

Book Review

The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo

by John N. Duvall (Ed.), 2008. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. xii+203. ISBN: 0-521-69089-8 (pbk).

The work of Don DeLillo since the publication of his novel *White Noise* (1985), is considered to be canonical American literature, while his novels are revered equally for his treatment of cultural crises in America, as for his mastery of language and narrative technique. Nonetheless, in 2007, *New York Magazine* published a guide to DeLillo's work (<http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/31522/>) which focuses on evaluation and classification of his work into four categories mainly according to its "readability" and commercial success – *classics, recommended, for fans only*, and *avoid*. Unfortunately, the novels *Body Artist* and *Cosmopolis* found their places in the last group, and it is safe to conclude that the guide, intended for a wider audience, only scratches the surface in the evaluation of most of DeLillo's work, casting out his dysfunctional or plotless narratives. As the authors of the guide fail to realize, DeLillo's writing is not about producing highly structured plots in the manner of high realism – his stories venture beyond, into the territory of the culture which produces plots of its own. His stories, each in its own way, tell about conspiracies, the intoxicating nature of crowds, and about the rupture between image and reality. DeLillo's novels, deliberately lacking plots, speak of the secret narratives which progress towards the ultimate end – since, for DeLillo's heroes, "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots", while his protagonists remain to position themselves in relation to the consequences of their progressing.

The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo is a well conceived scholarly project which approaches his works of fiction by emphasizing precisely the qualities of his writing that most frequently remain hidden in the reviews published in mainstream media. At the same time, it contains essays by a team of elite British and American DeLillo scholars, led by the editor, John N. Duvall, a renowned professor from Purdue University. The *Companion* is structured in four sections in addition to the introductory and concluding essays, presenting a total of fourteen articles on topics involving both literary and cultural aspects of DeLillo's writing.

In his introductory essay, Duvall points out that the main goal of the edition was to provide the reader with an insight into DeLillo's oeuvre, placing him alongside Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, Toni Morrison and John Updike as one of the most significant contemporary American authors. The idea of the *Companion* was to engage the reader in DeLillo's poetics and themes, as well as to provide more detailed analyses of the novels considered to be the core of his work. Although his cultural commentary is often considered the most striking feature of his writing, Duvall points out that the major strength of DeLillo's writing is in his persistent invitation to read fiction historically. More often than not, an anticipation of cultural crises, as in the cases of *White Noise* and the Bhopal disaster, or less directly as in the novels *Players*, *Mao II*, and *Cosmopolis*, when they actually occur, serve as a template for the novels' interpretation. However, by introducing the theoretical postulates of Frederic Jameson and Linda Hutcheon regarding historicity and narrative, Duvall clearly sets up the frame of interpretation which the *Companion* offers, focusing on the generally present consensus that the major and most significant theme of DeLillo's writing is American postmodernity – an outlook on a post-industrial society absorbed by the media and the processes of mediation.

Chapters that follow are written by major scholars in the field who have extensively published on DeLillo, while chapter overviews are presented in the introduction by the editor.

Part One focuses on the aesthetic and cultural influences on DeLillo's writing in two articles by Philip Nel, whose paper presents modernism's influences; and Peter Knight, who focuses on postmodernism, postmodernity and its bearings on DeLillo's writing. Nel emphasizes aspects of DeLillo's work which allow him to be recognized as a contemporary "incarnation" of modernism – richness of language and the heroic role of the artist – in addition to DeLillo's rejection of the "postmodern label". Knight continues the debate, adding the argument that it is precisely DeLillo's heritage in modernism which provides the reader with better understanding of his works as representatives of postmodernity.

Since the framework of the modern/postmodern scope of his fiction is largely set in Part One, Part Two focuses on DeLillo's early fiction, the novels published before the seminal *White Noise* (1985) - *Americana*, *End Zone*, *Great Jones Street*, *Ratner's Star*, *Players* and *Running Dog* - elaborating on their thematic focuses as well as on DeLillo's experimenting with fictional genres. The contribution by Peter Boxall, the author of a comprehensive study on Don DeLillo entitled *Possibilities of Fiction*, published for Routledge in 2006, discusses the novels *Americana* and *Great Jones Street*, exploring DeLillo's attitudes towards high culture and mass culture, media culture and "Madison Avenue values", and introducing Samuel Beckett's idea of the possibility of writing which would eliminate language as a key to understanding DeLillo's views regarding "aesthetic silence". Continuing the discussion on form, Joseph Dewey guides the reader through experiments with fictional genres and DeLillo's ponderings about the disastrous predicaments of American contemporary culture, by looking closer at the novels *Ratner's Star* and *End Zone*. Concluding the discussion on genre, Tim Engles observes the novels *Players* and *Running Dog* as political thrillers introducing the theme of terrorism which is to become one of the major themes of DeLillo's mature period.

Addressing the mature period of his writing, Part Three contains articles on DeLillo's major novels *White Noise*, *Libra* and *Underworld*. Since the body of literature concerning the novels is immense, it is rather difficult to do them justice in a compilation of this size and scope. However, essays by Stacey Olster, Jeremy Green and Patrick O'Donnell choose unique and specific approaches avoiding the pitfall of generalization. Olster starts off by introducing the reader to *White Noise*, probably the most widely taught of DeLillo's novels, also thought to be an apotheosis of American postmodernity. Olster adopts an approach which establishes television as one of the main characters of the story and its influences in the process of consumption. Green masterfully works the idea of the possibility of negotiation both of the presented versions of history in *Libra*, pointing out that the metafictional aspect of the novel mediates the two. Finally, O'Donnell adds to the cultural and historical image of the US by focusing on the formative influence of the Cold War on contemporary American cultural identity through the narrative of the novel *Underworld*, in the view of many, DeLillo's most complex and most intriguing masterpiece.

Following as a coda, Part Four deals with "Issues and themes" accentuating the specific aspects of cultural production and artistic achievement present in DeLillo's work. Ruth Helyer negotiates the masculinities of DeLillo's characters, their attitudes toward traditional role of a man and its failing realizations through their own personal insecurities, juxtaposed as contradicting powers in the creation of a postmodern masculine identity. Furthering the issues involving identity formation, Mark Osteen works toward a definition of a Daedalian artist, relying on "silence and exile" to carry his or her message to the world, but also in danger of having his or her tools of expression misused and commodified. Shifting the focus from the artist to the language as the medium of their art, David Cowart elaborates on the process of degradation of language and DeLillo's responses in the novels *The Names* and *Body Artist*, which reinstate the validity of the language as a medium. Concluding the section, John McClure discusses mystery and spirituality as elements of DeLillo's writing, slightly shifting

the focus from contemporary cultural framework, to point out a powerful contrast between mystery as an element of genre fiction and mysticism as a possibility of transcendence. The *Companion* concludes with Joseph Conte's observations on the post 9/11 world through analyses of the novels *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*.

Although not overwhelming in volume, the *Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* offers a well planned and impressively comprehensive perspective on DeLillo's work. The essays, in addition to forming rather smooth thematic units, also read well as individual pieces of writing, providing the reader with an opportunity to follow the notes, chronological table, and an excellent guide to further reading in order to continue readers' independent research. Although it also may be read as a general introduction into DeLillo's writings, it is much better suited for specialized analyses, since it presents highly demanding readings requiring extensive knowledge in the fields of contemporary literary and cultural theory.

The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo is particularly strong in providing a detailed and well structured insight into his work against the background of postmodern theory and American contemporary experience. However, although it is perhaps to be expected, the perspective regrettably remains one-sided, lacking a stronger intercultural presence and interpretation in a wider globalized context which might have offered a further insight into DeLillo's international acclaim.

Mirna Radin-Sabadoš
University of Novi Sad, Serbia