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Article

The Digital Siege and Its Self-Backlash: Tech-Capital Collusion in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

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Abstract: Don DeLillo's 2003 novel *Cosmopolis*, framed as a single-day narrative set in early 21st-century Manhattan, delivers a prescient account of the profound collusion between technology and capital in the digital age and its attendant social consequences. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's seminal theoretical framework The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, this paper systematically unpacks the construction mechanism and runaway logic of the "digital siege" depicted in the novel. By virtue of digitization, algorithmization and automation, technology thoroughly remakes the real world into a tradable, manipulable system of virtual symbols across three dimensions: perceptual mediation, spatial form, and linguistic carrier.

This study argues that DeLillo incisively exposes the inherent contradiction at the heart of the tech-capital collusion: virtual expansion divorced from the grounding of reality will inevitably culminate in systemic collapse through self-backlash. Tracing this analytical trajectory from "construction" to "loss of control", the paper seeks to systematically articulate DeLillo's literary critique of tech-capital collusion and its practical cautionary relevance to the contemporary AI era.

Keywords: Don DeLillo; *Cosmopolis*; Late Capitalism; Virtualization

1. Introduction

As generative artificial intelligence rapidly penetrates finance, media, translation, manufacturing and many other fields in the third decade of the 21st century, as algorithmic trading dominates global capital markets and digital platforms restructure the order of social production and distribution, the "collusion between technology and capital" has long ceased to be an abstract theoretical proposition, and has instead become the lived reality in which every individual is embedded: occupational boundaries are breached by technology, the value of labor is revalued by algorithms, and the meaning of the physical world is steadily diluted by data symbols. More than two decades ago, however, when the internet was still in its early phase of popularization and artificial intelligence was far from entering public vision, Don DeLillo, the American postmodern writer, already sketched a social landscape under the rule of digital capital with an almost prophetic touch in his novel *Cosmopolis*. Structured around an ordinary trading day in April 2000, the novel follows billionaire tycoon Eric Packer on his full journey across Manhattan in a luxury limousine, weaving financial transactions, technological media, urban space and individual destinies into a single narrative fabric, and unfolding a "digital siege" fully enveloped by data, screens and algorithms [1].

As one of the most intellectually incisive writers in contemporary America, DeLillo has consistently traced the infiltration and transformation of modern life by capital and technology with a dispassionate, sharp-edged style. *Cosmopolis* carries forward his signature postmodern narrative approach and critical stance toward society, yet it gains distinctive prophetic value from its precise insights into digital finance and media technology. This paper adopts Fredric Jameson's theory of The Cultural Logic of Late

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Capitalism as its analytical framework. Jameson argues that the defining feature of late capitalism is the all-round penetration of capital into previously uncommodified spheres such as culture, perception and the unconscious; the boundary between culture and economy is completely erased, symbols and images displace tangible commodities as the core of economic activity, and society as a whole bears profound traits of virtualization and flatness. This theory precisely offers a holistic perspective for interpreting the "digital siege" in *Cosmopolis*: technology is not a neutral instrument external to capital, but a technological carrier through which late capital achieves its own expansion; the collusion between the two is not an accidental convergence of interests, but an inevitable form of capitalism as it develops into the digital phase [2].

Grounded in this perspective, this paper unfolds its argument at three levels regarding the construction of the "digital siege": it examines how technology systematically transforms reality along three foundational dimensions of perception, space and language. Through this threefold transformation, the physical world is thoroughly encoded into a virtual symbolic system, laying the groundwork for capital's comprehensive manipulation and commodification. Finally, the paper proceeds to elucidate the inherent runaway logic of the "digital siege".

2. The Construction of the Digital Siege

2.1. The Technologization of Perception

In *Cosmopolis*, the world of protagonist Eric Packer is entirely enclosed by screens. This 28-year-old billionaire asset manager travels across Manhattan in a white stretch limousine, its interior "filled with television screens and computer monitors". The novel offers a meticulously detailed account of the on-board electronic devices: "Dates, flowing symbols, mountain-shaped charts and flickering numbers crowded each screen. He glanced at them every two seconds, heedless of the voice coming through the front speakers." The limousine functions not merely as a vehicle, but as a mobile perceptual apparatus: Packer accesses global information, monitors financial markets and communicates with the outside world exclusively through screens, which have become an insurmountable mediator between him and the world.

One highly symbolic scene in the novel depicts Packer seated inside the car, watching anti-capitalist riots erupt outside. Protesters set police cars ablaze and storm bank buildings, yet he remains utterly indifferent to the turmoil. His attention stays fixed on the fluctuating exchange rates and stock price data playing across his screens. The virtual world rendered by the screens supplants the physical world beyond the car window as the primary object of his cognition. As some scholars have observed, Packer "sees his own dead body in the future on the screen of his digital watch", witnessing his impending demise in a moment "suffused with apocalyptic sensibility". This scene marks the ultimate extreme of perceptual technologization: even death, the definitive bodily experience, must be mediated and validated through a screen. The virtual world on the screens replaces the physical reality outside the windows as the privileged object of his awareness [3].

Notably, this technologization of perception is by no means a neutral shift of media. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard argues that in postmodern society, images and signs no longer represent reality but replace it entirely, giving rise to hyperreality. When Packer perceives the world through screens, what he encounters is not the genuine protest and violence on New York's streets, but a "media reality" that has been encoded, filtered and curated. This mediated reality feels more "real" and more "significant" than physical reality, for it carries the informational value demanded by capital. Packer's apathy toward the protest outside his car is a classic symptom of the subject's lost capacity to grasp the "real" after simulacra have supplanted reality. Some scholars frame this condition as the predicament of the "posthuman subject" [4]; in *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo articulates his profound preoccupation with this figure through his portrayal of Packer.

From Jameson's theoretical perspective, this technologization of perception is precisely a cultural manifestation of the "death of the subject" under late capitalism. When

human perception no longer originates from direct bodily experience but from the indirect representation of technological media, the subject forfeits the ability to forge authentic connections with the world. Jameson notes that postmodernism, as a "spiritual product alienated from the reality of late capitalism", "in turn obscures and confuses reality, dominates and compels human submission to it, and leads to the disappearance of independent subjective consciousness". Packer's immunity to the violence outside stems from the fact that he no longer perceives the world through his body, but through data on screens-and data is exactly the version of "reality" that capital is most inclined to present. Through Packer's character, DeLillo lays bare a cruel trade-off: humanity exchanges authentic sensory experience for the convenience of technology and the efficiency promised by capital, at the cost of hollowing out the very faculty of perceiving reality itself.

2.2. The Digitization of Space

If the technologization of perception transforms the question of *how* we perceive, the digitization of space reshapes the question of *where* we exist. In DeLillo's novel, physical space is being overlaid and displaced by data space: human "existence" is no longer defined by the physical location of the body, but by virtual coordinates anchored in data streams.

Packer's luxury limousine in *Cosmopolis* stands as the most symbolic embodiment of spatial digitization. The vehicle, with its "Carrara marble floors and cork lining to muffle traffic noise" , is a hermetically sealed capsule cut off from the physical world outside. Yet it simultaneously operates as a portal to data space: the dense array of on-board screens receives real-time global financial data, news updates and market movements. Though Packer is physically situated on New York's streets, his "existence" is dispersed across the data streams of financial markets worldwide. His identity is determined not by *where he is*, but by *where his data resides*-the rise and fall of stock prices and the fluctuations of exchange rates are the coordinates that define his being. As some scholars point out, "In DeLillo's novel, the limousine symbolizes how capitalists balance capital circulation and wealth preservation. Within this singular, narrow spatiotemporal sphere, we ironically glimpse a microcosm of the boundless flows of the globalized economy."

The most profound expression of this spatial digitization is Packer's eroded ability to perceive and respond to events unfolding in physical space. When protests erupt across New York, traffic grinds to a halt and the city descends into chaos, Packer remains seated in his car, his attention fully absorbed by the screen displaying the yen exchange rate. The crisis unfolding in physical space registers for him as little more than a news headline on a display, while the fluctuating data on the screens constitutes the space where he truly "lives". Some scholars characterize this phenomenon as "New York City besieged by cybercapital, technological rationality and media signs": the city itself becomes a virtual space overlaid with data and signs, with physical reality reduced to mere "background noise" beneath this surface [5].

DeLillo's crafting of the limousine as a spatial form is particularly incisive. In the novel, Packer's luxury car is "massive and featureless"; this deliberate blankness, paired with its imposing scale, projects an overbearing sense of superiority and detachment. Packer "liked that cars looked alike. He needed this car because he thought it was a replica of a Platonic ideal"-the limousine's existence as a physical space has been thoroughly abstracted. It is no longer a concrete, embodied space, but a replaceable, idealized "data carrier".

DeLillo also repeatedly highlights a telling detail: Packer never makes eye contact with the people he speaks to or interacts with. Shiner, his head of technology, is the first person to board the car to discuss work. The novel states, "He no longer looked Shiner in the eye; he had not done so for three years." Nor does Packer look at Ibrahim, his driver: "There were moments when he thought he might look at the driver. But he never did." This detail exposes a deeper consequence of spatial digitization: within data space, the physical presence of others ceases to carry communicative weight. What truly matters is the data on the screen, not the person standing before one's eyes.

The most profound manifestation of this spatial digitization is that Packer loses the capacity to perceive and react to events taking place in physical space. When protests break out across New York, traffic paralyzes the city and order collapses, Packer remains in his limousine, his gaze fixed entirely on the yen exchange rate on his screen. The crisis of physical space registers for him only as a news item on a display, while the data fluctuations on the screen form the space of his real "life". Scholars have described this as a New York "besieged by cybercapital, technological rationality and media signs": the city itself devolves into a virtual space blanketed by data and signs, with physical reality reduced to nothing more than "background noise" beneath the overlay. By juxtaposing the screens inside Packer's limousine with the chaotic world beyond its windows, DeLillo creates a searing contrast: outside lie burning barricades and enraged crowds, inside flow calm, steady streams of data symbols-and Packer chooses the latter as his "reality" [1,6].

2.3. The Symbolization of Language

Having completed the virtual transformation of perceptual modes and spatial forms, the collusion between technology and capital further penetrates the linguistic dimension. Language, originally the core carrier that bears meaning and sustains interpersonal communication, is dismantled into transmissible, computable standardized units in the construction of the "digital siege". It gradually detaches itself from the real foundation of meaning and is reduced to a mere stream of data. In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo meticulously presents the full process of linguistic symbolization from three layers: the language of financial transactions, the logic of daily communication, and the expression of individual existence, while also exposing how this process hollows out the human world of meaning [4].

The first to undergo alienation is the specialized language of the financial sector. Inside Packer's limousine, the scrolling exchange rates, stock prices and trend curves on the screens constitute an independent system of signs. The rise and fall of the yen and futures fluctuations discussed by traders no longer correspond to the operating conditions of real industries or the actual flow of international trade; instead, they are tied solely to algorithmic models and trading practices themselves. The function of traditional economic language is to describe reality and reflect tangible value, yet in the novel's world of quantitative trading, signs form a closed loop of self-circulation: price fluctuations stem from the mutual influence of trading operations, trend curves are automatically derived from algorithmic models, and language no longer refers to reality but only to other signs within the system. For instance, Packer bets on the yen's trajectory throughout the story, yet his judgments are never based on Japan's economic fundamentals, but on the patterns of flickering numbers on the screen and quantitative indicators of market sentiment. The more sophisticated and abstract this financial language becomes, the further it drifts from real production and life, ultimately devolving into a pure sign game that serves only the proliferation of capital.

This logic of symbolization soon spreads from the financial sphere to everyday language. Most dialogues between characters in the novel are fragmented and flat, resembling the rapid transmission of information rather than warm intellectual exchange. Packer's conversations with his bodyguards, lovers and subordinates are often mixed with news flashes, market updates and fragmented trivialities, with arbitrary shifts in topic and rare instances of deep emotional expression or clashing viewpoints. The constant stream of text and sound from car radios and news push notifications fails to piece together a complete picture of society or deliver genuine cognitive advancement; it merely fills people's attention without cease. When the core function of language degenerates from "conveying meaning" to "transmitting information", writing loses its depth and weight, becoming fluid content indistinguishable from data. When people speak and receive information, they are essentially completing a process of data transmission and reception, no different in essence from machines exchanging signals [1].

More strikingly, the alienation of language and signs ultimately points to human existence itself. There is a highly prophetic scene in the novel: Packer sees an image of his

own corpse in advance on the screen of his digital watch. Death is inherently the most authentic and irreplaceable bodily experience, yet for Packer, he first "learns" of his own death through screen signs rather than through physical perception. This means that even self-existence, the most fundamental form of human cognition, has been brought within the definitional scope of the sign system. Who a person is, whether they are alive, and how they will die are no longer determined by their own lived experience, but can be presented and predicted by screens and data. This precisely corroborates Jameson's thesis on late capitalism: when capital penetrates every corner of culture and experience, the unified subject disintegrates; human beings cease to be creators of meaning and become mere nodes in an information network, defined and manipulated by an external sign system. Packer's identity, value and sense of existence are all bound to signs such as his asset figures and trading track record. Once the sign system spirals out of control, his entire existence loses its foundation [3].

In short, the symbolization of language is the final piece of the puzzle in the construction of the "digital siege". When perception is mediated by screens, space is reconstructed by data, and language is dismantled into data streams, the entire real world completes its transformation into a virtual sign system. Technology provides the technical means for this transformation, while capital drives its direction: everything must be made quantifiable, tradable and manipulable to serve the infinite proliferation of capital. Yet this sign system, thoroughly detached from the foundation of reality, also sows the hidden seeds of runaway disorder and collapse at its very root.

3. The Unraveling of the Digital Siege

3.1. From Instrument to Sovereign

In conventional understanding, capital is an instrument of humanity, serving human interests. Eric Packer, a billionaire asset manager, ought to be the master of capital: seated in a luxury limousine equipped with a full array of electronic devices, he directs global capital flows, commands his trading team, and appears to hold firm initiative over the market. Yet as the novel's narrative unfolds, this illusion of "mastery" gradually crumbles. Readers come to realize that all of Packer's actions are driven by the logic of capital accumulation, and his will has long been bound to the instinct of capital itself. The most direct manifestation is his obsession with yen trading. From the beginning to the end of the novel, Packer persists in shorting the yen, refusing to back down even as market trends consistently defy his judgment and as analysts and traders around him repeatedly warn of risks. This stubbornness stems not from rational judgment, nor from personal temperament, but from the projection of capital's instinct for infinite accumulation onto his person. For him, ceasing trading and accepting losses is unthinkable-his entire sense of worth is tied to the growth of capital. No longer the master who dominates capital, he has instead become the personified vehicle through which capital realizes its self-expansion.

Technological empowerment further amplifies capital's autonomy. Within the digital trading system, a vast number of operations require no manual execution: algorithmic models can automatically analyze data, execute trades, and adjust strategies. All humans need do is monitor screens and intervene on rare occasions. As algorithms grow increasingly sophisticated, the room for human intervention shrinks, and the entire system can operate almost entirely on its own [7]. For most of the novel, Packer's trading team stares at screens waiting for data shifts, while many actual trading orders are issued automatically by the system. Capital no longer depends on human decision-making; it has acquired its own operational rhythm and logic of judgment [8].

In his discussion of late capitalism, Fredric Jameson points out that at this stage, capital has penetrated every corner of society, forming an autonomous system beyond individual control. Human beings are no longer the subjects of history, but mere nodes within the capitalist system. Packer in *Cosmopolis* precisely corresponds to this judgment. He seemingly possesses everything-wealth, power, technological equipment at his

disposal-yet he cannot stop trading, cannot live outside the logic of the market, and even must yield his own itinerary to market fluctuations. All his choices are, in essence, inevitable outcomes dictated by the logic of capital accumulation. When capital gains autonomy, humans are transformed from manipulators into the manipulated-this is precisely the beginning of the digital siege's unraveling.

3.2. The Dissolution of Reality

Once capital attains autonomy, it quickly sheds its dependence on the real world. The prevalence of quantitative trading turns the operation of capital into an entirely self-contained game of signs; meanwhile, technology's replacement of human labor casts ordinary workers aside by the system. The former hollows out the material foundation of the digital siege, while the latter accumulates forces of resistance within the system. Together, they propel the system toward collapse.

First comes the complete decoupling of capital from the material world. Under the logic of traditional economics, financial transactions are anchored to the real economy: stock prices correspond to corporate performance, exchange rates reflect a country's trade levels, and all signs have real-world referents. But in the quantitative trading world of the novel, this correspondence has vanished. The flickering stock prices, exchange rates, and curves on the screen relate only to trading behavior and algorithmic models, bearing almost no connection to actual productive activity. When judging market trends, Packer never consults corporate financial reports nor concerns himself with industrial developments; he only analyzes the patterns of data on his screen and uses quantitative models to forecast trends. His firm generates profits through high-frequency trading, creating no physical products and serving no real demand-capital accumulation is achieved solely through the price differentials of buying and selling signs.

This reality-detached game of signs is precisely the feature of late capitalism described by Jameson: the focus of the economy shifts from production to finance and circulation; signs and images replace physical commodities; and the operation of society as a whole grows increasingly dependent on virtual digital systems. When capital no longer needs to engage with the material world, it forms a closed internal cycle, replicating and multiplying itself solely at the level of signs. This closed world of signs appears sophisticated and powerful, yet is in fact extremely fragile-having lost its anchor in reality, any internal fluctuation may be amplified infinitely, ultimately triggering the collapse of the entire system [8].

In sum, technology's empowerment of capital ultimately turns against humanity. Capital is alienated from an instrument into an autonomous sovereign, shifts from dependence on the material world to a closed internal cycle, and transitions from absorbing labor to excluding it. These three transformations turn the digital siege from an efficient resource allocation system into a self-devouring machine run amok. DeLillo's fictional allegory tells us that when the collusion of technology and capital is completely severed from reality and from human needs, its collapse is only a matter of time.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, grounded in Fredric Jameson's theoretical framework of the cultural logic of late capitalism, this paper presents a holistic analysis of the "digital siege" in *Cosmopolis*, following its complete arc from construction to loss of control.

Through the single-day narrative of Eric Packer's journey across Manhattan, DeLillo clearly delineates the mechanism of collusion between technology and capital. Taking screens, data and symbols as their instruments, the two forces deconstruct reality at successive layers - from modes of perception, spatial formations to linguistic systems - encoding the physical world into a tradable, manipulable system of virtual symbols. When capital, empowered by technology, casts off its instrumental nature, detaches from material production and progressively excludes human labor, this enclosed virtual system loses its anchor in reality, laying bare its inherent tendencies toward runaway disorder and systemic collapse.

From the unemployed traders displaced by algorithms depicted in the novel to the steadily devalued intellectual labor under the impact of today's artificial intelligence, DeLillo's writing from over two decades ago has already presciently foreseen the labor dilemmas and social symptoms of the digital age. The work is therefore far more than a postmodern urban fable; it constitutes a prophetic warning against tech-capital collusion. It reminds us that any digital system divorced from the foundation of reality and driven solely by the endless proliferation of capital is bound to disintegrate through self-backlash. In an age of breakneck technological advancement, upholding human value and the tangible warmth of lived reality holds the key to breaking free from the digital siege.

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