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REFERENCES


1 The latest volume of the Continuum Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction is dedicated to three of the most influential recent novels written by Don DeLillo: Mao II, Underworld and Falling Man. These novels are set in pivotal moments of recent history, the end of the Cold War, the millennium and 9/11 and, so, offer fertile ground for the investigation of themes, such as terrorism, consumerism and globalism, that are dominant in the author’s entire œuvre; what is more, the contributions to this volume also reflect on the broader picture of American culture seen under a multidisciplinary light of modernist and postmodernist theories, artistic concerns and notions of identity. The common threads spreading across the three novels are clearly outlined in the editor’s introduction which also functions as a cohesive and informed introduction to DeLillo’s entire work. However, the essays that follow do not compose such a cohesive or focused picture in their totality, at least not as much as those present in other collections of essays on the same author. Nevertheless, it may be precisely in their diversity that the value of these papers lies and it is precisely in their different approaches that the complexity of DeLillo’s work is revealed.

2 The first part of the collection, dedicated to Mao II, reintroduces the themes most commonly associated with this novel, namely aesthetic production, commodity production, terrorism and the role of the author in a world saturated by the media and digital imagery “from a post-millennial perspective” (16). David Cowart starts with the “cultural precognition” (22) commonly attributed to DeLillo to examine the prophetic qualities of the novel and to highlight the elements that differentiate Mao II from the
tradition of “postmodern prophecy” and other apocalyptic novels, elements that lie mainly in the rejection of eschatology, in “massive historical ellipsis” (23) and scepticism as well as in the emergence of art as a power that can prove to be “as surprising as history” (33). Peter Knight elaborates on the phrase “the future belongs to the crowds” and uses one of the novel’s key themes to investigate the erosion of the power of the individual as a consequence of its immersion in the mass, the erosion of the concepts of uniqueness and singularity as a consequence of the mass production of images, and the fusing of the first and third world as a consequence of extensive globalism; he suggests, however, that this very incorporation into the masses can potentially generate space for resistance, through the merging of consciousness and the resurgence of an “ethics of exchange and equivalence, gift and sacrifice” (43). The questions concerning literary production raised in these two essays naturally lead to Laura Barrett’s “Mao II and Mixed Media,” an investigation of “the adjustments to the modernist notion of the author/ auteur that must be made when the only lingua franca may be digital images and the meaning of words is presented as contingent upon their context” (17). Barrett contends that the novel “challenges the reader to consider words and images as conspirators in the construction of American culture” (51) and thus proceeds to examine the role and impact of the photographs that introduce each section of the novel with a view to debunking the notion of the photograph as a reductive, limited, purely documentary and literal medium of representation and interpretation. Given that language can often prove to be vague, class-bound, culturally determined, perhaps dogmatic, in effect “weightless,” the medium chosen to derive meaning is contingent on each individual’s needs and a combination of the two could actually depict reality more efficiently.

The second part focuses on the novel that has been heralded as DeLillo’s magnum opus, *Underworld*, and consists of three essays addressing “the union of high and low” (67). Thomas Hill Schaub’s “*Underworld*, Memory and the Recycling of Cold War Narrative” focuses on the novel’s spatiotemporal elements to submit that *Underworld* actually bears a few differences from other Cold War narratives, which are evident in its stativity, its lack of tension and its dismissal of teleology. Schaub explores the ways in which the novel’s anachronisms resemble the workings of memory, the importance of naming and the function of recycling and repetition to interpret the novel as a mnemonic structure. In “*Underworld* and the Architecture of Urban Space” David L. Pike takes up the relationship between high and low by examining the representation of the modern city in the novel under “three underground topos that help to define (its) interpretation” (85). He focuses on the narrators, the images of “the wall and the bunker” (85) and the images of waste and garbage and concludes with placing the novel in a space lying in between postmodern paranoia and science fiction, as a structure that repeats the “social and spatial organisation” (98) of the modern city while encompassing its contradictions in such a manner that does not allow them “either fully to cohere or fully to cancel each other out” (98). The final essay in this part, written by Josephine Gattuso Hendin, centres on ethnicity and the ways the traditional values and beliefs of a small ethnic community – such as Little Italy in Bronx – overlap and interact with mainstream American ideologies. Hendin looks into family ties, materialism but also spirituality and the sense of modernity present in such multicultural spaces. She explores the creation and usage of *arte povera* and she argues that “in its scrambled time sequences, interplay of secular and spiritual concerns, and focus on the art of the life-world, *Underworld* is a complex formal structure wrought from tools of mediation that break the wall between theology and experience, systems and soul” (114).
The essays included in the final part of this collection investigate DeLillo’s *Falling Man* with respect to its very specific historical context of 9/11 yet in such a way that also extends the discussion to a broader historical continuum. The arguments in this part unfold under the spectrum of falling, considerations on aesthetics and the limits of representation are raised, and the traumatic impact of the collision of the two dominant forces explored in the previous two novels – and most of DeLillo’s work for that matter – namely capitalism and terrorism is explored. John Carlos Rowe writes “Global Horizons in *Falling Man*” to trace the consequences of globalism and Westernisation. He analyses the complex relationships between terrorism and the Nation State and links the WTC attacks to political radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s. For Rowe the performances executed by David Janiak in the novel “call attention to the human being in the overwhelming scale of late-modern urban space” (131) and ‘falling’ is, in fact, a reflection of the decline of all traditional values and structures on which the hegemonic state is based. Linda S. Kauffman’s “Bodies in Rest and Motion in *Falling Man*” notes the novel’s obsession “with the corporeal body” (135) and advocates Keatsian Negative Capability as an appropriate mode of reaction and interpretation that would allow for imaginative empathy. For Kauffman life in ‘the days after’ is precarious and all existence is provisional. Regardless of whether one finds solace in spirituality or art, irrespectively of one’s ability to just let go, the one certainty confirmed is that the falling bodies of that day have given way to “fallen” individuals, “what unites us is that we are all bodies in rest or motion, in space, on a small planet” (141). John N. Duvall takes up the discussion of falling bodies to highlight how DeLillo “resists the notion of a new American identity based on collective trauma” (152). In the final chapter of this book, “Witnessing Trauma: *Falling Man* and Performance Act,” Duvall revisits the parallels between artists and terrorists and claims that in the post 9/11 era equivalence can be achieved only through ‘outsider artists,’ such as David Janiak, who are not immersed in the mainstream cultural mechanisms, who depend on the audience’s presence and reactions, thus carrying an element of witnessing, and who stage their art so as to remove distance and therefore create room for consolation, perhaps even healing.

5 The image and the role of the ‘outsider artist’ is an illustrative example of the collection’s inner contradictions: readers are challenged to ponder on the ways “the distinction between ‘artist’ and ‘outsider artist’ thus collapsed” (67) while simultaneously presented with eloquent arguments on alternative forms of artistic production’s potential to defeat terrorism in their vie towards shaping imagination. The diversity of opinions and claims expressed in these essays is well-worth noting not only for its extent but also for the remarkably complex picture that they paint. Perhaps this quality deems the collection advanced for the reader who is only just getting acquainted with DeLillo’s universe or who is not very familiar with a broad range of social and literary movements. But for those who want to delve deeper and cherish the finest nuances, this erudite study is truly priceless, it proves true to the “originality, insight and skill” advertised by the editors of the series and successfully achieves the series’ aim to provide “a critical approach that may develop existing perceptions or challenge them, but always expand the ways in which the author’s work may be read by offering a fresh approach.”