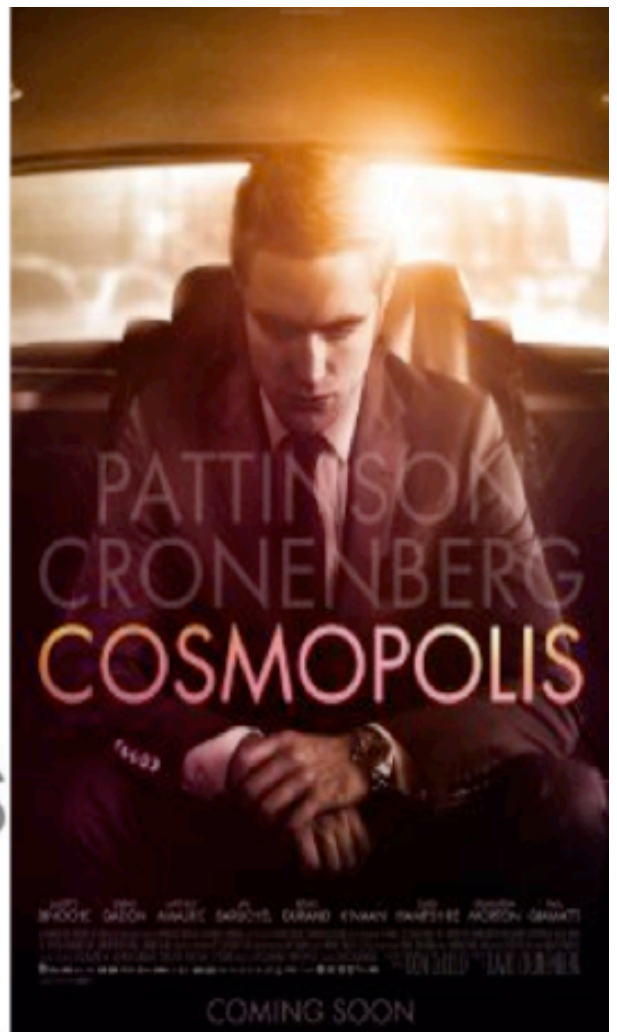
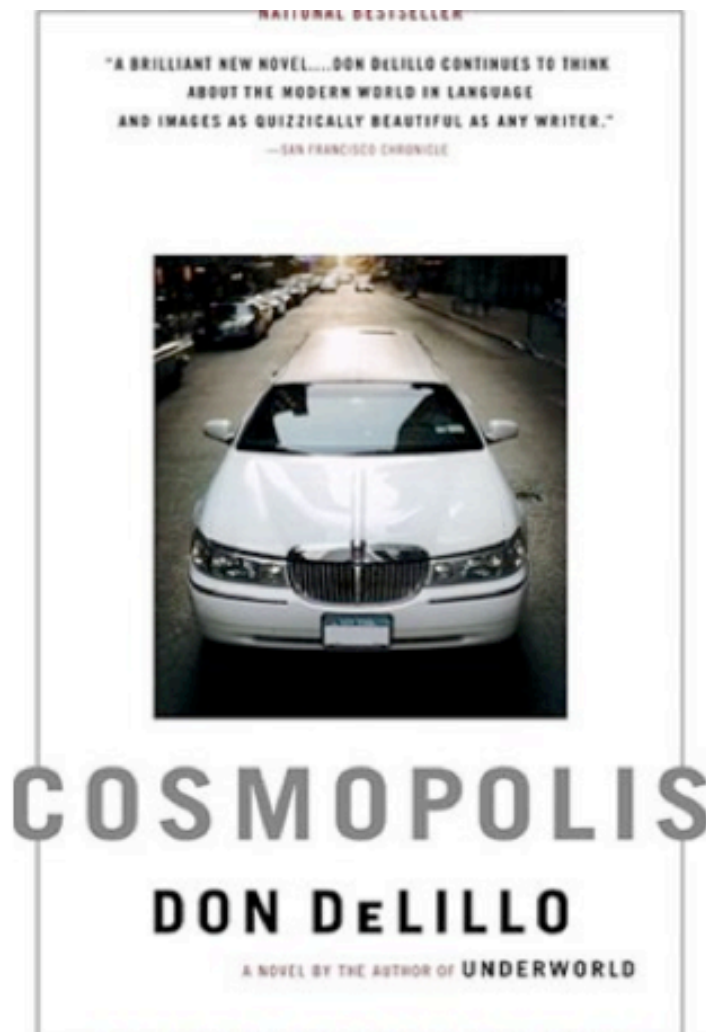


"Cosmopolis" (novel) -Don DeLillo a Theater of the Absurd Existentialist, nevertheless a Bronx southern-Italian American

Tom Verso (June 20, 2012)



"What are you doing Saturday night? / Committing suicide / What about Friday?" (Woody Allen) ... Richard E. Baker in his book "The Dynamics of the Absurd in the Existentialist Novel" writes: "Many existentialist writers in the twentieth century have defined the sense of the absurd... Miguel de Unamuno says it is the 'tragic sense of life'; JeanPaul Sartre calls it 'nausea'... [etc]." By any name, the 'absurd' denotes the experience of a rational individual struggling with a perceived irrational world. Increasingly, I'm coming to the opinion that Don DeLillo should be added to that long list which includes Richard Wright, Camus, Beckett, etc. What interests me is how the son of Abruzzo immigrants goes from 'hanging' on a Little Italy Bronx street corner to "Waiting for Godot", and what

that 'trip' implies about the culture of post-Little Italy Americana

Preface

Before I read anything about DeLillo's biography, I was perfectly confident he was a child of 1940s - 50s Bronx Little Italy. Having read his novel *Underworld*, I could not believe that even the most creative and imaginative writer could possibly capture the character of the people and cultural essence of "Little Italy - Urban Villages" as perfectly and brilliantly as he did in "Part Six" of that book. To my mind, he had to be a child of Little Italy! Subsequent searching of his bio confirmed my 'hypothesis'; he was indeed a son of Abruzzo immigrants and Arthur Avenue.

For example:

When an interviewer asked him: "Where do you place yourself, politically speaking?"

DeLillo replied: "I'm an independent. And I don't want to say anything more about it".

Interviewer: Why not?

DeLillo: "Well, in the Bronx, where I grew up, we'd have said 'Because it's none of your fucking business'." (note: interviewer indicated DeLillo was smiling - see: <http://dumpendebat.net/static-content/delillo-diezeit-Oct2007.html> [2])

In that vein, I always say:

You can take the boy away from Little Italy. But, you can never take Little Italy away from the boy! And, the boy...is always in the man.

Accordingly, I could not grasp how a quintessentially second generation southern-Italian American could artistically move so far away from his cultural roots into the philosophical / cultural morass of the existential absurd and dread.

I wondered how a person who spends his youthful formative years immersed in southern-Italian American culture can write novels so completely devoid of that cultural milieu? With the obvious and profound exception of the above-mentioned Part 6 section of *Underworld*, there is virtually nothing in his writing that conveys southern-Italian Americanity. (note: this point of view is debated by the literati: see Fred Gardaphé's *Italian Signs, American Streets*.)

DeLillo also fascinates me because he has the eye of a social scientist and the mind of a philosopher, but the disposition of a poet. Faulkner said all novelists start out as poets, then turn to short stories and finally the novel. To my mind, DeLillo the novelist hasn't completely broken loose of the poet's muse. He understands significant social and philosophical issues, but expresses in a style only a few on the literary fringe (post-modern aficionados) can appreciate - *Cosmopolis* being a quintessential example.

Cosmopolis

When I turned on the radio, the National Public Radio speaker was in the middle of a Cannes Film Festival movie review. A Clint Eastwood 'Dirty Harry' lowbrow movie type guy, generally I cannot appreciate Cannes Films. Accordingly, I was about to change the station when the movie reviewer referred to the film based on a novel written by and co-scripted by Don DeLillo. HuH! was my response.

DeLillo demonstrated his competence, indeed talent, as a scriptwriter with his *Game Six* film. But, that was not based on one of his novels. How could a DeLillo post-modern novel (whatever that means besides 'weird' - my taste in fiction is the same as movies) possibly be scripted for film - I wondered? Then the reviewer mentioned the film's title ..."*Cosmopolis*".

Ah yes! Of course I thought: *Perverse Sex, Violence, Drugs, Deafening music*... in short, *Decadent decaying society, twenty-first century variation of "Clockwork Orange"*; to wit, the stuff of successful movies. What's more, unlike many post-modern and some DeLillo works (e.g. *Underworld*), the *Cosmopolis* novel has a linear and relatively short (about 200 pages) plot line conducive to film scripting.

Game 6 precursor of the novel Cosmopolis

Another factor that may explain the conversion of the *Cosmopolis* novel into a film script; it was written about 15 years after DeLillo wrote the movie script of *Game 6*. The plot structure of *Cosmopolis* closely follows *Game 6*. Indeed, a comparison of the two works is a great comparative literature study of how two almost identical plotlines can result in profoundly different literary works.

Both plotlines involve a creative and successful protagonist being driven across Manhattan on traffic-clogged 47th Street in a taxi/limo from very well-to-do First Avenue to the slums of Twelfth.



Incidences (scenes) with psycho/social/aesthetic implications are developed at various 'stops' along 47th Street. What's more, some of the dialogue in *Cosmopolis* is an exact copy of *Game 6* (e.g. cab drivers in both works: "I peed under the Manhattan bridge", etc.).

Nevertheless, there is more to literature than plot. Thematically *Game 6* is a 'light' melodrama (albeit delving at times into significant issues) finishing on a happy up-beat life reaffirming father/daughter love note. *Cosmopolis*, very much the opposite, is a 'heavy' Existential "God is Dead" "Waiting for Godot" nihilistic type theme: i.e. loss of all life's meaning and value ... a world with no 'right' or 'wrong,' since, in an irrational world, those words and actions have no authoritative moral basis (e.g. Word of God, Natural Law, Nationalism, etc.).

Cosmopolis precursor of 2008 Financial Crisis

More importantly, while the plot of the *Cosmopolis* novel closely following the *Game 6* script lent itself to conversion into a movie script, what especially made it so desirable for a film version is the relevance the novel has to contemporary financial markets. Five years before, DeLillo brilliantly anticipated the 2008 financial market crash and its continuing repercussions.

Indeed, even as the film was being 'cured up' at Cannes, de facto scenes from the film were being acted out in the financial markets and on the streets of New York, Athens, Cairo, etc. The film's producer must have been delirious with joy thinking about the profound relevance and free public relations the film was garnering at Cannes.

Even as the film, whose protagonist was risking all of his and his customer's wealth "shorting the yen", was being viewed in Cannes, Jon Corzine was testifying to congressional committees that he "did not know what happened to 1.2 billion dollars of customer money" invested (i.e. bet) in European bond 'shorts', Jamie Dimond was trying to explain how he lost 2 billion dollars of his company's money 'investing' (betting) on (you guessed it) financial shorts, and Wall Street was being Occupied.

DeLillo writing in 2003 was literally prophetic, and Paulo Branco the film's producer realized that a film with sex, violence, decadence, financial markets turmoil and "occupy movements" was bound to be a winner.

Why DeLillo is significant in southern-Italian American culture

While DeLillo is internationally recognized as a great writer, his place in the southern-Italian American culture is the subject of some debate.

Fred L. Gardaphe in his book *Italian Signs, American Streets* observes that in recent Italian American literature, which he characterizes as the "philosophical mode":

"...linguistic signs of Italianness are not obvious ...[he] discusses the disappearance of a distinctive Italian American subject in light of the advance of postmodernism."(p.17, 23)

While he cites the works of Don DeLillo as in examples of this "philosophical" stage, Prof. Gardaphe seems not to accept the reality of Italian American writers who are not "obviously" Italian American. Nor does he seem to appreciate the transcendence of philosophy over ethnicity.

Accordingly, he developed a theory of "invisible" signs and a method of uncovering these "submerged signs of Italianità that are imbedded, consciously or not, by these writers."(p. 23)

I cannot understand any discussion of "invisible" or "submerged signs of Italianità". I guess this is an example of "post-modern" literary criticism. Post-modern critics like writers make up their own meanings.

To my mind, there is no need to look for "invisibles" in the works of southern-Italian American writers such as DeLillo. The absence of "obvious linguistic signs" does not diminish their southern-Italian Americanity.

One does not look for "invisible signs" of the English in Marlowe's "...Faustus", or the Germanic in Goethe's "Faust", or the French in Camus' "Myth of Sisyphus", etc. Nevertheless, they are acknowledged as great manifestation of the respective English, German and French cultures. By definition philosophy is universal, transcending ethnicity and nationality. Nevertheless philosophical writers are acknowledged as great thinkers in their respective cultures.

In short, it is not necessary to look for "invisibles" to prove to others or ourselves that Don DeLillo is a great **southern-Italian American** writer and thinker – a philosopher.

The southern Italian people throughout their near 3,000-year history have brought forth many great writers and thinkers. Now we see that tradition emerging in **southern-Italian Americana**.

No surprises here!



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