

Adriana-Carolina Bulz*

INVESTIGATING DON DELILLO'S ETHICAL ONTOLOGY THROUGH THE CITY-HERO INTERACTION IN COSMOPOLIS

Keywords: epistemology; mythic-archetypal criticism; neo-realism; phenomenology; trauma.

Abstract: *In my paper I intend to investigate Don DeLillo's aesthetic approach to character development in Cosmopolis. I will discuss the character's epistemological quest through the city of New York as a neorealistic cinematic odyssey, during which Eric Packer turns from the king of the stock market to the scapegoat of capitalism. I will focus mainly on the mode of reality reflection in DeLillo's fiction, stressing the displacement from the phenomenological rendering of reality towards the ethical ontology of perception. This vision, which the author describes in his latter-day essay "In the Ruins of the Future" (2001), enables readers to activate their perceptions and stage the action for themselves, by relegating subjectivity and judgment to the background. The purpose of the present paper is to dwell on the means of hero-displacement in Cosmopolis, resorting, among other critical tools to mythic-archetypal criticism such as that elaborated by Joseph Campbell in The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Eventually, it seems, DeLillo's fiction manages to integrate its hero into the hyper-reality of the cityscape, albeit through the achievement of an imperfect, nearly posthumous feat of illumination. Additionally, I intend to investigate the connection between Packer's downfall and the 9/11 events so as to prove that Cosmopolis may be regarded as the writer's response, mirrored on an individual level, to the traumatic event that shook the American nation.*

We depend on disaster to consolidate our vision.
(DeLillo – *The Power of History*)

The (postmodern) city of Cosmopolis, like many other versions of the city appearing in literature, inflicts upon the main character a feeling of frustration that the reader can easily share. For the City is the antithesis of the Garden of Eden, of a place where desire is appeased. On the contrary, in the city, desire is perpetually frustrated and occasional gratification only gives rise to more intense desire. As an introduction to the present paper, I will review several points from Richard's Lehan's book entitled *Dreamscapes: The City in Literature*, which is a history of the evolution of the city concept as it appears in literary works. As Italo Calvino wrote in *Invisible Cities* (1972), "Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else" (51). In accordance to the postmodern approach to the city, the urban environment is perceived as a maze, where the character gets lost in a hermeneutic circle, where the physical space and

* Military Technical Academy, Bucharest, Romania.

the state of mind are superimposed, so that looking for the truth outside the self inevitably leads back to one's self. Moreover, "urban activity becomes more abstract and unreal as power operates from hidden sources" (Lehan 287). In the absence of transcendence, chance predominates, while the uncanny abounds in all encounters. The self is a discontinuous entity, fraught with electronic stimuli, while surrounded by simulacra of value (such as money itself). However, as Joseph Campbell points out in his study, it is still the task of the (contemporary) hero to achieve a unification of the human self, by healing the split between the conscious and the unconscious (that have been torn asunder by the relegation of myth to a legendary status):

The hero-deed to be wrought is not today what it was in the century of Galileo. Where then there was darkness, now there is light; but also, where light was, there now is darkness. The modern hero-deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the coordinated soul...for the problem is nothing if not that of rendering the modern world spiritually significant - or rather (phrasing the same principle the other way round) nothing if not that of making it possible for men and women to come to full human maturity through the conditions of contemporary life. (Campbell 359)

In the present paper, I intend to argue that DeLillo's novel stages such an identity quest with the cityscape as its background. Indeed, there could be no better choice of a setting than the city of New York in the 21st century, while the choice of character is wisely set upon a young billionaire – both genius of finance and cultural connoisseur – 28-year-old Eric Packer, whose quest, albeit unconscious, eventually raises the reader above the city maze, pointing towards a possible enlightenment. Campbell's theory is useful once again, in observing that:

Today no meaning is in the group - none in the world: all is in the individual. But there the meaning is absolutely unconscious. One does not know toward what one moves. One does not know by what one is propelled. The lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two (358-9).

To confirm this point, we have a central character whose main decision in the novel is about getting a haircut on a very busy day, when the president is in town and the traffic is almost stationary. The idea comes to him apparently out of the blue: "He didn't know what he wanted. Then he knew. He wanted a haircut." (1) Absurdly, as it seems to his chief of security, the character insists that they should cross the city in his limousine to get to an old barbershop where his father used to take him as a child. But the way the idea emerges, right after his contemplation of the cityscape dawn, points to Packer's need to connect with the primal energies of childhood, to feel the power suggested by the figure of the father. Obviously, the main character's energy is on the wane – we are told about his sleepless nights – and he seeks power and inspiration in the material objects surrounding him (his gorgeous apartment, his limousine, the skyscrapers etc.). From this viewpoint, the first chapter abounds in descriptions of the images and objects that the gaze or touch of Eric

Packer reaches and by which the character takes possession of the world around him, feeding himself, ever more greedily, on its aura:

He stood at the window and watched the great day dawn. The view was across bridges, narrows and sounds and out past the boroughs and toothpaste suburbs into measures of landmass and sky that could only be called *the deep distance*. *He didn't know what he wanted*. It was still nighttime down on the river, half night, and ashy vapors wavered above the smokestacks on the far bank. He imagined the whores were all fled from the lamplit corners by now, duck butts shaking, other kinds of archaic business just beginning to stir, produce trucks rolling out of the markets, news trucks out of the loading docks. The bread vans would be crossing the city and a few stray cars out of bedlam weaving down the avenues, speakers pumping heavy sound. The noblest thing, a bridge across a river, with the sun beginning to roar behind it (DeDillo, *Cosmopolis 1*, emphasis mine).

He went back up to the living quarters, walking slowly now, and paused in every room, absorbing what was there, *deeply seeing*, retaining every fleck of energy in rays and waves. The art that hung was mainly color-field and geometric, large canvases that dominated rooms and placed a prayerful hush on the atrium, skylighted, with its high white paintings and trickle fountain. The atrium had the tension and suspense of a towering space that requires pious silence in order to be seen and experienced properly, the mosque of soft footfall and rock doves murmurous in the vaulting (DeDillo *Cosmopolis 2*, emphasis mine).

The central idea of Lehan's study is that cities, like novels, can be read as texts and that the former and the latter are mutually dependable. The city as an enlightenment ideal has been questioned repeatedly by the romantic, naturalistic, modern and postmodern trains of thought, but the city nevertheless remains a source of intellectual excitement through its establishment of political order. The challenge, on the other hand, is provided by the perpetual threat of social chaos that the diversity inherent in city life presents. The tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac is therefore a feature of the urban landscape as well: as a response to instances of radical individualism, there emerge instantiations of the Other (the man of the crowd or the outsider) that still recall the insinuating figure of Dionysus and its destructive potential. In *Cosmopolis*, we do have the hero-antihero couple of Packer, the egocentric magnate, and Benno Levin, the social outcast seeking revenge on the billionaire who ruined him. Also, surrounding Packer little by little is a constant sense of threat to his life, issued from the very beginning – at first in a most impersonal way, then embodied in several individual encounters, some of them humorous (such as that with the pie assassin that strikes Packer in a mock-heroic scene) and some nearly horrific (as when an angry mob attacks and vandalizes his limo while he is inside it) - also mirrored by the fate of another magnate who gets savagely murdered on TV or by the death of a rap-star much beloved by Eric, Brutha Fez, whose funeral procession accompanies Packer's limousine for a few miles along its way to the barbershop.

I would further like to dwell upon two images that Lehan brings up in his study, taken from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The first one is linked to the city of *Fedora*, with deposits which house roomfuls of globes, every one of them

containing the vision of each and every citizen that inhabited the city – thus, the city may be understood as an individual assumption, an imaginary artifact. For instance, Eric Packer conceptualizes the city of New York as his natural environment, where he feels at home despite his confusion, where he is free to appropriate whatever he can touch or gaze upon. His behavior is that of an alpha male, easily disturbed by any challenge to his authority (which is why close to the end of the novel he kills his bodyguard, tricking him to reveal the password of his automatic gun - a woman's name), cynically believing that money can buy him anything (the most astounding instance is his intention to acquire the Roethke Chapel – an art deco historical monument that belongs to the state, and the fact that he simply cannot conceive that it may be priceless and cannot be bought). Another “invisible” city evocative of the postmodern maze, in which the characters of *Cosmopolis* wander, is the city of *Zobeide*. Its description is equally fit for DeLillo's New York, in which both hero and anti-hero have been pursuing the same dream and failed, each in their own way. Zobeide was a dream figure that lured many men into building a city where she could finally be found, however, the inhabitants pursuing this dream only lost themselves in the city-maze they built but couldn't find her. More and more people arrive lured by the same mirage, and - having forgotten their initial purpose - “the first to arrive could not understand what drew these people to Zobeide, this ugly city, this trap” (Calvino 53). Eventually, New York as *Cosmopolis* proves a nifty trap for the characters who pursue their dream to the end. With the exception of narcissistic apparitions like Elise Shiffrin, Eric's cool-headed bride and would-be poet, the novelistic figures that engage in action bent on achieving a goal are headed for failure. *Cosmopolis* weaves an ever tightening fabric around them and the more they struggle for the light, the more they get tied up in its poisonous threads. Having said this, it is worth-while remarking that there are several points of similarity between the content of DeLillo's novel and the expressionistic silent movie of Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1927)¹. Towards the end of his study, Lehan also refers to T.S. Eliot's “unreal city” – an entropic, closed system, the product of a burned-out civilization. Yet, it has to be said, however “unreal” New York may seem to the readers of *Cosmopolis*, it is not in the least “burned-out”. On the contrary, its energies are felt to be seething, nearly bursting in the mob scenes that DeLillo artfully presents to us. Its carnivalesque overtones engulf the audience, who find themselves caught up in a hyper-realistic Bacchanalia, whose only victims are the hero/anti-hero couple, as exacerbated figures of individualism.

¹ *Metropolis*, just like *Cosmopolis*, was inspired by the city of New York. It shows a futuristic society (of the year 2000) that is sharply divided in two: the aristocrats and the industrial workers. The latter work the machines that make the life of aristocrats a dream in their paradisiacal gardens. The wealthy son of the city ruler and a poor but inspired worker named Maria form an improbable couple that somehow manage to save the people at large from the grips of this urban dystopia. Interestingly, in the movie, Maria has a diabolic double that drives men crazy with her loose ways. Similarly, in the novel, Elise Shiffrin seems to have a double personality since Eric finds her once in a library reading poetry books and at another time she is naked on the set of a movie scene from which they elope to have sex in a nearby barracks.

In the chapter “Memory, Desire, Lyric: The Flaneur” from McNamara’s *Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*, Catherine Nesci asserts that ever since Baudelaire’s “To a Woman Passing By” (1859), loving in the city became a drama of loss and frustrated desire. Thus, Eric’s love for his wife Elise and the scene of its “realization” is almost a palimpsest of Baudelaire’s aforementioned poem:

Around me the street deafeningly screeched./Tall, slender, in heavy mourning,
majestic grief,/ A woman passed, with an imposing hand/ Raising, swinging a
scalloped hem;/ Agile and noble, her leg was like a statue’s./As for me, contorted
like an extravagant, I drank/ From her eye, pale sky where a storm germinates,/ The
sweetness that enthalls and the pleasure that kills./ A lightning flash ... then night!
– Fugitive beauty/ By whose glance I was suddenly reborn,/Will I see you no more
before eternity?/ Elsewhere, far, far from here! too late! never perhaps!/ For I know
not where you fled, you know not where I go,/ O you whom I would have loved, O
you who knew it too! (Baudelaire in McNamara 69)

The instant he knew he loved her, she slipped down his body and out of his arms.
Then she wedged herself through the narrow opening in the boards and he watched
her cross the street. Nothing moved out there. She was the lone stroke of motion,
crew and extras gone, equipment gone, and she was cool and silvery slim and
walking headhigh, with technical precision, toward the last trailer in the service
station, where she would find her clothes, dress quickly and disappear. (DeLillo,
Cosmopolis 77)

Arguably, the novel can be also read as a drama of exacerbated individualism, in which Eric Packer contends for the first prize with his newly “acquired” wife, Elise Shifrin. The heir of an enormous fortune, she is an elusive presence in his life and denies him sexual gratification, preferring to hide away and be discovered in the most incongruous of places: a cab lost in traffic, an underground bookstore, the derelict set of a movie scene. The fact that Eric cannot coax her into being his regular partner makes him seek for intercourse elsewhere or otherwise go about his daily routine of business and sexual encounters without their marriage of convenience making any difference to his lifestyle. However, as the above quote reveals, his match with Elise is written in the stars since he feels that he loves her truly and right before his death fantasizes briefly about their married bliss. This is one reason why he decides to “take her down with him”: when he has lost his fortune and she offers to help, he transfers all her money into his accounts and makes doomed investments so that they may “see each other clean, in killing light”, without the money screen intervening between them. This neo-romantic approach to their love-affair strikes at the very basis of the materialism on which it had been conceived as a joint-stock enterprise.

In a sense, Eric, Elise and (most of all characters) Benno Levin are outsiders to the very system that has produced them and of which for a while they have been ardent supporters. They (partly, at least) embody the socio-economic outcast in the contemporary urban environment, a “figure as inherent to the city as are the phantasmagoria of commodity and the grandeur of urban architecture” (Keuen and Droogh in McNamara 99). However, for the readers of the novel, their enactment of this role aims to test it as a means of opposing the perpetual flow of capital through

the city veins. And here again, one may associate Eric's downward trajectory with the heroic quest and the search for a boon meant to redeem humanity (even if, like in *Metropolis*, the chosen fictional turn can be liable to charges of naiveté):

The modern hero, the modern individual who dares to heed the call and seek the mansion of that presence with whom it is our whole destiny to be atoned, cannot, indeed must not, wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding. 'Live,' Nietzsche says, 'as though the day were here.' *It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse.* And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal — carries the cross of the redeemer—not in the bright moments of his tribe's great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair. (Campbell, *The Hero Today*: 361-362, emphasis mine)

Cosmopolis has many passages that focus on the movement of people, with fleeting but impressive portrayals of the working class – “a generic identity, the identity of no-identity, the identity which is beyond all identities”. As Alain Badiou argues, “for Marx, ‘proletariat’ was the name of something like that. It's not an identity. It's ... humanity as such, because the working class is something generic and not a pure identity”, but today “probably that function of the working class is saturated” (qtd. in McNamara 99). However, the issue of the masses is still topical for authors such as DeLillo who “seek to construct that *generic identity* and make the problem of the socioeconomic outsider the key to reform of the modern world” (Keunen and Droogh in McNamara 99). A quote from the novel will easily prove that the scope of the novel includes the aforementioned point:

Buses rumbled up the avenue in pairs, hacking and panting, buses abreast or single file, sending people to the sidewalk in sprints, *live prey, nothing new*, and that's where construction workers were eating lunch, seated against bank walls, legs stretched, rusty boots, appraising eyes, all trained on the streaming people, the march-past, checking looks and pace and style, women in brisk skirts, half running, sandaled women wearing headsets, women in floppy shorts, tourists, others high and slick with fingernails from vampire movies, long, fanged and frescoed, and the workers were alert for freakishness of any kind, people whose hair or clothing or manner of stride mock what the workers do, forty stories up, or schmucks with cell phones, who rankled them in general. These were scenes that normally roused him, *the great rapacious flow, where the physical will of the city, the ego fevers, the assertions of industry, commerce and crowds shape every anecdotal moment* (DeLillo 18, emphasis mine).

While, from the above description, it is obvious that the working class is marginalized by society, it is nonetheless a part of it and – more importantly – it is the workers who are “appraising” society, while somehow aloof from it, their stance being similar for that matter with that of the observing hero. *Cosmopolis* may be remote in time from Edward Bellamy's urban utopia *Looking Backwards* (1888)². It

²A utopian novel that presented a vision of the future based on socialist reform in which citizens enjoy a harmoniously shared prosperity after industrial wealth has been nationalized.

nevertheless enters a prolific dialogue with it as yet another dystopian response (Thomas Pynchon's and Paul Auster's novels offering another bitter reaction) to the illusion of post-industrial bliss. Besides the portrayal of the working class and somehow included in it, DeLillo's cityscape equally highlights the minorities and the immigrant issue, little by little approaching the multicultural element of crisis that the 9/11 events were rooted in:

Hasidim walked along the street, younger men in dark suits and important fedoras, faces pale and blank, men who only saw each other, he thought, as they disappeared into storefronts or down the subway steps. He knew the traders and gem cutters were in the back rooms and wondered whether deals were still made in doorways with a handshake and a Yiddish blessing. *In the grain of the street he sensed the Lower East Side of the 1920s and the diamond centers of Europe before the second war, Amsterdam and Antwerp. He knew some history.* He saw a woman seated on the sidewalk begging, a baby in her arms. She spoke a language he didn't recognize. He knew some languages but not this one. She seemed rooted to that plot of concrete. Maybe her baby had been born there, under the No Parking sign. FedEx trucks and UPS. *Black men wore signboards and spoke in African murmurs.* Cash for gold and diamonds. Rings, coins, pearls, wholesale jewelry, antique jewelry. *This was the souk, the shtetl.* Here were the hagglers and talebearers, the scrapmongers, the dealers in stray talk. *The street was an offense to the truth of the future. But he responded to it. He felt it enter every receptor and vault electrically to his brain.* The car stopped dead and he got out and stretched. Traffic ahead was a long liquid shimmer of idling metal (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*: 26, emphasis mine).

Amidst the urban flurry, the image of the beggar woman holding a baby in her arms is both touching and destabilizing for the hero and reader as well. The emotional appeal is thwarted by the fact that her speech is unrecognizable, that her presence there is untraceable to any original location, by the fact that she seems a statue in motion – an impersonal presence, a generic non-identity, and therefore yet another specter of capitalism - her extreme, unquenchable poverty blankly juxtaposed with “cash for gold and diamonds”. According to Keunen and Droogh,

The identity of the working class has been primarily defined as a non-identity overrun by elements pertaining to heterogeneous identities: the working class is variously constructed as oppressed, subversive, unhygienic, morally weak, and so forth. Nevertheless, for cultural and literary theory, this referential ambiguity should not pose an obstacle to insight. Rather, precisely this construction of a generic identity sheds a fascinating light on how the western intellectual community has handled the complex cultural situation we call *modernity* (in McNamara, 99).

The way urban modernity has sought to solve the crisis and attempted to cope with such dazzling heterogeneity as the New York cityscape presents is indicative of the deepening crisis that will eventually end in the conflict and disaster that *Cosmopolis* anticipates:

Eye contact was a delicate matter. A quarter second of a shared glance was a violation of agreements that made the city operational. Who steps aside for whom, who looks or does not look at whom, what level of umbrage does a brush or a touch

constitute? No one wanted to be touched. There was a pact of untouchability. Even here, in the huddle of old cultures, tactile and close-woven, with passersby mixed in, and security guards, and shoppers pressed to windows, and wandering fools, people did not touch each other (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*: 28, emphasis mine).

The “pact of untouchability” briefly exposed by DeLillo is revelatory for the main character’s hybris, which extends to his wife as well. If Eric has a problem in acknowledging the features of the people he works with, Elise on the other hand simply refuses to let herself touched by any experience, including her husband’s love. On a wider scale, the distance between the various social categories inhabiting the city is apparently unbreachable, so that the encounter between Benno and Eric in the end of the novel and their attempt to bond in empathy for each other constitutes the novel’s climax, with a healing scope by which fiction may turn the tables on reality.

Outlined against the cityscape, Eric Packer can be identified as a postmodern flâneur, with romantic and naturalistic overtones along his quest. He is a semi-aware, imperfect hero, whose realization of a sense of mission overcomes him only at the very end. For the most part of his journey, Packer seems confused but equally exhilarated by the variety of choices and eclectic displays along his path. To start with, he is so obsessed about his own person that a minor problem detected at one of the daily medical check-ups (an asymmetrical prostate gland) turns his world upside down so that he keeps worrying over it until the final encounter with his murderer. The subtle link between his medical condition and his life view is that however he may attempt to disentangle the city’s palimpsestic structure, its multiplicity of texts, Packer fails to discern a meaning or logical order and repeatedly states his uncertainty of feeling towards the city’s manifestations. By repeatedly failing to integrate the Other element, logical confusion prevails and starts to affect his own actions, while prostration (i.e. complete physical or mental exhaustion, syn. collapse, abasement, powerlessness) as an existentialist stance becomes the character’s hallmark³. Equally important for stylistic purposes, the Arcadia element present in the idealized image of the city may imply a powerful element of satire. It is therefore possible that DeLillo intended to incorporate in the novel an element of melodrama, thereby distancing himself (and the reader) from the toils of the (mock) hero. The concept of the urban pastoral elaborated on by McNamara and Gray in the last chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature* includes the presence of both music and poetry, which are two powerful artistic forces in DeLillo’s text. However paradoxical or oxymoronic it may seem, life in the city does not preemptively exclude the possibility of finding (or at least seeking for) appeasement and enlightenment and we do get characters who are entranced by a passion for music and verse: the two elevators that Eric uses in his luxurious suite play music by Satie and Brutha Fez; also, Eric tries to soothe his

³The phonological similarity between the words “prostate” and “prostrate” may be more than a mere coincidence.

mind by reading sparse verse at night⁴ while strongly disliking the poetry of Elise, which he calls “bullshit”(probably because it is more descriptive and less mathematically precise). One way or another, the characters find solace in various art forms; besides music and poetry, Eric also cherishes abstract art. The disturbing “white” paintings that hang in his living room are significant for their role in confusing his guests and thus adding to Eric’s aura of unreachability⁵. As a cultural connoisseur, Eric entertains an artistic relation to the space surrounding him, including the skyscraper building which he inhabits and about which he muses that the name (“skyscraper”) is outdated, since reality surpasses the meaning that its name once reflected⁶. Last but not least, Eric’s limousine is indicative of the phenomenon of *conspicuous consumption* that Thorstein Veblen theorized in 1899:

He liked the fact that the cars were indistinguishable from each other. He wanted such a car because he thought it was a platonic replica, weightless for all its size, less an object than an idea. But he knew this wasn't true. This was something he said for effect and he didn't believe it for an instant. He believed it for an instant but only just. He wanted the car because it was not only oversized but aggressively and contemptuously so, metastasizingly so, a tremendous mutant thing that stood astride every argument against it. His chief of security liked the car for its anonymity. Long white limousines had become the most unnoticed vehicles in the city. (De Lillo, *Cosmopolis* 3)

In her article on “René Girard and the Rhetoric of Consumption”, Kathleen Vanderberg exposes the alienation, mystification and desire generated by the social hierarchies. According to Jacques Elul’s theory of social propaganda, members of a group behave so as to influence the attitudes, actions and lifestyle of other societal members, albeit in an unconscious way. He links Girard’s theory about the mimetic triangulation of desire to the way agency is diffused in a group, so that all members

⁴He tried to read his way into sleep but only grew more wakeful. He read science and poetry. He liked spare poems sited minutely in white space, ranks of alphabetic strokes burnt into paper. Poems made him conscious of his breathing. 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 (*Cosmopolis* 1).

⁵“The white paintings were unknowable to many, knife-applied slabs of mucoid color. The work was all the more dangerous for not being new. There's no more danger in the new” (*Cosmopolis* 2).

⁶“He went outside and crossed the avenue, then turned and faced the building where he lived. He felt contiguous with it. It was eighty- nine stories, a prime number, in an undistinguished sheath of hazy bronze glass. They shared an edge or boundary, skyscraper and man. It was nine hundred feet high, the tallest residential tower in the world, a commonplace oblong whose only statement was its size. It had the kind of banality that reveals itself over time as being truly brutal. He liked it for this reason. He liked to stand and look at it when he felt this way” (*Cosmopolis* 2).

share in the generation of persuasion⁷ - as in the case of the long white limousines that have become nearly inconspicuous by their conspicuousness (as a regular presence in New York traffic, as well as in front of Eric's residential building where there's a long line of such limousines, with their drivers waiting by their sides). The problem with conspicuous consumption as revealed by the novel is that - in a culture of intense consumerism - participation and competition are always intensified and never held in check (as opposed to societies of the past, when religion and the separation of classes limited the outspread of desire). Thus, when frustration of the masses reaches a peak (which in *Cosmopolis* is exemplified by the crowds protesting against the economic monopoly of cyber-capital), there is a strong demand for sacrificial violence - which is where the unraveling of the action leads Eric, to the scape-goating moment meant to quench the spiral of desire. The social competition is therefore generated by a desire for Being (what we ourselves feel to be lacking and the privileged few seem to possess - the central case in the novel being that of the antagonistic couple Eric Packer - Benno Levin), which preserves its aura of mystery and imparts a feeling of authenticity, since the individual will always remain separate from the Other, albeit linked to It by metaphysical desire⁸. According to Aaron Chandler, in the doublet Packer-Levin, DeLillo presents a model of antagonism that sheds light on the relation between avaricious self-regard and an unrestrained thirst for retribution posing a "post-national cultural diagnostic" that articulates how "the theatrics of playing victor and victim are intimately bound" (258). The author of the article makes an interesting comparison between Heidegger's and Levinas' views on the relationship between the Self and the Other, extending the novel's scope to the proximity of the 9/11 implications. For Levinas, the encounter with the face of the other is the ethical moment par excellence, and in *Cosmopolis* there's an emphasis on Packer's failure to see ethically (or to perceive the faces/features of others), which is intimately connected with his compulsive (hyper-maniacal) systematization of the world. Eric's willfulness to "acquire" details is a Heideggerian feature (the *DaSein* in opposition with the world), while for Levinas, "to recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master...whom

⁷According to Girard, the free-floating desire gets attached to an object that an individual displays inside a community, which triggers in another the desire to possess the same object (or one in its likeness). This phenomenon is called internal mediation, being boosted by the action of mass media and based on unstable comparisons. Due to conspicuous consumption, patterns of social relations change and envy becomes the vital principle of society, while those things that can only be purchased by the very few become "sacred", such as the white limousine which acquires a platonic quality (as more of an idea than an object).

⁸This is the only reason why Eric himself (who, despite his wealth, feels a perpetual lack of inner being) valorizes the barbershop where his father used to take him as a child and feels more authentic only when he talking to the old barber and tasting his food. Similarly, he has no use for the weapon smuggled from his chief of security, but cherishes the worn-out handgun which the barber gives him and, armed with it, flees to the encounter with the invisible enemy, suddenly feeling fearless.

one approaches in a dimension of height” (qtd. in Chandler 251). Packer’s asymmetrical prostate gland is also an element of otherness that he cannot conceive of in himself or fails to internalize (he remains prostrate in front of the incomprehensibility of the world, separate from it and always on the offensive, unable to understand what is going on) since, in Levinas’ view, no ontology (or economic system) can account for the fundamental heterogeneity of the Other. On the other hand, Heidegger’s existentialist conception of “authentic Being” implies a confrontation with Death (as part of DaSein) and so the last stage in Eric Packer’s drama is the takeover of his own death through an imaginative “burial in the sky” or through the attempt to ward off death by the fantasy of “digitalizing” his self - equally suggested by his advisor Vija Kinski:

‘You live in a tower that soars to heaven and goes unpunished by God.’ (...) ‘I understand none of this,’ she said. ‘Microchips so small and powerful. Humans and computers merge. This is well beyond my range. And never-ending life begins.’ She took a moment to look at him. ‘Shouldn’t the glory of a great man’s death argue against his dream of immortality?’ ‘There you sit, of large visions and prideful acts. Why die when you can live on disk? A disk, not a tomb. An idea beyond the body. A mind that’s everything you ever were and will be, but never weary or confused or impaired. It’s a mystery to me, how such a thing might happen. Will it happen someday? Sooner than we think because everything happens sooner than we think. Later today perhaps. Maybe today is the day when everything happens, for better or worse, ka-boom, like that’ (*Cosmopolis* 49-50).

But the fact that Eric forces himself to experience pain by shooting at his own hand (the acquisitive part) makes out of the experience pain an “other” of himself, and so the character finally reaches an integration of his own self. Just before this, he had “lost himself” in the crowd, became immersed in the experience of living life in a hedonistic way. His attendance of the drug rave session is a first attempt at immersion and then the flight in pursuit of his imagined enemy is another instance: “But it was the threat of death at the brink of night that spoke to him most surely about some principle of fate he’d always known would come clear in time. Now he could begin the business of living” (*Cosmopolis*: 51). According to Chandler, there could be established a link between *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Falling Man* (2007), DeLillo’s novel treating of terrorism: Benno Levin could be seen as an the Al-Qaeda terrorist avant-la-lettre, while Eric could stand for the embodiment of the American self – as the author stated in his essay, “In the Ruins of the Future” (“We are rich, privileged and strong but they are willing to die.”) But in DeLillo’s “The Power of History”, literature is seen as antithetical to reality or as a rewriting of reality: in its artistic rendering of the past, it can give us a second chance to the present, if only we would heed its lessons. That is why, eventually, a bankrupt, haggard Eric bonds strangely with Benno, his jagged assassin. They confess various things to each other, among which the fact that they both have an asymmetric prostate gland (and in a way they are equally “prostrate” in face of the world’s incomprehensibility). After this revelation, Eric feels relieved and warm inside (maybe for the first time? does he experience Being?), finally being able to see/comprehend/ integrate the Other *in a dimension of height*, as Levinas proposes.

Benno then takes care of his wound and explains that Eric's financial error was due to the latter's perfectionism and to his belief in the infallibility of logic (idealistic vision of symmetry that does not take into account the flaw, the asymmetry). Then Benno tells Eric: "I wanted you to heal me.", at which Eric suddenly feels remorse for having senselessly killed his bodyguard. He also pities Benno, regretting that he cannot "redeem" him anymore than he can redeem himself. In the end, Eric seems to have matured abruptly and his future life flashes before his eyes after he has a vision of his dead body (having acquired, it seems, supernatural powers through the use of technology). So, just before the fatal shot is to be heard, Eric focuses on his experience of pain (which is symbolic of life) and embraces experience wholeheartedly (without trying to understand anymore), living the present moment to the full, while death remains indefinitely suspended in the future. This is his end of the quest, according to Campbell's theory, his coming into possession of the boon (i.e. grasping the present moment as if it were the Holy Grail) and this experience can equally be treasured and imparted to the readers. The novel ends on a wise, albeit blurred note, revealing that "the misconception of the world, or even of another's single life, belongs to us" (Chandler 259).

To conclude, I will briefly turn to DeLillo's essay, "In the Ruins of the Future", regarding the notion of "response-ability", which is connected to an innovative way of perceiving reality, equally valid for reading fiction. Speaking about 9/11, DeLillo insists that point of view or the act of seeing is immanent in the event. Responding to this immanence, DeLillo's rhetoric of seeing suspends and questions any representational judgment that locates the perceiving subject's perspective on the outside and, from my reading of it, *Cosmopolis* can be considered a novel that endorses this neo-realistic viewpoint. Thus, the transition from epistemology to ethical ontology is ensured, response being defined as a capacity "to give oneself over to the primacy of the event" or as suspension that constitutes "an immanent mode of response" (Abel 1240). Representation is thus replaced with an aesthetic response, the author's aim in writing being not to represent the event itself but to forward the act of seeing that generates the representation. In this way, readers of the novel might wonder why they are being shown certain things and not what the things in themselves represent (this is also in keeping with mythical-archetypal theories about Being, which remains a mystery at the heart of things). Connected to the ethical approach may also be the characters' need to respond to an event by ontologically rewriting it – just as in the final scene when Eric attempts to turn the tables on his assassin and shoots at his own hand instead of waiting for the bullet that will end his life. Even though reviewers have called the novel a "hymn dedicated to the city of New York", some critics have stated that *Cosmopolis* proves the author's ultimate inability to comprehend urban life in the metropolis. However, if – as DeLillo explains – the ruins of the future are the ruins of representational language – which nevertheless is our only means of intervening in the world – then it is our "ethical task not to represent difference but to respond to its already present forces" (Abel 1247). "Response-ability" therefore may equally be induced in the reader by intensifying the narrative rhythm, a thing done to perfection by the hectic pace of the novel under discussion, which is unique through its "remarkable unity and brevity" (Minor 581).

Works Cited

- Abel, Marco. "In the Ruins of the Future. Literature, Images, and the Rhetoric of Seeing 9/11." *PMLA* 118. 5 (October 2003): 1236-1250. Web. 8 September 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261462?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents>.
- Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. 1972. Web. <https://monoskop.org/images/0/0e/Calvino_Italo_Invisible_Cities.pdf>.
- Chandler, Aaron. "An Unsettling, Alternative Self: Benno Levin, Emanuel Levinas and DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*." Web. 9 September 2016. <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3200/CRIT.50.3.241-260>>.
- DeLillo, Don. *Cosmopolis*. 2003. Trans. Veronica D. Niculescu. Polirom, 2012. Web. <[http://shadowsgovernment.com/shadows-library/Don%20DeLillo/Cosmopolis%20\(22298\)/Cosmopolis%20-%20Don%20DeLillo.pdf](http://shadowsgovernment.com/shadows-library/Don%20DeLillo/Cosmopolis%20(22298)/Cosmopolis%20-%20Don%20DeLillo.pdf)>.
- . "In the Ruins of the Future." Web. 10 September 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo>>.
- . "The Power of History." Web. 10 September 2016. <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html>>.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Web. <<http://seas3.elte.hu/coursematerial/TarcsayTibor/Joseph-Campbell--The-Hero-With-a-Thousand-Faces-Commemorative-Edition.pdf>>.
- Chandler, Aaron. "An Unsettling, Alternative Self": Benno Levin, Emmanuel Levinas, and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*." *Critique* 50.3 (Spring 2009): 241-260. Print.
- Lehan, Richard. *Dreamscapes. The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*. University of California Press, 1998. Print.
- McNamara, Kevin, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2014. Print.
- Minor, Kyle. *Cosmopolis* (Review). *The Antioch Review* 61.3. Dreams and Dreaming. (Summer 2003): 581. Web. 11 September 2016. <www.jstor.org/stable/4614533>.
- Packer, Matthew J. "'At the Dead Center of Things' in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: Mimesis, Violence, and Religious Awe." *Modern Fiction Studies* 51.3 (Fall 2005): 648-666. Print.
- Vandenberg, Kathleen M. "René Girard and the Rhetoric of Consumption." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*. 12.13 (2006): 259-272. Web. 11 September 2016. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41925294>>.