Leaving the Bronx: Depicting Urban Spaces in Don DeLillo’s “Baghdad Towers West” and His Early Short Stories

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1 Don DeLillo has produced a formidable array of novels over a forty-year period, beginning with *Americana* (1971) through *Point Omega* (2010). However, this American author’s career actually began in the early 1960s with a handful of still uncollected short stories that have not received much critical attention. The welcome publication of *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories* in 2012 elides these early stories and instead gives us more of the “mature” DeLillo’s voice in shorter fiction. By reading these early texts in terms of their depiction of cities and urban spaces, I hope to draw some connections to DeLillo’s later fiction, especially *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*. Taken together, these stories can help illuminate this writer’s relationship to postmodernism, which has always been a contested ground in criticism of this author’s work. Is DeLillo a committed postmodern writer or not? For David Cowart, for example, DeLillo moves beyond the standard “gospel” of poststructuralism—beyond the play of signifiers—to assert that there is a “numinous in its mystical properties” of language in his work (5). Similarly, echoing a Romantic view of more “authentic language,” Paul Maltby has developed a reading of DeLillo as a neo-Romantic, who examines the novelist’s quest for a “primal, visionary level of language” (503). Readings like these complicate DeLillo’s identity as an “exemplary” postmodern writer, whose mature work is often associated with a readily recognizable paranoia and an ability to engage American cultural obsessions with terrorism and “men in small rooms” in works ranging from *The Names*, *Libra*, *Mao II* and most recently *Falling Man*.

2 In contrast, DeLillo’s uncollected early fiction, which consisted of a handful of stories in magazines like *Epoch* and *The Kenyon Review*, provides new evidence for understanding
this author's fictional practice. With a careful reading of several of these short stories, we
can observe DeLillo's lifelong concern with depicting the fabric of city life and experience
in a more realistic, mimetic or even authentic mode. As I will argue, there are different
modes of depicting cities in DeLillo. Using the term "authentic" provisionally, I will
suggest this writing is more tied to local neighborhoods and, for this writer, Italian-
American experience in the Bronx, New York. Often in DeLillo, this more authentic mode
engages actual human bodies and sensory experience, as I will suggest. Even in these
eyearly stories, however, there are moments of "rupture," where postmodern and media
experiences interfere with an ostensibly provisionally more authentic depiction of urban
experience. I will then discuss some other examples of DeLillo showing nostalgia for his
native Bronx in several of his mature works.

I. The “Authentic” City and DeLillo’s Early Fiction in
Epoch Magazine

Don DeLillo’s earliest fiction shows characters that are not all “children of Godard and
Coca-Cola” in the words of the critic Mark Osteen. DeLillo explores Italian-American
characters, urban dialects and details from neighborhood life in his native Bronx in his
work during this period. These short stories show the emergence of one of the twentieth
century’s quintessential American voices, but one who actually started out portraying a
realistic “modern” city akin to Joyce’s Dubliners or Ulysses. DeLillo’s characteristic
narrative style, which some critics have taken as an exemplary voice of recent writing,
comes only after an apprenticeship that attempts to represent the texture and fabric of a
modern city.

Writing in 1964, the editor Baxter Hathaway reflected on fifty issues of his magazine,
Epoch, which had already published two of DeLillo’s earliest short stories and would go on
to publish two more. Hathaway writes:

Men and women all over America [...] have been sitting in front of typewriters in all
conceivable situations—in sparsely furnished cold water flats in the Village, in
beach houses, in suburban bedrooms, in makeshift cellar studies—in the attempt to give
the airy nothings of their minds a local habitation and a name. (79, my emphasis)

Hathaway’s list of possible sites for literary creation moves progressively away from a
center in New York City to the suburbs and beyond. As an editor for a magazine that was
filled with names of authors who went on to substantial publishing careers, Hathaway has
a perspective on evolving American literary taste after WWII: “A lot has happened in
American culture between 1947 and 1964.” He seeks to place the role of little magazines
amidst emerging popular culture: “The paperback industry, in its infancy in 1947,
bloomed. Television became a dominant form in the mass media of communication” (80).
Yet Hathaway’s relationship to a more dominant mass media is not wholly antagonistic.
He argues that a person “may lend his attention to Perry Mason or professional football
or manned flight into space even though he acknowledges no fealty to them” (80). In
other editorials, Hathaway speculates on the relationship between mainstream fiction
magazines such as The New Yorker and Esquire, which commanded significantly larger
“attention” from audiences, while little magazines like his own did not. Reading DeLillo’s
earliest fiction in the context of its publishing history suggests his earliest work was
similar in many ways to his contemporaries.
The writing in *Epoch* during the 1960s serves as an index of a certain flavor of realistic fiction literary taste. It points to what DeLillo was up against in forming what would become a distinctive voice in American fiction, but only after moving away from his “local habitation.” Throughout the pages of *Epoch* during these years, one sees many pieces that create a distinct sense of place, in Hathaway’s words—“a local habitation” of the Bronx, New York. Poems such as Stanley Cooperman’s “Brooklyn My Betrothed,” Kathleen Fraser’s “West Side Spinster,” or Louis Simpson’s “In the Suburbs,” as well as fiction set in upstate New York written by Joyce Carol Oates, provide examples of this kind of writing that is deeply rooted in place. Early in his career, DeLillo’s short stories partake of specific places too, not of the American South, upstate New York, or New England, or sophisticated citified milieus—the settings employed by other writers in *Epoch* during this period—but instead one of a gritty urban realism depicting his native Bronx and New York City.

To illustrate, the first short story by one “Donald R. DeLillo” appeared in *Epoch* magazine in 1960. It demonstrates a writer already in search of larger themes, specifically, the status of religious belief in a culture under siege by advertising. It is also a story set in a thickly realized modern city, not unlike Joyce’s Dublin. “The River Jordan” describes the plight of seventy-year-old Emil Burke, an evangelist for the “Psychic Church of the Crucified Christ,” who suffers from a profound messiah complex, as he wakes up on a hot summer day to go out and preach on the steps of the New York Public Library (106). At several points in the story, his religious message is confronted and parodied by the language of advertising from hecklers. For example, after Burke gives a disquisition laced with three-item abstractions such as “Aesthetics, Ethics, Religion” and “Father, Son, Holy Spirit,” a boy responds with a quote from a cigarette ad: “Hey man. [...] How ‘bout Purity, Body, and Flavor? Mel Allen say[s] it on TV all the time” (116). Mr. McAndrew, a former businessman and a financial backer of Burke’s church, comments on the impossibility of the church’s mission. The title of the story comes from the ironic use of the River Jordan, which to McAndrew is now “where salvation awaits in the form of a parking space and an air-conditioned moviehouse” (112).

Burke’s own situation is rendered sympathetically, and there is a sense that the author wants to render the full texture of life in a city at a particular place and time. There are scenes describing Burke’s cramped and dirty apartment near Times Square, to crowded streets on a hot summer day and the morose urban environment of a storefront church in a seedy part of Midtown near 9th Avenue. Moreover, DeLillo’s narrative technique is thoroughly novelistic, that is, filled with detail suitable for longer fiction.

“Take the ‘A’ Train,” which appeared in *Epoch* in 1962, provides the most disturbing portrait in all of DeLillo’s Bronx fiction. This piece depicts the downfall of a second generation Italian-American named Cavallo, divorced and unemployed, who ends up living on a train, literally underground. Later, DeLillo uses the subway to suggest a kind of primal wonder at his native New York City, whether in scenes of a Billy Twillig in *Ratner’s Star*, a young Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra*, or the graffiti artist Isaac Munoz in *Underworld*. The basic dramatic situation of life on the subway here echoes the depiction of such “yo-yo-ing” in Pynchon’s novel, *V*. Benny Profane, of course, sleeps on the subways when he first arrives in New York after a stint in the Navy. Profane’s life in the subways is comic, evidence of his passive “schlemielhood,” and there is really no sense of deprivation or danger as he rides the rails. In contrast, Cavallo’s situation is filled with unrelenting
hardship, including hunger and a knife attack by a street gang that deprives him of his very last dollar (“A Train” 20).

10 The overbearing cruelty and crudity of the protagonist’s Italian-American father is the most remarkable note sounded within this story. The father is unremitting in his insults to his son, which are rendered in rough-sounding, Italian-inflected dialogue. The elder Cavallo refuses to accept his son’s British wife, a rejection which the story implies leads to the son’s divorce and downward spiral. The father also berates his son for financial failure. “Lots jobs,” he says, “Even carpenter like me makes so much money in one week that in old country I drop [...] dead j[ust] to look at it. But you, my son, can find no good job” (15). At one point, the father refers to his son as a “bum” (15).

11 In the most powerfully rendered scene, in a harshly naturalistic moment, the father admonishes his thirteen-year-old son to go forth and multiply. “No book I need tell you this. [...] That is all you must know. You do it because it must be done,” the father says (18). DeLillo’s almost unrelentingly harsh tone in “Take the ‘A’ Train” runs counter to the effusive jazz standard of the story’s title. The use of the song’s title is a knowing gesture that the author has risen above his circumstances in his otherwise grim portrayal of Italian-American life in the Bronx. This story’s tone is strikingly at odds with Don DeLillo’s later mature voice of suburban anomie. But even in this naturalistic story, Cavallo encounters suburbia in a “model home” built in Grand Central Station, a moment of rupture that presents an incursion of a different mode of living, one set in the suburbia of the time.

12 A later slice-of-life story set in the Bronx, entitled “Spaghetti and Meatballs,” was published in Epoch in 1965. It offers a more kindly portrait of life in the Bronx and centers on two of the “fresh air inspectors” later depicted in Underworld. A middle-aged Santullo and the elderly D’Annunzio converse on a stoop and reminisce about life in the Bronx. Their conversational banter seems convincing as they complain about changing modern life. “Everyone is crazy,” D’Annunzio observes (245). The narrator here is truly comfortable with the details and rhythms of street life. The two men are subject to gentle comedy, but this portrait lets them retain their fundamental dignity too. Santullo has been kicked out of his home and abandoned by his wife “with nothing and with nobody and with nothing,” as he puts it, but he is treated to at least one last satisfying meal (249). The two men discuss their ideal foods. “Then all I ask is some bread, some cheese, and a glass of wine. It is simple and yet it is everything. That is all I would need,” says the elder D’Annunzio (248). There are none of the grotesques of “Take the ‘A’ Train” here.

13 In a way, the two men partake of an aestheticist impulse to enjoy one last pleasurable meal before returning to the harsh circumstances of their lives. “But this kind of beauty never lasts,” says Santullo. “Think of the present,” counters D’Annunzio (249). The story ends with the voice of contemporary media in the form of a radio broadcast on news and traffic, a very different mode of rhetoric in a story that relies on recording local character and voices in dialect. There is a sense that the two men are of a different era and sensibility, one certainly not tied to mass media: “The music stopped and an announcer came on to give the latest stock market report. Utilities were holding their own. [...] Santullo smoked his cigar” (250). The ending could remind us of John Cheever’s 1947 story, “The Enormous Radio,” where the final broadcast of a misbehaving radio receiver interrupts the gossip and secrets of a posh apartment building. DeLillo uses the same device, but here postmodern media—in the form of a radio broadcast—interrupts a simpler way of city life. DeLillo’s confident voice here suggests he could well have become
a writer who relied on depicting Italian-American life. From this point on in his fiction, however, DeLillo’s re-invention of his narrative style is nothing short of astonishing.

In “Baghdad Towers West,” published in the Spring 1968 issue of Epoch, DeLillo abandons his earlier mode of literary practice. He is no longer a Bronx regionalist. He discovers a different sense of urban space, one that is indebted to the new emerging postmodern architecture and culture of the 1960s and 70s. This sensibility stands in marked contrast to his earliest work; it is one that we think of as the “mature” DeLillo. In fact, the narrative voice—which is told in the first person by a middle-aged male protagonist—would not be out of place in any of his mature fiction, though his first novel, Americana, is still three years away. In this story, an unnamed first-person narrator speaks with a voice that sounds very much like many of the other narrators in the novelist’s later work. He could be James Axton in The Names or Jack Gladney in White Noise. A successful middle-aged businessman, who seems to have abandoned his job, leaves his Gramercy Park apartment for the “damned nightmare” of a new complex named “Baghdad Towers West” (197). He sublets a room in an apartment occupied by three women who, in their way, represent youth culture in 1968. They include an aspiring fashion designer, an actress and an artist. Interestingly, Caroline, the “junk sculptress” here, makes art out of found objects and waste (199). Her process of making art anticipates Klara Sax in Underworld.

The title of this short story, “Baghdad Towers West,” is taken from the name of the apartment building where the narrator resides. It is a shiny new apartment complex that eschews architecture tied to local concerns, neighborhoods or culture. In his seminal examination of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson noted in 1990 that architecture in the world’s capitals in its financial districts has grown increasingly similar. DeLillo’s story notes this trend back in 1968. The story engages a new sensibility of what it is like to live in a building devoid of local community, a tower that has little to do with the surrounding neighborhood or its inhabitants. In fact, the entire story takes place inside the apartment.

In this story, the narrator expresses an odd fascination with the rituals of life in this new apartment complex, which he describes as “promis[ing] a new mystery, electronic and ultra-modern, in which the angel of death pushes a vacuum cleaner and all the werewolves are schnauzers” (198–9). At one point, he observes that “the kitchen hummed with power and a kind of stainless steel lust” (201). In particular, the narrator is fascinated by the ritual of “being on security” by doormen who work behind a console that reminds him of “the blockhouse near the launchsite during countdown” (206). Being placed “on security” is normally a way to protect empty apartments from intruders. However, after an ill-considered attempt at “triple simultaneous seduction” on the last night of their time in the city (before the women move out), the narrator takes to being locked down in the now vacant apartment while he is inside his apartment (212).

The details in this story describe a certain new architecture and consumerism that could just as well exist in any city, not just the New York of the 60s and 70s, in the midst of a condominium building boom obsessed with doormen and white brick facades. As the novelist and critic Stephen Koch observes, in a review of DeLillo’s later novel Players, published in 1977, DeLillo’s portrayal of having dinner in SoHo in one scene had absolutely nothing to do with having dinner in the city. “We could be in downtown Omaha,” he writes (40). In abandoning the specifics of thickly realized place and history, DeLillo discovers his signature mature style, which he uses again and again in his fiction to describe suburbs and postmodern rituals of twentieth-century life.
Back in “Baghdad Towers West,” the narrator begins to sleep in different beds in the now abandoned apartment, in the manner of a fairy tale, but one that does not end very happily for the protagonist. The narrator’s neurotic collapse—he suffers from tremors and what seems like profound agoraphobia, as he can no longer leave his apartment—near the end of the story seems to prefigure the undoing of figures like Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis*. Instead of a character sharing a meal with a friend and conversation in an Italian-American neighborhood in “Spaghetti and Meatballs,” the unnamed narrator of “Baghdad Towers West” prefers to be placed “under surveillance” alone in his apartment. At the end of the story, the narrator is left riding the elevators in his building while ranting about such topics as “the universe and its origins” and “the persistence of memory” to a young boy named Ulysses (217).

The reader is struck by the unexpected originality of “Baghdad Towers West.” The accretion of detail in DeLillo’s earlier stories set in the city gives way to something else. Instead, DeLillo renders the specifics of new, highly artificial architectural environments and the new rituals of living in a building without a neighborhood, without a past, and without local history, in an emerging postwar American city. Although set in an urban space, the description here of anonymity could well describe any of DeLillo’s writing on suburban America, too. DeLillo delves into this material perhaps more directly that any of the other writers in the pages of *Epoch*.

In 1972, after DeLillo’s first novel *Americana* was finally published, *Epoch* ran the author’s own commentary on the novel in “Notes Toward a Definitive Meditation (By Someone Else) on the Novel *Americana*.” Even the title suggests a reluctance on the part of this not-so-young first novelist (already near thirty-five) to be certain of his work. In an introductory paragraph, the editors argue that DeLillo had been supported by *Epoch* magazine as an “authoritative” voice of his generation (“Notes” 327). We might ask what DeLillo’s writing during these years could have been expected to be “authoritative” about. The answer has to be the voice of local color—a Bronx and New York City regionalist—as I have suggested above.

II. The Nostalgia for Authentic Cityscapes in DeLillo’s Mature Fiction

Except for brief sections of *Ratner’s Star*, where we see the Bronx childhood of the math prodigy Billy Twillig, or in *Libra* where Lee Harvey Oswald rides the NYC subway, DeLillo does not return to the Bronx extensively for any of his mature fiction. In *Underworld* of 1999, however, DeLillo attempts to create an ambitious text that weaves in both personal and public history. I want to propose a quick reading of the later sections of this novel. One way to understand this novel is to see how DeLillo juxtaposes the cool, muted voice of suburban postmodern placelessness with a more “thickly realized” rendering that depicts life in the Bronx in the 1950s. These historical episodes tunnel backwards in narrative time not only into the life of Nick Shay, the novel’s protagonist, but also into DeLillo’s own fictional concerns and techniques demonstrated in his early writings. By now several critics have noted the set pieces of *Underworld*—whether the “Pafko at the Wall” baseball episode, Capote’s famous black-tie ball at the Plaza, or Lenny Bruce’s darkly comic monologues during the Missiles of October crisis, provide the best writing in the novel. Like the historical sections of Pynchon’s *V.*, which have been more highly praised by
critics than the chapters set in that novel’s present-day, the detail and confident virtuosity of the writing in Underworld within these historical episodes provides reason enough to get through the more muted sections of Nick’s life in suburban Phoenix.

22 Underworld explores the difficulties of writing a novel with a somewhat unsympathetic, reticent protagonist. For much of the novel, Nick is truly a paragon of withholding information. In a metafictional moment, Nick’s reticence is described by his brother, Matt Shay, like this:

When Nick dies a team of metaphysicians will examine the black box, the personal flight recorder that’s been designed to tell them how his mind worked and why he did what he did and what he thought about it all, but there’s no guarantee they’ll find anything at all. (447, my emphasis)

23 Nick’s withholding is hardly tedious, but it does flag when compared to the verbal energies harnessed in the set pieces, especially the extended sections taking place in the Bronx. Nick himself points out this difference late in the novel when he says “I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real” (810).

24 The narrative logic of Underworld digs further back in time to Nick Shay’s adolescence in the Bronx for some of its later chapters. In my reading, the high school physics teacher, Arthur Bronzini, echoes James Joyce’s Leopold Bloom as he walks down the street. The novelistic technique presents a satisfying realism, anchored by details of neighborhood life in DeLillo’s childhood home of the Bronx. The parallels between Bronzini and Bloom as city flâneurs seem clear. In one passage, for example, Bronzini speculates on a scheme to place part of his neighborhood inside a museum:

He imagined a fragment of chalked pavement cut clean and lifted out and elaborately packed— shipped to some museum in California where it would share the hushed sunlight with marble carvings from antiquity. Street drawing, hopscotch, chalk on pavement asphalt, Bronx, 1951. But they don’t call it hopscotch, do they? It’s patsy or potty here. It’s buck-buck, not johnny-on-the-pony. It’s hango seek—you count to one hundred by fives and set out into alleyways [...] finding the hiding players. (662)

25 Like Bloom, Bronzini is possessed of an inventive mind, noting the local flavor of an ordinary walk down his street in his neighborhood. Like Joyce, DeLillo renders his character’s thoughts directly, as Bronzini muses on children’s street games using the technique of interior monologue. Both characters seem to exhibit a fundamental decency and civic mindedness. Other details are surely a nod to an inescapable literary precursor. Bloom is 38, the same age as Bronzini, for example.

26 In these Bronx sections, the narration is not nearly so speculative or guarded as the rest of the novel. We return to lived experience in these passages (which seem to me to contain DeLillo’s personal nostalgia for his early life in the Bronx). These sections remind us that that history not only encompasses public figures such as J. Edgar Hoover or Lenny Bruce, but also exists in the thoughts of a betrayed, early middle-aged man strolling through a downtrodden neighborhood of his city and savoring its sights, sounds and human inhabitants—a description that could just as well apply to Leopold Bloom in Dublin in 1904 as it could for Arthur Bronzini in the Bronx, New York, in 1953.

27 There is another kind of flâneur in one of DeLillo’s later novels. In Cosmopolis (2003), the young billionaire Eric Packer tours New York City from the confines of his white limousine, but he is nonetheless still an urban traveler, and his journey throughout the
day allows DeLillo to depict New York City at the turn of the millennium. Eric leaves his limo only to eat, to carry on an affair, in pursuit of a haircut in his father's old neighborhood in Hell’s Kitchen. Ominously, several prominent millionaires around the world are murdered the same day as Packer's security forces decide there is a “creditable threat” against their client. Packer’s limousine is attacked during an anti-globalization protest, where the protestors shout Marxist slogans, and one of the protestors sets himself on fire in the style of Buddhist monks of the 1960s. There is a funeral for Brotha Fez, who mixes urban and Eastern influences, and some unfortunately cringe-worthy rap lyrics by DeLillo. Throughout this long day, in novelistic form, DeLillo meditates on bodies and market forces. Eric Packer’s bet against the yen’s rise ultimately brings down the world economy, makes him bankrupt, and leads to his becoming both a murderer and a murder victim in the same day.

From the confines of his limousine, Packer is almost comically insulated from the real fabric of cities and the spontaneous urban interactions of just walking down a street. Yet throughout the book, Eric is seen savoring authentic city detail, for example, in his passage through the midtown Diamond District whose currency of gems and jewelry seems to challenge Packer's purely virtual notion of financial speculation. As DeLillo writes:

In the grain of the street, he sense the Lower East Side of the 1920s and the diamond centers of Europe before the second world war, Amsterdam and Antwerp [...] 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 haggler 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. (Cosmopolis 64-5)

Here DeLillo registers Eric Packer’s reaction to an alternative, and indeed more, concrete form of commerce, one which traffics in jewels, not the bits and bytes that uphold Packer’s billions made in currency markets. This passage helps reinforce that Packer desires something more. We soon learn that Eric’s quest to get a haircut at his family’s longtime barber will develop as a source of authentic experience, a lost billionaire’s last nostalgic act to tie himself to a different mode of city living in the area called Hell’s Kitchen. After some reminiscing about his father, Eric Packer abandons the haircut halfway for a scene of psychological trauma or rupture as he runs out onto the street and encounters a very strange film shoot.

At this point, the book returns to cityscapes—and human bodies as sources of more authentic experience. At the end of the book, just after Eric’s thwarted haircut, he participates in a film scene—mass nudes—in the style of the photographer Spencer Tunick, whose large-format photographs feature hundreds of nude figures in cities around the world. In DeLillo’s version, the staging is for a film, and since the subjects are reminded to close their eyes, it is not clear if they are dead or not. The narrator says, “Their bodies were blunt facts, naked in the street. Their power was their own, independent of whatever circumstance attended the event” (Cosmopolis 173). Coincidentally, he meets his estranged new spouse, the poet Elise Shifrin, in the same scene, and the couple actually consummate their relationship apparently for the first time—a scene of more authentic connection. Eric disrobes and joins the 300 bodies on the street, as well as, in a way, getting re-acquainted with city history. DeLillo writes: “He smelled the ground fumes, the oil leaks and rubbery skids, summers of hot tar” (
Cosmopolis 174). Here Packer’s connection with the city is direct, tied to the actual street in his family’s old neighborhood and mediated by the senses and skin of the human body.

31 This scene is a final last act, before Eric Packer encounters his assassin, Benno Levin, the alias of Richard Sheets, an ex-math professor and employee who’s gone mad and is stalking Packer from an abandoned building. Since Levin has taken to writing his confessions, which he imagines will take thousands of pages, we are immediately reminded of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. Near the end of their strange conversation, where it isn’t clear who is going to murder whom, and Packer somewhat intentionally shoots himself in the hand, Packer speculates on what it would like to live on in silicon, an existence away from bodies, a glimpse of the posthuman. The author writes:

But his pain interfered with his immortality. It was crucial to his distinctiveness, too vital to be bypassed and not susceptible [...] to computer emulation. The things that made him who he was could hardly be identified much less converted to data [...]. So much come and gone, this is who he was, the lost taste of milk licked from his mother’s breast, the stuff he sneezes when he sneezes, this is him [...] His hard-gotten grip on the world, material things, [...] the small wart he feels on his thigh every time he showers, all him, and how the soap he uses, the smell and feel of the concave bar make him who he is” [and] his strangely achy knee, the click in his knee when he bends it, all him, and so much else that’s not convertible to some high sublime, the technology of mind-without-end. (Cosmopolis 207-8, my emphasis)

32 The futurist Ray Kurzweil has made a career on such predictions of bodiless future intelligences in silicon, or more likely self-replicating nano-robots that mimic human brain cells. So immortality and the postmodern condition are related? The mind-body problem and dualism are increasingly under pressure from cognitive science. Reflecting on “strong artificial intelligence” or AI, Kurzweil argues that the virtual intelligences of the future need not have bodies. He writes that while many robotics researchers believe that “intelligence needs an embodiment, a physical presence, to affect the world,” he disagrees (260). He writes: “Intelligence will inherently find a way to influence the world, including creating its own means for embodiment and physical manipulation” (260). Even at this juncture in the novel, DeLillo juxtaposes Packer’s daydream of immortality in silico with details of his real body and its real lived history in human bodies.

33 Packer imagines what it would be like to live in silicon, but his body’s imperfections and his sense experiences through the body mark him as unconvertible. We can speculate, of course, that it might well be a future billionaire who attempts such a transformation. And yet this would not be enough. DeLillo suggests that we need bodies to experience the world. The computer scientist David Gelernter has observed that Kurzweil and other mainstream artificial intelligence researchers have got it wrong. He argues for the necessity of memory, day-dreaming and emotions and, yes, a body—least a software simulation of one—to achieve simulated artificial thought: “Artificial thought will require a software model of the body, in order to produce a good model of emotion, which is necessary to artificial thought.” Unless a robot can dream, have emotions and think with its body, it will not be able to think like a human. DeLillo’s description of Packer’s thoughts late in the novel reiterates this same idea.

34 Paradoxically, Eric Packer’s return to bodies and, literally, the tar and smells of the city’s streets near his family’s ancestral neighborhood, after a billionaire’s lifestyle spent surrounded by mediated experiences from the confines of his white limousine, engenders in him a sense of being truly alive. However, at the very end of the novel, he becomes, like something out of quantum theory, suspended between two states as he views his dead
body on his watch screen while still apparently alive. Getting the reader to this aporia figures Eric Packer’s doom and his suspension between modes of existence—the reality of lived authentic experience, however painful, and the highly mediated existence in bits and bytes that are, of course, central to postmodernism.

In conclusion, points of rupture between modes of authenticity and postmodern mediation would seem to cut both ways. DeLillo’s “authentic” depiction of Italian-American life in the Bronx in an early story like “Spaghetti and Meatballs” from 1965 is interrupted by the intrusion of mediated experience in the form of a radio broadcast. In Cosmopolis, published nearly forty years later in 2003, Eric Packer’s extremely mediated existence is punctured, it would seem, by nostalgia for a haircut in a still ungentrified part of Manhattan, which seems associated with an earlier mode of experience in the city, one anchored to his father’s life in the tenements of Hell’s Kitchen. The movement back and forth between thicker descriptions of older cityscapes and more attenuated postmodern scenes has been a significant aspect of DeLillo’s fiction in nearly fifty years of his writing. To reiterate, the early stories reveal an impulse to record the lived reality of an older city, with moments of intrusions where advertising (such as Cavallo’s underground ad for suburbia or the radio broadcast at the end of “Spaghetti and Meatballs”) appear in an otherwise thickly rendered depiction of urban life. In some of his major fiction, sections of realistic writing about cities appears in otherwise highly stylized, more postmodern novels (The Bronx sections of Billy Twillig’s childhood in Ratner’s Star or in Underworld are examples here). Even in Cosmopolis, a novel suffused with mediation as depicted in Eric Packer’s insular life as a billionaire, controlling the world’s finances through screens inside his limousine offer glimpses of nostalgia for something like a more authentic urban experience. I have argued that “Baghdad Towers West” marks a significant point in DeLillo’s career where his mature style arrives. In this particular short story, he leaves the Bronx for the setting of his fiction, but he glances back at times in several of his most ambitious novels. In this proposed dialectic, DeLillo has never fully abandoned a quest for depicting origins in the Bronx in his later novels. The movement between these two modes is something we see again and again within DeLillo’s fiction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Mark Osteen perceptively reads the influence of Jean-Luc Godard’s early films like *Masculin féminin* and *Weekend* in three of DeLillo’s uncollected short stories, “Coming Sun. Mon. Tues.,” “Baghdad Towers West,” and “The Uniforms,” but does not consider the earliest Bronx stories, which are important for my discussion here. See Osteen, pp. 8-16.
2. Hathaway writes, “This is not to attack the New Yorker or Esquire for having succeeded. [...] If we [at Epoch] are envious, our envy takes the form of thinking that success in those places is a result of an *impure* alliance between excellence [...] and something else” (“Fifty Issues” 82, author’s italics). Some of these extra-literary impurities seem to be “perfume advertisements, the calendar of available entertainment around the city, the projection of sophistication” and the like, missing from small magazines like Epoch (82).

3. For its fiftieth issue, Epoch includes an index to all the writing which appeared in its pages between 1947 and 1964. There are many well-known names of emerging young writers in DeLillo’s generation besides Oates, and there are many poems and short stories that bear evidence of a local setting (outside New York City). See “Fifty Issues of Epoch,” pp. 121-130. DeLillo begins his writing career a local writer, but once he adopts the depiction of suburbs, he becomes the postmodern writer we associate with the larger themes of his major fiction. He abandons the Bronx in favor of less “local habitation.”

4. Cosmopolis posits Hell’s Kitchen as a site of a grittier New York City. Since the publication of the novel, this neighborhood has been re-branded as “Clinton” and has been largely gentrified. Eric Packer or anyone else seeking a site of a more “authentic” city would surely have to look elsewhere today.

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**ABSTRACTS**

Dans cet article, Richard Dragan s’intéresse aux descriptions réalistes de lieux et de personnages urbains dans les œuvres non-publiées sous forme de livres du romancier américain Don DeLillo. Dragan affirme tout d’abord qu’en début de carrière, DeLillo écrivait comme une sorte de régionaliste italo-américain, de par sa façon de s’inspirer de son enfance dans le Bronx. En étayant son propos avec des exemples tirés des premières nouvelles du romancier parues dans de petites revues, Dragan soutient que c’est dans “Baghdad Towers West” (1968) qu’il a trouvé la voix narrative mature qui le caractérise. Dans cette nouvelle, l’auteur abandonne l’approche réaliste de ses descriptions de New York pour une sensibilité postmoderne. Cependant, d’après cet essai, DeLillo est revenu vers le Bronx dans certaines parties d’Outremonde (Underworld), et vers des espaces urbains plus « authentiques » dans Cosmopolis. Prendre en compte les premières nouvelles de DeLillo—auxquelles on s’est jusqu’ici peu intéressé—nous aide à approfondir notre compréhension de sa vaste production romanesque. En effet, cette tension entre réalisme et postmodernisme dans la représentation des espaces urbains est présente dans toute son œuvre.

(Résumé traduit par Emilie Piarou)

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