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Luca Ferrando Battistá

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The Representation of Interiority in the Novels of Don DeLillo and Jay McInerney

Par Luca FERRANDO-BATTISTÀ

Thèse de doctorat en Études Anglophones

Dirigée par Mathieu Duplay

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Devant un jury composé de:

Mathieu Duplay -- Professeur -- Université Paris Cité -- rattaché au
laboratoire LARCA (ED 131) – Directeur de thèse
Sylvie BAUER -- Professeur -- Université Rennes 2 -- rattachée au
laboratoire ACE (EA 1796) – Examinatrice
Nicholas MANNING -- Professeur -- Université Grenoble Alpes -- rattaché
au laboratoire ILCEA4 (EA 613) – Rapporteur
Béatrice PIRE -- Maitresse de Conférences HDR -- Université Sorbonne
Nouvelle -- rattachée au laboratoire PRISMES (EA 4398) - Rapporteur

Titre : La représentation de l'intériorité dans les romans de Don DeLillo et Jay McInerney

Résumé :

Le but de ma thèse vise à l'analyse du rôle que l'espace intérieur joue dans le romans new-yorkaise de Don DeLillo et Jay McInerney.

Deux auteurs si différents l'un de l'autre, pourtant caractérisés par la même sensibilité dans la description de la ville à travers la multitude de ses lieux, particulièrement intéressés aux intérieurs peuplés par leurs personnages.

Les questions théoriques auxquelles j'ai essayé de donner des réponses sont essentiellement trois. Les deux premières sont de nature ontologique et concernent l'essence même de l'espace intérieur. Est-ce que l'intérieur d'un roman peut être un lieu capable de représenter une ville ? Ou je dirai mieux, est-ce l'intérieur peut avoir le même pouvoir d'un chemin et ne pas être seulement un des plusieurs lieux accessoires qui apparaissent plus pour une question d'achèvement que pour autre chose ? Et voilà, la deuxième question : si l'intérieur – comme on verra dans la réponse à la première question – aide dans la construction d'une représentation, de quel type de représentation s'agirait-il ? Et, pour conclure, sur le plan narratif, la troisième question : quelle est la fonction de l'intérieur au niveau de trame et quelle est la fonction de cette représentation dans la construction et l'évolution du personnage ?

Le défi, lors du traitement de deux auteurs en même temps, c'était l'analyse de la ville de New York comme on la voit à travers les romans, en négligeant l'espace extérieur, c'est à dire le chemin, pour me concentrer exclusivement sur les espaces intérieurs.

Du résultat on aperçoit que l'intérieur est un dispositif narratif qui impacte réellement la trame. A travers l'intérieur, on présente, concrètement, une double idée de la ville. La première que l'on pourrait définir *réelle et générale* et la deuxième *imaginaire et particulière*. Les deux idées entrent en relation l'une avec l'autre, ce que j'ai défini comme l'*opposition dynamique*, entre intérieur et extérieur : en intérieur les personnages, comme on verra, créant une représentation personnelle de la ville qui devra ensuite être testée à l'extérieur. Il s'agit d'un processus continu, une oscillation que continue tout au long de la narration. Cette opposition dynamique, que j'essaierai de démontrer, est le moteur caché

qui alimente la narration urbaine newyorkaise des deux auteurs, ainsi que l'expérience de la ville.

Voilà donc le véritable motif qui m'a encouragé à choisir DeLillo et McInerney après un long processus de lecture et d'analyse de différents auteurs et romans. Un fort impact se crée lorsqu'on découvre une liaison entre les textes analysés au sujet d'une résolution spéciale de la relation entre intérieur et extérieur. La résolution que j'ai nommé *opposition dynamique* existe en réalité dans leurs romans. Rien ne dit que cela existe ailleurs. Je crois, comme on verra dans la conclusion, que l'opposition dynamique constituera le chronotope du *Manhattan interior*. Un parmi plusieurs chronotopes métropolitains possibles. Si je devais, enfin, résumer dans une phrase la véritable raison qui m'a inspiré ce mémoire, est que DeLillo et McInerney, même si dans des situations totalement différentes, se fusionnent lorsque la création d'un chronotope narratif solide et efficace peut être utilisé, élargi, revisité même par d'autres auteurs.

Par le terme intérieur, que j'utilise tout au long du mémoire, je me réfère aux domiciles des protagonistes, plus en détail, des chambres et des lofts. Mon choix relatif au mot *intérieur* est lié à un sens plus vaste et capable d'inclure des aspects totalement différents. C'est un lieu où les personnages créent et recréent eux-mêmes en dessinant une image de la ville. Il s'agit d'un lieu de la ville que les personnages essaient d'arracher à la ville même. L'intérieur devient ainsi un lieu où on mène une activité domestique, un endroit où créer une œuvre d'art, un lieu à travers lequel on arrive à découvrir la ville et le lieu de l'esprit aussi.

Mots clefs : DeLillo, McInerney, New York, Chronotope, ville, littérature américaine, intérieur, chambre, loft

Title : The Representation of Interiority in the Novels of Don DeLillo and Jay McInerney

Abstract :

The purpose of my thesis is to analyze the role that interior space plays in the New York novels of Don DeLillo and Jay McInerney.

I chose these two authors because they are so, so different from each other, yet with the same sensitivity in telling the city through the abundance of its sites, with particular attention to the interiors inhabited by their characters.

the theoretical questions I have tried to answer are essentially three. The first two are ontological in nature and concern the very essence of the interior. Can the interior in a novel be a place capable of representing a city? Or rather, can the interior have the same power as a street and not be just one of the many accessory places that appear more for completeness than for anything else? And consequently, the second question: if the interior - as we will see in the answer to the first question - helps in the construction of a representation, what kind of representation will that be? And finally, at a narratological level, the third question: what is the function of the interior at the plot level and what is the function of this representation at the character construction and evolution level? The challenge was to analyze the New York of the two authors' novels by leaving aside the outside, i.e., the streets, to focus exclusively on the interior spaces.

The result is that the interior is a narrative device that actually acts on the plot. Through the interior, the reader is presented, concretely, with a double idea of the city. One that we could define as *real* and *general* and another *imaginary* and *particular*. The two ideas enter in relation with each other through what I have called the *dynamic opposition* between the interior and the exterior: in the interior the characters, as we shall see, construct a personal representation of the city that must then be tested outside. It is a continuous process, an oscillation that lasts throughout the narrative. This dynamic opposition, I will try to show, is the hidden engine that fuels the New York urban narrative of DeLillo and McInerney, as well as the experience of the city itself.

This is the last reason why I chose DeLillo and McInerney after a long initial process of reading and analyzing different authors and novels. The strong feeling was that what ties their texts together is this particular resolution of the relationship between inside and outside. The resolution I call *dynamic opposition* is something that exists in their novels. It doesn't necessarily exist elsewhere. I believe, as I will say in the conclusion, that dynamic opposition goes to constitute the chronotope of the *Manhattan interior*. One of the many possible metropolitan

chronotopes. So, if I had to summarize the reason for this thesis in one sentence, it would be that DeLillo and McInerney, though working from different situations, have come together to create a solid and effective narrative chronotope that can be used, modified, expanded and revisited by other authors. What, throughout the course of the thesis, I will call interiors, are obviously the houses in which the main characters live, more specifically, rooms and lofts. I decided, however, to use the term *interior* because I think it is a broader term capable of including different aspects. The interior, in fact, as it is used by the authors, has a function that goes beyond the domestic sphere. It is a place where the characters create and recreate themselves and in doing so create and recreate an image of the city. It is a place in the city that the characters try to take away from the city itself. A place where they can leave a trace of themselves. Characters are looking for a place in the interior, not only a home, but a place where they can fully express themselves. The interior thus becomes the place where to carry out a domestic activity, a place where to create an artistic work, a place through which to discover the city and also a place of the mind.

Keywords : DeLillo, McInerney, New York, Chronotope, city, american literature, interior, room, loft

Résumé

Le but ultime de ma thèse vise à l'analyse du rôle que l'espace intérieur joue dans la narration new-yorkaise. Au sein des études de théorie littéraire explorant la question urbaine, l'espace extérieur - en particulier la route et les interactions qu'y se déroulent, dictées par le mirobolant destin qui enveloppe l'âme chaotique de la métropole – a toujours été le centre de réflexions, apte à encadrer en arrière-plan les actions qui s'accomplissent dans les lieux habités par les personnages – voire des maisons, ou des simples chambres – pareil que d'évènements purement tangentiels, petites pièces autour d'une mosaïque bien plus complexe. Dans la littérature newyorkaise, en revanche, l'espace intérieur se voit tout de suite détaché du contexte pur, pour se qualifier immédiatement, comme espace d'observation, visant à représenter et à raconter, et à comprendre – possiblement - les mécanismes difficiles qui règlent la vie métropolitaine. Lorsqu'on essaie de donner un aperçu rapide et pas trop convaincant, il faut absolument tenir compte de l'importance du cadre intérieur newyorkais dans les ouvrages d'Henry James (ex.: le roman *Washington Square* ou la nouvelle *The Jolly Corner*) et d'Edith Wharton (ex.: *The House of Mirth*, ou *The Mother's Recompense*), n'oubliant pas Joseph McElroy (*Women and Men*), les nouvelles de Maeve Brennan (*I see you, Bianca*), les romans de Paula Fox (*Desperate Characters*), les ouvrages de Paul Auster (ex.: *The New York Trilogy*, *Moon Palace*, *The Brooklyn Follies*) ou écrit par Siri Hustvedt (*What I Loved*, *The Sorrows of an American*, *The Blazing World*, *Memories of the Future*), le roman *Martin Dressler – The Tale of an American Dreamer* par Steven Millhauser et aussi les romans de Michael Cunningham (à mentionner parmi tous, *By Nightfall*) et de Jonathan Lethem (ex.: *Chronic City*).

La raison de l'importance et l'intérêt des écrivains dédié aux espaces intérieurs lorsqu'il s'agit de raconter une ville telle que New York, se cache dans plusieurs raisons que ce mémoire essaiera de bien exprimer et expliquer.

Je commencerai par en introduire deux, car ils sont, à mon avis, les deux motifs fondamentaux sur lesquels se base le cadre théorique que j'essaierai de vous décrire.

Premièrement, je crois qu'il existe un problème pratique à ne jamais oublier. Habiter et trouver une chambre à New York – une métropole dont le noyau se trouve sur une île, c'est-à-dire sur un territoire avec des limites évidentes d'expansion – est bien difficile. Une chambre, spécialement à Manhattan, fait partie des rêves des voyageurs qui souhaiteraient vivre dans la ville de New York. Les rêves qui doivent franchir des limites physiques, et survivre à l'économie d'une ville visant à créer de plus en plus une distance entre les riches et le reste de la population. La sortie en 2014 de la collection d'essais et d'histoires *Tales of Two Cities. The Best & Worst of Times in Today's New York*, édité par John Freeman, a été essentiel pour visualiser comment un aspect littéraire – l'utilisation des intérieurs caractérisés par une fonction percutante au niveau de la trame – est causé et inspiré par un problème réel envahissant la vie quotidienne des new-yorkais : “The era of more affordable rents is gone, for now, and some writers show what – besides disposable income – has been lost with it” (p. XII).

Si une chambre à New York est un objectif concret et très difficile à rejoindre (et pas seulement aujourd'hui, ex. : *A Hazard of New Fortunes* de William Dean Howells), alors quel serait-il le meilleur prétexte pour activer le dispositif romanesque ?

Le deuxième motif, bien évidemment entrelacé au premier, se cache dans le fort pouvoir que le Skyline de New York opère sur l'imagination des gens, par ses millions de petites lumières allumées, se propageant des fenêtres de ses immenses gratte-ciels. Lorsqu'on observe une image de New York presque on espionne la vie des autres en les regardant de très près.

L'intérieur devient ainsi un espace qui allume notre imaginaire, qui invite la fantaisie. Et autour de l'intérieur deux mouvements prennent forme. Un mouvement de l'extérieur vers l'intérieur, bien exemplifié par l'essai *Ventanas de Manhattan* où l'écrivain espagnol Antonio Muñoz Molina explique comment le cadre des fenêtres se transforme en cadre de tableau à travers lequel l'observateur se perd dans la vie d'autrui, en se laissant charmer par des fragments de vie quotidienne perçus à peine. L'espace où l'esprit de ceux qui regardent, immédiatement construit des existences imaginaires, prêts tout de suite à tout faire juste pour vivre dans cette chambre. Probablement ceci est un geste de narration parmi les plus forts dont on est capable. Et les personnages des romans sélectionnés se trouveront à se projeter eux-mêmes vers une de ces fenêtres. L'autre mouvement, en revanche, est à l'opposé. De l'intérieur à l'extérieur. En regardant par cette fenêtre le monde apparaît bien plus lisible, plus compréhensible, plus gérable. Protégés par les quatre murs d'une chambre, dans un périmètre qui nous enferme, qui nous donne des faux espoirs d'autodéfinition, le chaos de la métropole nous effraye moins. Comme écrit par l'écrivain mexicaine Valeria Luiselli in *Collected Poems* (*The New Yorker*, 12/9/2014) : "Looking out of a window is, to some extent, like reading. Inside the frame of a window, of the page, events and their afterglow articulate and unfold in a single arrangement, an appreciate rhythm. There is a sort of window

syntax which perhaps renders the out there readable”. Dans l’espace réservé d’une chambre, nous trouverons les personnages occupés à faire le suivant : à construire et reconstruire une de leurs images de la ville. Une image que, selon Henry James, se forme à partir de qualités particulières offertes de la fente d’où se projette une vision du monde personnelle. J’espère donc que, grâce à ce double mouvement, on commencera à mieux comprendre que l’intérieur est un instrument fondamental de l’identité des personnages.

“What we see out our windows”, écrit l’écrivain Colum McCann (dans Matteo Pericoli, *The City Out My Window*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2009, p. 80), “is not always what other see. We must treat our windows like stories”. Et c’est ainsi que les écrivains qui ont écrit au sujet de New York, à partir des deux raisons indiquées, ont jeté leur regard sur la ville et ont fait en sorte que leurs personnages découvrent la ville même à travers ces deux mouvements. Le résultat, finalement, souligne le fait que l’idée de la ville se forme par des mouvements différents – entre autres, par ceux qui partent de l’extérieur et qui reviennent vers l’extérieur – qui s’accomplissent en deux grands moments d’expérience : le moment de l’extérieur et le moment de l’intérieur, ou bien plus symbolique, le temps du chemin et le temps de la chambre.

Et voilà dans ces pages-ci, une étude qui se sert des fenêtres réelles et imaginaires en se penchant précisément sur les intérieurs new-yorkais de deux auteurs : Don DeLillo et Jay McInerney. Deux auteurs si différents l’un de l’autre, pourtant caractérisés par la même sensibilité dans la description de la ville à travers la multitude de ses lieux, particulièrement intéressés aux intérieurs peuplés par leurs personnages.

Les questions théoriques auxquelles j'ai essayé de donner des réponses sont essentiellement trois. Les deux premières sont de nature ontologique et concernent l'essence même de l'espace intérieur. Est-ce que l'intérieur d'un roman peut être un lieu capable de représenter une ville ? Ou je dirai mieux, est-ce que l'intérieur peut avoir le même pouvoir d'un chemin et ne pas être seulement un des plusieurs lieux accessoires qui apparaissent plus pour une question d'achèvement que pour autre chose ? Et voilà, la deuxième question : si l'intérieur – comme on verra dans la réponse à la première question – aide dans la construction d'une représentation, de quel type de représentation s'agirait-il ? Et, pour conclure, sur le plan narratif, la troisième question : quelle est la fonction de l'intérieur au niveau de trame et quelle est la fonction de cette représentation dans la construction et l'évolution du personnage ?

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¹ Par le terme intérieur, que j'utilise tout au long de la thèse, je me réfère aux domiciles des protagonistes, plus en détail, des chambres et des lofts. Mon choix relatif au mot *intérieur* est lié à un sens plus vaste et capable d'inclure des aspects totalement différents. L'intérieur, en effet, comme utilisé par les auteurs, a sa fonction qui dépasse le milieu domestique. C'est un lieu où les personnages créent et recréent eux-mêmes en dessinant une image de la ville. Il s'agit d'un lieu de la ville que les personnages essaient d'arracher à la ville même. Un lieu où laisser son empreinte. Les personnages cherchent dans l'intérieur non seulement un foyer, mais aussi un lieu où s'exprimer pleinement. L'intérieur devient ainsi un lieu où on mène une activité domestique, un endroit où créer une œuvre d'art, un lieu à travers lequel on arrive à découvrir la ville et le lieu de l'esprit aussi.

Du résultat on aperçoit que l'intérieur est un dispositif narratif qui impacte réellement la trame. A travers l'intérieur, on présente, concrètement, une double idée de la ville. La première que l'on pourrait définir *réelle et générale* et la deuxième *imaginaire et particulière*. Les deux idées entrent en relation l'une avec l'autre, ce que j'ai défini comme l'*opposition dynamique*, entre intérieur et extérieur : en intérieur les personnages, comme on verra, créant une représentation personnelle de la ville qui devra ensuite être testée à l'extérieur. Il s'agit d'un processus continu, une oscillation que continue tout au long de la narration. Cette opposition dynamique, que j'essaierai de démontrer, est le moteur caché qui alimente la narration urbaine newyorkaise des deux auteurs, ainsi que l'expérience de la ville.

Voilà donc le véritable motif qui m'a encouragé à choisir DeLillo et McInerney après un long processus de lecture et d'analyse de différents auteurs et romans. Un fort impact se crée lorsqu'on découvre une liaison entre les textes analysés au sujet d'une résolution spéciale de la relation entre intérieur et extérieur. La résolution que j'ai nommé *opposition dynamique* existe en réalité dans leurs romans. Rien ne dit que cela existe ailleurs. Je crois, comme on verra dans la conclusion, que l'opposition dynamique constituera le chronotope du *Manhattan interior*. Un parmi plusieurs chronotopes métropolitains possibles. Si je devais, enfin, résumer dans une phrase la véritable raison qui m'a inspiré ce thèse, est que DeLillo et McInerney, même si dans des situations totalement différentes, se fusionnent lorsque la création d'un chronotope narratif solide et efficace peut être utilisé, élargi, revisité même par d'autres auteurs.

La thèse se divise en deux parties principales. Ma décision de commencer par les œuvres de DeLillo relève de l'utilisation des pièces à vivre dans ses romans – par rapport aux œuvres de McInerney qui s'étendent surtout aux décors et aux sujets traités – et m'a permis d'isoler la pièce de la métropole comme élément particulier en comparaison des autres lieux et des autres pièces, et grâce à cette première action et aux résultats obtenus on a pu observer les pièces des romans de McInerney. La première partie dédiée à DeLillo, en vérité, relève donc d'une double fonction. D'un côté, bien évidemment, on présente l'analyse du décor intérieur de l'auteur qu'il faut mettre en relation avec l'analyse de McInerney, relevé dans un deuxième temps, visant à définir - dans la conclusion- ce chronotope particulier. De l'autre côté, en revanche, il relève d'une fonction plutôt théorique lié au rôle général que l'intérieur aura au sein d'une narration romanesque. Il s'avère que le côté théorique est offert par la première partie consacrée à DeLillo ; il n'est pas accidentel, en effet, qu'il représente la partie plus longue et articulée, s'engageant autour du sujet de l'urbanisme.

Le plan du mémoire est ainsi conçu : un prologue, une partie consacrée à Don DeLillo, une partie à Jay McInerney et une conclusion.

Le prologue a la fonction de *montrer* au travers de l'analyse des images cinématographiques la façon dont le cadre intérieur puisse représenter un endroit essentiel de la narration urbaine. Le court métrage de Martin Scorsese *Life Lesson* raconte, en effet, une histoire typiquement newyorkaise sans presque jamais sortir du loft du peintre Lionel Dobie. Au travers de l'étude de la façon d'utiliser l'espace intérieur pour montrer les conflits entre les deux personnages et entre les personnages et la ville, le prologue veut idéalement suggérer au

lecteur une claire image de laquelle il est nécessaire de s'éloigner. Une espèce d'empreinte visuelle qui va accompagner le lecteur tout au long du mémoire.

La première section est consacrée à Don DeLillo et se divise en trois parties. Comme déjà mentionné, cette section dédiée à Don DeLillo s'adresse à des sujets qui vont au-delà de la métropole, car l'utilisation des pièces à vivre, soit comme dispositif narratif soit comme concept, trouve chez Don DeLillo une formulation bien complète. L'étude de la façon dont le cadre intérieur a été utilisé dans ses romans permet d'offrir un socle théorique solide au lecteur pour mieux comprendre comment l'espace intérieur est structuré et complexe, visant plusieurs aspects de la narration. La première partie, en effet, dont le titre est *Mental Aspect*, représente l'analyse de la transposition du cadre intérieur à l'idée de la pièce, un concept que DeLillo prend de l'expérience moderniste, capable d'influencer mentalement les personnages. La pièce devient tout d'abord une condition mentale. Les personnages de *Libra*, de *Mao II*, de *Running Dog*, parmi les romans analysés au sein de cette section, conçoivent leur esprit tel qu'une pièce, leur permettant de garder l'illusion d'un certain type de contrôle sur les objets. L'esprit tel qu'une pièce se transforme dans un espace restreint, fermé entre quatre murs, un espace plastique, où les pensées et les idées semblent se déplacer et gagnent au fur et à mesure de la consistance. Un espace où le personnage a presque la sensation d'être capable de manipuler non seulement des sensations, mais aussi les événements de la planète. Se concevoir comme une pièce qui se déplace dans l'univers permet d'avoir un certain niveau de protection, et les personnages peuvent lancer leurs plans d'actions dans cet univers, soit des *plans* politiques (ex.: Lee Harvey Oswald en *Libra*), ou bien des *plans* artistiques (ex.: Bill Gray en *Mao II*). L'échec de ces personnages nous

conduit à une première élaboration de la conception d'opposition dynamique. La deuxième partie, en revanche, est consacrée à l'utilisation du cadre intérieur tel qu'espace physique, architectoniquement concret. Dans cette partie, dont le titre est *The Physical Aspect*, on essaiera de voir comment l'espace intérieur devient pleinement un dispositif narratif qui affecte la trame de l'histoire. Dans le roman *Americana*, par exemple, la pièce permet au lecteur de voir précisément le désir caché qui influence le protagoniste. Dans *End Zone*, en revanche, la pièce devient essentielle car un des personnages principaux devient au final visible.

Dans cet espace physique et situé au sein de l'univers, la pièce qui relève des œuvres de DeLillo prend des formes et des fonctions diverses selon qu'il s'agit d'une chambre de motel, ou bien de la chambre d'un internat isolé dans le désert. Pour mieux comprendre, donc, la qualité spéciale d'un intérieur newyorkais, on a procédé grâce à la taxonomie de toutes les pièces présentes dans les œuvres de DeLillo. Grâce à cette démarche on arrive à la troisième et dernière partie de la section consacrée à DeLillo. Dans cette partie encore divisée en trois chapitres - le premier dédié à la ville de New York ainsi qu'on la représente dans les divers romans de l'auteur - on essaie de définir précisément la conception dite d'opposition dynamique qui trouvera son élaboration la plus complète dans l'analyse détaillée de *Cosmopolis*, le roman à lire parallèlement à l'ouvrage de Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. On relève ainsi, grâce à cette opposition dynamique qui pousse le protagoniste à entrer en contact avec la réalité de la ville, que ce roman apparaît comme un véritable geste d'amour et de résistance envers l'idée d'une ville physique et diversifiée.

Après avoir élaborer la notion d'opposition dynamique, on passe à la section consacrée à Jay McInerney, où on applique ladite notion à deux romans, en

particulier : *Bright Lights*, *Big City* et *Bright, Precious Day*. Ces deux romans représentent respectivement la deuxième et la troisième partie de la section. Ces deux romans, en effet, relèvent d'un double déplacement déjà mentionné, où l'intérieur est d'abord un lieu auquel on aspire. S'imaginer à l'intérieur d'une de ces milles fenêtres éclairées est en effet, le premier geste de conquête de la ville ; et ensuite, une fois le déplacement effectué, de l'extérieur à l'intérieur, cet endroit s'invite à l'observation de la ville, une espèce de filtre des expériences urbaines et un lieu de création d'une véritable identité urbaine. La première partie de la section de Jay McInerney est en revanche un chapitre générale autour de l'auteur, visant à l'usage des cadres intérieurs dans ses récits et dans ses romans. On a jugé nécessaire de se concentrer aux aspects généraux de l'auteur, car, contrairement à DeLillo, McInerney est un auteur qu'on étudie trop peu, dont les textes de critiques sont rares. Ce chapitre d'introduction veut donc représenter aussi une remarque critique au style dudit écrivain.

En conclusion de ce thèse voilà un chapitre dans lequel, d'une façon circulaire, on revient sur le visuel de l'appartement de Carrie Bradshaw dans *Sex and the City*, qui sert de résumé aux événements qui ont eu lieu jusqu'à ce moment-là, et qui permet finalement de parvenir à la définition du chronotope de *Manhattan Interior*. Et dans ce chronotope particulier, visant à régler la narration urbaine, ces deux auteurs enfin arrivent à fusionner dans la création d'un dispositif narratif commun.

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INTRODUCTION

I lived for several years in a studio apartment in the center of Turin; for no special reason, one day, I bought a painting: an aerial view of New York in black and white. It was clear that the picture had been taken at night. The painting, in fact, showed windows upon windows that pulsed with life.

I placed it right above the sofa bed, on the wall next to which my head used to lie when I slept.

Slowly, over time, I got into the habit of sleeping with my head on the other side, with my back to the windows: I was no longer interested in what was happening in the real, living city. During the night I would remain enchanted looking at that painting illuminated with the reflections of the light coming from outside. In my mind I imagined myself inside one of those windows, moving from one room to another. And New York outside.

So, I began to read novels set in New York and the first thing I realized was that in those novels there was the same desire I had to fully experience those rooms, to be, in short, part of the picture and therefore part of the city. In the novels I read, interiors occupied a decisive space.

I started to discover that a city is not only made up of the streets we walk on, *but* also the rooms we live in.

I was beginning to understand that in the novels a similar gesture to my own was made. In my interior, so far away, I represented in my mind a New York that was a sum of the memories of my travels to the city and something else, something that the interior itself provided. Something completely mine appeared in the image. The interior provided me with a new idea of the city. A representation where I was present. And the same was true for the characters of

the books I was reading. Even for them, who actually lived in the city, the interior helped to build another idea of the New York that just a moment before they had closed outside their door.

What was clear from the novels was that the idea of the city we live in is formed in these two areas: the outside and the inside. The streets and the rooms. I decided I wanted to explore this further and decided I would do so by relying on literature.

In New York literature the interior space is fundamental to observe, then to represent and narrate, and finally to try to understand the difficult mechanisms that regulate metropolitan life. Just to give a brief overview, by no means exhaustive, it is difficult not to consider the importance of a New York interior in the works of Henry James (think, for example, of the novel *Washington Square* or the short story *The Jolly Corner*) and Edith Wharton (for example, *The House of Mirth*, or *The Mother's Recompense*), passing through Joseph McElroy (*Women and Men*), Maeve Brennan's short stories (*I see you, Bianca*), Paula Fox's novels (*Desperate Characters*), those of Paul Auster (e.g.: *The New York Trilogy*, *Moon Palace*, *The Brooklyn Follies*) or those of Siri Hustvedt (*What I Loved*, *The Sorrows of an American*, *The Blazing World*, *Memories of the Future*), the novel *Martin Dressler - The Tale of an American Dreamer* by Steven Millhauser and also the novels of Michael Cunningham (among all, *By Nightfall*) and Jonathan Lethem (e.g., *Chronic City*). The reason for this importance and interest on the part of writers in interior space when it comes to narrating a city like New York City lies in multiple reasons that this thesis will attempt to explicate and then explain.

I introduce two of them here, precisely because they are, in my opinion, the two main reasons on which the whole theoretical framework I am going to construct is built.

I think, first of all, that there's a practical problem. Living and finding a room in New York - a metropolis that has its nucleus on an island, therefore on a territory with evident constraints of expansion - is difficult. A room, in Manhattan in particular, as we will see, is already part of those dreams that fill the baggage of those who are about to live in New York. A dream that in order to be realized must struggle not only with physical limitations, but also with the economy of a city that increasingly digs a gap between the rich and everyone else. The 2014 release of the collection of essays and short stories *Tales of Two Cities. The Best & Worst of Times in Today's New York*, edited by John Freeman, was essential in bringing into focus how one literary aspect - the use of interiors with a highly impactful plot-level function - was dictated and inspired (how much consciously or not is impossible to know) by a real problem enveloping the everyday life of a New Yorker: "The era of more affordable rents is gone, for now, and some writers show what - besides disposable income - has been lost with it" (p. XII). If a room in New York is a hard goal to achieve (and not just these days, see for example William Dean Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*), then what better pretext to activate the novelistic device?

The second reason, obviously intertwined with the first, lies in the strong power that the New York skyline has on people's imaginations and thus on fictional characters, a skyline that is composed of millions of bright lights, window lights. Looking at an image of New York is a bit like peering into the lives of others. The interior thus becomes a space that ignites the imagination, that stirs the imagination. And around the interior, two movements take place. One that

moves from the outside towards the inside, well exemplified by the essay *Ventanas de Manhattan*, in which the Spanish writer Antonio Muñoz Molina explains how the window frame becomes the exact frame of a painting through which the observer loses himself in the lives of others, allowing himself to be fascinated by those fragments of everyday life just perceived. Where the mind of the onlooker immediately constructs imaginary existences, finding himself immediately willing to do anything to live in that room. This is probably one of the strongest narrative gestures of which we are capable. And the characters of the chosen novels will at some point find themselves projecting towards one of these windows. The other movement, however, is the opposite. From inside to out. From a window the world appears more readable, more understandable, more manageable. Protected by the four walls of a room, within a perimeter that encloses us, that deludes us into defining ourselves, the chaos of the metropolis is less frightening. As Mexican writer Valeria Luiselli writes in *Collected Poems* (*The New Yorker*, 12/9/2014), “Looking out of a window is, to some extent, like reading. Inside the frame of a window, of the page, events and their afterglow articulate and unfold in a single arrangement, an appreciate rhythm. There is a sort of window syntax which perhaps renders the out there readable”. In the reserved space of a room, we will find the characters intent on doing this: on constructing and reconstructing their own image of the city. An image which, following Henry James, is formed from the particular qualities offered by the slit through which one’s vision of the world is projected. It begins, I hope, to become clear how, in this double movement, the interior is a fundamental instrument for the identity of the characters.

“What we see out our windows”, writes Colum McCann (in Matteo Pericoli, *The City Out My Window*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2009, p. 80), “is not always

what others see. We must treat our windows like stories". And so the writers who have written about New York, starting from the two reasons listed, have looked at the city and have made their characters experience the city also through these two urban movements.

And so here are these pages, this long study through real and imaginary windows of New York's interiors by two authors: Don DeLillo and Jay McInerney.

I chose these two authors because they are so, so different from each other, yet with the same sensitivity in telling the city through the abundance of its sites, with particular attention to the interiors inhabited by their characters.

Aware that I am dealing with two authors who express an almost exclusively heterosexual and masculine experience and knowing that therefore the analysis could present other developments and solutions, I accordingly chose to surround myself with a set of references as consistent as possible with the world expressed by the authors.

Beyond the fascination and interest aroused by personal experience, which I believe is essential for the start of any literary investigation, the theoretical questions I have tried to answer are essentially three. The first two are ontological in nature and concern the very essence of the interior. Can the interior in a novel be a place capable of representing a city? Or rather, can the interior have the same power as a street and not be just one of the many accessory places that appear more for completeness than for anything else? And consequently, the second question: if the interior - as we will see in the answer to the first question - helps in the construction of a representation, what kind of representation will that be? And finally, at a narratological level, the third

question: what is the function of the interior at the plot level and what is the function of this representation at the character construction and evolution level? I chose these two authors first because, given the number of novels set in New York, it was necessary to make a selection. In narrowing the field, I decided to limit myself to these two authors in order to have the space necessary to investigate them as thoroughly as possible; because their characters have certain characteristics in common (predominantly male characters, white, heterosexual and belonging to a certain social sphere, quite privileged) which again allowed me to investigate in depth the condition of a certain social category, one could say at the end of this thesis that the relationship that DeLillo and McInerney's characters have with the interiors they inhabit is an index of a constantly worsening crisis of the contemporary white American male, incapable of changing his pace to follow the renewed pace of the world, and for this reason unable to know and recognize his own limits, always ready to find refuge in illusions. And the rooms, as we will see, are perfect places to carefully construct one's illusions and escape routes. Then, because they are profoundly New Yorkers and then because, beyond their strong personal and creative relationship with the city itself, they are truly at opposite ends of the spectrum. And I believe that it is even more significant to bring out the strength of an interior precisely by relating two narrative conceptions that differ so much. By studying the peculiarities of the two, and then noting the differences and comparing them, the result should be more striking and perhaps, I hope, more structured, perceptible and visible.

Moreover, perhaps more than the others, the two authors have - as they wrote their novels - defined more and more this line that holds the metropolitan experience together, the line that connects the outside and the inside and vice

versa. The line along which the plot moves. In their journey there's a growth in the increasingly productive use of interior space that I have not encountered elsewhere. From *Great Jones Street* to *Cosmopolis* for DeLillo and from *Bright Lights, Big City* to *Bright, Precious Days* for McInerney, one can sense how the treatment of interior space in purely urban novels evolves to such an extent that, as I will try to demonstrate, the *final* two novels stand as two excellent examples for fully grasping the profound function that the interior can play in a narrative that wants to represent the urban experience as comprehensively as possible

The challenge was to analyze the New York of the two authors' novels by leaving aside the outside, i.e., the streets, to focus exclusively on the interior spaces.

The result is that the interior is a narrative device that actually acts on the plot. Through the interior, the reader is presented, concretely, with a double idea of the city. One that we could define as *real* and *general* and another *imaginary* and *particular*. The two ideas enter in relation with each other through what I have called the *dynamic opposition* between the interior and the exterior: in the interior the characters, as we shall see, construct a personal representation of the city that must then be tested outside. It is a continuous process, an oscillation that lasts throughout the narrative. This dynamic opposition, I will try to show, is the hidden engine that fuels the New York urban narrative of DeLillo and McInerney, as well as the experience of the city itself.

This is the last reason why I chose DeLillo and McInerney after a long initial process of reading and analyzing different authors and novels. The strong feeling was that what ties their texts together is this particular resolution of the relationship between inside and outside. The resolution I call *dynamic opposition* is something that exists in their novels. It doesn't necessarily exist elsewhere. I believe, as I will say in the conclusion, that dynamic opposition goes to constitute

the chronotope of the *Manhattan interior*. One of the many possible metropolitan chronotopes. So, if I had to summarize the reason for this thesis in one sentence, it would be that DeLillo and McInerney, though working from different situations, have come together to create a solid and effective narrative chronotope that can be used, modified, expanded and revisited by other authors

What, throughout the course of the thesis, I will call interiors, are obviously the houses in which the main characters live, more specifically, rooms and lofts. I decided, however, to use the term *interior* because I think it is a broader term capable of including different aspects. The interior, in fact, as it is used by the authors, has a function that goes beyond the domestic sphere. It is a place where the characters create and recreate themselves and in doing so create and recreate an image of the city. It is a place in the city that the characters try to take away from the city itself. A place where they can leave a trace of themselves. Characters are looking for a place in the interior, not only a home, but a place where they can fully express themselves. The interior thus becomes the place where to carry out a domestic activity, a place where to create an artistic work, a place through which to discover the city and also a place of the mind.

This thesis is divided into two parts. I decided to start with DeLillo because it was through the use of the rooms within his novels - which, unlike McInerney's, range more widely in both settings and themes - that I was able to isolate the room of the metropolis as a particular element with respect to the other places and rooms, and from this first operation and the results obtained it was then possible to go on to observe the rooms of McInerney's novels. The first part dedicated to DeLillo, in truth, has a double function. On the one hand, of course,

it presents the analysis of the author's interiors to be then linked to McInerney's later one with the aim of going of defining the particular chronotope in the conclusion, on the other hand, it plays a more theoretical function on the general role that the interior usually plays in a fictional narration. We can say that the theoretical support is provided precisely by the first part dedicated to DeLillo, it is no coincidence, in fact, that it is the longest and most articulated part, going to touch on issues beyond the urban issue.

Given the complexity of his work, I isolated the different interiors used by the author in his novels. For Don DeLillo, the interior is embodied in the idea of the room: the room both as a configuration of the mind and as a properly physical room. In his novels, physical interiors can be divided into three categories: the rooms of remote places, motel rooms, and New York rooms. It is thanks to this taxonomy of interiors that it has been possible to define the function of the metropolitan interior in DeLillo's work: the New York room is an attempt to assimilate the whole into one single entity and is realized in the allegory of the *Passage*: the image of an entire city being brought back inside. Where the city is initially taken for granted, the room is a place of absence in the presence of the city. The room is the place where one attempts to overcome the city, to incorporate it within oneself.

The second part is devoted entirely to Jay McInerney. In the initial chapter the interior is treated in a general way as it appears in his works, the last two chapters, instead, analyze the role of the interior in two specific novels: *Bright Lights, Big City* and *Bright, Precious Days*.

The interior in McInerney's work is all about division, about a clean break. The interior is the stage where a performance takes place. The interior is the place where one can find relief. It is the place where resistance is softened, and the

place where a strategy of living is defined. The interior serves to attest to a presence in the absence of the city and is realized in the allegory of the *Diorama* and the *Panorama*. The interior is the place where one tries to be accepted by the city.

Passages, *Diorama* and *Panorama* are images that I have taken from the work of Walter Benjamin and that I have tried to update by inserting into a contemporary context. Being dialectical images, these three are capable of summarizing the concepts that I am going to express in a snapshot.

Walter Benjamin's work has been the theoretical and philosophical guide that has supported me throughout the elaboration and the drafting phases. I believe that his work on the metropolis is still unsurpassed and perhaps unsurpassable. What I have tried to do (a challenging ambition for sure) is to follow in my reasoning his way of thinking and looking at things, always with the awareness of the almost secular (and geographical-cultural) distance that separates his works from those I have analyzed.

Essential was Nathalie Cochoy's book, *Passante à New York*. In my focus, I tried to work only on the interior, in dynamic opposition with her text, which, on the other hand, provided an indispensable support to understand the function of the exterior and to understand the representation of New York in the history of American literature.

On a narratological level, there are many authors I have relied on, one in particular I would like to mention here: Franco Moretti. His essays on the relationship between the metropolis and the novel were the spark that set off my interest in these themes. In particular, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*, directed my methodological choices, which focused on the spatio-temporal analysis of the urban landscape, giving preeminence to space, always, however,

in relation to time, being of the same idea as Evelina Calvi, according to whom a space becomes a place when it is the product of a mutual interconnection of space and time. The interior, as I have understood it, is a space in the city that the characters transform into place. In the dominant trend toward homogeneity in urban space, the interior becomes a place where DeLillo and McInerney try to maintain a certain degree of heterogeneity, going against even the characters themselves, as in the case of Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis*.

Following Bertrand Westphal's text, *La Géocritique. Réel, fiction, espace*, I used the principles of geocriticism in my analyses, preferring a more thematical reading of the texts over a linguistic one. Thus, I worked in an interdisciplinary way, trying to bring into dialogue the work of authors such as de Certeau and Foucault - who associated the rhetoric of displacement with a reflection on the presence of the body in a social space governed by authority - with the work of urbanists such as Zukin, Virilio, Soja and Lefebvre, which was essential to understand how space is both total and broken, global and fractured, and all depends on how it is conceived, perceived and experienced. Alongside these, I placed the work of Genette and Barthes, believing that the structuralist approach to the text was the best way to frame and regulate the dialogue of authors from different fields around the novels. Dynamic opposition is indeed a concept, as well as a way of understanding time and space in the city, but it is also a narrative device that only a structuralist reading of the text could bring out.

This thesis therefore is in the vein of studies that focus on the spatial relations of characters and their construction of a place from a part of inhabited space. Finally, I believe that novels can provide a contribution to geohistory, and can be useful readings for an understanding of the space we inhabit.

Before concluding, a clarification regarding *the great absent*, that is September 11th and the tragedy of the Twin Towers, is needed. It is absent for several reasons. It is a very complex theme, with multiple layers and branches, which would have been impossible to encapsulate in *a* chapter within a thesis. It's a theme that, on a literary level, has, in my opinion, already received a rather large amount of space and I couldn't have added anything of my own to the reflection. It would therefore have been *an* accessory chapter, and this would have terribly debased its scope, also risking taking me off-topic. Finally, but this is my personal opinion, I believe that, at the literary level, the importance of the event was extemporaneous, and in the case of the two authors I analyzed, it was resolved in the span of one novel (*Falling Man* and *The Good Life*) and then found no other space in further works.

Finally, I believe that each study must find its meaning not so much in the answers identified, but in the questions that the concrete and final work of writing inevitably brings to the surface, leaving to the conclusion the task not of a closure, but of an opening.

The questions I would like to find answers to, once I reach the end of this journey, are many. I leave some of them here, right away in the introduction, precisely because they are questions that arise from the explicit limits of this research work.

How does the interior function in metropolitan writing when the writer is not a straight, white, male writer? What is the function of the interior when you leave the island of Manhattan and move to the other districts, like, say, the Bronx, or Harlem? What role does it play with respect to the city and with respect to the characters? How is it used? What is its meaning, its function?

The plan of the thesis is as follows: a prologue, a part devoted to Don DeLillo, a part devoted to Jay McInerney, and a conclusion.

The prologue has the function of *showing*, through the analysis of cinematographic images, how an interior can be an essential place of urban narration. Martin Scorsese's short film *Life Lesson* tells, in fact, a typical New York story without practically ever leaving the loft of painter Lionel Dobie. Through the study of how the interior space is used to conflate the conflicts between the two characters and between the characters and the city, the prologue ideally wants to provide the reader with a clear image from which to start. A kind of visual imprint that should accompany along the reading of the entire thesis.

The first section is devoted to Don DeLillo and is divided into three parts. As already anticipated, this section dedicated to Don DeLillo goes into areas beyond the metropolis, because the use of the room, both as a narrative device and as a concept, finds a complete formulation in Don DeLillo. The study of how the interior has been used in his novels provides a solid theoretical basis for the reader to understand how interior space is a structured space, a complex space that affects multiple aspects of the narrative. In the first part, in fact, entitled *Mental Aspect*, we will see how the interior declined in the idea of the room, a concept that DeLillo retrieves from the modernist experience, has its influence on the mental level of the characters. The room becomes first of all a mental condition. The characters of *Libra*, of *Mao II*, of *Running Dog*, among the novels analyzed in this section, conceive their mind as a room, this allows them to maintain the illusion of having a certain level of control over things. The mind as a room becomes a confined space, enclosed between four walls, a plastic space, where thoughts and ideas seem to move acquiring consistency. Where the

character almost has the feeling of being able to maneuver not only sensations, but also the facts of the world. Conceiving of oneself as a room that moves through the world provides a degree of protection, and the characters can then initiate their plans to intervene in the world, whether these are political *plans* (see Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra*), or artistic plans (see Bill Gray in *Mao II*). The failure of these characters will lead us to an initial elaboration of the concept of dynamic opposition. The second part, instead, is dedicated to the use of the interior as a physical, architecturally concrete space. In this part, entitled *The Physical Aspect*, we will go on to see how interior space is in effect a narrative device that affects the plot of the story. In the novel *Americana*, for example, it is a room that allows the reader to visualize precisely what is the hidden desire that moves the protagonist. In *End Zone*, on the other hand, the room becomes essential for one of the main characters to eventually become visible.

As a physical space situated in the world, the room in DeLillo's work takes on different characteristics and functions depending on whether it is a motel room, or a room in an isolated college in the desert. To understand, then, the particular quality of a New York interior, I proceeded with a taxonomy of all the rooms in DeLillo's work. This allowed us to arrive at the third and final part of the section dedicated to DeLillo. In this part, in turn divided into three chapters - the first dedicated to New York as it is represented in the various novels of the author - I will define precisely the concept of dynamic opposition that will find its complete elaboration in the detailed analysis of *Cosmopolis*, the novel is read in parallel with the work of Benjamin *The Arcades Project*. It turns out that precisely because of the dynamic opposition that forces the protagonist to come into contact with the realities of the city, the novel is a true act of love and resistance towards the idea of a physical and heterogeneous city.

Having thus elaborated the concept of dynamic opposition, we move on to the section devoted to Jay McInerney, where this concept is applied in particular to two novels: *Bright Lights, Big City* and *Bright, Precious Day*. These two novels make up the second and third parts of the section, respectively. The two novels, in fact, develop precisely that double movement already anticipated earlier, where the interior is first a place to which one tends, because imagining oneself inside one of those thousand illuminated windows is the first act of conquering the city, and subsequently, once the passage has taken place, from the outside to the inside, here it becomes a place of observation of the city, a place for filtering urban experiences and a place for constructing one's own urban identity. The first part of Jay McInerney's section is instead a general chapter on the author, with, of course, the focus always on the use of interiors in his stories and novels. It was deemed necessary to dwell on general aspects of the author, since, unlike DeLillo, McInerney is an understudied author, with scarce critical texts, and this initial chapter is also meant to be a critical contribution on the writer's style. To close the thesis a concluding chapter, where, in a sort of circularity, we return to a visual image of Carrie Bradshaw's apartment in *Sex and the City*, to summarize everything that has been said and thus finally arrive at the definition of the chronotope of the *Manhattan Interior*. It is in the particular chronotope that governs the urban narrative that the two authors finally converge in the construction of a common narrative device.

New York Inside a Loft: Martin Scorsese's *Life Lesson*

Before I begin my analysis of the two main authors' texts and actually enter the many rooms of the novels, I would like to indulge in a brief overlook on a short film by Martin Scorsese. There are two reasons for this. The first one is a visual reason, through the ekphrasis of the film I would like to provide the reader with a visual image of what I mean by representing a city through the use of an interior. So that it can, in some way, be a sort of figurative guide.

The second reason is to begin to introduce the themes that will recur throughout the whole thesis. First, the repeated use of the "iris effect" - which belongs to the formal sphere - punctuates the entire story and shows how the interior depends on a subject who inhabits it, with respect to his own limited vision and in function of this. Therefore, in narrating the city from the inside, the all-encompassing vision narrows down. It is no longer an overview, but a reduced (and opaque) focus that shows the city through the particular interiority of the character who is experiencing it. It is a double representation, because as the author, moving through the interior, uses the character to get to the city, so the character uses the street and then the room to get to what is in effect his own representation of the city.

There is the loft: a peculiar living space that directs the plot, and that at the same time becomes a metaphor for a conception of living that articulates time and space according to what we will define in the conclusion as the *chronotope* of the metropolitan room. Then there is art, the conflict between the intrusions of the external world and the attempt to make the interiority impermeable to them in the moments of creation. And finally, there is the suspicion, in the lack of exteriors in the short film, of a possible tension, should interior/room and

exterior/road be put in relation. It is more than a suspicion actually, as I will try to demonstrate throughout this thesis, because there is in fact an opposition, which we will go on to call a dynamic opposition and which makes the writing of the chosen novels possible.

Lionel Dobie is a famous painter in crisis. He is preparing the paintings for his next personal exhibition, but without his lover-assistant the creative vein seems to fade. Too bad that she is thinking not only of leaving him, but also of leaving New York. The character, played by Nick Nolte, is the protagonist of the first episode, *Life Lesson*, of the collective film called *New York Stories* released in 1989.

The other two episodes are: *Life Without Zoe* directed by Francis Ford Coppola, written with his daughter Sofia, which is the story of a rich little girl who lives alone in a luxury hotel and who one day finds herself having to help her father, a famous flutist, return a jewel to an Arab princess, and *Oedipus Wreck*, directed by Woody Allen, story of a complicated relationship between an omnipresent Jewish mother and her son, a lawyer who is unable to build a private life because of his mother's constant interference.

Although the last two episodes present evocative images of the city, showing the characters interacting with the various places of the metropolis, the first episode, written by Richard Price and directed, of course, by Martin Scorsese, proves to be the most representative for the image of the city.

The first short film succeeds in showing in depth what it really means to live inside a metropolis like New York, when inside means just being as close as possible to the heart of the city, being an active part of it, interacting with all the factors that determine the unique style of the city.

Life Lesson, in its failure to show the city directly, except through the windows of Dobie's loft, marks an important step in the representation of the metropolis. The city, in the representation that the short film proposes, is completely internalized. The city is revealed not so much as a solid external architecture or as an interaction between characters and external, concrete physical spaces, but it shows and reveals itself through the interiority of the characters: in their lifestyle we find the style of the city. In their way of acting, reacting, in the problems they face, we find New York. To say that the city is now completely internalized means that we can deduce it from the behavior of the characters, that we no longer need to see it in the foreground in its particular architectural elements. It is the interiority of the characters that shows the character of New York.

Interiors thus become the continuation of the characters' interiority and the space where this is revealed often, as in the episode filmed by Scorsese, goes hand in hand with artistic production. The plot of the short film is, in fact, all about the making of a painting for Lionel Dobie's next exhibition. At first, the huge blank canvas is smeared with a few incomprehensible black marks, more dictated by frustration at the lack of inspiration. Dobie, offering room and board and *life lessons*, convinces young artists, just arrived from outside, to move to his place, using them as real muses and to exploit them both artistically and sexually². As in the case of Paulette³. Absent at the beginning, when the canvas is still

² The short film is a New York re-actualization of the myth of Pygmalion, and is influenced by the diaries of Polina Suslova, Dostoevsky's lover.

³ Paulette is played by Rosanna Arquette. Already protagonist, in 1985, of another film by Scorsese shot in New York, *After Hours*. In the film she plays Marcy Franklin, the girl who picks up Paul Hackett in a bar and who, by dragging him into her loft, will give life to the protagonist's nocturnal odyssey. *After Hours* is another film in which Scorsese pays a lot of attention to the interiors in his portrayal of the city. Real worlds where you

blank, her presence eventually inspires Dobie for the final realization of the painting. Her exit from the scene will coincide with the conclusion of the painting and its exhibition at the museum, where Dobie will meet another girl to whom he will offer the same things offered to Paulette.

There are two elements on which we will focus: the first one is the representation of the skyline, the filmic image of the city, the exterior; the second one concerns the forces that govern the city, determining the spatiality of the painter's apartment, the interior.

Skyline

The episode shows New York by subtraction, we only see what the windows of the artist's loft allow us a glimpse of New York. Never completely in focus, in the background, however, the skyline that is shown is unmistakably the New York skyline, both to a distracted and a careful eye.

grasp the essence of the city and its different facets. The director's ability to use interiors as places where the strong concentration of the city's features, accentuated and agitated by the closed space of the walls, provokes a continuous fission, capable of releasing unthinkable energies, perhaps stems from his childhood in Little Italy: "Puisque Martin est asthmatique, il passe beaucoup de temps chez lui, où il observe la vie de la rue depuis sa fenêtre, dans ce secteur étroitement délimité du Lower Manhattan", Kristina Jasper and Nils Warnecke, *Dans New York*, in *Martin Scorsese*, La Cinématèque Française, Silvana Editoriale, 2016, p. 80. Locked in his apartment, Martin begins to take pictures, and although he does not consider himself a good photographer, these are the first experiments to arrive later in cinema: "Les premières photos que j'ai prises l'ont été du troisième étage, de l'escalier de secours. J'ai vu beaucoup de choses de ce point de vue", Jasper, Warnecke, *Ibid*, p. 82. If the point of view resembles the view of the writer suggested by Henry James in his *House of Fiction* theory, which we will discuss later, it remains to be noted that in some photographs, such as that of the buildings on Elizabeth Street, the buildings, emptied of all human presence, seem to lead visually back to the photographic experience of Stieglitz and his circle.

First of all, the viewer's vision of the skyline is a view from above, which immediately suggests the location of the apartment in a city where buildings exceed certain heights. In addition to this, the view from above overlooks rooftops, but it is also at the same time overlooked by taller buildings. We are therefore in an area where height and verticality are the characteristic traits: Manhattan. Identification is helped both by the fact that Dobie explicitly says he is in New York, but also by those windows and the large living space without partition walls, that denote that apartment as a loft. What is more, Dobie is an artist, as well as the first inhabitant of lofts, which were born after the deindustrialization of factories and became, at the beginning, spaces dedicated precisely to artistic production.

The film is shot and set in the late eighties and lofts are still directly traceable, as far as the United States is concerned, to New York, where they were born in the early seventies, "this new housing style emerged along the canals of Amsterdam, near the London Docks, and in the old sweatshop districts of New York [...] But lofts really are an American phenomenon"⁴. And it was artists, painters like Dobie, who made lofts attractive, both commercially and aesthetically⁵. Scorzese relies on the clear picture that those who watch the film already have in their mind: in some ways, the painter in New York in his loft is already a cliché.

The viewer is immediately familiar with the idea of being in New York, and while the camera projects the viewer inside the apartment, spying on Dobie's work,

⁴ Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living. Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, Rutgers University Press, 2014, p. 1.

⁵ "Until the 1970's, living in a loft was considered neither chic nor comfortable - if the possibility was considered at all. [...] By the end of the decade, when photographs and descriptions of artists' lofts began to reach a wider public of magazine readers, the journalists declared that loft living had panache", Zukin, (2014), p. 58-62

the immediate perception is that the city outside, or rather the background, is New York. It doesn't need anything else to fit perfectly inside the city.

We therefore have a view from above, a view that at the same time is cluttered with even greater heights, indicative of a great density of tall buildings, and that, therefore, continually resizes the height of the viewpoint. Giving back to the viewer the sensation of being obviously high up, but that, at the same time, there will always be a higher place to look from, denying that vision capable of encompassing the whole city in a single glance, an overlook that manages to identify its limits. From the windows of Dobie's loft, the city is potentially infinite.

The view through the windows of a loft is a filtered view from a space that the viewer already perceives and recognizes as New York. But what is the skyline seen through the windows? And how is it seen?

The skyline you see from the loft windows is the classic New York skyline, made of buildings and windows in series. But what is meant by "classic"?

In his *Imaging New York City*, Christoph Lindner makes an important point about New York City and cinema:

Following the rise of narrative cinema and the relocation of the American film industry to Hollywood in the 1910s, the narrative potential of New York - so vividly suggested by the modern skyline - starts to become realized in films like *Traffic in Souls* (1913), *The Shock Punch* (1925), *New York* (1927), and *Speedy* (1928), leading to the creation of a mythic, cinematic version of the city that continues even today, through the

films of Woody Allen, Spike Lee, and Martin Scorsese, to dominate the popular perception of New York worldwide⁶.

It is therefore the image that followed the development - which began at the end of the nineteenth century - in vertical architecture, with the construction of skyscrapers, producing: *the modern skyline*, which immediately became the icon in the figurative representation of New York. The skyscraper has become the symbol of the city par excellence; the seemingly endless succession of tall buildings, that hypnotizing jumble of windows, like an almost unlimited army of possible lives, which, as Henry James wrote in *New York Revisited*, are “standing up to the view, from the water, like extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted”⁷. Showing the skyline of the city means showing the skyscrapers, the density and verticality of these constructions. The speed and efficiency and voracity of the city have made Manhattan the source of inspiration for viewers of an ecstasy of architecture⁸.

This is exactly what Lionel Dobie’s loft windows show: a choice that grounds itself in the filmic tradition associated with the city, which had among its founders the photographer Alfred Stieglitz and his circle, including Alvin

⁶ Christoph Lindner, *Imagining New York City. Literature, Urbanism, and the Visual Arts, 1890-1940*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015, p. 81

⁷ Henry James, *The American Scene*, George Bell & Son, London, 1907, p. 76.

⁸ “Manhattan has generated a shameless architecture that has been loved in direct proportion to its defiant lack of self-hatred, respected exactly to the degree that it went too far. Manhattan has consistently inspired in its beholders *ecstasy about architecture*. [...] Manhattanism is the one urbanistic ideology that has fed, from its conception, on the splendors and miseries of the metropolitan condition - hyper-density - without once losing faith in it as the basis for a desirable modern culture. *Manhattan’s architecture is a paradigm for the exploitation of congestion*”, Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1994, p. 10.

Langdon Coburn, Edward Steichen, Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler. Eminent artists that were maybe not the first to photograph skyscrapers, but the first to use the developing skyline not for commercial purposes, but for artistic ones. As Lindner explains, “through his numerous photographs of skyscrapers and skylines, which sought not only to document urban change but also to develop a new urban aesthetic, Stieglitz helped to establish New York’s vertical architecture as a subject of artistic study”⁹.

Thus, was born the fascination of visual art, from photography to cinema, for the skyscraper, capable in its figurative charge of incorporating the ambition of the city, the past, the present and the future at the same time. Progress, ambition and alienation, all themes that are peculiar to the city. Henry James, who likened the tops of the buildings to “the flanks and the summits of emergent mountain masses”, understood this well¹⁰, especially when he had the opportunity to visit the interior:

And I became conscious of the force with which this vision of their prodigious working, and of the multitudinous life, as if each were a swarming city in itself, that they are capable of housing [...] Each of these huge constructed and compressed communities, throbbing, through its myriad arteries and pores, with a single passion, even as a complicated watch throbs with the one purpose of telling you the hour and the

⁹ Lindner, p. 65

¹⁰ James, (1907), p. 81

minute, testified overwhelmingly to the character of New York¹¹.

The skyscraper thus becomes a metonym for New York. Showing the skyscrapers in the urban skyline, equals to showing New York, showing its character. Henry James moves inside to verify what he already suspected by looking at the towers from outside. This is the power of the skyscraper, to suggest simply through its monumental presence, the strong charge of the city, which like an inflexible clock marks the incessant flow of time and progress. The beat of an exuberant heart, always excited, always in search of novelty, never satiated, never exhausted. This is the city of New York, but this is also the skyscraper, in its continuous evolutions, in the demolitions and reconstructions that have been taking place rapidly for more than a century. The image of the skyscraper is thus defined as “suspended in a state of indeterminacy”, as in Stieglitz’s photo, *City of Ambition*, which shows the skyline of Lower Manhattan, taken from the East River, as “a barricade of modern architecture dominated by the dark silhouettes of vertical towers” where “the vertical form of the skyscrapers continues to be distanced and defamiliarized, looming in the background like some spectral apparition”¹².

Architectural styles change, but this representation of New York and Manhattan where the skyline is dominated by verticality and by the sense of distance that this suggests, will not be so easily modified in the years to come. The outside appearance resembles an impenetrable monolith, but inside, an entire city reveals itself in its frenetic daily life. The set of tall buildings and countless windows has

¹¹ James, (1907), p. 82

¹² Lindner, p. 71 - 75

become the image capable of synthesizing the city, or rather, a part of the city. The one that can be traced back to Manhattan. The subsequent standardization of the figurative panorama of New York has led to an excessive stylization, as for example can be seen in some musicals of the thirties, where only a background with the appearance of a constellation of windows of several skyscrapers was enough to evoke the idea of New York. As if to say: I'll show a landscape full of skyscrapers and this is enough to say: we are definitely in New York.

From Stieglitz's photos, which focused on the strengths of the skyscraper, capable of illuminating several aspects of New York life, to the use that has now become customary in films of these landscapes of steel and light, the first strong internalization of the city took place. It starts from the photos of Stieglitz, which showed, even in the title, the skyscraper in detail, with its name, differentiated from the indistinct mass, then it gradually opens up to a broader view moving towards anomie, where it becomes increasingly difficult to identify the exact skyscraper with its precise topographical position. The image of the skyscraper has therefore become devitalized, becoming a simulacrum introjected into the imagination of millions of viewers, who just need a visual hint of a shape that resembles a skyscraper, no matter which one, no matter if imaginary or real, to immediately be projected somewhere in Manhattan.

A few years before the release of Scorsese's short film, Baudrillard wrote in his book *America*. "Il ne faut donc pas aller de la ville à l'écran, mais de l'écran à la ville pour en saisir le secret"¹³.

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *Amérique*, Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1986, pp. 111-112.

Scorsese, bringing back the figurative tradition of the city, showing this panorama of buildings distanced from the heart of the scene, like specters appearing *in the background*, puts the spectator in the condition of really being able to understand the city. He does this by moving the attention and the action inwards, *inside*, not only of the film, but of the city itself, entering one of these windows, but always leaving the background there, so that the viewer, through imagination, can move *outwards*, towards the city, both within the film and in reality, thus coming to understand some aspects of the city's character through what is happening just inside the room. It is the city that moves into an interior. The stereotyped image of the city takes on a three-dimensionality precisely in the counterpoint between the static, gray tones of the skyline, and the dynamism of the story that takes place inside the apartment which, in its development of themes linked to New York lifestyle, gives vitality to the background, which immediately is no longer the background, but becomes New York¹⁴.

The skyline, as already mentioned, is always vague, so much so that it becomes difficult even with a thorough analysis of the frame to recognize the various buildings that appear, but we can grasp the architectural details typical of New York buildings. We can spot three peculiar characteristics. The first one appears in the building that can be seen while Dobie is painting. Its external composition

¹⁴ The skyscraper becomes an icon of the city not only for its size which inspires, as already mentioned, ambition and progress, but also for its windows. For the endless theory of windows that chase each other and that have always fascinated and inspired artists, from Hopper to Katz. The Spanish writer Antonio Muñoz Molina dedicated a book to Manhattan windows, *Ventanas de Manhattan*: "That's why I am so surprised and delighted by the large windows of Manhattan, large, rectangular, unobstructed, made to admit the outside world into the apartments, revealing in each building, as in separate chapters or illustrations, the lives and occupations of those who inhabit them..." (traduction by me)

recalls the architecture of the Plaza, as well as that of the Woolworth Building. The first one built in 1907 and the other in 1913, the period in which the construction of skyscrapers intensified, they symbolize the birth of the Manhattan skyline that later became an icon of the city. These are the first skyscrapers to enter the imagination. Large masses, angular windows, light-colored bricks and no balconies. Rem Koolhaas writes: “The Woolworth does not actually contribute any radical modifications or breaks to the life of the city, but it is supposed to work miracles through the emanation of its physical presence”¹⁵.

Architecture, in its structural realization, meets the artistic image that began with Sieglitz’s photos. So, the enormous building that can be seen at the side of the canvas transmits precisely to the spectator the sensation of enormity accompanied by weightlessness, and in this it is helped by the juxtaposition with the gigantic, yet suspended in the artistic act, body of Dobie, played by the massive Nick Nolte. The building and the artist enter a visual symbiosis.

That building is the only one you can get a glimpse of from Dobie’s studio. To get a broader picture of the city you have to move to the part of the loft where Paulette works and where you can clearly recognize the other two distinctive architectural features. *Water tanks*, made of cedar wood, have been appearing on the roofs of New York buildings for more than a century and were born, in fact, together with skyscrapers. With the economic, technical and architectural growth of the city, between 1850 and 1860, elevators came into use¹⁶ and the

¹⁵ Koolhaas, p. 99

¹⁶ Rem Koolhaas identifies in the elevators the technology that started the birth of the skyscraper. Introduced by the inventor Elisha Otis, Koolhaas says: “Like the elevator, each technological invention is pregnant with a double image: contained in its success is the specter of its possible failure. The means of averting that phantom disaster are

development in height of the buildings “...they need a way to get water pressure to higher floors to go beyond where the natural city water pressure went. Water pressure comes from the reservoir system, upstate New York, and it generally flows to about six floors up. That’s why buildings that are six floors and less don’t have water tanks. The tanks work by gravity, and that’s the whole beauty of them. The water gets pumped up from the basement and there is a switch in the tank that controls the water flow”¹⁷.

It is only at night that the lights, the *bright lights*, another characteristic element of New York, highlight the shadow in the background, which turns out to be a skyscraper. They also make a triangular roof clearer in the distance, illuminated, typical of many New York buildings (the Plaza or Woolworth for example), and another skyscraper, which could also be the Chrysler Building.

And with the night winding down and the lights shining out there, the film’s skyline is complete, the episode can only come to its end.

As we have seen, the city here is internalized on a first level, the image level. Just a few details are enough for the viewer’s imagination to connect-the-dots and therefore to define the New York skyline and thus look out over the city.

The internalization of the metropolis then continues in the spatial arrangement of Dobie and Paulette inside the loft. It’s important to point out that if for Dobie, a single building is enough to feel in New York, Paulette instead needs a complete, slightly sharper skyline. As if to suggest the different presence that the two have within the city: Dobie’s is more certain, Paulette’s less so.

almost as important as the original invention itself. Otis has introduced a theme that will be a leitmotif of the island’s future development: Manhattan is an accumulation of possible disasters that never happen”, Koolhaas, p. 27

¹⁷ Taken from *City Rooftops: New York*, a documentary realized by Xavier Lefebvre for ARTE

After all, it is Scorsese's style to reduce the city to the level of his characters, each time providing a vision that passes first through the interiority of the protagonists. "Le réalisateur dirige rarement sa caméra vers le reste de la ville - peu de panoramas spectaculaires du skyline de New York, par exemple. Au lieu de cela, il se déplace à hauteur d'homme, coude à coude avec ses protagonistes, dans les rues et les habitations du quartier"¹⁸.

Centripetal and centrifugal forces

After having carefully observed the outside, it's time to focus on the inside: the loft.

The narrative geography of the metropolis is an intricate interplay between centripetal and centrifugal forces, whose difficult balance is the state to which the character aspires. The first are those forces that attract us towards the city, seen as the place where anything can happen, where one can finally find the right opportunity to take "the big step", where one's vital energies are finally detonated in a creative explosion of all the instincts that the narrow boundaries of a suburb can only stifle. The arrival in the city is often the beginning of the narrative. Think of Lucien's arrival in Paris in Balzac's novel *Illusions Perdues*, or think of Carrie's double arrival, by train, first in Chicago and then in New York. It is precisely the segment of Lucien's arrival that Robert Ames advises Carrie to read. Towards the end of Dreiser's novel, *Sister Carrie*, we find again Carrie intent on reading *Le Père Goriot*, another novel of the scenes of Parisian life of the

¹⁸ Jasper, Warnecke, p. 80

Comédie humaine that begins with an arrival, that of Rastignac and his subsequent social climb that will find fulfillment precisely in *Illusions Perdues*.

The attraction of the metropolis and therefore the arrival in it, has become over time a *topos* of metropolitan fiction, thus defining a formula that dates back to the nineteenth century, from Balzac to Dickens. Richard Lehan summarizes it perfectly in his *The City in Literature*:

The young-man-from-the-provinces novel involves a predictable sequence of events. First, the provinces or the estate is played out, and the city is where the young must go in order to realize a romantic sense of self, an essential being. Urban flight in turn causes a break with the family, whose residual values the hero takes to the city, where he or she learns that they must be abandoned. Love and friendship prove insubstantial in a place where almost everything turns on money and where personal relationships are inseparable from commodity relationships. The city is so much larger than the individual that the human scale is lost - as are its values - and the hero spends much of the novel trying to reinvest energy in a system that is both compelling lure and trap. Such novels often address the need to find an alternative set of human values, but attempts to redeem the city usually are unsuccessful; the main character typically is left

confronting the city, after becoming experienced, wary, and disillusioned¹⁹.

Scorsese's *Lesson Life* follows this pattern. Not a young man-from-the-province, but a young girl, like Carrie, who arrives in the city (like many others, as the very ending of the short film attests) to succeed in becoming a painter and thus fulfill her romantic ideal of being a young artist in Manhattan. It seems to be just an ideal rather than a real goal because it is not supported by concrete talent. "What about your painting?", Dobie asks her at one point, while she is on the phone with a friend. We don't see her painting much, but we often see her looking for personal relationships, both love and friendship. Her arrival in New York in the short film is not, in fact, her first time. It is her first return after an attempted escape, a love affair with a performer, who, after seducing her, immediately abandoned her. The-young-girl-from-the-provinces is unable to accept, as Lehan described, that relationships in the metropolis are inseparable from work, from mutual economic exploitation. Dobie instead understood it well enough and doesn't bother to portray it.

Centripetal forces come into action as soon as the character arrives in town. If the centripetal forces continually act in pushing him closer and closer toward the center, continually reinforcing his frustrated ambitions, the centrifugal forces are instead those that test his desire and abilities. They are those that take the form of abandonment from the family, of relationships built on utility, of the obstacles of a superhuman city that demands other standards of values. It is the difficulty of achieving one's goals in a place where competition is so fierce. What's more,

¹⁹ Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature*, University of California Press, 1998, p. 202

often those who try to help such characters as Paulette like Dobie, do nothing but exploit them for their own personal ends. Baudrillard wrote this in his text *America*:

A New York, le tournoiement de la ville est tellement fort, la puissance centrifuge est telle qu'il est surhumain de penser vivre à deux, de partager la vie de quelqu'un. Seuls, les tribus, les gangs, les mafias, les sociétés initiatiques ou perverses, certaines complicités peuvent survivre, mais pas les couples. C'est l'anti-Arche, où les animaux étaient embarqués par deux pour sauver l'espèce du déluge. Ici, dans cette Arche fabuleuse, chacun est embarqué seul - c'est à lui de trouver, chaque soir, les derniers rescapés pour la dernière party²⁰.

New York is the city of catastrophe, the city where every day ends with a flood from which only those who manage to get on the ark are saved, no longer a selection for the preservation of each species, but a selection for the preservation of a single species, that of the New Yorker. To get on the ark means to have succeeded in governing the clash of forces, centripetal and centrifugal, and thus to have found a place in the center of the city where to finally get a grip on the city. It is a regenerating flood, for those who manage to get on the ark, as happens to Dobie, who in the end, despite having been abandoned by Paulette, find another survivor for yet another last party. And it is a flood, instead, that marginalizes, that defeats, that submerges those who are at the mercy of the

²⁰ Baudrillard, (1986), p. 41

centrifugal forces. Forces that relentlessly push beyond the boundaries of the city, towards a province, first disowned, but that now seems the only accessible place.

Arrival and, perhaps, departure, are thus the two narrative poles upon which most metropolitan fiction is built, if the former is the spark, the latter is the failure of balance.

In *Sister Carrie*, Carrie eventually manages, thanks to the theater and its central location in the heart of the city, Broadway, to find a balance, albeit ephemeral, which does not happen in the case of Hurstwood, annihilated by the power of the city, he in fact retires to a dingy apartment where he eventually commits suicide²¹.

²¹ I am aware of the simplified and superficial treatment of Theodore Dreiser's novel, *Sister Carrie*. But this is not the appropriate space for a more in-depth analysis. What interests me, in quoting Dreiser's text so quickly, is the identification of the elements of the plot, such as the arrival in the city, the encounter and clash with a ravenous city that swallows up every individuality, a life in the city that requires continuous adjustments, as well as the departure, or death, or success to sanction the ending. These are inescapable elements of the metropolitan narrative and that we will also find in the novels of the corpus of the thesis and that have found a first affirmation with the French literature traceable to Balzac, and in the American version with, precisely Dreiser, and others like Frank Norris. The plot of the short film by Martin Scorsese and Richard Price is strongly based on the schemes of nineteenth-century/late nineteenth-century metropolitan fiction, as attested by the fact that the story is inspired by Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*. In evoking Dreiser's text, I was also interested in the reference to a New York literature that is in opposition to the early literature of the city linked to Henry James and Edith Wharton. If here, "the symbolic gesture of the novel in New York is its closure of the door", in Dreiser "the new literary ethic of naturalism censures such a retreat", Peter Conrad, *The Art of the City*, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 178. The objective is therefore to note how the typical elements of a plot developed primarily *outdoors*, can be, without forcing, transported *indoors*.

Paulette, like Hurstwood, though for different reasons, is also crushed by this game and eventually, reconnecting with her family, asks her mother to accept her back home, in the province, so her brother comes to take her away.

This interplay of forces that articulate the plot are also the ones that energize the metropolitan space, and they are all consumed in Dobie's loft.

Dobie and Paulette occupy two different positions inside the loft, which are then the same positions they occupy outside in the city.

Dobie's loft, as we are shown, is composed of a large central room, where the canvas on which Dobie is working occupies almost all of the space. To the left of the canvas, close to the entrance to the loft, accessed by elevator, a staircase leads to a niche, independent from the rest. It is where Paulette sleeps inside the apartment and where she also occupies another room, her studio, whose location is impossible to understand with respect to the main body of the loft. Here, lie many paintings, all unfinished, waiting for the final judgment of Lionel.

Two other parts also appear, a bathroom, where the two are preparing for a party, and the kitchen, part of the central body of the loft, behind the canvas.

The canvas is the fulcrum on which the narrative is focused, the focusing point of the vision, everything else is on the margins.

Dobie is the only one able to fill the central body of the room, which becomes a true prosthesis of the city. Occupying that space means occupying the heart of New York. Here Dobie not only paints, but also performs other activities that normally take place outside, such as playing basketball.

As Dobie says to Paulette when she first manifests her intention of "leaving New York", "You're in the heart of the heart", but this is only a demystification, part of the painter's seduction of the young pupil. She is not in the heart, she is just close to it, but she has yet to truly reach it. Paulette is at the mercy of centripetal

forces, forces of attraction that drive her to stay, to try once again to verify whether her talent is real or not. Paulette decides to stay, dazzled by Lionel's promises, but the heart of the city is still far from being reached. The canvas, the main room of the loft becomes the heart of the metropolis, being there means finally having a grip on the city. Dobie is perfectly balanced in the interplay of forces. He has been able to counter those centrifugal forces that instead constantly besiege Paulette, who cannot renounce sentimentality, who cannot give in to the unscrupulousness of metropolitan relationships.

Paulette is at mercy of centripetal forces, unable to control them, and thus driven by an irresistible play of centrifugal forces that continue to push her to the edge of the apartment, and thus to the edge of the city.

When Dobie asks her if she wants to leave because of her failed romance with the performer, she says, "He is not driving out... It's not him. It's nobody... things".

In her imprecision, intolerable for Dobie, there is all the inability to achieve the balance, to find a way to inhabit the city, and so she always remains at the margins, as her presence in the apartment shows.

Their spatial relationship in the apartment, Dobie at the center and she at the margins, is replicated even in the social occasions the two take part in. Dobie is the guest of honor, the entertainer, everyone listens to him, everyone is around him, his voice overpowers all the others, his presence dominates the center of the scene, while Paulette, pressed up against the wall, sees her words always interrupted by others, she is unable to be heard under a crossfire of questions. If Dobie does not need to assert his position, Paulette on the other hand is constantly forced to correct the position that the others give her: "I don't live with him. I work for him."

And even when the interested gaze of another artist falls on her, in the end the real target is not her: she is seen as a simple means to get to Dobie.

But Paulette is also on the fringes in the artistic scene: none of her canvases have yet been exhibited, nor does she know when this will happen. As in the apartment, even in the city it is as if she did not exist, except as a simple corollary of the *Big Man*, Lionel Dobie. He thus becomes the predatory male who takes advantage of a young girl, but also becomes at the same time the implacable gaze of the metropolis, of New York, a city that imposes a choice, either to be predator or prey. As Dobie says at a certain point: “You work for Lionel Dobie, you work for the *Lion*”, and Paulette, in her passivity, cannot but be a prey, and answer: “Love me? You just need me around. Sometimes I feel like a human sacrifice”.

It is in the insistence on the use of the verb *to be driven* that Paulette’s inability to have an active relationship with the city is realized. She is always driven, she never leads. First it is the *things*, which push her out, then Lionel: “He is driving me crazy”, which attracts her towards the city. Between these forces, however, she does not find a balance, she does not find a way to dominate them.

Her room, her niche, is only apparently distinct from the rest of the loft, the two windows overlooking the main room, no possibility to look at anything else but Dobie and his canvas. There is no privacy and yet no intimacy. Dobie comes in whenever he wants, she cannot isolate herself from the loud music, from the ball with which Dobie plays basketball (the basket is in fact right under one of the two windows). Her presence in the loft is not only at the margins, but she is also always under the authority of Dobie who can invade her space at any time, day or night (for example, when he wakes her up, harassing her with his gaze). Dobie, in fact, like the city, never sleeps. It is always in full activity, in a creative

frenzy that is fed with the presence of Paulette who can do nothing to counteract it.

Only once is Paulette shown with Dobie in the main room, but even here she is only a shadow, the focal point remains the canvas and Dobie's artistic gesture. He is painting, she is angry and joins him in the room, she tries to call him repeatedly, but the music is too loud, and he doesn't hear her or pretends not to. It is only at this point, when she renounces her voice and her presence, that she surrenders to the beauty of what she is witnessing. She's enchanted by what she's seeing, but it's not only a demonstration of Dobie's worth, it's mostly an assurance that she can't paint, or at least, she's not on the same level as him. But realizing this also means realizing she has no chance of staying in town: "Maybe if I was as good as you, I wouldn't care anybody else either".

Talent is not sufficient to conquer the city, it is also necessary to abandon a certain idea of relationships²², to renounce sentimentality, as provided by the typical formula of the metropolitan novel identified by Lehan. Paulette is unable to stop the centrifugal forces and is thus forced to leave the main room, the loft and consequently the city.

On Paulette's lack of talent, the script remains vague. What is clear, however, is that what is also driving Paulette away from the city is a certain *machismo* prevalent in the New York art world²³. Paulette is never given the chance to

²² "Pourquoi les gens vivent-ils à New York? Ils n'y ont aucun rapport entre eux. Mais une électricité interne qui vient de leur pure promiscuité. Une sensation magique de contiguïté et d'attraction pour une centralité artificielle. C'est qui en fait un univers auto-attractif, dont il n'y a aucune raison de sortir. Il n'y a aucune raison humaine d'être là, mais la seule extase de la promiscuité", Baudrillard, (1986), p. 35

²³ On *machismo* in New York art, on inner spaces, on real rooms and rooms of the mind as places of defense and reaction to the city, I recommend Siri Hustvedt's novel, *The Blazing World*. In her works we find many of the things that will be said later.

prove herself, as if true art were a male-only affair. In the narrative, Dobie's genius is taken for granted, which is sometimes treated as a stereotype, sometimes emphasized with irony, sometimes, unfortunately, used as an alibi for his attitudes.

The movements and positions of the characters inside the apartment are indicative of the positions and movements the two entertain outside, in the city. In the ending, when Dobie argues with the performer, the same spatial placement occurs again. Paulette is at the bar, trying to peek at what is going on in the center of the place, where Dobie is sitting among other *people who count* in the New York art scene.

As I hope I've demonstrated, *Life Lesson* manages to tell the story of New York without ever walking the streets. Everything happens on this side of the window. The interior is a space in the city, which to all intents and purposes participates in the construction of a metropolitan experience and can, therefore, actively contribute to the narration of the story. The interior is the room of an experience, the place of a representation. It is not simply one of the many background places that permeate a novel, but it is a narrative device that is crucial to the plot.

Unfortunately, for a precise choice (as explained in the introduction), this writer was not chosen to be part of this dissertation. "I crossed the bridge and bought a building in Brooklyn, a scruffier borough in those days than it is now. I wanted to flee the Manhattan art world, that incestuous, moneyed, whirring globule composed of persons who buy and sell aesthetic objects. In that effete microcosm, it is fair to say Felix had been a giant, dealer to the stars, and I, Gargantua's artist wife", Siri Hustvedt, *The Blazing World*, Sceptre, 2014, London, p. 14

Life Lesson excludes the external in its development. The novels we are going to analyze, however, construct their metropolitan representation precisely by putting together the two spaces, the interior and the exterior. Where the former is not a simple replica of the latter, as happens, for obvious reasons (of time, space, stylistic choice) in the short film. The interior is in opposition to the exterior, creating a dynamism that inhabited by the characters allows them to live a complete urban experience, for better, and for worse.

CHAPTER 1: DON DELILLO

Introduction

What can the interiors of a building tell us about the exterior par excellence: the city? Would it not be more logical to illustrate the city by showing how a character behaves within it, starting from its streets? The street is the actual place where a city is revealed, inhabited, discovered and searched for, it is therefore quite obvious to identify the streets as the place of actual contact between the individual and the city itself²⁴. Yet we cannot be satisfied, because the city, and consequently the urban experience, functions on a reciprocal relationship, an unsolvable dynamic opposition between outdoor spaces and indoor ones. Excluding, or underestimating the value of the latter would lead to a partial view of the urban experience *as a whole*.

The two authors chosen for this thesis, Don DeLillo and Jay McInerney, are distinguished by the depth of their representation of the urban fabric. Despite their stylistic differences, their different approach, their sometimes opposite way of dealing with the urban matter, as an implacable *drone* that links them: the insistence on a certain psychological quality that characterizes them as

²⁴ “Le passant est le personnage de la ville – il est à la limite son personnage unique. C’est en lui que se cristallise l’art dont la ville est ou a le génie. [...] Le passant est précisément celui qui passant de lieu en lieu les réunit dans une proximité qui défie leurs éloignements.” Jean-Luc Nancy, *Un art de la ville*, Caliban [Online], 25|2009, Online since 13 December 2016, connection on 02 November 2020. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/caliban/1427>

New Yorkers. Both of them give to their characters a certain way of thinking and relating, a certain rough sophistication that runs through their veins. The city is therefore perceived by the chosen authors not only as a space, but also, and above all, as a way of processing, filtering and thus determining the daily experience. New York, in their works, is an essential aspect of a character's personality²⁵. In this process, in which the essence of New York is internalized by the characters, the experience they have of the metropolis is the result of a correspondence (often misplaced) between an inner vision (in which the

²⁵ "How do you know so much?" Babette said. "I'm from New York." (WN, 61), "Aren't you going too far?" "I'm from New York", (WN, 333) Murray Jay Siskind's character in *White Noise* with his responses is the epitome of this drone. It would be a dangerous operation, trivial and risky, to identify and then distinguish the certain characteristics that could define the typical personality of a New Yorker (as opposed to someone who lives elsewhere). The fact remains that the characters of the two authors experience being New Yorkers, or having become New Yorkers, or coming from New York as a personal characteristic that makes one proud. In McNerney's novel *Brightness Falls*, Jeff, the writer, realizes that he has finally become a New Yorker when he returns to the kosher dairy where he had been during his first day in New York and responds to the restaurateur: "... and when, finally, the old man asked him if he'd ever been in a restaurant, Jeff answered, "I don't know- you ever worked in one?" After that he was a New Yorker" (BF, 53). Being a New Yorker is experienced as a quality that automatically puts them in a different position (often, a slightly higher position) than other characters who live outside the Big Apple. Therefore, it is enough to appeal to one's New York-ness to find the answers to questions (whether big or small) or to stop any kind of doubt from arising in the first place. We find this drone in all the works of the two authors, including those set far from the city. Here New York appears in other forms, such as, for example, a cab speeding through the desert "Then a scatter of dust, a hazy mass rising from the sundown line. And an approaching object that made me think of a hundred movies in which something comes across the wavy plain, a horseman with scabbered rifle or a lone cameleer hunched in muslim on his dumbheaded beast [...] Less than fifty yards away. It seemed to be, it clearly was a New York taxi, impossible but true [...] What better gesture might I devise than an outstretched hailing hand?" (U, 64-65). New York is so much more than a city, it is something that the characters carry with them, that they carry inside. Something they can always rely on, an internal resource. Something that is impossible to get rid of.

perception of the city is irremediably personal) and an outer vision (in which the metropolis is a continuous flow that escapes a decisive hold). It becomes crucial to identify the narrative relationship between the public spaces of the city (such as the street, places of work, places of leisure, where it is the exterior vision to be brought into play) and the private, intimate spaces (such as the home, the inhabited rooms, where the inner vision is finally released).

For Jean-Luc Nancy, the house, and consequently the rooms, play a secondary role²⁶ in the movement²⁷ that generates the very existence of a city, but as Franco Moretti writes: “The great novelty of urban life, in fact, does not consist in having thrown the people in the street, but in having ranked them up and shut them into offices and houses. It does not consist in having intensified the public dimension, but in having invented the private one – and especially in having transferred the meaning of individual life, and thus also the standard for evaluating what constitutes experience, into this new domain.”²⁸ Thus, there are two movements: the external crossing of the city, which is the encounter with “reality” (and coming to terms with it) and the internal rooting in the city (which is the process of an idea or an image taking form). The former is the domain of the street, the latter, of the room. And the latter is by no means a movement destined to be interrupted. Far from this, it is a continuous movement, even more complex, because what is mobilized is the very imagination of the

²⁶ “Mais la demeure ou bien en général le lieu en tant proprement que local – en tous sens du mot – n’appartient à la ville qu’en second rang, après les voies, les passages et les correspondances.”, Nancy, p. 4

²⁷ “Le déplacement est inhérent à la ville, car celle-ci ne s’organise pas dans le rapport à son territoire, mais organise ce territoire selon des directions, des tensions et des assignations.” Nancy, p. 4

²⁸ Franco Moretti, *Homo palpitans. Balzac’s novels and Urban Personality*, in *Signs Taken for Wonders. On the sociology of literary forms*, Verso, London, New York, 2005, p. 127

characters and the construction of their own identity and the definition of their role in the city. “A home in New York! However, will we have one?”²⁹ In his memoir about finding a home in New York, writer Adam Gopnik, points out just that: “In literature, after all, New York is where we make careers, deals, compromises, have break-downs and break-ins and breaks, good and bad. But in reality, what we all make in Manhattan are homes.”³⁰ DeLillo and McInerney insert both aspects into their fiction.

To live in a city is to inhabit it in all its parts. And to inhabit it in all its parts, it is essential that each character has at his disposal an internal space, a room, a house, where he/she can... live. In the city³¹.

The room is movement, it is so for DeLillo and it is so for McInerney. Movement that produces experience for the characters and narrative movement that produces the plot. What happens inside is, in my opinion, and I will try to demonstrate this, part of what Jean-Luc Nancy calls *art de la ville*: “Tout son art était pourtant là, dans la rencontre, dans celle qui a lieu, dans celle qui n’a pas lieu et dans celle qui a mi-lieu: dans le frôlement, l’effleurement des passages, des regards, des allures, des signes, des marques et des traces qui ne valent que par le passage ou la passée, sans passation de pouvoir signifiant, dans le seul déplacement qui n’ébranle pas moins que la signifiante entière, dans le renouvellement incessant de l’étrangeté devenant familiarité, la distance proximité, le mouvement présence et le labyrinthe chemin”³². All the more so

²⁹ Adam Gopnik, *Through the Children’s Gate. A Home in New York*, Quercus, London, 2007, Kindle Edition

³⁰ Gopnik, (2007)

³¹ “Apartment-hunting is the permanent New York romance”, Gopnik, (2007) *Ibid.*

³² “Tel est l’art de la ville: inchoatif par essence et par excellence. Art des rapprochements furtifs, art des passages passagers, des passants insignifiants, des signifiants inframinces, expédiées sitôt esquissées. Pas même art chorégraphique, car

when talking about New York. The interiors inhabited by the characters are a fundamental part of the mechanism of the city. An interior is the particular product of a particular city³³.

The writing must take into account these two ways a character inhabits the city, it must hold in their contrasts, and show their similarities, to give back a detailed and profound image of New York. The indoor spaces, for these authors, are a city within the city, which *resembles* the outer city in its dynamics, as we saw in the introduction through the analysis of Scorsese's short film. The overlap between the two, the inner city and the outer city, is the fulfillment of a totalizing urban experience.

tout ce qu'on pourrait prendre pour un ballet, et qui en est un en effet lorsqu'on le saisit comme ensemble en vue panoramique et plongeante—comme d'une caméra sur grue au-dessus d'un carrefour d'avenues—mais qui n'en est pas un lorsqu'on y prend part: mais ne pas prendre part, c'est ne plus être dans la ville. Or "dans la ville" est plus que "au-dedans d'un certain périmètre"; "dans la ville" est "en ville"; on habite ou on va "en ville", on est plongé, immergé dans un élément et dans le mouvement qui fait son essence. Ni chorégraphique, ni cinématographique, ni proprement théâtral, et bien entendu moins encore pictural, l'art de la ville est bien plus proche de la musique et de la littérature au sens où ces deux arts mettent la résonance interne et l'imprégnation, avant la représentation, et le spectacle, le timbre, le ton et l'élan avant la composition et l'harmonie, l'atmosphère avant la narration. Art du mouvement [...] Tout son art était pourtant là, dans la rencontre, dans celle qui a lieu, dans celle qui n'a pas lieu et dans celle qui a mi-lieu : dans le frôlement, l'effleurement des passages, des regards, des allures, des signes, des marques et des traces qui ne valent que par le passage ou la passée, sans passation de pouvoir signifiant, dans le seul déplacement qui n'ébranle pas moins que la signifiante entière, dans le renouvellement incessant de l'étrangeté devenant familiarité, la distance proximité, le mouvement présence et le labyrinthe chemin", Nancy, pp. 6-10

³³ "The sweep of semi-detached houses in Knightsbridge or Kensington, the long boulevards filled with bourgeoisie in the sixteenth and eighth arrondissements of Paris, sum up the image of those places. New York, on the other hand, is famous for William Randolph Hearst's penthouse and Sister Eileen's basement apartment, or, more recently, for the Trump Tower aerie and the Tribeca Loft", Gopnik, (2007), *Ibid.*

It is important to point it out right from the start, that the room is a point of observation and at the same time a starting point for a representation. The interiors are conceived as the space in which a representation takes place, both of the city and of the character himself as an inhabitant of the city. It is in the closed space of a room that the filtering of the external urban experience takes place. The four walls of the room act as white screens waiting for the projection of an image. Firstly, the city representation takes place as its image is reproduced, overturned, as it happens inside a *camera obscura*, reconstructed in detail to make the understanding of the city accessible. Secondly, the interior helps the character to build his own representation of himself as an actor in the bigger show of the metropolis. The character, locking himself inside, in an indoor space that however never manages to keep itself secluded from the outside, succeeds in, or at least tries, to get a more defined view of himself in the metropolitan play. First of all, the city is a matter of representation, of an image continuously experienced and continuously reconstructed in search of an illusory perfection, of an ephemeral understanding.

We have already pointed out in the introduction, talking about the skyline, that New York is a city which is progressively built and continuously reconstructed defining itself as a proliferation of images. It could be seen as an agglomerate of mental representations condensed into an unrepeatable imaginary, resisting the friction of reality. The image of New York that stands out in the hearts and minds of the characters (and the readers) is so powerful that it annihilates every hardship, turning even the murkiest aspects into something somehow fascinating. Something which is part of a narrative, and therefore of a representation. In fact, in order to be part of New York, everything has to be representable. It is the almost unique power of the image of the city, so solid

and yet, at the same time, never static, that defines the status of being a New Yorker. What is important to the characters of the novels, is above all to obtain a space within the representation, to appear in the picture, even if only at the edges.³⁴

A room can never just be a room. A room, as we will try to demonstrate, acts within the narrative as a device that puts a series of issues into play, in a continuous movement detaching and rejoining the city to which the room belongs. We will begin the analysis starting from an author who has always paid particular attention to interior spaces: Don DeLillo. Starting from his first works, the New York writer has often investigated the compositions and mysteries of the room in relation to the outer space. We will show how, according to DeLillo, a room in the desert is different from a room in the metropolis for example. This is not only for geographical, and therefore spatial reasons, but also for the quality of the experience that takes place within it. An experience that is not easily solved in an equation of balance between inside and outside. A room cannot be irrespective of the place it is in, because a room says a lot about the location just outside its window. It says a lot, but it also adds something more. For DeLillo, the landscape and the room live in a mutual relationship that doesn't only concerns the physical position of the character in the concrete space, in the place where he/she is in a given moment of time, be

³⁴ “Klara noticed, midbridge, how the younger woman checked the human action, the bike riders and runners and what they wear and who they are and the thing they develop together of a certain presentational self. Not like Chicago, Acey said, where the action near the lake is all unself-conscious sweat, people who are busting to run, to shake off the film of office and job, the abnormal pall of matter. Here the film is what they're in, the scan of crisp skyline, and she seemed ready of it, Acey did” (U, 392).

it a college or Fifth Avenue, but it also describes somehow his position in general in terms of History and in terms of a vaster space, the country, which in our case is America, and the world. The room is therefore invested with an epistemological and an ontological meaning. Through the room the characters activate a process of knowledge that elaborates the facts of the world, in addition the room leads them to put into perspective their *own being* in the hope of a less murky self-understanding. Right from the author's first works the room takes the role of a spot for observation of the many changes in history, in the individual, in culture in general and in city architecture. DeLillo takes a look at the outside world at the same time through the movements of the characters in the interiors, like Scorsese's work mentioned in the introduction.

In one of DeLillo's first short stories, *Baghdad Towers West*, published in *Epoch* magazine in 1968, the protagonist rents an apartment occupied by three women in a building on 72nd St., Baghdad Towers West. The story is important because it introduces several elements that are crucial to our analysis. First of all, it was published even before DeLillo's first novel (*Americana*, published in 1971), and yet, in terms of style and content, this story anticipates, unlike previous stories, much of what will be seen later in more mature works, from the construction of the *character* to the way of using environments. It is also his first story in which he uses first person narration. It immediately stands out from the other stories due to a paradigmatic shift in urban writing. As Richard Dragan points out: "DeLillo abandons his earlier mode of literary practice. He is no

longer a Bronx regionalist. He discovers a different sense of urban space”³⁵. In fact, in previous stories, *The River Jordan* (1960), *Take the A Train* (1962), *Spaghetti and Meatballs* (1965)³⁶, all published for *Epoch* magazine, DeLillo focuses on capturing the “gritty urban realism”³⁷ of his native neighborhood, the Bronx. Some short sketches coming from this works will then find ample space in the sixth part of *Underworld* and in some passages of other novels, such as the subway fascination that occupies the first chapters of *Ratner’s Star* and *Libra*. In *Baghdad Towers West*, DeLillo instead “discovers a different sense of urban space, one that is indebted to the new emerging postmodern architecture”³⁸. The writing becomes more rarefied, just as the spaces become aseptic: an abstract composition of solids and voids, where the cold shine of anonymous materials, like steel, shows an immaculate capacity able to erase any trace of other human beings and, at the same time, the passage of history (“The kitchen hummed with power and a kind of stainless-steel lust”)³⁹. It could be well said: “the sterile setting anticipates DeLillo’s use of architectural motifs as symbols of postmodern alienation in *Players*”⁴⁰. These new towers are completely isolated

³⁵ Richard Dragan, *Leaving the Bronx: Depicting Urban Spaces in Don DeLillo’s “Baghdad Towers West” and his Early Short Stories*, *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 62 – Spring 2014, Online since 01 June 2016, connection on 05 September 2016. URL: <http://jsse.revues.org/1429>, p. 5

³⁶ *Coming Sun. Mon. Tues.* The other story that comes before *Baghdad Towers West*, published in *Kenion Review* Vol. 28, No. 3 (June 1966), pp. 391 - 394, is a story inspired by Godard *Masculin-Feminin*’s film, and could really be set anywhere: “It is Greenwich Village or the West Side. It is either of those or it is Soho or it is Montmartre” p. 391

³⁷ Dragan, p. 3

³⁸ Dragan, p. 5

³⁹ Don DeLillo, *Baghdad Towers West*, *Epoch* 17 (1968), 195 - 217, p. 201

⁴⁰ Mark Osteen, *Children of Godard and Coca-Cola: Cinema and Consumerism in Don DeLillo’s Early Fiction*, in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 439-470, University of Wisconsin Press, p. 443

from the urban context, they do not bear any traces of it, they try to erode any continuity with the surrounding architectural landscape instead⁴¹. However, the inside of the apartment that the protagonist lives in is identical to its façade⁴², and, since the whole story takes place inside, it becomes a reflection of the aesthetic changes taking place outside, in the city. As the interior decor changes, the lifestyle that he tries to recreate changes, becoming a reflection of the experience that he can have walking in a street where the aseptic landscape cancels the otherness⁴³. The progressive transition to a postmodern architecture, composed of reflective and alienating surfaces, that will invade Manhattan, is narrated here through the changes of the interior of the apartment, specifically

⁴¹ “The story engages a new sensibility of what it is like to live in a building devoid of local community, a tower that has little to do with the surrounding neighborhood or its inhabitants.”, Dragan, p. 5. It is interesting that a few years earlier, in 1961, activist Jane Jacobs published the book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which stood against the new urban policies of the 1950s introduced by the so-called *rationalist planners*, including Robert Moses (“the master builder”). The main criticism was precisely that the new modernist plans annulled the presence of man and above all annihilated the numerous communities that were created between the various districts in favor of efficiency (through the separation of uses: residential, commercial, etc.). To support the thesis of the importance of the *neighborhood* Jacobs insisted on the role of the street, merchants, neighbors to explain how, for example, security issues could be solved. DeLillo, on the other hand, referring roughly to the same issues, such as the risk of urban alienation due to new architecture, highlights the same problems by leaning on the internal space. He drifts away from the street and projects the urban fact and its solipsistic implications on the walls of an apartment.

⁴² “Then I saw it, Baghdad Towers West, a 40-story orgone box of glass and steel [...] It promised a new kind of mystery, electronic and ultramodern [...] I got off the elevator and walked down a corridor which seemed endless, like the corridors in our dreams, and there was no smell of cooking, no loud arguments, no obscenities scratched on the wall, no sign at all that men lived here in victory and defeat” (BDW, 198-199)

⁴³ “Gramercy Park is historical, they said. It is graceful, elegant, old, exclusive [...] Gramercy Park is one of the last preserves of civilization in New York, and it needs its champions. But I have become bored with civilization [...] I want to be swept along the neon tide” (BTW, 202)

referring to the sense of security, cleanliness, order and even numbness, of anomie that this transmits. Despite this sense of security, the dizziness of paranoia that hovers over the surface of things persists. We will see how the protagonist, with a not uncommon gesture in DeLillo's fiction, after having resigned from his job, chooses this indoor space in order to isolate himself from everything and everyone. At some point he will even get locked in, guarded by cameras ("On permanent security" (BTW, 212)) and "the result of this ubiquitous eye of the camera is not security, however, but an insecurity and paranoia"⁴⁴.

Starting from this short story, in a progression that reaches its apex in *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo's use of the interiors evolves and the indoors spaces are invested with new functional meanings. As seen above, letting the interiors narrate the outside and the dynamics of the city; gathering elements from the outside that are replicated inside the rooms waiting to be recomposed and assimilated, the room becomes a place of observation of a changing lifestyle, a point of view on the ever-changing urban world. Therefore, the internal experience is combined with the external experience, leading to a way more articulated and deep urban experience, which includes two poles, the room and the street. Another function that the room-device assumes is shown through a reflection that begins from DeLillo's first story and will continue with the third novel, *Great Jones Street*, where the need and possibility of an effective isolation within the city, is questioned. Is it really possible to retreat into silence and into oneself within a large metropolis? Is it possible to keep New York outside? And doing so will mean effectively to deny the room a metropolitan quality? DeLillo doesn't seem

⁴⁴ Osteen, (1996), p. 445

to believe it is possible or at least his novels seem to deny the characters this escape plan. As we will see more clearly in the next chapter, being in a motel room, one can indulge in the idea of being an ordinary man. However, in the city this cannot happen as the metropolis is the place of otherness, the space that leads to colliding with the other. Even if the desire of isolation and seclusion transforms the house into a den, a refuge, a cavern and eventually even a prison⁴⁵, the character always fails in his attempt to isolate himself from everything, to protect himself from the world.

While in fact, in the end, the protagonist of *Baghdad Towers West* would like to continue plunging deeper and deeper into the world of dreams – “I wanted to plunge, and now I’m plunging truly, to depths which few sleepers can image” (BTW, 216) - he succeeds in doing so only by lying down in the beds of the three girls who have meanwhile left the apartment: “those girls have entered my sleep” (BTW, 216).

It is as if through them, the city exerts such a force as to shatter the shell in which the protagonist has withdrawn, thus forcing him to come out. And the tale closes with a typically urban scene. The protagonist tries, under all kinds of pretexts, to strike up a conversation with the elevator attendant, “I talked of male nursehood. I talked of bridges, parades, sunsets, the four seasons, the moon and the scoop of tides. I talked at great length” (BTW, 217), and the latter’s response – “I think I’d like to get off now” (BTW, 217) - reveals how the metropolis⁴⁶ continually pushes you onto others, sharpening, however, at the

⁴⁵ “Naturally there was no practical reason for requesting security. The pleasure lay in knowing that some vivid electronic barrier had been erected to shield me” (BTW, 207)

⁴⁶ “Image standing by a window at night, on the sixth or seventeenth or forty-third floor of a building. The city reveals itself as a set of cells, a hundred thousand windows, some darkened and some flooded with green or white or golden light. Inside, strangers swim

same time the sense of loneliness, but it is a loneliness - the loneliness of DeLillo's New York - that leaves you with the hope that you can be pulled out into the world; as Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary: "If I could catch the feeling, I would: the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness and silence from the habitable world"⁴⁷.

If the metropolis, starting from Simmel's reflections⁴⁸, can be seen as the place of a progressive fading of a subjective culture with the emergence of a ruthless

to and fro, attending to the business of their private hours. You can see them, but you can't reach them, and so this commonplace urban phenomenon, available in any city of the world on any night, conveys to even the most social a tremor of loneliness, its uneasy combination of separation and exposure. You can be lonely anywhere, but there is a particular flavor to the loneliness that comes from living in a city, surrounded by millions of people", Olivia Lang, *The Lonely City. Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, Canongate Books Ltd, Edinburgh, 2016, p. 12

⁴⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume III 1925-1930*, Bell, Anne Olivier (ed.), The Hogarth Press, London, 1980, p. 260

⁴⁸ "To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions - with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life - it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and in the degree of awareness necessitated by our organization as creatures dependent on differences, a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory mental phase of small town and rural existence. Thereby the essentially intellectualistic character of the mental life of the metropolis becomes intelligible as over against that of the small town which rests more on feelings and emotional relationships. These latter are rooted in the unconscious levels of the mind and develop most readily in the steady equilibrium of un-broken customs. The locus of reason, on the other hand, is in the lucid, conscious upper strata of the mind and it is the most adaptable of our inner forces. In order to adjust itself to the shifts and contradictions in events, it does not require the disturbances and inner upheavals which are the only means whereby more conservative personalities are able to adapt themselves to the same rhythm of events. Thus the metropolitan type - which naturally takes on a thousand individual modifications - creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it. Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness, which in turn is caused by it. Thus the reaction of the metropolitan person to those events is moved to a sphere of mental activity which is least sensitive

objectivity and therefore the place where the maximum concentration of alienated and inaccessible individuals can be seen, DeLillo, in bringing this vision into his representation of New York, into the unfolding of the metropolitan plots, however, strives for a meeting to eventually take place. He removes all the doors of the rooms from their hinges and uses them to show that there still is an opportunity to spot even a faint glow of humanity in the metropolis. His metropolitan novels bear a trace of sentimentality that Simmel claimed forever lost, a romantic trace that does not want to die. Emblematic of this reflection is *Zero K* (2016). Desert and metropolis - places that have often been at the center of the author's work - are here continuously alternated and placed in sequential contrast, an intermitted sequence which step by step accentuates the differences, in contrast to DeLillo's typical way of making use of these two spaces. Either one or both present but separated by a long spatial or temporal distance. Here the two places exist at the same time, continuously intersecting. The desert takes on an increasingly technological dimension, where people retreat into sparse rooms waiting to withdraw momentarily from life⁴⁹:

The number of structures was hard to determine from my near vantage. Two, four, seven, nine. Or only one, a central unit with rayed attachments. I imagined it as a city to be

and which is furthest removed from the depths of the personality.” Georg Simmel, *The Metropolis and the Mental Life*, https://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/bpl_images/content_store/sample_chapter/0631225137/bridge.pdf (last access: 07/21/2021), p. 11-12

⁴⁹ The theme of the novel is cryogenics. In a compound built in the desert called *The Convergence*, patients' bodies are subjected to a controlled death waiting for a future where new technologies and biomedical advances will have found a definitive cure for all their diseases.

discovered at a future time, self-contained, well-preserved, nameless, abandoned by some unknown migratory culture. [...] They were blind buildings, hushed and somber, invisibly windowed, designed to fold themselves, I thought, when the movie reaches the point of digital collapse (ZK, 4-5).

The city, on the other hand, responds in a different way, and in the finale, offers a moment, where nature meets human artifice:

Seconds later the streets were charged with the day's dying light and the bus seemed the carrier of this radiant moment. I looked and then listened, startled by a human wail, and I swerved from my position to see the boy on his feet, facing the rear window. We were in midtown, with a clear view west, and he was pointing and wailing at the flaring sun, which was balanced between rows of high-rise buildings. It was a striking thing to see, in our urban huddle, the power of it, the great ground ruddy mass, and I knew that there was a natural phenomenon, here in Manhattan, once or twice a year, in which the sun's rays align with the local street grid (ZK, 273).

The city of the future, in the middle of a desert, immediately ready to be abandoned, is enclosed in a *hushed* atmosphere, which weakens every human breath, towards an imminent existence made of isolation and oblivion, in a solitary and indeterminate wait, most likely in vain. The city, instead, is invigorated in that *human veil* that recognizes and admires a *natural phenomenon*.

The protagonist, Jeffrey Lockhart responds to it by approaching the source of those cries of amazement, a boy “thick-bodied, an oversized head” (ZK, 274), in company of his mother, who moves from place to place repeatedly creating the opportunity for a meeting which would break the isolation. The hustle and bustle of the city with its incessant noise breaks the aseptic silence of the desert, where it is impossible for Jeff to determine the exact composition of the building, as if the dense silence could blur the sight too. In fact, the architecture in front of him is made of invisible windows, *designed to fold themselves*, unlike the architecture of the city, which *with a clear view west* is clear and sharp at Jeff’s sight. The contrast between the two spaces, that of the desert and that of the city, revolves around a sight. If in the first one the sight is blinded, at times even denied, everything there, in fact, is hidden, everything passes through digital screens about to collapse. In the city instead sight - “Is this what the boy was seeing?” (ZK, 274) - is the source of a revelation and of recognition of the exalting power of nature and the city itself, which comes from being face to face in amazement with the other. The artificial sunbeam of the Compound (“a central unit with rayed attachments”), is contrasted by the real sun with the Manhattanhenge phenomenon, where the natural rays here do not obscure the possibility of recognizing the actual details of the space around, but enhance the components of the metropolis, from streets to skyscrapers:

The full solar disk, bleeding into the streets, lighting up the towers to either side of us, and I told myself that the boy was not seeing the sky collapse upon us but was finding the purest astonishment in the intimate touch of earth and sun (ZK, 274).

In the urban context, therefore, the possibility of intimacy is re-established, while in the compound this was progressively denied. An intimacy with each other, with the world and above all with nature. So here the collapse is avoided in favor of a recovery, of an opening towards humanity, which, even though fragile and defective⁵⁰, still manages to gift moments of wonder. Looking towards a future of cryogenized bodies results in a blind, closed and insensitive stare, looking towards the city still allows an open and amazed gaze. These are the closing words of the novel:

I went back to my seat and faced forward. I didn't need heaven's light. I had the boy's cries of wonder (ZK, 275).

The places of total isolation belong to a landscape empty of obstacles and roughness, almost ascetic. The complete opposite of the city. The rooms of the city are in constant fermentation with noise, which may be as well seen as the essence of the city itself. We need only mention the name New York to start figuring a sort of fermentation process that takes place in these rooms. The city, New York, in its essence, always reappears indoors too. For this reason, we will define this peculiar characteristic of the metropolitan room in DeLillo's novels using the dynamic opposition concept. The dynamic opposition can be found precisely in the search for a balance between the temptation of the inside for the refugee and the call to discover the outside. The urban experience, as we are

⁵⁰ Another opposition can also be found between the dumb bodies, waiting to be perfected to excess that populate the Compound, and the defective but living and screaming bodies of the city, like the one of the boy who awakens Jeff's attention: "I hated to think that he was impaired in some way, macrocephalic, mentally deficient, but these howls of awe were far more suitable than words" (ZK, 274).

beginning to see, demands this opposition, this tension between the two spaces. In the construction of the metropolis' room, DeLillo emphasizes precisely this need. For the protagonist of *Baghdad Towers West*, for Bucky Wunderlick and for Eric Packer, the New York room is the symbol of a failed attempt at isolation. As shown in these novels, had isolation succeeded, a precise and profound portrait of New York would not have been possible. At one point in the story *Baghdad Towers West*, the protagonist decides to try sleeping on each of the three girls' beds who lived in the apartment. In each bed, sleep is tormented by images that can be traced back to the wishes of the girls. "His dreams are dictated by the beds"⁵¹. So, in the first bed, Caroline's bed, he has apocalyptic dreams, in Robin's bed, "Michelangelo Antonioni emerges from the darkness and kisses my hand" (BTW, 205) and finally, in Melinda's bed, he dreams of being on stage "in some cynical modern version of Peter Pan" (BTW, 207). Hence the need to isolate himself even more⁵². Those dreams fill in the matrix of the city itself, of New York - city built on of broken dreams, reflecting a multitude of images, and proliferating with young girls in search of fame. Dragan claims that: "Although set in an urban space, the description here of anonymity could well describe any of DeLillo's writing on suburban American." It is not an isolated criticism, in a review of the novel *Players*, Stephen Koch, talking about a scene set during a dinner at a restaurant in Soho, writes "We could be in downtown Omaha"⁵³. This equals to saying that the indoor spaces in this story, *Baghdad Towers West*, could very well be the inside spaces of any place, a townhouse in the *suburbs*, in

⁵¹ Mark Osteen, (1996), p. 444.

⁵² "I wanted a place to rest my jangling head, a chamber dedicated to sleep and magic" (BTW, 198)

⁵³ Dragan, p. 5

another city. As if the anonymity of the metropolis could be the same anonymity as the suburbs. However, a question arises: is it really possible to find the three girls in an apartment in the suburbs? One girl wants to be a sculptress, her friend an actress and the last one a model. A room that holds together three girls like this is typical of New York. Perhaps the room material structure can be comparable to many other interiors located anywhere in the United States and even outside them, but it is because of what it holds inside that it is immediately noticeable as an apartment in New York, *the city of ambition*, the only American city that has the potential to meet or disappoint at the same time the expectations of the three girls. As Melinda says: “I want to act... All my life I wanted to act... I like to walk up and down Broadway and look at the lights and at fabulous people” (BTW, 201). The girls’ dreams and desires paint the walls. The exuberance, the interference, the desires of the city enliven and make the walls of the apartment immediately recognizable.

The three-dimensional narrative of the room in DeLillo’s work immediately warns us that landscape and room are parts of the same urban experience. Walter Benjamin writes about the *flâneur*:

Landscape – that, in fact, is what Paris becomes for the flâneur. Or more precisely: the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room⁵⁴.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1999, p. 417

The experience of the metropolis is therefore conceived as an opening that coincides with a movement towards the outside, towards the inebriation and magnetism of the next corner of the city, and a closure that implies a movement towards the inside, towards an interiority that has the shape of a room, a sort of coming back that looks like a rest from the shocking experience of the street. The character never stops assimilating by setting its interiority in an open position, like a canvas that already bears the traces of an image, waiting to capture the right impulse to increase the possibilities of form and color. If by placing itself towards the city in a receptive attitude, operating an exchange between the interiority and the unexpected of the exterior is the first step towards the real experience of a metropolis, it is only in the ideal and practical recollection of closing a room that the experience can be complete. The room is not only a mental configuration to collect and manage the material acquired outside, but is also a physical place, four walls that mark a boundary which encloses part of the city, which differs from the outside space because it is owned by the character, although, in some cases, only temporarily. Owning a room, possessing a part of the inner space of a city, is the sign that attests a tangible presence within the city itself, the passage that decrees the change of state between being a stranger (or a tourist) and being a citizen. This double movement of opening and closing is a difficult one, which must not only be achieved by alternating the two experiences. It does not take place in the tradition from the street to the room. Opening up and closing up must be in the walk, as well as in meditation. The two opposite movements should occur in each pole and not only in the shifting from one to the other⁵⁵. A relationship

⁵⁵ “La ville est inventée—désirée, appelée, espérée—par le rassemblement et pour

with the metropolis that forces the characters to escape the idea of conceiving themselves as a whole. That is because the metropolitan experience, by its very nature, is an experience of encounter and confrontation with the other, a deep experience of change. Opening up and closing up are movements that occur in a minimal lap of time. It is such sudden interchange that it approaches simultaneity. This dynamic opposition with which we try to define the urban experience here is precisely this never-ending circularity, this continuous bouncing between the two poles, this going back and forth, which accentuates the transitive property, not only of the street, but also of the room. This going forward and then coming back, the fluidity in the movement, is the deep desire of DeLillo's characters which we are going to examine.

In this thesis, the room is the pole of greatest interest, as the room operates within the author's works as a real narrative device. In the novels chosen and in the analysis of the representation of the city, the room is immediately identified as an essential space for urban experience, a catalyst for various questions that incessantly assail the character in his attempt to inhabit a large metropolis. The

l'ensemble. Pas exactement pour l'assemblée—à laquelle pourtant elle aura recours—ni pour l'ensemble comme somme ou composition fixée, mesurée. Pour être plus précis, il faut parler de *rencontre*: la ville naît dans une composition, convergence et communication de rencontres. Et l'art qui lui revient consiste à permettre la poursuite de la rencontre—et si l'on peut dire, de la rencontre de toutes les rencontres dont le croisement, le nouage et la mêlée auront donné sa chance à la ville. Une rencontre poursuivie, voilà une ville. Cela veut dire une rencontre qui se prolonge, une rencontre qui va plus loin, une rencontre qui évite ce qui peut venir à son rencontre—mais une rencontre qui reste rencontre: contingence du contact, frôlement passager, occasions saisies et manquées. Pour qu'il y ait rencontre, il faut mouvement, déplacement. La ville est issue d'un déplacement et en reconduit la dynamique. Elle sort d'un déplacement de paysans et de voyageurs, de commerces et de jeux, d'armées et de missions. Elle n'en arrête pas le mouvement. Elle le suspend, sans doute, mais elle en entretient la dynamique", Nancy, p. 3

new image of the city is a construction that the character elaborates from the inside. The sensorial perception of the city that takes place in its external extension is then elaborated, refined and smoothed out, in the interior space of a home. The interior space can be seen precise, specific, very particular and personal place, the room, but also a mental configuration.

We start with DeLillo because analyzing his work on the room will allow us to better define the properties of this device by building a theory of the room that will guide all subsequent analysis. For this reason, before getting to the heart of the matter with the analysis of *Cosmopolis*, it is necessary to attempt a taxonomy of the rooms used in DeLillo's novels, which will not be an exhaustive search of all the rooms in the author's works, but it will be a selection of enclosed spaces to show and demonstrate the different quality of the room in the metropolis compared to the others.

1.1 The Mental Aspect

Already sketched out in the short story *Baghdad Towers West*, DeLillo's idea of the double function of the room, a mental structure, able to arrange the thought in relation to the world, and physical space, finds its first real formulation in the debut novel, *Americana*. In this first section we will analyze the first function: the mental aspect.

Americana is the story of David Bell, a 28-year-old ambitious television producer and it takes place in New York in the 60s. Though good-looking, rich and talented, David feels deeply dissatisfied with his life. Seizing the opportunity of a documentary on the Navajo commissioned by his broadcaster, he sets off for a journey into deepest America. He then decides, at one point, to postpone his work commitments to dedicate himself to directing his own personal film, an experimental film inspired by Ingmar Bergman, exploring the innermost recesses of his existence. This is only the beginning of a voyage to a remote island off the coast of Africa, as described at the end of the novel. David Bell is a typically DeLillian character: "for the majority of DeLillo's evil protagonists, isolation is the predominant state to which they aspire"⁵⁶. The room immediately becomes the main location where this kind of individuality can be expressed. Solitude and search for autonomy in contrast with the outside world are the predominate characteristics of DeLillo's characters. Phill Pass clearly explains their essential components: first of all, a space – "either literal or cognitive" – where the individual can recreate "a second, true self; a self-disciplining structure", that allows the subject to mediate, both physically and emotionally,

⁵⁶ Phill Pass, *The language of Self: Strategies of Subjectivity in the Novels of Don DeLillo*, Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publisher, Bern, 2014, p. 25

the interactions with the Other, and a fetishization of objects that “reinforce and maintain this isolated subjectivity”⁵⁷. The cognitive and literal space that DeLillo provides his characters with is that space of the room. Discipline and fetishization here find room for their implementation. It is above all the distance from the outside world that makes the room present itself to the character as the interiority where it is possible to reconstruct “a place where the act of observation is possible, where the observer can stand apart from the observed, perform the role and try to assemble the pieces into a systematic whole”⁵⁸.

This second self, this disciplined and controlled structure to which the character aspires, is transformed into a performance that follows a rigid, self-imposed script, in which the elements of the outside world can be channeled, managed and eventually understood. A physical but also mental performance, where the discontinuities of the outside world must find a way to remodel themselves around the new figure of the character. The room thus serves as a stage for a private performance where the outside becomes a fictitious setting, and it finally appears comprehensible. This phenomenon is made possible by the mental quality that the room acquires, as a structure, in the process of knowledge and memorization of the character. According to David Bell, in fact, the mind works like a *camera obscura*⁵⁹:

I functioned best with several doors open. Sometimes
I opened more doors, let in more light, risked the truth. If

⁵⁷ Pass, p. 25-26

⁵⁸ Lino Belleghia, *Staging and Performing in Small Rooms: Don DeLillo's Libra*, in *Critical Engagements: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*, 2.1, Summer 2008, p.168

⁵⁹ “... I visualized my mind as a dark room with many doors.” (A 36)

anyone seemed to perceive a distant threat in my remarks or actions, I closed all the doors but one. That was the safest position. But usually I kept three or four doors open. The image of this room was often with me. When I spoke at a meeting I could see the doors opening and closing in my mind and soon I arrived at the point where I could regulate the ebb and the flow of light with absolute precision. I got a raise and then another. (A 36, 37)

David Bell's mind reflects the typical mechanism of a room, which, by opening and closing doors regulates the entrance or the exit of the outside world just like it adjusts the exposure of its interiority. His mind is articulated in the architectural structure of the room so that he can relate with the world when the physical room is far away, and thus also protecting its vulnerability.

The rooms work in the following two essential ways. The first one sees the room becoming not only the filter of an experience, specifically the pole that Benjamin talked about, but, in one's mind, the shape of the world adapts to the shape of the room. The presence within the world must therefore be digested by the room, as if the room were really an internal organ for assimilation. The world is seen from the room, and it takes the shape of a room. This passage through its walls is a compulsory epistemological step that led to the worlds' comprehension. It can already be seen here that the room, to function as an experience, even just on a mental level, necessarily needs this dynamic opposition between inside and outside. Without this opposition, there would be no exposure to light, and the mental landscape would be completely obscured, because the flow of external light is a necessary condition for vision.

The second way in which the room works is highlighted in the decisive similarity of the room to an optical device: the camera obscura. In his essay *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary explains how the camera obscura operates in the mind of the observer by establishing a precise relationship between the inside and the outside, placing them in an oppositional dialectic. The camera obscura is the place where an orderly projection of the world (of the extended substance) is offered for to the mind to inspect. The world is therefore not known through a direct sensory examination, but through a mental inspection of its clear and distinct representations in the room⁶⁰. Unruliness and external disorder become more likely to be tamed and incorporated by the subject in his epistemological attempt. However, the objective character of the world is lost in this process of enlarged self-discipline that the subject tries to operate and the reflection of the world in the room risks to resembling more a personal representation than reality itself. The room anyway becomes essential for any experience. The concept of life elaborated and regulated through the room is fundamental to achieve that ideal self-discipline that is the mediation of the encounter with the other and with the world. However, even though there might be a significative proximity between the subjective representation of the character and the objectivity of the device, there is always a clear separation from the world, which steps in only as a flow of light, relegating the subject, in his interaction with the outside otherness, to a phantasmagoric presence. The movement of the body inside the room is only an apparent mobility that deceives and distorts the personal representation that is taking place. It is a mobility

⁶⁰Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, p. 46-47

limited to the surface of the room, which does not correspond to the surface of the world.

The personality of the room is decisive for the personality of the protagonist, one is cohesive with the other, one the expression of the other. For example, Glen Selvy, one of the protagonists of *Running Dog*, “to maintain this status and position of authority”, conceives his life in the image of the room: “Glen self-consciously shapes a “calculated existence” consisting of the rigors of a routine whose self-discipline ensures a life “narrowed down to unfinished rooms””⁶¹. *Running Dog* (1978) is a novel full of plots and mysteries that revolve around the alleged discovery of an amateur pornographic film starring Hitler, recorded a few days before the fall of the Nazi regime. There are many characters in the story, including Glen Selvy, a secret military agent working for a senator, and Moll Robbins, a reporting journalist. The two meet during the run for the film and have a short-lived affair that takes place in her home. The meeting with Moll is the moment when Selvy’s iron discipline begins to show its cracks. The self-representation that he has finely built in those *unfinished rooms* falters, and eventually collapses. The last encounter with Moll will be the beginning, for Selvy of an escape to the desert, a return to the places where his training took place, in a last desperate attempt to restore a new self-representation, purified from all the reality of the outside world that Moll’s presence has brought into his orderly and rigid one. DeLillo shows this irruption of reality into Selvy’s representation by working on the contrast of the rooms where the two characters live. Entering Moll’s room not only means leaving his own room, it also means coming into direct contact with Moll’s character: “her alterity impacts

⁶¹ Pass, p. 29

him in such a way that the scission damages the unity of Self to which Glen clings”⁶². The two rooms, or more generally, the two apartments are built according to a fictional idea of the typical nineteenth-century interior, where, writes Michelle Perrot, the private space acquires more and more prominence becoming the background of worldly and familiar intrigues⁶³. There is therefore a physiognomy in the interior spaces of the house from which some assumption can be made: Selvy and Moll’s rooms say everything about the personality and fate of their occupants. Selvy’s apartment is in Washington, in a “four story apartment building, in a predominantly black area near the Navy Yard. He’d been living here for several months but the place looked recently occupied. It was severely under-furnished. A number of unpacked boxes were arrayed near the bed. There was a floor lamp with the cord still tied in a neat bundle at its base” (RD 25).

The room thus becomes the reflection of the character’s self-representation. The room is defined as space by subtraction, there are no traces of Selvy’s physical and psychological imprint. Just as Selvy is a measured and humble presence in the world, the room reflects his attitude and becomes the mental anchorage

⁶² Pass, p. 50.

⁶³ “La poésie ouvre une “fenêtre éclairée” par Baudelaire. Et le roman est une source inépuisable. Au XIX^e siècle, il accord à l’espace privé, théâtre des intrigues mondaines et familiales, une place considérable. Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant, les Goncourt, le décrivent à la longueur de pages. Non seulement par goût du pittoresque, mais aussi, de manière plus raffinée, comme expression des caractères, des mœurs, des destins de leurs personnages. La *Comédie humaine*, les malheurs des *Misérables*, les tourments de Mme Bovary, les dramas des Rougon-Macquart se lisent dans les intérieurs dont leurs auteurs font une lecture métaphorique, idéologique, sociale et psychologique. Ils révèlent le statut, le caractère, les vicissitudes, les ambitions des habitants, comme la physionomie dit le tempérament. Il y a une physiognomonie de l’intérieur comme du visage, une archéologie des “reliques domestiques” équivalente à celle du patrimoine”, Michelle Perrot, *Histoire de chambres*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2009, p. 20-21

point for the process of self-discipline that Selvy continuously implements into his actions in the world: “The routine in one sense was his physical movement between New York and Washington, and the set pieces of procedure, the subroutines, that were part of this travel. In a larger context the routine was a mindset, all those mechanically performed operations of the intellect that accompanied this line of work” (RD, 88). Just as the rigid representation of himself finds in this ordered movement his reason for existing in the world, the room acts as a terminal point of arrival and the starting point of the whole strategy. Leaving and re-entering the room is each time an opportunity to continuously refine his representation. In addition to this, it offers a whole other series of very specific acts, such as “Sex with married woman, only” (RD 88). So, when Moll unexpectedly arrives, his whole life and his representation of himself are shattered into pieces. Not only is Moll not married, but she welcomes him into her home, into her room. Contact with the other is not part of Selvy’s representation, it therefore brings crisis. They always have sex at her place. It is entering the chaos of Moll’s room, which fully reflects her character, that pushes Selvy to a definitive breaking point. Within those messy walls Selvy cannot find his bearings and his idea of being a *reader* – “He was a reader” (RD, 60) - capable of deciphering and controlling every aspect of the world, definitely collapses:

“Something new in here.”

“What?” she said.

“Neon.”

“Guess I couldn’t resist. More flash. Transience and flash.

Story of my life. I realized looking around this place that I

don’t have any furniture in the strict sense. I stack clothes in

those modular boxes in the bedroom. I work at a folding table. I have a wall unit. It's just as well, isn't it? If you don't live in a house on your own piece of property, there's no point owning real things. If you're floating in the air, ten-twenty-thirty stories up, might as well live with play objects, shiny balls and ornaments." (RD, 121)

Moll's room, just like Moll, is constantly changing, no rigid strategy, everything floats around without any defined direction. The objects inside the room are conspicuous, eye-catching, the opposite of what Selvy wants, it is an unpredictable, dazzling, attacking, blinding and disorienting room.

These are two *under furnished* rooms, but one, Selvy's, emphasizes order, the other, Moll's, disorder. It is impossible for Selvy to adapt, but it is not possible at the same time, once entered that overstuffed room, to go back to his own *unfinished room*. The representation has cracked definitively, an explosion of brightness - *more flash* - ruined the negative, exposed it to the light of another reality that magnificently contradicted Selvy's constructed reality that now has to find another way to start a new representation.

As a mental structure capable of predisposing the character's mind towards the world, the room also functions as a warehouse, an archive of past experiences. Memories of the past unravel as if walking through a beehive of rooms. At the beginning of *Underworld*, Nick Shay describes the mnemonic process that will start the whole reconstruction of the novel's past⁶⁴:

⁶⁴ Regarding the plot of *Underworld*: "*Underworld* records Nick Shay's modernist search for lost time. The novel's structure is unusual in that it juxtaposes a backward and a

You know how certain places grow powerful in the mind with passing time. In those early morning dreams when I come back to bed after a sleepy pee and fall quickly into the narrow end of the night, there is one set of streets I keep returning to, one dim mist of railroad rooms, and certain figures reappear, borderline ghosts. (U, 75)

Even memory is therefore defined, with regard to the world, as a series of rooms, each enclosing the particular representation of the character in that particular historical moment. So, among that row of rooms, there is also the appearance of the first rooms where the fundamental experiences of Nick's life took place: "In *Underworld*, a basement room is the *small room* where the teenager Nick Shay is introduced to another world created from isolation and despair, the world of addiction"⁶⁵. Or the room where Nick had his clandestine relationship with Klara, a woman much older than him: "She noticed the room. He (Nick) unknotted the twine and flopped the small mattress down and lowered himself to his knees, waiting. The room was beautiful in this light, shadow-banded, all lines and gaps, claire-obscure, and she walked over to him, untrusting of course, and motioned for him to sit back on his haunches" (U, 732, 733). The rooms thus change according to the current performance, and due to Klara's disappointment and dissatisfaction the room acquires a new look in that transgressive gesture, suddenly becoming beautiful. It is Klara's mind, her

forward presentation of time", John Duvall, *Don DeLillo's Underworld, a reader's guide*, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, New York, 2002, p. 25

⁶⁵ Belleggia, p. 174

actions, that alter the room. Pétillon writes about Nick Shay's past: "Cet automne-là, il lui est arrivé deux choses. Il a fait pour la première fois l'amour dans une chambre claire [...] Plus tard, dans une ruelle obscure du Bronx, il a "effacé" un homme"⁶⁶. If truth be told, the killing of a man also takes place in a room⁶⁷, but what is rightly highlighted here is that all the dizziness of time and memory that unravels in Nick Shay's mind is traceable to those two moments. Nick Shay's past is shaped in these two rooms that have become part of that row of inner rooms that do not leave him alone. When we meet Nick, at the beginning of the novel, he is almost at the end of his narrative adventure. He lives in Phoenix, where he moved after a long journey West with the stated goal of overcoming those "days of disorder" (U, 810) that were his childhood and adolescence years in the Bronx. Nonetheless that New York City lives on in the rooms that have become his memory, rooms whose doors are impossible to lock: "Phoenix was a neater package for me. I needed a private life. How could you have a private life in a place where all your isolated feelings are out in the open, where the tension in your heart, the thing you've been able to restrict to small, closed rooms is everywhere exposed to the whitish light" (U, 341). Again, as for David Bell, for Selvy, Nick tries to forge all the excess and disorder of his past life into rooms folded deep inside himself, trying to act outside in a more thoughtful way. The *second self* that Nick stubbornly tries to perpetuate, however, is always agitated, always endangered by that past that he has never been able to overcome and that continues to live in those rooms, coming back into view at

⁶⁶ Pierre-Yves Pétillon, *Les Romans d'une ville*, in *Dossier New York*, Le Magazine Littéraire, n. 443, June 2005, p. 34.

⁶⁷ "He went up the narrow street [...] He went inside [...] He still felt uneasy about the basement room" (U, 778).

the slightest light exposure. Nick Shay's New York is an inner display of rooms from which he tries to escape and sometimes succeed, especially when Nick finds himself in situations where his mental state is altered or debilitated. This can be seen during a particular alcohol-imbibing evening when his exasperated drinking partner asks him: "Now how many references to New York have I heard from you tonight?" (U, 337). Or again, during a morning in which he has an extramarital affair with a stranger: "You make me aggressive [...] I'm having a relapse just sitting here. I'm backsliding a mile a minute" (U, 293). That New York which Nick can't verbally, or emotionally, express to his wife, finds room in the conversation with a stranger.

One could sum up a large part of *Underworld* as the conjugal drama of a husband who cannot open the rooms of his past to his wife. Or rather, a man trying to merge the present and the future with a past locked in rooms with sagging doors⁶⁸. On the other hand, in those inner rooms Nick puts what he considers the best that happened to him in his life: "all the interesting things in my life happened young" (U, 293). Nick is reluctant to tell his wife about his past and this creates friction in their marriage. Marion justifies her cheating on Nick in this way: "She was herself with Brian, whatever that meant. She knew what it meant. Less enveloped in someone else's figuration, his self-conscious shaping of a life" (U, 256, 257). From those rooms Nick has built a world his own size, where Marion finds no space: "I've always been a country of one" (U, 275). A

⁶⁸ "Characters in *Underworld* repeatedly try to revitalize the past to make sense of their present. [...] Nick's nostalgia is private and restorative; he longs for action and the physical masculinity of his teenage years that happen to be a part of the Cold War era despite the horrifying moments that modeled his existence." Damjana Mraović-O'Hare, *The beautiful, horrifying past: nostalgia and apocalypse in Don DeLillo's Underworld*, in *Criticism*, Vol.53, No.2 (Spring 2011), pp. 213-239, Wayne State University Press, pp. 214-218

world of inner rooms with no outside streets. The New York of the past, held in inner rooms, is a frightening New York, but it appears to be an exuberance which is spatially determined, controllable, quickly attainable, and therefore still and always coveted. When Nick finally manages to open up to Marion, things settle down between the two, the infidelities are overcome and they can move on to that word "Peace" (U, 827), which is the word that closes the novel. However, those rooms are still a part of Nick: "and I know the ghosts are walking in the halls. But not these halls and not this house. They're all back there in those railroad rooms at the narrow end of the night" (U, 810). The rooms of the past echo in the minds of the characters and are reconstructed in the present as other rooms full of representations that nostalgically vivify the mind and activate the memory. As Albert Bronzini (Klara's ex-husband) says at one point, remembering his childhood when a simple illness forced him to bed: "Like childhood, he thought. Those bedridden days when he was islanded in sheets and pillows, surrounded by books, by chess pieces, deliciously sick at times, a fever that sent him inward, sea-sweats and dreams with runny colors, lonely but not unhappy, the room a world, the safe place of imagination" (U, 767). Starting from the character's mind and then projecting into a physical and concrete space, the room really becomes a world of its own, another world, one more comfortable to live in, a world refined on the peculiarities of the character, a world to which the character always wants to return. The characters in DeLillo's works find themselves living in two worlds, the real world and the world inside the room. Often the latter is indeed the starting point: "Don DeLillo's novels begin, again and again, with a solitary man being propelled headlong in a sealed chamber [...] In other novels [...] the main character is often

enclosed in a room”⁶⁹. Leaving the room (physical and mental) or bringing one’s own room (physical and mental) to integrate into the outside world, are the two, not really hidden, metaphors of the narrative path that guides the plots of DeLillo’s novels.

The room, as a mental structure, is therefore a refuge from the world, a retreat from the outside as an attempt to protect one’s inner self, perceived as something unstable, under constant threat, something that only the structure of the room can hold together. The room works creating a world inside of which the imagination can finally take shape, transforming itself in a refuge, into a fantastic place of escape, as happens to Bronzini, or into a place where it is possible to elaborate a plan of intervention towards the outside world. This one is just another kind of escape, where the characters do not escape from reality towards fantasy but try to escape the reality they have experienced to prepare for a new return to reality. What has been imagined, through the spatial and temporal configuration of a room, can thus be implemented.

Charles Molesworth correctly writes:

The rooms they inhabit are both torture chambers and contemplative retreats; they can be understood as providing an “outsider’s” viewpoint for their inhabitants, allowing them to give shape and coherence to society and history, or as

⁶⁹ Charles Molesworth, *Don DeLillo’s Perfect Starry Night*, in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, edited by Frank Lentricchia, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 143

theaters of futility whose “inside” is always penetrated by history’s distorted and overwhelming simulacra⁷⁰.

After examining the room as a self-disciplinary structure and as a memory storage, the last aspect that concerns the room as a mental configuration is thus played out on this continuous oscillation highlighted by Molesworth, between the idea of the room as an unreachable shelter where to try, again and again, to give an explanation of what happens outside, and the room as the stage where to set one’s own play to the facing world and where its mental power helps ward off the deviations inserted by the intruding world into the play.

A clarification is required before going on with the analysis. Compared to the cases seen so far, the boundary between the mental room and the room as physical space here is almost minimal. Despite the mental aspect still prevailing, this type of room is also a physical space. It is no longer something that exists only in the mind, but, as we will see in the next chapter, even though the physical rooms are able to determine the actions and thoughts of the character according to their specific spatial location (we will distinguish between the rooms in the desert, the motel rooms, to finally get to the rooms of the city) here the room is still determined by the mind’s action and not vice versa. It is the mind that builds the room, it physically configures it. We are talking about the rooms of creation. A creative action that can be divided into two categories: political creation and artistic creation.

⁷⁰ Molesworth, p. 145.

1.1.1 Political Creation in the Room

Let us start with political creation. By political creation we mean everything that the characters elaborate in the room in order to intervene directly on the facts and the events of the world. Those events that determine History, that very same History that in Benjamin point of view appears as a military order, which assails and harms real life, crushes the losers, the weakest, or simply all those who live their daily reality and who do not decide the destiny of a nation. The characters are those who remain without the possibility of expressing their own version, those who cannot add their own anecdote to the constellations of tales that according to Benjamin, should form history. These characters who “had spent their lives dreaming of their affinities with principled, notorious, or merely intellectual or scholarly dwellers in small rooms: revolutionaries such as Trotsky and Castro, spies such as Francis Gary Powers [...], historians and writers”⁷¹. These are the characters DeLillo calls *men in small rooms*:

What we finally have is a man in a small room, a man who has shut himself away and this is something that happens in my work – the man hiding from acts of violence, or the individual reduced to silence by the forces around him⁷².

⁷¹ David Cowart, *Don DeLillo. The Physics of Language*, The University of Georgia Press, 2003, p. 103

⁷² Adam Begley, *Don DeLillo: The Art of Fiction*, in *The Paris Review*, 128 (Fall 1993), 274-306, p. 287

Who are these characters locked in small rooms making plans? They are what DeLillo himself, in another interview, calls *outsiders*. Men living on the margin of society, men crushed by the violence of contemporary life, “creatures from an atomized society that espouses a belief in individualism but as often as not produces only anomie and alienation”⁷³. They are those betrayed by the consumerist dream that “makes people alone”⁷⁴. They are characters who have completely lost their spot in the world. Everything that happens becomes incomprehensible: reality itself, now a succession of simulacra, is illegible and inexplicable to them. “So, given the frightening nature of the “outside”, the only escape seems to be the inside: a shelter, four walls, a psychological condition, a place closed to the overwhelming signs of dehumanized society”⁷⁵. For these characters, the anecdote is no longer enough, what they need, their pressing desire, is to interact directly with that History that always seems to cut them off, to get into its trajectory and change it drastically. This is why their plan must necessarily be violent.

For these characters, the room is, first and foremost, a condition of the mind, a necessity of the mind to find shelter from the outside world, no matter where this process physically takes place, i.e., where the room is located. The room as physical space is only the extension of a larger room that the mind has created to elaborate a plan of action: “eventually, their small room *seems to be* an antidote, a way of being in the margins and working inside”⁷⁶. Therefore, although physically present, the room is a mental matrix. It is a metaphor of the

⁷³ Molesworth, p. 144.

⁷⁴ Don DeLillo, *American Blood: The JFK Assassination*, in *Rolling Stone*, 8 December 1983, p. 27

⁷⁵ Belleggia, p. 168

⁷⁶ Belleggia, p. 171

claustrophobic condition of the individual in the society and the “antithesis of the life America seems to promise its citizen”⁷⁷.

The room is therefore a condition, before being a physical space, it is a way of *being in the world*. It is like being a room in the world. The enclosed space of the room is inside the world, but somehow kept outside as well. It is enclosed and protected with a door that can be opened and which must be opened at a certain point to allow some filtering. Only the filtering of the experiences can lead elaborated plans to finally meet the outside world and to move towards their realization without encountering obstacles. Behaving as a room in the world, in turn, makes it impossible to get “out of the room and out of the self”, and as DeLillo explains: “To merge with history is to escape the self”⁷⁸. In this case the room is physically created by the imagination of the character. The character becomes like an empty box that doesn’t allow any light to get through and whose walls give back an image of the world that is only partial, hypertrophic and obsessive in which the character is held captive. The room does not turn out to be an antidote to his intoxicated thought, as the character originally thinks, but it is an accelerator of his mental drift. Leaving the room, therefore, can only lead to a violent gesture that annihilates, among other things, the character himself, who ends up completely emptied, because his entire perception of the world collapses miserably when exposed to the light from outside.

⁷⁷ Anthony DeCurtis, “*An Outsider in This Society*”: Interview with Don DeLillo, in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, edited by Frank Lentricchia, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 52

⁷⁸ DeCurtis, p. 52

Libra

Again we came 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.⁷⁹

The epitome of this type of *man in the small room* who dedicated himself to political creation is Lee Harvey Oswald. Oswald is the protagonist of *Libra*, the novel that DeLillo dedicated to (reconstructing) the assassination of John F. Kennedy, published on August 15, 1988.

To understand how this type of room works in the construction of the novel, it is necessary to pause for a moment and to take into account the density of the material surrounding the plot and on how the author has found, through writing, a way to contain it all⁸⁰. The assassination of the President of the United States, as DeLillo has often recounted, is an event that has deeply marked his life, especially as a writer. He goes so far as to say that: "Maybe it invented me. [...] It occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination"⁸¹. The novel originated from an article written for *Rolling Stone*⁸². DeLillo interrupted the writing of *White*

⁷⁹ DeCurtis, p. 57-58.

⁸⁰ "The novel is the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements." Don DeLillo, *The Power of History*, in *New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 1997

⁸¹ DeCurtis, p. 47-48.

⁸² "Even before *Libra*, his writing engaged with the suspicion that has, since Dallas, infected American culture, a sense that history has been manipulated, that the real story is buried under layers of bureaucratic obfuscation or missing altogether." Jeremy Green,

Noise to write this article, it required an unprecedented effort from him, both in terms of writing and documentation, comparable only to what was done previously for *Ratner's Star*. In this case, however, there was no relation to real life events, things that really happened, people who really existed. In other words, it was the first time DeLillo set his story in a real-life context where everything was and still is cloaked by a veil of ambiguity and incomprehension that is virtually impossible to raise.

“Well this book is unusual in my own experience because I worked two sessions a day at the typewriter. [...] I couldn't do all the research, all the reading, in one extended stretch and then begin to write the novel, because there was simply too much reading to do”⁸³. The writing of the novel followed intensive reading, starting with the Warren Commission report⁸⁴, the viewing of period films, listening to numerous recordings and various inspections⁸⁵. The subject is one of the most arduous, in which writing must succeed in the difficult task of giving order to the chaos of events without, however, becoming didactic, without presenting a definitive and simplified vision of how things really went. It is this intersection of theories, this clash of evidence and counteracting evidence and the impossibility of binding them together in a clear and comprehensible whole that give power to the event⁸⁶. *Libra* is and should be read as a novel, not as an

Libra, in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.95

⁸³ DeCurtis, p. 54

⁸⁴ “I asked myself what Joyce could possibly do after *Finnegans Wake*, and this was the answer. It's an amazing document”, DeCurtis, p. 54

⁸⁵ “One week I'd be exploring the Bay of Pigs, the next week the Italian mafia and the next week the Yuri Nosenko affair and the next week the U-2 incident”, DeCurtis, p. 54-55

⁸⁶ “à savoir l'idée que ce qui arrive *se* montre sous une modalité qui voile plus qu'elle ne dévoile”, Karim Daanoune, *The writing of the event in Don DeLillo's fiction*. *Littérature*.

essay with the claim of giving an explanation: “I think that the book is an exploration of what variations we might take on an actual event rather than an argument that this is what really happened in Dallas in November of 1963 and in the months before and in the years that have followed”⁸⁷. DeLillo manages to write a novel that looks quite orderly on the surface, balanced by a precise structure, which neither flattens nor narrows at the edges, and at the same time manages to not exclude any of the ambiguities, mysteries, shadowy points, deceptive echoes⁸⁸ that permeate not only the event itself⁸⁹, but also, the very perception of the event (it has frequently been pointed out) as confusion becomes the very brand of the event⁹⁰. Suspended between intention and chance, as is made explicit in the finale: “he has learned enough about the days and months preceding November 22, and enough about the twenty-second itself, to reach a determination that the conspiracy against the President was a *rambling* affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to *chance*” (L, 441). “The stuff keeps coming” (L, 59, 378, 441) is the leitmotif of the novel, repeated by one of the three main characters, Nicholas Branch. The stuff that keeps

Université Michel de Montaigne - Bordeaux III, 2014. French. <NNT:2014BOR30039> <tel-01157946>, p. 34

⁸⁷ DeCurtis, p. 57

⁸⁸ “The Kennedy assassination was an event in which there are missing perceptions. How many shots were fired? I don’t think this has been determined beyond doubt. How many shots, how many wounds in the President’s body, how many gunmen? I don’t think we can know these things for certain.” Maria Moss, “*Writing as a Deeper Form of Concentration*”: *An Interview with Don DeLillo*, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, edited by Thomas DePietro, University Press of Mississippi, 2005, p. 162

⁸⁹ “Le réel passé est, au sens propre du mot, invérifiable. En tant qu’il n’est plus, il n’est visé qu’*indirectement* par le discours de l’histoire”, Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action. Essais d’herméneutique, II*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1986, p. 18.

⁹⁰ “The power of an event can flow from its unresolvable heart, all the cruel and elusive elements that don’t add up, and it makes you do odd things, and tell stories to yourself, and build believable worlds”, (U, 454-455)

coming is material on the murder. The event is thus characterized by its excess, an excess that not only concerns its impact on American history, nor is the excess of intrigues that prepared it and then followed it, but also the excess of material: an indeterminate flood of documents, statements, reconstructions without an index of priority that confuse the waters and render almost worthless any attempt to give the hypothesis an order or to choose a theory among the many⁹¹.

This proliferation of voices is supported by a complex balance between what is said and what cannot be said, between what can be imagined by putting the pieces together, and what instead continues to elude any attempt at unification but cannot be ignored, and therefore must be suggested: even the most hidden aspects must be revealed as they are impossible to grasp through the unravelling of the plot. As DeLillo himself specified: “I wanted a clear historical center on which I could work my fictional variations”⁹². To succeed in this delicate operation, which consists in continuous variations on the harmonic center, that is the basic framework of the event as it is known, as it occurred, as it was perceived, and DeLillo uses the disciplinary and creative power of the room as a mental configuration.

Libra is the most paradigmatic novel regarding the room as a mental configuration that we are going to analyze. This kind of room metamorphoses

⁹¹ As Karim Daanoune has rightly written about *Libra*'s intrigue: “Il s'agit plutôt de dire que l'Histoire n'échappe pas à un processus de fictionalisation, et que les doutes qui pèsent sur les conditions exactes de 'assassinat' donnent lieu à une multitude d'histoires et d'intrigues plutôt qu'à un seul récit organisateur, un récit homogène de maîtrise. Car telle est l'idée sous-jacente à un discours sur l'événement. Sa consignation par une voix, un récit d'autorité est impossible puisqu'il excède les conditions de sa réalisation”, Daanoune, p. 35

⁹² DeCurtis, p. 50.

into the character, or rather the character becomes a room. He then stands in the world as a room, and just like a room in the world, he creates experience. *Libra* is, as we have seen, a novel of rooms, of men in small rooms, who try to become the direct narrators of events, to intervene in History and to interact with the facts of the world, until they start to believe that they control those very same events.

A novel of Rooms

I think fiction rescues history from its confusion. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it can also operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we do not experience in our daily lives, in our real lives. So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it – correcting clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply do not encounter elsewhere⁹³.

The novel's ability to find itself simultaneously both *inside and outside* history is, in this case, guaranteed by the room's ability to find itself simultaneously inside and outside the world, "both doors could be locked from inside [...] part of the building but also separate from it" (L, 276). When we say that *Libra* is a novel of rooms it is precisely because the latent confusion of the various events, on which the plot is built, is avoided thanks to some kind of sorting of the innumerable data through rooms. That functions as the nerve center from which the directions of history and plot unfold.

Three different rooms are the starting point of the three main lines of the story and just as DeLillo has decided to narrate it, they leave and return, they reorganize and start again, in a progressive motion. The first room, Oswald's, is the very start of the convulsive and violent actions of the single human being

⁹³ DeCurtis, p. 56

who is trying to mix with history⁹⁴. After that we have Win Everett Jr.'s room. From this one, instead, we witness the orchestrated action of the one who has been excluded and consequently he tries to make his vision prevail, convinced that history is something you can control and manage at will. The last one is Nicholas Branch's room, the room where everything concerning the shocking central event flows together, in the vain expectation of being arranged, organized and finally narrated in some sort of linearity.

The three main rooms of the novel enter into symbiosis with the three characters who inhabit them. It is difficult to distinguish between the physical limitation of the character and the limitation of the room, the two are perfectly intertwined, one the projection of the other. The three characters share, in different ways, the condition of isolation and frustration, "seeking to fend off the disintegration of finding themselves alone in small rooms [...] Oswald and other characters in *Libra*, however, experience life in small rooms as deprivation"⁹⁵. The three characters react to this distance from the world and from history by searching for a conjunction to it within the room, Oswald thinks that "the only end to isolation was to reach the point where he was no longer separated from the true struggles that went on around him" (L, 248).

The role of the room in the novel is much more layered than to just consider it as a mere metaphor that recurs throughout the novel where "on its fundamental

⁹⁴ Or maybe he not: "(David Ferrie) he was right when he told Oswald that he didn't want to merge with history, he wanted to get out", Frank Lentricchia, *Libra as Postmodern Critique*, in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, edited by Frank Lentricchia, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 214-215

⁹⁵ Stuart Hutchinson, *DeLillo's Libra and the Real*, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 30, no.2 (2001), p. 122

level of meaning, the small room suggests isolation”⁹⁶. On the one hand it is indeed a metaphor for isolation: DeLillo, in fact, locks his main characters, and all their actions, inside rooms in a novel that tells of one the key public events in American history, literally showing us the isolation in which they are confined compared to America. In this case the physical location of the room is important too. From Oswald’s initial room in the Bronx, *the basement room*, situated in “a railroad flat in a red-brick tenement, five stories, in a street of grim exhibits”(L, 5), to Win Everett’s room, “in his basement at home”, in Texas, where he was sent on a sort of early retirement from the CIA, to live in “the sweet old house, turn-of-the-century, with the curved porch, the oak posts furled in trumpet vines”(L, 17), and finally to Nicholas Branch’s room, most likely an internal office at CIA headquarters in Langley, where he lives without any kind of human contact: “Branch hasn’t met the current Curator and doubts if he ever will. They talk on the telephone, “swamped with documents not seen by anyone outside the headquarters” (L, 14), the physical location, always at the edge of the building, reinforces the metaphor of isolation. More specifically, they are materially different rooms and geographically located in different places. Oswald lives in multiple rooms, rooms that are scattered everywhere, “each small room seems to be a natural consequence of the other”⁹⁷. The first room is the one we just saw, the one Oswald shares with his mother in the Bronx. This is followed by other rooms, which he calls “cramped spaces” (L, 184). From Japan *box room*, passing by Russia and back to America: “Men in small rooms, in isolation. A cell is the basic state. They put you in a room and lock the door. This is the final size

⁹⁶ Paul Civello, *Undoing the Naturalistic Novel: Don DeLillo’s Libra*, in *Arizona Quarterly*, 48, no.2 (Summer 1992), p. 35

⁹⁷ Belleggia, p. 184

of all the forces around you. Eight by fifteen” (L, 196). They are really small rooms, poor rooms, uncomfortable rooms, rooms that sometimes are merely cells where Oswald is imprisoned because of his political actions. If Oswald is the character of the multitude of identical rooms, Everett is the character of a classical American house, who could have easily appeared in one of the commercials that Oswald and his mom watched on TV in their Bronx apartment: “American Kitchens. This one has a breakfast nook, where a man named Walter Everett Jr. was sitting, thinking [...] lost to the morning noises collecting around him, a stir of the all-familiar, the heartbeat mosaic of every happy home” (L, 15). Oswald’s rooms are looking at them in this way, in their bare composition, Oswald’s rooms tell us about a difficult life, about hardships, about who really lives on the outskirts of society, or as Springsteen says, in *the darkness on the edge of town*. Everett’s room, just like the several family scenes shown, tell us about something that is completely the opposite. It is true that Everett is living in Texas, far from the core of the events, but the house he lives in, and the family life that takes place in there, is a life of quiet perfection.

The third room, Nicholas Branch’s room, is an office that has now become a home, “a book-filled room, the room of documents” (L, 14).

If the rooms are so different in their material appearance and reflect different lifestyle, what makes them the same? What are the elements that can put them in the same expression *men in small rooms*? The answer lies in those who live in them, specifically in the mental condition of the characters who inhabited them. As we will see in the next chapter, several of DeLillo’s characters find themselves, at a certain point, stopping by in a motel room, they may experience dissimilar mental conditions at first, but the motel room, with its peculiar characteristics, acts on them and changes them, making them all converge to

one singular emblematic self, regardless of who they were at the beginning. Here we witness the opposite process: it is the character who acts on the room, making all the rooms the same. More precisely, it is the combination of room and character that creates the peculiarity of the action. The three main characters share the same mental setting and the three rooms, that looked so different at the beginning, merge into the same function. Character and room merge in a synergic relation that changes them both. The mood of the character changes the rooms and the room's isolated setting enhances the emotional disposition of the character.

Isolation, loneliness, helplessness, ambition and imagination make up the walls and fill the room.

Lee Harvey Oswald's rooms

“The small room has shaped Oswald’s character and understanding”⁹⁸, and vice versa. Of all the identical rooms, *three* are crucial for Oswald. The first of these crucial chambers is his room in New Orleans where his readings began, where his idea started to take shape, where the seed is sown for what will take place later: “He kept the Marxist books in his room. [...] the books were private, like something you find and hide, some lucky piece that contains the secret of who you are. [...] they altered the room, charged it with meaning. [...] The books made him part of something. Something led up to his presence in this room [...] Men in small rooms. Men reading and waiting, struggling with secret and feverish ideas” (L, 40, 41). Books are the world that enters a room, they carry the example of the action and thought of other men who have tried to interact with the course of the events. “Stateless, word-blind, still a little desperate [...] he wanted to explain himself to posterity [...] Even as he printed the words, he *imagined* people reading them [...] A true picture of his state of mind” (L, 211). For Oswald who always had problems interacting with others, with writing and reading, the room becomes a place of reception and understanding, a place where he can finally build his own narrative: “it is just in his imaginative narrative that he is able to project his character outside the small room and see himself”⁹⁹. Here the room becomes the gateway to the world, it is no longer just a metaphor for isolation, but becomes the place where you can imagine yourself in the world. The world, or rather that part of the world selected by the character, a little by chance, a little by choice. The world enters the room together with the character

⁹⁸ Belleggia, p. 184

⁹⁹ Belleggia, p. 189

himself, who already gets in it in a condition of solitude, and here finally meets the multitude. Entering the room, he alters the room itself, transforms it according to his needs and builds his future presence in the world: “reading Marx as a teenager altered his room, charged it with meaning, propelled him into a history shaped by his imagination: he suddenly saw capitalists, oppressed workers, class struggle”¹⁰⁰. The room is the means to enter the world, not just exit it, to flee from it, and what the character does in the room is also what leaves from the room. Oswald enters it in one way and leaves it in another¹⁰¹. DeLillo himself defines Oswald as “an actor in real life [...] He was watching himself perform”¹⁰².

His vision of the world is thus shaped by what his mind has definitively established in his relationship with the four walls of the room: “En effet, Oswald ne voit pas le monde, il se voit dans le monde; il est son propre spectateur”¹⁰³. The combination of room and character finally cancels any differences to free the creation that takes place. It will no longer be the Oswald who entered the room for the first time, it will be the Oswald who moulded himself in his interaction with it. Oswald therefore becomes a spectator of his creation, which is nothing more than Oswald himself.

Therefore, the character and his room become inseparable, so it becomes impossible to leave the room, to escape from it. It is part of the character, who is no longer the individual in the world, but his own creation in the world in

¹⁰⁰ Lentricchia, p. 209

¹⁰¹ “Sa pluralité subjective lui provient également de sa propre propension à se créer des alias, à s’inventer des noms et des rôles, à jouer le jeu de sa propre fictionnalité”, Daanoune, p. 50

¹⁰² DeCurtis, p. 59

¹⁰³ Daanoune, p. 53

interaction with his room. Even when he is on the opposite side of the United States, in his second crucial room, his creation again needs this interaction to feed itself. Indeed, only through a room do the world and his presence in the world make sense: “It seemed so safe in these small rooms with Marina near him to talk and touch, to make this Russia seem less vast and secret. So many angers waned, as he sat under a lamp reading, reading politics and economics” (L, 208). Thus, we reach the third crucial room in Oswald’s development, the one in Dallas, where Oswald plans his assassination of General Walker: “In one of his apartments in Dallas he actually worked in a room almost the size of a closet. This seemed almost the kind of negative culmination of a certain stream that was running through my own work of men finding themselves alone in small rooms”¹⁰⁴. It is clearly shown what happens in these kinds of tiny rooms, where Oswald struggled to make room for a lamp, a table and a chair, “Locked in the miniature room, creating a design, a network of connections. It was a second existence, the private world floating out to three dimensions” (L, 277).

¹⁰⁴ DeCurtis, p. 61

Three movements

Three movements take place inside the room. The first one is the movement of the room itself, which guarantees a degree of closure, sets an impassable limit. *Locked*. Once the room is closed, nothing can enter it anymore and disturb the work being done inside. In its movement the room guarantees a certain order, balance and therefore a perception of clarity, the lack of ambiguity of things that are confined and therefore clearly defined.

The second movement is almost paradoxical. It is the movement of the world out there, which usually seems so elusive, incomprehensible, and finally becomes here something immediate, a design easy to read. *Design*. The world becomes a drawing to which the character can finally put his hand, he can intervene in its lines, he can move, modify, delete, rewrite. The operation that the room does on the outside world is to transform it into a linear system, where everything is connected without any mysteries, without any unexpected element intervening. *A network of connections*. The same thing happens to Win Everett. He, too, pours his mental condition of the outcast into a room which, from a plain room in an ordinary family house, becomes the room at the core of the plot. This happens precisely because of the character's intervention. Unlike Oswald who is a character with many rooms, many identities and many interrupted creations, Win is the man of the conspiracy. A single room, an idea, an identity. Win feels like the man who is in control of the story and who can hijack it. He feels like the creator of a plan. A plan that can work outside the room. Win is convinced that everyone, in the end, has a role in the crime, is a piece of the conspiracy puzzle "without the compression and numinous sheen" (L, 78). The life of an individual, Win says, abounds in meaning and significance, the whole

regulated by symmetries working below the surface. No mystery, but geometries and connections, invisible only to the eyes of those who do not want to look for them carefully. Win, in fact, believes that it is possible to create even an individual. Having found the fundamental patterns, the rest is just a long and refined work of joining dots: “An address book with ambiguous leads. Photographs expertly altered (or cruelly altered). Letters, travel documents, counterfeit signatures, a history of false names. It would all require a massive decipherment, a conversion to plain text” (L, 78). Thus Oswald, from his room, *imagined* people reading his words, guessing his thoughts and from there interpreting his deeds, Win from his room, “*envisioned* teams of linguistics, photo analysts, fingerprint experts, handwriting experts” (L, 78) and so on. Creation is for the world, it is meant to look at the world, it is meant to belong to the world. However, it is designed and built inside a room.

If Oswald in his many rooms creates many versions of *Oswald*, Win creates one and only Oswald: “Leading a life of quiet desperation [...] he organizes a conspiracy that gradually becomes his own purpose or “destiny” as an alternative to the banal details of teaching at a small-town college and the daily rituals of domestic life”¹⁰⁵. And he too, like Oswald, feels that his life “was leading toward a momentous event in which he would finally realize his historic destiny”¹⁰⁶. However, the moment must be reached by first passing through a room. As Oswald feels safe locked inside a room, Win Everett “had seen the logic in staying home” (L, 219).

¹⁰⁵ John Johnston, *Superlinear Fiction or Historical Diagram: Don DeLillo's Libra*, in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 40, no. 2 (Summer 1994), p. 330-332

¹⁰⁶ Johnston, p. 331

It is interesting, however, to think for a moment about the role that the room continues to have even when the creation is complete and released into the world. For Oswald, the room will function as a backdrop to the theatre stage that hosts his creation: in the conception of the many characters of different names he has staged in his everyday life, the room remains in the background, inhabited by a single one of these characters, the only one, perhaps, to remain constant. It is the figure of the ideal writer, locked in a *small room*, and intent on his work: “He saw himself writing this story for Life or Look, the tale of an ex-Marine who has penetrated the heart of the Soviet Union” (L, 205). As DeLillo said: “He did say he wanted to be a writer. He wanted to write “short stories on contemporary American life””¹⁰⁷ and, although there is no evidence that he actually wrote, this other fantasy of his remains latent throughout the novel. The room of the writer is the engine that fuels the representation, but this and only this alone, these floating identities will have to impact with the world. Oswald’s creation of himself, the other Oswald, must participate in the action. Different for Everett is the creation that will have to come out: “he knew he’d become remote from the cutting edge of the operation” (L, 221). What is the plan, what is Everett’s creation? It is not just to build an identity, it is to build another room, to force the world to get lost in another room. Oswald wants to expand his room to the world, so that it encompasses the entire world, while Everett’s plan is to force the world into his room: “He would create a shadowed room, the gunman’s room, which investigators would eventually find, exposing each fact to relentless scrutiny, following each friend, relative, casual acquaintance into his own roomful of shadows” (L, 78).

¹⁰⁷ DeCurtis, p. 52

The third movement is the one determined by the transitivity of the verbs used to describe what happens inside. Both Oswald and Everett *see, imagine, envision*, something. The object they relate to is something that we can address to as their creation. What they create is themselves. Their private world finally takes shape thanks to the room, and the room finally takes on a precise configuration thanks to their mental projection. *Three dimensions*. This is how they realize themselves. This how the characters see each other. The plan Everett is working on “speaks to something deep inside (him)” (L, 28). It is being locked inside his room, building his private world in three dimensions, that allows Everett to realize he has never been part of the Agency he has worked for all his life: “The Agency forgives. [...] they would admire the complexity of his plan, incomplete as it was. [...] And it was a picture in the world of their own guilty wishes. He was never more surely an Agency man than in the first breathless days of dreaming up this plot” (L, 363). The room makes the world meet the deep essence of the character. Everett, thanks to his creation, finally realized himself as the person he had always wanted to be. In the room the character can transform himself according to his own ideal standards and wishes, while still considering the real world. The room is the beginning of everything: “This was the true beginning” (L, 434). Oswald, after shooting President Kennedy, is locked in a cell thinking over and over about what he did: “It was beginning to occur to him that he’d found his life’s work” (L, 434). Behind the scenes starts to emerge the character/writer imagined by Oswald in his own personal self-representation: “Oswald seems to have found the role of a lifetime”¹⁰⁸. The cell is the space of reconstruction, of reflection, on what has happened: “Here is a

¹⁰⁸ Belleggia, p. 191

crime that clearly yields material for deep interpretation” (L, 434). His three-dimensional creation has impacted history, it has left the room and then returned to it all together with the waste that the encounter with the real world has produced. Oswald continues to care only about his creation and in his cell he can purify it. His only end is to perpetuate his infinite creation: “His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald” (L, 43). As Lentricchia wrote: “What he has, finally, is his cell in the Dallas Police and Courts building “the same room he’d known all his life” but now, in idealized form, the place where he felt himself growing into the role as it developed”¹⁰⁹. Only three characters exists in his creation: the writer ruminating in that cell, the killer and the president: “the figure of the gunman in the window was inextricable from the victim and his history” (L, 435). It is this closed view that “sustained Oswald in his cell. It gave him what he needed to live” (L, 435).

The Room Full of Self

It is precisely because the room is completely invaded by the private life of the character, *floating out in three dimensions*, that there is no more room left for anything else. Both Oswald and Everett cancel out the dynamic opposition between what’s outside and what’s inside. The world they bring into the room is a world fit for their vision. In his cell, Oswald acquires knowledge, he realizes that the murder has gone differently than he had thought and imagined, he knows that other things have overlapped, interfered, despite this however his room, his mental room, is invaded by his creation that occupies the whole space,

¹⁰⁹ Lentricchia, p. 215

not letting pass any fragments of reality. “Of course Everett did not plan to shoot Kennedy in a strict sense” (L, 219), but even if he annuls any opposition that may be found between his plan and its accomplishment: “the plan had one thing going for it that Win Everett’s levels and refinements could not have supplied. Luck” (L, 387). Everett then loses control of his creation, which evolves passing into the hands of those outside the room and is energized by the currents of the world, by chance, by luck. He has no choice but to disappear into his room: the private world spilled, drains the character and leaves him quite evanescent: “He watched himself come down the plank stairs [...] He smelled turpentine and understood how you could become hooked on the smell of turpentine, give yourself up to it [...] your whole life centered on spirits of turpentine” (L, 359).

The perfect geometry of the design of the world collapses, eventually, on the world itself, and on history: “*Libra* challenges this historical form by suggesting that random actions and the workings of chance will connect and collide with each other in a way that cannot be anticipated or adequately explained, in what is almost a chaos theory of history”¹¹⁰.

Nicholas Branch, the character in the last room of the novel, knows this¹¹¹. He has been living in his room for fifteen years, since he was commissioned to write

¹¹⁰ Glen Thomas, *History, Biography, and Narrative in Don DeLillo’s Libra*, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43 no. 1 (Spring 1997), p. 109

¹¹¹ “Branch’s labor represents the extraordinary difficulty of casting the details into a plausible historical narrative. His efforts, which will apparently reach no end, no finished work, and which entail in any case writing a history that no one will read, come to resemble a work of modernist complexity, a text that defies conventional legibility, not to mention aesthetic conventions, to pursue a principle to its logical end. Mastering the mess of this history, with all its bizarre coincidences and baffling contradictions, thwarts Branch’s historiographic endeavor.” Green, p. 100

the report on the assassination, but the event seems to be composed of way too many elements that escape linearity and prevent full comprehension. Locked in his room, isolated from everything and everyone, Nicholas Branch wants to cancel any opposition in the reconstruction of the facts: “He believes the writer needs to absorb reality through an objective approach to his data and assemble them into a cohesive narrative, in the mode of a linear chain”¹¹². Canceling all dynamic opposition, the room becomes “the room of growing old, the room of history and dreams” (L, 445). Lost inside the room, Nicholas Branch loses his way too¹¹³.

It appears quite obvious now that when we talk about *men in small rooms* who dedicate themselves to their political creation, what we have are “frustrated, stuck, self-watching characters” (L 181), trapped in chambers that absorb them into endless spirals. The room as a mental configuration, therefore, appears in *Libra* as a metaphor for isolation, it is also a means to get in touch with the world, albeit in a fictitious way, and, at last, it is also decisive for the plot because it is from those three rooms that the three narrative lines start. Oswald’s line is the one of his infinite rooms and consequently his infinite selves trying to affect the world, Everett’s line the one that talks about the theory that DeLillo has chosen to support: “I chose what I consider the most obvious possibility: that assassination was the work of anti-Castro elements”¹¹⁴, and finally, Branch’s line is the one of the writers grappling with the other two lines and with everything that happens to them and because of them at the same time.

¹¹² Belleggia, p. 181

¹¹³ “This is the room of dreams, the room where it has taken him all these years to learn that his subject is not politics or violent crime but men in small rooms. Is he one of them now?” (L, 181)

¹¹⁴ DeCurtis, p. 50

“Think of two parallel lines,” he said. “One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It’s not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It’s a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny.”
(L, 339)

The three rooms are anchor points for both the writer and the reader too, they are the only spaces of true understanding. These are the spaces where, thanks to the three movements in the room, we can understand what moved Oswald, what Everett conceived in the anti-Castroist current and what Branch, the writer, discovered around the confusion of the event, impossible to dissolve, but not impossible to tell. “*Libra* se construit autour de forces narratives qui jouent les unes contre les autres”¹¹⁵. It is built around rooms that bounce off each other, the rooms from which the narrative forces depart and to which they tend to return

If Ratner’s *Star* is, in part, a way to embody what it is all about, that is, if it’s a book of harmonies and symmetries, because

¹¹⁵ Daanoune, p.42

mathematics is a search for a sense of order in our lives, then I think *Libra* is, in a curious way, related to *Ratner's Star*, because it attempts to provide a hint of order in the midst of all randomness.¹¹⁶

The two novels, as already mentioned, are similar in their intentions, in the underlying work processes, but differ in their use of the room. *Ratner's Star's* rooms will be dealt with in the next part, but it is right here to highlight the substantial difference. In *Libra* we are dealing with rooms that take shape through the character's mind, they are the rooms that reflect a mental configuration. In *Ratner's Star* the predominant feature of the room is its physical location and architecture. The characters in the novel gradually isolate themselves in rooms that are smaller and smaller, more and more aseptic, more and more distant from the world, and it will be precisely these characteristics of these rooms to affect their reasoning.

¹¹⁶ DeCurtis, p. 56

1.1.2 Artistic Creation in the Room

A man is waiting, standing in front of a window, the room is dark, “drifts of paper on the desk, a mound of crumpled butts in the ashtray” (MII, 36). That man is Bill Gray, another *man in a small room*. Unlike those we have met so far, Bill has found his place in society. He is considered to be one of the greatest American writers; in fact, although he has only published a couple of novels, these have immediately been added to the lists of must-read-books, and despite not having published anything new in over twenty years, his books continue to be reprinted, translated and read. In short, he is not, like Everett or Oswald, looking for fame or of personal confirmation in the eyes of society, actually he needs quite the opposite. After having seen, in the example of *Libra*, the rooms where the characters conceive their political creations, in a self-inflicted (and, at least in their intention, temporary) isolation, we now move on to the rooms of artistic creation, where, again, the isolation sought by the protagonists is voluntary, but it arises from a completely opposite condition. As mentioned above, in the rooms of political creation the characters look for a way to reach the spotlight, in the rooms of artistic creation, instead, they look for a cone of shadow and protection.

Bill’s position is obtained despite himself. Bill is an artist in a world where literature has been swallowed up by the culture industry and has become subject to the rules of the market. As Jameson explains in his famous essay, aesthetic production has been definitively integrated with the production of goods in general¹¹⁷. A slipping that resonated like a crash in Bill’s soul. His novel works

¹¹⁷ “What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh

like an aftershave: the sales strategies are similar. The distribution on the market is like that of any product to be consumed, its strategically displayed in stores to capture the gaze and interest of the buyer. The surface becomes fundamental, the glitter on the cover more important than the content. The first chapter of *Mao II*, the novel which tells the story of Bill Gray, opens in a bookstore in New York, described as follows: “There were books standing on pedestals and bunched in little gothic snuggeries. [...] There were books on step terrace and Lucite wall-shelves, books in pyramids and theme displays. [...] He could hear them shrieking Buy me” (MII, 19). The figure of the writer undergoes an alteration and becomes like any other celebrity: a consumer good himself. For the book to be bought, it must not only be *it* who shouts *Buy me*, but also the author himself: “The artistic market [...] it literally haunts the writers’ imagination, casting a spell on their lives”¹¹⁸. His person is put on the market together with his work, the two things become inseparable, finally arriving at the point where the first prevails over the second. The novel alone is no longer enough: “The author has been marketed for consumption”¹¹⁹. Something else is required of the writer, a public exhibition, never requested until then. The artist’s privacy evaporates, more and more people ask about him, pieces of his personal life that transcend the work itself, now considered to be a collateral product. The glossy image of an author, or even the stolen image of an author, the out-of-

waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation.”, Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, p. 4-5

¹¹⁸ Christian Moraru, *Consuming Narratives: Don DeLillo and the “Lethal” Reading*, in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol.27, No. 2 (Spring, 1997), p. 195

¹¹⁹ Joe Moran, *Don DeLillo and the Myth of the Author-Recluse*, in *Journal of American Studies*, 34 (2000), Cambridge University Press, p. 146

focus photograph that violates a moment of private everyday life, becomes more precious than the hard creative work of assembling words, phrases to arrive at a story capable of revealing something that is still in the shadow of the world itself. Life inside the work becomes less interesting than life around the work. The terms of a story are renegotiated, or rather which story is more useful to tell or how it is more effective to tell it in terms of market sales is renegotiated rather than the intimate impact on the reader's consciousness. Bill's *j'accuse* is clear:

There's the life and there's the consumer event. Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or on film. Two lovers quarrel in the back of a taxi and a question becomes implicit in the event. Who will write the book and who will play the lovers in the movie? Everything seeks its own heightened version. Or put it this way. Nature has given way to aura. A man cuts himself shaving and someone is signed up to write the biography of the cut. All the material in every life is channeled into the glow (MII, 43-44).

The consequence of a life that must be channeled towards an expendable version of itself, towards a spectacular show, is that the stories flatten out, they lose their mystery. Anything can be told. Everything becomes an event. The quarrel in a taxi, no matter what started it, no matter if it can reveal anything, already carries the trace of a narrative. As if every daily moment was an event just as it appears, in its naked occurrence, without the need for filters, interpretation or an artistic glance. Life lived to be told. Life lived *24 hours* a day in front of an imaginary

audience. Contemporary life takes place in this way, as Bill says, in “an all-pervasive “narrativization” of the surrounding world”¹²⁰. The unpredictability typical of a work of art is neutralized by a continuous demand for narratives that adhere to the surfaces of things. The conflict that triggers the motion of consciousness is no longer searched for in the stories, the confirmation provided by the same plain reality is what audience needs now, a calm reflection that anesthetizes provocation. As Franzen writes, we witness the passage from imaginary to literal: “The world at the present is a world in which the rich lateral dramas of local manners have been replaced by a single vertical drama, the drama of regional specificity succumbing to a commercial generality”¹²¹. Various events take place, somehow, they are correlated, and these together form the basis of the novel. The first of these is pointed out by Mark Osteen: “The end of the grand narrative of modernist authority and its replacement by what I am calling [...] spectacular authorship: the power to use photographic or televised images to manufacture, as if by magic, spectacular events that profoundly shape public consciousness”¹²², not in contrast but for assimilation, for infatuation and then, eventually, just because of tolerance.

Everything turns towards “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense of the word”¹²³. Aspects of the world turn into images that are reproduced from other images in a chain that loses the

¹²⁰ Moraru, p. 199

¹²¹ Jonathan Franzen, *Perchance to Dream. In the age of images, a reason to write novels*, in *Harper's Magazine*, April 1996, p.43

¹²² Mark Osteen, *Becoming Incorporated: Spectacular Authorship and DeLillo's "Mao II"*, in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 45, No.3, *Don DeLillo Special Issue* (Fall 1999), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 644

¹²³ Jameson, p. 9

original, it is the hyperreal theorized by Baudrillard¹²⁴: a fictitious world, where reality is constructed through an excess of signs and images that refer only to themselves, to such a level of artificiality that it becomes impossible to discern what is real or not. It is a progressive process that has seen the transformation of the image, initially conceived as the reflection of a profound reality, into an image with no relation to reality whatsoever. In this change that has led to hyperreality, the representation that includes a deep immersion in its reading guaranteed by a distance - a distance that is also difference, for example, the difference between the map and the territory¹²⁵ - has been substituted by the simulation¹²⁶. As if the various layers of an image that had to be painstakingly explored in order to arrive to a meaning, had been compressed, crushed down to a pure surface, to make way for an image that is like an opaque film that prevents us, on one hand, from accessing the heart of things, and on the other, that obscures the very possibility of perceiving that there is something beyond that very film. DeLillo¹²⁷ has often investigated the attractive and addictive

¹²⁴ “Aujourd’hui l’abstraction n’est plus celle de la carte, du double, du miroir ou du concept. La simulation n’est plus celle d’une territoire, d’un être référentiel, d’une substance. Elle est la génération par les modèles d’un réel sans origine ni réalité.” Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, Éditions Galilée, Paris, 1981, p.10.

¹²⁵ “Car c’est la différence qui fait la poésie de la carte et le charme du territoire, la magie du concept et le charme du réel”, Baudrillard, (1981), p. 10

¹²⁶ “Cet imaginaire de la représentation [...] disparaît dans la simulation - dont l’opération est nucléaire et génétique, plus du tout spéculaire et discursive. C’est tout la métaphysique qui s’en va. Plus de miroir de l’être et des apparences, du réel et de son concept. Plus de coextensivité imaginaire: c’est la miniaturization génétique qui est la dimension de la simulation. [...] En fait, ce n’est plus du réel, puisqu’aucun imaginaire ne l’enveloppe plus. C’est un hyperréel, produit de synthèse irradiant de modèles combinatoires dans un hyperspace sans atmosphère”, Baudrillard, (1981), pp. 10-11

¹²⁷ “This concept has long been present in his novels starting from the very first - *Americana* - which is set inside the world of television and film production, both of which can be interpreted as hyperrealities. Baudrillard’s hyperreality is frequently

power that this patina exerts on the individual; we will see this later in his reflection on David Bell and the power of the cinematic image in the construction of his identity. With *Mao II*, however, DeLillo highlights how even the writer and his work have ended up in that flow of information, typical of the hyperreal world, which, as Baudrillard says: “dévore ses propres contenus.” Again, Baudrillard writes that: “L’information [...] au lieu de produire du sens, elle s’épuise dans la mise en scène du sens [...]”¹²⁸, in the hyperreal world it is no longer a writer’s work that interests the public, but it is everything around it, that which in theory should produce it. In theory, because in practice, a work of art transcends any action that led to its creation. But that coat that now envelops the world does not allow us to understand it.

In this situation in which it is the image only that counts, the author’s position, in respect to his work, is unstable. Anyone is able to control his/her image and undermine his/her role. “Greedy publishing houses and inquisitive media assail his privacy conspiring to turn him into a marketable icon”¹²⁹. It is the absence of a new novel that increases Bill’s popularity, and the public and the media, now, more than new pages, want his picture, his image: “the book disappears into the image of the writer” (MII, 71). Scott, Bill’s assistant, explains that “(he) gets bigger as his distance from the scene deepens” and at the same time “Bill

involved in DeLillo’s novels with the content created by technology or the mass media (including radio, television, film and the Internet, as well as press and advertising)”, Slađana Stamenković, *Human Identity in Hyper-Reality: The Hyperreal Self in Don DeLillo's Cosmopolis and The Silence*, in *Belgrade English Language and Literature Studies*, 13(1), 243-264, p. 250. Among the works that have explored the relationship between DeLillo and Baudrillard, see Marc Schuster’s, *Don DeLillo, Jean Baudrillard and the Consumer Conundrum*, Cambria Press, Youngstown, NY, 2008

¹²⁸ Baudrillard, (1981), p. 121

¹²⁹ Moraru, p. 191

gained celebrity by doing nothing” (MII, 52). Bill has been usurped by his brand name¹³⁰. What Bill has written is enough for the public, what they need now is the image of Bill, the writer: the famous writer who never appears.

“In the West,” DeLillo outlines, “every writer is absorbed, turned into breakfast food or canned laughter”¹³¹. The novel no longer has the power of a medium for a unique conception, the result of creative work, the outcome of a slow and gradual formation of a cultural landscape but has gained the same power as a commercial product, whose existence is guaranteed by mass production and bulimic consumption. The writer not only loses his cultural depth but is absorbed and mixed among many others: “The more book they publish, the weaker we become. The secret force that drives the industry is a compulsion to make writers harmless [...] there’s always a new one coming along” (MII, 47).

Suppositions about his next work do not fill Bill’s absence, rather fanciful musings about his life do: “there were stories that Bill was dead, Bill was in Manitoba, Bill was living under another name, Bill would never write another word”, and although some were convinced instead that Bill would never write again, this did not diminish their interest, as a matter of fact “(the stories) were not about Bill so much as people’s need to make mysteries and legends” (MII, 140 - 141). Those made-up stories, however, have nothing mythical about them, they are only a copy of an archaic tale, they repeat its structure, they imitate its emphasis and necessity, they simulate its objective. In other words, they are just copies of other copies. They do not seek an answer, they do not try to unfold the mystery of nature and existence, they are nothing more than constant

¹³⁰ Osteen, (1999), p. 649

¹³¹ Don DeLillo, *The Artist Naked in the Cage*, in *The New Yorker*, May 26, 1997, p.7

speculations of those who are unable to accept not knowing anything about a person's private life. Moreover, the stories that are most popular are the ones that provide a reassuring feeling, those which dispense validation. There is no salvation or catharsis, but a harmless semblance based on nothing, a void that takes on a reassuring idea of form. Everything about celebrity is nothing more than a long series of answers that overestimate the questions.

The image of the writer-celebrity takes over, but it is no longer the writer who controls it: "The audience, the media, and the publishing industry now make up a whole machinery of voracious consumption, an entire demonology of domestication, control, and alienation"¹³². The work is not interpreted, and the writer's life becomes a puzzle for the reader who stubbornly tries to put together all the pieces found around, on television, in magazines. A compulsive search, comparable, as Moran writes, to what happens with Hollywood stars: "An attempt to distinguish between the authentic and superficial in the star's personality by playing off the different texts against each other"¹³³. The problem, however, is that the only text which is important is discarded.

¹³² Moraru, p. 191

¹³³ Moran, p. 143

The Writer and the Mass

Mao II investigates the power of images together with changes in the nature of the writer's role. The novel's pages are interspersed with photographs that summarize and/or anticipate the content of what will be narrated in the story. The inspiration for the novel in fact comes from two photographs, as DeLillo himself tells us:

It all began with a photograph. I happened to come across a picture of a mass wedding, a ceremony that took place in an industrial warehouse in South Korea. Sixteen thousand people were involved. It was one of those mass weddings of the Unification Church, an organized, orderly crowd. From that point I began thinking about the psychology of the crowd, of the obliteration of distinctions, of how people lose themselves in the multitude, of the need to belong to the multitude. This made me reflect immediately on the juxtaposition between the regimented crowd and the writer who is trying to understand this phenomenon, who lives alone, who could be a recluse like Bill Gray (the main protagonist of *Mao II*), and who keeps himself secluded, away from the roar of our culture, away from the world of images¹³⁴.

¹³⁴ Maria Nadotti, *An interview with Don DeLillo*, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, edited by Thomas DePietro, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2005, p. 111

Another photo is added to this one, so that together they form the first two poles of the novel:

And I had another photograph – it was a picture that appeared on the front page of The New York Post, in the summer, I think, of 1988, and it was a photograph of J.D. Salinger. They sent two photographers to New Hampshire, to stalk him. It took six days, but they found him. And they took his picture. He saw them and they saw him. When they took his picture he came at them. His face an emblem of shock and rage. It's a frightening photograph. [...] It's the death of the individual¹³⁵.

The two juxtaposed concepts that constitute the structure of *Mao II* are thus defined, on the one hand the isolated writer struggling to maintain his individuality and on the other the indistinct mass, a homogeneous crowd of people tuned into a single mind, a single thought, a white noise that stabilizes frequencies, that flattens and absorbs any dissonance and that propagates indifferent to boundaries. The public sphere invades the private sphere. As Baudrillard writes, private space has lost its secrecy, the distinctions between inside and outside have been cancelled, giving life to a sort of obscenity: “where the most intimate processes of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media”¹³⁶.

¹³⁵ Vince Passaro, *Dangerous Don DeLillo*, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, edited by Thomas DePietro, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2005, p. 80

¹³⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, in Hal Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto Press, London, 1985, p. 130

The only means to interrupt the continuous flow that tries to cancel any resistance between the two poles is the room of artistic creation. The artist searches the room to return to its origin. The room must once again become a private space, a sacred space that protects individuality, that preserves the writer from the assault of those who want to neutralize the heterogeneity that his work brings to the world. The room is the place the system cannot penetrate, at least not completely. The room abhors uniformity because the room, after all, as we have already begun to see, is the place of individuality and egotism. For the time you are locked in an interior space is momentarily shut out: “the capacity of the cultural system to contain and profitably recycle artist dissident”¹³⁷.

To Bill however this possibility will not concretize. It is only an illusion. The problem, as I shall try to demonstrate, will not be in the room, but in how it is experienced on a mental level. *Mao II* makes us catch a glimpse of a chance for the artist to respond to change and not suffer it, though it does so by showing how this chance is missed. Bill’s negative example allows DeLillo to show us how the room *could* and should become a space of resistance. A space that is created from the position that the writer decides to assume in respect of the surrounding world. *Mao II* also tells us about a world made up of readers unable to face an artistic production. It can thus explain the deviation from the body of the novel to the author’s body, a transition of aura that implies a decrease of its intensity. What is missing then in the aura of work of art at the time of its technical reproducibility?

¹³⁷ Moraru, p. 191

Benjamin tells us that the aura - “the unique phenomenon of a distance”¹³⁸ - is a singular interweaving of space and time¹³⁹. The work of art lives *hic et nunc*: an interaction of history and rituals, where authenticity is guaranteed by its completion in an unrepeatable context. It is a fusion with tradition that touches a precise moment and transforms it into a higher meaning that suddenly clarifies everything, without any unraveling of the mystery, and gifts the viewer an instant of approaching something that would otherwise be irremediably lost, irremediably misunderstood. The work of art remains tied to that flash, its perception can change over time, but that work of art stands as unrepeatable. With the changes brought about by the culture industry¹⁴⁰, the work of art loses its authenticity, it empties itself from the surroundings and the growing importance of the masses redefines the process of building up of history, or as DeLillo says on the first page of *Underworld* “longing on a large scale is what makes history” (U, 11). The work of art is thus emptied of its uniqueness, of its

¹³⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility*, in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn from the 1935 essay, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, p. 5

¹³⁹ “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership. The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analyzes which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original”, Benjamin, (1969), p. 3

¹⁴⁰ “By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements”, Benjamin, (1969), p. 4

instant-like time, it is made accessible to anyone, everywhere. To lose its aura means to hold back the apparition, to lengthen it, then to dilute it until it becomes eternally present. An eternally synthetic image, whose heart cannot be enlivened by any circumstances. For Benjamin, bringing things closer together is a very real need for the masses. The need to take possession of the object, from as close a distance as possible, in the image, or rather in the copy, in the reproduction, is becoming indisputable. But the fact that the work of art has lost its aura is not seen by Benjamin as a completely negative phenomenon. On the contrary it shows the fundamental change that concerns the artistic creation in “the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics”¹⁴¹. This departure from the cultic aspect can, according to Benjamin, lead art to develop a discourse that inserts itself directly into the production processes, with the possibility, still to be developed and fully understood, of being able to carry out an active role in the progressive awareness of the masses. Art can therefore have the function of a sort of preventive psychic vaccination in defense of the widespread technologization of the modern age. Becoming a form of representation that guarantees an immediate look at changes, a mediation in the combined game between nature and humanity. The loss of the aura can therefore have a positive side. On the negative side, however, it leads to two consequences that intertwine the aesthetic and political questions, the same that *Mao II* deals with. On the one hand, in fact, this loss of distance, this shift from a profound and attentive use to a distracted and “close” one, can provoke, as in the case of the cinema

¹⁴¹ Benjamin, (1969), p. 6

highlighted by Benjamin, a shift of the aura forms the product of art to its creator¹⁴² (to his announced fragility and to his reluctance that must be dismantled). The real distance is not the work of art in its complexity, but the remoteness of the writer from people's curious eyes, which is experienced as an offense. *Mao II* presents a negative view of the mass: "DeLillo's novel obsessively zeroes in on the masses. Hecatombs of privacy [...] Easily manipulated by official iconography, addicted to images and indiscriminate consumption, crowds are in actuality exactly what the writer flees"¹⁴³.

And here the second consequence comes into play: the aestheticization of political life in the attempt to restore an aura to seduce and attract the masses. For Benjamin it's fascism, for DeLillo it's the new totalitarian leaders, such as those at the head of terrorist groups.

Although the prologue ends with the phrase "the future belongs to crowds" (MII, 16), the rest of the novel is an attempt to fight this statement, to beat it to a pulp. Bill's final failure is actually the sacrifice necessary for the individual who, reading the text critically, must understand that there is still a chance to rise from the ashes in which he dissolves after the assimilation into a crowd. The individual is not dead. Not yet, if he still has his room to go back to.

¹⁴² "The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the "personality" outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality," the phony spell of a commodity.", Benjamin, (1969), pp. 11-12

¹⁴³ Moraru, p. 193

The Power of the Novel

Mao II is a novel that stresses dialogue and confrontation, that challenge the contemporary reader's way of reading, where "there is hardly any "analysis" or critical filtering involved in this act (reading)", and Moraru adds:

There are at least two "catastrophic" results of these readings, DeLillo seem to suggest. First, they neglect "real", aesthetically valid narratives, replacing them with "trashy" or simply trivial materials. Second, reading as a traditionally conceived and completed process collapses, is reduced to mere repetition/recital of texts. Moreover, it carries negative overtones, being perceived as an act of manipulation, political control, and intrusion.¹⁴⁴

We have spoken extensively about the first risk: the proliferation of other texts that seduce the reader's intelligence by abandoning it in deserts of meaning, shifting the aura from the book to the writer making him a celebrity.

The second danger is still to be mentioned, and it constitutes the other polarity of the novel. *Mao II* was published on May 20, 1991, and amid an event that deeply affected Don DeLillo: the Fatwa against the writer Salman Rushdie, issued on February 14, 1989, following the publication of the novel *The Satanic Verses*. DeLillo exposes himself personally, participating in public readings and signing a pamphlet in 1994 together with Paul Auster in defense of the writer:

¹⁴⁴ Moraru, p. 200

In a real sense Rushdie has become a messenger between readers and writers. He reminds us all how sensitive and precious this collaboration is, how deeply dependent on individual thought and free choice. Every book carries the burden of giving offense. But there is an intimate contract between the two participants, a joint effort of mind and heart that allows for thoughtful differences and that thrives on the prospect of understanding and conciliation¹⁴⁵.

At a time when the power of images, designed to exploit their superficiality and intrinsic speed, is about to take over, literature is wondering what space is left at its disposal. If, in fact, there is still some space, perhaps even only borderline residues, they cannot and must not be underestimated, nor despised. In a time when literature is struggling to identify its defense line, a death sentence against a writer, guilty of having written something uncomfortable, of not conforming to the rigid dogmas of a religion, resonates like a warning that brings back the need to discover the peculiarity of the novel (and of the work of art in general). Perhaps literature's actual line of resistance is the fact that it is based on a collaboration, on a free and open pact between a writer and a reader with no coercion, no violence, no rigidity whatsoever. A pact that involves imagination, where one can reconstruct meaning according to his/her own life experiences¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴⁵ Salman Rushdie Defense Pamphlet, http://perival.com/delillo/rushdie_defense.html (last access: 21/06/2019)

¹⁴⁶ "In an age when other fantastically speedy, widespread media are triumphing, and running the risk of flattening all communication onto a single, homogeneous surface, the function of literature is communication between things that are different simply

Where the reader enters into a creative communion with the words that form the world imagined by the author, where depth is preferred to superficiality, where speed is replaced by a *quickness* that is meant to be enacted by thought¹⁴⁷ and not by the harmless movement of a passive body, a quickness that, as Calvino says, “does not presume to deny the pleasures of lingering”¹⁴⁸. According to Umberto Eco reader’s theory “every narrative fiction is necessarily and fatally swift because, in building a world that comprises myriad events and characters, it cannot say everything about this world. It hints at it and then asks the reader to fill in a whole series of gaps”¹⁴⁹. Fiction is not expected to say everything as certain images instead try to do, it does not synthesize to deny friction, it does not declare itself dynamic and exhaustive, “every text, after all [...], is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work”¹⁵⁰. Text, unlike images, must not and cannot say everything that the recipient must understand. The text, and I stress, every work of art, even visual art that is made up of images, does not require a single type of reader, it requires at least two. The empirical

because they are different, not blunting but even sharpening the differences between them, following the true bent of written language.” Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Vintage Books, New York, 1993, p.45

¹⁴⁷ “But mental speed cannot be measured and does not allow comparisons or competitions; nor can it display its results in a historical perspective. Mental speed is valuable for its own sake, for the pleasure it gives to anyone who is sensitive to such a thing, and not for the practical use that can be made of it [...] In practical life, time is a form of wealth with which we are stingy. In Literature, time is a form of wealth to be spent at leisure and with detachment. We do not have to be first past a predetermined finish line [...] Quickness of style and thought means above all agility, mobility, and ease, all qualities that go with writing where it is natural to digress, to jump from one subject to another, to lose the thread a hundred times and find it again after a hundred more twists and turns.” Calvino, pp. 45-46

¹⁴⁸ Calvino, p. 46

¹⁴⁹ Umberto Eco, *Six walks in the fictional woods*, Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 5

¹⁵⁰ Eco, p.5

reader, who can read in many ways because he often uses the text as a container for his passions, and the model reader: “a sort of ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator, but also tries to create”¹⁵¹. The novel/and the work of art is thus defined by its multiplicity of voices and readings, of agreements and disagreements, of languages that intertwine in open dialogues, because as Bakhtin says, multilingualism has always existed, but only thanks to the novel has it become a creative factor. The word in the novel “enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents”¹⁵². Against the rigidity of dogmas, built on past and immovable monuments, DeLillo opposes the incompleteness of the novel in its constant evolution, that takes place in the mind of the reader and in the mind of the writer, in a shared time, in a present that is not accentuated and blocked, but always in becoming, “through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness”, so that the artistic image “acquires a relationship - in one form or another, to one degree or another - to the ongoing event of current life in which we, the author and readers, are intimately participating”¹⁵³.

When this whole process fails, when an *author* imposes a vision in search of veneration and the individual stops his critical and committed work as a reader, the second risk identified by Moraru becomes a dangerous reality. Language becomes violent, capable of subjugating people by standardizing their individualities, turning off their voices, canceling their thoughts and crushing

¹⁵¹ Eco, p. 11

¹⁵² Osteen, (1999) p. 661

¹⁵³ M.M. Bakhtin, *Epic and Novel*, in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990, pp. 30-31

their dissent. The words here are no longer perceived as the realization of a work of art, but, as in Mao's case, for example, whose key role in the novel appears clear from the title and cover photo, "words are instruments of domination shaping not the author but the audience"¹⁵⁴. The language the novel speaks of is no longer the artistic language but the language that produces a violent expression, it is a military language, the language of totalitarian leaders and terrorists, of those "who are twisted by power and who seem capable of imposing their vision on the world, reducing the earth to a place of danger and anger"¹⁵⁵. In this case the aura of the speech is transferred to the person just as it happens to the writer. But while for the writer this is an unintended phenomenon, which can get into strong contrast with his work, for the violent leader the situation is the opposite, and it is definitely a welcomed side effect. The language becomes the ideal vector for the growth of the aura around his figure: "an ideal leader accepts the views of the masses, refines them, and then reflects them back with an enhanced aura reflecting his aura"¹⁵⁶.

Much has been said about the writer-terrorist issue that *Mao II* initiated, starting with Bill's phrase: "there's a curious knot that binds the novelists and the terrorists" (MII, 41). What Bill means, which is also what DeLillo has often repeated in many interviews, is that the two share the same ideal ability to reach and shake the consciences of people, of readers first, of their victims secondly. The ability to influence and shape an idea of the world. According to Bill, the terrorists have now taken the place of the writers, "they raid on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated" (MII,

¹⁵⁴ Osteen, (1999), p. 661

¹⁵⁵ Nadotti, p. 87

¹⁵⁶ Osteen, (1999), p. 661

41). The question is open: for Osteen, for example, “the novelist/terrorist polarity [...] is false on many levels”¹⁵⁷; Boxall, on the other hand, interprets it in the light of the writers’ need for a writer’s voice after what happened with the Twin Towers tragedy¹⁵⁸, or again, Gourley writes that DeLillo, through Bill Gray and his “intensely personal” commentary, presents not only “the writer struggling against the diminishing power of art and the growing influence of the terrorism, but also against the acceleration of time”¹⁵⁹. It remains a complex issue that would not find here the right space to be addressed.

However, in this polarity between the writer, who isolates himself sheltered from the world, and the terrorist/leader who, in an ambiguous and indefinite game of controlling images, tries to violently unify the world in his image and likeness through a narrative mode, we are interested in the space occupied by the room as an idea, as a conceptual space that can give shape or destroy an idea. *Mao II* intercepts the historical period in which it was envisaged, and also foresees the nearest future – not for the prophetic capacity often attributed to DeLillo, but –

¹⁵⁷ Mark Osteen, *DeLillo’s Dedalian artists*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 144

¹⁵⁸ “Perhaps most strikingly, the immediate aftermath of the attacks appeared to vindicate Gray’s suggestion that there is a particular bond between the novelist and the terrorist. From the very first days after 9/11, there was a wide perception that the attacks had some kind of connection to the novel as a public institution [...] the novel seemed to many to be at the right point in its development to offer a critical response to the event, even to extent that a novelistic response was demanded, and anticipated. As Zadie Smith has pointed out, this is a new phenomenon, one that has much to say about the public role and status of the novel at the beginning of the new century.”, Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction. A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2013 p. 124

¹⁵⁹ James Gourley, *Terrorism and Temporality in the Works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, New York, 2013, p. 18, Gourley also adds that “Gray is not merely suggesting that the action novel has superseded more serious literature, but our conception of narrative has shifted, dominated by cinematic expression that dominates the “sensibility” of the novel”, *Ibid.*, p. 24

for the peculiarity of the novel itself of being projected in an open time frame. The novel predicts¹⁶⁰, and does not prophesy, it speculates “in what is unknown”¹⁶¹ and consequently, admits the impossibility of knowing everything. It carries out the narrative conflict by adding the writer-terrorist polarity to the mass-individual polarity. It is within these four poles that the artist’s room must be placed, not on the outside, as in Bill’s case. The room outside these poles becomes a room outside the world, outside the power lines. The position outside the poles cancels the creative and dissenting force of the room and it becomes the room of isolation, which is represented in *Mao II* with the room of the writer, who is now unable to write, and in the hostage’s room who cannot write. These two rooms make up the watermark of the text.

There are two kinds of rooms: the room of the writer crushed by the masses, coming out of the world, and the poet’s room taken out of the world by the violent leader. If the second is not able to react, the first one is. He must fight back. *Mao II* is about this most of all.

¹⁶⁰ “Prophecy is characteristic for the epic, prediction for the novel. Epic prophecy is realized wholly within the limits of the absolute past (if not in a given epic, then within the limits of the tradition it encompasses); it does not touch the reader and his real time. The novel might wish to prophesize facts, to predict and influence the real future, the future of the author and his readers. But the novel has a new and quite specific problemativeness: characteristic for it is an eternal re-thinking and re-evaluating. That center of activity that ponders and justifies the past is transferred to the future.” Bakhtin, p. 31

¹⁶¹ Bakhtin, p.32

The Artist's Room I

The room that DeLillo has in mind for the artist is the result of the deflagration of the two rooms, Bill's and Jean-Claude's. It is a completely different room, of course, from that of political creation seen above. The only common denominator is the need to seek shelter within a room, to mentally project oneself into the confined space of an interior. First of all, the artist's escape into the room is to be interpreted in terms of an escape from the world, and not, as we have seen in previous cases, as an attempt to invade the world. In locking themselves up inside a room, Oswald and Everett seek a way to understand and meet the world, while the artist's aim is the opposite. The world has already met him, they already have their own idea to which they would like to remain as faithful as possible. Their isolation in rooms is, in fact, determined by the need to exclude any external interference. So much that the phrase engraved at the entrance to these rooms is Stephen Dedalus' phrase about the three weapons that an artist has available to defend himself against the intrusions of politics and history: Silence, exile, cunning. It is DeLillo himself who repeats these three words when asked the reason for his minimal public presence, adding that: "If you're able to be straight forward and penetrating about this *invention* of yours, it's almost as though you're saying it wasn't altogether necessary"¹⁶². There is again a creation at the basis of the escape, but artistic creation is not political creation. Let it be clear that the two can be united, an artistic creation can also become political, and vice versa, but in the cases we are dealing with, the two things are clearly distinct. Bill, as his publisher says, "(doesn't) write political

¹⁶² Thomas LeClair, *An Interview with Don DeLillo*, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, edited by Thomas DePietro, University of Mississippi, Jackson, 2005, p. 4

novels or books steeped in history” (MII, 102). For the artists in DeLillo’s novels, artistic creation is self-expression. The work of art is above all an invention, something that was not there before, something that adds to the world, something that more than changing the course of events helps us understand them, to see them in a different light, to propose a different order and interpretation of the world and of being in the world. It is an invention that once out of the room must not take the author with it, it must be enough for itself, just as those who use it must not claim any right to the private life of those who created it.

If the characters we met in the previous novel felt the urgent need to explain themselves, to talk about their motives, so that their creation did not contain points of shadow, knowing from the beginning that their work alone would not be enough, that it would not be able to make themselves understood, that their presence had to be inextricably linked to it, here we are turning towards something completely different. The words around the work of art are unnecessary words, futile words that empty rather than sustain the meaning. In these rooms it is no longer the magma of private life and the frustration of loneliness that takes on a three-dimensional greed of worldliness. In these rooms “each artist figure coils inward in order to spring outward, often with a new work that redefines his or her artistic practice”¹⁶³. The artist shuts himself up in the room to continue his artistic growth, the break occurs with the world, not with his own path of life and work. The room is essential for their work, so that it can continue without stagnating, without falling back on what has already been

¹⁶³ Osteen (2008), p. 137

said and done and so that it does not end up satisfying the public's wishes. If community is to be created, it must be from the work and not from the market. The dynamic opposition between the two poles, the street and the room, is essential for the artist to create his work, which must not disorder the world, but give it a form. It is impossible to think inside the room a world free of its frictions, its contradictions, its randomness, a world styled to satisfy the desires of the *man in the small room*. The world is met outside, not inside, like it happened for Oswald and Everett. The artist enters the room almost as a kind of purification of the soul to be freer to create. His position must hover between inside and outside. The street and the room must always exist, in a precarious but necessary balance. In all the stories of artists written by DeLillo this pattern “of seclusion and emergence, entrapment and escape”¹⁶⁴ occurs cyclically. Where for Everett and Oswald the marginality of the room is a necessary but temporary condition, for the artist the marginality of the room must always be safeguarded. Bill’s room, however, is not the right room for artistic creation, in this case, in fact, the artist who lives in the room: “Has exiled himself from the public, cunningly hiding his whereabouts and refusing to speak about his work”¹⁶⁵. The dynamic opposition is therefore broken, the room is outside the poles, outside the world, outside the lines of tension.

¹⁶⁴ Osteen (2008), p. 137

¹⁶⁵ Osteen, (1999), p. 643

Bill Gray

It is important to clarify that Bill Gray is not DeLillo's alter ego. We could quite safely dare to say however DeLillo risked becoming Bill Gray: "I called him Bill Gray just as a provisional name [...] I used to say to friends, "I want to change my name to Bill Gray and disappear". I've been sayin' it for ten years. But he began to fit himself into the name, and I decided to leave it"¹⁶⁶. DeLillo, for the first time, tells a story that has a writer as its protagonist and gives that character the name of a person that his mind had invented as a possible escape from the world¹⁶⁷ and therefore, from writing, or rather from the writing of books destined to be read by an audience. This is the first detail to keep in mind when reading the dialogues and interpreting the speeches Bill makes about the novel and writing, in order to avoid confusing the author with his character. Because it is precisely in this difference that the idea of a perfect room is built and defined in the dynamic opposition between the inside and the outside. *Mao II*, as Paula Martín Salván wrote, "is articulated as a series of conversations"¹⁶⁸ between the different characters [...] The narrative structure follows the conventions of philosophical dialogue"¹⁶⁹. Like *Libra*, *Mao II* is a novel of rooms,

¹⁶⁶ Passaro, p. 79.

¹⁶⁷ It may be that Bill Gray did this too, because Bill Gray is not his real name. As Scott finds out, Bill Gray's real name is Willard Skansey Jr., but we're not told why the name was dropped.

¹⁶⁸ "The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organised." M.M. Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*, in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990, p. 262

¹⁶⁹ Paula Martín Salván, "The Writer at the Far Margin". *The Rhetoric of Artistic Ethics in Don DeLillo's Novels*, European journal of American studies [Online], Vol 2, No 1 | 2007, document 3, Online since 04 April 2007, last access on 24 November 2020. URL: <http://ejas.revues.org/1147>; DOI: 10.4000/ejas.1147

of rooms all over the world, from New York to London to Beirut. These rooms become the receptacle of a continuous dialogue between the characters. Whereas in *Libra*, the story was carried along in the directions that Oswald and Everett's plans were taking once they left the room, before returning to them and then leave again, here the rooms are progressive nearing towards the conclusion. As in the ancient board-game Chutes and Ladders, the die is cast, and the next step is another room where the dialogue continues, where the story also advances, and as a result the geography of the narrative world expands, from room to room, from upstate New York to Beirut.

The rooms in the novel that interest us, however, are three: the room where Bill writes, the hostage room and, more specifically, the New York loft where Brita, the photographer, lives. We will deal with the latter in the last chapter.

"No, Bill Gray is not modeled on my life or work. I'm not a solitary person. Gray does not resemble me, is not my age and doesn't write like me – well, maybe a little. He doesn't lead my sort of life, nor does he share my personal history. Perhaps we have a few thoughts in common; perhaps as writers we have the same doubts about ourselves"¹⁷⁰, and to dispel all doubt, "Well, believe it or not, Bill and I have very little in common"¹⁷¹. And in fact, the name chosen by DeLillo for this writer is the projection of an existence he only fantasies about and we don't even know to what degree, considering that, the precise moment he decides to set it to paper, he finds himself in difficulty: "In fact, even though

¹⁷⁰ Nadotti, p.111

¹⁷¹ Maria Moss, "*Writing as a Deeper Form of Concentration*": *An Interview with Don DeLillo*, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, edited by Thomas DePietro, University of Mississippi, Jackson, 2005, p. 155

we're both writers, he was very difficult for me to discover, to find [...] to even begin to figure Bill out"¹⁷².

In the midst all these differences, and at certain point the irreconcilable nature between the two, as DeLillo himself reveals, there are moments here and there in the text where the distance between the two narrows, until it disappears completely. They are rare moments of such power though that almost jump out of history itself. It is the case of a fragment of a dialogue that Bill has with Brita, during the photo session¹⁷³. We are almost at the end of the photoshoot and Bill and Brita "are alone in a room involved in this mysterious exchange" (MII, 43). Bill, at this point, has already pulled out the two topics that underlie the novel itself, which will circulate from room to room, without ever belonging to a definitive space. These two are the "curious knot that binds terrorists and writers" (MII, 41) which will lead to the hostage room, in Beirut, to the terrorists themselves, and the commercialization of art, which will culminate with Bill's return to the offices of the publishing house and the meeting with his publisher Charlie Everson. There is a theme, however, which concerns the very room where the speech is made. There is a speech, in fact, that even if then taken up elsewhere, will always return to that room, a speech that, while speaking of writing, speaks of the room. It is the discourse Bill makes about his way of working, his way of writing, and how he can no longer produce anything

¹⁷² Moss, p. 155.

¹⁷³ Briefly summarizing the story: Bill is a writer who has been missing from the scene for years, when one day he decides to have his photo taken by Brita, whose photographic work focuses on writers in general. Her goal is to be able to photograph them all. When Brita meets Bill he brings a message from his publisher, Charlie Everson, asking to help him free an amateur poet, Jean-Claude, held hostage by terrorists. Bill decides to break his isolation and sets off, first to New York, then London and finally to Beirut where he dies as a semi-stowaway on board a ferry.

meaningful. Before we get there and deduce the artist's ideal room from that speech, let us take a tour of Bill's house.

Bill's House

Brita notices it immediately: "She liked the feel of the room with him in it. It was his room in a way in which this wasn't his house" (MII, 38). The room Bill is in has little to do with the rest of the house, like Oswald and Everett's rooms. Bill's room is inside a larger dwelling, but it is as if, at the same time, it was detached from it, almost a foreign body from the dwelling itself. Bill lives in a three-story house with a basement and an outside shed. On the ground floor we find Karen and Scott's kitchen and bedroom, while on the second floor a corridor leads to both the writer's room and the room where Brita is staying. These are the areas of the house where the action of the novel take place. Described in this way, the house appears small, with small spaces, and yet it is not so. The house is much bigger, but it is a cluttered house. Among the rooms that will be defined as rooms of *movement*, there are other rooms, other corridors, all crammed with materials concerning Bill's activity. If the description of the living part of the house takes place at the intersection between the actions performed by the characters and the visual descriptions of the space, which are dynamic and functional to the narrative economy, here, in these *dead* spaces, the description of the house proceeds following a list: "There were old handwritten manuscripts, printer's typescripts, master galleys. There were reviews of Bill's novels, interviews with former colleagues and acquaintances. There were stacks of magazine and journals containing articles about Bill's work [...]" (MII, 31)

and so on. It forms a list which, in Umberto Eco taxonomy of lists¹⁷⁴ it is called a “coherent excess” list. It is not the only list in the novel, *Mao* IPs writing at certain points approaches the coldness of a camera that records everything it sees, without letting any kind of emotion get in the way. As Caporale Bizzini writes about the last chapter of the novel - the section set in Beirut – “the language that DeLillo uses is dry and the sentences are short, there are no comments on people or the despair produced by war, just a list of images of people and of the war that merge with the ads”¹⁷⁵. The list as a descriptive modality of the surrounding world also appears at the end of the prologue, set during a mass wedding at Yankee Stadium: “The thousands stand and chant. Around them in the world, people ride escalators going up and sneak secret glances at the faces coming down. People dangle teabags over hot water in white cups. Cars run silently on the autobahns [...] People sit at desks and stare at office walls. [...] People bind themselves into numbered seats and fly across time zones” (MII, 16). The repetition of the word *people* increases the impersonality of the protagonists of the actions and the purpose is to strengthen the sentence with which the list is closed: “The future belongs to crowds” (MII, 16). This too is a *coherent excess list*, but it is used differently. The use of DeLillo’s descriptions brings out the polarity of the novel. The mass is distinguished, or rather confused, in a uniformity of the subjects that maintain their dynamism. They are

¹⁷⁴ “The infinity of aesthetics is a sensation that follows from the finite and perfect completeness of the things we admire, while the other form of representation suggests infinity almost *physically*, because in fact *it does not end*, nor does it conclude in form. We shall call this representative mode the list, or catalogue.” Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists, An Illustrated Essay*, Rizzoli International Publication, Inc., New York, 2009, p. 16

¹⁷⁵ Silvia Caporale Bizzini, *Can the Intellectual Still Speak? The Example of Don DeLillo’s Mao II*, in *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, Ed. Ruppensburg, H. & T. Engles, New York: G.K. Hall, New York, 2000, pp. 245-257

mobile lists that resemble concentric waves that expand over the earth's surface and have no boundaries. In fact, the actions on the list reinforce the feeling of power that the masses are portraying precisely because they embody both private and public situations, as if there was no longer any distinction. The list of the house's contents, on the other hand, is a static list, which folds on itself, which does not open, does not widen but tightens and forces Bill's individuality into ever smaller, ever more extreme spaces. In DeLillo's descriptions it is important to notice that even verbal tense differs, the crowd is always seen in the present, as if it had no other time, the crowd does not belong to a story, there is no past, the very future of the crowd is already in the present, just as the isolated writer exists only in the past, no active present, no possible future. One could argue that one list concerns people, the other, objects. But in DeLillo's vision, confirmed page after page by his novel, people that fade into a mass are like objects, devoid of their own will, helpless and subject to someone who has taken over the power to move them and move them at will¹⁷⁶. The objects of the house,

¹⁷⁶ "The crowd is no longer necessarily the actual crowd of mass sporting occasions or public rituals, but now includes the virtual crowd of a television audience, isolated yet fused into an unthinking mass mind of passive spectatorship, a fragmented indoors crowd watching the massed ranks of outdoor crowds. DeLillo's contention in *Mao II*, as in *Underworld* (1997), is that numbed and anonymous ranks of TV viewers have replaced the joyous crowds of sports fans coming together for a shared moment that – before the age of the instant replay- was unrepeatable. [...] the novel (*Mao II*) presents a forceful attack on the erosion of the self by the deindividualizing force of the crowd", Peter Knight, *Mao II and the New World Order*, in *Don DeLillo. Mao II, Underworld, Falling Man*, edited by Stacey Olster, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, London, 2011, p. 35, p.44 "The novel's crowd scenes present themselves for the most part on television screens, and Bill Gray, the protagonist, "has the idea that writers are being consumed by the emergence of news as an apocalyptic force", David Cowart, *Delphic DeLillo: Mao II and Millennial Dread*, in *Don DeLillo. Mao II, Underworld, Falling Man*, edited by Stacey Olster, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, London, 2011, p. 20

pages that should be alive with words and ideas, lie instead in an accumulation that goes against what Umberto Eco says about coherent excesses¹⁷⁷. In this list there is no longer the pleasure of speech, the exaltation of uniting more things in a creative ferment. It is quite the opposite. Here we are in the obsession of an accumulation that tries to fence out what the market, the cultural industry, the media, have said and written about Bill. The house becomes a symbol of the obsession to control every piece that the writer may have left lying around, every piece that someone else is trying to snatch. It is the house where all possible writing is now a compilation of lists, like the ones Scott draws up when Bill leaves, “Scott was still doing lists, moving toward May now, making lists of things”, but Bill is not a writer of lists, “Bill was not a list-making novelist. He thought sentences lost their heft and edge when they were stretched too far” (MII, 139 - 140).

It is a house that suffocates, like a tomb hiding the decomposing body of the artist: “Brita stood bent and silent and looked at the thick binders filled with words and she thought of all the words on all the pages stacked and filed in other parts of the house and she wanted to get out of here, run down the dark road away from this killing work and the grimness of the lives behind it” (MII 75).

Here is the polarity again: on the one hand the mass (“the millennial virus”)¹⁷⁸ that wanders unchallenged in every corner of the world, constantly spreading and diluting itself, on the other hand the solitary writer who tries to contain the spill-over and fills the house so that it cannot be invaded or inhabited by others.

¹⁷⁷ For Umberto Eco, the author does not make lists because otherwise he would not know how else to say the same concept, but he wants to say it out of excess, out of *ybris* and greed of the word, out of joyful science of the plural and the unlimited.

¹⁷⁸ Cowart (2011), p. 20

If the surrounding world of the masses is so mobile, the writer's home is stagnant. The house becomes a funeral monument that does not respond to the solicitations of the outside, any dynamic opposition is denied. The house is the outpost of a fight already lost at the start. The writer is silenced by the crowd, does not know how to respond and folds back, becomes a monolith, "trapped in his own massive stillness" (MII, 45). This is why Brita's entrance, the entrance of a stranger, reminds us in some ways of Moll's entrance into Selvy's life in *Running Dog*. Brita breaks the viscous immobility of the writer's life, as Karen¹⁷⁹, one of the two people living in the house with Bill, says, "It's just a feeling of there's something wrong. We have a life here that's carefully balanced. There's a lot of planning and thinking behind the way Bill lives and now there's a crack all of a sudden. What's it called, a fissure" (MII, 57). Brita's fracture brings the house back on axis, which is a building that can be closed, but in that closure, there is always a latent opening that is preserved, as Silvano Perosino writes: "The house is that building that gathers, and in this sense, it closes, around an opening that is destined to remain always open"¹⁸⁰. If this opening is not even

¹⁷⁹ We'll find Karen in the New York chapter, where she'll be the center of the analysis.

¹⁸⁰ Silvano Petrosino's reflections, which revolve around the work of Lévinas, Derrida and Heidegger, were fundamental for my conception of a dynamic opposition. For the conception of the interior as an inhabited place in relation not only to itself, but also and above all to the surrounding. A place made to enclose, but which, at the same time, leaves a crack from which a blade of light of the world appears. Petrosino, answering to what a house is, identifies in the spiral the sign that perhaps can identify it better as an inhabited place and a place to inhabit. The house therefore welcomes a man, the house is the place where a man is welcomed and where he can reflect and gather onto himself in peace. A place to which he can return at any time. However, the house is also the place from which man must be able to re-exit. It cannot therefore assume the closed form of a circle or even the always open and exposed form of a straight line: "it is necessary that the straight line, gathering on itself, bends but does not close, it is necessary that in bending it circumscribes a place (the house) [...] The fundamental architectural elements of the "house", in addition to the external/internal walls that

conceived by those who live in the house, the risk is that they will collapse and implode within themselves. This happens to Bill, or to Karen and Scott, who live not as otherness to Bill but as membranes perfectly attached to his existence, without friction. Brita brings the opening, she brings Bill's house back to the world, to the otherness of the world, and that is why the objects, the stacks and stacks of writings of and about Bill, go back to their, as Bachelard calls it: *coefficient of adversity*¹⁸¹, that is their resistance, their malleability and their threat. For Bill, these objects now become something to get rid of. Bill's body wants to regain

close, are certainly the doors and windows that open: no "house" exists without doors and windows that face on the outside, no room in a house is so closed as to exclude the door that opens to other rooms which, in this sense, are always the other's rooms. Crossing the door, which breaks the closed wall, the Other can always arrive, and precisely because he can always arrive, he has always arrived to some extent; from this point of view, the simple existence of the door attests to the other, refers to the other, to the waiting and coming of the other. Silvano Petrosino, *Capovolgimenti. La casa non è una tana, l'economia non è il business*, Editoriale Jaca Book SpA, Milano, 2007, p. 53-55 (traduction by me)

¹⁸¹ "Dès qu'on rend à la psychologie dynamique son juste rôle, dès qu'on commence à distinguer — comme nous avons essayé de le faire dans nos considérations sur la composition de l'eau et de la terre — toutes les matières suivant le travail humain, qu'elles provoquent ou qu'elles exigent, on ne tarde pas à comprendre que la réalité ne peut être vraiment constituée aux yeux de l'homme que lorsque l'activité humaine est suffisamment offensive, est intelligemment offensive. Alors tous les objets du monde reçoivent leur juste coefficient d'adversité. Ces nuances activistes ne nous paraissent pas avoir été suffisamment exprimées par «l'intentionnalité phénoménologique». Les exemples des phénoménologues ne mettent pas assez en évidence les degrés de tension de l'intentionnalité; ils restent trop «formels», trop intellectuels. Des principes d'évaluation intensive et matérielle manquent alors à une doctrine de l'objectivation qui objective des formes, mais non pas des forces. Il faut à la fois une intention formelle, une intention dynamique et une intention matérielle pour comprendre l'objet dans sa force, dans sa résistance, dans sa matière, c'est-à-dire totalement. Le monde est aussi bien le miroir de notre ère que la réaction de nos forces. Si le monde est ma volonté, il est aussi mon adversaire. Plus grande est la volonté, plus grand est l'adversaire". Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Librairie José Corti, Paris, 1942, pp. 183-184

its centrality, as if Brita's entrance started a theoretical switch well summarized by Vidler¹⁸²: "thus, where in classical theory since Alberti, the house is a good house insofar as it is constituted analogically to the body [...] in Sartrean terms the body is only seen to exist by virtue of the existence of the house"¹⁸³. Bill tries to escape Sartre's vision to return to the classic vision of personification. That house, those objects in the house, must not subdue his body, it must be his body, his body as a writer to manifest *things* first. Bill feels the need again to use things to free himself from the siege of the world. Bill no longer wants to dampen the danger, but wants to live it, personally, and by leaving, he destroys that house

¹⁸² In the essay *Architecture Dismembered*, Anthony Vidler outlines the history of the relationship between human body and architectural construction : "The history of the bodily analogy in architecture, from Vitruvius to the present, might be described in one sense as the progressive distancing of the body from the building, a gradual extension of the anthropomorphic analogy into wider and wider domains leading insensibly but inexorably to the final "loss" of the body as an authoritative foundation for architecture" Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge (Mass.), London, 1992, p. 70. The body, therefore, does not disappear in the design of a building, but its essence changes: it is no longer a solid body, whole and symmetrical, but a body in pieces, fragmentary, "if not deliberately torn apart and mutilated almost beyond recognition [...] This body no longer serves to center, to fix or to stabilize. Rather, its limits, interior or exterior, seem infinitely ambiguous and extensive [...] its power lies no longer in the model of unity but in the intimation of the fragmentary, the morselated, the broken." Vidler, *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70. The house in which Bill lives seems to be a classic house, with a veranda entrance, without any particular post-modern structural and aesthetic devices, yet Bill's body is also perceived by Bill himself, compared to the inhabited environment, as a shattered body, in disintegration. : "he would go to the desk and turn on the lamp and do some work, going over what he'd written during the day, the scant drip, the ooze of speckled matter, the blood sneeze, the daily pale secretion, the bits of human tissue sticking to the page"(MII 28), "If someone ever writes his true biography, it will be a chronicle of gas pains and skipped heartbeats, grinding teeth and dizzy spells and smothered breath, with detailed descriptions of Bill leaving his desk to walk to the bathroom and spit up mucus and we see photographs of ellipsoid clots of cells, water, organic slimes, mineral salts and spotty nicotine." (MII 135, 136).

¹⁸³ Vidler, p. 81

that has now made explicit the terror. The house that Brita faces, is a house that does not mask the sense of unease that inhabits it, it manifests anxiety, Bill's unfinished novel moves like a ghost, a monstrous double of Bill: "a neutered near-human dragging through the house, humpbacked, hydrocephalic, with puckered lips and soft skin, dribbling brain fluid from its mouth" (MII, 55). It is no longer the space of the sublime, of artistic creation, "but the space of the uncanny, that of silence, solitude, of internal confinement and suffocation, that mental space where temporality and spatiality collapse"¹⁸⁴.

Brita's entrance thus creates a fracture, which is nothing more than the reaffirmation of the opening of the house, the house becomes home again, dead spaces are visited and recognized for what they are: dead. When will Bill's interminable novel end? Bill, after the photo session, once everyone has gathered for dinner, pronounces the following words: "This place feels like home tonight. There's a wholeness, isn't there? A sense of extension and completion. We all know why. Here's the guest and what they mean to civilization" (MII, 67).

Bill's room, as we said, is not harmonious with the rest of the house and so the first problem of the protagonist's artistic immobility is soon identified. The fault is not in his room, the fault is, as plainly shown above, in the house. However, it is not that simple. If the problem was the house in itself, it would be mainly a physical matter. The house is to all intents and purposes isolated, far from the world, immersed in a nature that hides it. The house has fed off this isolation until it's transformed in that funeral monument, that dusty museum that it is. And so are the inhabitants. The room is in the house and so you could think it an easy solution to just physically move the room. But we are talking about mind

¹⁸⁴ Vidler, p. 39

rooms here and physical placement counts to a certain extent. You could move Bill's room, put it in the middle of a country, a city, in a completely different kind of house, but that would not change anything. Bill's room still wouldn't work.

But why is that? Let's go back to where we started, to Bill's speech during the photo session. Why did Bill decide to have his picture taken?

The Writer

"I think I need these pictures more than you do. To break down the monolith I've built" (MII, 44). Although far behind schedule, Bill is beginning to realize that total isolation cannot be the answer. For two reasons in particular. First, "the inability of authors to escape intrusions of the media"¹⁸⁵, second, "he is aware that his disappearance is itself a primary source of his fame"¹⁸⁶. On the one hand some sort of surrender, an acceptance that it has become impossible to escape the laws of the market, so much so that even its immobility becomes a product, on the other hand an attempt to re-appropriate its role, to understand it in a different way and try to find a way to have more control¹⁸⁷. Because most of all, Bill is no longer a writer, he no longer feels like a writer, and he explains this in the speech mentioned at the beginning:

¹⁸⁵ Moran, p. 142.

¹⁸⁶ Moran, p. 143

¹⁸⁷ Perhaps as Caporale Bizzini says: "The camera can give him what he needs at this moment, an image which is able to tell him that, in spite of everything, he still exists as Bill Gray, the writer", Caporale Bizzini, p. 245-257

Every sentence has a truth waiting at the end of it and the writer learns how to know it when finally gets there. On one level this truth is the swing of the sentence, the beat and the poise, but deeper down it is the integrity of the writer as he matches with language. I've always seen myself in sentences. I begin to recognize myself, word by word, as I work through a sentence. The language of my books has shaped me as a man. There's a moral force in sentence when it comes out right. It speaks the writer's will to live. The deeper I become entangled in the process of getting a sentence right in its syllables and rhythms, the more I learn about myself (MII, 48).

Bill Gray is not Don DeLillo's alter ego, but through him, DeLillo, in these brief moments of revelation, puts together his idea of writing. On the contrary, Bill Gray's life as a writer resembles more the idea of a counter-life of the writer. How would things have turned out if DeLillo, for example, had pursued the path of imprisonment. *Mao II* is a novel that also announces a change of direction for the author himself, who begins to show himself in public, to give interviews, to participate, albeit reluctantly, in promotional tours. So, it is not the ideas about writing that make the two of them different, but how they are consequently put into practice.

Bill Gray's long speech resembles a reply which DeLillo gives in one of his first interviews, "I think after a while a writer can begin to know himself through his language. He sees someone or something reflected back at him from these constructions. Over the years it's possible for a writer to shape himself as a

human being through the language he uses”¹⁸⁸, or, in another interview, “I look for the right word or I try to find a word with one more syllable. Before history and before politics there’s language, and this is what I mean when I call myself a writer”¹⁸⁹ and, lastly, “for me the crux of the whole matter is language, and the language a writer eventually develops. If you’re talking about Hemingway, the Hemingway sentence is what makes Hemingway. It’s not the bullfights or the safaris or the wars, it’s a clear, direct, and vigorous sentence”¹⁹⁰.

As has been pointed out many times, language is the theme most addressed by DeLillo. Each novel contains a reflection on the nature of language, its use and the possibility of finding in it a path to redemption, a kind of resistance and existence, a way to define oneself through a personal use of language. Thus, for DeLillo, a writer defines himself not so much from the content, but from how this content is expressed and kind of sentences supports the whole inner world of the writer¹⁹¹. The clarity and effectiveness of Hemingway’s sentence, as well

¹⁸⁸ LeClair, p. 6-7

¹⁸⁹ Moss, p. 164

¹⁹⁰ David Remnick, *Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo’s Undisclosed Underworld*, in in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, edited by Thomas DePietro, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2005, p. 140

¹⁹¹ What could be the phrase that identifies DeLillo as a writer? The structure of his sentences has changed over time, and it changes from one novel to another. Sometimes it is broad, capable of creating vortices, sometimes it is synthetic, lapidary. However, as Boxall has shown, there is a type of expression (of a figure of speech) that recurs in DeLillo’s writing and it is that of tautology: “Tautology and cliché, as the marker of an exhausted worn out aesthetic, may not present themselves to the critical reader simply as symptoms of cultural malaise which are either to be yielded to or overcome. Instead it may be within the blank horizons of the tautology itself, or in depths of the cliché, that both the failures and the possibilities of DeLillo’s early fiction lie. [...] it is the silence that moves within the tautology, the wordless surplus that the tautology itself creates that David (*Americana*’s protagonist) is only ever partly David, God is only partly weapon, America is only partly the world. The dark silence of the art work opens, from within the closure of American culture, onto the emptiness of an unrevealed future”.

as its vigor, reveal his character to the writer (and to the reader). Just one sentence, in the act of writing. From how this sentence is constructed on a syntactic level, the choice of words, of combinations, a writer learns to know himself and to define himself, “indeed, for DeLillo, rhythm, time, and appearance supersede significance”¹⁹².

For sure this can be said about DeLillo, his interpretation of the facts of the world is almost perceivable from his sentences, from how they are written, “I’ll consider altering the meaning of a sentence to keep the rhythm, the syllable beat”¹⁹³. Before what the words say, there is a veneration for what words are, physically, for how they appear on the page in their harshness, in their concreteness: “There’s something nearly mystical about certain words and

Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The possibility of fiction*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 45- 49 And it is in this use of tautology, in its simultaneous imploding and exploding in silence and in a thunderous silence, that Boxall places DeLillo’s in the cultural panorama, opening to a third interpretation to sum up to the two proposed by the other critics (the first summarized in the sentence: “DeLillo’s work as offering a means of redeeming the culture that he depicts): “the mingling in DeLillo of a Beckettian austerity with a (Joycean) epic catholicity suggests a new term in the relationship between high and low, between the parsimonious and the extravagant, between the speechlessness of the artwork and the articulacy of the marketplace.” Peter Boxall, *DeLillo and Media Culture*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.43-44-45. This third interpretation places the fundamental intention of DeLillo's work at the edges, in its sinking into the spaces between words, aided by the particular use of tautology, a use that recurs over time, enriching itself with new meanings each time: “DeLillo’s work has been concerned with the tautology from the beginning, but in his late fiction it becomes particularly prominent and captures a starved vibrancy- what he calls in *The Word for Snow* “the bracing sting of clear thought” – that is particularly tuned to his postmillennial turn.” Peter Boxall, *A Leap Out of Our Biology: History, Tautology, and Biomatter in Don DeLillo’s Later Fiction*, in *Contemporary Literature* 58,4, University of Wisconsin, 2017, p. 528

¹⁹²Laura Barrett, *Mao II and Mixed Media*, in *Don DeLillo. Mao II, Underworld, Falling Man*, edited by Stacey Olster, Continuum International Publishing Group, London, New York, 2011, p.63

¹⁹³ Begley, p. 283

phrases that float through our lives [...]. If you concentrate on the sound, if you disassociate the words from the object they denote.”¹⁹⁴ Hence also the frequent use of glossolalia, or the often-meaningless speech of children, their invented words¹⁹⁵. Language for DeLillo starts from the material charm of the letters that combine with each other, from their intrinsic sound¹⁹⁶ and through his “poet’s interest in concision, cobbling clauses at once elfin and granitic”¹⁹⁷. DeLillo thus seeks to make visible “the immanence of transcendent meaning in the material of daily life”¹⁹⁸.

Writing is not just a means to understand and reflect the outside world, first of all it is a cognitive act, a gesture that deepens the interiority of those who are writing, and it is only thanks to this immersion that a re-emergence in the outside world is possible. The muscularity of the sentence is the physical expression of the writer’s interiority. Writing becomes the body of ideas. The act of writing then points out, in the first instance, towards the writing self. Writing (though it would be better to broaden the concept to include all forms of artistic production described in DeLillo’s works) is an internal movement that allows to

¹⁹⁴ Begley, p. 291

¹⁹⁵ “DeLillo tends to emphasize those aspects of human language – and those behaviors regarding language – that can be said to be abnormal in one way or another, “anti-languages” to some extent. [...] All the linguistic phenomena aforementioned imply a manipulation of the common uses of language, a challenge to normal communicative skills or even the utter obliteration of any form of language at all. They are usually presented in DeLillo’s novels as the mechanisms through which revelation can be achieved.” Paula Martín Salvan, *A Language not quite of this world’: Transcendence and counter-linguistic turns in DeLillo’s fiction*, in *Babel-Afial*, 18/ Año 2009, p. 73-74

¹⁹⁶ “And when you detach one of these words (Es: Toyota Celica, in *White Noise*) from the product it was designed to serve, the word acquires a *chantlike* quality”, Begley, p. 97

¹⁹⁷ Cowart, (2003), p. 225

¹⁹⁸ Amy Hungerford, *Don DeLillo’s Latin Mass*, *Contemporary Literature* 47, 2006, p. 346

see and discover the external world starting from the perceptions and experiences of the outside phenomena that the writer then preserves in his interiority. Therefore, writing is not a way to see the world, but a way to see and discover how the author looks at the world. Talking about how he wrote *Underworld*, specifically how he conceived such a complex and original structure, DeLillo explains that each part was conceived by writing: “I think most of these things happen through intuition more than from conscious planning”¹⁹⁹. The writer’s intuition comes not so much from pure thought as from writing, “writing [...] is a concentrated form of thinking. I was able to remember much more deeply because I was writing about it, rather than just sitting in a chair and thinking about”²⁰⁰. Writing is a process that creatively rearranges conscious and unconscious aspects of absorbed experiences: “and I do think there’s something in this book (*Underworld*) that, privately, suggested to me a longing for the experience of having written *Libra*”²⁰¹.

The revelation of, and in, writing, is a revelation first for the writer, who finally reveals to himself what was latent within him: “Language is the final enlightenment and the final revelation”²⁰². The physicality of the sentence, the

¹⁹⁹ Marc Chénétier, François Happe, *An Interview with Don DeLillo*, Revue française d’études américaines, 2001/1 n.87, Belin, p. 106.

²⁰⁰ Marc Chénétier, François Happe, p. 103-104.

²⁰¹ Marc Chénétier, François Happe, p. 102-103.

²⁰² Marc Chénétier, François Happe, p. 108. Writing for DeLillo, as this statement demonstrates, is at the center of a paradox. On the one hand, writing, springs from an enlightenment, a term that seems to derive from a context of rationality, on the other hand, revelation seems to be the source, showing it has more to do with a kind of mysticism. The two things are not, at least for him, so opposite, but rather, they interpenetrate each other. It follows that writing for DeLillo is first and foremost a work of balance: “the paradox that’s at the center of a writer’s consciousness- this writer’s anyway [...] on the one hand, you look for discipline and control. You want to exercise your will, bend the language your way, bend the world your way. You want to control

plasticity of the letters, the way they are arranged one after the other, their rhythm, give concrete form to the inner movement of the writer. For DeLillo, “a word has a life and a history”²⁰³, in fact, the image²⁰⁴ from which writing appears, finds its concrete form in the words. It is not the sentence and its subsequent elaboration into even complex periods, but it is the individual words²⁰⁵ that manage to achieve as close a resemblance to that original image as possible, that give the reader a sense of what the writer sees in his mind. Words are chosen not only for their meaning, but also and above all, for their physicality, for what, in their assembly through letters, they manage to convey to the reader. He explains this well in an interview, “I’m not only aware of the rhythms of my sentences... but I’m also conscious of the physical appearance of those alphabetic units that compose a given word. There is a relationship between certain letters that strikes me in a rather important way”²⁰⁶.

It is especially in the descriptions that this process becomes clearer. Take, for example, a passage from *Zero K*, in which the protagonist approaches the window and observes the desolation of the desert before his eyes:

the flow of impulses, images, word, faces, ideas.” However, DeLillo adds, you also “want to let go. You want to lose yourself in language, become a carrier or messenger. The best moments involve a loss of control. It’s a kind of rapture, and... I think poets must have more access to this state than novelists do.” Philip Nel, *Don DeLillo’s Return to Form: The Modernist Poetics of The Body Artist*, in *Contemporary Literature*, XLIII, 4, University of Wisconsin, p. 748

²⁰³ Begley, p. 88

²⁰⁴ “My works often begin in my mind with images”, in Sid Smith, *Creative Stages: From Novelists to Playwrights in Two Short Acts*, Chicago Tribune May 2, 1993, sec. 13: 8-10, p. 8

²⁰⁵ “He arranges words in clusters and designs a life around them”, Nel, (2002), p. 737

²⁰⁶ Interview with Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, Oct. 2, 1997

Stood and looked. Spare land, skin and bones [...] Sky pale and bare, day fading in the west, if it was the west, if it was the sky (ZK, 116).

The image of the desert that is printed in the reader's mind is rendered not only by the precise choice of adjectives. A strict, minimalist choice. The adjectives follow the subject - the land and then the sky - without the support of the verb. They are as if carved on the page. There is, at first, no movement. The description is at first glance static. Between one word and another, in fact, there is like a pause, which imposes itself on the view of the reader, who thus pauses to delve into all the depths of that word, all the allusions, all the facets, all the possible references. Then, however, in repeating those words through the vocal apparatus²⁰⁷, reading them in the mind, here is where movement appears. It is a movement dictated by the assonances, the repetitions of the letters that bind the words together in a sound that is itself part of the description. It is the vibrations of the sound of those phrases - Spare land, skin and bones/Sky pale and bare - that restore a sense of how that desert appears to the protagonist. In this process, the words retain all their power intact by capturing the reader's attention on themselves, and the construction of the image occurs through the threefold combination of meaning, sound, and form of the words themselves. During a

²⁰⁷ "Writing is received first by the retina and then "copied", reconstituted as language, along the palpable surfaces of the vocal apparatus [...] Reading is thus a transcoding, if not a transcription, of the graphic into the alphabetic, the scriptive into a morphophonemic-and all the while, of course, the linear into the syntagmatic", Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*, University of California, Berkley, 1990, p. 21

lecture²⁰⁸, DeLillo dwelt on this very description to explain both how it came about and the process behind his writing:

I wrote this sentence and I looked at it for a while, what I saw were 18 one-syllable words, and a single word of two syllables, and then the curious juxtaposition of letters within words. None of it planned or managed or rearranged: PALE and BARE, P A, B A followed by DAY and FADING, D A, F A. Well, so what? Tending almost childlike repetition: if it was the west, if it was the sky. Do the words physically resemble with they describe? Or is this crazy? It's probably crazy. But what I see in the sentence, on the white sheet of paper, in the old typewriter, somehow sending mystically, tends to resemble the sky I'm describing. The previous sentences STOOD and LOOKED, more monosyllabic words, S T O O, stood and looked, L O O. Second sentence: SPARE LAND, SKIN AND BONES, these monosyllables are expressive for the view itself. The spare land, the pale sky. All of it instinctual; it happens simply when it happens, and it sometimes takes me a while to notice. But there is also the scene beyond the words, the view itself, spare land, pale sky, three dimensions. Isn't that ...? I'm seeing what the character is seeing, the first-person voice and vision inside the words

²⁰⁸ *Fiction Rescues History: Don DeLillo Conference in Paris*. Paris Diderot University and Paris Sorbonne University, February 18th - 20th 2016: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8181> (last access on: 08/11/2022)

and sentences.

Never rely too much on a writer's words. That this process is entirely instinctive leaves perhaps some doubt, given then the actual precision of the final result, which gives more the feeling of a long work, of a slow refinement to near final exactness. Yet DeLillo has repeated the same thing on other occasions, for example, referring to the first sentence of *Americana*: "Then we came to the end of another dull and lurid year" (A, 3), although here the decision-making process appears more conscious:

"certain words will arrange themselves based in large part on ... the shape of the letters in those words. I might connect a word like dull with lurid - which has an l, which has a d, which has a u - largely because of the visual relationship the two words have. This happens not through painstaking writing and rewriting. It ... tends to happen automatically"²⁰⁹.

This inner movement shines through the assembly of DeLillo's sentences around precise words. As if everything else in the sentence, adverbs, conjunctions, verbs, push against each other like tectonic plates, as if in a process of orogeny, so that in the end, there are certain individual words, whose letters echo each other, that ultimately make the picture as precise as possible, as happens, for example, in a passage in the novel *The Silence*, when just as the Super Bowl is about to begin, strange things begin to appear on the screens:

²⁰⁹ Interview with Terry Gross

It was not ordinary visual distortion, it had depth, it formed abstract patterns that dissolved into a rhythmic pulse, a series of elementary units that seemed to thrust forward and then recedes. Rectangles, triangles, squares²¹⁰.

The main clause gives a feeling of surrender, of not being able to grasp the specificity of what is going on, and thus expands into a period, where, however, the feeling is reiterated by the subordinates that one after the other try to get closer and closer. Each subordinate tries to go deeper than the main one, but as the verb *seemed* denotes, the operation must settle for a certain degree of approximation, when, after the period, like outgrowths branching off from the clash of the preceding sentences, three words appear that resonate within each other, succeeding in their being detached, as if they were precisely sculpted, to return at last, the idea of what is going on. This proceeding to eventually arrive to the word that resolves everything, is something that happens often in DeLillo's novels.

Writing is the extension of what the writer carries within himself: "it is precisely this concept of transition from breath to sound to word to Self which is the basis of the relationship between λόγος, and the language of Self [...] It is this inability to separate thought and λόγος which reveals cognition as inherently linguistic"²¹¹. For DeLillo, language is not separate from thought, his idea of language approaches Heidegger's theory "which emphasizes a phenomenological

²¹⁰ Don DeLillo, *The Silence*, Picador, London, 2020, p. 25

²¹¹ Pass, p. 99

perspective that inextricably links λόγος and phenomenon”²¹². At the same time, DeLillo approaches Benjamin’s idea of language: “the linguistic being of things is their language; this proposition, applied to man, means: the linguistic being of man is his language. Which signifies man communicates his own mental state being in his language”²¹³. He thinks of writing as the gesture that inserts the artist’s vision into the world. The gesture *in which the* artist expresses himself, not the gesture *through* which the artist expresses himself. Writing imposes a time, a verbal time to the chaotic flow of thoughts, to the swarming of perceptions and experiences.²¹⁴ Writing brings the external and generic time of the world into the artist’s internal and personal time, thus forcing him to build his work in a time that is neither the one nor the other, and it is both at the same time. The artistic gesture “imposes artificial temporal divisions” without which “λόγος escapes competent use in the formation of the language of the Self, resulting in a signification of Being which takes a fluid, uncertain form”²¹⁵, a form that can finally be communicated. In the two rooms, Bill’s and the hostage’s, the writing falls to pieces because it loses this temporal element. Isolation brought Bill out of the world time, “Used to be, that time rushed down on him when he started

²¹² Pass, p. 100

²¹³ “[...] because nothing is communicated through language, what is communicated in language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity.” Walter Benjamin, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, in *Selected Writings Volume I 1913-1926*, edited by M. Bullock and M. Jennings The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, London, 1997, p. 64

²¹⁴ “It is only by imposing divisions in time through the λόγος that the subject can engage with its own historicity, shaping its enunciation of Self [...] Through the mediation of tense, it is the λόγος which allows engagement with temporality, structuring and shaping the language of Self”, Pass, *Ibid.*, p. 97

²¹⁵ Pass, p. 97

a book, time fell and pressed, then lifted when he finished. Now it wasn't lifting. But then he wasn't finished" (MII, 54). The hostage room is also a timeless room: "There was no sequence or narrative or one day that leads to another" (MII, 109). Power is exercised by removing any temporal reference to the hostage, so that it is impossible for him to experience the moments, line them up and give them order and meaning. It is impossible to reconstruct a story, use language to tell what is happening. Without the time of the world any story is impossible, the language, as Bill demonstrates, is unreachable. What is missing are what Blanchot calls *les circonstances*²¹⁶, which determine the end that still must come.

It is incorrect and imprecise to include DeLillo in a single stream of thought, be it Wittgenstein's or Heidegger's, or Benjamin's theory²¹⁷, his idea about language fluctuating and modeled on the story he is telling, the type of character and the research that this is doing. As Cowart points out, "DeLillo's meditations on

²¹⁶ "A un certain moment, les circonstances, c'est-à-dire l'histoire, sous la figure de l'éditeur, des exigences financières, des tâches sociales, prononcent cette fin qui manque, et l'artiste, rendu libre par un dénouement de pure contrainte, poursuit l'inachevé. L'infini de l'œuvre, dans une telle vue, n'est que l'infini de l'esprit." Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1955, p. 14

²¹⁷ Phil Pass has identified in DeLillo's work a passage, not so much progressive as reflexive through the theories of Wittgenstein, Benjamin and Heidegger "While DeLillo's texts thus initially correlate to a predominantly Wittgensteinian conception of the *λόγος*, the unsuitability of his theories for an *eigentlich* language of the Self ultimately results in an abandonment of such a conception. Through the exploration of issues of externality, the novels show a transition towards a more Benjaminian philosophy of language [...] In his presumption, however, of thought as a-linguistic, Benjamin's linguistic theories prove insufficient in conceptualizing the inextricability of *λόγος* and subjectivity in DeLillo's later novels. A further transition accordingly occurs, analogous to a predominantly Heideggerian conception of language which emphasizes a phenomenological perspective that inextricably links *λόγος* and phenomenon, positing time as the horizon for Being, manipulated through tense, preposition and case." Pass, p. 100

language tend to take place in a kind of a parallel universe”²¹⁸ and “DeLillo’s thinking about the language is resolutely eclectic and creative”²¹⁹. It is also true, however, that you can trace a rich pattern. Firstly, DeLillo’s deliberation begins with an initial dichotomy. On the one hand, there is the static language of history, technology and politics, which is the language of the state trying to control and standardize, to compact and reassure, “the single uninflected voice, the monotone of the state, the corporate entity, the product, the assembly line”²²⁰. It is the language from which, for example, Gary Harkness in *End Zone* is fascinated “by the way the state troopers copied from each other’s little books’ in an attempt to reassure themselves as to the factual veracity of the information”²²¹. A language that creates a unique view of events by eliminating any discordant element, “through such an effort they could “safeguard against errors and stray facts”, ensuring “a fortress like enunciation undisturbed by doubt or question, centered upon the λόγος”²²². And it is against this fortress, that the personal language of the individual must address itself, that uniformity must be opposed by heterogeneity. On the other hand, we have then this personal language which must always bear the trace of its own individuality, of its own fallibility, that must always be open and willing to err, doubt and integrate. As DeLillo says: “We need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the

²¹⁸ David Cowart, *DeLillo and the power of language*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 151

²¹⁹ Cowart (2003), p.226

²²⁰ Don DeLillo, *The Power of History*, in *New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 1997, p. 63

²²¹ Pass, p. 73

²²² Pass, p. 73

whole apparatus”²²³. Both Bill and the hostage are denied this opposition language. Bill’s room is a room that boycotts the release of his book. Bill is Scott’s prisoner, a character symbolizing the extremes to which fanaticism can lead. Scott prevents the publication of the novel, even once Bill disappears (unlike the reader, Scott will never have the certainty of Bill’s death), “the manuscript would not go anywhere” (MII, 224). Without the publication of the novel there can be no work as Blanchot writes: “l’écrivain écrit un livre, mais le livre n’est pas encore l’œuvre, l’œuvre n’est œuvre que lorsque se prononce par elle, dans la violence d’un commencement qui lui est propre, le mot être, événement qui s’accomplit quand l’œuvre est l’intimité de quelqu’un qui l’écrit et de quelqu’un qui la lit.”²²⁴

Without the work there can be no writer. The writer is such and is strong when he can write (and he is published), that’s why the hostage is forbidden to write: “he wanted a paper and something to write with, some way to sustain thought, place it in the world” (MII 110). Without the possibility to write, without the possibility to use language, the thought dies and “this breakdown of his mental story leads him to lose control over his identity”²²⁵. Bill Gray and Jean-Claude, though for different reasons, are in the same position, thrown out of the power lines of the poles, without any means to intervene, to counteract, to create another force field. Their rooms have descended into oblivion.

DeLillo’s novels are built around this language dichotomy, which reflects “the need to preserve singularity, to assert material historical and cultural difference

²²³ Ann Arensberg, *Seven Seconds*, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, edited by Thomas DePietro, University of Mississippi, Jackson, 2005, p. 45

²²⁴ Blanchot, p. 15

²²⁵ Osteen (1999), p. 655

as a form of resistance to the colonizing power of the USA²²⁶. The writer, or more precisely, the artist must maintain “their medium answerable to social, political and historical contingency”²²⁷. To this opposition between languages, DeLillo contributes the idea that artistic creation, and therefore writing “comes from everything you’ve ever done, and said, and dreamed, and imagined. It comes from everything you’ve read and haven’t read. It comes from all the things that are in the air. At some point, you begin to write sentences and paragraphs that don’t sound like other writers”²²⁸. Starting from himself, from his availability to the world, the writer begins to build his own sentence within himself. Even though he gives space to metaphysics (“the influence is almost metaphysical”²²⁹), to something that goes beyond direct experience, and which pours into the magical quality of the language that “codified as alphabet, proves able to contain every kind of sublime magic”²³⁰.

In the essay *The Power of History* DeLillo compares fiction to some kind of religious fanaticism. The writing of a novel contains the obsession and devotion that believers show towards their religion, but if in this case the believer is pushed to go beyond himself, the fanaticism of writing is directed towards oneself: “Obsession, sure; devotion to the subject I had chosen, to the characters I was creating and to the language I was using”²³¹. The peculiar language of the artist is born within himself, that is why Bill, explaining how writing has always worked for him, draws the discussion to a close by admitting that:

²²⁶ Boxall, (2006), p. 49

²²⁷ Cowart (2008), p. 155

²²⁸ Remnick, p. 140

²²⁹ Remnick, p. 140

²³⁰ Cowart (2008), p. 156

²³¹ Chénétier, Happe, p. 108

I've worked the sentences of this book long and hard but not long and hard enough because I no longer see myself in the language. The running picture is gone, the code of being that pushed me on and made me trust the world. This book and these years have worn me down. I've forgotten what it means to write. Forgotten my first rule. Keep it simple, Bill. I've lacked courage and perseverance. Exhausted. Sick of struggling. [...] This is someone else's book. It feels all forced and wrong. [...] I'm sitting on a book that's dead (MII, 48).

Bill no longer finds himself in what he writes. His book has become a creation that no longer represents him, that is not an expression of his interiority. So, the writing process is blocked, and the novel never reaches a conclusion, a form that satisfies him²³².

Bill starts writing again when he's away from his room, in another room. A hotel room: "he had to settle for pencil and pad, working in his hotel room through the long mornings, slowly building chains of thought, letting the world lead him into that basement room" (MII, 160). Why is Bill writing again? And what does he write about?

Bill starts writing again from the moment he leaves his room, that house. Now he is prepared to open up to the world, to be part of it again, even if it means

²³² Bill fell into the first risk identified by Blanchot, with respect to the need to write: "Le plus souvent, on dit de l'artiste qu'il trouve dans son son travail un moyen commode de vivre en se soustrayant au sérieux de la vie. Ils se protégerait du monde où agir est difficile, en s'établissant dans un monde irréel sur lequel il régnait souverainement. C'est exiler des difficultés du temps et du travail dans le temps", Blanchot, p. 57

remaining on its threshold. He goes back to listening to the world, to absorbing its perceptions and experiences, to making them his own. He then moves to another room, and this room is not the end of a journey, but the center of a coming and going to and from another pole: “In his room he thought about the hostage. He tried to put himself there... *then* he went to see George Haddad” (MII, 154). The writing comes out the moment Bill starts interacting with other people, discussing, moving around, “engaging in a series of discussions”²³³. From the time Bill exits his isolated house, the street-room polarity is restored. The dynamic opposition between inside and outside is activated again and this stimulates his writing, his sentences come back to show him something: “There was something at stake in these sentences he wrote about the basement room. They held a pause, an anxious space he began to recognize. There’s a danger in a sentence when it comes out right” (MII, 167), and Bill can identify with what he writes. He writes about another room, he projects himself into that room which should be the opposite of his room in the house, but which instead dangerously resembles it. The situation in which the poet hostage finds himself is not, in fact, that different from his own. This similarity is underlined by the fact that when Brita is about to arrive at Bill’s house, at the beginning of the novel, what she notices is that she feels as if she is “being taken to see some terrorist chief at his secret retreat in the mountains” (MII, 27). Bill lived like a prisoner, “Everything we do that isn’t directly centered on work revolves around concealment, seclusion, ways of evasion” (MII, 45). He has been for all intents and purposes Scott’s prisoner, with a life marked by a strict routine, just like life in prison, a routine that destroys every vital breath.

²³³ Osteen (1999), p. 658

Bill was also a prisoner of his novel, of his isolation: “I’ve paid a terrible price for this wretched hiding. And I’m sick of it finally” (MII, 45). To finally be free though Bill must first escape the power that Scott has over him: “Scott now holds him hostage, taking over the way a disease takes over a life”²³⁴. It’s Scott who keeps Bill from publishing his book, it’s Scott who keeps Bill from doing anything other than stay in his room writing: “I want you in the room, seated” (MII, 64).

While Bill is a prisoner, on the one hand because of a wrong choice, isolating himself from the world, and on the other because of Scott’s fanatical and fetishistic obsession, Jean-Claude is a prisoner of a totalitarian idea that “wants to drain all conviction from the writer”²³⁵: “solitude by the gun” (MII, 154). In this coercive state, writing is no longer possible, the prison room is in fact a room where language is sedated, “the writer’s classic condition, to be alone in a room, has been cruelly extended”²³⁶. And this cruelty, the submission to a single language, to the uniform language of power and violence, can only lead, in Bill’s view, to failure: “the experience of my own consciousness tells me how autocracy fails, how total control wrecks the spirit, how my characters deny any effort to own them completely, how I need internal dissent, self -argument, how the world squashes me the minute I think it’s mine” (MII, 159). And it is at this moment, when Bill recognizes the “democratic shout” at the base of the novel, that he rediscovers the strength of the novel which can contain “ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints” (MII, 159), that is everything the terrorists want

²³⁴ Osteen (1999), p. 650.

²³⁵ DeLillo, (1997), p.7

²³⁶ DeLillo, (1997), p.7

to destroy. At the same time though it is also everything he, isolated in his room, was trying to undo as well.

In writing about the hostage's room Bill tries to get into that room, he tries to open up to the other to tell his story and the language comes back to shape his imagination: "see his face and hands in words" (MII, 160). Bill's language goes back to being a language in opposition: "a writer creates a character as a way to reveal consciousness, increase the flow of meaning. This is how we reply to power and beat back our fear" (MII, 200). The dialogism of the novel in opposition to the monologism of the terrorist.

Bill's room sadly turned out to be similar to the hostage room, therefore being the antipode of the ideal artist's room.

What is the artist's room supposed to be like?

The Artist's Room II

DeLillo writing *Mao II* shows that total isolation for a writer cannot be the answer. The very moment he decides to publish a novel, the author cannot avoid being part of the productive machine into which the publishing market has been transformed. What is at stake is the position that the artist decides to occupy with respect to society, a position that will prove fatal to the success of his work: "I don't think that a writer can allow himself the luxury of separating himself from the crowd, even if he is by definition *a person who spends much of his life alone in a room* in the company of a typewriter, paper and pen. It is indispensable to be fully involved in contemporary life, to be part of the crowd, of the clash of voices"²³⁷.

In the light of these words, the room in which the artist works plays a crucial role. It is, first of all, the place where his creation is conceived, elaborated and finalized. Then, it is the place where the artist chooses to live, where he spends most of his time. Finally, it is the place from which he observes the world. The place that determines its position. The room, in fact, functions as a link between personal experience and the many experiences that flow outside its window. For the artist, the room is the point of intersection between himself and the world²³⁸.

²³⁷ Nadotti, p.110

²³⁸For this reason, Virginia Woolf, in her essay on writing, repeatedly argued that in order for a woman to be able to write, she needs a room of her own, understanding the matter not so much from a symbolic point of view – "that a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself" - as precisely from a practical, materialistic point of view – "intellectual freedom depends upon materialistic things" - A room, in fact, in her conception, is a concrete space necessary for writing to reach the maximum fulfillment. "So that when I ask you to earn money and have a room for your own, I am asking you to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life, it would appear, whether one can

It is much more than a physical space, the room is a: “rhetorical frame on which [...] ideas are built [...] a peculiar spatial organization”, as Martín Salvan rightly writes: “it establishes a privileged location for the writer that is represented as being almost external to power structure but that grants its inhabitant the capacity to affect them from the border area”²³⁹.

It is a fact that the novel (*Mao II* denounces it) has lost much of its ability to influence culture, ending up relegated to the margins. However, this doesn't mean that the writer has been definitively ousted from the world, rather it means that he has to do his work from a different angle than in the past. He is on the margins, but he is still an integral part of the system. And the margins, says DeLillo: “(are) a perfect place to observe what is happening at the dead center of things”²⁴⁰.

Writing from the margins means that the writer must place himself in the shadow of the facts of the world, in the darkness, avoiding the risk of using those screamed and trivialized words that have taken the center of the cultural sphere²⁴¹. The writer must avoid the risk of being incorporated. He must pursue

impart it or not”, Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Published by Leonard & Virginia Woolf at Tavistock Square, London, 1935, p. 160 – 162 - 166

²³⁹ Paula Martín Salván, *The Writer at the Far Margin*, in *European journal of American studies* [Online], 2-1 | 2007, document 3, Online since 04 April 2007, connection on 01 May 2019. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/1147>; DOI:10.4000/ejas.1147, p. 4

²⁴⁰ “The writer has lost a great deal of his influence, and he is situated now, if anywhere, on the margins of the culture. But it isn't where he belongs? How could it be any other way? [...] I am not particularly distressed by the state of the fiction or the role of the writer. The more marginal, perhaps ultimately the more trenchant and observant and finally necessary he'll become”, Gerald Howard, *The American Strangeness: An Interview with Don DeLillo*, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, edited by Thomas DePietro, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2005, p.130

²⁴¹ “From a strictly aesthetic perspective, moreover, to live in the margins would mean to reject the dominant aesthetic paradigm in search for a different one [...] his marginal

the search for a room that is a metaphor for a mental condition in which the writer is both present and absent: in the world but separated from it.

For the writer this is not an isolation from the world, but it means being in solitude *in* the world. It's obviously a lonely business predicated on the possibility of finding a space and a time to commune privately with language. A different loneliness from the one pursued by Bill in *Mao II*. His was a human loneliness, at the level of the world. The writer's loneliness, on the other hand, is of a different quality. "Le "Il" qui se substitue au "Je", telle est la solitude qui arrive à l'écrivain de par l'œuvre"²⁴². The loneliness that the writer experiences, as Blanchot explains is in relation to the work, where he no longer has the freedom to say²⁴³. For this reason, the writer, Bill explains, never maintains, unlike the authoritarian leader, full control over his characters, but must instead let them act in their autonomy, in their democratic possibility to develop according to their own needs²⁴⁴. The writer finds himself in the intimacy of silence that imposes on the word and in its incisiveness and rapidity brings active time into the almost infinite time of the work. The author preserves himself in the work by sacrificing his own word to give voice to the universal. And giving the voice that the writer attests to himself as such, preserving his silent presence

position, moreover, grants him the distance he claimed as the requisite for writers to provide a sharp negative of reality", Martín Salván, p.5-6

²⁴² Blanchot, p. 23

²⁴³ "“Il” ne désigne pas le désintéressement objectif, le détachement créateur. “IL” ne glorifie pas la conscience en un autre que moi, l’essor d’une vie humaine qui, dans l’espace imaginaire de l’œuvre d’art, garderait la liberté de dire “Je”. “Il”, c’est moi-même devenu personne, autrui devenu l’autre, c’est que, là où je suis, je ne puisse plus m’adresser à moi et que celui qui s’adresse à moi, ne dise pas “Je”, ne soit pas lui-même.” Blanchot, p. 23

²⁴⁴ “Dans l’effacement auquel il est invité, le “grand écrivain” se retient encore: ce qui parle n’est plus lui-même mais n’est pas le pur glissement de la parole de personne”, Blanchot, p. 22

and exercising his control over the narrative material. Bill, in the end, returns to feeling like a writer only when he returns to dialogue. When he moves from his room, no longer through, but no way back, to move towards the other (the hostage as hostage) and towards a new character (the hostage as a character in the text who tries to write in the hotel room). Bill tries to get as close as possible to his object of interest, both physically and, above all, empathically, *trying to put himself in his shoes*, because this is the only way to give him a voice. The only way to regain the strength to face a blank page. In this decisive step, which is now out of time, Bill rediscovers the essential element of that room where he began to feel like a writer. The room to which he retired when he was a child:

When I was a kid I used to announce ballgames to myself. I sat in a room and made up the games and described the play-by-play out loud. I was the player, the announcer, the crowd, the listening audience and the radio. There hasn't been a moment since those days when I've felt nearly so good (MII, 45, 46).

To get back to writing, to immerse yourself in the clash of voices you need to find the right room. Room and writing live in a relationship of mutual exchange. The room gives a position to the writer and through its physically limited perimeter, almost infinite imaginatively, it creates the conditions so that the writer's isolation is not reduced to the level of the world. Writing, instead, makes the room real, alive, pulsating, inhabited. And because it becomes suitable for creation, the room cannot be an inaccessible and impermeable place, but rather a place open to relationships, interactions between characters, situations and

ideas. The work of art is molded on this essential quality of the room, becoming a multitude of states and voices that interpenetrate. The artist does not have to look for security and confirmation of his identity by closing himself inside, but rather a sort of protection that is a protection of the integrity of his work, born in doubt, in identification, in empathy. The room is a mental space where he can live more lives and play more roles. A free space, physically limited but mentally open, where, as Bill recalls, the walls are one with the surfaces of the body: “There’s no separation between you and the players and the room and the field. Everything is seamless and transparent. [...] it’s the lost game of the self” (MII 46)

The room as a mental configuration is therefore the place the writer occupies with respect to the world in order to have a privileged point of view: “In order to be able to observe reality from a “sideline vantage” point and to keep their capacity to denounce and criticize it”²⁴⁵.

²⁴⁵ Martín Salván, (2007), p. 3

Appendix

Before moving on to the room as a physical space, two clarifications must be made regarding the concept of dynamic opposition. It is true that this relationship that is created between the room and the street, and between the character and the world, is, as we will see in the chapter on New York, a characteristic of the metropolitan room and of the plot of novels set in New York. However, it is also true that DeLillo applies this concept to the room as a mental configuration too. In this case, the dynamic opposition is not created with the specific space of the metropolis, nor with any other specific type of space. Rather, it is a creative disposition that keeps the character in the world. Above all, this idea of dynamic opposition exists, as in the case of Bill and other artist characters, as a function of artistic creation. The difference is that while in the city, dynamic opposition is something the character cannot escape, because the city is the context to which, for better or worse, he is forced to adapt. In artistic solitude, on the other hand, the dynamic opposition between the room and the world is something that the character, with strength, dedication, and courage, must construct for himself.

Going forward in the thesis, the use of Benjamin's concept of dialectical images in the construction of my theory of dynamic opposition will be increasingly present. Although an entire chapter will be devoted to this in the section on McInerney, I think it is only fair, to begin right now to specify how the two are related. How the former led me to define dynamic opposition. The dialectical image in Benjamin's work is the indissoluble union of thought and image, and it is dialectical because it is capable of having opposite moments coexisting within

it²⁴⁶, and before it becomes a vision it must pass through language: “only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language”²⁴⁷. Through language, dialectical images find their fulfillment, taking shape and showing as in a constellation of opposing moments that collide within each other. Like flashes of lightning, dialectical images make it possible to see something that would otherwise be impossible. In the way it is used through writing and through its employment in the plot by DeLillo and McInerney, the interior functions are, for example, the dialectical image of *Passages* for Benjamin. That is the image that takes form, thus becoming capable of showing the reader (and the character himself) simultaneously the unfolding of different states, different situations, different ideas, often even conflicting with one another other. The interior becomes a dialectical image precisely because it allows access to a broader vision. It is an image saturated with tensions, charged with possibilities. And the dynamic opposition is nothing but the gesture that breaks this stillness, the gesture that occurs after the flash. Dynamic opposition is the concrete gesture the characters make to overcome the dialectical image provided by the interior they inhabit and find a way to relate to the world.

Finally, *The Body Artist*, DeLillo’s novel contained in this appendix, is an exception to the author’s corpus because the protagonist is a woman. It is only fair to point out that Lauren as Brita²⁴⁸ in *Mao II*, are, in comparison to all the

²⁴⁶ “Image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill”, Benjamin, (1999), p. 462

²⁴⁷ Benjamin, (1999), p. 462

²⁴⁸ “Brita’s photographing - or shooting - Bill begins to dismantle his power [...] In *Mao II* he puts Brita Nilsson to work deconstructing the ways in which images uphold the masculine power of people like Abu Rashid and Bill Gray” Philip Nell, *Amazons in the*

others, the most autonomous characters in their artistic pursuit, in their self-actualization, and in their active confrontation with the world. It is possible that this is because they are women. But to draw any conclusions from this, I think, within the limits of this thesis, is almost impossible, and any attempt would lead to imperfect if not entirely erroneous results. Precisely because they remain an exception, and it is true as Philip Nel pointed out, that in DeLillo's novels "women can speak for both genders and indicates a recognition of the effects of relegating such comments to only one gender" and that "DeLillo investigates construction of masculinity and femininity"²⁴⁹, but I still think that DeLillo's fictional universe (as well as McInerney's) is still a purely masculine universe, where it is the male characters who are placed under a magnifying glass, revealing all their crises, imperfections, failures, and mental and physical violence perpetrated against women, and where the female characters remain, however deep and multifaceted, still too functional to sketch out a kind of world that still has men at its center anyway. Not much has changed since, after the release of *Mao II*, DeLillo said: "I think that the basic thing is that women have begun to put their eyes behind cameras. Whatever is on the other side that becomes the object will now be seen in a different way from the way it would be seen otherwise, especially if the objects on the other side of the view finder is a man"²⁵⁰. Gender awareness has grown, but that leap has not yet occurred (nor was it necessary for it to occur, it must be said) in which DeLillo shows what and how that different point of view could be. For this reason, this thesis remains male-centered, and I recognize that as a flaw, but I also know that

Underworld: Gender, the Body Artist, and Power in the Novels of Don DeLillo, in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 42:4, 2001, 416-436, pp. 423-424

²⁴⁹ Nel (2001), p. 431

²⁵⁰ Nadotti, p. 113

characters like Lauren and Brita can, in an eventual future development, be the entry point to go and see how my whole theory of the interior can change, can be modified, can implement itself by analyzing not only female characters, but also female writers, such as, to stay in the New York context and a writing studded with interiors, Edith Wharton, Grace Paley, Paula Fox, Siri Hustvedt, Jennifer Egan, Nicole Krauss, and Ottessa Moshfegh.

There is a novel, a short novel, which opens with a door that closes and closes with a door that opens²⁵¹. *The Body Artist* was released in February 2001 and is the perfect counterpart to *Underworld*, the previous novel. So immense is the later as is evanescent the description of the other. *Underworld* is dense, due to the thickening of the muscles of fifty years of American history; yet so thin, fragile and brittle is *The Body Artist*, written as if it were traced onto the body of the main character, the body artist Lauren Hartke.

The door that closes belongs to a New York apartment, where director Rey Robles, married to his third wife Lauren, ends his life with a gunshot. It is the gesture that kicks off the story, the story of an artist who, through the process of creation²⁵², tries to overcome the sudden and unfathomable death of her loved one²⁵³. The door that opens in the finale is located in a house on the New

²⁵¹ DeLillo's novels repudiate closure; they invariably end by not ending", Mark Osteen, *Against The End: Asceticism and Apocalypse in Don DeLillo's End Zone*, in *Papers on Language & Literature* 26 (1990), pp.143-163, p. 144

²⁵² "The idea that the moment of creation coincides with the end of a mourning process might not seem very original if it is not backed up by the idea that it is the very work of this mourning, compressed in time, that makes up the material of the work of art", Geneviève Morel, *Body Art, an art between mourning and melancholy?*, in *ERES, Savoirs et clinique*, 2006/1 n°7, p. 121.

²⁵³ "How, *The Body Artist* asks, can one tell a story of trauma, a story in which the known is deeply imbricated in the unknown?", Laura Di Prete, Don DeLillo's "*The Body*

England coast that the couple rented for a period of time and in which Lauren eventually decides to continue living anyway. The house, rented²⁵⁴ and haunted, is central to Lauren's path, which is tightly bound to the form and substance of the house, but the rooms in this house are even more essential to the narrative of the novel. More than ever DeLillo, with *The Body Artist*, "thinks with his novel"²⁵⁵ together with Lauren's body, that is continuously refined in a muscular and psychological *training*: "She patiently razed the lone callus, stretching the task over days, lost in it, her body coiled in a wholeness of intent" (TBA, 80). As Philip Nel²⁵⁶ has pointed out, in this passage - where we witness live the process of artistic transformation in which Lauren is undergoing along with her body - the chosen words, the meticulousness of the gestures, the repetition and the enjoyment of the repetition of the same gestures - "It was good to be doing this again" (TBA, 81). The attention and care between movements are reminiscent of the very act of writing: "She had emery boards and files, many kinds of scissors, clippers, and creams that activated the verbs of abridgement and excision [...] There is a way in which she isolated a digit for *sharp regard*, using a

Artist: *Performing the Body, Narrating Trauma*, in *Contemporary Literature*, VOL. 46 No.3 (Autumn, 2005), pp. 483-510, p. 484

²⁵⁴ "First, then, whose house? Like all renters, Rey and Lauren move into a house that is not exactly theirs. They are not the first to live in this house and they will probably not be the last." Michael Naas, *House Organs: The Strange Case of the Body Artist and Mr. Tuttle*, *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Starts (2008), pp.87-108, p. 93

²⁵⁵ "Yet *The Body Artist* might be seen as the sole DeLillo novel that puts the author's theories of language into practice without repeatedly announcing those theories in the text of the novel", Philip Nel, *Don DeLillo's Return to Form: The Modernist Poetics of The Body Artist*, *Contemporary Literature* XLIII, 4, 2002, University of Wisconsin, p. 738-739

²⁵⁶ "DeLillo's diction invites us to consider the language itself, to think about the "verbs" and nouns (and verbs as nouns) to notice how revising the body resembles revising a manuscript", Nel, (2002), p. 749

magnifier and a square of dark cardboard” (TBA, 81). The words of the novel are placed as if they were sculpted one on the other, “repeated letters created symmetries that we see and hear, building a language that looks beautiful on the page and sounds vivid in the mind”²⁵⁷, creating a more and more precise writing in the aesthetic and a rhythmic relationship between the parts, as we can see, for example, in the assonance between *arp* and *ard*, where “visually, *ar* precedes the final letter of each word, and the *p* at the end of “sharp” is the inverse mirror of the *d* at the end of “regard”²⁵⁸. The same process can be seen in the *r*’s and *b*’s in *verbs of abridgment* and the *ar*’s and the *d*’s in *dark cardboard*.

It is not only through this play of assonances, which we have previously seen to be an element of DeLillo’s style, that the words in the novel seem to be chiseled into each other in symbiosis with the operations Lauren performs on her body, but also in the descriptions of what goes on around, in Lauren’s perception that becomes, live, sharper and sharper, as if, along with Lauren’s preparation – “Over the days she worked her body hard [...] Her bodywork made everything transparent. She saw and thought clearly” (TBA, 59-60) - we are at the same time witnessing the work of writing trying to achieve the utmost precision in capturing the object of interest, such as the arrival in flight of a group of birds competing for space at the bird-feeder, “they flew off and came back, semi-hovering, nine, ten, eleven birds” (TBA, 76), where the progressive enumeration is not a sign of approximation, quite the opposite instead, it is indicative of a precision that sculpts in time, between pauses of commas, the scan with which Lauren captures the quantity of birds around her. As, indeed, is the case where it is all but impossible to have an immediate idea of how many birds have

²⁵⁷ Nel, (2002), p. 751

²⁵⁸ Nel, (2002), p. 749

perched in front of us. The cardinal numbers, here, have the function of a verb, that is, they carry on the action. “Not singing exactly but what's the word, twitter or peep or squeak” (TBA, 76) as if we were in Lauren’s mind, we witness the search for the right verb to define what she is hearing. But it is not so much in the identified verb/noun that we find exactness, but in the transition between verbs; here, it is the conjunction ‘*or*’ that acts as a chisel. In the repetition of the conjunction, it is as if we sense the hand of the writer trying to thin the distance between words and things more and more. And the vision becomes more specific, precisely because the writing fixes this movement on the page, sculpts it by isolating the words²⁵⁹, and then, we can see the birds in our minds when “they attacked each other on the rungs or scrambling in midair, the color-changing birds, the name-saying birds, the birds that feed upside down” (TBA, 76). There is a repetition of that mechanism whereby sentences eventually break down in a list of words²⁶⁰ where “DeLillo uses nouns or verbs as adjectives”²⁶¹ creating contrasts between one and the other making the differences clearly perceptible²⁶², as the shadows that intensify the definitions of the muscles of a statue. The use of the conjunction *or* as a chisel that eliminates the superfluous to achieve the precision of sculpture, returns later, “she stood naked in the workout room [...] Or sat cross-legged [...] Or went about on all fours” (TBA,

²⁵⁹ “Words on page, that’s all it takes to help him (her) separate himself(herself) from the forces around him(her), streets and people and pressures and feelings”, Begley, (Interview), p. 87

²⁶⁰ “Appropriately, as DeLillo strives for a heightened attention to the sound, shape, and feel of words, he has created a deliberately stylized prose that feels more 'real' precisely because it is stylized”, Nel, (2002), p. 740

²⁶¹ Nel, (2002), p. 743

²⁶² “As body artist Lauren sands away the imperfections in her own body, she sculpts herself much as DeLillo sculpts language” Nel, (2002), p. 748

77). And it is in this movement that Lauren is, through writing, also precisely sculpted in the space of the house. A superior and concrete, almost tactile, aesthetics is superimposed by an evenness of meaning²⁶³, thus forming the typical paradox of poetic language, where the physical limits of words, instead of limiting, make the language even more evocative, “his words embody this paradox: their shapes look precise and beautiful next to each other on the page, but their implications expand, growing more porous”²⁶⁴.

The rooms of the house in their solidity, work in the novel in a simultaneous double movement. On the one hand they allow the free expression of an interiority, on the other hand they allow the character, and the reader, to reflect more deeply on what they let out of this interiority, to reflect on it, to shape it according to their own will and thus transform it into a work of art. Living in the rooms of the house, the reader witnesses the artistic creation. The rooms become the observation point and also the necessary reagent for this to be visible and even possible. The words of the novel are like the walls of the house, they repeat and repeat and at a certain point they turn to form a right angle that in its simple exactness opens up to a sinking that eventually leads to an understanding²⁶⁵. The reader learns to read the text, a moment after Lauren has learned to read and listen to herself. In one of the first dialogues with Mr.

²⁶³ “Put another way, sculpted language may be more precise in its form, but it is just as (or perhaps more) suggestive in its meaning.”, Nel, (2002), p. 748

²⁶⁴ Nel, (2002), p. 748

²⁶⁵ “DeLillo’s narrative structure is perfectly suited to this kind of interaction between inside and out, quick cuts between characters and themes, rhythmic returns to thoughts picked up, dropped, repeated, and amplified.”, Naas, p. 107

Tuttle²⁶⁶, a presence that appears in the house when Lauren returns after her husband's funeral, we see this double trial at work.

I know how much [...] I know how much this house. Alone
by the sea. (TBA, 48)²⁶⁷

The repetition and essential plasticity of the phrase, "Simple words, Lauren thinks, but somehow profound"²⁶⁸, hides the quality of the house and the mechanisms in place. Lauren listens to the phrase and climbs into the abysses of meaning to re-emerge with a new awareness of how the rooms in the house should be functionally inhabited:

Four words only. But he'd placed her in a set of counter-surroundings, of simultaneous insides and outsides. The house, the sea-planet outside it and how the word alone referred to her and to the house and how the word sea reinforced the idea of solitude but suggested a vigorous

²⁶⁶ Mr. Tuttle's presence is indefinable. In my reading, Mr. Tuttle is a projection of Lauren, an externalization of her mood. "Reviewers and critics have offered an almost comic variety of descriptive terms for him: "autistic", "alien", "ghost" (Begley); "inmate wandered off from a local mental institution," "figment of Lauren's imagination" ("Body Artist"); "shadow of a man" (Roncevic); "ageless, babyish homeless" (Evans); "medium," "psychotic" (Jones); "pure cipher" (Amidon); "Lauren's projected identity," "ghostly embodiment"(Simon); "Figure of the double" (Gorra); and "emissary from beyond," "projection of a troubled mind," "heteroclite muse" (Coward)," Di Prete, p. 484

²⁶⁷ "Earlier, Mr. Tuttle gives expression to a notion that seems to capture the very questions of house, body, and voice that the novel", Naas, (2008), p. 97

²⁶⁸ Naas, (2008), p. 97

release as well, a means of escape from the book-walled limits of the self (TBA, 49).

The house must be inhabited as an interior that always looks out towards an exterior. An opposition of simultaneous places and moments that must find, in the relationship with those who live there, the possibility of interpenetrating²⁶⁹. The work of art is created from the trigger of this opposition, which is welcome inside the house, but above all inside the world²⁷⁰. The house is geographically isolated in the sense that it is far from other houses, and for this reason it refers, for example, to the rooms of *End Zone*, the difference is that the rooms of the house do not isolate, but rather, are lived in their full positive potential, that is to say that, of being internal spaces that do not deny a relationship with the outside²⁷¹. The house thus also becomes a metaphor for the work of art. Lauren's creation will not only take shape inside and outside the house but will also have the same shape as the house, as Mariella Chapman's review just before the end of the novel suggests: "The power of the piece is Hartke's body. At times she makes femaleness so mysterious and strong that it encompasses both sexes and a number of nameless states" (TBA, 115)²⁷².

²⁶⁹ "The narrative often shifts back and forth between what is going on inside the house and the weather or the birds outside. The question of the relationship between inside and out, an inner world and an outer one, is thus posed from the very beginning: "When birds look into the house, what impossible worlds they see" (TBA, p. 22)", Naas, (2008), p. 107

²⁷⁰ "If the work of body artist is like the work of the writer – the incorporation of the other voices and other lives into oneself", Naas, (2008), p. 104

²⁷¹ "Every house has windows and doors, every house is an inside that gives onto what is outside, every house is exposed to everything and everyone from the past or the future that may make a *claim* on those who dwell within.", Naas, (2008), p. 106

²⁷² "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sexes. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. [...] And fatal

The work of art with which Lauren will overcome her grief is in fact a set of situations that interpenetrate each other and that have two derivations: the first is related to her personal elaboration of grief experienced in the house through the memories that still ooze from the walls. The second, instead, are images, which Lauren has taken and transformed in her movements outside the house. This is the case, for example, of the Japanese woman who waters her garden and who opens her show. A scene that Lauren witnesses at the beginning of the novel, shortly after the death of her husband: “*In town* she saw a white-haired woman, Japanese, alone on a stone path in front of her house” (TBA, 34). *Body Time*, Lauren’s performance is a fusion of internal and external experiences.

Bachelard writes: “dans la plus interminable des dialectiques, l’être abrité sensibilise les limites de son abri. Il vit la maison dans sa réalité et dans sa virtualité, par la pensée et tes songes”²⁷³. The house provides a shelter, without which man would be lost and at the same time the house provides an element of stability²⁷⁴ in contiguity with what is instead in a perennial flow. Lauren establishes a reciprocal relationship with the rooms in the house²⁷⁵. It wraps with

is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death”, Woolf, (1935), p. 156-157

²⁷³ Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l’espace*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1957, p. 33

²⁷⁴ “La maison est un corps d’images qui donnent à l’homme des raisons ou des illusions de stabilité. [...] La maison est imaginée comme un être vertical [...] La maison est imaginée comme un être concentré.”, Bachelard (1957), p. 45

²⁷⁵ I believe that this relationship Lauren creates with rooms and home is precisely the positive achievement of that space for creation that Virginia Woolf wrote about in her essay *A Room of One’s Own*. We are thus beyond that network of metaphors that, at least since the Middle Ages, have ensnared women: “Women themselves have often, of course, been described or imagined as houses [...] To become literally a house, after all, is to be denied the hope of that spiritual transcendence of the body which, as Simone de Beauvoir has argued, is what makes humanity distinctively human. [...] For even if

the entirety of its body the entirety of the house and is in turn wrapped in its entirety by the entirety of the house.

The various parts of the house are organic parts and mental images for Lauren's interior process: "she played it through to a certain point, mentally, in the rooms and halls" (TBA, 120).

But, unlike Bill, Lauren makes a gesture that is decisive in avoiding sinking into a world and time that is entirely interior. Lauren, in fact, is always on the edge of a definitive fall, until, in the finale, accepting that the room is now empty, that whoever was is really gone, that the pain will always remain as a scar that will never stop pulsating, she understands that the only way to resist and to exist is to open the window:

She walked into the room and went to the window. She opened it. She threw the window open. She didn't know why she did this. Then she knew. She wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body (TBA, 132)

The opening of the window²⁷⁶ is thus both a concrete gesture and a metaphor. It is the gesture through which, as we will also see in the analysis of *Great Jones*

she is only metaphorically denied transcendence, the woman writer who perceives the implications of the house/body equation must unconsciously realize that such a trope does not just "place" her in a glass coffin, it transforms her into a version of the glass coffin herself", Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2020, p. 88-89

²⁷⁶ "On se protège, on se barricade. Les portes arrêtent et séparent. La porte casse l'espace, le scinde, interdit l'osmose, impose le cloisonnement: d'un côté, il y a moi et

Street, the character enters the dynamic opposition. By immersing himself in this flow, he regains contact with the outside world and finally places himself in a proactive manner with respect to the things that until a moment before were hurled against him. It is a metaphor, therefore, for DeLillo, of a world that, in order not to become entangled, needs a frame through which the character can observe himself, turning his head back towards the room, and turning his head forward towards reality.

Like the Angelus Novus in Benjamin²⁷⁷, who has his face turned toward the past, on a catastrophic accumulation of ruins upon ruins on which it would like to hold himself in a vain attempt to awaken the dead and recompose what is broken, while a storm snags its wings without it being able to close them, pushing it irresistibly into the future. Thus, it is DeLillo's character when he finally looks out the window. If this is the negative image of progress for Benjamin, for DeLillo there is still a way of redemption. It is in the glimmer of clear sky, slowly approaching, just beyond the storm. That dynamic opposition can transform the ruins into a memory that does not look passively at itself but becomes impetus for the creation of its own counter-narrative that places the character in history, in his own and in the world's. That places the artist in a positive mood to create a work of art.

mon *chez-moi*, le privé, le domestique (l'espace surchargé de mes propriétés [...] de l'autre côté, il y a les autres, le monde, le public, le politique. On ne peut pas aller de l'un à l'autre en se laissant glisser, on ne passe pas de l'un à l'autre, ni dans un sens, ni dans un autre: il faut un mot de passe, il faut franchir le seuil, il faut montrer patte blanche, il faut communiquer, comme le prisonnier communique avec l'extérieur", Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, Galilée, 1974, p.52

²⁷⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, p. 257

1.2 The Physical Aspect

In an interview with Thomas LeClair, Don DeLillo explains how the room is functional to his creation process:

It's a way to take psychology *out* of a character's mind and *into* the room he occupies. I try to examine psychological states by looking at people in rooms, objects in rooms. It's a way of saying we can know something important about a character by the way he sees himself in relation to objects. *People in rooms* have always seemed important to me. I don't know why or ask myself why, but sometimes I feel I'm *painting* a character in a room, and the most important thing I can do is set him up in relation to objects, shadows, angles²⁷⁸.

The room is therefore the expression of a psychology²⁷⁹. The room is the space where a movement takes place: a physical retreat that creates the ideal condition

²⁷⁸ Thomas LeClair, *An Interview with Don DeLillo*, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, edited by Thomas DePietro, University Press of Mississippi, p. 14

²⁷⁹ It is not only the writer who thinks about his characters inside a room, it is also the characters who find themselves thinking about themselves inside rooms. The process is the same. Returning with the mind to a room helps the character to resolve a conflict, allows him to review what happened in the past, to relive emotions. It is a reflection that therefore proceeds on two tracks, writer and character are observed inside a room, as happens, for example, to the protagonist of *Zero K* in the finale, when, back to his daily life, he has to metabolize his father's choice to be cryogenized: "Sometimes I think of the room, the scant roomscape, wall, floor, door, bed, a monosyllabic image, all but abstract, and I try to see myself sitting in the chair and that's all there is, *highly detailed*, this thing and that thing and the man in the chair, waiting for his escort to knock the door"(ZK 271). As Bachelard wrote: "C'est par l'espace, c'est dans l'espace que nous

for a free manifestation of interiority. It is the relationship that is created between the architecture that encloses a space and the objects contained therein that allows the writer to bring out the psychology of the character.

As Willa Cather wrote quoting the elder Dumas in her essay *The Novel D meubl *, “to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls”²⁸⁰. In the never-ending debate over DeLillo’s affinity to the modernist current or the postmodernist current²⁸¹, the use of the room – “in its suspension between the figural and the literal”²⁸² - is to be traced back to the use of it by modernist writers. “Modernism begins in rooms”²⁸³, writes Michael Levenson, and the room for modernist writers is a physical, concrete place, sought almost obsessively by both the writers themselves and their protagonists. It is the place where writing is possible, the four walls not only, as Virginia Woolf also explained, guarantee a kind of peace, an isolation from the disturbances of

trouvons les beaux fossiles de dur e concr tis s par de longs s jours. L’inconscient s journe. Les souvenirs sont immobiles, d’autant plus solides qu’ils sont mieux spatialis s” (Gaston Bachelard, 1961, *Ibid.*, p. 37). It’s not just a question of memory, of going back in time and space. DeLillo’s characters are built from their rooms, they are made of rooms and looking at themselves or imagining themselves in rooms is the best way they have for auto-recognition. Seeing oneself not in time, but in space (“places are primary in the order of description as in the order of being”, Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place. Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 31), and in the space of a room is the only chance they have to find relief. The essence of a character is thus defined to his own eyes and for the others starting from his presence in a room: “the force of a body in a room” (MII, 35).

²⁸⁰ Willa Cather, *The Novel D meubl *, in *The New Republic* 30, April 12, 1922, p. 6

²⁸¹ see for example: Philip Nel, *DeLillo and modernism*, and Peter Knight, *DeLillo, postmodernism, postmodernity* in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2008

²⁸² Alice Gavin, *Thinking rooms and thought streams in Henry and William James*, *Textual Practice*, 26:5, 2012, 871-893, p. 891

²⁸³ Michael Levenson, *From the closed room to an opening sky: vectors of space in Eliot, Woolf, and Lewis*, in *Critical Quarterly*, Volume 49 Issue 4, Winter 2007, 2-20, p. 2

everyday life that break or even block the flow of creativity, the four walls delimit a field that allows inwardness to soar into the air, giving more space to thoughts, to ideas. The room, then, in further development, comes into opposition with both the sensory overcrowding of the street and the Victorian idea of the house²⁸⁴: it is a narrowing of space, the only place to find shelter from the excesses of the outside, the room becomes a refuge from the chaotic world of the city²⁸⁵. The room also takes the form of a tomb, a coffin²⁸⁶, or at the opposite end of the spectrum a womb, a definitive retreat from the world, a return to a primordial state, as is the case, for example, in Cather's novel, *The Professor's House*, where the protagonist takes refuge in his study, withdrawing more and more from worldly affairs: "St. Peters eschews his own commitments: he seeks to identify himself with an idealized, purified version of the self - a self totally free of entanglements with other human beings"²⁸⁷. An attempt, which, as in the case of the professor, but not only, is doomed to failure, "the room, then, is an

²⁸⁴ "Unlike the house, the room can be there where you are, present to the senses, open to inspection. It is a container, giving both the solace of envelopment-a refuge from the world-and the anxiety of enclosure-the buried self. The modernist room is typically single and self-contained. It is not a house for a family. It is a box for a brain", Levenson, pp. 5-6

²⁸⁵ "the room carves the city into many discontinuous spaces. To inhabit the modernist room, the compact sphere, is precisely to be an atom in the spreading social universe. The metropolis of rooms is an affront to ideals of the unique, the centered, the autogenic" Levenson, p. 6

²⁸⁶ "Walls, chairs, shoes, books - little cherished artifacts suddenly disclose their objecthood. The room shows itself as detached and indifferent, a close hard shell, a realm of things that will always be distant, no matter how close they get. We think of them as friends, our rooms, but really they don't notice when we go away. By the end of the novel, Jacob's room is no longer a proper name for the self - it's now the corpse of subjectivity, an inert casing, a receptacle of death, a coffin", Levenson, p. 14

²⁸⁷ James F. Maxfield, *Strategies of Self-Deception in Willa Cather's "Professor's House"*, in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (spring 1984), pp. 72-86, p. 81

unavailing refuge²⁸⁸. The room then becomes, in a broader sense, the metaphor of body and mind²⁸⁹: “the room is the body’s body”²⁹⁰, and if as Victoria Rosner writes, interiority “has spatial as well as cognitive dimensions”²⁹¹, Alice Gavin, argues that “in modernism, thinking is often delimited by a single thing, the room”²⁹². A process that as we have seen in the previous chapters also finds a place in DeLillo’s writing.

In *The Novel Demeublé* Willa Cather resorts to the room using a double metaphor. In fact, the essay begins with her famous critique of the excess of literature contemporary to her, which now seems to be marked by the exaggerated use of lists of material objects - as if these endless lists would guarantee a greater degree of realism to the text - or by meticulous explanations of social or industrial processes that add nothing to the story, running rather the risk of watering down the emotional conflict that should instead, by itself, be the engine of the whole plot²⁹³. Thus, “the novel, for a long while, has been over-furnished”²⁹⁴, in this sense, she wants to “get rid, that is, of all the social facts that Balzac and other realists had felt to be so necessary for the understanding of modern character”²⁹⁵.

²⁸⁸ Levenson, p. 5

²⁸⁹ “Mind in modernism are often rooms. This is a connection that is at once metaphorical and constitutive. On the one hand, minds are like rooms, meaning that psychic interiority borrows its form from the metaphor of a room”, Gavin, P. 873

²⁹⁰ “the carapace of personhood”, Levenson, p. 5

²⁹¹ Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, p. 12

²⁹² Gavin, p. 873

²⁹³ “Is the story of a banker who is unfaithful to his wife and who ruins himself by speculation in trying to gratify the caprices of his mistresses, at all reinforced by a masterly exposition of the banking system, our whole system of credits, the methods of the Stock Exchange?”, Cather, (1922), p. 6

²⁹⁴ Cather, (1922), p. 5

²⁹⁵ Lionel Trilling, *Willa Cather*, in *The New Republic*, February 9, 1937, (<https://newrepublic.com/article/76896/willa-cather>, last access on 09/25/2022)

For Cather, the room is thus the frame that makes it possible to fix through writing the movement of the characters, whether physical, psychological, or emotional.

It is the nucleus of the story, both compositionally and formally, but for this to happen, for the room to become the site of observation of the drama that is about to unfold, it is necessary for the room to have very specific characteristics, it must be a bare room, free of all unnecessary trappings²⁹⁶: “How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theater”²⁹⁷. The aesthetics of the room is the aesthetics of writing²⁹⁸. Only precise writing, clean of excess, capable of making choices, not relying on mechanical

²⁹⁶ “The basic requirement for the room it is insulated and isolated from the world. It is filled with light, its small, spare, high rooms totally sheltered on three sides and totally open on the fourth to “the river of blue air”, Cynthia K. Briggs, *Insulated Isolation. Willa Cather’s Room with a View*, in *Cather Studies* Volume 1, p. 4, see also, Judith Fryer, *Cather’s Felicitous Space*, in *Prairie Schooner* 55 (Spring/Summer 1981), pp. 185-198; as the professor’s room: “(he) went resolutely up two flights of stairs to the third floor where, under the slope of the mansard roof, there was one room still furnished – that is, if it had ever been furnished. The low ceiling sloped down on the three sides, the slant being interrupted on the east by a single square window, swinging outward on hinges and held ajar by a hook in the sill. This was the sole opening for light and air. Walls and ceiling alike were covered with a yellow paper which had once been very ugly, but had faded into inoffensive neutrality. The matting on the floor was worn and scratchy. Against the wall stood an old walnut table, with one leaf up, holding piles of orderly papers. Before it was a cane-backed office chair that turned on a screw. This dark den had for many years been the Professor’s study”, Willa Cather, *The Professor’s House*, Vintage Books, New York, 1990, p. 6-7

²⁹⁷ Cather, (1922), p. 6

²⁹⁸ “Criticizing the current trend of “realism” that tends to catalogue material objects, Cather lays out her minimalist aesthetics with a spatial metaphor of an unfurnished rooms”, Madoka Kishi, “*More Than Anything Else, I Like My Closets*”: *Willa Cather’s Melancholic Erotics in The Professor’s House*, in *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Spring 2013), pp. 157-173, p. 153

observation but on selection, can bring the content of the room itself back to the page. A writing that should come as close as possible to Tom Outland's diary contained in the novel *The Professor's House*: "To St. Peter's this plain account was almost beautiful, because of the stupidities it avoided and the things it did not say. If words had cost money, Tom couldn't have used them more sparingly [...] Yet through this austerity one felt the kindling imagination"²⁹⁹.

Continues Willa Cather, in her essay, "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there-that, it seems to me, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the over-tone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself"³⁰⁰.

In its second sense, which is obviously double-tied to the first, the metaphor of the room acquires a formal dimension. Picking up on the idea of Henry James's *House of Fiction*³⁰¹, which we will analyze later with respect to McNerney's work, the novel becomes a room, a structure capable of allowing the reader to glimpse the presence of the unspoken, to allow him or her to hear the unheard, to perceive the penumbræ where the emotional states of the characters are stirred. Tom Outland's diary itself is "the structural center of the novel"³⁰², as Michael Leddy has written, Cather's writing "points toward an idea of the novel not as narrative but as image, as if placing objects against one another in space were

²⁹⁹ Cather, (1990), p. 338

³⁰⁰ Cather, (1922), p. 6

³⁰¹ On the influences of Henry James in Willa Cather's work see: Elsa Nettels, *Willa Cather and the Example of Henry James*, in *Cather Studies*, Volume 10

³⁰² Ann Moseley, *Spatial Structures and Forms in The Professor's House*, in *Cather Studies*, Volume 3, p. 4

indeed a way to tell a (temporal) story”³⁰³.

The novel is constructed precisely from a juxtaposition of two images. On the one hand, that between the new, *over-furnished house* where the professor refuses to move and the old house³⁰⁴, in particular, the small, *unfurnished* room where he wrote his academic work, in that typical movement seen above of modernism that operates a progressive shrinkage from the house to the room³⁰⁵. On the

³⁰³ Micheal Leddy, ““Distant and Correct”. *The Double Life and The Professor’s House*”, in *Cather Studies*, Volume 3, p. 1

³⁰⁴ “In fact, in one novel, *The Professor’s House*, that method frames the basic structural pattern of the work, and that pattern in turn establishes the basic theme of the book. *The Professor’s House* is concerned principally with the conflict between society and solitude, between community and isolation -- a conflict dramatized graphically in the person of Professor Godfrey St. Peter and echoed in Tom Outland. That conflict is portrayed structurally in the three sections of the novel, “The Family”, “Tom Outland’s Story” and “The Professor”. The family is community, habitat of the social man. The professor by the end of the book is the man in isolation, separated from family principally by the ideal represented in Tom Outland’s story. And in a very real sense Tom Outland does come between the professor and his family; or he might be said to precipitate the division within the professor himself, the division between the social St. Peter and the primitive loner who returns as St. Peter’s other self in the book’s final section. This structural and thematic dichotomy is projected symbolically in the two houses of St. Peter”, Marilyn Arnold, *The Function of Structure in Cather’s The Professor’s House*, in *Colby Library Quarterly*, series 11, no. 3, September 1975, pp. 169-178, p. 169

³⁰⁵ *The Professor’s House* is the epitome of the whole elaborate modernist conception of the room. The same conception from which DeLillo seems to have drawn heavily for his own elaboration of the room. Indeed, all the uses of the room appear in the novel. The room as womb, see Leon Edel’s essay, “*A Cave of One’s Own*” in *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*. Ed. John J. Murphy. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984, pp. 200-217. Then, the view of the room as an Epicurean refuge (“St. Peter’s withdrawal as an Epicurean withdrawal to contemplative retirement” Micheal W. Price, p. 1) and finally, the room as a mental structure, again according to Micheal W. Price, who argues there is a correlation between the room and the professor’s mind: “This portrayal correlates St. Peter’s attic study and head in terms of their physical position: the attic resides in the house as the head rests on the body. In fact, the detailed description of the region of St. Peter’s head between the top of his ear and the crown exactly aligns his brain with the attic study, stressing their relationship”, Michael W. Price, *St. Peter’s Contemplative Retirement to the Attic Study and Garden in The Professor’s House*, in *Cather Studies*, Volume 4, p. 2

other hand, the room and the window: “the image of the open window extends throughout the Professor’s house, providing symbolic import and contributing to the spatial structure of the work [...] In the middle section of the novel the window completely disappears”³⁰⁶.

The story of Tom Outland sandwiched between the two parts of the novel, between the professor’s room, thus becomes the window through which the novel as a home³⁰⁷. The idea of the novel as a room opening onto another landscape³⁰⁸ arises, as Cather herself recounts, from observing a painting³⁰⁹:

Just before I began the book I had seen, in Paris, an exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings. In many of them the scene presented was a living-room warmly furnished, or a kitchen full of food and coppers. But in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey. The feeling of the sea that one got through

³⁰⁶ Moseley, p. 2

³⁰⁷ “I tried to make Professor St. Peter’s house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things . . . until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew o the Blue Mesa, and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland’s face and in his behavior”, Willa Cather, *On The Professor’s House*, in *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*, Foreword by Stephen Tennant, Knopf, New York, 1949, pp. 30-32.

³⁰⁸ ““Tom Outland’s Story” functions within the novel like a painting within a painting” Moseley, p. 3

³⁰⁹ “Vividly juxtaposing the confined space of a domestic interior and an unlimited outdoor expanse beyond a window, Dutch genre scenes such as Vermeer’s *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1659) not only influenced the general structure of Cather’s novel but also inspired its central setting, the third-floor study with a “single square window” where St. Peter works,” Jean Schwind, *This Is a Frame- Up. Mother Eve in The Professor’s House*, in *Cather Studies*, Volume 2, p. 5

those square windows was remarkable, and gave me a sense of the fleets of Dutch ships that ply quietly on all the waters of the globe-to Java, etc.³¹⁰

To conclude, Willa Cather's double metaphor of the room is summarized in the image of the room with a view. An image that we also find in DeLillo's narrative, in the end of *The Body Artist* we have just seen and in the rooms in the metropolis we will see later. The window is central not only in the composition of the room on a physical level within the setting of the story; on a structural level, as a window that allows the reader to look out on another world, more airy than the protagonists' rooms that risk suffocating the plot and consequently the writing, but it is above all essential because, as for Cather and as for DeLillo, the window is the instrument that relates the individual to the world: "there was one fine thing about this room that had been the scene of so many defeats and triumphs. From the window he could see, far away, just on the horizon, a long, blue hazy smear - Lake Michigan, the inland sea of his childhood"³¹¹. The window, as it happens for Lauren, literally saves the life of the protagonist³¹²: the professor, in

³¹⁰ Cather, (1949), pp. 30-32.

³¹¹ Cather, (1990), p. 26

³¹² "The furnace heat did not reach the third floor. There was no way to warm the sewing-room, except by a rusty, round gas stove with no flue – a stove which consumed gas imperfectly and contaminated the air. To remedy this, the window must be left open - otherwise, with the ceiling so low, the air would speedily become unfit to breathe. If the stove were turned down, and the window left open little way, a sudden gust of wind would blow the wretched thing out altogether, and a deeply absorbed man might be asphyxiated before he knew it" Cather, (1990), p. 22 ; "Yet, although it is an important source of air, the Professor's window also represents the threat of death: "If the stove were turned down, and the window left open a little way, a sudden gust of wind would blow the wretched things out altogether, and a deeply absorbed man might be asphyxiated before he knew it. When the stove does blow out at the end of the novel,

the end, is saved from intoxication by the seamstress's gesture, who runs to his rescue by opening the window. It is a gesture that breaks that pattern typical of DeLillo and here is represented by the professor, where a character tries to isolate himself more and more from the world by seeking a refuge in the room, a place where he can reconnect: "Cather combines the small room and the expansive space by creating a room with a view. This sacred space, with its insulated view of the world, nourishes the characters, as a parish should, strengthening them for their sojourn in the world"³¹³. As with DeLillo, Cather's intention is followed throughout the course of the novel, until something or someone makes it utterly impossible. For, as we saw in the case of Bill in *Mao II*, to create, to write, one always needs an open window to the world. The room is the place of gathering of ideas, of uninterrupted work, the space where the experience of the world is brought back in and digested, assimilated: "this pattern, creating a private, sheltered space that opens on an expansive view of the world, recurs not only in each stage of Cather's life³¹⁴ but also, in the lives of the characters she creates"³¹⁵. The room is the professor's center of operations, and although during the writing of his work the professor frequently traveled, the idea itself was born on a boat trip: "The design of his book unfolded in the

the gas fumes nearly kill the Professor. Paradoxically, it is the open window itself that renders the Professor's world literally "stifling." Deborah Karush, *Bringing Outland Inland in The Professor's House. Willa Cather's Domestication of Empire*, in *Cather Studies*, Volume 4, pp. 9-10

³¹³ Briggs, p. 2

³¹⁴ On references to the many points of contact between Willa Cather and her work see James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1987, and on autobiographical influences specifically in *The Professor's House* see Leon Edel's *A Cave of One's Own*

³¹⁵ Briggs, p. 1

air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves”³¹⁶, it is also true, however, that “the notes and the records and the idea always came back to his room. It was here they were digested and sorted, and woven into their proper place in his history”³¹⁷. The room is embedded in the world, isolated, but subject to the vibrations of everything that moves around it, above and below: “while he worked so doggedly on his eight mighty volumes, he did not remain insensible to the domestic drama unfolding beneath him”³¹⁸. And that drama, somehow, influenced the writing. Because after all, that drama of the family, the wife, the two daughters, the two husbands, Tom’s inheritance, is what makes up the story. The drama enclosed within the four walls of the house, observed from the four walls of one room.

The room gives the writer access to the vision of an interiority that becomes plastic enough to be sculpted with words. It is precisely the room, specifically the narrative gesture of placing a character inside a room, that makes it possible to write part of the plot itself and most of all the evolution of the character, which is fully accomplished often thanks to him being located in a room with certain characteristics, in certain decisive passages of the intrigue. As if the room had the power to remove the opaque nature of the outside world in favor of a clarification of those dilemmas of the soul that, when in contact with the outside world, become exasperated to the point of total incomprehensibility. This

³¹⁶ Cather, (1990), p. 131

³¹⁷ Cather, (1990), p. 22

³¹⁸ “*The Professor’s House* radically undercuts St. Peter’s view of his literary success. While Professor St. Peter presents his *Spanish Adventurers* as a product of “isolation [and] insulation” from the trivial concerns of his female household, the details of Cather’s novel expose St. Peter’s theory of artistic conception as a critical misconception. St. Peter’s ideal “sons”, Cather shows, are immeasurably indebted to the real women of *The Professor’s House*”, Schwind, p. 6

certainly does not mean that the room works for the writer, and then for the reader, as a window that is clearly facing on the human interiority, quite the opposite. The room only makes it possible to write (and therefore to read) of a torment caught at the moment in which it just begins to unravel. No clear picture can be seen from it. However, the four walls act, not only as the perimeter of a precise space within a particular context, but also as the perimeter of an inner mass that would otherwise be impossible to discern and therefore written in the world outside. According to Michelle Perrot: “La chambre est une boîte, réelle et imaginaire”³¹⁹. And the rooms we’re looking at here are all a combination of those two characteristics. The rooms of Selvy and Moll, that we have previously encountered, are a concrete and particular place and at the same time an expression of a condition of being. Just as well as David Bell’s mental room, which finds its physical counterpart in the room of his apartment in Gramercy Park³²⁰, where it can perpetuate his longing for solitude³²¹. For a room to take on a narrative value, it must qualify itself, in the interweaving and progressive construction of the character, as a development of these two characteristics. Because according to DeLillo, room and character interact with each other in a qualitative exchange. However, not all the rooms that appear in the novels are

³¹⁹ Perrot, p. 9

³²⁰ In Gramercy Park lives the protagonist of *Baghdad Towers West* too: “Setting out every weekend from my terrace apartment in Gramercy Park” (BTW 197)

³²¹ “I slipped out from under her leg and turned off the TV. I went naked down the stairs, carrying my shoes and clothing. I wanted to wake up alone; it was a characteristic of mine, which many women learned to despise down through the years. My apartment welcomed me, dim and silent, the redwine flavor of paintings and rugs [...] all warm and familiar and needing no acknowledgment, all reminding me that solitude asks no pledges of anyone” (A 60). “For Bell, such a love for the self is only possible with the denial of the Other, shielded from the threat of connection by the isolation of his enunciation and the objects which constitute his environment”, Pass, p. 28

important, not all the rooms, in fact, play an active role in the plot. Only in some rooms, the entrance and the exit are dynamic points of the plot, capable of modifying the unfolding of the story in a fundamental way. At the same time, they also illuminate something extremely essential and otherwise hidden of the personality of the character. An example is the room where, thanks to the art dealer Lightborne, the meeting between Moll and Selvy in *Running Dog* takes place, which is “the area of the loft he used as living quarters” (RD, 13). As fascinating it might be, it is functional to the plot simply as a place where an encounter takes place, an encounter that could have taken place in several other places without this bringing changes to the story. Different instead, as seen above, is the discourse concerning the rooms of the two protagonists. Selvy’s room, because of its particular quality, is a glimpse of his identity and it represents the structural support of his actions. Moll’s room, also because of its quality, is the starting point of a crack that will be crucial for the development of the story.

In the previous chapter we highlighted the mental aspect of the room, now let us analyze the other aspect, the physicality of the room. While in the cases seen before the physical room was only the mundane anchorage of a perception and the mental dimension predominated, here the situation is reversed. It was a mental to physical process, here it is the opposite. It is the physical space that favors a certain mental operation that is fundamental for the unfolding of the plot³²².

³²² Here I refer to the plot as Peter Brooks would: “Plot as we have defined it is the organizing line and intention of narrative, thus perhaps best conceived as an activity, a structuring operation elicited in the reader trying to make sense of those meanings that develop only through textual and temporal succession”, Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, Alfred A. Knopf, p. 41, or as Ricoeur writes: “By plot I mean the intelligible whole

1.2.1 To Comprehend the Desire in the Room

In *Americana* there are physical rooms that are a representation and a mental reconfiguration of the self and the world around it. Each room has its own particular quality in relation to the place where it is located.

Just before the end of the first part (the novel consists of four parts) we find a first synergy between the imaginative power and physical recollection provided by a room. It is a brief flash that gets lost in the chaotic density of the text, but which, if read carefully, stands out as a decisive passage³²³, in which the heart of the novel reveals itself for the first time. The room becomes both the place where the character's³²⁴ desire is made explicit and a narrative hub. We are almost at the end of chapter four of the first part. David Bell at the heights point of his

that governs a succession of events in any story. [...] A story is *made out of* events to the extent that plot *makes* events *into* a story", Paul Ricoeur, *Narrative Time*, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.7, No. 1, On Narrative (Autumn, 1980), The University of Chicago Press, pp. 169-190, p.171

³²³ The importance of this room will only become clear to the reader at the end of the novel because, as Peter Brooks explains, the meanings of a story emerge following a process articulated in two phases: the first has metonymy as its organizing principle, and concerns the experience we have in the middle of the story; the second, resembles a metaphor and concerns the experience of the end, where we can finally reach a total interpretation: "Plot is the structure of action in closed and legible wholes; it thus must use metaphor as the trope of its achieved interrelations, and it must be metaphoric insofar as it totalizing. Yet it is equally apparent that the key figure of narrative must in some sense be not metaphor but metonymy: the figure of contiguity and combination, of the syntagmatic relation. The description of narrative needs metonymy as the figure of linkage in the signifying chain: precedence and consequence, the movement from one detail to another, the movement toward totalization under the mandate of desire", Brooks, *Ibid.*, p. 100

³²⁴ "Desire as that which is initiatory of narrative, motivates and energizes its reading, and animates the combinatory play of sense-making", Brooks, p. 53

dissatisfaction, after a disappointing party on the Upper East Side, more precisely at his ex-girlfriend Wendy Judd's³²⁵ place, decides to reach Sullivan's house in Greene St. in Soho. Sullivan, a young sculptress, is one of the key figures of the novel, and she is at the center of David's attention. As Elise A. Martucci explains: "Sullivan is an artist who does not conform to the image of women produced by the television network where David works"³²⁶. But like his mother, Ann Bell, Sullivan's figure will remain largely incomprehensible and elusive to David³²⁷. At a certain point he will leave with her and two other comrades for an Indian reservation in Arizona. During the journey, in David's mind, Sullivan's figure is superimposed on the tormented maternal figure. The two female images overlap accordingly with the hostile image of the American landscape³²⁸. According to Martucci, David embraces the metaphor expressed by Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land*: "The central metaphor of American pastoral experience [is] the metaphor of the land as woman"³²⁹. For David Cowart: "David Bell's existential distress seems to have an important Oedipal dimension"³³⁰: the relationship between the protagonist and his mother, who died when he was still a child, also extends symbolically "into the life of the

³²⁵ "Dessert was a nervous affair." (A, 105)

³²⁶ Elise A. Martucci, *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo*, Routledge, New York & London, 2007, p. 35

³²⁷ "Sullivan always made me feel totally inadequate." (A, 8)

³²⁸ "In psychoanalytic theory one's sense of self originates, at least in part, in the early relationship with the mother. DeLillo, like Freud or Lacan, extends this idea beyond individual psychology. He knows that Americans collectively define themselves with reference to a land their artists frequently represent, in metaphor at least, as female. In *Americana* DeLillo represents this female land as maternal", Cowart (2003), p. 132

³²⁹ Martucci, p. 35

³³⁰ David Cowart, (2003), p. 138

nation”³³¹. So the journey in search of a still pure America³³², free from the images and aggressive language of the city and the media³³³, is, at the same time, a journey towards the maternal figure: “Bell’s mother and father serve to illuminate the dichotomy between female pastoral purity and masculine aggression.”³³⁴

Ann Bell died of cervical cancer when David was still a boy and her life has been a tormented one, marked by manic-depression that no one, neither her children nor her husband, have been able to alleviate³³⁵. Thus, she becomes an ambiguous presence in David’s life³³⁶, full of eroticism and death drive, that insinuates itself into whatever he does and most of all into every relationship he manages to establish with a woman. “For almost every woman he sleeps with turns out to be a version of his mother”, every relationship established with a woman is nothing to David but “an unconscious search for the woman forbidden to him, at once recapitulating and reversing the tragically imperfect Oedipal model. As he was rejected, so too will he reject successive candidates in what occasionally

³³¹ David Cowart (2003), p. 138.

³³² “With her patrician Virginia heritage, Ann represents a high cultural legacy”, Osteen (1996), p. 454

³³³ “DeLillo frequently draws parallels between the arid objectivism of Bell’s epistemology and that of American culture in general and suggests that both lead to the same destructive and inhumane behavior.” Benjamin Bird, *Don DeLillo’s Americana: From Third- to First-Person Consciousness*, in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Winter 2006, Vol. 47, No.2, p. 186

³³⁴ Martucci, p. 34

³³⁵ “While his father provides the ideological framework, the psychological “darkness” issues from his mother, Ann. Molested by the family physician and then stricken with cancer, she shared the story of her molestation with the immature David, inciting unresolved oedipal feelings in him”, Osteen (1996), p. 454

³³⁶ “Even from this long way off, in the magnet-grip of an impending century, it is painful to write about her”, DeLillo, (A, 166)

amounts to a literal orgy of philandering and promiscuity”³³⁷. *Americana* is a novel that is built around the unconscious desire³³⁸ of a boy who is unable to become a man and tries in every way to overcome the cumbersome presence of his mother, and thus responds to his drives³³⁹ with a frenzy that makes this desire not only the theme and the engine of the narrative, but also the constant recourse to the need to tell. In fact, David Bell first tells his story in a film and then in a novel³⁴⁰, which is presumably the text we read. He seems to be always revolving around the authentic meaning of his story³⁴¹, but without ever being able to reveal it openly and therefore to overcome it. For this reason, the insistence on the figure of Sullivan betrays the narrative. If America becomes a metaphor, a replacement of an absence with something that is present, Sullivan is a

³³⁷ Cowart (2003), p. 141.

³³⁸ The definition of desire expressed by Brooks, starting from Freud’s essay on Faust and the Lacanian interpretation of the concept of desire, is fitting for *Americana*: “desire comes into being as a perpetual want for (of) a satisfaction that cannot be offered in reality. Desire is inherently unsatisfied and unsatisfiable since it is linked to memory traces and seeks its realization in the hallucinatory reproduction of indestructible signs of infantile satisfaction: it reposes on phantasmatic scenarios of satisfaction.”, Brooks, p. 60

³³⁹ “By the pressure [Drang] of an instinct we understand its motor factor, the amount of force or the measure of the demand for work which it represents. The characteristic of exercising pressure is common to all instincts; it is in fact their very essence. Every instinct is a piece of activity”, Sigmund Freud, *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes* [*Triebe und Triebchicksale*], in *Standard Edition*, vol.14, p.122, in Brooks, p. 47

³⁴⁰ Brooks writes: “Desire as a narrative thematic, desire as narrative motor, and desire as the very intention of narrative language and the act of telling all seem to stand in close interrelation”, Brooks, p. 59

³⁴¹ “Discourse hence becomes the interconnection of signifiers one with another in a “signifying chain” where meaning (in the sense of access to the meaning of unconscious desire) does not consist in any single link of the chain, yet through which meaning nonetheless *insists*”, Brooks, p. 61, or as Cowart says: “*Americana* is the record of an attempt to break out of the endlessy circular signifying chain of images replicating and playing off each other to infinity”, Cowart, (2003), p. 136

metonymy, that is a movement that indicates an absence³⁴². Of all the women he meets, who are, in some way, surrogate figures of his mother and with whom he has brief, unsatisfactory relationships, Sullivan is the most important and is the one who, in the film that David will try to shoot about his life, will actually have to play his mother part. “In Sullivan, at once mother and “mothercountry”, Bell recognizes the most significant - and psychologically dangerous - of these surrogates”³⁴³. Sullivan lives in a loft on the top floor of a building whose front door “was off its hinges” (A, 109). The only door in the building that has no writing on it (“I wondered why this one door had not been marked” (A,109) while the others are presented with words that refer to other images: “to give a door the name River was an act of odd joy, or poetry, or childhood” (A, 109). The word *River* drags David for a moment into a brief scene from the past, one of the first references to the country where he grew up and where his memories with his mother are recalled: Old Holly, one of the many suburbs of New York (“unlike the surrounding communities it was not an extension of the city’s monoxide spirit” A, 130)³⁴⁴. The words GOOD, EVIL, BREAST, JUSTICE, MARTYRDOM³⁴⁵ appear too, all of them somehow connected to moments in

³⁴² “If narrative desire keeps moving us forward, it is because narrative metonymy can never quite speak its name”, Brooks, p. 61

³⁴³ Cowart, (2003), p. 141

³⁴⁴ “I thought of the river in Old Holly then” (A, 109)

³⁴⁵ All the words have clear religious meanings, and somehow they can lead back to the mother and the religious faith that she tried to inculcate in David as well. Extending this line of thought, the adjective GOOD can refer to the situation David experiences in the office: on the one hand, the wish to disappear and fade into the background in order not to be noticed: “There were vedettas against the *good*-looking. One sought to avoid categories and therefore confound the formulators” (A, 13), while, on the other hand the mechanism used by the network to make its employees feel appreciated, which, for as much as this is ironically emphasised by David, cannot but make him feel flattered, thus making him fall into the trap and making him suffer: “At

David's life and to the situation in America at the time, at the height of the Vietnam war³⁴⁶. To pass through those doors would therefore mean to passing also through those images, it would mean to perpetuate again that uncomfortable sensation of living in a videotape³⁴⁷ that accompanies David and not only. In a New York that is a flash of self-reflecting surfaces, screens that refer only to themselves, where the image has taken over, where every sensation, every thought, every fragment of existence is hardly traceable to a real experience, the fusion between fiction and reality is inevitable. What David Bell remembers, what David Bell sees or feels is really part of his experience or is it

the network, people were always telling the situation other people they had heard *good* things about them" (A, 67). "Something else was left over for the rest of us, or some of the rest of us, and it was the dream of the good life" (A, 129). A situation that evidently goes against his private narcissism: "Bell revels in his own image, constantly looking at himself in the mirrors and boasting of his handsomeness", Osteen (1996), p. 451. The word BREAST, instead, clearly refers to the mother figure, but especially to the women that David meets in the novel. The first thing David searches for in every woman, is a contact with the breast and in this gesture he re-lives each time his desire for a mother and the failure this implies. This happens when he thinks about his ex-wife Meredith, "I wanted to be back in Meredith's warm musky bed, lost in the hollow of her breasts" (A, 71), "those thrifty breasts, salvation of Western man" (A, 166). It happens when he tries to seduce a girl in a bar: "My hand touched her cool breast [...] and when I kissed her there was a message returned from the humid mechanical mouth which let me know that whatever we did, here or later, was a matter of the vastest indifference" (A, 52). Also his ex-girlfriend Wendy is recognized from the breast, as she herself tells David: "He put me to work in a SoHo striptease joint because of my breasts. [...] he told me thanks for the mammaries." (A, 104). Lastly, Sullivan's covered breast becomes the blatant proof of David's inability to satisfy his desire: "she was covered now, even her breasts and lying rigid, a message that this was the end of a stanza" (A, 319)

³⁴⁶ "The war was on television every night but we all went to the movies." (A, 5)

³⁴⁷ "Bell's quest demonstrates the inescapability of the interrelationship between cinematic and commercial images, and the profound way that they shape- and fragment-postmodern subjectivity", Osteen (1996), p. 451, "All of us at the network existed only on videotape." (A, 23)

the result of a total addiction to film images, advertisements that have turned a simple vision into a direct experience?

In addition to the conflict with the mother figure, there is also the conflict with the father figure. David comes from a family of advertisers; when he was a child, his father forced him to watch long sessions of commercials in detail. This inevitably had a profound effect on his perception of the world³⁴⁸. As his father explained to him, the success of a commercial lies in its ability to influence the viewer and to project his consciousness towards a universal third person: “the man we all want to be. Advertising has discovered this man. It uses him to express the possibilities open to the consumer. To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream. Advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled” (A, 270). David is stuck in this vision until, in his life as an *almost* adult, he gets to perceive himself not as a three-dimensional person, but flat and two-dimensional, though still quite charming³⁴⁹. To add to this perception that influences his conception of himself and the world around him, there is also the training personally pursued by David, all focused on the power of some other types of images³⁵⁰, cinematic ones. As

³⁴⁸ “Two scenes in Don DeLillo’s fiction are primal for his imagination of America,” writes Lentricchia, and this is one of the two “in the dialogue from *Americana* the genius of television emerges as nothing other than the desire for the universal third-person – it is *that* which “came over on the Mayflower,” the person we dream about from our armchairs in front of the television, originally dreamt by the first immigrants, the pilgrims on their way over, the object of the dream being the person those pilgrims would become, could the dream be fulfilled: a new self because a new world.” Lentricchia, (2007), p. 193-194

³⁴⁹ “When I began to wonder who I was, I took the simple step of lathering my face and shaving. It all became so clear, so wonderful. I was blue-eyed David Bell. Obviously my life depended on this fact.” (A, 11)

³⁵⁰ “David Bell’s fascination with the image in *Americana*. Rather than the *λόγος* providing the basis for stable, fulfilling enunciation of Self, it is instead towards the

Mark Osteen wrote: “David’s education is not literary but cinematic, and his identity has been shaped most powerfully by those American pyramids Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas”³⁵¹. David’s film education began when, at the age of sixteen, he attended the screening of the film *From Here to Eternity* twice. This is a crucial moment in his life for two reasons. The first one is because here it is placed the first conflict with his father, to whom David lied so he could go to the cinema. When he finds out he is not so much disappointed or angry with the lie as with the fact that he expected David’s escape to be for other purposes, namely a girl. There is a first-generation difference, the father’s talks and actions are opposed to David’s passive vision and obsession with the cinema: “Is that what you do up in New Hampshire? Go to the movies every night? It’s costing me a small fortune to send you to that school” (A, 161), his father tells him one evening when David refers to a family situation in a film (*Cry of the City* starring Victor Mature and Richard Conte). From then on, cinema will become a fundamental part of his way of being, of his way of acting. Every situation experienced is mediated by the power that images have on his mind. For example, when he visits a female friend at college, he imagines himself as he “stood in the doorway and thought of Burt Lancaster standing in the rain waiting for Deborah Kerr to open the door” (A, 144). The impossibility of satisfying his sexual instincts therefore arises from both his relationship with the mother figure and from his inability to escape from the power of images initially

visual that David is drawn for much of the novel, in particular the medium of film”, Pass, pp. 103-104

³⁵¹ Osteen (1996), p. 452.

inculcated in him by his father, an authoritarian figure who also dominates his son in the present³⁵².

As Edgar Morin explained in his essay *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire*, cinema creates a symbiosis that integrates the spectator's psychic flow into the film flow. The image is therefore not only the meeting point between the real and the imaginary but is the set-up act of the real and the imaginary. It is the moment when what has been seen is amalgamated into the viewer's experience. As Luckács said, in cinema there is an unsettling truth of life to which Benjamin also adds that instead of a space elaborated by man's conscience, cinema leads to a space processed by the unconscious; one of the reasons for the effectiveness of cinema, as Casetti pointed out, lies in its ability to create myths and rituals. Everything resides in the ability of cinema to create an imaginary and establish itself as an experience in the mind of the viewer, but without this process being intelligible to the viewer³⁵³.

David writes: "Burt (Lancaster) was like a city in which we are all living. He was that big. Within the conflux of shadow and time, there was a room for all of us and I knew I must extend myself until the molecules parted and I was spliced into the image" (A, 12)³⁵⁴. The cinema image becomes a true and proper space

³⁵² "My father was already there, sitting at a corner table. His stocky figure [...] seemed to dominate that part of the room. [...] but there was a blunt authority in his eyes which could not be ignored. We did not look at all alike. [...] I wished he were dead. It was the first honest thought which had entered my mind all day." (A, 82, 85)

³⁵³ Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century. Film, Experience, Modernity*, Columbia University Press, 2008

³⁵⁴ "L'univers fluide du film suppose des *transferts* réciproques incessants entre l'homme microcosme et le macrocosme. Substituer alternativement l'objet à la personne est un des procédés les plus courants du cinéma; le film tire ses effets les plus efficaces précisément de tels transferts [...] Le visage est devenu médium: il exprime les tempêtes marines, la terre, la ville, l'usine, la révolution, la guerre. Le visage est paysage. [...] Le grand courant qui emporte chaque film suscite l'interchangeabilité des hommes et des

in which to live and experience life. Personal experience merges with what is seen on screen³⁵⁵ and life becomes what David at a certain point realizes: “a lesson in the effect of echoes” (A, 58)³⁵⁶. From his father’s influence to his personal training, David finds himself stuck in an endless multiplication of images that repeat and modify each other, echoing each other³⁵⁷: “One thinks of echoes. One thinks of an image made in the image and likeness of images. It was that complex”³⁵⁸. Destroying this immense simulacrum that dominates his existence therefore requires David to get rid of the chain of echoes that has become his life. Davide Barbuscia rightly surmises that this chain of echoes also reverberates in the narrative and temporal structure of the novel, determined by 4 lines. The first one is about David’s life when he is in his 28, the most consistent narrative line, which starts in New York and then follows him through his journey. The second narrative line is a flashback that shows the

choses, des visages et des objets. [...] Car le visage, sur l’écran, devant paysage et le paysage devant visage, *c’est-à-dire* âme. Les paysages sont des états d’âme et les états d’âme des paysages”, Edgar Morin, *Le cinéma ou l’homme imaginaire, Essai d’anthropologie sociologique*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1956, pp. 77-78. “Investing himself within the simulacrum of Burt Lancaster’s image, David “extend [s him] self until the molecules parted and [he] was spliced into the image”, opening the Self to the fragmentation of the hyperreal and eliminating the supposed modernist unity of the subject”, Pass, *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³⁵⁵ “The power of images. This is something I kept thinking about when I was writing *Americana*”, LeClair, (2005), p. 9

³⁵⁶ For example, the marriage and his married life seem to be “arranged for the whim of a camera”, in the same way his professional life is: “also at work, his life in the office seems to exist only on videotape”. “My twenty –eight years in the movies. Making of a life so easily made that a hat on the head could become the man.” (A, 287)

³⁵⁷ Davide Barbuscia, *Le prime opere narrative di Don DeLillo. Rappresentazione del tempo e poetica beckettiana dell’istante*, Firenze University Press, 2013, p. 31 (translation by me)

³⁵⁸ “Alors tout le système passe en apesanteur, il n’est plus lui-même qu’un gigantesque simulacre – non pas irréel, mais simulacre, c’est-à-dire ne s’échangeant plus jamais contre du réel, mais s’échangeant en lui-même, dans un circuit ininterrompu dont ni la référence ni la circonférence ne sont nulle part”, Baudrillard, (1981), p. 16.

marriage with Meredith backwards. The third line is David's childhood story and the fourth is the narrative frame of the novel, that is David autobiography written in 1999. "It will be shown how the metaphor of the echo with which the protagonist defines his own existence, can not only find an accurate articulation in the narrative structure of *Americana*, but also, and again through the temporal structures of the story, in the search for an original moment in the life of the protagonist, the first sound, able to generate the subsequent echoes of which the novel resonates"³⁵⁹.

So what is the original sound? What is the initial image that David has to get rid of?

Let us go back to David's entrance into Sullivan's room. If passing through the other doors means entering rooms redundant with echoes, Sullivan's door instead presents itself without inscriptions, without any suggested images. Entering it silences the urban effervescence of David's echoes, which loses its thread: "I assembled an opening remark to toss at Sullivan. The remark would be both clever and graphic and I was still working on the exact phrasing when I opened the unmarked door and walked into the room" (A, 107). That door without writing, without names referring to other images, can thus become for David the opportunity for a momentary exit from the chain of echoes into which he has fallen, and if "throughout his narrative Bell strives to come to terms with some fearsome thing having to do with his mother"³⁶⁰, it is precisely in Sullivan's loft, this one big room without names, that for the first time, the reader and David, approaching the essence of himself, perceive the Oedipal shape of his torments:

³⁵⁹ Barbuscia, p. 33

³⁶⁰ Cowart, (2003), p. 138

I could never enter Sullivan's studio without feeling that I had just stepped, unwillingly, into an alien country, one visited in the past but with a landscape that remained no more than the barest of memories. (A, 107-108)

Slowly, entering the room becomes a return to the self, free from all the superstructures of the metropolis, remaining within the metropolis. A return to an already seen landscape, yet just beyond the threshold of oblivion. If David's apartment is a shelter that conveys a feeling of closure, Sullivan's loft, also being her work studio (natural to think back to the figure of Lionel Dobie, mentioned in the introduction), is a house that is characterized by openness, welcoming and above all it attests the presence of the owner in metropolitan life, "her reputation was growing locally" (A, 106). In that studio David comes across Sullivan's works waiting to be shown to the outside. Sullivan's room also has a metaphorical aspect in the positive synergy of a room that is both a physical and a mental space at the same time. The decor of the room, in fact, recalls the womb. Sullivan's studio is called *The Cocoon*, and entering the loft is an initial return to the complex figure of the mother:

There was, finally, most alien, the membranous chemical material which covered the walls and ceiling. Similar to the kind of wrapping used to keep sandwiches fresh, but somewhat more dull and opaque, this material was not wallpapered on in sections; it was a single tent-like unit, clinging, billowing slightly at times, bubbled with air pockets

between itself and the walls. One rectangular section corresponding to the length and width of the door had been cut away so that people could enter and leave [...] A stained chunk of foam rubber, the remains of a mattress, lay under the workbench. I dragged it out and rolled my body into a ball and went immediately to sleep inside the plastic envelope of that room. (A, 108-109)

It is a dream in a fetal position, suggested by the shape of the room and the furnishings, and for the first time, the figure of Sullivan fatally merges with that of his mother, and the matrix of the original image is revealed³⁶¹. In Sullivan's presentation, already in the first chapter, David said "To me, she was simply homely", finally now this description is clear (A, 9):

³⁶¹ It is the first time in the novel where the figure of the mother appears so clearly as the character's *quest*. The image of his mother tormenting the character is already perceived at the end of the first chapter, when David is inexplicably attracted by a shoe left on the floor by Sullivan and when, before leaving the party, he spits on some ice cubes. We will discover later, in the part dedicated to his childhood, that this gesture is part of a moment of interrupted intimacy with his mother: "My mother was there. The refrigerator door was open. She was wearing just one shoe. The other was on the floor, a black shoe, upright, near the wall. She held a tray of ice cubes in her hands and she was spitting on the cube." (A, 195). David feels that this is the moment when he can finally get closer to his mother, "the sense of tightness I had felt in my room was beginning to yield to a promise of fantastic release. It was going to happen." (A, 196), but the meeting is interrupted by the arrival of the father. Boxall writes: "this unfulfilled encounter, during which David looks over the boundary of his tarnished, compromised reality into the abyssal, poetic depths of unchecked desire, forms the primal scene of novel and film", Boxall, (2006), p. 29, and Barbuscia adds: "the multiple forms in which the image of David's mother is reverberated, refer to this single Oedipal moment, and at the age of twenty-eight he returns to it and tries to reconstruct and sublimate it through the camera [...] The search for that single moment capable of giving the existence of the protagonist a new meaning, is transformed into the failure at the heart of the film and the novel itself". Barbuscia, pp. 42-43

The loft seems endless, a scene lifted from the sandy bottom of a dream. A shape in the shape of my mother was forming in the doorway (A, 110)³⁶².

Nonetheless the membrane that protects David is not a human membrane, but something chemical, which therefore refers not only to the mother figure, but to the figure of the American landscape tormented by the excesses of progress³⁶³. Metaphor and metonymy in David's unconscious merge in the room³⁶⁴.

In the room the four narrative lines intersect for a moment. The first line finds its turning point, the second one explains David's failed marriage and his behavior towards his wife - the latent and unresolved Oedipal drive. The third narrative line finds in the room the place where the original maternal image finds its body in the figure of Sullivan, decisive for the continuation, and then the failure, of David's attempt to relive his past by freeing himself from the chain of echoes. The fourth narrative line sees in this coiling up in a chemical membrane the essence of the failure of David's research. The matter of the membrane is

³⁶² Sullivan's room acts as a collector between present and past, between several rooms: the rooms of childhood and the rooms of the present. The relationship with his mother was born right within the walls of the house, with an epiphanic scene during a nocturnal meeting "in the pantry" with his mother: "in this enclosed space, through this reveling moment about his mother, the living root of his disconnected presence in the world, David feels "a promise of fantastic release", Belleggia, p. 173

³⁶³ "We must realize we are living in Megamerica. Neon, fiber glass, Plexiglass, polyurethane, Mylar, Acrylite" (A, 119).

³⁶⁴ "DeLillo suggests that the real violation occurs in an Oedipal drama of almost cosmic proportions: not in the encounter of European man with the tender breast of the American land but in the violation of that mother by their Oedipal progeny." Cowart (2003), p. 144

just an illusion³⁶⁵. It is not a womb, Sullivan's womb, but America itself, that America steeped in consumerism, in products made indispensable by the persuasive power of advertising, that America that has now become plastic, where it is "Better living through chemistry" (A, p. 13). David's journey, the room forecasts to us, will not be a return to the past to finally re-live the interrupted original scene in its entirety, it will not even be a journey forward, a journey towards a future where the drive is finally resolved. David's journey remains wrapped in that membrane, entangled in that substance that is made of the same material that America is made of, a slimy material that is impossible to get rid of. David's journey, the room tells us, will be a continuous loop, which can only end in a circuit in Texas: "The test track was a nine-mile circle in the desert" (A, 369).

This is how the room, in the economy of the plot, turns out to be fundamental as a privileged space for an initial representation of oneself and of the problems hidden in the recesses of the character's soul. Inserting the character in a room allows the author to outline the perimeter of his torments in order to be able to write about them. It is only at the end of the first part, and therefore just before the decisive journey begins, that DeLillo, by finally putting David and

³⁶⁵ "the America that David divines [...] is an America that is also, and at once, a psychical landscape, a private mind-scape, in which the oedipal prohibitions beneath which David lives might be lifted to offer him an orgasmic, epiphanic release. The America that emerges in *Americana*, through David's autobiographical quest, is a nation that is inscribed and disfigured with oedipal injunctions, with baffled, prohibited desire, with nameless fear and dread. The pathology from which David suffers, a pathology which is reflected and repeated across the entire nation, [...] is inseparable from the unresolved erotic longing that David feels for his deranged, spiritual mother." Boxall, (2006), p. 28

consequently the narrator in Sullivan's room³⁶⁶, is able for the first time to reveal the primary cause of that emotional chaos that was unfolding, thus giving it a direction, without dissolving it, trivializing it, but at the same time stopping it so as not to let its meaning slip away in the confusion. Sullivan's room is therefore the conjunction that separates three worlds, New York, Old Holly and America. By perceiving the room, the idea and purpose of the journey begins to become clearer in David's mind. From the next page New York disappears and David is already on his way. Waking up from that dream, David, although at first perhaps still unconsciously, decides to set aside the documentary on the Indians to devote himself to exploring his past, entrusting the most important role, the part of his mother, to Sullivan. The room is that flash of perception that allows the writing process, that gives a direction to the events, and which finally allow the second and then the third and fourth part of the novel. The room is intuition, the plastic vision of an otherwise intractable mass.

The metropolitan quality of the scene inside the room was highlighted in the analysis. The fact that Sullivan's loft is inside New York is essential for it to function as a conjunction. As we shall see as we go on, if the room had been located near a desert, there could not have been the opening necessary for the novel to continue. In a room in the *desert*, David's desire would have fallen asleep along with the plot of the novel itself, closing for good. As in the finale of the second novel, *End Zone*.

³⁶⁶ As Davide Barbuscia correctly wrote, *Americana* recovers the structural model of confessional narratives. Constructed from a moral and temporal distance between the narrator and the protagonist that slowly fades to the conclusion. "DeLillo's novel is more violently maimed by a hostile separation between the two, which the narrative is unable or unwilling to close", Boxall, (2006), p. 20

1.2.2 To Comprehend the Character in the Room

While in *Americana*, the room allows the vision of the character's desire, in *End Zone*, the room, one room in particular allows the presence of an elusive character who, until that moment, has been furtive and difficult to pin down. Set in a college in Texas, *End Zone* narrates the academic year of a college football team³⁶⁷. There are two players on whom the narrative focuses: Gary Harkness and Taft Robinson, who are respectively the positive and negative drives of a writing that creates a real electric field of alternating current, between the speed of the game and the slowness of reflection. The first one, Harkness is chatty to the point of exhaustion³⁶⁸, Robinson insured hovers at the margin of a gradually increasingly silence. The incipit of the novel is emblematic³⁶⁹: "Taft Robinson was the first black student to be enrolled at Logos College in West Texas. In time he might have turned up on television screens across the land, endorsing eight-thousand-dollar automobiles or avocado-flavored instant shave"³⁷⁰. From the first words, the novel seems to be heading towards the story of the season

³⁶⁷ "End Zone explores the possibility that football might work metaphorically at the heart of a culture, galvanizing its moral aggression and unity of purpose in the aesthetics of mass and spectacle. But in doing so it consistently undermines the artistic and dramatic capacities of football, repeatedly reducing the game to its simple and brutal constituent parts." Boxall (2006), p. 35

³⁶⁸ "Harkness' aesthetic delight in the language and poetics of war, his joyful imagining of global destruction, is mirrored in the pleasure he takes in the bodily contact that football requires and allow", Boxall (2006), p. 40

³⁶⁹ "Ce qui est remarquable dans le premières lignes de End Zone c'est l'existence d'un mouvement double, d'une tension: d'une part le narrateur semble mettre en place un discours de type monologique [...] d'autre part ce narrateur hésite, rechigne à prendre en charge son récit", François Happe, *Voix et autorité dans End Zone de Don DeLillo*, in *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, n°54, novembre 1992, *La voix dans la fiction américaine contemporaine*, pp. 385-393, p. 386.

³⁷⁰ Don DeLillo, *End Zone*, Picador, London, 2011, p. 3

of this new rising star, but a few lines later, the narrator, Harkness, makes a significant detour: “There were other intonations to that year, for me at least” (EZ, 3). As François Happe writes: “Ce détour oblige le narrateur, afin de recentrer le récit sur sa personne, à déployer toute une stratégie discursive”³⁷¹. The narrator therefore immediately presents himself with an inability to fix the center of his narrative, and to recognize an authoritativeness to his voice. He is a weak narrator, constantly trying to establish his position against the monological and authoritarian language of his father, and especially of Coach Emmett Creed³⁷², whose goal is stated in his words: “We need more self-sacrifice, more discipline. Purify the will. Learn humility. Restrict the sense of life” (EZ, 190). If David Bell was trying to free himself from the chain of echoes into which his life had turned, Harkness instead is seeking exile, he is trying to isolate himself in an extreme place, in search of something that DeLillo himself calls “something nameless”, something that is hidden within him, “he is struggling, trying to make something he felt had to be faced”³⁷³. As Osteen rightly says, “Gary seeks an origin that is also an “end zone” where language is simplified, choice is reduced”³⁷⁴ and thus, finds himself surrounded by a real war between different kinds of languages. Each student, each of his teammates, as well as the professors themselves, is engaged in their own research around

³⁷¹ Happe, p. 386

³⁷² “This discourse defeats dialogue; it is a monologue – univocal, direct: it is the Logos, the Word of God. No player is allowed to stand out or make decisions for himself”, Mark Osteen, *Against The End: Asceticism and Apocalypse in Don DeLillo's End Zone*, *Papers on Language & Literature* 26 (1990), pp.143-163, p. 148

³⁷³ LeClair (2005), p. 8.

³⁷⁴ Osteen (1990), p. 148

language,³⁷⁵ creating a disorder of discourses that never mix, that never meet, ending up defining the space around the college “in the middle of nowhere [...] a place of few bodies and many stones” (EZ, 29-30) as a space of mutual clash, of confusion, where the noise of words falls into a perennial void that swallows all ambition. Among all this bouncing around of voices, which the narrator himself struggles to keep within the closed tracks of a plot, a character disappears and it’s precisely the character to whom the story of the novel seems initially dedicated.

Unlike Harkness, “Robinson is invisible to language itself.”³⁷⁶ Hired for his extraordinary speed, “They got him for his speed” (EZ, 3), it is ironical that we only perceive flashes about him that run out almost immediately. His presence is denied at first by the very speed with which he appears and disappears during the game, “then, on a column sweep, Taft turned the corner and picked up speed just as a lane opened and suddenly, he was gone, out in the open territory. [...] I didn’t believe a man could run that fast or well” (EZ, 130,120). Harkness is thus

³⁷⁵ Starting with Bakhtin’s idea of the novel as a container of many voices and many styles, Thornton clearly summarizes the chaos of languages which make up the novel: “Bakhtin’s assertion is validated by the idiosyncratic register of discourses we see in *End Zone*. A tackle named Raymond Toon speaks in a bizarre blend of economic terms and sportscasting metaphors [...] Major Staley’s language is notable not only for its graphic detail but also for its syntactical uniformity and its reliance on copulative verbs. [...] He is aware that in the case of nuclear war is self-assured syntax will provide little defense. [...] These characters are united in their refusal to adjust their discourse to the needs and demands of their listeners”, Z. Bart Thornton, *Linguistic Disenchantment and Architectural Solace in DeLillo and Artaud*, in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (March 1997), pp. 97-112, p. 103 Harkness’ roommate, Anatole Bloomberg is instead busy trying to *unjew* himself, “How do you unjew yourself? [...] You revise your way of speaking.” (EZ, 44) DeLillo speaks of the characters in his novel: “Some of the characters have a made-up nature. They are pieces of jargon. They engage in wars of jargon with each other.”, LeClair (2005), p. 5

³⁷⁶ Cowart (2003), p.28

forced to stop to watch him, “I slowed down” (EZ, 120), “I staggered to the steps of the library and remained there [...] For a moment, in a state of near despair, I thought it was he...” (EZ, 32). This way he slows down the narration too, which as Barbuscia has rightly noted, adopts the style of slow motion precisely in the representation of the speed of the game, “the meticulous use of some specific words (“silently”, “smoothly”) allows the author to create a dual speed in a few lines”³⁷⁷. Throughout the novel, Robinson’s presence is that of a ghost, a shadow, as Cowart writes, it is the “invisible man” who “haunts this book”³⁷⁸ in stark contrast to the initial premise. Robinson disappears immediately; or rather his voice does not appear among the voices of the novel, moving around the campus wearing sunglasses, remaining on the sidelines. His non-presence, however, haunts every page and approaching him inevitably becomes, as the incipit betrays, the *quest* of the protagonist. In his retreat, in his disappearance, Harkness glimpses the possibility of finally grasping what he is looking for all the time. Harkness’s desire is to get to Robinson. That is how Robinson’s room then becomes not only the place where the character is finally shown to us, but also where the narrative climax is reached.

³⁷⁷ Davide Barbuscia, p. 53 For Barbuscia, *End Zone* is structured according to an opposition of different speeds: “On the one hand, it describes the “accelerated” dynamics of football as a symbol of contemporary American mythology and its collective aesthetic sense; on the other hand, it reveals at a deeper level the expression of a search for a form of “deceleration” which, as we will see, is implemented both by the decisions of the protagonist and by the aesthetic choices of the author” (Barbuscia, *Ibid.*, p.47) This oxymoronic quality of the gait (such as the *slow motion* descriptions of lightning-fast actions, or the alternation of rapid and slow chapters) of the plot reflects the same oxymoronic quality of a narrator’s voice that continuously loses its authority, until he finally loses that voice (“un narrateur sans voix, maintenu en vie artificiellement”, Happe, p. 393).

³⁷⁸ Cowart (2003), p. 28

For Osteen “*End Zone*’s end is genuinely strange [...] Inconclusive and anti-climactic, the novel seems simply to trickle off; the reader finds himself looking for the missing pages”³⁷⁹. An ending that Osteen reads as DeLillo’s attempt to confront the reader with his desire for violent closure. According to Osteen it is the whole novel that highlights how there is latent in the American consciousness the desire for an imminent nuclear disaster, for an apocalypse that razes everything to the ground, a destruction, that in a distorted vision, takes the connotations of a purifying destruction from which we can finally start again free from any dissonant, aberrant, or simply different element, not in accordance with certain aesthetic, cultural and political dictates.³⁸⁰

Osteen’s reading is certainly correct, although, maybe it is wrong to define the third part as a sort of anticlimax³⁸¹, it could be so if we read the novel dominated from another voice which is not Harkness’. As François Happe pointed out, the reading of *End Zone* is contrasted by two voices:

Lecture à deux voix, puisque deux guides invitent le lecteur à
suivre deux pistes distinctes: celle du narrateur, Gary Harkness

³⁷⁹ Osteen, (1990), p. 162

³⁸⁰ “The anti-apocalyptic ending of *End Zone* thus simultaneously critiques conventional plot and makes a strong statement against “the end” as presented and consumed in our apocalyptic fictions. DeLillo writes a nuclear novel that is not apocalyptic. Just as it repudiates conventional closure, then, *End Zone* repudiates nuclear apocalypse”, Osteen (1990), p. 163

³⁸¹ “Indeed, the novel’s inconclusive conclusion conforms perfectly to the unmistakable sense of anticlimax produced in its final section. One reason for this impression is that DeLillo places the staple of sports fiction, the Big Game, not at the end of the novel but in the middle, and then follows the team’s disintegration and Gary further explorations in part 3. (In this regard, it resembles a nuclear disaster novel: part 1 builds to a confrontation, the middle section details the “war”, and part 3 describes the aftermath)” Osteen (1990), p. 161

qui, exilé a Logos College, au milieu du désert texan, nous fait le récit d'une saison dans l'univers impitoyable du football universitaire, et celle de l'entraîneur de l'équipe, Emmet Creed. [...] Les deux voix, engagées dans un combat semblable qui est celui de l'autorité, du pouvoir, s'éclairent et se commentent de façon implicite, jusqu'à ce que leur destin se confonde, dans le silence³⁸².

For Happe *End Zone* attests the failure of the two voices. Indeed, the plot is interrupted because it remains without a voice that can communicate and carry it on, as the last words of the text say: "in the end they had to carry me to the infirmary and feed me through plastic tubes" (EZ, 231). So indeed, for the coach's voice, the third part represents an anti-climax. The coach himself, instead of a striking action, retires to his room, a sort of monastic cell without windows, "decorated only by a black and white plate of Santa Teresa d'Avila", where Harkness can only attend a "conference [...] ritualized and Jesuitical, dominated by the remembrance of Last Things". Here, his voice goes off, in a silence that speaks of the coach's concentration "on achieving the ascetic Way of Perfection, that path which Saint Teresa carved out through discipline and self-sacrifice"³⁸³. The authoritarian voice of the coach (that monological voice that carried within itself the seeds of the idea of a purifying nuclear catastrophe, bringing his attitudes and thoughts closer to a Nazi ideology³⁸⁴) finds its

³⁸² Happe, p. 385-386

³⁸³ Boxall (2006), p. 41

³⁸⁴ "Creed creates what Robert Jay Lifton might call a "totalistic environment": one that proceeds on the assumption that it "contains the key to absolute virtue", and which "mobilizes the vast human potential for guilt and shame in its imperative of eliminating

surrender in a room. The coach will no longer go out and no longer attend practice, appointing Harkness captain. Therefore, once the first voice, that voice which was the metonymy of the idea of a purifying nuclear catastrophe, has been dissolved, there is still the other voice, that of the narrator, Harkness³⁸⁵. So if for the coach the resolution of everything was intended in a violent conclusion that opened to something else, what is the purpose of Harkness' journey through history? Let us go back to DeLillo's words: "I think they see freedom and possibility as being too remote from what they perceive existence to mean. They feel instinctively that there's a certain struggle, a solitude they have to confront. [...] The voice you have to answer is your own voice"³⁸⁶.

DeLillo shifts the character's conflict inside of the character himself, from this perspective the perception of the three parts of the plot is overturned, it is no longer a progressive slowing down towards a stasis and it doesn't reach an anti-climax; this is true specifically for Emmett who does not see his final goal coming true, he is not even confronted with a test that decrees its success or failure. Barbuscia sees it correctly when he writes that in the third part of the novel "most of the action takes place in Gary's room or in those of other players, and in general there's a kind of narrowing of the novel in closed spaces. The story seems to implode into an internal dimension"³⁸⁷. Certainly, what happens

all "taints" and "poisons" in a demand for purity". It also loads language in a way that "eliminate ambiguity about even the most complex human problems and reduces them to definitive –sounding, thought-terminating images." Obviously such ascetism is only a step away from fascism, from "final solutions" that resolve problems through mass atrocity" Osteen (1990), p. 149

³⁸⁵ Creed's defeat [...] or to speak of Derridéen, the deconstruction of logocentrism, is therefore part of a narrative that the narrator is supposed to be able to carry out as he pleases" Happe, p. 390

³⁸⁶ LeClair (2005), p. 8.

³⁸⁷ Barbuscia, *Ibid.*, p. 62

is far from an explosion, but Harkness's final implosion is not an anti-climax for sure. We could even say it is a climax instead, a climax that is prepared and made possible by the physical power of the rooms.

What is a climax? According to writing manuals³⁸⁸, the climax arrives just before the final, and it is the moment when the showdown takes place, the moment when the protagonist faces a seemingly impossible situation, it is the culmination of his journey and it answers the questions posed by the triggering event, *what will happen? This*. The climax is therefore in close relation to what happens at the beginning of a story, it is the reversal of the initial situation, positive or negative as it may be, it is the final moment which the character must go through to reach a conclusion. The triggering event of *End Zone* hinted from the front pages is double: Gary Harkness going to college and his choice to exile himself, "I liked the idea of losing myself in an obscure part of the world" (EZ, 22), and the arrival of Taft Robinson. The two things, though not openly stated initially, have a connection that is suggested in the request by the college coach and principal to ask Harkness to welcome Robinson: "I was there because I was a northerner. Apparently, they thought my presence would help make Taft feel at home" (EZ, 6). The idea seems ridiculous to Harkness and the meeting between the two is constantly postponed. Harkness' interest in Robinson is implicit in his initial indecision about where to start telling the story. Robinson's presence, his (non) voice does not conflict with Harkness', as it does with the others, but in his absence, in his silence, Harkness feels a possibility of approaching a response to his voice, a voice that, as we have already seen, is continuously disturbed,

³⁸⁸ See for example: John Yorke, *Into The Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them*, Penguin, 2014 and Christopher Vogler, *Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Michael Wiese Production, Studio City (CA), 2007

continuously unbalanced, overwhelmed and contradicted. So “Taft [...] occupies the space of an aesthetic and philosophical retreat”, and “Harkness spends the entire novel edging towards Taft, working his way towards the poetic mystery that it represents”³⁸⁹. Therefore, the climax of the narrator’s plot can only take place with the definitive encounter with the object of his research. It would be an anti-climax, as in the case of Creed, if this meeting did not take place, if there was no possibility of a final confrontation that reopens the indeterminacy of the beginning. How can one of the fastest athletes, at least in the United States of America, emerge in the plot using words? An athlete who, in addition to speed, has defined his presence in the college around silence? The answer is that this is possible thanks to a room. The character’s room, just like Sullivan’s room before, becomes essential for the plot to unfold. Robinson’s room allows for the final climax.

If, however, Sullivan’s room was a dream room, in an almost abstract form, and its aim was to adapt to the character to allow the revelation of desire, Robinson’s room is instead a chamber of pure concreteness, defined in a precise geometry. The more elusive the character is, it seems, the more architecturally precise the room will be.

The climax comes tiptoeing, after all, as Vogler tells us, it doesn’t always have to be the most explosive, the most dramatic, the loudest or the most dangerous moment in history, “there is such a thing as a quiet climax, a gentle crest of a wave of emotion”³⁹⁰. We are in Chapter 27, three chapters from the end, it rains and then it turns to snow, an uninterrupted mass of snow blown by the wind in silent whirlwinds. The world outside is “unsyllabled” (EZ, 181). Time has no

³⁸⁹ Boxall (2006), pp. 41-43

³⁹⁰ Vogler, p. 202

meaning, even the continuous training session were forced to lose their compulsive rhythm, “we were part of the weather, right inside it, isolated from the objects on the land, from land, from perspective itself” (EZ, 185), “the days seemed even longer than the incandescent days of summer” (EZ, 181), and eventually Harkness “took a walk down the hall and dropped into Taft’s room” (EZ, 181). The weather, and the variation it imposes on the characters’ action and on the writing itself³⁹¹, is the first sign of a jump, of a further step: the conflict between the rhythms of the narration seems to reach a resolution. The opposition between speed and slowness, the continuous tears that disorient the reader, find in Robinson’s room the calm nucleus that suddenly vents the accumulation of energy. The climax of *End Zone* is the attainment of a suspended moment, where the discordant forces that have traversed the text crystallize and then immediately afterwards are unloaded on the walls of Robinson’s room, which immediately becomes recognizable as the necessary center around which the text is balanced³⁹².

The walls were bare [...]—This room had not existed one year before. Room and building were new. [...] In his austerity he blended with the shadowless room. Everywhere it was possible to perceive varieties of silence, small pauses in corners, rectangular planes of stillness, the insides of desks

³⁹¹ “In the twenty-seventh chapter, in particular, DeLillo concentrates his writing on the strident contrast between speed and slowness, describing and annulling it within a single chapter”, Barbuscia, p. 63.

³⁹² “The novel is balanced around this central tranquility, this pool of timeless calm [...] which is weighted against the enveloping turbulence of football, war and history.” Boxall (2006), p. 41

and closets (where shoes curl in dust), the spaces between things, the endless silence of surfaces, time swallowed by methodically silent clocks, whispering air and the speechlessness of sentient beings, all these broken codes contained in the surrounding calm, the vastness beyond the window [...] I got up and went back to my room (EZ, 181,182,183).

The description of the room occupies the whole chapter and makes us progressively see Robinson, revealing him through a precise description of the room that dwells on the minimum aspects, revealing the aspects of the room that are of the same quality as its inhabitant (on the other hand there is a *special relationship* between the room and the man). It seems at first glance a flat description, dwelling on the pure geometry of the room, as if it was the precision of Harkness gaze and the precise words used to build and make the room concrete³⁹³. Yet it is a dynamic description, full of details that carry the story forward. In that description of the room, there is a moment of pure imaginary representation. Harkness, studying “the topography of his skull, searching for mountain ranges and rivers” (EZ, 182) manages to see the magical and mysterious essence of Robinson’s speed. It is an epiphany that, apart from revealing the quality of his speed, tells us about Robinson’s past and history:

³⁹³ “Taft’s bedroom in the team’s dormitory works as a minimalist, late modernist space. The empty grey compartment in which Taft sits silently meditating is cast as a late Beckettian space – calling to mind the rotundas [...] Taft’s grey room, located at the center of the grey desert, is described with similar exactitude, and tends towards a similar kind of mathematical beauty. [...] As in Beckett’s Rotunda texts, the intense focus on the mathematical, architectural construction of the built space coexists with an equally sharp focus on the disposal of the human figure within it”, Boxall (2006), pp. 41 - 42

“Taft’s speed has a life and history of its own [...] To wonder at his past [...] much to consider that could not be measured in simple centimeters [...] But at least they had seen it now” (EZ, 182, 183). In the end even the reader, like those who witnessed Robinson’s race live, can get an idea of the fact that the speed in him is a whole other story and not just that of an athlete. The speed cannot be measured only in centimeters, of course, but the room can be built centimeter by centimeter to make that moment, impossible to look at and impossible to fully understand, remain smeared on those walls as much as possible. The room does not contain Robinson’s speed³⁹⁴, although he is “sitting on his bed, legs bent in” (EZ, 181), his speed is still inherent in his legs, in his muscles, in his history, in his possibilities, but the room contains his perception. Through the room we see what the vision from the field had denied us, as the second part of the novel is fully dedicated to the description of a match. Through the room we perceive Taft’s speed, we grasp its historical and personal nuances, we get closer to touching its essence.

Robinson’s room is therefore Harkness’ implosive climax and it is the space that allows the writer to try to fix, with words, a character plunged into the dizziness of silence, whose purpose it is to study what lies beyond the words.³⁹⁵ Robinson will always escape writing; he goes beyond the unspoken and yearns to peek in all shades of silence. Stasis and speed are his condition, two qualities difficult to

³⁹⁴ Not even the field can contain it, despite being fenced in well, but the field is the space built around the other voice of the novel, that of Emmett Creed: “Sa voix définit l’espace: il fait entourer le terrain de toile, ce qui reste incompréhensible pour Gary puisqu’il n’y a que des insectes pour les espionner”, Happe, p. 389.

³⁹⁵ “Robinson is the character who moves beyond language, the character who embraces Wittgenstein’s special brand of mysticism - which is the recognition of the realities beyond language that silence harbors”, Cowart, (2003), p. 27 -28

balance in a fictional character. If Harkness gets close to the margins with his intention to unhinge language and his action always takes place close to words, thus giving the writer the possibility to develop his writing, since “the silence was difficult” (EZ, 30), and “silence pleased me least” (EZ, 29), Robinson resides in the white of the page³⁹⁶. DeLillo thus works on Robinson by subtraction, he is described by *the rumors* of the other characters. In fact, the narratively most important moment concerning Taft as a character, namely the beginning of his evolution, is not presented to the reader through a scene, but through an *en passant* dialogue that closes Chapter 24. A dialogue that seems inserted almost by accident, since the focus up to there was on something else entirely, and Taft had disappeared from the pages since Chapter 21. Gary is sitting in the lounge playing gin rummy when a companion sits down next to him and begins to ask: “Taft Robinson. You haven’t seen him? You haven’t heard?” (EZ, 174), and goes on to reveal that Taft has shaved his hair completely, “It means something” (Z, 174). Gary’s answer is a flat no. No, Gary, like the reader - after all, the narrative is in the first person and Gary is the narrator - has not seen or heard anything more about Taft, but, as the companion suggests, Taft’s gesture will surely mean something. A change will have taken place and in fact, before long, Gary, in the novel’s end, finds himself in Taft’s room and discovers that he has decided to quit football.

Taft’s insertion at unexpected moments is one that affects the entire text. Taft, in fact, appears for brief flashes. Brief moments when Gary is doing something

³⁹⁶ “Taft is a devoted student or disciple of that which remains unwritten and untellable in Wittgenstein’s philosophy. [...] The absent picture of Wittgenstein, sitting smugly in his body in Vienna, opens here onto the poetic silence that Wittgenstein imagines as the outside of language, and that is the final destination of the *Tractatus*”, Boxall, (2006), p. 42

and at some point, turning his eyes away, he realizes that Taft is there somewhere. Yet, in the early chapters, Taft Robinson is presented as a possible co-protagonist and appears several times in the text, with the chapters revolving around his movements, his movements within the College: “Taft showed up at the beginning of September” (EZ, 6); “Taft walked in flanked by our head coach (EZ, 7). Until Chapter 5, Taft’s presence seems to take precisely the story in the direction of a plot centered on a duality between the two athletes, as indeed the apparent story set in the world of football might suggest: the season is about to begin and two very different, but talented athletes find themselves playing together for a new team. In Chapter 5, Gary arrives at the cafeteria and “Taft Robinson was sitting three tables away” (EZ, 24), just a nod of greeting appears between the two, “he looked up, nodded, then looked down again” (EZ, 24). Taft is isolated from the rest of his teammates, and this stirs the atmosphere, until one of the team turns to him in a threatening tone and asks him to remove his glasses – “Hey Robinson”, Moody Kimbrough said, “we don’t wear sunglasses indoors around here. We don’t do that - hear?” (EZ, 25) - reacting to the provocation, however, is Gary, who, in an attempt to defend Taft, ends up in a fight. In a classic story line this should be the turning point in the relationship between the two. Gary’s intervention should take the bond between the two to the next step, whether Taft refuses the help or is flattered by it instead, but the chapter closes with the simple realization that Taft has remained completely indifferent: “When I raised my head finally, Taft was just finishing his dessert” (EZ, 26). This moment marks the gradual disappearance of Taft, who, in fact, as early as the next chapter no longer appears. In chapter seven a similar situation is repeated: the team is involved in a game, Bang You’re Dead: “your hand assumes the shape of a gun and you fire at anyone who passes” (EZ, 31).

Throughout the course of the game, Taft is absent, and only at the end, when Gary is hit, does he appear: “in time I opened my eyes. Taft Robinson was sitting on a bench [...] For a moment in a state of near rupture, I thought it was he who had fired the shot” (EZ, 33). Taft is like a vision, off-center from the heart of the action. A suggestion of the protagonist. And he is always on the margins of the construction of the chapters themselves.

Taft from now on will appear only fleetingly, one name among others during game actions.

It is in this continual looking for him, this continual seeing him appear only to always disappoint expectations that keeps the tension high in the reader, precisely because DeLillo’s chosen first person always avoids further exploration, going on. The writing seems to get stuck in the simple statement that Taft is simply there, as if he appeared out of nowhere, as if he were nothing more than a vision. A sudden movement of the head or eyes, and there he is, only to disappear soon after. There is no reflection by the protagonist about it. There is no more than simple observation. Gary’s many reflections, aided also by the choice of the first person, involve various topics, but never Taft. Until precisely, a possible change in him is hinted at by rumors, and the question that is asked thus seems to be addressed even to the reader himself. And Gary’s approach occurs in two moments. The first seems entirely accidental: “I took a walk down the hall and dropped into Taft’s room” (EZ, 188). Gary enters Taft’s room and finds him sitting on the bed, cross-legged. This is the already analyzed chapter, in which Gary pauses to describe the room exactly. This chance encounter, reminiscent of previous ones. At some point Taft appears, but unlike the beginnings, Gary recognizes in the room a place where Taft can finally be discovered. And so, the second time, he decides to go directly, “I went down the

hall to 'Taft Robinson's room' (EZ, 230). This time, however, after realizing "that I had always spent a lot of time in doorways, that much of my life had been passed this way" (EZ, 230), Gary decides to cross the threshold, and along with him, the text too finally crosses that threshold on which it had always stood, and by his action now the room, which before was only in the register of description, becomes the precise place where a precise action that has been postponed throughout the novel takes place. The room becomes that End Zone of which the title speaks. The place where all the patterns of play and narrative end. When the climax of the novel arrives, Harkness can face Robinson and the room becomes the place where to attempt the task³⁹⁷. The sounding board that can give a voice to the unsaid:

I think the room tone changes at a different time of day. Sometimes it's oceanic and there's other times when it's just barely there, a sort of small pulse in an attic. The radio is important in this regard. The kind of silence that follows the playing of the radio is never the same as the silence that precedes it. I use the radio in different ways. It becomes almost a spiritual exercise. Silence, words, silence, silence, silence." (EZ, 229)

Just as Robinson uses the radio to measure variations in silence, DeLillo uses the room to try to put into words at least what remains in the frame of this

³⁹⁷ "This drive toward the concrete is also an affirmation of built space, for it is only within the walls of architecture that spatial security is a recognizable possibility", Thornton, p. 103

silence. The room is thus instrumental to the objective of the novel. As DeLillo explained during an interview: “*End Zone* wasn’t about football. It’s a fairly elusive novel. It seems to me about extreme places and extreme states of mind”³⁹⁸.

“Words move the body into position” (EZ, 43), says Harkness at one point, and the room, for DeLillo, is the space where this process is possible. In the room we finally hear Robinson’s voice, here he pronounces his first words, so he finally finds a position, both within the novel itself and the college. Language and room make Robinson’s ghostly presence alive for an instant. Robinson’s room is therefore the device of unveiling for the author, who thus manages to insert Robinson’s physical presence in the plot. In this way he stops representing him as an echo and he becomes an embodied presence³⁹⁹: “Then Taft’s left shoulder twitched a bit [...] That faint break in basic structure was enough to alter every level of mood” (EZ, 230). It is almost an involuntary movement, breaking the structure on which Taft’s perception has been based so far. In the two times Gary went to his room, his is always the same, sitting on the bed with his legs crossed, and this repetition, again referred to some kind of vision, something not real: in two different moments, with the protagonist appearing without being expected, Taft is still always in the same position. That movement, on the other hand, situates him beyond any suggestion, any allusion, any distorted perception that the protagonist might have had, aided also by the

³⁹⁸ DeCurtis, (2007), p. 57

³⁹⁹ “Taft gives Gary a tutorial in the mechanics of interior space. [...] Taft has created a room of a few precise horizontal and vertical shapes; the result is a space [...] that is abstract and minimal but intensely connected to the physical presence of its creator, so connected that when something changes, everything changes, for the room and for Taft. The room allows Taft [...] to stand differently”, Thornton, p. 107

choice of using the first person. The reader starts to doubt the narrator's reliability. When Gary says, "Sooner or later one of us would say something" (EZ, 230), it is the moment when the enchantment must be broken and it is Taft who breaks the pattern created so far by giving a warm, yet ironic welcome to Gary: "A hundred thousand welcomes, he said" (EZ, 230). Through his voice, but especially through the movement of his body, Gary finally has the feeling that he is looking at a person in flesh-and-blood. The dialogue can begin: the fateful final showdown.

Nonetheless, if the room has a positive function for the writing ends, for the character the exact opposite can be said. For an instant, in fact, it reveals to us what is behind Robinson's shadow, and it increasingly takes on the contours of a dream that pushes reality and every contact with it to the edge. Without that room, which, we must keep in mind, was built specifically to house Robinson inside the college⁴⁰⁰, there probably would not be any Robinson at all, and without Robinson there would not have been Harkness' antithesis and the whole challenge that moves the plot:

I've got this room fixed up just the way I want it. It's a well-proportioned room. It has just the right number of objects. Everything is exactly where it should be. It took me a long time to get it this way. Before I came here, I told Creed there was one condition. I room alone. I had to have that, I told him. I guess everybody thought they kept me separated in the name of racial sensitivity. But that wasn't it at all. It was my

⁴⁰⁰ The college is called Logos and not casually it was founded by a dumb headmaster.

idea from the beginning. It was the only demand I ever made of Creed. I room alone. (EZ, 228)

Robinson and the room are built together and are inextricably linked, without the room there could be no Robinson, and vice versa. So the room itself becomes the predicate: *I room*, which attests to the actual presence of Robinson within, not only the college, but the plot itself.

Only in the room, in the end, can Robinson take “the whole big outside and drag it in behind [me]” (EZ, 223), abandon his career as an athlete, avoid any kind of fight against racial marginalization and flee the metropolis (Robinson is from New York). Thus, also the novel is extinguished in the finale in Harkness’ room, who, annihilated by his encounter with Robinson also locks himself in his room without eating or drinking “for many days” (EZ, 231). When the room closes in on itself, it ceases to give writing any more possibilities and the novel ends in nothing more than an abrupt interruption. A finale anticipated and prepared by a climax that is in the implosion register. After all, this is what, DeLillo tells us, certain rooms bring to.

1.2.3 A Location Taxonomy

The first two novels, *American* and *End Zone*, are two important examples of the use of the rooms from which you can immediately build a first taxonomy. There is another consideration that can be made apart from the function the room performs. DeLillo varies this function according to the novel or the plot, however a certain locational pattern emerges. The writer in fact distinguishes between the rooms of the metropolis, which we will study in depth with the analysis of *Cosmopolis*, and the rooms located in remote places of the world, on which we will soon briefly dwell.

DeLillo often builds his novels on this opposition between a chaotic, effervescent and irrational world, often represented by New York, and the controlled, rational aesthetic of these spaces on the outskirts of the world, which are usually visited by characters that come from the Big Apple. This forms a type of chiasmus, where the madness that seems to be prevalent in the great metropolis actually hides a breath of lucidity and the progressive concealment of humanity in cold rationality typical of these other spaces can only lead to a latent folly, and it is even more menacing as it remains hidden until the end⁴⁰¹.

⁴⁰¹ “In Part One, we are given telling glimpses into Billy’s childhood in a Bronx apartment along Crotona Avenue, an unsettling world of random menace (fierce summer lightning storms, domestic quarrels, sidewalk shootings, bar brawls, territorial playground squabbles, even treacherous school bus).” Joseph Dewey, *DeLillo’s apocalyptic satires*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 60, as Barbuscia writes: “... but also the quest of the protagonist, (is) permeated by the presence of an irrational component inherent in the process of scientific investigation itself.” Barbuscia, p.90. This opposition is a constant that is repeated also in the last novel, *Zero K*, “The Convergence, even as it shares the desert setting with *Point Omega*, builds a world that more closely resembles the scientific installation “Field Experiment Number One”, in DeLillo’s 1976 novel *Ratner’s Star*, and the New York sequences from the section of *Zero K* have the vibrant

As it may appear from this first analysis another differentiation can be found between the rooms at the edges of the world. Starting from the first two novels there are, in fact, two types of these rooms: those facilities such as the College of *End Zone* and the rooms of motels, on which the third part of *Americana* is built.

“Motels represent in DeLillo’s novels an almost irresistible urge to create sterile spaces, to destroy history by demolishing its architectural symbols. Often DeLillo’s motels are found in the desert, and thus they do not interrupt its sterility so much as internalize that terminal geography. The blandness of motel rooms betrays the spiritlessness”⁴⁰²

Osteen’s considerations are certainly easy to agree with, it will be shown that between the rooms of a structure such as Logos College and as if to reach real loneliness one must be in a *community* of lonely people. rooms are effectively end

lyricism, the embodied hues, of the Bronzini episodes in *Underworld*”, Boxall (2017), *Ibid.*, p. 545. *Point Omega* and *Underworld* also follow the same oppositional pattern between New York and the desert. “Matt Shay sat in his cubbyhole in a concrete space about the size of a basketball court, somewhere under the gypsum hills of southern New Messico” (U, 401) – “In cities you build a language of circumspection and tact, a thousand little intimations [...] Then you go the wilderness and become undone, lapsing into babble, eating mushroom caps that implode your brain” (U, 446). As Martucci explains: “many of DeLillo’s characters attempt to find their identity in relation to a myth of a place instead of an actual physical location. Bell from *Americana*, Gary Harkness from *End Zone*, and an assortment of characters from *Underworld* journey towards the myth of the American West without realizing that their destination is “placeless”. They travel towards a concept, not a place.”, Martucci, p. 20

⁴⁰² Osteen (1990), *Ibid.*, pp. 146 – 147

zones, but the mental processes of the characters. This kind of indoor spaces can often be seen as a set of rooms, one next to the other that we could paradoxically define as *community*, or shared loneliness. They are an enclave where disparate inwardness piles up and where loneliness ignites and recreates itself close to other lonelinesses.

The desert rooms

The college of *End Zone* is followed by *Ratner's Star's* The Field Experiment Number One (1976). Billy Twillig, the protagonist of DeLillo's above mentioned fourth novel, like Taft Robinson, leaves New York and moves to the outskirts of the world, where a message is waiting for him, a message that seems to come from space, from an alien entity. Billy seems to be the only one who can decipher it.⁴⁰³ *Ratner's Star* is the story of a 14-year-old boy, Billy, who has already received a Nobel Prize for mathematics. Billy is called to this mysterious place where the best scientists in the world are gathered to decrypt a code from, supposedly, the Star of Ratner. As the investigation goes on, the boy is taken to an underground part of the building with the aim, together with a small group of scientists, of coding a language that can be considered universal. While an eclipse looms over the earth it is discovered that perhaps this signal comes not from such alien beings but from the past⁴⁰⁴. The Field Experiment Number One, as a building, is "remarkable. Rising over the land and extending far across its breadth was a vast geometric structure, not at first recognizable as something designed to house or contain or harbor, simply a formulation, an expression in systematic terms of a fifty-story machine [...] the dominating shape seemed to be a

⁴⁰³ In his analysis of the text, Peter Boxall finds an interesting analogy also with *Americana*, the first novel: "*Ratner's Star* [...] builds upon the frantic picaresque of *Americana*, depicting a surreal, dreamlike journey, not from the US east coast to Midwest and back, but to the far edges of space and time", Boxall (2006), p. 50

⁴⁰⁴ *Ratner's Star* is certainly DeLillo's most complex novel, difficult to synthesize the story, I am indebted for this short plot to Marco Trainini, *Don DeLillo*, Castelvechi, Lit Edizioni, Roma, 2016, p. 50

cycloid”⁴⁰⁵. Inside this building⁴⁰⁶ a plethora of scientists are gathered, a large community of minds extraordinarily bent on themselves, each with his/her own theory to elaborate, experiments to perform but all collaborating to solve the main task: to find the exact definition of the word science⁴⁰⁷. An exhausting task that never, not even slightly, comes close to a definitive solution.

The congregation of scientists, united only by the inordinate search for a solitude that reverberates even in the extravagant research carried out, shares with Billy an existence inside aseptic rooms built according to mathematical relationships that refer to the very subject of the novel, which has to do with the potential and limitations of scientific and mathematical language. Billy’s room, called the cylinder, is emblematic in this sense:

There were no windows. The lighting was indirect, coming from a small carbon-arc spotlight focused on a reflecting plate above it. The walls were slightly concave and paneled in a shimmering material decorated with squares and similar figures, all in shades of the same muted blue and all distorted by the concave topography. The optical effect was such that

⁴⁰⁵ Don DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star*, Picador, London, 2016, p. 15.

⁴⁰⁶ “A top-flight government think-tank [...] housed in a fifty-story cycloid-shaped facility in central Asia, is staffed by a dozen egghead researchers with goofy names who declaim tediously on equally goofy projects that render delightfully absurd the Enlightenment’s pretense to understand the universe.” Dewey, p. 60

⁴⁰⁷ “Although every character has a specialization, a theory and a jargon, no overarching system integrates the various technologies of knowing. Indeed, part of the research here involves a committee’s attempt “to define the word science”, but the proposed definition, as committee member Cyril Kyriakos informs Billy, remains incomplete at “some five hundred pages””, Cowart (2003), p. 147

the room seemed at first to be largely devoid of vertical and horizontal reference points. (RS, 17)

Exploring such a boundless semantic field, permeated by a referential circularity that continuously announces its defeat, requires the author, once again, to create special rooms that are shaped on the form of the reflections of the characters. Just as Billy's theory is not applicable, so too his room is blurred, and any structural applicability is lost since the cardinal points essential for the solidity of a structure are missing: no vertical and horizontal reference points. It is a room made of the same matter and the same form of dreams; it is a room made of theory. It is a room in theory that seems to support Peter Boxall's thesis that the whole story of *Ratner's Star* is in truth only a dream. "If the dream structure of the novel returns Ratner and the cycloid to Billy's Brooklyn apartment"⁴⁰⁸, however, the novel's dreamwork also takes us outwards, away from Brooklyn, towards the bottomless depths of the unconscious and the unknowable"⁴⁰⁹. The room thus affirms itself as a writing device that limits the vastness of the possibilities of narration by channeling the content and supporting the form. If everything is a dream, the solidity of *The Field Experiment Number One*, in its structure in rooms, allows the very existence of the novel. The idea of a solid theory of rooms designed on the ephemeral theories of the occupants is essential for the writing itself. Only thanks to the setting of the story in these rooms is it

⁴⁰⁸ There is a mistake here, as the apartment is not in Brooklyn, but in the Bronx: "Before his work earned enough money to enable the family to move to a neighborhood just south of Yonkers (*laundry rooms, terrace apartments, air conditioning, kids on bikes!*), they lived in an old building on Crotona Avenue, Billy, Babe and Faye, wedged between room dividers and other debris, on the fourth floor, overlooking a split-level playground, scene of ritual mutilations" (RS, 25)

⁴⁰⁹ Boxall (2006), p. 62

possible to descend into the depths of the unknowable: “The novel, then, seeks to follow the logic of the dream, to allow it to take us, from Billy’s apartment, and his Oedipal confrontation with the scream lady, to an unwritten geography beyond the furthest limits of the universe”⁴¹⁰. The first uncertain representation of Billy in his Bronx apartment is limited and will be complete in those rooms specially designed to contain it and allow it to express itself. As DeLillo himself stated in an interview, the novel’s formal structure is inspired by Lewis Carroll’s Alice books⁴¹¹. It is a novel that blends structure and content, where it is the structure itself that becomes content.

I was trying to produce a book that would be naked structure. The structure would be the book and vice versa. I wanted the book to become what it was about. Abstract structures and connective patterns. A piece of mathematics, in short⁴¹².

In its proliferation of rooms, the structures of the Number One Field Experiment and then of the Logicon Project (the underground part) creep into the novel structural form defining and sculpting it spatially. The rooms are getting smaller and smaller, sinking towards the earth and finally becoming a

⁴¹⁰ Boxall (2006), p. 64

⁴¹¹ Also the passage to the Second Part is built along the lines of Alice’s movements, as Boxall points out and it is the passage that occurs in Billy’s room, through a grill: “And is through this grill that Billy descends as he moves from the first to the second part of the novel, as he progresses, perhaps, from a dream to a dream within a dream”, Boxall (2006), *Ibid.*, p. 61 – “At the close of Part One [...] he is reassigned to an underground facility to join a secret project [...] assembled by Robert Hopper Softly [...] who escorts Billy to the underground facility through a lush garden, recalling Alice’s *White Rabbit*”, Dewey, p. 62

⁴¹² LeClair, p. 11

hole. This progressive passage, this terminal retreat towards cancellation not only contributes to reveal that the message at the end did not come from space, but from the center of the earth. It also reveals the naked structure of the novel, which, as DeLillo himself points out, “It works from the particular to the general”⁴¹³ and vice versa. The architecture of the room follows the architecture of the text, reinforces it, supporting it where the abstractness of the ideas and theories expressed (“Billy Twillig, the child prodigy at the center of the novel, repeatedly insists that his branch of mathematics - pure number theory, has no application”)⁴¹⁴ would risk making the plot lose the necessary narrative solidity. The rooms of *The Field Experiment Number One* are rooms where the various characters can find space to represent their theories and they also allow the writer to find a possibility of representation of the complex theoretical structure underlying the novel for the reader. In conclusion, the structure of the building in the macro, and the structure of the rooms in the micro, in their particular composition, become a metaphorical and visible representation of the ideas expressed through the plot.

This first kind of room at the edge of the world, the rooms of buildings that suddenly appear in a desert landscape, have implosion as their dominating characteristic. The characters, the rooms and the theories elaborated within them implode on themselves in a silence that is lethal even for the narrative itself⁴¹⁵.

⁴¹³ LeClair, p. 11

⁴¹⁴ Boxall (2006), p. 50

⁴¹⁵ DeLillo explains the idea at the basis of the novel: “Well, *Ratner’s Star* is almost a study of opposites, yes. Only because I think anyone who studies the history of mathematics finds that the link between the strictest scientific logic and other mysticism seems to exist. I mean, this is something any true scientist might tend to deny, but so

The concrete rooms of the Bronx, and therefore of the city, are the rooms of memory, of a projection of the past, and they function with a movement that rewinds time until it grasps and brings back into the present what was lived inside them, and who the character was inside them. Somehow those rooms are relived. The temporality of these rooms instead, is different. The present liquefies itself in a projection that goes towards the future, paradoxically these rooms produce some kind of immobility within them that decelerates every action inside them but accelerates the passing of the years. So for Billy, in that room is possible to have access to a vision of his future that in no way differs from his present: “then he sat down to work in purposeful isolation [...] managing in a remote part of his mind to watch himself at work, an old man (cuter than most) [...] sitting in an oak desk [...] finding himself pleased by this history of his future” (RS, 127). These are the rooms where both Billy and Harkness and Robinson sink to, a center, an original nucleus in the depths of the self that resembles a black hole that absorbs everything in the world, bringing to a nothingness. The problem with these rooms is that they open infinitely beyond the limits of the world. The search that is consumed in these rooms, that tends to *Ratner’s Star*, to space, to the edge of a dream, that seek escape from all worldliness, is a search of the limits. As if only a total abnegation of all that is in front of us, the world, and

many mathematicians, in earlier century anyway, were mystical about numbers, about the movement of heavenly bodies and so forth, while at the same time being accomplished scientists. And this strange connection of opposites found its way into *Ratner’s Star*. I think modern physicists seem to be moving toward nearly mystical explanations of the ways elements in the subatomic world and in the galaxy operate”, DeCurtis, pp. 64-65, Boxall instead summarizes this opposition as: “*Ratner’s Star* is a novel which oscillates rapidly between two poles, between the enlightened determination that the world is comprehensible, and the mystical conviction that its meaning is contained in secrets which remain hidden from us.” Boxall (2006), p. 68

everything that is outside of us, could somehow reveal the true meaning of things. These are rooms that, while looking beyond, lead into the quicksand of inner life. They are rooms that while apparently opening, relentlessly close. Until the final implosion.

Paralysis and alienation are the dominant features of these rooms, where the character's representation of himself and the world is always sent back in an eternal loop⁴¹⁶ that condemns its ultimate success. Thus, the character's mind slowly slides on a downward spiral with no way out.

⁴¹⁶ "DeLillo reveals the fallacy behind Softly's vision in a text that, like language itself (including the most scrupulous scientific or mathematical language), constantly embodies a kind of referential circularity. It does so from sentence to sentence as well as on broadly structural and thematic levels. [...] Indeed, the message that propels the plot of DeLillo's novel proves to be arrived, boomerang-like, at its point of origin", Cowart (2003), pp. 147-148

The Motel Rooms

Motel rooms are on a different level. Always on the sidelines, but less out of the way. That's what DeLillo calls them in act two of *The Day Room*:

A motel is a peculiar reality – not exactly the same reality as a hospital, but it does represent a peculiar form of nowhere, particularly motels in undefined parts of landscape. You don't know quite where you are, and for a brief time-perhaps not quite who you are⁴¹⁷.

The motel rooms make their first appearance in the author's books, in the third part of *Americana*. David Bell, fleeing New York, stops in a small town, Fort Curtis, and decides to make a film there: "I'm thinking of making a long messy autobiographical-type film, part of which I'd like to do out here in the Midwest, if that's where we are – a long unmanageable movie full of fragments of everything that's part of my life" (A, 205). In his impersonal life, lived in a placid and neutral third person, David⁴¹⁸ discovers that there is a motel in "the heart of every man" (A, 257) and between the rooms of a motel he decides to set most of the scenes of his film⁴¹⁹.

⁴¹⁷ Mervyn Rothstein, *A Novelist Faces His Themes on New Ground*, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, edited by Thomas DePietro, University Press of Mississippi, 2005, p. 23

⁴¹⁸ "Bell's relationship with his mind is based on an epistemology that focuses exclusively on external appearance and response, isolated from any internal experience with which it might be said to correlate.", Bird, p. 188

⁴¹⁹ "The style of Bell's film, however, most clearly resembles that of *Masculin Féminin*, which is subtitled "A film in 15 precise acts," the same number of segments that David films during the time of the novel", Osteen (1996), p. 460

The room here tends towards an infinity that resembles seriality, the standardization of a product⁴²⁰. These too are aseptic rooms, but different from the other kind. There, a-septicity was a door towards introversion, towards the hope of a more stringent contact with something unique that goes beyond any relationship with another human being, something spiritual. Here instead the rooms favor the most complete externalization, to the point of reducing the individual to a homogeneous, serial multiplicity that mocks uniqueness. The individual becomes a product made in series and is set up specifically to suit the market. The individual, alone in here, becomes mass. If the rooms of the first type distanced the individual from any adhesion with the ordinary, here instead it is everyday life that explodes in its most banal essence, “the pleasure of being other and none” (A, 261).

The motel rooms, as Randy Laist rightly wrote, are about quantity and not quality, they are particular psychological existences that tend to the universality of a type, the anonymous individual in the crowd, without the latter being physically present. It is a comforting, restful representation of self as part of something greater. Randy Laist, in his analysis of the opening and closing fragment of David Bell’s film, fully grasps this passage that takes place in the motel room. David takes Austin, the character called upon to play him, in front of a mirror reflecting both the camera and, presumably, the cameraman, who is obviously David, in his only direct physical presence within the film. The fragment lasts a total of twenty seconds, the time of an advertisement, thus summing up David’s feeling of living in an eternal television commercial:

⁴²⁰ “They stopped at a motel in mid-Ohio [...] and sitting in a room that was identical [...] the same room repeats itself in a cross-country chain” (MII, 81)

All of the other twenty-second commercials that have ever been filmed crowd into David's advertisement, insinuating David himself into their variety of object-hood, anonymity, and mass-producedness. The commercial exists for some anonymous audience [...] I exist both in the commercial, as the man who gets the promotion because of his shiny teeth, and also as the commercial, I have the being of a commercial, which is to be an image for other people rather than a subject for myself⁴²¹.

The representation of the character in the other type of rooms, those of the desert, is a representation that despite aiming at something higher, always keeps the character in the center; it is, in fact, the ambition to grasp the unexpected, the incomprehensible, that pushes the ego towards this type of representation. In the depiction of the character in a motel room, every ambition is dormant, and a translation happens: the subject loses its centrality by filling the ranks of an anonymous choir. He becomes an image of another image, in a chain of echoes that the motel room can only reiterate⁴²².

⁴²¹ Randy Laist, *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, 2010, p.49

⁴²² Both the aforementioned quotes are preceded by questions that Austin (David) asks the future David, and Austin (David) who expects questions from the future David: "Hello to myself in the remote future. [...] I hope you've finally become part of your time." (A, p.286) "Not only this mute tableau suggest that younger David has no answers for the older one; it also mocks David's exploration of the past. [...] They reconfirm that David's identity [...] remains a performance, an image made in the "image and likeness of images", a copy of a copy", Osteen (1996), p. 465

The motel room here favors another kind of writing, screenplay writing. In the interesting analogy that Peter Boxall proposes in his essay *DeLillo and Media Culture*⁴²³, David, with his film conceived and made in a motel room, resembles the Marcel of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, both performing an operation that tries to give back to all that past time⁴²⁴, which seems to be lived by an anonymous third person, a more personal, more subjective nature. Both try to transform it into a time that coincides as much as possible with their interiority and experience.

If on the one hand the motel rooms, in their aseptic nature, become an ideal projection screen free from any interference, on the other hand, in their serial anonymity the quality of the rooms eventually influences the film's outcome and it leads it to a failure.

“For DeLillo the motel is a powerfully abstract invention – hermetic, temporary and bland”. In *Americana*, Daniel Aaron writes: “he wonderfully catches motelness: chill damp sheets, the “steady and almost unendurable whispering of ventilation, the too many hangers in the closet, as if the management were trying to compensate for a secret insufficiency too grievous to be imagined”⁴²⁵.

⁴²³ “David is imagining here a new version of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* [...] David's film is composed of a number of scenes from his own life, in which he employs stand-ins to act as himself and his family members. By filming these scenes, by standing both outside the scene as director and inside the scene as a simulacrum of himself, he sets out to bend time back in on itself”, Peter Boxall, *DeLillo and Media Culture*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 48 – 49.

⁴²⁴ “He believes he will regain his identity by creating a work of art in the form of a semi-autobiographical film. However, this film appears to be nothing than an attempt to capture images in order to control them.”, Martucci, p. 43

⁴²⁵ Daniel Aaron, *How to Read Don DeLillo*, in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, edited by Frank Lentricchia, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 72

If the rooms of the first type, the ascetic rooms, are almost completely asexual, or at least places where sex is only imagined, idealized, the anonymity of the motel is first of all expressed with sexual activity. So, through sex, David for the first time clearly perceives what a motel room really is:

You can easily forget who you are: you can sit on your bed and become man sitting on a bed, an abstraction to compete with infinity itself; out of such places and moments does modern chaos raise to the level of pure mathematics ... [The motel] embodies a repetition so insistent and irresistible that, if not freedom, then liberation is possible, deliverance; possessed by chaos, you move into thinner realms, achieve refinements, mathematical integrity, and become, if you choose, the man sitting on the bed in the next room (A, 257).

This anonymity, this abstraction from one's own subjectivity is further reinforced by the sexual encounter with another person who never really reveals themselves, precisely because they enjoy the same flat, uncomplicated existence in the motel. The encounter with the other is more a reciprocal reflection, finding oneself equal, images of the same image, rather than an attempt to reveal oneself. The motel room is the meeting room of an anonymous self with the anonymity of another and this encounter becomes the final concretization of the personal representation of the character. Besides, as Robert Venturi writes, "a motel is a

motel anywhere⁴²⁶, and just as the motel empties itself of its identity, so do its occupants.

Quick, unsatisfactory relationships like in *Underworld* where Nick Shay cheats on his wife, in a motel-like convention center in Mojave, with a woman who is with her husband and whose aim is precisely to meet other swingers. Nick and the woman are complete strangers, they just tell each other their names, and Nick confesses some things that he never revealed to his wife: “You withhold the deepest things from those who are closest and then talk to a stranger in a numbered room” (U, 301).

The Sullivan loft where David has his first Oedipal epiphany is not numbered, let alone carries any name on the door, the motel room instead, just as in a serial process, has a number on the door.

Nick and the woman maintain anonymity in confession, but not in sex:

She was near to real earth now, the sex-grubbed dug-up self,
and I felt close to her and thought I knew her finally even as
she shut her eyes to hide herself.

I said her name.

We were hollowed out like scooped guava when it's over.

[...]

I heard room maids talking in the hall and knew we were gone
from each other's life, already and forever (A, 300).

⁴²⁶ R. Venturi, D. Scott-Brown, S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas. The forgotten symbolism of architectural form*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1977, p. 35

Sex brings you closer, creates contact, pushes you towards the earth, unites the two bodies and gives you the feeling of getting to know the person in front of you. But it is pure illusion, because while sex dug deep into the married woman's deepest self, she inexorably closes her eyes, denies the depth of herself by preventing Nick from looking at her, so that as soon as her name is mentioned by Nick in an attempt to redeem herself from anonymity, everything ends. And the final sensation is that of a hollowness. The motel room acts on the character by subtraction, both physical and mental. The motel room is, in Rebecca Rey's words: "an infusion of anonymity"⁴²⁷ and does not involve a meeting for real. What is from the motel stays from the motel. In the end, the confession is only the anonymous confession of one anonymous to another anonymous.

In his text *Lieu commun. Le motel américain*, Bruce Bégot explains how in the motel room⁴²⁸ there is a reversal of the intimate relationship that we have with the home. *Players*, DeLillo's fifth novel, stages this reversal. The novel is the story of the disintegration of a family nucleus, composed by Lyle and Pammy. As long as they remain in their domestic sphere, through a codified language, result of

⁴²⁷ Rebecca Rey, *Staging Don DeLillo*, Routledge, 2016 p. 37.

⁴²⁸ "Chambre de personne, loin de la maison natale, chambre aseptisée où l'on préfère ne pas s'attarder ni même se reposer, mais où l'on recherche simplement une immobilisation de quelques heures, la chambre du motel inverse le rapport intime que nous tissons avec le chez soi. Elle possède cette propriété étonnante, que l'on s'imagine ne pouvoir appartenir qu'à des espaces interdits, de se refuser à toute appropriation de l'extérieur. Dans sa constance intemporelle, elle crée ce prodige d'un espace auto-référent qui efface ses propres delimitations et entraîne ainsi celui qui l'occupe à ne plus se soucier de ce qui pourrait être Autre. Si elle permet pour un instant plus ou moins long de se détacher de l'affairement de la vie extérieure, même si on le devine encore tout proche dans le va-et-vient incessant des voitures sur le parking adjacent, elle enferme aussi chacun dans son identité vide et égale, élément abstrait de la société", Bruce Bégot, *Lieu commun. Le motel américain*, Éditions Allia, Paris, 2014, Kindle version, position 370

years of cohabitation⁴²⁹, they maintain their own identity, although perpetually in crisis. One of these crises drives them away from each other and goes far away from New York. Pammy, on vacation in Maine, embarks on a disastrous relationship with a couple of homosexual friends and Lyle tries to join a terrorist organization. Lyle's failure, who unlike Pammy never returns to New York, is perfectly rendered in the finale, a short chapter set in a motel, in opposition to the first part which is set between the walls of the house, that highlights the definitive loss of the character's identity even more. As Davide Barbuscia rightly notes, "this motel room is the place where Lyle's narrative existence ends, the space where he enters into anonymity. DeLillo eliminates all possible signs of recognition, to the point of reducing the characters and the scene as a whole, to a kind of tabula rasa - or an abstract scheme"⁴³⁰.

The shift is marked precisely by the passage from his name to the impersonal pronoun *he*, which "encloses everyone in his empty and equal identity"⁴³¹ becoming an abstract element.

He is barefoot and shirtless, stretched in a chair. He wears pants with belt unfastened. The room is dark. He wonders about the tendency of motels to turn things inward. They're a peculiar invention, powerfully abstract. They seem the *idea* of something, still waiting to be expressed fully in concrete form.

⁴²⁹ DeLillo explains, in an interview, the idea at the basis of the novel: "The original idea for *Players* was based on what could be called the intimacy of language. What people who live together really sound like. Pammy and Lyle were to address each other in the private language they'd constructed over years of living together", Le Clair, p. 9

⁴³⁰ Barbuscia, p. 104

⁴³¹ Barbuscia, p. 104

Isn't there more, he wants to ask. What's behind it all? It must be the traveler, the motorist, the sojourner himself who provides the edible flesh of this concept. Inwardness spiraling ever deeper. Rationality, analysis, self-realization. He spends a moment imagining that this vast system of nearly identical rooms, worldwide, has been established so that people will have somewhere to be afraid on a regular basis⁴³².

The rooms of the first type are the last stop on the trip, the motel rooms are one of the stops. Lyle is waiting for a call that will never come, but he's still waiting. Waiting for something to start again. Waiting for some movement. The motel rooms are a pause, a brief interruption. The desert rooms instead are the cessation of any idea of a future movement. In this state of waiting the character becomes a caricature of the man without identity who soon discovers that this turning things inside out is nothing more than a void of experience, a dumb interior⁴³³.

Between the house and the street, the man is always passing by.

Sex once again, even in *Players*, accompanies this deprivation of identity becoming a sounding board for all the numbness of the senses. "Lyle, in addition to losing his name, also loses his sexual identity", with him in the room there is a woman who "is stripping herself, second by second, of every ability and characteristic trait"⁴³⁴. The perspective of the motel relationship is that of a

⁴³² Don DeLillo, *Players*, Picador, London, 2016, p. 209-210

⁴³³ "Malgré sa forme simple et son apparente banalité, le motel se situe toujours au carrefour d'une double aspiration humaine dont il reste tributaire: la protection et l'aventure, le confort et l'inquiétude, la maison et la route", Bruce Bégout, *Ibid.*

⁴³⁴ Barbuscia, *Ibid.*, p. 105

sexual interweaving that does not bring satisfaction, but rather, thanks to the toy phallus that the woman exhibits, leads to a total confusion that blurs any gender distinction which combined with the loss of identity can only lead to the final sentence of the novel: “We know nothing else about him” (P, 212). Just as it happens in the first type of room, in the motel room too, the writing is abruptly interrupted.

Having neither antecedence nor interiority, the motel room can, in itself, be an antidote against the fear of death, or the place where one can find a medicine so powerful that it cancels all fear. When the house loses its calming effect, then the motel room may become the only place in which to seek some form of redemption. That is what is believed by Jack Gladney, the protagonist of *White Noise*, DeLillo’s eighth novel, published in 1985. The novel is the explanation of the interference that technology and globalization have brought inside the domestic sphere⁴³⁵ that, losing its impermeability from the outside world, finds itself under a siege of electromagnetic waves. These waves invade the idyll and privacy of the house with a flat background noise that is impossible to drive out and to which, inevitably, one quickly becomes accustomed to, thus transforming it from invasion into an actual domestic element⁴³⁶. It is the outside that evades and inexorably conquers the inside. When Gladney finds out that his wife has

⁴³⁵ “Waves and radiation [...] I’ve come to understand that the medium (Tv) is a primal force in the American Home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring. It’s like a myth being born right there in our living room” (WN, 60)

⁴³⁶ “*White Noise* is a traditional, realistic, domestic novel, focused on a single, middleclass family, a typical American Town. [...] But DeLillo’s American family of the 80s is far removed either from the Victorian tradition or, what might come more immediately to mind, the television sit-com family of the 1960s and 70s. The Gladneys straddle the traditional and the contemporary family situation in complex ways.” Leonard Orr, *Don DeLillo’s White Noise. A Reader’s Guide*, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc./Ltd, New York, London, 2003, p. 20

cheated on him, he decides to take revenge and he goes to that motel where his wife has consumed her adultery and where her lover still lives. But as his wife explains to him, what happened between those walls it is something different from a mere love affair. In fact, Babette's sexual performances, that occur always with a covered face to prevent kissing, are a necessary exchange, an inevitable commercial transaction to get some *Dylar* in exchange, a medicine that supposedly blocks the fear of death⁴³⁷ (but it also causes several side effects including memory loss).

The motel room⁴³⁸, appearing here again at the end of the novel, should be the place of a final duel, of a catharsis of the protagonist, an opportunity to redeem himself from the failures and banalities of everyday life. However, as Murray Jay Siskind Murray, a New Yorker on the road, explains during a long talk⁴³⁹ about death⁴⁴⁰ (he is "the resident guru of the novel")⁴⁴¹, in fighting the fear of death, since it is impossible to cancel the action, the only possibility to overcome the pain, even if only partially, is to plan the extension of personal power over other individuals⁴⁴². In response to his personal fear of death, Jack thus invents a

⁴³⁷ "*White Noise*, then, is about the fear of death in a world that offers more and more insidious ways to die- and fewer and fewer structures conducive to the acceptance of death." Cowart (2003), *Ibid.*, p. 78, "Much of the novel's power derives from the elemental conflict it stages between the family unit, on the one hand, source of poetry and frail structure against chaos, and the omnipresence of death on the other", Arnold Weinstein, *Nobody's Home. Speech, Self, and Place in American Fiction from Hawthorne to DeLillo*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 309

⁴³⁸ "It was called the Roadway Motel." (WN, p. 349)

⁴³⁹ The chat occupies the entire chapter 37 of the novel, but it was also published individually in *Walkmen*, a short story that was published in the August issue of *Vanity Fair* in 1984.

⁴⁴⁰ One of the working titles of the novel was *The American Book of the Dead*

⁴⁴¹ Weinstein, *Ibid.*, p. 298

⁴⁴² "I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers [...] It's a way of controlling [...] be the killer for a change. Let someone

vindictive plan, a complex plot, in which to play the role of the betrayed and ridiculed husband in a sexual conspiracy and sees in the motel room the ideal setting⁴⁴³. This time too, the room becomes central to the climax of the story, positioning itself like the neck of a funnel that tries to stem the rhapsodic character of the text⁴⁴⁴.

As already seen in *Americana* and *Players*, the motel room is characterized as the site of a certain type of sexual exchange. In these two novels however, it was the place of passage and waiting, here, for the first time, it becomes the place of a possible final resolution, of a transformation of everyday life that can reach a peak of sensations and emotions and should, from the premises, be

else be the dier. Let him replace you, theoretically, in that role. You can't die if he does. He dies, you live." (WN, 277)

⁴⁴³ "Mais malgré sa banalité sans pareille, le motel n'est pas sans provoquer chez le visiteur un certain appel de sens. [...] La conscience transfigure le banal et l'insignifiant, l'ordinaire et le commun. Elle en fait des œuvres, des mythes, des légendes. [...] Continuellement, avec une obstination muette et inconsciente qui force l'admiration, (les clients) ils projettent dans l'espace diverses visions de leur imaginaire, ils inventent à partir des ressources de leur médiathèque interne des bribes de récits, des esquisses de sensations esthétiques, des ébauches de paysages, en résumé tout ce qui les protège de la vue insupportable de la médiocrité absolue du moment. *Symboliquement* ils aménagent la chambre à leur façon [...] vivent cet instant à travers la force des habitudes contractées à la lecture des polars qui traditionnellement font des motels des lieux de rencontres d'aventures hors norme." Bégout, *Ibid.*, position 1224, chapter VII

⁴⁴⁴ "Most of the novel is certainly episodic rather than tightly plotted. The reader looking for plot lines and anticipating the resolution would be placing the elements for the killing of Willy Mink together. [...] All the traditional elements are in place: Jack has found out about Babette meeting a man [...] so he is the offended husband seeking revenge. There is a surprise visit from his father-in-law, Vernon Dickey, who gives Jack a gun and tells him he will need to use it. [...] The magical weapon of vengeance that will restore him to life by making a killer instead of a dier, is a Zumwalt automatic [...] The pistol is even of German origin, tying with his attempts to attach himself to the power of the Nazis, such as when he named his son Heinrich Gerhardt. Jack plots out the murder of Willie Mink, planning everything as if he is writing a film noir script.", Orr, pp. 36-37

extraordinary. The motel room in Jack's mind could be the place where he could finally feel an active part of a larger and more complex machinery, that until then made him feel only overwhelmed, "I sensed I was part of a network of structures and channels" (WN, 350). Revenge against Mr. Gray, or Willie Mink, masquerading as a sentimental showdown, is nothing more than an attempt to pursue a more personal goal, to banish the fear of death once and for all⁴⁴⁵. Entering the motel room means abandoning any shared intent, and the personal aim becomes central. As happened in *Players*, the motel here is the place where the husband, and in this case also the father, disappear. Jack loses all his roles to be only himself. This way the motel is the antithesis of the house. Unlike the room in *Players*, which is flooded with light, in Mr. Gray/Willie Mink's room "there was the scantest flicker of light" (WN, 350). Mink is the man on hold, he has no memory, he can't remember anything he experienced inside that room, he can't even remember the affair with Jack's wife. This is not only the effect of the drug he is taking, the side effects of the Dylar, but it's also due to the characteristics of the motel room. And Mink is the motel man, and like any motel man, he too is in a condition of anonymity that surprises Jack:

The hair was long and spiky. He was sprawled in the attitude of a stranded air traveler, someone long since defeated by the stale waiting, the airport babble. I began to feel sorry for

⁴⁴⁵ "To live means to plot, to model time and space at will, to affirm the order of consciousness over the chaos of the world, to bend the "unnaturalness" of reality to the "nature" of the human mind, to let the narcissistic pleasure of storytelling prevail over the unprecedented suffering of death. Therefore, it is necessary to plot death through funeral rituals, affirming the aesthetic law of perfection on the indifferent imperfection of things." Fabio Vittorini, *Narrativa USA 1984-2014. Romanzi, film, graphic novel, serie tv, videogame e altro*, Pàtron Editore, Bologna, 2015, p. 42 (translation by me)

Babette. [...] Of course he hadn't always been like this. He'd been a project manager, dynamic, hard driving. [...] This is the grayish figure of my torment, the man who took my wife.
(WN, 353 - 355)

The motel is not the right place to look for a resolution of everyday life, it is not the place for extraordinary gestures. This impossibility is the very essence of the motel. Motel rooms scale back every striking gesture, they even disfigure everyday life. Jack, going over his plan in his mind, in his advancing towards the center of the room has the illusion of having gained power, of having access to all the innermost meanings, of living an enhanced, more real, more concrete experience. But it's all an illusion⁴⁴⁶ and after failing his plan, Jack feels "hurt, stunned, disappointed. What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I carried out my scheme?" (WN, 360). So, Jack returns to be just an ordinary man, from an avenger he transforms himself into the "virtuous [...] and stately" man (WN, 361) because, after having wounded the enemy and having been wounded in return, instead of finishing him, he helps him and feels satisfaction in this gesture. A satisfaction that brings him back to his nature. The motel in the finale becomes this passage door, which dazzles promising a narrative twist and a turning point in the character's personality and destiny, but DeLillo knows the rooms well and knows the differences between one type of room and another, and the motel room cannot be the room of a transformation,

⁴⁴⁶ "Elegant. My airy mood returned. I was advancing in consciousness. I watched myself take each separate step. With each separate step, I became aware of processes, components, things relating to other things. Water fell to earth in drops. I saw things new." (WN, 350)

it is the space that narrows all perspectives. No transcendence is expected in motel rooms. So, just before the end, the motel room reconfirms everything written before and after Jack's character, putting him back into his daily existence, where supermarkets are the only place of consolation⁴⁴⁷.

So, what happens in the motel rooms is quite different from the desert room. If the desert room is the ideal space for introspection, the motel room is the place in which an "extro-spection" takes place. The interiority on the character is projected outside and he is watching it in its anonymity of the third person. Although these two processes may seem opposite, they are similar in the object of observation. Both the desert room and the motel room have a way to make the characters concentrate on themselves. Whether this happens by looking inside themselves or "outside" themselves it is not so crucial, as what happens in both these kinds of rooms is an examination of self. This operation is made possible by the secluded and isolated essence of these rooms. The desert rooms as well as the motel ones are characterized by having little to no exchange with the outside. Their fundamental characteristic is their impermeability: no portion

⁴⁴⁷ Here too we see the repetition, the one blending into the other: characteristic qualities of the motel room. "The problem is that Jack, still searching for modernist epiphany and underlying truth, does not recognize his own implication in the scene he describes. [...] What Jack does not see is how much Mink is his own doppelgänger. [...] Yet Jack's gestures – which, as narrator, inhere not only in what he does but in how he relates what he does – bespeak a sensibility that is no less mediocolonized. [...] he has in fact at his disposal only clichéd words [...] to describe his B-movie plan to kill Mink, the details of which he repeats seven times in instant replay. [...] Jack can no longer be divorced from Minsk. He has disintegrated to the point where he has become identical to Minsk, the two conjoined into a "we" with their mutual shooting", Stacey Olster, *White Noise*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 90-91

of the outside world gets in. It is complete isolation. There is no external influence that may distract the character. The absence of permeability of these rooms makes it quite consequent for the protagonists to fold on themselves, to turn their attention to the only object available: their interiority. What is more, their representation of themselves will therefore be univocal. The absence of outside input makes it impossible for them to have different representation of themselves, there is only one image they can form and investigate. This is also the main difference from the rooms in the metropolis, which we will examine in the following chapter, where the essence of the indoor places is to function as an interchange space. The room will there be characterized by permeability.

Mink, as soon as Jack enters the room, says:

Room behavior. The point of rooms is that they're inside. No one should go into a room unless he understands this. People behave one way in rooms, another way in streets, parks and airports. To enter a room is to agree to a certain kind of behavior. It follows that this would be the kind of behavior that takes place in rooms. This is the standard, as opposed to parking lots and beaches. It is the point of rooms. None should enter a room not knowing the point. There is an unwritten agreement between the person who enters a room and the person whose room has been entered, as opposed to open-air theaters, outdoor pools. The purpose of a room derives from the special nature of a room. A room is inside.

This is what people in rooms have to agree on, as differentiated from lawns, meadows, fields, orchards.” (WN, 352)

Here we can see all the characteristics with which we have dealt in the analysis of the rooms contained in the selected novels. First of all, the rooms have to do with interiority, not only because the space they delimit is an indoor space, a private space that interposes itself with a public space, but also because it is in the rooms, thanks to their conformation, that the character can exist in his interiority, manifesting it, pursuing it, making it the center of the scene. They are spaces of interiority that reflect the interiority of the individual, so much so that one can say that being in a room means being with oneself. In this, as we shall see, the rooms reveal an indispensable part of the metropolitan experience. From the way you live in the rooms you can understand how you live in the city. The room is a projection of an external living, and it is a projection of an internal state, which sometimes cannot be expressed outside, or which is formed precisely in the outdoor experience. That’s why in a room you *behave in a way* that is necessarily different from the way you behave outside. Not only one experiences different sensations inside a room, but they also have different experiences of the same sensations experienced outside. One also behaves in relation to the other, and the relationship that is established between four walls is necessarily different from the one that is established outside, on the street. It is in the differences that the distinction is clear. The character, in the room, behaves in a different way than in other places simply because of the intrinsic difference of the spaces and the rules that govern these spaces, but he also behaves in a different way by entering the opposition, creating the clash, the

fracture, the friction. Ultimately creating his own representation in contrast to the world outside. The room is the place where the individual can and must finally make his representation of himself, but above all, of the world. Just as no one should enter a room without being aware of what he is doing, so also in our investigation into the interior spaces of the metropolis, we should be aware that a room is part of the city, but it is above all a precise space with rules that differ from the street and other interior spaces, but still public.

Randy Laist clearly expresses the primary quality of a room: “four walls enclose the body and extract it from time, space, and society”⁴⁴⁸. Apparently, the room, by definition, is a space characterized by closure, and yet, this is not fully convincing. Because, as we shall see, by extracting the body from time, space and society, the room creates a new configuration where time takes on another dimension that necessarily intersects with the time of the metropolis. The rooms encountered up to here are rooms far from the metropolis and they come into conflict with the metropolis. These rooms are a rest from identity, they cancel and deny it. The rooms of the metropolis, instead, are the rooms of identity, the meeting rooms. The metropolis, as we have already mentioned and will now go into more detail, is the space of the encounter/clash and therefore the rooms also participate in this essence.

⁴⁴⁸ Laist, p. 48

1.3 The Metropolis Rooms: Don DeLillo's New York

It was dark now and I went to the window. Looking south, from as high as we were, I could see the stacked lights extending almost the entire length of Manhattan, and the delicate gridiron tracery in the streets. I opened the window slightly. The whole city was roaring. In winter, when the darkness always comes before you expected it and all those lights begin to pinch through the stale mist, New York becomes a gigantic wedding cake. (A, 27)

First of all, New York, or at least Manhattan, is observable in its entirety. The city has within it the possibility of a point of view that comprehends it. The view to which David Bell has access is comparable to the view from the 110th floor from which de Certeau writes: "Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide – extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space"⁴⁴⁹.

Apart from this almost external point of view, the city also has a space in which it is possible to escape from its grip. In the metropolis one can live of two kinds of moments and two kinds of spaces. There is the moment of the city and the time of the city and personal time as there is a personal space. The two rarely fit

⁴⁴⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984, p. 91

together peacefully, more often they enter in contradiction, and they are always in opposition.

The desert instead is “out beyond cities and scattered towns. [...] There was the house and then nothing but distances, not vistas or sweeping sightlines but only distances”⁴⁵⁰. The house⁴⁵¹ where the young filmmaker Jim Finley and Richard Elster are located is not a space different from the outside, it slowly blends in with the landscape, and it is impossible to escape the grip of what is around. The two characters are often on the small terrace, but their gaze is lost on the horizon without having a concrete perception of how much space they have in front of them. So, even when they take turns sitting and waiting for Elster’s missing daughter, nothing, no image, is revealed to their sight: “It was too vast, it was not real, the symmetry of furrows and juts, it crushed me, the heartbreaking beauty of it, the indifference of it, and the longer I stood and looked the more certain I was that we would never have an answer” (PO, 116-117). As they stay there Jim stops counting the days, the passing of time fades, one moment merges into the next. The rooms inside remain the only sign of a possible division, of a possible detachment: “At nights the rooms were clocks”, but it is a small resistance, which soon collapses: “The stillness was nearly complete [...] time here and out there” (PO, 110).

The grid⁴⁵² on which Manhattan is built makes the streets appear as many lines that are extremely easy to follow at a glance. The essential matrix of the

⁴⁵⁰ Don DeLillo, *Point Omega*, Picador, London, 2011, p. 22

⁴⁵¹ “The house was a sad hybrid. There was a corrugated metal roof above a clapboard exterior with an unfinished stonework path out front and a tacked-on deck jutting from one side” (PO, 23).

⁴⁵² “In 1807 Simeon deWitt, Gouverneur Morris and John Rutherford are commissioned to design the model that will regulate the “final and conclusive” occupancy of Manhattan. Four years later they propose - above the demarcation that

metropolis is never hidden, never to be discovered, always reveals its nature to the observer. The Manhattan that David Bell is watching is a city that has definitely prevailed over nature⁴⁵³ and it is a city that claims its artificial nature. DeLillo's Manhattan never forgets the foundational and superb gesture of men that channels all the forces in a territory: "The Grid defines a new balance between control and de-control, in which the city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, a metropolis of rigid chaos"⁴⁵⁴.

DeLillo's New York appears on the page always in a moment of rearrangement: something breaks, and the characters must adjust their path through the city facing all the metropolitan flaws typical of a city that is constantly changing⁴⁵⁵. Thus, the grid is also electric and dangerous: "there were men in orange vests jackhammering along the middle of the broad street, with concrete barriers rimming the raw crevice and every moving on either side taking defensive measures"⁴⁵⁶. DeLillo never halts the city, he doesn't catch it in a point of balance, he rather exalts its chaotic essence, he incites the jolting movements of the grid, portraying a New York always on the brink of ruin, always in the instant

separates the known from the unknowable part of the city - 12 avenues running north-south direction and 155 streets running east-west. With that simple action they describe a city of $13 \times 156 = 2028$ blocks (excluding topographical accidents): a matrix that captures, at the same time, all remaining territory and all future activity on the island. The Manhattan Grid." Koolhaas, p. 18

⁴⁵³ "The plotting of its streets and blocks announces that the subjugation, if not obliteration, of nature is its true ambition." Koolhaas, p. 20

⁴⁵⁴ Koolhaas, p. 20

⁴⁵⁵ "The city seemed flattened, everything near street level, construction scaffolds, repairwork, sirens" (ZK, 188).

⁴⁵⁶ Don DeLillo, *The Starveling*, in *The Angel Esmeralda. Nine Stories*, Picador, London, 2012, p. 185

before its disappearance and its reappearance⁴⁵⁷. “There was muddy water in the street, deepening as they proceeded, three, four inches now, the residue of water-main break earlier in the day. Workers in day-glo vests and high boots were still in the area” (C, 130).

It is the movement of the grid from chaos to a new rigor that interests DeLillo, its intrinsic heterogeneity, due to its fundamentally human matter, that makes it the space to oppose to *the places at the ends of the world*. DeLillo’s narrative is not a progression of spaces, but a contrast of spaces. While the desert is the extreme space dominated by silence and introjection, the metropolis is the extreme place of externality, of noise, of the crowding of sounds, bodies, smells⁴⁵⁸.

⁴⁵⁷ “More than any other metropolis of the Western world, New York disappears. It disappears and then disappears again; or say that it metamorphoses between disappearances.” Cynthia Ozick, *The Synthetic Sublime. How can a constantly changing city stay the same?*, in *The New Yorker*, February 22 & March 1, 1999, p. 152

⁴⁵⁸ *Americana* begins in an exterior where the noise of the street sets the scene tone: “Music came from all the stores in jingles, chants and hosannas, and from the Salvation Army bands came the martial trumpet lament of ancient Christian legions. It was a strange sound to hear in that time and place, the smack of cymbals and high-collared drums [...] and it seemed to annoy people.” (A, 3). “Traffic pounded in the street” (MII, 20). The New York which Packer crosses is a cacophony of horns: “They sat in the swell of blowing horns. There was something about the noise that he did not choose to wish away.” (C, 14) *Cosmopolis* is “a novel that spends more time listening to that city than observing it through any other of our five (or six) senses. [...] DeLillo’s is a kind of urban animism, one in which everything resounds [...] This is a novel in which sound is imprinted on place and on object[...] *Cosmopolis*, it is about sound [...] a glossary of urban ambient noise”, Marc Weidenbaum, *Crosstown Static: Listening to Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis*, <https://disquiet.com/2010/07/15/crosstown-static-don-delillo-cosmopolis/> (Last Access: 02/16/2021). The noise of people crowding the entrance of the museum is in stark contrast to the silence of the desert in *Point Omega*. The mysterious protagonist of the scene cannot hide from this noise: “He put his head down to think, to duck away from it all, the sustained pitch of voices, languages, accents, people in motion carrying noise with them, lifetimes of noise, a clamor bouncing off the walls and ceiling and it was loud and surrounding, making him cower down.” (PO, 144)

There are no other cities in DeLillo's fiction that have the same power of New York. It is a New York that is as deeply human as its overall structure. It's a concrete, physical city, even when DeLillo focuses on its media quality⁴⁵⁹, on the flow of information that circles the city's buildings,⁴⁶⁰ as Richard Dragan writes about the representation of New York: "The movement back and forth between thicker descriptions of older cityscapes and more attenuated postmodern scenes has been a significant aspect of DeLillo's fiction in nearly fifty years of his writing"⁴⁶¹.

The Grid, as Koolhaas explains, claims the superiority of mental construction over natural reality, it is an idea projected onto a piece of reality and made concrete by making that piece of natural matter fit the idea. An idea that becomes a place visible to the open eye, a place that can be walked through, a place where movements take place, where events are experienced and sensations are perceived. DeLillo's New York enhances the tactile quality of the grid, as Bucky Wunderlick says: "You know where you are in New York" (GJS, 24). In the perceptive function of the characters the grid works as a precise space where the

⁴⁵⁹ "From the confines of his limousine, Packer is almost comically insulated from the real fabric of cities [...] Yet throughout the book, Eric is seen savouring authentic city detail", Dragan, p. 7

⁴⁶⁰ It is what LeClair calls "the physical city as information. As Packer crosses the island on 47th Street, he sees buildings in Times Square and elsewhere sheathed with information". For LeClair, New York in *Cosmopolis* is also "the city as nomadic space. [...] The streets he observes are spectacles of information in motion", "the city as representative of accelerated time. [...] the events he witnesses, the actions he takes, and the information he processes come faster than the proverbial New York minute", and lastly, "the city as a metapolis – about itself. This quality of self-reference surfaces through the numerous manifestations of videotape in the novel." Tom LeClair, *Going Up, Falling Down*, Electronic Book Review, (<http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/going-up-falling-down/> last access 02/17/2021)

⁴⁶¹ Dragan, p. 9

only possible negotiation is between themselves and the city. Where the last one is taken for granted. Hence another difference with the other extreme spaces:

I drove and looked. He stayed at the house, sitting on the creaky deck in a band of shade, reading. [...] and I stood on promontories in punishing sun, stood and looked. The desert was outside my range [...] I had to force myself to believe I was here. He knew where he was, in his chair, alive to the proto-world, I thought, the seas and reefs of ten million years ago. *He closed his eyes*, silently divining the nature of later extinctions... (PO, 24- 25)

The desert is a concave space, a space that does not reveal where you are, without coordinates, without vanishing lines. It is the exact opposite of the Grid. The only way to perceive the desert is with your eyes closed, when everything faces inwards. The house is an amplification of the interiority of the character, a sight enhancer that allows him to capture the essence of the place without ever having to leave⁴⁶². This creates an unusual compactness of the characters' gestures, crystallized in a synthesis that strips them of excesses and is implemented in a monotonous repetition. The metropolis is instead under the sign of a discontinuity that is guaranteed by the differences between inside and outside; in fact, the way in which the character sees themselves inside can be very different from how they see themselves outside.

⁴⁶² ““Look at all this,” he said, not looking at it, the landscape and the sky, which he'd indicated with a backwards sweep of the arm. We didn't look at it either” (PO, 56).

Here we are, all this and more, things that normally escape the inquiring eye, a single searching look, so much to see, each of us looking at both of us, and then we shake it all off and walk down four flights into the pitch of street noise that tells us we're back among the others, in unsparing space (ZK, 208).

The outside space in the metropolis requires to have inquiring eyes⁴⁶³ and demands crossing the threshold that divides it from the inside. It seems as if there is a sort of decompression chamber between the two. This passage device is represented by the stairs for the protagonists of *Zero K* and by the elevator for David Bell:

You board the singing elevator and drop an eight of a mile in ten seconds flat. Your ears hum as you are decompressed. It is an almost frighteningly impersonal process and yet something of this kind seems necessary to translate you from the image to what is actually impaled on that dainty fork. (A, 27)

The rooms of the desert or the conglomerates of chambers at the limits of the world in DeLillo's narrative are either perfectly blended into the landscape, where the room is just the perimeter that allows fixation and narration, or of a complete indifference to what is around. The rooms of the cities are immediately

⁴⁶³ "She said something funny at dinner about her eyes being closer together in New York, caused by serial congestion in the streets. Out here the eyes move apart, the eyes adapt to condition, like wings or beaks." (PO, 75)

recognizable, they have a different quality, they live in contrast to what is just outside. The substantial difference of a metropolitan interior compared to the other kinds is identified by DeLillo already in his first novel. In this passage he describes the difference between an interior that internalizes the outer space, emphasizing it in the mental processes of the character, and an interior that enters a direct and dynamic opposition with the outer space. Whereas in the cases seen in the previous chapter there is a sort of spatial and experiential continuity, here, when the character leaves an interior, a transformation takes place in the character. It appears as a sort of translation between the image that he has built of himself and the image that the friction of the metropolis engraves on the first one⁴⁶⁴. The character appears to suffer from this forced and necessary shift, which he carries out in a way that is often completely unconscious. The result is often an opaque, elusive image that forces the character to constantly confront the environment and the people around him: “in this city the crowd was essential to the individual; without it, he had nothing against which to scrape his anger, no echo for grief” (A, 29). Where in the desert the echo sought by the character is inside himself, as if the desolated space transformed it into his own sounding board, purifying him from any interference, in a strenuous and vain attempt to find its origin⁴⁶⁵, here the echo is the constant bounce-back to the

⁴⁶⁴ “... a translation proceeds from the original. Not indeed so much from its life as from its “afterlife” or “survival””, Walter Benjamin, *The Translator's Task*, Translation by Steven Rendall, in *TTR: traduction, terminologie, redaction*, vol. 10, n°2, 1997, p. 151-165, <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037302ar>, p. 153

⁴⁶⁵ “When Elster (*Point Omega*) retreats to this unfriendly country (the desert), he realizes a favorite DeLillo conceit, for the author of *Americana*, *End Zone*, *Running Dog*, *The Names*, and *Underworld* often evokes the desert as place to which, by ancient tradition, one repairs to simplify and purify. [...] To some degree, the author makes of desert ascetism a spiritualized analog to pastoral (also predicated on the dream or vision of getting away from the complexity and temptations of the civilized world)”, David

inevitable materiality of the outside world,⁴⁶⁶ and its origin is impossible to trace⁴⁶⁷.

If the task of a translation, Benjamin tells us, is not to express a content, but to represent a relationship between languages⁴⁶⁸, the situation of DeLillo's metropolitan character is complicated by his inability to discern which is the *original text* to translate. Is it the self-image built on the inside, or the self-image experienced on the outside? David Bell speaks of this translation as something impersonal yet necessary, inevitable and therefore always in action every time the character crosses the threshold between inside and outside. The two images, however, not only never coincide, but they seem to play a sick and hide with each other, getting confused. One of David Bell's first *outdoor* scenes is emblematic:

When we reached the sidewalk, a lovely teen-age girl wearing pink eyelashes asked me for my autograph. "I don't know who you are", she said, "but I'm sure you must be somebody." Her smile was rather winning, and blithely I signed her foldout map of the subway system, thinking

Cowart, *The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo's Point Omega*, in *Contemporary Literature*, 53, 1, University of Wisconsin, p. 44

⁴⁶⁶ "The urban novels are claustrophobic, their characters hemmed in by the skyscrapers, locked in bolted apartments, prisoners of the discourse.", Norman Bryson, *City of Dis: The Fiction of Don DeLillo*, in *Granta Magazine*, <https://granta.com/city-of-dis-the-fiction-of-don-delillo/> (last access: 02/17/2021)

⁴⁶⁷ Or, put more simply: "The difference is that they have now broken into the real world", Bryson

⁴⁶⁸ "Thus translation ultimately has as its purpose the expression of the most intimate relationships among languages. Translation cannot possibly reveal or produce this hidden relationship; however, translation can represent this relationship, insofar as it realizes it seminally or intensively", Benjamin (1997), p. 42

Maples might be amused. He avoided me for the next six months. (A, 13-14)

The short circuit created in this scene perfectly sums up the instability of metropolitan living. Among the crowd of people, David is recognized by a young girl who is presumably a tourist (this can be deduced from the fact that she has a map with her), so on a first level, David emerges as a figure who stands out from the crowd, like a successful figure, a well-adjusted city dweller, and yet, on a second level, recognition only throws David back into another kind of crowd, the crowd of those who seem to have made it⁴⁶⁹. The girl, in fact, doesn't know who he is, she senses that he could be someone important, but hers is only an intuition supported by the fact that David appears to be "blue-eyed David Bell [...] an extremely handsome young man"⁴⁷⁰. It is a false recognition, which at first flatters the image that David has built of himself (an image that as we have already seen is protected and strengthened by the impenetrable interior of his house in Gramercy Park⁴⁷¹) but it soon reiterates David's frustration at feeling nothing more than a copy of a chain of images, the imperfect and fallacious translation of his inner image. In the past this had already happened, but David

⁴⁶⁹ According to the famous Kander and Ebb song about New York City: "If I can make it there, I'd make it anywhere."

⁴⁷⁰ "Physical identity meant a great deal for me when I was twenty-eight years old. I had almost the same kind of relationship with my mirror that many of my contemporaries had with their analysts. When I began to wonder who I was, I took the simple step of lathering my face and shaving. It all became so clear, so wonderful." (A, 11)

⁴⁷¹ "My apartment welcomed me, dim and silent" (A, 60) "The essential purpose of the interiors buildings is to enclose rather than direct space, and to separate the inside from the outside. Kahn has said: "A building is a harboring thing." The function of the house to protect and provide privacy, psychological as well as physical, is an ancient one." Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture, New York, 1992, p. 70

had admitted that he was mistaken for someone else, and then identified himself, ironically, under the name Buster Keaton⁴⁷². Now, however, things are different, David has moved to New York and has chosen to work for a network as a confirmation of his autonomy and identity⁴⁷³. In front of this ambiguous assault on his image, that reiterates the failure of his autonomy, David reacts differently and signs using his own name⁴⁷⁴. It would seem to be a gesture of strength and authority, affixing his signature on the map of New York, as if he was affixing his signature on the city itself, thus affirming his presence, but it is actually a gesture that marginalizes him from his colleague and his workplace instead and therefore from his position in the newly conquered city: “after that I did my best to be exceedingly humble and withdrawing” (A, 14). For a person who “needed every ego-scrap, that I feared my own disappearance” (A, 41), the scene in the street resonates in his interiority as a short circuit impossible to defuse.

The scene is the vertex of an imaginary isosceles triangle, where the other angle equal to the initial one corresponds to another scene, this time at the end of the book. Here, again, while on a plane, David is stopped by a woman who asks him for an autograph⁴⁷⁵. David is returning to New York after the failure of his journey and his attempt to jump out of the flat surface of the self-image, and it

⁴⁷² David is flying home from school as soon as he receives news of his mother's deteriorating condition: “When I came out of the toilet a man stopped me to introduce himself. He said his wife would like to have my autograph.” (A, 169)

⁴⁷³ “To avoid following too closely in his (father) footsteps” (A, 33)

⁴⁷⁴ “Avec la signature, l'écriture s'*approprié*, c'est-à-dire qu'elle deviant à la fois l'expression d'une identité et la marque d'une propriété; elle assure à celui qui le signe la jouissance de son produit; elle authentifie l'engagement de la personne; c'est une pièce majeure du système économique mais aussi psychologique”, Roland Barthes, *Variations sur l'écriture*, Übersetzung und des Nachwortes, Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2006, p. 126

⁴⁷⁵ The last words of the book: “Ten minutes after we were airborne a woman asked for my autograph.” (A, 377)

is as if he is going back to that scene on Madison Avenue again, reinforcing the novel's very circularity and reiterating the character's inner conflict in finding a mediation between the perception of the inner self image and the perception of the outer self-image. A conflict that sees David Bell's image, provided by the streets of New York, as a winning one⁴⁷⁶.

The metropolis differs from the desert precisely in this dynamic opposition between how the character is represented in an interior and what happens outside. Living in the metropolis is a process of continuous translation between inside and outside and DeLillo's characters find themselves in the complicated situation in which they have difficulty in finding the original text and thus they are stuck in a perpetual search for the origin of the echo and end up replacing it with the deafening echo of the city. It is not, therefore, a translation that rises up, in which "the original grows into a linguistic sphere that is both higher and purer. It cannot, however, go on living indefinitely in this sphere, since it is far from attaining it in all parts of its form, but it nevertheless at least points, with wonderful penetration"⁴⁷⁷.

With the loss of the *original text*, the character finds himself having to redefine his position: is he the translator of his image or is it the city that translates it? Is he the author of his image, or is the city that produced it with its political, social, commercial and cultural mechanisms? This uncertainty is the sign of an

⁴⁷⁶ "At the close of the diegetic narrative, Bell returns to New York from a lengthy trip to the western United States, undertaken in the hope of forging a more satisfying first person epistemology. [...] DeLillo appears to suggest that while in New York it may be impossible for Bell to escape the vacuity of his former persona. In particular, Bell informs us that on the return flight [...] a request that recalls an almost identical previous incident and suggests that life in New York will continue to direct Bell's attention toward his third-person mirror image", Bird, p. 190

⁴⁷⁷ Benjamin, (1997), p. 157

instability that cannot be avoided, which therefore becomes the qualitative element of metropolitan life, a continuous oscillation between the regions of the outside and the regions of the inside. It is a sway between a self-formed image, constructed in autonomy, and a self-image claimed by the city.

The attraction of the outside of the city is such that the character cannot retire permanently into some interior⁴⁷⁸. It is the characteristic of the metropolitan interior, to always be in lively contact with the exterior. The walls are porous and not as hard and impermeable as those of the extreme limits of the world. The street doesn't allow the inside climate to expand, it forces it between the walls of some building opposing its chaotic force to it. For David Bell as well as for Eric Packer, the outside conflicts with the perspectives investigated inside⁴⁷⁹: "The street was an offense to the truth of the future. But he responded to it." (C, 65). In *Cosmopolis* what happens outside⁴⁸⁰ is a resounding denial of what

⁴⁷⁸ What happens to Elster, for example, cannot happen: "I could watch him being driven insistently inward" (PO, 109).

⁴⁷⁹ "If in the late 1960s, *Americana's* young executive defined his self through movie images, in 2000, Packer gleans his sense of being from "all the flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing"" Sven Philipp, *Words and Syllables*, Electronic Book Review, (<http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/words-and-syllables/> Last Access: 07/28/2019)

⁴⁸⁰ "Going west now means wrestling with the soulless grid of midtown Manhattan, while enmeshed in computerized data, graphs, diagrams. Ironically, the digital speed of international market updates is matched with a local, physical journey", Sven Philipp, *Ibid.* The novel (which we will study in depth further along) is set on this dual platform between the immaterial and the abstract qualities of the financial economy on the one hand, portraying the inside of the limousine as its main existence and being: "no doubts "celebrates" the transcendence of the material world and the obsolescence of time and space". On the other there is the myriad other physical economies that bloom on the streets of the city. "Although critical readings of this journey have emphasized, variously, Packer's impulse to self-destruction, the ephemerality of wealth in the global area, or even the Ulysean pace of crosstown traffic, none adequately accounts for this fable of financialization, in which capitalism is imagined as not only expanding beyond the rules of historical materialism but as liberating itself from the real world altogether."

Packer thinks should be the direction in which the city, and not only (even himself), should transform, which is the progressive minimization into the dimension of a chip, ethereal as information floating in the digital world⁴⁸¹. For Packer the road itself becomes the space of a continuous renegotiation of his ideas. The exteriority of the world that he would like to contain inside his interiority continuously eludes him, his very image is continuously attacked, scaled down, outraged. The streets of New York act on the character by pushing him out of himself and destabilizing his image⁴⁸². So, James Wood summarizes a common view of many critics regarding the consistency of Packer as a character: “he exists in order for DeLillo to explore various ideas [...] Eric Packer is an enormous, deliberate exaggeration [...] Eric is not supposed to be real”⁴⁸³. The street thus becomes the place where Parker stops being an idea to become a real-life character. In his apartment, in which he lives in solitude just like David Bell, his pacing, room after room, is characterized⁴⁸⁴ by slowness, by an inner rhythm dictated by a personal need that finds. The interior is the realm of the self, everything is built, furnished to second him and not to tug him: “Walking

Alison Shonkwiler, *Don DeLillo's Financial Sublime*, in *Contemporary Literature* 51, 2, University of Wisconsin, p. 250

⁴⁸¹ “Eric’s (and presumably DeLillo’s) interest in money is secondary to his infatuation with Eric’s technological environment. Rather than using the technologies of high finance as a means of making money, Eric engages in money-making as a way of immersing himself into the electronic data stream of global informatics.” Randy Laist, *The Concept of Disappearance in Don DeLillo's Cosmopolis*, in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 51:3, pp. 257-275, p. 259

⁴⁸² “Il nous faut prendre acte du changement qui s’opère chez Packer. C’est en cela que nous pouvons parler de progression. [...] La progression vers l’altérité doit subséquemment être mise en parallèle avec le processus de destitution et d’appauvrissement de Packer.” Daanoune, *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁴⁸³ James Wood, *Traffic*, in *The New Republic Online*, April 14, 2003.

⁴⁸⁴ “He walked through the apartment, forty-eight rooms. He did this when he felt hesitant and depressed.” (C, 7)

slowly now, and paused in every room, absorbing what was there, deeply seeing, retaining every fleck of energy in rays and waves” (C, 8). The interior acts on the character as a calming, relaxing flow that radiates and warms the body⁴⁸⁵, a sort of blanket that protects and has beneficial effects. Different is the effect of the road that instead acts as a violent discharge: “He felt it enter every receptor and vault electrically to his brain.” (C, 65). The walk through his apartment, also given the vastness of this, is a walk that meets no obstacles. It is a silent, uneventful, walk if not for internal movements of perception and reflection⁴⁸⁶. The *walk* on the street is the opposite. The outside does not suit the climate of the inside. In its linearity, only initially placidly following that of the apartment, the architecture of the street, on which the urban plan of *Cosmopolis* is articulated, is an architecture of the event that starts from the momentary melting of the Grid. There is therefore a transitory loss of stable geometric/spatial references and eventually temporal too. Everything happens continuously, every event, ephemeral in its final substance (the demonstrations against capitalism, for

⁴⁸⁵ “a moonless calm in which every force is balanced by another.” (C, 6)

⁴⁸⁶ The first pages of *Cosmopolis*, set indoors, are built on seeing: “He stood at the window and watched the great day dawn” (C, 6), “He watched a hundred gulls” (C, 7), “He stood a while longer, watching” (C, 7), “He liked painting that his guests did not know how to look” (C, 8), “then turned and faced the building where he lived”(C, 8). And on the understanding of what Packer is looking at that adds meaning to his thoughts: “Poems made him conscious of his breathing”(C, 5) “He mastered the steepest matters in half an afternoon” (C, 7), “he felt contiguous with it” (C, 8). The first part inside is, in fact, built around the desire that Packer cannot understand what it is. The apartment adjusts to the character’s view to help him find an answer. The interior is functional to the character’s needs: “he didn’t know what he wanted. Then he knew. He wanted to get a haircut.” (C, 7) The street, instead, is marked by the progressive incomprehensibility of what it is observed. It is the unpredictability, democratic (or disinterested) quality of the street that makes it possible to unravel the plot. The street, in opposition to the room, which emphasizes the ego of the character, continuously postpones the realization of the desire (born in the room).

example, as mentioned in the novel itself, only allow the existence and growth of capitalism itself), fades seamlessly into the next event, so that the inebriation of the street is compulsively magnetic for the character who cannot resist its allure, “the magnetism of the next streetcorner”⁴⁸⁷.

These were scenes that normally roused him, the great rapacious flow, where the *physical* will of the city, the *ego fevers*, the assertions of industry, commerce and crowds shape every anecdotal moment (C, 41).

The street is a succession of events that take shape from the movement of the crowd, from trade, from a multitude of moments that blend together, that break and recompose the scene involving the character who has no chance to get away from it. He too is part of the city, of the violent and completely physical desire of the metropolis⁴⁸⁸. The loneliness of the character, as well as his protection strategies fail not only every time the room is left, but also when the interior space is inhabited, because the interior overlooks the tumult of the city. As Raymond Williams writes: “not only the ordinary experiences of apparent isolation, but a whole range of techniques of self-isolation, are then gathered to

⁴⁸⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1999, p. 417.

⁴⁸⁸ “New York never prefers not to. New York prefers and prefers and prefers – it prefers power and scope to tranquility and intimacy, it prefers crowds and tumult to gardens and ease, it prefers struggle and steel to acquiescence and cushions. New York is where you go to seize the day, to leave your mark, to live within the nerve of your generation.” Ozick, p. 158

sustain the paradoxical experience of an ultimate collectivity which is beyond and above community”⁴⁸⁹.

In the places at the extreme ends of the world, an opposite process takes place. Only apparently a sort of community is formed above the sum of the solitudes gathered there. In concrete terms, those compact structures isolated from everything are forms prior to a community, where loneliness never blends to give shape to a living environment or at least to create the idea of it. There is no *physical will* to keep up the tension. The desert is the place of an inner contraction, the city of an extension:

The city was unreasonably insistent on its own fibrous beauty,
the woven arrangements of decay and genius that raised to
one’s sensibility a challenge to extend itself. (P, 207)

Even in Pammy’s perception, in the final of *Players*, the city is first and foremost a physical beauty, strong, made of dense fibers and aimed at intertwining opposites, novelty and decadence, opulence and misery. DeLillo’s metropolis is made up of contrasts, surprises and challenges. “The city functioned on principles of intimidation” (P, 24) and, like Pammy, the characters “knew this and tried to be ready, unafraid to stride across the angling path of a fender that probed through heavy pedestrian traffic” (P, 24). The practice of continuous renegotiation between the character and the city is shown by DeLillo not through striking gestures, but in the small everyday life gestures, as if in order to contrast the grandeur and majesty of New York it is necessary to establish one’s

⁴⁸⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Vintage Classics, Penguin Random House, London, 2016, p. 335

own presence close to the fragments, the invisible moments that make up the wide palimpsest of metropolitan living. The renegotiation takes place in a decisive confrontation that aims, however, at the most marginal episodes of the city⁴⁹⁰. As de Certeau writes: “They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is a blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms”⁴⁹¹. The clear, visible and therefore legible text that DeLillo’s New York (and not only) has engraved on the Grid is opposed to another text, which is that of those who live the city, the characters who walk it day after day. A text that, de Certeau tells us, escapes legibility: “It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other”⁴⁹². *Seeing* belongs to the recognizing of the pre-established places and trajectories of the city (this is what happens to David Bell while looking down at the grid), *Going* instead belongs to a practice of appropriation of space:

⁴⁹⁰ “I’ve become a student of crossing lights. I like to dash across the street with the red seconds on the crossing light down to 3 or 4. There is always an extra second-and-a-fraction between the time when the light turns red for pedestrians and the time when the other light turns green for traffic. This is my safety margin and I welcome the occasion, crossing a broad avenue in a determinate stride [...] It makes me feel true to the system, knowing that unnecessary risk is integral to the code of urban pathology.” (ZK, 189) – “From this point of view, every walk constantly leaps, or skips like a child, hopping on one foot. It practices the ellipsis of conjunctive *loci*.” de Certeau, p. 101

⁴⁹¹ de Certeau, p. 93

⁴⁹² de Certeau, p. 93

“The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). It creates shadows and ambiguities within them. It inserts its multitudinous references and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors). Within them it is itself the effect of successive encounters and occasions that constantly alter it and make it the other’s blazon: in other words, it is like a peddler, carrying something surprising, transverse or attractive compared with the usual choice”⁴⁹³.

In its being an illegible text, since it is a text that is continually being formed and reformed losing practically every trace of itself, unexpected and unpredictable, it becomes difficult to fix it on the page as it was written when it occurred and then immediately deleted. The text that the page of the novel accepts is the clear and readable text of the city to which the character is opposed to⁴⁹⁴, or rather,

⁴⁹³ de Certeau, p. 101

⁴⁹⁴ It is necessary here to make a clarification from what Richard Lehan says about the city represented in DeLillo’s texts (and not only), the so-called postmodern city, where “Without a transcendental signifier, urban signs begin to float, and meaning gives way to mystery [...] We can no longer position ourselves in time in a way that gives authority to history or position ourselves in space in a way that will allow the meaning of a city to unfold”, Lehan, p. 265-277 “Richard Lehan’s inability to accept narratives of transcendence for what they ostensibly are: totalizing fictions that – however seductive – simply serve as palliative reassurance. The post-modern turn was a recognition, not a fall from grace [...] From the novel’s very inception, its reality has been inherently discursive, and the “real world” that fiction represents – urban or otherwise- is similarly

tries to oppose, in his (formative) search for a space within that text. This is what we will see happen in McInerney's novels⁴⁹⁵, which is the same as what happens, for example, in Balzac's or Dreiser's novels.

DeLillo, instead, opts for a different solution. Not a close fight or an epic struggle of the character against the city, but he tries to reconstruct, to recover the fragments of that personal text from oblivion, that the character writes almost unconsciously. It is in these minimal fragments that the character performs his real act of resistance towards the readable and stringent text of the city. These are moments in which the character creates a sort of intimacy with

constructed, always already an amalgam of disparate and competing narrative fragments. Both novels and cities, in other words, resist definitive exegesis. Transcendental signifiers and totalizing metanarratives merely provide a false sense of mastery; both are forms of fiction, and neither underwrite the real. Ultimately, cities, like novels, are only as real as the stories we tell about them.”, Justin St. Clair, *The Reality of Fiction in a Virtually Postmodern Metropolis*, in *The City Since 9/11. Literature, Film, Television*. Edited by Keith Wilhite, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, Teaneck, 2016, *Kindle Edition*.

Although I agree more with this last position than with Lehan's, it is nevertheless true that DeLillo's New York, especially the one linked to the novels of the seventies such as *Players* and *Running Dog*, presented a city where the sense of paranoia and mystery is strong. Both given by the impenetrability of some places, by the sensation of being in a place codified according to inaccessible codes, signs that trap the protagonists in a loop, signs that reject the protagonists, and finally, the need (denied, both to the protagonist and to the reader) for a transcendent meaning capable of reassuring everyone. Although this opacity is present in DeLillo's New York, I speak of a clear and legible text of the city, precisely because, perhaps paradoxically, DeLillo's New York is clearly legible, clearly visible, clearly perceivable its shadowy areas, unlike, for example, Pynchon's New York, where it is easy for the reader to get lost and confused. In DeLillo's New York, however mysterious (or postmodern), this does not happen. Clearly readable does not mean, however, that it is fully comprehensible. We can read a text that stands clearly in front of our eyes, in its full spaces and its empty spaces, in its writing and language, but this does not mean that the exact comprehension of that text can be taken for granted.

⁴⁹⁵ See in particular the chapter *Understanding House as a Media*

the city, where he can feel the reverberation of sensations already experienced in the most personal and protected space of an interior.

Jeffrey Lockhart and his partner Emma just dropped off her son at a jujitsu class; we are in the third part of *Zero K*⁴⁹⁶. The two decide to take a walk in the Financial District, where the two main characters Pammy and Lyle work, a neighborhood that has already been presented by DeLillo in *Players*. The neighborhood is described as one where “everything tended to edge beyond acceptability” (P, 27), a neighborhood marked by the time of economic transactions, with a stiffened exterior that does not let anything leak out, a neighborhood where “there were rules, standards and customs” (P, 28). Entering that neighborhood therefore requires a forced adaptation to the mechanisms that regulate it, mechanisms that are clearly visible and virtually impossible to escape, and that have gradually alienated more and more the two characters of the novel, “Lyle wondered how much of the world, the place they shared a lucid view of, was still his to live in” (P, 28)⁴⁹⁷. Jeffrey and Emma, however, do not work there, and their walk is an *intermezzo*, a wait that does not fit at all with the time and the rules of the neighborhood⁴⁹⁸.

⁴⁹⁶“... Don DeLillo’s postmillennial prose – from the *Body Artist* to *Zero K* – develops a particular late style, which allows him to fashion a new and distinctive relationship between historical time and the experience of embodiment, expressed in the starkest, barest of terms. There is in this stripped, sinewy prose, I argue, a particular diminishment, a starving to nothing, which yields an expansion.” Boxall (2017), *Ibid.*, p. 526

⁴⁹⁷ “Lyle and Pammy [...] joylessly pursue their livelihoods at two of the great workplaces of late-twentieth-century America: The Stock Exchange and the World Trade Center. [...] Lyle and Pammy are aimless victims of the contemporary urban anomie”, Cowart (2003), p. 45

⁴⁹⁸ “In setting the desert against the city, decommissioned bodies against those still struggling to become, the novel seems to oppose an experience of collective, loving life, against the abstracted, technologized life of the Convergence.”, Boxall (2017), p. 545

We fell into long silences, walking inward, step by step and a light rain did not prompt a word or send us into cover. We walked north to the antiterror barricades on Broad Street where a tour leader spoke to his umbrella'd group about the scars on the wall caused by an anarchist's bomb a hundred years ago (ZK, 179).

Jeffrey and Emma almost sneak into the fabric of the city, slipping into the inner streets, unseen, away from predetermined routes. Theirs is a walk that wears itself out between the folds, in a silence that is an internal dialogue between the two that does not exclude the city but welcomes it on another level. The traces of a constant threat, of an attack that could be imminent, and of an attack that has already taken place and has mutilated that very neighborhood are clearly visible in the city. It is a city that limits and protects itself, but at the same time allows itself to be admired. The barriers speak precisely of this new configuration of the metropolis, demonstrating its latent fragility, as well as the strength proudly displayed. They also talk about one of the essential qualities of the city, that of being a city of perennial catastrophe⁴⁹⁹. So, the walls bear traces of a more distant past. DeLillo's New York experiences the echoes of two timings: the immediacy, that clutters the surface of the city and accelerates the lifestyle of the characters and the slowness that lies sedimented and barely perceptible, yet resilient, and that comes out as the novel progresses to stand out in the finale: "As Wunderlick finds the history of New York exposed on the urban surface, at

⁴⁹⁹ see Introduction

the end of *Great Jones Street*, so in *Cosmopolis* the layers of geological time are somehow revealed, lying simultaneous with each other, with the present and the future”⁵⁰⁰. For Bill Gray, “the city is a device for measuring time” (MII, 27). Richard Elster defines the time of the city starting from the time of the desert where “day turns to night eventually but it’s a matter of light and darkness, it’s not time passing, mortal time” (PO, 56). In New York instead “It’s all about time, dimwit time, inferior time, people checking watches and other devices, other reminders. [...] Cities are built to measure time, to remove time from nature.” (PO, 57)

The time that marks life is artificial and imposed as much as the Grid. In their walk, Jeffrey and Emma slip away from both of them, and in silence they begin to write their text, which appears as if it was the imprint of a glance from a window. The time that the two find again is inner time, that time that Bergson talks about, that personal time, which is proper to each one of us, impossible to measure and which is opposed to the time of the city, which is a rational, organized time, with a place in space⁵⁰¹, and which finds in language the

⁵⁰⁰ Boxall (2006), p. 224

⁵⁰¹ “On peut donc concevoir la succession sans la distinction, et comme une pénétration mutuelle, une solidarité, une organisation intime d’éléments, dont chacun représentatif du tout, ne s’en distingue et ne s’en isole que pour une pensée capable d’abstraire. L’elle est sans aucun doute la représentation que se ferait de la durée un être à la fois identique et changeant, qui n’aurait aucune idée de l’espace. Mais familiarisés avec cette dernière idée, obsédés même par elle, nous l’introduisons à notre insu dans notre représentation de la succession pure; nous juxtaposons nos états de conscience de manière à les apercevoir simultanément, non plus l’un dans l’autre, mais l’un à côté de l’autre; bref, nous projetons le temps dans l’espace, nous exprimons la durée en étendue, et la succession prend pour nous la forme d’une ligne continue ou d’une chaîne, dont les parties se touchent sans se pénétrer”, Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1927, p.92

externalization of inner feeling. That's why there is no dialogue between Jeffrey and Emma⁵⁰².

We went along empty streets and our shared stride began to feel like a heartbeat and soon became a game, a tacit challenge, the pace quickening. The sun reappeared seconds before the rain stopped and we went past an untended shish kebab cart and saw a skateboarder sailing past at the end of the street, there and gone, and we approached a woman in Arab headdress, white woman, white blouse, stained blue skirt, talking to herself and walking back and forth, barefoot, five steps east, five steps west along a sidewalk webbed with scaffolding (ZK, 179).

The weather punctuates the steps of the two who follow an internal rhythm, a rhythm that comes from the encounter, from a slotting puzzle that is sought and then rejected and then sought again, almost resembling a dance. A supported *Pas de deux* that finds no hindrance in the architecture of the city. The appropriation of space is taking place. It is as if between the words and in the

⁵⁰² “La raison en est que notre vie extérieure et pour ainsi dire sociale a plus d’importance pratique pour nous que notre existence intérieure et individuelle. Nous tendons instinctivement à solidifier nos impressions, pour les exprimer par le langage. De là vient que nous confondons le sentiment même, qui est dans un perpétuel devenir, avec son objet extérieur permanent, et surtout avec le mot qui exprime cet objet. De même que la durée fuyante de notre moi se fixe par sa projection dans l’espace homogène, ainsi nos impressions sans cesse changeantes, s’enroulant autour de l’objet extérieur qui en est cause, en adoptent les contours précis et l’immobilité.”, Henri Bergson, p. 116- 117

acceleration, in the raising of the stakes, implicit in the sudden changes of rhythm, we can sense that there is a writing process taking place, not so much on the walls of the buildings as in the space between them. After the concreteness of the previous passage, this one seems rather to evaporate, as the drops of water on a hot pavement do. DeLillo's New York is, as previously mentioned, a profoundly human city and it is in this disappearance of the city's hard and imposed architecture, in this suspended moment, that Jeffrey and Emma participate as witnesses in the personal writing of other people who would normally be invisible, and instead suddenly become real and three-dimensional⁵⁰³. The metropolitan walk is made of discontinuous moments, of sudden flashes that immediately disappear, like the boy on the skateboard. It takes the right inclination to capture these moments, a sort of intimacy with the city, obtained where the city does not expect it. There are empty moments, like the absence of the cart's owner, or full ones like that of the woman who speaks to herself while swinging obsessively. It is in the sum of the perceived moments that we are shown the cosmopolitan soul of New York, that New York of the crowds⁵⁰⁴ Whitman speaks of, which is anything⁵⁰⁵ but uniform and

⁵⁰³ "Far from experiencing the crowd as an opposing, antagonistic element, the city dweller discovers in the crowd what fascinates him. The delight of the urban poet is love- not at first sight, but at last sight. It is an eternal farewell", Walter Benjamin, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, 4: 1938-1940*, Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 324

⁵⁰⁴ "Numberless crowded street [...] A million people –manners free and superb-open voices-hospitality-the most courageous and friendly young men" *Manhatta*, p. 21; "What hurrying human tides, or day or night!" *Broadway*, p. 23; "Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious are to me [...] Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd", *Crossing Brooklyn Ferries*, p. 24, in *Poems of New York*, selected and edited by Elizabeth Schmidt, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, (2002)

⁵⁰⁵ "For it is in the daily life available in cities like Manhattan that, according to Whitman, one can best "absorb" and be absorbed by the largest number of other people – that

unidirectional as the underlying rules of the neighborhood would have us believe. Thus, the city returns to the end in its imperfect stretch, more like that abandoned cart and those bare feet, again the image of the city as an open construction site.

Then the Money Museum, The Police Museum, the old stone buildings on Pine Street and our peace increased again, no cars and people here, just the iron posts, the stunted security markers set along the street, and I knew she'd outrace me, keep an even measure, she was will-driven just walking to a mailbox with a postcard in her hand. (ZK, 180)

Jeffrey and Emma's walk continues with sudden jerks, which correspond to as many different mind states, all reached in small sprints, as they as they approach the core of the city. The leap here brings us back to the naked reality of the city. Around them, marking the edges, are the buildings of the city, but this time without anyone nearby. These are the buildings that contain traces of the city's history and summarize the main aspects of the neighborhood: money and security. It is both a forward jump and a backward jump and it is Emma who sets the pace. The walk in the city is marked by meeting with the other, by approaching and not by leaving. It is a walk that does not try to dismantle and reassemble the city at will, or to identify hostile elements, the walk here seeks an

one can try on, learn from, identify with other subjectivities, other concretely embodied modes and style of life", Lytle Shaw, *Whitman's Urbanism*, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of New York*, Edited by Cyrus R. K. Patell and Bryan Waterman, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 76

encounter with the heart of the city, an attempt at interpenetration that speaks of welcoming the city within its own discourse⁵⁰⁶.

A sound around us that we could not identify made us stop and listen. The tone, the pitch, a continuous low dull hum, inaudible until you hear it and then it's everywhere, every step you take, coming from the empty buildings on both sides of the street, and we stood outside the locked revolving doors of Deutsche Bank listening to the systems within, the networks of interacting components. I grabbed her arm and moved her into the doorway of a shuttered storefront and we clutched and pressed and came close to outright screwing. (ZK, 180)

The streets of New York are a constant replica of a previously acquired and already well-set discourse: "he felt the street around him, unremitting, people moving past each other in coded moments of gesture and dance" (C, 66), "... and pedestrians sprinting across the streets in stages, in tactical bursts, cell phones welded to their heads" (S, 185). While it is true that the people portrayed in these two passages are isolated from each other, they participate together in a

⁵⁰⁶ "... in New York, walking, even without companions, can still be an expression of companionship, of expansive connection; a happy opening out to an enlarged civic self rather than a narrowing down to a contemplative inner self. [...] Whereas the Parisian poet-walkers of his time walk to take it all apart, dissect the scene, find the skull beneath the street lamps, Whitman walks to take it all in, see what's up, get the life of the city right. Walking in New York, Whitman says, leaves him "enrich'd of soul - you give me forever faces. Whitman is always walking *through* the city [...] Whatever else we walk to accomplish, we always walk in New York to randomize our too neatly gridded city existence." Adam Gopnik, *At the Strangers' Gate. Arrivals in New York*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2017, p. 230 - 231

dialogue of gestures whose aim is not to make them clash further and that is part of the structure of the city itself. This physical dialogue somehow unites them, making them meet through the voice of the city, which, maybe counterintuitively, brings together rather than divides. Recognizing this system of movements essentially means being part of the metropolis, knowing how to apply the rules. The city requires an integration effort that cannot be found otherwise. In demanding this effort, it so happens that the city's speech interferes with millions of personal speeches. Thus, while in the novels set in extreme places silence prevails at the end, biting and mutilating the text, truncating the ending, in metropolitan novels it is the voice of the city that seems to take over at some point⁵⁰⁷.

The *Zero K* walk scene, however, shows us how DeLillo's characters eventually find a way to air their personal voice and find a way to put it into the Grid.

In their reaching a higher level of contact with the city, Jeffrey and Emma don't talk to each other, avoiding exposing themselves to the standardized language of the city. The metropolis is not silent: it is not made for silence. The two find a way to open a dialogue with the city that is made of an exchange of sounds coming from the inside, sounds that cannot be intercepted and encoded by the Grid. To catch that sound is to have entered a relationship of intimacy with the city and indeed the two finally touch, embrace and sink into the interior of the

⁵⁰⁷ We have already seen the endings of novels set in the remote places of the world: they are sharp interruptions. The silence is a plunge into nothingness. Instead, in the New York endings, as we see in the words that close the novels, a sense of suspension always prevails, where silence is anticipation: "Waiting for the shot to sound." (C, 207); "It's just a question of what sound to make or fake" (GJS, 250); "If he blinked an eye, she would disappear." (S, 211); "Seconds passed before she grasped its meaning." (P, 207); "I went back to my seat and faced forward" (ZK, 274); "Then he stares into the blank screen." (TS, 116)

city. So, they create a sentimental interaction between their personal text and the New York text, together they form a superior one, which although ephemeral and instantaneous, has nevertheless been updated. “Then we looked at each other, still without a word” (ZK, 180), the act of resistance takes place by denying the street the voice it would expect⁵⁰⁸. Not a mute silence that closes the world outside, but a silence that opens and drags everything towards the center of the question: “Our shared awareness [...] it’s only who we were and how we talked and felt” (ZK, 180). The silence widens the narrow fibers of the Grid and lets a last image emerge. An unusual, incongruous and yet decisive scene that sums it all up: an apparently quiet and at ease man, who at home, in his own home, minds his own business blissfully indifferent to the rules of the surroundings.

We resumed our walk, casually now, seeing a barechested old man in rolled-up pajama bottoms sunbathing in a wet beach chair on a tenement fire escape. This was everything. [...] We wandered slowly back to the street where we’d started and I realized we were walking into a certain kind of mood (ZK, 180).

Their eyes finally turn to an interior. In this struggle with the city, the interior becomes essential to the character, as a safe haven of integrity, so that his original image is not completely erased, so that his voice maintains the person’s own

⁵⁰⁸ The silence of the walkers reassembles the silence of some art work that appears in the novels of DeLillo: “The dark silence of the art work opens, from within the closure of American culture, onto the emptiness of an unrevealed future”, Boxall (2006), p. 49

tones. DeLillo's New York characters define themselves from an interior, which must be as particular as they are, so Jeffrey responds to his father's request to go and live in his house:

I told him I didn't know how to live here. This was a handsome brownstone with a front door of carved oak, a wood-paneled interior sedately furnished. My remark was not delivered purely for effect. I would be a tourist here, bound to a temporary arrangement. [...] I know how to live where I was living, in an old building on the upper east side with a small sad inner courtyard in perennial shadow, a once grand lobby, a laundry room that needs flood insurance – in an apartment of traditional fittings, high ceilings, quiet neighbors, say hello to familiar faces on the elevator, stand with Emma on the hot tarred surface of the roof, at the western ledge, watching a storm come whipping across the river in our direction (ZK, 186).

Described in all its details, Jeffrey's apartment responds to his needs, fits in with his hesitancy, is an extension of his person. It is a place where the soul can quieten down and hover over the walls. His interior space faces the parts of the city that are most familiar to him, revealing those streets and that corners more suitable to feed his idea of inhabiting the metropolis. That type of interior responds to him specifically, to his personality and needs, and puts him in relation to others, makes him feel part of a community. Plus, it also allows him to welcome Emma. The interior not only stabilizes his position in the city, but

also shelters him from the bad weather that threatens the Grid, placing him in a somewhat privileged position to watch the storm advancing towards him, still feeling protected. More protected than if he were on the street, even if it was somewhere safe. The inside spaces are the anchorage point for the characters in the city, their essence is enclosed in them, so that even when they are far away from their rooms, just knowing they are still there triggering a feeling of relief in the characters and reminds them that somewhere the essential part of themselves is kept. This way they always have a place where they can return and recognize themselves as happens to the young filmmaker of *Point Omega*, stranded in the desert:

I sat back and closed my eyes for a moment, seeing my apartment, clear and still and empty, four in the afternoon, local time, and there seemed more of me there in dusty light than there was here, in the house or under open sky, but *I* wondered if I really wanted to go back to being the man who lives in the two rooms that are surrounded by the city that was built to measure time (PO, 75) My life at a glance, everything there, music, movies, books, the bed and desk, the seared enamel around the burners on the stove. (PO, 126)

If New York is the city “where people do not ask” (PO, 47), the interior is the space where the character can question himself. The space thanks to which the character can decide his action in the metropolis. As in the case of the protagonist of *The Starveling*, who decides to devote his life to watching films, starting from a guarantee provided by his room: “When it started [...] he lived in

one room. He did not hope for improved circumstances. This was where he belonged, single window, shower, hotplate, a squat refrigerator, a makeshift closet for scant possessions. There is a kind of eventfulness that resembles meditation” (S, 183).

Although, as we have seen, the metropolitan interior is of a different quality from an interior located in the extreme places of the world, the risk for the character to fall back into silence, into isolation is always high. The metropolitan interiors make the city a more livable one, because the character creates a personal representation of the city that, at some point, becomes much better than the real city. However, by denying the essential quality of the interior, that is the dynamic opposition that always keeps the outside city in contact with the character, the house soon becomes difficult to guard, to defend and if in the other rooms you could slip and merge into the walls without encountering any resistance, in New York this is not feasible. The character will have to find a way to keep the door at least ajar.

At the end of a walk in the financial district, Lyle confesses to Pammy that:

“I was downtown. I walked around down till now. [...] The district, outwardly, is like the end of organized time – outwardly, mind you. [...]”

“Inwardly?”

“Things happening [...]”

(P, 71-72)

“All the space is inside” (MII, 40), says Brita to Bill in *Mao II* about the newly erected Twin Towers. Finally, DeLillo’s New York is a New York that follows

Rem Koolhaas' theory of lobotomy, according to which, the exceeding of a certain critical mass due to the construction of ever larger and larger buildings has created a rupture in the relationship, which Koolhaas calls moral, between the interior and the exterior⁵⁰⁹. The latter no longer reveals what are the elements that should compose the interior, and the interior, as a result, no longer confirms the revelations of the exterior. There is no longer a coincidence between exterior and interior. There has been a discrepancy between the facade and what might be inside⁵¹⁰. Between the container and its contents:

In the deliberate discrepancy between container and contained, New York's makers discover an area of unprecedented freedom. They exploit and formalize it in the architectural equivalent of a lobotomy - the surgical severance of the connection between the frontal lobes and the rest of the brain to relieve some mental disorders by disconnecting thought processes from emotions. The architectural equivalent separates exterior from and interior architecture. In this way the Monolith spares the outside world the agonies of the continuous changes raging inside it. It hides everyday life⁵¹¹.

⁵⁰⁹ "Buildings have both an interior and an exterior", Koolhaas, p. 100

⁵¹⁰ "In fact, the schizoid arrangement of thematic planes implies an architectural strategy for planning the interior of the Skyscraper, which has become autonomous through the lobotomy: the Vertical Schism, a systematic exploitation of the deliberate disconnection between stories. By denying the dependence of one floor on any other, the Vertical Schism allows their arbitrary distribution within a single building" Koolhaas, pp. 105-107

⁵¹¹ Koolhaas, p. 100-101

This concealment of daily life and this painful and sharp division causes an emotionally and intellectually complicated New York experience. In their denial of the activity of the interior, the skyscrapers of DeLillian urban architecture become repelling self-monuments⁵¹² that insinuate in the character the suspicion that inside them, plots are made against him. This separation also accentuates social differences. DeLillo's New York shows the urban contrasts with such clarity: homeless people seek shelter against the impenetrable walls that protect wealth and power and perpetuate their condition.

The reaction to these monoliths is thus to transform their interiors into similar monoliths⁵¹³, into an opposition that is no longer dynamic. It is a real opposition, a solid one, where a wall stands against a wall almost compressing the city and thwarting its vital breath.

⁵¹² "It is a solipsism, celebrating only the fact of its disproportionate existence [...] This monument of the 20th century is the Automonument, and its purest manifestation is the Skyscraper", Koolhaas, p. 100

⁵¹³ "Eric [...] takes a deep satisfaction in tall buildings; he identifies then with himself. But to Eric, the tall building represents neither a monument to human industry and intellect capable of bulding spires to abrade God's firmament, nor a cathedral of corporate supremacy. Eric's ideal tall buildings is a cenotaph: a monument to the disappearance of the human through the surpassing of the present", Randy Laist, *Ibid.*, p. 263

1.3.1 Dynamic Opposition

On the one hand we have a street “hovering on the edge of revelation” (GJS, 18-19), on the other “a small crooked room, cold as a penny” (GJS, 6). DeLillo’s third novel, *Great Jones Street*, “not one of his more highly regarded novels”⁵¹⁴, is built entirely on a dynamic opposition between inside and outside. Between the street mentioned in the title and the small studio apartment where the rock star Bucky Wunderlick retires at the height of his success. The plot is thin⁵¹⁵, a character isolates himself in New York in a room and is continually disturbed by a procession of other characters who are competing for two products: a drug capable of blocking the ability to speak and the music tapes that Bucky recorded alone in a mountain refuge, the famous *Mountain Tapes*⁵¹⁶. The unintentional exchange⁵¹⁷ of these two products, which, being packaged in the same way, are at a certain point confused⁵¹⁸, twists the course of events, which, up to that

⁵¹⁴ Anthony DeCurtis, *The Product: Bucky Wunderlick, Rock’n’Roll and Don DeLillo’s Great Jones Street*, in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, edited by Frank Lentricchia, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 131.

⁵¹⁵ “I think the plot found me. In a book about fear and paranoia, a plot was bound to assert itself. It’s not the tightest sort of plotting - more like drug fantasies, seeing dead relatives come out of the walls”, Begley, 1993, p. 94

⁵¹⁶ “The drug and Wunderlick’s music, no matter how authentically conceived or individually created, are both products, and the buying and selling of products is what makes the world of *Great Jones Street* turn,” DeCurtis, 2007, p. 137

⁵¹⁷ “Hanes brings the tapes and exchanges them for the package with the first product, the word-blocking drug. This event is central in more than one sense: not only does it take place midway through chapter 13, in the exact center of the novel, but in exchanging one product for another the novel identifies them”, Mark Osteen, “*A Moral Form to Master Commerce*”: *The Economics of DeLillo’s “Great Jones Street”*, in *Critique*, Minneapolis, Minn., Vol. 35, Issue 3, (Spring 1994), p. 161

⁵¹⁸ “The package he took from the shopping bag looked the same as the one in the trunk. Brown wrapping paper. Brown gummed tape. Same size. Roughly the same weight” (GJS, 128).

moment, had been rather static. This narrative line responds to the ironic and unquestionable assumption that by now every artistic product is on the same level with any other kind of goods. What makes the novel interesting is the tension that is created between Bucky's desire for stasis and the movement of the city around him. The real energy that moves the novel precisely originates from this contrast. This is the first time that the metropolitan room qualifies as peculiar compared to the other rooms specifically because of the inevitability of the dynamic opposition⁵¹⁹. From this novel on, the dynamic opposition will be the fabric on which each of DeLillo's metropolitan narratives unfolds. At the end of this path, we'll see the *Cosmopolis*, to which we will devote ample space in the next chapter. It is useful, however, before we get there, to dwell a little bit more on this novel.

Barbuscia is right⁵²⁰ when he writes that *Great Jones Street* continues the exploration of that metaphorical *end zone* that gives its title to the previous novel. The story of Bucky Wunderlick seems, in fact, to develop from that isolated and muffled dimension that characterizes the conclusion of the *End Zone*⁵²¹. When he arrives in New York, after having unexpectedly abandoned the tour, Bucky finds a city covered in snow: "It was dark in the street, snowing again" (GJS,

⁵¹⁹ "*Great Jones Street* is DeLillo's first analysis of the problems with Stephen Dedalus's modernist aesthetic principles. Instead of permitting Wunderlick to find his voice, silence and exile merely allow others to put words into his mouth, drowning out his words with echoes", Osteen, (2008), p. 140-141

⁵²⁰ Barbuscia, p. 69

⁵²¹ "Bucky's story begins where Gary's ended, in a small room. Both men remove themselves from society in an attempt to find some space outside the seemingly pervasive influence of the media", Douglas Keesey, *Don DeLillo*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1993, p. 48.

6)⁵²². Everything is still, “the mornings were cold and dark. Down the street the rounded doors of the firehouse remained closed” (GJS, 14). For several days Bucky manages to pursue his need for uninterrupted solitude: “The room’s tensions were suitable for a few enterprises besides my own, that of testing the depths of silence. Or one’s willingness to be silent. Or one’s fear to this willingness” (GJS, 26). His desire is to shut out the world, he wants to exclude the city from his room, unlike Packer who, instead, tries to introject the metropolis into his limousine/room. Bucky chooses New York simply because it is New York, a city that in his eyes is so strikingly obvious⁵²³ that it does not need to be investigated further, as Opel tells him: “Great Jones, Bond Street, The Bowery. These places are deserts too” (GJS, 86). Like a desert shrouded in silence, New York is perfect for his goal: “Wunderlick wants to remove himself from the circulation of commodities”⁵²⁴. His fame has reached such a level that Bucky has only two alternatives to choose from: “Either I’d return with a new language for them to speak or they’d seek a divine silence attendant to my own” (GJS, 5). The public wants more and more from him, it idolized him to the point that, as Cochoy writes: “Le mythe Wunderlick menace en effet d’abolir la personnalité de l’artiste”⁵²⁵. Bucky has now become a stereotype, unable to have any kind of control, not only over his art, but also over his person. DeLillo says

⁵²² “Dans un paysage cristallisé et effacé par la neige, le refuge de Great Jones Street est le lieu idéal qui abrite le chanteur en hibernation et le stéréotype qu’il incarne,” Nathalie Cochoy, *Du rock au rap: New York dans Great Jones Street*, in François Happe, ed. *Profils Américains N°16. Don DeLillo*, Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry - Montpellier 3, 2004. p. 36.

⁵²³ “You know you are in New York. You’re in New York. It’s New York. This fact is inescapable. In other places I didn’t always know where I was” (GJS, 24).

⁵²⁴ Osteen, (1994), p. 158

⁵²⁵ Cochoy, (2004), p. 36

about the creation of this character: “The interesting thing about that particular character is that he seems to be at a crossroads between murder and suicide. For me, that defines the period between 1965 and 1975, and I thought it was best exemplified in a rock-star music”⁵²⁶. In this metropolitan desert Bucky tries to carve out a space of purity where he can either immerse himself to return regenerated or lose himself in it for good. Not only does the novel begin with the ending of another novel (*End Zone*), an ending, as we have already pointed out, that collapses on itself, but it also begins its narration - Bucky writes his story in the first person⁵²⁷ - by saying that “I was interested in endings, in how to survive a dead idea. What came next for the wounded of Houston might very well depend on what I was able to learn beyond certain personal limits, in endland, far from the tropics of fam” (GJS, 5). Certainly not the best pretext to kick off a novel. The *endlands*, for those who have experience of DeLillo’s earlier novel or even his later ones, are those places where novels usually end⁵²⁸.

However, New York is anything but a desert. And the substantial difference between the two novels is precisely this: the setting, and consequently the function of the room in relation to it. Because the metaphorical spark that ignites the narration of the text is indeed a real spark: “The building was pounded by shock waves from an explosion at a construction site nearby” (GJS, 28). As Colson Whitehead says, “You are a New Yorker when what was there before is

⁵²⁶ DeCurtis, (2007), p. 133

⁵²⁷ “Great Jones Street est donc non seulement la caverne-métonymique où se loge l’image stéréotypée du “rocker” mais aussi la chrysalide où s’opère sa métamorphose en écrivain”, Cochoy, (2004), p. 38

⁵²⁸ “Thus he begins where many of DeLillo’s obsessive ascetic protagonists reside,” Osteen, (1994), p. 157

more real and solid than what is here now”⁵²⁹. There are as many New Yorks as there are people who have passed through it. The city is constantly changing and surprising by manifesting what is there and what is no longer there. New York is the antithesis of every desert. A gust of wind in New York is a perceptual shock, not a further leveling of the landscape. The line of the horizon does not retain the knowledge acquired, it does not let it sediment layer upon layer in a slow accumulation, but that line of certainty disappears in an infinite multiplication of new lines, in a dizzying geography that always catches one off guard and forces the character to continually renegotiate the relationship between the New York engraved in his mind and the real New York that is about to change at any given moment. As happens to Bucky throughout the course of the novel. In the New York of the seventies, as Catalina Neculai has well described, “a flagrant contrast existed, on the one hand, between the office building boom and privatized redevelopment, which fueled false expectations about improvement of living standards, and, on the other hand, the searing predicament of local neighborhoods in a rotting inner city divested of public funds. The contrastive image of the rising office skyscraper and the disintegrating neighborhood is most emblematic for the 1970s New York City”⁵³⁰. The New York that Bucky took for granted as a well-known place is instead on the verge of a crucial transformation. A change rooted in a strong contrast, symbolized by the construction of the World Trade Center, which took place precisely in those years: “the two office buildings were metonyms for crisis

⁵²⁹ Colson Whitehead, *The Colossus of New York. A City in Thirteen Parts*, Anchor Books, New York, 2003, p.4

⁵³⁰ Catalina Neculai, *Urban Space and Late Twentieth-Century New York Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014, p. 90

in spite of the connotation of boom and prosperity that they were invested for”⁵³¹.

Great Jones Street is located between the neighborhoods of Greenwich Village and the East Village, Downtown, one of the areas of New York that starting in those years would undergo a total change, not only on an architectural level, but also on a social level, exemplified by the transformation of the factories present there and now decaying into lofts, which would be the first sign of the subsequent process of gentrification of the area⁵³². Bucky’s room is thus right in the center of a neighborhood in full ferment, and not only that, unbeknownst to him, the room has now become a real estate asset of his record label⁵³³. Not the last pure space in which to pursue his *waldenian* ideal⁵³⁴, but a place perfectly inserted in the economy of the city.

“The room was dark” (GJS, 30), but “the air carried a dismal stench, some kind of earth gas released by the detonations” (GJS, 30)⁵³⁵. The first friction that initiates the dynamic opposition lies here, in the basic urban element, that is, in

⁵³¹ Neculai, p. 90

⁵³² “As city governments and the press throughout the United States praised loft living as a part of general urban resurgence of the 1970s, the residential conversion of lots began to interest sponsors of a different type. These were investors rather than owner-occupiers, or real-estate developers and builders instead of tenants”, Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living. Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London, 2014, p. 2

⁵³³ “Transparanoia owns this building,” he said” (GJS, 8).

⁵³⁴ “Wunderlick’s spiritual exile is a part of a long tradition in American culture, perhaps best exemplified by Thoreau’s Walden. [...] *Great Jones Street*, however, re-examines such Thoreauvian economies in the light of the late capitalist economy of commodity consumption”, Osteen, (1994), p. 157

⁵³⁵ According to DeLillo, the city acted on him in the same way it acted on his characters, entering by force into the writing process: “Sometimes things insinuate themselves onto page. When I was working on *Great Jones Street*, there was dynamiting going on all the time, and eventually these construction noises turned up in the book”, LeClair, (2005), p. 14

the difference of state between the inside and the outside, and in the character's inability to overturn it in his favor.

On the one hand then we have the street, pressing on the walls of the room, creating continuous jolts in the actions of the character as he strenuously tries to make his desire come true. On the other hand, the interior, also beaten by the currents of the city that invade him irreparably and towards which the protagonist is unable to defend himself. Where the rooms of the desert favored a comforting situation, the rooms of the metropolis are under siege. From here, the second friction: "The very permeability of Wunderlick's room - the ultimate room of his own, an image of the sacrosanct internal world of the artist - is testimony to the failure of alternatives and escapes in the novel"⁵³⁶.

Soon, in fact, even though Bucky has not told anyone the location of his retreat, the Great Jones Street apartment is invaded by a series of characters who cannot understand the rock star's intentions⁵³⁷ and urge him to participate in their activities. Cochoy described it well: "Le refuge de *Great Jones Street* devient alors la scène où les garants de la spontanéité informelle et les tenants de la codification extrême se croisent et se confondent, par le truchement d'acteurs individuels ou de groupuscules bien localisés sur la carte de la ville ou le plan de l'immeuble"⁵³⁸. The hectic activity of the metropolis cannot avoid that seemingly calm space in which Bucky sits motionless. That space, after all, belongs to the city. Its stillness

⁵³⁶ DeCurtis, 2007, p. 135

⁵³⁷ "In another sense, *Great Jones Street* depicts a group of grotesque and stylized performances by a series of nearly indistinguishable characters, identified by little more than their voices. It is a theater in which Bucky has evolved from performer to spectator [...] More specifically *Great Jones Street* resembles a masque [...] The masque is less a drama than a series of tableaux, and the chapters of *Great Jones Street* function similarly", Osteen, (1994), p. 164

⁵³⁸ Cochoy, (2004), p. 40

is an affront. On the one hand, Transparanoia, his record label, constantly needs new products signed by Bucky to sell, and on the other, Happy Valley Farm Commune, which wants to exploit Bucky's isolation to promote the return of privacy in America⁵³⁹.

“Cette perturbation se donne aussi à lire dans la répartition spatiale de l'immeuble-synecdotique de *Great Jones Street*”⁵⁴⁰. Unlike the conglomerates of the desert, the city's real estate carries inscribed in its structure the dynamics that inhabit the city. Bucky, in fact, lives between two opposing entities, like two opposing drives that act on his silence and summarize the struggle that is taking place outside⁵⁴¹. On one side, above him, lives Fenig, who represents the excess of words, the writer who writes incessantly hoping, without success, to find a place in the market. He is the artist who perpetually aspires to embrace agencies like Transparanoia. On the other side, below him, live Mrs Micklewhite and her son, who could very well represent the natural instances of Happy Farm: “présence larvaire ou déjà putrifiée, les fils Micklewhite est un “devenir” aussi innommable qu'une voix s'écoulant indéfiniment dans le “jarred” d'un dire impossible”⁵⁴². Bucky's room is a threshold, between the rock star's past, exemplified by Fenig, and the future, ensnared in those primordial sounds

⁵³⁹ “Happy Valley exemplifies how commodity culture turns political awareness into private pleasures, how it transforms first-person consciousness into a “universal third person” (*Americana* 270) by appropriating even the symbols of individual rebellion,” Osteen, (1994), p. 160

⁵⁴⁰ Cochoy, (2004), p. 42

⁵⁴¹ “Happy Valley retrouve ainsi le silence sonore, ineffable et volatile de la nature en érigeant les murs d'une cité intérieure. Inversement, Transparanoia tente d'isoler la parole dans le carcan des copies en recréant la nature d'un cri”, Cochoy, p. 42

⁵⁴² Cochoy, (2004), p. 42

emitted by the child⁵⁴³. Because what Bucky is aiming for is not so much a return to childhood as - as Barbuscia points out⁵⁴⁴ - the search for a purer form of language⁵⁴⁵, free from any dominant cultural conditioning. The problem is that Bucky, in order to do this, chooses the city, without understanding that the very essence of the city requires a pact of collaboration. By constructing the building in which Bucky lives in the image and likeness of the city, DeLillo reaffirms the city as a very peculiar place, starting from a room that keeps out the outside world and only at the end does he re-establish the canonical procedure of all metropolitan writing. In every urban narrative a relationship must be created between character and city, the character must achieve his aims and desires by leading them back in some way to the plots that the city draws around him, overpowering him most of the time. This is where the ultimate challenge

⁵⁴³ “Because time thins to “hurried calm” and thickens to “slimy history” and because the space of the novel’s action narrows to the door, stairway, and interior of Bucky’s apartment and the three blocks of Great Jones Street, most of DeLillo’s novel belongs to Bakhtin’s chronotope of threshold. [...] Indeed, Bucky is on some threshold of discovery, of crisis, or of indecisiveness throughout the novel”, Robert E. Kohn, *Parody, Heteroglossia, and Chronotope in Don DeLillo’s Great Jones Street*, in *Style*, Vol. 39, No. 2, General Issue (Summer 2005), p. 212 - We will return to the concept of the chronotope in the conclusion of this thesis.

⁵⁴⁴ “The apartment on Great Jones Street represents Bucky’s search for a form of “self-attenuation” (GJS, 87). [...] Thus, it is not the search for emptiness, or the consequence of a self-destructive and nihilistic pose, that is the true motivation for Bucky’s exile. Rather, it is the desire for that “minimum” that can never be brought to nothingness [...] an “inannulable minimum” to be contrasted with the noise of the outside world from which Bucky wants to escape, and to be contrasted with the void that is nothing but the counterpart of that same noise”, Barbuscia, p. 75 (translation by me)

⁵⁴⁵ “Just here DeLillo signals what will be a career long meditation on the idea of language as it exists in the “unimprinted” minds of the very young. As Lancelot Andrews observes in a famous passage, the literal meaning of the world infant is “without speech”, and DeLillo, like Andrews (and T.S. Eliot), savors the paradox of some infinitely supple, even numinous linguistic possibility that dwells in the mouths of wordless”, Cowart, (2003), p. 38

between character and city lies: the character places himself in opposition to the overwhelming forces of the metropolis, and, digging into the recesses of the grid, he identifies a dynamic path where he can trace the direction towards his desire⁵⁴⁶.

Down on the street someone was using a hammer. The sound was vibrant, accompanied by liquid echoes, and soon it was joined by the sound of another hammer, maybe a block away, a thick ripple to each granulating blow, probably Bond Street. The heavier of the two sounds was the more distant, and together they formed a slowly spreading wake, one of time, silence and reverberation, each of these flowing through the others, softening the petrified air, until finally one hammer was rested, and the other grew brutal. (GJS, 29)

DeLillo writes the resolution of the enigma already at the beginning, but it goes unnoticed and unheard of. The solution is in the city. The solution can be found by looking out of the window, opening it to welcome the noise of the city, overlapping and then intersecting it with one's own silence. That silence that

⁵⁴⁶ “La reversibilité que l'intrigue organise entre les représentants de la violence subversive du cri (Happy Valley ou Micklewhite) et les maîtres de l'articulation régulée (Transparanoia ou Fenig) permet d'appréhender la position de l'auteur. En effet, pour le chanteur comme pour l'auteur, l'accès à l'écriture et à l'espace urbain [...] apparaît comme un “point de pur passage” - une phase de latence où l'écriture chemine vers la plénitude informe du son sans pourtant s'y”, Cochoy, (2004), p. 44

Bucky looks for in the recesses of time⁵⁴⁷, that form of personal language he still needs to create, but the city continuously recreates it for itself instead in its incessant reproduction, as the blows of the first and the second hammer demonstrate: they ruthlessly continue to build its history, but it is not any new language. This can be found in what lies in the middle, where, like a flash of lightning, the intuition of an outline: the room, then, becomes the unique point from which that latent possibility can be observed. But for this to be evident, Bucky must first shut himself up and find his way back to the excitement of discovering the city again. Eventually Bucky takes the drug that blocks his ability to speak. He loses his speech, as happens to the protagonist in *End Zone*, only here, the event occurs just before the end, and not at the end. In the finale of *Great Jones Street*, Bucky wanders around the city, or rather, Bucky walks in the hidden interstices between one hammer and another, discovering an old Manhattan⁵⁴⁸ that endures between the folds of the Manhattan to come⁵⁴⁹ :

⁵⁴⁷ “Isolated in a room, immersed in a strict silence, Bucky senses the presence of hidden potentialities in the space of a single minute”, Barbuscia, , p. 78 ; “The sense of time in *Great Jones Street* is ambiguous or vague”, Khon, p. 213

⁵⁴⁸ “When I was working on the book there were beggars and derelicts in parts of the city they'd ever entered before. A sense of failed souls and forgotten lives on a new scale. And the place began to feel a little like a community in the Middle Ages. Disease in the streets, insane people talking to themselves, the drug culture spreading among the young. We're talking about the very early 1970s, and I remember thinking of New York as a European city in the fourteenth century. Maybe this is why I was looking for a ruined sort of a grandeur in the language at the end of the book”, Begley, 2005, p. 94-95

⁵⁴⁹ “Wunderlick sees the geography of New York anew, as a kind of blank manuscript on which the history of peoples has yet to be written. [...] He sees the history of immigration, of movement and growth, written spectrally in the streets [...] he reads in the streets a political and economic history of the city [...] Entry into wordlessness, into void, has afforded Wunderlick a clear sight of the relations of production at work in the city. It has allowed him to read the city clearly and accurately as an expression of economic forces. But it also gave to him the city as a material text which is still organized

“Bucky chemine à travers le babil de sa voix et la diversité babélienne de Manhattan (il parcourt les quartiers juif, hispanique, italien, chinois...) vers une fusion idéale du langage et de l’espace. Mais en cours de route, il inaugure un nouveau mode d’écriture urbaine, plus attentif aux présences inchoatives qui parsèment le trottoir de leurs traces éphémères”⁵⁵⁰. This creates a creative commuting between room and city, the two poles that enhance the discoveries of the character: “The bed remains at the center of the room. [...] and I begin to feel I’m sinking into the history[...] I walked more slowly” (GJS, 249).

Bucky, after the drug injection, thus finds himself unable to use language: “Having no words for the things around me affected even my movement across the room” (GJS, 24), but paradoxically Bucky is also the narrator of the story himself, and in the writing of the last chapter it is as if we are witnessing live the formation of a new language in which the town actively participates. It is the only chapter in the entire novel, in fact, to feature no dialogue (apart from the brief Chapter 15, which, however, serves a purely instrumental function, serving to finally reveal what the Mountain Tapes are), and in its form it is as if we enter inside his mind, as if *we see* the sounds and words of the city and simultaneously witness the mind’s effort to recompose them into letters. Bucky enters into relationship with the city, from the city he takes in and brings back, his body and mind act as a sounding board, and the vibrations are transformed into the notes of a score. The writing⁵⁵¹ creates, in the reader’s mind, an internal rhythm, a

around an immanent possibility, an emptiness in which the history that still remained un-lived is harbored, and which allows us to reread what has already been written, as it gestures to the form of that which has yet to be imagined”, Boxall, (2006), p. 48

⁵⁵⁰ Cochoy, (2004), p. 52

⁵⁵¹ “L’écriture devenue rythme parvient à dévoiler l’ineffable poésie qui vibre au-delà des “passages obligés” de la géo-graphie newyorkaise”, Cochoy, p. 55

complex rhythm made up of continuous tempo changes. And so the melody, in a crescendo that from silence explodes in four points into a kind of rap (“le rap de Don DeLillo”⁵⁵²). There is the slow, quiet rhythm of movement verbs that define the geography of his movements and punctuate the edges of the composition: “I never ventured north of Cooper Square” (GJS, 244); “I turned a corner” (GJS, 245); “We headed south and east” (GJS, 245); “We headed west from the bridge districts and reached Chinatown” (GJS, 246); “We walked down to the battery” (GJS, 247); “We rode past an urban redevelopment” (GJS, 248). And within these are created the spaces of improvisation, with the rhythm becoming more syncopated, where Bucky finds himself “among traceless men and women, those whose only peace was in shouting ever more loudly: nothing tempted them more than voicelessness. But they shouted” (GJS, 248). The city fragments into a dusting of noises that do not materialize in the writing, as the writing leaves them on the threshold, harnessed in the written words without defining their content, in allusive phrases, which do not describe, but simply list the presence of sound sources where it is the reader’s suggestion that has to try to give them concrete form, unlike, for example, in *The Body Artist*, where the writing tries to bring back to the page not only the presence of a sound source, but also the sound itself by resorting to the use of onomatopoeia: “The birds broke off the feeder in a wing-whir that was all *b*’s and *r*’s, the letter *b* followed by a series of vibrato *r*’s (TBA, 17). There are, for example, the “police dogs (that) roamed the U-Haul trailer lots”(GJS, 244); the “tall black kids in sneakers charged up out of the subway, cutting left and right across a street” (GJS, 245), then “in barbershops Latin men stood talking” (GJS, 246); inside the Criminal

⁵⁵² Cochoy, p. 54

Court Building “the lobby was crowded and noisy” (GJS, 246); “we saw the subway crowds drop into openings earth” (GJS, 248); “the bus panted over cobblestones”(GJS, 249).

Surrounding this sound paste that is like a carpet, rise the four moments that resemble the pacing of a rap, and appear on the page just like peaks, single words in block letters, with unintelligible meaning, and chasing each other in the assonance of letters, and where the body parts merge with the words caught around, sanctioning the relationship between individual and city:

HAND FOOT ARM GOD NOSE TOE FACE GOD LEG ARM GOD SEE
IT RAIN TWAIN CAIN PAIN BRAIN SLAIN STAIN GAIN VAIN SEE IT
MOUTH EYE TEETH GOD NECK CHEST GOD SEE IT IN THE
DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT (GJS, 247)

The form in which this graft appears on the page seems to lead directly back to Bucky's mind, which inwardly repeats the words to itself, as if through their scanning and repetition he can finally find their meaning. The other grafts, on the other hand, are the words Bucky hears from a woman who catalogs everything she finds, or the words of a salesman, who with a repartee cadence, in its simplicity sums up the economic function on which the entire town rests, with that final reference to that apple that has forever taken away Eden by throwing the individual into the chaos of the world:

YOU'RE BUYING I'M SELLING YAPPLES YAPPLES YAPPLES (GJS,
245)

And it is in this complex structure, mute but simultaneously with a strong aural impact, that the reader's mind first in reconstructing the sounds to which the sentences allude - a reconstruction that also passes through an obligatory interaction with the different ethnic groups that populate the city, leading the imagination to reconstruct at the same time also a heterogeneous and living visual landscape - and then in the cadenced repetition of the words in block letters, in an appropriation of the words spoken by others, that a triangular relationship is created between city, character and reader. And urban writing then becomes participatory writing. The last chapter might thus also appear as the "mental" draft of Bucky's next yet-to-be-written song.

It is the dynamic opposition, finally experienced positively, that places the character fully into reality, in history, uniting his personal story to that of the city, finally putting them in relation. Like Lauren in *The Body Artist*, Bucky too, in the finale, keeps the window open. A window that no longer overlooks the void, but that has meanwhile become a piece of a mosaic that depicts the multiplicity of the city, and that places the character in context, in a dynamic situation that is still to be explored: "I looked out at the window and moaned (quietly) at the lumbering trucks below and at the painters and sculptors now occupying windows across the way, placid faces suspended over Great Jones Street" (GJS, 249).

Dynamic opposition makes the city visible, and it makes the character visible. It puts them both face to face. And even though Bucky admits that he has not been able to figure out which direction to take, and finds himself, as at the beginning, suspended between choices - as DeLillo said: "*Great Jones Streets* bends

back on itself in the sense that the book is the narrator's way of resurfacing⁵⁵³ - I find it hard to see a failure in the ending. Instead, it is the realization that gives way to a new beginning⁵⁵⁴. New York, for DeLillo, is a world of its own that, starting from a room through the streets and returning to the room, cannot help but generate an energy that inevitably inscribes the character on the walls of the city, and inscribes the city on the character's skin. Where the ending does not close, but opens, definitely. The city is an inexhaustible beginning: the perfect opposite of an *endland*.

Before closing my study of interiors in DeLillo's fiction with an analysis of *Cosmopolis* - the novel that more than any other focuses on the ongoing conflict in the metropolis between human and artificial - I think it is useful to dwell on a few more examples of how the dynamic opposition is instead positively experienced by the characters. These are rare cases, brief gaps within the texts, tangential experiences. The dynamic opposition experienced negatively is the hidden mechanism of the plot: in most cases, in fact, DeLillo has focused on characters who have attempted to evade this opposition by inhabiting the metropolitan interior, trying to ignore or even overcome the city, as in the case just seen of *Great Jones Street* and in what we will see later in *Cosmopolis*. Attempts which, as we have seen, fail because of the peculiar quality of the metropolitan room which, unlike the others, is based precisely on the inevitability of dynamic opposition.

⁵⁵³ LeClair, 2005, p. 12

⁵⁵⁴ "I think this is how urban people react to the deteriorating situation around them - I think we need to invent beauty, search out some restoring force. [...] Ugly and beautiful - this is part of the tension of *Great Jones Street*." Begley, (2005), p. 94

Scott stood looking around the loft apartment. Columns extended the length of the room. [...] Out the south windows the Trade towers stood cut against the night, intensely massed and *near* (MII, 87).

That *Mao II* is a novel built from room to room has already been said. It remains, therefore, to close a discourse⁵⁵⁵ left open, moving from Bill's house to Brita's. Brita's loft with respect to the concept of dynamic opposition is paradigmatic. Its first characteristic is the optical illusion: the apartment, thanks to the columns, appears larger than it really is, constituting a world apparently able to contain the multitude of the city. There is the looming presence of the city, represented in its most striking symbol: The Twin Towers⁵⁵⁶.

Brita has already anticipated, in a dialogue with Bill, what she sees outside her window: "there's a rooftop chaos, a jumble, four, five, six, seven storeys, and it's water tanks, laundry lines, antennas, belfries, pigeon lofts, chimney pots, everything human about the lower island-little crouched gardens, statuary, painted signs" (MII, 39). It is expressed through a list, as in the description of Bill's house, the mode of the coherent excess list returns, but the difference is marked by the adjective *human* that gives the landscape a dynamism, a vital disorder that was completely absent there. New York is this: "the essence of the

⁵⁵⁵ See Chapter *Artistic creation in the room: Mao II*

⁵⁵⁶ "disons simplement que le paysage fictionnel de *Mao II* est tout entier dominé par la silhouette emblématique des tours du World Trade Center." François Happe, *L'image ironique: figures de la répétition dans Mao II de Don DeLillo*, in *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, n° 73, juin 1997, pp. 66-77, p. 67

city is its people”⁵⁵⁷. The metropolitan interior is an obligatory view on human activity⁵⁵⁸. It is impossible to inhabit an interior without correspondence with the exterior, and Brita accepts it and lives this complicated relationship⁵⁵⁹.

Brita continues in her description of the wide-open view in front of her window by adding another important aspect: “But it’s all being flattened and hauled away so *they* can build their towers” (MII, 39). Although the pronoun *they* remain undefined, the criticism of the economic policy that has redesigned (and is still redesigning) the city is evident. *Mao II*, like *Great Jones Street* contains a denunciation of “the development of the FIRE industry, of an urban regime of finance, insurance, and real estate that increasingly conditioned and took command of the production of urban space and its social reproduction during the 1970s and the 1980s”⁵⁶⁰. This is the crux of the matter: what happens in the city, its transformations, as well as its contradictions, can be experienced not only from the streets, but also from the inside. From an interior one can reconstruct the processes that govern metropolitan life. DeLillo describes New York and gives us a composite image of the city simply by looking out of the window of Brita’s room. Again, in *Mao II* the ongoing struggle is between a human idea of the city and a city that becomes more and more volatile, a postmodern city, where, as Lehan writes: “as free-floating signification eliminates meaning, interpretation becomes equivalent to paranoia, which is the result of any self-enclosed system. We are left with a sense of diminished

⁵⁵⁷ William B. Helmreich, *The New York Nobody Knows. Walking 6,000 miles in the city*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2013, p. 1

⁵⁵⁸ “In New York City, the architectonics of habitation are incommensurate with the heterogeneity of bodies.” Joseph May, *Fluid New York. Cosmopolitan Urbanism and the Green Imagination*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2013, p. 65

⁵⁵⁹ “And I wake up to this and love it and depend on it.” (MII, 39)

⁵⁶⁰ Neculai, p. 15

humanity, of the anonymous and superfluous, of human isolation, and fragility, of anxiety and great nervous tension”⁵⁶¹. That *they* mentioned by Brita is thus a symptom of the sense of paranoia that runs through the inky veins of every DeLillo novel, finding here, however, when speaking of the city, an obvious referent: the new towers. The feeling of paranoia, which elsewhere is pure anguish, turns towards something frighteningly invisible, while in the city there is a resistance to paranoia that settles and grows stronger in the interiors. The metropolitan interiors are, for the characters, places of resistance and existence. In *Mao II there is no relenting*, the duality of the city⁵⁶² persists: “New York, although concretely present as geographic space and sensuous experience, is also abstracted as the visible sign of invisible forces that shape it and encompass it”⁵⁶³.

Returning to the vision of the towers⁵⁶⁴, Brita says, “But having two of them is like a comment, it’s like a dialogue, only I don’t know what they’re saying” (MII, 40).

Although the window of an interior helps shed light on the outside, the fact remains that not everything that happens outside is comprehensible. The

⁵⁶¹ Lehan, p. 266

⁵⁶² “While his novels make no special claim to a theory of the city, they do support the belief that the city is a self-sustaining system; moreover, reality involves a series of interconnecting loops that extend back to nature, where we are called back to what is biologically compelling”, Lehan, p. 281

⁵⁶³ Heinz Ickstadt, *Envisioning Metropolis - New York as Seen, Imaged and Imagined*, Revue électronique d’études sur le monde anglophone [online], 7.2, 2010, online 3/24/2010, consulté le 6/2/2014. URL: <http://erea.revues.org/1069>; DOI: 10.4000/erea.1069

⁵⁶⁴ “The towers themselves sought to capture and to articulate the spirit of technology which belongs in the unembodied, theoretical future. They appear throughout DeLillo’s oeuvre as a kind of delicate antenna, as a radio tuned in to tomorrow, a structure that can somehow negotiate between the spacetime of the twentieth century, and the unanchored time of electronic global capital”, Boxall, (2006), p. 223

interior, however, provides this: the possibility of intuition. The ability to detect the presence of a discourse that excludes the character. Knowing this may be better than ignoring it, because it keeps alive the possibility of a strategy to counter it.

Scott says it well, once he enters Brita's apartment, and Brita says it equally well in her wry response:

“Now I finally feel I've seen New York inside and out, just standing here in this space and looking through the window.”

“When it rains out, it also rains in.” (MII, 87)

Although of the two, initially, it is Scott who seems more comfortable with this invasiveness of the city – “despite whatever inconvenience” (MII, 87) - his statement is dictated by the fact that, first and foremost, Scott is passing through. For him, New York is an accident on his path. Cumbersome, but surmountable. Scott experiences the city as a place of transit in the novel. A city that for him presents itself in two *distinct* moments. In the first, the street dominates, continuing to overwhelm him. His only goal is not to be touched by the oddities that point at him⁵⁶⁵; rather than walking, he flees, as when he encounters a woman chasing him down the street: “He would listen to her but would not reply and would not let her touch or give him anything she had touched” (MII, 22). At this moment the city is summed up in a thought: “take it outside the city, where it's got a chance to live” (MII, 22).

⁵⁶⁵ “When there is enough out-of-placeness in the world, nothing is out of place” (MII, 22).

It is therefore obvious that, when he returns to New York for the second time, he finds it reassuring to be able to avoid the outside – “You can’t send me out there” (MII, 89) - and so in the second moment, the city is reduced to just an inside. Hence his statement conceals a double value, the value of simplification: the city, at that distance, becomes more manageable and, in some ways, even recovers its charm. But his statement, unconsciously, also assumes an ontological value regarding the quality of an interior. Hence Brita’s ironic response: for her, New York “is my official state religion” (MII, 24). She cannot afford to live the city in distinct moments, but in a concatenation of instants that reverberate one into the other, one against the other. Inside and outside, the city is the two moments. And his loft is the nerve center of his work: “I roamed the streets first day, taking picture of city faces [...] I did it for years. [...]” (MII, 24). The street was, in fact, his creative starting point⁵⁶⁶, from the moment he began to inhabit the city, then, after running out of faces to meet on the streets, here is the transition to photographs of writers around the world, “I never stop traveling and taking pictures” (MII, 25). In this creative evolution the loft has become the starting and returning point of each of her journeys, her physical and mental anchor: “these cups and spoons made her feel intact again, reclaimed her from the jet trails, the physics of being in transit” (MII, 87). The irony used by Brita is therefore the sign of a critical acceptance, of an emotional distance that clears the vision of the city: “I overstate things to stay alive. This is the point

⁵⁶⁶ “DeLillo, therefore, would seem to be intent on a double and articulated operation: to enunciate in narrative and fictional form the main stages of twentieth-century American photography, as Susan Sontag has schematized them; to implicitly outline, under the mask of Brita, the figure of Diane Arbus, through her masters”, Matteo Eremo, “*Americia, seen through photographs, darkly*”. *Don DeLillo, Susan Sontag and Diane Arbus comparing between the lines of Mao II*, in *Et| Contaminated Texts*, no. 2, July- December 2013, p. 61 (translation by me)

of New York. I completely love and trust this city, but I know the moment I stop being angry I'm finished forever." (MII, 88) Brita builds her relationship with the city by keeping the tension high, by living the conflict. She does not run away from the conflicting and contradictory forces acting on New York and therefore on her⁵⁶⁷.

The interior has the power to stabilize the character as an inhabitant of the city, and it also has above all the power to balance the different energy currents that flow through it: "It was strange to lie still in a small corner and feel the power of movement" (MII, 90).

The dynamic opposition is the dual relationship that invests the interior versus the exterior, and the character versus the city.

The metropolitan interior is always porous, it does not hold back silence: "Soon the road replayed itself in her mind" (MII, 90). The city frees itself hitting the different senses. Where there is no sight, there comes hearing: "Sirens sounding to the east" (MII, 88), "She heard car alarms going off in sequence" (MII, 88).

The architecture of the interior space is an architecture that adds the details of the city to the details of the loft, a process that doesn't stop to a mere summative discourse, but it reaches a deeper and deeper meanings each time. In this opposition between the vastness of the exterior and the reductive perimeter of the interior, between the movement of the city and the physical immobility of

⁵⁶⁷ "People are swept out into the streets because the owners need space. Then they are swept off the streets because someone owns the air they breathe." (MII, 88) "Yet it would be a mistake to think that *Mao II* appeals simply and vainly to a traditional liberalism in the face of these new dangers [...] The alternative is to look more directly in the face of terrorism, to investigate its meanings, to pursue a dialogue beyond the borders of liberal America, and this the characters of *Mao II* begin to do", Peter Brooker, *New York Fictions: Modernity, Postmodernism, The New Modern*, Longman, London and New York, 1996, p. 232-233

the character, Brita manages to carve out some time to dig deeply within herself, without ever slipping into that infinite spiral that has sucked in all the other characters who have retreated to places on the edge of the world.

There is always an adversative conjunction in these descents into interiority: “*But* the time eventually came when she had to admit she was still awake” (MII, 91). The “*but*” here gains its strength from paradox, it leaves space for a contradiction that binds city and character, the character and her purposes: “She felt she needed her own hidden meanings to get through the average day” (MII, 90). Brita, curled up and protected⁵⁶⁸, thinks about her body and makes a discovery: “(she) had become defensive, homesick for lost assurances. It wanted to be a refuge against the way things work, against the force of what is out there” (MII, 90). Lying down, with her eyes closed, she runs the risk of being sucked into turning back on the world, into turning back towards an ideal which is still completely free of all friction: “Then she rubbed the cat’s fur and felt her childhood there. It was complete in a touch, everything intact, carried out of old lost houses and fields and summer days into river of her hand” (MII, 90-91). It would be more comforting to abandon oneself. However there comes the “*but*” of the city that brings her back to reality. It resounds like an alarm clock⁵⁶⁹, like a trill that does not make any thoughts vanish, it holds them close to the body. A body that has regained the sense of things around itself, renewed by the discovery it has made. Brita, getting up, approaches the window, projecting her thoughts onto the city. And that meaning achieved thanks to the quality of the interior, fills her eyes, mingling with the city outside, like a cloud of vapor with

⁵⁶⁸ “The roundness of these moments was crossed with something wistful” (MII, 90).

⁵⁶⁹ As Fred Ebb writes in the Theme from *New York, New York* by Martin Scorsese, New York is the city that never sleeps: “I want to wake up in the city that never sleeps”.

blurred edges: “like earthwork art, these vapor columns rising all over the city, white and silent in empty streets” (MII, 91).

Mobility and immobility, interior and exterior, are simultaneous statuses that continually regenerate the character. Brita is then ready to go out again: the encounter with Bill has been digested⁵⁷⁰ and she can prepare to meet the terrorist Rashid⁵⁷¹.

The character experiences the city as a pendulum swinging between inside and outside, and the most obvious demonstration of this dynamic opposition is that experienced by another character in *Mao II*, Karen.

After leaving Reverend Moon’s cult and escaping a cruel attempt at reprogramming by her family, Karen takes refuge in Bill’s house, becoming the lover of both the writer and his assistant, Scott. Then after Bill’s escape⁵⁷², she

⁵⁷⁰ “I need to sleep, to stop the noise in my head. I feel I’ve known all three of you for years and it’s goddamn tiring actually.” (MII, 89)

⁵⁷¹ “Unlike the session with Bill, where’s Brita’s aim was commemoration and resurrection, here she shoots Rashid to disarm him, to steal his force [...] Departing, she shakes Rashid’s hand, “pronouncing her name slowly (MII, 237), as if to say, “You are nothing without me.” Brita’s gesture suggests her cunning awareness of her social and political power: photographs may glorify or diminish [...] Although they represent her mind at work, her photos also present portraits of the culture in which she does that work. Unlike Bill, whose escape from his self-created labyrinth merely leads him into another kind of prison, Brita’s travels from Bill’s house to New York to Beirut place her at center of global culture, yet permit her to remain “somewhat apart”, as if floating slightly above the action, shooting down”, Osteen, (2008), p. 145

⁵⁷² “As the novel moves out from the Bill’s hermitage into the larger world that consumes him, it depicts (like *Players* and *White Noise*) its character’s attempt to reauthorize themselves, to wrest control of the story by consenting to or contesting the spectacular authors who dominate the photos”, Osteen, (1999), p. 655

decides to reach New York as well, finding asylum right in Brita's loft, then Brita soon leaves her for one of his trips⁵⁷³.

For François Happe there is a similarity between Karen's movements in the city and Bill's progressive movements towards the East⁵⁷⁴. Indeed, there are many moments in which the two, although geographically distant, seem to meet, such as when Karen begins to imagine situations⁵⁷⁵, and among these has a vision of a man who is run over, which will then really happen to Bill: "or see a man stepping off the curb and form a picture of the car that's bearing down and then he's in the street all bloodied up" (MII, 149).

What changes in the two paths is the result: Bill disappears into thin air, dying without being recognized, Karen, however, reaches an unprecedented degree of awareness.

As happened with Brita, the dynamic opposition operates inside the character, but in this case with even greater force. Karen, in fact, in her oscillation between the streets of New York and Brita's loft, wakes up to find her own persona. From a character guided by others, a pure empty container subject to the will of others, Karen becomes a character in her own right, now autonomous, capable of reacting and interacting⁵⁷⁶.

⁵⁷³ "Brita went away to take pictures of writers and left the keys and some money. She gave Karen oral and written instructions for feeding the cat and working the locks and the alarm system and she left phone numbers and dates" (MII, 147).

⁵⁷⁴ "Le chemin de croix de Bill semble, en raison de l'ordre de la narration, calqué sur le signes rencontrés par Karen", Happe, (1997), p. 75

⁵⁷⁵ "She began to form pictures of people falling in the street" (MII, 149).

⁵⁷⁶ "We are here confronted with a figure, as it were, concave, which in its creative passivity welcomes what extends outside its boundaries and makes it excrete within itself as (according to Merleau-Ponty's famous formula) in a sounding board. In antithesis to the monadic depiction of self-realized in the Kafkaesque work, this means, in the first place, exposure to relation. [...] Their sense is, in short, in their relationships

Before her arrival in New York, Karen⁵⁷⁷ appears to the reader as an insubstantial character, for Brita she is even a ghost: “She’d entrusted her home, her work, her wine and her cat to a ghost girl” (MII, 166). At the beginning of the novel, Scott finds her. Karen has fled from her relatives and is wandering the streets. She appears to Scott’s eyes as an image from a Bill novel: “Then he knew what was familiar here. It was like something out of Bill Gray” (MII, 77), Bill confirms, adding an essential detail⁵⁷⁸: “Scott says I invented her. [...] She scares me sometimes. She can scare me and delight me in the space of five words. She’s smart about people. Looks right through us. Watches TV and knows what people are going to say next. Not only gets it right but does their voices. [...] She does their voices with a trueness that’s startling. That’s *our* Karen” (MII, 65-66). Karen is defined by a possessive adjective. Karen exists as a function of other characters. Others make Karen exist and yet Karen has this particularity, as Begley has well defined it: “Karen is our guide to the post-literary world, the world we encounter when we close DeLillo’s book, face today and imagine tomorrow. She has two equal qualities: She can merge with the mass

and in their eminently temporal character. Far from solidifying in a lyrical immobility (as in the cases of the novel's twentieth-century poeticization), the character is caught in a becoming: his change in time, in the relationship, in the confrontation [...] appears the most important feature of his physiognomy”, Enrico Testa, *Eroi e figuranti. Il personaggio nel romanzo*, Giulio Einaudi Editore, Turin, 2009, p. 31-32 (translation by me)

⁵⁷⁷ “*Mao II*’s Karen, a character who moves from cult membership to homelessness, is the quintessential decentered subject. Glutted with the visual prescriptions of both programmers and deprogrammers, surfeited with incessant images from television and picture books, she suffers from peculiar lack of perimeters”, Laura Barrett, “*Here but also there*: subjectivity and postmodernism space in “*Mao II*”, in *Modern Fiction Studies* Vol. 45, No. 3, *Don DeLillo Special Issue*, Fall 1999, The Johns Hopkins University Press pp. 788-810, p. 789

⁵⁷⁸ “Two decades and eight novels later, in *Mao II* he invented Karen Janney, whose mind melds with what she sees on television”, Begley, p. 479

consciousness of a crowd, and she can merge with the television screen. [...] Watching television, Karen slips in and out of the event, without regard for the fact of mediation; she experiences what she sees on screen as unmediated reality”⁵⁷⁹. Karen’s personality is something that fluctuates based on what she sees, what she hears, what she perceives. There is no stability, no basic core of identity. Karen is merely character marked by the absence of any discerning capability.

Until her arrival in New York, until the moment she takes possession of Brita’s loft. Slowly, Karen stops being a projection, it is the dynamic opposition operating on her as an energy that draws precise contours.

She felt the warning aura in the street, the sense that she was glowing, cars and people glowing, the electric shiver down her arm and then the full truth of the pain, the pain in full surround, streaming from the neurons, a brain trail so deep it might crack the skin. She could not see for a number of seconds, maybe half a minute, or could see only glow, intense white shadow, and she stood dizzily where she was and waited for the street to reappear so she could walk out of the glow and come into objects and surfaces and the words that we attach to them. She took a cab back to the building. (MII, 148)

This is perhaps one of the strongest passages in DeLillo’s entire urban narrative: a character undergoes almost a transfiguration at the sight of the city in the midst

⁵⁷⁹ Begley, p. 493-494

of its turmoil. The clouding of her vision is nothing more than the refinement of a vision that becomes sharper and deeper. It is the moment in which Karen, from the projection of others, becomes a person⁵⁸⁰.

Karen, in fact, in her commuting between the New York interior and exterior becomes a responsible subject⁵⁸¹ concerned⁵⁸² with the world around her and capable of moving within the institution⁵⁸³, which in the case of the novel is the city, with its fragility fully exposed⁵⁸⁴ and not exempt from precise rules⁵⁸⁵. In proceeding in this evolution, Karen finally inscribes herself in her own story.

⁵⁸⁰ For Ricœur there are four planes that constitute a hermeneutic phenomenology of the person: language, action, narrative and ethical life: “Il vaudrait mieux dire d’ailleurs: *l’homme parlant, l’homme agissant (et j’ajouterai l’homme souffrant), l’homme narrateur et personnage de son récit de vie, enfin l’homme responsable*”, Paul Ricœur, *Approches de la personne*, in *Esprit* No. 160 (3/4), (Mars-avril 1990), Editions Esprit, pp. 115-130, p. 116

⁵⁸¹ “L’élément éthique de ce souhait ou de ce vœu peut être exprimé par la notion d’*estime de soi*. En effet, quoi qu’il en soit du rapport à autrui et à l’institution dont je parlerai un peu plus loin, il n’y aurait pas de sujet responsable si celui-ci ne pouvait s’estimer soi-même en tant que capable d’agir intentionnellement”, Ricœur, (1990), p.116

⁵⁸² “Je suggère d’appeler *sollicitude* ce mouvement du soi vers l’autre, qui répond par l’interpellation du soi par l’autre,” Ricœur, 1990, p. 117

⁵⁸³ “En introduisant le concept d’*institution*, j’introduis une relation à l’autre qui ne se laisse pas reconstruire sur le modèle de l’amitié. L’autre est le vis-à-vis sans visage, le *chacun* d’une distribution juste. [...] Le chacun est un personne distincte, mais je ne la rejoins que per les canaux de l’institution.” Ricœur, 1990, p. 118

⁵⁸⁴ “One theme running through *Mao II* (and other DeLillo novels such as *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*) is that New York, the zenith of postmodern Western technologically advanced capitalism, looks remarkably like a third-world city at times”, Peter Knight, *Mao II and the New World Order*, in *Don DeLillo. Mao II. Underworld. Falling Man*, Edited by Stacey Olster, Continuum International Publishing Group, London, New York, 2011, p. 39.

⁵⁸⁵ “In the subways, in many streets, in corners of the park at night, contact could be dangerous. Contact was not a word or touch but the air that flashed between strangers. She was learning how to alter the way she walked and sat, how to hide her glances or sort of root them out. She walked within herself, did not cross the boundary into the no-man’s-land of a glance, a fleeting ray of recognition. Like I’m a person and you’re a person, which gives you the right to kill me” (MII, 176).

It is peculiar that the episodes of Karen in New York are detached from the main narrative progression, in fact, if we remove these pieces, the plot of the novel would not be altered at all. What DeLillo shows in these sections of the text is how dynamic opposition can bring a character to life, allowing him, once integrated into the metropolitan flow, to free himself from the narrative control that other characters have over him. Succeeding, finally, in the complicated quest of *egotistically* carving out a space entirely dedicated to his development.

Ricœur writes: “Mais, si tout n’est pas langage, tout, dans l’expérience, n’accède au *sens* que sous la condition d’être *porté au langage*”⁵⁸⁶. For the philosopher, the first layer that defines a person is the linguistic one, meaning that a person, on the level of pragmatics, is designated as himself each time, by speaking, he specifies the illocutionary act in which he uses his own words. For this to happen, it is necessary to address someone else, in an interlocutory relation in which the self and the other are implicated in a respective recognition⁵⁸⁷. Everything passes through the assumption of the totality of language as an institution (which on the one hand is prior to the speaker, on the other authorizes him to speak). The process by which Karen reaches this first layer is guided by sight, *to see* and *to look* are the predicates that govern her exploration⁵⁸⁸.

⁵⁸⁶ Ricœur, (1990), 120

⁵⁸⁷ “Mais je ne serais pas celui à qui la parole est adressée si je n’étais pas en même temps capable de me désigner moi-même comme celui à qui la parole est adressée. En ce sens, auto-désignation et allocution sont aussi réciproques que l’étaient plus haut l’estime de soi et la sollicitude.” Ricœur, (1990), p.123

⁵⁸⁸ The street is in the verb *to see*, the moment in which she begins to become aware of the life around her, in which the eye accidentally falls on things: “She saw pictures of missing children [...] She *saw* the normative life of the planet” (MII, 148); the loft is in the verb *to look*, the moment of investigation, the moment in which it is the eye that chooses: “She looked at the limbs of African starving” (MII, 175).

Initially Karen “was loose in the city of overflowing faces and needed to find ways to tell them apart” (MII, 148). Her first approach to the city is overwhelming, right away, she is attracted to the marginalized part of the city, to those individuals - the sax player, the bag-lady, the man who walks back and forth in the subway saying he has holes in his hips without begging - who have “learn how to narrow the space you take up for fear of arousing antagonistic interest” (MII, 145). She sees in them a shared condition. She too hides or has hidden in the spaces of the text. The first attempts at dialogue, however, fail: “It is hard to find a language for unfortunates” (MII, 145). Karen is not recognized by others, has not yet taken form, does not even possess the grammar necessary for dialogue.

For Lévinas the way of manifestation of absolute otherness is the face, because it is in the face that absolute otherness is concretely expressed. The face is not a sign, it does not refer to something else, it is something else. The face is the expression of the unique: “as unique, the face reveals itself in the world but is not of the world; it breaks into the world of the ego, upsetting time - built on the present - and imposing itself as its own name. The face opens the world beyond the world, opens it to the real”⁵⁸⁹. Ricœur corroborates Lévinas’ thesis by adding the further element of reciprocity as a deeper ethical instance. Karen’s precipitation into reality- because it is a precipitation, to all intents and purposes, given that after her first encounters she will come into contact with the community of homeless people in Tompkins Square - thus passes through the progressive establishment of this reciprocity in which Karen constitutes the

⁵⁸⁹ Silvano Petrosino, *La fenomenologia dell'unico. Le tesi di Lévinas*, in Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalità e Infinito. Saggio sull'esteriorità*, Jaca Book, Milan, 2016, p. LXVIII (translation by me)

other as her similar and herself as the other's similar⁵⁹⁰; a reciprocity that takes place in the two moments of dynamic opposition, and that starts precisely from recognizing the face of the Other. Thus, in the street, Karen "began taking cabs here and there, yellow cabs driven by fantastically named men from Haiti, Iran, Sri Lanka, the Yemen" (MII, 148), then, comes the discovery of the park: "She came upon this park. It was something you came upon and then stop in your tracks. A tent city. [...] A refugee camp or the rattiest edge of some dusty township" (MII, 149), and again, as in the instant of ecstasy, taken by dismay, she returns to the loft: "she went home to feed the cat" (MII, 150). It is in this sentence, in this basically banal gesture, that the leap takes place, and Karen, for the first time, finds an anchorage, a pole that opposes the pole of the road and that balances the tension and does not leave her adrift. From now on, the movement will always be this: dangerous excursions outside, saving forays inside. "Some nights she came into the loft and went straight to the pictures" (MII, 174), the interior, as well as a place of protection and stabilization, serves above all as a space of interpretation, of understanding. In the loft Karen "went through many books of photographs, amazed at the suffering she found. Famine, fire, riot, war. These were the never-ceasing subjects, the pictures she couldn't stop looking at. She looked at the pictures, read the captions, looked at the pictures again" (MII, 175)⁵⁹¹.

In the loft, Karen revisits what she saw outside, with the safety of the four walls protecting⁵⁹² her and setting a boundary. With time to observe, to go into detail,

⁵⁹⁰ Ricœur, (1990), p. 117

⁵⁹¹ "While immersing herself in the lives of these lost souls, Karen also studies photographs of disasters, crowds and holy men," Osteen, (1999), p. 657

⁵⁹² "She liked climbing the ladder to Brita's bed with the little TV in hand and the loft all dark and sitting near the ceiling in the glow, watching without sound" (MII, 176).

to dig deep, to begin to get an idea, of the world and of herself, she begins to look at photographs in a way that seems to contradict DeLillo's own words⁵⁹³: "and you know there are thousands more outside the picture"⁵⁹⁴. In fact, observing a photo of a refugee camp, Karen entertains a first relationship of reciprocity with the other by detaching from the mass the people who compose it – "She noticed a single worried adult" (MII, 146) - and questioning them, she begins to pose actively as a person who asks questions to another: "and she wondered if" (MII, 147). The inside allows her what the street does not grant her at first, out there "things fading all the time, hard to retain" (MII, 150). In the interior, on the other hand, things remain attached to her hands, becoming manageable. The interior acts as a *training* space. The images, but also the words: "the words helped her locate the pictures. She needed the captions to fill the space. The pictures could overwhelm her without the little lines of type" (MII, 174). On the other hand, as Susan Sontag warns: "whether the photograph is understood as a naive object or the work of an experienced artificer, its meaning - and the viewer's response - depends on how the pictures is identified or

⁵⁹³ "I am not an opponent of the proliferation of pictures in our culture, I am just trying to understand its impact. I like photography, I like to look at photographs and paintings. However, the difference between the world of pictures and the world of printed matter is extraordinary and hard to define. A picture is like the masses: a multitude of impressions. A book on the other hand, with its linear advance of words and characters seems to be connected to individual identity. [...] Somehow pictures always lead to people as masses. Books belong to individuals", David Cowart, *Delphic DeLillo: Mao II and Millennial Dread*, in *Don DeLillo. Mao II. Underworld. Falling Man*, Edited by Stacey Olster, Continuum International Publishing Group, London, New York, 2011, p. 27

⁵⁹⁴ It falls, in this section of the novel, the theory that: "The demise of the individual is particularly felt in the reproductions of photographs of crowds in *Mao II*, which ostensibly reject the possibility of uniqueness: distinct humans are literally lost in the throng and the replicated image itself serves to echo the end of the singularity" Barrett, (1999), p. 797 - 798.

misidentified; that is, on words⁵⁹⁵. The words of the captions, together with the words read along the way – “she kept seeing the words Sendero Luminoso on the cinder-block windows of abandoned tenements” (MII, 175) - help Karen to approach the language of the institution⁵⁹⁶ in which she is immersing herself, as Laura Barret writes: “language for DeLillo, offers a route from personal to public, from reverie to dialogue, from solipsism to connection⁵⁹⁷”.

“No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other’s people pain⁵⁹⁸”, Susan Sontag says of war photographs and Karen, compulsively looking at those photos in which she finds traces of what she saw in the street – “she might study the same pictures seven times in seven nights” (MII, 174) - leaves the generic *us* and becomes a particular *self* that begins a process of interlocution: “When night came down she was talking to a tall kid” (MII, 150). Omar is the first real interlocutor with whom Karen establishes mutual contact, and because of this first contact Karen “realized they *saw* her. This was a shock” (MII, 151). The silent cab rides turn into speech: “She talked to all the drivers, asking questions in the cash slot” (MII, 175). A certain layer of language is decisively reached as Karen learns, respects, and starts to use the codes of the institution’s grammar: “It was a different language completely [...] and Karen had

⁵⁹⁵ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador, New York, 2003, p. 25.

⁵⁹⁶ Picking up on Ricœur, I understand the term institution in the sense of a teleology regulating actions.

⁵⁹⁷ Barrett, (2011), p. 56

⁵⁹⁸ Sontag, p. 3

to listen carefully” (MII, 180)⁵⁹⁹. At this point, “She carried many voices through New York” (MII, 173)⁶⁰⁰.

Having arrived here⁶⁰¹; for Osteen, on the other hand, her *futuristic* character is due to the fact that “Karen represents such audiences, those individuals who image themselves in or as crowds”⁶⁰²; for Barrett, “Karen’s response to televised tragedies exemplifies the loss of distinction between reality and representation”⁶⁰³. Among all, Karen actually is perhaps the only character with one foot already in the future, in that future imagined by DeLillo, where the image has taken over, where every mediation is skipped, every distance exceeded, where the primary need is to mingle with a crowd. A future in which identities are cancelled and everyone surrenders to an often authoritarian, coercive and untruthful idea, capable of channeling the daily action, to be soothing for those who suffer, to give motivation to face the difficulties, and finally to give a concrete concept to cling on to⁶⁰⁴. Karen, Bill always says, is someone who has faith, who believes that the Messiah is among people⁶⁰⁵. Karen has never stopped being a follower of Reverend Moon’s Unification Church, even once she has

⁵⁹⁹ “It was a world apart but powerfully here, a set of milling images with breath and flash and a language everywhere that sounded like multilingual English” (MII, 149).

⁶⁰⁰ “In an overpopulated world where urban centers are the future, there is little room for discrete voices”, Barrett, (1999), p. 798

⁶⁰¹ Begley, p. 495

⁶⁰² Osteen, (1999), p. 656

⁶⁰³ Barrett, (2011), p. 54

⁶⁰⁴ “Mao II dramatizes the arrival of the millennial moment, the end of history, the permanent future, the final exhaustion of the conflict between east and west that has determined the political life of a generation. [...] The perception that history is already over, that the future is already here, revealed to us in all its stark completion”, Boxall, (2006), p. 158-161

⁶⁰⁵ “Karen thinks God is here. Like walkin’ and talkin’” (MII, 69).

exposed its limitations⁶⁰⁶. Her commuting around Manhattan, her path of discovery, will only emphasize this need of hers to firmly believe in something and no matter how weak are the dogmatic bases on which this faith of hers grows exponentially, Karen at the sight of the suffering and degradation that has invaded the city begins to proselytize, trying to bring the word of the Reverend among the derelicts, convinced that she is giving them hope⁶⁰⁷. Dynamic opposition is not a regenerative energy from an ethical point of view, and here in this thesis, as well as in DeLillo's novel, it is not interesting to investigate the moral implications about her choice. What is important to point out is how the dynamic opposition is regenerative from the point of view of the character's very existence as a person.

In New York, Karen becomes even more of a person when, after the linguistic layer, she reaches the condition of being an agent:

D'un côté, il n'est pas d'agent qui ne puisse se désigner lui-même comme étant l'auteur responsable de ses actes. En ce sens, nous retrouvons les deux composantes de l'estime de soi: la capacité d'agir selon des intentions et celle de produire par notre initiative des changements efficaces dans le cours des choses; c'est en tant qu'agent que nous nous estimons à

⁶⁰⁶ "But guess what I found out later. The day before the ceremony Master had looked at photographs of members and he actually matched us by photographs. So I thought how great, I have an Instamatic husband" (MII, 183).

⁶⁰⁷ "She talked to certain familiars in the park, telling them how to totalize their lives according to the sayings of a man with the power" (MII, 176); "Karen came down from the stage and looked for someone who might listen. She had Master's total voice ready in her head" (MII, 194).

titre primaire. Mais d'autre part, l'action humaine ne se conçoit que comme interaction sous de formes innombrables variant de la coopération à la compétition et au conflit⁶⁰⁸.

According to the principle of cooperation, Karen begins to actively help the people who live in Tompkins Square, “in the morning she began to forage for redeemable bottles and cans [...] she took these things to the park and left them at the openings of lean-tos” (MII, 152). Even if, for her, “it was not a whole lot different from selling sweet williams in the lobby of the Marriot” (MII, 152-153), as she did when she was part of Moon’s sect, the difference does exist. Because here she is the one who chooses, she is the *one* who recognizes herself as the person capable of intervening and acting, she *alone* decides what actions to take and why to take them, and the popping into her mind, of the Reverend’s authoritative voice as a guide occurs later. It happens, most likely, because Karen, with her peculiar personality, needs to place her actions within already drawn tracks, and perhaps also because the shock of the terrible things she witnesses lead her to find comfort in an idea she believes in anyway. If so, this would only confirm Karen’s ultimate coming to terms with her faith this time in a conscious manner. But even more substantial, in the discourse on dynamic opposition, is that Karen, albeit for a short period⁶⁰⁹ between what she sees and herself. In New York Karen, commuting between inside and outside, is an active

⁶⁰⁸ Ricœur, (1990), p. 125

⁶⁰⁹ “The transmitter of the “virus of the future”, Karen ingests and relays the projective narratives and regulative biographies that patriarchal authorities produce. At first she carried “many voices through New York” but now the chorus of cries is drowned out by the monologic sound of “Master’s total voice ready in her head””, Osteen, (1999), p. 657

spectator. It is not true what Begley writes: “(DeLillo) also alternates scenes of Karen watching TV and Karen wandering lower Manhattan. The point is that to Karen there’s no difference”⁶¹⁰.

Karen sees the difference, precisely because she can experience it daily, she can ascertain the distance of what she sees on television and the closeness of what happens in the city. She can see the similarities, but also notice the peculiarities. Inside, in those hours of compulsive viewing, Karen not only absorbs, as she usually does, but, unlike all the other times, reacts. Sontag writes: “Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing “we” can do - but who is that “we”? - and nothing “they” can do either - and who are “they”? - then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic”⁶¹¹.

Karen responds to compassion with action. She removes herself from that generic “we” and places herself in relation to the world as a particular *self*, as an acting subject. The interior thus becomes the space for reflection, awareness, and identification with the lives of others, and the exterior consequently becomes the place of reaction to what is experienced within.

The interior is positioned as a perfect space for mental processing, the exterior, on the other hand, as a (less than perfect) space for physical action. Demonstrating this is the scene that closes her stay in New York.

We see Karen in front of the TV as a passive spectator at the beginning of the novel, when in bed, at Bill’s house, she watches a live broadcast of the massacre at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield. On the one hand, Karen *sees*: “She sees

⁶¹⁰ Begley, p. 495

⁶¹¹ Sontag, p. 79

men and boys first [...] then a crowd, thousands, filling the screen”, “She sees a great straining knot of people pressed to a fence”, “She sees men far back actually climbing on top of the mass of bodies”, “she sees the crowd pushed toward the fence” (MII, 52-53), on the other she is *shown* situations: “They show men in shorts and jerseys”, “they show men calmly watching”, “they show the fence from a distance” (MII, 53-54). No indication of Karen’s emotions is given, as she watches the event without processing any thoughts, unable to discern people from the crowd. In New York, however, while in a cab, “she was looking at a wedge-shaped building in Times Square and it had a band of glowing letters running all round it” (MII, 185). Karen is unable to understand, to make sense of those flowing sentences. She will be able to do so only once back in the loft, where, in a perfect circle with her beginning in New York, she has again a “warning aura [...] She came away from the window with a feeling in her arm that was like running current” (MII, 187). Inside, things become clearer, the words readable, the images vibrate in depth when Karen, soon after, turns on the TV and watches the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini. Brita, who has meanwhile returned, watches passively, Karen, instead, thinks that “it was possible to believe that she was the only one seeing this and everyone else turned to this channel was watching sober-sided news analysis delivered by three men in a studio with makeup and hidden mikes” (MII, 190). Unlike the previous

time⁶¹², Karen⁶¹³ recognizes others as people and not as a crowd, and four times she is able to go backwards into their lives: “and Karen could go backwards into their lives, see them coming out of their houses” (MII, 188), “and Karen found she could go into the slums of south Tehran” (MII, 189), “Karen went backwards into their lives, into the hovels and unpaved streets”(MII, 190), “Karen went backwards into the lives of the women”(MII, 192). Karen is active. The window opens to the city, the mind processing within the perimeter of the loft. Karen can go beyond the images, to widen their edge and glimpse at what was before. In the interior of the loft, Karen does not stop at the directionality of the camera lens. She goes beyond it.

Karen’s stay in New York is thus consummated “in the vertigo of intermingled places, the great square in Beijing and the wind-smoked downtown street and the space in the squat building where the TV sits” (MII, 178). Thanks to the dynamic opposition, what are distant and opposed spaces find a way to interact together, in a vertigo that allows Karen, for a brief moment, to insert the story

⁶¹² “Nous nous reconnaissons nous-même à travers les histoires fictives de personnages historiques, de personnage de légende ou de roman; à cet égard, la fiction est un vaste champ expérimental pour le travail sans fin d’identification que nous poursuivons sur nous-même” Ricœur, (1990), p. 129. I would add to this passage that, as in Karen’s case, this work we are constantly required to do can also relate to real and distant images broadcast on television, when fruition prompts us to reflect on what we are watching. “It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. But it is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people’s pain, just as it is absurd to generalize about the ability to respond to the sufferings of others on the basis of the mind-set of those consumers of news who know nothing at first-hand about war and massive injustice and terror. There are hundreds of millions of television watchers who are far from inured to what they see on television. They do not have the luxury of patronizing reality.” Sontag, p. 86

⁶¹³ “Karen felt she was among them” (MII, 189).

of her life in the stories of other human lives. To insert, I dare say gracefully, her life segment into the plot of the novel and reach the last layer of which a person is composed: “chaque histoire de vie, loin de se clore sur elle-même, se trouve enchevêtrée dans toutes les histoires de vie auxquelles chacun est mêlé”⁶¹⁴. Osteen is therefore right when he writes that “Although DeLillo’s entire career has been a critique of authoritarian thinking, nonetheless his portrayal of Karen [...] exhibits genuine sympathy for her spiritual impulses. Indeed, along with Jean-Claude, she is the only character in the novel whose actions are motivated by altruism rather than by money or ego. Thus, while Karen exemplifies the losses incurred in becoming a spectacular subject, her selflessness and compassion epitomize its attractions”⁶¹⁵.

⁶¹⁴ Ricœur, (1990), p. 129

⁶¹⁵ Osteen, (1999), p. 657-658. “Karen absorbs and transcends threats to selfhood. She embraces the doctrine of the Unification Church, submits to the annihilation of her own individuality, and reemerges - a little worse for the wear but by and large intact - as a relatively self-assured self. This pattern is repeated for emphasis. Twice she submerges her identity, twice it resurfaces. Karen’s resilience makes the post-literate self suddenly seem somewhat less frightening. But even as we learn to admire her television empathy (televathy? Telempathy?), we wonder about how the rest of us will achieve it- or whether we really should. Is brainwashing a prerequisite?” Begley, p. 496

1.3.2 Packer's Passages

Published in 2003, after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, but set in New York on an April day in 2000, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* immediately takes place itself at the intersection of two historical moments, before and after the tragedy⁶¹⁶. It's crystallized into a temporal hinge that condenses the whole narrative into a dialectic in the twilight of an era. The time of the aesthetics of the *music videos* is coming to an end, and so is the first Internet bubble and unbridled hedonism, while the prophecy of a world to come, where invulnerability seems to give way to a congenital fragility, is coming true. The novel thus provides, in its timelessness, a very particular portrait of the metropolis⁶¹⁷. Above all, the novel suggests a possible, perhaps inevitable, paradigm shift in the urban experience, where digital space is added to physical

⁶¹⁶ "When the novel *Cosmopolis* first came out in 2003, it was regarded by most reviewers, myself included, as a disappointment [...] It didn't help that the novel, set in Manhattan, was published while the wounds of 9/11 were still fresh [...] a lot of us were picking through the book looking for pre-echoes of that tragedy [...] Re-reading *Cosmopolis* now, however, in the light of David Cronenberg's film adaptation, and given the context of the 2007 global economic meltdown and the Occupy Movement that followed, it appears to me that Don DeLillo has once again taken on the mantle of artist-prophet" Cornel Bonca, *Contact With the Real: "On Cosmopolis"*, in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/contact-with-the-real-on-cosmopolis/> (Last access: 5/25/2021)

⁶¹⁷ "DeLillo takes his title from Greek history. The Classical "polis" or city-state was citizen-run and manageable. But in the Hellenistic age, the polis grew into authoritarian and alienating world-city or "cosmo-polis" – contemporary multinational and gigantic New York City. [...] Packer feels time is accelerated, compressed. Manhattan space in the novel is analogously narrowed, compacted. [...] But *Cosmopolis* is ultimately more metaphysical than sociological", Tom LeClair, *A Review of Cosmopolis*: http://perival.com/delillo/cosmo_leclair_rev.html (Last access: 5/25/2021)

space⁶¹⁸. It changes the landscape of the city and therefore it changes the places of interiority. The two dialectical poles, the street and the room, with which the city opened itself up to the Benjamin *flâneur*, are close to a collision that, by jeopardizing the dialectic itself, risks silencing the interiority of the individual. *Cosmopolis* tells the story of the fall of an Icarus of finance, it is the story of Eric Packer who at the age of 28 is perhaps the most powerful and wealthiest man in New York, thanks to his intellectual ability to predict market fluctuations. One April morning he decides to cross the city, all along 47th Street, to go for a haircut⁶¹⁹. What should be a short trip, crossing Manhattan from east to west, turns out to be an endless odyssey. At every intersection Eric's limousine is forced to stop: traffic is congested due to the arrival of the President. Throughout the day (the journey lasts from morning to night) we witness an organized protest and an artistic manifestation: the funeral procession of a famous rapper, numerous meetings, a rave party, a murder, the end of a flash wedding. Eric will continue to earn money from his car and then lose it all in an instant⁶²⁰.

⁶¹⁸ “Thus the character finds himself in what Antonio Negri terms the ‘non-place’ of Empire, feeling the particular experiential dilemma of such capitalist relations: because the situated experience of the individual (or in the other words, the space of places) is structured by transnational economic and political relations (the space of global flows), when individual experience is felt to be authentic (in terms of embodied ethnicity, gender, and class), it cannot be true to its conditions of production, and when it is understood as the result of global determinants, it cannot feel authentic”, Marie-Christine Leps, *How to map the non-place of empire: DeLillo's Cosmopolis*, *Textual Practice*, 28:2, 2014, 305-327, p. 306

⁶¹⁹ “Haircut” is a word used in the finance slang to indicate a major loss of stock and money.

⁶²⁰ “Comme si tous le maux et les dèirs individuels et collectifs se télescopaient dans le cours d'une seule journée, Michael Naas, *Autonomie, auto-immunité et stretch-limousine. Des « États voyous » de Derrida à la Cosmopolis de Don DeLillo* », in *Chimères*, 2013/3 (N° 81), p.

It seems impossible that all these multiple experiences lived by Eric, together with his death in the finale, are gathered on such a brief novel. Thickness and texture are the first two signs of a metropolitan experience of the frenetic acceleration of time⁶²¹. The succession of the instants⁶²² is increasingly rapid and every subjectivity decays, towards an objectivity of experience that prefers quantity to quality, where the individual is definitively overwhelmed by a flow of information⁶²³ that becomes less and less readable and therefore manageable. Eric himself, in his manic need of controlling everything that happens, struggles to comprehend the excesses of the metropolis, the continuous noise, the noise accumulated over the centuries, which breaks through the barrier of his limousine, the fragments intercepted in the streets from the window become increasingly incomprehensible.

From his apartment in the First Avenue skyscraper to the house occupied by Benno Levin (the man who will kill him, whose menacing presence is in the background of the whole story) in Hell's Kitchen, Packer moves around the city

55-73. DOI: 10.3917/chime.081.0055. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-chimeres-2013-3-page-55.htm> (last access: 5/26/2021)

⁶²¹ "The urbanization of real space is thus being overtaken by this urbanization of real time which is, at the end of the day, the urbanization of the actual body of the city dweller", Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, Verso, London, New York, 2008, p. 20

⁶²² "... ce présent dilaté, chargé de sa double dette, de sa mémoire double du passé et de l'avenir, est aussi guetté par l'entropie. L'instant, l'éphémère, l'immédiat le happent et l'amnésie seule peut être son lot. [...] un présent monstre. Il est à la fois tout (il n'y a que du présent) et presque rien (la tyrannie de l'immédiat), François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expériences du temps*, Collection La Librairie du XXI^e siècle, dirigée par Maurice Olender, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2003, p. 217

⁶²³ "This is the end of the outside world. The whole world suddenly becomes endotic. And such an end implies forgetting spatial exteriority as much as temporal exteriority ("no future") and opting exclusively for "present" instant, the real instant of instantaneous telecommunications", Virilio, p. 25

like a *flâneur*⁶²⁴ eager to own and know everything. He does not move on foot, except for short stretches, but inside a super-accessorized limousine, equipped with screens from which he can keep up with market trends and everything that happens in the world, including what happens in New York⁶²⁵. As if the naked eye were no longer enough, as if the physical space of the city had become the kingdom of digital space, so that to understand the former one must pass through the brokerage of the latter. In the interconnection between the two spaces and in the continuous contrast between materiality and immateriality, the

⁶²⁴ “For Benjamin [...] the *flâneur* was a powerful symbol. He was a figure of the modern artist-poet, a figure keenly aware of the bustle of modern life, an amateur detective and investigator of the city, but also a sign of the alienation of the city and of capitalism. For Benjamin, the *flâneur* met his destiny in the triumph of the consumer capitalism”, Gregory Shaya, *The Flâneur, the Badaud, and the Making of a Mass Public in France, circa 1860-1910*, in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 109, No. 1 (February 2004), Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Historical Association, pp. 41-77, p.47 “What changes is not an understanding of the flâneur, but the space in which the flâneur imagines himself to exist [...] Packer travels through New York in his limousine, with the same exploratory gaze as the flâneur, yet mediates this experience. This hesitancy expose himself to the city around him speaks to a flâneur figure who is similar to the figure put forth by Benjamin, yet different in the space in which he imagines his own existence. If Packer imagines himself as a digital entity, the subsequently, his flânerie may be imagined as exploring the various avenues of the digital world”, Haydon Huges, *A Flâneur for the 21st Century: DeLillo’s Cosmopolis*, in *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 3(2), 66-91. Retrieved from <https://sanglap-journal.in/index.php/sanglap/article/view/60>, p. 87 “Le refus de l’extériorité et le confort de la totalité sont poursuivis par Packer dans sa relation au monde. Packer est littéralement obsédé par l’ordre, ou plus précisément par l’ordonnancement du monde. Cet ordonnancement passe par la connaissance”, Daanoune, p. 163

⁶²⁵ “... le sujet de *Cosmopolis* concerne autant l’automobile de Packer que “Packer” [...] La limousine de Packer raconte aussi l’histoire très comique de beaucoup d’autres limousines – y compris celle du Président des États-Unis et celle du cortège funèbre du rappeur soufi Brutha fez – loms qui avancent lentement à travers la ville, pare-chocs contre pare-chocs, se croisant, ou se faisant obstacles les unes aux autres [...] Ce que *Cosmopolis*, pourrait-on dire, “déconstruit”, c’est un rêve typiquement américain d’autonomie et d’indépendance, d’auto-détermination et d’individualisme, de liberté et d’autosuffisance, toutes les valeurs véhicules par la voiture américaine”, Naas, (2013)

narration of *Cosmopolis* does not give in to either of the two spaces. It remains suspended in the friction that it continuously creates between two concepts of *flânerie*: one that could be defined as modernity, consumed in concrete and tangible spaces, strongly connected to the urban space, and the other, a *flânerie* that could be defined as postmodernity, experienced in the abstract and ephemeral space of the digital.

The resulting image of the metropolis is therefore comparable to that of a phantasmagoria where it is “now a landscape, now a room”⁶²⁶. It is a fluctuating and discontinuous image that originates in that limousine that DeLillo seems to use as Benjamin used the Passages: an urban phenomenon with “the emphatic claim to be new”⁶²⁷, already old enough to be obsolete, yet bearing in its ruin the mark of an epochal passage. The limousine⁶²⁸ becomes for DeLillo, like the gallery for Benjamin, the place for a detailed observation of the essential elements of the city, a way to identify the constellation of facts from which the mutation of a form can be seen. The limousine, being already out of fashion as a model, stands as a container of new experience, at the intersection between a recent past and a near future⁶²⁹.

⁶²⁶ Benjamin, (1999), p.10

⁶²⁷ Rolf Tiedemann, *Introduzione* in Walter Benjamin, *I “passages” di Parigi*, Volume primo, Einaudi, Torino, 2010, p. XIII (traduction by me)

⁶²⁸ “The limousine, while not the only object-actant in the novel, is the novel’s most prominent object [...] DeLillo’s use of the limousine ensures that much of the novel occurs on a very small scale, a move that seems [...] to contrast with the vast world of cybercapitalism”, Andrew Strombeck, *The Limousine and Technicity in Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis*, in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 63, Number 1, Spring 2017, pp. 146-167, p. 156

⁶²⁹ “This character, Eric Packer, lives in a state of accelerated time. Essentially he’s a man who lives in the future. But he also travels back to his past [...] I tried to create a character living in a spasmodic state, moving from sensation to sensation. It seems to me that what happens to him, and the people he gets in touch with in the course of his

In the case of *Cosmopolis*, the form that DeLillo captures in transit is therefore that of an urban experience that seems to shatter concreteness of the metropolis and the sense of space, towards a nonphysical place. The possibility of observing, from anywhere, the movement of the city in the data flows, and therefore renouncing even the physical presence in the city itself, is part of the reductive need to confine oneself in a chip⁶³⁰, which reveals the “suicidal tendencies at the heart of homo technologicus”⁶³¹. If the sense of place disappears, DeLillo seems to suggest, the sense of man’s individuality disappears⁶³², which has in its asymmetry the seed of diversity⁶³³, just as the city encloses the hypothesis of individuality in its asymmetry, in its unpredictable intersections and its unexpected glimpses⁶³⁴.

day, is more significant than his state of mind, which he himself doesn't know anything about! He's a man with no awareness of his own psychology, no sense of his intellectual limits. He's extremely intelligent but in a very strange way”, Stéphane Bou, Jean-Baptiste Thoret, *A Conversation with Don DeLillo: Has Terrorism Become the World's Main Plot?* http://perival.com/delillo/interview_panic_2005.html (last access: 5/26/2021)

⁶³⁰ “En effet, Packer semble défier la grille serrée et orthonormée de Manhattan car il a substitué, à la matérialité de la ville, un espace dématérialisé qui lui permet d’être dans la ville sans tout à fait y être”, Daanoune, p. 246

⁶³¹ Randy Laist links Eric’s psychological collapse to the collapse of the Twin Towers. The collapse of both the individual and the metropolis: “Eric himself is a kind of third Twin Tower, a monolithic symbol of global hegemony”, Laist, p. 258

⁶³² “C’est la matérialité du corps plutôt que l’immatérialité de l’esprit ou de l’âme, les anomalies du corps plutôt que ses symétries, qui produisent des questions autour du Bien, de la Beauté et de la Vérité”, Naas, (2013)

⁶³³ “With asymmetry as a recurring theme in the novel – Packer is concerned about an asymmetry in his prostate, he walks out of a barbershop with half a haircut – we can recognize the obvious hubris, perhaps, in his search for order, for the systems and patterns of the universe, for his insistence that the yen *has* to chart. But asymmetry is not merely a reminder of the human, the flawed, or the irrational; it also a force of creation”, Shonkwiler, p. 267

⁶³⁴ “Levinas insists that a radical asymmetry marks the self’s encounter with the Other. The self moves toward the Other and is dominated by him; the Other infinitely overflows any adequate idea the self may have of him. Therefore, in Levinas’s view, no

The dream image of *Passages* is ambiguous: “which are house no less than street”⁶³⁵, so, the limousine is suspended between a public and a private space⁶³⁶. At one point Shiner, one of Packer’s many consultants who alternate along the way, asks: “Is there a particular reason why we’re in the car instead of the office?” Packer says, “How do you know we’re in the car instead of the office?” (C, 14-15) There is no clarification on the position⁶³⁷, Packer is confusing him, and at the same time he is confused too, because in that machine work matters accumulate on top of private matters, such as the medical examination to which

economic system or ontology can account for the fundamental heterogeneity of being and the incomparability of the Other. “Multiplicity in being, which refuses totalization but takes form as fraternity and discourse”, writes Levinas, “is situated in a space essentially asymmetrical”. Packer’s inability to see asymmetry, in himself and others, symbolizes his inability to encounter anything but the prearranged, thematized idea he has of them”, Aaron Chandler, *An Unsettling, Alternative Self: Benno Levin, Emmanuel Levinas, and Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis*, in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 50:3, pp. 241-260, p. 252, (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority*, Trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969, p. 216)

⁶³⁵ Benjamin, (1999), p. 10

⁶³⁶ One thinks of Jean Baudrillard who created a similar binary image: “Mais sur le plan du système, il faut admettre qu’elle (la maison) ne constitue plus aujourd’hui qu’un des pôles binaires du système global – l’autre étant précisément l’automobile [...] Ainsi la voiture fait plus que s’opposer à la maison dans une quotidienneté dédoublée: elle est aussi une demeure, mais exceptionnelle, elle est une sphère close d’intimité, mais déliée des contraintes habituelles de l’intimité, douée d’une intense liberté formelle, d’une fonctionnalité vertigineuse. L’intimité du foyer est celle de l’involution dans la relation domestique et l’habitude. L’intimité de l’automobile est celle d’un métabolisme accéléré du temps et de l’espace, et c’est tout ensemble le lieu toujours possible de l’*accident*, où vient culminer dans un hasard, une chance parfois jamais réalisée, mais toujours imaginée, toujours involontairement assumée d’avance, cette intimité avec soi-même, cette liberté formelle qui n’est jamais si belle que dans la mort. Un compromis extraordinaire est réalisé: celui d’être chez soi, et d’être de plus en plus loin de chez soi. La voiture est ainsi le centre d’une subjectivité nouvelle, dont la circonférence n’est nulle part, alors que la subjectivité du monde domestique est circonscrite”, Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets*, Gallimard, Paris, 1968, pp. 93- 96

⁶³⁷ “L’habitable de la limousine renferme le pouvoir de Packer de dématérialiser l’espace autour de lui”, Daanoune, p. 246

he is subjected at a certain point. The *exterieur* of profit is mixed with the *interieur* of dreaming. A dreamlike reflection on the world, the elaboration of theories (“We need a new theory of time” (C, 86)) and reminiscence, not at all nostalgic of the past (When he finally got to the hairdresser, the same one he went to with his father when he was a child: “The car stopped, and Eric sat thinking. He stayed for five, six minutes” (C, 159)). The reader knows that Packer is in the car, but at the same time, that car no longer appears as a means with which to move, with which to cover a distance⁶³⁸. Ian Davidson says so precisely: “The car in *Cosmopolis* is not going anywhere - it covers time not distance”⁶³⁹, as well as “the phantasmagorias of the space to which the flâneur devoted himself find a counterpart in the phantasmagorias of time to which the gambler is lot”⁶⁴⁰, and Packer is a flâneur when he gets out of the car,⁶⁴¹ and a player, a speculator, when he is inside. Packer, in fact, is connected to the world as Naas says: “que d’une façon abstraite et purement financière”⁶⁴². Benjamin writes about the *Passages*:

Trade and traffic are the two components of the street. Now, in the arcades the second of these has effectively died out: the traffic there is rudimentary. The arcade is a street of lascivious commerce only; it is wholly adapted to arousing desires. Because in this street the

⁶³⁸ “The car in *Cosmopolis* is finally associated with immobility as much as mobility [...] The car does not become de-privatized, an important element in future scenarios of low-carbon city, but has an intensely private interior, guarded by security staff, and a place where not only his work life but also his sexual, medical and domestic life can take place in public but outside of public view”, Ian Davidson, *Automobility, Materiality and Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis*, in *Cultural Geographies*, 19.4 (2012), 469-482, p. 478

⁶³⁹ Davidson, p. 473

⁶⁴⁰ Benjamin, (1999), p. 12

⁶⁴¹ “La vulnérabilité de Packer ne pourra se manifester que lorsqu’ il sortira de la limo, de son bunker en mouvement”

⁶⁴² Naas, (2016)

juices slow to a standstill, the commodity proliferates along the margins and enters into fantastic combinations, like the tissue in tumors. -The flâneur sabotages the traffic. Moreover, he is no buyer. He is merchandise.⁶⁴³

The idleness of the flâneur is Packer's idleness following a whim, and like a flâneur is "the observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the occult science of industrial fluctuations. He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of the consumer"⁶⁴⁴. But Packer is also the player, the speculator. The capitalist himself, the capital, "his actions against the yen were causing explosions of disorder" (C, 116). Its vulnerability, the vulnerability of its portfolio to the unpredictability of the yen is the vulnerability of the entire financial system⁶⁴⁵. So, the traffic in which his limousine is stuck is a rudimentary traffic, which already belongs to a past, it is his car that through the screens is already in the future, in the sensuality of the fluctuations of a market where every lifeblood stagnates, but everything is a neurotic swarming of visual signals, of numbers that seduce:

The other screens showed money moving. There were numbers gliding horizontally and bar charts pumping up and down. He knew that there was something no one had detected, a pattern latent in nature itself, a leap of pictorial language that went beyond the standard models of technical

⁶⁴³ Benjamin, (1999), p. 42

⁶⁴⁴ Benjamin, (1999), p. 427

⁶⁴⁵ "Eric is free to speculate on the future disappearance of everything, because for Eric in the limousine, everything has already disappeared", Laist, p. 265

analysis and out-predicted even the arcane charting of his own followers in the field. (C, 63)

Cyber-capitalism is exaggeratedly volatile that it can be managed from a limousine. The crowd disappears, and it is no longer “the veil through which the familiar city is transformed into phantasmagoria”⁶⁴⁶, because even though it is fascinated by it, for Packer the street and the crowd - the crowd that is also the sign of an archaic economic exchange “It was solid, brilliant, multi-faceted money. He represented everything he had left behind”⁶⁴⁷ - are nothing more than “an outrage at the truth of the future” (C, 65). Packer, from the limousine, is still the flâneur on the threshold, “whose way of life conceals behind a beneficent mirage the anxiety of the future inhabitants of our metropolises”⁶⁴⁸. It is the city that is no longer familiar, and its way of life is conciliatory of an idea that narrows the city into a chip, rather than expanding it in the experience. “I need all the meanings of inflamed” (C, 73), Packer is turned on by the desire of the windows of the *passages* which is his limousine, whose architectural and figurative configuration does not differ from that of the city. So, when he accompanies Kinski, his theory expert, out of the limousine to show her one of the city’s buildings:

⁶⁴⁶ Benjamin, (1999), p. 21

⁶⁴⁷ “As Packer passes through the diamond district, for instance, he contemplates an older economy that somehow still flourished within the modern. [...] But the “obsolete” money of the past has not acutally disappeared: it is more present than ever, by virtue of being so far removed from the virtual. [...] ... we can see the entire city as a palimpsest of capital traces semivisible across time. The cosmopolis is inscribed with the history of the money”, Shonkwiler, p. 263-264

⁶⁴⁸ Benjamin, (1999), p. 21

He led her out of the car and onto the sidewalk, where they were able to get a partial view of the electronic display of market information, the moving message units that streaked across the face of an office tower on the other side of Broadway. Kinski was transfixed. This was very different from the relaxed news reports that wrapped around the old Times Tower a few blocks south of here. There were three tiers of data running concurrently and swiftly a hundred feet above the street. Financial news, stock prices, currency markets. The action was unflagging. The hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols, the fractions, decimals, stylized dollar signs, the streaming release of words, of multinational news, all too fleet to be absorbed. But he knew that Kinski was absorbing it. [...] The speed is the point. (C, 79-80)

That is how the city's landscape flattens into the limousine landscape. There is no difference between the flow of data and numbers from inside and outside⁶⁴⁹, because the car is no longer a means to something, but has become the very purpose itself, the experience. It does not matter if the actual traffic out there slows the race. The experience inside the car enjoys a fluidity that is like a walk inside a tunnel. Free of encumbrances, completely subject to the blinding volatility of the goods or data, which in their inhuman flow enchant with the promise that no interruption will come to eradicate the pleasure.

⁶⁴⁹ "The intoxicated interpenetration of streets and residence", Benjamin, (1999), p. 425

The Parisian bourgeois in Benjamin's portrait was "so sure of his prosperity that he is careless of façade"⁶⁵⁰, so, Packer in his affluence relies on one of the many identical limousines lined up on First Avenue: "The cars were identical at a glance [...] Long white limousines had become the most unnoticed vehicles in the city [...] He liked the fact that the cars were indistinguishable from each other" (C, 10-11). Is it the *intérieur* advancing towards the outside? Or vice versa?⁶⁵¹

An advance may contain a victory or a defeat, or even a reversal of roles, "the street becomes room and the room becomes street"⁶⁵², never a disappearance, the dissolution of one within the other. Packer chose the limousine because "it was not only oversized but aggressively and contemptuously so, metastasizingly so, a tremendous mutant thing that stood astride every argument against it" (C, 10). One could describe New York using the same adjectives. Aggressive. Disdainful. Able to overrule any opinion. No, what Packer is trying to accomplish in his sealed closure in the limousine is to annul any contradiction between outside and inside, any position that does not contain the two at the same time⁶⁵³. Vija Kinski says at one point: "There is no outside" (C, 90); the limousine is thus the possibility of a definitive fusion. Randy Laist says: "The limousine in which Eric spends so much of the novel represents Eric's ideal of a completely futurized micro-environment"⁶⁵⁴.

⁶⁵⁰ Benjamin, (1999), p. 406

⁶⁵¹ "The domestic interior moves outside", Benjamin, (1999), p. 406

⁶⁵² Benjamin, (1999), p. 406

⁶⁵³ "Ce que désire Packer c'est s'approprier l'extériorité pour pouvoir la contenir et la contrôler", Naas, (2016)

⁶⁵⁴ Laist, p. 264

That is why Packer had the machine soundproofed, he gave the order to “proust it, cork-line it against street noise” (C, 70). Prousted is the word he uses, with a direct reference to the soundproof room on Boulevard Haussmann where Proust wrote part of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, “but in contrast to Proust, who remains motionless and reproduces the world outside the limousine, Packer moves through the city and integrates the people directly into the limousine”⁶⁵⁵. The limousine ceases its vehicular function, the limousine becomes environment, landscape, gallery. Dream room. Place of perception and writing of the city. Whereas for Proust the room kept the distance with the outside, and he conceived writing in the reverberation of opposition, Packer assimilates the city inside the machine, disregarding any trace of exteriority, pushing for the city to happen inside, according to its rules. It is no longer the writer who tries to govern and write the city in the vitality of his own writing, but in his delirium of omnipotence, swallowed up by the oneiric excess of screens - in a digital space that for Eric should increasingly approach the idea of a “simply narrow dark room in which the technology has become so refined that it deliquesces into “airy” forms with only the slightest and most provisional of spatial properties”⁶⁵⁶ - Packer wants to cancel the vitality of the city, to write the city himself, with its financial operations and its ability to predict market flows. The only way to realize this ideal is to cancel any surface that can delimit an inside and an outside, “a surface separates inside from out and belongs no less to one than the other” (C, 9). Packer aspires to master the world, but the very presence of the city⁶⁵⁷, in

⁶⁵⁵ Naas, (2016)

⁶⁵⁶ Laist, p. 265

⁶⁵⁷ “The irony, as we discover a few lines on, is that the cork lining doesn’t work in a city that “eats and sleeps noise””, Davidson, p. 475

its otherness⁶⁵⁸, in its unpredictability and in its material nature does not acknowledge this and hinders his ambition, unmasking his finite essence and asymmetry⁶⁵⁹.

“So that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature”⁶⁶⁰, in the similarity of the landscape, in the similarity of the projectile chosen to describe it, as a gallery the city is moved inside the limousine and Packer can perpetrate the illusion, as DeLillo said in an interview: “He is his own Cosmopolis”⁶⁶¹.

Like the glass-covered passageways of the Passages, the limousine (covered like the marble Passages, “the floor of the limousine was Carrara marble” (C, 22)) is covered with glass and when the roof opens, the city Packer admires is the one in the making, the one that most resembles his limousine:

He felt his elation deepen. He slid open the sunroof and thrust his head into the reeling scene. The bank towers loomed just beyond the avenue. They were covert structure for all their size, hard to see, so common and monotonous, tall, sheer, abstract, with standard seatbacks, and block-long, and interchangeable, and he had to concentrate to see them. They

⁶⁵⁸ Packer quotes the poem “Report from the Besieged City” by Zbigniew Herbert, where “the rat has become currency out of utmost desperation. [...] Herbert’s city under siege finds its intertextual echo in New York, the world-city of which Packer seems first citizen. [...] The rat leitmotif comes to signify an ominous otherness at every turn, one that threatens the tidy demarcations of property, self, and sovereignty”, Chandler, p. 249-250

⁶⁵⁹ “L’espace où circule la limousine de Packer est urbain. Si le périple qui le mène à sa perte a bel et bien lieu dans l’espace cosmopolite de New York, Packer entretient néanmoins un rapport problématique avec la ville”, Daanoune, p. 244

⁶⁶⁰ Benjamin, (1999), p. 31

⁶⁶¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/reports/archive/arts/hay.shtml> (Last access: 06/01/2021)

looked empty from here. He liked that idea. They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. They were the end of the outside world. They weren't here, exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it. (C, 36)

The indeterminate nature⁶⁶² of the limousine's status, so mechanically anchored outside the street, yet already projected inside towards an intangible, volatile future, is the indeterminate nature of the city itself, captured by DeLillo in the representation of a city that is changing shape. It is a city that risks implosion, expanding everywhere without needing to be, only to appear behind a screen. It is the non-physical city⁶⁶³ that Packer hopes for, the endless passage of shop windows that bear no trace of the elusive shadow of the past, no flash of uncertainty, no disturbance in predictability, no defect in form: "people will not die. Isn't this the creed of the new culture? People will be absorbed in streams

⁶⁶² "the car is both appealing as a complete idea and as a blunt object, a spirit and a boulder", Laist, p.264

⁶⁶³ *Cosmopolis* presents the negative version of the non-physical city, a concept I picked up from Massimo Di Felice's study, which opposes *atopia*, that is a city based on a form of communication spread by personal digital media, to Marc Augé's non-place, as he understands *atopia* not as an absence, or a low-intensity locality, but as the experience of a genius loci built in collaboration with digital technologies: "the atopic dwelling is no longer linked to geographical coordinates, nor to a genius loci, but to information flows and to a mutant spatiality, neither external nor internal, a dwelling neither sedentary nor nomadic that, through wireless technology and laptops, makes the body the support of information by uniting "bio-mass" and "info-mass" in a fluid interrelationship", Massimo Di Felice, *Paesaggi Post-Urbani. La fine dell'esperienza urbana e le forme comunicative dell'abitare*, Collana diretta da Alberto Abruzzese, Bevivino Editore, Milano, 2010, p. 244 (translation by me)

of information [...] A box, a screen, a keyboard. They're melting into the texture of everyday life [...] Humans and computers merge" (C, 104-105), and with them also the city.⁶⁶⁴

The towers which Eric sees are, in the words of Randy Laist, "a piece of abstract architecture in a cityscape that has been silently depopulated by the ascendancy of techno-scientific forms over the world of human inhabitants condemned to exist under the ignominious limitations of the present tense"⁶⁶⁵. It is the progressive erosion of every disturbing element of the city's architecture that adapts the essence of the urban phenomenon to a binary code. Packer seeks the coincidence between the landscape around him and the anonymity of his limousine. The heterogeneous quality of the outside world must, according to Packer's wishes, become abstract in an echoing monotony, where the inside becomes a mirror of the outside. An outlook that is flattening the city, must result not from the dialectical image, but from recognizing itself as identical to those who are looking at it. Packer's gaze is the gaze of a *flâneur* who has disowned curiosity in favor of an intellect capable of encompassing all information, a database that processes uninterruptedly not for knowledge as

⁶⁶⁴ The idea of the city presented in *Cosmopolis* is very similar to Paul Virilio's: "the current revolution in (interactive) transmission is in turn provoking a commutation in the urban environment whereby the image prevails over the thing it is an image of; what was once a city becoming little by little a paradoxical agglomeration, relationships of immediate proximity giving away to remote interrelationships. The paradoxes of acceleration are indeed numerous [...]: getting closer to the "distant" takes you away proportionally from the "near" (and dear) [...] where the motorization of transport and information once caused a *general mobilization* of populations [...] instantaneous transmission tool cause the reverse: a growing inertia; television and especially remote control action no longer requiring people to be mobile, but merely to be mobile on the spot [...] this terminal citizen of a teletopical City that is going up faster and faster", Virilio, p. 19-20-21

⁶⁶⁵ Laist, p. 263

participation and discovery in the world, and therefore in the city, but as a means of control, of total protection, of prevention of every shock. Every impression of Packer from the window of the machine is to be written on a sandpaper that smooths every surface to an extreme, to the most complete transparency.

Where the buildings appear as a bar graph, the comprehensibility of the event, the ontology of things seems schematic and therefore decipherable: “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. 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 define every breath of the planet’s living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole” (C, 24). The city is transformed from solid to image. Just as in the *Passages*, through the Panorama and Diorama, the city expands into landscape, so in the gallery of screens in the limousine, the city becomes more comprehensible in the perfect resolution of an image transmitted in binary code. Screens simplify and cancel distances; city boundaries are mocked by the ubiquity provided by electronic connections.

A threat looms over Packer’s day and the first alarm that stirs the escort is not lurking in the 47th Street canyon, but in North Korea: “The man down was Arthur Rapp, managing director of International Monetary Fund [...] Happened only a minute ago. Eric watched it happen again, in obsessive replays, as the car crawled toward a choke point on Lexington Avenue” (C, 33). The image in the replay is addictive for Packer who feels an erotic impulse due to the violence of the image: “he could recover a slow-motion shot of the willowy woman and her hand mike being sucked into the terror and he could sit here for hours wanting

to fuck her then and there” (C, 34). The screen is functional to Packer’s goal of eliminating any margin. The screen eliminates the distance between New York and Korea, the screen allows Eric’s every gesture to have influence on every side of the world. The screen, just when it cancels physical presence in the contingent world, makes eternal and immortal even the very moment of death that now resides in a potentially infinite loop. So another death runs concurrently with the data: “He sat on the banquette this time, facing the visual displays, and learned that the context was the death of Nikolai Kaganovich, a man of swaggering wealth and shady reputation” (C, 81). Death encapsulated in the inexhaustible flow of information is for Packer the redemption of the future from the obsolescence of the recent past.

In front of the screen, the community rooted in the essence of a city that is progressively diminished by Packer’s technological afflatus, can find a place of gathering: “We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable. The small monitors of the office, home and car become a kind of idolatry here, where crowds might gather in astonishment” (C, 80).

With the proliferation of the dioramas in the *passages*, the city expanded into a spectacle that invigorated the soul, where the perfect imitation of nature became more inhabitable and consoling than nature itself. This was a first sketch to standardize the imperfection of the city.

Technology, in which Packer allows reality to disappear, is technology that is perfected becoming increasingly invisible: “as this interface becomes more invisible, it ceases to represent a border between the individual and the

technology. The interface is no longer the point at which the individual encounters otherness, but a site of overlap between subject and object”⁶⁶⁶.

The margins between the individual and the city are eliminated in a numerical symbiosis, and the individual-city must thus, Packer hopes, definitively immerse itself in the flow of technology, as the only condition for living the accelerated time of the future.

“Here is something like a sportive precursor of fast-motion cinematography – a witty, and somewhat malicious, “dancing” acceleration of time”⁶⁶⁷, in the new technology of the diorama of passages, Benjamin saw the occurrence of a future condition. A century later, Packer in the screen sees his immediate future: “Eric watched himself on the oval screen below the spycam, running his thumb along his chinline. The car stopped and moved, and he realized queerly that he’d just placed his thumb on his chinline, a second or two after he’d seen it on-screen” (C, 22). The representation has taken over reality, with the overturning of the relationship between physical and digital space, with the latter now seeming to determine everything that happens in the former.

The interest of the panorama is in seeing the true city – the city indoors. What stands within the windowless house is true. Moreover, the arcade, too, is windowless house. The windows that look down on it are like loges from which you gazes into its interior, but one cannot see out these windows to anything outside.⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶⁶ Laist, p. 266

⁶⁶⁷ Benjamin, (1999), p. 529

⁶⁶⁸ Benjamin, (1999), p. 532

If the dialectic of the city is annulled, the dialectic of the *flâneur* also fails: “on one side, the man who feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man”⁶⁶⁹.

Therefore, in the limousine with polarized windows, from which Packer can look out without being seen, and in the absence of dialectics, the city becomes more understandable only through the image. Thus, the city filtered by the screen is the real city. During a violent demonstration that takes place on the hard ground of the metropolis, Packer, instead of looking out to observe, only looks onto the inside gallery of the limousine and only there does he seem to find the real thing, in the image that passes on the screen and not in the one that is raging outside:

It made more sense on tv. He poured two vodkas and they watched, trusting what they saw. It was a protest all right and they were smashing the windows of chain stores [...] He could hear the chant more clearly, channeled through the dish antennas of tv trucks and extracted from the rolling clamor of sirens and car alarms (C, 89).

While the car was being targeted by the protesters, hit, scarred, Packer and Kinski sit back and observe the reality that now belongs to the images⁶⁷⁰, so it is

⁶⁶⁹ Benjamin, (1999), p. 420

⁶⁷⁰ “Cosmopolis déborde de reflets, d’images spéculaires, d’enregistrements vidéo et d’écrans télé à travers lesquels les personnages apprennent des choses au sujet des autres

inevitable that the screen will then suggest in advance what will happen in the city out there:

His own image caught his eye, live on the oval screen beneath the spycam. Some second passed. He saw himself recoil in shock. More time passed. He felt suspended, waiting. Then there was a detonation, loud and deep, near enough to consume all the information around him. He recoiled in shock (C, 93).

The limousine gliding anonymously on the street, in progressive symbiosis with new architectural constructions, is the metonymy of a city to be ensnared by the obstinate loop of screens that take possession of the surfaces cancelling them at the same time.⁶⁷¹ Packer's desire is to assimilate every boundary, to anesthetize every incongruity, of the body, the city, the economy, towards a symmetry that finds its full realization in the transposition of everything into a record, "not a

et d'eux-même. Packer comprend son propre corps à travers son reflet sur le vitres d'un immeuble, à travers les caméras de la voitures, et le miroirs du salon de coiffure de son enfance. Ce qu'il apprend à son sujet, il ne le tient pas de l'introspection, ni en suivant la maxime de Socrate ("Connais-toi toi-même), ou come Descartes, en se tournant vers l'intériorité afin de découvrir son propre Monsieur Cogito, mais en observant son image produite par la spycam dans la limousine", Naas, (2016), *Ibid.*

⁶⁷¹ "The car's presence alters the protests; it becomes a focus of the protestor's energy partly because it figures into networks of privilege and exclusion but also because its long roof provides an apt surface for skateboarding and its long sides for graffiti. [...] The urine on the outside of the limousine foregrounds what has been true throughout the novel: that what seems to be hermetically sealed space is in fact permeable to the street. By extension, Packer's perceived autonomy – his insulation from the protestors – also becomes visible as a fiction. When the limousine stops functioning, then, Packer's mastery of the discourses of cybercapitalism becomes unsustainable" Strombeck, p. 158

tomb. An idea beyond the body” (C, 105). This is the final judgement⁶⁷² for a city that has become insubstantial. The scene, however, is a crucial one: “the car sat stunned. It was slathered in red-and-black spray paint. There were dozens of bruises and punctures, long burrowing scrape marks, swaths of impact and discolor” (C, 101). It is no longer anonymous⁶⁷³, the signs of the physical city make clear the limits, the boundaries of that machine, which from this moment on, declares its vulnerability, and will be increasingly abandoned by Packer. As mentioned at the beginning, the representation of New York in *Cosmopolis* is a representation that continues in contrasts. The pure, unreal, flat, binary city dreamed of by Packer is a constant and increasingly violent counterpoint of the city of otherness, of the hard and concrete spaces of a heterogeneous architecture, of a protruding and unpredictable social and economic body⁶⁷⁴. It is the city that already exists, it is the city that in darkness accumulates the signs

⁶⁷² “The car’s presence alters the protests; it becomes a focus of the protestor’s energy partly because it figures into networks of privilege and exclusion but also because its long roof provides an apt surface for skateboarding and its long sides for graffiti. [...] The urine on the outside of the limousine foregrounds what has been true throughout the novel: that what seems to be hermetically sealed space is in fact permeable to the street. By extension, Packer’s perceived autonomy – his insulation from the protestors – also becomes visible as a fiction. When the limousine stops functioning, then, Packer’s mastery of the discourses of cybercapitalism becomes unsustainable” Strombeck, *Ibid.*, p. 158

⁶⁷³ “Ce qui constituait jusqu’à présent la carapace de Packer, son habitacle, voire son habitat commence maintenant à céder et à enregistrer les agressions extérieures. La limousine est affectée, voire choquée. [...] C’est en cela qu’elle devient elle-même un corps dont l’épiderme trahit les coups et les blessures. [...] Souillée, entachée, la limousine sort de l’anonymat, se singularise et ce faisant, promet la singularisation et la personnalisation d’Eric Packer”, Daanoune, p. 266

⁶⁷⁴ “Although Packer does not suffer from a future shock, we find the general population of New York suffering from stress and disorientation. [...] New York is in chaos as are the world financial markets”, Stuart Noble, *Don DeLillo and Society’s Reorientation to Time and Space: An Interpretation of Cosmopolis*, in *Aspeers*, 1, 2008, pp. 66-67

of the times that have scratched it, reshaped it but never smoothed it out to the point of transparency. If this city still holds out, the other city that it could become is shown to us by DeLillo right through the limousine, *un résidu de rêve*. The beatings the machine is subjected to act as a wake-up call. “Every epoch has such a side turned toward dreams, the child’s side. For the previous century, this appears very clearly in the arcades”⁶⁷⁵. We don’t know yet, not having the same temporal distance as Benjamin while he was writing about the *Passages*, whether the gallery of screens capable of absorbing the body and mind of the individual and of the city that DeLillo moves in *Cosmopolis* is still the childish side or rather the exact opposite. That we are at the dawn of a form is confirmed by a passage from the exposés: “Corresponding to the new form of the new means of production [...] are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. These images are wish images [...] At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated – which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past”⁶⁷⁶. Here, then, is how the New York of *Cosmopolis* is all a construction of contrasting forces that, now pushing towards the future, now towards the ancient, try to hide the incremental obsolescence of the products of the recent past: “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” (C, 9). The

⁶⁷⁵ Benjamin, (1999), p. 388

⁶⁷⁶ Benjamin, (1999), p. 4

acceleration of novelty is also the acceleration of the consumption of things. The objects of the recent past, are already outdated, and Packer no longer has the possibility of finding suitable ones. The dizzying innovation quickly exceeds even the ability to name new objects. In this compression in which the present and the very recent past seem impossible even to be named, the new, the flows, the data, increasingly flat and defined screens are surrounded by an archaic past. Thus, the abstract and limpid remoteness of the numerical fluctuations of the new economy are soiled by the proliferation of mice, of human sacrifices, of a noise that “the tone of some fundamental ache, a lament so old it sounded aboriginal” (C, 14), which recall those Middle Ages where the urgency of the plague threatened the grotesque hedonism of bodies and cities under siege. Body and mind, cities and digital spaces are articulated in an opposition that stands out throughout the novel precisely in the centuries-old cross-reference between archaic eras and futuristic scenarios. Precisely in the technological fading of the metropolis, DeLillo lets the bestiality of a city in the turmoil of its prehistory, resurface from the tangential sidewalks to the limousine. This is how it appears to us, from the white spaces on the page, a New York in which what has been unites, in a flash, with the now, in a constellation.

Just as *Passages* has emancipated the creative forces of art, thus exacerbating the power of capital, speculation, and commodification, giving rise to the next state of the metropolis, DeLillo seems to warn us that the limousine carries within it the risk of a total emancipation of the individual from the city. An emancipation that passes from the definitive loss of a distinction between inside and outside, and of a dialectic that keeps the city’s times moving. “So what is left that is worth the telling?” (C, 61), asks Benno Levin, the threat that chases Packer throughout the novel, in his confessions that interrupt the narration in two points and reveal

the time discrepancy of the two narratives⁶⁷⁷. Levin's narrative starts with Packer's death and goes back. Packer's instead is the reverse, where his future is actually his past, but the final gunshot sounds like a further awakening, where we have confirmation that Packer's story was already finished before it started, and we can thus get out of the dream. "The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking"⁶⁷⁸, which Packer, in his dematerialization of the city had jeopardized, in the ideal of a new era poured into an interiority with steep walls sinking into a pneumatic vacuum. "Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening."⁶⁷⁹ "This is not the end" (C, 209).

⁶⁷⁷ "Yet this novel of excess and unknowing drenched in information flows is sparingly organized in two parts [...] Textual architectonics are reassuringly organized by two chronographs: a-day-in-the-life narrative taking place in April 2000, progressing from pre-dawn until night, and a day (the same day) of writing confessions in two autobiographical installments, regressing from night to morning [...] Yet these complex textual architectonics that seem to encase both characters and the reader in a totalizing apparatus enfolding all time and all space can be cracked.[...] Thus through spatio-temporal figuration, characterizations, and plot devices, *Cosmopolis* engineers a narrative temporal fold producing a kind of "inside-outness" that enfolds the unthought, ignored, and unseen, into capitalist development and destruction, and engages the reader in the discovery of patterns and co-production of meaning", Leps, *Ibid.*, pp.320-321

⁶⁷⁸ Benjamin, (1999), p. 13

⁶⁷⁹ Benjamin, (1999), p. 13

INTERLUDE

Yet at the end of *Cosmopolis* the reader is left with the strong impression that Packer is not dead, that there is still a remote possibility for him.

The novel closes with a suspended ending: “waiting for the shot to sound” (C, 209). The reader like Packer is waiting for the shot to sound. And deep down he hopes for it. He hopes, perhaps, for one of those last-minute, utterly implausible, though highly comforting, rescues. Although Packer certainly does not fall into the category of the most reputable characters, his path meets that kind of redemption that prompts the reader to imagine what he would be like next. What kind of character he might become. What kind of New York he might become an interpreter of. Because the novel, at the end of the day, is about that, about the city a character would like and his attempts to force it into the arc of his desires. And between the lines, the reader, too, finds himself weighing the pros and cons of the two cities DeLillo shows us, wondering which, selfishly, would be the city most to his measure. If throughout the novel Packer, enclosed in his hypertechnological interior, persists in recreating a one-dimensional, homogeneous and evanescent metropolis, on the other hand, DeLillo opposes a New York City under the banner of heterogeneity and contrast that spills out into the streets to press against the walls between which Packer confines himself. *Cosmopolis* is a great act of love toward a New York irreducible to any definition, impossible to imprison in a single microchip. And if the reader finds himself imagining which New York Packer would tell about if that shot did not go off, it is precisely because New York is neither: it is not that of the inside of the limousine, exaggerated in its minimalism, and it is not that of the outside, exaggerated in its maximalism. Through the use of dynamic opposition, DeLillo

continually conflates two hypotheses of the city, but without arriving to the final thesis. As an urban novel should, because the literary city is always at the intersection of a character's tensions and what the author has deduced about that city. Where the latter has the enormous space of streets to maneuver, the character has his own reduced inner space to oppose. A literary city is always a clash of two. A dynamic opposition, in fact. The real city exists in that instant. In that moment before the shot goes off. In that dizzying hope that in the end the gun does not go off. In all that, in that instant we are able to imagine, to reconstruct, to rethink, to revise. In that instant that is never resolved. Which remains open to the infinity of new re-readings. In the passage of real time that impacts on the passage in novel time. On that represented landscape that steadily fades into the landscape that is inevitably destined to change.

With *Cosmopolis* the section on Don DeLillo closes, and we move on to McInerney's work, for we will find a different New York, but one represented with the same principle of dynamic opposition. We will find different city hypotheses - McInerney writes with more empathy than his characters - and engaged on other fronts. If DeLillo's New York is a city in half-light, without great dreams or hopes, but of the bare roughness of everyday life, McInerney's New York is a New York in full display, saturated with light. Cluttered with dreams and hopes, but mostly with illusions.

And it is in this vertigo of lights that we will find the dynamic opposition between inside and outside. Although declined in another way - the interior for McInerney is a stage seeking the consent of the audience, for DeLillo a stage with a drawn curtain trying to avoid the audience - the dynamic opposition is used for the same intent. To compare two cities, and from the clash leave the reader with the feeling of having glimpsed, albeit fleetingly, the real city.

CHAPTER 2: JAY MCINERNEY

Introduction

Jay McInerney's work can easily be divided into three distinct groups. The first one corresponds to the novels of immediacy, where the story is concentrated in a minimum period of time: a few days, barely a week. *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), *Story of My Life* (1988) and *Model Behavior* (1998) stand out for their rapid and smooth writing that, like the actions of the protagonists, seems to leave the surface intact in the end. The characters succumb to the New York urban emergency that tramples over everything: love, dreams, ideals and ambitions. The second group we can identify in McInerney's works is about the distance from New York, the nerve center of the writer's elective affinities. The times of these stories expand, passing from days to years, to decades, but the writing does not proceed accordingly and continues to be astute, however unsuitable in its agility to give the broad scope and the necessary depth required by those scenes. The novels that can be described as such are *Ransom* (1985), which tells of the exile in Kyoto of a young American in conflict with his father, and *The Last of the Savages* (1996), set mostly in Memphis and in the south of the United States, a story of friendship between a future lawyer and the heir (full of guilt) of an important slave-owning family, seasoned with a good dose of blues music. The third group brings us back to New York, to a less fleeting and stratified in a polyphonic chorus of voices narration. He portrays here situations and catastrophes with the ambition to embrace the entire New York experience from the stock market crash of 1987 to the economic crisis of 2008, passing through

the attacks of 2001. These novels form a trilogy in which the main protagonist is the Calloway family. The saga of Russell and Corrine begins on the Upper East Side, continues in TriBeCa, and ends in Harlem.

In order to understand the role of interiors in McInerney's New York novels and put them in relation with those by Don DeLillo already analyzed it is necessary to first observe what happens in the orbit of the tripartite system of McInerney's work. The author has always juxtaposed his novel-writing to the prolific, albeit subordinate, production of short stories, which served mostly as preparatory phase, as an experimentation space. McInerney himself explained in the introduction to the complete collection *How It Ended*: "Clearly, I was attracted to the long form, and my short stories - some of them, at least - often turned out to be warm-up exercises. There's psychological as well as practical value using one as a sketch for a novel; the idea of undertaking a narrative of three or four hundred pages, which might consume years of your life, is fairly daunting. A novel is a long-term relationship. Sometimes it's easier to pretend you're engaging in a one-night stand and see how it feels"⁶⁸⁰.

All novels thus take shape initially as short stories⁶⁸¹. An important step both in the development of the contents and in the final structuring of the form. In

⁶⁸⁰ Jay McInerney, *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, p.10

⁶⁸¹ *Bright Lights, Big City* from *It's Six A.M. Do You Know Where You Are?* published in issue 86 (winter 1982) of *The Paris Review*, *Ramson* from *In the North-West Frontier Province*, published in the collection *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*. Although the story's plot, unlike what happened on other occasions, only covers a small part in the novel as flashback, it had an important role as it is the first work that McInerney chose to show to an employee: "I sent short story to *The Paris Review*... And lo and behold, I was home one night in Syracuse and I got a phone call from George Plimpton, of all people [...] He said, I liked your story, I think you're talented, let me know if you have anything else" (Jay McInerney, *The Art of Fiction No. 231, The Paris Review*). The other story he will send will be the first to be published and will also become the first chapter of his first

some cases, the story makes up the first and last chapters, as happens for *Bright Lights*, *Big City* and *Story of My Life*, the novel becomes the development of “a new center”⁶⁸². With *Ramson*, however, the story provides a background to support the motivations that drove Christopher Ramson into his final exile in Japan. In the Calloway saga, the short stories occupy a marginal position compared to novels: in *Smoke* some elements are retained even in the subsequent transition to the final form, but they are tangential elements. Some themes of the story, how the two decided to quit smoking for example, are left out, as does Corrine’s participation in the anti-war parade in the short story *The March*, written during the production of the novel *The Good Life* (2006). The plot of the stories does not coincide nor clashes with the novels’ central one, but rather works as a test, as a first attempt. In *Smoke*’s case, the author begins to outline the characters starting to build a possible biography of them. *Smoke* may be seen as a test but being set in the same year of the novel among other things, it could almost work as a light prologue, *The March* is instead a test of conclusion. Written, as already mentioned, while writing the second novel, *The March* is set a year after the ending of *The Good Life*, which most likely at the time of writing the story was not yet fully defined. *The March* thus appears as a test, as a simulation, a projection into the future to test the novel’s ending and plausibility.

novel (see above). *Story of My Life* comes from the short story of the same title *Story Of My Life*, published in the August 1987 issue of *Esquire*. Alison Poole also returns in the short story *Penelope on the Pond*, written between December 2007 and spring 2008, and published in *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*. The Calloway saga begins with the short story *Smoke* written in 1985 and appeared in 1999 in the hardcover edition of the novel *Model Behavior*. The basis of the novel *The Last of the Savage* is the short story *Savage and Son*, published in the February 1993 issue of *Esquire*.

⁶⁸² Robert C. Clark, *American Literary Minimalism*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 2014, p.72

To all intents and purposes, therefore, these McInerney stories appear to be just drafts or sketches. They are interesting to read as they were notes that help to follow the trajectory of the story to their final transformation.

If one can dare to affirm that these stories evidently needed fictional development, the same cannot be said for the novel *Model Behavior*, based on the short story, *Philomena*, published in the December 25, 1995, issue of *New Yorker* magazine. The first editorial presentation shows already the spurious and unstable form of the novel, in fact on the cover, just below the title, shows the inscription “A novel and seven stories”. The consistency of the hardcover version, barely 275 pages, highlights how we are faced with a longer story that grafts onto another already existing one. In fact, unlike all other cases, the forerunner story already contains the entire development of the story. It is the story of the young Connor McKnight, of his work as a journalist following the stars for *CiaoBella!* magazine and the end of his story with the model Philomena, who after a party suddenly disappears, only to reappear at the end, sentimentally linked to the very actor that Connor was chasing. What the novel does is to add more short chapters to the already numerous short chapters of which the story is composed, giving the effect of a watering down rather than a deepening. From a content point of view, the novel does not add anything new, on the contrary, it is a step backwards, a return in extremis to the past, and is very similar in themes and situations to the first novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*, as critics have also pointed out.

A.O. Scott states, in his review in *The New York Times*. “Those of us who are old enough to be scanning the horizon for the approaching thunderheads of middle age might be forgiven a bit of temporal confusion. The vicissitudes of the stock market and the unfolding of a complicated Presidential scandal dominate the

news. Manhattan real estate prices spiral past all rationality, and the city's restaurants are full of 25-year-olds flush with new money and old-fashioned liquor, decked out in little black dresses and yellow silk neckties. What decade is this, anyway?"⁶⁸³, while Walter Kirn in the *New York Magazine* writes: "First, it's *Bright Lights, Big City* all over again, and not a reworking but a virtual copy. Only the clubs and designer labels have changed. Clever young man hung up on willowy model (Philomena, she's called this time) and accompanied by way-cool buddy (Jeremy, a brilliant short-story writer) is wasting his life and talent working at a magazine (*CiaoBella!*) instead of buckling down to his art (screenwriting)"⁶⁸⁴. From a formal point of view the novel continues the experimentation on the narrative voice which is one of the peculiarities of the first part of McInerney's production. *Model Behavior* is built according to a continuous shift in the point of view, a seamless transition from the first to the second to the third person⁶⁸⁵. If

⁶⁸³A.O.Scott, *Babylon Revisited*,
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/27/reviews/980927.27scott.html>

⁶⁸⁴ Walter Kirn, *Last Year's Model*,
<http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/books/reviews/3166/>

⁶⁸⁵ McInerney, in an interview in *Writer's Digest.com*, motivated his technical choice as follows: "In *Model Behavior*, I alternate between first-, second- and third-person point of view. There's even one section in first-person plural. Partly it was a technical experiment, but again, partly it was accident. Going over the first 15 pages of what became the first draft I discovered that I had shifted between first and third. And I found there was a method in that madness. I don't want to make this too formulaic, but as a general observation I'd say that the narrative starts in first person and shifts to second or third when I want more distance from my narrator and his understanding of himself. Or more irony. Henry James talked about the "terrible fluidity of self-revelation" of the first person; sometimes it's too transparent. There's no traction, as it were. This is in many ways my most self-conscious novel, self-reflexive in part because of the self-consciousness of the era, and the media-saturated culture it depicts, is one of its main thematic concerns", Anne Bowling, *Novelist Jay McInerney on Getting Your Novel Underway*, http://www.writersdigest.com/qp7-migration-all-articles/qp7-migration-fiction/novelist_jay_mcinerney_on_getting_your_novel_underway

Bright Lights, Big City astounded the audience for the use of the second person singular, *Story Of My Life* amazes because it is written using a classic first person singular person, but it adopts a female point of view, a rare and challenging practice, as well as risky one, for a male writer first person⁶⁸⁶.

Consistent in content, albeit with demerit, and consistent in the form, though with merit, *Model Behavior* comes out when the Calloway saga has already begun, and it is the last McInerney novel that doesn't feature Russell and Corrine. For this reason, then, it plays an important role, it is a sort of watershed, a compendium, perhaps not essential for the author's career but necessary for our analysis that tries to understand the function of the interior in the author's work. The first part especially will serve us, in the next chapter, as a bridge to *Bright, Precious Days* (2016), the last novel by Calloway.

Thus, *Model Behavior* is the final compendium of a first representation of the urban experience and the role of interiors in McInerney's work. Although more than the novel it is the story that really interests us, the main point is what is said at the end of it that will be changed in the transposition. The plot remains intact, Collin McNab (in the novel his name is changed to Connor McKnight) after discovering his girlfriend's betrayal, waits for his rival, the actor Chip Ralston (in the novel his name remains the same), on the red carpet of Ed Sullivan's show and knocks him out with a right-handed jab (in the novel it is a headboard). He then ends up in prison until he is freed by his sister, Brooke (again, the name in

⁶⁸⁶ "There, too, I don't wanna to get mystical, but I heard a voice, a voice in my head, and it propelled the writing. Both books (*Bright Lights, Big City*) had a sense of rhythm and music that made them a pleasure to write [...] And it was really fun to put on a pair of high heels, as it were, and a black cocktail dress and step out in a completely different persona", Lucas Wittmann, *The Art of Fiction No. 231*, in *The Paris Review*, Issue 217, Summer 2016

the transposition doesn't change) and the two of them find themselves "alone and anonymous again on the sidewalk"⁶⁸⁷. It is some days before Christmas, the city is festively decorated and Collin suggests going see the Christmas show at the Rockefeller Center, but it is just an ironic joke to ease his disappointment. He had arrived in New York with the idea of writing the screenplay that would change his life, but instead he found himself without a job and, what's more, without his girlfriend, who until then had been the *passepartout* to participate to every event of New York's dazzling worldliness. In the novel, brother and sister continue to walk in sadness, Collin embraces Brooke and while "the pedestrian traffic of Fifth Avenue surging around (us)", Collin has a vision of his now ex-girlfriend the year before "standing on a stool like an angel in a white robe, putting the star on the Christmas tree last year"⁶⁸⁸. The novel doesn't end here, it still has a coda, where surprisingly, everything happens in very few pages, as Walter Kirn writes: "Nothing happens until the last few pages, when suddenly too much happens. This routine satire of Manhattan party going that might have been titled *Absolut Breeze* is abruptly capped off with deaths and disfigurements that come less as a shock than as an impertinence. The narrator's sister is slashed with a razor. His closest friend is shot and killed. It's tossed-off, cocktail-hour apocalypse - the equivalent of a straight - bourbon nightcap after an evening of Chablis spritzers - that leaves the reader nastily hung over and asking a question: What the hell just happened?"⁶⁸⁹. Although Kirn too abounds in alcoholic and lashing irony, a common practice among the critics when it comes to talking

⁶⁸⁷ Jay McInerney, *Philomena*, in *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, Kindle edition, p. 460

⁶⁸⁸ Jay McInerney, *Model Behavior*, Kindle edition, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014, p. 211-212

⁶⁸⁹ Kirn, *Ibid.*

about a McInerney novel, what he notes at the beginning of the review is correct. The final part of the novel stuns, it goes completely beyond the genre that had been followed pedantically until then. It signals once again how this transposition is forced and inefficient. However, the ending of the story remains noteworthy: it is the sister who takes Collin's hand and accompanies him eastwards, on Fiftieth Street, and in the final lines, the protagonist reveals a memory:

And, walking through the slanting *secondhand light* toward Rockefeller center and Fifth Avenue, I remember that the city used to seem to me like a giant advent calendar with a thousand doors. Prowling the streets at night, you felt that every *luminous* tower was a *glittering* enigma that might secretly bear your name. I remember the joy, not so very long ago, of waking up newly arrived in the city, believing that everything I wanted in the world was waiting outside the door of my apartment, right down the street. Just around the next corner, or the one after (P, 460-461).

The light under which Collin moves is no longer a spotlight to which he aspires, but a secondary light, an ordinary one that illuminates just enough, that promises nothing and does not ignite desire. It is a light of loneliness that does not dazzle, but that strips the tired body of the character from illusions. It is a light of awareness, or rather, of an abrupt return to reality; one that forces him to stand with his feet firmly planted on the ground. It is the actual light of the city as opposed to the other light, ambiguous and enigmatic, enveloping it, the one that

feeds the illusions. New York never ceases to enchant all McInerney's characters and the memory of their first idea of the city returns to reinforce their desire to stay and try again. As in Fitzgerald's *My Lost City*, "l'expérience du deuil est une épreuve indispensable à la recréation de l'attrait liminaire de New York"⁶⁹⁰. The memory of the past Christmas is thus transferred from the domesticated figure of the model to that of the city itself and its towers, whose illuminated windows recall an advent calendar and New York is this way presented to the disillusioned eyes of the protagonist as it was the first time he saw it: still full of possibilities to be discovered, sparkling with surprises behind every door. Often compared to Francis Scott Fitzgerald, McInerney remembers him in this finale imbued with melancholy and bitterness, but nevertheless hooked on the resistant idea of the city's glitter. As Nathalie Cochoy writes: "dans l'œuvre fitzgeraldienne, la distance mémorielle, nécessaire à la restauration du scintillement liminaire se mesure à l'aune de l'espace", and if Nick Carraway⁶⁹¹ "s'arrête sur le pont de Queensboro afin de retrouver l'émerveillement d'un premier regard"⁶⁹². Collin stops in front of the brightness of the towers and of all those promises that seem to be contained in their invisible interior. For Nick to revisit the bridge "for a moment the enchanted, sweet-smelling and sweet-tasting city represents the full wonder of the new continent"⁶⁹³, so, for Collin the buildings in front of him represent the city as a string of doors still to be opened on new and promising

⁶⁹⁰ Nathalie Cochoy, *Passante à New York*, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, Pessac, 2009, p. 103.

⁶⁹¹ "The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its wild promise of all mystery and the beauty in the world", Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1950, p. 67

⁶⁹² Cochoy, (2009), p. 103

⁶⁹³ Peter Brooker, *New York Fictions: Modernity, Postmodernism, The New Modern*, Longman Publishing, New York, 1996, p. 173

days. “Seule la connaissance de la perte amène le narrateur ou le personnage fitzgeraldien à recouvrer la force “colossale” de ses illusions premières”⁶⁹⁴. For McInerney’s characters too, it is the awareness of a defeat, of a loss, that reinforces the desire of the city. Yet, what is this desire, this metropolitan ideal? What part of town works as a lure? As we have seen, for Nick it was the Queensboro Bridge, Fitzgerald in *My Lost City* starts again from Central Park, Collin instead stares at the skyscrapers and focuses on his apartment where “the world was waiting outside”. As if the beating heart of the city was guarded in that interior, which would have given life to all the adjacent streets. Every road started and ended there. The same thing happens to the protagonist of *Bright Lights, Big City* after yet another night of excess and the abrupt awakening in the blinding morning light on leaving the club. In the first chapter, in which the protagonist is on his way home, he stops at a certain point to look at the windows from outside. To be outside of the inside is to be outside the center of the city:

On Bleecker Street you catch the scent of the Italian bakery. You stand at the corner of Bleecker and Cornelia and gaze at the windows on the fourth floor of a tenement. Behind those windows is the apartment you shared with Amanda when you first came to New York. It was small and dark, but you liked the imperfectly patched pressed tin ceiling, the claw-footed bath in the kitchen, the windows that didn’t quite fit the frames. You were just starting out. You had the rent covered, you had your favorite restaurant on MacDougal where the

⁶⁹⁴ Cochoy, (2009), p. 104

waitress knew your names and you could bring your own bottle of wine. Every morning you woke to the smell of bread from the bakery downstairs. You would go out to buy the paper and maybe pick up a couple of croissants while Amanda made the coffee. This was two years ago, before you got married⁶⁹⁵.

The promise of the city is in the interior, inhabiting an interior means inhabiting the exterior. Even before arriving in New York, the image of the city that is built in the mind is the image of a city lived from an interior. No matter the quality of the house, despite its imperfections, when perfectly inhabited it allows you to own the city and to feel a concrete presence of it. The rent is paid, the protagonist is recognized as a New Yorker by the waitresses and, bringing wine from home, he can afford to behave outside exactly as he would behave inside. The city automatically becomes his home. The city seen for the first time becomes the city seen from the front door. This is how the interior for McInerney strikes us immediately, we can see it as a point of anchorage as well as some sort of protection. But it's an illusion, and soon the city is lived only outside, and it acquires a spectral feeling in total opposition to that ideal city imagined before getting there.

It is as if the loss of the interior corresponds to a progressive ghost-like transparency of the body. Physical presence becomes absence: "As this urban, oftentimes "unbelievable" experience unfolds, "you" become very aware of the

⁶⁹⁵ Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City*, Bloomsbury Edition, 2017, Kindle edition, p. 8

unreality and uncanniness of the place⁶⁹⁶. It is the interior, in dynamic opposition to the exterior, that gives a sense of reality to the city. For McInerney, as for DeLillo, it is the dynamic opposition between the inside and the outside that is the only possibility for the characters to have some roots, to settle in the city. Without it, the city fades and the characters lose their consistency, and the perceived New York no longer resembles what was perceived the first time: “This was your neighborhood. These shops were your shops. You possessed these streets as securely as you held title. Now the vista was skewed slightly. Someone has tilted the ground a few degrees and everything is the same and not the same” (BLBC, 127).

Lévinas, in the essay *Totalité et infini*, dedicates a part to the concept of *demeure*; Demeure intended as a condition for attaining a dimension of interiority, in which man can inhabit the world feeling at home, therefore temporarily achieving a separation, a suspension that, however, does not nullify the relationship of the subject with the world⁶⁹⁷. The concept of *demeure* is also moved to the question of the house intended as a building⁶⁹⁸, that belongs to the world of objects, but differs from the other objects in the fact that it is placed in

⁶⁹⁶ Maria Beville, *Zones of Uncanny Spectrality: The City in Postmodern Literature*, in *English Studies*, 94:5, 2013, p. 615

⁶⁹⁷ “La fonction originelle de la maison ne consiste pas à orienter l’être par l’architecture du bâtiment et à découvrir un lieu mais à rompre le plein de l’élément, à y ouvrir l’utopie où le « je » se recueille en demeurant chez soi. Mais la séparation ne m’isole pas, comme si j’étais simplement arraché à ces éléments”, Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l’extériorité*, Kluwer Academic, 1987, p. 167

⁶⁹⁸ “On peut interpréter l’habitation comme utilisation d’un “ustensile” entre “ustensiles”. La maison servirait à l’habitation comme le marteau à l’enfoncement d’un clou ou la plume à l’écriture. Elle appartient, en effet, à l’attirail des choses nécessaires à la vie de l’homme. Elle sert à l’abriter des intempéries, à le cacher aux ennemis ou aux importuns”, Lévinas, p. 160

a different position: “Concrètement, la demeure ne se situe pas dans le monde objectif, mais le monde objectif se situe par rapport à ma demeure”⁶⁹⁹. The dwelling place therefore becomes, not the end, but the very condition of human activity, which is much more of a beginning. It is from the dwelling that the subject exists according to the way of being that belongs to him. The quality of the dwelling is in its ability to act as a starting point for the individual, both welcoming him and pushing him towards that world: “L’abord du monde se produit dans le mouvement qui, à partir de l’utopie de la demeure parcourt un espace pour y effectuer une prise originelle, pour saisir et pour emporter”⁷⁰⁰. The dwelling is the conjunction between interiority and exteriority, it enjoys a special extraterritoriality: “Simultanément dehors et dedans, il va au-dehors à partir d’une intimité. D’autre part cette intimité s’ouvre dans une maison, laquelle se situe dans ce dehors”⁷⁰¹. The house therefore allows establishing a distance “in” and not “from” the world, not an isolation, it means being always in the world even if in a condition of temporary protection. Distancing himself from the surrounding chaotic flow in, sheltered in a house, the individual builds his presence and tightens his grip on the world⁷⁰².

As we saw in the previous chapter with the analysis of *Cosmopolis*, the interior in DeLillo is the place where the character makes an attempt to assimilate the metropolis and the self into a single entity. The city is taken for granted, there is no performance anxiety. The interior thus becomes *passages*, where the whole city is brought back inside. The city is subordinate to the ego of the character.

⁶⁹⁹ Lévinas, p. 163

⁷⁰⁰ Lévinas, p. 169

⁷⁰¹ Lévinas, p. 162

⁷⁰² “Elle rend possible le travail et la propriété” Lévinas, p. 167

The interior is the attempt to overcome the metropolis. For McInerney, as we will see in detail in the analysis of *Bright, Precious Days*, the inside is a sign of detachment, of distance. The inside is the starting point from which to begin your action on the city, but it is also a stage, the set for a performance. Because of the sense of protection given by the interior, the characters use this space to perform their own personal representation of the city. The interior becomes a *diorama*. It's an attempt to make an impression on the city, to understand it, to finally touch it and to be part of it.

In *Story of My Life*, the protagonist Alison Poole, who has acting ambitions, at a certain point, inside her boyfriend's apartment, remembers a dream she had a few days earlier:

Reality is out the window by the time we end up back at Dean's place. It's like nothing can touch us as long as we stay high. Sitting down around the coffee table I'm having this déjà vu about a dream I had where Dean's living room is a stage and we're playing Truth or Dare for an audience⁷⁰³.

If the interior makes the city real and possible, however, the interior can also transfigure reality, mitigate it, alleviate it, as it happens for Russell in the Calloway saga. It is the main feature of McInerney's interiors, they are built and defined in their extraterritoriality. If for those who arrive in the city, they are a realm of luminous promises, for those who are already in the city, they risk becoming dangerous traps. When asked why the word Bright appeared so often in his titles,

⁷⁰³ Jay McInerney, *Story of My Life*, Bloomsbury, Kindle edition, 2014, p. 151

McInerney answers: “I don’t know. I just think my characters are always seeking the light, and all of my characters are drawn to Manhattan like the proverbial moths to the flame”⁷⁰⁴. It is possible that the brightness to which he refers is that of the windows, of those inviting interiors, piled on top of each other in the night especially for a perfect postcard. The iconic New York of a thousand lights⁷⁰⁵, what else but window lights. To be part of that image, to be part of that light, inside one of those windows is everything that McInerney’s characters ask for.

⁷⁰⁴ Wittmann,

⁷⁰⁵ In the Italian translation, the title *Bright Lights, Big City*, becomes *The Thousand Lights of New York*, (*Le mille luci di New York*)

2.1 A New York Embedded Writer

Starting from his first novel the author's life has mixed with the life of his characters: "From the response I've received to *Bright Lights, Big City*, I have what I take to be a smaller problem - namely, that readers tend to confuse author with protagonist"⁷⁰⁶. His particular narrative strategy was instrumental in creating, from the very beginning, this endemic confusion. The second person narrator, in fact, has as its main feature the instability, "some of its characteristic features include ambiguity over the identity and status of the "you"⁷⁰⁷. According to the division proposed by Richardson, the second person engaged by McInerney belongs to the *standard* category, i.e., where *you* replaces the first or third person, without affecting the rest of the narrative form that remains rather traditional. "This irreducible oscillation between first and third person narration that is typical of second person texts, texts that simultaneously invite and preclude identification"⁷⁰⁸.

In this oscillation between first and third person that establishes in the reader a dialectic between identification and distance, the *you* used by McInerney is closer to the pronoun *I* than to the third person.

All the information that is given to the reader comes through the narrator. It is information that is visible and accessible to who is telling the story. The dialogue that the narrator has with himself, the reflections and analyses on his situation, as well as the questions he asks himself, do not have that veil, that veneer of

⁷⁰⁶ Sanford Pinsker, *Soft Lights, Academic Talk: A Conversation with Jay McInerney*, in *The Literary Review*, 30 (Fall 1986), p. 135

⁷⁰⁷ Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices. Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, The Ohio State University Press/Columbus, 2006, p. 20

⁷⁰⁸ Richardson, p. 22

intimacy, that distinguishes the third person. The third person hovers over the narrative as a promise, as a projection. The character sees himself in the third person, and we see him in the third person, only when he steps out of himself, only when he steps into the realm of his imagination: “You remember how you felt when you passed this way for your first interview ... You thought of yourself in the third person: “He arrived for his interview...”” (BLBC, 34). The oscillation towards the third person therefore appears in the novel more as a model towards which the character aspires. A third person similar to that to which David Bell aspired in *Americana*. The third person here, as in DeLillo’s novel, written in the first person, represents the character’s desire to resemble as much as possible the characters of cinema, television, advertising, those who, at least there, on the screen, seemed to have made it. “You are the stuff of which consumer profiles are made” (BLBC, 144). But the protagonist of McInerney’s novel, like David Bell, is buried in an uncomfortable, prurient, unfriendly *I*, not at all admirable. We can therefore say that if we lay out the novel’s plot as a continuous line, the *you* would be the vector fleeing from the *I* towards an unattainable *He*. We can see this possible shift tending more towards the first person starting from the incipit:

You are not (*I am not*) the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are (*I am*), and you (*I*) cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy. You are (*I am*) at nightclub talking to a girl with shaved head. The club is either Heartbreak or the Lizard Lounge. (BLBC, 1)

An incipit that is completely different, for example, from the incipit of another text written in the second person, *If on a winter's night a traveller* by Italo Calvino⁷⁰⁹: “Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach.” Unlike McInerney’s passage, where the distinction between the *you* who speaks as the main subject of the narrative and the *you* to whom it is addressed (the reader) remains clear, in Calvino’s text, instead, *you* refers directly to the reader, it calls him, invites him to enter the narrative: “Calvino’s sophisticated strategy is to catch you, the extradiegetic reader, off guard, and make you the subject of diegesis”⁷¹⁰. Calvino’s *you* is what Richardson calls “the autotelic form”, which “employs direct address to the reader”, while “the Hypothetical form employs the style of the guidebook”⁷¹¹, with an abundant use of the word “autotelic”, with an abundant use of the imperative.

But in the case of first-person narration, “the reader may [...] actively disengage from identifying with a homodiegetic or even autodiegetic narrator, in order to maintain a psychological distance from the situation in the narrative”, with the second person, continues John T. Kirby, “this becomes much more difficult [...] the narrator effectively vanishes, leaving it to the reader to mark that space in the text”⁷¹². Therefore, if the choice of the second person was an intrepid one⁷¹³,

⁷⁰⁹ Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, Trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988, p.1

⁷¹⁰ John T. Kirby, *Toward a Rhetoric of Poetics: Rhetor as Author and Narrator*, in *Journal Of Narrative Technique* 22, 1992, p. 10

⁷¹¹ Richardson, p. 18

⁷¹² Kirby, p. 10

⁷¹³ Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, dedicates only a footnote to the second person, dismissing it with the (mistaken) belief that attempts to use the second person have never really succeeded. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983.

the same is not true for the narrative form. In the continuity of tradition, the reader, at mercy of the instable statute of the second person narrative, can easily move towards the first person, and favored by the evanescence of the narrator, he may confuse what happens to the protagonist with what happened to the author. What is more the story told has many references to the author's life too, as he openly declared. Not only that, to encourage confusion between the text and real life, making it hard to determine if it is fiction or autobiography, also helped McInerney's choice not to give a name to the character: "the only loss I think I've suffered has been that reviewers have had a hard time coming up with ways to talk about Jay McInerney's "you". But the benefit just might be that he'll never become a household word like Salinger's Holden Caulfield"⁷¹⁴. Only an apparent benefit, because if it is true that Holden Caulfield "has become the generic terms for an upper-middle-class male adolescent coming of age", it is also true, as Stephanie Girard rightly pointed out, that in the absence of a proper name for the protagonist, "Jay McInerney has become a household word and [...] it has frequently been detached from its referent"⁷¹⁵. The first novel was therefore the inaugural event of an author's reading mode that continued over time. Thanks to the many aspects of his private life that have been declaredly

⁷¹⁴ Pinsker, p. 135

⁷¹⁵ Stephanie Girard, *Standing At The Corner Of Walk And Don't Walk*: *Vintage Contemporaries, Bright Lights, Big City, and the problem of betweenness*, in *American literature*, Vol. 68, No.1, *Write Now: American Literature in the 1980s and 1990s* (March, 1996), p. 172

used as part of both his first novel and the⁷¹⁶ following⁷¹⁷, critics, have often looked and continue to look at his work without separating two aspects: the private and the creative⁷¹⁸. Nor did it help the author's particularly exposed

⁷¹⁶ Robert C. Clark writes in this regard: "The novel contains several biographical parallels, many of which have been addressed in various publications. McInerney's first wife, Linda Rossister, was a model, and she left him in much the same way that the protagonist's model wife, Amanda, does. He worked as a fact checker for the *New Yorker* for nine months until in 1981 he was tacitly encouraged to either "quit or be fired"; the protagonist has a similar job at a prestigious (though unnamed) magazine. [...] McInerney was a self-described roisterer who "had a taste for alcohol and "Bolivian Marching Powder". Robert C. Clark, *American Literary Minimalism*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 2014, p.73. Not only, like the protagonist, McInerney mother too died from cancer. The author nonetheless mentions that the protagonist experiences his bereavement in a different manner.

⁷¹⁷ The second novel, *Ransom*, was born after his experiences in Japan: "I wanted to write The Great Expatriate Novel, and it didn't seem like Paris was the place to go anymore. I decided that perhaps Japan was. [...] So off I went", Wittmann, p. 3. The same applies to the other novel in the second part of his work, written after a move to Nashville with his third wife, Helen Bransford, as Lynn Barber wrote. "His next novel, *The Last of the Savages*, was set in the South, and the interviews he gave on publication were all about horses, heirlooms, ancestors, and revealed a hitherto-unsuspected vein of snobbery. He claimed "I always wanted to live in the world that I have ended up living in". But the Tennessee idyll was already flawed." Lynn Barber, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, The Observer, Sun 10 Sep 2000 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/10/fiction.features> (last access: 8 August 2018). The end of his marriage and the idyll with Nashville is narrated in *Sleeping with Pigs*, where the protagonist's wife, like McInerney ex-wife, brought a piglet to bed: "Oh sure, it became too much for me. Terrible! I could have done without that. Wouldn't you, if your husband installed a pig in your bedroom?" <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/books/jay-mcinerney-interview-story-of-his-life-1-1153542> (last access: 8 August 2018)

⁷¹⁸ In an essay written for *Esquire*, McInerney harshly criticizes the treatment of young authors by the critics creating "a taxonomy of the currently favorite, though ageless, critical fallacies" consisting of six elements that perfectly illustrate the situation that has been created around him and his work. "**1. The Intentional Fallacy.** This occurs when critics extrapolate the extraliterary motives of the author and his publisher from the text of a work of fiction [...]. **2. Killing the Messenger.** [...] Recent critics, complaining about subject matter that they find distasteful and unpretty [...]. **3. Determining Guilt by Association.** This strategy usually begins with irresponsible label –mongering **4. Ad**

public life⁷¹⁹, and soon found himself “treated less as a writer [...] than as a literary celebrity, with “page Six” and *People* chronicling his habits”⁷²⁰. So, as Sonia Baelo-Allué pointed out, “McInerney’s loose lifestyle as a literary celebrity has marked his career and the way his novel has been received”⁷²¹. At the same time, the author’s lifestyle has become in itself a justification, as shown, for example, by the opening of a review published on the occasion of the release of the novel *The Good Life*: “With a title like *The Good Life*, Jay McInerney’s seventh novel is difficult to approach without reference to its author’s well documented hedonism. The Jayster (to use Bret Easton Ellis’s name for his Toxic Twins) has no one to blame but himself. For two decades McInerney has affected a smug, bespoke-suited public persona - the rail blowing, model-dating, sommelier-in-a-

Hominem Attack. [...] This includes indiscriminate use of derogatory adjectives and attacks on someone’s haircut, manner of dress, (ecc...) [...] **5. The Autobiographical Smear.** The word autobiographical is often used as a critical diminutive [...]. **6. Citation of Spurious or Dubious Sources.** The misquotations and paraphrases attributed to writers in feature articles, gossip columns, and “interviews” are suspect and should not be considered primary sources [...]. Jay McInerney, *The Writer of Wrong. A novelist carves the critics*, in *Esquire*, June 1989

⁷¹⁹ Jay McInerney was on the Literary Brat Pack. A group born in the eighties mainly thanks to the press, comprising as well as McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, Donna Tartt and Jill Eisenstadt who had as a reference point *The Odeon*, a club at 145 West Broadway. “Young writers who were rumored to spend more time in downtown bars and nightclubs partying until dawn instead of writing. Just like Hollywood at the time” Jason Diamond, *Sex, Drugs, and BestSellers: The Legend of the Literary Brat Pack*, in *Harper’s Bazaar*, Nov 2, 2016. The term Brat Pack is derived from the Rat Pack, the term used to define a group of Las Vegas-based showmen between the 1950s and 1960s who included, among others, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop. The term was coined in 1988 by Bruce Bawer.

⁷²⁰ David Blum, *Slave Of New York. Jay McInerney is back with another nightlife novel*, New York Magazine, September 5, 1988 (<http://nymag.com/arts/books/profiles/48479/>, last access: 4 September 2018)

⁷²¹ Sonia Baelo-Allué, *Post-9/11 New York: Jay McInerney’s The Good Life*, in *Literature of New York*, edited by Sabrina Fuchs-Abrams, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2009, p. 168

club-chair frat boy”⁷²². I mean, it is the writer’s fault and not the critics’ lazy myopia. As we shall see, in fact, the situation of the author’s position is much more complicated than it would seem at first glance. However, this is about storytelling and not gossip. It is obviously not the place to discuss McInerney’s personal life and to resolve all the implications of its massive presence in his works (for this reason, albeit briefly, please refer to the notes). We are interested in the particular use of interior spaces, which here too, as we have already seen for DeLillo, are functional to the unfolding of the plot, becoming real narrative devices that make the urban experience complete and deeper. We cannot, however, in reconstructing the themes and style at the center of the author’s narrative and therefore of his use of interiors, disregard this aspect, as it is a decisive part of his view of New York and its aesthetics, as Robert C. Clark well pointed out: “His use of biographical details is a conscious element of his aesthetic”⁷²³.

Autobiographical elements have always come together in the narrative of each author, as cues, small details, left as they are or slightly modified. Names that change and remain similar due to assonance; additional family members, or family members that disappear. Names of cities and schools that are used as diversions. Personal cues can be found in almost every narrative work without them constituting elements aware of an aesthetic and openly exposed as such. McInerney, from the very beginning, from his first novel actually, presents himself as an author who sees in his own life, in the way he lives his life, the main element of being a writer. Not a life lived as a work of art like

⁷²² Benjamin Strong, *Last Night*, in *The Village Voice*, January 24, 2006 (<https://www.villagevoice.com/2006/01/24/last-night/>, last access: 4 September 2018)

⁷²³ Clark, p. 73

D'Annunzio's, but rather a life seen as the driving force behind its narrative. However, autobiographical elements used in a conscious and even declared way must not lead to the mistake of understanding the author's private life and his prose as a single entity. There is no soft and fluent passage without filters between one and the other. The author himself explains what kind of writer he is:

I'm afraid that – not necessarily deliberately, but consistently – I've made a kind of laboratory out of my life, where I mix the stuff in the test tubes to create explosions – possibly resulting in interesting by-products. I mean, not deliberately – I'd be crazy to deliberately do that – or maybe not. But it sometimes appears to be part of a plan. Flannery O'Connor once said that anybody who had childhood has enough to write about, and she lived on her little farm, not leaving the house for months at a time, and she wrote better than I probably ever will. But I do think that diversity and range of experience can't help but make a more interesting novelist. There is a type of writer that can happily bury themselves in the country and dig very deep, but I'm not like that⁷²⁴.

McInerney immediately qualifies as a writer who takes particular experiences of the world, as dynamic and varied as possible, to set the basis of his writing. A

⁷²⁴ Lynn Barber, *The beautiful and the damned*, in *The Observer*, 10 September 2000 (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/10/fiction.features>, last access: 4 September 2018)

writing characterized by a constantly integrated look, immersed in the world, that the author never leaves, not even during the transposition of this into a fictitious world. The experience of the world must become the spark of fiction. Writing follows the direct experience of the world, thus becoming an integral part of it. The experience must live up to the narrative. It must be allowed to become history. Life understood as a laboratory for creation, but not life transposed as it has been lived, because, as it was extensively discussed above it is to keep in mind the author's own warning: do not confuse author with protagonist. McInerney starts from his experience, but he does not write autobiographies and his novels are fiction novels. They are *by-products*. They are therefore derivatives, passed through a meticulous transformation in the laboratory. The decisive explosion is due to a mixture of observation, reflection, transposition and adaptation. What the experience has brought must then be declined according to the rules of the narrative, the elements borrowed must be functional to the plot, consistent with the character created.

In 1999, in the January 18 issue of *The New Yorker*, a text by McInerney entitled *Naked On the Grass* appears under the title *Personal History*, with a clear subtitle: *The author recalls his mother's deathbed confession*. The reader is therefore warned that he is going to read a true story: the story of a dying mother who confesses a betrayal to her eldest son. The death of his mother, accompanied by thoughts and a confrontation on sexual life (intimate and secret) is one of the leitmotifs of McInerney's writing. The theme comprises all three forms he has used over the years: *novel*, *short story* and *essay*. It is the most striking case of how a piece of his private life has been taken and transformed and retransformed according to

the demands of writing. The essay, like the confession, is *anticlimatic*⁷²⁵. From the very first lines, the reader immediately learns the secret of the author's mother: "her own secret love story" (NOTG, 52). Then we continue with an accurate analysis of what happened; the presentation of the mother is followed by the presentation of the father and their meeting, their marriage, the birth of McInerney, the eldest son, and the definitive move to a town in Massachusetts, with the invented name of Buxton. The chronology of events is punctuated, from time to time, by a few lines of the final exchange between mother and son, which, however, sees complete progress only after half of the essay. First, McInerney talks about Buxton, of the life there, of his first time, but above all of the Millbrook family, "the most glamorous couple in town" (NOTG, 54) (here too, the name is invented). The Millbrooks and the McInerneys immediately bond and young Jay, in that house full of books and works of art, receives his artistic education: "The Millbrooks did as much as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones to shape my growing scorn for my middle-class upbringing" (NOTG, 55). Wick Millbrook and McInerney's mother immediately formed a strong friendship, "He was so obvious about his affection for her that it seemed almost ridiculous to think that anything sub rosa could be going on" (NOTG, 56). Despite these words, the friendship between the two turned into a stronger feeling. This happens also thanks to Charlotte Millbrook who (ironically) experiences a sort of sexual awakening, just when her husband is forced to have a cardiac bypass ("her timing was terrible"). One of the most moving scenes follows. In a ballroom, after having waited so long, Wick and Merf (short for Marilyn) confess their love for each other. Merf eventually decides to stay with

⁷²⁵ Jay McInerney, *Naked On the Grass*, New Yorker, January 18, 1999, p. 61

her family and then falls ill. The final dialogue between the mother and the writer is not only an opportunity to unveil the secret love story, but also a moment for the two to get to know each other, dealing for the first time with such a thorny subject as sexuality. The situation, a dying mother and her son confessing aspects of their sex life, is, as said, dealt with several times by the author and each time defined according to the needs of the current narrative.

This theme appears for the first time in the debut novel. Towards the end, it turns out that to upset the protagonist was not so much his failure as a writer and the failure of his marriage, but rather the death of his mother: “My mother, forget my wife” (BLBC, 171). The protagonist slowly becomes aware that the decision to marry Amanda was a reaction to his mother’s illness. In the penultimate chapter, symbolically titled *The Night Shift*, after having sorted things out with his brother, whom he had previously been trying to avoid by using flashbacks, the protagonist tells of the last days at his mother’s bedside: “You thought you would faint when you came home the last time, *three days* before she died” (BLBC, 157). The incisiveness of the event and its use in the plot of the novel lies in the use of the adjectives *rambling* and *Tudor* and the adverb *almost* in both texts. The first is used in the essay to describe Buxton’s parents’ house, chosen, as opposed to the first house proposed by his father, by his mother because of its characteristics more similar to her personality: “a *rambling* lakeside *Tudor* [...] At least there she would have the consolation of sailing and water-skiing in the back yard” (NOTG, 54). The house thus takes on a strong maternal connotation. Another similar house appears in the novel, “a *rambling Tudor* affair on the shore” (BLBC, 89). This is Vicky’s house, Vicky is Allagash’s cousin. During their sole meeting, she tells the protagonist the story and the episodes connected to this house, arousing in him a lot of emotion and a sense of

protection, “you want to watch over her through the interval, protect her [...] the irrevocable past tense of the narration suggests to you some intervening tragedy” (BLBC, 90). Vicky, as we will see in the analysis of the novel, is a fundamental character, representing the third New York, the possible New York that could wait for the protagonist at the end of the novel. For the protagonist, Vicky represents the right woman, with a maternal character, in total opposition to his ex-wife Amanda. Vicky is thus the chance to find an interior that welcomes, a cozy house in the heart of the city. It is to Vicky, in fact, that the character confesses, albeit briefly, at the end in a desperate call sampling an epiphany. This is how the memory of the author’s maternal home becomes one of the elements in the novel that contributes to creating the particular figure of Vicky’s character. As for the adverb *almost*, it is used at the beginning of the essay in reference to the long maternal confession, “*almost* turned out to be the significant word” (NOTG, 54). The whole story told by his mother is based on this adverb, on this never occurred approach but only perceived, often denied just before its materialization, on the decisive moments that in the end kept her just apart from some of the most important moments of her life. If in her story the adverb *almost* denotes the position of the mother with respect to events, in the novel, the adverb denotes the position of the protagonist with respect to what is happening to him. It is used both towards his mother and with Vicky. With respect to the death of his mother, the adverb *almost* marks the instability of the protagonist consequent to what happened and his inability to deal with it: “you have made such a point of not dwelling on the incidents associated with your mother’s death, almost denying that it was a consideration at all” (BLBC, 154). *Almost* is finally used after the phone call to Vicky, in the finale, to identify the feeling, a precise one this time, about himself and the city: “you are afraid of almost

everything” (BLBC, 172). The adverb here suggests to the reader that in addition to the Sunday morning light, and despite that day being a reproduction of the Sunday with which the novel opens, there is still a note of hope in the protagonist that the Monday that it is about to begin will be a day of rebirth. That *almost* seems to tell the reader that everything scares the protagonist, except for the fact that from now on he will be able to count on the often maternal presence of Vicky.

The similarities of the two texts with what really happened are obvious, the questions that the mother in the novel asks, as well as the final vision of her father, are the same. There is no confession of betrayal here, although, speaking of Amanda’s forthcoming marriage, her mother admits that, in the past, she thought about leaving her husband. The scene is functional to the novel as it reveals the source of the crisis of the protagonist, it is a moment, the memory of those days, which works as an epiphany. Only by finally admitting the suffering for the death of his mother can the protagonist reknit the threads of his existence and try to start over. The scene thus becomes the catalyst for all the narrative events, those that happened before and those that will happen afterwards. The central core is thus strategically postponed to the end.

The location and function of a similar situation is different in the other novel *The Good Life*. Here, there are several passages that are taken literally from the essay, with slight modifications. For example, Luke’s mother is similar to the description of the mother that the author proposes in the essay, both physically and for what concerns her personality. Talking about his mother’s intolerance of enclosed spaces and her tendency to be out of the house all the time, McInerney says that both he and his brother used to tease her, saying over and over “Such a nice day, go out and play” (NOTG, 52). The same goes for Luke,

who “always pictured his mother outdoors”, the constant refrain of his childhood was “such a nice day, you should go out and play”⁷²⁶. The shifting of the subject, from the mother to that *you* referring to Luke is thus also the shifting of the episode’s focal center, here it is no longer the mother’s affair that interests the narrator, but rather how this can help the resolution of the main affair, which is Luke’s.

Beyond these descriptive assonances that confirm how much the construction of the character of Luke’s mother was based on the author’s mother, the scene is written with another purpose and from another perspective. First, in the novel the mother is still alive, and the infidelity is consummated, and discovered not through confession, but by direct witness of a teenage, Luke, and this will be decisive in determining his departure from home. The memory of this episode returns when Luke meets Corrine, Russell’s wife, the protagonist of the Calloway saga. Realizing he is in love with her, Luke begins to tell her about some moments of his life, including the day he discovered his mother’s infidelity. The scene, which starts from a *proustian* reminiscence, where instead of the madeleine we find a sandwich smeared with peanut butter, is very interesting because, in Luke’s episode, which of course is made up by the author, some sentences appear copied word for word from the essay. We can see this for example, in the description of the bond between the mother and the family friend: in the essay it is described as follows “It was something of a joke around town that if you needed to find my mother at a cocktail party you simply had to look for Wick’s head” (NOTG, 56); in the novel, it becomes: “everybody used to joke about Mom’s special friendship with Duck. If you were at a cocktail party and

⁷²⁶Jay McInerney, *The Good Life*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, Electronic Edition, 2014, p. 278

wanted my mother, all you had to do was look for Duck, who was a good head taller than most people in the room, and there she'd be" (TGL, 113-114).

Wick's head is transformed from the object into a unit of measurement to indicate Duck's particular height. It is a minimal variation in a game of small differences that, accumulating, with patience and painstaking mastery, definitively broaden the gap between what has happened in reality and what has happened in fiction. These micro syntactic variations are thus the basis on which the difference between reality and text is built. Small and constant changes that apparently serve to sculpt the narrative world as something completely self-sufficient. Not only at the level of content, but the narrative text is also autonomous even at the grammatical level. What actually happened has now evaporated completely. In contrast to the shift in meaning of the event, which is sharp and immediate, these changes are instead "slow-release". The two operations interpenetrate precisely enhancing McInerney's novelistic writing.

The mother's infidelity here, unlike what happens in the first novel, is grafted onto the love story, and thus to the infidelity of Luke and Corrine. It creates an additional bond between the character and his mother and has a dual function. On the one hand, it gives depth to the clandestine relationship, thus allowing more psychological depth. Luke's searing reaction in the past has repercussions when both he and Corrine are confronted with their actions, and so Corrine identifies with her lover's mother: "She pictured Luke's mother in her own image [...] Casting herself in that same role of the scarlet mother ... imagining her own son eventually and inevitably turning his heart against her?" (TGL, 258). The episode becomes a projection of a possible future, of a possible reaction. Here too, as in *Bright Lights, Big City*, there is a connection between the mother and a female character. If the memory of the confession, in the novel,

sounded like an acknowledgement of the cause of the pain, here instead, because Luke and the mother will confide and finally confront each other with what happened in the past, the confession creates a more complex plot that links the story of the mother in the past with the story of the son in the present. This creates a phenomenon of temporal continuity where an episode of the only apparently forgotten past will be the guideline to what will happen in the present. What the mother says to Luke in the final confrontation about why she didn't leave his father, will come back to Luke at the end of the novel: "Seeing Corrine in this context reminded him of something his mother had said - that if love is something more than wanting" (TGL, 359).

The story told in the essay about the Millbrooks family, their social and cultural influence, is reported in virtually the same way in the novel, from the first-time brie cheese appears on the table, to Picasso's disturbing painting *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which is used in the novel to build Luke's character. It provides the background to explain certain choices made in the past and his dissatisfaction at the beginning of the story, the same dissatisfaction that led him to leave his job and go to work in the field kitchen set up at Ground Zero, where he will meet Corrine.

As happened to McInerney, "I was flattered when Wick started to take an interest in me" (NOTG, 56), Luke too is attracted by the figure of Duck, "I think those were the things you admired him for, sweetie. Why else did you follow in his footsteps, all the way to Deerfield and Williams. Even into banking, for God's sake. I always thought that was a little ironic, Luke, because he hated the bank" (TGL, 323). It's ironic that Luke is inspired and follow Duck's footsteps, who was, after all a profoundly unsatisfied man, but also that, in the words of his brother: "We're just simple middle-class, small-town folk who don't

know our ass from a hole in the ground. You know who you married, bro? You married Jolene Cheatman. You went all the way to New York fucking City to find a girl just like the goddamn wife of our mother's supposed lover" (TGL, 293). Compared to the first novel, this episode in the essay has a larger, more articulated and more stratified role here, to the point it constitutes the entire biography of a character conditioning his choices. If part of the dynamics of the events and the sentences with which they are told are borrowed from the essay, at the same time they are inserted without undermining the narrative coherence as they are perfectly subordinate to the needs of the plot. This, as was the case in *Bright Lights, Big City*, is a transposition that we can define a *first level narrative reworking*, where situations are taken from real life and carefully diluted in the plot. It is the novel, with its internal rules, that dominates the hierarchy and the quality of autobiographical moments that the reader comes to recognize as such only if aware of the context beyond the novel. This elaboration is followed by another one, which we will call *second level* in which it is the effect of the first elaboration to be told. It is a process because even here, it is the plot that dominates, the narrative gives direction *The Madonna of Turkey Season*, written between 2007 and 2008. This is the story of four brothers (plus one acquired) who end up fighting every time they gather at their father's house to celebrate Thanksgiving. Despite this, however, the five continue to keep the tradition intact, until one year it is broken by their older brother Brian. Brian is a writer for the theatre who achieves success with a play about his mother's death and subsequent grief. In his quite autobiographical play, he focuses everything on himself and provides a portrait of the other brothers oscillating between the plausible and fantasy: "On the one hand, as brothers we wanted to say, *Hey, that's*

not me, and on the other, *But wait a minute; that's me*⁷²⁷. However, most of all, it is the father who, after the premiere, keeps asking everyone: "Was I such a bad father?". The most effective answer is that of the *fifth* brother, Foster: "All the characters in the play, even the ones who look and sound like you, are Brian, or else they're foils for Brian". So, explains his brother, "Every artist interprets the world through the prism of narcissism" (TMOTS, 96- 97). If the father does not know whether to feel relieved by this explanation, the sentence, for the reader, resonates like a declaration of intent by the author himself, though slightly cracked by a subtle vein of sarcasm. A warning not to interpret fiction on the basis of certain facts. In the end the writer's starting point is himself, and he again is the prismatic body on which he is refracted. Certainly, the lived experience is the basis on which the work is built, but in the process of writing, the work undergoes those variations required and necessary for the narrator's gaze (and narcissism) to inflate the plot. What comes out must not be the quality of life lived, but the quality of life narrated, the ability and skill of the narrator to weave a credible and exciting plot. The story not only gives us a statement of style and look, it is also a sort of atonement of the author himself, after the other two novels (*Bright Lights, Big City* and *The Good Life*).

The recounted fact again has the confession made to him by his mother as a center point. The triggering event that breaks the tradition of the gathering at his father's house is the transposition of Brian's drama into a Hollywood movie. In this version there is a new element in the plot, the dying mother confesses to her eldest son that she was unfaithful to his father, having had an affair with his best friend. As much as Brian claims it is a simple ploy to make the story's plot

⁷²⁷ Jay McInerney, *The Madonna of Turkey Season*, in *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, p. 96

in the film adaptation more intriguing, doubt silently creeps up and never completely evaporates. The film's release thus marks the end of the brothers' annual get-together.

The McInerney brothers are very critical of this work: "I got a lot of questions about, "Why would you do this? Why would you hold our mother up this way?" and of course the answer is: because I'm a writer – and I'm hardly the first writer to have come up against this problem. There's a terrible way in which being a novelist, or a memoirist, is a question of constantly betraying the deepest confidences of those around you. So, yes, it was tough. It was tough to come up with an answer for my brother – Why did you do it? Well- because *I had to*. That's what I do. And this is my way of dealing with it – I've been living with it for a long time. And ultimately, I fell back on the old excuse that it was my form of therapy". The writer faces the experience of real life like a sponge able to absorb everything and then use it again in his work. It is a conscious choice, often confirmed, "the more life you live, the more chance you have to understand the world around you"⁷²⁸. One has almost the sensation that it is a life lived to serve his narrative. This is what surely happens with Brian, whose personal life "with all its chaos, Sturm und Drang, was the workshop version of his professional life, a laboratory for drama. And of course, he wrote about us. [...] "thinly disguised" was too chubby by half to describe Brian's relation to his source material" (TMOT, 95). Life is like a laboratory, always open and always in relation to it. It is the particular statute of the narrator of the story that makes clear the writer's standing with respect to the subject to be transformed in view of the narrative.

⁷²⁸ Will Pavia, *The Second Age of Jay McInerney*, the Times, 3 September 2016 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-second-age-of-jay-mcinerney-dz9fsrgkk> (last access: 9 August 2018)

The narrator of the story is *homodiégétique*⁷²⁹, the first-person plural, the “we”, marks the succession of events and calibrates the information. Yet this “we”, this “I” narrator who proclaims himself part of a “we”, in truth does not exist in the story, is a figure of absence, which exists only in his repeated use of the “we”, but which actually disappears in actions and descriptions. It starts with, “we are *three boys*” (TMOT, 91) but when he then goes on to recount the actions of the *three boys* instead of continuing as a narrator inside the story turns to an outside narrative, choosing a third person: “As different as we were, we were all recognizably alike, with the same unruly hair, the same heavy-browed, smiley eyes and all our invisible resemblances, born and bred. *Brian*, the eldest, kept things lively by bringing a different girl every year [...] *Mike* had been with Jennifer since his freshman year at Corby, and *Aidan* met his future wife, Alana, before he was twenty” (TMOTS, 91).

Which one of the three is the narrator? Which of these different yet similar characters is telling the story? Who is taking charge of that *we*?

He is a narrator who stands out for his ambiguity, an absent presence, an intermediate standing, he is at the same time inside the story, but also outside,

⁷²⁹ “Le choix du romancier n’est pas entre deux formes grammaticales, mais entre deux attitudes narratives (dont les formes grammaticales ne sont qu’une conséquence mécanique): faire raconter l’histoire par l’un de ses “personnages”, ou par un narrateur étranger à cette histoire. La présence de verbes à la première personne dans un texte narrative peut donc renvoyer à deux situations très différentes, que la grammaire confond mais que l’analyse narrative doit distinguer: la designation du narrateur en tant que tel par lui-même [...] et l’identité de personne entre le narrateur et l’un des personnages de l’histoire [...] La vraie question est de savoir si le narrateur a ou non l’occasion d’employer la première personne pour designer *l’un de ses personnages*. On distinguera donc ici deux types de récits: l’un à narrateur absent de l’histoire qu’il raconte [...] l’autre à narrateur présent comme personnage dans l’histoire qu’il raconte [...] Je nomme le premier type, pour des raisons évidentes, *hétérodiégétique*, et le second *homodiégétique*.” Gerard Genette, *Figures III*, Éditions du Seuil, 1972, p. 302

or better, on the side. The very particular distance of the narrator, wavering and uncertain, tells us that the writer's relationship with the facts of life is more articulated than it may seem. Above all, when it comes to telling a story it is fiction with its rules, and the subversion of its rules too, that really interests the writer, not the reporting of a fact as it happened. Writing for him it is neither a therapy session, what is important for him is to bring out a story that otherwise, without writing, could not have taken place.

It is plain to see now that, unlike DeLillo's, McInerney's New York enjoys the representation of the author's massive presence in the social life of Manhattan. Almost all his novels have been read, sooner or later, under the lens of the *roman à clef*⁷³⁰ and the author's own relation with the narrated city is decisive in the choice of themes and contexts covered. McInerney is, for all intents and purposes, an *embedded* writer. Fully integrated into the world it narrates. A scrupulous observer of the narrative universe that lurks in the *bright lights* of the *big city*. This *embeddedness*, as we will see in the next chapter, will be fundamental to define the implied author, "immanent to a narrative"⁷³¹, created by

⁷³⁰ As Catalina Neculai, for example, pointed out: "*Brightness Falls* mirrors, with a high degree of precision, The New York world of literati and celebrities. Even more accurately, however, it tells the camouflaged story about the actual acquisition of Random House by Samuel I. Newhoude Jr.", Neculai, p. 167. Relating to this, McInerney in an interview stated he was irritated by this tendency to find, in his work, and in this novel in particular, references to real-life people and situations (For example: Gary Fisketjon, the author's editor and friend, should be the model for Russell, the writer Harold Brodkey for the writer Propp, while McInerney would be the writer Jeff Pierce) : "It's not a roman à clef [...] I'll admit there are some thinly disguised people in the book, but this notion that every character corresponds to a real person is very tedious". Benjamin Svetkey, *Brightness Falls*, Entertainment Weekly, 10 July 1992 <https://ew.com/article/1992/07/10/jay-mcinerneys-brightness-falls/> (last access: 8 August 2018)

⁷³¹ Seymour Chatman, *Story and discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1980, p. 151

McInerney. An author who is always true to himself and consistent over time. An author who is a slightly different version of the writer, but at the same time, a slightly similar version of him too.

As we have just seen, and as we will see in the rest of the discourse, to the tripartite system of novels, and to the stories that gravitate around them, we must also add McInerney's articles, written on several occasions and for different newspapers. In these articles personal experience is directly inserted, exactly as it happened, and it is an active part of the thesis he supports. In this case, unlike what happens in his novels and short stories, it is McInerney himself who speaks and narrate.

2.1.1 The House of Fiction

The first and third parts of McInerney's work, presented in the introduction, constitute a long narration of the city that could be read as a unique description. In its current composition, however, McInerney's New York work is far from forming a metaphorical hierarchical building such as Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*, instead it approaches the architecture defined by Henry James in the *House of Fiction* theory, elaborated in the *Prefaces* and which holds all the novels and the short stories of the *New York Edition* together.

After *The Madonna of Turkey Season* which showed how the writer's life is a never-ending laboratory where to experiment with the page to be filled as the ultimate goal, another short story seems to complete the narrative theory behind McInerney's poetics or his idea of how a writer should behave in real life. We are talking about *Everything Is Lost* which belongs to the cycle of short stories written between December 2007 and spring 2008. It is the story of a couple formed by Sabrina, aspiring writer, and Kyle, a writer too and Sabrina's former writing professor at New York University. Kyle's birthday is coming up and she would like to throw a surprise party: "Her biggest concern was that she wouldn't be able to keep it a secret"⁷³². Not only do the two of them share their thoughts, their emotions, "I tell him everything, she would say. Kyle would say the same" (EIL, 486). The two also share a loft whose "bedroom walls stopped six feet short of the ceiling" (EIL 487). To add to these complications, there is also the fact that Kyle is a writer and therefore a man who is by nature accustomed to observing and noticing things. However, Sabrina's fears are unfounded. Kyle, in

⁷³² Jay McInerney, *Everything Is Lost*, in *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, Kindle edition, p. 486

fact, despite the many opportunities that arise, does not seem to notice anything. Neither her blushing, her abruptly interrupted calls nor her unusual outings. Sabrina, astounded by her husband's blindness, begins to ask herself some questions, "She wondered if he'd always been so unobservant" (EIL, 494) and gradually, her reflection shifts to the stories Kyle has written since they have been living together. What gets her attention is his way of portraying women. She notices that "the women in the stories weren't terribly complex [...]" (EIL, 495). There are only two types of female characters, united by the flatness of representation, one of which can be traced back to his ex, and the other to her: "Which said more about his lack of curiosity than it did about her" (EIL, 495). Sabrina starts to wonder, for the first time, if Kyle is indeed a great writer. The author's progressive loss of credibility, in her eyes, is marked by the widespread use, of the verb *to notice*, in a negative sense. It appears six times, each time to mark a lack, first as a companion, then later as a writer. If the previous story highlighted the reservoir from which a writer should draw when writing - his or her own experiences and the world experienced through his or her own eyes - this story shows what the right attitude of a writer should be in life as a provider of creative inspiration. Both Brian and Kyle are being punished. Brian from *The Madonna of Turkey Season* ends up in Hollywood working with a team of scriptwriters for TV series, while Kyle is cheated on by Sabrina. The two stories perfectly exemplify McInerney's authoritative posture, based on careful observation: "Mon secret, confie McInerney, c'est l'*observation*. Je scrute avec curiosité la vie et les agissements des New-Yorkais. New York est pluriel et me permet de broser le portrait de gens et de raconter leur histoires. J'essaie de saisir les nuances de certaines façons d'agir. Je m'intéresse à divers milieu: la finance, les sphères littéraire et artistique, les œuvres caritatives, la jeunesse

estudiantine, et aussi les galas also de bienfaisance de la haute société, les bars, les night-clubs, tout ce qui fait le bourdonnement incessant de New York, la fuite ou le désespoir de nombreuses âmes en quête de sens”⁷³³.

Everything, every gesture, every moment, every situation passes under the magnifying glass of the author, who, unlike Kyle, is faithful to Henry James’ suggestion: “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost”⁷³⁴. The writer must be in the world; he cannot rely only on his imaginative capacity. He cannot isolate himself from the world like Bill Gray in Don DeLillo’s *Mao II*. The risk is to flatten one’s own writing, to recycle it, creating worn-out characters like Kyle.

The look, the careful observation of the human scene, is the essential element for every good narrator in James’ theory: “The glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience”⁷³⁵. Writing arises from an encounter between the conscience and the moment of the world caught in a glance. A moment that is already of the world, but that can only reveal itself if observed by a conscience. At the center of the narrative is the act of seeing, in its particularity and quality, which is the creative manifestation of the artist’s consciousness: “the power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern”⁷³⁶.

⁷³³Alessandra Mattanza, *My New York. La ville mythique par ses plus célèbres habitants*, Éditions Gründ, Paris, 2015, p. 154

⁷³⁴ The phrase “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost”, is repeated by Kyle to his students, and also appears engraved on a plaque in his office. The phrase is not the only reference to James in the story. There is another, subtler one. The club where the party is organized is called *The Golden Bowl*, the novel that closes the *New York Edition*.

⁷³⁵ Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*, in *The Art of Fiction: And Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1948, p. 11

⁷³⁶ James, (1948), p. 11

What the novel has to do, continues Henry James, is “(to) attempt to represent life”⁷³⁷, and can only do so if the writer is free, in his writing, to feel and say what he has perceived in observing life, “a novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life”⁷³⁸. Henry James guides the aspiring writer away from any restriction, from any theory that harnesses vision according to previously established patterns, and with this gesture of liberation, exalts the writer’s soul and his ability to perceive in experience some imperceptible nuances, visible yet still invisible for others. It is the mind of the writer, who when “is imaginative [...] it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations”⁷³⁹. The existence of the outside world is punctured by the writer’s gaze so that he grasps a very fine part of it. World and writer exist in each other’s presence. It is necessary for the writer to be in the world, to seek out the world, for the world to hurry under his watchful and attentive eyes.

Henry James’ theory thus gets rid of traditions and of those rules that should be imposed to write. He disagrees with those who foist one way of writing rather than in another, or that particular type of novel, and builds a theory from the sensitivity of the artist and his ability to relate to life and to distance from it as soon as he has identified and collected what is necessary. Just as McNerney talks about his life as a laboratory, so too does Henry James write in the preface to *The Lesson of the Master*: “We can surely account for nothing in the novelist’s work that hasn’t passed through the crucible of his imagination, hasn’t, in the

⁷³⁷ James, (1948), p. 5

⁷³⁸ “... that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and says”, James, (1948), p. 8

⁷³⁹ James, (1948), p. 11

perpetually simmering cauldron his intellectual pot-au-feu, been reduced to savoury fusion”⁷⁴⁰.

A transformation happens in the passage from captured life-experience to the page. A process guided by the eyes and the consciousness of the artist “that is at the same time familiar, scientific and magical”⁷⁴¹ and that produces, finally, something that starts from life, but that is reborn as something completely new, “thanks to a rare alchemy, a better thing”⁷⁴². Exactly the process we saw at work in the previous chapter.

The theory of the *House of Fiction* comes from the eye and conscience of the artist and his need for a position that is at the same time in the world, but also detached from it, slightly aside. The need to look through a window towards the human scene is the spark from which the novel is born. The window of an interior is thus the essential tool of vision. Every window is different for every observer who looks in. Every observer, in fact, has his own window. Different from all the others. The window is part of a house that is nothing more than the novel itself, the novel that becomes, metaphorically, home. A home, as Lévinas writes, lies in its condition of extraterritoriality, both outside and inside at the same time⁷⁴³. A simultaneous position, as we shall see, is essential for the *House of Fiction*:

⁷⁴⁰ Henry James, *The Lesson of the Master*, in *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, ed. with introduction by Richard P. Blackmur, London, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953 (first published New York, 1934). p. 230

⁷⁴¹ Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, *James on Art and the Novel*, Presses universitaires de Liège, p. 7 (<https://books.openedition.org/pulg/910> last access: 15 October 2018)

⁷⁴² James, (1953), p. 230

⁷⁴³ see Introduction

The House of fiction has not one window, but a million [...] every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision, by the pressure of the individual will. [...] But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes [...] insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbors are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less [...] The spreading field, the human scene, is the “choice of subject”; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the “literary form”; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher – without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist⁷⁴⁴.

The *House of Fiction* is the definition of a literary form, and it explains how it acts on the chosen content. Life is an unbroken series of relationships and the window cuts, structures and thus shapes what the writer is observing.

The *House of Fiction* is conceivable starting from a simultaneity that is not only of position, being at the same time in the world and out of the world, but also a simultaneity of vision. In fact, the peering out takes the form of writing in two consequent ways: the particular sensitivity of the artist who looks directly at the world and of the characters who are active observers, and through which the

⁷⁴⁴ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel*, in *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, ed. with introduction by Richard P. Blackmur, London, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953 (first published New York, 1934), p.46

narrator looks at the story and tells it according to their point of view. The house with its millions of windows thus becomes a game of reverberations, refractions and reflections between a narrator and a character through whom the narrator observes. To observe is the verb that triggers the story, the predicate on which the house is founded and establishes the beginning of the novel.

Who is looking out of the window? First, the writer, peering out, becomes the author-narrator, thus allowing the house to exist, to identify itself as the house of fiction.

The novel, therefore, becomes an interior space that houses the exterior. It is conceived as a string of rooms that gradually lead to the intimate heart of the story, but categorically according to the order of reception typical of a house. As he wrote in a letter to Mrs. Humprey Ward, about his novel *Eleanor*, what is missing is that “the reader feels you approach your subject too *immediately*, show him its elements, the cards in your hand, too bang off from the first page – so that a wait to begin to guess what and whom the thing is going to be about doesn’t impose itself: the ante-chamber or two and the crooked corridor before he is already in the Presence”⁷⁴⁵. The narrative must therefore adapt to an architecturally conceived structure. It should be like an interior that welcomes the story and, as in a house, the parts are redistributed according to the different functions of the rooms. The narrator then follows the character entering the house and moving around. The structure of the house becomes the structure of the plot, the development of the story.

⁷⁴⁵ Henry James, *July 1899*, in *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. P. Lubbock, MacMillan and Co., London, 1920, vol. 1, p. 322

The human scene is thus brought back to a first level. Simultaneity, as mentioned above, it involves an additional level. This house that exists thanks to the narrator who makes the original gesture by observing and then peering out but the character too can see inside the story, intra-diegetic in a second level. The house is therefore not only in an extraterritorial position with respect to the world, but also with respect to the novel itself.

Henry James opts for a particular third person narration, or omniscient narration, rather than a first-person narration, “(a) variant of narration focused through one or various reflectors who are in turn described, seen, presented by the author-narrator”⁷⁴⁶. What interests James is not so much the development of the plot, the objective actions, but the characters themselves with all their potential. Only through an exploration into the psychology of the character, only by showing it as a whole, can a plot emerge. This however is always subordinate to the need to express the exceptionality of a figure detached from the crowd, even if banal at first glance, and apparently lacking in ideas: “I could think so little of any situation that didn’t depend for its interest on the nature of the persons situated, and thereby on their way of taking it”⁷⁴⁷. Using this technique, what James was trying to do in practice, and trying to explain in theory, was to make the narration, and therefore the reception of the reader, happen through a process of *showing* as opposed to the concept of *telling*. In telling the author’s commentary is predominant: it is where the *narration* dominates over the

⁷⁴⁶ Sonja Basic, *From James’s Figures to Genette’s Figures: Point of View and Narratology*, in *Revue Française d’Études Américaines*, No. 17, May 1983. American Writers 1870-1914. pp. 201-215, p. 205 (<https://doi.org/10.3406/rfea.1983.1125> last access: 15 October 2018)

⁷⁴⁷ James, (1953), *Ibid.*, p. 44

representation. On the other hand, in the process of showing⁷⁴⁸, representation is the author's main strategy and that is, when fiction offers us the chance to see life without any elaboration, when fiction almost touches the truth. That third particular person who goes to form a center of consciousness that filters every aspect of reality, serves precisely to enter as much as possible in the mind of the character and thus to expose it to the reader. As Sonja Basic writes, "limitation of vision to one or several reflectors (centers, lucid or bewildered mirrors) and the resulting interplay between the objective and subjective view [...] as an excuse for reveling in the intricacies, refinements and complexities of consciousness", this is the only way to create an "intense illusion, not so much of life, as of the ways life is felt and experienced by these characters"⁷⁴⁹. The author's hand disappears, though not completely, and we see the character behave, move, suffer and react almost through his own eyes. *Almost*, because Henry James chooses not to use first-person narration. The use of the third person is absolutely essential because it avoids the flaws of the first person: much less flexible and very limited, expiring in the autobiography, a sterile and anesthetizing form:

⁷⁴⁸ "“Montrer”, ce ne peut être qu’une *façon de raconter*, et cette façon consiste à la fois à *en dire* le plus possible, et ce plus, à *le dire* le moins possible: “feindre, dit Platon, que ce n’est pas le poète qui parle” — c’est-à-dire, faire oublier que c’est le narrateur qui raconte. D’où ces deux préceptes cardinaux du *showing*: la dominance jamesienne de la *scène* (récit détaillé) et la transparence (pseudo-) flaubertienne du narrateur (exemple canonique: Hemingway, *The Killers*, ou *Hills Like White Elephants*). Préceptes cardinaux, et surtout préceptes *liés*: feindre de montrer, c’est feindre de se taire, et l’on devra donc, finalement, marquer l’opposition du mimétique et du diégétique par une formule telle que: *information + informateur = C*, qui implique que la quantité d’information et la présence de l’informateur sont en raison inverse, la mimésis se définissant par un maximum d’information et un minimum d’informateur, la diégésis par le rapport inverse”, Genette, p. 227

⁷⁴⁹ Basic, p. 203

There is, to my vision, no authentic, and no really interesting and no *beautiful*, report of things on the novelist's, the painter's part unless a particular detachment has operated, unless the great stewpot or crucible of the imagination, of the observant and recording and interpreting mind in short, has intervened and played its part – and this detachment, this chemical transmutation for the aesthetic, the representational, end is terribly wanting in autobiography brought, as the horrible phrase is, up to date⁷⁵⁰.

The house, with its separating facade, with its windows, always particular and personal, with its function of diaphragm, ensures the existence of the distance. The house, or the idea of the house, structures and organizes the necessary distance for the narrative to take place. The House of Fiction theory allowed James to give compositional and stylistic compactness to all the novels selected for the New York Edition. It is therefore an ambiguous, elastic, opaque theory that serves to balance the theory of the point of view, i.e., the choice to show the character rather than tell it, and always do so while maintaining a distance. In McInerney the house, from being an idea, becomes reality McInerney's narrative, as mentioned in the introduction⁷⁵¹, are in the name of detachment, of distance. Hence, the interiors become *House of Fiction* inserted in the

⁷⁵⁰ H. James, H.G. Wells, *A Record of their Friendship, their Debate on the Art of Fiction and their Quarrel*, ed. L. Edel and G.R. Ray, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1958, p. 128-129

⁷⁵¹ See Introduction

metropolitan fabric, plots that cut across the warp of the city. The character looks out from that particular interior and from there has his vision of the New York human scene. The house detaches itself from the metaphor and becomes an actual house. And so, the characters' houses become *House of Fiction*, providing the necessary distance both to the characters, in their construction of an idea of New York, and to the narrator (osyntac implied author, as we will see a little later) to show them in his text, which, like that of Henry James, is at the extreme of minimal authorial interference.

Both in James's novels as in in McInerney's, the presence of an omniscient narrator who knows every corner of the narrated world isn't portrayed, as there is a *narrative* position determined by the activity of the subject who observes and acts in the moment in which he observes and acts, without partially pulling himself out like most of Henry James' characters. McInerney, too, therefore, uses characters-reflectors, centers of consciousness, whose gaze is imperfect. The window from which they look out to observe New York is lowered to the level of the scene, without the possibility of domination. However, caught in the act of observing, their position dictated by their aspiration to be part of the city and their inability to do so, determines their particular status as involved observers. On the other hand, the best narrators employed by Fitzgerald, writes McInerney, "seem to be partaking of the festivities even as they shiver outside

with their noses pressed up against the glass”⁷⁵². Unlike Nick Carraway⁷⁵³, McInerney’s characters find themselves tangled in the city’s tentacles.

Both the second person in the first novel, and the third person in the Calloway saga, are constructed as imperfect windows. The saga is in fact constructed using several characters-reflectors, and each chapter is built according to the vision, always mediated by the third person of one of the characters. If the main characters appear together in the same chapter, it is the character with whom the chapter began that imposes the limits of vision and perception.

The representation of the city observed by the author is translated, transferred, onto the characters that they are nothing more than projections of the writer in a very similar world to that which he has experienced. Unlike James who uses different types of characters, McInerney builds a prototype character (at least in the texts set in New York) that advances his work with minimal variations. On the one hand his narrative work was born as a projection of the writer within a world built in the image and likeness of the real one. It works according to the typical mechanisms of a novel, as occurred for his first one, where a real existing house becomes a *House of Fiction* from which to look out and whose particular opening will provide the particular literary form of the novel: “Je vivais là quand j’ai écrit *Journal d’un oiseau de nuit*, ce n’est pas un hasard si le protagoniste habite la 12e rue ouest. Je n’ai jamais vécu dans cet immeuble, mais il me plaisait assez pour y planter mon intrigue”⁷⁵⁴. On the other hand, the narrative and therefore

⁷⁵² Jay McInerney, *Why Gatsby is so great*, The Guardian, Sun 10 June 2012, (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/10/great-gatsby-fitzgerald-jay-mcinerney> last access: 16/10/2018)

⁷⁵³ “(who) “apprend à reconnaître les charmes de la cité sans toutefois y succomber”, Cochoy, (2009), p. 104

⁷⁵⁴ Mattanza, p. 163

the characters are a way of exploring the city, as in the Calloway saga: “(Russell) He is an editor and publisher, which is the only career I ever considered besides writing. If I couldn’t have been a novelist, that’s what I’d have done [...] “I still think of these characters as a way to continue exploring the life of this city”⁷⁵⁵.

The window-characters, from which McInerney observes and narrates the city, are therefore versions of himself, counter-lives that build up the plot starting from their differences from the writer himself. Writing and publishing are constant occupation for his characters. In the novels of the first part, excluding *Story of My Life*, the two protagonists dream of living writing: novels for the protagonist of *Bright Lights, Big City* and screenplays for that of *Model Behavior*. In the third part, however, it is the editorial world that becomes the center of the narration, and it is impersonated in the figure of Russell, a failed poet and ambitious publisher, and in his protégés like Jeff and Jack.

Here, however, we must take a further leap to complete what was said in the previous chapter and we must be sure we freed ourselves from the temptation to confuse McInerney’s life with his work. Seymour Chatman writes: “thus the crucial difference between “point of view” and narrative voice: the point of view is the physical place or ideological situation or practical life-orientation to which narrative events stand in relation. Voice, on the contrary, refers to the speech or other overt means through which events and existents are communicated to the audience”⁷⁵⁶. Chatman moves from the distinction made by Genette in *Figures III* between mode, i.e., the point of view that guides the narration, and voice, i.e., the speaker. It is impossible, Booth tells us in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, to eliminate

⁷⁵⁵ Wittmann, p. 12

⁷⁵⁶ Chatman, p. 153

the narrator, “whatever our ideas may be about the natural way to tell a story, artifice is unmistakably whenever the author tells us what no one in so-called real life could possibly know”⁷⁵⁷. In short, as much as there may be a difference between *showing* and *telling*, the presence of the narrator, and therefore of mediation, is inevitable⁷⁵⁸. Narration is a matter of language⁷⁵⁹. As for the method, McInerney prefers a story with variable internal focus, that is, where the information given by the narrator is the same information available to the character. Everything you see passes through the eyes of the characters. The quality of the vision is determined by the filtering sensitivity of the character and varies every time the character changes.

It is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author’s most important effects.

McInerney’s narrative is thus constructed from an implied author⁷⁶⁰ that McInerney made sure to create from a variation of himself, an implied author very similar to McInerney himself, with *almost* the same experiences. In the *almost* the essential difference is constructed. Because the implied author that comes

⁷⁵⁷ Booth, p. 3

⁷⁵⁸ “...la notion même de showing, comme celle d’imitation ou de représentation narrative (et davantage encore, à cause de son caractère naïvement visuel) est parfaitement illusoire: contrairement à la représentation dramatique, aucun récit ne peut “montrer” ou “imiter” l’histoire qu’il raconte”, Genette, p. 224

⁷⁵⁹ “... le langage signifie sans imiter”, Genette, p. 225

⁷⁶⁰ “He is “implied”, that is, reconstructed by the reader from the narrative. He is not the narrator, but rather the principle that invented the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative, that stacked the cards in this particular way, had these things happen to these characters, in these words or in these images. Unlike the narrator, the implied author can *tell* us nothing. He, or better, *it* has no voice, no direct means of communicating. It instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices, by all means it has chosen to let us learn. We can grasp the notion of implied author most clearly by comparing different narratives written by the same real author but presupposing different implied authors”, Chatman, p. 148

out reading the novels is slightly different from the writer, and the difference lies precisely in that sense of admiration that pervades the entire narrative and that we will explore later. Writer McInerney has made it into the glittering world he has always dreamed of, the exact opposite of his characters. His admiration benefits from continuous satisfaction, his characters' admiration, on the contrary, is always unsatisfied. The sense of admiration for the glittering things of New York that seem untouchable lies in the tone of the narrator employed by McInerney. The image of the author that the reader constructs when reading, the implied author, parallel to the employed narrator, that is, the speaking voice, the narrator instance.

The tone of the work and of New York results precisely from this friction between the characters - different versions of the author - and the similarity between narrator and implied author. It is a concatenation of similarities and differences on par with the re-writing of episodes that actually happened and that we analyzed earlier.

McInerney's stylistic mark is in this continuous playing, masking, reflecting reality and fiction. Both at the level of content and at a technical level of narration. Continuous refractions that stun and deceive those who approach his work.

The implied author, and consequently the narrator of McInerney's work appear like the waiter in the story "The Waiter", who sneaks into a world that does not belong to him, but to which he aspires. The protagonist of the story dreams of becoming a writer, and while he waits to go "to grad school back in the city", he spends the summer working as a waiter and thus comes into contact with people

of a higher social level: “I’d been insinuating myself into her presence for weeks. And if there was a story, I figured, I might as well hear it”⁷⁶¹.

So, the implied author McInerney observes and shows his characters through a narrator who feels as if he had insinuated himself, as if he were present, just detached from that world for which he feels - and the reader cannot help it but feel it too - an admiration tinged with nostalgia and cynicism.

⁷⁶¹ Jay McInerney, *The Waiter, How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, p. 198

2.1.2 The Sensibility of the Artist

If the narrator used by DeLillo maintains an emotional detachment from the stories told, the same cannot be said for the narrator employed by McInerney. In her review of *Brightness Falls* in *The New York Times*, Cathleen Schine writes McInerney's process of characterization, regarding socialites: "But Mr. McInerney is not heartless enough to dismiss them as a true satirist must. He sympathizes with them. He *admires* them. He eats lunch with them. Describing a pilgrimage Russell makes to "21" Club with Melman, in which the financier proudly displays his table clout, Mr. McInerney betrays his own breathless excitement, his fascination with the intricacies of social status"⁷⁶². He is a narrator (which Schine confuses with the author himself, which seems to be norm by now, as we have seen in the previous chapters, as far as McInerney is concerned) who is emotionally involved, looking in admiration, with peaks of envy, towards the world he narrates, which he can access, but only for very brief moments.

It is an attraction that concerns the narrator and is also part of the author himself, who, as we have already said, builds an image of himself - working precisely on a narrator instance so similar to the author - an image of himself that determines in the reader the idea of an implicit author not dissimilar from the characters employed and the narrator. This similarity, and thus this closeness, ultimately resolves themselves into an entirely tempered humor and satire. As this image of the implied author is also corroborated by the writer's massive presence in the media; emblematic is the case of an article that appeared in AD

⁷⁶² Cathleen Schine, *Boy Editor in the Naked City*, in *The New York Times*, 31 May, 1992

magazine where McInerney opens the doors of his new home, recounting and explaining everything about the particular choices of furnishings. The conclusion of the article thus shows a writer who has finally realized his dream: a magnificent Penthouse. Not the fateful Great American Novel⁷⁶³.

Irony, admiration, nostalgia therefore envelop McInerney's writing, built on these three levels: writer as public man, openly in love with New York⁷⁶⁴; the implied author and narrator are also in love, but more critical and ironic; and, finally, the characters, who get from New York the opposite experience of the writer who created them. It is a game of mirrors that bewitches and confuses the reader, as well as the critic, in which, however, I believe, lies McInerney's true authorial particularity.

It is interesting then to see what McInerney says about a writer who, as he has often said, has inspired him, and to whom critics have often compared him to: Francis Scott Fitzgerald:

And yet Fitzgerald had a kind of double agent's consciousness about the tinsel of the jazz age, and about the privileged world of inherited wealth; he couldn't help stopping to admire and glamorise the glittering interiors of which his midwestern

⁷⁶³ "It had been my fantasy for 25 years to live in a penthouse, preferably in the Village," he says. "I remember as a kid seeing movies from the '20s and '30s, when the penthouse was this new concept that encapsulated the glamour of living in New York", Christopher Mason, *Novelist Jay McInerney's Home in New York*, in *AD*, March 2013 Issue, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/jay-mcinerney-robert-couturier-new-york-apartment-article> (last access: 08/09/2021)

⁷⁶⁴ "To confound the "implied author", a structural principle, with a certain historical figure whom we may or not may admire morally, politically, or personally would seriously undermine our theoretical enterprise", Chatman, *Ibid.*, p. 149

heart ultimately disapproved [...] Fitzgerald manages to strike a balance between his attraction and repulsion, between his sympathy and his judgement. [...] He seems capable of double vision⁷⁶⁵.

The article was written on the release of the film *The Great Gatsby*, directed by Baz Luhrmann. Later, McInerney goes on to explain that the best narrators employed by Fitzgerald are those who, quoting from the previous chapter, “seem to be partaking of the festivities even as they shiver outside with their noses pressed up against the glass”. There is a fatal oscillation between admiration and revulsion in the writer, and then in the implied author, that is poured into the story by the narrator, an oscillation often balanced by irony and nostalgia. This decisive trait is evident in one of the rare stories in which McInerney uses a character who is already part of high society as the main character. *Summary Judgment* is the story of Alysha de Sante, a gold digger who, after the death of yet another husband, finds herself in a desperate economic situation. In order to pay off all her debts, she decides to look for another husband and, after careful study, identifies Billy Laube, whose company “was now a sprawling conglomerate with interests in timber, paper and chemicals”⁷⁶⁶ as a possible candidate. Laube’s grandfather “was one of those giants who had won the West” (SJ, 328), Billy is a *mountain man*⁷⁶⁷: “Le Cirque might be little

⁷⁶⁵ McInerney, *Why Gatsby is so great*, *Ibid.*

⁷⁶⁶ Jay McInerney, *Summary Judgment*, in *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, p. 328

⁷⁶⁷ As well as the writer, so much so that over time he became a food and wine critic and fortune ticket writer for a famous chain of Chinese restaurants. See: Ian Parker, *When Jay McInerney writes your fortune*, in *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2018

flashy, a little Euro, a little feminine for a macho guy like himself—the realm of lurching ladies. Its masculine counterpart was “21”, the former speakeasy, exactly the kind of place where a lumber baron with a prep school tie would feel right at home” (SJ, 333). The story is in fact built on two tones; the *comic realism* he uses to narrate the characters’ adventures, such as a court order that is delivered to Alysha on the red carpet of a charity event, under the eyes of photographers who spare no shot, (“the whole scene recorded as the cameras continued to flash, Alysha repairing her smile and leading the bewildered Billy through the gauntlet, turning to see Kip and Mary Trotter, who were right behind them, witnesses to the whole fiasco” (SJ, 345)), it is flanked by a detailed description, veiled with irony. It is a more mitigated irony however, or rather a sympathetically envious irony of the places where the characters move, creating in the writing that friction that Schine quickly dismissed as admiration. From this story, one can see, instead, how McInerney’s writing is more stratified, not sharp and define from a single angle, but wider, more yielding to compromises towards a world where one cannot accept the definitive addiction nor the final detachment. Admiration and criticism coexist. The city is always revered and so are its places, its rules, the social hierarchy, its luxuries and its contrasts, what is criticized is the way it is lived and experienced.

McInerney draws from that world that has now become his own, maintaining, thus ensuring, objectivity: “But I have access to worlds that not many serious people have access to. Also, I’m not afraid to betray people. The gold digger is based on a real person. Not someone I know well, but that’s a story from the world Anne has lived in, and which I go in and out of. I don’t have any doubts

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/12/when-jay-mcinerney-writes-your-fortune> (last access: 25/10/2018)

about my objectivity”⁷⁶⁸. Then the filtering happens, through a narrator who has a double attitude, detached towards the characters and in awe towards the attractions of the city.

In the same interview mentioned above, McInerney also says that: “my most representative characters are privileged educationally and culturally, not financially”⁷⁶⁹. There is always a distance, sometimes minimal, but never too broad (the characters always have a culturally privileged education and training), between the world to which the characters aspire and the world in which they can actually live in. The narrator sits astride this distance, constantly pushing his characters to fill it. And the desire to overcome this distance kindles the spark of the plot.

In his review of the book *The Last Bachelor*, which contains the short story “Summary Judgment”, Jason Cowley writes: “The model for McInerney has long been F Scott Fitzgerald [...] It’s clear why McInerney would be so admiring of Fitzgerald. Both writers are obsessively interested in wealth and high-born privilege. Both writers are, at heart, sentimentalists (though Fitzgerald is more of an elegist, with a greater sense of the tragic). They savour beauty while being tormented by its very transience and fragility”⁷⁷⁰. The further difference, Cowley continues, lies also in the different personal paths: Fitzgerald’s path was much more painful, while McInerney’s saw an immediate positive peak that then

⁷⁶⁸ Rachel Cooke, *The interview: Jay McInerney*, the Guardian, Sun 12 July 2009, (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/12/interview-jay-mcinerney>, last access: 10/25/2018)

⁷⁶⁹ Cooke, *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁰ Jason Cowley, *Twilight of the Manhattan gods*, The Guardian, Sun 11 Jan 2009 (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jan/11/last-bachelor-mcinerney-review>, last access: 11/7/ 2018)

stabilized over time, without excessive emotional and psychological trauma. What is lacking is, in fact, the sense of tragedy and the torment towards the fragility of beauty, what we can find is a torment that is practical and easy to resolve. Though his characters often do not triumph in the city, they still manage to find daily glimpses of beauty, which remove the feeling of failure.

McInerney's irony and his satire begin from the rules that structure New York society, not by addressing them, rather by considering them to be right. As much as looking at people who question those rules, and by doing so, they disregard them. It is an irony that moves against certain characters (such as Alysha, for example) for their behavior that does not suit the style and the elegance of the city. It is not an all-encompassing criticism like that of Tom Wolfe, for example, in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, which involves everyone and spares no one, regardless of social class, zip code of residence, or the role of history. We will never see Russell, or Luke, on all fours chasing a dog like Sherman McCoy. It is rather, an irony in connivance, a fluctuating irony, at times as weak as Alysha's ability to keep her home on the Upper East Side:

After their dinner at La Grenouille, she invited Billy up to her apartment for coffee, and he seemed every bit as impressed as she'd hoped. The doorman had appeared at just the right moment to help them out of the car, and said "Welcome home, Contessa." She was almost impressed herself as they stepped directly from the elevator into her foyer, with its black-and-white marble floor and coffered ormolu ceiling. She pointed out the major paintings-the mortgaged Renoirs and the Monet-as they made their way to the living room,

where there was no need to point out the view of Central Park. Billy walked over to the windows over Fifth Avenue and whistled. “Now that’s what I call a view.”

“One gets used to it, after all this time, but I suppose I am very lucky.”

“It’s really something.”

“Come see the rest of the apartment”, she said taking him on a brief tour, which ended in the master bedroom (SJ, 364).

Before the seduction of the body, and therefore of the character, there is the seduction of the home, and therefore of the city. Only once you have shown off the apartment with all its perfect concierge apparatus, works of art and panorama, you can finally move on to the final blow (and the fellatio implicit in the incipit can finally take place). The house, in its appearance, since it is actually used as a mortgage and is about to be confiscated from the protagonist, works not only as a weapon of seduction, but as proof of the presence of the protagonist in the city. More than a place to live in, it is a place to show off. The house is the city itself. The house says much more than any action by the protagonist, so much so that she too is *almost impressed*.

Although the piece is built ironically against the protagonist, and even if the apartment is not spared, in the end it keeps its beauty intact despite the signs of a collapse (e.g., “the mortgaged Renoirs”), remaining invisible to those who are unaware of the real situation of the lady of the house, which is everyone else’s inside the story. The apartment thrives off Alysha’s failure, yet it does not give anything away. Only the reader can be aware of this, but the effect of amazement remains intact. What can affect the city, and therefore its exclusive interiors, is

something that does not remain imprinted on the shimmering surface of things. Only the words of the narrator can try to scratch this surface, albeit with little conviction, because the beauty and richness of the house dazzle and astound him too. The character, the protagonist, will decay, but the interior, that epitome of a New York lifestyle, will be ready again to host other people and to renew its aesthetic power.

This is an irony, therefore, that is built on the softness of his critical pretense. The narrator's tone is not ironic at all, he does not completely satirize that world of which he does not hide the unchanged charm. When he picks on certain characters, however, he always leaves room for those shiny places, such as restaurants, bars, apartments with views of Central Park, even in the tightness of a short story. As if writing about them, as if remembering them, as if flanking them with the same power of the plot, would redeem the city from the miserable gestures of some of its inhabitants. The rules of society are well understood and accepted by the narrator. In the interview mentioned above, at one point, McInerney admits: "So much of what we talk about in New York is mores rather than morals"⁷⁷¹. Criticism in this way is not directed at Upper East Side society, but at one of its members who makes the mistake of distorting the established customs. At the end of the story, the reader blames Alysha, and almost agrees with her "friend" Mary Trotter who excludes her from a prestigious party (according to her, so as not to put her in trouble), when the truth is that the strict and rigorous, as well as questionable, selection has just cut her out

György Lukács writes in *Theory of the novel*: "(Irony) As a formal constituent of the novel form this signifies an interior diversion of the normatively creative

⁷⁷¹ Cooke, *Ibid.*

subject into a subjectivity as interiority, which opposes power complexes that are alien to it and which strives to imprint the contents of its longing upon the alien world, and a subjectivity which sees through the abstract and, therefore, limited nature of the mutually alien worlds of subject and object”⁷⁷². It is insistent, and at times violent, in the voice of the narrator, as it is imprinted in the interiority of his characters, the clear sensation of an insoluble separation from the city, or rather from the specific world and lifestyle of the city to which they aspire. An irreparable separation does not, however, marginalize the subject definitely. In fact, in some cases, they also manage to succeed in life and become famous, as in the case of Jared, the protagonist of *Getting in Touch with Lonnie*: “They would come to him now. Send a car (with a bar and a phone, please)”⁷⁷³. Jared⁷⁷⁴ continues to visit Laura in “a Georgian mansion surrounded by white clapboard satellites on several acres of blue-green lawn” (GITWL, 310). She is there under treatment; she is still suicidal, and he is paying for all her cures. Despite his success, - “signing his autograph on the back of a taxi receipt” (GITWL, 311) - however, his feeling of separation from the outside world is even more urgent than before. Perhaps because it is now clear that nothing will ever heal that fracture. In fact, Jared is torn between his new life in Los Angeles, to which he has not yet become accustomed, and his desire to return to New

⁷⁷² Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the novel. A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, translated from the German by Anna Bostock, The Merlin Press, London, 1988, p. 74-75

⁷⁷³ Jay McInerney, *Getting in Touch with Lonnie*, in *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, p. 308

⁷⁷⁴ Probably inspired by something that actually happened to the author. After the success of the first novel, McInerney became a celebrity and his second wife could not handle the strain: “She married a graduate student and woke up married to an MTV star” Cooke, *Ibid*. It was the writer himself who paid for psychiatric treatment when his ex-wife suffered from depression.

York, though: “After only a day and a half back in Manhattan, he remembered how compressed and accelerated life could be. Exhausting. *Living in New York was like being on location for a movie that never wrapped*” (GITWL, 311). This is perhaps the most pungent and fitting description of how living in New York feels for the protagonists of his stories. Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote that the screenplay is a dynamic structure⁷⁷⁵, a structure with a precise and constituted form that tends towards another structure. There is a movement in it, a throbbing tension. Living in New York, for Jared and the other characters in McInerney’s fiction, is precisely the feeling of frustration of this dynamic. The maximum tension towards a transformation/consecration that never seems to happen. So, living in Manhattan becomes necessary to activate or maintain the dynamics of the transformation process desired. Although there is an acknowledgement, as there is for Jared, of the inevitable split, there remains the effort to imprint one’s own nostalgia on the outside world. The failure to make the film - of transforming the mental script that has been constructed by reaching the city - a metaphor for the final definitive passage, is thus consumed with a nostalgia for the past and

⁷⁷⁵ “If, in formulating a definition in the necessarily limited field of writing, the sign of the screenplay-text is presented as the sign that denotes a “form in movement” a “form endowed with the will to become another form” in formulating the definition in the wider and more objective field of language the sign of the screenplay-text is presented as the sign that expresses *meanings of a*” *structure in movement,*” *that is, of “a structure endowed with the will to be- come another structure.”* This being the situation, what is the typical structure of the metalanguage of the screenplay? It is a “diachronic structure” by definition, or better still, [...] an actual “process.” But a specific process, in that it is not a question of an evolution, of a passage from a phase A to a phase B, but of a pure and simple “dynamism,” of a “tension” which moves, without departing or arriving, from a stylistic structure-that of narrative-to another stylistic structure-that of cinema-and, more deeply, from one linguistic system to another.”, Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Eretichal Empiricism*, translated by Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett, edited by Louise K. Barnett, New Academia Publishing, Washington, 2005, p. 1

for those who had just arrived in the city. The character's life remains in suspense, like a story thought out, written, but never finished. What the production process of a film highlights in a striking way, is how it is precisely the lack of physical places to interrupt the final realization of the movie. Life in New York becomes a vain search for spaces suitable for representation, for spaces where one can identify the moments of one's own history conceived before moving towards the city.

It is a cool nostalgia for action and reaction, thus becoming, as we said in the introduction, something that concerns only the thought, the look, the necessary memorial distance "à la restauration du scintillement"⁷⁷⁶. Here lies the greatness, albeit ironic, of McInerney's characters, in fully understanding the distance, the unsolvable separation with that world, and interpreting this distance not as a final defeat and consequent farewell to the city, but as a feeling of nostalgia to be embedded on one's own idea of the city, so that it can be reconstituted again as it was in the beginning. Representing it once again as a new possibility to overcome the distance, as hinted by the last sentence of *Bright Lights, Big City* says, "You will have to learn everything again" (BLBC, 174). Lieven Ameel rightly comments, "Paralleling the ending of *The Great Gatsby*, with its invocation of how the first Dutch sailors viewed Manhattan, he imagines retracing the steps of earlier inhabitants of that very same place"⁷⁷⁷. It is not the success achieved that suggests the final epiphany, but the observation of the unbridgeable distance from the city.

⁷⁷⁶ Cochoy, (2009), p. 103.

⁷⁷⁷ Lieven Ameel, "It's Six A.M. Do You Know Where You Are?" *Urban Peripherality and the Narrative Framing of Literary Beginnings*, in Jason Finch, Markku Samela, *Literature and the Peripheral City*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 52

E.B. White writes: “The island of Manhattan is without any doubt the greatest human concentrate on earth, the poem whose magic is comprehensible to millions of permanent residents but whose full meaning will always remain elusive”⁷⁷⁸. New York is like a poem that compresses too much into little space by adding some music. A music that is the rhythm of the city’s internal mechanisms and that manages, like the sound of poetry, to intensify meaning. It is the meaning of the city itself, a sense that only lets itself be grasped for a moment before escaping again. New York remains understandable only up to a certain point, it can never be handled with confidence. It remains indomitable. McInerney’s characters are indefinitely hooked on the elusiveness of the city. They continually seek refuge because they have understood that the city provokes you into desiring to be part of it as protagonists. A desire contradicted, however, by the evasive character of the city itself, by the inability of the characters to participate actively in the writing of this deceitful poem. An elusiveness that is the continuous present of the city, while desire is generated and regenerated in the past, in going back to that first day, to that first glance that for a moment deluded you to have understood.

Therefore, the relationship with the city is not ventured with distancing, but with a nostalgic grip that seems the only way to fight the elusiveness of New York magic: “the aroma of bread triggers memories of homecoming to his paternal home, as well as - more implicitly - about his former first home with his now ex-wife, located in these same surroundings”⁷⁷⁹. The ending of the novel leaves every interpretation open, but in the light of all the author’s work that follows, and of the conversation that is being built here, it seems there is a sparkle of

⁷⁷⁸ E.B. White, *Here is New York*, The Little Bookroom, New York, 1999, p. 29

⁷⁷⁹ Ameel, p. 53.

hope. This heartwarming memory reminds him of his first steps in the city: the memory of a house, of the first example of an inhabited New York interior. “McInerney distinctly alludes to the Eucharist”, writes Robert C. Clark, “a rite that calls attention to his desire to belong”. The protagonist, like the other characters, shares the feeling of being “the only man in the city without group affiliation”⁷⁸⁰. Being part of a community means reducing a large part of the distance that weighs on the character’s city life. In a way, a community feels like home. “New York is still the city of neighborhood that E.B. White described [...] Local knowledge offers comfort when you’re in your neighborhood but can make you feel subtly ill at ease when you’re away from it”⁷⁸¹. McInerney’s characters lack this sense of belonging, the sense of feeling at home in their own neighborhood, of being in *their own* metropolitan space, a space polished to their needs. What happens instead is the inhabited areas are always sharp edges that tear their resistance, tear the worn fabric of their desires without undoing it completely. The city is thus continuously balancing on the uncomfortable edge of the fracture. Living is all about distance. No giving in, no going home. So Jared returns to Laura, because the initial image of New York he has is preserved in her. That nostalgic image, the image of that glimmer of understanding that gladdens those who have just arrived in the city. Before, long before he became famous, “Sometimes he suspected he was afraid to let go because she was the only person who wouldn’t allow him to reinvent himself completely, turn himself into something bright and shiny and superficial” (GITWL, 348-349). Jared’s success makes him look like the glossy image of the city. The adjectives

⁷⁸⁰ Clark, p. 84.

⁷⁸¹ *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of New York*, Edited by Cyrus R. K. Patell and Bryan Waterman, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 2

that could describe it are the same ones used to describe the city. Or rather, the city imagined before we actually got there. The city as pure image, the city as a dream, detached from its actual reality, concreteness, hardness and everyday hassles.

The distance from the city it is a gap that the characters themselves, in the end, do not want to overcome, because after all, as the writer says: “In my mind, all my characters are strivers”⁷⁸². This distance, becoming nostalgia, is a proud part of their identity. To fill it means to lose depth, to flatten, just because by healing the split, you lose the subjectivity understood as interiority. Thus, the others, those who somehow managed to integrate perfectly into the city, did so at the expense of their capacity of amazement. They had to abandon that wonder of the look that makes the feel alive, that gives them a defined purpose and that is why they try strenuously to keep it far from themselves. The characters, instead, seek no protection, no concession to sophistication and rationality to avoid being swallowed up by the urban whirlwind. Luke explains this in a passage from *The Good Life*, which encompasses all the differences between the protagonists and the others, those who are only secondary characters but who are also essential for the definition of the context:

When had the dewy sheen of youthful exuberance hardened into the glossy shellac of sophistication? [...] The same thing happened, he supposed, to all of the eager boys and girls drawn to the brilliant glow of the city [...] They gained their

⁷⁸² *Arts: A conversation with Jay McInerney*, The New York Times, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6F04HIA76Us> last access: 5/12/2018)

citizenship at the expense of their amazement. In the long run, the spectacle and chaotic grandeur of the city, like the sun, were too overwhelming to view with the naked eyes of wonder. They donned their two-hundred-dollar sunglasses, looked straight ahead when they walked down the street. [...] The same thing had happened to Luke, though he retained some of his capacity to be amazed [...] (TGL, 87)

McInerney's characters do not let themselves be subdued by the city. They do not end up like Carrie, for example (*Sister Carrie*) who is, as Cochoy writes: "séduite par les chatoiements urbains, elle finit par se confondre avec eux"⁷⁸³. They do not even climb to the highest point to challenge the city like Rastignac at the end of *Le Père Goriot*. His characters, protected by the shield of nostalgia, of the memory of the first day in the city, are fixed in a certain moment, crystallized in a never-ending moment of passage, as the protagonist of the story *The Queen and I* explains in the end:

You think you're living a secret and temporary life, underground, in the dark. You don't imagine that someone will drive up the street or walk the door or look through the window – someone who will reveal you to yourself not as you hope to be in some glorious future metamorphosis, but as you find yourself at that moment. Whatever you are doing then,

⁷⁸³ Cochoy, (2009), p. 81

you will have to stop and say, “Yes, this is who I am. This is me”⁷⁸⁴.

There is no metamorphosis; the city is not a place of change, but of recognition. Something unexpected that is part of the city suddenly impacts on the character whose latent identity is revealed, not questioned. Change is part of the strategy of impossible boarding, of the attempt to avoid the gap. When the protagonist of the story says, “lives can change overnight”, he means, “we have changed direction” (TQAI, 247). It is no longer stubbornly going forward toward the city, but he is going back to that first day. That decisive moment is an awareness of who one is, not a transformation into what one would like to be. The city makes the character fall towards himself, and not towards who he believes he can become. The city, in its typical romance, in its being characterized by the unexpected encounter, brings the character back to himself. In the end, one can even go home to detoxify, but again, one inevitably returns to the city, always having that unbridgeable distance in mind: “Now, two years later, I have a boring job and a crummy apartment and a girlfriend who makes the rest of it seem almost okay. I’d be lying if I said there weren’t times I miss the old days, or that I don’t breathe a huge sigh of relief when I climb on the train after a few hours spent visiting my parents” (TQAI, 247-248).

Just like the author who arrived in New York in 1979, his characters belong to the third New York that White talks about in his essay. There is the first New York of those who were born there, the second New York, the one which belongs to commuters and the third one: “The New York of the person who

⁷⁸⁴ Jay McInerney, *The Queen and I*, in *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, p. 248

was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something [...] The city of final destination, the city that is a goal. It is this third city that accounts for New York's highly-strung disposition, its poetical deportment, its dedication to the arts, and its incomparable achievements"⁷⁸⁵.

This third New York is *The Greatest*, and it is the city that attaches to the soul of the characters, the city that strikes at first glance "each embraces New York with the intense excitement of first love"⁷⁸⁶ and its view eternally blends into observer who imagines himself "as a pinprick of life, floating whole in the dark, before all of these divisions and divorces and separations"⁷⁸⁷.

⁷⁸⁵ White, pp. 25 - 27

⁷⁸⁶ White, p. 26

⁷⁸⁷ Jay McInerney, *Reunion*, in *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, p. 572

2.1.3 Understanding House as a Medium

The two stories, *Everything Is Lost* and *Summary Judgment*, clearly show how the type of interior inhabited by the protagonists' addresses, not only their lives, but even the unfolding of the plot, thus becoming receptacles of metropolitan experiences, just like the street, and generators of narrative situations. In the first story mentioned, it is the composition of the loft itself that forms the backbone of the plot. If it were not for the open and shared structure of the loft, that kind of plot could not have been written, the story would not exist. The story exists, in fact, thanks to the particularity of the interior. It is the interior that gives rise to the narrative. At the same time, as we have already pointed out both in the introduction and in the chapter dedicated to Don DeLillo, in these stories, the city, even though it remains in the background, is not avoidable at all. The interior becomes the privileged container of an experience that, as in this case, is metropolitan and strongly New York-ish. In *Summary Judgment* instead, Alysha's apartment is a fundamental step in her seduction operation, representing the culmination of it, the definitive affirmation of the hunter in the eyes of the prey and her momentary mastery.

The two stories are therefore examples of how the interior for McInerney is not simply a living space to accompany a metropolitan experience consumed elsewhere, in other outdoor spaces, but becomes a potentially narrative space, a space that interacts on a higher level with the plot, becoming decisive in its main junctions. Also, in McInerney, as in DeLillo, the interior is one of the two Benjamin's poles of the urban experience.

“All media” McLuhan writes in *Understanding Media*, “are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms”⁷⁸⁸. Among the different media, McLuhan also includes the dwelling space (putting it next to clothes, also considered media): “clothing and housing, as extensions of the skin and the heat-control mechanisms, are media of communication, first of all, in the sense that they shape and rearrange the patterns of human association and community”⁷⁸⁹. McLuhan identifies dwelling as a medium because thanks to changes in the forms of housing, due to innovations in the field of energy, the dwelling has allowed the creation of new specializations and new notions thus “performing the basic functions of all other media”⁷⁹⁰. McLuhan’s discourse is limited to a technical issue to trace back to the moment when man evolves into an alphabet man, thanks to the adoption of “an analytic technology of fragmentation”⁷⁹¹. The specialization of knowledge and crafts also passes through a change in the architectural forms of living: “the square room or house speaks the language of the sedentary specialist”⁷⁹². The dwelling as a medium is therefore understood as a form that functions not only as a medium or intermediary, but also as an advocate of a transformation of experience.

If the cities, continues McLuhan, “are an even further extension of our bodily organs to accommodate the needs of larger groups”⁷⁹³, the house (the interior space in the city) further pushing (even daringly) McLuhan’s reasoning, becomes the *personal* extension of our physical organs and it manifests our need to be part

⁷⁸⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Exstensions of Man*, Ginko Press, Berkeley, California, 2013, p. 62

⁷⁸⁹ McLuhan, p. 137

⁷⁹⁰ McLuhan, p. 136

⁷⁹¹ McLuhan, p. 134

⁷⁹² McLuhan, p. 135

⁷⁹³ McLuhan, p. 133

of larger groups. The house is the medium through which we not only communicate our presence within the city itself to others (and also to ourselves, confirming that we are part of the city), but it also becomes the medium capable of transforming our metropolitan experience. It activates the need to satisfy the new requirements that the arrival in the city has brought with it. The house is to all intents and purposes part of a larger language, the language of the city. It belongs to a system of signs with which the character relates to society and consequently to the city itself.

In two respects, McInerney's New York (which for the Calloways saga, among other novels, was inspired by *Illusions perdues*) resembles Balzac's Paris. It is the author himself who marks the saga's affinity with the work of the French writer: "I already had Russell and Corrine in my mind. For some reason they stuck with me. I put them together with this notion of a Balzacian *comédie humaine*"⁷⁹⁴. The first similarity lies in the entrepreneurial spirit as a fundamental model of human relations. The relational ties become instrumental for job advancement. Stability, especially affective stability, is lacking. Relationships are built and woven with the aim of advancing in the social status sphere. Desire in the eyes of characters like Russell is always directed towards those who hold power, towards those who are in control, towards those who have access to the most exclusive places. Like Balzac's Paris, McInerney's New York is the metropolis of scandals, vulgar compromises and false expectations⁷⁹⁵. The boundaries between work and

⁷⁹⁴ Wittman, *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁵ "To Balzac, the modern city with its culture of voracious mobility was really a revelation of the human psyche fully emancipated from stable obligations, duties, feudal contacts, traditional ties. In the city, petty corruptions, little mindless cruelties, seemingly insignificant slights became inflated to moral absolutes: there was no longer any transcendent principle of King or God to oppose these cruelties. The city exposed

personal life are eroded to the point of disappearing altogether. So, a dinner at home with friends is no longer separate from a business dinner. The two spheres interpenetrate to the point of an indissoluble bond and form the essence of the city: “She had a horror of appearing pushy or mercenary, a legacy she blamed on her WASPy New England heritage - a worldview in which business and pleasure were strictly *segregated*. She knew that this was a quaint notion and thoroughly contradicted the very essence of social life in Manhattan” (TGL, 11). Improving one’s professional position is instrumental to improving one’s position in the city, at the expense of the quality of life. Every moment within the city, even the moments of pleasure are dedicated to the consolidation of one’s working position. Every romance, every aspiration, decays. The city, for the characters, becomes a vertical obstacle course towards a slippery and impregnable peak. A metropolitan life marked by office hours and social impressions, favorable to those who prove to be open and willing to almost infinite professional mobility. “Manhattan was an existential town, in which identity was a function of professional accomplishment; only the very young and the very rich were permitted to be idle” (TGL, 4). There is no room for Corrine in this Manhattan. When she decides to leave her job to devote herself to her children, Corrine suddenly becomes invisible in her husband’s eyes, and just as invisible in the eyes of the city and its inhabitants. It is unthinkable to live in New York without making a profit. There is no room in this Manhattan for Luke either (who will have an affair with Corrine), who, unlike Corrine, retires from

thus all the possibilities of human psychology; that is, every scene had a meaning, because no principle outside human desire made it happen”, Richard Sennett, *The Fall of the Public Man. On the Social Psychology of Capitalism*, Vintage Books, New York, 1978, p. 155

work after accumulating a modest fortune. Yet, despite this, he too is treated like a ghost: “They have a term for guys like Luke”, Sasha (Luke’s wife) announces: “Men who cash out their early winnings and leave the table. There are dozens of them around town. *Walking ghosts*. That’s what they call them. Isn’t that good?” (TGL, 25).

Of course, their invisibility is also reflected in their interior spaces. Corrine, for example, in *Brightness Falls*, after leaving her job on Wall Street, feels herself shrinking not only in comparison to her position in the city, but also in the interior of her home: “One of us has to get smaller,” she whispered, “You take up more and more room in the house, so much space. I feel like there’s none left for me” (BF, 325). The same for Luke in *The Good Life*: “his advocacy of conventional domesticity marks him as an outsider within the home whose presence is a constant irritation to the other family members’ long-established habits”⁷⁹⁶

The Manhattan described in McInerney’s novels is therefore a metropolis where pleasure for pleasure’s sake is not allowed. It is the metropolis where identity is defined through ambitions and achievement of goals which are already obsolete. The other similarity is found in the concept of external appearances. Richard Sennet wrote about Balzacian Paris: “The self no longer transcended its appearances in the world”⁷⁹⁷. The ego is no longer independent from appearances. You are what you appear to be, and what emphasizes this new way

⁷⁹⁶ Till Werkmeister, *Male Domesticity and the 9/11 – Novel: Jay McInerney’s The Good Life*, in *In Radical Planes? 9/11 and Patterns of Continuity*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | Rodopi. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004324220_009, p. 146

⁷⁹⁷ Sennett, p. 153

of being is fashion, clothing specifically. What you wear, what you show, what you exhibit are no longer discreet projections of interiority, but are the final mosaic that reveals everything. McLuhan continues, “clothing is an extension of our private skin”⁷⁹⁸, and that is why it becomes the preferred means of defining a person socially. If already in Balzac’s Paris, clothing began to take over, qualifying itself as a medium capable of transforming experience and thus directly replacing identity⁷⁹⁹. In McInerney’s New York, this process has now reached its final conclusion. Appearance more than anything else defines not only the person, but also their role and presence within the city⁸⁰⁰. “Clothing and housing are near twins”⁸⁰¹, just as clothing puts the individual into a particular social context, so does his or her home. In order to become *that kind* of New Yorker you have to live in *that kind* of house, in that particular neighborhood, in addition to wearing certain clothes. In the Calloway saga, “social identity is inextricably linked to place-identity”⁸⁰², as Corrine says at one point in *The Good Life*, the novel of the saga that exacerbates the differences

⁷⁹⁸ McLuhan, p. 133

⁷⁹⁹ “In Balzac’s own work, clothes are a favorite subject for showing the presence of individual personality in all appearances. Not only do clothes reveal the character of those they drape; changes in clothing prompt Balzac’s characters to believe that they have become new persons”, Sennett, *Ibid.*, p. 159

⁸⁰⁰ This way of thinking, given as definite, will find literary fulfillment in Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. Manhattan becomes an exasperation of brands, where the only distinguishable and distinctive names are those of the designers of the clothes worn; while the names of the characters as well as the characters themselves become interchangeable, without depth. The descriptions no longer concern the physical characteristics, but focus only on the clothes worn: “Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti”, Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*, Vintage Contemporaries, New York, 2010, p. 2

⁸⁰¹ McLuhan, p. 129

⁸⁰² Baelo-Allué, p. 172

between the different neighborhoods of Manhattan, “Casey lived at 740 Park, an address resonant with talismanic significance in her rarefied world. This simple address on an ecru Crane note card consecrated the embossee as an Olympian who had attained the heights of Manhattan social aspiration” (TGL, 208).

The house thus becomes a combination of words. It compresses itself in writing, simultaneously increasing its symbolic value. The simple address written on a specially embossed business card confirms the status achieved by the inhabitant. Outside the city, the house resonates even more powerfully when it physically disappears, when it is not possible to visit it and eventually becomes a text written by evocative and confirmatory power. That house compressed into a card has a confirmed and continuously extolled value from the city itself. The house becomes writing, the address is a signifier to which the practice of the city has precisely established the meaning. A meaning that is accessible to every metropolitan reader, attesting itself as the marked, planned element that enters into opposition to everything that is unmarked, variable and unplanned. “The existence in all villas, starting from the moment when it is actually being experienced by the man, and made by him, this is fundamentally the meaning of the opposition, alternation and juxtaposition of marked and unmarked elements”⁸⁰³. The city therefore rests on an oscillating rhythm, which moves the undulating plot of the city, a phrasing between what is structured, defined, as the social condition of those who live at a certain address, and what is spontaneous,

⁸⁰³ “Il existe dans toute ville, à partir du moment où elle est véritablement habitée par l’homme, et faite par lui, ce rythme fondamental de la signification qui est l’opposition, l’alternance et la juxtaposition d’éléments marqués et d’éléments non marqués”, Roland Barthes, *Sémiologie et Urbanisme*, in *L’aventure sémiologique*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1985, p. 264

that something that tries to subvert, to change what seems given and imposed. McInerney's characters try to implement the opposite of a jerking movement, rather they try to agree with what is established. They dream, admire, accept New York in its already arranged and unchangeable elements. Their action towards the city is not a revolutionary action, but an action that aims at fusion with the system.

The decisive point is that urban life has turned the struggle with nature for food into a struggle for humans. In this metropolitan struggle⁸⁰⁴, the individual, through exhibition, competes with the others in search of success as an end in itself and in this pursuit he is subject to rapid and unpredictable changes in taste and opinion. The individual lives as if glued to the present and to widespread feeling, his interiority is as if emptied and hanging on the gesture, taste and judgment of others⁸⁰⁵. Selfishness and opinion thus constitute a virtual narrative in which the protagonists do not oppose things and the world but conform to it in a relationship of eternal communicative interaction, almost distracting themselves from nature, from the real vanity of things and life, as if to take the naked reality out of sight. So, the naked reality of the fortune hunter fades, disappears, loses interest in the magnificence of her home. Which is not only magnificent in its architecture, but in its position and fits perfectly like a dress. It already communicates on its own. It speaks a language immediately understandable to those who want to access that world. In this regard, speaking of the novel *The Good Life*, Baelo-Allué correctly writes:

⁸⁰⁴ "In the heartland of the country, carnage is usually the result of acts of God. In the city it's man-made-arson, rape, murder" (BLBC, 54)

⁸⁰⁵ See: Antonio Rafele, *La métropole, Benjamin et Simmel*, CNRS editions, Paris

Place-identity is a factor that contributes to the formation of self-identity together with gender, race or social class. In the novel place-identity is an obvious component of social class. In fact, geographical space defines social identity to the extent that geographical references are used to describe people's dressing style⁸⁰⁶.

The house is at the center of this identity map where certain places in the city match certain clothes. The dwelling, in fact, is part of that language with which the metropolitan character builds his virtual narrative. An extension therefore of the body necessary to become part of the history of the city. A narrative that therefore fits into an eternally unfolding plot, which is the plot of the city, "car la ville est un poème"⁸⁰⁷. Not a classic poem, Barthes explains, not a poem centered on a subject, but a poem of the *multitude*, to retrieve a term used by Whitman, open and continuously written and rewritten, where the character must first find a way to adapt, inserting himself without entering into opposition to the main course of that text. Here the personal writing, with the subjective intervention of the character in the complex plot without a precise subject, grafting itself onto the writing of another world, unable to scratch it more than it should, is imbued with that irony of distance mentioned above. It is forcing oneself into a narrative that could easily go on without the character. "Do you think that our being gone from New York has a tangible effect?"⁸⁰⁸ Corrine asks

⁸⁰⁶ Baelo-Allué, p. 172

⁸⁰⁷ Barthes, (1985), p. 271.

⁸⁰⁸ Jay McInerney, *Brightness Falls*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2006, p. 119

Russell in *Brightness Falls*⁸⁰⁹, while the protagonist of *Bright Lights, Big City* goes from feeling finally in the center, as soon as he arrives *in* town, to feeling completely invisible after the city's plot driver has moved: "Even now, as you puff yourself up with tales of high adventure in magazine publishing, you can see now Elaine's eyes wandering out over the room, leaving you *behind*" (BLBC, 45). The character has no influence on the plot of the city. He is left behind, while everything else advances inexorably. However, he is not removed from the city, but remains stationary, in a latent position. Late, in a dysphasia that affects his power to intervene in any way to change his position, as every speech he makes to regain centrality now seems to belong to a worn-out language, he is unable to keep pace with the inexhaustible evolution of the city. Even Alison Poole, in *Story of My Life*, at a party at a friend's house, locks herself in the bathroom, isolates herself even physically from everything that is going on and asks: "What if I just kept going, left New York entirely?" (SOML, 146). It is the general feeling that envelops all the characters, that of not having any kind of grip on the plot. The only chance they seem to be given is to adapt, to follow the codes of the city without being able to showcase anything of their own identity. As if their own peculiarities were a foreign body constantly rejected by the city's plot, "I'm so involved in all this hysterical noise which is supposedly my life, but it doesn't add up to anything" (SOML, 147). The sensation of estrangement from the main plot leads, as already mentioned, not to a transformation, or to an evolution, positive or negative as it may be, but to an

⁸⁰⁹ "Corrine and Russell arrive at this perception of urban space as relational and the awareness that space is not external to social connections or independent of social processes when they are outside New York [...] Corrine undoes the taken for grantedness of space and resolves to see it as relative to the relations that produce it", Neculai, p. 175

immobility that confuses, blinds, upsets the character, who therefore always feels as if he were trapped in a cloud that prevents him from moving forward. Just like the plot of the city that flows relentlessly and when observed from a distance it turns out to be a noise in which it is impossible to distinguish an understandable speech from which to start again: “If you step back far enough it’s just a dumb buzz like a swarm of mosquitoes” (SOML, 147). The house – an interior space - is therefore indispensable to find an anchorage in front of the city’s whirlwind. As for real cities⁸¹⁰, also, the New York represented in McInerney’s novels is a language, pulsating in a main plot that speaks to the protagonists, but to which the protagonists are unable to respond. The house is part of the language of the city. It is a medium that transforms the experience of the character while providing him with a phoneme with which to participate in the speech. A loft in TriBeCa, like an apartment with a view of Central Park, therefore, is part of the city’s plot, a necessary step to remain involved. The fortune hunter seems to manage it, as does the writer Kyle, even if, being McInerney’s characters, we have to expect the trick. In fact, the apartment does not belong to Alysha, just as Kyle cannot fully understand its implications. It is their not being aligned with the main plot of the city, even if they want it strongly, dazzled and hooked to the glitter of its lights, they end up always being slightly out of tune, struggling with a twisted and bitter smile. The New York they fell in love with is always in their eyes, a love at first glance. All of this together makes them so recognizable as McInerney characters.

The apartment with a view of Central Park and the loft in TriBeCa represent the tension line that longitudinally crosses McInerney’s Manhattan, not only to

⁸¹⁰ “La cité est un discours, et ce discours est véritablement un langage: la ville parle à ses habitants, nous parlons notre ville”, Barthes, (1985), p. 265

pographically but also narratively. The Upper East Side and Downtown function as the two poles of attraction of the characters' stories. McInerney's New York presents itself as a city polarized between the immense apartments built on money and power and the lofts cloaked in artistic and romantic sentiment. Like Balzac who, according to Benjamin⁸¹¹, built the mythical nature of his narrative world thanks to the specific topographical form of Paris, so too McInerney has built a narrative world dominated by a New York City in tension between two spaces. The Upper East Side (with the Wall Street appendix) and Downtown are so constructed in opposition as the West End and the Parisian Latin Quarter of *Illusions Perdues*. The lines of tension between the two poles intersect in a complex whirlpool that plays against the characters who aspire to mobility along this line, which is continually hindered and prevented. What Franco Moretti says about Balzac's novel is therefore applicable to McInerney's work, and in particular to the Calloway saga:

A Paris oriented by desire, and held together by
reverie [...] Specific stories are the product of specific spaces,
I have often repeated; and now, the corollary of that thesis:
without a certain kind of space, a certain kind of story is

⁸¹¹ "Balzac has secured the mythic constitution of his world through precise topographic contours. Paris is the breeding ground of his mythology – Paris with its two or three great bankers (Nuncingen, du Tillet), Paris with its great physician Horace Bianchon, with its entrepreneur César Birotteau, with its four or five great cocottes, with its usurer Gobseck, with its sundry advocates and soldiers. But above all – and we see this again and again – it is from the same streets and corners, the same little rooms and recesses, that the figures of this world step into the light. What else can this mean but that topography is the ground plan of this mythic space of tradition, as it is of every such space, and that it can become indeed its key", Benjamin, (1999), p. 83

simply impossible. Without the Latin Quartier, I mean, and its tension with the rest of Paris, we wouldn't have the wonder of the French Bildungsroman, nor that image of youth – hungry, dreamy, ambitious – that has been its greatest invention⁸¹².

McInerney's New York is oriented by desire and supported by the dreams of the characters too. McInerney constructs certain spaces outlining them with precision. In this almost artificial gesture of fragmentation and urban division, he creates the movement of the plot of his novels, placing the house and its interior spaces as catalysts. Like this are also the novels and like tales of the *Bildungsroman* destiny, conceived starting from the movements of the characters. From their arrival to their being rejected, passing through their attempts at claiming back their life. In the end, however, these works as a whole appear instead like novels of abruptly interrupted learning, generating in this way a sort of ironic and frustrating metropolitan *Peter Pan* syndrome⁸¹³.

The writer himself, in an article, explains what it means for a New Yorker to own an apartment on the Upper East Side: "From that day down to the present, an apartment in one of several dozen buildings built before 1930 – the number of "good buildings" is generally agreed to be 42 – was a necessity for status-

⁸¹² Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800 - 1900*, Verso, London, 1999, p. 100.

⁸¹³ In an interview with Oriana Fallaci, Pier Paolo Pasolini, during one of his visits to America, regrets not having come to New York much earlier, when he was still young: "New York is not an escape: it is a commitment, a war. It puts on you the desire to do, to face change: you like the things the way you like them, that is, at twenty years old." Oriana Fallaci, *Un marxista a New York*, in *New York Stories*, a cura di Paolo Cognetti, Einaudi editore, Torino, 2015, p. 233 (traduction by me)

conscious New Yorkers”⁸¹⁴. If with clothing the process of change is rapid, it is different for housing. However, they too, are subject to the rules of fashion. McInerney says, recalling *the Upper East Side period* of his life: “Like many Manhattan-dwelling breeders, I just assumed that when I finally spawned, I would - more or less like a salmon - have to move inexorably upstream”⁸¹⁵. Here is the main plot of the city that transcends the individual and his personal plot. Although he may find it more congenial to live in the West Village, he is convinced that “saying *hello* to the Village was part of growing up”⁸¹⁶. It is the virtual narration that the individual creates in order to adhere to the city’s plot, where the house becomes an essential element, the medium, as often repeated, which transforms the experience by acting as a connector to all the other functions that make up the morphology of metropolitan life. So, the dwelling as fashion, coincides with the inclusion of a lifestyle within the circuit. Each stage of life’s journey corresponds to a specific step in the city’s route. Being integrated into the city is the result of an approach and an alignment of the routes, until the two stages coincide. Finally, you get to own an apartment on the Upper East Side, and you enter another kind of experience and become part of another social group, as McInerney always explains: “Members of the tribe that inhabits these buildings whose territory comprises the Upper East Side seldom use the words *society* or *socialite*, although the phrase “social people” is often used to denote its members. It is far more porous today [...] It is most easily defined by the annual circuit-of-charity benefit parties”⁸¹⁷. And so, also the gold digger

⁸¹⁴ Jay McInerney, *The Death of (the Idea of) the Upper East Side*, in *New York Magazine*, Oct 24, 2007, (<http://nymag.com/news/features/24097/>, last access 11/24/2018)

⁸¹⁵ McInerney, (2007), *Ibid.*

⁸¹⁶ McInerney, (2007), *Ibid.*

⁸¹⁷ McInerney, (2007), *Ibid.*

combines the seduction of the house with participation in a charity event: “Although the ballet was not among the many organizations to which his company doled out donations, he had yet to be adopted by any of the other high-profile charities since arriving in New York” (SJ, 359). After all, *Summary Judgment* story is nothing more than the story of a failed alignment.

Living as fashion dictates also means being subject to changes in taste. Despite being a slower process compared to clothing, changing taste in homes and their locations can also go out of fashion. McInerney with the saga of the Calloways, as we will go into further detail later, talks about this very change within the city, where the social geography has undergone a major change. Russell and Corrine’s house, or rather loft, is gradually transformed from an outpost into a decrepit fortress. It is precisely the interior inhabited by the two that reveals the evolution of Manhattan.

The Upper East Side idea lasted over a century. It began in the late nineteenth century and was also linked to the adoption by wealthy people of the concept of living in an apartment: “As the city had grown, several factors had sapped the ardor of resistance to apartments: the rising costs of maintaining private houses with servants; the trend toward country houses [...] and the new civic enthusiasm, which drew people away from the confines of their houses into public places for entertainment”⁸¹⁸. The apartment therefore operated as a medium, changing the urban experience, and so the neighborhood and the type of housing flourished together until the apogee of the 1920s, when “an apartment was not only a stylish way to live in New York; it had become a symbol of the stylish life - tranquility and grace in the midst of activity and

⁸¹⁸ Elizabeth Hawes, *New York, New York. How the Apartment House Transformed the Life of the City (1869-1930)*, 2013, Kindle edition, position 2881

noise”⁸¹⁹. If at the beginning of the last century it was Levi P. Morton who started the move to the apartments along Fifth Avenue⁸²⁰, thus also kick-starting the idea of the Upper East Side, it was instead, according to McInerney, John Kennedy Jr. who marked the beginning of the end of that neighborhood in favor of downtown. A gesture that abruptly unhinged the narrative sequence of the city’s history and that McInerney’s characters would never be able to accept: “As a young man, John-John had moved to the Upper West Side, then later downtown, not an unusual trajectory for an Upper East Side scion, even then. But when he became a grown-up and got married and still did not move back [...] well, that suggested trouble”⁸²¹. This change/exchange of values between one district and another, determined by the gestures of eminent characters, at least socially eminent, is the perfect example of that continuous movement of the main plot of the city that McInerney’s characters cannot keep up with. They are perpetually late, perpetually chasing and perpetually living in the wrong houses.

⁸¹⁹ Hawes, *Ibid.*

⁸²⁰ “It shocked New York profoundly when he moved into an apartment and proceeded to tear down his seventeen-year-old McKim, Mead and White house at 681 Fifth to erect a thirteen-story commercial structure on the site. Drastic decisions like Morton’s set radical new precedents”, Hawes, *Ibid.*

⁸²¹ McInerney, (2007), *Ibid.*

2.2 Bright Lights, Big City

In *Bright Lights, Big City*, Jay McInerney's literary debut, we can find two New Yorks. The New York imagined by the protagonist before his arrival in the city and the *real* New York actually experienced. Each one of these New York *Cities* corresponds to a particular interior. It is these interiors that show to the character the two different versions of the city, so it is the interior that determines the possible passage from one city to another. This immediately points out the interior's dual role: position and representation. As already mentioned in the introduction, the interior is the starting and return point of the experience on the grid of the city, becoming the place of reflection and protection of the experience itself. The interior is detached from the road and in the distance creates the anchorage to the city. To inhabit the dynamic opposition between inside and outside means to have control of one's presence in the city, otherwise, as we will see happen to the protagonist of *Bright Lights, Big City*, the only possible condition is metropolitan exile. In the same way, the interior, precisely because it is longed for as an essential place through which to enter the city, becomes the place of a representation, a representation of oneself within the city and a more conciliatory representation of the city itself. It is in the representation mechanism that the main difference between the first novel⁸²² and the Calloway saga appears, and it is precisely this passage that consolidates the idea expressed from the beginning of the possibility of reading the entire

⁸²² ... and also *Model Behavior*, which we won't talk about here because it is already covered sufficiently in the introduction.

New York work of McInerney (and not only the three novels in the saga) as a single building, in horizontal rather than vertical development.

In the first novel, in fact, the representation of the city and of the self within the city takes place by looking towards the house, towards the facade of the house. In the saga, the inverse process happens instead, and it is but looking out of a house that the characters form their idea of the city. Observing the interior, often from the outside, the protagonist of *Bright Lights, Big City* portrays two versions of the city in his mind, in the saga it is by looking out the window that the characters, Russell in particular, build their own representation of the city⁸²³. Like the device of windows that constitute the façade of the *house of fiction* and, of which, according to Henry James tells us, we only see that one side, also the interior from which McInerney's characters look out shares this particular status of visibility. It lies between inside and outside, in the extra-territoriality of the *house* highlighted by Lévinas. The inside is therefore the device that allows the character to be seen.

⁸²³ On this ambiguity, on this paradox of the ambivalence of the window, a reflection by Donata Meneghelli is interesting: "The window overlooks, opens onto the scene; but at the same time, it is inside the scene, part of it, placed somewhere inside. And if it's inside the told universe, if the capsule-character is there, where things are also, how can it be a diaphragm or have a diaphragm? That window is, in fact, a paradox [...] capable of occupying two points of space simultaneously, it represents a multiplied diaphragm, several superimposed diaphragms; it is not between inside and outside but inside and outside", Donata Meneghelli, *Una forma che comprende tutto. Henry James e la teoria del romanzo*, Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna, 1997, p. 216 (traduction by me)

2.2.1 The Imagined New York

The first New York is what we could call the dream, the pure image. It starts far from the city and has more to do with an idea. It is the New York of intangibility, elusive yet eternally sweet, infused with the “scent of the Italian bakery” (BLBC, 8). For the protagonist of the novel⁸²⁴, this idea of New York takes shape over time. It starts when he was a boy. It starts in the movies he saw and in the novels he read. It takes root so strongly in him and it starts to influence his behavior, making him think that those who meet him cannot but think that he is a New Yorker and he consequently poses as such: “She seemed to think you came from Manhattan. Everyone in Kansas thought you came from New York City, whether you said Massachusetts, New England, or just East Coast.” (BLBC, 66). The first one to think this is Amanda, more precisely the first version of Amanda. The girl he meets in a bar and who will become his wife very soon. In fact, the clean faced woman corresponds to this dream version of New York: “You thought of this ingenuousness as being typical of the heartland” (BLBC, 65). After college, perhaps following in Hemingway’s footsteps⁸²⁵, the protagonist moves to Kansas City to be a journalist, in search of “some kind of

⁸²⁴ The protagonist of the novel has no name, as the author himself explained in an interview: “Every time I tried to find a suitable name for him, I couldn’t. And that’s funny, because, normally, I love to name characters, to play around with the possibilities. But nothing felt quite right for this character, so I finally came to feel that something in the book wants him to be nameless”, Sanford Pinsker, *Soft Lights, Academic Talk: A Conversation with Jay McInerney*, in *The Literary Review*, 30 (Fall 1986), p. 112

⁸²⁵ “His inclusion of Kansas City makes sense, however as an allusion to Hemingway. When the narrator talks about how he met his ex-wife, he mentions that he was a journalist in Kansas City at the time, the same job Hemingway held when he was a teenager”. Robert C. Clark, *American Literary Minimalism*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 2014, p.79

truth” (BLBC, 65), but he is dazzled by the young woman’s appearance in that bar. The protagonist immediately understands the magnitude of the figure in front of him: “She looks like a goddamned model and she doesn't even know” (BLBC, 65), yet he decides to look away from the *truth* of Amanda’s body to project a romantic vision onto it. Similarly, Amanda sees in the protagonist a chance to escape, even though he is still a young novice not used to the metropolitan effervescence. As Clark rightly wrote: “She is drawn to the protagonist because she saw him only as a means to enter into a world she envisioned as a glamorous escape”⁸²⁶. It is not so much a feeling that ties the two together, it is more of a possibility seen in their projections on to the other’s body. “Amanda herself was never the true object of our hero’s desire; what he wanted was what he imagined she represented, and what she wanted was what he gave her - entry into yuppie life, access to the bright lights”⁸²⁷. So, the New York that begins to be materialize from the meeting of the two is a New York made up of surfaces that reflect on one another, deceiving each other. For the protagonist, that idea of the city is realized in the verb *to picture*. First used for Amanda: “You *pictured* her backlit by a sunset, knee-deep in amber waves of grain” (BLBC, 65) and then for the first house the two live in, in New York: “It all seemed to be just as you had *pictured* it when you discussed plans for marriage and New York”⁸²⁸. It is the perfect New York for a novel, for a film, supported by a verb that enhances its figurative, imaginative condition. A verb that

⁸²⁶ Clark, p.78

⁸²⁷ Girard, p. 176

⁸²⁸ It is true that this passage has been expunged in the passage from the story to the novel. But given the contiguity of content and feeling between the two texts, I dare here to read them as part of the same text. Jay McInerney, *It's Six A.M. Do You Know Where You Are*, in *How It Ended, New and Collected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, Kindle edition, p. 37

supports a construction without a grip on reality. Therefore, in the protagonist's mind, Amanda becomes a fictional character: "Amanda is a fictional character [...] I made her up" (BLBC, 133). So, the first interior that makes this dream image come true is the interior of the Plaza: "When you first came to the city you spent a night here with Amanda" (BLBC, 143). Towards the end of the novel, after escaping from his brother who was waiting for him on the steps of the house, and after crossing the city by subway, the protagonist finds himself walking between Fifth and Madison "between the cool shadows of tall buildings and brief regions of direct sunlight" (BLBC, 142). The walk of the main character - "enamored with facades"⁸²⁹ - starts in front of Saks store windows that show the mannequin of his now ex-wife, who had become a world-famous model. It is not the first time he has been back there. Since Amanda left him with a short phone call from Paris, the Saks shop window has become a ritual stop. The protagonist, in fact, returns there over and over again, to "try to remember if this was how she really looked" (BLBC, 64). He has not seen her since the day she left, Amanda is no longer a concrete presence in the flesh, but has become a body of latex, as was written in her destiny: "a designer who used her all the time said she had plastic features" (BLBC, 118). The fictional character of the first version of the city has now become completely fictitious here, losing all potential narrative charm.

As Stephanie Girard pointed out, "the evolution of Amanda as metaphor, from two-dimensional print ad at department store mannequin, reflects not only the conflation of reality and representation characteristic of the postmodern period (with definite overtones of Haraway's cyborg), but also the reduction of human

⁸²⁹ Clark, p. 72

relationships to exchanges of consumer commodities”⁸³⁰. Amanda’s personality built by the protagonist is a two-dimensional character, lacking depth, just a mental image built with a purpose, to achieve “a storybook existence”⁸³¹. Just like the first New York that escapes the eyes of the protagonist and exists only in his head: “though you could not see the city out the window, you believed that it was spread out at your feet” (BLBC, 144). The window of the *tiny room* on the tenth floor of the Plaza, the same floor of room 1088 where Anthony Patch falls in love with Gloria Gilbert, does not allow any opening on the street. If the view from the Plaza was a vision of splendor for Fitzgerald: “Just as it had been a tradition of mine to climb to the Plaza Roof to take leave of the beautiful city, extending as far as eyes could reach”⁸³², here New York is just outside, but not visible and the splendor is just assumed. The protagonist can only imagine it and thus give in to his particular mental construction, “you seemed to be arriving at the premiere of the movie which was to be your life” (BLBC, 143). The interior supports and amplifies the character’s vision. It places him in the pulsating and glamorous heart of the city and corroborates his personal representation of the city. The window that “overlooked an airshaft” (BLBC, 144) is anything but a silent window. It is a window overlooking a representation. It is the neutral screen showing the first images of the mental film of the arrival in the city full of promises and expectations, purified from any infiltration of reality. However, living in New York is like “being on location for a movie that never wrapped”

⁸³⁰ Girard, p. 175

⁸³¹ Jefferson Faye, *Cultural/Familial Estrangement: Self-Exile and Self-Destruction in Jay McInerney’s Novels*, in *The Literature of Emigration and Exile*, edited by James Whitlark and Wendell Aycock, Texas Tech University Press, 1992, p. 123

⁸³² Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *My Lost City*, in *Writing New York. A Literary Anthology*, edited by Philip Lopate, The Library of America, 2008, p.578

(GITWL, 335) and so the movie stops before it even starts, but the façade remains, as does the vision glimpsed from within. The façade, reappearing, torments the character, standing, impenetrable, on the grid like the sum of all his failures, like a monument on which his unfulfilled desires remain engraved, never to be realized, a huge building that swallows everything, insatiable. It is as if an immense dream was in the center of the city: “A gargantuan white chateau rising in the middle of the island, like a New Money dream of the Old World” (BLBC, 143).

The windows of the interiors of the first New York are imperfect, they are deformed windows, like those of the first apartment shared with Amanda: “the windows that didn’t quit fit the frame” (BLBC, 9). The first New York is the one that precedes the book, the one that makes the story of the novel possible, the one that paves the way for the other two versions. The first New York, being only imaginary, still has two interiors that are experienced by the character, as well as by the reader. It is a city experienced, or better imagined, only from the outside. As soon as the novel starts, these two interiors become pure façades. They are seen from the outside. The protagonist, who at the beginning of the story is already living in the second version of New York, reconstructs the first version of New York from these two interiors, from the outside. It is a version that reaches the reader, transmitted from the inside to the character who is hopelessly placed outside, in exile even from this first version. It is a completely unreachable New York. The New York of a film that exists only on the screen, just as the two façades, that of the Plaza and that of their first apartment, are screens themselves. Like the Plaza, the first house is observed only from the outside, with a glance full of nostalgia. By looking at them from the outside, the *windows* bring the character back into that continuously protected fictitious

world, encapsulated precisely by their imperfections, when the character was still *inside*, before the novel began: “You stand at the corner of Bleecker and Cornelia and gaze at the windows on the fourth floor of a tenement. Behind those windows is the apartment you shared with Amanda when you first came to the city” (BLBC, 8). Like the Plaza, also this interior is qualified with the adjective *first*. It is the trace of a New York that already no longer exists, that never existed, but that nevertheless resists, because McInerney’s characters always come back to the first look at the city, that moment when “You were just starting out” (BLBC, 9) and the city seems to be at your complete disposal, ready to welcome you. The two interiors then become the places where the protagonist and the reader can come back to re-imagine the New York of the first glance. Thanks to these two interiors the representation of New York, formed before arriving in the city, could be realized, even if briefly, just enough to experience the moment of a beginning, that becomes the decisive moment for the formation of the gaze on the city. The one that will always come back, the one that definitively hooks the character to the city, despite all the failures that will follow, and whose interiors are nothing but indices.

There is no real feeling between Amanda and the main character - “you were inclined to find her lacking” (BLBC, 67) - and the feeling during the reading is that the heartbreak of the character is rather a sin of pride. It is the concept of having been left that torments the protagonist, not so much the loss of a loved one. If there is pain of loss, it is the loss of that first New York. As Faye writes: Amanda “is a reminder of his failure to reach his surrogate dream”⁸³³. He feels used by her, she who in the meantime has managed to become part of the city:

⁸³³ Faye, p. 123

the utilitarian relationship has only worked in one direction. Amanda is essential to the character, not just for a feeling, but for her function. Amanda is a part of those, interiors that initially made the protagonist feel part of the city. Amanda is part of that first New York. Those interiors exist because of Amanda's presence. They have that strength because of the dreams built beforehand. Those interiors are inhabited together. "He fails to separate real life from idealized societal expectations, and the resulting sense of exile is consuming him"⁸³⁴. Uprooted from the interior on which his dream was projected, the character inevitably feels exiled from the city and claims those interiors as he claims his now ex-wife. They are fictional insides of the same nature as Amanda. Fictional as in the end the film that the protagonist has created, without the possibility of seeing it on stage, will turn out to be. It, in fact, looks much more like an advertisement, without a plot tending towards something, but rather the construction of a profile to adhere to, an anonymous third person on which to translate his identity: "your dreams were so shallow [...] You are the stuff of which consumer profiles - American Dream: Educated Middle-Class Model - are made" (BLBC, 144).

Thus, the exterior of the Plaza replaces Amanda's missing mannequin, and reveals the fictitious, plasticized matrix of her aspirations.

⁸³⁴ Faye, p. 123

2.2.2 Real New York

After all, it is in the nature of the character, the construction of fictitious worlds. His dream is to become a writer: “In fact, you don’t want to be in Fact. You’d much rather be in Fiction” (BLBC, 21). The work at the *Department of Factual Verification* of the prestigious magazine exacerbates even more his frustration at unmet expectations: “You never stopped thinking of yourself as a writer biding his time in the Department of Factual Verification” (BLBC, 38). He would like to work in the Fiction Department, which “the people in the Verification Department tend to look down on” (BLBC, 21). Instead, it is part of the department that is responsible for verifying that everything written is true, that everything coincides with what really happened, the exact opposite of what happens in fiction texts, where the goal is “to confirm that the story doesn’t unintentionally coincide at any point with real people and events” (BLBC, 21). This is how his exiled condition is confirmed at work too, as Faye rightly points out: “As a member of its staff, he is at best a misfit, more accurately an outsider, definitely an exiled prisoner”⁸³⁵. The distinction, or rather the discrepancy, between *real* and *fictitious* facts is essential in the experience of the second New York, what we can call the real, concrete New York, the one that betrays the initial image.

The work for the prestigious magazine at the beginning belonged to the fictitious construction of the first New York, which for a very brief moment had an effective duration even in reality, a blaze so rapid and so intense that it burned everything: “Amanda was the fashion model and you worked for the famous

⁸³⁵ Faye, p. 123

magazine. People were happy to meet you and invite you to their parties” (BLBC, 38). But it is a brief moment, that is still part of the arrival in the city, and which culminates with the change of apartment when the couple gets married. They will no longer live in that imperfect house in the Village they imagined together, but they choose another house that will then appear clearly as the first crack in the image: “This place was your compromise - an uptown sort of building downtown: high ceilings, daytime doorman, working fireplaces” (BLBC, 36).

The second New York, like the apartment, looks like a compromise, a sort of New York dramatically in real colors, but still not quite completely opposite to that first betrayed image. This New York starts right around this discrepancy, this difference between “words masquerade as flesh without the backbone of fact” (BLBC, 21) and facts, as the piece of the Talking Heads song on a little frame on the character's desk says: “don't do what I want them to” (BLBC, 22). A discrepancy well summed up from the inhabited interior, no longer an idyllic romantic space, but a compromise, a space that represents the turmoil of life that distresses the dream, updating it into a nightmarish existence. And just like a nightmare, the interior is experienced by the protagonist: “Your apartment is a chamber of horrors. There are instruments of torture” (BLBC, 76). Instruments that are nothing more than the remaining traces of a now gone Amanda, who vanishes like a bad dream when you wake up, and that make the protagonist fall like: “the sound of the tumblers in the locks of your apartment door puts you in mind of dungeon” (BLBC, 35). So, for him what was to become the house in the city: a haunted place (“The place is haunted” (BLBC, 35)). No longer a house, almost a prison: “a remainder of what was lost to him [...] Even

the dust in his apartment prevents his escape from Amanda's expatriation and his own exile”⁸³⁶.

The second apartment in the city thus becomes the symbol of a life still entangled in the meanders of a personal fiction that has to deal with that fracture between *fiction* and reality. The dream which is becoming a nightmare, which has already become a nightmare in the house and which is gradually becoming a nightmare in the street. The inside is the thermometer on which the heat and the intensity of experience is measured. It is no coincidence that this interior of the second New York, now impossible to inhabit, finds, within the novel, the most important space in a chapter entitled *The Utility of Fiction*.

The third chapter is the moment when the protagonist not only reveals the interior of his home, but also reveals his artistic ambitions and tells us how these have been frustrated by the incessant life of the metropolis. When Amanda was still there, when Amanda had not yet made her final transformation, that was already in essence though, the protagonist could still perpetrate his vision as a writer, “cultivated a writerly person” (BLBC, 38). As he tells us, the first few weeks he would wake up early, when Amanda was still asleep, and write at the kitchen table. But the city was about to overwhelm him:

Then your night life started getting more interesting and complicated, and climbing out of bed became harder and harder. You were gathering experience for a novel. You went to parties with writers [...] You wanted to be Dylan Thomas without the paunch, F. Scott Fitzgerald without the crack-up.

⁸³⁶ Faye, p. 124

You wanted to skip over the dull grind of actual creation. After a hard day of work [...] the last thing you wanted to do was to go home and write. You wanted to go out. [...] Of course, mentally, you were always taking notes. Saving it all up. Waiting for the day when you would sit down and write your masterpiece (BLBC, 38).

McInerney's first novel (and the same can be said of all his New York works) follows that line of fiction that represents the city as a *vortex*, where, as Lehan explains, the metropolis is experienced as a space "in which the play of personal and cultural motives take place", he then continues, "built in the city, in other words, is the hope of romantic possibility as well as the reality of physical defeat and death"⁸³⁷. It is a tradition of the representation of a city as the destination of a romantic desire for fulfillment, then frustrated, that comes from the urban literature of the 19th century, from Dickens to Balzac and Zola to culminate, in America, with Dreiser and, especially Fitzgerald, not only the author inspires the protagonist, but also the author who inspired McInerney. Continuing the tradition of the metropolis as a *vortex*, *Bright Lights*, *Big City* also persists in the conception, expressed for the first time by Fitzgerald himself, that the city "exists to be enjoyed"⁸³⁸. The city offers itself as "a succulent banquet of sense"⁸³⁹ and the self-made image of the protagonist of the first New York, charged with all the possibilities, the one that contains "all the iridescence of the

⁸³⁷ Lehan, p. 219

⁸³⁸ Peter Conrad, *The Art of the City. Views and Versions of New York*, Oxford Press University, New York and Oxford, 1984, p. 200

⁸³⁹ Conrad, p. 201

beginning”⁸⁴⁰ collapses like Fitzgerald at the end of *My Lost City*, “the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his imagination came crashing to the ground”⁸⁴¹. The protagonist goes from the first New York of the Plaza and the apartment in the Village to the New York of an apartment where “hope is mostly gone” (BLBC, 37). The arrival in New York, The protagonist’s desire for the city coincides with his ambition to become a writer, so the first interior becomes the symbol of a beginning of a sparkling career, “a career is the careening pursuit of a self-image, the enactment of a fantasy more than a job, and New York is the theater where such histrionic fiction can be played out”⁸⁴². It is the interior of writing stolen from the time of work, of writing that triumphs over uncertainties and difficulties. A writing, a way of writing that supported the perfect façade of the dream. Then there is the transition to the second apartment, and the second New York coincides with a collapse, the crumbling of this writing full of promises, first “gradually and then suddenly”⁸⁴³.

The vortex of the city comes to encompass him too, shredding every edge of his perfect dream. Writing in this way loses its support, its main matter. As Barthes writes, “L’humanité a vraiment écrit sur n’importe quoi, mais il semble qu’elle ait le plus souvent tiré un sens de ce n’importe quoi [...] le support détermine le type d’écriture parce que qu’ il oppose des résistances différentes à l’instrument traceur”⁸⁴⁴. Writing requires a medium on which it can be fixed, on which it can become writing: “L’écriture n’est en somme rien d’autre qu’une *craquelure*”⁸⁴⁵. At

⁸⁴⁰ Fitzgerald, (2008), p. 578

⁸⁴¹ Fitzgerald, (2008), p. 578.

⁸⁴² Conrad, p. 193

⁸⁴³ The sentence is contained in Ernest Hemingway’s novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, and is inscribed in McInerney’s first novel.

⁸⁴⁴ Barthes, (2006), p. 172

⁸⁴⁵ Barthes, (2006), p. 170

the same time, the support provides the writing with that resistance that is fundamental for its depth and for its effective and concrete realization. It is the work on the text that the character begins to want to avoid, “You wanted to skip over the dull grind of actual creation” (BLBC, 38). The writing of the protagonist thus makes a reverse passage, and while the city from *dream* turns towards the real city finding support in the architectural concreteness of the city, the writing loses its support and its physicality and remains floating in the mind, as ephemeral as an unexpressed thought can be. “Of course, mentally, you were always taking notes” (BLBC, 38) adds Barthes: “L’écriture est toujours du côté du geste, jamais du côté de la face”⁸⁴⁶. The *writing* of the protagonist is nothing more than a continuous saying, telling himself and others to write, without this becoming the actual tactile gesture, but always leaving the verbal, suspended, “I do some writing. I’m sort of an editor actually [...] Without getting to specific you imply that your job is extremely demanding [...] You hate this posturing, even as you persist” (BLBC, 43 -44).

The Utility of Fiction is also the only chapter where we see the protagonist write, or rather he tries to write. On his return home, on Monday evening, it is shown how the interior of the second New York is marked by loss, by falling into raw realism. If the first interior is marked by a desire to return, the second interior is marked by an attempt to escape. Not only do Amanda’s traces remind the protagonist of his emotional failure, but other signs also remind him of his failure as a writer. Yet the prospects on the way home seemed good, after the excesses of the weekend, “You see yourself as the kind of guy who appreciates a quiet night at home with a good book. A little Mozart on the speakers, a cup

⁸⁴⁶ Barthes, (2006), p. 98

of cocoa on the arm of the chair, slippers on the feet” (BLBC, 34). The bookcase is thus the symbol of this new possibility of living in the city: “you hunt up your slippers and read the spines of the books in the shelves, determined to make a go of this quiet-night-at-home idea” (BLBC, 37).

What comes to mind, reading this passage, is the plea of the protagonist of Siri Hustvedt’s novel, *The Blindfold*, irritated by Mr. Morning “It would relieve me enormously if you could keep books out of this for once”⁸⁴⁷. The lifestyle pursued is one that relies on fiction, it is the world recreated in those book pages and the isolation in that world that allows comfort in the city. A comfort that has the sign of isolation, distance and momentary denial of the physical presence of the city. Not that you can’t read a good book at home in the city, quite the contrary. The problem of the protagonist is that this gesture does not lie so much in being a pleasure, or a need (which is also work, given his ambition), but it is again, a fantasy, a purely mental activity to build another image of himself. One that perhaps, after all, is not even supported by an actual desire. An idea this, similar to the situation crystallized in Fitzgerald’s third symbol of New York: “But that night, in Bunny’s apartment, life was mellow and safe [...] The gentle playing of an oboe mingled with city noises from the street outside, which penetrated into the room with difficulty through great barricades of books [...] I had found a third symbol of New York and I began wondering about the rent of such apartments and casting about for the appropriate friends to share one with me”⁸⁴⁸. A situation of sophisticated complacency of one’s intellect and culture, a situation that opposes the frenzy of the city to the calm of an interior completely sheltered from every sound that is not a melody. It is an attempt to

⁸⁴⁷ Siri Hustvedt, *The Blindfold*, Sceptre, London, 1994, p. 28.

⁸⁴⁸ Fitzgerald, (2008), p. 571

cheer the city, to soften it, to turn it into a welcoming home. Neither of the two passages, in fact, denies the city or rejects it. On the contrary, the situation gives, or could give in the case of McInerney's novel, even more enjoyment knowing that the city is out there, at your fingertips. It is an attempt to tame the chaos of the city. It is the illusion that this idea of a city, at the center of chaos and dissipation, is also possible.

But just as Fitzgerald loses his symbol, the protagonist also finds himself dealing with a library that is nothing more than a remnant of what could have been but has never become: "A random sampling of titles induces vertigo [...] You must have had an ambitious youth. Of course, many of these spines have never been cracked" (BLBC, 37). It is an interior characterized by failure, the exact opposite of the first one. As Fitzgerald wrote in his essay about the *crack-up* that the protagonist would like to avoid: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function"⁸⁴⁹. A well-functioning mind should therefore understand, says Fitzgerald, that "things are hopeless, and yet be determined to make them otherwise"⁸⁵⁰. The mind of the protagonist struggles between two ideas, a negative "You are not the kind of guy..." (BLBC, 1) and a positive "You see yourself as the kind of guy" (BLBC, 34). Instead of completing themselves in their propositional dialectic, they are continually stuck in the character's inability to make this dialectic work in reality. Traded for a novel celebrating an overly hedonistic life, as the author himself explains, of a collapse, of failure: "Students, I've been told, want to go to New York City and to live the life described in my

⁸⁴⁹ Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, Esquire, March 7 2017 (<https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/a4310/the-crack-up/> last access: 20/9/2018)

⁸⁵⁰ Fitzgerald, (2017), *Ibid.*

novel. I've heard myself described as a yuppie hero, as some kind of celebrant of a way of life and a set of values which I believe are actually held up for critical examination in my book. I don't feel I'm a Yuppie at all. Rather, I thought I was writing a book about someone coming to terms with *failure*⁸⁵¹. The impossibility of writing is the first obvious sign of it. Back home he decides to write, "to *jump* immediately into the story you have in mind" (BLBC, 39). It is a writing however that opposes the composed time of reflection with a time of jerks, sudden forward jumps, and backwards jumps. He starts writing *in medias res* the story of Karen, or Meredith, then "(he) tear(s) the sheet out of the typewriter" (BLBC, 39) and starts writing again, he "Go(es) farther back", attempting to insert some flashbacks, but fails here too, "this is dreadful", then he tries to resort to the epistolary form but he runs into a *lapsus* (instead of Dear Amanda writes Dead Amanda) that makes him desist and he will not start writing again until the end of the novel. "La relation à l'écriture, c'est la relation au corps"⁸⁵². the protagonist's body is a body in ruins, frenetic, neurotic, shaken by alcohol and drugs. Just as Fitzgerald loses the symbols of his first New York, so too the protagonist loses his idea of New York in the exaggerated nightlife of the city, including parties and clubs. "It was too late - or too soon. For us the city was inevitably linked up with *Bacchic diversions* [...] My first symbol was now a memory"⁸⁵³. In *My Lost City* Fitzgerald returns to the New York of the 1920s described in his first short stories and novels, starting with *May Day* where "(he) begins by disestablishing New York as a place of work and consecrating the city

⁸⁵¹ Pinsker, p. 135

⁸⁵² Barthes, (2006), p. 140

⁸⁵³ Fitzgerald, (2008), p. 575.

to pleasure”⁸⁵⁴. It is the New York of the “hedonistic glories of the Jazz Age”⁸⁵⁵. McInerney’s New York City is presented under the banner of a lifestyle of hedonism as well. It is the New York of the early 1980s, where, as David Leavitt wrote: “It was always Saturday night and we are always going to a party”⁸⁵⁶. Not yet completely out of the crisis (still with the aftermath of the bankruptcy avoided in 1975), in the Eighties New York lives a sort of awakening, marking one of the most important decades for the city, culminating in the Wall Street crash of 1987, described by McInerney in the novel *Brightness Falls*. This is the time when the invisible, but yet so real, lines that divided uptown from downtown began to shift, “a city that simultaneously embraced the materialism of the Reagan era, and rejected its moralism, where stretch limos deposited partygoers in unseemly neighborhoods and yuppies ran rampant while “Die Yuppie Scum” graffiti spread”⁸⁵⁷. The culture of excess enlivened every area and every sector of the city, from the one hundred million shares traded in 24 hours to skyscrapers inaugurated with pomp and circumstance (like Trump Tower with its pink marble atrium), to the discos and clubs in downtown, where transgression was the norm, where you could find the clubs that later became legendary, such as Studio 54, Area and CBGB’s. So McInerney describes that New York:

⁸⁵⁴ Conrad, p. 194

⁸⁵⁵ Philip McGowan, *Exile and the City. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Lost Decade”*, The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2013), pp.54-79, Penn State University Press, p. 61

⁸⁵⁶ David Leavitt, *The New Lost Generation*, in *Esquire*, May 1985, p. 90

⁸⁵⁷ Frank Bruni, *Why Early ‘80s New York Matters Today*, The New York Time Style Magazine, April 17, 2018, (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/17/t-magazine/why-new-york-city-1980s-matters.html> last access: 23/9/2018)

It was an interesting time to arrive here, the moment where it still seemed as if the city could go either way [...] There was a heroin epidemic. The city was still dirty and dangerous. At the same time, there was the interesting cultural scene, the music coming out of the Lower East Side [...] And a generation of older writers whom I admired were based here [...] New York had a literary center at that time, which I eventually discovered at George Plimpton's house. [...] But I was also attracted to what was happening downtown, worlds away. I spent a lot of time exploring the nightclubs and music clubs [...] It was a word-of-mouth, underground scene – drug fueled, pansexual, and spontaneous⁸⁵⁸.

McInerney too then, like the protagonist of his novel, “wasn't getting much writing done”. It is this New York immersed in the simultaneity and heterogeneity of events - *at the same time* - that stuns the protagonist and impedes his writing. After burying all artistic ambitions for the evening then, the protagonist decides to go out again, persuaded by his friend Tad Allagash, who, like his ex-wife Amanda, “(is) busy living the shallow lives of cartoon yuppies”⁸⁵⁹ and who however, unlike the protagonist, is perfectly integrated, and represents the perfect prototype of The Yuppie (“a highly educated, extremely motivated consumer with a vested interest in distinction”⁸⁶⁰).

⁸⁵⁸ Wittmann, *Ibid.*

⁸⁵⁹ Girard, p. 174

⁸⁶⁰ Girard, p. 177

The only interior that seems to alleviate his despair is that of a club, the Odeon⁸⁶¹: “the glittering, curvilinear surfaces inside Odeon are reassuring” (BLBC, 42). Here, artificial lights cancel people’s professions, labels disappear, one cocktail after another identity is lost. The protagonist is an exception, and he is immediately recognized as Amanda’s husband. He cannot, after all, manage to shed his clothes. Following Allagash’s idea of saying that Amanda was ill, as a tactic to drive away the aura of failure that surrounds the figure of the friend, the protagonist lies to his interlocutor. After the initial relief, however, he begins to feel the futility of his fiction: “After you met Amanda and came to New York, you began to feel that you were no longer on the outside looking in [...] You succeeded in faking everyone out, and never quite lost the fear that you would eventually be discovered a fraud, an impostor in the social circle. Which is just about how you feel these days” (BLBC, 45). An impostor who feels compelled to prove to everyone that he can still have fun. After setting off for New York with an image of fiction in his head, the protagonist has to convert it to practice and, in the actual writing of this fiction, he deflates and becomes transparent. The plot of the city detaches from the plot of its mental history, and the place where he should find the connection to participate, connection reachable in the act of writing as a master key to unhinge the ongoing narrative of the city, it is an inhospitable place. It is an unlivable interior, continuously lashed by the

⁸⁶¹ In a *New York Times* special dedicated to New York in the early Eighties, Frank Bruni writes about the *Odeon*, also on the cover of McNerney’s novel: “Just as the era had its defining art and music, it had its signature restaurant, the Odeon. It opened in late 1980, pulling New Yorkers from more polished precincts to TriBeCa, which was then an urban frontier. In its sleek, unfussy dining room, glamour and grit sat cheek by jowl, and going to the bathroom to powder your nose could mean one of the two things”, Bruni, *Ibid.*

sound of the phone or bell that interrupts, interfering with the deafening noise of the city against the dumb and naive desires.

The New York of the interior does not enter into dynamic opposition with the New York of the street, the two spaces mingle and merge and so the street propagates the sense of loss of the interior. New York thus becomes a system of signs that seem to refer to a single meaning, New York is “all rewritten as a system of metaphors for absence, loss, and failure”⁸⁶² that rejects the protagonist, that digs into the gripping sense of loneliness. “Through the haze of cocaine and ecstasy”⁸⁶³ the protagonist moves around the city wearing sunglasses, without knowing what to do or where to go. After being fired, he finds himself on the street “wondering where to go. An old question, it seems to come up more and more frequently” (BLBC, 101). By now he is nobody: he has never been a writer, now he is not even an editor anymore and the blues songs played by a street musician seem to address him directly. It is the only time that the city and the events of the city seem to take him into consideration, but they are songs about not having a home, about being abandoned. So, after buying a joint he finds himself in the park behind the library completely out of the urban mechanisms: “You want to go somewhere, do something, talk to someone, but it’s only eleven-thirty in the morning and everyone else in the world has a job” (BLBC, 103).

For the city he has now become a stereotype, someone to mock, a figure to be exorcised with a laugh, to be removed as quickly as possible. On the steps of the Metropolitan Museum a mime performs in front of a small crowd, “as you pass

⁸⁶² Girard, p. 174

⁸⁶³ Bruni, *Ibid*

you hear laughter and when you turn around the mime is imitating your walk” (BLBC, 145). If, as Maria Belville points out, “on the level of experience “your” daily journey to work is a journey through all kinds of urban absurdities”⁸⁶⁴, the path taken by the protagonist once he loses his job is a slow drift that eventually drags him out of Manhattan, which means out of New York, since McInerney's New York coincides essentially with Manhattan.

The scene where he wakes up in Queens, in a stranger's bed, resonates like an awakening from fiction, but the protagonist still has the chance to return to the city. “By the time you get back to Manhattan [...] You feel as if you have come across oceans and mountains” (BLBC, 147) and for the first time “you never been so glad to see the inside of your apartment” (BLBC, 147), the perimeter of the interior momentarily relocates him to the city that seemed lost. The relief, however, lasts only for a brief moment, because once again the sound of the intercom unmasks the permeability of the apartment, whose limits are the limits of the city itself. For the first time since he has been in New York, the protagonist has had a physical experience of how the city, of how Manhattan, is not unlimited and it really takes nothing at all to find oneself outside of it all. Fitzgerald had climbed to the top of the Empire State Building to realize it: “Full of vaunting pride the New Yorker had climbed here and seen with dismay what he had never suspected that the city was not an endless succession of canyons that he had supposed but that it had limits”⁸⁶⁵. To the protagonist of McInerney's

⁸⁶⁴ Belville, p. 615

⁸⁶⁵ Fitzgerald, (2008), p. 578

novel, however, it was enough to find himself once again in his apartment, now irrevocably real⁸⁶⁶: “The apartment has become very small” (BLBC, 163).

Dwelling in a house which becomes home, one prepares oneself for labor and possession, thus finding oneself in the condition of having time to ward off the threats. To exist, at least in the extraterritorial space of dwelling, beyond fear⁸⁶⁷. This does not come true, however, if the concretization of this passage is missing. As Lévinas explains: “la « concrétisation » ne reflète pas seulement la possibilité qu’elle concrétise pour en expliciter les articulations enveloppées. L’intériorité, accomplie concrètement par la maison, le passage à l’acte l’énergie du recueillement à travers la demeure, ouvre de nouvelles possibilités que la possibilité du recueillement ne contenait pas analytiquement, mais qui, essentielles à son énergie ne se manifestent que quand elle se déploie”⁸⁶⁸.

By failing to make this passage, through which the home becomes a house, concrete, the protagonist always finds himself with a supply of energy and possibilities that remain latent and thus cannot be expressed in fully inhabiting the city. Precisely because these energies and possibilities depend on the character’s ability to concretize his dwelling from a dwelling. Dwelling from a

⁸⁶⁶ “The darkness of Fitzgerald’s acerbic eye on New York in “My Lost City” is unquestioned. New York, while a city of possibility, is one riven with failure, mapped with a foreboding, arguably apocalyptic dimension to its hyped ambition”, McGowan, p. 65

⁸⁶⁷ “La demeure suspend ou ajourne cette trahison en rendant l’acquisition et le travail possibles. La demeure surmontant l’insécurité de la vie, est un perpétuel ajournement de l’échéance où la vie risque de sombrer. La conscience de la mort est la conscience de l’ajournement perpétuel de la mort, dans l’ignorance essentielle de sa date. La jouissance comme corps qui travaille, se tient dans cet ajournement premier, celui qui ouvre la dimension même du temps”, Lévinas, p. 178

⁸⁶⁸ Lévinas, p. 164

dwelling is the fundamental step for the experience, in this case urban, to be satisfying and complete. This surplus of energy sticks to the skin and causes in the character a restlessness that continually drives him to move through New York City without ever being able to find either meaning or satisfaction in his actions. His is thus an inexhaustible wandering without any of his gestures being able to scratch the surface of the city in the slightest. He is like a ghost who moves about without leaving any trace. Without finding any foothold to anchor his existence to. Always subject to the wills of others, always bouncing from one place to another, from one situation to another. His intentions always remain only intentions. And the city seems to be covered by a coating that hides its real texture. So that the character finds himself unable not only to decipher what is happening around him, but also unable to react in the right way. And that is why he finds himself, under the constant threat of danger at every street corner, which may be his friend's alcoholic and narcotic excesses that lead him away from what he would like to do, in ambiguous situations, such as when he finds himself in a limousine whose owner is most likely a drug dealer – “you ask yourself: How did I get here?” (BLBC, 111) - or the numerous scams he runs into, such as a watch passed off as a Cartier, and which in truth turns out to be a fake – “How do you know anything's real? Says *Cartier* right there on the face, right? Looks real. So what's to know? Forty bucks. How can you lose?” (BLBC, 26) - or a dose of drugs that is nothing but talcum powder – “You're buying some kind of white powder and the weight looks about right, not that means much” (BLBC, 103).

Real New York presents itself as a city where it is impossible to feel at home. One cannot feel at home in the city, and one cannot, ultimately, find home in the city. The two Benjaminian poles of urban experience, the street and the

room, are lacking therefore no dynamic opposition is implemented. It therefore becomes impossible to imprint one's own trace on the texture of the city. The character's hands⁸⁶⁹ slip without grasping anything, and the protagonist, outside of any tension between street and room, is lost in the infinite interstices⁸⁷⁰ of the metropolis, remaining anonymous, unknown even to himself and homeless. In a loneliness that slowly but inexorably distances New York from his body, just as, kneeling - "You get down on your knee" (BLBC, 174) - almost nailing himself to the city's asphalt, he tries to oppose this drift.

The sense of illusion, the sense of having only glimpsed a blurred image of the city that is the characteristic of McInerney's first novel, is given, from the beginning, by the lack of a dynamic opposition. A different lack than in DeLillo's novels, precisely because here, both poles are denied to the character.

⁸⁶⁹ "Mais la main rapportant l'élémental à la finalité des besoins, ne constitue les choses qu'en séparant sa prise de la jouissance immédiate, en la déposant dans la demeure, en lui conférant le statut d'un avoir. Le travail est l'énergie même de l'acquisition. Il serait impossible à un être sans demeure", Lévinas, p. 170

⁸⁷⁰ "Demeurer, n'est précisément pas le simple fait de la réalité anonyme d'un être jeté dans l'existence comme une pierre qu'on lance derrière soi. Il est un recueillement, une venue vers soi, une retraite chez soi comme dans une terre d'asile, qui répond à une hospitalité, à une attente, à un accueil humain", Lévinas, p. 166

2.3 Bright, Precious Days

To summarize: the interior in McInerney's narrative plays multiple roles. It is the starting point that makes initiating an experience of a purposeful metropolitan experience possible. The interior is part of that New York imagery that irradiates the character's youth by propelling him into the city. The arrival in the city is also guided by the type of interior one has imagined to live in, precisely because the interior is the medium through which to establish an initial connection, through which to communicate one's particular presence. Consequently, taking up Benjamin's concept of polarities, the interior is also the place of return, where what happened outside can be relived, remixed, readapted and finally understood. It is, in fact, among other things, precisely the absence of an interior that makes the failure of the protagonist of *Bright Lights, Big City* definitive. No dynamic opposition is created with the street causing the metropolitan experience to break down very soon. It fails because the interior is part of the language of the city, as Sarah Schulman writes in one of her novels, "An apartment in New York City tells many truths. It shows where you really stand, relationally"⁸⁷¹. To be deprived of an interior means therefore to be unable to place oneself in the plot of the city, to assume a role. It makes you mute in front of dialogue. The interior is an anchorage point. It inevitably becomes part of the metropolitan identity that the character

⁸⁷¹ Sarah Schulmann, *Rat Bohemia*, Arsenal Pulp Press Edition, Vancouver, 2008, p. 34

builds, as Russell expresses very well in the novel that we are going to analyze: “What he wanted to say was that being a resident not only of Manhattan but of downtown was an irreducible core of his identity” (BPD, 234). Through the interior a narration of the city becomes possible, the interior in this case is the place of observation of the processes of the metropolis. Finally, the interior plays a fundamental role in the construction of the plot. Both as a narrative junction and as the imprint of the plot. The typology of the interior determines the typology of the story, as we have seen in the stories *Summary Judgement* and *Everything Is Lost*.

This constellation of elements - scattered throughout the various texts - finally finds fulfillment in McInerney’s latest novel to date, *Bright, Precious Days*, the third volume of the Calloways saga.

The TriBeCa loft inhabited by Russell and Corrine is the heart of the matter. It is the interior in its particularity that makes the novel possible. Through the loft, in fact, three operations are accomplished. As McInerney explained, the choice of two protagonists, such as Russell and Corrine, occurs because “they seemed like a good center because they were right *in between*”⁸⁷². The couple, in fact, finds itself between the two (extreme) polarities that define the social sphere of the city: “You had Ace, the homeless guy, and then you had Melman, the financier inspired by Perelman, and right in the middle you had Russell and Corrine and their orbit”⁸⁷³. Their loft, therefore, being their medium of communication, relationships and representation, is like a

⁸⁷² Wittmann, *Ibid*.

⁸⁷³ Wittmann, *Ibid*.

hollow in the city, constantly under pressure. From this loft, set or, to put it better, *stuck* between the interstices of a city in transformation, three narrative lines continuously intersect until the final resolution. The first, which we might call the surface line, is that of the plot. As Bremond argues, “Tout récit consiste en un discours intégrant une succession d’événements d’intérêt humain dans l’unité d’une même action”⁸⁷⁴, the loft is the guarantor of this unity in the composite structure of the novel, becoming the vector that moves the plot. The second, intermediate line, concerns the representation of the city. The loft is a particular housing practice that challenges social, economic, and cultural issues that the novel exploits to sketch a specific moment in New York City’s history. The interior becomes the vector along which the story of the city and the couple is told. The third line, the line of depth, is the one which concerns the very identity of the characters. Especially Russell, on whom the interior acts in the most determinate way, becoming the vector of representation.

⁸⁷⁴ Claude Bremond, *La logique des possibles narratifs*, in *Communication*, 8, 1968, p. 62

2.3.1 The Surface Line: the interior as a vector of the texture

The first edition of the novel has 397 pages divided into 48 chapters. In between are: two fishing trips; two parties in the Hamptons; a softball game; countless lunches and dinners where, among other things, “deep-fried bull’s ball” (BPD, 12), “fish sperm”(BPD, 163)⁸⁷⁵, and a Cobb salad without “bacon, the blue cheese, the egg and the dressing” (BPD, 189)⁸⁷⁶ are presented; a contest played with very expensive bottles of wine barely tasted; an editorial scandal; a publishing success; the resurrection of a 1980s artist who suffers the disfigurement of one of his works at an exhibition opening; three marital crises resulting in betrayal, one culminating in a million-dollar divorce, the other two in a reunion; the transposition of a novel by a now-deceased old friend into a Hollywood film; the sub-prime mortgage crisis with the collapse of Lehman Brothers (“which presaged the biggest financial crisis and deepest economic recession since the nineteen-thirties”⁸⁷⁷); two elections (that of New York Governor Eliot Spritz on November 7, 2006, and that of Barack Obama for President of the United States on November 4, 2008⁸⁷⁸). The list could still go on, but what was presented is enough to understand the chaotic⁸⁷⁹ nature of the

⁸⁷⁵ “Well, I tasted it. I certainly didn’t finis hit. But I think I owed it to myself and the establishment to at least try it”, (BDP, 163)

⁸⁷⁶ “What’s left besides lettuce?” “Not much. Water and fiber and the sweet smell of self-denial” (BPD, 189)

⁸⁷⁷ John Cassidy, *The Real Cost of the 2008 Financial Crisis*, in *The New Yorker*, September 17, 2018 Issue: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/17/the-real-cost-of-the-2008-financial-crisis> (last access: 1/11/2022)

⁸⁷⁸ “The standard narrative is that the rescue operation succeeded in stabilizing the financial system. The U.S. economy rebounded, spurred by a fiscal stimulus that the Obama Administration pushed through Congress in February, 2009”, Cassidy, *Ibid.*

⁸⁷⁹ “McInerney fills most of his pages less with story than with a kind of cultural indexing [...] where not cataloguing celebrities, the narrative is cataloguing the

novel, which complicates the identification of the main story. Yet there is a story that makes up the framework of the text. As Forster writes “the backbone of a novel has to be a story”⁸⁸⁰ and “the plot, then, is the novel in its logical intellectual aspect”⁸⁸¹, Chatman confirms this theory by stating that “a narrative without a plot is a logical impossibility”⁸⁸². But if “the working out of a plot (or at least some plots) is a process of declining or narrowing possibility”⁸⁸³, in McInerney’s novel this operation does not take place. On the contrary, the novel is constructed through the opposite process: its progress is marked by excess. There is a continuous addition of elements that, paradoxically, dilute the scope of events, do not affect the chronological flow of the plot, the comprehensibility of the story and its traditional structure. In order to tell the story of contemporary New York, McInerney chooses a form that now belongs to the past: that realism typical of nineteenth-century fiction, that finds its fulfillment in Balzac⁸⁸⁴. As Ian Watt argues, “le réalisme du roman ne réside pas dans le genre de vie qu’il représente, mais dans la manière dont il le fait”⁸⁸⁵ and even if at first glance the anachronistic choice of recurring to a form already fully

possessions and tastes of elite New Yorkers”, Sarah Churchwell, *Bright, Precious Days review - more precious than bright*, in *The Guardian*, 09/09/ 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/09/bright-precious-days-by-jay-mcinerney-review> (last access: 1/11/2022)

⁸⁸⁰ Edward Morgan Foster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1954, p.27

⁸⁸¹ Foster, *Ibid.* p. 96; “A story, by the way, is not the same as a plot. It may form the basis of one, but the plot is an organism of a higher type”, Foster, p. 30

⁸⁸² Chatman, *Ibid.*, p. 47

⁸⁸³ Chatman, *Ibid.*, p. 46; “The choice become more and more limited, and the final choice seems not a choice at all, but an inevitability”, Chatman, p. 46

⁸⁸⁴ On the influence of Balzac see chapter *Understanding House as a Media*

⁸⁸⁵ Watt, *Réalisme et forme romanesque*, in *Littérature et réalité*, Éditions du Seuil, 1982, *Ibid.*, p. 14

codified and in some ways outdated, may seem a mistake, it will prove to be fundamental to unveil the truths that are hidden behind a landscape only apparently immobile.

The course of the plot is in fact built on the contraposition of two movements, or rather, of a movement and a stasis. And it is in the friction of these two that McInerney definitively (and finally) breaks the New York illusion of which all his work is composed. So to the question posed by critic Lionel Shriver, “more to the point, do we need this book?”⁸⁸⁶, there can only be an affirmative answer. *Bright, Precious Days* is the novel that puts an end to illusions.

However, let's proceed in order.

Within a novel, narrative events not only have a logical connection, they also have a logical hierarchy. Barthes divides narrative episodes according to their function. We therefore have *cardinales* and *catalyses*⁸⁸⁷. The same division is made by Chatman with *kernels* and *satellites*⁸⁸⁸.

⁸⁸⁶ Lionel Shriver, *Bright, Precious Days by Jay McInerney review - Manhattan Moves*, in *Financial Times*, September, 9 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/d8ecc51c-6eb1-11e6-a0c9-1365ce54b926> (last access: 09/23/2021)

⁸⁸⁷ “Pour qu’une fonction soit cardinale, il suffit que l’action à laquelle elle se réfère ouvre (ou maintienne, ou ferme) une alternative conséquente pour la suite de l’histoire [...] Par contre entre deux fonctions cardinales, il est toujours possible de disposer des notations subsidiaires, qui s’agglomèrent autour d’un noyau ou d’un autre sans en modifier la nature alternative [...] Ces catalyses restent fonctionnelles, dans la mesure où elles entrent en corrélation avec un noyau, mais leur fonctionnalité est atténuée, unilatérale, parasite”, Roland Barthes, *Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits*, in *Communications*, 8, 1966, pp. 9-10

⁸⁸⁸ “Kernels are narrative moments that gives rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths [...] A minor plot event - a *satellite* - is not crucial in this sense. It can be deleted without disturbing the logic of the plot, though its omission will, of course, impoverish the narrative aesthetically”, Chatman, *Ibid.*, p. 53-54

To understand the story of the novel, it is necessary to go and identify those moments (*cardinales* and *kernels*) in which a forced choice is posed that changes the direction of the course of things.

There are nine moments where turning points appear, and these are the moments that go into making up the actual movement of the story.

One of the first turning points occurs in Chapter 9, when Russell finds support from his financier to acquire the rights of journalist Philip Kohout's book, who has just been freed after being held hostage by a terrorist group in Pakistan. Two other turning points are tied to this narrative line. The first is in Chapter 28, when we learn that Kohout's story is a lie. The journalist was never kidnapped; he had simply disappeared in opium fumes in an apartment in the Gulberg district of Lahore. The scandal brings Russell and his publishing house to the brink of bankruptcy, given the copious advance already paid. Hence the other turning point, in Chapter 42, is due to the financial crisis that prevents Russell from receiving the financial help of Tom Reynes. This is the first break in illusions:

“.. he understood that he was collateral damage. He'd often told himself that he inhabited a world apart, that the machinations and fluctuations of the financial markets had nothing to do with him, and he was shocked to realize that he was deeply entangled in the current crisis. He'd always been a little scornful of that other world, the world of suits and money, but it turned out that devoting your career to letters didn't give you immunity” (BPD, 356).

This is not the first time that a financial crisis has hit Russell, nullifying his efforts to improve his economic situation and his position in the New York social sphere. The first novel in the saga, *Brightness Falls*, ended with the 1987 Wall Street stock market crash that ceased his rise to the top of the publishing house. In the finale of *Brightness Falls*, “Russell not only loses money and his job, but also the basis for his personal happiness set in New York”⁸⁸⁹. Christina Cavedon, however, questions the fact that Russell has learned his lesson in her essay published before the release of *Bright, Precious Days*. Commenting on the last words of the novel – “... as he feels himself falling asleep he has an insight he believes is important, which he hopes he will remember in the morning, although it is one of those thoughts that seldom survive translation to the language of daylight hours”(BF, 416) - Cavedon writes: “while this quotation is deeply infused with a melancholy mood, it suggests that Russell, in the future, will use insights gained from his past in order not to blindly follow the promises of a glamorous, easily attainable American Dream. However, the phrase “which he hopes to remember” makes such a conclusion doubtful”⁸⁹⁰. It is in the nature of the city but especially of the metropolitan narrative the absence of a definitive⁸⁹¹ closure, and [the characters] “even in the middle of catastrophe they are induced

⁸⁸⁹ Christina Cavedon, *Cultural Melancholia: US Trauma Discourses Before and After 9/11*, Brill | Rodopi, 2015, p. 226

⁸⁹⁰ Cavedon, p. 227

⁸⁹¹ “Towards the end of *Lost Illusions*, for example, we foresee Lucien’s ruin. But there is a substantial difference between his fall and, say, Oedipus’s or Macbeth’s. In tragedy everything conspires concertedly in *only one direction*. In Balzac, although the basic tendency is clear, the high number of variables inherent to the systems of the city and the novel brings about the conclusion through a continuous and highly unpredictable series of ups and downs. In this way, suspense and surprise encourage city dwellers to believe that only rarely is *everything* lost”, Moretti, (2005), *Ibid.*, p. 118

to perceive, and hence rejoice in, all surviving potentiality”⁸⁹². New York, wrote LeCorbusier, “c’est une catastrophe, mais une belle et digne catastrophe [...] catastrophe féérique”⁸⁹³, among whose arteries, in its grid, boils an infinite potential made of drama, intensity and violence⁸⁹⁴, a surplus of randomness that makes it much more than a mere background. Like Balzac’s⁸⁹⁵ Paris, McInerney’s New York, through its continuous catastrophes, acts on the plot as a *third agent*⁸⁹⁶ that adds to the binary opposition at the base of every narrative. “New York, ils le sentent bien, est un peu diabolique”⁸⁹⁷, and Russell for the umpteenth time discovers that he is not immune to the power of the city: this opposition between the character and the city is the very essence of urban writing. It is inevitable. There is no lesson to be learned. The city is seen as a system, as an intricate mechanism of social, cultural, and economic forces, it is an invincible third narrative agent to which at some point it is impossible not to bend. The impossibility of achieving complete satisfaction and obtaining what is desired are conditions essential to the plot from the beginning. They persist throughout the story like a continuous whisper that suddenly, uncontrollably and, indeed,

⁸⁹² Moretti, (2005), p. 118

⁸⁹³ Le Corbusier, *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches. Voyage au pays des timides*, Bartillat, Paris, 2012, pp. 64 -74

⁸⁹⁴ Le Corbusier, p. 124 - 125

⁸⁹⁵ “Il se préparait chez madame de Bargeton et chez Lucien un désenchantement sur eux-mêmes dont la cause était Paris”, Honoré de Balzac, *Illusions perdues*, J. Jamar, Éditeur du muséum littéraire, Bruxelles 1837, p.211

⁸⁹⁶ “A plurality of agents. Better: three agents. This is the Open Sesame of Balzac's narrative: a deep structure which is just as clearly delimited as the binary one - but different. Triangular. The field of the hero, of the antagonist, and then a third narrative pole; and a plot that in the course of time becomes more and more the story of this third pole. The story of the Third. Of an independent, autonomous 'Third'”, Moretti, (1999), p. 108.

⁸⁹⁷ Le Corbuier, p. 124

unpredictably turn into a scream. They are an air gust that overwhelms everything. In his inhabiting of the city, Russell is driven to reiterate, from novel to novel, an act of conquest that might lead to an improvement. It is the city itself that, acting under the skin, sharpens his ambition. And it is the city itself that at some point intervenes to stifle it, “in general, its intervention leads to the conclusion of the conflict, usually by way of compromise”⁸⁹⁸. A compromise is the only possibility to restore a final equilibrium: “and at this point the narrative hierarchy reverses itself: the melodramatic polarization [...] recedes, while “the middle” of universal mediation, far from being excluded, occupies the foreground”⁸⁹⁹.

The city then is a third agent that establishes in the plot of *Bright, Precious Days* a narrative triangle: New York creates, exacerbates, and ultimately resolves - through compromise - the conflict at the heart of the story.

What is the conflict? Who then is Russell’s antagonist?

It is not Tom Reynes, who represents one side of the third narrative⁹⁰⁰ agent. In this case, as they say, the enemy is within the walls, and the antagonistic force is to be found in the very interior inhabited by Russell and the other character who inhabits it with him.

The other twists and turns of the novel, in fact, concern Corrine. In Chapter 22, Corrine betrays Russell with Luke, then in Chapter 40 the betrayal is discovered with the consequent temporary separation and finally, in Chapter 46, Corrine,

⁸⁹⁸ Julien Freund, *Le rôle du tiers dans les conflits*, in *Études polémologiques*, 17, 1975, in Moretti (1999), p. 109

⁸⁹⁹ Moretti (1999), p. 109

⁹⁰⁰ “It is really the secret shape of the city, where the indirect - triangular - nature of social relations becomes unmistakable and unavoidable. [...] And in order to capture this underlying structure of the city a binary narrative configuration is not enough”, Moretti (1999), p. 110

thanks to a real *deus ex machina*, manages to save Russell's publishing house and the couple is reunited, finding themselves *no longer in the loft*, but in a new house. No longer in the loft. Here it is, the object of desire. The object through which, following Greimas' attentional model, the action of the subject is defined⁹⁰¹. The loft is the backbone of the novel, the vector that carries forward the actions that make up the plot. The loft is the guarantor of unity in the composite structure of the novel. The turns we have seen so far are (again following Greimas) the *programs* that serve the protagonists to join the object of desire, the other three turns, instead, are those that constitute the basic *program* narrative. The first turn corresponds to the beginning, the trigger of the story. We immediately find it in Chapter 2, when Corrine simultaneously expresses her desire and the latent conflict waiting to deflagrate: "God, she was so over loft living - that was one of the things they fought about, her desire to move" (BPD, 19). Corrine's wish opposes to Russell's own will. He would like to stay in that loft, and the twist in Chapter 9 is the reaction to that. Russell wants to acquire the rights to Kohout's book because, "If Russell ever hoped to own a house or leave money to his kids, this was his shot, and that was no small part of what attracted him to Kohout deal" (BPD, 88). The development of the story is sustained, alongside Russell's actions, by what we discover in Chapter 32, another turning point, which decrees the climax of the conflict. Corrine, in fact, is looking, unbeknownst to her husband, for another house, in Harlem: "Harlem. It was a heady concept. Russell had a completely irrational dislike of the Upper West Side [...] She hadn't even

⁹⁰¹ See: A.J. Greimas, *Du sens, essais sémiotiques*, Éditions du Seuil, 1970; A.J. Greimas, *Du sens. 2*, Éditions du Seuil, 1983; A.J. Greimas, Joseph Courtés, *Sémiotique: dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Hachette, 1979

told him she was looking yet” (BPD, 299). On the one hand, we have Russell who desperately wants to buy the loft⁹⁰², to the point of embarking on a risky economic venture (at the moment the couple is in a rent-controlled situation⁹⁰³). On the other hand, we have Corrine who wants to move, to buy a bigger house, to live in a more affordable neighborhood than TriBeCa. The frustration for the impasse that is being created pushes her back into the arms of her lover Luke: “She desperately wanted this house and told herself if she could only find a way to get her family there, she would be happy with her lot, and with the man she’d married, and never wish for more” (BDP, 300).

The final twist is obviously the final resolution, in Chapter 47, we find out that the couple has reunited and moved into a new house in Harlem.

As Gaudreault writes, at least two transformations are needed for there to be a narrative: the disruption of a situation initially posed and the establishment of a new situation once the vicissitudes caused by the disruption⁹⁰⁴ have passed. To summarize, the plot of *Bright, Precious Days* is the story of a couple which comes into conflict - as we will see later, between the nostalgic idea of the city, and the practical idea - to find the best interior (object of desire) through which to inhabit the city and eventually they find it.

In between, New York “were nothing was ancient and a new crop of stores and bars and restaurants pushed up between the cracks of the sidewalks to flourish

⁹⁰² “I’m fifty years old and I’ve never owned any real estate,” Russell said. “How pathetic is that?” (BPD, 162)

⁹⁰³ “A rumor had reached Russell that his landlord was thinking of forming a condominium for the purpose of selling off the five apartments in the building, and while it was possible the Calloways could continue to rent, Russell wanted, not unreasonably, he felt, to become a home owner for the first time in his life” (BPD, 162)

⁹⁰⁴ André Gaudreault, *Du littéraire au filmique. Système du récit*, Armand Colin, 1999

for a season or two, before they, in turn, were crowded out by newer ones” (BPD, 168).

What about the other 39 chapters?

If the twists and turns give movement to the story, the other 39 chapters belong to what we have called the static part of the story that, only in the background, comes into friction with what we have seen above. The presence of so many fillers⁹⁰⁵ numbs the impact of the main plot turns, until the end. It makes the reader doubt that perhaps it is the reverse: maybe the novel is in the fillers and the events involving the couple are merely ancillary turns, tangential events in the buzzing Manhattan universe. It isn't so, though.

The twists and turns are the ones we saw above, and the fillers are of two types keeping the polarity between street and room active, even in this part of the narrative. The first type is what we can call the *interior fillers*: those scenes that take place in the loft. Basically, they consist in dinners with guests and domestic situations where nothing happens, if not the quiet reiteration of a gesture that serves to soften the impact of the outside, to return a feeling of possession of one's situation and confirmation of one's position within the city. As we will see in the last chapter, these scenes are part of the mechanism of representation by which Russell attempts to bring the city back to a more manageable level.

We can call the second type of fillers the *street fillers*, and they are those scenes with which we opened the chapter: dinners, gala events, presentations, etc., which serve to sketch the New York landscape. They are those accommodating

⁹⁰⁵ I use the term filler, instead of *catalyses and satellites*, borrowing it from Franco Moretti, for the same reason he uses it, for simplicity (and, I might add, effectiveness). Franco Moretti *Il secolo serio*, in *Il romanzo. Volume primo. La cultura del romanzo*, edited by Franco Moretti, Giulio Einaudi Editore, Turin, 2001, pp. 689 - 725

parts of the text, through which the Author conveys the idea of a world that is perpetually able to sustain its own existence.

As McInerney explained, “I wanted a way to write a more panoramic novel of New York City than I had found in the narrow lens of *Bright Lights, Big City*. I wanted to write something on a bigger scale, something that encompassed a much broader picture of contemporary life in New York City”⁹⁰⁶.

In her review of *Bright, Precious Days*, Sarah Churchwell writes that “although he is ceaselessly ironic about money, McInerney’s novel still seems to inhabit an antiseptic space sterilized by its own laws” and goes on to add that “McInerney fills most of his pages less with story than with a kind of cultural indexing [...] where not cataloguing celebrities, the narrative is cataloguing the possessions and tastes of elite New Yorkers”⁹⁰⁷. For John Dugdale, “the Calloways are staggeringly myopic, showing little interest in New York City’s other boroughs, let alone the rest of the US, or in politics, economics, big ideas or emerging social forces”⁹⁰⁸, even Cornel Bonca is peremptory, when affirming: “Incidentally, none of these books are panoramic, unless you carve New York City down to a few slivers of Manhattan: the artier precincts below 14th street, the Upper East Side”⁹⁰⁹.

The criticisms are not inaccurate: the landscape McInerney observes is a narrow one. What he is interested in is the story of the social conventions of a

⁹⁰⁶ Wittman, *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁷ Churchwell, *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁸ John Dugdale, *Unmade in Manhattan*, in *Literary Review*, September Issue 446, 2016, <https://literaryreview.co.uk/unmade-in-manhattan> (last access: 1/11/2022)

⁹⁰⁹ Cornel Bonca, *He Gets Us, He Really Gets Us: Jay McInerney’s “Bright, Precious Days” and the Sighs of the One Percent*, in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 13, 2016 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/gets-us-really-gets-us-jay-mcinerneys-bright-precious-days-sighs-one-percent/> (last accessed: 1/11/2022)

community and a precise social class, which it is possible to map within clear, and not at all permeable, boundaries. A narrow circle of people who live out their dramas, heedless, and perhaps even completely unaware, of the world around them and of the other dramas taking place just a few blocks from them. McInerney's is not a New York of multitudes, it's just one: sparkling and exaggerated. It is a neighborhood that is well perched and well defended. It is a panorama that, deep down we, as readers, feel the need to observe, with ill-concealed admiration, with evident scorn, and with a slight vertigo of enchantment. It is a panorama that does not question the subjects represented, but rather questions the subjects to whom it is addressed⁹¹⁰.

The saga thus marks a change in content⁹¹¹ that inevitably brings with it a change in form, as Lukács writes: "form sets limits around a substance which otherwise would dissolve like air in the All"⁹¹². The writing is modified: it loses the

⁹¹⁰ "Reste à interroger notre fascination pour l'élite new-yorkaise, et notre goût pour le livres qui la dépeignent. La clé nous a été donnée dix ans par l'excellent auteur new-yorkais Michael Cunningham [...] Interrogé sur ce parallèle, Michael Cunningham avait acquiescé: oui, nous avons besoin d'aristocratie et de belles gens aux vies de rêve et aux mœurs sophistiquées; oui, les États-Unis, ne possédant pas de "noblesse" fondée sur le nom, se sont dotés d'une aristocratie fondée sur la richesse; oui, celle-ci vit à New York. Par la grâce des fictions qui l'ont mise en scène, cette élite fascine désormais le monde entier", Alexis Brocas, *Grandeur et décadence*, in *Lire Magazine Littéraire*, Numéro 500-501, Octobre 2021, p. 35

⁹¹¹ "*Brightness Falls* actually took me quite a while to write. Not least because I'd never written a long novel before. Until then, I'd only written novels from a single point of view, with a relatively limited time frame. So it took me a long time to figure out what I was doing. For one thing, I decided on this multiple-point-of-view, third-person strategy, which serves me well because it allows me to move around in time and place and to represent action through the eyes of different characters, which obviously suited my goal of creating a Manhattan social panorama", Wittmann, *Ibid.*

⁹¹² "All writings represent the world in the symbolic terms of a destiny-relationship; everywhere, the problem of destiny determines the problem of form. This unity, this coexistence is so strong that neither element ever occurs without the other; here again a separation is possible only by way of abstraction", György Lukács, *Soul & Form*,

experimental character of the first works, settling on a tone that is in some ways more journalistic, more neutral; even if with lightning-fast jumps, it remains a writing in the cinematic register⁹¹³ of the objective recording of events and places⁹¹⁴. Alex Preston even accuses McInerney of having written the novel between one commitment and another, without the usual concentration and dedication, “McInerney repeats words and phrases from sentence to sentence, from paragraph to paragraph, the sign of a writer dashing off his book in between more important commitments”⁹¹⁵.

If the experimentation with the second person in the first novel had led to stylistically resourceful writing, it was because the phrasing and rhythm of the composition were built on the psychology of the protagonist. It was through this exuberant style of writing that the character was to come forth: the writing made the character. It is as the reader could eavesdrop with words on the meanderings of the protagonist. So that even the situations around, the city itself, were nothing more than the character’s personal and subjective appreciation. With

Translated by Anna Bostock, Edited by John T. Sanders & Katie Terezakis, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, p. 23.

⁹¹³ “Dans ces scènes, Richardson accomplissait pour le roman ce que D.W. Griffith apporta au cinéma par sa technique du “gros plan”: ajouter une nouvelle dimension à la représentation de la réalité”, Ian Watt, p. 32

⁹¹⁴ “McInerney’s evocation of New York was so powerful in “Bright Lights” because it emerged naturally from the story he had to tell. By the time he wrote “Brightness Falls”, McInerney had been labelled a New York novelist, and, as if on cue, he delivers long, cinematic set pieces depicting everything from parties of the Upper East Side’s rich and shallow to police raids on homeless encampments in the East Village. They are well done, but feel performative, not quite organic” Waldman, *Ibid.*

⁹¹⁵ Alex Preston, *Bright, Precious Days by McInerney - Review*, in *The Guardian*, 07/24/2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/24/bright-precious-days-jay-mcinerney-review> (last access: 1/11/2022)

the saga a different process takes place. The writing remains calm⁹¹⁶, even in the decisive moments of the text, it flows in simple, explanatory sentences, that outline the situation in economy – “The next day he got a call from Steve Israel, a rare book dealer who’d been a class ahead of him at Brown” (BPD, 184) – in common sayings – “the best marriages, like the best boats, are the ones that ride out the storm” (BPD, 18) – in even those banal connections that function as a prompt and as a frame to the dialogues, with an often redundant effect – “The next morning, at breakfast, they eventually found a subject of conversation in their guide” (BPD, 182), and, above all, in those polyphonic dialogues that are entire pages long without indicators of who is talking, without further comments, that allow the scenes to unfold in real time.

The organization of the text also follows a classical procedure. The speed of the text, created by the alternation of the four forms of movement identified by Genette (*sommaire, scène, ellipse* and *pause*⁹¹⁷), is guided, maybe excessively, by a principle of economy and effectiveness, which enhances the chronology of the story rather than the psychology (as it happens, for example, in Modernism) and the fluidity of the situations.

Therefore, in the choice of well-defined margins and expectations, fillers play a fundamental role.

⁹¹⁶ “chez eux deux (Defoe et Richardson) nous sentons que le but exclusif de l’auteur est que les mots serrent le sujet et nous le rendent dans tout sa particularité concrète, au prix éventuel de répétitions, de parenthèses ou de prolixité [...] Il semblerait alors que la fonction du langage soit beaucoup plus largement référentielle dans le roman que dans d’autres formes littéraires; que le genre lui-même fonctionne plus par représentation exhaustive que par élégance”, Watt, p. 38

⁹¹⁷ “Mais l’isochronisme d’un récit peut aussi se définir, comme celui d’un pendule par exemple, non plus relativement, par comparaison entre sa durée et celle de l’histoire qu’il raconte, mais de manière en quelque sorte absolue et autonome, comme *constance de vitesse*”, Genette, p. 146

Fillers, Moretti explains, keep the story within the ordinary. They are some kind of narration, but a narrative of the everyday. The filler, Moretti argues, was established in the nineteenth century because “it offered the kind of narrative pleasure that was compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life”⁹¹⁸. The multiplication of fillers then, according to Moretti, allowed the novel “to find a new, quiet rhythm, a sort of narrative neutrality that allows it to function without having to resort to extreme measures”⁹¹⁹. Therefore, the novel, in its interwoven turns and fillers, achieves a domesticated form, where the aim of the mimesis of a portion of reality - the New York landscape according to McInerney - tends towards an epilogue that fulfills and seals content bi-univocally (a *fabula* that presents itself as a continuous and closed temporal interval in which a teleologically oriented action unfolds) and form (which has the dominant narrative structure of a plot)⁹²⁰. The closure proposed, following Ricœur, simulates a resting state of the system of interactions that constitutes the plot of the story⁹²¹. A resting state that finally satisfies the reader, resolving all the anxieties, finding answers to all the questions, bringing to completion all the actions of the characters who in the finale find a state of apparent calm. One could conclude it is a conciliatory form and as Bonca ironically writes: “It’s easy to imagine couches from TriBeCa up to the Upper East Side filled with curled-up readers sipping old-vine Bordeaux, turning *Bright, Precious Days*’ s pages and sighing, “He gets us, he really gets us”⁹²².

⁹¹⁸ Moretti, (2001), p. 691

⁹¹⁹ Moretti, (2001), p. 694

⁹²⁰ Vittorini, (2017), p. 31

⁹²¹ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit. La configuration dans le récit de fiction*, Éditions du Seuil, 1991

⁹²² Bonca, *Ibid.*

The fillers, both those of the interior and those of the street, are therefore functional in the strategy adopted by McInerney because they are the part of the text that feeds the illusion. The illusion that, despite a thousand catastrophes, everything will remain the same. Despite thousand failures TriBeCa's loft is still the right interior to inhabit the city. Fillers maintain the illusion precisely because they overpower the twists and turns, almost anesthetizing them, but the twists and turns are the true dynamics of the story, those that take it to the next state. Here hides the criticism inherent in the novel. Only on the surface everything remains the same, because in reality the city has profoundly changed. Consequently, the force with which the reader comes to realize this is inversely proportional to the softness with which McInerney stages the change. He does so without resorting to extreme measures: not so much a shock as a thrill that insinuates doubt into the mind, when the novel is closed. The doubt that you haven't read the usual glamorous story. For the first time, McInerney's novel offers a glimpse of a different New York. It is symptomatic that it is Luke himself who notices it, who unlike Russell and Corrine, belongs to that elite, which is celebrated only apparently: "Luke knew as well as anyone how badly things stood in the markets, but still, this came as a bit of a surprise; he'd somehow expected the Upper East Side as he remembered", but "his city was gone" (BPD, 388). The illusion is broken for good. But not all is lost, the illusion leaves room for reconstruction: the final compromise. The construction of another city, another idea of New York, starting from the reconstruction of an interior in a part of the city yet to be explored, Harlem: "We have a nice house, an Italianate brownstone with amazing architectural details. Well, actually it's a kind of a wreck, but we're fixing it up slowly" (BPD, 390).

I cannot therefore find myself agreeing with Katherine Powers, when she states: “Still, we’ve been here before, twice, and it’s time to close the door on the Calloways”⁹²³, precisely because if the door to the new interior were to be reopened in the future, it could lead to something completely new, something not yet seen in McInerney’s work. Like, for example, the expansion of the New York narrative beyond Manhattan⁹²⁴.

⁹²³ Katherine Powers, *Bright, Precious Days* review: *Legends in their own minds*, in The Irish Times, 09/10/2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/bright-precious-days-review-legends-in-their-own-minds-1.2769619> (last access: 01/11/2022)

⁹²⁴ In fact, McInerney when speaking of New York in a political and social discourse claims that it is a city detached from the rest of the country, but is actually referring not the metropolis in its entirety, but a small part of it: “Je suis pour que Manhattan devienne un pays indépendant des États-Unis”, *Jay McInerney: un Américain à Paris*, entretien avec Frédéric Beigbeder, in *Lui*, n. 5, Mars 2014, p. 34

2.3.2 The Intermediate Line: the interior as the vector of history

Theirs was one of those old tunnel-style TriBeCa lofts, *shaped like Manhattan itself*, long and skinny, the most space they could find for the money back in 1990, when the area was still considered remote - an eighteen-by-eighty-foot rectangle with a single bathroom carved out of commercial space in the seventies (TGL, 8).

In the intermediate line of the novel, that is, the line through which the story and the representation of the city unfold, there is an overlap between the interior and the exterior, well exemplified by the image of the loft shaped like of the city itself. At a first superficial glance, the superimposition would seem to be more of a juxtaposition: two equal forms that are juxtaposed by similarity. Therefore, the reading of the city would find its solution in the continuity between the two places and would seem to be guaranteed by their evoked analogy. What happens outside is reflected in what happens inside, and vice versa. But, as we have tried to demonstrate throughout this thesis, inside and outside, on a metropolitan level, produce experiences according to a principle of opposition. And this is also the case in *Bright, Precious Days*, where the intermediate line is the one that unrolls following the interior that has become a *dialectical image*. The loft, understood as a specific housing practice, performs in the text like the Passage/limousine that we met in the chapter dedicated to *Cosmopolis* by Don DeLillo. The loft, like the *Passage* (among the dialectical images used by Benjamin), is ambiguous in its nature: “because it represents both home and

work, hedonism and domesticity, and public and private space⁹²⁵. This intrinsic dialecticity, capable of containing different extremes at the same time, makes the loft rise, in the novel, to the status of Benjamin's *monad*: "wherever a dialectical process is realized, we are dealing with a monad"⁹²⁶.

McInerney succeeds, in fact, in representing an idea⁹²⁷ (in the Benjaminian⁹²⁸ sense) of New York by working on this image that the reader⁹²⁹ imprints on his own mind: the loft whose shape corresponds to that of the island of Manhattan. The task of the *idea* is to dynamize the apposition of contraries⁹³⁰, in this case: the outside and the inside, the city and the characters, the public and the private, the general and the particular, the encounter and the clash, the city as a catastrophic third narrative agent and the narrative bipolarity of the characters' actions. Therefore, it is not a question of simple juxtaposition, since the outside, in the novel's representation of the city, acts as a static background. It settles in the pages through a simple registering of facts. A registration that, at most, sees the characters ask themselves questions that do not require a real answer, which are resolved in quick observations as one of the many sighs in front of the

⁹²⁵ Zukin, (2014), p. 60

⁹²⁶ Benjamin, (1999), p. 476

⁹²⁷ "The representation of an idea can under no circumstances be considered successful unless the whole range of possible extremes it contains has been virtually explored" Benjamin, (1998), Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Translated by Joan Osborne, Verso, London, New York, 1998, p.47

⁹²⁸ "The idea is a monad – that's means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world", Benjamin, (1998), p. 48

⁹²⁹ The reader of the complete saga would better grasp the idea in this passage, as this particular image of the loft appears at the beginning of the second volume, *The Good Life*, but is developed right in *Bright, Precious Days*.

⁹³⁰ "Just as a mother is seen to begin to live in the fullness of her power only when the circle of her children, inspired by the feeling of her proximity, closes around her, so do ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them", Benjamin, (1998), p. 35

another, as usual, urban fact: “Turning east on Spring Street, Corrine marveled anew at the upscale boutiques that had infested SoHo ever since Prada invaded - Chanel and Longchamp and Burberry- wondering when, exactly, Manhattan had become a collection of luxury brands and franchise outlets: Dubai on the Hudson”(BPD, 202).

The exterior, in its concreteness, as the island of Manhattan, does not carry imprinted traces of the characters’ past and present interactions, it is something that happens in the interior, however, in the loft, in fact: “contemplating the entrance of the building, she felt a strange frisson of recognition” (BPD, 330). The interior contains and produces experience, the outside, in the *idea* (as intended by Benjamin) that New York represents, fades out. In the image imprinted in the reader’s mind - as the text proceeds, as we decide to pursue the intermediate line by looking for the moments that mark the representation of the city in a particular historical period - the loft is eventually superimposed on the island of Manhattan: in this image the perimeter of the inside is emphasized, rather than that perimeter of the outside. The loft takes on the extremes, precisely because of its dynamism, which overlaps with the stasis of the exterior. In the interior the history of the city can be read. In the interior, the city is no longer a background, but a living presence that enters into opposition with the lives of the characters. The loft is thus that dialectical image⁹³¹ where opposite moments plastically coexist, without, however, this opposition being resolved in a superior synthesis, without there being a dissolution of the contradiction. In the image of the loft superimposed on the island of Manhattan “the tension

⁹³¹ *Costellazioni. Le parole di Walter Benjamin*, Edited by Andrea Pinotti, Einaudi Editore, Turin, 2018, pp. 75 - 78

between dialectical opposites is greatest”⁹³². In the rapid time of the novel compared to the time of History, the loft is the place “where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tension”⁹³³. As in the example cited above, at the entrance to the loft, that we will see was inhabited by two characters from the saga, the past contracts into an instant that is barely perceptible, that almost slips from the grasp, but inexorably becomes an involuntary memory that brings to the reader both personal moments and moments of the city. As we will see in a moment, the loft where Corrine enters, in the flashback of Chapter 5⁹³⁴, plays a crucial role and tells about the past of the protagonists and their future, linking them to the evolving history of the city. In the loft, exterior and interior enter into dynamic opposition and therefore it becomes possible for the author to tell, alongside the events of the characters, the past events of the city. Among the tasks of the dialectical image there is that of guaranteeing the superior actuality of the past that is the object of investigation: “everything past [...] can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it had in the moment of its existing. How it marks itself as higher actuality is determined by the image as which and in which it is comprehended”⁹³⁵.

⁹³² Benjamin, (1999), p. 475, “tension that is not dichotomous and substantial, but bipolar and tensive” Giorgio Agamben, *Ninfe*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2007, p. 31 (translation by me)

⁹³³ Benjamin, (1999), p. 475

⁹³⁴ “The summer after graduation, Jeff is subletting a *loft* in SoHo. The word itself seems as raffish and bohemian as the neighborhood, half-deserted, inhabited mainly by painters and sculptors in search of cheap studio space” (BPD, 52).

⁹³⁵ “It is said that the dialectical method consists in doing justice each time to the concrete historical situation of its object. But that is not enough. For it is just as much a matter of doing justice to the concrete historical situation of the *interest* taken in the object. And *this* situation is always so constituted that the interests is itself performed in that object and, above all, feels this object concretized in itself and upraised from its

The loft is raised to the status of a *monad* and it represents the world from a particular point of view. Through Jeff and Luke's loft then, the middle line mixes the personal and the universal, the particular story of Russell and Corrine and the general story of New York from the eighties to the early 2000s.

Infinitely more than from the street, the city's past, present and future can be inferred from this loft and the relationships created between it and the characters.

Between the aspiration for authenticity and the longing for a facelift that reduces imperfections to a minimum, the extremes of the city allow the occurrence of that catastrophe which, according to Benjamin, is the eternal repetition of the same: "That things are status quo *is* the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given"⁹³⁶. "To a New Yorker", writes E.B. White, "the city is both changeless and changing"⁹³⁷. In this paradox is the essence of the city. The fact that the city continues to change does not change, this is the inevitable catastrophe: "there is greater tension, increased irritability [...] and there is greater speed"⁹³⁸. If DeLillo represents this nature of the city through the noises, the breakdowns, the works in progress, McInerney, in *Bright, Precious Days*, uses a loft that defines itself in extreme poles: art and commerce, hedonism and domesticity, authenticity and sameness.

Among the reasons that led to the birth and continuation of the saga, McInerney includes the investigation of the idea of marriage: "as someone who was already on his second marriage when I conceived [of] this first book, I was

former being into the higher concretion of now-being "*Jetztsein*" (waking being!)", Benjamin, (1999), pp. 391-392

⁹³⁶ Benjamin, (1999), p. 473

⁹³⁷ White, p. 48

⁹³⁸ White, p. 51-52

intrigued by the idea of a marriage that survives”⁹³⁹. In the essay *The End of the Novel of Love*, Vivian Gornick explains how, from a certain point, after the end of the fifties, the union of love and marriage ceased to be a sort of promised land, both in real and in fictional life: “Then, within a generation, everything everywhere in the world conspired to make us know. Suddenly there was divorce. And psychotherapy. And sex and feminism and drugs, as well as crime in the street. In short it was the Fall of Rome. From one end of the city to the other. Even in the Bronx. Frightening, but exciting as well. We who had married for life were reprieved: at liberty to correct the mistake”⁹⁴⁰. In short, argues Gornick, love is no longer the supreme enterprise towards which the characters must embark. Love, in the contemporary novel, can no longer be the final, transformative, redemptive act. It can no longer afford to be the ambition underlying every human action, the spark that raises the tension of the plot to the climax, simply love “it’s the wrong catalyst. It doesn’t complicate the issue, it reduces it [...] I’d never before considered that love might dilute the strength of a good novel rather than gather it in”⁹⁴¹. Today, therefore, no author, says Gornick, can place romantic love at the center of the plot, the love that culminates in forever together, because “who could be persuaded that in its pursuit the characters are going to get something large? That love is going to throw them up against themselves in such a way that we will all learn something important about how we got to be as we are, or how the time in which we live

⁹³⁹ “Beyond ‘Bright Lights’: Jay McInerney Reveals The Trials Of A ‘Perfect Couple’” Radio Interview, Aug. 1, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/01/488173223/beyond-bright-lights-jay-mcinerney-reveals-the-trials-of-a-perfect-couple?t=1633971804149> (last access: 10/11/2021)

⁹⁴⁰ Vivian Gornick, *The End of the Novel of Love*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1997, p. 161.

⁹⁴¹ Gornick, p. 155

got to be as it is. No one, it seems to me. Today, I think, love as metaphor is an act of nostalgia, not of discovery”⁹⁴².

Gornick is not wrong, McInerney’s saga, especially in its last chapter is, in fact, a long act of nostalgia towards that city seen at first glance. A New York that no longer exists. This is the true catastrophe of the city that the passages in that loft bring to the fore. That New York resists in the memories protected by the solid walls of the loft inhabited in the early eighties by Jeff, the writer friend of the couple who dies of AIDS at the end of *Brightness Falls*.

The loft, which appears in several chapters of *Brightness Falls* and in a chapter of *Bright, Precious Days*, is already the product and producer of one of the many changes New York has gone through and is going through.

In a city in perpetual motion, housing renewal is the first sign that something new is happening. This was first noticed by Ruth Glass⁹⁴³, in an essay on London that launched the study of *gentrification* processes. *Gentrification* is the phenomenon that in Hackworth’s⁹⁴⁴ definition is stabilized in the formula according to which an urban space is subjected to increasing investment by public and private entities in order to produce urban space for progressively wealthier users: “it is

⁹⁴² Gornick, p. 165

⁹⁴³ “shabby, modest mews and cottages - two rooms up and two down - have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences”, Ruth Glass, *Introduction to London: Aspects of Change*, edited by the Centre for Urban Studies, Macgibbon & Kee, London, 1964, p. xviii, in *Rubbish Theory. The Creation and Destruction of Value*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979, Michael Thompson explains how this work of transformation starts right from the houses that undergo a series of interventions that will then become typical, replicable. For example, the enlargement of the rooms, the rediscovery of the previous floors, the breaking down of the distinctions between the dining room and the kitchen and the use of design objects to decorate and fill the house.

⁹⁴⁴ Jason Hackworth, *Postrecession gentrification in New York City*, in *Urban Affairs Review*, 37(6), pp. 815-843

really a broad process of re-urbanization [...] bringing new residents, their tastes, and their concerns into the city's mix; and creating not just an economic division but a cultural barrier between rich and poor, young and old. This is what happens when a city loses its soul"⁹⁴⁵.

At the turn of the seventies and eighties, as we have already seen in the chapter dedicated to *Life Lesson*, the loft becomes a symbol of change in a neighborhood, SoHo, and a lifestyle: "Loft living has been widely adopted as both a model of gentrification and a scenario of post-industrial development"⁹⁴⁶. As Zukin explains, the loft is characterized by several ambiguous features: "open space, a relationship between art and industry, a sense of history, and a fascination of the middle-class imagination with the artist's studio"⁹⁴⁷.

Initially, in fact, the lofts were chosen by the artists as suitable places both to live and to create their works, after all, as Gopnick explains, art always reflects the spaces in which it is created and the spaces of SoHo gave birth to a unique artistic ferment able to take root in the imagination of Russell and Corrine upon their arrival in the city: "Having recently graduated from Brown [...] to her, SoHo is terra incognita, a mysterious southern region of the island allegedly inhabited by artists and who knows who"(BPD, 52)

"SoHo spaces", Gopnick continues, "produced art big and sober and a little austere. The lofts lent themselves to scale [...] The spaces themselves - tin ceilings supported by classical columns, floor-to-ceiling windows with warped old glass

⁹⁴⁵ Sharon Zukin, *Naked City. The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, p. 9, "Members of an upper class invade a lower-class neighborhood, purchase and upscale the houses, displace people, and change the character", Jeremiah Moss, *Vanishing New York. How a Great City Lost its Soul*, Dey Street Books, New York, 2018, p. 41.

⁹⁴⁶ Zukin, (2014), p. xvii

⁹⁴⁷ Zukin, (2014), p. 65

- were, in every way, cheerful. They made for a more confident art, an art in communion with industry, in every sense”⁹⁴⁸.

Like Benjamin’s dialectical image of the prostitute who is both seller and commodity, through Jeff’s loft, McInerney provides us with a dialectical image that fixes a moment of the city and a moment of the characters’ lives. An image made up of extremes in continuous opposition that give way to a dynamic opposition capable of triggering the plots of all the volumes of the saga.

On the one hand we have the city, art that is also commerce⁹⁴⁹: “the spell Soho cast lay in its being both a cathedral village, dedicated to the religion of advanced art, *and* a market town, devoted to selling produce of the true faith”⁹⁵⁰. However, this essential bipolarity of the city is only partially assumed by Russell, who “liked [...] to divide humanity into two opposing teams: Art and Love versus Power and Money” (BPD, 19). The dynamic opposition that the interior as loft produces with respect to the exterior thus arises precisely from this initial discrepancy. The division made by Russell is the result of a misunderstanding of the nature of the city.

On the other hand, though, we have the couple. Jeff’s loft simultaneously holds the extremes of an artist’s life and a family life, between hedonism and domesticity. In that loft the desires of the couple come into sharp contrast. In that loft, for Russell, in *Brightness Falls*, for Corrine, in the memory of *Bright, Precious Days*, the thrill of being on the edge is realized, of walking on a thread that could lead to a fall towards “that kind of convulsed and jerry-rigged yet serendipitous situation” (BPD, 52), or a leap towards a quieter, domestic

⁹⁴⁸ Gopnick, (2017), p. 145-146

⁹⁴⁹ “Art always plays more than role in a culture; it’s playing many roles is what makes it art”, Gopnick, (2017), p. 152

⁹⁵⁰ Gopnick, (2017), p. 146 - 147

arrangement, made up of family and work, under the banner of seriousness and maturity.

For Russell, in fact, “Jeff performed a vital role in his ecosystem, following the road Russell hadn't taken and thereby saving his best friend the trip” (BF, 111). Each time he enters Jeff's loft, the opposite of the life he is living appears to Russell. His current situation and the situation he desires are suddenly set in opposition. A feeling of envy pervades him, a feeling of nostalgia for that moment when his life took another direction. There is a scene in *Brightness Falls* where this mixture of emotions comes out in a grotesque way. Russell and Corrine, along with some other people, are on their way to Jeff's loft for an intervention to force Jeff to come to terms with his drug addiction. One of the chaperones stares in horror at the squalor of the building and the neighborhood, suggesting that the cause of the drug addiction is where Jeff lives. But, as Russell annoyedly points out, behind those filthy windows are hidden lofts worth millions of dollars: “he felt obliged to explain this to Bev, almost adding that a famous artist lived in the building next door to Jeff's, before he remembered that the artist was also a notorious junkie” (BF, 284).

This ambiguity and indeterminacy that Russell feels is the driving force behind his ambitions and will keep him moving like a top throughout the saga⁹⁵¹.

The loft has the same impact on Corrine. It is in this loft that Corrine betrays her ideal of love and the perfect family, twice. She cheats on Russell, first with Jeff and then with Luke. She also tries cocaine for the first time: “She's never

⁹⁵¹ “Russell, of course, stands in an illustrious American Tradition of male literary protagonists who suffer the conflict between “masculine desire” and domesticity”, Werkmeister, p. 144; “Somewhere in the metropolis was a Russell Calloway whose life was devoted to seduction” (BPD, 108).

felt so driven, so desperate, and even the inevitable thought of Russell fails to quell - seems even to fan - her desire” (BPD, 60). The same happens when she returns with Luke, “her body was responding without reference to her scruples” (BPD, 333). And like the first time with Jeff, with Luke, too, in the end, the conflicting feeling takes over: “suddenly, she realized, she couldn’t wait to get home to her husband and children” (BPD, 334).

As with Russell, so with Corrine, the opposite feelings that agitate her throughout the story are realized in that loft.

If, as anticipated in the previous passage, at the sight of the changes in the city from the street, the reaction is fleeting and soon buried, when these changes are inscribed in the façade of the loft they immediately become inescapable issues that shake one to the core. The change of the city is finally felt as something personal and becomes an active part of the story. Luke, unbeknownst to him, has in fact rented the same loft in which Jeff lived: “She was almost certain she’d been here many years ago [...] But, of course, the neighborhood had been transformed, like the rest of the city. It sorts of made her sad, how polished and prosperous and tasteful it had become, like the streets of SoHo [...] as if gentrification were disservice to Jeff’s memory, as if everything should have stayed dirty and dangerous forever” (BPD, 331).

“It is not a conspiracy, but simply a tragic of historic coincidence that in the middle of this process of converting low-income housing for the wealthy, in 1981 to be precise, the AIDS epidemic began”⁹⁵². Although the cause of Jeff’s death was not due to his homosexuality, but to his drug addiction, as Sarah Schulman points out, in this passage, there is a relationship between the AIDS

⁹⁵² Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind. Witness to a Lost Imagination*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 2012, p. 25-26

epidemic and the phenomenon of gentrification. Gentrification “is a concrete replacement process”⁹⁵³, which has completely erased the past, thus erasing, not only Jeff’s memory, as is the case in the novel, but has also erased the experience, pain and struggle of thousands of people in 1980s New York who had to unite to succeed in the face of an epidemic that almost wiped out a generation of remarkable people and artists altogether. Gentrification “physically it is an urban phenomenon: the removal of communities, of diverse classes, ethnicities, races, sexualities, languages, and points of view from the central neighborhoods of cities, and their replacement by more homogenized groups”⁹⁵⁴. If McInerney’s New York is a New York experienced through money and status, the New York experienced by artists such as Schulman herself, Allen Barnett, Alan Gurganus, David Wojnarowicz, and so many others, is a New York experienced in hiding and through a struggle to survive against numerous threats, a struggle that gentrification in its process of homogenization and zeroing in on conflict has eliminated from the city’s history⁹⁵⁵. If gentrification is a disservice to Jeff’s memory, this thesis could in a sense also be in turn misunderstood as a disservice to the memory of a part of the city that is in danger of falling into oblivion. McInerney’s New York, examined here, however, is a New York centered on the heterosexual experience of urban space. Since urban space is a space profoundly connoted by the experience of gender and sexuality, and consequently, aware that the eventual continuation of this work will not be able to do without tying the theme of this thesis together by broadening it to include texts that tell of how there is a New York that is radically different from the

⁹⁵³ Schulman, p. 14

⁹⁵⁴ Schulman, p. 14

⁹⁵⁵ “With this comes the destruction of culture and relationship, and this destruction has profound consequences for the future lives of the city”, Schulmann, p. 14

heterosexual New York of McInerney's and DeLillo's novels, I have chosen to limit the analysis to the world expressed by these authors' novels.

The disservice to Jeff's memory it is the ultimate realization that the city has changed, that the city is pushing it away, that the city is erasing its past. It is symptomatic that the chapter devoted to Jeff's loft, despite being a flashback, is written in the present tense, "an awkward form" for telling a story, as Siri Hustvedt writes, "fiction usually takes place in the past. Somehow that's its natural place"⁹⁵⁶. But telling and thinking about it in the past would mean definitively dragging that part of oneself, that part always imagined, never really lived, that city with its original enchantment, into memory and into the risk of oblivion. The present time of memory is an act of resistance, the total realization of that sense of nostalgia that pervades the moods of Russell and Corrine. As if everything that represents that loft should be kept in a perpetual present state. As if that were the only real city. The only city worth living in. The only city in which, albeit in contradiction, they are able to live.

But the city has changed. The loft is not the same now: "This could be any loft in SoHo, she thought, or, for that matter, in any city in any country" (BPD, 331). The loft, finally, in the present of the story, embodies the last pair of opposites. The city has become like a loft. In its exasperated process of renewal⁹⁵⁷ "the city's recovery has come at the cost of a part of its identity: that New York is

⁹⁵⁶ Hustvedt, *Ibid.*, p. 42

⁹⁵⁷ "In the past, a city was said to have "Manhattanized", when it bulldozed old storefronts to make room for dense clusters of commercial skyscrapers", now, instead "this is the new meaning of Manhattanization: turning a city into a playground for the wealthiest inhabitants, even as it forgets about the poorest", Elizabeth Greenspan, *How to Manhattanize a City*, in *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/how-to-manhattanize-a-city> (last access: 01/11/2022)

safer and richer but less like itself, an old lover who has gone for a face-lift and come out looking like no one in particular”⁹⁵⁸.

The transition, which took place between the sixties and seventies, from a managerial city to an entrepreneurial⁹⁵⁹ city, has had an abrupt acceleration at the turn of the millennium, leading to a process of *super-gentrification* that has produced on the one hand an improvement⁹⁶⁰ and on the other an emptying of its neighborhoods, with a forced removal of residents, “many of the city’s most treasured amenities, essential to its middle-class character and built up for decades through the painstaking labors of so many dedicated individuals [...] have been turned away”⁹⁶¹. As the musician David Byrne denounces “the cultural part of the city - the mind - has been usurped by the top 1 percent”⁹⁶², and that 1 percent in which most of the wealth is concentrated does not even inhabit the

⁹⁵⁸ Adam Gopnik, *Gothamitis*, in *The New Yorker*, January 8, 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/01/08/comment-gothamitis> (last access: 01/11/2022)

⁹⁵⁹ “The rise of “entrepreneurial city” meant increased inter-urban competition across a number of dimensions[...] (a) competition for position in the international division of labor; (b) competition for position as centers of consumption; (c) competition for control and command functions (financial and administrative powers in particular); and (d) competition for governmental redistributions [...] These four options are not mutually exclusive, and the uneven fortunes of urban regions have depended upon the mix and timing of strategies pursued in relation to global shifts”, David Harvey, *Flexible Accumulation through Urbanization. Reflections on “Post-Modernism” in the American City*, in *Perspecta, Vol. 26, Theater, Theatricality, and Architecture* (1990), pp. 251 - 272, p. 255.

⁹⁶⁰ “New York - today - in the aggregate - is probably a wealthier, healthier, cleaner, safer, less corrupt, and better-run city than it has ever been”, Kevin Baker, *The Death of a Once Great City*, in *Harper’s Magazine*, July 2018, <https://harpers.org/archive/2018/07/the-death-of-new-york-city-gentrification/> (last access: 12/15/2021)

⁹⁶¹ Baker, *Ibid.*

⁹⁶² David Byrne, *If the 1 Percent stifles New York’s Creative Talent, I’m Out of Here*, in *Tales of Two Cities. The Best & Worst of Times in Today’s New York*, edited by John Freeman, Penguin Books, New York, 2015, p. 244

city: “many of the wealthy don’t even live here”, “the new rich infesting the city, by contrast, are barely here”⁹⁶³.

In a city suspended in contradiction, for Russell and Corrine there is no more space, “New York today is not at home”⁹⁶⁴, and, as Neculai has rightly pointed out, their situation is paradoxical: rejected by *gentrification* but at the same time gentrifiers⁹⁶⁵, operating on others what has been done to them⁹⁶⁶: “They are also painfully conscious that due to their middle-class status, they remain first-wave of gentrifiers [...] through the relocation from TriBeCa [...] to a townhouse in disrepair SoHa [...] thus reinforcing the stereotype of the inmoving gentrifiers”⁹⁶⁷.

Of the two, Corrine is the one most aware of the process underway – “I’d hate to think we were displacing the... local residents” (BPD, 298) - and, in the end, as we have seen in the surface line, “despite her affective reaction to gentrification”⁹⁶⁸, she tries to fight this feeling of nostalgia. Russell, on the other hand, succumbs to it by failing to come to terms with the reality of the city, anchoring himself to a narrative that is now out of date, already expired in the mythical. “The city’s narrative - of it being a special place, a city of dreams -

⁹⁶³ Baker, *Ibid.*

⁹⁶⁴ Baker, *Ibid.*

⁹⁶⁵ “*Bright, Precious Days* adds a transnational dimension to gentrification showing how it does, indeed, become generalized and how, for example, gentrification in New York responds to trend-setting patterns in London or other cities financed by big corporate capital”, Catalina Neculai, *Neoliberal New York: Contemporary literature and the politics of urban redevelopment*, in *New York: A Literary History*, edited by Ross Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 119

⁹⁶⁶ “SoHa?” “South Harlem. Get it? It’s Soho for the aughts. I’m not saying it’s the Upper East Side, but its’ safer than the Upper West Side was when I was growing up” (BPD, 299).

⁹⁶⁷ Neculai, (2020), p. 119

⁹⁶⁸ Neculai, (2020), p. 117

shreds in the face of reality: the city's income disparity is as big as it has ever been"⁹⁶⁹. At stake, however, is not the social issue, but the authenticity of the city itself. It is increasingly becoming a dream city, in which to sink in, in order to defend oneself. And this is what the line of depth is about, where the loft becomes the allegory of the *Panorama*, overlooking a city that is now only part of the mind.

⁹⁶⁹ John Freeman, *Introduction*, in *Tales of Two Cities. The Best & Worst of Times in Today's New York*, edited by John Freeman, Penguin Books, New York, 2015, p. x

2.3.3. The Line of Depth: the interior as a vector of personal representation

When Jack Carson, Russell's young writer protégé, first makes his entrance into the Calloways' loft, what unfolds before his eyes is a real performance: "he felt like he was watching a movie, an updated version of one of those Depression-era New York flicks in which all the characters were ridiculously good-looking and witty" (BPD, 61). We are at the beginning, at the first of a long series of dinners that punctuate the novel and that form that succession of scenes that are the *fillers of the interior*.

After all, *Bright, Precious Days* was born from an image in an interior: "I had a vision of writing about election night. This group of friends in a loft around a television set, watching the election"⁹⁷⁰.

In the loft, events that shake up the country are witnessed and at the same time events that serve to strengthen the Calloways' presence in the city are recreated. The saga, in fact, begins with a dinner. The curtains open on the main actors who enter the scene arranged around a kitchen ready to receive guests: "Lemoning the sole fillets in the kitchen, Corrine hears her husband's voice louder than the rest" (BF, 5). Here too, the present tense is used. It is different, however, from that encountered in the flashback of the last volume of the saga. Here, the present tense, the tense used for description and actions, which vehicles an exchange of lines between Russell and Corrine, belongs more to the category of play script writing. The reader witnesses the staging of a play, the dialogues seem rehearsed, the actors settle down – "they often debated her hair before a party" (BF, 5) - for what is meant to become another opportunity

⁹⁷⁰ Wittmann, *Ibid.*

through which they can consolidate their position in their circle of friends and in the town, and, ultimately, even with respect to themselves.

Like a tragedy, the dinners always follow the same script, and they always fail, inexorably. Each time the event is repeated, always with the same conviction, always with the same care. Russell, of the two, is the one who, as the saga progresses, takes the stage and the credit, assuming the role of both the director and lead actor. The preparation of the dinner becomes an exhibition, a display of ability, with all the pressure that this entails: “Russell was a maniac about dinner parties. He was capable of throwing a tantrum if Corrine added someone at the last minute. It was one of the few areas of life in which he was prissy. When he put on his chef/host hat, everything had to be just so” (TGL, 9).

For Werkmeister, “the text represents kitchen work as an activity in which masculinity is acted out. The preparation of food, rather than an essentially altruistic action [...] becomes a field of homosocial competition and narcissistic self-fashioning”⁹⁷¹, on the other hand, Russell, as it is also written in the novel, “belonged to the new breed of male epicureans who viewed cooking as a competitive sport and pursued it with the same avidity that others had for fly-fishing or golf, with the attendant fetishization of the associated gadgetry and equipment” (BPD, 42). The phenomenon, in my opinion, however, is more complex. It is true that successful cooking represents a sublimation for Russell that cannot be realized elsewhere, thus transforming the culinary art into a real battlefield in imitation of the battlefield that is the city. It is also true, however, that through cooking, Russell carves out his privileged space in the city. The interior takes the place of the city, it detaches itself from the city, it puts some

⁹⁷¹ Werkmeister, p. 142

distance between itself and the city. The city is relegated to the role of the stalls, occupied by the different guests, and the interior becomes the stage where Russell can finally play the role he has always been denied. For the time of the dinner, the interior becomes the heart of the city: as if everything revolves around it. A feeling of power, of a pleasant daze, pervades Russell. The interior, in that brief but clear opportunity, becomes Russell's⁹⁷² metropolitan universe, his personal city, made up of the things that represent New York to him. Protected by the walls, the dreams⁹⁷³ and ambitions that brought him to the city return. They take shape, stretch and expand⁹⁷⁴. Bringing guests in, therefore, means making his idea of the city *real* and making it available to others. The presence of guests/spectators is just another confirmation, he can feel the master of the city itself, a sort of new Gatsby, in a New York that is suddenly lighter, surely more accommodating: "Eventually, when they were all finally seated at the dinner table, Russell stood up and raised his glass. "I'd like to toast old friends and new, and in particular to welcome Jack Carson to our fair city"

⁹⁷² "Taking it to the couch, he surveyed his kingdom, such as it was - the bookshelves with their signed first editions, the Berenice Abbott portrait of Joyce, the almost abstract Russell Chatham landscape they'd bought from the artist himself on a trip to Montana, the Wiener Werkstätte side table they'd bought at a flea market in Pennsylvania for seventy-five bucks; these were among the few items of worldly value, and they didn't add to all that much - certainly not enough to cover the down payment on the loft - but everything here had been gathered by the two of them together over the years and he felt a keen sense of conjugal proprietorship in the family portraits and bric-a-brac, the cracked leather club chair from his father's den, the *Those Calloways* poster, the kids' artwork framed on the walls or attached to the refrigerator with magnets - the backdrop they'd created over many years for the ongoing story of their lives" (BPD, 166).

⁹⁷³ "Si l'on nous demandait le bienfait le plus précieux de la maison", writes Bachelard, "nous dirions: la maison abrite la rêverie, la maison protège le rêveur, la maison nous permet de rêver en paix", Bachelard, (1961), p. 25-26

⁹⁷⁴ "Loft living reflects a self that continually demands more space to prove its individuality", Zukin, (2014), p. 69

(BPD, 62). And it matters little that the reaction of the guests does not share his enthusiasm. perhaps his gestures continue, after all, to show what Russell in all respects is: “He was relieved to hear his famous Manhattan editor sounding so dorky” (BPD, 62). however, he still got to decide who may or may not attend his party, or rather his play: “The cast in their loft” (BPD, 79).

Rejected by Corrine from the beginning, the interior increasingly takes the form of Russell, assimilating the latter’s appearance as it appears on the outside – “You’re niche, remember?” (BPD, 125)⁹⁷⁵ - so, the interior, in its detached character, as we said at the beginning of the chapter, becomes a hollow space in the city⁹⁷⁶, where Russell, as a result of his failures – “So, maybe I want to broaden the niche” (BPD, 197) - progressively withdraws, denying the changes that occurs outside. In the house: “l’inconscient séjourne. Les souvenirs sont immobiles, d’autant plus solides qu’ils sont mieux spatialisés”⁹⁷⁷. Russell can thus perpetrate, without difficulty, the illusion of his personal New York⁹⁷⁸: “ces valeurs d’abri sont si simples, si profondément enracinées dans l’inconscient qu’on les retrouve plutôt par une simple évocation que par une description minutieuse”⁹⁷⁹. New York, as seen through Russell’s eyes, pertains to the realm of lyricism rather than description: “Once, not so very long” (BPD, 3), so begins the novel, followed by the nostalgic evocation of all the literary events that have sculpted his imagination of the city. From Hemingway to O’Hara, to Kerouac

⁹⁷⁵ As Tom Reynes suggests to him, “My point is, stick to the market you know” (BPD, 275)

⁹⁷⁶ “over the years they’d carved out a place for themselves in the Darwinian social fray without violent effort or expenditure” (BPD, 125)

⁹⁷⁷ Bachelard, (1961), p. 28

⁹⁷⁸ “Russell realize that for him the American Dream of upward social mobility has failed and will probably continue to fail to come true”, Cavedon, *Ibid.*, p. 231

⁹⁷⁹ Bachelard, (1961), p. 31

and Ginsberg, from Wharton to Capote. Russell's New York is a New York of paper, made for dreamers: "these dreamers were people of the book" (BPD, 3). The interior becomes a corpus of dreams: its task is to provide for the repose of Russell's youthful dreams.

"We're living like grad students" (BPD, 233) Corrine tells him exhausted at one point, who sees the change of home not only as an opportunity to find a bigger, better space, but also as a chance to become adults for good.

For Russell, leaving the TriBeCa loft means this: abandoning an idea of New York and simultaneously abandoning an idea of himself: "for Russell, New York was downtown" (BPD, 234). Downtown is now part of his identity, and the interior represents the last irreducible space of authenticity within New York. Inhabiting the interior is thus transformed into an extreme attempt to grasp with one's fingertips a dream that has already evaporated.

Gentrification, as Moskowitz explains, is a trauma that produces "mental geographies of loss"⁹⁸⁰, and the interior ends up being experienced as a kind of anchor that secures the authentic⁹⁸¹ city in depth. The last stronghold of a New York that may have been.

As Zukin explains, "yearning for authenticity reflects the separation between our experience of space and our sense of self [...] though we think authenticity refers to neighborhood's innate qualities, it really expresses our own anxieties about how places change"⁹⁸².

⁹⁸⁰ Peter Moskowitz, *How To Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality and the Fight for the Neighborhood*, Nation Books, New York, 2018, p. 167.

⁹⁸¹ "In a world that changes moment by moment, anchoring the self to old places is a way of coping with the continuous past", Zukin, (2014), p. 68

⁹⁸² Zukin, (2010), p. 220

Russell's authentic New York is a mental construction. It is a fusion between an idealized city and a city that maintains the aura and walls of the past. It is a construction which is worked on fragment by fragment. Fragments from the idealized city, taken from a novel or a film, and fragments from the concrete city, cobblestones, sawdust on the floor, some strategically placed graffiti, a fire escape. Fragment after fragment⁹⁸³, a piece of the city is composed all over again and passed off as authentic, first and foremost to oneself. It is that desire to put down roots that distinguishes those who have just arrived in neighborhoods that already have heaps of history behind them. As in the case of Downtown, the neighborhood where the bohemian⁹⁸⁴ soul of the city developed, the artistic⁹⁸⁵ soul, and also where the more combative soul developed, the one that, over time, has increasingly resisted change (see the famous clash between Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses)⁹⁸⁶, creating that short circuit between pride in difference (difference from other neighborhoods and difference understood as the ability to accommodate all differences: ethnic, cultural, sexual, etc...)⁹⁸⁷ and the constant

⁹⁸³ "These fictional qualities of authenticity are not "real", but they have a real effect on our imagination of the city [...] Authenticity, then, is a cultural form of power over space that puts pressure on the city's old working class and lower middle class, who can no longer afford to live or work there", Zukin, (2010), p. xi

⁹⁸⁴ "Americans imported the idea of bohemia from European artists' enclaves, especially nineteenth-century Paris", Melissa Bradshaw, *Performing Greenwich Village bohemianism*, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of New York*, Edited by Cyrus R. K. Patell and Bryan Waterman, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 147

⁹⁸⁵ "The writers and artists who made the Village an enclave of countercultural forces in the first decades of the twentieth century read like a who's who of American artistic, literary, and intellectual history", Bradshaw, p. 147

⁹⁸⁶ See note 41

⁹⁸⁷ "There is no such thing as an "authentic" bohemianism: it is always an affectation, a self-conscious performance of an antiestablishment sensibility, expressed through art, non-marital and homosexual liaisons, and a rejection of bourgeois comforts", Bradshaw, p. 147

weeping for a glory now permanently lost⁹⁸⁸. The fascination for that particular neighborhood acts in the choosing process, then comes the readaptation, to make it more like oneself, safer, more comfortable, and more aesthetically enjoyable. Smoothing its edges, limiting its defects, minimizing friction. Starting “a conflict between city dwellers desire for authentic origins - a traditional, mythical desire for roots - and their new beginnings: the continuous reinvention of communities”⁹⁸⁹.

Authenticity⁹⁹⁰ is therefore a product, it is not an innate characteristic of a neighborhood, “it will be achieved”⁹⁹¹. As Zukin explains, “reinventing authenticity begins with creating an image to connect an aesthetic view of origins and a social view of new beginnings”⁹⁹².

This way, the city is authentic, but only for Russell. Not only does he mentally construct it, but he also has daily experiences of it, reconstructing it through gestures⁹⁹³. Such as those repeated over time – dinners celebrating Valentine’s Day always in the same place - which should, through repetition, make him

⁹⁸⁸ “Mourning this lost authenticity, then, is part of being a bohemian, as is understanding the elusiveness of authentic experience. Savoring this impermanence, taking comfort in this loss as a secret only those who are in the know are in on, while gullible tourists squeeze into cafes and wander winding Village streets looking for glimpses of artists or Marxists or free-love prophets, becomes itself a marker of the true Greenwich Village”, Bradshaw, p. 158

⁹⁸⁹ “a city is authentic if it can create the *experience of origins*”, Zukin, (2010), p. 2-3

⁹⁹⁰ “Lately, though, authenticity has taken on a different meaning that has little to do with origins and a lot to do with style. The concept has migrated from a quality of people to a quality of things, and most recently to a quality of experiences”, Zukin, (2010), p. 3

⁹⁹¹ Zukin, p. 23

⁹⁹² Zukin, p. 234

⁹⁹³ “Authenticity in this sense is not stage set of historic buildings [...] it’s a continuous process of living and working, a gradual buildup of everyday experience”, Zukin, *Ibid.*, p. 6

visible, recognizable: “Russell was no different from any other denizen of the city in his need to be recognized and coddled in his own corner of the metropolis” (BPD, 196). Alongside these public and ostentatious gestures, there are intimate ones, kept secret, such as the wanderings in the local stores – “he wouldn’t necessarily want anyone to know that he added three blocks to his mornings commute because he thought this was the best coffee in the city” (BPD, 109) - which, paradoxically, reinforce his sense of living in authenticity, in a neighborhood that responds to his desires, and at the same time, testify to the artificiality of this construction. In fact, it is precisely these places - those that have ousted the small family-run stores, offering an increasingly specific range of products aimed at a more privileged consumer - that are the sign that an initial process of *gentrification*⁹⁹⁴ has taken place. A process in which Russell himself has actively participated, ousting the generation of artists behind the creation of the *loft living style*: “The increase in boutiques especially reflects a strategic shift in consumer industries toward niche marketing and customized goods”⁹⁹⁵. It’s hard to imagine Russell’s clique of favorite authors going in search of such a sophisticated café.

⁹⁹⁴ In a city that has progressively shifted its economy to the tertiary and quaternary sectors, Russell belongs to Florida’s *super creative core*, that group of people who, according to his often much criticized essay (accused of being too anchored in numbers, too technical, and too promotional of a practice that creates obvious social earthquakes), are the architects and clients of the redevelopments of specific neighborhoods. Local development, in his idea, must attract creative people so that they, in turn, can germinate ideas and bring investment, creating a somewhat magical spiral of knowledge-driven growth. See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Basic Books, New York, 2002; *Cities and the Creative Class*, Rutledge, London, 2005; *The Flight of the Creative Class*, Harper, New York, 2006.

⁹⁹⁵ Sharon Zukin, *New retail capital and neighborhood change: Boutiques and gentrification in New York City*, in *City & Community*, 8(1), pp. 47-64, p. 48

“Authenticity”, finally, Zukin explains, “involves time [...] First, the appeal of authenticity suggests that we cling to the ideal of a timeless city that never changes, and we use this ideal, represented by cultural images of a specific historical period, as an absolute standard for judging urban experience. But second, our mental images of authenticity do reflect change, for each generation has an experience of the city in its own time [...] Third [...] the importance of time in the broadest sense because city dwellers are increasingly concerned with making their way between the promise of creation and the threat of annihilation”⁹⁶.

In this sort of continuous renegotiation with time Russell transforms the city into a panorama, a complex puzzle where all the fragments of his ideal city fit together perfectly. Only this way can the city become the perfect backdrop for his actions and imagination:

“Though the city after three decades seemed in many ways diminished from the capital of his youth, Russell Calloway had never quite fallen out of love with it, nor with his sense of his own place here. *The backdrop of Manhattan*, it seemed to him, gave every gesture an added grandeur, a metropolitan gravitas” (BPD, 4).

The interior thus becomes the scaffolding capable of supporting this enormous and heavy background. The space in which the actions of the outside can be reviewed in a more epic key. Gradually, as the story progresses, and as the line

⁹⁶ Zukin, (2010), p. 29

of depth interweaves with the other two lines, this background becomes detached from reality, and, like Borges' map, it extends until it completely covers the edges of the city itself, like a blanket thrown over to stifle the escapes of time.

The interior, determining the spirit⁹⁹⁷ of its inhabitants, in the line of depth, is saturated in the allegory of the panorama and the diorama. The two devices, on the other hand, as Patrice Thompson has pointed out in his study, are not at all opposed, but complementary in their processes of construction and maintenance of the illusion⁹⁹⁸. In the 1800s, panorama and diorama were the precursors of what would later become cinema and television, precursors also of a particular way of enjoying a show. What interests me, for the purposes of this analysis, is their form and how this acted on the viewers. The experience lived within these devices seems to me to be of the same kind as the experience lived in the interior inhabited by Russell and Corrine. An experience that is in some way sudden, not yet codified in precise gestures, as at a certain point the experience in the loft of Russell and Corrine becomes. An essentially immobile experience, whose illusion of movement is not of the same matrix as the illusion of movement, for example, of a more modern medium such as cinema, where movement is inherent in the images themselves, in their being conceived in succession and in their rapid flow. The images that flow in the loft are fundamentally static images, containing no hint of a future (in fact, the image of

⁹⁹⁷ "La maison, plus encore que le paysage, est, "un état d'âme"", Bachelard, (1961), p. 98

⁹⁹⁸ "Si maintenant l'on tente de comparer panorama et diorama, leur différente origine ne les oppose plus et leurs différences sont bien comprises dans un progrès de l'illusion [...]C'est cette complémentarité qui opère la totalisation du spectacle en un univers clos se suffisant à lui-même", Patrice Thompson, *Essai d'analyse des conditions du spectacle dans le Panorama et le Diorama*, in *Romantisme*, n° 38, 1982, pp.47-64, p. 63

New York created by Russell is an image that crystallizes a moment in the city, with no past, no future). The process we have seen of construction of an imaginary by Russell is similar to that operated by panorama and diorama⁹⁹⁹. Where the illusion in panorama and diorama is primarily given by the architecture that supports the device¹⁰⁰⁰. An architecture that is still rudimentary, as is the architecture of Russell and Corrine's¹⁰⁰¹ loft. In both cases, it is the entire room that, in communion with the images, contributes to determining the experience. Panorama and diorama were, in fact, *room-like*¹⁰⁰² built in the center of the city, where one could enter to immerse oneself in a spectacle, isolating oneself from the surrounding¹⁰⁰³ reality: "enfermant complètement l'observateur prisonnier dans le volume de la fiction où la lumière du jour elle-même est prise dans l'univers de l'illusion"¹⁰⁰⁴.

⁹⁹⁹ "créant ainsi un imaginaire autonome et totalisant, coupant toute référence à notre environnement naturel: d'où son effet poétique. Jouir de l'illusion, c'est alors oublier qu'elle est illusion, non pas en détruisant l'illusion, mais en oblitérant le vécu quotidien", Thompson, p. 63

¹⁰⁰⁰ "L'effet général de tous ces procédés est comme de suspendre le spectacle dans un détermination que l'existence de la plate-forme ne gêne nullement puisqu'elle projette en quelque sorte le spectateur en plein ciel: on lui ôte la mémoire, le sentiment d'une distance mesurable au spectacle et jusqu'à la référence au soleil qu'il a laissé à la porte", Thompson, p. 53

¹⁰⁰¹ "They'd walled off first one bedroom in the back and then another when the children were born" (TGL, 8)

¹⁰⁰² "il faut enfermer le spectateur dans un ensemble construit pour lui et lui faire accepter cette perte de liberté", Thompson, p. 50

¹⁰⁰³ "Ce sont aussi un espace et un temps de perception, c'est-à-dire un médium construit de manière à donner une perception optimale [...] Pourtant elle subsiste, tant dans le panorama que dans le diorama, par l'organisation du parajour, du couloir d'accès et de la fosse dans le premier cas, que par l'obscurité, et, dirions-nous aujourd'hui, la fiabilité de la salle des spectateurs du diorama", Thompson, p. 60

¹⁰⁰⁴ Thompson, p. 51

In the panorama as in the diorama, the model is replaced by representation. The closure inside a room-like structure¹⁰⁰⁵ had a specific aim: “faire entrer le spectateur dans l’artifice du spectacle”¹⁰⁰⁶, so that any kind of comparison with reality was impossible. Leaving out the chaos of the metropolis¹⁰⁰⁷, the interior space, through fiction, produced a new reality where time and space were absolutes: “il faut, dans ce but, abolir l’espace et le temps contingents et qui restent tels dans le spectacle traditionnel, pour ne plus laisser de place qu’à la nécessité de la fiction”¹⁰⁰⁸.

In the line of depth, the interior, immobile in the mobility of the city – “The decor had remained unchanged for a decade” (BPD, 43) - is constructed by McInerney as if it were both a panorama and a diorama and thus acts on the characters exactly as the latter have done with their respective viewers: deluding them into believing that they were going along with the rhythm of the world, that they were experiencing reality more deeply, more in detail, in a more participatory way, with a basically naïve amazement: “tout se passe comme si c’était dans l’impression de mouvement”¹⁰⁰⁹. It is Corrine herself who proposes the allegory: “Their apartment could have been a diorama at the Museum of Natural History: Last of the Early TriBeCans” (BPD, 44). Even if she is referring to the current conformation of the diorama, the basic assumption does not change, the diorama has maintained over time the same purpose, that is to “bring

¹⁰⁰⁵ “Le passage par le souterrain est le germe du principe de la chambre noire qui permet la transition du modèle à l’image”, Thompson, p. 53

¹⁰⁰⁶ Thompson, p. 59

¹⁰⁰⁷ “Il faut qu’il arrache le spectateur au souvenir même de son environnement naturel”, Thompson, p.52

¹⁰⁰⁸ Thompson, p. 48

¹⁰⁰⁹ Thompson, p. 58

the outdoors inside”¹⁰¹⁰, simulating the passage of time through the control of light¹⁰¹¹, in fact fossilizing a situation. Corrine, as we have already seen, is the one, of the two, who is more aware of the trap¹⁰¹², she realizes that the interior they live in is now detached from the city, it no longer follows the flow of the metropolis, it has become a separate entity that continuously suffocates their every gesture, relegating them in an impasse that acts on them, on Russell in particular, like an enchantment. For her, the interior is, to all intents and purposes, a diorama. She perceives it this way because in the panorama the spectator is, albeit in a circumscribed space, free to move, while in the diorama, the spectator is physically¹⁰¹³ constricted. In the diorama: “le temps y est organisé chronologiquement et sa fonction est de glisser insesiblement de l'anamorphose à la métamorphose”¹⁰¹⁴. The spectator, like Corrine, is subjected to an imposed speed, without any possibility of intervening.

For Russell, on the other hand, the interior is a panorama, and this, of course, contributes to the delay with which he finally manages to realize the deception in which he has fallen. In fact, in the panorama it is the viewer’s gaze that dictates the passage of time. In that panorama of New York that has been built up and which he experiences in the interior-panorama, Russell maintains the illusory

¹⁰¹⁰ Pat Morris, *A Window on the World - Wildlife Dioramas*, in *Natural History Dioramas. History, Construction and Educational Role*, Edited by Sue Dale Tunnicliffe and Annette Scheersoi, Springer, Dordrecht, 2015, p. 33

¹⁰¹¹ “Le dispositif éliminant toute trace de jeu dans les proportions pour concentrer l’effet dans la relation entre des sources lumineuses et la matière sur laquelle elle tombe”, Thompson, p. 55

¹⁰¹² “Nothing changes chez Calloway” (BPD, 189).

¹⁰¹³ “Dans le diorama le fonctionnement est tout à fait indépendant du spectateur, qui n’en peut fuir l’impact qu’en sortant de la salle obscure”, Thompson, p. 56

¹⁰¹⁴ Thompson, p. 59

sensation of flowing along with the city¹⁰¹⁵: “dans le panorama y avait apparemment subjectivation du spectateur, puisque le fonctionnement du spectacle dépendait de ses libres mouvement dans l'enceinte centrale qui lui était réservée”¹⁰¹⁶.

But, like the panorama, far from authentic, his perception of movement, too, is but an illusion. The dynamic opposition is therefore interrupted. The house becomes a dream, where from the windows you can no longer see the city, but you are left staring at the same memory, at the risk of being embalmed in a time that belongs to the sphere of unrealized dreams.

Leaving the diorama and the panorama means breaking the fourth wall. Interrupting the representation to reactivate the dynamic opposition with the outside. To inhabit a city like New York entails (something Russell does not do until the end) indulging that cycle of attraction, transformation, mourning, and newfound attraction that is not only the essence of the attachment to the city, but is also “an old one in New York City writing”¹⁰¹⁷.

The present time returns in the last chapter. With an even different function. This is indeed a present: the beginning of a reconstruction, a story that is yet to come. In the re-created dynamic opposition between inside and outside, passing by the old loft and walking through the neighborhood¹⁰¹⁸, Russell and Corrine experience something new, something that until now has always been missed:

¹⁰¹⁵ “He refused to believe that the city no longer had room for people like themselves” (BPD, 234)

¹⁰¹⁶ Thompson, p. 56

¹⁰¹⁷ Bryan Waterman, *Epilogue: Nostalgia and counter-nostalgia*, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of New York*, Edited by Cyrus R. K. Patell and Bryan Waterman, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 235.

¹⁰¹⁸ “This was once their neighborhood and she wants to reclaim it for a little while, to walk the apartment where they spent so much of their lives”, (BPD, 396-397)

“the private interludes between the tribal gatherings, the transit between destinations, when the city becomes an intimate landscape, a secret shared by two” (BPD, 396). It doesn’t matter, therefore, if the feeling is that “the city is supremely indifferent to their transit through its arteries” (BPD, 397) because, finally, Russell and Corrine - unlike all of McInerney’s other characters - have managed to plunge into its interstices, arriving to touch the satiny fabric of the plot on which New York moves inexhaustibly. It is an instant that is already a memory. A memory, however, this time made of the same material as the city. A memory mixed with characters and cities. Bathed in infinite lights, in infinite interiors. Of infinite stories.

She knows that later it won’t be the party she will remember so much as this, the walk with her husband in the crisp autumn air, bathed in the yellow metropolitan light spilling from thousands of windows, this suspending moment of anticipation before arrival (BPD, 397).

CONCLUSION

We began this journey into interiors starting with a film, *Life Lessons*. The ever-present image of the loft, as the scenes unfold, allowed us to visualize how an interior can tell the different facets of a city's personality. In conclusion, it seems appropriate to take a further leap. It may be necessary to test the actual power of the interior as a generator of particular metropolitan experiences. If the initial assumption was that an interior would suffice on its own, like the street, to represent a particular city and that a city could be told without the need to leave a room, the final temptation might be to detach, to literally separate the interior of a work from the city, from New York of course, and to transport it to another city, for example, London, and thus see how many traces of the city to which it belongs would survive. It's a gamble, or rather a dizzying leap of imagination. Yet it really happened.

For two days, on 11 and 12 December 2021, Londoners were able to experience the New York of *Sex and the City* simply by entering an installation. At Carnegie Hall on Covent Garden's Floral Street, Carrie Bradshaw's apartment was, in fact, reproduced in every detail.

The basic idea is to allow fans to relive the most important moments of the series¹⁰¹⁹. To live the interior of a New York until now only imagined and dreamt of. A New York lived entirely through a character.

¹⁰¹⁹ "You'll now be able to relive some of the shows most iconic moments in person [...] At the [pop-up](#), you'll be able to recreate Carrie's dreamy fashion show moment as she tried on every item in her wardrobe or sip on a cosmopolitan as you perch on the writer's bed. You can even pose for an Instagram photo as you sit pensively at her desk (obviously captioning the post "I couldn't help but wonder...")",

*The Sex and the City Apartment*¹⁰²⁰, as the installation was called, is one of many initiatives to promote the release of *And Just Like That*, the long-awaited sequel to the series, which aired on December 9, 2021. On 12 and 13 November, however, in New York, for two nights, at a price of \$ 23 (in honor of 23 years since the first airing of the pilot), you could book a night in Carrie's apartment - recreated for the occasion in the Chelsea neighborhood - by accessing the Airbnb¹⁰²¹ platform (bookable as if it were a real existing home).

Sarah Jessica Parker said about the event: "I'm excited for our audience to experience Carrie's New York like never before and walk in her shoes, quite literally, for the first time"¹⁰²². According to her words, the possibility to enter and move around Carrie's apartment, to touch the objects, to perceive her daily routine becomes an immersive experience superior to the many tours that, for several years now, have accompanied fans and tourists in search of the places in which the various episodes are set¹⁰²³. The interior surpasses the city. The fact is,

<https://www.stylist.co.uk/travel/events/sex-and-the-city-immersive-experience/589461> (last access on: 02/08/2022)

¹⁰²⁰ "The Sex and the City Apartment pop-up will be at Carriage Hall on Covent Garden's Floral Street from 11th - 12th December, where hopeless romantics and fashionistas can sip on cocktails, type pensively at their favorite columnist's laptop, explore all corners of her apartment and pose for a photo in Carrie's iconic closet", <https://www.warnerbros.co.uk/news/articles/2021/11/15/early-bird-access-sex-and-city-apartment-immersive-pop> (last access: 02/08/2022)

¹⁰²¹ https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/51955893?source_impression_id=p3_16359501_10_ab7PK4dxN0%20Faxa9&set_bev_on_new_domain=1642527928_OWE3YTUX_MWY5YmUz&locale=en (last access: 02/08/2022)

¹⁰²² <https://www.vogue.com/article/step-inside-carrie-bradshaw-apartment-now-on-airbnb> (last access: 02/08/2022)

¹⁰²³ It is among the peculiarities of the series, filming is done on location and not in recreated studios: "by filming on location *Sex and the City* creates New York itself as physical space to be consumed", Susan Zieger, *Sex and the citizen in Sex and the city's New York*, in *Reading Sex and the City*, edited by Kim Akass & Janet McCabe, I.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2004, p. 98

of course, that the city emphasizes the real over the fictional, especially in a city where changes happen overnight. In the tourist experience of the street, one must continually operate a mental process of reconstruction. Imagination requires more, and perhaps less satisfying, work. Where, for example, there was a club in a given scene, there is now a laundromat. There is not the slightest trace of that fictional world. The street incessantly tears away the veil. The city is an ever-evolving infinite set of disparate experiences that mingle with one another, that vanish in a flash. And even if the street of the city is reconstructed in a film studio, as it is in an episode of the series¹⁰²⁴, its artificiality is so evident that it hinders any leap of imagination. The street of a city is a relationship of different phenomena, an accumulation that is never exhausted, a continuous interference of real stories and all the other fictions that have exploited it. The interior, on the other hand, is a two-way relationship with the character, and the resulting city is the result of that relationship. That particular interior can only be of that particular character. Therefore, the tourist will never find Carrie's city, not even for a moment. We can only find that city by passing through the front door of its interior. The interior thus functions as a sort of portal. Inside that room, a room that is still recreated, there are strong remnants of a New York universe carved in the imagination. The interior clutches the traces, like molecules in perpetual agitation. The interior is capable, thanks to this quality, of suggesting the lines of that world seen from the screen. And the city reappears. Inside, in Carrie's house, New York exists. Not just any New York, but Carrie's New York. Such is the evocative power of an interior. The interior, as we have seen, contains the maximum power of a character and is where her relationship with the city

¹⁰²⁴ Episode 13, season 3: *Escape from New York*

becomes concrete, almost tactile, turned over and over in her hands, always in the process of renegotiation and transformation. Carrie's experience is distinct precisely because it passes through the interior she inhabits. It is both the starting and ending point of her metropolitan excursions.

All this is made possible thanks to a careful narrative construction that, throughout the series, has developed the tension that runs between the two *Benjaminian* poles, that of the room and that of the street.

As in the works analyzed by DeLillo and McInerney, also in *Sex and the City*, in fact, there is a precise elaboration of the interior, which is actively inserted in the representation following the same lines adopted by the two writers.

First, Carrie's home combines two ideas of New York. The sophistication of the Upper East Side¹⁰²⁵ and the creativity of the Village. In fact, different¹⁰²⁶ locations were used for the exterior of the house before settling on the façade of a brownstones in the Village. The address itself, repeatedly communicated by Carrie herself, 245 East 73rd Street, states that she is an Upper East Side resident, too bad her address doesn't exist. Carrie lives on the Upper East Side, she tells us about that elite world, but the house she lives in recalls the aesthetics of the Village, given that on the Upper East Side, at the address given by Carrie, there are no buildings of that type. A short circuit is created in the viewer's mind,

¹⁰²⁵ "I thought the comparisons to Woody Allen's work were so obvious as to not need comment. The Upper East Side milieu, the neurotic, insecure, hyper-reflective writer-protagonist, the obsession with relationships, the talking back to the camera and other stylistic visual devices which frequently romanticize Manhattan "all out of proportion", *Sex and the City* creator Darren Star openly admits his debt to Allen", Tom Grochowski, *Neurotic in New York: the Woody Allen touches in Sex and the City*, in *Reading Sex and the City*, edited by Kim Akass & Janet McCabe, I.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2004, p. 149.

¹⁰²⁶ Some of these are: 960 Madison Avenue, 34 East 62nd Street, 64 Perry Street and 66 Perry Street.

which is resolved in an articulated and profound image of the city. Two distinct and distant places in Manhattan touch each other and find a way to express themselves and interact around the protagonist's apartment.

As Susan Zieger writes, “New York City becomes the medium”¹⁰²⁷ through which the four protagonists can access all the different social, cultural, aesthetic, sexual and consumeristic possibilities offered in a wide and varied way and that always put into play the construction of their style and identity: “The series maps identity-based consumption onto space of New York City, creating lightly overlapped social and consumer orbits into which the series’ straight, white protagonists occasionally drift as they borrow elements of others’ style”¹⁰²⁸. If New York becomes the medium through which the protagonists can live their experiences, the interior, Carrie’s¹⁰²⁹ house, becomes the medium through which the viewer can access that world, understand it, question it, precisely because through the interior the viewer can always recognize and find the protagonists

¹⁰²⁷ Zieger, p. 99

¹⁰²⁸ Zieger, p. 99

¹⁰²⁹ “Carrie Bradshaw (Parker) didn’t always keep her junior one-bedroom on the Upper East Side tidy, but she did design with an eye for the unconventional. Early on, “she had a flea-market style that made sense for a single writer”, production designer Jeremy Conway tells *Architectural Digest*, noting that her walls were not heavily decorated except for her extensive magazine display. Many of the items-down to the bathroom medicine cabinet-were, in fact, picked up at downtown Manhattan antique and thrift shops. But along the way, “Carrie picked up more interesting objects as she experienced her life.” Indeed, set decorator Karin Holmes tells *Architectural Digest* that she purchased Jonathan Adler accessories, Calvin Klein bedding, and Marimekko curtains for the apartment. (And lest we forget, Carrie also received a custom-made chair from furniture designer boyfriend, Aidan.) As for the fashion maven's walk-in closet with its own mini runway, Conway based it on one of his former apartments: “There was a hallway that led from a living room to a bedroom. We figured Carrie turned her hallway into a closet” <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/sex-and-the-city-from-the-inside> (last access on: 01/27/2022)

to whom he is now attached. Carrie's interior, as the series progresses, becomes the only place in the city that is truly familiar to the viewer¹⁰³⁰.

After a disappointing trip to Los Angeles¹⁰³¹, Carrie finally returns to New York, we are at episode 14 of season 3, *Sex and Another Country*. She enters the house, puts down her suitcases, leans against the wall and after a sigh of relief, lights a cigarette, pausing to observe her home. Off-screen, we hear his voice: "Six hours later, I was home. It looked even better on the inside that I remembered it, because inside it was all real. I was starting to feel myself again". The comfort of having found the city again comes from the inside. It is the interior that confirms she is back in New York. And the inside that guarantees that she will always be herself. In a Manhattan¹⁰³² that, as Fiona Handyside writes, "is constructed as a

¹⁰³⁰ "Carrie's apartment is an apartment everybody's had. The idea was that instead of the bed being in a separate bedroom, the apartment is one big room with curtains that you can pull. The closet is more like a hallway to the bathroom, with racks in it for all her clothes, because the most important things to Carrie is what she wears. If shooting is taking place in the closet, then we really try to show clothes that you've seen Carrie in before to make it real. We change the magazines on a regular basis, we rotate books and the stuff inside the drawers. If Carrie is reading a book in a bed scene, we carefully decide what book it is she's reading. All the floors are hardwood and the forty-year-old braided telephone wire painted into the wall is very typical Manhattan rental apartments. The photos on her refrigerator and bookshelf are all personal photos of Sarah Jessica's friends and her friend's daughter", Sohn, *Sex and the City. Kiss and Tell*, Pocket Books, New York, 2002, Kindle edition, position 812

¹⁰³¹ "Neither of the alternatives offered by the show, the West Coast or Paris, however, offers Carrie her freedom and flânerie", Handyside, p. 413

¹⁰³² About New York, Darren Starr, the creator of the series, said: "The city to me was always the fifth character on the show", Sohn, *Ibid.*, position 1996; for Sarah Jessica Parker the city is a "kind of this fifth lady of our show", in Deborah Jermyn, *In love with Sarah Jessica Parker: celebrating female fandom and friendship in Sex and the City*, in *Reading Sex and the City*, edited by Kim Akass & Janet McCabe, I.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2004, p. 214

Utopia in which women are free to negotiate their individual identities”¹⁰³³, the interior, on a first level, collaborates in the construction of the characters’ identities, it stabilizes them. Inside, the characters can always find themselves again. Characters take shape thanks also to their homes that end up representing them in full: “each aspirational abode-exclusively built on NYC’s Silvercup Studios-featured stylish decor and furniture, bed linens, rugs, and lamps that managed to fit with the character's individual personality”¹⁰³⁴. As Jeremy Conway, the show’s production designer, explained, in choosing the interior design of Carrie, Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte’s individual homes, color¹⁰³⁵ theory was the guiding light. The goal was twofold: “to make sure the apartments feel right for their characters and authentically New York”¹⁰³⁶. And this is the other aspect that made the installation possible. Not only does the interior function as a medium for the viewer. But the interior itself was conceived and constructed by tying the particularities of the character to the essence of the city. The interior therefore represents the character in union with New York. They are both present in the same place and at the same time.

“Identity then, is seen by the series as something that can be in flux, along with the Manhattan cityscape”¹⁰³⁷, the identity of the characters then is constructed in a dynamic opposition between the self-image that is preserved inside and the

¹⁰³³ Fiona Handyside, *It's Either Fake or Foreign: The Cityscape in Sex and the City*, in *Continuum*, 21:3, 405-418, 2007, p. 407

¹⁰³⁴ <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/sex-and-the-city-from-the-inside>, *Ibid*

¹⁰³⁵ “Samantha’s color scheme is like a big-game hunter, ochres and reds. Charlotte is kind of ivory tower, whites and very atonal. Miranda is like the color of a bruise, with plums and greens. Carrie is a soft sea-foam teal color, which works great for her skin tone and her hair”, Sohn, position 812 *Ibid*

¹⁰³⁶ Sohn, *Ibid*, position 807

¹⁰³⁷ Handyside, p. 406

self-image that is continually questioned outside¹⁰³⁸. The first one is stable, the second is moving constantly. The contrast between the two is essential and is the spark that fuels the *quest* at the base of the series that relentlessly examines the process of professional and personal growth of its characters.

In episode 11 of the first season, *The Drought*, the story between Carrie and Mr Big takes another step forward: appearances finally collapse. The event that kicks off the unraveling is comical: Carrie and Mr Big are in bed, at his place, as they always have been up to this point, and she lets out a fart. Carrie gets embarrassed and runs away. Days pass before she finds the courage to call him. She is convinced that the episode may have completely changed Mr. Big's perception of her and that he, because of this, has lost all sexual interest. Carrie, up to that moment is living a kind of fantasy¹⁰³⁹. She wants to appear in Mr. Big's eyes as the perfect woman, but what happened breaks the illusion. The finale of the episode is emblematic: Mr. Big suddenly shows up at Carrie's house, uninvited. It's the first time he enters her apartment, and while Carrie would like to push him out, Mr. Big walks forward and looks around: "it's nice. It's very nice", he tells her. Carrie is visibly distressed, "No it's not. It's a mess". Upon entering the apartment Mr. Big has definitely broken the illusion, casting a glance into Carrie's

¹⁰³⁸ "New York is an intrinsic part of all of their lives", Helen Richards, *Sex and the City: a visible flâneuse for the post-modern era?*, in *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 147-157, p. 148

¹⁰³⁹ Carrie's discomfort, however, suggests that she is involved in a fantasy she cannot realistically maintain. Carrie has constructed a romantic fantasy around Big in which she also plays archetypal roles, including "Together Carrie" and "Sexy Carrie". She wants to be his fantasy too. As she confesses to Miranda, "I'm in love with him and I'm terrified he's going to leave me because I'm not perfect", Joanna Di Mattia, "*What's the harm in believing?*" *Mr Big, Mr Perfect, and the romantic quest for Sex and the City's Mr Right*, in *Reading Sex and the City*, edited by Kim Akass & Janet McCabe, I.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2004, p. 22

reality that she has been trying to keep hidden. The apartment tells more about Carrie than she can share about herself. It holds no secrets, it exhibits everything. And Mr. Big, sitting in an armchair, looks up and says “I like it. I like it the way it is”, referring to the apartment, but it’s understood that, in truth, he’s talking about her. The revelation of a character’s essence is accomplished through the discovery of their interior. Where the character cannot speak, it is the inside that does it for him or her.

On a second level, however, the interior supports one of the strongest themes underlying the series, ensuring the autonomy and independence of the four women. All four, in fact, own their homes¹⁰⁴⁰. They claim this in episode four of season 6 (*Ring a Ding Ding*), where the sense of independence provided by owning a home is reaffirmed by one of the series’ strongest scenes. Carrie finds herself forced to buy back her apartment from ex-boyfriend Aidan, but she hasn’t enough money for the transaction. After turning to Mr. Big for help, as a consequence of an argument with her friends, she decides to decline his offer. Charlotte is the one who eventually helps her, giving Carrie her engagement ring, in a double declaration of independence: Carrie will be able to own her house without owing a man money with a man and Charlotte gets rid of her last link with her ex-husband, proclaiming her newfound independence.

At this level, the interior becomes the concrete symbol of autonomy. It becomes the harbor to return to after a storm, the only fixed point in the chaos of the

¹⁰⁴⁰ Emblematic is the final scene in which Miranda, in episode 5 of season 2 (*Four Women and a Funeral*), decides to reply to the bank with a letter in which she asserts her being single, her being a woman and her power to be able to buy a house independently. At the signing of the contract, in fact, Miranda is besieged by insistent questions about her sentimental condition. What does not seem credible to the bank is that she only thanks to her job, can buy a house without the help of a male figure.

metropolis, as Carrie's voiceover recounts when she is in danger of losing it: "As a I thought about leaving the apartment that I lived in for a decade, I realized how much I'd miss it. It had always been there for me".

Finally, at the third and last level, Carrie's interior plays a precise role in the organization of every single episode, both from a formal point of view and from a content point of view. In fact, in addition to the motifs just identified, Carrie's apartment has taken on a symbolic value, thanks also to one of the most recurrent images, capable of summarizing the structural idea of the series: from the street, we see Carrie, in front of her laptop, looking out of the window, intent on thinking about what to write for her column. The words that form in her mind ready to become the text are passed to the viewer thanks to the voiceover¹⁰⁴¹ (each episode, in fact, is built on the writing of Carrie's¹⁰⁴² column). The interior thus becomes an integral and fundamental part of the rhetorical device that gives the series its peculiar narrative form. The interior is the protected place that allows Carrie to reflect, to revise, to reorganize, to question and make sense of what happens to her and to her friends on the streets of Manhattan: "*Sex and the City* contains some elements of the workplace sitcom format, since its emphasis on Carrie's production of her column provides a

¹⁰⁴¹ "but the self-conscious style that characterizes the earlier seasons has settled down into a more predictable pattern [...] The content of the four main characters' experiences becomes more important than their narrative form, as it becomes assumed that what we are witnessing are recollections that become part of Carrie's column, represented by the voiceover and shots of Carrie typing on her Mac notebook. These moments of Carrie's reflection do try to pull thematic issues out from the narrative threads, but they are more conventionally integrated into the character arcs of the four protagonists", Grochowski, *Ibid.*, p. 159

¹⁰⁴² "Carrie is immediately identified as the show's central narrator - an omnipotent observer in the city", Kim Akass, Janet McCabe, *Ms Paker and the Vicious Circle: female narrative and humour in Sex and the City in Reading Sex and the City*, edited by Kim Akass & Janet McCabe, I.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2004, p. 178

structural motivation for episodes and places the central character socially and economically. But since Carrie works from home, her friends are not her workmates and hierarchical relationships are relatively insignificant, so that the program represents an interesting variation on this form. The whole city is Carrie's workplace, and her friendship networks and personal concerns merge with her occupation"¹⁰⁴³. The image of Carrie in her apartment, intent on setting up her address book, always arrives at a precise moment: after the initial set up. In the first few minutes and in the first few scenes, the various cues, that are later developed in the episode, emerge. Between this exposure and the actual development, there always comes a scene (about ten minutes into the episode) in which Carrie returns home - in a street-interior swing similar to Karen's in *Mao II* – and she writes the first line of the address book, which is each time a question that will only be answered at the end of the episode. The interior thus serves as a privileged place of reflection where the events of the outside are linked together in search of a meaning that can elevate them and detach them from the flow, creating a hierarchy. At the same time though, the interior, as a narrative device, assumes the architecture of a funnel that narrows the field of possibilities and in this way stems the flow of the city and makes the unfolding of the episode itself possible¹⁰⁴⁴.

"These women", says Sarah Jessica Parker, "wouldn't be the same in Milwaukee, Boston, Chicago, or Cincinnati [...] If Carrie lived in a small town that was a

¹⁰⁴³ Jonathan Bignell, *Sex, confession and witness*, in *Reading Sex and the City*, edited by Kim Akass & Janet McCabe, I.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2004, p. 172

¹⁰⁴⁴ "*Sex and the City's* images contain these multiple possibilities, but it is Carrie's voiceover, often used to suggest her column, rather than editing, that limits their possibilities and constrains the possible meanings within the polysemic image [...] Carrie's voiceover allows her to direct our view of Manhattan", Handyside, *Ibid.*, p. 416

crossroads, she wouldn't walk out a door and not know what the future holds. In New York City, you walk out the door and you do not know what is going to happen. There's such a potential for poetry"¹⁰⁴⁵. And with these last words, I would like to finally move to the conclusion.

From the short film *Life Lessons* to the *Sex and the City* series used as a corollary to DeLillo's New York novels and McInerney's novels, what I have tried to demonstrate is that the interior is to all intents and purposes a chronotope¹⁰⁴⁶. The New York narrative, therefore, is constructed at the intersection of multiple chronotopes, such as, for example, the chronotope of the street, loaded with its poetic potential, its chance encounters and epiphanies. It is Bakhtin himself who believes that a text is a composite mosaic of major and minor chronotopes working together¹⁰⁴⁷. The New York interior, or rather, the *Manhattan interior* -

¹⁰⁴⁵ Sohn, *Ibid.*, position 2001

¹⁰⁴⁶ "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope", Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*, in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981, p. 84,

¹⁰⁴⁷ "Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships", Bakhtin, *Ibid.*, p. 252 ; "A novel is not finally reducible to a single chronotope but is a complex of major generic chronotopes and minor chronotopic motifs [...] a web of competing chronotopes in dialogue and a central chronotope that serves as a unifying ground", Barbara Pittman, *Cross-Cultural Reading and Generic Transformations: The Chronotope of the Road in Erdrich's Love Medicine in American Literature*. 67.4, 1995, 777-92, p. 778; "Au sein d'une seule œuvre, nous pouvons parfois identifier plusieurs chronotopes : certains sont principaux ou organisateurs, alors que d'autres sont plutôt liés à un thème précis. Parfois un seul chronotope prédomine mais, selon Bakhtine, plusieurs chronotopes peuvent "coexister" dans une relation "dialogique" au sein d'un même roman", Tara Collington, 2006, *Lectures chronotopiques. Espace, temps et genres romanesques*. Montréal, XYZ, 2006, p. 88.

since all the texts analyzed prefer the island of Manhattan rather than the other districts - thus belongs to the category of dominant chronotopes, those that as Ladin explains: “define and limit the ways in which human character can exist in the narrative”¹⁰⁴⁸. Compared to the other chronotopes, the chronotope of the *Manhattan interior* works in a dynamic opposition that continually calls into question, throughout the arc of the plot, the image that the character has of himself in relation to the city. It is the place where the foundations of living are laid, where one builds one’s own city, where the ephemeral acquires depth and the relationship between character and city becomes, to all intents and purposes, a personal fact. The city becomes a part of the self. Because the interior is part of the city. it is inside the city; it is the character’s particular and personal place through which he can attest to himself and to others that he too is inside the city. The interior is the true and solid trace of his passage, of his existence, of his being an inhabitant. If the chronotope “serves as the primary point form which “scenes” in a novel unfold”¹⁰⁴⁹, the interiors analyzed, as we have seen, are the places where the character’s form becomes sharper than ever, where events, turns, crucial reflections take place. The chronotope of the *Manhattan interior* thus fulfills the double function of every chronotope: it is one of the centers in which the main events of the plot¹⁰⁵⁰ are organized and it has a strong representational¹⁰⁵¹ function. In the interior, the suspended time of reflection,

¹⁰⁴⁸ Jay Ladin, *Fleshing Out the Chronotope*, in *Critical Essays on Mikhail Bakhtin*. Ed. Caryl Emerson. New York: G.K. Hall., 1999, 212-35, p. 223.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Bakhtin, p. 250

¹⁰⁵⁰ “they are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative”, Bakhtin, p. 250

¹⁰⁵¹ “the representational importance of the chronotope. Time becomes, in effect,

construction, representation and negotiation takes on substance. It is an all-encompassing time that is structured in simultaneous instants that seem devoid of duration, but dense with all the present, the past and the future of the city and all the present, the past and the future of the character, with the highly regulating time of the outside beating on the walls, on the windowpanes. The chronotope of the interior makes the rhythm of the metropolitan experience resonate in the reader's mind and heart. The chronotope makes the polyrhythm, on which the plot of the urban narrative is arranged, almost tactile. The character is always on the edge, a beat away from going outside, from getting lost, from not finding the link between the simple time of the city and the compound time of the inside¹⁰⁵². And there will be, here and there, always a line out of place, to remind us that after all, we are still in the world of fiction. Where the dynamic opposition between the different places, between the different states, between the different characters is the flame that in the darkness produces that light that allows us to see the creation of the story we are reading.

palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins”, Bakhtin, *Ibid.*, p. 250.

¹⁰⁵² “A chronotope only becomes a chronotope when it shows something, when it brings to mind an image that can be observed by the mind’s eye”, Bart Keunen, *The Chronotopic Imagination in Literature and Film*, in *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope. Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*, edited by Nele Bemong, Pieter Borghart, Michel De Dobbeleer, Kristoffel Demoen, Koen De Temmerman & Bart Keunen, Academia Press, Gent, 2010, p. 35.

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