# Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and the Dialectics of Complexity and Simplicity in Postmodern American Philosophy and Culture

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> *Reductionism is the essence of thinking and the heart of science – it is the tool that*
> *allows us to see the world as something other than a chaotic, writhing welter.*
> *– Jonathan Gottschall, "The Tree of Knowledge and Darwinian Literary Study" (2003)*[1]

In his introduction to *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (2001), Mark C. Taylor, polemically opposing those of his colleagues in American academe who have denounced "the unholy alliance of technology, business, and education,"[2] insists on what he terms the constructive alternative or the imperative of hope (echoing here, ironically, the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch's famous *Prinzip Hoffnung* or principle of hope). Such optimism, however, has never come easily to him, Taylor confesses. Indeed, his opening diagnosis of the postmodern moment of "unprecedented complexity" does suggest a much more pessimistic, not to say apocalyptic response:

> Awash in a sea of information that seems to have no meaning and bombarded by images and sounds transmitted by new media, many people have lost a sense of direction and purpose and long for security and stability. Stability, security, and equilibrium,

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1. Jonathan Gottschall, "The Tree of Knowledge and Darwinian Literary Study," *Philosophy and Literature* 27 (2003): 262.

2. Mark C. Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 17; hereafter abbreviated *MC*.

however, can be deceptive, for they are but momentary eddies in an endlessly complex and turbulent flux. In the world that is emerging, the condition of complexity is as irreducible as it is inescapable. (*MC* 3)

So we postmoderns must face, Taylor sternly exhorts, this vertiginous moment of complexity and "learn to live with it creatively," not denounce it as "catastrophic nihilism" (*MC* 3). Although Michel Foucault's social constructivism and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction are both considered in the book, Taylor's theoretical mentor *par excellence* in his diagnostic work on postmodern complexity turns out to be Jean Baudrillard, "one of the first theorists to realize the ways in which informatic and telematic media change experience and reconstitute the world" (*MC* 65). Up to a certain point at least, Taylor seems to endorse Baudrillard's theorizing about the postmodern condition – the critical point being of course the French philosopher's unpalatable pessimism and melancholy, devoid as it is of any constructive alternatives or imperatives of hope. Taylor's partial endorsement comprises Baudrillardean theories like the so-called structural revolution of value, in which, to quote Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993), "*referential value is annihilated, giving the structural play of value the upper hand*":

The structural dimension becomes autonomous by excluding the referential dimension, and is instituted upon the death of reference... Now the other stage of value has the upper hand, a total relativity, general commutation, and simulation – simulation in the sense that, from now on, signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real. (Quoted in *MC* 66-67.)

With this liquidation of the referential dimension Baudrillard has introduced us not only to the postmodern condition of *hyperreality* where the simulation principle has displaced the reality principle, but also to the condition of *hypercapitalism* or, to be more historically specific, the American boost-and-bust capitalism of the 1990s, the era of Nasdaq, the world's largest electronic stock market, but also the era of digital big business and its sudden domino collapse. To quote Taylor's excellent summary of Baudrillard's crucial argument: "When economic relations are mediated by blips of light transmitted through fiber-optic networks and displayed on computer screens, the economy and media become virtually indistinguishable" (*MC* 68). Indeed, "hypercapitalism can thrive only in a world where exchange value displaces use value in a play of signs whose worth grows as the speed of trading increases" (*MC* 70).

Don DeLillo's latest book, his thirteenth novel, *Cosmopolis* (2003), can be read as a sophisticated, ironically apocalyptic-cum-carnivalesque satire that deals with this very phenomenon, namely the postmodern moment of *unprecedented complexity* as embedded in American *fin-de-siècle* hyper/cybercapitalism, and as embodied by the novel's tycoon-protagonist Eric Packer, a veritable master-of-the-universe type of hyper/cybercapitalist: a 28-year-old billionaire, evidently the smartest and coolest asset manager and currency trader on Wall Street, with a "wife of twenty-two days, Elise Shrifin, a poet who had right of blood to the fabulous Shrifin banking fortune of Europe and the world,"[3] but also the owner of a 48-room, $104-million triplex apartment at the top of the world's tallest residential tower (89 storeys) overlooking the East River, equipped with rotating bedroom, lap pool, shark tank, borzoi pen, two elevators (one timed to Erik Satie music, the other to Sufi rap), and one could go on listing the ingredients of this surreal orgy of plutocratic Man-hattan-lifestyle materialism and hedonism. In a 2003 interview with Paul Gediman, Don DeLillo comments on the significance of the historical and socioeconomic context in which his story about the decline and fall of Eric Packer and Packer Capital is situated:

> I'd been working on the book for some time before it occurred to me that the day on which the action occurs ought to be the last day of an era – the interval between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the current period of terror [that is, the post-9/11 era]. A 10-year interval. Essentially the 1990s. This is when culture was boiling with money. Capital markets surged. Multinational corporations began to seem more vital and influential than governments. CEOs became global celebrities. And ordinary people entertained dreams of individual wealth. The Dow kept climbing, and the Internet kept getting swifter and more inclusive. All this began to end (as it does in the novel) in the spring of the year 2000. It happens faster in the novel because everything happens faster in the novel.[4]

Thus, on an April day in the year 2000, DeLillo's latest fictional protago-nist wakes up after another sleepless night in his apartment on First Avenue/47th Street and decides that he wants to get a haircut at the other end of 47th Street, at the barbershop of his childhood in Hell's Kitchen. This decision sparks off a day-long gridlocked crosstown trip, which

3. Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (London: Picador, 2003) 15; hereafter abbreviated *C*.

4. Paul Gediman, "A Day in the Life of the Present: Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*" (http://www.borderstores. com/features.jsp?file=delillo).

turns out to be our postmodern hyper/cybercapitalist's long day's journey into the night of his West-Side Manhattan origins as well as the night of his financial and existential apocalypse-cum-suicide. It takes place in Packer's white, stretched and prousted limousine, *prousted* here meaning *sound-proofed*, a nerdy-witty reference to the notoriously hypersensitive French writer Marcel Proust's cork-lined bedroom. For Packer, who is impressively, not to say obsessively knowledgeable about science and the arts as well as business, shares his author's characteristic encyclopedic erudition. Packer's CEO limo is, of course, also equipped with all kinds of high-tech gadgetry, including electronic screens that carry the endless data stream of the currency markets. Indeed, at first glance Packer appears to be the perfect incarnation of Taylor's optimistic vision of post-modern man as creatively and constructively integrated with his complex network culture, complete with what Taylor envisages as his digital superman's "more radical style of *incarnational* thinking and practice" (MC 224). This is Packer's own holistic version of such incarnational thinking and practice *à la homo digitalis*:

> He understood how much it meant to him, the roll and flip of data on a screen. He studied the figural diagrams that brought organic patterns into play, birdwing and chambered shell. It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold com-pression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial market. In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the bio-sphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole. (*C* 24)

Packer's euphoric celebration of the zero-oneness or digital imperative of the postmodern business world articulates the truly paradoxical moment of Taylor's incarnational complexity, with its spontaneous overflow of organic metaphors (climaxing with "the heave of the biosphere" and "bodies and oceans") inserted into the otherwise abstract and rigid digital discourse of hyper/cybercapitalism – organic images that closely re-semble, for instance, those of a late-romantic anti-modernization organi-cist and primitivist like D.H. Lawrence, who, in *Apocalypse* (1931), famously proclaimed that "we ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and in the flesh, and part of the living, incarnate cosmos."[5]

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5. D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (London: Penguin, 1995) 149.

Unlike Jack Gladney, the pathetic college professor of Hitler studies in DeLillo's deservedly most popular satire on the postmodern condition, *White Noise* (1984), Packer has so far performed successfully as the charismatic master of the new digital universe. Gladney, by contrast, clearly belongs to what Taylor would consider the less progressive group of people, for whom "the white noise of today's culture," "the much-hyped information glut creates both confusion and a debilitating sense of vertigo" (*MC* 100). The climax of Gladney's postmodern confusion and vertigo is reached in the black comedy of the SIMUVAC operation where questions of life and death can only be answered by digital machines, computers, and their human or rather posthuman agents. SIMUVAC is short for simulated evacuation, a new state program, and after Gladney and his family have been evacuated (or rather evacuated themselves) due to a real toxic event (*event* being the American euphemism for cata-strophe), Gladney points out to the SIMUVAC official in charge that this, after all, is a real situation and a real evacuation, not a simulation. The postmodern SIMUVAC response goes like this: "We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model."[6] But there are of course problems in matching the messy human reality with the clean hyperreality of the SIMUVAC model:

> The insertion curve isn't as smooth as we would like. There's a probability excess. Plus we don't have our victims laid out where we'd want them if this was a real simulation. In other words we're forced to take our victims as we find them. (*WN* 139)

The SIMUVAC official's hilarious *cri de coeur* beautifully illustrates N. Katherine Hayles's cyborg nightmare in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), namely the "transformation [by cybernetic man and his machines] of embodied experience, noisy with error, into the clean abstractions of mathematical pattern,"[7] the rigid machine absorbing the human being, "co-opting the flexibility that is the human birthright" (*HWBP* 105). Now the toxic situation happens to be particularly real for Gladney himself seeing that he has accidentally exposed himself to the toxic cloud when

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6. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador) 139; hereafter abbreviated *WN*.

7 N. Catherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 98; hereafter abbreviated *HWBP*.

he had to get out of the family car to fill the gas tank. But in the digital-ized postmodern world only the SIMUVAC computer can decide how serious Gladney's condition really is, namely by displaying its "coded responses on the data screen," "the passage of computerized dots that register ... [Gladney's] life and death" (*WN*, pp. 139-40). Although Glad-ney pathetically insists on a more human response from the SIMUVAC agent as to whether or not "we have a [critical pathological] situation," the answer remains the same, namely that of the posthuman cyborg, the digital machine operating as a *cyb*ernetic *org*anism devoid of human judgment and empathy. The SIMUVAC official himself has been reduced to the ontological and ethical status of an abject cyborg slave and inter-preter:

> "*I* didn't say it. The *computer* did. The whole *system* says it. It's what we call a massive data-base tally. Gladney, J. A. K. I punch in the name, the substance, the exposure time and then I tap in your computer history. Your genetics, your personals, your medicals, your psychologicals, your police-and-hospitals. It comes back pulsing stars. (*WN* 141; my emphasis)

As Hayles points out, it is no longer so clear that sophisticated judgments cannot be made by machines and, in some cases, made more accurately than by humans, but the issue is not whether or not an expert programme works. The real issue is "an ethical imperative that humans keep control" (*HWBP* 288) and refrain from turning over the uniquely human function of judgment to computers. Hayles cites Joseph Weizenbaum's crucial argument in *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation* (1976):

> What Weizenbaum's argument makes clear is the connection between the assumptions undergirding the liberal humanist subject and the ethical position that humans, not machines, must be in control. Such an argument assumes a vision of the human in which conscious agency is the essence of human identity. Sacrifice this, and we humans are hopelessly compromised, contaminated with mechanic alienness in the very heart of our humanity. (HWBP 288)

But let us leave poor Professor Gladney with his modernist confusion and alienation and return to the truly postmodernist protagonist of *Cos-mopolis* who seems so much more successfully to embody Taylor's opti-mistic vision of *homo digitalis* in his moment of *unprecedented com-plexity*. Let us first complete our portrait of Packer as exemplary *homo digitalis*. Despite his Lawrentian celebration/incarnation of the digital

imperative as an integral part of the biosphere, microcosm as well as macrocosm, Packer also experiences moments where he wants to transcend his body: "He wanted to judge it redundant and transferable ... convertible to wave arrays of information" (*C* 48):

> He'd always wanted to become quantum dust, transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat. The idea was to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in a whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from void. (*C* 206)

Packer is of course not the only postmodern *homo digitalis* who has fantasized about digital disembodiment, downloading his brain into a computer, replacing his carbon-based life with a silicon-based, etc. As Hayles notes, Hans Moravec had argued, in *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988), that the age of carbon-based life is drawing to a close and that humans will be replaced by intelligent machines as the dominant life-form. In *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind* (1999), Moravec anticipates a hyperhuman future where machines become transcendent minds, leaving behind what Packer described as his body mass, his muscle and fat, all of it subject to the aging and dying process. Instead, Moravec believes, "our failing brain may be replaced by superior electronic equivalents, leaving our personality and thoughts clearer than ever, though, in time, no vestige of our original body or brain remains" (quoted in *HWBP* 222). In *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (1999), Ray Kurzweil, another utopian prophet of the transcendental *homo-digitalis* gospel, promises not only to satisfy Packer's yearning for digitalized disembodiment, but also to cure Professor Gladney in *White Noise* of his pathological obsession with death, the "vast and terrible death" (*WN*, p.288). In Kurzweil's postbiological future there is a real digital alternative to Gladney's (and his wife's) abuse of the Dylar tranquillizer, for soon immortality will no longer be a mere religious fantasy:

> Up until now, our mortality was tied up to our *hardware* [that is, our physical brain]. When the hardware crashed, that was it. For many of our forebears, the hardware gradually deteriorated before it disintegrated ... As we cross the divide to instantiate ourselves into our computational technology, our identity will be based on our evolving mind file. *We will be software, not hardware.* (Quoted in *MC* 221.)

Unlike Moravec and Kurzweil, Packer refuses to go religious about his digital spirituality and disembodiment. He is (or at least pretends to be) a

cool postmodern *homo ludens*, Nietzchean-Derridean in his "joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming" as distinct from the "nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play," to quote Derrrida's seminal poststructuralist manifesto "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."[8] So Packer *plays* with the idea of digital transcendence and immortality, which he characterizes as "semi-mythical," but then who knows: perhaps there might be "an evolutionary advance that needed only the practical mapping of the nervous system onto digital memory" (*C*, pp. 206-07). As an afterhought, Packer self-ironically legitimizes his futurist wishful thinking by adding the good old capitalist profit motive: "It would be the master thrust of cyber-capital," he muses, "to extend the human experience toward infinity as a medium for corporate growth and investment, for the accumulation of profits and vigorous reinvestment" (*C* 207).

However, Packer, whose hyperactive mind operates or oscillates in a kind of progression-regression dialectic, soon tires of playing the disembodiment game and returns to the primal claims of the body, no longer in terms of its postmodern digital incarnation, but in terms of a cosmopoetic paean to "the passion of the body, its adaptive drive over geologic time, the poetry and chemistry of its origins in the dust of exploding stars" (*C* 44).

The situation that I am referring to here, however, occurs at the very end of the novel where the protagonist has resigned himself to being shot by a former employee in his company, now transmogrified into Packer's demonic judge and executioner, who has been haunting, if not actually stalking him all day. It is in this endgame *à la* Beckett that Packer again changes his existential priorities, dismissing the quasi-religious game of digitalized transcendence, returning again to Hayles's gospel of human embodiment, and endorsing her bottom-line argument that "human being is first of all embodied being, and [that] "the complexities of this embodiment mean that human awareness unfolds in ways very different from those of intelligence embodied in cybernetic machines" (*HWBP*, pp. 283-84). In Packer's own words, close to the end of the book:

8. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (London and New York: Longman, 1988) 121.

The things that made him who he was could hardly be identified much less converted to data, the things that lived and milled in his body, everywhere, random, riotous, billions of trillions, in the neurons and peptides, the throbbing temple vein, in the veer of his libidinous intellect. 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, and how a person becomes the reflection he sees in a dusty window when he walks by. (*C* 207)

Like Hayles, Packer is now convinced that human identity and self-consciousness cannot be separated from its material substrate, its organic embodiment, and converted to digital data because the libidinous intellect, to quote Hayles's prologue, is "a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it" (*HWBP* xiv). Packer's intellect cannot be dematerialized or "delibidinized" into pure information without being lobotomized, as it were. It is this kind of cybernetic lobotomization, the disembodied posthuman mind of the so-called Information Age, complete with its apocalyptic cyborg nightmares, that both Hayles and a spate of *Matrix, Terminator* and *(I)Robot* movies have been warning us against. Taylor's creative and constructive optimism is, of course, indignantly opposed to such whining apocalypse-now responses to the emerging brave new world of network culture. With particular reference to Hayles's diagnosis of a *posthuman* condition, Taylor argues that the postmodern Information Age should not be "conceived in terms of growing abstraction and increasing dematerialization, but as the complication of the relation between information and the so-called material conditions of life" (*MC* 106). But however we choose to conceive or valorize a digitalized network culture, the fact remains that the world of Packer's digital imperative is based on dramatically increasing abstraction and dematerialization, which must necessarily complicate and problematize the relation between the simulacra of digitalized information and *the real thing or things.*

After all, it is not only the middle-aged Professor Gladney in *White Noise* that is bothered by the digital hypereality of the SIMUVAC operation. Even Packer, the young futurist state-of-the-art hyper/cybercapitalist in *Cosmopolis,* gets lost, occasionally, in the epistemological Bermuda triangle of Baudrillardean postmodernity where, as it were, a digital simulation principle has displaced the analogue reality principle. Take, for instance, the situation at the beginning of the novel where

Packer is being examined *en route* in his limo by Dr. Ingram. Packer is on his back watching his echocardiogram on the monitor, but he cannot be "sure whether he was watching a computerized mapping of his heart or a picture of the thing itself" (*C* 44). Another example, also from the beginning of the novel, is the surreal moment of high-tech complexity when Packer is watching himself on the screen below the spycam and suddenly realizes that "he'd just placed his thumb on his chinline, a second or two after he'd seen it on-screen" (*C* 22). There is a repeat of this *Twilight-Zone* phenomenon when Packer sees himself recoil in shock on the spycam screen and has to wait in suspension before he registers the detonation that makes him recoil in shock for real. What could this possibly mean, he asks himself and Vija Kinski, his so-called chief of theory, who has joined him in the limo. I'm not sure how far Taylor would sympathize with Packer's postmodern theorist, but her professional response is at least both creative and constructive:

> "Think of it this way. There are rare minds operating, a few, here and there, the polymath, the true futurist. A consciousness such as yours, hypermaniacal, may have contact points beyond the general perception." … "Technology is crucial to civilization why? Because it makes us make our fate. We don't need God or miracles or the flight of the bumble bee." (*C* 95)

I read DeLillo's portrait of Packer as wryly sympathetic, subtly ironic, and the description of Packer's *Twilight-Zone* moments of epistemological disorientation as pure carnivalesque satire. For an equally farcical demonstration – indeed, it could be deemed the classical DeLillo send-up of the postmodern epistemology of simulacra – see the scene at the beginning of *White Noise* where Gladney's smart postmodern cyber-kid Heinrich simply refuses to believe in the evidence of his own senses, which indisputably tells him that it is raining right now, because the radio, with its transcendent white noise of mediated news, has told him that the rain won't start until later that evening. In other words, DeLillo undoubtedly shares Baudrillard's critical position as far as the anomy factor of postmodern hyperreality and complexity is concerned, including that enervating philosophical ambivalence which makes one oscillate, to quote Baudrillard's 1984 interview with Salvatore Mele and Mark Titmarsh, between the "total helplessness" of a "posthistory which is without meaning" and "a certain pleasure in the irony of things, in the

game of things."[9] By contrast, Taylor's response to the kind of epistemological complexity articulated, for instance, in DeLillo's *Twilight-Zone* episodes would, at least in principle, be much more sympathetic, witness, for instance, the following observation by Taylor:

> The information revolution occurs when information turns on itself and becomes self-reflexive. This turn has been made possible by new electronic and telematic technologies, through which information acts on information to form feedback loops that generate increasing complexity. (*MC* 106)

In this light, Packer's scary experience of some kind of parallel virtual reality could very well be the result of a cybernetic feedback loop in the limo's sophisticated computer equipment. But if I read Taylor's argument correctly, we (and Packer) should not get too scared, but instead celebrate such paranormal phenomena as sublime moments of *unprecedented complexity.* My own problem with this position is the same problem that Weizenbaum tackles in *Computer Power and Human Reason,* namely the existential or existentialist problem of *judgment* as the essence of human agency and identity. If we turn that function over to the so-called intelligent machines, the cyborgs, we have, in Hayles's phrase, become *posthumans.* Consequently, I also have a serious problem with Taylor's conception of "human subjectivity or selfhood" as not necessarily entailing "the prior existence of mind or any kind of *purposeful agent*" (*MC* 205, my emphasis). Instead, Taylor's postmodern mind is conceived as a kind of autopoietic system that organizes itself, but with no "self," no consciously organizing agent within the system, hence also devoid of any ethical imperative, in principle giving *carte blanche* to, say, *laissez-faire* hypercapitalism *à la* Enron or Parmalat: "Instead of intentionally formed patterns through which experience is screened, the mind is generated by complex interrelations among patterns that emerge spontaneously" (*MC* 205). In Taylor's postmodern network culture, the human self is being reduced to "a node in a complex network of relations," in the midst of which "I [that is, Taylor himself] can no more be certain where I am than I can know where or when the I begins and ends" (*MC* 231). To a Sartrean existentialist like myself, this postmodern version of Emerson's transparent eyeball spells the posthuman cyborg nightmare diagnosed by

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9. Salvatore Mele and Mark Titmarsh, "Game with Vestiges," *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews,* ed. Mike Gane (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 95.

Hayles. But the underlying epistemology of that position may also serve, I believe, as a nice illustration of Baudrillard's memorable diagnosis of American postmodernity in *America* (1988), namely in terms of an epistemological "clash of the first level (primitive and wild) and the 'third kind' (the absolute simulacrum)":

> There is no second level. This is a situation we [that is, we Europeans] find hard to grasp, since this is the one we have always privileged: the self-reflexive, self-mirroring level, the level of unhappy consciousness.[10]

One of the many voices in DeLillo's fiction that would protest against Taylor's conception of the postmodern self is the 57-year-old, olive-skinned, no-nonsense Nick Shay in *Underworld* (1997), who does not "accept this business of life as a fiction," but claims to live "responsibly in the real":

> I hewed to the texture of collected knowledge, took faith from the solid and availing stuff of our experience. Even if we believe that history is a workwheel powered by human blood – read the speeches of Mussolini – at least we've known the thing together. A single narrative sweep, not ten thousand wisps of disinformation.[11]

True, the situation of Eric Packer, the digital superman and hypercapitalist in *Cosmopolis*, may be a bit more complex, but, as carnivalesque satirist and moralist, DeLillo arguably shares Shay's philosophical moment of simplicity in the way he has designed the *single narrative sweep* of Packer's endgame. As his former employee, now his self-appointed judge/executioner, Richard Sheets aka Benno Levin (the symbolic name of ethnic victimization and alienation) calmly explains, Packer's hypercapitalist system had first made him, as employee, a "helpless robot soldier," then, when he got fired, just "helpless" (*C* 195), with panic attacks "from holding in [his] anger all these years" (*C* 202). In his view, Packer "need[s] to die no matter what":

> "I have my syndromes, you [that is, Packer] have your complex. Icarus falling. You did it to yourself. Meltdown in the sun ... You have to die for what you think and act. For your apartment and what you paid for it. For your daily medical checkups. This alone. (*C* 202)

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10. Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1989) 104.
11. Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998) 82.

*Icarus falling*: Like Icarus, Packer must fall because of his hubristic arrogance, including his egomaniacal desire to beat the *unprecedented complexity* of the yen in the globalized postmodern currency market, losing, in the process, the "Packer Capital's portfolio" as well as "his personal fortune in the tens of billions" (*C* 121). Packer himself must somehow have realized that his hyper/cybercapitalist egomania, with its "huge ambition" and "lack of remorse" (*C* 191), needed to be counterbalanced by spells of transcendental meditation, but his practice of "meditat[ing] for hours," only sent him, Sheets/Levin ruefully notes, "deeper into [his] frozen heart" (*C* 198). In order to defrost that frozen heart, Packer must return to what I have called the primal claims of the body, he must be *reincarnated*. Throughout the novel, sex has served as Packer's favoured embodiment therapy: during his crosstown odyssey in the limo, Packer has sex with his longtime lover and art consultant, various employees, and his wife (in that order), but at the end of his apocalyptic odyssey, when suddenly experiencing "an enormous remorseful awareness," a sensation "called guilt" (*C* 196), Packer chooses physical pain to *embody* his sense of guilt. He shoots himself in the hand, which goes hot, "all scald and flash," "pervertedly alive in its own little subplot" (*C* 197). Incidentally, the function of agonizing embodiment as a kind of cognitive psychotherapy closely resembles the crucial role of acute physical pain and self-mutilation in David Fincher's notorious film *Fight Club* (1999), based on Chuck Palahniuk's apocalyptic first novel from 1996. Another interesting comment on the existential desire or need for painful embodiment as a postmodern phenomenon is provided by Slavoj Zizek, who, in his 9/11 book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), suggests that, ironically or dialectically, "the 'postmodern' passion for the semblance [that is, the passion for "the pure semblance of the spectacular *effect of the Real*"] ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real," "a desperate strategy to return to the Real of the body."[12] Zizek cites, as a key example, the phenomenon of *cutters*, that is, "people, mostly women, who experience an irresistible urge to cut themselves with razors or otherwise hurt themselves":

> Far from being suicidal, far from indicating a desire for self-annihilation, cutting is a
> radical attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality, or (another aspect of the same pheno-

12. Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002) 10; hereafter abbreviated *WDR*.

menon) to ground the ego firmly in bodily reality against the unbearable anxiety of per-
ceiving oneself as nonexistent. Cutters usually say that once they see the warm red
blood flowing out of the self-inflicted wound, they feel alive again, firmly rooted in
reality. (*WDR*, p.10)

Penitent Packer, however, is not a typical cutter in that his desire for
bodily reality is linked to a desire for self-annihilation. He has lost the
*élan vital* of the hyper/cybercapitalist, "the predatory impulse, the sense
of large excitation that drove him through his days," and asks himself
what he could possibly "want that was not posthumous" (*C* 209).
DeLillo's endgame with Packer turns out to be as grotesque and carniva-
lesque as anything else in the novel. Packer the hubristic postmodern,
posthuman *homo digitalis* is brought to poetic justice through a human-
izing *reincarnation*, comprising a fragile body with an asymmetrical
prostate, reinforced by his masochistic "cutter" act, that is, his shooting
"a hole in the middle of his hand" (*C* 197) as a kind of self-stigmatiza-
tion, followed by the virtual reality of his own impending death, another
*Twilight-Zone* scene (actually lifted from an authentic *Twilight-Zone*
episode, "A Most Unusual Camera"). Packer, "alive in real space" (*C*
209), is watching his own body "facedown on the floor" (*C* 205) as regis-
tered by the refined electron camera inside his watch and displayed on
the crystal. Later he sees himself first in an ambulance, with drip-feed
devices, then in a vault with the identification tag *Male Z*, "the designa-
tion for the bodies of unidentified men in hospital morgues" (*C* 206). The
all-too-human response of Packer, who is still waiting to be shot *in real
space*, is a grotesquely sublime one-liner: "O shit I'm dead" (*C* 206). The
postmodern simulacrum has once more, if not replaced, at least preceded
the real thing, fulfilling, in this case, Dracula's ancient dream of a world
where the vampiric Un-Dead have exterminated the real Dead.

*Sic transit* the glorious moment of postmodern complexity, according
to DeLillo, one of the few contemporary American writers who, as Frank
Lentricchia notes in "The American Writer as Bad Citizen" (1991), "con-
ceive their vocation as an act of cultural criticism; who invent in order to
intervene; whose work is a kind of anatomy, an effort to represent their
culture in its totality."[13] To Lentricchia's pertinent observation I would

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13. Frank Lentricchia, "The American Writer as Bad Citizen," *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentric-
chia (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991) 2.

like to add that, as a philosophical critique of American postmodernity, DeLillo's writing could also be seen as a fictional implementation of what Alain Badiou, in *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy* (2003), stresses as "the singular and irreducible role of philosophy," especially in a postmodern world marked not only by complexity, but also by speed (the speed of technical change, communications, transmissions etc.), namely the role of what might be called philosophical retardation: "its thinking is leisurely, because today revolt requires leisureliness and not speed."[14] The prime objective of such leisurely thinking, Badiou argues in his own philosophical revolt against "the postmodern orientation" with its "polyvalence of meaning" and "infinite regression of quibbling," is "the return to ethics," which again "necessitates the return of an unconditional principle" (*IT*, pp. 44, 46, 54). In other words, the postmodern moment of complexity must be complemented by the philosophical moment of simplicity, the moment of some unconditional truth or *truths*. But the category of truth must be reconstructed, Badiou insists, as the truth of *singularity*, that is, singularity both in terms of the *event* and the *agent* because "the singular is always, in the final analysis, the true centre of any decision which counts" (*IT* 53). It is, I suggest, this moment of truthful simplicity and singularity that Eric Packer is attempting to negotiate in his endgame, against all the postmodern odds.

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14. Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London and New York: Continuum, 2003) 51; hereafter abbreviated *IT*.