Burning with Temporality: Postmodernism and the Modern Aesthetic in Cosmopolis

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Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis was written in 2003, yet the story itself is set “in the year 2000” on “A Day in April,” as precisely noted within the first few pages of the text. DeLillo’s decision to begin the novel by emphasizing the narrative’s temporal context allows these two dates to act as distinct temporal moments, nodes around which the sparks of history and literary theory offer reflective moments of observation, informing the novel with a context fraught with temporal (historical) reference. Cosmopolis probes the dynamics of the relationship between futurity, technology, and subjective experience, locating “the year 2000” in a particularly American context, where technological development influences and complicates the development of historical narratives. In DeLillo’s response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, (written in 2001), the author establishes the relationship with technology and futurity as uniquely united in defining American historical identity, claiming, “Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet.”¹ In Cosmopolis, DeLillo readdresses the relation between American historical and technological development, focusing the novel’s analytical spotlight on the characters’ subjective experiences with the systemic isolation and repression characteristic of “postmodern” society’s technologically driven organization. But above all, DeLillo’s attention to the shared pace of American historical and technological development exposes this shared temporal structure to comparison with conflicting postmodern and modern critical theories of aesthetic progression and innovation.

Eric’s aesthetic alignment with modernity challenges negative determinations of

the ethical/moral status of his character. According to contemporary scholarly reactions to *Cosmopolis*, Eric represents the absolute embodiment of evil, the archetypal narcissistic Wall Street monster, perpetuating systemic economic abuses across a globalized landscape, to the detriment of all and the exacerbation of the suffering of “the other,” clinging to existence, on the fringes of the globalized landscape. To dismiss Eric’s character as less than deserving of an attempt at moral or ethical redemption, however, fails to realize the possibility of this reading, and the value of the anti-nihilistic message that such a reading produces. While critical readings of Eric’s character through the postmodern lens allow his capitalistic qualities to degrade his ethical status, modern theory remains readily viable as a means of revealing the greater aesthetic redemption of his character’s development through the progression of the novel. Eric’s character signifies a figure of merciless and destructive American capitalism, yet he also realizes the ethical potential of his destructive tendencies. This shift in his subjective perspective leads him to explore the extent to which he can utilize aesthetically charged destructive acts as an anarchistic means to create an ethically superior counter-narrative in opposition to the forces of capitalism and global hegemony. Essentially, Eric comes to represent a capitalist turned anarchist, who disregards the fleeting value of capital to pursue the creative experience of aesthetic transgression, motivated by the temporal transcendence of those destructive acts.

Modernist theorist Karl Heinz Bohrer tells us that the history of artistic expression unfolds according to “the idea of the transitory nature of art.”\(^{2}\) This concept of historical progression demands that “the polar opposition of new and old” aesthetic values remain

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\(^{2}\) “...Baudelaire gave us the first definition of modernity, in which the polar opposition of old and new is resolved in the knowledge that what is romantic today will soon be yesterday’s romanticism, thus definitively establishing the idea of the transitory nature of art.” (*Suddenness*, 74)
in tension within that present moment, allowing the destruction of the “old” tradition to create meaningful aesthetic expression in the “new” present moment. It is in this conception of the potential of the present “moment” that postmodernism and modernism diverge at the ideological level. While postmodern theory claims the repetition of formal techniques of aesthetic expression destabilizes the evolution of aesthetic values, and the possibility of historical referentiality, Bohrer recognizes the myopic faults of this position, divorcing technical repetition from affecting the “moment” of progression:

To prove that formal techniques exhaust themselves over time does not prove anything. In keeping with the importance of the moment as a criterion of modernism, formal techniques can vary greatly. The historical misunderstanding that keeps repeating itself is to imagine postmodern art as a merely technical repetition of the avant-garde and thus to dismiss it as something outworn. (78)

Through Bohrer’s emphasis on the elevated role of “the moment as a criterion of modernism,” modernist applications of formal techniques of aesthetic expression rightfully become means for representing the process of modernization, rather than superficially representing the totality of that process. The “historical misunderstanding” that “postmodern art” represents only a “technical repetition of the [modernist] avant-garde” devoid of aesthetic value fails to realize inevitability of the progression of aesthetic values, as expressed in “the idea of the transitory nature of art.” Postmodern theorists are so hung-up on the details of “technical repetition” that they fail to regard the greater temporal movements at work beyond those lesser representational elements and the expressive power of the moment!

Bohrer likens the process of the modernist aesthetic progression to the mechanics of anarchistic rule breaking 3, but amends this comparison by emphasizing

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3 “The rule is not refuted from within the system of rules; rather, it is just ignored and simply passed over.” (Suddenness, 79)
modernization’s total disregard for past ideals and tradition. Modernism progresses outside its contemporary “system of rules” defining aesthetic values. The difference between a postmodern and a modern reading of *Cosmopolis* rests in modern theory’s capacity to identify moments of productive moments of aesthetic expression and the value of historical referentiality in the text. A modernist reading of the text, thus, holds the power to reveal its characters’ recognition of — and engagement with — expressions of authentic aesthetic innovation. Further elaborating on the historical context of the potential of the moment, Bohrer specifies that:

...the emphatic moment in modern art did not forget tradition. But when modernists quote tradition...it destroys tradition in order to create meaning in the present. Part of the structure of modernism is this polar tension, however it may manifest itself stylistically. It is a tension without piety, something like a patricide, so to speak. (*Suddenness*, 84)

Thus, the effort to reclaim Eric from aesthetic and ethical oblivion coincides with an effort to reveal his destructive tendencies as informed with a desire to “create meaning in the present.” To reclaim Eric from ethical debasement, we must identify his attempts to engage the aesthetic possibilities of his moment, and realign the purpose of his brutal qualities to coincide with the inherently brutal structure of modernism, (given this literary perspective “destroys tradition in order to create meaning in the present.”)

Throughout the progression of DeLillo’s oeuvre, literary critics have attached the ambiguously defined “postmodern” label to the author’s works, an aesthetic and historical classification, commonly promoted by the similarities between Jean Baudrillard’s nihilistic ruminations about subjective reality and symbolic exchange, and DeLillo’s own (somewhat nihilistic) Americanist literary representations of subjective reality and symbolic exchange. Marc Schuster examines the similarities between Baudrillard’s postmodern theory and Eric Packer’s subjective perspective, writing, “...
the computer-generated images that haunt the billionaire throughout the novel suggest that the "reality" in which he lives amounts to what Baudrillard refers to as a third-order simulacrum, or a model based on other models rather than upon reality." (Schuster, 181) Schuster further develops the connection between Baudrillard's "simulacrum" and Eric's perspective of a distorted "reality" based on the availability of Baudrillard's claim to the existence of postmodern "hyperreality," a state of reality that Schuster summarizes as, "...a closed system of signs that protects itself "from the referential, as well as from all metalanguage" by "operating its own metalanguage, that is, by duplicating itself as its own critique."" (Schuster, 181) If Eric does indeed occupy a "hyperreality" as Schuster purports, and Cosmopolis (as well as contemporary literature at large) becomes reduced to a recursive, self-replicating "closed system[s] of signs," then the novel and its characters would signify the perpetuation of a mere abscess in temporal progression, a closed unit of aesthetic expression, devoid of participation in symbolic exchange capable of destabilizing the continuity of the hyperreality. But Schuster's reading of Baudrillard's theoretical perspective of "hyperreality" as the defining reality of Cosmopolis diverges drastically from Baudrillard's intenioned use of the term, as Schuster explains:

Where Baudrillard sees hyperreality as a state that can only stifle humanity, however, DeLillo recognizes the hyperreal landscape as a proving ground for humanity. As such, his novels explore the ways in which we might retain our humanity even in the dehumanizing face of hyperreality. (Schuster, 6)

Schuster acknowledges that while DeLillo and Baudrillard recognize the existence of conditions of hyperreality, the writers promote markedly different responses to the challenge it poses to subjective potential. For Baudrillard and the postmodernists, the "hyperreal landscape" marks a "closed" repressive environment; yet, for DeLillo, the hyperreal poses a challenge to humanity and, thus, to Eric's subjectivity, which actually
reveals and validates the independence of his subjective determination to raze the hyperreal and step outside its expressive limitations.

To explore the validity of Schuster’s reading of DeLillo’s use of “the hyperreal landscape as a proving ground for humanity,” as a proof against the tenability of the postmodern hyperreal, we can turn to the moments in Cosmopolis where “the computer-generated images that haunt the billionaire throughout the novel” illuminate Eric’s conflict with the constraints of hyperreality. These moments occur when “The digital displays in Packer’s limousine and, later, the displays of his digital wristwatch allow him, mysteriously, to see seconds into the future.” Initially, these prescient moments communicate only slight disturbances in the temporal continuity of Eric’s perception, as when, “Eric watched himself on the oval screen below the spycam, running his thumb along his chinline. The car stopped and moved and he realized queerly that he’d just placed his thumb on his chinline, a second or two after he’d seen it on-screen.” (Cosmopolis, 22) Eric’s realization of what occurs in this moment prompts him to ask the passenger in his limousine, “Why am I seeing things that haven’t happened yet?” (22), but the question goes unanswered. The passenger, Michael Chin, one of Eric’s employed advisors, previously advises Eric to pull out of his bet against the rise of the yen shortly before the incident with the screen and the spycam. Eric’s initial suspicion leads him to think that the security of his company’s network has been compromised; however, the second instance of prescient sight, via the computer screens in Eric’s limousine, seems to further confound Eric’s sense of causal logic, as he struggles to rationalize how if, “He knew the spycam operated in real time, or was supposed to. How could he see himself if

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his eyes were closed? There wasn't time to analyze. He felt his body catching up to the
independent image.” (52) Here, Eric reaches sexual climax (as “his eyes were closed”) while sharing an erotic interaction with another of his employed advisors, Jane Melman, who also enters the limousine to warn Eric against continuing to leverage against the yen. Eric’s admission that “there wasn’t time to analyze” the “independent image” dictates that while the image confers meaning and confusion onto Eric’s present state of consciousness, he still lacks the temporal agency of thought necessary to make sense of the image, or deduce its origin or purpose. Eric’s physical reality, (the physical and cognitive demands of his sex act), takes precedence within his consciousness to the extent that he is unable to rationally process the existence of the “independent image.” Physical reality, hence, takes precedence over hyperreality, creating a productive moment of tension around the ambiguous discrepancy between Eric’s present reality and the hyperreality of the screen display.

The “independent image” breaks free from the temporal continuity of Eric’s hyperreality, disrupting the “closed system of signs” from perpetuating the false reality of the simulacrum. Where before the screen and its images presented Eric with an assured representation of hyperreality, the “independent image” betrays that hyperreality, channeling the futurity of Eric’s genius to such an extent that the hyperreal is brought to excess, exposing the simulacrum to temporal disorientation. With the curtain pulled back, so to say, if only for a moment of excessively projected futurity, DeLillo allows his text to act as a commentary on the tension between the reflective function of aesthetic experience and the blinding acceleration of technologically ordered subjectivity in the arena of the hyperreal. Author Arthur Kroker confronts the temporal tensions contained
within the relationship between the simultaneously developing progression of art and technology. In attempting to answer the question, “What is the art of the digital matrix?,” Kroker addresses the polarized issue of the relationship in question, writing, “If the planetary drive to completed technicity is premised on what Marx theorized as the violent fetishism of the speed of circulation, then art recovers a sense of temporality — the time of duration — as a way of aesthetically undermining empty spatialization.” Joining Kroker’s perspective with the context of Baudrillard’s hyperreal/simulacrum, and the exemplification of Eric’s perceptive experience with the “independent image” of the screen, Kroker’s commentary reveals the extent to which Cosmopolis emphasizes the necessity of “the time of duration” as a counterforce to the “violent fetishism of the speed of circulation” at work in Baudrillard’s nihilistic hyperreality. Thus, to Kroker’s statement that “art recovers a sense of temporality — the time of duration — as a way of aesthetically undermining empty spatialization” aligns art’s purpose with precisely the potential that Schuster identifies with DeLillo’s use of the “hyperreal landscape as a proving ground for humanity.”

A pattern begins to form around Eric’s meetings with his admonitive advisors, as they are consistently accompanied by intensifying visions of his future reality. During the third incident of Packer’s prescient perception, when his “chief of theory, ” Kinski, meets with Eric in his limousine to dispense theoretical interpretations about the relationship between Eric’s role as a capitalist and an anarchist riot, which is simultaneously unfolding outside the confines of the vehicle. DeLillo details Eric’s immediate reaction to

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looking directly into the image of the future:

His own image caught his eye, live on the oval screen beneath the spycam. Some seconds passed. He saw himself recoil in shock. More time passed. He felt suspended, waiting. Then there was a detonation, loud and deep, near enough to consume all the information around him. He recoiled in shock. Everyone did. The phrase was part of the gesture, the familiar expression, embodied in motion of the head and limbs. He recoiled in shock. The phrase reverberated in the body. (93-94)

In this scene, DeLillo emphasizes the delay, the temporal disruption, that exists between the image projected on the screen and the real-time event, allowing Eric to perceive the image on-screen, and comprehend (consciously) that he is witnessing his image in the future from his present (now) position. Given that after the experience of witnessing his future image, as “more time passed,” Eric “felt suspended, waiting,” Eric anticipates the moment when real-time will catch up with the prescient image on the screen; yet, this moment of anticipation still precedes another significant subjective sensation, the “shock” of the bomb’s detonation, which DeLillo describes as “near enough to consume all the information around [Eric].” The “shock” that Eric experiences exemplifies the intended effect of modernist aesthetic on consciousness, and confronts Eric’s reality with “a result of contents of consciousness that have not yet been processed.”

The explosion of the bomb during the anarchists’ riot utterly disrupts Eric’s consciousness, (producing a “phrase” that “reverberated in the body”), as demonstrated by the fact that the “shock” of the explosion is able to “consume all the information around him.” The bomb works in tandem with the screen displays in Eric’s limousine to produce a “shock” that affects Eric’s conscious in such a way as to disrupt his physical reality, his sense of temporality, and thus, the simulacrum of the screen image as well.

While the source of the explosion is known, DeLillo allows the source of the screen’s

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prophetic images to remain ambiguous to Eric. The bomb event provides a moment of reflection for Eric when it breaks the temporal rules of the screen medium, betraying the continuity of the simulacrum. The prior rationality of the hyperreal screen image suddenly becomes irrationally accelerated. The hyperreal image presents Eric with an impossible vision of reality, a temporally fragmented acceleration into the future that renders the meaning of its existence ambiguous within Eric’s present moment. Ambiguity forms like a sliver of shrapnel within Eric’s consciousness, composed of the “contents of consciousness that have not yet been processed.” The hyperreality of the screen is intended to allow Eric to anticipate the future reality of his present moment, to read and predict the future movements of cybercapital; but, upon perceiving the images of that actual future reality, Eric can only anticipate the shock to come, and still experiences the full “shock” of the bomb exploding.

Seeing his reaction to the bomb exploding does nothing to alter Eric’s actual real-time reaction to the explosion. In this light, “shock” manages to break whatever control the simulacrum and hyperreality hold over Eric’s subjective experience, forcing him to reflect, to process “contents of consciousness that have not yet been processed,” to doubt the utility and security of the future as it peers out from the screen. Thus, the “shock” challenges Eric’s ability to participate in the simulated reality of the screen given the temporal discrepancy he experiences, between seeing the future and living the future, posits meaning onto his present moment in the form of ambiguity, confusion, and doubt. Eric’s sense of reality becomes so impossibly ambiguous for him to process that the hyperreal simulacrum becomes subservient to the reality outside the borders of the screen. These moments, thus, reveal that Eric experiences an identifiably modern
aesthetics of imagistic and temporal distortion, which challenges postmodern assertions that postphenomenological experience has effaced ambiguity and the possibility for moments of conscious reflective duration.

Returning to the scene of the anarchist riot and corresponding dialogue between Eric and Kinski, the "chief of theory" explains how the anarchist rioters' motive for their actions reflects Eric's subjective position as a capitalist. Kinski relates the two groups, anarchists and capitalists, in terms of a struggle to "influence mass consciousness," as a means to influence a temporal shift in consciousness, when she states of the riot, "This is a protest against the future. They want to hold off the future. They want to normalize it, keep it from overwhelming the present." (Cosmopolis, 91) Kinski's remark about the anarchistic struggle to relocate consciousness in a past historical context echoes DeLillo's comments about anti-globalization protests and terrorism following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the context of the 9/11 events in America, DeLillo states that, "Whatever acts of violence marked the protests, most of the men and women involved tend to be a moderating influence, trying to slow things down, even things out, hold off the white-hot future. The terrorists of September 11 want to bring back the past." 7 According to Kinski, the anarchists protesting in Times Square around Eric's limousine share the same motive, "they want to hold off the future." The relations between the radical movements, (anarchist, anti-globalist, and terrorist), are clear enough to demarcate Cosmopolis as a continuation of DeLillo's commentary on the historical perspectives in tension within America's millennial moment. These radical forces share a common material enemy, Eric Packer, the novel's embodiment of American capitalistic hegemony. Yet, these radical

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forces also align themselves against Eric’s character as a representative of the futurity, a temporal harbinger rise with the oppression of the hyperreal.

Kinski identifies the anarchists’ protest as a “...fantasy generated by the market...” given that the protestors, “...don’t exist outside the market. There is nowhere they can go to be on the outside. There is no outside.” (90) Espousing the same postmodernist theory promoted by Baudrillard, Kinski claims the protest will ultimately fail to effect any change to the hyperreal of the market system, given that, “The market culture is total. It breeds these men and women. They are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market driven. They are traded on the markets of the world. This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system.” (90) Herein lies the crucial difference between the anarchists fighting police and spray painting Eric’s limousine and the 9/11 terrorists’ suicidal destruction; the “market driven” anarchists of Cosmopolis fail to effect any real threat to the rule of the capitalistic system they attack, while the Islamic terrorists use their self-destruction to break the rules of that capitalistic system with a symbolic action far more lethal than the system can withstand.

After the moment of “shock” following the bomb’s explosion, Eric’s response to the energy of the protest is a desire for participation, rather than cognitive reflection they hope to inspire. He is drawn into the violence, tempted into participation with the hyperreal “closed system of signs” (literally) firing around him. He is drawn into the creative moment of the protest, the inspiration of its energy, but only to enact the hegemonic rebuttal to their futile attempts at provoking systemic change. Kinski’s claim that the protestors “exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system” is affirmed when Eric recognizes a line of poetry that they program into a stock ticker, which reads, “a rat
became the unit of currency,” (96) DeLillo prefaces the novel with the same line of poetry from Zbigniew Herbert’s “Report From the Besieged City,” which the protesters intend to use as an anti-capitalist political statement. The fact that the protestor’s read and use the same poetry that Eric has been reading produces the exact opposite effect of their intention. Eric’s response is then to further intensify his role in cybercapitalistic exchange, prompting him to, “…take a web phone out of a slot and execute an order for more yen. He borrowed yen in dumbfounding amounts. He wanted all the yen there was.” (97) Eric’s recognition of the poetic statement only compels him to buy more yen, to “invigorate and perpetuate” the very system they are protesting.

The protest scene provides a crucial moment of divergence from the postmodern assurance of the tenability of hyperreal, when Eric and Kinski witness a man committing self-immolation. This suicidal act becomes, in the moment, symbolically comparable with the horrific suicidal acts of the 9/11 terrorists, as Eric explains, “There was a shift, a break in space. Again he wasn’t sure what he was seeing, only thirty yards away but unreliable, delusional, where a man sat on the sidewalk with legs crossed, trembling in a length of braided flame.” (97) The sight of the burning man is almost impossible for Eric to comprehend, an event so provocative and disturbing that its existence seems “unreliable, delusional” to Eric. The man’s self-immolation acts as an event within the larger event of the protest, significant enough at the symbolic level to break Eric away from the screen (the “simulacrum”) and create “a shift, a break in space” (in the temporal continuity of the moment) amongst the symbolic impotence of the protesting crowds. Eric discerns how the provocative depth of the act reflects the helplessness of the protest, capable even of bringing the protest and Eric consciousness (and thus, the system of
Behind Eric all the screens were pulsing with it. And all action was at a pause, the protestors and riot police milling about and only the cameras jostling. What did this change? Everything, he thought. Kinski had been wrong. The market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act. Not such starkness and horror. This was a thing outside its reach. (99-100)

The act holds the power to “influence mass consciousness,” as demonstrated by the fact that “all action was at a pause,” and demonstrates a break in the hyperreal, that “the market was not total,” unable to “assimilate his act.” Here, DeLillo demonstrates the validity of the claim that Schuster makes regarding the hyperreal as “a proving ground for humanity,” such that the suicidal act of self-immolation demonstrates an act of self-sacrifice so extreme as to redirect consciousness towards empathy for the humanity reduced to ashes amidst the less meaningful interaction between the anarchists and the capitalistic system they are protesting against.

Prior to the publication of *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo explored the relation between the use of bombs and terrorism and the use of literary products to affect social consciousness in his 1991 novel *Mao II*. In that novel, the character Bill Grey (a novelist whose identity and voice is analogous to DeLillo’s) speaks with George, a representative from a terrorist group. In a moment of dialogue between the two figures, Bill Grey states, “For some time now I’ve had the feeling that novelists and terrorists are playing a zero-sum game.” (Mao II, 156) Bill expands on this comment to explain that, “What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous.” (Mao II, 157) What DeLillo and Bill identify as the “failure to be dangerous” on the part of novelists corresponds to their absorption into the market system, such that they fall prey to that same symbolic impotency as the anarchist
protesters in Cosmopolis, unable to influence mass consciousness in a way that threatens oppressive social systems because they must operate within the expressive confines of those same social systems. The terrorist, on the other hand, is able to use symbolic violent acts to cut through the barriers between mass consciousness and reality, to literally explode the order of the simulacrum and the hyperreal. Thus, with the burning man's act in Cosmopolis, DeLillo continues to comment on the forces that “influence mass consciousness” through the perspective of Eric Packer, equating the burning man’s suicidal act to a play in the same “zero-sum game” that terrorists engage in.

DeLillo’s use of game theory terminology (the “zero-sum game”) bears a striking resemblance to Jean Baudrillard’s reaction to the 9/11 events, in which the postmodernist theorist also explains the symbolic effect of those terrorist acts in relation to a “zero-sum game.” Baudrillard claims that, “Admittedly, in terms of our system of values, they [the terrorists] are cheating. It is not playing fair to throw one’s own death into the game. But this does not trouble them, and the new rules are not ours to determine.”8 For Baudrillard, the politically motivated act of self-destruction presents a symbolic challenge to a “system of values,” which cannot possibly be redirected into perpetuating that system, because it cannot be countered with an equally symbolic act. The act contradicts the “system of values,” and so, for the system to attempt to counter the act with an equally self-destructive symbolic act would also contradict its own “system of values,” destroying itself materially and symbolically in the process. And so, Baudrillard communicates what modernists have long understood about the nature of aesthetic and symbolic expression, that only provocation symbolically oriented outside of the rules (the

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“system of values”) commands the ability to effectively destabilize the system structuring those rules, and pose challenges to mass consciousness; “The rule is not refuted from within the system of rules; rather, it is just ignored and simply passed over.”

Kinski’s reaction to the act of self-immolation is to dismiss the act as, “...not original,” and to invoke the image of “All those Vietnamese monks, one after the another, in all their lotus positions.” (100) The recollection of Quang Duc and Vietnam protest imagery only further destabilizes her position, however, as her reference to that historical moment advances the current act’s historical relevance, allowing the present to break free from the temporal and symbolic confines of the hyperreal present. Eric’s response to Kinski’s nihilistic postmodernist assessment of the self-immolation bears the marks of admiration, and passes meaning onto his own later suicidal act, given his statement, “Does he have to be a Buddhist to be taken seriously? He did a serious thing. He took his own life. Isn’t this what you have to do to show them you’re serious?” (100) In debating the symbolic value of the self-immolation, Eric and Kinski assume divergent critical perspectives regarding the aesthetic value of the act based on its repetitious historical context, with Kinski positing that the man’s suicide as less provocative than the original acts of self-immolation carried out by the “Vietnamese monks” during their past years of protest. From a modernist perspective, the provocative quality of the act matters less in regard to its originality than its significance in the moment of its passing.

Eric’s response to the act of self-immolation illustrates his decision to assume a decidedly modernist perspective when he challenges Kinski’s evaluation of the act, and identifies self-immolation’s provocative value based on the present relevance of its

shocking aesthetic expression. From her position as a postmodern critical theorist, Kinski’s reaction to the act, (by invoking the image of the Vietnamese monks as a means of devaluing the present act), is essentially a reaction against the repetition of the expressive technique. The true aesthetic significance of the “independent images,” as well as the act of self-immolation, lies in how they accomplish the effect of provoking consciousness into reflection during moments of duration, moments that might otherwise be dismissed as expressions of repetitive formal techniques of modern or postmodern aesthetics. For Kinski, aesthetic value is based on what modernism identifies as, “…the erroneous assumption that in art and literature the law of modernity, that is, of progress in history, was expressed through constant innovation.” (Bohrer, 77) Rather, Kinski misappropriates the aesthetic value of the self-immolation based on “the erroneous assumption” that the act is “not original” based on her postmodern perspective that the act represents a valueless repetition of previous acts of self-immolation, rather than an act that is consistent with “constant innovation.” In essence, Kinski makes the mistake of mapping the necessity of “constant innovation” onto aesthetic expression. She fails to realize that aesthetic provocations like the burning man do not require “constant innovation” to continuously affect changes in consciousness.

While Eric and Kinski disagree over the theoretical implications of the act of self-immolation, the ambiguity of the “independent images” of the future that Eric witnesses remains unresolved from the perspective of his subjective position. In his own words, Eric remains fixated on the “shock” of being forced into negotiating the seeming impossibility of anticipation in the hyperreal, where technology claims to eliminate doubt, and his inability to conquer the movements of the yen (in the digital space of
cybercapital) parallels his inability to rationalize the existence of the "independent image." Eric admits to Kinski that he lacks the ability to perceive, "An aesthetics of interaction," that would reveal, "...a common surface, an affinity between market movements and the natural world," (Cosmopolis, 86), a realization that impregnates his consciousness with "doubt." Eric wants to believe that he can eliminate all doubt by locating a "common surface," a rational connection between computer screens and the reality outside the windows of his limousine, an a perceivable organic relation "between market movements and the natural world." The tragedy of Eric's desire is its impossibility, which reflects the impossibility of the tenability of the simulacrum and hyperreality. The "natural world" resists this organic stasis necessary for the "aesthetics of interaction," resists the elimination of doubt and ambiguity, because events like the burning man will always tilt the referential connection between "market movements and the natural world." The repetition of these events remains inevitable, and thus, moments of duration and conscious reflection that resist the transformation of reality into the aesthetic stasis of the simulacrum remain inevitable as well. Kinski's response to Eric on the matter reaffirms her lack of ability to perceive an answer beyond the simulacrum and its "technological, positivistic idea of progress." 10

In counseling Eric, she can only assure him, "You don't believe in doubt. You told me this. 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... We need a new theory of time." (Cosmopolis, 86) Once again, Kinski puts her theoretical foot in her mouth. The idea that "computer power eliminates doubt" because "all doubt

rises from past experience” fails to realize that the past is not disappearing. The past remains forever available to be called out of the continuum of history to deposit meaning onto the present moment, as evidenced by the example of the burning man and all the provocative historical associations that his act calls to mind. When Kinski claims that the future is becoming more knowable than the past, she fails to reconcile the rational progression of technology with the asymmetrical (irrational) qualities of “the natural world”. Her fallacy with this idea is best exemplified by Eric’s “asymmetrical prostate,” the idea of which haunts the character throughout the course of the novel, as well as his inability to discern the future movements of the yen.

When Eric subsequently presses her to explain his experiences with the “independent image,” Kinski appeals to Eric’s financial “genius” as means of illuminating his extra-temporal perception, claiming, “Genius alters the terms of its habitat... There are rare minds operating, a few here, a few there, the polymath, the true futurist. A consciousness such as yours, hypermaniacal, may have contact points beyond the general perception.” (95) By labeling Eric as a “genius” and “hypermaniacal,” Kinski labels Eric with terms that elevate his perceptive capabilities to the level of the divine; yet, the fact remains that Eric is mortal and cannot perceive the “aesthetics of interaction” that would validate Kinski’s claim that “computer power eliminates doubt.” One could claim that Eric’s perception of the “independent images” constitutes an example of his consciousness’ ability to locate “contact points beyond the general perception,” but the fact that these “independent images” have the opposite effect of effacing doubt renders Kinski’s argument mute. Postmodernist theory like Kinski’s wants to claim that the hyperreal endows reality with accelerated perception, but consciousness does not follow
the same pace of innovation as technology does. Rather, consciousness requires moments of reflective duration to process the ambiguity of the moment.

Throughout *Cosmopolis*, Eric remarks at length about the limitations of language’s ability to maintain pace with the futurity of the globalized market and the headlong pull of cybercapital. In his commentary on *Cosmopolis*, literary critic Jerry Varsava distills the meaning behind Eric’s preoccupation with nominating the obsolescence of various technological terms:

Though existentially constrained by the present like everyone else, Packer seeks to transcend the present through the pursuit of futurity, and it is above all technology that serves as a proxy for the latter. His quest has both negational and affirmative elements...Packer denigrates antiquated technologies and their collaterally dated lexical markers. 11

Varsava’s claim that Eric “denigrates...antiquated technologies and their collaterally dated lexical markers,” as a conscious manifestation of his desire to use technology as a “proxy,” by which to facilitate his desire to “transcend the present through the pursuit of futurity,” coalesces with Kinski’s claim that Eric’s “genius alters the terms of its habitat.”

Rather than reading Eric’s lexical negations as affirmation of the postmodern hyperreal’s ability to sustain a “closed system of signs,” DeLillo’s characterization of Eric’s subjective vision of futurity acts more effectively as a symptom of Eric’s figurative identity as a modernist. He is able to articulate the process of aesthetic change in the modernist “idea of the transitory nature of art,” by which the aesthetic language of technology inevitably changes with the passing of time. The distinction between the shift in linguistic tradition and the loss of history gives the modernist “transitory nature of art” validation of Kinski’s claim that the past is disappearing. History remains an ever-

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accumulating continuum, but the destruction of cultural traditions, like the technological terms that Eric reads as dated, forms a necessary component in the process of modernization that passes without effacing history itself. Reading DeLillo’s characterization of Eric’s futurist declarations as evocative of the a shift in aesthetic values allows us to finally realize Eric as an agent of the aesthetic forces of modernity, placed in opposition with the nihilistic tendencies of a postmodern (Kinski-type) evaluation of the present of *Cosmopolis*.

The happening of the prescient image proceeding the anarchist protest, the protest itself, and Eric’s theoretical opposition with Kinski all demarcate this moment in *Cosmopolis* as a turning point for Eric’s phenomenological development, a hinge from which he is able to experience an epiphanic moment of self-realization, provoked by a newfound sense of mortality that validates the potential of life through meaningful death. It is at this epiphanic moment that Eric admits, “…it was the threat of death at the brink of night that spoke to him most surely about some principle of fate he’d always known would come clear in time. Now he could begin the business of living.” (*Cosmopolis*, 107) The passage marks a formal hinge in *Cosmopolis* as well, a textual break in temporality that separates “Part One” and “Part Two” of the novel, allowing DeLillo to emphasize the relevance of Eric’s decision to “begin the business of living” as informative of the content that follows Eric’s affirmative phenomenological declaration.

Following the novel’s transition into Part Two of the text, Eric’s behavior becomes increasingly masochistic, (and ultimately suicidal), as he begins a quest for subjective self-realization through bodily experiences characterized by pain, violence, and self-destruction. Eric’s motives for undertaking this quest coincide with his relation
to the anarchistic qualities of a modernist figure, allowing us to read DeLillo’s depiction of Eric’s phenomenological development from the modernist perspective that Eric’s self-destruction represents a desire to destroy tradition so as to make meaning in the present. Fittingly, Eric’s desire to “begin the business of living,” ironically, leads him to his own self-destruction. Eric demonstrates real conscious (ethical) development when, the anarchistic inspiration he draws from the protest that he witnesses, prompts him to acknowledge that, “The urge to destroy is a creative act.” (92); yet, DeLillo also allows Eric to admire the symbolic power of the unknown man’s self-immolation. Eric tells Kinski, “Imagine the pain. Sit there and feel it...To say something. To make people think.” (100) Thus, Eric conceives of pain and death, in the second half of the novel, as the means to a last meaningful act, a means to “say something” and “make people think,” yet, also a creative pathway towards greater “consciousness,” an aesthetically informed subjectivity.

The shocking close to the scene depicting Eric’s sexual encounter with his bodyguard, Kendra, offers insight into the condition of rationality in Eric’s desire to “identify consciousness. Eric requests that Kendra shock him with her stun gun, phrasing his request as more than morbid curiosity when he demands, “Show me what it feels like. I’m looking for more. Show me something I don’t know. Stun me to my DNA. (Cosmopolis, 115) The condition necessary for Eric to experience “something” new (“something I don’t know”) is, therefore, one of “shock” and pain, capable of interrupting his technologically modeled sense of rationality. Where before “computer power eliminates doubt” for Eric, he now rejects this misapplication of technical positivism in the “business of living,” turning instead to the anarchist solution for creation as a means
of elevating his consciousness through aesthetically informed bodily destruction. Eric’s desire to be shocked, to “deprived of his faculties of reason” (Cosmopolis, 115) represents a desire to embrace and understand the irrational asymmetry motif that haunts him throughout the novel via temporal disjunctions in the continuity of hyperreality, and the uncontrollability of cybercapital.

In the first half of the novel, Eric communicated a desire to locate “An aesthetics of interaction” between “market movements and the natural world,” (Cosmopolis, 86); yet, he is unable to do so because of his technological rationalism renders him incapable of recognizing the asymmetry inherent to the “natural world,” the fundamental element that composes “the structure of modernism” and defines the ambiguity of that “aesthetics of interaction.” The repeated detail that Eric’s prostate is “asymmetrical” worries the character from the very beginning of the novel, producing an (literally and figuratively) internal conflict in Eric, prompting DeLillo’s elaboration:

He [Eric] liked to track answers to hard questions. This was his method, to attain mastery over ideas and people. But there was something about the idea of asymmetry. It was intriguing in the world outside the body, a counterforce to balance and calm, the riddling little twist, subatomic, that made creation happen. There was the serpentine word itself, slightly off-kilter, with the single additional letter that changes everything. But when he removed the word from its cosmological register and applied it to the body of a male mammal, his body, he began to feel pale and spooked. He felt a certain perverse reverence toward the word. A fear of, a distance from. (Cosmopolis, 52)

Eric’s desire to “attain mastery over” the “idea of asymmetry” brings him ideologically into the fold of the anarchist and the modernist, but also physically places him in confrontation with his wife (Elise Shifrin), his bodyguard (Torval), and Richard Sheets (a.k.a. Benno Levin, Eric’s former employee and would be assassin). Richard and Eric face a common tension with the asymmetry of the “natural world.” Literary critic Aaron Chandler acknowledges that Richard serves as a sort of foil to Eric’s existence, and identifies the character as, “…the reification of Packer’s own pathogenic nature, the
otherness he suppresses in himself.”12 This reading of Richard as a figural representative of Packer’s suppressed “otherness” is supported by the verbal exchange between the two characters. Where Richard tells Eric, “I have become an enigma to myself. So said Saint Augustine. And herein lies my sickness...I’m not talking about myself. I’m talking about you.” (Cosmopolis, 189) Richard identifies with Eric, as Eric’s “otherness,” to the extent that the characters culminating interaction marks a symbolic exchange of complementing phenomenological experience.

As is characteristic of Eric’s “otherness,” Richard’s character lacks the ability to reconcile with the oppressive pace of the technological development in his present moment. Richard admits to Eric, “I loved the baht. But your system is so microtimed that I couldn’t keep up with it. I couldn’t find it. It’s so infinitesimal. I began to hate my work, and you, and all the numbers on my screen, and every minute of my life.” (Cosmopolis, 191) Thus, Richard’s inability to “keep up” with Eric’s “infinitesimal” and “microtimed” cybercapital “system,” with the pace of Eric’s futurity, marks Richard as a victim of the pace of Eric’s futurity. Richard represents one of the multitude who (like the anarchists) act like fuel for the technological progression of cyber-capital, those who are, “...necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market-driven. They are traded on the markets of the world. This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system.” (Cosmopolis, 90) By realizing Richard’s connection with anarchists as part of “a form of systemic hygiene, purging and lubricating,” (99) Richard’s terroristic desire to kill Eric allows him to form a polar

tension with Eric, past versus future; however, unlike Richard, Eric remains ethically amenable as an agent of cyber-capital’s futurity by the nature of his suicidal act.

Aaron Chandler summarizes the ethical/moral implications of the comparison between Richard and Eric in writing, “...in order to be answerable to the philosophical and social challenge DeLillo presents in *Cosmopolis*, we must not discard Eric Packer and Benno Levin as extravagant caricatures, though certainly the mode of satire prevails in this text. Rather we should seek to recognize a semblance of our own blindness in them.” (Chandler, 257) The violence that connects Eric and Richard can be seen as representative as a single suicidal act, provoked by both character’s complementary identities and their shared desire for productive acts of destruction, (Eric’s suicide and Richard’s murder representing a single destructive event). The “blindness” that Chandler presents as the site of ethical/moral judgment in *Cosmopolis*, (a “blindness” that corresponds to Richard’s destruction of his past identity, and subsequent formulation of a new murderous identity with Benno Levin), reveals the shortcomings of Richard’s “rational” justifications for violence in *Cosmopolis*.

Previously in the novel, Kinski poses the question to Eric, “What is the flaw of human rationality?” (90), to which she replies, “It pretends not to see the horror and death at the end of the schemes it builds.” (91) This claim seems an appropriate critique for Richard’s unethical rationalization of Eric’s murder, yet Eric’s decision to allow Richard to murder him reverses Kinski’s logic, allowing his self-destructive act (that “horror and death”) to render Richard’s rationality utterly dubious. Thus, the symbolic and ethical exchange between Eric and Richard reveals an attempt by Eric (and DeLillo) to demonstrate the flaw of “human rationality” inherent to Richard’s subjective position.
The comparison of destructive urges inherent to Richard’s “otherness” and Eric’s anarchistic suicide reveals another example of the “zero-sum game” at work in *Cosmopolis*. Richard murdering Eric constitutes an ethically self-destructive (suicidal) end when Eric’s suicidal act is interpreted as the symbolic counterstrike to Richard’s position, which subverts the ethical and symbolic potency of Richard’s murderous retribution.

When Richard articulates his motive for killing Eric in his section of the novel’s narrative, “The Confessions of Benno Levin,” he reveals he is, “...ambivalent about killing [Eric].” Richard is “ambivalent” about his decision to kill Eric precisely because he is unable “to see the horror and death” that his actions produce. Richard is blinded by a rationality weakened with the fragility of his incomplete memory. Through his desire for innovative action that will pose a challenge to the economic system that he hates, Richard unknowingly participates in the perpetuation of that very system. Richard supports this reading in his own words, articulating his “ambivalence” as a rationally manipulated lack of prescience in writing:

> But to take another person’s life? This is the vision of the new day. I am determined finally to act. It is the violent act that makes history and changes everything that came before. But how to imagine the moment? I’m not sure I can reach the point of even doing it mentally, two faceless men with runny clothes.”
> (*Cosmopolis*, 154)

Richard rationalizes his murderous desire by falsely mapping himself into an ethical polarity with Eric. In reality (outside the distortion of the hyperreal) his decision to murder Eric amounts to a symbolically recursive, meaningless act void of the subjectively creative quality inherent to the destructive “structure of modernism.” Richard thinks that his killing Eric signifies a “violent act that makes history and changes everything that came before,” but he fails to see that Eric’s death is the consequence of
Eric’s conscious decision rather than his own. Richard’s blindness to the impotence of his attempt to claim symbolic purpose is articulated by his inability to visualize the murder, as he confesses, “I’m not sure I can reach the point of even doing it mentally, two faceless men with runny clothes.” Eric’s decision to allow Richard to murder him, on the other hand, represents an act symbolically on par with unknown man’s self-immolation. Eric is able to employ the power of the modern aesthetic in creating a moment of duration by destabilizing Richard’s rational consciousness within their confrontational moment.

When Eric questions Richard about his motives for killing him, prior to the actual act, Eric tells Richard that, “Violence needs a cause, a truth.” (Cosmopolis, 194), a proposition that Richard cannot negotiate with his misguided sense of rationality, blinded by his failure to inflect memory and identity into the present that might force him to realize the implications of his murderous act. In this final moment preceding his death/suicide, Eric does what Richard cannot, allowing the symbolic power of memory and identity to bring meaning to the present moment. He thinks of, “…the burning man and imagined himself back at the scene, in Times Square, watching the body on fire, or in the body, was the body, looking out through gas and flame.” (Cosmopolis, 195) Eric’s sudden ability to invoke historical consciousness endows his consciousness in the present with a subjective ethical position superior to Richard’s. While Eric loses his life and Richard retains his own, Eric’s death manifests an aesthetically informed ethical gain for his subjective position, as well as an ethical loss for Richard’s. In face of Eric’s demand for Richard to provide “a cause, a truth” to explain his motive for violence, Richard can only state, “There’s nothing in the world but other people,” (195) revealing his inability to access the sympathetic register that might stay his hyperrationalized hand with the
counterbalance of consciousness. Eric continues to destabilize Richard’s rationalization for unconscious and historyless action, stating, “Your crime has no conscious. You haven’t been driven to do it by some oppressive social force... Your crime is in your head. Another fool shooting up a diner because because.” (Cosmopolis, 196)

In Cosmopolis, the value of creation (even for the price of destruction) overwhelms the potential value of stasis. Richard is lulled into believing that his murdering Eric will effect the “the violent act that makes history and changes everything that came before,” but he is wrong; in reality, Richard’s murdering Eric does not represent the violent aesthetic revaluation he hopes for; rather, he effects the perpetuation of the simulacrum, the system, the hyperreal. His act is not representative of modernist ethical exchange, as with the case of Eric’s suicide and the “burning man,” but only a repetitious action comparable to those anarchists that “invigorate and perpetuate the system,” and in doing so, fail to affect consciousness in the present. The stakes have been raised for contemporary culture. There is a vein of legitimacy in the nihilistic lamentations of the postmodern field, but the game is on, and hope remains well enough alive to say that people resist the oppression of technology and cybernetic influences. Postmodernism presents a reimagining of the complexity of aesthetic representation without foundational solutions, but DeLillo challenges this nihilism. His solution: the truly creative act, the American freedom to dictate a narrative that breaks free from the symbolically oppressive limitations of hyperreality/simulacrum. The solution is in keeping with modernist theory, is modernist theory, and follows the process of that theory. Consciousness and its creation is the solution to the failings of rationality.

Richard reveals to Eric that they both have “asymmetrical prostates” (199), but the fact
that their identities intertwine at the level of the empathetic is lost to the rationality of violence that perpetuates the self-other conflict. This is the conflict that DeLillo identifies with *Cosmopolis*, that which must be overcome, somewhere, sometime, in a future that will always remain grounded in the present at its most sublime moment.

The processes of modernism embody the asymmetry that Eric strives to locate, that imbalanced integral component of creative temporal reflection that provokes consciousness to ever-greater heights. How can we interpret postmodernism except as the worst-case scenario of the millennial moment, a nihilistic interpretation of contemporary reality that demands counterexamples to the tenability of its proclamations? Postmodernism views the world as robbed of its subjective potential, and thus those opposed to nihilistic determination must endeavor to reclaim humanity through the promotion of provocative subjective expression to the limit of its availability.
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