

Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and *Underworld* through Postmodern Lens

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Abstract

Postmodernism, originated in the mid-20th century, is a cultural, intellectual, and artistic movement characterized by scepticism of narratives, rejection of absolute truths, and emphasis on fragmentation, paradox, and irony. In America, it is primarily associated with writers like DeLillo, Pynchon, Wallace, and Morrison, and is primarily defined by a shift from traditional narratives.

A thorough study reveals that Postmodernism in art and architecture deviates from modernist focus on functionalism and form, purity, incorporating past styles and historical references. It represents uncertainty, plurality, and questioning of norms, influencing the contemporary thought and shaping artistic expression. In fact, its themes are hyperreality, fragmentation, consumerism, and breakdown of traditional narratives and the unprecedented influence of media. This paper will attempt to examine DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and *Underworld* through postmodern lens.

Keywords: Postmodernism, fragmentation, consumerism, Simulation, hyperreality, media, & technology

Introduction

American postmodernism is a cultural, philosophical, and artistic movement that emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to modernism. It is characterized by its sceptical interpretation of cultural narratives, challenge to macro narratives, and inclination towards irony and paradox. The main features of postmodernism include irony, playfulness, black humour, fragmentation, intertextuality, metafiction, and the interplay between reality and simulations. In fact, postmodern fiction has fundamentally altered narrative structures and themes, focusing on subjects like paranoia, identity crisis, and the blurring of reality and fiction. It often rejects objective reality and emphasizes subjective construction of experience and knowledge. Its legacy is evident in vast fields such as arts, philosophy, and critical discourse, prompting reassessment of reality, truth, and meaning. Postmodern authors like Pynchon, DeLillo, and Wallace explore societal complexity, technology, and metafiction.

Postmodernism in *Cosmopolis*

A thorough study of DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and *Underworld* reveals that both these novels possess themes and techniques that exemplify the postmodern literary movement (known for its scepticism toward macro or grand theories, fragmented structures, and emphasis on surface over depth). *Cosmopolis* centres on the life of a young billionaire, Eric Packer, as he traverses Manhattan in his luxurious limousine. It epitomizes postmodern sensibilities through its exploration of hyperreality, the fragmentation of time and space, the influence of technology, and the nature of capitalism. It explains the relationship between futurity, technology, and subjective experience in 2000 in American context. DeLillo's response to 9/11 highlights the unique connection between technology and American historical identity. It explores the relationship between American historical and technological development, focusing on characters' experiences with systemic isolation and repression in postmodern society, and comparing it with conflicting theories. The novel is fragmented in its narrative structure, reflecting the disjointed nature of contemporary life. The protagonist, Eric Packer, navigates a day in New York City, experiencing events in a nonlinear and disjointed manner, mirroring the fragmented reality of postmodern existence. The hyperreal environment, where the simulation of reality (technology, media, capitalism) often surpasses the real, is evident in Packer's detachment from the world around him. DeLillo's fiction incorporates hyperreality, a concept influenced by Baudrillard's hyperreality. The hyperreal self is central in many of Don

DeLillo's novels, often revolving around television and mass media, including radio, television, film, and the Internet. We are reminded of Baudrillard's *From Precession of Simulacra* wherein Baudrillard, one of the most famous writers on postmodernism says:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts, which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself. (Leitch 2001:1557)

Richard J Lane writes in *Jean Baudrillard*:

Baudrillard argues that there are three levels of simulation, where the first level is an obvious copy of reality, and the second level is a copy so good that it blurs the boundaries between reality and representation. The third level is one, which produces a reality of its own without being based upon any particular bit of the real world. The best example is probably "virtual reality", which is a world generated by computer languages or code. Virtual reality is thus a world generated by mathematical models, which are abstract entities. It is this third level of simulation, where the model comes before the constructed world, that Baudrillard calls the hyperreal. (Lane 2000: 30)

Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality refers to the process where representations of things replace the real thing, leading to a simulacrum where reality is replaced by false images. In fact, "original no longer exists" (Baudrillard 1994:99). This has resulted in a collapsed distinction between the real and simulations that is quite visible in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*. In fact, it talks of the complex question of human identity in the contemporary society where media through its hyperreality shapes not only the society but also humans. It focuses on the presence of cutting-edge technology and discusses the fusion between the human and the mechanical, resulting in the "new" reality, known as hyperreality. This novel is pregnant with instances where computer-generated images reveal Eric's conflict with hyperreality, highlighting the tenability of the postmodern hyperreal.

Eric Packer is a multi-billionaire representative of the "New World Order global elite" (Noble 2020:58). He represents the egoistical Leopold Bloom or Odysseus, cruising New York City in his high-tech limousine. Packer serves as a metaphor for merging the universal and the individual, highlighting the obsession with money and the American Dream. He represents a typical American citizen living a mobile life, blurring the line between the real and the hyperreal. His personal identity becomes elusive, as he is more *technologicus* than *homo* throughout the novel and thus simulated living in simulations and hyperreal. This makes Baudrillard state: "We are presently living with a minimum of real sociality and a maximum of simulation" (Baudrillard 1990:155).

In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo presents a world where reality is increasingly mediated by technology and finance, echoing Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. Eric Packer's limousine, a mobile command centre equipped with advanced technology, symbolizes this detachment from the physical world. "He didn't know what he wanted. Then he knew. He wanted to get a haircut He put on his sunglasses. Then he walked back across the avenue and approached the lines of white limousines." (Chapter 1) This seemingly trivial desire to get a haircut sets off the day's journey, highlighting the hyperreal nature of Packer's life. His existence is driven by whims that seem disconnected from the tangible world, reflecting a hyperreal state where desires and their fulfilment are mediated by the artificial environment of his limousine. In "Requiem for the Media" Baudrillard contends that the media's main function is to generate meaning, messages, and signals, addressing the loss of meaning in the modern period. He claims that mass media, a site of disappearance, is to blame for this loss. Baudrillard contends that messages no longer serve an informational function, but rather are employed to control and conceal the real. D. Kellner seconds this argument by saying:

By the late 1970s, Baudrillard was interpreting the media as key simulation machines which reproduce images, signs and codes which in turn come to constitute an autonomous realm of (hyper)reality and also to play a key role in everyday life ... now they are coming to constitute a (hyper)reality, a new media reality, 'more real than the real,' where 'the real' is subordinate to representation thus leading ultimately to a dissolving of the real. (Kellner 1989: 68)

This way hyperreality causes confusion, fragmentation, and ambiguity as people rely on easily available resources to establish successful behavioural patterns and identify themselves in relation to existing traditions. Eric Packer is fully engaged in the computer world, cut off from human interaction. He observes events on the television, frequently before they happen. Packer does not forecast the future, but rather observes patterns in the media and adapts them to his environment. The limousine's exterior is similar to many other non-distinctive limousines on New York's streets. It fits into the environment on the outside while being extremely well equipped on the inside, allowing Packer to monitor the flow of economic and media information. The digital depiction of capital is a signifier, like Baudrillard's simulacrum that could be meaningless. Eric uses cyber-capital to show the lack of link between the real and the image that only claims to be real.

Eric Packer explores New York Street

In *Cosmopolis*, Eric Packer lives online, exploring New York Street while searching for the deeper purpose of his life. The novel talks of an individual's isolation in modern society, as well as the never-ending drives for innovation and novelty. Packer's existence is made possible by the Internet and contemporary technology, even at the most basic level. His house is filled with smart gadgets, and a live stream broadcasts. The Internet stream is a key component in his collapse, fuelling his obsession with technology. Following lines from the novel are worth mentioning here:

He sat in the club chair at the rear of the cabin looking into the array of visual display units. There were medleys of data on every screen, all the flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing. He absorbed this material in a couple of long still seconds, ignoring the speech sounds that issued from lacquered heads. There was a microwave and a heart monitor. He looked at the spycam on a swivel and it looked back at him. He used to sit here in hand-held space but that was finished now. The context was nearly touchless. He could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank. (DeLillo, 2003:13)

Postmodern literature often disrupts traditional notions of time and space, presenting a fragmented narrative that mirrors the disjointed experience of contemporary life. In *Cosmopolis*, the journey through Manhattan becomes a microcosm of this fragmentation. "Time is a corporate asset now. It belongs to the free market system. The present is harder to find." (Chapter 3) This reflection on time as a commodity emphasizes the disconnection from linear, personal experience. The fragmentation of time in Packer's world, where market fluctuations dictate reality, reflects a broader postmodern condition where the continuity of personal and historical narratives is disrupted.

DeLillo's novel critically examines the pervasive influence of technology on human experience. Packer's limousine, with its multiple screens and constant data streams, epitomizes the omnipresence of technology and its capacity to isolate individuals from direct experience. "He watched the yuan fall, in percentage points, first to the tenth decimal place and then to the hundredth." (Chapter 2) This moment illustrates the degree to which technology mediates Packer's perception of reality. His immersion in digital information represents the postmodern condition of being constantly connected yet profoundly detached from the tangible world.

Cosmopolis presents a critical view of late capitalism, focusing on the excesses and irrationalities of the financial system. Packer's journey is marked by his obsession with markets and wealth, reflecting the novel's critique of capitalism's impact on human values and relationships. "A spectre is haunting the world, the spectre of capital." (Chapter 4) This paraphrase of Marx's famous line about communism underscores the pervasive and haunting presence of capital in every aspect of life. The novel's portrayal of a world dominated by financial speculation and consumerism critiques the dehumanizing effects of capitalism.

DeLillo's portrayal of Eric Packer delves into themes of identity and alienation, common in postmodern literature. Packer's detachment from others and his environment highlights the fragmentation of self that characterizes the postmodern condition. "He'd always wanted to be calmer than anyone around him. It was a way to take their power, make their effort seem pointless." (Chapter 5) Packer's desire for control and detachment from others underscores his alienation. His calm demeanour is a façade that masks a deeper existential emptiness, reflecting the postmodern theme of fragmented identity.

DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* delves into the intricacies of late capitalism, a common theme in postmodern literature. Packer's wealth and his pursuit of financial control reflect the commodification and consumer culture prevalent in postmodern society. The financial markets become a metaphor for the unpredictability and volatility of postmodern life. In fact, the Internet plays an important role in Packer's life and riches, given the world of modern economic and financial circles is mostly virtual. Packer's hyperreality, which is entirely based on the Internet, enables him to forecast currency movements. Packer is a pioneer in this way of life, believing that seeing everything around him on a screen makes everything more genuine. The Internet and its virtual reality have become home to modern mass media, including television. The following lines reveal how much infatuated the protagonist is with ones and zeros:

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. (DeLillo, 2003: 24)

Postmodernism often explores the instability of language. In *Cosmopolis*, the dialogues are cryptic and often devoid of substantial meaning, highlighting the inadequacy of language in conveying reality. This aligns with postmodern theories of deconstruction, where meanings are fluid, and multiple interpretations are possible.

Cosmopolis is a compelling exploration of postmodern themes, encapsulated through its fragmented narrative, critique of capitalism, and examination of technology's role in shaping human experience. DeLillo's portrayal of Eric Packer's surreal journey through Manhattan serves as a powerful reflection on the disorienting and hyperreal nature of

contemporary life. Through its intricate exploration of these themes, *Cosmopolis* stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of postmodernism in understanding the complexities of the modern world.

Postmodernism in *Underworld*

Like *Cosmopolis*, *Underworld* employs a nonlinear narrative, presenting the postmodern view of history as a subjective construct rather than an objective truth. The novel spans several decades, jumping back and forth in time, which emphasizes the relativism and constructed nature of historical narratives. This novel addresses the concept of simulacra – copies without an original – through its depiction of media and technology. The famous opening scene at the baseball game and the presence of iconic images throughout the novel illustrate how media shapes and distorts reality, a hallmark of postmodern thought as articulated by theorists like Jean Baudrillard.

A pervasive sense of paranoia is present in *Underworld*, a characteristic of postmodern literature. The fear of unseen forces and the intricate web of connections between characters and events suggest a world where nothing is as it seems, reflecting the postmodern suspicion of metanarratives and grand explanations.

DeLillo's novels feature protagonists who are de-centred and lack a clear, stable identity. Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis* and Nick Shay in *Underworld* are both searching for meaning in a fragmented world, embodying the postmodern condition of uncertainty and alienation. The pervasive influence of technology is a key theme in both novels. In *Cosmopolis*, technology mediates every aspect of Packer's life, contributing to his alienation. Similarly, in *Underworld*, the omnipresence of media and technology shapes the characters' perceptions and interactions, underscoring the alienation inherent in postmodern society.

DeLillo's use of intertextuality and metafictional elements invites readers to question the nature of fiction and reality. References to real events, cultural artifacts, and other literary works create a layered text that blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, a common technique in postmodern literature.

Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, a sprawling narrative that traverses the American landscape and psyche across several decades, stands as a quintessential work of postmodern literature. Through its fragmented structure, pastiche of historical and fictional events, and deep interrogation of mass culture and technology, *Underworld* embodies many characteristics of postmodernism.

One of the hallmarks of postmodern literature is its departure from traditional linear storytelling. *Underworld* exemplifies this through its fragmented structure, shifting timelines, and multiple perspectives. The novel begins with a prologue set during the famous 1951-baseball game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers, and then leaps forward to 1992 before scattering across various moments in between.

Following line from the prologue is worth mentioning: "He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful". (*Underworld*: Prologue). This opening sentence immediately immerses the reader in a moment of cultural significance while foreshadowing the fragmented narrative. The prologue serves as a microcosm of the novel's broader exploration of American identity, using a single event to anchor a vast, multifaceted narrative.

DeLillo's use of pastiche – blending various styles, genres, and references – is another postmodern trait. *Underworld* weaves together real historical events, fictional characters, and cultural references, creating a tapestry that reflects the complexity of contemporary life. "J. Edgar Hoover watches the game from the stands, a small man with a large vision of surveillance and control." (*Underworld*: Prologue). Here, DeLillo inserts the real-life figure of J. Edgar Hoover into the fictionalized account of the baseball game, blending fact and fiction. This intertextual approach allows DeLillo to comment on the pervasive nature of surveillance and the intertwining of personal and political histories.

A central concern of *Underworld* is the impact of mass culture and media on individual and collective consciousness. DeLillo portrays a world saturated with images, advertisements, and broadcasts, where the boundaries between reality and representation are increasingly blurred. "The waste, the garbage, the culture of excess – it's all part of the same story. The things we throw away are more revealing than the things we keep." (Part 4: Cocksucker Blues)

In this passage, DeLillo critiques the consumerist culture that defines much of modern America. The metaphor of waste serves as a potent symbol of the ephemeral nature of contemporary life and the hidden narratives within discarded objects and overlooked moments.

DeLillo's postmodern lens also focuses on the pervasive influence of technology. *Underworld* examines how technological advancements shape human interactions, societal structures, and personal identities. "Technology is lust removed from nature." (Part 6: East). This succinct statement encapsulates DeLillo's ambivalence towards technology. While it offers unprecedented possibilities, it also estranges individuals from the natural world and from genuine human connections. The novel frequently returns to this theme, exploring the paradoxes inherent in technological progress.

Postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality – the condition in which reality and simulation are indistinguishable – resonates throughout *Underworld*. DeLillo's narrative often blurs the lines between the real and the imagined, challenging readers to discern the truth amidst layers of representation. "The painting on the billboard is more vivid than the landscape it depicts, more real than real." (Part 2: Elegy for Left Hand Alone) This moment illustrates the postmodern idea that mediated experiences can seem more authentic than direct ones. The hyperreal image on the

billboard becomes a substitute for actual experience, reflecting the novel's broader critique of how media shapes perception.

In short, DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* & *Underworld* are insightful explorations of postmodern ideas, utilizing a fractured narrative and understanding of mass culture, media and technology. These challenge readers to question reality, identity, and history in a society characterized by simulacra and media saturation, demonstrating the relevance of postmodern literature in contemporary times.

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