eric's distinguished social position, his hypermasculinity and indulgence in speculation, either monetary or philosophical, all indicate an anxiety related to time both on the level of how time appears and passes on the level of narrative content as well as how it informs the very narrative structure of *Cosmopolis*. This anxiety, related to being unable to grasp (the notion of) time, is explained by Peter Boxall as "total obsolescence," an understanding of time in which "technology is obsolete the moment that it acquires a material form, from the moment it is realized as hardware" (222). It is of notable importance here that obsolescence, at least in Boxall's reading, is the precondition of the exposure to capital:

In the evacuated now of *Cosmopolis* [and of *The Body Artist*] the present disappears continually into the past or into the future, so that to experience time is always somehow to miss it. One can only approach the present through its echo or reflection in a past or a future that lies on the very surface, as time itself, uncorrupted by tenses or by "arbitrary" distinctions, is made available to the cyber market, eminently present, overwhelmingly there, but also somehow ungraspable, stripped of the "clinging breath of presence" [as phrased in *The Body Artist*]. (224)

Boxall goes on to suggest that the lack of a narrative frame, i. e. that mediation and virtualization take over from storytelling is due to this "contamination" of the present and the past by an invasive future, one that exceeds and erases the temporal boundaries necessary for the narrative to proceed (226). What remains, in line with Boxall's argument, is the poetical registering of the present and a mournful remembrance of the past in the face of one's exposure to the future. The first can be exemplified by the deaths occurring and mediated and repeated into meaninglessness to Eric Pecker on his way to the hairdresser's salon of his childhood, the second by his poetic musings about the passing of physical objects and the cultural associations they have with historical time, as in case of the words "skyscraper" or "phone." The irony inherent in

the idea of “obsolescence” is, of course, that even to register the invasion of the future requires certain technologically defined media crystallizing into linguistic forms, only to become obsolete themselves in due time. As the narrator remarks in connection with Eric’s habit of “mental” note-taking:

He took out his hand organizer and poked a note to himself about the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper. No recent structure ought to bear this word. It belonged to the olden soul of awe, to the arrowed towers that were a narrative long before he was born. The hand device itself was an object whose original culture had just about disappeared. He knew he’d have to junk it. (9)

“Obsolescence,” however, is not only a function of culture’s materiality, but appears on a conceptual level, as the example of how Eric insists on the “obsolescence” of ideas as suggested and represented by words would indicate. At one point he suggests that “It was time to retire the word phone” (88), indicating that in a culture based on communication words are subject to an ongoing process of inflation—an acute observation for a contemporary writer, expressed by the conceit of the novel’s motto taken from Zbigniew Herbert’s poem: “A rat became a unit of currency.” One may argue, relying on Boxall’s observations, that this persistent theme in DeLillo’s fiction is related to his constant preoccupation with terror, as well as his life-long attempt to cope with the issue from *Libra* to *Falling Man* and beyond.

This connection between “obsolescence” and “terror” acquires all too much significance in a post-9/11 context, and exerts some major influence on the chronotope of *Cosmopolis*, a novel written immediately after the terrorist attack on the American mainland, but set before that date. Thus, it can be argued that *Cosmopolis*, together with DeLillo’s post-9/11 literary and journalistic output, is an attempt to overcome the joint forces of terror and obsolescence, a case made in Marco Abel’s “Don DeLillo’s ‘In the Ruins of the Future’: Literature, Images, and the Rhetoric of Seeing 9/11” as well as in Donovan’s *Postmodern Counternarratives* (155). In this context it is a matter of urgency that there are two instances in *Cosmopolis*, both related to the body and terror, presenting a rupture in this invasion of the present and the past by “cybercapital.” The first is the self-immolation of an anti-globalist protestor, whose radical and self-destructive reclamation of his own body in order to make a political claim through evoking terror *and* sympathy by its mere sight resists, in Eric’s eyes, the market’s assimilative logic:

Now look. A man in flames. Behind Eric all the screens were pulsing with it. And all action was at a pause, the protesters and riot police milling about and only the cameras jostling. What did this change? Everything, he thought. Kinski had been wrong. The market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act. Not such starkness and horror. This was a thing outside its reach. (99-100)

Terror, obsolescence and “cybercapital” are linked here by Eric’s existential dread,⁴ the fear of death that the terrorist overcomes to make a political claim. The protest “cites” the historical Buddhist resistance, and this time this gesture is not interpreted as a futile historical repetition (as in the self-reflexive, salutary practice of some postmodern intertextual referencing), but evokes genuine sympathy by way of manifesting a radical agency staged as corporeal performance. It is understood as this, that the self-immolation of an individual finds its counterpart in a heap of naked bodies in the middle of the road off Eleventh Avenue, a collectively staged bodily performance in the fictional frame of shooting a movie.

There were three hundred naked people sprawled in the street. They filled the intersection, lying in haphazard positions, some bodies draped over others, some leveled, flattened, fetal, with children among them. No one was moving, no one’s [sic!] eyes were open. They were a sight to come upon, a city of stunned flesh, the bareness, the bright lights, so many bodies unprotected and hard to credit in a place of ordinary human transit. (172)

Ironically, but in line with the taboo against representing victims of 9/11, the movie set is one of the handful of episodes left out of David Cronenberg’s otherwise faithful adaptation of the same title from 2011. It is yet another instance of the invasion of the future, but this time extra- and homodiegetic in nature, as it anticipates the memory of 9/11 in the fictitious April of 2000 in the New York of DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* in 2003. What the novel at this point posits is the very certain presence of the future, one tempered by Eric Packer’s epiphany of meeting his wife and their consummation of the marriage despite their previous animosity. While the protestor’s death was a solitary act, this idealized scene brings together the individuals, again, outside the circuit of “cybercapital,” beyond its reach and in or after its temporary collapse. As Eric learns from the woman lying next to her: “the financing has collapsed. Happened in seconds apparently. Money all gone. This is the last scene they’re shooting before they suspend indefinitely” (175). The narrator also emphasizes that the experience is the most intimate interpersonal being together Eric Packer has ever had the chance to participate in:

The bodies were blunt facts, naked in the street. Their power was their own, independent of whatever circumstance attended the event. But it was a curious power, he thought, because there was something shy and wan in the scene, a little withdrawn. A woman coughed with a head jerk and a leap of the knee. He did not wonder whether they were meant to be dead or only senseless. He found them sad and daring both, and more naked than ever in their lives. (173)

These two meaningful ruptures of “cybercapital,” the self-sacrifice as a futile but ultimately politically viable possibility for resistance outside the system, and, outside

⁴ The novel is dedicated to Paul Auster, and a possible explanation may not only take into account how *Cosmopolis* bows its head to an instructive figure in the long history of the city novel, but how DeLillo acknowledges and affirms the existentialist traits of Auster’s fiction.

the novel's diegetic temporal frame, the fictionalized memory of the yet-to-happen terrorist attacks of 9/11, signal poetic moments against the monotonous pace of how the imperfect future invades the present and is constantly engaged in erasing traces of the past. The two episodes together and how they may refer extradiegetically to alternative individual reaction to the power of cybercapital and an embodied national response to the events of 9/11 also testify to how DeLillo's narrative in its most poetic moments⁵ contests any linear notion of historical time and the sense of a permanent crisis of representation as maintained by the very operation of cybercapital itself. One may even argue, that the latter of these poetic instances is indeed DeLillo's novel way to phrase a national allegory in the face of adversity, acknowledging, yet downplaying individual differences in race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and age.

The above cited two episodes only highlight the need for political agency, but the text also indicates its possible limitations by insisting on how the culture of "cybercapital" hardly allows for any individualized reading of its signs. It is not only that Eric Packer is unable to recognize the asymmetrical patterns of the market coded in his own "asymmetrical prostate." As Richard Sheets a.k.a. Benno Levi, his previous employee and later assassin warns him: "that's where the answer was, in your body, in your prostate" (200). Levi thereby extends the universe of "cybercapital" by reciprocating the otherwise unbalanced relationship between the system and the individual when he subscribes to Packer's claim that "[t]he logical extension of business is murder" (113). In the final scene of the novel, two maxims of DeLillo's fiction seem to converge: the first is that all of his plots are driven deathwards, while the second is the observable tendency that "the oeuvre follows a trajectory of virtualization" (Boxall 223). Eric experiences his own death as if it were a security breach in the system: he sees "things that haven't happened yet" (22). His consciousness redoubles the images of his own death as a reverse *déjà vu*: his own virtualized image looms large in the crystal of his watch over the scene of his murder, virtually a suicide itself. But in a memorable passage, Eric Packer's sense of his body returns through the pain of the self-inflicted wound of his hand, and in the spirit of the self-immolating anti-globalist protester, triumphs, if only momentarily, over the virtual:

But his pain interfered with his immortality. It was crucial to his distinctiveness, too vital to be bypassed and not susceptible, he didn't think, to computer emulation. The things that made him who he was could hardly be identified much less converted to data, the things that lived and milled in his body, everywhere, random, riotous, billions of trillions, in the neurons and peptides, the throbbing temple vein, in the veer of his libidinous intellect. So much come and gone, this is who he was, the lost taste of milk licked from his mother's breast, the stuff he sneezes when he sneezes, this is him, and how a person becomes the reflection he sees in a dusty window when he walks by. He'd come

⁵ These themes and their relationship to the body become more prominent in DeLillo's fiction when he returns to them in a narrative of post-9/11 America in *Falling Man*, wherein he connects the figure of the perpetrator and the victim through "organic shrapnel." For an extended reading of the motif in *Falling Man*, see Julia K. Szolysek.

to know himself, untranslatably, through his pain. He felt so tired now. His hard-gotten grip on the world, material things, great things, his memories true and false, the vague malaise of winter twilights, untransferable, the pale nights when his identity flattens for lack of sleep, the small wart he feels on his thigh every time he showers, all him, and how the soap he uses, the smell and feel of the concave bar make him who he is because he names the fragrance, amandine, and the hang of his cock, untransferable, and his strangely achy knee, the click in his knee when he bends it, all him, and so much else that's not convertible to some high sublime, the technology of mind-without-end. (207-08)

The passage emphasizes how Eric Packer has recourse to his own body as a fundamental source of identity in an instance that clearly connects self-sacrifice, terrorism, and fictions as generated by cybercapital, only to underline the moment of reflection occasioned by physical pain and, by extension, grief over one's mortality.

If DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* was criticized for conforming too much to conventions and, correspondingly, to critical expectations of the novel of ideas, it may seem evident today how these ideas had been misunderstood by commentators for their lack of comprehending how the novel's form comments on the very ideas it circulates. Thus, it is all the more fitting to mention that a more important charge is brought up against "the novel of obsolescence." Fitzpatrick argues that in the case of the white, middle class, heterosexual male authors like DeLillo the genre reveals "a cluster of anxieties about being displaced from some possibly imagined position of centrality in contemporary cultural life," and provides "access to a number of useful writing strategies that assist the novelist in trying to regain his ostensibly faltering importance as a cultural critic." At the same time these strategies are "employed to obscure other, unspeakable anxieties about shifts in contemporary *social* life that pose a lesser threat to the dominance of the novel than to the hegemony of whiteness and maleness long served by the structures of traditional humanism" (Fitzpatrick 201-02). It is only fair to add that DeLillo in *Cosmopolis* also exposes how some of these ideas, best exemplified by the theorist Vija Kinski, are not only dangerously operative in a cybercapitalist economy (i.e. they make things "happen," the word being almost a catchphrase in *Cosmopolis*), but at the same time are void and can and ought to be resisted by the material acts of the body, be it the cinematically staged body of a national collective, or, as in Eric's individual recognition of how "the market was not total" and how the key to resistance lies in turning to one's body in an existential dread. This is a claim that uneasily opens up the question of the relationship between fiction and terrorism for the white male subject of *Cosmopolis*, who, in turn, sees no other way to reconcile them than his ultimate act of self-sacrifice, a symbolic resignation of power.

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Legacies of the Past and the American Family: Sam Shepard's *True West* and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog /Underdog*¹

Lenke Németh

Isolation from societal and historical continuity ingrained in American thought and culture has resulted in an unprecedented economic growth, creativity, and flexibility in all facets of American life. Paradoxically, a constant search for an American past—generated by the lack of a common history—also prevails in American culture and these mutually exclusive trends lead to a sense of “rootlessness, loss of connections, and anxiety about identity” (Menides 607). American literary expressiveness appears to reflect these opposing views on history as well as the impact these attitudes exert on the (in)stability of the American character. Viewed from the “classic” period of American literature a variety of responses were generated by the literary culture. American writers’ approaches to history range from evident separation from the constraints and restraints of history and tradition (Emerson, Thoreau) through creating romanticized versions of the American past (Cooper, Longfellow) to the search of a “usable past”² (Eliot, Pound) that would explain the causes and impinge on the way how Americans exist in the present (Menides 607).

Theatrical performances are particularly suited to raising searching questions about how the dimensions of the past—individual and collective—occur to us and shape our present. The lack of a valid and available past—personal, cultural, and historical—as well as the distorting effects of this absence on the individual and family level have featured as a central theme in modern American drama since its long-awaited advent at the beginning of the twentieth century. The themes of the aborted legacies of the Cabots in the New England regions (O’Neill, *Desire Under the Elms*, 1921), the misused and abused Dixie inheritance of the DuBois family (Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947), Joe Keller’s and Willie Loman’s thwarted dreams because of the personal and communal sins committed in the past (Arthur Miller, *All My Sons*, 1947 and *Death of Salesman*, 1949, respectively) continue to refigure in postmodern American drama, however, in new ways. As Sanja Bahun-Radunović maintains, “history becomes ‘humanized’ and workable by/in the very act of performance” as history is understood as “the chronotopic point at which our personal and social being is excited, ex-centered, and . . . brought to awareness of its historical condition” (446).

1 This essay is dedicated to Professor Mária Kurdi, distinguished scholar, teacher, mentor, and colleague, for her unceasing encouragement and support in my scholarly career and research.

2 The term is introduced by Van Wyck Brooks in his essay “On Creating a Usable Past” published in *Dial*, 1918.