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978-0-521-69089-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo

Edited by John N. Duvall

Excerpt

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Introduction: The power of history and the persistence of mystery

Since the 1985 publication of *White Noise*, winner of the National Book Award, Don DeLillo has become one of the most significant contemporary American novelists, standing in the first rank with Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and John Updike. In a 2005 poll conducted by the *New York Times Book Review* that asked 125 prominent writers and critics to name the best American novel of the past 25 years, three of DeLillo's novels ranked in the top twenty: *Underworld* (1997) (runner-up to Toni Morrison's 1987 *Beloved*), *White Noise*, and *Libra* (1988).¹

The recognition of DeLillo's achievement has not been limited to America. In 1999 DeLillo received the Jerusalem Prize at the Jerusalem International Book Fair. The award, given every two years since 1963, honors a writer whose body of work expresses the theme of the individual's freedom in society. The first American recipient of the award, DeLillo joined an international group of previous winners that includes such distinguished novelists, playwrights, and philosophers as Bertrand Russell, Simone de Beauvoir, Jorge Luis Borges, Eugene Ionesco, V.S. Naipaul, Milan Kundera, and Mario Vargas Llosa. In selecting DeLillo, the jury characterized his work as "an unrelenting struggle against even the most sophisticated forms of repression of individual and public freedom during the last half century."²

The author of fourteen novels, DeLillo has become a fixture on college course syllabi and is often selected to represent the American postmodern novel in undergraduate literature surveys.³ Given DeLillo's undeniable significance to contemporary American fiction, this volume seeks to provide the reader with an overview of DeLillo's achievement as a novelist, taking up the author's poetics and themes, as well as providing more in-depth coverage of his best-known and most frequently taught novels.⁴

One reason, though by far the least significant, that DeLillo has garnered the following he has is that his fiction seems to anticipate and to comment on cultural trends and tendencies, the full significance of which emerge only after his novels are published. When *White Noise* with its Airborne Toxic

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Event appeared in 1985, just weeks after the chemical spill in Bhopal, India, a number of readers took the novel to be an uncanny commentary on the environmental disaster in India, despite the fact that the novel was in press well before the accident occurred.⁵ More chillingly, DeLillo's speculations on terrorists and the cultural role of terrorism in such novels as *Players* (1977) and *Mao II* (1991), it is retrospectively clear, provided us with a frame of reference for beginning to process the post-9/11 world years before the terrorist attack on America. But mere topicality is insufficient to explain why DeLillo's works will be read long after the fiction of Michael Crichton has been forgotten.

What makes DeLillo one of the most important American novelists since 1970 is his fiction's repeated invitation to think historically. For the influential Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, it is precisely historical thinking that is no longer possible in an age of multinational capitalism. In particular, Jameson sees a severely diminished role for aesthetics to ground an oppositional politics that might challenge consumer society. Indeed, for Jameson, all aesthetic production now is nothing more than a form of commodity production.⁶ In simpler terms, what this means is that the amount of time between the emergence of a new aesthetic form (such as hip hop) and its appropriation by Madison Avenue to sell everything from fast food to running shoes has been so radically reduced that the ability of a new aesthetic form to establish a critical purchase on the social order has been thoroughly undercut.

In an age in which advertising has largely abandoned words in favor of the image, DeLillo, who still works with that old-fashioned word-assemblage called the novel, has a rare gift for historicizing our present, a gift that empowers engaged readers to think historically themselves. In other words, DeLillo teases out the ways in which our contemporary world bears the traces of such crucial events from the mid twentieth century as the rise of Adolf Hitler's fascism, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and Cold War brinksmanship. In his most important novels, then, DeLillo explores the ways in which contemporary American personal identity (as fragmented as it may be) is related to larger social and cultural forces forged over time. Fully aware that the twentieth century is the first to have been thoroughly documented on film, DeLillo shows us nothing less than how America became postmodern.

In this history such media forms as radio, television, film, and the internet must be reckoned with as social forces. In *White Noise* we see how the pressures of advertising and capital make it so difficult to think historically when the very structures of thought seem to have been coopted by the logic of television genres. Living in a culture of simulation, Jack Gladney, a professor

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of Hitler Studies interested only in Nazi aesthetics, has lost sight of the horrors of the Nazi past, which makes him equally oblivious to the horrors of his intensely media-driven, aestheticized present. In *Libra* DeLillo explores a transitional moment in American national consciousness. The assassination of JFK ends a certain kind of political innocence, but more importantly, DeLillo recognizes the event as a turning point in which the effects of the media (ranging from the Zapruder film of the shooting to the televised images of Jack Ruby killing Lee Harvey Oswald) serve as a fundamental mutation in Americans' lived relationship to the world; like Hitler and Elvis Presley, Lee Harvey Oswald (as well as his victim, John Fitzgerald Kennedy) becomes absorbed in the celebrity-making apparatus of media culture. In *Underworld* DeLillo gives us an anatomy of the emergence of paranoia as a constitutive feature of American identity during the Cold-War period. In his big novel DeLillo also shows us that how we "won" the Cold War was at least as much the work of American media and consumer culture as it was US nuclear tonnage. Major novels such as these are precisely why the Jerusalem Prize judges praised DeLillo for his fiction's moral focus. What they recognized is that DeLillo's fiction creates the possibility of wrestling a bit of freedom from necessity by so thoroughly diagnosing what constrains us.

Frank Lentricchia perhaps said it best when he identified DeLillo as one of those "writers who conceive their vocation as an act of cultural criticism."⁷ In this regard DeLillo stands in a long tradition of American novelists from Herman Melville and Mark Twain to Morrison and Pynchon who are critical of home as found. DeLillo's critique, especially in his early fiction, often proceeds with satire and dark humor, tools favored by Melville, Twain, and Pynchon, to frontally attack those aspects of postmodernity that would turn individuals into so many iterations of Madison Avenue's dream of America.

Although his focus remains steadfastly on American postmodernity, in mature works such as *Libra*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld*, DeLillo's social critique often proceeds from a form that Linda Hutcheon has termed "historiographic metafiction." For Hutcheon, the postmodern novel blends the reflexivity of metafiction (fiction that calls attention to itself as fiction or fiction that thematizes its own fictional production) with an explicit questioning of what counts as official history. Historiographic metafiction intentionally and self-consciously blurs the boundary between history and fiction, exploring the gaps and absences in the historical archive. For Hutcheon, the contemporary novel's blend of history and fiction creates an art with the potential to comment critically on the culture of which it is nevertheless inescapably a part.⁸

DeLillo's final significance may lie in the way that, while he recognizes the power of history, he insists on the novel as a counterforce to the wound of

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history through the persistence of mystery. Beyond the play of plots and plotlessness, determinism and chance, there lurks in DeLillo's writing the possibility – never overtly confirmed – of spiritual transcendence. A particular example from *Underworld*, I believe, is representative. In one of Lenny Bruce's night-club monologues, DeLillo has the beat comic begin an off-color story about a girl who can blow smoke rings from her vagina, but in mid-story Bruce loses interest and begins instead to tell a decidedly unfunny story that the reader only later recognizes as that of Esmeralda, a girl not yet born when Bruce is speaking but whose tragic death forms part of the Epilogue of the novel. Through a power of his art that exceeds his volition or any possibility of his knowing, then, Bruce begins an uncanny critique of the social forces that enable Esmeralda's violent end, forces that another of DeLillo's outsider artists, Ismael Muñoz, must engage later in the novel, again through his art.

For DeLillo, then, these ambiguous moments of possible transcendence are frequently linked to artistic production. Despite his anxiety about the role of the novelist in an age of the sound bite and the rapid image burn, DeLillo, it seems, wants us to imagine that, beyond the realm of media simulation, there is still a possibility for the artist to effect change. Thus the productive tension of DeLillo's fiction resides in the juxtaposition of this subject matter, which often resonates with Jameson's pessimistic view that contemporary art has been coopted by advertising, and DeLillo's poetics, which resonate more with Hutcheon's belief that the postmodern novel can still enable social critique. With pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the spirit, DeLillo continues to write novels that probe American postmodernity.

There is a general consensus that DeLillo writes about American postmodernity – what it feels like to live in a postindustrial nation at a time when media forms absorb increasingly more of our daily attention, so much so that these forms cease to feel like mediations of the real and are simply experienced as the real itself. But how he chooses to address his subject matter is more contested. The issue of DeLillo's poetics is addressed in Part I: in chapter 1 Philip Nel makes the case for seeing DeLillo in a direct line of descent from the modernists; in chapter 2, however, Peter Knight surveys the theoretical underpinnings of postmodernism to make the case that DeLillo is appropriately seen as a postmodern novelist.

Nel starts with DeLillo's own resistance to being identified as a postmodernist and considers resonances between DeLillo's fiction and that of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Malcolm Lowry, and John Dos Passos. For Nel, it is finally the richness of DeLillo's language (a topic explored in greater depth in David Cowart's chapter) and the novelist's heroic sense of the role of the artist (see also Mark Osteen's chapter) that make DeLillo a contemporary incarnation of modernism. For Knight, however, it is precisely DeLillo's

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acknowledgment of his debt to modernism that helps us understand his work as postmodern. To be an artist working in the wake of modernism is to be aware of the canonization and commodification of all the great modernist individual styles in art museums and literature anthologies, and Knight points out how often DeLillo's characters are aware of the weight of previous representation. At the same time, DeLillo's fiction is highly conscious of the problematic role of the artist in consumer culture. The great modernist hope to achieve an oppositional position vis à vis the market has diminished in an age when just about every aspect of modernist aesthetics has been coopted by Madison Avenue to sell all manner of consumer goods. Knight focuses our attention on the ways that DeLillo's fiction portrays the role of the media in a culture of simulation wherein representations of representations of representations create a regressive maze in which any notion of reality becomes obsolete or meaningless. In short, representation becomes the Real. Knight concludes by considering the extent to which DeLillo's fiction creates a critical purchase on postmodern simulation.

Part II examines DeLillo's early fiction. Throughout the 1970s, DeLillo explored the potential of a variety of fictional genres. However, to call *End Zone* (1972) a sports novel, *Ratner's Star* (1976) science fiction, or *Players* and *Running Dog* (1978) thrillers would be as reductive as identifying *White Noise* as an academic novel. In his first six novels, DeLillo consistently undercuts the reader's expectations of genre fiction by intellectualizing genre (though never simply producing the novel of ideas) so that these works convey his suspicions, disappointments, and occasional anger regarding American corporate capitalism.

DeLillo's first novel, *Americana* (1971), follows the episodic adventures of a young television executive, David Bell, who walks away from his job in order to travel the US in search of himself; this early exploration of American national identity forms a cornerstone for DeLillo's subsequent fiction. DeLillo's early focus on the entertainment industry is developed in his third novel, *Great Jones Street* (1973), in which rock guitarist Bucky Wunderlick discovers just how sinister the machinery of fame can be. In chapter 3, "DeLillo and media culture," Peter Boxall takes up DeLillo's first and third novels in order to think through DeLillo's relationship to both high and media culture. For Boxall, the early thinking of Samuel Beckett on the possibility of a writing that would attempt to eliminate language provides a crucial purchase for understanding DeLillo's relation to an aesthetic silence. While acknowledging the differences between Beckett's ultraminimalism and DeLillo's expansive prose, Boxall nevertheless finds a current of ascetic withdrawal in DeLillo's depiction of photography and film in *Americana* and of music and silence in *Great Jones Street*.

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While *Americana* is written in a realist mode, the same cannot be said for DeLillo's second and fourth novels, *End Zone* and *Ratner's Star*, both of which are more akin to the high postmodernism of such white male writers as John Barth, Robert Coover, and Donald Barthelme. Both novels deploy allegorical elements as part of their satirical social critique. *End Zone*, by far the more approachable of the two, imagines a world in which football players at Logos College in Texas articulate various philosophical positions as part of the novel's larger mediation on the congruence of the terminology of football and nuclear war. *Ratner's Star* employs the trappings of science fiction, yet its dense and difficult foray through the history of mathematics and its representation of abstracted scientific projects yields a critique of the myth of progress. In chapter 4 Joseph Dewey explores the ways in which DeLillo's only two coming-of-age narratives allegorize apocalyptic intimations in American culture. For Dewey, the educations of Gary Harkness and Billy Twillig (of *End Zone* and *Ratner's Star* respectively) are largely failed ones since both register only the secular and never the sacred implications of apocalypse.

In chapter 5 Tim Engles explores a third main current from DeLillo's 1970s fiction, a refiguration of the genre of the political thriller. Novels such as *Players* and *Running Dog* employ plot elements of the thriller not simply to reproduce the genre but rather to critique the structuring of American identity and to subtly engage the political realities of post-Vietnam American politics. In the former, Lyle Wynant's involvement with a terrorist organization planning to blow up the New York Stock Exchange grows out of his extramarital affair; the novel suggests the extent to which by the 1970s secret agency had become a feature of late Cold War American identity. In the latter, the search by reporters and intelligence agents for a pornographic film that Hitler purportedly made in the final days of World War II becomes a way for DeLillo to register latent fascist urges in American culture.

Despite the undeniable power and promise of his fiction from the 1970s, had DeLillo stopped writing then he would not occupy the eminent place that he holds in contemporary literature. Intimations of DeLillo's greatness may be found in *The Names* (1982), a novel set in Greece in which an American risk analyst and unwitting tool of the CIA, James Axton, stumbles onto the existence of an ancient death cult that selects its victims by matching their initials with the name of the place where the cult then murders them. While continuing to use elements of the thriller, *The Names* is in fact about language and the possibility of meaning.

Part III explores the three novels most crucial to the making of DeLillo's reputation – *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Underworld*. In chapter 6 Stacey Olster

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examines *White Noise* and its representation of a thoroughly postmodern, dehistoricized America in which Hitler and Elvis can become nearly interchangeable figures in a culture of celebrity. After tracing resonances between the novel's portrayal of simulacra and the theories of Jameson, Guy Debord, and Jean Baudrillard, Olster turns to the centrality of the television in the Gladney household. The television, which almost becomes a character in *White Noise*, typifies the way in which all contemporary media forms underscore the social imperative to consume. Despite DeLillo's depiction of postmodern media culture, Olster registers the ways in which he resists despairing over such conditions and finds that it is novel writing itself that serves as DeLillo's challenge to media culture.

Libra, then, takes up a moment that DeLillo sees as crucial to the history of the twentieth century, the assassination of President Kennedy. Jeremy Green in chapter 7 examines the way DeLillo negotiates the either/or logic that surrounds the event: either we accept the official lone gunman story of the Warren Commission Report or we wander in the multiple possibilities of conspiracy theory. For Green, DeLillo attempts to negotiate both possibilities in his novel by alternating chapters that provide a fairly straightforward biography of Oswald with chapters focusing on the plots of various government and anti-Castro agents to stage an act that would signal their displeasure to Kennedy in the wake of the failure of the US-backed invasion of Cuba. The third and metafictional strain of the novel mediates the other two. Nicholas Branch's role doubles DeLillo's, for Branch, a CIA analyst, has been charged with writing a report that makes sense of the assassination. Supplied by a CIA archivist with ever more pieces of textual evidence, Branch helps underscore the elements of chance and coincidence that frustrate the urge to construct a fully unified narrative of the assassination.

In *Underworld* DeLillo reflects on the history of the Cold War and its effects on American national identity. Without denying that DeLillo effectively uses the Cold War as a backdrop, Patrick O'Donnell explores in chapter 8 the ways in which *Underworld* fictionalizes postmodern subjectivity, characterized by a reversal of the classical relation between subject and object. In a contemporary world in which the human subject can no longer be assumed but rather is seen from various theoretical perspectives as a cultural product constructed from without, the connections between and among various events and spectacles are never sure. This undecidability, O'Donnell claims, can elicit paranoid alienation and/or an almost blissful acceptance of the schizophrenic cultural flow. In mapping postmodern identity DeLillo represents the contradictions and complexity of contemporary American life.

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Part IV, “Issues and themes,” takes up matters that transverse DeLillo’s fictional worlds. The section begins in chapter 9 with Ruth Helyer’s consideration of DeLillo’s representation of masculinity. For Helyer, DeLillo does not model a facile, alternative masculinity; rather, he presents the reader with a number of male characters who are self-conscious and insecure about their performance of masculinity. Surveying DeLillo’s fiction, Helyer looks at how DeLillo portrays men in various facets of their lives – at work, with family, sexual desire, sports, violence, and an awareness of mortality – as they try to fulfill their traditional roles, even as those roles become increasingly underscored as precisely that – enacted roles and not biological essences.

Throughout his career, DeLillo has frequently made artists central figures in his work. In chapter 10 Mark Osteen takes up DeLillo’s recurring portrayal of the artist. Focusing on *Great Jones Street*, *Mao II*, and *The Body Artist* (2001), three novels that span various stages of DeLillo’s career, Osteen takes seriously the author’s claim regarding his desire for privacy. Echoing Joyce, DeLillo once invoked “silence, cunning, exile” as a reason for his desire not to talk about his work. For Osteen, it is precisely DeLillo’s reference to Joyce that gives us access to DeLillo’s take on the labyrinth of commodification. As DeLillo’s depiction of the rock star Bucky Wunderlick in *Great Jones Street* and the novelist Bill Gray in *Mao II* illustrates, silence and exile themselves may become commodified. Silence and exile are tools that speak to the need for artistic detachment; however, for Osteen, it is finally DeLillo’s sense of a cunning collaboration with an audience that provides a path out of the labyrinth and defines the artist’s role in society.

Segueing from Osteen’s sense of the artist’s role, David Cowart turns our attention in chapter 11 to DeLillo’s relation to his art’s medium, language. Arguing for the thematic centrality of language in all DeLillo’s works, Cowart pays particular attention to *The Names* and *The Body Artist*. The contemporary novelist, as Cowart sees it, is strangely and adversarially positioned between media culture’s degradation of language and the post-structuralist critique of referentiality. Challenged on two fronts, DeLillo, like the best postmodern novelists, creates virtuoso performances that affirm the value of language as a medium. In a novel such as *The Names*, with its centuries-old death cult and various sites of faith, DeLillo’s affirmation of language seems to point toward a spiritual force at odds with the skepticism of his characters.

Cowart’s emphasis on the almost theological nature of DeLillo’s language finds its complement in chapter 12, “DeLillo and mystery,” in which John McClure explores recurring intimations of spirituality in DeLillo’s fiction.

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Without denying DeLillo's significance as a chronicler of postmodernity, McClure invites us to consider the variety of mystery in the novelist's fiction. DeLillo's appropriation of the popular genre of detective fiction clearly plays with mystery in a secular sense, but for McClure, these moments of secular mystery often give way to another order of mystery that opens the possibility of transcendence. In short, McClure charts the movement from the forensic to the sacramental. Given DeLillo's Roman Catholic upbringing, McClure shows us how one might see DeLillo in a Catholic tradition of American literature. Ranging over *Players*, *The Names*, *White Noise*, and *Underworld*, McClure identifies recurring moments of implied spiritual-communal possibility.

The volume concludes with Joseph Conte's consideration of DeLillo's fiction in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001. In "Writing amid the ruins: 9/11 and *Cosmopolis*," Conte considers DeLillo's recent novel in the context of DeLillo's essay on 9/11, "In the Ruins of the Future," as well as of DeLillo's earlier depictions both of terrorism and of the World Trade Center. *Cosmopolis* (2003) takes up a liminal historical moment, attempting to read the preconditions of 9/11 in the self-destructive pilgrimage through Manhattan of 28-year-old billionaire asset manager Eric Packer. Focusing on one day in April 2000, DeLillo shows the unraveling of the 1990s through Eric's downward spiral. Aware that DeLillo has previously focused on key moments in America's recent history, Conte sees *Cosmopolis* as a fictional meditation on why America's role in managing cyber-capital made it such an inviting target and helped usher in a new Age of Terror.

Because the chapters in this volume were all finished in 2006, the authors were not able to address DeLillo's most recent novel, *Falling Man*, which was published in June 2007. *Falling Man*, which examines the psychological trauma experienced by New Yorkers in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, once again underscores DeLillo's longstanding concern with the role of the artist in contemporary society. The *Falling Man* of the title refers to a performance artist who stages falls at various locations in the city that leave him suspended in mid-air. These enigmatic and macabre pieces, which recall the people who leaped from the World Trade Center towers rather than burn to death, illustrate the power of an art that operates outside of mainstream media channels to speak to the collective pain of New Yorkers. *Falling Man*'s deeper meditation on the relation of aesthetics and politics, however, occurs through the arguments of Nina Bartos, a retired professor of art history, and her lover Martin Ridnour, an international art dealer. In the 1960s, however, Ridnour (then known as Ernst Hechinger) was a member of a radical group, Kommune One, that protested against the West German state. The arguments

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of these two recall those of Bill Gray, a famous novelist, and George Haddad in *Mao II*. Haddad, a spokesman for a terrorist group in Lebanon, who sympathizes “with their aims if not their means” (*M* 128) sees a link between the novelist and the terrorist since “through history, it’s the novelist who has felt affinity for the violent man who lives in the dark” and asks, “Where are your sympathies? With the colonial police, the occupier, the rich landlord, the corrupt government, the militaristic state? Or with the terrorist?” (*M* 130). Like Haddad, Ridnour sympathizes with the urge (if not the methods) of Islamic terrorists to seek alternatives to “the narcissistic heart of the West” (*FM* 113). As a New Yorker, DeLillo feels the pain and anger of the 9/11 attacks acutely, but he is too much of a novelist not to be able to imagine that there are people in the world who do not wish to mirror American values, especially when these “values” appear to mean nothing more than getting a good deal on consumer goods.

Notes

1. *New York Times Book Review*, May 21, 2006, pp. 16–19. DeLillo was one of only three writers to have more than one of their novels receive multiple nominations.
2. 19th *Jerusalem International Book Fair Home Page*, May 20, 1999, <www.jerusalembookfair.com/page6.html>.
3. DeLillo is also reputed to be the co-author of *Amazons* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980). Written under the pseudonym Cleo Birdwell, the novel is a racy fictional memoir of the first woman to play in the National Hockey League. DeLillo, however, does not publicly acknowledge his authorship of this novel.
4. DeLillo is also the author of four short plays and two more substantial plays, *Valparaiso* (1999) and *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005). However, since DeLillo’s reputation and awards derive from his work as a novelist, the *Companion* makes his fiction its focus.
5. Mark Osteen, “Introduction,” in Osteen, ed., *White Noise: Text and Criticism* (New York: Viking, 1998), p. vii.
6. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, pp. 16–25.
7. Frank Lentricchia, “The American Writer as Bad Citizen,” in Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 2.
8. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 47–92.