Chapter 2

Aesthetics of the Hyperreal in *Cosmopolis*

Don DeLillo’s thirteenth novel, *Cosmopolis*, published in 2003, is a sagacious narrative that explores the convergence of technology and capital adding a new dimension of cyber capital to the twentieth century capitalism. In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo tends to review the repercussions the capitalist system of America that once held out a great hope to its citizens, thus, making it a novel on cyber-capitalism and anti-globalization. The economic boom at the close of 1990s, the dramatic consequences of the digital revolution and at the bottom of all these drastic changes, the anger brewing against globalization are some of the aspects quite efficiently tackled by DeLillo in *Cosmopolis*. Though the novel was published in 2003, DeLillo chooses the year of 2000 as the temporal sequence because the eventful era of 2000 separates the end of cold war and the beginning of the year of global terrorism. DeLillo in an interview describes the novel as follows:

I’d been working on the book for sometime 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 the 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.

After the two wars, as the world moved towards the millennium, the global politics changed its course, laying the foundations for a new period in its history. The era of 1990s witnessed the decline of unwavering social programs in the west and growth of market competition worldwide. Amid such radical changes, Bush administration gave the slogan of ‘the new world order’ which the various critics discredited as a cover up
for the growth of multinational private powers and centralized markets over local cultures. The US implemented many proposals claiming to address the problems related to economy not just confined to her boundaries, but those concerning other nations as well. This breakthrough step was suspected by the left wing as a way to monopolize power in favour of the US and to conquer a resistance-free phase of capitalism. The newly unregulated markets dovetailed with the technology opened ways for efficient modes of communication and capital system. The expansion of multinational companies took away the reins of power and control from the government. It is the free and unregulated markets that are deemed as the new religion in the cyber capitalist world. However, when *Cosmopolis* reached the readers in 2003 it was meted out with lukewarm response. Cornel Bonca in “Rethinking *Cosmopolis*” (2012) writes:

> After the vaulting achievement of *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Underworld*, *Cosmopolis* seemed like a return to the lesser DeLillo of *Running Dog* or *Great Jones Street*—as corrosive in its way as steam-punk, grimly absurdist, hopelessly nihilistic. It didn’t help that the novel, set in Manhattan, was published while the wounds of 9/11 were still fresh. (web)

From an introspective author of the books like *White Noise* and the likes, the readers were expecting to find reverberations of the catastrophe of 9/11 in *Cosmopolis*. Later in 2008, when the world was struck with financial meltdown, the Great Recession, *Cosmopolis* reemerged as a powerful novel synced with prophetic echoes which earned DeLillo the epithet of an “artist-prophet” (Bonca np). Recession had crashed the corporate world fracturing the backbone of economic system of powerful nations. Due to the escalating unemployment, millions of livelihoods crashed down. What followed were widespread revolutionary movements and protests against the financial crisis, known by the term Occupy Wall Street, in 2011. DeLillo, prophetically, could manage to predict the same scenario way before it actually happened and incorporates it meticulously in *Cosmopolis*.

This dystopian novel captures the life of 28 year old cyber capitalist and billionaire financier, Eric Packer, and his journey on a day in the month of April in New York. The reason DeLillo chooses New York as Eric’s business terrain is
because New York is the hub of global financial activity. DeLillo portrays New York as a microcosm that reflects the trends of globalization and the problems associated with it, which are faced by the entire world. After spending many sleepless nights in his 48-room lavish apartment in the world’s tallest residential building, reading “science and poetry,” (5) Eric Packer realizes that he wants a haircut from the downtown part of the city, at Anthony’s salon in Hell’s Kitchen. The reason he chooses that old dingy area is because it reminds him of his past, as he has spent his childhood there, with his family. His journey from the rich Eastern part of New York to the seamy West side of the Hell’s Kitchen is metaphorical. Through the journey that Eric Packer undertakes, DeLillo charts the entire trajectory of the character’s life as moving from his rising to his downfall; from his fortune to his adversity. As he sits in his limousine on his way to Antony’s salon, the place where he used to have his haircut as a kid, his chief of security, Torval, warns him against the hassles on the roads on account of President’s visit to that part of the city. Eric, nevertheless, pursues his journey. He is joined in by different financial and technological advisors, which comprise his staff, in his limousine. Apart from President’s visit, there is a burial procession of a renowned rap star and an unexpected attack on the American electronic stock market, NASDAQ (National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations), causing the journey to consume all day. He has leveraged huge amounts of money against the yen and all his advisors warn him against the danger of his decision of betting on the fall of the yen. Yet he blatantly ignores their warnings and goes on to lose millions of dollar belonging to him as well as others. He even loses his wife’s money and renders her bankrupt. He is also informed of a threat, coded as “credible red” (101) against his life that again falls on his deaf ear. The threat is made by Eric’s frustrated ex-employee, Richard Sheets, called by his pseudonym, Benno Levin. As the night grows, Eric shoots his chief of security, Torval, who is responsible for the protection of Eric’s life. Thus, every step of Eric’s gets him closer to his descent. As the novel moves to the end, Eric is seen chasing Benno Levin, his assassinator, into a derelict building where Eric is shot dead; hence culminating the process of his fall. In the light of Eric Packer’s self discovery, after what he goes through, Cosmopolis can be seen as a bildungsroman.

The character of Eric Packer can be figuratively paralleled with exploitative American capitalism, as he is a personification of cyber-capitalism of America that
rules not only the Wall Street but the virtual global market space. The self destructive

tendencies in Eric’s character, vis, borrowing huge amount of money against the
rising yen, killing his own chief of security, and chasing his own killer—suggest the
qualities of an anti-hero. He is a capitalist turned anarchist who thrives on capitalist
culture, obsessed with profitable development. As the control of the right wing
ideology, which supports free market, privatization and deregulation of capital,
strengthened in technocratic America, the hydra headed monster of economic
oligarchy spread its tentacles in the form of a small but strong breed of exploitative
elites for whom free and unregulated markets promised infinite development. Eric
Packer represents the same breed of an elite class with whom economic power and
plutocratic decision-making rest.

When the novel opens, the readers are informed of Eric chronic insomnia and
his abrupt decision of taking a haircut from Antony’s salon, the place he used to have
his haircut when he was a child. Though, the narrator doesn’t tell the readers about the
reason of Eric’s restless nights, it is ironic to note that Eric’s wavering faith in
America’s market remains dormant on his mind. Packer has made a huge leveraged
bet on the ambiguous pattern of the Japanese Yen which if goes wrong, as mentioned
earlier, would bankrupt him and destabilize banks around the world. The narrative of
*Cosmopolis* shows Eric’s market speculations to be immaculate to the extent that he
could forecast stocks on his website thereby causing “doublings in share price and
shifting the worldviews, when he was effectively making history before history
became monotonous and slobbering” (75). Therefore, his decision, of betting against
the loss of the yen, has the potential to cause damage at global level. In this context,
Jerry A. Varsava in “The “Saturated Self”: Don DeLillo on the Problem of Rogue
Capitalism” writes:

Packer’s madcap currency speculations, with their global
consequences, are made possible by the lack of regulation. . . .
that exists within the domestic trading community in the United States.
Recall that the New York Stock Exchange imposed a system of trading
“curbs” in the aftermath of the market collapse of late 1987—the worst
since “Black Tuesday” (October 29, 1929), which ushered in the Great
Depression—during which, from October 13 to October 19, the Dow
Jones Industrial Average fell by nearly a third, wiping out about one trillion dollars in shareholder value. (94-95)

The unregulated markets ruled by whimsical financiers like Eric have the potential to bring about detrimental changes in the currency market. He, in spite of this imminent peril, seems more concerned in getting his hair cut at his childhood barber shop. The reason he chooses that salon, instead of any other uptown posh salons where he resides, might be his immediate call for tackling the problem that is underway. Or it might be that by undertaking a symbolic journey towards the place he comes from, he is trying to find an escape from the system which is destined to destroy him. Through the character of Shiner, Eric’s chief of technology, DeLillo highlights the insecurity brewing in the psyche of Americans on account of tumultuous shift in American economy. Shiner hints at the growing apprehension that the yen, which Packer’s company underestimates and is now giving a tough competition to the dollar, would eventually rise above the apparent invincible dollar. The promise and hope held out by American Exceptionalism is seen fading away slowly but steadily as voiced by Shiner in the following statement:

All this optimism, all this booming and soaring. Things happen like bang. This and that simultaneous. I put out my hand and what do I feel? I know there’s a thousand things every ten minutes. Patterns, ratios, indexes, whole maps of information. I love information. This is our sweetness and light. It’s a fuckall wonder. And we have meaning in the world. People eat and sleep in the shadow of what we do. But at the same time what? (14)

The promises and optimism associated with globalization proves to be an ivory tower and consequently, the faith in American Exceptionalism seems to be waverering for the characters in the novel. They discover the apparent fact, that America is the torch bearer for the rest of the world in terms of progress and that she holds a significant pace in the world map, as a sham.

Through the fictional character of Eric, the writer, exemplifies the paradoxical outcome of capitalism. Eric has hired an art dealer, Didi Fancher who is also her lover. He has been longing to buy a painting by Mark Rothko, the late American painter, for a while and when it is finally available for him, Eric puts across his
passion to buy the entire Rothko chapel, the Houston landmark decorated with canvasses by the abstract expressionist, consisting about fourteen to fifteen paintings. Didi expresses the superfluity and impropriety of buying the whole chapel since the world needs to see the paintings as much as Eric does. The conversation between Eric and Didi reflects the commodification of art and Eric’s blatant desire to possess and have authority over things:

“If they sell me the chapel, I’ll keep it intact. Tell them.”

“Keep it intact where?”

“In my apartment. There’s sufficient space. I can make more space.”

“But people need to see it.”

“Let them buy it. Let them out bid me”

“. . . But the Rothko chapel belongs to the world” (28).

The contemporary society has reached an age where there are only signs and objects have surpassed their exchange value. As contended by Baudrillard, commodities are not merely described by their use-value and exchange value but sign-value, which is the expression and mark of status, style, and power. DeLillo consciously chooses a Rothko as Eric Packer’s object of desire because Rothko’s works, the most expensive paintings, in the world represents the ills of the art world in terms of “overinflated prices determined purely by a speculative market; art as investments to be traded only by rich people and kept in private vaults; the estrangement of the artist’s original values” (web), as noted by Russel Smith. He had revolted against the commodification of art through his paintings. Much contrary to Mark Rothko’s revolt against making the art as a luxurious commodity Eric stands for true privatization of the work of art and philosophy. He lives in a world where everything has a selling price and even Rothko cannot escape capitalist system.

The novel begins with an epigraph, “a rat becomes the unit of currency;” words taken from Zbigniew Herbert’s poem “Report from the Besieged City” which DeLillo happened to have read at an event in New York. As the novel progresses, Eric and his currency analyst, Michael Chin, in a humorous mood, discuss a hypothetical situation where the rat would replace the currencies like the euro, the twacha etc, thus:
“There's a poem I read in which a rat becomes the unit of currency.”  
“Yeah, that would be interesting,” Chin said.  
“Yes, that would impact the world economy.”  
“The name alone, better than the dong or the kwacha.”  
“The name says everything.”  
“Yes. The rat,” Chin said.  
“Yes. The rat close lower today against the euro.”  
“Yes, there’s going concern that the Russian rat will be devalued.”  
“White rats, think about that.”  
“Yes, pregnant rats.”  
“Yes. Major sell-offs of pregnant Russian rats.”  
“Britain converts the rat.”  
“Joins trend to universal currency.”  
“Yes. U.S. establishes the rat standard.”  
“Every US dollar redeemable for rat.”  
“Dead rats.”  
“Yes. Stockpiling of dead rats called global health menace.” (23)

DeLillo further uses the motif of rat as a mark of protest by the characters in the novel against the evils of globalization. As the city witnesses a strong protest against drastic changes taking place in the lives of the people in the wake of the globalization, the protestors choose to mark their protest with the insignia of “rat” making it an unforgettable event. The rat is used as a tool to suggest the rise of corruption and collapse of markets in New York City. The rat also symbolizes the gigantic and deep networked multinational companies whose sole aim is to achieve huge profits for its sake without taking the welfare of common people into consideration. It is against the oligarchy and supremacy of the multinational companies that people raise in protest in the novel. While proceeding towards his destination, Eric witnesses protestors approaching his limousine and he wonders: “Who were they? They were protestors, anarchists, whoever they were, a form of street theatre, or adepts of sheer rampage. The car was hemmed in . . . enveloped by paralysis. . . . Protestors were rocking the car… They were rocking the car back and forth. . . . Someone flung a trash can at the
rear window” (88, 89, 91). The anarchists are hell bent upon rampaging the virtual economic infrastructure created by the elitist cyber-capitalism. Moreover, the limousine in which Eric travels singles him out as an adversary, an other. Limousine becomes an emblem of inequality and consumer culture as Thomas Homer-Dixon opines:

Think of a stretch limo in the potholed streets of New York, where homeless beggars live. Inside the limo are the air-conditioned postindustrial regions of North America, Europe, the emerging Pacific Rim, and a few isolated places, with their trade summity and computer-information highways. Outside is the rest of mankind, going in a completely different direction. (24)

What Dixon clearly suggests is that Cosmopolis presents an ironic picture of the disnarrated truth about the American economy. The ideals of equality, freedom and fraternity that formed the troika of American Dream have verily turned into a nightmare as a result of America’s blind obsession with the dream of becoming a global superpower. Cosmopolis pictures the nemesis that has fallen upon American society, something which is a logical corollary of the hubris of excessive industrialization, interference in the affairs of other countries, extreme consumerism and virtual economy. The protestors are donned in rat costumes, carrying a huge Styrofoam rat effigy of twenty-feet. The symbol of rat is used in the novel to suggest the dark side of cyber-capitalism, the stink it generates and the rampant plague of poverty it has ensured for the rest of the mankind.

The novel also alludes to The Manifesto of the Communist Party, a political guide by German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but with a little alteration. The slogan that appears at the beginning of The Manifesto of the Communist Party reads as “A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism” (6). In Cosmopolis, Eric happens to look outside the window of his limousine on a screen of an electronic display across the avenue flashing a message, “A SPECTER IS HAUNTING THE WORLD—THE SPECTER OF CAPITALISM” (96). While the slogans of Marx and Engels have optimistic connotations, the protestors’ altered version is akin to a dark prophecy. Martina Sciolino in “The Contemporary American novel as World Literature: The Neoliberal Antihero in Don
DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*” perceives the difference between the sentence in orthodox Marxist terms and the one used in the contemporary sense as:

The difference between the original line from the *Communist Manifesto*, in which the specter of an emerging communism haunts Europe, to this one, where a victorious capitalism now haunts the whole world, is a succinct, satirical summary of history leading to a dystopian present where nothing can exist outside the market. Anything can be commodified. To put it more completely, any phenomenon is a proto-commodity. (214)

With the expansion of unchecked multinational companies, the world has become seamless as it has altered the face of the economy by making it global. The alliance between the gigantic multinational companies with the rich native class that maintain the political and ideological control of their respective countries has proved to be a boon to a selected class. The myth of the free market promises limitless development but the fact is that it only serves an exploitative class to which Eric belongs; a class whose ideology rat represents. While Eric believes that capitalism produces “its own grave-diggers,” (90) his chief of security, Vija Kinski responds, “But these are not the grave-diggers. This is the free market itself. These people are a fantasy generated by the market. They don’t exist outside the market. There is no outside” (90).

There are critics who believe that the present confluence of technology and economy has, very optimistically, opened up the avenues towards development and progress and the alliance of these systems has been perceived by them as constructive and hopeful. *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* by Mark C. Taylor commences with a bleak and pessimistic response towards the contemporary obsession with a disastrous aspect of technology, i.e., media but offers an optimistic approach to survive in such times:

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

Taylor regards the current period as the one where the encroachment of meaning by the media has rendered people directionless and purposeless. He, at the same time, fervently believes that since the current times are in a state of flux, stability, security, and equilibrium prove to be illusory concepts. Taylor further adopts a positive approach and enumerates that the key to survive this moment of endlessly turbulent flux is to learn to live it creatively and not to view this epoch as one of “catastrophic nihilism” (3). Eric seems to look at the current times with the optimism and creativity that Taylor visualizes in his book. He does not lament but, on the contrary, celebrates the abstract and rigid zero-oneness of the electronic computerized world. The rapid movement of digits on the screen holds more attraction for Eric. He puts his energy and efforts in studying the cold patterns of the economy so that he can understand their working and understands, “how much it meant to him, the roll and flip of data on screen” (24). As Lyotard asserts in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, that the status of the knowledge in the postmodern times has been reduced to a tool for driving profit. The sole aim of the postmodern human remains to extract as much profit as can be obtained from knowledge. Eric is the product of capitalized and digitalized society where the meaning is sought in the zero-oneness of the cyber world. He does not find his incapacity to connect less with people and more with data as his hamartia. He, on the contrary, believes in living in the future and its key, according to him, lies in studying the lifeless data. DeLillo writes:

It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. 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. (24)
His strong connection with the digital patterns and intangible data matters to him more than any human relation. He believes to predict the future of the stock market by studying the data properly, something that, eventually, proves his own death knell.

Eric Packer is a metaphorical figure for articulating the experiences of capitalism and globalization at the beginning of twenty-first century. With new ideas and technologies making a significant mark in the first world countries, development in the field of economy has been moving at an incomprehensible speed. Packer admires his currency analyst, Michael Chin’s prospects, as a young technocrat, by telling him, “For someone your age, with your gifts, there’s only one thing in the world worth pursuing professionally and intellectually. What is it, Michael? The interaction between technology and capital. The inseparability” (23). Eric, being a man much ahead of his times, finds a close relation among intelligence, technology and capital which can prove to be a boon to American economy if utilized cleverly.

However, Jerry Varsowa in “The Saturated Self: Don DeLillo on the Problems of Rogue Capitalism” writes that the figurative figure of Eric as a man of capitalism, “a world citizen,” represents a false mode of contemporary citizenship. Though Eric is connected to everyone around him all the time he fails to look at the people around him and can only establish connection with his surrounding through screen. Certain gadgets that help him to remain updated and in touch with his external world are so efficient and sophisticated that he doesn’t even have to touch them to make them work because Eric, “could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank” (13). In this connection, Christina Cavedon can be referred to have written in Cultural Melancholia: US Trauma Discourses Before and After 9/11 that:

Whereas in White Noise characters are mainly subjected to depersonalized threats occasioned by the capitalist system – threats which are contrasted to the strength of family ties as a protection – the narrative of Cosmopolis implies that cyber-capitalism, along with the hyperreality to which it caters, destroys the very basis for any meaningful connections to other human beings. (299)

The threats, subtly ensued, by the advertisements which generated fear and insecurity in the lives of the fictional character in White Noise, as suggested by the
text, were more or less counterattacked by the strong protection of the family members. The narrative of *Cosmopolis* suggests that the union of cyber-capitalism and consequent hyper-reality have destroyed, for human beings, the scope of forming meaningful relationship in the society. Eric, always surrounded by e-connections, lacks the understanding and importance of human connection. When stuck in the gridlock of traffic, he looks outside his window screen and finds his wife in another car. It takes him sometime to realize that woman is his wife that he had married only twenty-one days before. Despite being married to each other, they live separately. While Eric’s hi-tech network offers him possibilities of infinite associations with the world, these associations and connections are, however, bereft of emotions and compassion. He is born in an age where real and intimate associations are becoming outdated and the humanity is at the brink of being dehumanized and mechanized.

Eric, who is constantly driven by profit, has married a girl with average looks and qualities but with an extraordinary financial background. Elise Shifrin, Eric’s wife of twenty two days, is “a poet who had right of blood to the fabulous Shifrin banking fortune of Europe and the world” (15). Marriage is purely a business alliance for him. Even Eric’s lover and art dealer, Didi Fancher, understands this fact and she articulates it aptly as “a union of two great fortunes. . . . Like one of the great arranged marriages of old empire Europe” (26). Eric’s relation with his wife stands on flimsy grounds as the wife hardly knows what exactly her husband, Eric, does. Nor does the couple keep track of each other’s whereabouts. Joel Alden Schlosser in the essay, “The Polis Artist: Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* and the Politics of Literature,” describes the couple by saying:

> Throughout the day chronicled in *Cosmopolis* Eric repeatedly runs into his wife of twenty-two days, Elise Shifrin. . . . while married they only encounter one another in the streets of Manhattan. . . . They share meals throughout the day, their paths somehow intersecting at just the right time, yet little else is shared. They face each other and play the roles of husband and wife without seeming to mean it; they depart just as spontaneously as they come together. (2)

Eric lacks the sense of cultivating substantial relationships with people around him. He forces upon himself the role of a husband as he is a man most comfortable around
gadgets and capital. He fails to achieve the domestic bliss that American Dream ensues.

Historian James Truslow Adam uses the phrase, American Dream in his book *Epic of America* as he writes, “The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement... regardless of their fortuitous circumstance of birth or position” (404). It professes that anybody could rise in society regardless of one’s social status by means of one’s hard work and ability. With the dawn of twenty first century, however, the ideology of American Dream altered owing to the rising consumer culture in the USA. The scope of American Dream changed, from accomplishment of the higher status in the society and attainment of domestic bliss to insatiable hunger for the products and gadgets in the new consumer culture. People from the major cities of the States, because of their bewildering consumer experience caused due to the constant proliferation of new products in the market, reconfigured the scope of the American Dream. Eric Packer is an ideal example of someone who has realized the American Dream in the twenty first century. His roots are entrenched in a place like Hell’s kitchen but with his luck, talent and hard work he rises to the status of a powerful billionaire. Eric’s unfltering faith in technology leads him to harbour a desire of attaining salvation and eternity through the prowess of America in terms of its technology.

Martina Sciolino in “The Contemporary American Novel as World Literature: The Neoliberal Antihero in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*” examines *Cosmopolis* in existential terms with the anti hero, Eric Packer, facing fresh issues in the realm of American Dream. She writes:

Through the use of an antihero placed in an allegorical relationship to his environment, DeLillo connects (or reconnects) the American Dream- turned-nightmare to the existentialism inherent in the world novel tradition from Dostoevsky to Arvind Adiga, whose Indian antihero in *White Tiger* suffers a crisis of values similar to Packer’s (and Raskolnikov’s in *Crime and Punishment*). The conventional themes of the existential novel—identity and culpability—are situated in *Cosmopolis* through a struggle with embodiment. (212)
DeLillo, by means of Eric, highlights a new version of American Dream borne for those who have already achieved what the earlier American Dream promised them with. People like Eric have transcended the old version of the dream and are looking for new prospects which claim to give something extraordinary generated by the new avenues offered by advancements in science and technology. The significant development in the domain of science and technology from the late twentieth century to the twenty-first century, as witnessed by the Americans especially, has completely transformed their concept of ‘being’. The body loses its tangibility and corporeality to intangible and elusive patterns of technology, amidst the zero-oneness of the cybersphere. Eric Packer hardly feels the need to look at the faces of his staff or his wife. He is only aware of his body when he has to satisfy his carnal needs. French postmodern theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* warns that such an age where capitalism and technology form ways in which humans haul over efficiency and perfection, humans get dehumanized. Saturated with a life based on technology, gadgets, digits, and power, Eric, like a transcendentalist, dreams to go beyond his body and attain a state of disembodiment. He solemnly believes that he can transcend death. The novel echoes it as: “He was here in his body, the structure he wanted to dismiss in theory even when he was shaping it under the measured effect of barbells and weights. He wanted to judge it redundant and transferable. It was convertible to wave arrays of information” (48). Invention of intelligent machines has now replaced most of the manual labour, overtaking human minds and human body that are exposed to aging and dying. In this age of machines where *Homo sapiens* have transformed into *homo digitalis*, it is obvious to envisage a future where Eric’s ambition could be fulfilled. Taylor’s utopian approach of the transcendental *homo digitalis* is shared by Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. She believes that the failing brains of the humans may be replaced by superior electronic equivalent, leaving their personality and thoughts clearer than ever, though, in time, no trace of their original body or brain remains (222). Seductive technologies like computers have created a veritable prospect of cyberspace in which the concepts of human body, being and consciousness have been reconceptualised. Cyberspace subverts the traditional understanding of human being with its elemental components of truth, identity, and logos. In this cyberspace, humans will be replaced by posthumans, who will transcend minds and cheat natural phenomena like decaying, aging and death.
Since Eric wants to transcend his body and to “become quantum dust, transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat” (206), *Cosmopolis* can be read within the context of de-corporealization as moving from the bodily foundations of virtue to the absent body of virtuality. While Eric’s body is in the real world, his consciousness wanders in the cyberspace that promises him the illusions of immortality. Randy Laist in *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity* asserts that Eric Packer suffers from a disease handed over to him by posthuman métiers. He notes:

. . . rather than pitting himself against this malaise, Eric attempts to tunnel into the vortex of technopsychic interphorocity in order to explore its contours and possibilities. His cure as he conceives it will not come in the form of a regressive blackslide away from the depersonalized future and into the biological past, but through a commitment to the imperatives of the depersonalized future toward which technology summons him. . . . Why die when you can live on disk? A disk, not a tomb. An idea beyond the body. A mind that’s everything you ever were and will be, but never weary or confused or impaired. It’s a mystery to me, how such a thing might happen. Will it happen someday? Sooner than we think because everything happens sooner than we think. Later today perhaps. Maybe today is the day when everything happens, for better or worse, ka-boom, like that.

(169,105)

Eric packer is in the process of transcending his status as a *Homo sapien* to turn into a *Homo digitus, Homo economicus,* and *Homo technologicaus* as apprehended by Taylor, Jerry A. Verasava and Randy Laist, respectively. To sum up the perspectives of these critics one may conclude that *Cosmopolis* is a deep analytical indictment on the impact of global cyber/technocapitalism on human beings.

David Harvey in *Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Conditions of Cultural Change* argues that cosmopolitanism dissolves borders, offering hope of huge profits for a large number of people. But digital technology is a tool of multinational companies that brings profit only to a selected class and consequently the repercussions of market instability affect everyone. The digital revolution ensued
disembodiment for humans as well as currencies. The electronic currencies that Eric trades have investors from all parts of the world. Eric who knows that his currencies are virtual and thus are vulnerable asks Shiner if he has secured their system of “rogue programs” (12), to which he replies that the “system’s secure. We’re impenetrable. There’s no rogue program” (12), and hints at the virtual nature of currency. In the capitalist system property and wealth have ceased to be concrete and have become an abstract phenomenon. J. G. A. Pocock in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essay on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* studies the transformation the western economic sphere underwent. He quotes:

Property—the material foundation of both personality and government—has ceased to be real and has become not merely mobile but imaginary. Specialised, acquisitive and post-civic man ceased to be virtuous, not only in the formal sense that has become the creatures of his own hopes and fears; he does not even live in the present, except as constituted by his fantasies concerning a future. (112)

This study of the western economic transformation holds special significance in the twenty-first century cyber-capitalism. The magnitude of development attained by America in the field of technology and economy has made the world to believe that America is invincible. Through Eric Packer, DeLillo presents a class of young contemporary business elites who have blind faith in America’s invincible economy. It is this conviction consolidated in the psyche of people like Eric Packer that makes him risk his money and reputation by betting against the yen. Eric usually makes decisions on behalf of the company and Chin accepts all of them, though resentfully. When Michael Chin, the currency analyst of Packer’s, warns him against the risk of “leveraging too rashly” (21) Eric Packer coolly assures him that

“It’s going our way.”

“Yes. I know. It always has.”

“The rashness you think you see.”

“What is happening doesn’t chart.”
“It charts. You have to search a little harder. Don’t trust standard models. Think outside the limits. The yen is making a statement. Read it. Then leap.”

“We are betting big-time here.”
“... But the yen can’t go any higher.”
“. . . We are speculating into the void.” (21)

Eric’s adamant stance on not backing out from the suicidal bet against the yen is implicitly his desire to destroy the system. As Eric has borrowed large sums from the market, the rise in the yen would not only drive his company bankrupt but destabilize the American market as well. Eric invests his trust on the power of the virtual world, but his vision and faith turns out to be suicidal for him. In the light of this suggestion Randy Laist proposes that the novel needs to be grasped as a fable and says, “Eric’s tale is a cautionary fable about the violence—both outward and inwardly directed—which crouches in the heart of technoutopian aspirations” (181). Eric is aware that his action is going to invite serious repercussions yet he goes ahead with his decision. He chooses a journey for himself in which though moves towards his destruction, yet aims to achieve a digital consciousness. Christina Cavedon seconds Laist’s conclusion and connects this situation with the event of 9/11. She points out that the fable of Eric’s, on account of his desire to destroy the system as well as his own existence, “reflects the role 9/11 takes up as a fantasy in American culture and the ways in which this fantasy has been affected by the reality of the attacks themselves” (297). In other words, the way American economic history was taking its course particularly in the eventful decade of 1990 and formulated a fantasy to virtually bring self annihilation upon itself. Eric Packer’s desire to destroy himself—physically and financially, is the manifestation of the culture he is an integral part of. Theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek, particularly, assert that American capitalist system invited wrath from within and without the country. By attacking the twin towers, the terrorists not only fulfilled their own desire but responded to the fantasy upheld by the American cyber-capitalist society. In his book, Welcome to the Desert of the Real, Žižek suggests that only with a strong violent act of annihilation, a society can awaken from its consumerist slumber (9). Ironically, for Žižek
The passion for the real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular effect of the Real... the ‘postmodern’ passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real... take the phenomenon of ‘cutters’... this is strictly parallel to the virtualization of our environment: it represents a desperate strategy to return to the Real of the body... Far from being suicidal, far from indicating a desire for self-annihilation, cutting is a radical attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality. (10)

Eric Packer’s hubristic desire as a cybercapitalist for disembodiment is overshadowed many times in the novel whenever he feels pain. For instance, when his doctor visits him in the limousine to have a routine checkup for his prostrate or when he shoots his own hand, he is reminded of the reality of his body, no matter how fragile it is as the contact with pain surpasses hyperreality. When the managing director of the International Monetary Fund and an important figure of the capitalist system, Arthur Rapp is assassinated, his assassination is caught live on television. This footage on television is enjoyed by Eric so much that he “wanted them to show it again. Show it again. They did this, of course, and he knew they would do it repeatedly into the night, our night, until the sensation drained out of it or everyone in the world had seen it” (34). By watching the clip of assassination continuously, Eric’s latent desire to face the Real comes to surface. Christina Cavedon suggests that the beginning of the novel pictures Eric Packer as the human embodiment of the cyber-capitalist system who is completely at peace with his current system (299). Eric takes great pride in living in the tallest building of the world. DeLillo writes:

He went outside and crossed the avenue, then turned and faced the building where he lived. He felt contagious with it. It was eighty nine stories, a prime number, in an undistinguished sheath of hazy bronze glass. They shared an edge or boundary, skyscraper and man. It was nine hundred feet high, 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 only 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. (8-9)
This eighty nine storied residential building, with two elevators that play the music of Satie, a historical musician and rap of Butha Fez, a fictional rapper, defines Eric. He loves his limousine which is one of the many limousines that drives by the city. He holds all his meetings inside his car. He does not mind if his limo bears identity with rest of the limos of the city and thus does not feel the need to separate it from the rest as he believes that “I’m a powerful person who chooses not to demarcate his territory with singular dribblets of piss is what? Is something I need to apologize for?” (39). All these limousines stand apart on the roads of New York as a class Eric finds satisfaction to be a part of. He doesn’t find it unusual that he feels more inclined towards data and patterns than people and their emotions. Eric, representative of the new world order, is stalked by his former employee who feels exploited by capitalism. Based on the threat messages that Benno Levin leaves for Eric at his office, Eric’s, chief of security, Torval warns him of a credible threat which he ignores. Eric’s focus is, however, solely on the people who belong to his class- the president of the US, Arthur Rapp, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, Elise Shifrin etc. But as the novel progresses DeLillo brings Eric Packers’s internal conflict on the surface. Eric’s stance on digital transcendence and immortality, however, appears skeptical, subsequently. The wishful conviction of Eric’s “to extend the human experience toward infinity as a medium for corporate growth and investment, for the accumulation of profits and vigorous reinvestment,” (207) gets transformed. The narrator voices what Eric comes to feel as:

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 a reflection he sees in a dusty window when he walks by. (207)

Eric becomes, for the first time in the novel, aware about his corporeality and its related features like neurons, veins, sneezing etc. He suddenly becomes aware about the “lost taste of milk licked from his mother’s breast, a psychological regression that pushes him back to the state of infancy. When Eric’s antagonist Benno Levin aka
Richard Sheets shoots him, Eric suffers. The pain makes him conscious of his physical being and human identity. It is this moment that makes him realize that neither his consciousness can be separated from his body nor his intelligence can be devitalized into pure information that he used to hunger after. This development in Eric’s character complicates his ambition of disembodiment. Marc Schuster in *Don DeLillo, Jean Baudrillard and the Consumer Culture* sums up Eric’s conflict with his opposing desires. He believes that Eric’s quest for pain and death is his way to remind himself that he is alive. The cause of Eric’s inescapably ennui ridden lifestyle says Schuster, is the system in which he works as an asset manager. While being examined by the doctor in order to assess his prostrate Eric felt the pain as it:

> [T]raveled the pathways. It informed the ganglion and spinal cord. He was here in his body, the structure he wanted to dismiss in theory even when he was shaping it under the measured effect of barbells weights. He wanted to judge it redundant and transferable. It was convertible to wave arrays of information. (48)

He oscillates between his desire to transcend his body and his need of corporeality. The maddening rush of cosmopolitan city like New York, the flow of information and its overload, the veritable transformation of the real into the virtual and the obsessive disorder to become rich exponentially have forced the contemporary human to forget about his reality that is corporeal. Eric Packer represents DeLillo’s serious concern about the immediate need to regain the body and natural requirement to live within.

Eric’s world is formulated on abstraction and dematerialization. French theorist Baudrillard reckons such an age as the one where, referential value is annihilated, giving the structural play a value the upper hand; an age where simulacra of digital world supersedes the reality. While going through a prostrate exam in his limo, Eric happens to look at the image of his heart in one of the screens fixed inside his car. It proves to be an astounding experience for him because what Eric is watching is not the heart itself but the image of the heart. The image is so refined and alive that Eric nearly seems to forget that it’s the simulation and not the “thing itself” (44). It fills him with reverence and he feels insignificant compared to his beautiful heart. This instills in Eric a sense of deep awareness of his consciousness. He gets mesmerized by Heideggerian “thingness of things.” Eric for the first time sees beyond
the signs of the things, he looks at the thing itself. Geoffery Batchen’s “Ere the Substance Fade: Photography and Hair Jewelry” gives a precise description of how to theorize a thing that is stuck between the realm of sign and substance. He studies Victorian photographs in which the hair jewelry is conjoined with the photograph itself. Made from the organic matter like hair of the depicted persons and heavy metals like the ornaments, these photographs, according to Batchen, remind the viewers that photographs are objects embedded in cultural practice. They supersede their symbolic significance—become more than signifiers and meanings attached to them. They cease to be objects and become things. Bill brown, in his paper “Thing Theory” provides the difference between the two as such:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (4)

In the photographs in point the person depicted is absent. It’s just his/her “shadow” that is made. It is precisely here that the object becomes a thing since it is the essence of a person and material simultaneously, bereft of all the spiritual qualities of an actual person. Because the photograph is partially human as it is the direct record of a bygone human life it is intangible, and thus gains the status of a thing. Eric’s beating heart gives up its objecthood when seen on the flat screen. The image of the heart proves powerful enough to invoke in Eric a strong sense of awe that he can’t help admiring the mighty organ for its capability of evolving through ages.

As discussed earlier, the new spirit of capitalism has instilled a great deal of resentment and revenge in the people working at the base of social hierarchy. If Eric represents elite of New World Order, Benno Levin represents an old breed of unsatisfied working reeling under the maladies of cyber capitalism. Thomas Piketty in *Capital in the Twentieth Century* asserts that literature is a tool that highlights the experience of social and political life that we live under capitalism. A politics of
literature, thus, helps out to diagnose the (ruling) ideologies of the current epoch by using literary sources. In this respect DeLillo is no exception. The chronology of the novel is broken by the introduction of Benno Levin’s journal titled as “The Confessions of Benno Levin.” Levin’s diary entry reveals his feelings that also reflect the frustration and torment of the working people victimized by the capitalism. “How many of you know the true and bitter force of that simple word provide?” (55), asks Benno. Benno, the byproduct of Eric’s modes of economy reveals DeLillo’s conviction to prove that “the killer is the product of the system that Eric represents, or – from a different perspective – that the system created the conditions for its own destruction” (Cvek 176).

While Eric’s concept of American Dream revolves around his hunger for limitless power and disembodiment on account of technological advancements, and creation of information and capitalist society, his ex employee, Richard Sheets, aka Benno Levin, merely wishes to make some money. In the chapters titled “The Confessions of Benno Levin,” we are informed that he had been working as an assistant professor of computer applications in a community college from where he, “left to make… millions” (56). He starts working in Packer Capital, but soon he is demoted and then later on fired. He complains, “I became a minor technical element in the firm, a technical fact. I was a generic labour to them. And I accepted this. Then they let me go without notice or severance package. And I accepted this” (60). Benno Levin has been reduced to such insignificance by a system driven by virtual economics that he has lost the power of assertion and, therefore, accept everything helplessly and passively. These pent up frustration and exasperation find the volcanic outburst in his plan to threaten and kill Eric Packer who represents the exploitative and repressive cyber economy. He tells us that he had been married to a disabled woman with an infant child. Due to his degrading circumstances she abandons him with the help of her immigrant brothers. He now lives in a forsaken building and uses things that he collects from the streets, helplessly accepting the self created axiom: “What people could discard could make a nation” (57). Benno, in this sense, represents a deprived nation within the prosperous American nation. When he was an employer he used to keep his account in five different major banks. Such an act gave him security and confidence. But as he lost his job, his finances shrunk due to which he was forced to limit his transactions to just one bank. He grieves over his current
circumstances by telling his readers, “Now I bank at one location only because I am dwindling down financially to nothing. It’s a small bank with one machine inside, one in the street set into the wall. I use the street machine because the guard will not let me in the bank” (151). All such unwelcomed changes in his life make him protean Benno Levin from Richard Sheets.

*Cosmopolis* also becomes repentance on the excessive commodification of information that assures a contended life for everyone who knows how to buy and sell it. Eric’s wife, Elise, commenting on Eric’s profession says that, “I think you are dedicated to knowing. I think you acquire information and turn it into something stupendous and awful. You’re a dangerous person. Do you agree? A visionary” (19). Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* probes into the “condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies” (xxiii). He believes that as the societies entered postindustrial age and cultures entered postmodern age the position of knowledge got altered. He comments, “Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both the cases, the goal is exchange” (4). In the industrial era, the labour was done by the working class and its fruits were enjoyed by their employers because the government used to control the economy. But in the postindustrial era, the control of economy, but passed from the reins of the government to multi-national companies. When technology dovetails with capitalism, the profit entirely depends on the whims of the market forces. In “From Virtue to Virtual” Valentino writes, “Packer’s costumers believe they are on the game, privy to sacred information. They hope to acquire vast sums (without necessarily working for them) in the magical turn of market forces” (150). Such is the impact of American Exceptionalism. There is hope and optimism on high scale.

Frederic Jameson’s two-dimensional characterization in his canonical work, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalist*, explains the effect of late capitalism on the postmodern society. There is sheer depthlessness behind every postmodern work. Since in the post modern culture everything is sellable, the status of things, culture, art, figures has been reduced to mere commodities and culture gets commercialized. Writers like DeLillo have shown strong resistance against commercialization through their works. DeLillo brings into focus the function of art in the culture where images and spectacle has taken over. Various critics have
registered Frederic’s concept of depthlessness in their own ways. Randy Laist in *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity* reiterates that Eric Packer is the product of technological cyber capitalist age. Alison Shonkwiler in “Don DeLillo’s Financial Sublime” conveys DeLillo’s stance on the status of art in the culture of spectacle:

The thinness of the novel’s history and the abstractions of its narrative form reflect precisely the new condition: the sublime imagination of capital does not reach into the thickness of historical material realizations. As wealth comes and goes in the blink of a cursor, DeLillo suggests, our representational techniques may be limited to historicizing the forms of alienation that are produced by such contemporary cultural fantasies of global technocapitalism. (254-55)

In such a culture, alienation is engendered by capitalism which further becomes what Guy Debord calls as “the society of spectacles,” in which “all life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived … moved away into representation” (1). Eric views this society of spectacle through multiple screens—his car windows, his cameras, his television etc. It is these screens which hinder his vision from reality. Andrew Cross writes:

Today there is no landscape if it is not seen through the windscreen, only a series of places, postcard snapshots separated by time and space. It is only within frame of the windscreen that places coexist, that they become animated along the continuous narrative of the landscape through which you drive. (255)

Eric Packer’s depthless character has been conferred upon him by the conditions of late capitalism. In order to canonize himself he puts the video of himself meditating online so that the world could see him sitting still for hours. His act of his meditation is reduced to a performance, which captures the conviction of postmodern era as the culture of spectacle which has nothing to do with attaining spiritual balance. In such a culture the alienated modern self morphs into schizophrenic postmodern self. It is precisely because of this conviction that the act of a protestor immolating himself is not taken seriously by Vija Kinski, Eric’s chief of theory:
“It’s not original,” she said finally.

“Hey. What’s not original? He did it, didn’t he?”

“It’s an appropriation.”

“He poured the gasoline and lit the match.” (100)

In the culture of spectacle everything is a self referential image with nothing beneath and beyond it. This is why Vija Kinski perceives the reality of the act as a mere spectacle. Martina Sciolino asserts that such experience for people like Vija Kinski is a performance- “the precision of simulacra:”

. . . when such a personal act is made into a spectacle and judged by an intelligence like Kinski’s, the protestor is consumed twice, by fire and by commodification, however cheaply the act is valued because it is a spectacle that is no longer novel. This textual moment demonstrates that Kinski, the postmodern theorist, is incapable of seeing fresh, of seeing in the first person. (217)

Spectacle in many steps remolded from the real, therefore, it invites the response of the spectator which is equally inauthentic and removed from real. Maybe this is why Vija Kinski fails to say anything beyond, “It’s not original,” (100) while witnessing the intense event of a man immolating himself.

In *The Physics of Language*, David Cowart explores how DeLillo applies language around the significant events articulating the postmodern condition (210). His book surmises that in the world of *Cosmopolis*, which is abound with instances of digitalization and capitalism, transcends linguistic representation (213). The writer, through the fictional character of Eric gives commentary on language during various times in the novel:

He took out his hand organizer and poked a note to himself about the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper. No recent structure ought to bear this word. It belonged to the olden soul of awe, to the arrowed towers that were a narrative long before he was born.

The hand device itself was an object whose original culture had just about disappeared. He knew he'd have to junk it. . . .
He was thinking about automated teller machines. The term was aged and burdened by its own historical memory. It worked at cross-purposes, unable to escape the inferences of fuddled human personnel and jerky moving parts. The term was part of the process that the device was meant to replace. It was anti-futuristic, so cumbrous and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated. . . .

It was time to retire the word phone. . . .

Even the word computer sounds backward and dumb. (9, 54, 88, 104)

The novel, thus, reflects society’s quick remaking fails to accommodate the language to shun or accommodate old and new changes respectively. The writer, through Eric, echoes the inadequacies of contemporary language. This kind of critique on old vocabularies identifies the novel as depicting a vanishing socio-economic order in the world of dot com boom. This world is transforming too quickly and, thus, induces boredom and banality for futuristic man like Eric Packer.

DeLillo’s critique on the world of cyber-capitalism in *Cosmopolis* is tied with issues like America’s too much living and investing in futurity, the inadequacy of language, reconfiguration of American Dream. The novel is also DeLillo’s disnarrated stance on the event of 9/11. By portraying a fictional character like Eric, who is also a personification of American cyber-capitalism, and who incites his own doom, the writer may have been registering his own explanation of the happening of an event like 9/11 on America. The novel reverberates the theories of critics like Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek which they offer to depict the repurcusions of America’s thriving capitalistic system which knows no boundaries and overflows with ambitions just like the protagonist of the novel.

While the slogans like American Exceptionalism, American Dream, and New World Order keep inducing new hopes and promises to people living even beyond the boundaries of America, these also incite threats on the account of their promises. Fictional character of Benno Levin is the product of the failures of such promises, as illustrated in the novel. While American Dream enables elites like Eric Packer envision a future where one can live on a disc, transcending his body, destitute like Benno Levin can’t even provide for their family and have a stable life. The writer also
investigates the relationship between human body and technology by illustrating Eric’s desire to transcend his body to digitalize his consciousness. But through the same character, he also seems to warn us about the threats of envisioning such a future where one becomes megalomaniac to an extent of inviting his own downfall. The novel explores that the overdependence on technology would only incite anarchy. In an era where capitalism and technology work hand in gloves, the utopian dream that this convergence offers is only confined to a certain class of the society. The gulf between the rich and the poor is widening only to produce the two extremes represented by Eric Packer and Benno Levin.