

Apocalyptic Vistas in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

Abstract: This essay proposes to read Don DeLillo's 2003 novel *Cosmopolis* as an allegorical treatment of turn-of-the-century concerns about the crisis of representation of capitalism. *Cosmopolis* read in this way becomes a tale of capitalist and narrative apocalypse which stages the confrontation of opposing forces of "the future" and "the past," or the utopian desire inscribed in the capitalist vision of time and the carnivalesque practice of subjects under capitalism. The use of allegorical form and the mocking framework of Bakhtinian carnival allows for *Cosmopolis* to be read not as high satire but popular comedy. I argue that by implicating the writer as a character in this apocalyptic allegory, DeLillo prevents the glorification of the writer to the position of an authoritative voice in history, leaving the final judgment of the capitalist myths to the reader.

Keywords: Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, allegory, apocalypse, carnival, Bakhtin, capitalism, plague

When in 2003 Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* saw the light of the publishing day, it did not meet with much appreciation. Reviewers were disheartened by the novel's failure to address the situation following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and annoyed at its supposed repetitiveness. Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* review, for instance, pronounced the novel's "portrait of a millennial Manhattan [to be] hopelessly clichéd, quite devoid of the satiric black humor [of] *White Noise*" and "thoroughly predictable" ("Books of the Times"). John Updike sounded a similar note when he remarked that "somehow nothing happens" in *Cosmopolis* and recommended reading Tom Wolfe to those who would like to know "what it's like to be a young Master of the Universe" ("One-Way Street"). Such reviewers did not appreciate the allegorical quality of the novel, nor did they value the novel's attunement to popular apocalyptic imagination or its use of plague imagery. The present essay seeks to fill this gap by proposing to view the novel as an allegorical treatment of turn-of-the-century concerns about the crisis of representation of capitalism. *Cosmopolis* read in this way becomes a tale of capitalist and narrative apocalypse which by staging the confrontation of opposing forces of "the future" and "the past" that ends in an accumulation of corpses and ruins reveals the limits of modern mythology of cyber-capitalism. Despite the familiarity of the formula used in the novel, such a reading of *Cosmopolis* as allegory-apocalypse brings to the fore the marginalized but popular response to cyber-capitalist myths that follows the mocking rhetoric of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival, making room for the critical assessment of the shift in representations of capitalism at the dawn of the era of economic crisis. What emerges in the wake of such apocalyptic assessment is a peculiar record of the ravages of modern myths that showcases the novelist's humble place in history.

Apocalyptic Vision

The biblical origins of apocalypse show it to be a narrative of revelation propelled by a two-fold dynamic of destruction and promise of renewal of humanity (*Postmodern* 121). What binds the two together is a system of symbols that allows the events of the end of days to be interpreted as prophecy of what is to come. Refusing to see apocalypse as politically neutral, Elana Gomel notes the seductiveness of a scenario that thus “enables one to wallow in violence and to worship purity; to believe in predestination and to engage in feats of derring-do; to act in history and aspire to utopia” (*Postmodern* 123). The desire for utopia, or escape from time and history, becomes then instrumental in justifying and by extension effacing the brutality of the catastrophic end of history. This dual logic of apocalypse lies at the core of *Cosmopolis*.

Set on a day in April in the year 2000, *Cosmopolis* invites apocalyptic interpretation already in its opening scene when the lot of its protagonist, twenty-eight-year-old billionaire asset manager Eric Packer, is said to have cosmic implications, since “[w]hen he died he would not end. The world would end” (6). In this short aside, DeLillo at once teases the narrative’s end and ascribes the apocalyptic impulse to Packer’s sleep-deprived and capitalist mind. When read within the framework of apocalyptic impulse, Packer’s trivial plan to cross Manhattan to get a haircut becomes an act of derring-do hastening the consummation of the end of the world that Packer imagines as the moment of millenarian transformation. The singlemindedness with which he begins his journey is here significant: he does not care that the city has been brought to a standstill by the visit of the president, since the promise of a haircut is rich in lofty implications. This is implied in the way he explains his trip to Shiner, his chief of technology, as they begin the cruise through the city in Packer’s limousine. When Shiner suggests that, instead of inching his way through the gridlock, Packer could simply have the barber come to the office, or to the limousine, his boss answers: “A haircut has what. Associations. Calendar on the wall. Mirrors everywhere. There’s no barber chair here. Nothing swivels but the spycam” (15). With the calendar signifying the passage of time, mirrors reflecting the self, and the barber’s chair swiveling to welcome the customer and then release them already changed, even something as prosaic as a haircut becomes a symbol for the end of the old and the birth of the new.

More than that, for an asset manager such as Packer the word “haircut” also signifies appropriation of transformative imagery by the market logic, since in the financial world it denotes “a sudden loss of equity or drop in income” (Safire). By extension, the only transformation that Packer can imagine entails a cataclysmic financial miscalculation, which is why as his journey begins, Packer continues to bet against the Japanese yen, staking his fortune on the hint of economic recession in Japan. Although the decision invites comparisons with George Soros’s 1992 breaking of the Bank of England, it is rather the inverse of Soros’s move as Packer is intent on vaporizing his fortune on the market, in this way effectuating a world

market apocalypse that opens the way for utopian future. Despite seemingly going against capitalist logic of profit generation, this move is very much in line with what Packer sees as the actual transgressive potential of capitalism. Jean-François Lyotard's remarks on the relation between capital and time help us understand why it is so: "What is important for capital is not the time already invested in goods and services, but the time still stored in stocks of 'free' or 'fresh' money, given that this represents the only time which can be used with a view to organizing the future and neutralizing the event" (66). In this light, by disturbing the market through his speculation, Packer is looking to realize the promise of the future stored in capital.

Such unleashing of the future requires that Packer "[t]hink outside the limits," which he interprets as charting what is to come (21). As a result, Packer's entire journey from his high-rise apartment westward through the city effectively unravels as apocalyptic revelation. Eschewed of its narrowly scriptural understanding, this revelation shows the space of the city, the time of the journey and the accompanying spectacle of cyber-capital to be prefiguring a utopia that Packer envisions awaiting at the end of history. The rhymed structure of Packer's apocalyptic narrative creates a kind of secular typology, where events, spaces and people function as types of post-transformation antitypes. All such types can only be read as revelation due to their immersion in technology and capital, or as DeLillo calls it—cyber-capital.

One such type are monumental bank centers, which Packer appreciates as extensions of capitalism, reveling in their apocalyptic symbolism:

The bank towers loomed just beyond the avenue. They were covert structures for all their size, hard to see, so common and monotonic, tall, sheer, abstract, with standard setbacks, and block-long, and interchangeable, and he had to concentrate to see them.... They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. They were the end of the outside world. 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)

The abstract symbolism of the buildings not only masks their historical materiality with visions of utopia—"a time beyond geography," but also "hastens the future." Himself a resident of a forty-eight-room apartment in "the tallest residential tower in the world" (8), Packer not only appreciates but also functions within—to borrow Henri Lefebvre's term—abstract space. Such abstract space produced in capitalism occludes the fact that space is a product of urban practice by burying such practice under an abstract phallic fantasy (Lefebvre 287). The bank centers illustrate this point vividly, showing abstract space to be one of apocalyptic types in Packer's typology.

Characteristically, not only city buildings but also Packer's customized white limousine is seen by him as abstract space typifying utopia. Sound-proof and fitted with an array of displays, a microwave and a spycam, among other things,

the limousine doubles as a mobile office and reflects Packer's need to overcome reality and time: the different displays in his car stream news broadcast and financial information from currency markets 24/7, helping him predict market fluctuations, while the spycam makes it redundant to even look outside the car's window. In the limousine, Packer is working in real time, which, as Jean Baudrillard reminds us: "has a secret millenarianism about it: cancelling the flow of time, cancelling delay, suppressing the sense that the event is happening elsewhere, anticipating its end by freeing ourselves from linear time, laying hold of things almost before they have taken place" (9). Baudrillard's theory seems to answer the call of Vija Kinski, Packer's chief of theory, for "a new theory of time" that would account for the disappearance of the past and harnessing of the future characteristic for the present historical moment (DeLillo 86). Real time is then apocalyptic: it glosses over the paroxysms of history and geography and colonizes the future.

The pressure of abstract space and real time inside Packer's limousine is in fact so great that it leaves its mark on Packer's interactions with other people. Not only does Packer appreciate the alienated, abstracted genitality of phallic towers and limousines, but he also tends to see people as removed from such glorious fantasy and reduced to their foul corporeality. Inside the limousine, Packer's chief of technology sits "in his masturbatory crouch" (12), his currency analysts gnaws on his fingers in a scene "awful and atavistic... [turning him into an] unborn, curled in a membranous sac" (36), and his chief of finance Jane Melman enters the limousine sweating profusely after a jog with "the kind of grim deliverance that marks a deadweight drop to the toilet" (39).

The overbearing sense that biology can only survive under cyber-capitalism as emblematic of what needs to be overcome and purified through apocalypse is strengthened in the scene that follows Melman's entry to the limousine and in which a prostate exam is given to Packer by Dr. Ingram in Melman's presence. Fittingly, it ends with Packer and Melman experiencing an orgasm without touching seconds after Packer witnessed the scene projected onto the screens of his limousine by the spycam's eye. In this way, Packer and Melman reenact alienation imposed on them by the abstract and real-time-based environment structured by cyber-capital. Even the reality of bodily orifices—such as Melman's crotch, her open mouth "showing large gapped teeth" (47), Packer's rectum—is hijacked to symbolize openness to penetration by alienating forces both human (Dr. Ingram's probing finger) and mechanical (spycam, echocardiogram). For Packer, the experience prefigures utopian postcorporeality to be realized upon the fulfilment of cyber-capital-driven transformation of the "redundant and transferable" body into life as "a consciousness saved from the void" (DeLillo 48, 206).¹

Crucially, all the types of cyber-capitalist utopia have a distinctly spectacular and seductive character. This seductive power is emphasized whenever we see

1 This vision of postcorporeality puts Packer in opposition to the tradition of posthumanism that seeks to identify such transcendence with liberation from the regime of capitalism and confines of the subject-object matrix (Hayles).

characters in *Cosmopolis* entranced by “the glow of cyber-capital” emanating from screens or street tickers (78). One such character is Kinski, whom Packer imagines to be a fellow believer in cyber-capitalist apocalyptic vision as they stand before the three-tier street ticker north of Times Square, observing “[t]he hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols” (80). In that moment, Packer feels that he knows what Kinski is thinking:

Never mind the speed that makes it hard to follow what passes before the eye. The speed is the point. Never mind the urgent and endless replenishment, the way data dissolves at one end of the series just as it takes shape at the other. This is the point, the thrust, the future. We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as a pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable. The small monitors of the office, home and car become a kind of idolatry here, where crowds might gather in astonishment. (80)

Alison Shonkwiler argues that the above fragment illustrates the workings of the financial sublime, an aesthetics of unrepresentability that structures our understanding of capitalism (273). But it has to be added that in line with such sublime aesthetic, the spectacle imparts a decipherable if mystical message of destruction, as becomes evident when Packer reads from it the news of the death of Nikolai Kaganovich, a Russian oligarch whom Packer knew and respected. Packer welcomes the news and his theorist Kinski provides an instructive interpretation of his employer's contentment when she says that Kaganovich died so Packer could live (82). Kaganovich's death comes to typify the passage from a body trapped in time to transcendence in cyber-capitalist utopia as he actually becomes one with the spectacle-as-revelation when his death is broadcasted around the world.

To Packer, the violence of death upon which such transformation is predicated is not something to be wary of, but rather accepted. Packer is thus not an idolater, nor a man of the crowd, but a prophet of cyber-capitalist apocalypse willing to become a martyr. The mystical quality of his position and vision is evident whenever he refers to data as “soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process” (24). He is driven to study “the roll and flip of data on a screen” and is convinced that he understands this revelation, which renders the world “knowable and whole” (24). Packer's wife, Elise Shifrin, fittingly summarizes her husband's position: “I think you're dedicated to knowing. I think you acquire information and turn it into something stupendous and awful. You're a dangerous person. Do you agree? A visionary” (19). In this light, Packer's attempt to chart the movements of the Japanese yen in time and thus find “a pattern latent in nature itself” (63) becomes an arcane and apocalyptic mission of uncovering the hidden promise contained in circulating information.

Describing Packer's mission in apocalyptic terms helps show how DeLillo effectively exposes in *Cosmopolis* the working of modern cyber-capitalist myth. Packer's utopian desire for transcending the confines of the world is shown to rely,

on the one hand, on an elaborate construction of his own capitalist typology and, on the other, on perpetuating the discourse of unrepresentability, or the sublime spectacle, with regard to cyber-capital's elusive but pervasive structuring presence. Because of indirect narration used in the novel, it is easy to mistake Packer's stance for the governing idea of the novel itself. Yet once we consider the apocalyptic framework into which this idea is written and its ostensibly allegorical character, we open such mystifying discourse to a critique coming from the side of that which apocalyptic vision aims to overcome, namely history. As we will see, the tedium of abstract dialogues and glowy images is broken by the actuality of events and practices opposed to the tyranny of visions. Things do happen in *Cosmopolis*; the problem is that when they do, it is all a show.

Carnavalesque Practice

What DeLillo paints as the main counter-force to the apocalyptic vision is irreverent practice that bears all the marks of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival. To recall, according to Bakhtin:

carnival [in medieval times] celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (10)

Instead of advocating hope for utopia at the end of days, accessible only to the chosen few, carnival staged a jolly celebration of material history, stripped of abstract and eternal authority and grounded in the crudest reality of the population—biological life (Bakhtin 19). Carnival festivities reveled in materiality at its most grotesque and celebrated parts of the body such as the rectum or the genital organs, instrumental in conveying the themes of fertility, regeneration and rebirth (Bakhtin 19). By means of degradation into the flesh, the grotesque open body, forever dying and being reborn, the populace not only celebrated the biological links of social cohesion but also asserted its right to the future (Bakhtin 99). We can then say that transformation, which in the apocalyptic vision is only possible at the break of times, was in carnival translated into the very material nature of historical time. For that reason, carnival worked as a mock-apocalypse; it ridiculed pretensions to utopia erected on the fundament of apocalyptic typology of signs; it was not a revelation but a play in time. At its horizon, medieval carnival erected not utopia, but the stage of history—the marketplace.

The modern-day tradition of carnival differs from its medieval predecessor in that it cannot celebrate rebirth into history in innocently biological terms. This is due to the fact that the biological basis of social collectivity, once the locus of revolutionary resonance of carnival festivities, is now a resource exploited by the combined forces of cyber-capitalism and biopolitical state. For this reason, both the

imagery and the language of modern carnival has changed: since phallic imagery has been appropriated by cyber-capitalism, genitals are no longer the main focus for the new grotesque body used in carnival. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the Hippocratic face, the face marked by the signs of impending death, and it is the state of undeadness in history, the state of being never fully dead or alive, that is celebrated.

In DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, carnival is introduced by a score of anti-prophets or jesters that ridicule Packer's revelation. One of these is none other than Packer's chief of theory, Vija Kinski. In contrast to her employer's mythologizing discourse of discovery and promise, Kinski's theories of cyber-capital do not seem to claim to uncover anything. Despite satisfying Packer's hunger for systematicity and abstraction that effaces reality, these theories are curiously full of self-avowed gaps and interlaced with Kinski's admissions that she does not and does not want to understand the actual mechanisms governing the financial market of which she theorizes (78-79). Even the most coherent of her theories, the comments she offers when Packer and she encounter violent anti-globalist protests, are offered in a tone vacillating between dismissal and idolatry. At the same time, when she begins to talk of the protesters as "a fantasy generated by the market" that invigorates the system (90-91), she articulates for the readers the idea that the protest is a make-believe practice produced under the conditions of cyber-capitalist apocalypse and ridiculing cyber-capitalist mythology. Such theories show Kinski to be undermining Packer's vision by denying capitalist promise of transcendence and utopia and asserting that there is nothing outside the historical market.² Kinski's session with Packer is then a kind of comical carnivalesque debate in which praise is interlaced with abuse (Bakhtin 435). Clownish in her business shirt, "old embroidered vest and a long pleated skirt of a thousand launderings" (DeLillo 77), Kinski can flatter Packer's genius, only to smile cryptically, look slyly, or laugh a dirty laugh, "scornful and coarse" (85). From Packer's own central seat in the limousine, she even teases—"evilly, eyes alight"—Packer's demise and is delighted when she learns he may be in danger (DeLillo 92, 79). To Packer, she remains "unrevealing," and he finds himself wondering what she truly believes (104). That her paradoxical status is not entirely lost on him becomes evident when by the end of their session of theorizing Packer imagines her "asquat his chest in the middle of the night... not sexually or demonically driven but there to speak into his fitful sleep, *to trouble his dreams with her theories*" (104, my italics).

Packer's apocalyptic vision is undermined not only by Kinski's theories, but especially by the reality of the cityscape and urban practice that in a truly carnivalesque fashion offends his meticulously constructed typology. Initially, the offensive signs that deny the pull of the future and remind Packer of the continual

2 If Kinski is silent when faced with the spectacle of the self-immolating man, it is not because she cannot theorize it away, but rather because in him performance of undeadness crosses into death and becomes the proper subject for the chronicler, not the jester. The concept of the chronicler is explained in the last part of the present essay.

sway of the past over the present seem innocuous enough and can be glimpsed in the persistence of obsolete technologies, such as a hand-held organizer “whose original culture [has] just disappeared” (DeLillo 9), or words such as “skyscraper” or “computer.” As Packer’s journey progresses, however, he is forced to withstand more and more pressure. When Packer witnesses commercial history incarnated in the shops and life of the Diamond District, he struggles to accept this historical sphere’s retrograde character. Peopled with Hasidim and foreign-speaking beggars, the district is an obsolete but still operating site of city commerce. Of jewelry sold and bought there Packer remarks: “Hundreds of millions of dollars a day moved back and forth behind walls, a form of money so obsolete Eric didn’t know how to think about it. It was hard, shiny, faceted. It was everything he’d left behind or never encountered, cut and polished, intensely three-dimensional” (64). Crowded by an amalgamation of immigrants and evoking visions of “the 1920s and the diamond centers of Europe before the second war” (64-65), the district potently conveys that it is a product of centuries of multi-cultural urban practice shaping the city architecture as well as its life. As a prosperous historical space, the Diamond District becomes a deconstructive alternative to Packer’s abstract space as a type of utopia. For this reason, it is for Packer “an offense to the truth of the future” (65)—an accusation revealing the dogmatic and elitist nature of cyber-capitalist vision of apocalypse in which he believes.

If the palimpsestic character of the Diamond District proves a disturbing view for Packer, all the more troubling are the moments when despite Packer’s supposed real-time-based control of the future, his limousine is simply stuck in traffic and time. In fact, the car’s progress is obstructed by three major occurrences: the anti-capitalist protests on Times Square, the spectral presence of President Midwood’s motorcade, and the funerary procession of Sufi rapper Brutha Fez. All three show different aspects of carnivalesque play, creating new carnivalesque temporality of meetings and missed encounters.

The performance of street protesters is perhaps the most characteristic carnivalesque moment in the novel. Even before Packer’s limousine reaches Times Square, the protests are foreshadowed in street performances that parody apocalyptic typology. At one point, Packer passes a single woman in grey spandex wielding a dead rat in front of bronze-and-gold facades of financial centers, only to find a pair of similarly clad men hurling living rats around a luncheonette in which he stops when trying to convince his young wife to have sex with him (74-75). Once Packer’s limousine nears Times Square, it becomes clear that the rat is a grotesque banner for the protests. The earlier dead and living rats serve as mock-types of the final antitype—the large Styrofoam rat wielded by the rampaging crowd. But the mock-rat typology is only the first element of the carnivalesque protests.

Another is the language that protesters use. Despite being referred to as protesters, they do not voice any actual demands. Instead, they chant a motto, which turns out to be a bastardized line taken from *The Communist Manifesto*: “A specter is haunting the world—the specter of capitalism” (DeLillo 96). By reformulating

the basic quote, the protesters at once parody Marxist discourse that claims to account for their condition and show their familiarity with cyber-capitalist rhetoric. In their treatment, the spectacle becomes the specter, and that which was supposed to anticipate the future morphs into a harping menace from the past. The ingenuity of the first motto is met by the elegance of the second one, which is not chanted but instead displayed on the hijacked NASDAQ tickers. This second motto, taken from Zbigniew Herbert's anti-establishment poem, which Packer has read and quoted early in the novel, proclaims the rat to be "the [new] unit of currency" (DeLillo 96). What is intimated in the second motto is at once the global reach of carnivalesque protests that can find points of convergence between the United States and Poland, subversion of the apocalyptic vision, and a crude degradation of the elusive and soulful cyber-capital into an animal that is a vector for the plague. There is no place for prophecies in carnival; the language of the revelation is twisted by the amalgamation of the high and the low, and the result is grotesque.

Thus, carnival in the age of cyber-capital turns from the celebration of renewal to its mockery, not only grotesque but also ruthless. The protests become a staging of apocalypse performed, significantly, at the very heart of abstract space—Times Square. Packer watches the protests unravel from a TV broadcast on his limousine screen, but despite his attempts to isolate himself from them, the violence outside penetrates inside. Images of "faces scorched by pepper gas," visions of cars burning, "battalions of rats in restaurants and hotel lobbies," policemen "genuflected, outside a fast food shop" and protesters storming the NASDAQ tickers alternate with Packer and Kinski's relentlessly abstract commentary and descriptions of mutilation that Packer's car suffers as it is swayed, urinated on, and spray-painted by the protesters (89-91). Both Times Square and Packer's limousine are then degraded into the material reality of excrements used as weapons and brutalized bodies, while Kinski's jester theories pick holes in Packer's mind.

In the light of the violence of these assaults, Packer is no longer able to ignore the influence of urban practice. Not only is his apocalyptic journey halted, but all the types of utopia he has deciphered are ridiculed by powers rising from the city. Real time controlling the future is refracted into the time of carnivalesque play—a historical practice revived at the end of the twentieth century—that turns into performance of mass death. Accumulation of bodies and rats, real and imaginary, ultimately constructs a visual allegory in which apocalypse becomes the plague. In this allegory, there is no place for dreams of utopia beyond the material world; instead, all emphasis is placed on the horrors of dying. Cyber-capital becomes a disease, a plague that ravages the world, and everything that it touches either dies or enters the state of undeadness, becoming the carrier for the plague. In this sense, the

rat³ that becomes “the unit of currency” symbolizes human life reduced to collateral for the future of genocide. In the carnivalesque mirror, Packer himself is a rat and plague-carrier.

But the influence of the carnivalesque does not stop at the level of images and narratives; as a practice it actually penetrates Packer’s body. Packer’s sexual encounters, initially taken to reflect his power in phallic terms, become points when the city can begin to strip him of insignia of power. Not only does each lover require that Packer step outside of his limousine, but they also leave him missing successive parts of his attire and reeking more and more of sex, degrading him into his own flesh. In effect, Packer becomes obsessed by the flawed reality of this flesh, as symbolized by his inability to understand what having an asymmetrical prostrate means. Asymmetry becomes then instrumental in emphasizing unbalanced and unrhymed relation of meaning and event, distorting Packer’s apocalyptic typology. Always “[l]ooking for balance, beautiful balance, equal parts, equal sides” (200), Packer feels therefore “pale and spooked” by the inelegance of asymmetry, which opens his body to some potential disease (52). Symbolizing another aspect of carnivalesque opposition to Packer’s utopian designs, asymmetry as disease illustrates the beginnings of the new grotesque body in cyber-capitalism. Just as the original model of the grotesque body, its new version is still “not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (Bakhtin 26), which is why the promise of transgression inscribed in it so easily seduces Packer. But the openness of the cyber-capitalist grotesque body invites the menace of biological horrors and the hilarity of false fears that Packer is apparently unable to transform into utopian types. He then opens himself to the marks of the mock-plague.

Once we realize Packer’s complex transformation, it becomes easier to understand why President Midwood’s motorcade and Brutha Fez’s funerary procession become significant obstacles on his journey. Even though Packer’s limousine never clashes with the President’s motorcade, its progression is still affected by the ripples in traffic and the broadcasts of President’s appearances. The President’s ability to penetrate both the city and Packer’s limousine (through videostreams) exemplifies a mode of circulation as pervasive as the plague but not as immediately felt. If Packer is a plague-carrier, President Midwood is the undead: “his eyes [carry] no sign of immanence, of vital occupancy” and he waits “in a state of occult repose... to be reanimated” (77). Packer’s hatred of the President is then two-fold. On the one hand, he feels the aversion of a true-blue capitalist toward this archaic, antiquated-in-life figure of nation-state power. On the other hand, he envies

3 The image of the rat itself is DeLillo’s nod to the actual rodent problem of New York City, where the relentlessly growing population of rats continues to trouble the authorities and provide surprising moments of entertainment to NYC inhabitants. Cf. “Rat Information Portal,” NYC.gov, 2016, <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/data/health-tools/rats-information-portal.page>. Accessed 31 Jan. 2017; “#Pizzarat becomes internet sensation.” *Youtube*, uploaded by CNN, 22 Sep. 2015, <https://youtu.be/4pitaHPXRuc>.

Midwood's omnipresence, his ability to subdue the urban landscape as Packer himself used to be able to do (77). Since on another plane, the Japanese economy also resists Packer's plans, Packer is forced to realize the continuing viability of state politics and state economy within cyber-capitalism. His hostility toward the President indicates Packer's increasing sense of slipping command of reality and the world.

While the President's at once spectral and zombified presence annoys Packer, his encounter with another fluid obstacle evokes a very different reaction. When the funerary procession that has been impeding Packer's movements turns out to be linked to the death of his favorite Sufi rapper Brutha Fez, whom Packer knew admired, he is shocked and assumes that Fez died a rap star's death "humming in a spatter of gunshots" (132). Kozmo Thomas, Fez's manager and a one-time associate of Packer, explains however that Fez's "[h]eart just wore out" and mocks Packer's ideas about rap stars (132). Significantly, this is one of the few scenes where Packer is directly confronted with the ridiculousness of his ideas about death. A fellow capitalist that somehow manages not to allow cyber-capitalist mythology to overtake his hold on reality, Kozmo shows Packer that in the glow of cyber-capital it is possible to assume a sort of hybrid position and not yearn for apocalyptic consummation or be undermined by carnivalesque practice. A testimony to the viability of such hybridity is the funeral itself—a procession of bodyguards, breakdancers, weeping women, nuns, dervishes and other mourners moving to the sound of Brutha Fez's music, which is at once traditional and modern, at once a practice in which the city pays respects to its star, and a way for the record label to exploit Brutha Fez's death (131). Fez himself is not simply a victim of the plague of cyber-capitalism, as evidenced by the ordinary cause of his death and the fact that a funeral is held for him, whereas there are no public funerals in times of plague. Although Fez's corpse lying in an open coffin for the world to see is another dead body and undead presence in the novel, he is also a performer even in death and his music repudiates Packer's preference for utopian transformation and apocalyptic typology through the words "Let me be who I was / Unrhymed fool / That's lost but living" (140). Fez's death, as Packer notes, is "a spectacle he [can] clearly not command" (136). In this way, next to Vija Kinski, Brutha Fez, dead but performing, is another jester troubling Packer's dreams and forcing him to reconfigure his thinking.

In fact, the cityspace as a whole repudiates Packer's apocalyptic vision. Unravelling before him is not a void to be charted by his typology but rather a palimpsest of history and social practice, the inverse of eternal utopia. At the horizon of this urban practice we find the marketplace of cosmopolis teeming with a multicultural crowd: a Sufi rapper, a Chinese acupuncturist, a cockney bookseller, a Sikh taxi driver, Packer's chauffer Ibrahim Hamadoua, or even Packer's young wife Elise Shifrin,⁴ heiress to a European banking fortune, "Swiss or something"

4 Shifrin is another subversive character in the novel. Her elusive presence, her drifting in and out of Packer's view, forces him each time to get out of his limousine and opens Packer to penetration by the city. Her refusal to have sex with him also undermines his

(17). All of them are a living testimony to the vicissitudes of global historical forces impacting the city and deconstructing the apocalyptic narrative by staging a return to history and urban life.

DeLillo's use of carnivalesque imagery to counter utopian schemes is telling in that it juxtaposes cyber-capitalist elitism with a popular practice that constitutes entertainment and which does not shy away from violent imagery. It is true that this entertainment is still based on possibilities offered by cyber-capitalism and the protesters' freedom to act is the freedom of consumers in history; yet perhaps it is precisely this hybrid character of carnival that allows it to penetrate cyber-capitalist apocalyptic vision. DeLillo is very much aware of the limits of open opposition to cyber-capitalism and it is for this reason that the Times Square protests seem so ineffective and pointless as political protests. The main thrust of carnivalesque is not revolution, but the ridicule of authoritative mythology. Instead of being directed toward the colonization of the future, it recycles the apocalyptic narrative, its typology and sublime mythical language, showing their conventionality by turning them into allegories.

Contagious Body

Allegorical reading proves most instructive in making sense of what happens to Packer's body in the second part of the novel. Left more vulnerable after the encounter with the protesters and assault on his limousine, Packer is ritually "murdered" by Andre Petrescu, the pastry assassin, who plants a pie in Packer's face. Petrescu's overt and successful approach illustrates carnival's final triumph and even the violent kicking that Petrescu gets from Packer in response showcases that Packer has finally been manipulated into physical contact. When shortly after this beating Packer shoots his chief of security Torval, it is because he is seeking to balance out the situation, to murder someone who has either failed to protect him or willfully admitted Petrescu, since Packer suspects that Torval hates him. Yet Torval's offhand murder only debases Packer further; he has now acted not according to plan, but in line with some visceral automatism.

Therefore, when Packer finally reaches the barbershop that was his destination, he is no longer able to fend off the onslaught of the city or realize his dream of personal transformation. We see him suddenly become strangely human as he invites his chauffeur Ibrahim Hamadoua into the shop and together with his barber Anthony Adubato, they share stories over a meal. A friend of his father's, Adubato proves instrumental in turning Packer's vision to the past, not the future. Already infected and scarred by the carnivalesque, Packer then gives himself one of his final wounds, when he leaves the shop with only half a haircut, accepting the failed nature of his visit to the barber.

It is then that, at the end of his journey, Packer finds himself in Hell's

ideas about her and their marriage, and when they finally do have sex, it is only after all of Packer's designs have missed the mark.

Kitchen, by a derelict tenement and limousine garage, wishing to burn his limousine “to a blackened scrap of dead metal,” but deciding—of all things—that “he could not subject Ibrahim to such a spectacle” (180). Having bid goodbye to his chauffeur, Packer is suddenly left with nothing to do, in an unplanned situation, in a dead neighborhood, in other words, in the ruins of history. Emerging from the day’s journey wrecked, reeking of sex, gunpowder and blood, penniless after his failure with the yen, and with half a haircut, Packer presents a lamentable illustration of what the apocalyptic vision can do to its prophets. At the same time, he is paradoxically uncannily close to realizing his initial ideal, since he has lived through a number of symbolic deaths and witnessed the staged end of the world. Despite suffering the assaults and seductions of the carnivalesque grotesque reality, he may seem to be incarnating the apocalyptic body: “a suffering body, a text written in the script of stigmata, scars, wounds and sores” (Gomel, “Plague” 406). This is a decisive moment for the apocalyptic vision driving Packer since it is now that Packer can morph into the paradoxical figure of the martyr, or Girardian scapegoat, whose death would bring transformation. The apocalyptic body can thus be counted among types of utopia comprising Packer’s typology that prophesizes fulfilment of his vision.

It is only once we realize that Packer has been physically drawn into the crowd of revelers that martyrdom disintegrates under the pressure of the staging of the plague. We can see this process when Packer participates in a techno rave and later when he joins in the staging of mass murder. Having stumbled upon three hundred naked people lying in the street—extras in an underfinanced movie—he joins them. The experience of becoming one of the mock-dead crowd unsettles his visions:

It tore his mind apart, trying to see them here and real, independent of the image on a screen in Oslo or Caracas. Or were those places indistinguishable from this one? But why ask these questions? Why see these things? They isolated him. They set him apart and this is not what he wanted. He wanted to be here among them, all-body, the tattooed, the hairy-assed, those who stank. He wanted to set himself in the middle of the intersection, among the old with their raised veins and body blotches and next to the dwarf with a bump on his head. He thought there were probably people here with wasting diseases, a few, undisadable, skin flaking away.... He was one of them. (176)

Packer thus drifts away from the utopian desire that has thus far structured everything he did and alienated him from people. Counting himself among the dead and not the chosen ones, Packer stops the pull of the apocalypse and elides its utopian trajectory. From the carrier of the plague of cyber-capitalism, through the apocalyptic body of a martyr, Packer is thus forced to slowly morph into the masses of anonymous victims of pestilence, becoming one with the contagious body. This inverse postcorporeality, which is the new grotesque body, turns the stigmata of Passion ushering utopia into the marks of mock-plague. As a grotesque mirror of apocalyptic body, the contagious

body shows apocalypse as material violence without redemption, a denial of history that results in the erasure of identity (Gomel, “Plague” 413).⁵ The use of the allegory of the plague already by the protesters and later by extras working in the street indicates that the crowd is very much aware of their own status as statistical data in the history ledgers. This final inversion of the apocalyptic by the carnivalesque opens another plane in the apocalyptic narrative of *Cosmopolis*. Practical recycling of the carnivalesque, it turns out, is not the only response to apocalypse.

Postapocalyptic Text

The recycling dynamic of carnival does not purport to reveal eternal truths; it mocks the idea of the outside of history, which is why as a counter-force to the apocalyptic narrative, it is only partly successful. A counter-narrative that complements carnival and does offer a revised vision of the horizon of history is the postapocalyptic narrative. Postapocalypse “is a discourse not so much of radical transformation as of ‘aftermaths and remainders,’” concerned “with the interminable duration of dying” and “enmeshed in the backward-looking narrative of trauma” (Gomel, “Plague” 408). It does not have prophets or jesters, but chroniclers, whose narratives are spun from beyond the horizon of a particular period in history. Still we cannot say that chroniclers write in the spacetime of immaterial utopia; instead, their reality is very much material—it is the reality of ruins and corpses.

Packer enters the realm of ruins when he is left alone in a dead neighborhood without a plan to his soul. It is there that he meets his former employee and future assassin Richard Sheets, or Benno Levin as he prefers to be known. Levin has been forced to eke out his existence on the dumpster of history after he was fired from Packer’s company. The only thing that remains to give meaning to Levin’s life is his plan to kill Packer, not for any especially well-harbored hatred, but due to his sense of historical necessity. Although Levin first appears to be the antithesis of successful Packer, by the time the narrative progresses to the meeting of the two characters such interpretation no longer holds true.

If apocalyptic typology had remained uncompromised, we could argue that Levin is a belatedly revealed type of Packer; but in the postapocalyptic reality of the ruins and fragmented narratives such as the one that Levin writes, it is no longer possible to say who here prefigures whom. Rather, changing registers in line with the ruinous setting of the last part of the novel, we can see Levin as Packer’s gothic doppelganger. The similarities between the two are truly uncanny. If Levin has proven unable to keep up with minor currencies at Packer’s company, Packer has failed to chart the Japanese yen. Reduced to a squatter after his wife leaves him and his savings dwindle, Levin welcomes Packer, who in the course of one day has squandered his and his wife’s fortune and seen her leave him. In line with the mass character of the

5 It is only once Packer begins to merge with the contagious body, in this way denying his utopian design, that his wife Elise Shifrin, herself an extra in the scene, has sex with him, which suggests that she is opposed to Packer’s utopian vision.

contagious body, Packer's body is not even special for holding inscriptions of both capitalist utopian desire and carnival since Levin suffers from a number of global "syndromes," such as *hwabyung*, or Korean cultural panic (DeLillo 56), Haitian and East African delirious gusts, or agitated behavior and extreme confusion (D60), Caribbean *susto*, or soul loss (152). Although seemingly unreal, these syndromes indicate that he is "susceptible," or shaped by a multitude of global forces as well as his own destructive desire to kill Packer (152). More than that, Levin shares the condition that has been haunting Packer; he too has an asymmetrical prostrate and has even had delusions about his penis receding into his body. It is thus only owing to the meeting with Levin that Packer learns finally that an asymmetrical prostate is a trivial condition that has no health consequences. As Packer's double, Levin implodes Packer's ideas about transformation, utopia or revelation, since Levin is a man transformed by cyber-capital, forces of globalization, and designs (his plan to become rich by working in the financial world) and symbolically hurled outside of history. Even Packer's own last attempts at making sense of Levin or his desire to kill him are repudiated when in response to Packer's accusations that Levin's murder plan is "cheap imitation," "a stale fantasy" and "has no history"—a charge that sounds especially ironic coming from the man whose original apocalyptic design was a similarly stale fantasy—Levin responds simply that "It's all history" (193).

Levin's grounding in history is emphasized in his second strongest drive, namely his intention to write a spiritual autobiography of thousands of pages that will narrate his murder of Packer, elevate him to the level of historical relevance and make him transgress his own bounds. The text of *The Confessions of Benoit Levin* then becomes a post-historic utopia that Levin imagines within the bounds of his own postapocalyptic reality. Levin's *Confessions* actually insinuates itself into the core narrative of Packer's journey and from its early stages denies the chronological progression of apocalyptic narrative. *Confessions*, following backward trajectory, begins the scattering of apocalypse, prolonging it into a fragmentary consideration of the trauma of Packer's murder that forever remains outside the text, unnarrated. Left with Packer's corpse after the murder, Levin narrates his own growing obsolescence, describes Packer's corpse, the aftermath of the killing and his helplessness. The outdated form of confessions as well as Levin's writing method—pencil on paper on a writing desk—all position Levin as a remnant of the past, but also a chronicler of "the besieged city" from Herbert's poem.

As a chronicler, he is neither the proponent of the carnivalesque, nor the advocate of apocalyptic vision, but someone who acknowledges the influence of both of these forces on history by constructing a record. It is in this sense that Levin is "derived" both from Packer and forces opposing him (60). For this reason he is also the only person capable of writing about and thus paying respects to the contagious body, for "[u]nlike fantasies of global annihilation, pandemics are a matter of record" (Gomel, "Plague" 408). In an obverse way, Packer's digital dream of exceeding the limits of his body is realized in his corpse's inscription as a haunting voice in Levin's head and in Levin's *Confessions*, which mirrors Packer's entrapment in technology

during his life. But as part of the record, Packer is at the same time reduced to merely another “syndrome” from which Levin suffers.

Through the prism of Levin’s position as the chronicler, we can finally decipher the meaning of the persistent technological glitches that haunt Packer throughout his journey and expose him to broadcasts of future events before they take place. These screenings do not show Packer any abstract visions of the future, but rather the close future of his body. Whether he sees himself touching his chin line, orgasming with eyes closed, recoiling in shock, or ultimately lying dead in a morgue, what he witnesses is his material body. Contrary to Kinski’s theory that the visions are a testimony to the power of Packer’s hypermaniacal genius to influence his environment (DeLillo 95), in other words part of his apocalyptic vision, these screenings are moments when postapocalyptic narrative intervenes in and marks the apocalyptic narrative, just as Levin’s *Confessions* intervenes in the account of Packer’s journey. In this sense, in the final scene of the novel, when Packer sees his corpse designated as “Male Z” in the crystal face of his watch, he completes his transformation into an anonymous victim of cyber-capitalism. It is now only the haunted and fragmented narrative of Levin that can account for his life, but this narrative also traps him forever between death and record, the new time of postapocalypse that forever defers utopia.

The postapocalyptic perspective allows DeLillo to introduce a critical assessment of the shift in representation of capitalism into the novel, in this way making room for the evaluation of the writer’s place in history. *Cosmopolis* is not just about the apocalyptic desire inscribed in cyber-capital, or about the popular carnivalesque opposition to cyber-capital. It is predominantly an allegory of the process of writing about myths and representations, an allegory through which DeLillo questions his own right to write about myths from within another kind of mystifying language—the novel. By writing Levin and his narrative into the apocalyptic story, DeLillo prevents the glorification of the writer to the position of an authoritative voice in history. The chronicler in his treatment becomes simply the ruined man aware of his own reliance on conventions for describing events, but also reconciled with these conventions and influences. The idea that the chronicler can provide an authoritative critique of history is undermined when Levin himself says that “all the thinking and writing in the world will not describe what [he] felt in the awful moment when [he] fired the gun and saw [Packer] fall” (61). But Levin not only confirms the indescribable horror of the event, he also asks the reader “what is left that’s worth the telling?” (61). In this way, the record leaves the final judgment to its readers.

The allegorical formula employed in *Cosmopolis* is essential for the success of the novel’s depiction of the clash and shift of representation and this final surrendering of authority. Allegory, we are reminded by Olaf Hansen, “becomes a viable form of expression whenever its cognitive qualities are needed as part of a solution to a cultural crisis, which is best defined as a *question from within* of the symbolic character of reality” (Hansen 198). This is because allegory in its

ostensibly conventional structure that joins two disparate realms acknowledges the “nonsymmetrical relationship between meaning and event” and “not only acknowledges the fact that the symbolic character of reality is fictitious, it also works with this realization” (Hansen 198). As Walter Benjamin notes in his study of baroque allegory, allegory confronts the observer with “the *facies hippocratica* [death’s head] of history” and showcases the ruins and is in this way postapocalyptic (166).

In this way, *Cosmopolis* stands out among DeLillo’s works as a concise allegorical reckoning of cyber-capitalist mythology and forces responding to it. The conventional representation of the three main realms of apocalyptic narrative, carnivalesque play and postapocalyptic text in the novel as well as the allegorical transformation of Eric Packer help draw the reader into the conversation about modern representations and leave the final word to them. If DeLillo refuses to write high satire that would be better received by the critics, it is because he appears to envision the writer’s role among—not vis-à-vis—diverging conceptualizations of modern experience. Tuning into the concerns about the Y2K bug, the bursting of the dot-com bubble, the increasing precariousness of economic situation, DeLillo thus paints the picture of the end of cyber-capitalist mythology and the rise of the discourse of participative capitalism.

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