

Don DeLillo and Society's Reorientation to Time and Space: An Interpretation of *Cosmopolis*

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Abstract: This essay reads Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* as a novelization of social theories of time and space as expressed across various academic disciplines. Changing conceptions of time and space point to an underlying change in the social structure. I thus view DeLillo's novel as social theory. Economist Jeremy Rifkin recently wrote, "[t]he great turning points in human history are often triggered by changing conceptions of space and time. Sometimes, the adoption of a single technology can be transformative in nature, changing the very way our minds filter the world" (89). Eric Packer lives in a world with a multitude of adopted new technologies. His reflections on language embody this mental filtering. Cyber-capital, and digitization in general, represent these new technologies. Packer's desire to "live on a disc" (105), epitomizes the novel's portrayal of changing conceptions of time and space. This paper thus explores expressions of the inadequacy of contemporary language under these "turning points in human history." It demonstrates how statements on language reflect society's mental filtering or changing orientation to time and space. *Cosmopolis* could be viewed as a redescription project.

C*osmopolis* tells the story of the twenty-nine year old ego-maniacal billionaire currency trader Eric Packer, whose sole *raison d'être* is to manipulate the electronic flow of capital on global financial markets. The story unfolds mostly from within his opulent high-tech limousine, from which the other characters are introduced. Most notably, Vija Kinski, Packer's "Chief of Theory" (77), whose role serves to support the underlying themes as

expressed by Eric Packer. The story unfolds over the course of one day. Packer travels from the wealthy Eastern districts in New York (5th Avenue), to the West side so that he can “get a haircut” (7) in Hell’s Kitchen, the working class neighborhood of his youth. Ultimately, he gets his haircut, both literally and metaphorically. A “haircut” is also a common slang word among stock and currency traders for losing enormous sums of money in the stock market. The novel concludes with the assassination of Eric Packer at the hands of Richard Sheets, alias Benno Levin, a disgruntled former employee. The protagonist Eric Packer does not easily invite sympathy from the reader. Yet, it is through him that DeLillo illuminates this short novel’s *raison d’être*. If one of the central postmodern philosophical notions is that all we are left with is language, then DeLillo promotes the idea that we currently lack the linguistic capabilities to describe our contemporary social and economic environment.

DeLillo portrays America as a society undergoing a radical reorientation to time and space. This new temporal/spatial environment is rapidly breaking from the past and what is left of the remaining but fleeting present. In this environment, society experiences not only an altered temporal/spatial consciousness but also increasingly accelerated rates of change. This ever-faster acceleration thus results in the rapidly-increasing obsolescence of both objects and relationships. For DeLillo, contemporary language itself is also becoming increasingly obsolete. He portrays contemporary America, with New York functioning as a microcosm for neoliberal globalization and its problems. The city is portrayed in a state of chaos, suffering from collective post-traumatic stress disorder. This is reflected in the anti-globalist riots (88), the funeral procession of the Sufi rapper Brutha Fez (131), the “trance like state” of the young clubbers (127) and the staged movie scene with “three hundred naked people sprawled in the street” (172). I argue that his portrayal of America reflects a society that has not yet “adjusted” to the new temporal/spatial reality. The protagonist Eric Packer, representative of the New World Order’s global elite, is seemingly unaffected by this rapid temporal/spatial reorientation. His antagonist, Benno Levin, even remarks that Packer is, “always ahead, thinking past what is new . . . he wants to be one civilization ahead of this one” (152). However, despite Packer’s access to vast wealth, information, and technology, his attempts to live beyond this ever-accelerating vanishing past and present ultimately fail. His reflections on the inadequacy of modern language typify the novel’s portrayal of

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a radically-changing spatial and temporal environment. Vija Kinski serves to reinforce this message, giving intellectual credibility to Packer's reflections on language. This theme reflects a Baudrillardian conception of a society in simulation, consumed by the spectacle of global digital media and cyber-capital. In one scene, Packer fixates on "three tiers of data running concurrently and swiftly about a hundred feet above the street" (80). This is, "[t]he hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols, the fractions, decimals, stylized dollar signs, the streaming release of words, of multinational news, all too fleet to be absorbed" (80). Kinski is there and thinks, "[w]e are not witnessing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable" (80). According to Baudrillard, "the hyper-real transcends representation only because it is entirely in simulation" (186). Eric Packer's world, the world of digitization and cyber-capital, transcends linguistic representation. DeLillo facilitates this point through Packer's running commentary on language. "The cool universe of digitality has absorbed the world of metaphor and metonymy" (Baudrillard 188). Language, according to the protagonist, is currently incapable and utterly inappropriate for expressing the current situation, which is marked by simulation, hyper-reality, and ever-increasing speeds of change.

DeLillo novelizes social theory that considers contemporary American society not to have yet adjusted to the new temporal/spatial reality. This becomes visible in language, which is incapable and utterly inappropriate for expressing the current situation. Time and space are fundamental in any form of communal life. Changing conceptions of time and space therefore point to an underlying change in social structure.¹ For the purpose of this paper I thus view DeLillo's novel as social theory. Economist Jeremy Rifkin, who studies the impact of scientific and technological changes on society, recently wrote: "The great turning points in human history are often triggered by changing conceptions of space and time. Sometimes, the adoption of a single technology can be transformative in nature, changing the very way our minds filter the world" (89). Eric Packer lives in a world with a multitude of adopted new technologies. His reflections on language embody this mental filtering. Cyber-

1 Anthony Giddens incorporates time and space at the heart of his social theory. He claims that structural properties of social systems exist only in so far as forms of social conduct are reproduced chronically across time and space. This process of reproduction is undermined due to the time/space crisis which DeLillo portrays. See Giddens.

capital and digitization represent these new technologies. Packer's desire to "live on a disc" (105) epitomizes the novel's portrayal of our changing conceptions of time and space. This paper thus aims to explore expressions of the inadequacy of contemporary language under these "turning points in human history." I will demonstrate how the protagonist's statements on language are a broader reflection of society's mental filtering or changing orientation to time and space. From this light, *Cosmopolis* could be viewed as a redescription project. Furthermore, I argue that DeLillo asserts that this temporal/spatial shift should be viewed as no less profound than the societal dislocations experienced during early industrialization.

Ursula Heise, among others, has examined the form and structure of the postmodern novel as a reflection of the postmodern condition. Furthermore, she questions whether postmodern literary representations of time and space are merely products of avant-gardism or if they reflect deeper social changes.² *Cosmopolis* certainly contains many elements of postmodern literary form, for example the random appearances of Packer's wife at several places, seemingly non-sequentially (cf. 15, 67, 116). The critic Sven Philipp thus noted DeLillo's use of the limousine ride from the UN building west to Hell's Kitchen as an example of postmodern form. He writes:

By rewriting the soul-searching westward quest as a vain, day-long journey from the East Side to the West Side, *Cosmopolis* illustrates what David Harvey has called the "time-space compression" of the postmodern experience in a global, post-industrial world. (n. pag.)

"Time-space compression" is only one element of the postmodern aspects of the limousine ride. The limousine itself is portrayed as extravagant and surreal, floor made of "Carrara marble from the quarries where Michelangelo stood half a millennium ago" (DeLillo 22). In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo also depicts the limousine as both cybernetic and virtual. The car is equipped with surveillance systems (34), plasma screens (35), night vision, and thermal imagery (170). It was "less an object than an idea" (10). When Packer's "Chief of Technology" asked why they should meet in the car instead of the office, he replies, "How do you know we're in the car instead of the office?" (15). Packer's "Chief of Security," Torval, is portrayed

2 See Heise, chapter one "From soft clocks to hardware: narrative and the postmodern experience of time."

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as a cyborg connected with the car and other technologies, “a man whose head seemed removable for maintenance” (11). His body is actually connected to several gadgets (18) and he receives his orders in the form of short computer-like codes (116). While Philipp concentrates on the time-space compression, which reflects the topic of my thesis, the limousine ride also reflects the postmodern sensibility of simulation, or even double simulation. All reality is viewed from within the car looking out, much like a simulated Disney ride. This becomes double-simulated as Packer watches events unfold through the limousine’s video surveillance system, often moments before they actually occur (cf. 22, 52, 93). He watched the Russian media mogul “sign a document on one screen and prepare to die on another” (33). While surrounded by a riot, rather than looking through the window, he makes a drink and watches the events on screen because it “makes more sense on TV” (89).

However, this short novel is not merely structurally postmodern; it also serves as commentary on what Heise identifies as the postmodern condition. She concludes that there is in fact a deeper social readjustment taking place. She thus claims:

[I]n the late twentieth century, conventional notions of both time and space are in crisis, and cultural artifacts, to the extent that they depend upon or address temporal and spatial experiences, participate in their reconceptualization. (2)

The thrust of her argument is thus that a fundamental change in the Western culture of time has indeed taken place. While *Cosmopolis* expresses this radical shift in temporal and spatial cultural understandings, society at large, according to Eric Packer, continues to operate from a modernist and sometimes even nineteenth century industrial language platform, “carrying the nitwit rhyme out of the age of industrial glut into smart spaces built on beams of light” (102). In this sense, *Cosmopolis* serves as a cultural artifact participating in the reconceptualization of time and space. However, DeLillo does not offer a replacement vocabulary. The redescription thus occurs only as a critique of contemporary language’s inability to accurately express society’s reconceptualization. This begins just a few pages into the narrative when Packer contemplates “the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper” (9) and “the hand organizer . . . an object whose original culture had just about disappeared” (9). The redescription continues as he questions the use of archaic words like “Automated Teller

Machine” (54) and “Walkie-Talkie” (102). Other instances of this occur when he for instance thinks that “it was time to retire the word phone” (88). Later the reader is told that, “even the word computer sounds backward and dumb” (104).

Richard Rorty provides further insight into DeLillo’s commentary on language, which permeates the novel’s narrative. Rorty, like Heise, ponders the idea of language and vocabulary as a reflection of temporal/spatial reconceptualization. He writes,

roughly, a break of this sort [from one era to the next] occurs when we start using “translation” rather than “explanation” in talking about geographical or chronological differences. This will happen whenever we find it handy to start mentioning words rather than using them. (173)

As established above, DeLillo mentions words throughout his narrative. However, he takes this Rortian concept further. Here is one of the examples listed above: “The woman looked Egyptian in profile, Middle Kingdom, leaning toward her left breast to speak into the wearable phone. It was time to retire the word phone” (88). Had DeLillo employed a Rortian technique, he could have merely substituted the above passage with “leaning toward her left breast to speak into the wearable ‘phone.’” For DeLillo, society’s spatial/temporal reorientation advances too quickly to merely mention words or use “translation” as Rorty suggests. However, DeLillo’s linguistic strategy clearly echoes Rorty’s ideas on translating geographical or chronological differences.

Many critical reviews have also considered this use of language. However, most do not address the time/space assessment.³ A few have touched on the meta-narrative of socio-economic change but overlook DeLillo’s use of the protagonist. Rob Walker for example remarks: “Sadly, Kinski gets little face time with the boss and disappears quickly. Her cosmic rambles are the closest DeLillo comes to clarifying what exactly he’s up to here” (T4). For Walker, *Cosmopolis* is only about capital. In a review for the *New Yorker*, John Updike briefly identifies this spatial/temporal shift. He notes a scene in which Eric Packer, while watching himself on the spy cam, notices that his gesture occurs a few seconds before he makes it in reality. Updike writes, “[t]his temporal dislocation

3 For a large sampling of critical reviews, see “The Cosmopolis Media Watch,” 3 May 2007 <http://perival.com/delillo/cosmopolis_media.html>.

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recurs, indicating an underlying shift in the past-future paradigm.” Yet here again, for John Updike, it is Packer’s “Chief of Theory,” Vija Kinski, who is the focus of communicating this meta-narrative. Updike quotes the following Kinski passage: “Computer power eliminates doubt. All doubt rises from past experience. But the past is disappearing. We used to know the past but not the future. This is changing” (86).

Of course, these digitized and televised experiences are not new themes for DeLillo and are tied into the novel’s portrayal of cyber-capital. These Baudrillardian hyper-real experiences are themselves related to a spatial-temporal reorientation. But this paradigm shift is most often expressed through Eric Packer’s numerous personal narratives about the outdated vocabulary of objects and society’s relationship to those objects. The text gives abundant evidence to bear this hypothesis out. As mentioned, this begins very early in the narrative. Packer reflects on “the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper” (9). We are told: “No recent structure ought to bear this word. It belonged to the olden soul of awe, to the arrowed towers that were a narrative long before he was born” (9).

This ancient narrative that Packer refers to is similar to what David Nye calls the “American Technological Sublime.” This theory is concerned with the social construction of the public’s experiences with technologies. For Nye, this was a narrative that had great impact and influence on American society. The Technological Sublime was profoundly connected to American society’s temporal/spatial reorientation under rapid industrialization in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, which may be said to reflect Rifkin’s idea of technologically-influenced mental filtering.⁴ These industrial era technologies, such as skyscrapers, were objects that defined time and space. Nye writes, “the geometrical sublime [the mental filtering of skyscrapers] came to be a dominant way of seeing and understanding the city after the First World War” (100). This entailed a sense of awe and achievement of man’s mastery over space. DeLillo’s protagonist Eric Packer finds the skyscraper utterly de-mystified. The word itself is an archaic product of a bygone era. In relation to skyscrapers, Nye writes about the captains of industry appreciating the “Olympian perspective” as a “visualization of their power” (97). Kinski tells Packer that property “has nothing to do with traditional self-assurances,” it is “no longer about power, personality

4 For more on Nye’s thesis, see chapter two “The American Sublime.”

and command” because “it no longer has weight or shape” (78). Packer associates the narrative value of these structures only as surface and simulation. He thinks, “the one virtue of its surface was to skim and bend the river light and mime the tides of open sky” (9). He later refers to New York’s bank towers as “so common and monotonous” that “he had to concentrate to see them” (37). What were once recognized as engineering marvels have become banal and prosaic. Again, their only function is to be a surface or a reflection. As he notes, “they were the end of the outside world. They weren’t here, exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography” (36).

When he thinks about the “hand organizer” that he uses to note “the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper” (9), the protagonist continues to contrast his contemporary era to this earlier era. He thinks, “[t]he hand device itself was an object whose original culture had just about disappeared” (9). DeLillo tells the reader, “[h]e knew he’d have to junk it [the word ‘hand organizer’]” (9). In the following example, Packer again provides a rich contrast between the fading industrial/machine age and the emerging information/cyber age:

He was thinking about automated teller machines. The term was aged and burdened by its own historical memory. It worked at cross-purposes, unable to escape the inference of fuddled human personnel and jerky moving parts. The term was part of the process that the device was meant to replace. It was anti-futuristic, so cumbersome and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated. (54)

Packer’s critique of archaic vocabularies typifies the novel’s portrayal of a dying socio-economic order. The era of industrial awe and wonder is replaced by banality and boredom. Again, only simulated hyper-reality provides any fleeting feelings of admiration. The following epitomizes the protagonist’s reflections and running commentary:

He saw a police lieutenant carrying a walkie-talkie. What entered his mind when he saw this? He wanted to ask the man why he was still using such a contraption, still calling it what he called it, carrying the nitwit rhyme out of the age of industrial glut into smart spaces built on beams of light. (102)

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A reference back to Jeremy Rifkin could prove instructive here. The above excerpt closely mirrors Rifkin's notion that society is at a major "turning point[s] in human history" (89). Rifkin thus claims:

Humanity finds itself, once again, at a crossroad between a dying old order [the age of industrial glut] and the rise of a new age [smart spaces built on beams of light]. Revolutionary new technologies [cyber-capital and digitization] are forcing a fundamental change in our spatial and temporal consciousness. (181)

This is the reason DeLillo tells us that "[t]he street was an offense to the truth of the future" (65). For Rifkin, American society is not historically suited to cope with these new, "spatial and temporal realities of a globalized world" (92). For Eric Packer, American society is not suited linguistically.

This sentiment finds expression in politics and public policy circles as well. Al Gore, former Vice President of the United States, has spent much of his political career addressing issues surrounding government's role in relation to the impact of new technologies on society.⁵ He too sees an evolving society which is linguistically handicapped. In an editorial piece for *Science* he writes, "we lean against the crutch of Industrial Age metaphors that are splintering with age." Gore then goes on to explain:

The language we use to discuss public problems is less vivid and less robust than it ought to be. Chaos theory may offer clues for when government should intervene in the economy. Economic policy perhaps should focus less on "priming the pump"—and more on "imprinting the DNA." Evolution could offer insight into our social structures. But at the moment, we lack the vocabulary to even begin such discussions. (177)

These examples demonstrate how DeLillo novelizes social theory, as expressed across various disciplines, through Packer's commentary on language and words.

Thus far, I have argued that DeLillo employs the protagonist rather than Kinski as his primary source of observation and commentary. However, Kinski plays an important role in expressing the novel's ultimate meaning. She

5 See Noble, "Al Gore's Environmental Narratives: A Systems Challenge to Technological Momentum." Gore's recent book, *The Assault on Reason*, explicitly deals with the mediating effects of information and communication technologies on democratic societies.

authenticates Packer's observations on the contemporary situation. Kinski serves as a plausible witness to the protagonist and his perceptions. In this regard, she is an authority figure independent of him. Whereas Packer reflects on the inadequacy of contemporary language, Kinski deals with the root causes. The following conversation between Packer and Kinski typifies their joint function to the novel's purpose. This conversation deals specifically with the underlying cause of the purported temporal/spatial realignment. Again this echoes Rifkin's hypothesis, contrasting the importance of "digital time" to "industrial time" (cf. Rifkin 106-11, 182-83). Just as the introduction of the clock moved society into a different temporal consciousness in the last great social upheaval so too does "digital time" threaten to disrupt our sense of time and place. The new economy exists only in the future or an "almost future" based not on an archaic industrial clock time but on digital time, measured in nanoseconds.

"The idea is time. Living in the future . . . Money makes time. It used to be the other way around. Clock time accelerated the rise of capitalism. People stopped thinking about eternity. They began to concentrate on hours, measurable hours, man-hours, using labor more efficiently."

"It's cyber-capital that creates the future. What is the measurement called a nanosecond?"

"Ten to the minus ninth power."

"This is what."

"One billionth of a second," he said.

"I understand none of this. But it tells me how rigorous we need to be in order to take adequate measure of the world around us."
(DeLillo 79)

In other words, this new relationship to time and space affects "the way our minds filter the world" (Rifkin 89). Kinski later explains that "we need a new theory of time" (86). This leads to the final aspect of this temporal/spatial reorientation; the accelerated speed of change. DeLillo not only comments on society's changing temporal/spatial orientation but also on the seemingly uncontrollable speed at which this change takes place.

Futurist Alvin Toffler addressed this notion in his first publication *Future Shock*. His premise was that individuals and whole societies would experience stress and disorientation brought about by a too-rapid reorientation to time and space. Although Packer does not suffer from a future shock, we find the general population of New York suffering from stress and disorientation (65). Two

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major Tofflerian thematic concepts are prevalent throughout the narrative. These are what he identifies as increased obsolescence and transience and accelerative thrust.⁶ With accelerated thrust, time is not only radically sped up but it continually increases in speed. Time has no beginning or end. It is immeasurable. Kinski explains:

Never mind the speed that makes it hard to follow what passes before the eye. The speed is the point. Never mind the urgent and endless replenishment, the way data dissolves at one end of the series just as it takes shape at the other. This is the point, the trust, the future. (80)

New York is in chaos as are the world financial markets. Even the financial experts are unable to predict or measure cyber-capital's movements. "Strategists could not explain the speed and depth of the fall" (115). This sense of loss of control prevails. Again, Kinski provides the meta-theory:

In the end you're dealing with a system that's out of control. Hysteria at high speeds, day to day, minute to minute . . . We create our own frenzy, our own mass convulsions, driven by thinking machines that we have no final authority over. (85)

Furthermore, not only will change occur more quickly but the rate of change will continually multiply as well. For Packer, the movement from clock time (hours and minutes) to nanoseconds already seems quaint. The accelerative thrust pushes us ever faster forward. He explains that nanoseconds are not really that fast anymore because there are now "zeptoseconds" and "yoctoseconds," "one septillionth of a second." Kinski responds, "This is why something will happen soon . . . [t]o correct the acceleration of time. Bring nature back to normal, more or less" (79). DeLillo does not however tell the reader what "back to normal" entails, anymore than he offers us redescription vocabulary.

For Toffler, there is a direct correlation between the speeding up of time, or accelerative thrust and increased obsolescence. He notes that words as well as objects under this sped-up environment would come into use, then drop out of

6 Toffler has dealt with this theme throughout his career. For a quick review of his argument, see chapters two and six in *Future Shock*. Furthermore, Toffler is interesting from the perspective of this paper in that he takes part in a redescription project attempting to name and rename the future present. Read the "table of contents" for a quick example of this.

vocabularies at heightened speeds (174). The narrative of the acceleration of change can also be observed with Packer's running commentary on language and objects. Packer naturally is privy to the latest technologies but he senses they are already becoming obsolete. This mirrors what Toffler referred to as a "foreshortening of our ties with the physical environment" (73). Benno Levin notes that for Eric Packer, "things wear out impatiently in his hands" (152). Examples of this occur when Packer thinks his video scan retrieval technology is "a technology that seemed already oppressively sluggish" (34). Later, he thinks: "Plasma screens were not flat enough. They used to seem flat, now they did not" (140). This speeding up of time creates not just an increased obsolescence of objects and vocabulary, but personal human relations as well. Transience, the increased rate of turnover of things, places, people, and organizational and informational relationships (Toffler 316), has thus far been expressed through the protagonist's observations. It could be said that the protagonist experiences shorter relational durations. His high-speed, in-and-out power meetings are systemic of this speed-up society. The fact that most of his human contact, including his prostate exam, occurs rapidly in a moving limousine adds to this sense of transience. The relationship between Packer and his wife Elise typify this idea. They have only been married a few weeks and they hardly know one another. She did not realize his eyes were blue, and he thinks she may be "Swiss or something" (DeLillo 17). They meet each other several times "by chance" over the course of the day, yet Eric never recognizes her as his wife. Elise is just a temporary or transient relationship like all those who enter and exit Eric's limousine.

The protagonist's observations on the archaic property of language permeate and ultimately motivate the novel's action. Society is portrayed as suffering from disorientation, brought about by the temporal and spatial re-conceptions that those observations reflect. The protagonist tries and ultimately fails to transcend society's temporal and spatial realignment. For all his wealth, power, and access to information, he is as desperate for "real" experiences as the protester who lights himself on fire (99-100). This is ultimately expressed in his desire for a "financial haircut." Although Packer, an unlikable anti-hero, attempts and ultimately fails to live beyond the constraints of "real" time and space, he eventually finds some semblance of humanity and with it a shred of hope. In a rare interview from 1979, DeLillo provides a window into his philosophy on

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vocabulary and language systems. He states: "Rilke said we had to rename the world. Renaming suggests an innocence and a rebirth. Some words adapt, and these are the ones we use in our new world" (LeClair 25). For all the feelings of uncertainty and insecurity brought about by this radical transformation in post-industrial society's relationship to time and space, DeLillo suggests a postmodern romanticism, an innocence and rebirth. This is, after all, not the first time society has experienced such profound mental dislocations. Richard Rorty explains:

What the Romantics expressed as the claim that imagination, rather than reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change. (174)

It is in these terms that *Cosmopolis* should be viewed as a redescription project or an instrument of cultural change. Many scholars have noted DeLillo's emphasis in previous works to use "the power of language to shape identity and society" (Carmichael 178). *Cosmopolis* is no exception to that claim. The protagonist ultimately expresses this innocence or rebirth in the face of a seemingly overwhelming onslaught of society changing technologies. The novel thus concludes: "This is not the end. He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound" (DeLillo 209). Despite a reorientation to time and space, there still exists "original space," a sacred and pure space which is not digitized. Although Packer ultimately wishes to transcend time and space by living on a disc (48, 105), his very real human pain prevents his desired immortality.

But his pain interfered with his immortality. It was crucial to his distinctiveness, too vital to be bypassed and not susceptible, he didn't think, to computer emulation. The things that made him who he was could hardly be identified much less converted to data. (207)

It is ultimately language that provides a platform for transcendence beyond the new cyber-reality. Among those "things that made him who he was" were objects as banal as the soap he uses when he showers because "the smell and feel of the concave bar make him who he is because he names the fragrance" (207). DeLillo, in the capacity of one of Rorty's "philosophical novelists," reminds us that not only do words adapt, but so do people and societies.

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