

THE CITY OF HYPERVISIBILITY, PARANOIA AND COMMODITY CULTURE IN DON DELILLO'S *GREAT JONES STREET*

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Abstract

My paper analyzes Don DeLillo's 1973 surrealist novel Great Jones Street with focus on the relationship between the urban space and human subjectivity - the way they influence and shape each other. The city in Don DeLillo's novel appears to be quite close to a representation of simulacra and hyperreal, according to Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation, with all its sensorial excess, as well as a place of heterogeneous voices that will not add up to a coherent discourse, an instance of Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossia. Drawing especially on Baudrillard, I will also discuss how aspects of hypervisibility and consumerism define both the city and the self in DeLillo's novel.

Keywords: New York City, simulacra, hyperreality, commodification, paranoia, schizophrenia.

Published in 1973, *Great Jones Street* is Don DeLillo's third novel, in which he further pursues his analysis of popular culture phenomena, from film and football in the first two novels, to the music industry - rock and roll- in his third. He states, nevertheless, in an interview that the novel is not one about rock and roll. Certainly, there is an interest with DeLillo in tackling popular culture topics and the way they are experienced through images and simulacra. He takes the popular imagery in terms of rock stars, financiers, media figures, and many such popular icons and, while drawing a cultural criticism of the age, uses it for musing on notions of real, unreal and the meaningful.

Using Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreal, I will discuss aspects related to hypervisibility, simulation and paranoia as well as issues related to

commodification and consumer culture in DeLillo's *Great Jones Street*. I will dwell on the sense of place and contemporary grounding in my analysis, as well as on the different implications of the cultural criticism that DeLillo's novel puts forward through the part of New York City described.

1. The novel

Great Jones Street does not have a plot per-se and this comes as no surprise, since it was written in the seventies when the wave of experimentation of high postmodernism was still in full flow. Another aspect that links it to postmodern experimentation is the fact that the characters have no emotion. They give voice to an emotionless, robotic world and they come out as channels through which DeLillo puts forth his view, voices of his discourse on contemporary society. Credibility and verisimilitude of actions, plot and character is not what DeLillo is interested in, but rather to convey a certain picture of reality that we might not be aware of. In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, he expresses his interest in depicting "a sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments" and he adds:

"So I think that's something that has been in the background of my work: a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision. (...) I think it is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is *almost* there. (...) This extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions" (DeCurtis *Interview*, 63).

There is a certain mixture of transcendence and fear, a sense of the "almost there" that goes deep into human sensibility and that comes out in DeLillo's narrative in *Great Jones Street* as well, connected to awaiting revelation and redemption that I will refer to in my analysis.

If one were to put the disparate actions and events into a coherent plot line, this is briefly what happens: Bucky Wunderlick is a rock star who decides to withdraw in the middle of a tour in Houston, abandons his band mates, and, in complete secrecy, goes to New York City and confines himself to a small barren room on *Great Jones Street* – a part of lower Manhattan that was still industrial at that time. People soon find out of his

whereabouts and start showing up at his door. Somebody gives him for safekeeping a package containing a powerful drug referred to as “the product”. The rest of the novel simply shows him receiving a lot of people who are strictly business-oriented, each with their offer on either the drug package or the other “product” – the Mountain Tapes that he recorded in secrecy. This is the entire story line, to which is added an insertion of lyrics and interviews in the middle called “Superslick Mind Contracting Media Kit” with the subtitle “The Bucky Wunderlick Story. Told in news items, lyrics and dysfunctional interviews” and another shorter insertion of lyrics from the Mountain Tapes in the third part of the novel. The text displays only factual records and replies drawing the reader into a whirl of absurdity and lack of sense, suggesting the meaninglessness and substancelessness of the image-making industry, but also its aggression on the self. It creates a rather surrealist absurdist narrative that paints a world of commodification and simulacra tinged with fear and violence at every level.

The city in Don DeLillo’s *Great Jones Street* appears to be quite close to a representation of *simulacra* and *hyperreal*, according to Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation, with all its sensorial excess, as well as a place of heterogeneous voices that will not add up to a coherent, unifying discourse, an instance of Mikhail Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia*. At the narrative level, one can spot a predominant discourse: that of fetishized consumer products, symbolized by the “product” everyone in the novel is after and the far reaching hype it creates. While the characters are obsessed with one particular discourse, in its different forms (symbolized by Happy Valley Farm Commune, the African-American underground culture, the Transparanoia company, etc.) DeLillo, nonetheless argues that everything is constructed through language, and reality seems to be shaped by competing discourses that interconnect and separate from time to time, forming a web that represents the structure of the urban setting as well.

Taking into account its relation to the sensibility of the main character, I argue that the city has two distinct modes of existence in *Great Jones Street*, that coexist and sometimes intersect. The first is a dreamlike, hallucinogenic one combined with a concrete, all “too real” feel of the city, which I will analyze by focusing especially on several outside scenes at the end of the novel. The second is a latent reality mode, characterized by the awaiting of revelation. I am using these distinctions in order to talk

about the nature of subjectivity and reality that comes out from Don DeLillo's 1973 novel, and will focus in the present article especially on the first one.

2. The City and Subjectivity

Certain episodes at the end of the novel are relevant to the depiction of the urban scene of New York City, coherent with the first mode of existence.

At the end, Bucky is shown strolling the streets in several chaotic, rather labyrinthine walks, with no purpose or final destination than just to talk and discuss the "product" with the people who are negotiating for it, and he seems to have no agency, no control over the situation, he walks as if he is remote-controlled, but there is no agency behind this control. The city is a space of random facts and events, where the walker has no purpose that prompts his actions, no intentionality and he is stripped of any human attributes.

2.1 Simulacra and Hypervisibility

The urban scenery set in motion by wanderings seems unreal, and the unreality of the lower part of Manhattan is extended to the larger contemporary urban space, testifying to its artificial character, and, therefore, to its simulacra status. Opel remarks in this respect:

"'Places are always what you expect', she said. 'That's both the trouble with places and their redeeming feature. I'm certain it wasn't like that in the past. But it sure is that way now. A few places are still different from each other but nowhere do you find something different from your own expectations. Look at postcard manufacturers. They take a sleazy tourist-trap lake and try to make it into the canoeing grounds of the gods. (...) Not that there isn't beauty in such places. That's just it. The whole world is turning into Lafayette Street, the most ugly-beautiful street in New York City.'" (89)

What she observes about the touristic industry, which caters to people's expectations for a certain place defines, by extension, the nature of present-day cities, with their tendency to translate desire and expectation into a constructed scenery. This is part of the commodification of places, but at the same time, is regarded as their "redeeming feature", as space becomes flexible, adjustable to the various needs of the

present and its imaginary. Space is appropriated this way, by remodeling it according to desire.

Bucky first walks through the subway with Hanes, getting on and off trains, climbing up and down platforms, then he meets Dr. Pepper and Bohack, only at the end to meet Fred Chess – this time in a closed space who tells him that everything so far might have been a farce.

The meeting with Hanes happens on the subway, in a continuously shifting ride from one train to another, trying to escape Hanes's potential pursuers.

The people on the subway, the urban actors, make up a collage of disparate elements, which, even if they are negotiating the same space, are enclosed in their own edifice, suggesting insulated lonely individuals, blocks of isolated meaning that, through their different voices, make up the mosaic of the city.

“We changed trains one more time. A woman wearing torn clothing and surgical mask stood laced to one of the poles. About a dozen young students got on, dressed in black, nodding their bodies to the train's demonic flutter, serene rabbinical boys, hair solemnly curlicued, their ears like desert fruit. A man brought up battle sounds from his scarred throat. Creatures of the subway passed through the weaving cars. A woman across the aisle, carrying fifteen or twenty shopping bags inside each other, leaned forward and spoke to us.” (212)

The description seems to be taken from a surrealist picture, pervaded with anxiety and the feeling of the absurd. Questions are left unanswered, human interaction, even when it is called for, is ignored and all scenes are recorded in a matter of fact manner, flattening out all emotions. What comes out of the subway meeting description, is a picture of people stranded on their own islands of meaning, contributing their solitude but at the same time their very reality, their concrete presence that will not let itself be dissolved and incorporated into a larger system of significance. What one finds in the urban underground is individual histories, small truths, bits and pieces of meaning that are different from the larger discourses.

In “Simulacra and Simulation”, starting from the difference between to dissimulate (to feign not to have what one does) and simulate (to feign to have what one doesn't), Baudrillard defines the *hyperreal* as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality”. Simulation is therefore “no longer that of a territory, a

referential being, or a substance” (1). It represents its own referent, eliminating the difference between the “true” and “the false”, between the “real” and the “imaginary”.

The discussion on Disneyland and Los Angeles is relevant for the way New York can be seen in *Great Jones Street* as well. Discussing the famous theme park and its being the perfect illustration of simulacra, Baudrillard maintains that the entire

“Los Angeles is surrounded by these imaginary stations that feed reality, the energy of the real to a city whose mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation – a city of incredible proportions but without space, without dimension. As much as electrical and atomic power stations, as much as cinema studio, this city, which is no longer anything but an immense scenario and a perpetual pan shot, needs this old imaginary like a sympathetic nervous system made up of childhood signals and faked phantasms” (13)

Just as Los Angeles seen through Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, New York appears in the novel as an immense scenario, in which different people play their own part, disappear and reappear several times, together with the networks they represent.

The portion of the city described in the subway scene appears as a dissonant, noisy and cold underworld, a rather repellent environment that is either a reflection of the emotionless self -as in many cases with DeLillo’s novels- or a stimulus that makes the self retract even more, in a defensive impulse:

“We got off the train and walked through a series of cold passageways. Hanes carried the airline bag cradled to his chest. A strange wind lingered in the tunnels. The stone walls seemed to have a refrigerating effect and I submerged myself in my coat. Train noise reverberated over our heads and beyond the blank walls.” (212)

Hanes is left in the subway, in a continuously changing ride of fear, while trying to escape the pursuers of the “product” he carried. The very content of the conversation with Bucky is full of anxiety as well, as he repeatedly asks Bucky to take the “product” off his hands and talk to the people who are after it and put a good word in his favor.

The subsequent walk through the city, only a few hours after meeting Hanes, happens at midnight, with Dr. Pepper’s bodyguard and help Menefee. The walk takes a labyrinthine trajectory through a bizarre and wild environment, unpredictable in its aggressiveness, in which humans display animal instincts:

“Our route was circuitous in the extreme, full of loops, detours and backtrackings. A man emerged from beneath a freight platform and came toward us, barking strange words, his hair pasted straight back in choppy wet strokes, like a Cuban prize fighter’s hair. He lunged at Menefee, who tossed the umbrella away and backed quickly to the middle of the street where he leaped repeatedly in panic, inundated by his own cape.

‘New York!’ he screamed at the man. ‘New York!’ New York!’ New York!’” (215)

The American metropolis is to Menefee a place of aggressive, rather primitive behavior, a threatening environment, whose hard-hitting reality one can only resist, as Menefee confesses, by using drugs, therefore eluding into another form of simulacra. At the end of his meeting with Dr. Pepper, a meeting which happens in a city bus this time, Bucky is escorted back by Manefee, who confesses that ever since he became Dr. Pepper’s apprentice, he began thinking of himself as a “full-service container with access outlets” (220). The same as Hanes, who has a similar role in the company he works for, and similar to Opel as well, Manefee expresses his humanity in terms of desirable achievement. The episode ends with Menefee leaving “like a mythological bird returning to its jeweled nest” (220) enhancing thus the sensation of surreal and illusory reality.

The hallucinatory and at the same time violent environment leaves Bucky with what seems to be a desire for self-annihilation, for removing the load of fear, and every shred of humanity and emotion until he reaches a state of complete affectlessness:

“Then I took a bath, scrubbing my body with a hairbrush, outlasting the series of deep quakes that passed through me. When I stepped out finally, I was colder than the room.” (220)

The same desire towards attaining a non-human state, combined with one for self-dissipation into abstraction and bodilessness in front of the violence and terror of the outer space, is expressed by Bucky in the succeeding meeting with Watney: “‘I want to become a dream,’ I said. ‘I’m tired of my body. I want to be a dream, their dream. I want to flow right through them’”(231).

The walk with Bohack, south on the Bowery, is even more illustrative of the anxiety and fear that Bucky has to confront. His reaction is that of yawning, another defensive mechanism against the threatening outside, or rather a mere instance in which Bucky, just as Globke or other characters in the novel, paints a caricature of himself, bordering absurdity.

“I had a yawning seizure then. It was fear, I knew, that caused it – the mechanism in the body that covers up fear in this whimsical way, yawn after yawn. The seizure lasted all the way to the Salvation Army Memorial Hotel, accompanied by popping sounds in my cheekbones.” (247)

This is an even more disturbing walk in terms of Bucky’s intensity of fear and internal, physical reactions to it. The city has a dreamlike quality, combined with a feeling of being in ruin, on the verge of decay, with all elements on the brink of collapse, an industrial wasteland:

“We strolled among chimneys of various shapes and materials, crumbling brickwork, heavy metal painted black, aluminum peanut-whistles. The tar was hard. To north and south, towers grew out of crooked rooftops in the foreground.” (242)

The bizarre, strange atmosphere is also reminiscent of gothic descriptions with the looming feel of eeriness and eccentricity.

The last walk towards the end of the novel is with Skippy, through the streets of Lower East Side, still conveying an illusory sense of the city, characterized by its coldness, aggression, artificiality, enveloped in “a chemical smell from the river” (259). It seems to be a restatement that everything is contrived, make-believe, unreal, with “nondeliverance” hovering “in the air”.

The picture of the city as a hallucinatory dreamlike environment is even more clearly highlighted in this last walk, reminiscent of a sleepwalker’s trance, but unlike a sleepwalker, Bucky has nevertheless retained his capacity to register what other people perform. All of the activities recorded throughout the walk indicate instances of violence, in its different forms: an argument between two deaf men who use their hands to curse and then throw construction boards at each other, others selling produce in the street by “bellowing” and “wailing”, as a way of advertising. The recorded words of such a vendor add up to the incoherence and absurdity of the urban scene.

Both Bucky and Skippy go through extreme experiences, that threaten self-preservation and containment (Skippy coughs blood, Bucky vomits) pointing to an environment that threatens the limits of the self. These are traumatic experiences in a setting that triggers drastic and violent responses.

In all the walks through the city described at the end of the novel, with the various negotiators who are trying to get hold of the “product”, people are recorded doing daily instantaneous activities that are very concretely described, but at the same time they are taken out of their natural flow and presented as a collage of disparate strikingly violent acts. They are recorded factually, by a distant observer, an uninvolved mind, as they enter its sight and make up a gallery of lonely figures populating a cold, nonemotional, robotic-like city.

At the opposite pole, NYC is also gritty, factual, “an identifiable place” where one can retreat, as Bucky, or do business, as Dr. Pepper. On the other hand, Menefee, Dr. Pepper’s bodyguard, finds the city “too real” and confesses to his escapist strategy of surviving the “realness” of the city by using drugs:

“I have to load up on dope every time we come to New York. I stoke myself like a coal-burning engine. New York is too real. It’s just about the realest thing there is in an observable universe. (...) I stoke up, man. I mix me some weird concoctions. That’s the only way I can survive this kind of realness.” (174).

The sensory overload and the hyperreality of the entire metropolitan construct is so powerful that, to survive it, one can only evade into another hyperreality.

Grounding is denied to reality, because the latter does not have any referent behind, it is its own simulation and prototype at the same time, the difference between the sign and its object of reference being thus abolished. Hence, in a Baudrillardian fashion, the image masks nothing, it sends to nothing behind, because it is the only reality existent, in a world of make-believe. Baudrillard says in this respect:

“It is no longer the obscenity of what is hidden, but of what is visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-the visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication” (131)

From this perspective, what Menefee voices when he complains about the “too real” city is the hypervisibility of reality: its being all too visible and present in its groundlessness and self-reflection. Everything is visible, nothing is hidden or private, real or authentic and hence “too real” means “not genuine but very present.”

2.2 *From Paranoia to Schizophrenia*

During the walks discussed above, Bucky wanders across the city in the company of different people who want the “product”. He is taken through different locations, all of which seem like a somnambulist’s walk, chaotic and confusing, only to be told –in jest or in serious intent- at the end, by a man who characterizes himself as an “ordinary American”, Fred Chess, that everything might have been part of a well-calculated plan to get hands on the “product” and that he might have been the victim of a charade all along, with only the illusion of a certain degree of power and individual agency:

“It would mean that you’ve been the victim of the paranoid man’s ultimate fear. Everything that takes place is taking place solely to mislead you. Your reality is managed by others. Logic is inside out. Events are delusions.” (254)

At the same time, taking into account DeLillo’s satire, this is a warning to the reader to resist the desire for a revelatory meaning, to refrain from looking for “metaphysical testimonies” (248), as Bucky says in a comment on his behavior in one of the end scenes.

Conspiracy is a common topic with DeLillo¹ because underneath what he is describing is a world of violence and invasion. In an interview about the subject matters of his novels DeLillo states:

“Certainly there are themes that recur. Perhaps a sense of secret patterns in our lives. A sense of ambiguity. Certainly the violence of contemporary life is a motif. I see contemporary life as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America. Again we come back to these men in small rooms who can’t get out and who have to organize their desperation and their loneliness, who have to give it a destiny and who often end up doing this through violent means. I see this desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and products and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go” (DeCurtis *Interview* 57).

¹ He says in an interview: “All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act” (interview quoted in Daniel Aaron, “How to read Don DeLillo, p. 80).

His novels portray a system that is circular, with interacting and intersecting rings. The city in *Great Jones Street* is a flow of networks in a plot that plays itself, its own reality and has no referent, no underneath reality except what is out there, for the eye to see.

The hyperreal space, with no identifiable referent, triggers a different kind of subjectivity, characterized by seriality, dehumanization – all a result of the decentering forces of what Jean Baudrillard calls the “protean era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication” (127). In the contemporary age of “proteomic networks” (127) and consumer society, the most important thing seems to be engagement in the webs of influence and being part of the exchange system.

He shows intersecting undergrounds, like Pynchon, but he goes beyond conspiracy and paranoia to a system of networks that Baudrillard assimilates to schizophrenic traits, marking thus a clearer shift to a postmodern sensibility². The colliding, intersecting undergrounds “begin to resemble flaky, sinister spin-offs on the dominant culture, rather than rebellious or subversive alternatives to it” (DeCurtis *Product* 136).

In “The Ecstasy of Communication” Jean Baudrillard describes the present as an age dominated by networks of various kinds that take the place of the previous era of discovery and exploration of daily life. He states that

“in place of the reflexive transcendence of mirror and scene, there is a nonreflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold – the smooth operational surface of communication.” (127)

The scene acted out publicly now is not anymore one of the projection of interiority, a mental and metaphorical one, where the subject was “engaged with its objects as with its image” but represents its own projection, into a space of simulation, with no metaphor behind, where the subject is “living no longer as an actor or dramaturge but as a terminal of multiple networks.” (128) Baudrillard refers to this as a form of schizophrenia that characterizes the present, infused with a state of terror that the subject experiences. The latter, Baudrillard argues, “can no longer produce the limits of his own

² Ihab Hassan identified paranoia as characteristic of modernism and schizophrenia as a trait of postmodernism in “Towards a Concept of Postmodernism”.

being, no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.” (133)

From this perspective, Bucky is an instance of such a schizoid self, confronted with networks of influence and power.

The last scenes of the novel analyzed earlier, when Bucky walks the city streets in the company of various people connected to the “product” in one way or another and involved in a network of control and in a struggle for dominance send to the idea of inescapable insertion into an engulfing system of power and manipulation.

3. Commodity Culture

The two forces that set things in motion are the desire to produce and the desire to consume and to devour, the latter acquiring aggressive connotations.

Every major aspect of life can be commodified in the world *Great Jones Street* describes, from drugs and art to privacy and people. In DeLillo’s novelistic world, even death is commodified and sold to suit the public’s taste and expectations.

There is nothing hidden and nothing escapes the public eye and the public consumption in this nightmarish surrealist universe. Subjected to these coordinates that shape the *Great Jones Street* universe, Bucky’s retreat – the location of which, as mentioned before, he doesn’t tell anyone about- becomes the theater of successive biddings and discourses from people who represent various networks and their respective doctrines or beliefs and are intent on getting hold of “the product”.

Thus, the drug package that Bucky receives contains a top quality “product” made by the government that all characters are trying to get, because it is said to bring the loss of language. This is another absurd situation, in which people create a lot of hype over a “product” that allegedly brings silence – which, apparently is what everyone is looking for, the “excess” they are hungry for. The paradox and the absurdity come from the fact that they make noise because they crave silence. DeLillo suggests the irony :

“I wondered how long I’d choose to dwell in these middle ages of plague and usury, living among traceless men and women, those whose only peace was in shouting ever more loudly. Nothing tempted them more than voicelessness. But they shouted.” (263)

However, the usefulness of the drug is illusory or, actually, temporary. Discourse cannot be escaped from and “after several weeks of immense serenity” he falls back into “the mad weather of language” (265).

Bucky’s album, *The Mountain Tapes* that he recorded secretly, is an example of commodification related to art. The album also turns into the “product” that everyone desires, and becomes interchangeable with the other “product”. After Bucky’s retreat from the music business, the tapes gain in value and represent the object of numerous negotiations, whose initiators want to release them to the public.

People are also commodified in the market-driven world of *Great Jones Street*. All characters represent different forms of human commodification. Bucky is one of them, even if he is also the only one aware of this and the only one who tries to escape the system. As the rock star symbol that he has become, he is also a product of the music industry and caters to the standards imposed by his status and to the tastes and expectations of the audience. His entire life is an artifact for the consumption of his fans. At one point he even confesses his desire to be their dream, their fantasy, and produce the sounds they want to hear.

Fenig is another example of human commodification. He is a writer who can produce anything the market desires to read, subject to the demand. He can cater to the public tastes however shifting and fluctuating as long as he can make money. At one point, Bucky says of him that he looks like he has four more Fenigs in his closet – a hint at his status of a simulacrum: he is only an image, a serialized copy of a reality with no real referent or substance. He says about himself: “I’m a poet. I’m a novelist. I’m a mystery writer. I write science fiction. I write pornography. I write daytime dramatic serials. I write one-act plays.” (19) The enumeration shows him as a writing machine. He has no difficulty writing any kind of literary or non-literary text, he can cater to the public tastes however shifting and fluctuating as long as he can make money. The irony is that he cannot make money, however versatile he proves to be. We are not told what is the reason for his lack of success, he is only portrayed as a writer ready and eager to comply with the market demand. This is another indication of art as a consumption product, subject to the laws of the market, to the adjustment of supply function of the demand.

There is also Opel, Bucky's girlfriend, who becomes a thing through her travels, commodifies herself by traveling through different environments like a tourist up to the point where she is reduced to whatever her luggage contains.

Menefee is one of the 'emissaries' sent to negotiate the package. As mentioned above, he confesses that ever since he started working for his current employer –he is Dr. Pepper's "apprentice"- he began thinking of himself as a "full-service container with access outlets" (220). His commodification resides in inserting himself into a network that provides him with a use, but at the same time this voices his desperation, as the network is not to be trusted and the ground underneath seems shaky.

Regarding death, Bucky is told that his life has to be sacrificed for the sake of his public's dream. Bohack tells Bucky how his suicide should be, so as to be congruent with his fans' expectations and imaginary, and discusses it as any other business plan or transaction:

"Your suicide should take place in a city like Tangier or port-au-Prince or Auckland, New Zealand. Some semi-mysterious or remote place is probably best for your kind of suicide. (...) The perfect suicide is when people know you're dead on one level but refuse to accept it on a deeper level. It's the final inward plunge." (243)

Privacy is also commodified. When the Happy Valley Farm Commune decide to take him as a model because he restored "the idea of privacy to the idea of American life"³, they transform his attempt at solitude into a public cause. When Bucky wants to go back on stage, the Happy Valley people tell him that they cannot allow it, because it would completely ruin their status, since Bucky became their model of privacy – and they suggest the suicide discussed above. Bucky's retreat and his inner crisis is appropriated by the group and rendered useless. This is another suggestion to the aggression and cannibalization of privacy by contemporary culture. The Happy Valley Farm Commune is a caricature of the sixties and seventies communal idealism that materialized in different groups with utopian platforms. However, DeLillo points out the violence underneath, as the Happy Valley – a group symbolizing rural idealism turned urban- start to threaten whoever gets in the way of them acquiring "the product" and engage in drug

³ The way the Happy Valley emissary formulates their creed: "we believe in the *idea* of restoring the *idea* of privacy to the *idea* of American life", in its satirical tinges, is another hint at the hyperreal of contemporaneity (193)

dealing in the first place. The book is filled with such self-annihilating, self-contradictory acts, pointing to the absurdity of contemporary society's values and behavior, above and beyond all other considerations regarding capitalism and consumer society.

4. Mastering commerce

Mark Osteen remarks in his essay on the novel that the plot is static, unlike the fret and the hype presented. Indeed, the novel makes for a difficult, thorny reading that goes against consumerism, against easy intake and this way resists inclusion into the commodity culture it discusses, becoming what Bucky is looking for - a "moral form to master commerce." (70)

The novel can undoubtedly be viewed in this light, but at the same time, there is some form of revelation, a mixture of "redemptive tenor" (18) and decline that one can sense throughout the narrative. One wonders, does this make it an apocalyptic narrative, suggesting we are nearing the end of a system that has had too much excess?

5. Why NYC?

To illustrate the simulacra and commodification of the contemporary age, the novel could have probably been set in any other big, cosmopolitan city in the U.S. that exhibits consumer culture characteristics and its mass appeal. Nonetheless, it is my contention that the spatial insertion for *Great Jones Street* could only have been New York City because the latter is the city that displays a unique mixture: it offers the possibility of revolution and revelation, the creation of new trends and cultures and, on the other hand, it is an extremely gritty, factual and aggressive space, whose reality one cannot escape.

I believe that DeLillo goes beyond cultural criticism – which is definitely present and a very important component of his work- to some form of poetic intimation of reality. His care for words testify to this, his carefully constructed phrases. He says about his books:

"I think my work has always been informed by mystery; the final answer, if there is one at all, is outside the book. My books are open-ended. I would say that mystery in general

rather than the occult is something that weaves in and out of my work. I can't tell you where it came from or what it leads to." (DeCurtis, *Interview 55*)

His interest in in-betweenness, in the gray zones, the heteroclitite, the hybrid and the heterogeneous forms of life and identity. He tries to capture in words the inklings, pictures of a level of existence that lies out there, too sensitive to grasp, too present to ignore. Like the fascination with the supermarket (*White Noise*) or Oswald's belief in coincidence and magic (*Libra*) – the extra element that is crucial for meaning and for truth – a certain dimension of reality that lies beyond everyday awareness or conscious perception.

From this point of view, *Great Jones Street* paints one of the subtlest pictures of New York City in the seventies decade, with all the mixture and assortment, stasis and fret, decline and grandeur, unreality and reality.

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