

Ruzbeh Babae

Zhang Haiqing

Cultural Landscape of Bourgeois Society in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

Abstract: This paper investigates “crises” happening in the cultural landscape of bourgeois society in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* through Raymond Williams's aesthetic theory of cultural materialism. Based on Williams's theory of “the base” and “superstructure”, the study aims to break down the myth of “crises” in capitalist society through analyzing other cultural meanings in bourgeois society, as cultural materialism sees all the society as a cultural phenomenon. Following Eric Packer's one-day experience in *Cosmopolis*, the chaotic and turbulent state quo in New York is revealed to the readers. Underneath the visible issues taking place in society are related cultural practices like the alternative and oppositional cultures as well as the emergent form of culture

Keywords: Base, Superstructure, Culture, Bourgeois Society.

1. Introduction

The present paper is to investigate crisis in Cultural landscape in Bourgeois society of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) through Raymond Williams's Marxist theory of Culture.

First and foremost, the application of the proposition of “the base” and “superstructure” in Raymond Williams's Marxist theory of cultural studies will be helpful to examine the causes of social crises in the contemporary capitalist system. According to Gigi and Kellner, “Any modern approach to a Marxist theory of Culture must begin by considering the proposition of a determining base and a determined superstructure, namely the proposition that social being determines consciousness.” (Gigi and Kellner, 2006:137) That is to say, the great importance should be attached to the relationship between “the base” and “superstructure” if a research is to be done from the Marxist culture theory.

However, in Raymond Williams's aesthetic theory of cultural materialism, the proposition of “base” and “superstructure” is not a fixed and definite relationship. The structure of “the base” and “superstructure” is not sort of “homologue structure” in which there may be no direct or easily apparent similarity and certainly nothing like reflection or reproduction between the superstructure process and the reality of the base, but in which there is an essential homology or correspondence of structures, which can be uncovered by analysis. As such, when it comes to economic systems in current societies, based on the traditional view on the fixed relationship between “base” and “superstructure”, the system of free market economy should have been only taken by capitalism while planned economy system should have been implemented

in socialism or Marxism. However, to some extent, it is far fetch from the reality. In such a way we are likely to emancipate our cognition from the above stereotyping perception of the relation between the “base” and “superstructure”. According to William’s aesthetic theory of culture, “the base is the more important concept to look at if we are to understand the realities of culture process” rather than virtually as an “object” in essentially “uniform” and “usually static ways” such as “the real social existence of man” (1998: 36). Certainly, the other concept of “superstructure” cannot be neglected in reevaluation “towards a related rang of cultural practices, and away form a reflected, reproduced, or specially dependent content and towards the specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process.” (Gigi and Kellner,2006:139)

In accordance with what mentioned above, “the base” is the reality of culture process and “superstructure” is such dynamic culture process. Due to the incompatible conflict between private-owned production materials and socialized mass production in capitalist system, economic crisis would take place regularly almost in each decade, like Asian Financial Crisis in 1998, and global economy turndown in 2008. Obviously, *Cosmopolis* happens to be setting in the aftermath of Dot-com Crisis and thus the study will see “cyber-capital crisis” as “the base” for social realities, which cause crisis of ideology and catalyze threats to social security like anti-capitalism riots, assassinations as well as gender relation, all of which will absolutely be analyzed respectively below. Naturally, all of “Ideology”, “anti-capitalism riot” and “assassination” as well as gender relations will be subsumed into the category of superstructure. As Marxist cultural theory argues, “superstructure is acquired as a main sense of a unitary ‘area’ within which all cultural and ideological activities can be placed.”(Gigi and Kellner, 2006: 140)

Owing to the relatively flexible relationship between “the base” and “superstructure” in Marxist culture theory, Williams believes that “the facts of alterative and oppositional forms of social life and culture can rise in relation to the effective and dominant culture” (Gigi and Kellner, 2006:139).

To handpick Don Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* for the analysis of cultural landscape in bourgeois society, it must be limited to all-round comprehension of crises of capitalist systems on the basis of such a “selective tradition” even though the novel also can be seen as a culture practice contributing to the effective dominant culture. As William observes, “the literature is there from the beginning as a practice in society and we are bound to recognize that the act of writing, the practices of discourse in writing and speech, the making of novel and poems and plays and theories, all this activity takes place in all areas of the culture” (1998:62).

2. Cultural Landscape in Bourgeois Society

In William's aesthetic theory of culture, "the base" is the reality of cultural process and "superstructure" means cultural and ideological activities. According to Williams "the middle-class culture is about the basic individualist idea and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intentions which proceed from that" (1998: 75). Therefore, in Bourgeois society, the middle-class culture dominates all fields in terms of social totality. However, such dominant culture is deemed as "selected tradition" for special social intention, so this 'selected tradition' is unable to completely embrace all forms of cultural meanings and practices. Cultural materialists believe that other forms of cultural meanings and practices such as emergent culture and the oppositional and alternative culture deserve equal attention in the analysis.

DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* is received as prescient for its views on the flaws and weaknesses of the international financial system and cybercapital. There are anti-capitalism riots in Time Square as Eric Packer, the protagonist, noticed in his luxurious car. In such particularly historical context, people of all walks of life begin to question the capitalist system and deny its power in social economy. Obviously, those groups of people demonstrate against "Capitalism" that takes charge of all fields like economy, culture, and politics as well as society. In a Capitalist institution, the means of production are largely or entirely privately owned while anti-capitalism indicates ideas and attitudes that oppose capitalism. In a Capitalist system, everything should be controlled or created by a minority of people or social elites rather than the mass, so be culture. Such private-centered mentality drives people to be greedy for their own interests and thus speculation in the stock market is so rampant in the advent of economy regression. However, anti-capitalism offers an egalitarian chance for all individuals to participate into production, which is well matched with what Williams calls "structuring of feeling", "the shared values of a particular group, class, or society" (Williams, 1998: 1-2)

2.1. Emergent Culture

Eric Packer as a self-made millionaire demonstrates not only the middle class culture, but also the working class culture because he starts business from scratch and climbs up social ladder by transferring from the working class to the middle class. He absolutely represents the 'lived experience' of both classes. The formation of a new class comes to consciousness of a new class. Thus, Eric's double cultural identities entail new meanings, new values, and new class in bourgeois society as Williams remarked, "emergent culture means new meanings and values, and new practices, new signification and experiences are continuously created." (Williams, 1998: 47). That is to say, the 'newness' in Eric is mainly because of his social outlook that is unable to be hemmed up in any one of social classes. One aspect of his social outlook derives from the middle culture in which everything in society proceeds from individualist idea

while the other part of his social value is influenced by the working-class culture and that is why he takes positive view on anti-capitalism riots.

Eric Packer takes on extreme individualism and does everything out of his own interests. On one hand, when he speculatively tries to manipulate the share market, he greedily desires to accumulate a pot of money during the turbulence in America stock market against the backdrop of dot-com crisis. As the embodiment of American financial capital, he interiorizes capital's structural contradictions, specially a destructive drive through which he constantly searches for a more profitable 'fix' (Marco, 2012: 25). Eric determines to push 'the logic of cyber-capital to new extremes' for the sake of making money. Especially, to the end of the novel, Eric tends to be on the way of self-destruction by killing his loyal bodyguard after understanding that the bodyguard is useless.

On the other hand, Eric's sexual encounters with different women such as Elise Shifrin, Didi Francher, and Jane Melan, to some extent, show his selfishness. All the relationships mingles with money and sex. Eric Packer and Elise Shifrin's marriage is like a combination of money and interests:

They'd married in the shroud of this unspoken accord. They needed the final term in the series. She was rich, he was rich; she was heir-apparent, he was self-made; she was cultured, he was ruthless; she was brittle, he was strong; she was gifted, he was brilliant; she was beautiful. That was the core of their understanding, the thing they needed to believe before they could be a couple. (*Cosmopolis*, 142)

Jane Melan, Eric's chief of finance, discusses about the situation of stock market in the wake of their sex:

"How com we' ve never spent this kind of time together?"

"Sex finds us out. Sex sees through us. That's why it's so shattering. It strips us of appearances..." (*Cosmopolis*, 165)

Ironically, Eric Packer holds a voracious appetite for speculation in the market as well as expressing his resentment to the dark side of capital system such as he likens unity of currency as a "Rat" that indicates unclean, parasitic, and vicious animals in English culture. When Eric converses with Michael Chin by saying "Russian Rat", "pregnant rat", "dead rats":

..."Yes, there is growing concern that the Russian rat will be devalued."

"White rats. Think about that."

"Yes. Pregnant rats."

"Yes, Major sell-off of pregnant Russian rats."

"Britain converts to the rat," Chin said.

"Yes. Join trend to universal currency."

"Yes. U.S. establishes rat standard."

“Yes. Every U.S. dollar redeemable for rat.”

“Dead rats.”

“Yes. Stockpiling of dead rat called global health menace.” (*Cosmopolis*,23-24)

Eric Packer shows hatred to a financial officer of IMF who was murdered by Benno Levin. Arthur Rapp is a capitalist practitioner in the international institution, representing conflicts with Eric’s own interests. Meanwhile, Eric’s hatred shows his indifference and cold-bloodiness to others as the beginning of the story by saying “he has no friends who he loves to harrow with a call.” (*Cosmopolis*, 1).

Besides, Eric Packer expresses his supporting attitude towards anti-capitalism riots in Time Square when observing the protests through his luxuriant car. He deems that protesters are vigor and drive to the market rather than damagers to capitalism and in the market culture those people cannot be eliminated from the capitalist system.

...The market culture is total. It breeds these men and women. They are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market-driven. They are traded on the market of the world. This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system. (*Cosmopolis*,90)

2.2 Alternative and oppositional Culture

The social riot and the assassination are hovering over *Cosmopolis*. Apparently, both of them threaten social stability. Tracing back to the dynamic relationship between the base and superstructure in Marxist theory of culture, anti-capitalism riots and assassination are playing “alternative” and “oppositional” roles in resisting economic crisis and social inequality in the capitalist system. Those terms of ‘Alternative’ and ‘oppositional’ can be interpreted as “There is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light.” (Gigi and Kellner,2006:141) The anti-capitalism demonstration is like a small-group solution to social crisis, properly belonging to political and ultimately revolutionary practices while the assassination is the individual behavior to solve social equality. Whether anti-capitalism protests or assassination happens in bourgeois society, they could be seen as the conflicts of different social classes especially when the economic crisis hits a society.

In conformity of the alternative and oppositional culture, the anti-capitalism riots and assassination can be seen as a collective and individual way to solve social crisis and inequality. The dominant social forces will try, in the conflicts that are destined to become more acute, to maintain their privileged position. And

the worker and the people who will be the victim of this barbaric evolution could put to flight the reactionary social and political forces (which are not 'liberal' as they like to dislike themselves). Furthermore, the dominant forces that resort to violence attempt to stop the workers' protest:

...there were police in tight formation advancing behind riot shield, helmeted men who moved with a totalistic grimness that made Kiniski seem to sigh...Projectiles came popping from tear-gas launchers and cops free-lanced in the crowd. (*Cosmopolis*, 89)

Assassination is the deliberate killing of a prominent person, usually for financial or political reason. It usually appears in the novel, films and other cultural forms as a way to challenge social stability. "Benno Levin", in *Cosmopolis*, murdered "Arthur Rapp" for the sake of financial reason. The assassination can be due to social conflicts between the working class and capitalism and that is the only way for Benno to pull himself out of the predicament:

The man down was Arthur Rapp, managing director of the International Monetary Fund. Arthur Rapp had just been assassinated in Nike North Korea. Happened only a minute ago. (*Cosmopolis*, 32)

The most striking part in the novel should be "the Confession from Benno Levin". The confession, in the text, shows that the murderer has no choice but to assassinate someone else for the sake of collecting a great deal of money. Specially, as Benno said in confession, "mercy" "touch" and "intimacy" can lead us to take blame for such twisted system. In fact, capitalism is the root of Benno's crime:

I wanted his pocket money for its personal qualities, not its value so much. I wanted its intimacy and touch, his touch, the stain of his personal dirt. I wanted to rub the bill over my face to remind me why I shot him (*Cosmopolis*, 58)

3. Conclusion

The relationship of base and superstructure in cultural materialism is not an absolute one but it is still compatible with social totality. The less absolute relationship offers possibility of other forms of cultural meanings and practices that are different from the dominant culture. Undoubtedly, Economy regression causes anti-capitalism riots. *Cosmopolis* occurs in a chaotic society where social riots and the assassination could possibly take place anytime and anywhere. Both of protests and assassination play "alternative" and "oppositional" roles in dealing with social crises.

References:

Delillo, Don. *Cosmopolis*. New York: Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc, 2003. Print.

Gigi, Durham & Kellner, Douglas. "*Raymond Williams's Base and Superstructure in Marxist Culture Theory.*" *Media and Cultural Studies Keywords*. Blackwell Publishing, 2006. P137-P143. Print.

Marco, Alessandra. "Late DeLillo, Finance Capital and Mourning from *the Body Artist* to *Point Omega* ." *49th parallel* 28.17535794 (2012): 1-33. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. revised ed. Pearson Education Asia Limited: Prentice Hall, John Storey, Hemel Hempstead, 1998. Print. *The Analysis of Culture* .