

FICTION
Blood sport

By JOSEPH CONTE
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Cosmopolis

By Don DeLillo

Scribner

209 pages, \$25

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In "Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything," James Gleick makes the case that the electronic transmission of data and the interconnectedness of the systems that transmit information are responsible for the impossible acceleration of our pace of life.

The protagonist of Don DeLillo's "Cosmopolis," Eric Packer, is a 28-year-old billionaire currency trader in New York City who appears to have an almost preternatural ability to recognize the patterns in currency values that shift in milliseconds and the cyber-capital that is dispensed in nanoseconds. His fortune depends on the recognition that "speed is the point. Never mind the urgent and endless replenishment, the way data dissolves at one end of the series just at it takes shape at the other. This is the point, the thrust, the future. We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle."

In contrast to the mercurial speed of electronic trading, the action of "Cosmopolis" is agonizingly confined to a single day as Eric attempts to make his way in a luxurious and technologically sophisticated stretch limousine through the midtown Manhattan gridlock to get a haircut. He departs from his 48-room penthouse apartment on the upper East Side that is furnished with a

lap pool, gymnasium, shark tank, and dog pen for his borzois, intent on making his way across 47th Street to the Italian barber who cut his hair as a child.

His chief of security, Torval, reminds him that the president is in town and the motorcade will snarl "traffic that speaks in quarter inches." He pauses periodically to meet his wife of 22 days, Elise Shifrin, an untalented poet and heir to a European banking fortune, for meals and oddly estranged conversations (they hardly know one another, their marriage seemingly one of financial rather than romantic alliance). And he stops for a tryst with his art dealer and longtime lover, whom he commissions to buy the Rothko Chapel.

Location doesn't matter for Eric, however, whose car is equipped with microwave oven, heart monitor, telecommunications and most importantly "flat plasma screens of assorted sizes, some in a cluster framework" that display the market's pulsing, streaming data.

He is continuously wired to his business "complex" and his cabinet members, including the chief technology officer, Michael Chin, and his chief of theory (more cultural than business) Vija Kinski, variously hop into the limo's jump seat en route.

DeLillo deliberately intends the novel's claustrophobic setting, in which no one's getting anywhere fast, to foreground the saturation and rapidity of the electronic environment. One doesn't say that Eric resides in Manhattan so much as that he presides over a financial empire of global connections and strategic alliances. His mission on this day, besides the haircut, is to bet his entire fortune to leverage the Japanese yen.

DeLillo has been accused of writing novels that are more concerned with advancing ideas about contemporary American culture than with presenting engaging characters or absorbing stories. As the 13th novel by one of America's most accomplished writers, "Cosmopolis" hardly cashiers personal engagement for social critique. But its protagonist makes the issue of "our time" clear from the beginning, as Eric opines:

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"There's only one thing in the world worth pursuing professionally and intellectually - the interaction between technology and capital. The inseparability."

During the postwar Nuclear Age, the former supreme Allied commander and then President Dwight Eisenhower warned of the consequences that a "military-industrial complex" would have for statesmanship and social welfare. At the millennium, DeLillo suggests, the unholy alliance has shifted to that between information technology and global capitalism. What then are we to make of the precocious, arrogant, intelligent but self-absorbed Eric Packer? "Cosmopolis" is hardly the first American novel to critique the vain obsessions of an elite class of businessmen. Packer has no pretenses to philanthropy in the style of 19th-century industrialists like Carnegie or the social largesse of the Astors and Rockefellers. His cruel diet is his competition. It's a blood sport, and he regards the assassination (one of several in the novel) of his rival Arthur Rapp, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, "killed live on the Money Channel," as "refreshing. The prospective dip in the yen was invigorating."

When presented with such a repulsive character whose existence it is surely the author's desire to excoriate, the "Cosmopolis" reader must set aside the simple need for a "pleasurable read" and recognize why the novelist has brought him or her along on this harrowing, if short, trip.

Like DeLillo's earlier novels, "Running Dog," "Libra" and "Mao II," "Cosmopolis" is deeply concerned with terrorism and the consequences of political change through violent means. After Sept. 11 (one might want to have another look at the foreboding photograph of the twin towers on the dust jacket of DeLillo's "Underworld"), there can be no New York novel or film that is not sifted in the ash of terrorism and the irreconcilable conflict of world cultures.

In this one day Eric observes the sacking of the Nasdaq Center by red-and-black clad anarchists, including one protester who immolates himself after the fashion of Vietnamese monks protesting that earlier imperialist American war. He's pied in the face by Andrew

Petrescu, the pastry assassin, "who stalked corporate directors, military commanders, soccer stars and politicians."

Perhaps one ought to look at the face in the smoked-glass windows of that stretch limousine as it passes on the street and ask how it makes one feel.

Joseph Conte is the chairman of the State University at Buffalo English Department.

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