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### The Polis Artist: Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and the Politics of Literature

Joel Alden Schlosser

*Bryn Mawr College*, jschlosser@brynmawr.edu

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## The Polis Artist: Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and the Politics of Literature

[Joel Alden Schlosser \(bio\)](#)

### Abstract

Recent work on literature and political theory has focused on reading literature as a reflection of the damaged conditions of contemporary political life. Examining Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, this essay develops an alternative approach to the politics of literature that attends to the style and form of the novel. The form and style of *Cosmopolis* emphasize the novel's own dissonance with the world it criticizes; they moreover suggest a politics of poetic world-making intent on eliciting collective agency over the commonness of language. As a "polis artist," DeLillo does not determine a particular politics but shapes the conditions and spaces of political life with an eye toward alternative futures.

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While Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* offers the most well-known example of recent uses of literature to illuminate the lived experience of political and social life under capitalism, his approach accords with developing work in political theory and beyond.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, and as Stephen Marche writes, "culture is the echo of economics."<sup>2</sup> Given the deep intertwine of economics and politics, this maxim seems easily extended to the political: culture echoes politics; for these readers, literature returns to Stendahl's famous image as a "mirror in the road,"<sup>3</sup> reflecting the tortuous and often traumatic ordinary lives of twenty-first century political subjects. According to this view, a politics of literature consists in using literary sources to diagnose the ideologies of the current epoch.<sup>4</sup>

Yet while turning to literature to develop their theories, the approach embodied by Piketty and others overlooks the literary resources for confronting and potentially traversing the conditions that they use literature to diagnose. Such an approach to literature continues a tradition of critical theorists including Georg Lukács and Frederic Jameson, a tradition intent on reading literature in strictly ideological terms.<sup>5</sup> Reading Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* against the grain of the recent return to this kind of literary realism, I argue here that the novel's dramatization of political and social experience within capitalism offers not just a more complex account of this experience but also opens up a different political response to it. *Cosmopolis* shows the limits of a realist approach to literature, acknowledging the constitutive fantasies of contemporary political and social life, yet also doing so in a distinctive form and style that undercut the very diagnosis it provides. The dissonant and self-undermining style of *Cosmopolis* refuses a single image or resolved picture of American capitalism entirely.

Once scrutiny of literature includes not just the social reality it purports to depict but *how* it depicts this reality, a different politics of literature appears on the horizon. Whereas Piketty et al. treat literature simply as a "mirror in the roadway," I show how *Cosmopolis* does not merely critique its social and political world but initiates its own – the novel's – project of poetic world making. By emphasizing poetic acts within the action of the novel itself while also including moments of "writiness" that bring attention to the novel's status as a text circulating in the world, *Cosmopolis* thus gestures toward a politics of literature beyond the merely diagnostic. Rather than dramatizing what political theory can only describe, DeLillo's novel suggests the politics of literature might be theorized in a different register: "literature" names a material act with political potential when seen as contributing to the "wording of the world"; setting forth an alternative grammar of self-understanding for citizen-subjects of American capitalism both resists the enervation of language and calls attention to language as the common ground of our acts of resistance.

By calling attention to the literary work as a *work*, that is, as something permanent and durable in the world, my reading of *Cosmopolis* thus suggests a new way of theorizing the relationship between literature and politics. Against commodification and the consumption cycles of the capitalism it describes, the novel – both *Cosmopolis* and the novel more generally – resists dominant trends and also opens space for collective acts of wording the world, making language a common project and thus taking ownership of the terms and conditions of political life. Here the commonness of language grounds political community and provides a site for political self-fashioning. By calling attention to its commonness and critically engaging the language of common life, literature constitutes a prefigurative politics, a mode of politics that seeks to embody an alternative vision of political community. In the case of *Cosmopolis* more specifically, DeLillo's novel creates a site for publics not only to promote a critique of capitalism but to craft a common language as a basis for resistance. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, DeLillo describes the work of the novel as a "counterhistory" meant to counterbalance the rapid-fire repetition of the twenty-four hour news cycle. DeLillo's model of poetic world-making thus offers literary works as bases for such counterhistories, as narratives that can

contribute to the founding and sustaining of political worlds while bringing ordinary people into a shared linguistic project. As a "polis artist," DeLillo does not determine a particular politics but shapes the conditions and spaces of political life with an eye toward alternative futures.

## 2. "The Allegory of the Stretch Limo"

For over forty years, DeLillo has chronicled the experience of living in contemporary America with an intense and self-conscious realism unparalleled across American fiction.<sup>6</sup> From the publication of *Americana* in 1971, his novels have especially focused on the aftermath of three significant turns in American culture, turns that initiated massive transformations in the way we live now: the rise of electronic media, especially the new pervasiveness of the image and the motion picture; a new level of public violence made readily available through these media and captured most momentously by the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963; and the fear and paranoia of the Cold War, especially its threat of imminent destruction and its generation of the military-industrial complex. These three events have created the conditions for DeLillo's stories about the struggle to live amidst clouds of dread, an absent God, and a concussive culture of consumption and speed. As one critic puts it: "DeLillo is compelled by American culture itself."<sup>7</sup> His novels pick up this culture's rhythms and phrases, its euphemistic acronyms and commodified forms of speech, its images and story lines. DeLillo's subjects are extraordinary—rock stars and math geniuses, presidential assassinations and mass movements—yet their very extraordinariness helps to exemplify (often prophetically) the moments they capture: the Bob Dylan-like rock star in DeLillo's 1973 novel *Great Jones Street* whose fate is "eerily reminiscent of John Lennon"; or the Airborne Toxic Event of *White Noise* that preceded the Bhopal disaster of 1984. As John Duvall writes, DeLillo "has the rare gift for historicizing our present."<sup>8</sup> DeLillo thus confronts us with the social and cultural forces that have constituted both ourselves and our world.

To this assembly of representative figures and events, *Cosmopolis* adds an archetype of the 1990s: the entrepreneurial self living in a world of networks and connections. Taking place in April 2000, just when the dot com bubble popped, the novel recreates a moment in American capitalism noteworthy both for its historical singularity and the broader trend of boom and bust that it repeats.<sup>9</sup> As DeLillo describes the epoch to an interviewer:

Between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the Age of Terror . . . there was this period, essentially one decade, the 1990s, and in it, there was one theme, the name of the theme was money. People spent days and nights looking at their computer screens to watch their money growing, increasing, developing character.<sup>10</sup>

As Joseph Conte puts it, "Eric Packer," the chief character of *Cosmopolis*, "is the lord of this domain, the very avatar of cyber-capital."<sup>11</sup> In such a world, living has become a business: one either makes money or one loses it; this moment represents the culmination of an optimistic and self-forgetting capitalism that has imprinted the political present.

As many reviewers and readers of the novel have pointed out, the protagonist of *Cosmopolis*, Eric Packer, cuts the perfect allegorical figure for a depiction of the experience of capitalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>12</sup> In the language of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, chroniclers of the "new spirit of capitalism" of the 1990s, Packer is the "great man" of this social order: active, replete with connections and projects, "chameleon-like" and marked by uncanny flexibility and adaptability.<sup>13</sup> The founder and chief executive of Packer Capital, Inc., Packer controls billions of assets and has limitless networks at his fingertips: screens around him overflow with data—"soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process."<sup>14</sup> Packer is a paragon of activity: his chief of technology, art dealer, personal physician, chief of theory, and other employees simply come to his limousine, always in motion, to conduct business. He is a man with seemingly limitless projects, from betting on the yen to buying the newest Rothko. "I'm a world citizen with a New York pair of balls," Packer says.<sup>15</sup> He's making history, inventing the future, and doing so from the comfort of his mobile office, a "platonic replica" of a car, as he moves across the cosmopolis of international finance, New York City.<sup>16</sup>

Yet this paradigm of the connexionist world does not live his success well. The allegory of the great man of capitalism, as Jerry Varsava writes, "represents a false model of contemporary citizenship."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Eric Packer seems to lack any kind of substantial connection with others, let alone political solidarity; the networked great man may have all kinds of access but the access itself does not amount to much. Take, for instance, the case of Eric's marriage. Throughout the day chronicled in *Cosmopolis* Eric repeatedly runs into his wife of twenty-two days, Elise Shifrin, "the poet who had right of blood to the fabulous Shifrin banking fortune of Europe and the world."<sup>18</sup> Already her introduction suggests one reason for their strange separation: while married they only encounter one another in the streets of Manhattan; Elise is not identified as a woman with her own dispositions so much as a jobholder (albeit a poet) with a certain right to power and influence. They share meals throughout the day, their paths somehow intersecting at just the right time, yet little else is shared. They face each other and play the roles of husband and wife without seeming to mean it; they depart just as spontaneously as they come together. "What are we going to talk about?" Elise asks Eric. "Let's talk about us," Eric responds. Elise answers:

"You and I. We're here. So might as well."  
 "When are we going to have sex again?  
 "We will. I promise," she said.  
 "We haven't in a while now."  
 "When I work, you see. The energy is precious."<sup>19</sup>

"We're people in the world," Eric later tells Elise. "We need to eat and talk."<sup>20</sup> Yet for Elise and for Eric, "time is a thing that grows scarcer every day."<sup>21</sup> "Trying to make contact in the most ordinary ways" comes up short.<sup>22</sup> In a world structured such that freedom and self-expression are not only promised but seem only possible in work, sex and other forms of intimacy are bad investments. The energy is precious. At the lunch hour Eric and Elise play at conversation; this seems like all they can sustain.

While sex with Elise only eventuates when she and Eric happen to find each other — improbably for the fourth time that day — as extras on a movie set, posing as naked victims of some apocalyptic event,<sup>23</sup> Eric still has sex two other times over the course of the novel. Each sexual event, however, has the air of business, setting off the distance between the unachievable connection promised by his marriage to Elise and the mechanical fulfillment of needs facilitated by the capitalist order. Between breakfast and lunch, Eric finds Didi Fancher, his art dealer; they have sex without undressing and then discuss acquiring the Rothko Chapel.<sup>24</sup> After lunch with Elise, Eric finds himself with one of his bodyguards, Kendra Hays. She wears her ZyloFlex body armor as they copulate.<sup>25</sup> Intercourse comes mediated by economic positions: Didi has another Rothko to sell; Kendra may be off the clock but she still bears the trappings of her employment. Neither connection, intimate as they may be in practice, gives Eric — not to mention Didi or Kendra — more than the most momentary of satisfactions. Eric does feel better after sex with Kendra, but this appears as he dresses in double time to get back to work. Indeed, the greatest stimulus seems to come from Kendra's tasering Eric upon his request.

*Cosmopolis* thus shows us how the networked man "connects" without ever really connecting. Eric does not look at the members of his network; this is not necessary for their use. While Shiner, his chief of technology, speaks to him Eric examines images of himself created by a camera in the limousine.<sup>26</sup> Impressed by the missing finger of the cabbie driving him and Elise he does not ask about "a body ruin that carried history and pain."<sup>27</sup> Eric never eyes his chief of security, Torval, until he shoots him dead. The "great man" of the connexionist world has little need for faces.

While Eric's networked existence promises to give him the freedom of limitless connection these connections are affectless and routine; so too do Eric's projects fail in their promise to realize his desires. The novel's motive force is quite simple: to get a haircut. But even as the story begins, the project of the haircut is compromised by the movement of capital around the world: the assassination of the IMF director on international TV indicates a threat on Eric's life as well; "the complex" requests that Eric return to the office. The sheer multiplicity of projects with which Eric feels himself constrained prevents the simplest of wants from finding fulfillment: the press of New York traffic, the diversions in search of physical satisfactions, the growing catastrophe around him. "What is happening doesn't chart," his *Wunderkind* Michael Chin tells Eric.<sup>28</sup> Pursuing the intersection of technology and capital assaults the borders of perception yet Eric presses forward. At the same time, however, these projects pull Eric into a virtual world where the very desires that impel him become unreal. The eloquence of alphabetic and numeric systems may have its life but Eric also seems to doubt its promise.

The affective bargains that make connection a commodity and seek meaning only in graphics and charts prevent (or preclude) Eric from expressing himself in his projects.<sup>29</sup> As Eric's bet on the yen appears increasingly dangerous, his chief of theory, Vija Kinski insists that he hold his position: "To pull back now would not be authentic. It would be a quotation from other people's lives," Vija tells him.<sup>30</sup> As the protests mount around his limousine, Vija and Eric catch sight of a man who has set himself on fire. "It's not original," Vija comments. Later, in the act that most closely approaches self-immolation, Eric eliminates Elise's assets with a few swipes on a screen, "a gesture of his own, a sign of ironic final binding."<sup>31</sup> Yet even in choosing death, literal or metaphorical, one's expression remains mediated by the capitalist order. Happening upon the funeral of Brutha Fez, a Sufi rap star, Kozmo Thomas tells Eric that "the record label wants an exploitation event."<sup>32</sup> Funerals become marketing tools.

Without genuine connection or truly expressive projects, Eric feels the sacrifice of his personality demanded by the new spirit of capitalism; flexibility and adaptability have a cost. "Every act he performed was self-haunted and synthetic."<sup>33</sup> Eric seems forced to deny his own body and the bodies around him even while he cannot fully rid himself of these bodies' present absence. Eric feels the physical presence of Torval, his chief of security, as a "provocation."<sup>34</sup> He senses the impressions of people hurrying past as "sprays of fleetest being" but remains unmoved. Even while undergoing his daily physical, in the immediate vulnerability of his body, Eric seeks to escape it:

He was here in his body, the structure he wanted to dismiss in theory even when he was shaping it under the measured effect of barbells and weights. He wanted to judge it redundant and transferable. It was convertible to wave arrays of information.<sup>35</sup>

Eric feels the crowded Manhattan street "as an offense to the future," but he still responds to it: People move past each other "in coded moments of gesture and dance" and Eric marks this performance.<sup>36</sup> Eric feels himself in relation to bodies around him: the "sloppy-bodied, smelly, and wet" body of his chief of finance, Jane Melman; the "gynecoid upper body" of the President of the United States, Midwood, "with its swag of dangling mammarys"; the body of Kendra Hays, with which he wants to spend a day in silent meditation.<sup>37</sup> There seems to be a kind of truth to the materiality of the world that Eric can detect without articulating:

The amassments, the material crush, days and nights of bumper to bumper, red light, green light, the fixedness of things, the obsolescences, going mostly unseen.<sup>38</sup>

As chaos erupts around him, Eric feels exhilarated with his head in the fumes.<sup>39</sup> Knowing he faces bodily harm (the "credible

threat") moves and quickens him. "Now he could begin the business of living."<sup>40</sup>

### 3. From Allegory to Style

The allegory of *Cosmopolis* seems obvious to the point of banality, yet both reviewers who have complained about the novel's clichéd qualities and those who have heralded it as prophetic have missed another layer suggesting a different political import. The "pronounced allegorical quality" of *Cosmopolis* does not simply buttress extant critiques of capitalism; it also shows how literature can reveal the disavowed undercurrents beneath the struggles the novel outwardly depicts.<sup>41</sup> Simply focusing on how *Cosmopolis* critically illuminates late American capitalism – reading it as a diagnostic of our times – overlooks the distinctive and, I will argue, *political* style in which DeLillo presents this allegory. To foreshadow the argument to come, if the critique of capitalism in *Cosmopolis* leaves us at a politics of impasse, the form of the novel suggests a politics of poetic world-making and thus an alternative political vision.

Focusing on the form of *Cosmopolis* does not simply add a dimension to the allegorical reading, however; the dissonance of the novel as a form in the epoch it chronicles serves to reject the reassurance of its apparent critique by highlighting and dramatizing its own basic irreconcilabilities: the promise of connection under conditions of disconnection; the falseness of a networked existence when the proliferations of "friends" vitiate deeper relationships; the apparent power of a great man of capitalism like Eric Packer which actually confines him to his limousine stuck in traffic and beholden to the orders of "the complex." The form of *Cosmopolis* thus does not merely resist the regnant model of "super-sized" abundance and sumptuous prose; it taries with the basic irreconcilabilities of the present epoch. This irreconcilability appears at the most elemental level of its existence as an artifact circulating in the very world it engages. Critics commenting on the inadequacies of *Cosmopolis* have pointed to how its very clichéd nature suggests the impossibility of authentic cultural production under the conditions it describes. *Cosmopolis* thus suggests that the novel has come too late, that "there's no such thing as a work of art or philosophy that's too dangerous to commodify,"<sup>42</sup> that once everything is a "quotation," in the language of Packer's chief of theory, we no longer have anywhere to stand.

This attention to the conditions of the novel's production and circulation that elicit a kind of dissonance when considering *Cosmopolis* has an analogue in what Michael Fried has called "facingness": the artistic strategy of turning the subject's gaze toward and confronting the beholder, a strategy that Fried argues Manet used to great effect to prevent any confusion of his sincere expression for something theatrical and thus potentially manipulative.<sup>43</sup> In the context of a novel, "facingness" describes how the novel's style effects a kind of "presentational theatricality"<sup>44</sup>: compelling readers to confront the novel *as a novel*; calling attention to the reading experience from within the novel itself (as opposed to changes in the physical form, as would occur subsequent to Manet in painting). Indeed, *Cosmopolis* begins with such a moment:

He liked spare poems sited minutely in white space, ranks of alphabetic strokes burnt into paper. A poem bared the moment to things he was not normally prepared to notice. This was the nuance of every poem, at least for him, at night, these long weeks, one breath after another, in the rotating room at the top of the triplex.<sup>45</sup>

"Poems made him conscious of his breathing."<sup>46</sup> As we read of Eric Packer's experience of text DeLillo confronts us with the experience of his own text. Later, Packer stands in the poetry alcove of the Gotham Book Mart, leafing through chapbooks:

He scrutinized such poems, thinking into every intimation, and his feelings seemed to float in the white space around the lines. There were marks on the page and there was the page. The white was vital to the soul of the poem.<sup>47</sup>

Encountering Elise Shiffrin in the bookshop, Packer calls out "recite to me" just as we readers recite — summoning up these words to ourselves — the novel as we read. The novel calls attention to itself; language thus calls attention to itself.

By injecting these moments of what we might call "writingness" into the novel, DeLillo confronts readers with the immediacy of the reading experience even while making them aware of its mediations: the language, the tropes, the shape of narrative remain at work in DeLillo's novel; at the same time, this "writingness" makes itself visible, calling attention to its contingency and fabrication and the dissonance of this kind of artifactual production in a world increasingly dedicated to the disposable and the fungible. "Facingness," as Fried suggests, insists on intelligibility between artist and beholder (or reader) even as it calls attention to the deteriorating conditions of this intelligibility. As DeLillo chronicles the power of the image and the speed of the torrents of information available at our fingertips, he also draws attention to the words and narrative with which he does so, calling into question their ability to comprehend what they attempt to describe. Words themselves pale in comparison to the glow and flow of data; the narrative is episodic and fragmentary, incapable of exhausting its subject.

These dissonant moments of writingness culminate in the final encounter between Packer and his killer, Benno Levin, at the end of *Cosmopolis*. While Benno Levin enters the action of the novel in its final scene, readers encounter him through interspersed sections of his diaries, "The Confessions of Benno Levin," that break from the otherwise chronological narrative following Eric Packer's limousine ride across Manhattan. These writings take place after the murder of Eric Packer and chart Levin's reeling consciousness in the wake of the killing. "He is dead, word for word," the confessions begin.<sup>48</sup> Levin ruminates on great themes and how "they say I had problems of normalcy."<sup>49</sup> Resembling the angry rumblings of Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, at the level of allegory "The Confessions of Benno Levin" gives voice to the "little people" within the new spirit of capitalism, showing the resentment and revenge this social organization breeds.

Yet while these sections reveal Benno's tortured personality, they also connect his writing to DeLillo's own writing and thus raise questions about the latter: its intentions and motives, its public role, and the very sanity of its author. Even the humor of *Cosmopolis*, such as Eric Packer's last name and its closeness to the rats hurled and imitated by anti-capitalist protestors, contains a bitter quality: the rat has become the unit of currency, as the epigraph to the novel from Zbigniew Herbert puts it.<sup>50</sup> rats have become our sole source of value. This dark comedy extends to DeLillo as the author. Like Levin, DeLillo writes in the wake of Eric Packer's death; both take this loss as occasion to deal with existential themes such as "loneliness and human discard," "the theme of who do I hate when there's no one left."<sup>51</sup> Both seek sympathetic contact, reaching out to readers to mark a loss and the experience of abandonment in the world. Both also take writing as a "public act,"<sup>52</sup> struggling with the deadness of the material (of Eric Packer, for one) even as they seek to give it life. Yet Levin calls into question the writing itself and thus the very project of a realist novel meant to diagnose the present:

All the thinking and writing in the world will not describe what I felt in the awful moment when I fired the gun and saw him fall. So what is left that's worth the telling?<sup>53</sup>

What is left that's worth the telling? There is something absurd about the very idea of writing a novel to diagnose a culture that no longer has time for novels; DeLillo's likening of himself to the killer of Packer suggests the madness of such an endeavor. For all of the bluster about the bad citizens that capitalism creates, DeLillo's form of engagement may have as much hope of impact as Levin's – that is, until Levin pulls the trigger. *Cosmopolis* may well be, in the words of Ben Jeffery, "another lump of useless, pseudo-radical critique."<sup>54</sup>

#### 4. "Before everything, there's language."

The form of *Cosmopolis* suggests the limits of an allegorical approach by highlighting its own dissonance of presentation, but it also holds within it the basis for a possible response. As Stefan Mattessich writes, "DeLillo brings his readers to this point of crisis about art and life, not to keep us there . . . but to fix our attention on what resists."<sup>55</sup> *Cosmopolis* refuses reconciliation yet this resistance requires language for its very articulation. That is, language makes critique (and the form the critique) possible; language holds the promise, in other words, of divergent responses or creations to the conditions it describes. While the readers in the realist mode see literature diagnosing political subjects deformed by capitalism, *Cosmopolis* calls attention to constructive possibilities inherent in the very medium of critique. The "writingness" of *Cosmopolis* – and of late DeLillo more generally – resists the promise of transparent language, often reduced to language, as a representation of the virtual capital flows circulating around it. At the same time, however, the dissonance characteristic of such writing in the present epoch also creates, in Edward Said's words, a "platform for alternative and unregimented modes of subjectivity."<sup>56</sup> The platform for an "alternative and unregimented" mode of subjectivity and thus the basis for new forms of solidarity and resistance in *Cosmopolis* consist of language itself.

The resistance of "writingness" in *Cosmopolis* takes place in three registers. First, the experience of language can interrupt the unquestioned flow of experience. As some have argued marks all of DeLillo's novels,<sup>57</sup> language is both the vehicle and the subject of *Cosmopolis*. Amid the action of the novel, language occasions a cessation of sorts, a break from the unbroken immediacy of experience. "A person rises or falls on a syllable,"<sup>58</sup> Eric Packer comments; language moves like breath through Eric's experiences in the novel, allowing for momentary respite and reflection. Packer pauses on the "anachronistic quality" of the word "skyscraper";<sup>59</sup> he is struck by the outdatedness of the word "office" or "automated teller machine" or "phone" or "computer";<sup>60</sup> the "pathos of the word 'satchel'"<sup>61</sup>; the "true and bitter force" of the word "provide";<sup>62</sup> all the meanings of "inflamed."<sup>63</sup> Packer feels "a certain perverse reverence" to the word "asymmetry."<sup>64</sup> He has his car "prousted," lined with cork against the street noise.<sup>65</sup> Packer watches teenagers "doing adagios with their skateboards."<sup>66</sup> Against the instrumental use of language, these words occasion brief clearings even while the inevitable rush continues unabated.

On a second register, the moments of "writingness" suggest a deeper ontological point about our existence within and as language. As Cowart writes, language in DeLillo resists the postmodern flux with which his work is normally associated: "DeLillo is a writer whose valuation of language has placed him at odds with . . . the contemporary *Weltanschauung*."<sup>67</sup> Language is, for DeLillo, "the ground of all making" and thus captures every aspect of what we as human beings do to create and condition our lives.<sup>68</sup> One of the refrains throughout *Cosmopolis* suggests this: "Let it express itself. . . . [Eric] liked the sound of that. It was not unevocative."<sup>69</sup> The phrase returns as Eric listens to Elise recite poetry: "Eric was rapt. Let it express itself."<sup>70</sup> Language does not just hold the possibility of introducing a pause; it also may well be the only way to connect with reality, the grounding force against which "fleest sprays of being" – we ourselves – can feel our lack of gravity.

Yet while Cowart sees "something numinous" in language's mysterious properties, the title of *Cosmopolis* suggests a third register on which "writingness" can serve to resist: by calling attention to language as a condition that we all share, the novel illuminates the *commonness* of language itself; "*Cosmopolis*" suggests a language for the *cosmos*, for the world, that might articulate the absurd life the novel depicts. While "writingness" brings readers to experience Eric Packer's savoring of words not just as a cessation but also as indicative of the grounds of our being, "*cosmopolis*" suggests a kind of commonness and thus that language is a common thing, something we hold and sustain together. While techno-capitalism seems to presage the overcoming of language and its replacement with algorithms, images, and gleaming data, Packer stumbles on language and limns the possibility of some more basic connection through it. The novel's entire arc turns on this basic point, that words spoken in common

constitute reality: Eric must return to his childhood barber across town not just for a haircut but because his language recalls connections that language used to sustain: "This is what he wanted from Anthony. The same words."<sup>71</sup>

These three registers of significance that "writingness" possesses – the interruptive quality to language, its ontological dimension as a condition of our being, and the fact that we share this condition as something common – give flesh to what Michael Warner calls "poetic world-making" as a practice that moves beyond mere resistance. While not creating a common language (as one might say Whitman sought to do), *Cosmopolis* gestures towards it from the midst of its bitter and fragmented depiction of American capitalism. In doing so, the novel calls attention to how we (as speakers, readers, and writers) "word the world," in Stephen Mulhall's phrase: the ways in which we call a world into being through our use of language and how this language depends upon us.<sup>72</sup> Language, writes Mulhall, can be understood in two different ways: "In one sense, the term refers to a body of words and sentences, and so to one particular kind of phenomenon among the many we encounter in the world . . . But it can also refer to a grammar, to the articulated network of discriminations that inform our capacity to word the world, to bespeak anything and everything we encounter within it."<sup>73</sup> In this second sense, language sustains our articulation of the world as well as our experiences within it; when we apprehend our ability to change and shift this language, we also realize our potential influence over and within the world it makes possible. As Aletta Norval puts it: "making visible the grip of a particular . . . grammar requires disclosing the specific paths and practices that have been closed off."<sup>74</sup> When *Cosmopolis* illuminates language as a common project within the world and "cosmopolis" as a dream of a common language, it denies another vision of "cosmopolis" as naming the "flat" world produced by super-charged capitalism while also opening up the possibility that we may return words to their meanings – or invent new meanings entirely. In this way, the novel's attention to the wording of the world has a political valence: if we recognize our wording of the world, we realize our ability to affect our condition; when realizing our conditioning influence as a project of poetic world-making, we undertake a kind of political activity.

*Cosmopolis* thus faces its readers with the question: what will be our language of the future? As words become "outdated" will our descriptions of the world – and thus our way of making the world intelligible to ourselves, of acting in the world – reflect our own efforts or instead stem from the imperatives of market capitalism: the buzzwords that test well in market research, the futuristic language of technology, the neologisms meant to cue unconscious interests? Will we create our future language or resign ourselves to its givenness and our passivity in its creation?

Raising these questions, the attention to language in *Cosmopolis* thus suggests a way of reconceiving the politics of literature by way of the example of DeLillo's literary production. Stanley Cavell's reading of *Walden* provides a useful analogue here. In Shulman's language, Cavell's Thoreau "returns" the key words of his culture, "from disembodied abstraction in political rhetoric to the ground of ordinary life, as if to test whether and how those words might be practiced otherwise."<sup>75</sup> This "public experiment . . . (pre)figures collaborative revision of prevailing social practices."<sup>76</sup> Taking this approach to *Cosmopolis*, we can see DeLillo's attention to language as more than an invocation of its magical properties but as something deeper and more enduring: the calling of attention to how we word the world while at the same time a seeking to word it otherwise; the bringing of language out of the heavens of abstraction (and the hades of commodification) and into the realm of the ordinary. Returning language to its place as a project undertaken and sustained by participants in a common world makes writing a novel a pluripotent political act.<sup>77</sup>

## 5. The Prefigurative Politics of Literature

Shulman's suggestion that the "public experiment" of Thoreau's linguistic project "(pre)figures collaborative revision of prevailing social practices" offers a way of connecting DeLillo's similar project more directly to politics in the twenty-first century. The label "prefigurative," as Francesca Polletta writes, "describe[s] movement groups whose internal structure is characterized by a minimal division of labor, decentralized authority, and an egalitarian ethos and whose decision making is direct and consensus oriented."<sup>78</sup> Prefigurative groups thus seek to build a new society in the shell of the old, creating within their very structures new forms of being together. As advocate of prefigurative politics Richard Day argues, "nothing is more important today than building, linking and defending autonomous communities," which might create spaces "available for experimentation" for alternative political modes of being together.<sup>79</sup>

Translating the wording of the world to prefigurative politics offers a new approach to theorizing politics and literature. "Prefiguration" does not just gesture towards some utopic form of being together; it rather begins to cultivate this being together in its very practices, even if these practices stand at odds with the broader social and political realities. The "writingness" of *Cosmopolis*, as we have seen, develops a form of poetic world-making that resists the felt outdatedness of language amid the flux of techno-capitalism and all the false promises it implied in the 1990s. Moreover, this poetic world-making returns readers and writers to the participative project of fashioning a common language – and thus a common world – together against the seemingly irrefragable imperatives of the epoch we inhabit. The resistance of sheer writingness also fosters political work of collective self-fashioning.

While these claims about potential effects do not depend on the author's intent, DeLillo gives every appearance of understanding the work of his novels in similar terms. DeLillo describes his novels in terms of a counternarrative or counterhistory meant to open spaces for alternatives to the political and social conditions the novels describe. In the midst of writing *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo published a widely read and circulated essay in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September." There, DeLillo calls for the creation of a "counter-narrative"

of who we are, a counternarrative that might contest the narrative of the Cold War for which the Bush Administration still felt nostalgia.<sup>80</sup> The writer creates this counternarrative by giving life to the “living language” of the innumerable stories obscured by the coverage of the event:

The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is. But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us. . . . The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately. . . . Before politics, before history and religion, there is a primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counter-narrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel.<sup>81</sup>

The narrative of September quickly coalesced into a melodrama of America as victim-hero, as Elisabeth Anker has recently shown.<sup>82</sup> DeLillo anticipated the need for an alternative and *Cosmopolis* followed this call; critics have mistakenly focused their attention on DeLillo’s subsequent novel, *Falling Man*, as his “9/11 novel” while *Cosmopolis* provides the more apposite complement to the diagnosis and prescription DeLillo offers in “In the Ruins of the Future.”

DeLillo’s call for a counternarrative also echoes earlier pronouncements about the crafting of language as a vital political act. In the wake of the publication of *Libra* (in 1997), DeLillo described the novelist’s work with language as “a form of counterhistory”: The cycle of celebrity and fame, “the fast forward of the decade,” collapses time, DeLillo writes; “The newspaper with its crowded pages and unfolding global reach permits us to be ruthless in our forgetting.” The novel, however, works against this loss as a kind of “old, slow water-torture business of invention and doubt and self-correction.”<sup>83</sup> The writer imagines the past and in doing so allows language to fulfill its “tendency . . . to work in opposition to the enormous technology of war.”<sup>84</sup> While language can be used to obfuscate or circumlocute, DeLillo envisions the language of the writer as the “breath” of generosity, giving vitality to a past all too quickly left behind by a culture driven to imitate itself endlessly — “the rerun, the sequel, the theme park, the designer outlet.”<sup>85</sup>

Returning to *Cosmopolis* with the lens of the counterhistory illuminates how it offers a style of prefigurative politics in its attention to language. The prefigurative politics of literature appear in how, in Michael Warner’s words, the novel seeks to “specify . . . the lifeworld of its circulation”, “its circulatory fate is the realization of that world.”<sup>86</sup> In other words, *Cosmopolis* does not just represent the vitiation of language but enacts a counterforce; this enactment takes the form of an artifact – the novel *Cosmopolis* – that DeLillo puts out into the world yet remains untethered by DeLillo’s particular ambitions or intentions. Understood as poetic world-making, the politics of literature resides not in the act of the writer but in the circulatory life of the artifact. The counterhistory of *Cosmopolis* offers not another fantasy meant to replace that which it allegorizes but rather an activity demanded by the work of the novel: reading a novel in the age of images, a novel that underscores its own “writiness,” requires a slowness and deliberateness dissonant with the time and space compression characteristic of the present epoch; in effect, the novel enacts “slow” practices at a time of accelerated cultural consumption, defetishizing its own commodity form by calling attention to its making. The novel thus solicits an alternative space and, more importantly, language for common life by putting its difficult counterhistory into circulation, eliciting participation in the prefigurative politics of crafting a common world.

## 6. The Polis Artist of the Twenty-First Century

“It is surely no accident that money — at least in the form of specific amounts — virtually disappeared from literature after the shocks of 1914-1915,” Piketty writes in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. He continues:

Specific references to wealth and income were omnipresent in the literature of all countries before 1914; these references gradually dropped out of sight between 1914 and 1945 and never truly reemerged. This is true not only of European and American novels but also of the literature of other continents.<sup>87</sup>

Contrary to Piketty’s confident assertion, *Cosmopolis* presents an undeniable counter-example: not only is money everywhere, but money – in particular money’s inability to provide satisfaction or even a haircut to Eric Packer – provides both the theme and the specific point of contrast. Money has become the chief category of value and the dominant index of human relations; language, by contrast, risks becoming outdated. The poetic world making suggested by the novel and its implicit dream of a common language constitute a prefigurative politics, an art of resistance ignored by Piketty.

Yet Piketty and others help to remind us that we no longer inhabit the optimistic and self-forgetting capitalism that *Cosmopolis* chronicles; the Eric Packers of the 1990s may be richer than ever, but they no longer serve as the exempla of an epoch. Speed and growth have been overtaken by precarity and affective bargaining.<sup>88</sup> Novels also seem increasingly the province of those above the roiling masses. Novels can serve as “phenomenological testimonies of certain structures of everyday life,” as Axel Honneth puts it,<sup>89</sup> yet as Stephen Marche has argued, “the new fiction of the second gilded age has had most of its sting removed.”<sup>90</sup>

Against the forgetting of money and the cocooning of elite literary fiction, literature and *Cosmopolis*, in particular, can prefigure an alternative. In Mattessich’s language, the novel testifies to the present “depoliticized polity pressed to find the equivalents of . . . democratic passions in private life . . . while their public conditions of possibility erode out from under it.”<sup>91</sup> *Cosmopolis* rejects these equivalents and the disavowals upon which they rest. Such rejections have not won praise in the establishment, however. After the publication of *Libra*, the fictional retelling of the Kennedy assassination, George Will berated the novel and the novelist, calling the latter “a bad citizen” and a “bad influence.” DeLillo’s response suggests how the work of the novel involves a

prefigurative politics emerging out of a critical relationship to the *status quo*:

Being called a “bad citizen” is a compliment to a novelist, at least to my mind. That’s exactly what we ought to do. We ought to be bad citizens. We ought to, in the sense that we’re writing against what power represents, and often what government represents, and what the corporation dictates, and what consumer consciousness has come to mean. In that sense, if we’re bad citizens, we’re doing our job.<sup>92</sup>

Will’s vitriol focuses on the destructive consequences for American mythology that DeLillo’s critical fiction seems to possess: without the fantasy that novels like *Cosmopolis* skewer, Will worries, of what will the American Dream consist? Granted, DeLillo does depict “the collapse of an American future.”<sup>93</sup> But this “writing against” – be it what power influences, government represents, the corporation dictates, consumer consciousness has come to mean – does not simply negate, as we have seen, but also focuses its readers on a constructive task of reclaiming language for ordinary life, of wresting the ways in which we make our lives intelligible from mediating entities distant from that life. “Writing against” asserts the kind of *writingness* that we have seen evident in *Cosmopolis* – as well as the political activity to which it calls us.

“Who wins the struggle for the imagination of the world?” Don DeLillo asked rhetorically in his 1993 interview with *The Paris Review*.<sup>94</sup> The counterhistory of *Cosmopolis* does not make a conventional tragedy of events with clear heroes and villains and a discernible program for action but rather chronicles the ordinary dissonance of American capitalism and while doing so sets in motion alternative political possibilities. Even while the novel’s diagnoses stem from a past epoch of American capitalism, *Cosmopolis* still puts readers on the path of rebuilding a common language, a language that can work in opposition to “the rerun, the sequel, the theme park, the designer outlet.” Returning language to life provides the basis for possible resistance to the forces of oblivion characteristic of social and political life in the twenty-first century. The literary work initiates this language, or prompts it; it puts an alternative into circulation with its act of poetic world making. The polis artist dreams of a common language. It remains our task to take up this language to craft more desirable political futures.

#### **Joel Alden Schlosser**

Joel Alden Schlosser is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Bryn Mawr College, where he teaches courses in the history of political thought and contemporary political theory. His work has previously appeared in *Political Theory*, *The Journal of Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Polis*, *The Review of Politics*, and *Theory & Event*, among others. He is the author of *What Would Socrates Do?* (Cambridge, 2014), and is currently working on a booklength project on Herodotus, social science, and democratic politics. Joel can be reached at [jschlosser@brynmawr.edu](mailto:jschlosser@brynmawr.edu)

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## Notes

1. Piketty 2013, Honneth 2013, Berlant 2011.
2. Marche 2014.
3. The full quote from Stendahl's novel *The Red and the Black* is "a novel is a mirror carried along a high road": Stendahl 2004 [1830], 515.
4. Jehlen 1986.
5. Shulman 2014.
6. For this paragraph, I draw upon general comments in Dewey 2006, who focuses on the three significant turns in American culture I describe in what follows. Lentricchia, ed. 1991, Leonard 2001, and Osteen 2000 have also been helpful for situating DeLillo's work in contemporary American culture. Cf. the recent interviews by Alter 2010 and McCrum 2010. My entire approach to DeLillo owes a significant debt to Euben 2003.
7. Dewey 2006, 5.
8. Duvall 2008, 2.
9. As Varsava points out, April 2000 "is of symbolic value given that the U.S. stock markets peaked early in 2000, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average reaching its all-time record in January at 11,908, while the tech-dominated NASDAQ hit 5,132 in intraday trading on March 10": Varsava 2005, 83.
10. Ulin 2003; Quoted in Conte 2008, 129.
11. Conte 2008, 182.
12. In addition to Conte 2008, Cowart describes Packer's "archetypal identity as American tycoon" (Cowart 2003, 220). Cf. Varsava 2005 (who calls *Cosmopolis* "the allegory of the stretch limo," p. 92), Valentino 2007, and Cvek 2010.
13. Boltanski and Chiapello 1995. Basing his research on interviews with Americans over the past forty years, Richard Sennett's treatment of "the culture of the new capitalism" follows a similar trajectory as Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis: Sennett 2006.

14. DeLillo 2003, 24.
15. DeLillo 2003, 26. Nancy Fraser has noted the differential burdens borne by men and women under the new spirit of capitalism (Fraser 2013, 220); *Cosmopolis* supports such a reading, as underscored by Ferry 2014.
16. DeLillo 2003, 10.
17. Varsava 2005, 105.
18. DeLillo 2003, 15.
19. DeLillo 2003, 18.
20. DeLillo 2003, 68.
21. DeLillo 2003, 69.
22. DeLillo 2003, 119.
23. This scene anticipates my discussion of "facingness" to come. DeLillo's corpus is filled with such moments.
24. DeLillo 2003, 28.
25. DeLillo 2003, 117.
26. DeLillo 2003, 14.
27. DeLillo 2003, 18.
28. DeLillo 2003, 21.
29. The language of "affective bargains" comes from Berlant 2011.
30. DeLillo 2003, 85.
31. DeLillo 2003, 123.
32. DeLillo 2003, 131.
33. DeLillo 2003, 6.
34. DeLillo 2003, 20.
35. DeLillo 2003, 48.
36. DeLillo 2003, 63 and 66.
37. DeLillo 2003, 50, 77, and 112.
38. DeLillo 2003, 83.
39. DeLillo 2003, 96.
40. DeLillo 2003, 107. With its chronicle of Eric Packer's inchoate and yet frustrated desires, *Cosmopolis* appears to offer a fitting example of the kind of impasse Lauren Berlant names as the common affliction and remaining aspiration of those in situations of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011, 4). However, as I point out in the following section, these moments of absorptive awareness and hypervigilance come presented in a style that works against the cessation and abstraction Berlant finds as a potential (although ultimately hopeless) basis of resistance.
41. I would argue that David Cronenberg's version of *Cosmopolis* (Prospero Pictures, 2012) also undercuts an allegorical reading by deploying a flat and colorless affect throughout the film, refusing the typical flare and glare of Hollywood production.
42. Jeffery 2014.
43. Fried 1996, 266.
44. Ibid., 331.
45. DeLillo 2003, 5.
46. DeLillo 2003, 5.
47. DeLillo 2003, 66.
48. DeLillo 2003, 55.
49. DeLillo 2003, 60.
50. The passage comes from Zbigniew Herbert, "Report from a Besieged City": Herbert 2007 [1982], 416.
51. DeLillo 2003, 58.
52. DeLillo 2003, 149.
53. DeLillo 2003, 61.
54. Jeffery 2014.

55. Mattessich 2007, 15.
56. Said 2006, 116.
57. Cowart 2002.
58. DeLillo 2003, 12.
59. DeLillo 2003, 9.
60. DeLillo 2003, 15, 54, 85, and 104.
61. DeLillo 2003, 42.
62. DeLillo 2003, 55.
63. DeLillo 2003, 73.
64. DeLillo 2003, 53.
65. DeLillo 2003, 70.
66. DeLillo 2003, 93.
67. Cowart 2002, 225.
68. Ibid., 226.
69. DeLillo 2003, 45.
70. DeLillo 2003, 74.
71. DeLillo 2003, 161. Thanks to Steve Salkever for reminding me of this moment.
72. Mulhall 2001, 176.
73. Ibid.
74. Norval 2007, 107.
75. Shulman 2014, 559. In Cavell's elliptical language: "The endless computations of the words of *Walden* are part of its rescue of language, its return of it to us, its effort to free us and our language of one another, to discover the autonomy of each": Cavell 1992, 63.
76. Shulman 2014, 559.
77. George Steiner glosses this point in a way that DeLillo could well have put himself: "The English spoken by Mr. Eisenhower during his press conferences, like that used to sell a new detergent, was intended neither to communicate the critical truths of national life nor to quicken the mind of the hearer. It was designed to evade or gloss over the demands of meaning. The language of a community has reached a perilous state when a study of radioactive fall-out can be entitled 'Operation Sunshine'" (Steiner 1970, 27).
78. Polletta 2002, 6.
79. Day 2005, 204. Quoted in Cornell 2011.
80. DeLillo 2001, 34. Conte 2008 also calls attention to the connections between "In the Ruins of the Future" and *Cosmopolis*.
81. DeLillo 2001, 39.
82. Anker 2014.
83. DeLillo 1997, 6, 1 - 2.
84. DeLillo 1997, 7.
85. DeLillo 1997, 8.
86. Warner 2002, 114.
87. Piketty 2013, 108 – 9.
88. Berlant 2011.
89. Marcelo 2013, 215.
90. Marche 2014.
91. Mattessich 2007, 2.
92. Remnick 2007, 136.
93. Conte 2008, 190.
94. DeLillo 1993, 13.

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