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Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*. Modern Outcasts and an Old Barbershop

Abstract: In Don De Lillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003), Eric Packer is a young multi-billionaire who inhabits a homogenising landscape turning individuals into urban waste. Driving safely across New York City into his white stretch limo, he has replaced both his body and personality with hyperreal and luxurious simulacra; he inhabits a self-referential cosmos reflecting a polis where human beings are discarded as active and sensible actors. However, Eric seems ready to renounce his luxurious but aseptic reality and to return to a more human condition; in this novel, an old barbershop becomes the point of departure to restore humanity and fight back the overwhelming urban wasteland.

Eric's journey back to his truer self is doomed to fail, as he will be killed by his alter ego, Benno Levin. A former employee of Eric, Benno was first demoted then fired by Eric. The two characters are therefore presented as the two sides of the same coin, in fact two self-made outcasts of globalization: they are both playing a role in the new e-capitalism, they are both responsible for what they have become and must face the consequences. Their final epiphany is here turned into a nemesis that translates into their final loss, their final defeat. There is no way out of globalised capitalism.

Keywords: *DeLillo, human waste, non-places, globalized capitalism, American literature*

> I've never liked thinking back, going back in time, reviewing the day or the week or the life. To crush and gut. To eviscerate. Power works best when there's no memory attached.
> (Eric Packer, *Cosmopolis*)

Capitalist entropy, delusional escapes

Cosmopolis (2003) is neither Don DeLillo's most celebrated novel, nor it is his best one: the magic which follows our 'suspension of disbelief' is not easily achieved when reading this novel, as the writer adopts a (sometimes perfunctory) style which makes the reader too aware of his/her very act of reading. Yet, being a novel that engages us in the exploration of some tenets of our actuality, *Cosmopolis* can be considered as a useful novel, or, better, as a novel which might help us to navigate the new global world in its making. The main character, Eric Packer is a young multi-billionaire who inhabits (and contributes to create) a homogenizing landscape turning individuals who do not conform to it into urban waste at an accelerated pace. Driving across New York

City into his white stretch limo, he has replaced both his body and personality with hyperreal simulacra: inside the luxurious car, decorated with Carrara marble ("from the quarries where Michelangelo stood half a millennium ago, touching the tip of his finger to the starry white stone" 22),[1] a series of sophisticated monitors and screens create a self-referential cosmos reflecting a polis where human beings are cast-off as active and sensible actors.

All through this urban novel and as an unconscious Odysseus, Eric moves towards his Ithaca, the place where he once belonged; in the novel, that place takes the shape of an old barbershop, itself a discarded place in a city which lives fully in the high tech present, annihilating time and history. Old pieces of furniture, detritus and holes in the floor stand for a lost civilization, memorabilia of a not too far past, too soon thrown away. Inevitably, Eric's journey towards such a counter-scenario becomes an exploration of his outer and inner reality, that which does not conduce to a happy end. After all, Eric's journey takes place on a day in April in the year 2000 and, as we know from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, April cannot but be the cruelest month even at the dawn of a new century.

Manmade fragments and ruins are still components of the otherwise sophisticated mechanical and electronic prevailing landscape of Don De Lillo's New York, in turn mirroring the unemotional life of the main character, as well as of his entourage. Similarly, the city crowd flows from place to place performing collective rites which are only apparently comforting and truly shared ones; they look more as trashy rituals unveiling a (wittily and artificially induced and staged) collective hypnosis. Once more, the crowd of De Lillo's *Cosmopolis* reminds us of the crowd flowing over London bridge in Eliot's famous poem, and New York looks here as a hyperreal city, in fact a modern version of Eliot's 'unreal' one. Hence, also in De Lillo's world, the human sensorium needs to be salvaged, and individual identities need to be rescued from their final self-induced destruction. In the novel, memorialization is suggested as the key that might conduce to preserve (if not recycle) humanity; at the same time, memorialization implies to die as a non-human and, inevitably, it proves to be a dangerous choice for someone who is the by-product of the empowering but hyperreal world. As Eric warns us, "power works best when there's no memory attached" (184). Eric must therefore choose if to erase his unique history and live forever in a blank, timeless cocoon; or if to rescue his humanity but be rejected by his own capitalist world. Each of these choices implies a defeat; the novel does not seem to suggest a third possibility, nor a happier conclusion.

All through the novel, the way he acts and thinks makes the reader aware of how Eric is, in fact, trying to go back to his human status so to bring new life to his "frozen heart" (198); however he will not be able to fully control that

[1] All references are from Don De Lillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribner Paperback, 2004). Inspirational sources for this article, among others, were: David Cowart, *Don DeLillo – The Physics of Language* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002); Elise Martucci, *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Henry Veggian, *Understanding Don DeLillo* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014).

process as he thinks he can. His nemesis will come in the shape of a modern outcast, one of Eric's first demoted then discarded employee, Benno Levin alias Richard Sheets, who is following a similar search, even though he is starting from a different point in history; by killing Eric, Benno-Richard, too, aspires to change from human waste to a human condition. Readers discover Eric's death halfway through the novel when reading the first of Benno Levin's confessions, in fact a sort of preview into Eric's future. However, the details of the dramatic confrontation between Eric and Benno are strategically unveiled only in the final pages of the novel, through a theatrical crosstalk that sees Eric and Benno taking turns as hero and villain. Precisely because the reader already knows how it is going to end (Benno killing Eric), that dialogue becomes crucial not to progress with the story, but to apprehend what is the bleak truth that Eric has discovered while dying; inevitably, that dialogue ascends to a pseudo-philosophical investigation of our present time and societal organization. As a matter of fact, through that dialogue, we realize, with Eric, that the reverse process (going back to a human status) is perhaps no longer possible, as "there is no outside" (90) to capitalism – here understood as "a specter haunting the world" (89), reducing individuals – all individuals – into operative spare parts and servo-mechanism of 'the system'. Loneliness and human discard are here exposed as pillars of such a sad cosmopolis, and hatred is what both generates and emanates from them. By contemplating and by carefully listening to Benno Levin, Eric understands that nothing will change after his own death; he understands that, even though he will survive to Eric, Benno's life will continue to be wasted. As Vija Kinski, Eric's chief of theory, explains to her boss, all individuals are given a precise role that must be played against the overwhelming and triumphant capitalist scenario. Even those who rebel, even those who protest are part of the same scheme; they are not the grave-diggers of capitalism, they are 'the free market itself. These people are a fantasy generated by the market. They don't exist outside the market. There is nowhere they can go to be on the outside. There is no outside" (90). Therefore, Benno, too, is the free market itself; he, too, does not exist outside the market. Unavoidably following this fact, together with Benno, we begin to ask ourselves a truly disturbing question: who will we hate when there is no one left? Which illusions will we cultivate to cope with the overwhelming capitalist entropy?

It is not by chance that, in recent years, De Lillo's novel attracted David Cronenberg's attention as a novel dealing with some uncanny aspects of our consumerist society. Cronenberg's 2012 movie, of the same name, visualizes DeLillo's urban setting as if it were a dystopic and surreal reality, in turn exploring the hidden pathologies of the human modern condition, that which, back in the Nineties, J.G. Ballard defined as "the marriage of reason and nightmare that has dominated the 20th century".[2] Consistently, Cronenberg's

[2] J.G. Ballard, Preface to *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995), 4. In 1996 Cronenberg adapted Ballard's novel, *Crash*, in a controversial movie which was awarded the Jury's Special Award at Cannes for "it's audacity and innovation".

adaptation turns *Cosmopolis* into the exploration of how the "great twin leitmotifs of the 20th century – sex and paranoia"[3] remain also as leitmotifs of the 21st century. They continue to preside over the daily lives of human beings who are more and more robot-like, anaffective though not repressed, and who inhabit a world where: 'Thermo-nuclear weapons systems and soft-drinks commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography".[4] It is the new anthropological world of the 'non-places', as per Marc Augé's famous definition of a supermodernity which is self-contained and which results in a profound alteration of human awareness and sensibility;[5] something which makes organic life obsolete and turns solitude into the new prevailing human condition. Yet, published in the new century, DeLillo's novel takes that speculation a step further and seems to suggest that the very ideas of *supermodernity* and *non-places* are now being reversed into the opposite of their original meaning, in turn triggering another, even more disturbing, anthropological revolution.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] See Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1992).

What Augé defined as non-places are now to be reconsidered as the *new places* defining the habitat of today's humanity; therefore, they have to be reexamined as the new anthropological spaces reflecting a different collective, trans-national – and inevitably uncanny – human (in fact post-human) identity. The non-places theorized in the Nineties as transitional spaces (planes, cars, roads, airports), or as spaces of services (outlets, shopping malls), or as temporary spaces for either people or goods (waiting rooms, deposits) have now become places inhabited in more permanent ways, inevitably changing the way people perceive themselves. In many parts of the world, even the refugee camps, once considered as non-places given their transitory status, have now become places where people live on an almost permanent basis; they are places where people are forced together, places where people are born and die, places where traumatic memories and identities are now shared, formed and consolidated. They have become permanent places for discarded people, that is for all those people whose 'place' cannot be found outside of 'non-places'. Following a similar path, in De Lillo's novel cars, roads and commercial sites are turned from non-places into places: No longer they are simply backgrounds for stories and people in transit; instead, they become real habitats molding people's stories, relations, and personalities. In a challenging way, in De Lillo's novel, houses are no longer *domus*, nor they are *genus loci*, but places of solitude lacking affection, whereas roads and cars become meeting places where to establish a new *human* (or post-human) world. All the traditional symbols of a sympathetic and sensible humanity are here turned into blank and aseptic containers discarded of humanity, which consequently becomes both waste and wasted.

By so doing, *Cosmopolis* stages the side effects that the global, or better the globalized reality (the 21st-century phase of the capitalist induced entropy) is having on its inhabitants, somehow suspended in between simulacra and simulations. De Lillo's postmodern city seems to embed the point of non-return of a decaying Western civilization, so much so, that DeLillo might have written a 'post-mortem' novel, where post-modernity combines with the survival of a hyperreal – either anaffective or demoted – post-human species. Inevitably, the very title of the novel sounds iconic: in *Cosmopolis*, New York is now beyond the 'world city' and has become a self-referential and imploded (entropic) microcosm, where bored individuals form an indifferent collectivity which finds its meaning in artificial commodities, mass rituals and extreme sensations, often mortal ones (both metaphorically and physically so).

Physics and metaphysics of the world-waste-machine

In 2003, *Cosmopolis* was well received, though not over celebrated, by the international press and literary community. At the dawn of the new century, the author presented to the reader an urban landscape dominated by a toxic interplay of mechanical and electronic technologies; a world where individuals are the content of an exceeding media and economic habitat of which they appear to be ordinarily unconscious servomechanisms.

The novel opens with the detailed description of the luxurious penthouse of the young main character, Eric Packer: it consists of forty-eight rooms richly decorated with priceless works of art. Thus, the novel starts in a place traditionally associated to one's own identity, presented as standing on the top of the *vertical city*, where the idea of 'vertical' integrates social hierarchy. Eric's tower is:

> the tallest residential tower in the world, a commonplace oblong whose only statement was its size. It had the kind of banality that reveals itself over time as being truly brutal. He liked it for this reason. He liked to stand and look at it when he felt this way. He felt wary, drowsy and insubstantial.... The tower gave him strength and depth. (8-9)

With its 'banality', a term which resounds with anonymity and conformity, Eric's penthouse perfectly matches both his "wary, drowsy and insubstantial" being, and his 'habitat'; in fact a society whose depth and strength, just like Eric's, are stated through ephemeral symbols. Readers are therefore immediately made aware of how out of proportions that 'place' is, especially considered that Eric lives in it alone; also, they soon realize that Eric's penthouse has lost all what would normally define it as an identity place (it is, in fact, a 'commonplace'). It is a place mirroring a system, a life style and not

an individual. Rooms are decorated with media and stylish commodities that are status symbols but have no personality; many monitors are always on, as they analyze and keep constant track of the international financial markets. The expensive works of art in the house are on display as symbols of power and not for aesthetic pleasure: "He liked paintings that his guests did not know how to look at. The white paintings were unknowable to many, knife-applied slabs of mucoid color. The work was all the more dangerous for not being new. There's no more danger in the new". (8) Hence, Eric's apartment is conceived as a 'container' where uncanny objects and information accumulate, an icy space also filled with nervousness. Readers soon discover that Eric is restless and spends most of his nights not sleeping but exercising, trying to stimulate his body so to somehow 'feel it'. At night, he cannot but confront himself; he uses poetry to find both meaning and introspection. When reading, he escapes into a more intimate and private space that nonetheless remains a solitary one:

> He tried to read his way into sleep but only grew more wakeful. He read science and poetry. He liked spare poems sited minutely in white space, ranks of alphabetic strokes burnt into paper. Poems made him conscious of his breathing. A poem bared the moment to things he was not normally prepared to notice. (5)

However, what is here introduced as an inner journey triggering both physical and metaphysical awareness is returned to a more ephemeral and therefore ineffectual action later in the novel; we will soon discover, in fact, that Eric chooses poetry based on its length.

> He stood in the poetry alcove at the Gotham Book Mart, leafing through chapbooks. He browsed lean books always half a fingerbreadth or less, choosing poems to read based on length and width. He looked for poems of four, five, six lines. (66)

Eric searches depth through brevity and small surfaces ("A surface separates inside from out and belongs no less to one than the other. He'd thought about surfaces in the shower once" [9]) and his act of reading becomes in fact an elusive, suspended act performed within an overwhelming space dominated by silences, artificial communications, and financial ephemeral fluxes. Originality and creativity are no longer part of Eric's world; commonplaces and banality are.

As a result, the reader is not surprised to discover that, most of the time, Eric is bored and restless. He never looks satisfied or pleased, and he is in constant search for new challenges, for new reasons to be. He is and feels alone: "There was no friend he loved enough to harrow with a call. What was there to say? It

was a matter of silences, not words" (5). His anaffective solitude is shared by all those who inhabit Eric's world, including his chief collaborators and his young, super rich and super bored poet-wife, Elise Shifrin. The couple does not live together and their recent marriage is introduced in terms of an 'accord' or an 'understanding' to complete each other's 'fiction':

> They'd married in the shroud of [an] unspoken accord. They needed the final term in the series. She was rich, he was rich; she was heir-apparent, he was self-made; she was cultured, he was ruthless; she was brittle, he was strong; she was gifted, he was brilliant; she was beautiful. This was the core of their understanding, the thing they needed to believe before they could be a couple. (72)

No wonder that Eric does not recognize her when he perceives her from his limo:

> He glanced out the one-way window to his left. It took him a moment to understand that he knew the woman in the rear seat of the taxi that lay adjacent. She was his wife of twenty-two days, Elise Shifrin, a poet who had right of blood to the fabulous Shifrin banking fortune of Europe and the world. (15)

No wonder that they share the same incapability to feel; only, they reveal it in opposite, though complementary ways. While Elise eats almost nothing and feels no desire for food, Eric looks voracious and each time he meets her, he takes her to a restaurant. However, he does not enjoy what he eats, he ingurgitates and dominates food. Similarly, when he makes love to his several lovers, he displays the same voracious – sometimes cerebrally so – attitude and always leads the action; but no real joy, no deep pleasure is ever revealed.

Eric's self-assurance matches his lack of affectivity and rests both in his being in control, and in his own restlessness, as the latter induces him to find new ways to challenge himself and his collaborators. Hence, it does not come as a surprise to the reader the fact that, from the very beginning of the novel, Eric is facing a dangerous and self-induced challenge: he has invested all his patrimony on the fall of the yen, but the yen continues to raise. Eric is risking everything, his status and his prosperity, because in a system based on money, to loose one's own capital equals to disappear, to annihilate oneself and be rejected by that very system; it equals to become waste. However, Eric does not look to be too worried; on the contrary, he seems to get more excited the more the situation degenerates. He trusts his own wit and power of observation of the financial waves: there must be a way to chart the yen, so much so he cannot but succeed. He will not. What instead comes as a surprise to the reader is the fact that, in the middle of what looks like an ultimate struggle, Eric decides to do

something that looks incongruous: he wants a haircut and wants to have it at his old barbershop.

> His chief of security liked the car for its anonymity. Long white limousines had become the most unnoticed vehicles in the city. He was waiting in the sidewalk now, Torval, bald and no-necked, a man whose head seems removable for maintenance.
>
> "Where?" he said.
>
> "I want a haircut."
>
> "The president's in town."
>
> "We don't care. We need a haircut. We need to go crosstown."
>
> "You will hit traffic that speaks in quarter inches."
>
> "Just so I know". Which president are we talking about?"
>
> "United States. Barriers will be set up," he said. "Entire streets deleted from the map" (10-11)

The real story starts from that instant and unfolds through an urban landscape whose topography matches not only the social landscape, but also the main character's evolving metaphysics. Barriers keep people either in or out, streets are deleted from the map and so are those who are outside both barriers and limos. When Eric enters his white stretch limo to cross the wasted landscape and to reach the barbershop at the other side of the city, he is not fully aware that it is a much more complex journey he is in fact undertaking. His awareness will come gradually: what he experiences from that moment will take him from his timeless self-assurance to a questioning and time-determined present. Even though he seems to like the process, Eric will not survive it.

All people in Eric's team try to persuade him to get a haircut somewhere else, closer to where he lives and works. Nobody will succeed:

> Shiner [Eric's chief of technology] said, "Any special reason we're in the car instead of the office?"
>
> ...
>
> "We're in the car because I need a haircut."
>
> "Have the barber got to the office. Get your haircut there. Or have the barber come to the car. Get your haircut and go to the office."
>
> "A haircut has what. Associations. Calendar on the wall. Mirrors everywhere. There's no barber chair here. Nothing swivels but the spycam" (14-15)

Similarly, Eric's bodyguard cautions him on all the dangers he will meet: no matter his young age, Eric is under constantly life-threatening circumstances. He is hated by many people who see him as the symbol of the new speculative capitalism, which, by producing 'capital' for few instead than 'jobs' for many, turns people into spare parts and objects easy to be discarded. During his

journey Eric will be attacked by real protesters, who are symbolically disseminating rats in the classy part of New York City and who vandalize symbols of capitalism (banks and limos), and by the ludicrous André Petrescu, "the pastry assassin" whose mission worldwide is "To sabotage power and wealth" (142).

In addition, that very day New York is barricaded due to a series of events (including, as said, the visit of the President of the United States), a situation that makes driving even more complicated. Careless of the circumstances, Eric insists because to cut his hair becomes here a ritual that has 'associations': he wants to perform it in the same old place, the old barbershop where his father used to take him as a child, before he became the rich and successful man he now is. While fighting a mortal game in the computer-generated world of financial fluxes, Eric drives back to his roots no matter how difficult that may appear. Crossing the city is compared to the crossing of hell, New York being presented as a jungle full of potential dangers for Eric; and yet, the greatest danger is hidden within Eric himself. To drive back to one's own origins proves to be much more dangerous than to bet on the financial market; it proves to be the only and real ultimate challenge, as the individual is asked to go through an inner and disruptive (in fact deadly) journey himself.

The old barbershop is here offered as a 'real place', as per Augé's original understanding; it embeds memories, stories and relationships, it embeds time and its passing. Hence, it embeds not only associations but also individual and collective responsibilities. Because of that, it inevitably looks 'out of place' in a society where successful individuals are emotionless and inhabit non-places. It is located at the antipodes of Eric's penthouse, in a shabby part of town made of rows of old brick tenements. In this neglected part of the city, Eric's father was born; hence, the barbershop has intimate and private 'associations' for Eric. What in Eric's new life would be perceived as waste and garbage, in that part of town and inside the barbershop is instead framed as a shelter of meaningful memorabilia. Old pieces of furniture, holes recalling where things once were, the same storytelling narrated by Anthony Adubato, the old barber, are more than traces of the past: they are Eric's consciousness, his human roots and traces, his only means of salvation, if only he could comprehend and accept them truly. They are, in fact, all symbols of that distinctive personality that makes each human being unique and not just a consumerist banal cliché. They are there to nourish Eric's inner self, just like the poems he reads at night, but in a much deeper way. But Eric, who is now used to small surfaces, will not be able to fully cope with the metaphysical weight of that place. Even though he finally rests for a while lulled by Anthony's stories, all of the sudden he feels the urge to run away:

> In time the voices became a single vowel sound and this would be the medium of his escape, a breathy passage out of the long pall of wakefulness that had marked so many nights. He began to fade, to drop away, and felt a question trembling in the dark somewhere.
>
> What can be simpler than falling asleep? ... He confided in them. It felt good to trust someone.
>
> ...
>
> After a while he threw off the cape. He couldn't sit here anymore. He burst from the chair, knocking back the drink in a whiskey swing.... "I need to leave. I don't know how come. That's how come" (165-169)

Eric leaves with his hair half cut, he leaves Anthony's job (and his own inner journey) half way. When that happens, readers have the right to become suspicious and think that, perhaps, Eric is lying to himself and knows 'how' that come more than he wishes to admit to himself: in that 'old place' which stands as a 'non-place' in his stylish billionaire life, he has started to behave in a different, more human and sympathetic way. While there, he not only trusts the barber, but also respects his driver, someone who did not exist as a person for him until then. He has also begun to notice these people's physicality, therefore acknowledging their presence; he becomes interested in their life stories, therefore acknowledging their existence. He feels the comfort of resting with them. He feels the pleasure of going back in time. Unescapably, remembering his past makes him question his present, something which risks to undermine the very essence of capitalist power (a power that "works best when there's no memory attached"); to question means to doubt, it means to start to look at things in a different way. For Eric, though, it means to risk to be either demoted or even discarded by his own system.

As John Ralston Saul wrote: "In a society of ideological believers, nothing is more ridiculous than the individual who doubts and does not conform".[6] Not only is it ridiculous, but it is also very alienating and dangerous; it implies to challenge not a financial flow within Eric's hyperreal world, but the founding credo of that very world itself. It implies to lose lucidity and, therefore, the capacity to control and predict actions. When Eric starts to doubt his ability to trace the hidden pattern which guides the yen unusual market movement, his chief of theory reminds him that doubts do not belong to their reality:

> "Doubt. What is doubt? You don't believe in doubt. You've 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" – she said – "We need a new theory of time" (86)

When she says so, readers begin to realize that Eric is in danger not because someone is threating his life for what he represents, nor is he in danger because

[6] John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilisation* (Toronto: Anansi, 1995), 20.

he is losing his financial wealth; he is in danger because he doubts, he is in danger because he is revealing a poisoning weakness. To doubt means to think of the present through past experience and that is a deadly limit in a world dominated by computer power, by cyborg 'nowness'. Hence, for Eric the real danger comes from his strange and obstinate will to have a haircut at the old barbershop precisely because both that place and Eric's decision have 'associations'. Eric has started a hazardous retrieval of the past, therefore triggering uncertainty.

To retrieve the past, to remember is an act which might give power back to the individual. As said, Eric tries to run away from that awareness which is full of consequences; but it is too late, because once that the journey has started, he can no longer look at his reality in the same way. Suddenly, he develops an interest in people's life stories; before reaching the barbershop, he did not care because to give people a 'history' would make them 'disappear' (104-105). Until then, people in Eric's entourage are defined through their roles and tasks, not through their physicality and personal stories. Eric does not look into their eyes ("He did not look at Shiner [Eric's chief of technology] anymore. He hadn't looked in three years. Once you'd look, there was nothing else to know. You'd know his bone marrow in a beaker" [111-12]). He knows nothing about their real lives ("She [Vija Kinski, chief of theory] was a voice with a body as afterthought, a wry smile that sailed through heavy traffic. Give her a history and she'd disappear" [105]). He even kills Torval, his chief of security, impromptu and discards him as he discards the mortal weapon while some kids are playing basketball in the background: "He gave them a casual hand signal indicating they ought to continue their game. Nothing so meaningful had happened that they were required to stop playing" (146). But in the barbershop, he starts to listen to Antony's stories, he listens carefully to the intimate dialogue between the barber and Ibrahim, Eric's driver, and even interferes:

> The driver was a mild figure in a suit and tie, sitting with cake in his outstretched hand, and his comments were clearly personal, extending beyond this city, these streets, the circumstances under discussion.
>
> "What happened to your eye," Antony said, "that is got all twisted that way?"
>
> "I can see. I can drive, I pass their test."
>
> "Because both my brothers were fight trainers years ago. But I never seen a thing like that."
>
> Ibrahim looked away. He would not submit to the tide of memory and emotion. Maybe he felt allegiance to his history. It is one thing to speak around an experience, use it as a reference and analogy. But to detail the hellish thing itself, to strangers who will nod and forget, this must seem a betrayal of his pain.

> "You were beaten and tortured," Eric said. "An army coup. Or the secret police. Or they thought they'd executed you. Fired a shot in your face. Left you for dead. Or the rebels. Overrunning the capital. Seizing government people at random. Slamming rifles butts into faces at random."
>
> He spoke quietly. There was a faint sheen of perspiration on Ibrahim's face. (168)

Eric is now truly interested in Ibrahim's past, but this time it is the driver who does not want to give his memories away to strangers who will then forget it and you with it (give people a history and make them disappear). Ibrahim's determination touches Eric, who does not want to disappoint the man and who begins to respect if not the man, for sure the story behind the man, the 'associations' that his twisted eye preserves. Eric respects those associations just like he respects the stories preserved by each hole, by each missing piece of furniture in the old barbershops: "He tried to read the man's ravaged eye, the bloodshot strip beneath the hooded lid. He respected the eye. There was a story there, a brooding folklore of time and fate" (170).

However, in Eric's real world – in fact the world of financial liquid flows – true empathy leads to a renewed and deeper solitude because it turns newness into an obsolete idea and retrieves time as a tangible and linear concept. Inevitably, by doubting, Eric becomes more and more alienated and alone. Leaving the barbershop, he begins to experience a new form of solitude: earlier in the novel, his solitude was part of the frozen world he had created for himself and inhabited. At the end of his journey, instead, Eric's solitude is a truly existential one that has developed through all the different experiences he has gone through. It is a more human sentiment that even makes him feel remorse, empathy and love.

As soon as Eric begins to accept his growing awareness of both people and people's feelings and stories, he tries to share it with his affiliated, but to no avail; to them, his confession sounds odd, reveals an inconsistency and it confirms Eric's eccentricity. To his wife Elise, his intimate confession sounds boring; she responds in a skeptical way:

> "But I'm feeling a change. I'm making a change. Did you look at the menu? They have green tea ice cream. This is something you might like. People change. I know what's important now."
>
> "That's such a boring thing to say. Please."
>
> "I know what's important now."
>
> "All right. But note that skeptical tone," she said. "What's important now?"
>
> "To be aware of what's around me. To understand another person's situation, another person's feelings. To know, in short, what's important" (121)

Eric truly means it. From now, he will truly start to reconsider his relation with Elise and will learn he loves her; inevitably, "the instant he knew he loved her, she slipped down his body and out of his arms" (178). By triggering doubts and by developing real and deep feelings, Eric shifts from the role of a 'superman' who leads and controls nowness and the invisible world of financial fluxes, to the role of a 'normal man', who cannot but be discarded by that very world. Ironically, the shift and the elimination will be marked and achieved through the meeting with a 21st-century outcast, Benno/Richard.

Imploded market fantasies, genuine human waste

Eric and Benno are, in fact, complementary parts of the same system, pseudo enemies whose presence determines the persistence of cyber capitalism in the 21st century; their existence and their juxtaposition are essential to the preservation of a *status quo* that gives them both the illusion to play a role and change or affect reality. Consequently, their final meeting becomes a cruel epiphany that makes the reader fully appreciate both characters' delusional life-philosophy. As said, they come together following two metaphorically opposite roads: Eric is a self-made man and has gone from the street level to the top penthouse, moving from hell to paradise, whereas Benno has suffered many reversals. He once had a job and a family, and he "struggled to love and provide" (55). He once was assistant professor of computer application and left to make his million. He started to work for Eric's company, then:

> They said I [Benno] had problems of normalcy and they demoted me to lesser currencies. I became a minor technical element in the firm, a technical fact.... And I accepted this. Then they let me go without notice or severance package. And I accepted this. (60)

When he meets Eric face to face, Benno is a man who leaves "at the end of earth philosophically" (57), he has moved from paradise to hell. He leaves in an abandoned and miserable building, collects things from local sidewalks, and has made a life for himself through discarded items because "What people discard could make a nation". Benno, too, is alone and an alienated, discarded man missing sympathetic contact, but his solitude is self-imposed. Even though once he passively accepted decisions imposed on him, Benno was never truly fit for the system. He tried and failed ("You wanted me to be a helpless robot soldier but all I could be was helpless" [195]). Paradoxically, to acknowledge his failure and to decide to leave alone and at the margins of society is a form of rebellion that might even lead him to a truly human condition; to refuse to

conform and live through commonplaces might, in fact, free Benno. However, his rebellion is doomed to fail because, both as a failure and as a survivor, Benno perceives himself only in relation to the system, which in his mind takes the form of Eric. As he confesses, he needs to kill Eric because Eric failed him. Benno no longer has a role in the system and blames the system even though he himself played a part in his own discharge. He does not want to listen to Eric telling him that he has "to ask [himself] whose fault this is" (194). Benno is, in fact, part of the same system and to blame the latter inevitably means to also blame himself. Through Benno's confessions, the reader understands that Benno is a man made of cliché, too, and a prisoner of his stereotypically middle-class values and mind; his desires are, in fact, commodified commonplaces. Benno wants to feel "like a writer with his cigarettes" (61), he plans "to make a public act of [his] life" (149) through the pages he will write. The 21st century imploded capitalism is determining also Benno's most intimate illusion, as he thinks he is now living his life 'offline'; but he is not, because there is no outside to the world of cyber-economy.

Benno and Eric are two self-made outcasts of globalization doomed to meet at the end of their individual journeys, when they reach together a sort of purgatory level and must face their ultimate truth. Their epiphany becomes also a nemesis and translates into a final loss, a final defeat, as they are both deprived of what they have come to appreciate as their possible salvific way out. Benno will lose his conscious memory, the effective logic behind his will to be different from all other discarded individuals; he is overwhelmed by the revelation, loses lucidity and will not even remember why he had to kill Eric:

> I am working on this journal while a man lies dead ten feet away. I wonder about this. Twelve feet away.... All through the day I became more convinced I could not do it. Then I did it. Now I have to remember why. (61)

As a counter-step, Eric will lose his physical life the moment he retrieves his life memories, and fully understands the profound meaning of his past associations. While talking to Benno, Eric mechanically shoots his own hand and is brought back to his tangible existence. Soon after, he feels "an enormous remorseful awareness" thinking of his chief of security dead on the asphalt and of "others down the years, hazy and nameless" (196). Eric's excruciating awareness of the finite human existence extends through the feeling of pain in his own body. His pains interferes "with his immortality ... He'd come to know himself through his pain" (207).

Eric is ready to die when he retrieves his human condition through his wounded body and is ready to leave the metaphysical and post human world of 'cyber-capitalism', which nonetheless will survive him. Hence, contrary to what

Benno thinks, killing Eric does not free him, nor does it affect the system; instead and paradoxically, it turns himself into a prisoner of his own self-induced mental disorder:

> I am ashamed every day, and more ashamed the next. But I will spend the rest of my life in this space writing these notes, this journal, recording my acts and reflections, finding some honor, some worth at the bottom of things. I want ten thousand pages that will stop the world.
>
> Allow me to speak. I'm susceptible to global strains of illness. (151-52)

In fact, Eric's death preserves the system because by killing him, Benno eliminates the buggy element within that system, as he kills an individual who doubts and no longer conforms. The revelation becomes grotesque when the 'two separate systems', Eric and Benno, meet and try miserably to link, as they discover they share the same physical, invisible imperfection: their prostate is 'asymmetric'. Their inner bodies contain a harmless anomaly that does not alter the system as a whole, unless it grows into a perceptible obsession. However, if properly understood that anomaly might even lead to salvation, to accept diversity and doubt as tools to overcome hyperreality for real. Instead, Eric perceives that invisible anomaly only as an incongruity until Benno reveals its insightful irony to him:

> "You should have listened to your prostate."
>
> "What?"
>
> "You tried to predict movements in the yen by drawing on patterns from nature.... You made this form of analysis horribly and sadistically precise. But you forgot something along the way."
>
> "What?"
>
> "The importance of the lopsided, the thing that's skewed a little. You were looking for balance, beautiful balance, equal parts, equal sides.... But you should have been tracking the yen in its tics and quirks. The little quirk. The misshape."
>
> "The misweave."
>
> "That's where the answer was, in your body, in your prostate" (200)

Benno's revelation finally makes sense to Eric who can now link his murderer's philosophy to what his physical pain is revealing to him; but he is now too tired and can't but end his life as a renewed 'human superhero', that is as a humanly conscious outcast:

> His murder, Richard Sheets, sits facing him. He has lost interest in the man. His hand contains the pain of his life, all of it, emotional and other, and he closes his eyes one more time. This is not the end. He is dead inside the

> crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound. (209)

The same epiphany proves to be mortal for Benno, too. His 'charting sense' leads him to his self-annihilation. His body is alive, but all his actions are now suspended in a timeless zone located inside his mind. Killing Eric has deprived Benno of his confrontational normalcy; it has turned his journey into a suspended and alienating condition that mirrors his existential loneliness as a human discard now deprived of an enemy to blame and pursue:

> There are great themes running through my mind. The themes of loneliness and human discard. The theme of who do I hate when there's no one left. (58)

> I understand for the first time, now, this minute, that all the thinking and writing in the world will not describe what I felt in the awful moment when I fired the gun and saw him fall. So what is left that's worth the telling? (61)

Benno and Eric both bet against a system that is out of human control and they inevitably lose when they find each other again as human beings. They cannot but be discarded as soon as they begin to understand each other truly, by sharing associations and by conveying an emotional meaning to those associations. They run fast down to the state of human waste discarded by an overwhelming cyber economy. They fulfill their role as fantasies "generated by the market". In fact, they cannot exist outside the market. Can we?