

DON DELILLO'S ADAPTED NOVELS: THE TREATMENT OF LANGUAGE, SPACE, AND TIME ON SCREEN

LAS NOVELAS ADAPTADAS DE DON DELILLO: EL TRATAMIENTO EN LA PANTALLA DEL LENGUAJE, EL ESPACIO Y EL TIEMPO

LAURA ALVAREZ TRIGO

Universidad Complutense de Madrid
lauraa13@ucm.es

151

Abstract

Don DeLillo is an author who pays special attention to language, time, and space when constructing characters' identity as well as their milieu. Considering this aspect of his fiction, the present article looks at how cinematic adaptations of his novels translate time, space, and the use of language onto the screen. Two of DeLillo's novels have been adapted so far: *Cosmopolis* (DeLillo 2003) by David Cronenberg in a 2012 movie of the same name, and *The Body Artist* (DeLillo 2001) by Benoît Jacquot under the title *À Jamais* (2016). In light of the importance that the aforementioned elements play in the author's works, this article delves into how they are represented in the two adaptations and analyzes the role that they play in the movies compared to the novels.

Keywords: Don DeLillo, film adaptation, time, space, language.

Resumen

Don DeLillo es un autor que pone mucho peso en el lenguaje, el tiempo y el espacio a la hora de construir la identidad de los personajes y su entorno. Considerando este aspecto de su ficción, el presente artículo analiza cómo las adaptaciones cinematográficas de sus novelas trasladan el tiempo, el espacio y el

uso del lenguaje a la pantalla. Dos de las novelas de DeLillo han sido adaptadas hasta el momento: *Cosmopolis* (DeLillo 2003) por David Cronenberg en 2012 a una película con el mismo título, y *The Body Artist* (DeLillo 2001) de Benoît Jacquot bajo el título *À Jamais* (2016). Dada la importancia que los elementos aquí señalados tienen en la obra del autor, este artículo ofrece un análisis de cómo se representan en las dos adaptaciones, explorando el papel que juegan en el cine en comparación con las novelas.

Palabras clave: Don DeLillo, adaptación cinematográfica, tiempo, espacio, lenguaje.

1. Introduction

There has been a notable increase in the acquisition of the film rights to Don DeLillo's novels since the publication of his latest one, *The Silence*, in October 2020. Some months earlier, in June of the same year, Emma Cline published a short story in *The New Yorker* which takes its title, "White Noise", from one of DeLillo's most famous novels. In this story, a fictional Harvey Weinstein thinks that his neighbor is none other than Don DeLillo and, having a cordial relationship with him, Weinstein imagines acquiring the rights to produce a movie based on the piece's namesake novel. In January 2021, it was announced that director Noah Baumbach would be adapting *White Noise* and that the film would be starring actors Adam Driver and Greta Gerwig (Barajas 2021). A limited series adaptation of *Libra* was announced very shortly afterwards and Uri Singer, who acquired the rights to *White Noise*, also did so for *The Silence* and *Underworld* (Sheehan 2021). It has been disclosed that the latter will be made into a Netflix series by director Ted Melfi (Fleming 2021). Some years before this set of acquisitions, in 2015 director Alex Ross Perry was revealed to have optioned the rights to an adaptation of *The Names* (Jagernauth 2015). However, so far only two out of the eighteen novels published by Don DeLillo have been adapted for the screen: his 2003 novel *Cosmopolis*, directed by David Cronenberg in 2012 to a movie of the same name; and *The Body Artist*, published in 2001, adapted by French director Benoît Jacquot under the title *À Jamais* in 2016. This article explores why film adaptations are particularly relevant to the study of DeLillo's work when focusing on the literary versus cinematic representations of language, time, and space, and notes how the two adaptations offer quite different approaches to these elements. The analysis also considers whether the presentation of these three elements in the movies can establish a dialogue with the original work that furthers the field of Don DeLillo studies.

DeLillo is an author who has repeatedly remarked on the influence that cinema and media have had on his work, so how his novels are adapted for the screen

might open up a dialogue with his literary work is an interesting line of inquiry. The importance that this author places on communication media is highlighted in various ways, from his acknowledgment of the influence of some movie directors on his writing to explicit references to movies and movie characters. The author has recognized the influence of director Jean-Luc Godard (LeClair 1982) and in many of his novels other film directors such as Michelangelo Antonioni and Akira Kurosawa are explicitly mentioned. DeLillo has been praised for being a writer “whose tireless effort to frame the excess of media and technology has guaranteed the survival of the novel in a hyper-kinetic culture” (Philipp 2003). It can be seen that cinematic allusions do not merely work as a mere wink to readers in the know but rather they help us realize that DeLillo's narratives are often built upon a common mediascape shared by characters, narrator, and readers. Movie references appear as a manifestation of the narrative interest in featuring concepts, names, and language that originate in the media, highlighting the industry's central role in the milieu of the novel. Although this might not be specific to Don DeLillo, this inclusion of communication media references showcases the intended connection between his literary production and the world of cinema. The author devises a playful game of intertextual layers that can put the films in conversation with the novels as well as between themselves. Across DeLillo's entire oeuvre, the cinematic atmosphere that the author purposefully creates serves to set up an inviting framework in which to approach the movie adaptations that this article explores.

153

When considering film adaptations, there is a well-known tendency to rank and compare the novel and the film, establishing which one is superior to the other. This type of hierarchical analysis often leads to “a suppression of potentially more rewarding approaches to the phenomenon of adaptations”, missing the chance to see them as “an example of convergence among the arts” (McFarlane 1996: 10). This article, rather than focusing on fidelity, offers a comparison of how some of the two novels' central elements are represented. Hence, the key interest of this analysis is to consider how these two adaptations engage with language, time, and space as key aspects in the narrative. The article explores the use of cinematic and visual resources in the representation of these key aspects and whether the result is in any way akin to how they appear in DeLillo's novels, whether the movies rely solely on content taken from the literary works or whether, on the contrary, they refocus the interest of the text altogether leaving behind all or some of these interests.

2. Framing the Study of Adaptations

An important theoretical framework concerning the position of a film relative to the original text is that of Karen E. Kline's four critical paradigms of film adaptation:

translation, pluralist, transformation, and materialist. Kline herself recognizes the value in considering all paradigms as equally valuable, for not doing so “would ignore a complexity of factors that mitigate in the individual case, including the linguistic qualities of the specific novel and the socio-historical circumstances of the film’s creation” (1996: 70). In this vein, let us begin by noting how the different paradigms can serve as useful approaches for looking at the adaptations here analyzed. The translation paradigm focuses on remaining as close as possible to the original text, especially “towards the narrative elements, such as character, setting and theme” (70), attaching more value to the literary tradition over filmmaking. The present article does not privilege the literary over the cinematic work. However, it does recognize the novel as the starting point that establishes the elements to be explored in the adaptations. The pluralist paradigm considers that adaptation “exists in its own right” (72) but helps convey what Dudley Andrew refers to as the “spirit” of the novel (in Kline 1996: 72). While the key elements selected for this study do not necessarily convey the whole “spirit” of these novels, they do notably contribute to its construction. Kline’s third paradigm is transformation. This approach “consider[s] the novel raw material which the film alters significantly, so that the film becomes an artistic work in its own right” (72). Following this paradigm, some traces of the original text should be maintained but some privilege is given to the adaptation over the novel. The last paradigm is the materialist. It considers the film as “a product of cultural-historical processes” valuing the adaptation over the original text (74). It understands the cultural-historical context as the most important aspect, almost disregarding the original text. Nevertheless, according to Kline “the film’s literary source is not [completely] overlooked” (74). When looking at adaptations, it is worth keeping in mind the possibility of looking at the film separately from the novel, especially in those cases in which the central themes are reworked so much that, when analyzing the film, one needs to leave behind the limitations imposed by the thematic interests of the novel in favor of other important highlights.

Don DeLillo’s preoccupation with the use of language and its complexities is evidenced in his rhetoric and stylistic elements. Ubiquitous consumption of media and a lack of interpersonal connections are often present in his works, and they are most easily appreciated in the type of language and grammar that his narrative and dialogues showcase. Characters’ perception of their own consciousness and their attempts at attaining some form of human connection are profoundly affected by the media-saturated society they inhabit. Numerous scholars have already extensively discussed these characteristics, most notably David Cowart in his seminal work *Don DeLillo and the Physics of Language* (2002). DeLillo’s novels offer an exploration of individuals’ ability to communicate through detached and almost disconnected interactions, which are highly influenced by their mass media

consumption. The author's work often revolves around characters trying and failing to communicate amongst themselves while surrounded by mass media productions—from terrorist violence on the news to advertising in supermarkets and compulsive re-watching of an autobiographical documentary. In this context, interpersonal communication fails where media messages succeed, setting the grounds for a critique of American society. The form that dialogues take, built upon seemingly unnatural and disconnected utterances, is one of the ways in which the author's preoccupation with language is manifested. Some critics have singled out the style of his dialogues as an example of poor craftsmanship on the part of the author, arguing that "the sounds they produce are so monotonous that it's not only hard to tell who's speaking, it's a mystery why they're even bothering" (Kirn 2003). While it is true that oftentimes conversations do not seem to have a specific purpose, as other scholars such as Mark Osteen and David Cowart have observed, this apparent contrarian construction of dialogue is not only purposeful but also ensures a particular reading of the characters and their environment (Osteen 2000; Cowart 2022).

As for the significance of places in DeLillo's works, the settings and descriptions of spaces are highly influenced by post-industrialism, depicting big city streets filled with high skyscrapers. Such a representation of the importance of the city environment helps the author construct the archetypal urbanite character who often figures as the protagonist in his work. Despite the overwhelming environment that populated cities are associated with, those characters who live in the city usually find themselves in a position of privilege that tends to be connected to their capacity to watch and control others. This is the case in *Cosmopolis*, where the view of the city space is presented through the detached vantage point of Eric, the powerful rich young protagonist of the novel who is driven around the city in his limousine. Not only can he see the entire city, as it were at his feet, but he can also see the future on the vehicle's screens. The position of observer surpasses the act of inhabiting the space. DeLillo's fiction presents two main types of places: the overpopulated cities described above and isolated deserts where the protagonists have their retreats (e.g. *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, *Point Omega*, among others). These uncolonized spaces open up the possibility of inhabiting a place that would allow for a different type of self and often also for artistic creation. This type of enclave is found in *The Body Artist*, in which Lauren stays in Rey's house after his passing. The potential of visual language to represent these two kinds of spaces that Don DeLillo portrays in these two works justifies space as the second element of interest in this analysis.

Finally, the passage of time is closely intertwined with the aforementioned two opposing spaces. They, respectively, cause a sense of fast-paced meaningless existence (the overpopulated city) and a loss of awareness of the passage of time

itself (the isolated house). Both situations tend to cause DeLillo's characters to feel as if they were trapped in time. This is sometimes explored in his fiction through experimentation with the literary form and a desire to overcome the limitations of present, past, and future. The kind of stasis that DeLillo portrays in his fiction is of great interest when analyzing the kind of cinematic resources employed to represent time in the adaptations. The connection between space and time has led DeLillo scholars to explore the chronotope in his works, that is, the representation of time and space through language and discourse (for an example of this, see Falconer). When considering the visual representation of space, one cannot forget how it is in fact associated with the representation of time in both adaptations. Ultimately, language, space, and time are distinct key elements in DeLillo's fiction that provide insight into the postmodern environment portrayed in the narratives while, at the same time, they highlight the underlying concerns that the novels are dealing with. This article aims to elucidate whether these elements point toward the same concerns in the cinematic adaptations of DeLillo's work.

3. *Cosmopolis*

DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* follows a day in the life of Eric Packer, a young millionaire who is crossing the city in his limousine to get a haircut while he worries about global financial markets. This novel "serves as a cultural artifact participating in the reconceptualization of time and space" (Noble 2008: 61), due to the protagonist's capacity to see the future combined with both the very short timeframe of the novel and the city space being seen from the confined space of the limousine. The novel has been widely read as a metaphor and critique of postmodern society and the struggles caused by the abusive capitalist system. For instance, David Harvey has defined *Cosmopolis* as an illustration of the "time-space compression" of the postmodern experience in a global, post-industrial world (in Philipp 2003). Eric Packer reflects on death, money, and technology while moving around a postmodern cityscape in his limousine surrounded by technological advances that embody what seems to be a confusing integration of changes in communication and space. In the imagery of the film, some of these key elements are reinforced through the visual language, including art, signs of wealth, and the almost constant presence of screens. Technological advances represent the integration of changes in communication and space that is not lost in the cinematic adaptation. The only key difference in terms of plot between movie and novel is that, in the latter, Eric is able to see his own dead body in the future on the screen of his watch while in the movie his death is neither seen nor heard; only anticipated before the final fade to black and the rolling of the credits.

Dialogues in the movie, almost invariably, follow the translation paradigm. Hence, they are for the most part reproduced verbatim from the novel. The careful word choice and phrasing found in the novel are emphasized in Cronenberg's work thanks to the intonation and non-naturalistic performances of the actors. Consider, for instance, the first conversation between Eric and Elise, the young millionaire woman he has recently married:

“Your eyes are blue”, she said. [...]

“Eat breakfast yet?”

“No”, she said.

“Good. I'm hungry for something thick and chewy”.

“You never told me you were blue-eyed”. (DeLillo 2003: 16-17)

The same conversation is exactly reproduced in the movie (Cronenberg 2012: min. 6). This dialogue takes place when Eric, while being driven across the city in his limousine, notices his wife in the taxi driving next to him. The couple has been married for twenty-two days and they are portrayed as having a very distant, almost stranger-like, relationship. The detachment they treat each other with, along with the abrupt changes in topic mid-conversation, are there every time they meet. In terms of the narrative, there are moments of observation between different conversations (and sometimes in the middle of them) in which novel-Eric takes the time to observe people on the streets and contemplate their situation. These passages, in free indirect speech, allow DeLillo to dig deeper into his protagonist. Some of the information about what Eric observes is translated into the movie through scenes that the audience can see through the windows of the limo, mostly behind Eric. The passage of time is perceived as less contemplative in the movie. First, thanks to the quick cuts that jump from Eric's encounter with one person to the next inside his limousine and, second, as the audience needs to pay attention to what Eric is discussing inside the limo with his employees and/or lovers at the same time that they need to observe what is happening around Eric on the streets. For instance, while Eric discusses the importance of time with Vija Kinski, his “Chief of Theory”, a protest unfolds around them. As Eric pours two glasses of transparent vodka shown against the bluish glow of the screen, a crowd moves rapidly around them, fighting with his security guard, spray-painting the limo, jumping on cars, and brandishing a giant rat dummy.

The issue of time in *Cosmopolis* is highly conditioned by the fast-moving pace of the post-industrial era. Such concern is explicitly discussed in the narrative, for instance, when Eric is thinking about automated teller machines and considers that it “was anti-futuristic, so cumbrous and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated” (DeLillo 2003: 54). Interestingly enough, this brings about once again the connection between time and language, as language in itself is becoming outdated

according to the discussions that Eric has with his employees, as the times are moving way too fast for everyone and everything. Another way in which the novel plays with the linearity of time is through the two sections of the novel entitled “*The Confessions of Benno Levi*” (italics in the original). These passages are transcriptions of Benno Levi’s diary, reminiscent of Oswald’s historic diaries reproduced in DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988). These are not included in the movie, but the conversation that Benno and Eric have at the end is retained almost in its entirety. These passages in the novel not only interrupt the linear narration of Eric’s day but are also presented in inverse order, as the diary’s first entry is “NIGHT” (DeLillo 2003: 55), hence after Benno has killed Eric, and the second, “MORNING” (149). Ultimately, these passages directly affect the perception of time by interrupting the rhythm of the narrative, which does not occur in the adaptation.

The postmodern era that concerns DeLillo is a “society [that] experiences not only an altered temporal/spatial consciousness but also increasingly accelerated rates of change” (Noble 2008: 58). The fact that people have not caught up with the times they are living in is embodied in the narrative quite nicely in the prophetic power of the screens Eric watches inside his limousine. In his review of the novel, John Updike discusses the subject of time in relation to Eric’s perception of events being conditioned by his screens, arguing that this “temporal dislocation recurs, indicating an underlying shift in the past-future paradigm” (Updike 2003). Cronenberg’s *Cosmopolis* offers a very particular take where the importance of screens in the narrative appears to be emphasized by how unnatural both the background and the limousine look thanks to the movie’s cinematography. Screens are in fact a central element in the protagonist’s journey and are closely linked to the construction of chronotope in the narrative. First of all, they are the medium that allows him to transcend time. They provide the narrative with “a paradoxical insight into the mediated nature of human time” (Anker 2017). The screens are where Eric sees “things that haven’t happened yet” (DeLillo 2003: 22; Cronenberg 2012: mins. 10-11). In the novel, there are also spycams installed recording both the inside and the outside of the limo. Eric witnesses himself doing things on screen that he does “a second or two after” (22) and also often checks them to see what is happening on the outside. The city space is much less prominent in the movie than in the novel. The novel notes different streets and famous New York locations such as Times Square while the movie does not focus on showing specific locations. In the novel, Eric often stops between conversations, or mid-conversation sometimes, to stare at the city and the buildings. At some point, he even puts his head out of the sunroof of the car to look at the towers, “so common and monotonic, tall, sheer, abstract [...]”, buildings that “were in the future, a time beyond geography” (36), a scene that is absent from the movie.

Cronenberg's visual narrative relies on the windows of the limo to show the audience what is happening on the street but, at the same time, it reinforces Eric's detachment and disengagement with the world by having him not show as much interest as novel-Eric in what is going on in the streets around him. The spectral glow of the screens that provides the scene with a sort of futuristic cyber quality, "the glow of cybercapital" (DeLillo 2003: 78), as Vija Kinski calls it, is kept in the movie. These glowing lights are mostly a bright light blue, playing with both the quality of space and time and, most notably, emphasizing the coldness that permeates human interaction inside the limousine. The fact that Eric perceives time differently from the rest of the world is also seen in the comparison between the inside and the outside of the limo. The capacity to control time through "enormous wealth" and to see the future emphasizes what Eric has been discussing with Vija and her assertion that "money makes time" (DeLillo 2003: 79; Cronenberg 2012: mins. 34-35). In the movie, as the images of frantic and violent happenings outside the safe space of the vehicle are shown, it is highlighted that Eric and Vija are perceiving time as if it were much slower given how contemplative they act. As opposed to the protesters outside the limousine, they have time to discuss theoretical approaches instead of having to take action. The space where Eric and Vija are sitting inside the vehicle is soundproof and, in the film, accompanied by slow music and a muffled rhythmic thumping caused by the crowd pushing the limousine from the outside, which rocks both of them quite violently, although they remain impassive.

159

The spatial background works to construct a highly mechanized and materialistic world. Both the novel and the movie paint an image of the city saturated with wealth and skyscrapers. Time then functions as a "mimetic element that is repeatedly invaded and deformed by the false nervous systems of markets and their surrogate machines, against any willful resistance" (Veggian 93). Overall, this helps establish a critique of late capitalism, particularly of the fast-paced environment of the global markets in which Eric speculates and has been trying to control. Besides the limousine and the market, wealth finds another signifier in the novel in art, which turns out to be intertwined with space. Eric discusses in the following conversation with Didi, one of his lovers, the possibility of buying the Rothko Chapel:

"I thought you'd be thrilled about the painting. One painting. You don't have an important Rothko. You've always wanted one. We've talked about this".

"How many paintings in his chapel?"

"I don't know. Fourteen, fifteen".

"If they sell me the chapel, I'll keep it intact. Tell them".

[...]

"Forgive the pissy way I say this. But the Rothko Chapel belongs to the world".

"It's mine if I buy it". (DeLillo 2003: 27-28)

From this conversation, it can be seen that Eric's desire to acquire the Rothko Chapel originates mostly in his desire to show power and wealth. He argues that he can have it just because he can afford it. The Rothko Chapel is a very particular space. Both a religious building and a museum of sorts, the Chapel represents a sense of non-time. Most importantly, by approaching it with the logic of the market (i.e. "It's mine if I buy it" [2003: 28]), it evokes how a "non-place church normalizes the banality of consumer capitalism" (Sanders 2016: 71). Eric desires this type of symbolic space that helps him approach some form of non-time and non-place. This is exemplified in many of the spaces he comfortably occupies throughout the novel, from the limousine where he spends most of his day to the barbershop and the hotel room where he has sex with one of his security guards. Employing the resource of the screen in a very interesting way, the movie shows the Rothko Chapel on Eric's screen as he has the above-quoted conversation with Didi. The role that art (especially painting) plays in emphasizing the significance of space is not lost in the screen adaptation. The opening credits of Cronenberg's *Cosmopolis* show strips of white, gray, and blue paint falling on a parchment-like background, forming shapes that are reminiscent of a Jackson Pollock painting. These scenes reinforce the importance of art in the high-class space Eric inhabits and, moreover, it adds a new layer to the construction of his character. Rothko's paintings will later appear in the end credits, a more direct reference to the novel, but also heightening the signification of the ending as death.

160

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, Cronenberg's adaptation remains quite faithful to the source material except for the removal of Eric's vision at the end. Through the acting, the movie has its characters behave in an extremely contrived manner, maintaining in most cases the unnatural dialogues verbatim from the novel. The false-looking scenes along with contrived and measured performances reinforce the whole environment signified in the novel. The closing line of the novel deals with time. Eric sees his dead body on his watch's screen but is still alive, "waiting for the shot to sound" (DeLillo 2003: 209). The certitude that he is going to die is not so plausible in the movie as it is in the novel although, I would contend, it can be intuited through Pattison's acting. The murder that has not yet occurred in the present time is translated into the movie with a cut to black before Benno fires his gun. The gunshot, just as in the novel, never actually comes and it is neither seen nor heard. This last moment of stasis is relevant to the understanding of time as, following Lacan, Eric is left to a "symbolic death and real death" (Garrigós 2015: 527). While DeLillo's Eric's end "implies a concept of time as simultaneous" Cronenberg's "is left stuck in time" (527). The movie's position toward the malleability of time is left unclear but can perhaps be inferred from the dialogue through which the narrative suggests that Eric can see things that others can't and when Jane Melman, his chief of finance, tells him he is "the

seer” (DeLillo 2003: 46, Cronenberg 2012: min. 24). In the novel, it is most clearly implied that this refers to things that have not happened yet. However, this is expressed in the movie in a more symbolic way through audiovisual language. Despite the explicitly magical element being left out of the movie, the complete surrealism of Eric’s behavior (along with the way they are acted) can cause a sense of the uncanny in the narrative as if everything we are watching is staged, where coincidences are too much. The director’s choice to keep those lines of dialogue that reference Eric’s seer abilities cannot be thought of as incidental.

Cosmopolis follows closely DeLillo’s style of conversation as the script takes most of the original dialogue verbatim from the novel. The author creates a disturbing feeling of alienation in the novella through dialogues that seem either rehearsed or uninterested exchanges between people who do not care too much about what the other has to say. Meanwhile, in Cronenberg’s movie, the mystification of time stems from a very different construction of non-linearity. While in the novel the unusual sense of time is due to the actual witnessing of future events in the movie, it is connected to the subjective perception of time as the characters are entrapped in the sphere of late-capitalism. This can be appreciated, for instance, in the way characters keep entering the limousine to hold meetings, and even for a medical exam. This speaks of the fact that Eric cannot allow himself to waste any of his time, and needs to have all sorts of meetings during his drive to the hairdressers’. Hence, time is associated with capitalism and the way that the capitalist mentality frames our conceptualization of time. The visuals, offering a combined representation of the wealth and privilege inside the limo in contrast with the messy protests outside that can be seen through the windows of the vehicle, draw the audience’s attention to the negative aspects of extreme wealth much more explicitly than the novel does. In terms of the use of color, cold tonalities are very prominent inside the limousine created by the screens and the LED lights that surround them. The bright whites and blues are traditionally associated with death and technology, both themes that permeate DeLillo’s novel. By making a film so similar to the source material through the literal reproduction of dialogues, characters, and plot, the acting also helps punctuate scenes that in the novel might not feel so violent, direct, and/or fast-paced. To help achieve this, the actors often speak very fast and with a somewhat unnatural prosody that, once again, highlights the interest in time.

161

4. *À Jamais (The Body Artist)*

Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* has been widely discussed in terms of the use of language, as it is one of its most evident themes. Careful attention to language is most noticeable in how the author “consistently deploys nouns *en masse* and at the

occasional expense, if not exclusion, of verbs” (Jelfs 2011: 146). Constructing sentences in this way creates a gap between what is expected of dialogue and what is found in the narrative. The importance that each individual word has for the narrative is reinforced by the novel being one of DeLillo’s shorter works. Some (mostly American) critics saw its brevity as a disappointment, especially because it was published right after his most lengthy work. For instance, Tom Deignan complained about DeLillo following *Underworld* “with a slim novella that conceivably could be used as a bookmark for its hefty, much acclaimed predecessor” (2001: 28). *The Body Artist* follows a period in the life of Lauren Hartke, a performance artist who has married a much older film director named Rey. After Rey commits suicide by gunshot in his first wife’s apartment, Lauren begins to encounter a man who looks like her late husband but seems unable to communicate properly. The novella explores her grieving process through this man whom Lauren nicknames Mr. Tuttle and whose nature and existence remain unexplained. Toward the end, the narrative includes a review of Lauren’s performance piece, *Body Time*, which explores trauma, time, and loss.

162

The Body Artist helps us understand how DeLillo’s preoccupation with language has expanded throughout his career. In this work, the narrative tackles the subject of language through a character that operates outside both language and time. Confusion and overlapping of time are manifested in conversations between Lauren and Mr. Tuttle, for example: “‘It rained very much.’ ‘It will rain. It’s going to rain.’” (DeLillo 2001: 44). This strange man who appears unexpectedly in Lauren’s house is capable of producing speech by repeating sentences (or variations of sentences) that he has heard from Lauren and, sometimes, conversations that Lauren had previously had with her late husband. Communication between Lauren and Rey was not easy while they were together and this seems to be reflected in her grieving process through the unproductive conversations she has with Mr. Tuttle:

“Say some words”.

“Say some words. Doesn’t matter if I can’t understand”.

“Say some words to say some words”. (DeLillo 2001: 57)

The dialogue does not operate as a mere process of communication and the experimentation with language is a way of exploring the characters, “a way of channeling his heroine’s inner life” (Kakutani 2003). *A Jamais* retains the uncanny feeling of entrapment and miscommunication evoked in the novel and Laura (Lauren from the novella) also asks Mr. Tuttle to speak to her. However, it does so differently, by presenting a thriller-like reading of the strange man’s presence in the house. The conversations between the two of them are much fewer and tend to be replaced by scenes of Laura listening to the recordings of their conversations on

her own. Mr. Tuttle's inability for understandable communication apparent in the novel is reinforced in the movie through the use of silences and tension rather than by dialogues taken verbatim from the source material. Instead of a reflection of Lauren's insecurities about her and Rey's ability to communicate in the past, in Jacquot's version Laura appears to be attempting to communicate with a ghostly presence that may or may not be her late husband.

Sentence repetition is also present in Jacquot's adaptation. For instance, one of Rey's ex-wives, Isabelle, tells Rey: "Elle te quittera un jour. Un jour, elle te quittera" (Jacquot 2016: min. 27). Another example is when Laura repeats to herself that Rey has left: "Il a parti. C'est tout", increasing the speed of the sentence with each repetition (Jacquot 2016: min. 45). These word and sentence repetitions in the film are almost invariably expressed in whispers and at moments of intense emotion—grief in the case of Laura and love in the case of Isabelle—as the film narrative implies that there are still quite strong feelings between her and Rey. Hence, the importance that individual words hold for the narrative is still there in the adaptation, but it becomes meaningful in a different way. While for DeLillo the repetition emphasizes the hollowness of human interaction between people who do not necessarily care about what the other person is saying, Jacquot uses the weight that the language carries to accentuate emotion-heavy scenes. One way in which Jacquot's adaptation highlights the gravitas in the speech is through whispering and reverberated sound. While the feeling of uncanniness due to Lauren's inability to communicate (with Mr. Tuttle and with Rey, by proxy) is built very differently in the novel, the use of sound and voice helps to partially preserve the "spirit" of the source material by emphasizing each word as it is heard, time and time again, with the unexpected sound quality of a whisper, even if the words used are not as carefully selected as DeLillo's.

In *The Body Artist*, Rey is found dead in his first wife's apartment after having committed suicide. In Jacquot's adaptation, Rey is seen carelessly driving a motorbike in a highway tunnel. Even though his intentions to do something quite dangerous are made pretty clear by a scene including a close-up of the back of a truck and a reverse shot of Rey lowering his helmet visor, the scene cuts to black and his death is never shown. Lauren and Laura's grief are therefore quite different. While Lauren in the novella is plagued with sadness and remorse thinking about Rey's depression and his evident connection to his first wife given that he decides to die in her apartment, Laura in the movie is engulfed in a greater mystery, left to wonder if her husband committed suicide and with less evident ties to his former wife. After Rey's passing, the issue of time becomes much more visceral, as it comes to be entangled with Lauren's process of grieving and the effects of trauma

in her perception of time. This is, once again, expressed through Mr. Tuttle who not only confuses verb tenses and seems to exist outside of time, but “remembers the future” and “violates the limits of the human” because he is unable to “locate his existence” (DeLillo 2001: 107, 108). The novel presents Lauren’s perception of time in terms of past, present, and future as unimportant. Such a dismissal of a seemingly objective understanding of time can be elucidated in the conversations that Lauren has with her husband early in the novel. They discuss time with a certain detachment, even in circular conversations that anticipate the repetitions that Lauren will experience with Mr. Tuttle:

“All day yesterday I thought it was Friday”. He said,
“What?” (18)
And then again:
“All day yesterday I thought it was Friday”.
He said, “Was it?”
She remembered to smile.
He said, “What does it matter anyway?” (19)

164

These interactions build characters that are highly mediated by their own sense of time. They relate to their perception of time through intertwined subjectivities as they “live in a perennial present that is both past and future at the same time” (Kitis and Kontoulis 2011: 223). However, Lauren’s performance art, which is also closely connected to her grieving process, is what brings to the forefront how the character deals with time. The act is entitled *Body Time* and as the review in the narrative puts it: the artist “clearly wanted her audience to feel time go by, viscerally, even painfully” (DeLillo 2001: 110). During the performance piece in the film, Laura’s appearance is very different from that of Lauren as described in DeLillo’s novel. However, the key aspect of the performance (which, as the title suggests, is the connection between body and time) prevails in both. Laura’s performance is one of the scenes with the greatest visual impact in Jacquot’s movie. It places the emphasis of its message on the workings of silence and sound as well as lighting. Laura is wearing black clothes against a background of the same color, with direct yellow light focusing on her face and body. This type of illumination and color help establish an uncanny and even scary ambiance characteristic of the mystery and thriller genres. Although it is particularly notable during Laura’s performance, a dark color palette and shadows are used throughout the movie except when she is looking at the ocean and the sunny scenery. In moments of introspection, for instance, when Laura finds herself alone in the house after Rey’s suicide, the rooms and stairs seem to turn darker and the lights dim as she searches the shadows.

Lauren remains isolated from the rest of the world in the house she had rented

with her late husband and uses the space to work on her artistic performance. In the novel, they rent an isolated house outside of New York on the New England coast while in the movie they go to a house on the Portuguese coast. The meaning given to space in the movie turns out to be quite similar to that of the novel. *The Body Artist* “sought the intimacy of single moments in a domestic landscape” (Philipp 2003) and mostly takes place in the aforementioned house. It is presented as an enclave where Lauren/Laura is able to separate herself from the outside world. And, once again, the feeling of isolation is mostly reinforced here by how the film uses silence and sound. The weight of the isolation is accentuated in the movie through the visual narrative. It is reinforced through scenes where Laura looks up the big staircases searching for glimpses of Rey’s lookalike/ghost and finds big empty spaces made ominous by shadows and darkness, and when she sits alone in the near dark listening to conversations and her own monologues that she has recorded. The space within the house when Rey (Mr. Tuttle) appears is dark, almost black with few lines of illumination reminiscent of Laura’s performance as she dresses in black against a black background. In contrast to this gloominess but with the same effect of overwhelming loneliness, the house has ceiling-high glass window-doors that face the sea. In several scenes, Laura’s back is toward the audience, as she looks at the ocean and is framed by semi-transparent white curtains that blow inwards with the wind.

165

In *À Jamais*, the color and lighting palette play a key role in the perception of space. And, in turn, the perception of time is highly influenced by a sense of entrapment in the main spaces that appear in the film. Moreover, the soundtrack notably contributes to the creation of an eerie environment that, by evoking anxiety, works in combination with the feeling of entrapment. Time still remains a central concern in *À Jamais*. The aesthetic choices of the movie slow time down, from the prolonged silences to the slow-paced panning scenes of dark spaces. Instead of a detached sense of disconnection and the almost nihilist helplessness that the novel might evoke, time becomes a much more anxiety-inducing element, sometimes even scary. The very title of the film is a compelling reference to time, playing here with both time and language. “À jamais”, meaning “forever”, most evidently refers to Rey and Laura’s marriage and her love for him. The words are famously uttered in marriage ceremonies: “let them speak or forever hold their peace” (“qu’il parle à present ou se taise à jamais”). But it is also an interesting wordplay given that “jamais” means “never”.

The dialogue in *À Jamais* is even scarcer than in the novella and the plot of the movie is framed as a different genre, being closer to a thriller or even a horror film (in the style of a haunted house narrative). Following the last of Kline’s paradigms,

the materialist, taking a step back and looking at the film aside from the source material adds to the analysis of an adaptation. A review in *The Hollywood Reporter* described *À Jamais* as a failed attempt at a “romantic ghost story with psychological thriller undertones” (Young 2016). Indeed, the audiovisual elements used to emphasize the role of language, time, and space in the movie (such as whispers, noises, eerie music, and dark lighting and shadows) are characteristic of the psychological thriller genre. These devices frame the experience of loneliness and grief as frightening and anxiety-inducing. The apprehension connected with the passing of time is mediated by the use of lighting and color, not by language as in the novel. To the novel’s explorations of time and language, the adaptation adds an interesting interpretation through the use of linearity, cuts, sound, and silence. Overall, the use of silence is central to how the movie has taken one aspect of the novel (i.e. the uncanny feeling transmitted by the unnatural dialogues) and has managed to transfer it to the signifiers most commonly used in film to communicate such a feeling of unrest. According to Kline’s pluralist paradigm, an adaptation should maintain the “spirit” of the novel to a certain extent in terms of the representation of time and language (1996). Space in this case is more similar to the source material thanks to the preserved elements of the isolated house, the sea, and the performance piece. The aspect that remains furthest from its treatment in DeLillo’s novel is language, here dominated by the aural resources of silence and sound effects.

166

5. Conclusion

Film adaptations always bring something new to the plot, the characterization, and the milieu of the novel. As David Cronenberg puts it: “once there is an adaptation, you get a fusion between the sensibility of two authors” (in Garrigós 2015: 520). Complications of language, time, and space remain in the two adaptations analyzed above. However, as the different perspectives of the directors influence the narrative, they do so with some diverging end results.

The eerie narrative of *À Jamais* adds an interesting layer of fear to the detached understanding of time, grief, and loneliness—all closely linked with space and language—that DeLillo offers in his narrative. It brings a different kind of humanity to the stagnant, disjointed, and aloof dialogues that the author offers in his works. In *À Jamais*, the use of lighting and color evoke, as previously seen, a thriller, and even bring some gothic modes into the narrative—with elements such as grief, trauma, loneliness, and even the castle ruins that have become a fancy house on the coast that threatens to metaphorically collapse on

top of Laura— that can be used as a new point of departure for considering DeLillo's narrative. For instance, it might inspire a different approach to grief and loss in the novel, emphasizing the sense of fear that surrounds these feelings. It is interesting to note that *The Body Artist* was published in 2001, some months before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Jacquot, being a French director, cannot be so easily connected (as Don DeLillo is) with post-9/11 narratives, especially considering that the narrative does not take place in the United States. However, thinking about how important cultural-historical processes can be, as Kline notes in her materialist paradigm (1996), it is a compelling fact to consider when thinking about this new fear-infused experience of grief that the film focuses on. In *Cosmopolis*, one fascinating detail that the movie evokes is a result of the historical context, as per Kline's materialist paradigm. Space and time, specifically when it comes to their connection with the economic critique that the author presents in his fiction, are heightened in the movie which was made after the financial crisis of 2007-2008. The protests that Eric sees on the street are more reminiscent of *Occupy Wall Street* (which Garrigós [2015] also mentions in her analysis of the movie) than other protests that might have inspired DeLillo before 2003 when the novel was first published.

167

Ultimately, by looking at the treatment of specific elements in the narrative, one can put novels and their adaptations in conversation with each other in a thought-provoking way. Most importantly, through their analysis, one can look beyond a direct comparison between source material and film adaptation in terms of fidelity and consider instead the influence that the cultural-historical processes might have had on the films, and then bring this contemporary reading to bear on an author who has been previously read and discussed as prophetic. The comparisons of these novels with their respective adaptations is not an attempt to argue in favor of one over the other. It is, on the contrary, an attempt to explore the possibilities that the use of a different medium can add to a narrative by taking advantage of the resources available to it. And, from there, to look at whether, on the one hand, this new medium uses the said resources to highlight the same thematic concerns or, on the other hand, opts to tell a different story altogether. It has been shown in this analysis that the way in which language, time, and space are presented in these fictions is clearly influenced by the medium. These two films unquestionably add a new layer to Don DeLillo's work that can be seen within the context of his profound interest in media and cinema. There is no doubt that exploring the audiovisual elements and references is key for the study of this author, and that continuing to put the novels and their likely upcoming adaptations in conversation with each other helps us find a new lens through which DeLillo's work can be studied.

Works cited

ANKER, Richard. 2017. "Mutability as Counter-Plot: Apocalypse, Time, and Schematic Imagination in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*." *Angles: French Perspectives on the Anglophone World* 4: 1-17. <<https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.1474>>.

BARAJAS, Julia. 2021. "Noah Baumbach Will Adapt DeLillo's 'White Noise'; Adam Driver and Greta Gerwig to Star." *Los Angeles Times* (January 14). <<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-01-14/adam-driver-greta-gerwig-and-noah-baumbach-reunite-for-adaptation-of-don-delillos-white-noise>>. Accessed January 17, 2022.

CLINE, Emma. 2020. "White Noise." *The New Yorker* (June 1). <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/08/white-noise>>. Accessed January 17, 2022.

CRONENBERG, David. 2012. *Cosmopolis*. Entertainment One.

COWART, David. 2002. *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press.

DEIGNAN, Tom. 2001. "Sensation and Sensibility: The Body Artist." *Commonweal* 128 (8): 28-29.

DELILLO, Don. 1988. *Libra*. New York: Penguin.

DELILLO, Don. 2001. *The Body Artist*. New York: Scribner.

DELILLO, Don. 2003. *Cosmopolis*. New York: Picador.

DELILLO, Don. 2005. *Love Lies Bleeding*. New York: Picador.

DELILLO, Don. 2010. *Point Omega*. New York: Scribner.

FALCONER, Rachel. 2010. "Heterochronic Representations of the Fall: Bakhtin, Milton, DeLillo." In Bemong, Nele, Pieter Borghart, Michel De Dobbeleer, Kristoffel Demoen, Koen De Temmerman and Bart Keunen (eds.) *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*. Gent: Academia Press: 111-129.

FLEMING JR., Mike. 2021. "The Starling' Helmer Ted Melfi To Adapt & Direct Don DeLillo Masterpiece Novel 'Underworld' For Netflix". *Deadline* (13 September). <<https://deadline.com/2021/09/the-starling-ted-melfi-direct-don-delillo-novel-the-underworld-netflix-1234832683>>. Accessed January 17, 2022.

GARRIGÓS, Cristina. 2015. "Death Drive and Desire in Cronenberg's Adaptation of DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56 (5): 519-530. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2014.959641>>.

JACQUOT, Benoît. 2016. *À Jamais*. Alfama Films.

JAGERNAUTH, Kevin. 2015. "Alex Ross Perry To Write And Direct Adaptation Of Don DeLillo's 'The Names'." *Indiewire* (April 7). <<https://www.indiewire.com/2015/04/alex-ross-perry-to-write-and-direct-adaptation-of-don-delillos-the-names-265325>>. Accessed January 17, 2022.

JELFS, Tim. 2011. "Something Deeper than Things: Some Artistic Influences on the Writing of Objects in the Fiction of Don DeLillo." *Comparative American Studies* 9 (1): 146-160. <<https://doi.org/10.1179/147757011X12983070064872>>.

KAKUTANI, Michiko. 2003. "Books of the Times; Headed Toward a Crash, Of Sorts, in a Stretch Limo." *The New York Times* (March 24). <<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/24/books/books-of-the-times-headed-toward-a-crash-of-sorts-in-a-stretch-limo.html>>. Accessed January 17, 2022.

Don DeLillo's Adapted Novels

- KIRN, Walter. 2003. "Long Day's Journey Into Haircut." *The New York Times* (April 13). <<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/13/books/long-day-s-journey-into-haircut.html>>. Accessed January 17, 2022.
- KITIS, Eliza, and Cleopatra KONTOULIS. 2011. "Don DeLillo's 'The Body Artist': Time, Language and Grief." *Janus Head* 12 (January): 222-242. <<https://doi.org/10.5840/jh201112117>>.
- KLINE, Karen E. 1996. "'The Accidental Tourist' On Page and On Screen: Interrogating Normative Theories About Film Adaptation." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24 (1): 70-83.
- LECLAIR, Thomas. 1982. "An Interview with Don DeLillo." *Contemporary Literature* 23 (1): 19-31.
- McFARLANE, Brian. 1996. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. London: Clarendon Press.
- NOBLE, Stuart. 2008. "Don DeLillo and Society's Reorientation to Time and Space: An Interpretation of *Cosmopolis*". *Aspeers* 1: 57-70.
- OSTEEN, MARK. 2000. *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- PHILIPP, Sven. 2003. "Words and Syllables". *Electronic Book Review* (May 29). <<http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/words-and-syllables>>. Accessed January 17, 2022.
- SANDERS, George. 2016. "Religious Non-places: Corporate Megachurches and Their Contributions to Consumer Capitalism". *Critical Sociology* 42 (1): 71-86. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514531605>>.
- SHEEHAN, Dan. 2021. "The Netflix-Don DeLillo Romance Continues with *Underworld*". *Literary Hub* (September 14). <<https://lithub.com/the-netflix-don-delillo-romance-continues-with-underworld>>. Accessed January 17, 2022.
- UPDIKE, John. 2003. "One-Way Street". *The New Yorker* (March 23). <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/31/one-way-street>>. Accessed January 17, 2022.
- VEGGIAN, Henry. 2015. *Understanding Don DeLillo*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.
- YOUNG, Neil. 2016. "Never Ever (À jamais): Film Review | Venice 2016" *The Hollywood Reporter* (September 9). <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/never-ever-a-jamais-926204>>. Accessed January 17, 2022.

169

Received: 17/01/2022

Accepted: 10/06/2022

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License