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## Don DeLillo's Mapping of the City

### Summary

Taking as his point of departure the immense significance the city has for understanding the present moment and the special relationship the city has had with the novel, the author gives a reading of Don DeLillo and the way his work has engaged the city of New York. Focusing upon his last two novels, *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*, the author describes how these two novels narrate the transformations the American city has undergone during the second part of the twentieth century. The bulk of his analysis deals with the function the Prologue flashback of the Bronx has in the earlier novel and the transformed city of late capitalism in his last text. The author concludes his reading by pointing out how DeLillo's novels not only provide fictional accounts of what has occurred in the urban sphere but how they provide evidence of the difficulty of representing the contemporary world and how they foreground urgent political considerations.

**Key words:** the city, the novel, perception, historical transformation, late capitalism

## Kartografska podoba mesta v prozi Don DeLilla

### Povzetek

Izhodišče razprave izpostavlja pisateljev poseben odnos do mesta New York in načine njegovega umeščanja v pripovedno strukturo. Avtor prispevka se osredotoči na zadnja romana Don DeLilla, tj. *Underworld* (*Podzemlje*) in *Cosmopolis*, ter razčleni pripovedno preobrazbo New Yorka v drugi polovici dvajsetega stoletja. Osrednja obravnava je posvečena funkciji Prologa o Bronxu v zgodnjem romanu ter preobraženemu mestu poznega kapitalizma v zadnjem delu. Avtor sklene z ugotovitvijo, da romani Don DeLilla niso zgolj fikcijski oris urbanega okolja, ampak tudi ponazarjajo težavnost upodobitve sodobnega sveta in hkrati opozarjajo na nujnost politične presoje.

**Ključne besede:** mesto, roman, percepcija, zgodovinska preobrazba, pozni kapitalizem

# Don DeLillo's Mapping of the City

## 1. Introduction

The timeliness and perhaps the urgency of the city as a subject of discussion and analysis can be gleaned from the succinct statement Neil Leach makes in introducing his book *The Hieroglyphics of Space: reading and experiencing the modern metropolis*: “To understand the metropolis is – to some extent – to understand our present age” (Leach 2002, 1). However, even in our global environment, neither question, namely when the present exactly is nor what constitutes a city, would yield answers that would muster universal consensus. In other words, one must approach these issues bearing in mind that they are culturally marked, differentiated by their geopolitical setting and historical period.

The following reading of Don DeLillo's last two novels I see as an installment in the story of the place of the city in United States culture and literature. Winthrop's “city upon a Hill” has been routinely drawn upon as evidence that the rhetoric of the city was present at the originary moment of this polity's emergence onto the historical scene. One could argue that the various takes on the American polity engage the difference between this utopian vision emblazoned on its founding moment and the actualization of the vision in historical urban realities. Literary works likewise partake of this dualism. There are, of course, works of literature supportive of the utopian, idealizing strain, proselytizing texts burdened and at times sunk under the ballast of ideological trappings. However, there are the more relevant achievements which work athwart the complacent acceptance of ideological justifications and their supportive projections. The ways that the city has figured in literature could doubtlessly be a source providing ample evidence of how these socio-cultural energies and political constellations have been aligned at different points of American history. In what follows I propose to trace a number of these points and their attendant spatial configurations and to delineate the position from which one of the most significant American novelists views present developments.

**2.** In his study *The City in Literature* (1998) Richard Lehan gives a historical survey of how this spatial configuration has been represented and used by authors belonging to different literary formations. Dealing with the same title on a more abstract level, Roland Barthes, in his article “Semiology and the Urban”, writes about the need “to work out the language of the city” and how it has been the writers who have been at the forefront of this task: “For the city is a poem, as has often been said and as Hugo said better than anyone else, but it is not a classical poem, a poem tidily centered on a subject. It is a poem which unfolds the signifier and it is this unfolding that ultimately the semiology of the city should try to grasp and make sing” (Gottdiener 1986, 97–8).

Amongst the different literary genres it is the novel which seems to have a special relationship to the urban. Peter Middleton and Tim Woods write of this relationship in the following manner:

The novel has a special relationship with the city, because it offers a ‘structure of feeling’ adequate to our experiences of abstract space. This discourse of ‘feeling’, of personal response, of subjective mood in relation to city experience, is part of the transformative power of fictional representations, because it structures our spatial awareness through a concretization of our everyday spatial consciousness....Representational concepts have become lived forms that govern our grasp of urban space. Fiction is able to mobilize emergent metaphors and rhetorical forms which have not yet become established enough to register on sociological screens (2000, 278).

According to Middleton and Woods the very nature of fiction, its flexible ever-changing forms and strategies enables it “to catch-and-play with its representations of the city, now shaping it, now losing it, now being deluded by it” (ibid. 309). These different takes on the city as they are embodied in fictional narratives are not only symptoms of the changes that have occurred within literature itself but reflect and attempt to produce adequate representations of the transformations that have modified urban reality.

**3.** Readers familiar with Don DeLillo will easily recall the significance of New York for his work. If Peter Brooker, writing his study *New York Fictions: Modernity, Postmodernism, The New Modern*, could have had the two novels DeLillo wrote after its publication date (1996) at his disposal, namely *Underworld* (1997) and *Cosmopolis* (2003), there can be no doubt that DeLillo would figure more centrally in the study than he does as it now stands. It amounts to a platitude to observe that both of these novels evince a powerful fascination with the city. The second point I want to stress here and one which I believe is immensely important to our understanding of both DeLillo and of the city is that the reader can reconstruct from the last two novels a history of the transformations the city has undergone in recent history. Regarding this diachronic sweep, the novelist himself had prepared us for juxtaposing the passing of time and the city in his earlier novel *Mao II* where we find a statement highly relevant to the topic under discussion: “The city is a device for measuring time” (1991, 27). To put forward a thesis which I hope to substantiate by my analysis one could contend that unlike the abolishment of the historical sense in the fixation on the instantaneous in much postmodernist writing DeLillo does not abandon the sense or the weight of history. This is the significance of his “longing”, of which more in what is to follow, both for a point in time and a spatial belonging in the past.

Put in very general terms, my contention is that whereas a segment of *Underworld* contains a cognitive urban map, a point of apprehending the city as a totality, this is no longer the case in *Cosmopolis*. The way that the city, as a complex and changing spatial configuration, engages human perception and knowledge has received cross-disciplinary attention and study. Jonathan Hale writes that the

sense of orientation springs from the *imageability* of the urban scene – the perpetual clarity and vividness of the characteristic spatial elements that allow

their use by the inhabitant's imagination. Once an overall framework has been constructed out of a series of distinctive and 'legible' components, any journey across the city can be measured according to its relationship to a relatively stable and complete 'environmental image' of the whole (in Leach 2002, 33).

Looking at this description of the cognitive processes at work in the human confrontation with the city we can say that in DeLillo's last two novels we can isolate a number of stages of the engagement with the city as an object of perception. In these texts this trajectory is initiated by a now lost moment when the city was still imagineable and continues to unfold as conditions for knowledge are in the process of disappearing or have already been erased.

Both by its magnitude and by its thematic scope and complexity *Underworld* is the most ambitious of DeLillo's novels. It is one of the latest installment of the intermittent attempts by American writers to produce the great American novel. As such it provides ample material to deploy various critical approaches both as far as its textuality is concerned but also as negotiating a relationship to its cultural context. On the present occasion I am more interested in the latter approach. My analysis is founded on the assumption that DeLillo inscribes an originating moment in the sweep of history which serves as the backdrop of his narrative and that the temporality of his narrative is profoundly implicated in what has taken place in the city during the second part of the twentieth century.

This sprawling, panoramic text works with a number of structuralizing elements, two of which are the mythic baseball game played on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 1951 and the repeated elaboration of the tug of nostalgia felt by different characters for that historical period. Reengaging the text on the lookout for these thematic clusters one not only sees how they appear very early in the novel but how they are also related to the theme of the city. In the third paragraph of the novel the reader encounters the sentence "longing on a large scale is what makes history" as well as the indicative phrase "the body heat of a great city" (11) which DeLillo applies to the people flocking to the ballpark.<sup>1</sup> The way the baseball game and the human dramas that accompany it are rendered can be described as a kind of communal ceremony. For instance, when DeDillo reverts to a panoramic sweep outside of the ballpark he paratactically lists different characters who, having tuned in to the game, create a network with a common reference point. Describing this network as "the game and its extensions" DeLillo writes of these "connected" nodes as "the game's remoter soul" (32). What I would like to draw attention to is this sense of a sport ritual building a sense of togetherness. The winning homer "makes people want to be in the streets, joined with others" (47). One of the spectators, the boy Cotter who is the lucky catcher of the winning ball, walking Harlem, feels "a sense of placeness" (58). The sport announcer looking at the people leaving the field thinks

1 I like to draw attention to a parallel which doubtlessly adds a certain weight to both the place and the date DeLillo chose as the site of his nostalgic analepsis. Namely, Marshall Berman on the very first page of his book *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* mentions "the Bronx of thirty years ago" as the place producing his fascination with modernity. Since the book was originally published in 1982 the dating of his fascination roughly coincides with DeLillo's nostalgic flashback. The relevance of this correspondence is given even greater weight by the fact that the description of what happened to the Bronx in the fifth chapter of his study (287–348) gives a moving socio-historical reconstruction of processes fictionally rendered in the novel.

that “they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power” (59). That observation, coming as it does at the end of the prologue, is important to my reading. To put it in very brief terms, what endows the spectators of the historical game with protective power is not only the sport result but, more importantly, the way that it is a pivotal point in conceiving of New York as an entity that can be experienced as a place where a sense of wholeness and community is still possible.

The magnetic pull of both the experience delineated in the Prologue and its homogenizing impact on the city is replayed on another thematic level in the second part of the novel where Nick Shade meets a woman from his past. Their intimate experience was consummated in the Bronx of his adolescence, and that confluence of a place and a time is succinctly stated in the following remark: “You know how certain places grow powerful in the mind with passing time” (74). The function of the evocation of the old neighborhood – particularly as it relates to developments set chronologically later in the narrative – can be seen when Nick speaks of the “responsibility in the real”. Emphatically stating that he “lived in the real” he continues: “The only ghosts I let in were local ones, the smoky traces of people I knew and the dinge of my own somber shadow, New York ghosts in every case, the old loud Bronx, hand-to-mouth, spoken through broken teeth” (82). One way of understanding this tug of what has disappeared is to say that it serves as a kind of antidote to the growing non-reality of the new dispensation. If one recalls the pivotal significance DeLillo assigns to the Kennedy assassination<sup>2</sup> the significance of opening *Underworld* with the ballgame and what he attributes to it cannot be overestimated:

When JFK was shot, people went inside. We watched TV in dark rooms and talked on the phone with friends and relatives. We were all separate and alone. But when Thomson hit the homer, people rushed outside. People wanted to be together. Maybe it was the last time people spontaneously went out of their houses for something (94).

Juxtaposed as they are these two scenes imply a set of oppositions (separate/together, private space/public space) which signal a historical trajectory that is of immense significance in fathoming what has happened within the American city.

Part II, aptly titled “Elegy for Left Hand Alone”, reverts to the old neighborhood but at a later date (mid-1980s – early-1990s) and through a number of focalizations of people still living there, immobilized by as they are the tug of the past, shows a blighted cityscape which has become a destination (“*South Bronx Surreal*”) for sightseeing Europeans (247). The change that has befallen the locality is mirrored at one point in the ethnically marked renaming of the borough as “El Bronx” (196). Changes, as far as the positioning of the human within the

<sup>2</sup> The decision to write *Libra* (1988) was doubtlessly prompted by the importance he attributes to this event. The following remark from the book needs no additional comment: “He has abandoned his life to understanding that moment in Dallas, the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century” (181).

urban environment, have also occurred. Instead of the Prologue's sense of belonging we read of Marvin's "sense of being lost in America, wandering through cities with no downtowns" (176). The sense of loss is signaled by the use of the past tense when Matty is told that "these were your streets" (213). The function of the Prologue, the way that it had inscribed a particular point of departure and the way it stands as an older center set against the sprawl into which America is developing, can be read in the following passages: "I always thought they lived in the East. I thought this is where all the remembering is done" (322). Even more to the point is another observation:

This happened back East of course. I've heard that term a lot since coming to this part of the country. But I never think of the term as a marker of geography. It's a reference to time, a statement about time, about all the densities of being and experience, it's time disguised, it's light-up time, shifting smoky time tricked out as some locus of stable arrangement (333).

Nick's ruminations refer to the accretions of affective investments in the older eastern habitats in contradistinction to the more recent urban developments. However, the point to keep in mind is that the former sites have also been affected by forces which DeLillo is at pains to uncover and describe in his last two novels.

The opening scene of Part IV set on a New York rooftop evokes a city that has picked up momentum and that has developed a more complex circulation. Klara Sax finds

a hidden city above the grid of fever streets. Walk and Don't Walk. Ten million bobbing heads that ride the tideline of taxi stripes, all brainwaved differently, and yes the street abounds in idiosyncrasy, in the human veer, but you have to go to roof level to see the thing distinct, preserved in masonry and brass (371).

Placing this passage on the backdrop of the earlier community-like wholeness it is evident that the cityscape has undergone profound changes. The streets are fevered and the pedestrians are not attuned to a communal event but diversified and varied. A little later in the novel the difficulty the changed outlay and motion of the city imposes upon human perception is set in explicit terms:

She realized how rare it was to see what stands before you, what a novelty of basic sensation in the grinding life of the city – to look across a measured space and be undistracted by signs and streetlights and taxis and scaffolding, by your own bespattered mind, sorting the data, and by the energy that hurrying people make, lunch crowds and buses and bike messengers, all that consciousness powering down the flumes of Manhattan so that it becomes impossible to see across a street to the turquoise tiles of some terra-cotta façade, a winged beast carved above the lintel (379).

The mind “bespattered” by the hectic activity of the city and how it signals a distance, both temporal and spatial, from the scene evoked in the Prologue indicates not only the changes that have taken place but also how these tax human perception.

Some additional examples will show how this practice of collocating different historical embodiments of urban space is a pervasive facet of DeLillo’s narrative strategy. In one of the fragments making up the fifth part of the novel *Edgar Hoover*, one of the spectators of the historical game, overlooks Central Park and grows “nostalgic” gazing up “where the earth curved toward Harlem”, that is, in the direction of the now defunct ballpark. In another fragment, staged during the famous electrical failure on the Eastern American seaboard, Nick meets an acquaintance from the old Bronx neighborhood who tells him that he goes back to the old place but that he notices changes: “See it now. It’s disappearing” (620). The analepsis (Fall 1951–Summer 1952) making up part six of the novel presents a broader social panorama and fills in information about events that have befallen some of the characters. On the very first page the Bronx is designated as a “compact neighborhood” (661) but already the focalizer of the opening scene anticipates that the street “filled with children playing” will be intruded upon: “With cars, more cars, with the status hunger, the hot horsepower, the silver smash of chrome, Bronzini saw that the pressure to free the streets of children would make even these designated areas extinct” (662). The evocation of the fragility of this environment and how it cannot resist powerful forces transforming society is reinforced in the proleptic vision which follows: “He imagined a fragment of chalked pavement cut clean and lifted out and elaborately packed – hipped to some museum in California where it would share the hushed sunlight with marble carvings from antiquity. *Street drawing, hopscotch, chalk on paved asphalt, Bronx, 1951*” (662).

The Epilogue entitled “Das Kapital” with its initial statement that “Capital burns off the nuance in a culture” (785) emphatically names the “status hunger” and “pressure” which Bronzini foreglimpses in his street vision, inaugurating the theme of international finance which figures in the final section but, more to the purpose of my reading, updating the context in which the Bronx is depicted in the closing movement of the novel. Namely, the dilapidated Bronx of the final sequence of the text and Esmeralda’s tragedy narrated there are mediated through the internet. The confluence of the power of capital flows and the newest technologies and the way these are imbricated one in the other provide the departing shot of Don DeLillo’s voyage through the last fifty years of American history. The perplexity which I read from the questions located near the end of the novel – “[is] cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure” (826) – further exacerbates the difficulty of apprehending and coming to terms with a world, a world of the city, which I have attempted to contour in this reading.

Let me bring these considerations of *Underworld* to a close with the description of the position of the advertising sign on which apparitions of the murdered girl are drawing pilgrims from the city: “scaffolded high above the riverbank and meant to attract the doped-over glances of commuters on the trains that run incessantly down from the northern suburbs into the

thick of Manhattan money and glut” (818). Laying aside the possible ways of interpreting the function of these seances within the novel I draw attention to the description of the in-between nature of the Bronx, disempowered between the northern suburbia and the hub of capital. One way of understanding what DeLillo is doing in his is his embarking on a journey into the “money and glut” of Manhattan.

Structurally speaking, *Cosmopolis* (2003) updates the motive of the *flâneur* who as a character reading the street and its spectacle as a decipherable text has had a prominent role in the literature of the city. However, instead of the earlier stroller Don DeLillo provides us with a late, motorized version of this character type placed in a cityscape which seems to confound his powers of apprehension. The surface narrative of the novel follows the journey by limousine of Eric Packer, a powerful currency broker, from his forty-eight-room apartment on the East Side of Manhattan to his encounter with his nemesis-to-be Benno in the blighted dock area of Manhattan’s “Hell’s Kitchen”. The stalled crawl of the car through the clotted streets of midtown Manhattan, signaled by references to street names and neighborhood, unrolls scenes from the multifaceted urban experience. The “crosstown” drive provides a skeletal framework within which the text maps the city’s physical layout, its differentiated functions, its social distinctions and relics of its temporal palimpsest.

It would not be difficult to chart on a New York City map the drive from Second Avenue (13) to Eleventh Avenue, “the last block before the river” (179). The progress of the narrated April day in the year 2000 is charted out along a recognizable route. The cityscape unfolding before the moving car, intermittently halted by Eric Packer’s personal and professional commitments but also by different events taking place on the streets, is not only rendered as a physical given but also as a scene of social practice. Thusly we read of the “diamond district” which, still dealing with palpable objects of exchange, in the opinion of the financial wizard “was an offense to the truth of the future” (64). Further on, the limousine presses through “the theatre district” while bouncing heavy trucks heading downtown bring to the mind “the garment district or the meatpacking docks” (82–3).

DeLillo strikes a social note when he has “the others of the street, endless anonymous” (20) obtrude upon the protected and privileged car space of the main character. The stalking killer out to get Eric is in part motivated by his sense of suffered injustice (“I was generic labor to them” (60)). Finally, the drive to the old West Side neighborhood can be seen as a stepping back into time to “a particular place, where elapsed time hangs in the air, suffusing solid objects and men’s faces. This is where he felt safe” (166). The fact that both Eric’s self-destructive binge and his encounter with his murderer occur in this neighborhood show not only how deluded the character was in his feeling of safety but that the old neighborhood as an enabling space is simply no longer there.

The city as portrayed in *Cosmopolis* is not only bereft of an enabling locus and partitioned into various functions but has, most importantly, itself become a function of the powerful flow of global

capital. In a telling remark the association of the city with capital is put in the following terms: “These were scenes that normally roused him, the great rapacious flow, where the physical will of the city, the ego fevers, the assertions of industry, commerce and crowds shape every anecdotal moment” (41). I would wager the notion that the oxymoronic phrase, “physical will”, reveals DeLillo’s inability to narrativize the interface between capital and the urban. The main character, negotiating the cryptic space of capital flows, is ultimately baffled by its waywardness just as his attention is taxed by the concrete manifestation of money power. Looking up at the bank towers Eric ruminates: “They weren’t here, exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it” (36). In another scene, a view of “the electronic display of market information” on a building prompts the following observation: “Financial news, stock prices, currency markets. The action was unflagging. The hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols, the fractions, decimals, stylized dollar signs, the streaming release of words, of multinational news, all too fleet to be absorbed” (80).

Putting these two excerpts alongside each other highlights two interrelated motifs which I believe are very significant for understanding what DeLillo sought to capture in his last novel. In the first quotation we read of the erasure of place, a “time beyond geography” as he puts it, which is definitely one of the ways of reading the thematic import of *Cosmopolis*. In the second quotation, we read that the velocity of financial information is such that it incapacitates comprehension, simply disables mental absorption. Stated differently, we can say that the language of the city has broken free of its geographical reference. When DeLillo writes of money that possibility is put in straightforward terms: “Because money has taken a turn. All wealth has become wealth for its own sake. There’s no other kind of enormous wealth. Money has lost its narrative quality the way painting did once upon a time. Money is talking to itself” (77). If we keep in mind the close connection DeLillo establishes in his last two novels between the city and capital one could say that, under the impact of what has occurred in the sphere of finance, the city has also lost its “narrative quality”, that its present state incapacitates decipherment and understanding. In *Cosmopolis* New York has become a kind of absent signifier, an absent semantic matrix that can no longer contain the fragmented, piecemeal segments, that are no longer anchored within the city itself but are blips on a glutted informational screen.

4. At this point it would be worthwhile noting to what extent DeLillo’s observations are in tune with insights reached by scholars dealing more strictly with the urban problematic within a recognizable socio-economic system. To give but one example, I offer an excerpt from David Harvey’s Article “The Urban Process Under Capitalism”:

Under capitalism, there is then a perpetual struggle in which capital builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it, usually in the course of crises, at a subsequent point in time. The temporal and geographical ebb and flow of investment in the built environment can be understood only in terms of such a process (Harvey 1978, 124.)

Keeping this description of the imbrication of capital and space in mind one can say that, on one level, DeLillo's work has focused on how it has played itself out during the last half of the twentieth century within the American city. Launching out in *Underworld* with a cityscape that is characterized by a sense of neighborhood, a condition in which the urban can be experienced as a human habitat, the chronological order of the novel presents moments of transformation eventuating in dispersal and disruption. It is on the background of this disruptive momentum, the way that the forces of capital impact on urban space and on the psycho-emotional investment city dwellers have in that space, that we understand DeLillo's intentions in writing *Cosmopolis*. The bafflement produced by emerging forms of communication and unleashed forces of capital which is foreground in the closing section of *Underworld* provide the framework within which DeLillo deploys his narrative in the later novel. To return to the topic under discussion, in *Cosmopolis* the city is no longer a discrete and readable spatial configuration but is networked as a unit, albeit a very important unit, within the global circulation of capital.

I would contend that DeLillo's choice of title for his last novel opens up a number of ways of understanding both his positioning in relation to these developments and the placement of the novel within a broader cultural context. Namely the word "cosmopolis" – as Stephen Toulmin uses it in his study bearing the same title – designates the overall human order at specific points of historical development (Toulmin 1990). Going by this definition, one could say that the two novels dealt with on the present occasion stage what Toulmin terms "the demolition of the modern cosmopolis" (ibid., 160). One would have to enter a caveat here and specify that DeLillo is primarily focused upon how this process has unfolded within the US polity. On this more specific level, there are numerous references in these texts to phenomena and developments which Edward Soja, for instance, dwells upon and reads as the transformation of the modern metropolis into a cosmopolis, the world city of late capitalism (Soja 2000). If both of these meanings of the word are relevant to the title of DeLillo's novel the designation that cannot be associated with his choice of title is the image of the cosmopolis as an imagined postmodern Utopia in the sense that Leoni Sandercock uses the word (Sandercock 1998). Keeping in mind these three optional readings, we can say that his endeavour to make an all-embracing pronouncement upon the present stage of the American project, its "overall human order", registers present actualities, inscribed as these are in particular configurations of spatiality but that he distances himself from what he sees.

## 5. Conclusion

That critical distance, which spans the gamut from nostalgia to "bespattered" incomprehension, helps us situate Don DeLillo within his literary and cultural context. Unlike those who, networked into the information age and un baffled by its overload of images and messages, celebrate its potential DeLillo, in my opinion, stands athwart its dizzying swirl, painfully aware of a loss of ground from which to humanly relate to the transformed environment. Although in *Cosmopolis* DeLillo appears to plunge into the contemporary the novel evinces

certain structural features which reveal not only the perplexing complexity of the present but also the difficulty of narrating it. The strongest evidence for this would be those cogent statements which Tom Shippey in his review of *Cosmopolis* labels as “inscrutable sayings” strewn throughout the novel (Shippey 2003, 23). These comments, although relevant to the theme, seem not really worked into the texture of the narrative. For instance, in the skirmish scene with the anti-globalists DeLillo gives a variant of Marx’ famous quotation but then goes on to explain: “He recognized the variation on the famous first sentence of *The Communist Manifesto* in which Europe is haunted by the spectre of communism, circa 1850” (96). The reader has to ask for whom are these didactic explanations intended. Has reality become so inscrutable, so recalcitrant to making it intelligible through story, that there is no way of accounting for it except through succinct explanations superimposed onto the narrative? Or is DeLillo drawing attention to the pertinence of accounts of capital and power whose explanatory potential and political relevance seem to have been submerged under the glitter and the disembodied transactions of seemingly self-generating currency flows on screens the world over? My reading has attempted to show how a focusing upon the special relationship the city has had with the novel yields a mapping of the urban in the work of one of the most important contemporary American novelists which, in its turn, places on the agenda political questions of enormous weight and urgency.

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