

DeLillo's Reevaluation of History

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Abstract

In his essay "The Power of History" (1997), Don DeLillo addresses the process of getting the elements for his novel *Underworld* (1997), and expresses how writers recreate the past through their use of language. An author does not want to tell people what they already know about a determined historical fact or figure. A novelist goes back to the archives, but he/she reviews all occurrences and reelaborates them according to his/her own interpretation. DeLillo's approach to History can be connected to the Postmodern perspective which intends to rethink the past in a critical way (Hutcheon, 1988, 1993). In his novels and short stories, the past is reevaluated through several historical moments, such as the case of the Sputnik, the missile crisis of 1962, President Kennedy's assassination. Moreover, powerful men in History, for instance, J. Edgar Hoover and Hitler are subverted. DeLillo demystifies History by breaking up with the traditional way of writing, establishing a confusion of voices, and inserting historical documents in the narrative to denounce their own narrativization. In a world where consumerism, advanced technology, and multinational capitalism prevail, it is more than necessary to rescue the historical past. The aim of this paper is to show, through some of DeLillo's texts, how he opens new possibilities of focusing a period in History and, consequently, the relevance of his work to the Brazilian readers when he desacralizes official History in order to try to make them have historical consciousness, since all certainties have ruined, mainly after September 11, 2001.

Introduction

More than ever, reviewing History has become a necessity. This attitude has turned out to be a fundamental issue for us to understand how history has been built over the years. All certainties have ruined in our present world. DeLillo, who writes against the system and approaches postmodern culture, has a large area to exploit and can play with official History. Since it is possible to know the past "through its textualized traces" (Hutcheon, 1993, p. 81), DeLillo makes the reader aware of the situation that there may be several different interpretations for the same fact. In this paper, I want to focus on DeLillo's ability to show multiple perspectives for a certain historical fact and to subvert historical figures. By mixing fictional characters and people who existed, the author reevaluates their roles in History and also the historical past.

Reevaluating History and Historical Figures

In his short story "The Black-and-White Ball" (published in 1996-republished with some changes in his novel *Underworld*-1997), J. Edgar Hoover and Clyde, his "staunchest aide in the Bureau" (p. 80) go to New York to take part in a ball:

It was called the Black-and-White Ball. A godlike gathering of five hundred, a masked affair, invitation only, dinner jacket and black mask for men, evening gown and white mask for women. (p. 82)

At first Hoover had not been invited, but he gave a word to Clyde and Clyde to someone “close” to Truman Capote, who was giving the party for Katharine Graham. It “was not difficult” for Edgar to get an invitation:

They were in the files, of course, a number of those involved in planning the event—all catalogued and dossered up to their eyeballs, and none of them eager to offend the Director. (p. 82)

Since “The file was everything, the life nothing” (p. 82), Edgar could have in the files anything about those people. He could create whatever it was necessary in order to try to prove what they wanted a person to be, or to have done, after all:

The dossier was a deeper form of truth, transcending facts and actuality. The second you placed an item in the file, a fuzzy photograph, an unfounded rumor, it became promiscuously true. (p. 82)

It is possible to see that the FBI files determined people’s lives, as much as the military dictatorship we had in Brazil did, since the DOPS (Departamento de Ordem Política e Social - Department of Political and Social Order) files were able to send many intellectuals, accused of being communists, to exile. Moreover, people were sent to jail, tortured and, several of them, killed.

Tanya Berenger, who did the masks, was also in the files:

She’d been accused at various times of being a lesbian, a Socialist, a Communist, a dope addict, a divorcée, a Jew, a Catholic, a Negro, an immigrant, and an unwed mother.

Just about everything Edgar distrusted and feared. (p. 83)

Hoover is shown here as someone who hated everything that he considered “different” from his conservative values. It is interesting to think of Hoover as a person who was ready to combat all the ideas that could threaten the establishment. He could not accept the idea of a demonstration against the Vietnam War:

“Protest. Outside the Plaza tonight.”

“What is it the bastards are protesting? Pray tell,” Edgar said in a tone he’d perfected through the years, a tight amusement etched in eleven kinds of irony.

“The war, it seems.”

“The war.” (p. 80)

Besides, urban guerrillas are “planning a garbage raid at 4936 Thirtieth Place Northwest, Washington, D.C.” (p. 80). The idea of having the garbage “on tour”, exposed to

the public, makes Hoover feel a certain apprehension. He wants to know if they have a dossier on those guerrillas, since

In the endless estuarial mingling of paranoia and control, the dossier was an essential device. Edgar had many enemies-for-life, and the way to deal with such people was to compile massive dossiers. Photographs, surveillance reports, detailed allegations, linked names, transcribed tapes—wiretaps, bugs, break-ins. (p. 82)

When Clyde tells Hoover that what they could do was to “arrest them and charge them” (p. 82), Hoover states: “Maybe I can sympathize with the Mafia over this” (p. 82). The possibility of having those people killed, as a Mafia godfather, reveals Hoover’s personality. The Director of the FBI is cruel, mean, and nobody was allowed to protest, to show dissatisfaction towards the system. Clyde points out that Hoover was “always half a gangster” (p. 82), and this is what DeLillo does in this text. He shows the Director as someone who was the holder of the truth, of *his* truth. In his essay “The Power of History” (1997), DeLillo states:

The novelist does not want to tell you things you already know about the great, the brave, the powerless and the cruel. Fiction slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and head colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror of restless nights. This is how consciousness is extended and human truth is seen new. (p. 63)

The role of literature in these cases is exactly what happens in “The Black-and-White Ball”: the characters existed, but they are reviewed in their intimacy. The readers can have another perspective of that historical figure.

For instance, it is possible to see that Hoover could create people’s lives, facts, whatever the thought that would be necessary for his interests. Hoover could recreate History, as the readers verify in the following passage: “He rearranged the lives of his enemies, their conversations, their relationships, their very memories, and he made these people answerable to the details of his creation” (p. 82).

Hoover acted as a writer, creating situations, things that could happen, and his enemies had to answer for things that they had not done. He could link whomever he wanted to the kind of action, ideology, he had imagined for that person. Once again, it is interesting to connect those circumstances to the military dictatorship in Brazil, a period in which people were accused of having committed several “crimes” against our nation, and even died under tortures. Now, there is a movement in Brazil to open up the files of the military dictatorship. People wish to see this done, since it would show the atrocities that happened in that dreadful time of Brazilian History. It can be an opportunity for reviewing our History too.

Hoover and Clyde listen to the protesters, those who want to “bring about the end of the existing order” (p. 84). According to Edgar, “it’s the old Bolshevik dream, and it’s happening here” (p. 84). For him, those who took part in demonstrations were on the Communist side. The crowd shouted at the guests of the ball: “Society scum!” “A dead Asian baby for every Gucci loafer!” “Vietnam! Love it or leave it!” “White killers in black tie!” (pp. 85, 86)

But Edgar would continue acting the way he wanted, with his dedication to the system, to the order, to the rules, as the readers can verify in the following passage:

Many people in the room were in the files. Not a single one of them, Clyde imagined, more accomplished in his occupational strokes than Edgar himself. But Edgar did not carry the glow. Edgar worked in the semi-dark, manipulating and bringing ruin. He carried the small wan grudging glory of the civil servant. (p. 86)

He had his duties and had to complete them in a form that would be the most interesting one for the structure that has to be kept at all costs. He had a routine to follow, and he would not ever change his way of thinking and trying to protect the system that he served.

In “The Black-and-White Ball”, DeLillo goes deep into Hoover’s idiosyncrasies. Hoover has the power to incriminate people, to make people suffer the consequences of the accusations he created for them. He does not want, however, to be connected to this dirty underworld. Everything around him had to be clean:

At home Edgar sat on a toilet that was raised on a platform, to isolate him from floorbound forms of life. And he’d ordered his lab people to build a clean room at the Bureau with unprecedented standards of hygiene. A white room manned by white-clad technicians, preferably white themselves, who would work in an environment completely free of contaminants, dust, bacteria, and so on, with big white lights shining down, where Edgar himself might like to spend time when he was feeling vulnerable to the forces around him. (pp. 82-83)

The readers can notice that Hoover could not accept diversity; white was the color of everything and everyone near him, and no other possibility could be taken into account.

This passage reminds the readers of an occurrence in DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997). When Hoover was attending the baseball game between the Dodgers and the Giants on October 3, 1951, he gets a picture on a page of *Life* magazine. He sees a picture by Pieter Bruegel, called *The Triumph of Death*. In this picture, there are dead people, skeletons, the whole scene is disgusting, and

Dear germ-free Edgar, the man who has an air-filtration system in his house to vaporize specks of dust—he finds a fascination in cankers, lesions and rotting bodies so long as his connection to the source is strictly pictorial. (p. 50)

The FBI had the files and Hoover could control people’s lives. He liked those signals of suffering, but he was far from the setting in which cruelty had happened.

In “The Power of History,” DeLillo states that in *Underworld*,

Hoover is a disinvention, real, conjectured, gambled on, guessed at. Hoover in his taut and raging selfhood. Hoover in his impregnability, an incitement to the novelist’s perennial effort to detect the hidden nature of things. (p. 62)

The writer shows Hoover as a person from whom people could not expect any kind of tolerance towards those who meant an indication of danger to the values he defended.

At the end of *Underworld*, J. Edgar Hoover meets another character, another Edgar, a nun, Sister Edgar. “Church and State” (Osteen, 2000, p. 259) meet in cyberspace, not in heaven. The two Edgars are together: “The bulldog fed, J. Edgar Hoover, the Law’s debased

saint, hyperlinked at last to Sister Edgar ..." (1997, p. 826). Sister Edgar, along with Sister Grace, tried to help a girl called Esmeralda, but she was raped and killed before they could do something for her. Since "everything is connected in the end" (p. 826), Sister Edgar and J. Edgar Hoover represent the failure of the system. The Church and the FBI (together with the CIA) cannot prevent violence from happening all over the world.

Another historical figure, President Kennedy, is DeLillo's focus through the missile crisis of 1962 in *Underworld*. DeLillo uses the comedian Lenny Bruce to write about some aspects of that period. Bruce makes fun of the nuclear war that could possibly occur and of President Kennedy's ability to negotiate with the Russians:

Because the Russians had put missiles into Cuba. ...

"You know what this is? This is twenty-six guys from Harvard deciding our fate." ...

"These guys wear boxer shorts with geometric designs that contain the escape routes they've been assigned when the missiles start flying." ...

What's Jack [Kennedy] supposed to say to him [Khrushchev]—a secretary gave me a handjob on the White House elevator? (pp. 504, 505, 507)

Lenny brings about the idea of a Kennedy who had charm and charisma, but this would not be enough to convince Khrushchev not to attack the U.S. That was the time for Kennedy to prove that he could save the world from a nuclear war, and that he was not only a handsome guy who had studied at Harvard. If the war happened, people would see "the end of history" (p. 508), so he had to be strong and intelligent enough to overcome that crisis.

In his novel *Libra*, DeLillo fictionalizes the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, and rejects the theory of the lone gunman stated by the Warren Commission. Through a series of events, the readers notice that the conspiracy may have gotten out of control, and something that was originally planned only to frighten the government and blame Castro, put an end to Kennedy's life. Kennedy's assassination is still a subject for debate. People can always think of the interests of different groups to kill Kennedy. According to DeLillo, in his text "The Fictional Man" "Oswald would not have walked two blocks to shoot at the President. But the President came to him" (Carnes p. 92). How much did Oswald know about the conspiracy? Did the period he lived in the Soviet Union make him a perfect person to be accused of the president's assassination? He wanted to enter history, and got it in the worst way.

The figure of Hitler is addressed by DeLillo in *Running Dog*. The author shows a fragile Hitler in a film imitating Charlie Chaplin. This Hitler is a tired man, and here is the counter-history: a man whose image is connected to strength is portrayed as an ordinary person. The readers can be in touch with another Hitler, a physically weak one, against all expectations, including those of the characters in the novel who were looking for an alleged porno film with the *Führer*.

It is important to mention that DeLillo has a style that breaks up the traditional way of writing. There is a confusion of voices, pronouns (I/he), and sometimes the readers have to reread the passages to know who is speaking. He inserts documents in the narrative to show the narrativization of these texts. The scenes change in cinematographic speed, the rhythm is fast, just like our contemporary life. The parts are fragmented and the readers have to put them together.

In this period of war, it is important to mention that DeLillo also discusses this subject in some of his writings, as it happens in the short story "Human Moments in World

War III" (1983). It shows two astronauts orbiting the earth, in order to protect it from attacks. They "swing out into high wide trajectories, ... to inspect unmanned and possibly hostile satellites" (p. 118; p. 120). The piece of information that "The banning of nuclear weapons has made the world safe for war" (p. 120) allows the readers to see that wars will continue, no matter what. There are no nuclear weapons, and this may enable men to start a war in an easier way than it was before the banning.

The two astronauts get news from the Colorado Command, but one of the astronauts and first-person narrator states that: "they are not telling us things they feel we shouldn't know, in our special situation, our exposed and sensitive position. ... The war is going well, they tell us, although it isn't likely they know much more than we do" (p. 120). All the time, there are details of actions during the wars that the general public cannot know. This is the way History is also built, through decisions that are made in the underground. Nobody knows the whole truth. Therefore, it is essential to be aware of the fact that there is not only one truth, but several different approaches to the same subject.

Vollmer, one of the astronauts, looks out of the window and sees the earth, "the colors and all" (p. 126). People have to think of the beauties of our planet and not destroy all the good things we have in the name of greed.

As far as terrorists are concerned, it is well known that DeLillo deals with this theme in his novels *Players*, *The Names*, and *Mao II*. This is now part of History, or rather, terror is making History. Furthermore, the war on terror is changing people's everyday lives. As DeLillo states in *Cosmopolis* (2003): "It is the violent act that makes history and changes everything that came before" (p. 154).

In *Players*, terrorists choose to attack the New York Stock Exchange, because they "want to disrupt their system, the idea of worldwide money" (1989, p. 107). Terrorism has led people all over the globe to reevaluate values, to try to understand differences.

In *The Names* and *Mao II*, DeLillo works with deaths and kidnapping. Nowadays, terrorists use magnetic tapes, videos and the Internet to spread fear. It is necessary to find out how to restrain their actions without causing the death of innocent people.

In his short story "The Uniforms" (1970), DeLillo portrays a group of terrorists who attack and kill without having any specific reason, but they want to attack structures that are connected to the system: a tank with products made by Dow Chemical, people who transported bananas "picked by oppressed workers" (p. 5), "a film crew shooting a television commercial for a movie about television" (p. 8), a former colonel who was an industrialist and his wife, "a group of six middle-class white Protestants" who were riding golf-carts (p. 9). The group has the following members:

The girl with the Apache headband joined them at the crossroads. Jean-Claude considered her rape-material but Bradley, who was new at this, tossed her a Sten gun and named her Harlow. Bradley, an American, was the giver of names. Jean-Claude, who had been at the barricades outside the second Renault factory, was the theoretician and heartless bastard. Hassan was back at the ex-farm editing film clips of the attack on the police barracks. Doung lectured at the University on Tuesdays. (p. 4)

The readers can verify that these terrorists lead their lives in the community, as common citizens:

They went into the village and window-shopped all afternoon. ... Later Bradley went through his collection of money-saving coupons for Maxim, Crest, Dial, Lucky Strike, Comet, Sylvania and Buick Electra. He spread the coupons on the table and they all looked at them, admiring the bright colors. (pp. 6-7)

It is true that Jean-Claude “broke one of the windows and took a red fez” (p. 7), and Bradley shot the shopkeeper. However, they go to stores and take part in the normal routine of the places.

Closing Remarks

DeLillo wrote “The Uniforms” in 1970, so it is not surprising that people wanted to know his reaction towards September 11. And this is what he does in his text “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on terror and loss in the shadow of September” (2001). The author states, “Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists” (p.33), but, at the end, when there is a “woman on the prayer rug” (p.40), praying in the direction of Mecca, he shows that New York (and America) will continue to receive people from distinct cultures, and they can enjoy democracy in their own way. Thus, through several of his novels and short stories, DeLillo makes readers review the world in which they live, reevaluate History, and think of the future.

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