

Desire, Assemblage and Deterritorialization of the Self: A Critical Reading of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

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Abstract

In the present era of 21st century, our understanding of capitalism has changed dynamically, where we are experiencing a new form of it altogether. Coming out of feudalism, mercantilism, and industrial capital, now it has taken another new avatar, that of cyber-capital. With the expansion of corporate sector, stock markets, digital economy, money exists in its liquid state, characterized by the hyper-mobility spread through global business networks. The seeds of this unchecked rise in finance were sown in 1970's, when free market capitalism, popularly known as neo-liberal policies were taken by Regan government in the United States. The effect of this finance is all pervasive and in its manifold Medusa like manner exerts its influence upon individuals, nations and societies with its continuous creation and replication of 'desire'. Critics such as Frederic Jameson and Ernest Mandel gave a more nuanced term-'late capitalism'.

Therefore it becomes imperative to call the present era as the age of 'financialization' when we are witnessing an ascendancy of global finance. The situation demands for a renewed interest in the ontological position of the rational subject, who is now construed, constituted and subjected to the flows of 'desire' swirling around, becoming interpellated by constant

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forces of production and reproduction of desire, living in a 'libidinal economy', in Jean Francois Lyotard's phrase. Displacing from the idea of a rational, logical being', we are confronted with a new ontological praxis which is enmeshed in the world of money, technology and desire. The inevitable question that haunts us now is- does the 'real' at all exist in the hyper-real world of simulation? Can we locate the points of 'rupture' when the subject refuses to be a part of these constant 'desiring-machines' (to use Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's idea which sees the unconscious as a realm of producing desires)?

This paper will try to probe into the matter of 'subjectivity' in the realm of this new world of economic, technological and social flows which builds the subjective economy and its assemblages, where it will juxtapose the arguments stated above with a critical reading of Don DeLillo's novel *Cosmopolis* (2003). In the novel *Cosmopolis*, the protagonist Eric Packer, a billionaire traverses the city of New York in his limousine, to get a haircut and in the course of his journey witnesses the funeral of a Sufi rap star, violent anti-capitalist movements continually betting against the rise of the Japanese currency yen and losing all his wealth. Depicting the abstraction of finance from the actual reality, Eric's subjectivity is questioned when he continuously feels that he is attuned to the machines surrounding him that generate flows of capital exchange where he always wanted to become "quantum dust, transcending his body mass.. to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as a data" and at the same time affirms himself as "located nowhere". Immersed in technology, he is at once enslaved by the machines yet seeks a way out to feel reality, to transcend beyond the limits of his bodily perceptions and be free of it. This is the constant impulse of capitalism, where desires are commodified endlessly till the point when the 'self' dismantles completely, creating psychic breakdown. Borrowing Deleuze and Guattari's idea of 'desiring machines', "Body without Organs" and Nietzsche's concept of 'becoming', the present paper seeks to find an analogy between the present world of late capitalism and the problematic idea of the 'self', questioning the embedded semiotic capitalism. I would argue, how the dominance of finance capital has given a new idea of the 'self' as constituted in the 'desire' produced by market capitalism, how the 'self' remains caught up between 'real' and the 'digital', creating a hypermediated world of experience, displaying psychic disorder and how through repeated performances of identity, Eric's personality is reconfigured and reconstituted.

Keywords: Financialization; Desire; Assemblage; Body without Organs; *Cosmopolis*

“Everything is rational in capitalism, except capital or capitalism itself. The stock market is certainly rational, one can understand it, study it, that capitalists know how to use it, and yet it is completely delirious, its mad...”

(Deleuze and Guattari, 36)

“Look at those numbers running. Money makes time. It used to be the other way around. Clock time accelerated the rise of capitalism. People stopped thinking about eternity. They began to concentrate on hours, measurable hours, man-hours, using labor more efficiently.”
(DeLillo 69)

Retheorizing Financialization

The term financialization is a very recent coinage and can be traced to the end 1970's in the United States, when Keynesian school of welfare economics, which aimed at maximization of benefits to the poor, leaning close to socialist objectives, were replaced by free market capitalism. The then President of the United States of America, Ronald Reagan adopted 'New Federalism' aiming to lessen the austerities imposed by the governments on economy, easing tax burden on the capitalists and leaving it upon the market "laissez-faire", to decide upon the trajectory of economic growth. Neo-liberalism at once became a political as well as an economic philosophy that spread across globally. As a political philosophy, it believed in promoting individual freedom (which is a fundamental principle upon which capitalism stresses upon) and as an economic philosophy, it affirms in the principle of free market to increase demand and create a robust economic model.

Financialization (financial liberalism) accelerated the rise of stock markets as finance capital metamorphosed into liquid state, transgressing national and international boundaries, transmitted through global networks of exchanges. Suddenly markets turned as fictitious, with industry becoming 'immaterial', unmoored from a specific location, money becoming 'dematerialized' opening up the arena of speculation and risk. The world of finance became a chimera, ephemeral as digital economy boomed up. Between the interconnected digitized financial empire of high-risk trading, the creation of new bonds, schemes, mortgages, security,

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hedge-funds, our everyday lives were rife with such para-financial terminologies, and so called 'real economy' got substituted with 'digital' or 'virtual' economy'.

The web of finance capital and its appendages have infiltrated in our social and cultural production to an extreme level. Financial metaphors constantly imbricate upon our daily lives, practices and ideologies, making us see all things through the lens of commodification, accelerating desire and increasing capitalist accumulation. Now the subjective understanding of the self therefore is in a critical point. Situated at the intersection between money, desire and technology, it suffers from as Deleuze and Guattari says, a 'schizophrenic sense of reality'. Contrary to traditional Marxist interpretations where capitalism constantly subjugates labour, extracting its value ceaselessly and turning it as part of capital accumulation creating alienation of self, Deleuze and Guattari talks about the schizophrenic self, which revolts from a fixed, standardized version imposed by capitalism, seeking escape and flux, constantly *deterritorializing* the self, and again reterritorializing it, endlessly. Thus the self which is implicated in the social systems, attaches and detaches from reality, abnegates from pre-existing social conditions of enslavement to find new paths, 'lines of flight' to escape from the tyranny of capitalism.

Desire, Flow and Deterritorialization of the Self

"The true history is the history of desire." (Deleuze and Guattari, 36)

"... desire (can be) defined as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it." (Deleuze and Guattari, 170-1)

Deleuze and Guattari in their seminal work, *Anti-Oedipus* published in 1972, brought forward a radical understanding of the subject, as a being constituted in desire. The idea of desire is fundamental in understanding life and all the other aspects of it, such that how it creates, shapes and channels all the energies of daily performance. Unlike psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan which posits the being as an entity created by 'lack', Deleuze and Guattari celebrate the limitless affirmative potential of desire, as both a resistance to social systems and a creative form of self-expression and possibility. They are more curious to understand the molecular revolutions that happens in the realm of a productive unconscious - "...for desiring machines are precisely that: the microphysics of the unconscious, the elements of the microunconscious... Beneath the conscious investments of the economic, political,

religious etc, formations there are unconscious sexual investments, microinvestments that attest to the way in which desire is present in a social field, and joins this field to itself as the statistically determined domain that is bound to it.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 216)

They call this new way of unlocking the infinite potential of the unconscious as schizoanalysis. The unconscious is not seen as an abstract, uniform category, but works as a desiring-machine where desires are ceaselessly produced, amalgamated, replicated and reformed. Hence their disavowal in the singularity subjective category of ‘being’. Instead they speak of the self as ‘becomings’. Schizoanalysis is the process of opening up this interface of the unconscious where microscopic and macroscopic entities interact, react and produce a complete new set of being. This process goes on endlessly through the rhizomatic network of connection, disjunction and reconnection (branche, debranche as they call it in French). Deterritorialization involves this urge of the self in breaking down of boundaries, shattering the fixed identities as imposed by the rigorous systems of capitalism. Schizophrenia becomes the metonymy for resistance to capitalist control and embracing desire’s creative potential. It is not a mental illness conditioned by neurosis, hallucination and psychic breakdown.

The Deleuzian idea of ‘being’ is predicated upon Nietzsche’s *Will to Power* and Spinoza’s *Ethics*, where they bring into force the relations composing, decomposing or modifying an individual which corresponds with the intensities that affect it, augment or diminish its desires to act. Thus the composite understanding of being happens with the relational idea of its existence. Subjectivity therefore is constructed through endless difference and repetitions and is never finished. Herein comes the logic of ‘becomings’ (devenir in French) which is unlimited and unending and does not share a single point of origin or destination, but is always incomplete and remains in flux. Nietzsche claims in *Will to Power* are,

1. Becoming does not aim at a final state, does not flow into “being”
2. Becoming is not a merely apparent state; perhaps the world of beings is mere appearance.
3. Becoming is of equivalent value every moment, the sum of its values always remain the same, in other words, it has no value at all, for anything against which to measure it, and in relation to which the word “value” would have meaning, is lacking. (Nietzsche 378)

Freedom from any fixed idea of being releases its transformative potential, Life is only a means to something; it is the expression of forms of the growth of power.” (Nietzsche 375)

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Deleuzian understanding of being always elides the present, removing itself from the world of essence to that of immanence, as the subjective being moves in both the directions of past and the future. In this sense becoming is not perceptible because it is always in an evanescent stage of existence.

The present world of global capital, propagated through vast technological flows of seamless dissemination and flows, draws upon it a power to influence and act upon our cultural and social life. The cogs of capitalism dehumanize individual and labour as value extraction and profit, and turns it into 'machinic enslavement'. Enslavement the concept was borrowed by Deleuze and Guattari explicitly from cybernetics and the science of automation. Finance capitalism with its enormous apparatus of money flows, exchange has swallowed the individual and made them hybrids, living in the realm of subject-object biface identities. Maurizio Lazzarato calls this condition as "ontologically ambiguous" (Lazzarato 30). The subject always,

"acts within an assemblage, a collective, where machines, objects, and signs are at the same time "agents"... If subjection calls on consciousness and the representations of the subject, machinic enslavement activates both much more and much less than consciousness and representation, in other words, much more and much less than the person, the individual and intersubjectivity." (Lazzarato 30)

Deterritorialization is the creative ability of the self to transgress any limits imposed upon it by the external forces of reality, transmute the reality and form new productive connections to escape the oppressive forces. It is an interesting concept which gives power to the subject to break free from all modes of representation, capitalist semiotics, giving the power of enunciation to the subject to live outside all forms of subjectification. The idea challenges the centralized authority of 'logic' or 'ego' controlling the rational self and instead believes in the opening up of a 'schizophrenic self'. It disrupts fixed identities, norms and values and encourages fluidity and connectivity.

Deterritorialization and Body without Organs in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

Cosmopolis published in 2003, primarily is a novel about the world of financialization set in the year 2000. Eric Packer, the protagonist, a 28 year old billionaire goes across the midtown Manhattan borough in New York, to get a haircut. He lives in a forty-eight room apartment and suffers from insomnia, essentially bored and restless and is insouciant from the real world that exists around him. The metastasizing opulence of Eric (his 104\$ Manhattan

residence with dual elevators, the shark tank, the meditation room, luxury car equipped with latest technology) with “dashboard computer screens”, “night-vision display on the lower windshield”, “infrared camera situated in the grille” helps him to carry on his business ventures even outside his office. He is the symbolic representation of global corporate finance which continuously monitors the rise and fall of stock market prices, instantly manipulates them, not in nanoseconds but in zeptoseconds and yoctoseconds, i.e one septillionth of a second. The limousine in which he travels is a symbol of luxury, isolation and financial excess. Readers see that he is continuously betting against the rise of the Japanese currency, yen and losing all his wealth.

The interaction between technology and the body happens ceaselessly inside his limousine, where he is under the surveillance of cameras, feeling the ‘medley of data’ on every screen, the flowing symbols and numbers that were swirling around him.

He absorbed this material in a couple of long still seconds, ignoring the speech sounds that issued from lacquered heads. There was a microwave and a heart monitor. He looked at the spycam on a swivel and it looked back at him. He used to sit here in hand-held space but that was finished now. The context was nearly touchless. He could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank. (DeLillo 22)

The ubiquitous power of market, as the sole determinant of future world, is time and again brought forth in the narrative. At one point, Eric asks his currency analyst, Michael Chin, 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. (DeLillo 29)

His body is integrated with the desiring-machines of capital, yet he feels insufferable loneliness, and says, “I feel located totally nowhere. I think I’m ready to quit, basically, the business.” (DeLillo, 29). In a world of cyber capital, liquidity, fluidity, exchanges and transactions, “data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process.”

The ascendancy and power of cyber-capital is pronounced in his chief of theorist, Vija Kinski’s words,

“Time is a corporate asset now. It belongs to the free market system. It is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential.” (DeLillo 69)

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Capitalism has subsumed all the reality and it has made itself as the only living reality. The affinity between market movements and the natural world, seems therefore “an aesthetics of interaction”. (DeLillo 73)

Throughout the course of his journey, halted at intervals at traffic caused due to the President's visit, a pop star's funeral and violent political demonstrations, his subjectivity gets transformed. At one point in the route, their car gets stuck in violent anti-capital protests. Eric watches the protesters from his limousine, but even this reality seems like a dream, a chimera in the eyes of the global capital. Vija again makes Eric understand that these demonstrations are only but a “fantasy generated by the market. There is nowhere they can go to be on the outside. There is no outside.” (DeLillo 77)

The continuous machinic assemblage of subjectivity, the signifying totality of capitalism creates tension within the psyche of Eric Packer. The incessant interaction between humans and machines has splintered the authenticity and aura of existence. In the novel, we see this tension getting acute more and more, as he wishes to continuously dismantle everything that he has created and achieved so far. The potential destructive desire of the self to be free from the constricting forces of ideas, desires, thoughts can be compared to Deleuze's idea of Body without Organs (BwO). Deleuze and Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* calls such a state as –

“This body without organs is permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 77)

The Body without Organs (BwO) can be called as a plane of pure intensities, the molecular stratum, free and absolutely deterritorialized in itself. They refer to such a plane as-

“...the unformed, unorganized, nonstratified or destratified body and its flows: subatomic and submolecular particles, pure intensities, preital and prephysical free singularities.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 83)

The process becomes complete for Eric when he himself shoots his bodyguard Torval and meets his assassin, Benno Levin to live his final moments as a free man. The desire to be released from the compulsive system of capitalism becomes pronounced in the narrative- “He'd always wanted to become quantum dust, transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat. The idea was to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from void.” (DeLillo 156)

Conclusion

Eric's fragmented thoughts defy the singularity of one identity, adhering to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of 'becomings'. The novel depicts his disorganized thinking and behavior and detachment from reality which itself reflects the deterritorializing effects of global finance. Though his character metonymically represents the dominance of global finance, a part of his psyche always wrestles with the oppressive capitalist system. His aimless wandering in the streets of New York depicts his desire to be unleashed from the repressive system of capital and live as free as 'quantum dust.' Deleuze's idea of Body without Organs (BwO) and assemblage can be used to understand this contemporary world of finance capital and the general disillusionment it produces. His subjectivity is therefore 'schizophrenic', lacking any coherence and structure but reveling in unlimited possibilities of meanings, desires and its unending replications.

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