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A Place of Your Own: Looking for a Space Outside the Sphere of Commodification in Don DeLillo's *Great Jones Street*

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Introduction

In his works dealing with postmodernity, Fredric Jameson adduces an interrelation between late 20th-century capitalist ideology and contemporary American society, whereby all cultural and aesthetic creations "become integrated into commodity production" (2) and are thus absorbed by the sphere of commodification. Don DeLillo articulates a similar preoccupation within his novels, as many previous studies have demonstrated.[1] Research on this author covers a varied set of fields, from psychology and sociology, to theology and history. But, almost invariably, his works are discussed within the greater framework of postmodernist critique and context, evidencing the novelist's notable interest in consumer culture and its effects on the subject.

One of the ways in which such concerns are exemplified is through the artists who are depicted in his works; writers, photographers, musicians, all of whom challenge their commodified status as they strive to create work that stands outside the restrictions of the logic of the market. My paper then, is an exploration of such attempts through a close reading of DeLillo's depiction of the spaces and locations where these artists live, create, and seclude themselves; and most crucially, how they strive to construct enclaves outside what one might see as normative space.

Artists in DeLillo often note that their work is inescapably integrated into the logic of the market because the space they occupy is part of the sphere controlled by late capitalism and consequently, their productions cannot operate outside of it. In several novels by DeLillo we see characters trying to get away from the mass mediated and market-invaded sphere as they seek new territory that they might make their own. Both in *Americana* (1972) and *Mao II* (1991) there is an ever-present concern with the possibility of the market taking over the artist and/or their creations. In *Americana* David Bell, a TV executive, embarks on a journey across the country with the sole objective of producing an autobiographical film; while in *Mao II* the protagonist, Bill Gray, is a reclusive novelist with cult-like followers who does not want any contact with the masses for fear it would taint his work.

[1] See works by Mark Osteen (2000), Christopher Donovan (2004), and Peter Boxall (2005) for further insight into these preoccupations.

Their actions are ultimately an attempt to find some uncolonized space (Boxall 6) that will open up the possibilities for creating an enclave, a space that, while existing within the dominant culture, allows for a different type of artist's subjectivity and artistic creation. Such, then, is the space this paper is concerned with: a space individually constructed and tentatively situated outside the late capitalist sphere of market influence. These antagonistic creations aim to oppose, both literally and metaphorically, a space that affects and limits the possibilities for subjective and artistic expression.

My intent is to delve into the nuances that DeLillo's presentation of space and its descriptions tell us about the possibility or impossibility of creating, within the logic of his fiction, a space outside the normative. To this purpose, I will specifically examine the relationship and understanding of spaces of the protagonist of *Great Jones Street* (1973). As we have seen above, this is not the only novel in which the subjectivity of artists and their commodification is brought up in DeLillo's oeuvre. To begin with, the choice seems quite straightforward inasmuch as the title itself, a street name, compels us to reflect upon the occupied space and its implications. Great Jones has been the name of a street in the NoHo area of Manhattan, between Broadway and the Bowery, since 1789. It was created to transport food and traffic and owns its name to Samuel Jones, a New York lawyer and politician. It suffered many changes due to factories moving toward the northern part of the city, as well as to numerous fires that forced renovation. It is a short and eclectic street that became famous for having artists coming to its apartments as the factories began to steadily disappear. It is also well known for its drug culture, being sometimes credited as the source of the term 'jonesing' - to crave something, as in an addiction. Beyond the title, the concern with this particular novel derives from the direct escape from fame, framing my conceptualization of the enclave as something combining a retreat and a place of resistance for the artist who opposes the open market. Thus, focusing on the process of the emotional escape in itself–as opposed to *Mao II* where we meet the already secluded artist - and how, with a compromised sense of self and subjectivity, the creation of the artistic enclave might or might not prove attainable.

Great Jones Street introduces Bucky Wunderlick, lead singer and songwriter for a successful rock band, who is disenchanted with his music and stardom, and decides to quietly isolate himself in an apartment on Great Jones St. There, he will meet with various people who will try to lure him back to his usual position in the market for diverse personal reasons. Opel, his girlfriend, joins him in the apartment, but insists that he needs to move on. Globke, his manager, desperately wants him to go back to performing and release his "mountain tapes," which he recorded in his house in the mountains. The Happy Valley Farm Commune, an unusual terrorist organization

that owns a recreational drug that they want to place on the market, aim to appropriate Bucky's isolation as it seems to perfectly represent the ideals of their organization and want him to help in the placement of the drug. And finally, Dr. Pepper, a famed drug lord who wants Bucky's help in getting the commune's new drug. For the most part of the novel, all these confrontations take place at Great Jones St. apartment, but, after Opel's death, Bucky decides to finally comply with his manager's desires, and leaves his room to release his mountain tapes.

The city space

Great Jones Street is narrated in the first person by its protagonist Bucky Wunderlick, a successful and famed rock and roll singer living and working in New York during the 70s'. The historical moment when DeLillo writes is undoubtedly relevant to the construction of space he presents in his fiction. It is the era of post-industrialism, when big city streets are plagued with enormous buildings that connote economic accumulation, but at the same time, lots of factories have shut down. In spite of the action of the narrative starting out within the enclosed space of a private apartment, it does not let the reader forget that the action is located in Manhattan. This is a point in space surrounded by the perfect embodiment of postmodern city space and all the market forces that Bucky, seeing himself as a commodified rock star, is trying to escape.

Almost invariably in every chapter, a character takes note of the buildings around him. Adding to the recognition of buildings as symbols of late-capitalist American society, this continuous acknowledgement of the city's architecture sheds light on an interesting duality: the opposition between the powerful symbolism of immense buildings, and the nostalgia for marginal faraway places and regions. This contrast between the rural and the urban is specifically brought up when Azarian, Bucky's band mate and guitarist, describes the Happy Valley Farm Commune as "a rural group that came to the city to find peace and contentment" (36). The irony of this statement cannot be overlooked. To anyone who has been in a city before, such a statement would be ludicrous, as a city could hardly ever be associated with anyone's pursuit of peace. To add to this, Bucky describes New York in the first chapter of the book as a "contaminated shrine" (2) that always appears to be "on the verge of plague" (3), providing the reader with quite an unappealing image of the city. This inversion of the natural implications of cities in general and of New York in particular can be seen as an attempt on the part of the terrorist group to affect the perceptions and interpretations of space. Such an opposition is again brought up when Hanes, the assistant to Bucky's manager, informs him that, according to speculations on the press about his disappearance, Bucky has been buried "in rural Montana. As opposed to urban Montana" (131).

In the light of the previous quote, we could see this as a reassertion of the commune's power contrasted with Bucky's inability to locate himself or, as it has been suggested in the novel so far, to create the enclave he is looking for.

The fact that Bucky has chosen to retreat to his apartment in Manhattan seems at first like a strong contradiction of his attempt at escaping the restrictions of his role as a super star. Beyond his individual opinions and observations of the city, there seems to be no need to explain this city in any more detail. The narrative does not provide the reader with any help to create a map of it, since everyone's familiarity with the city of New York is somehow taken for granted. Bucky argues that he is in New York precisely because he wanted to be in an "identifiable place," and when you are in New York, the "fact is inescapable" (23). This could be taken as a deeper layer of the distinction between the city and its opposites. There is the attempt at an individual space outside the normative that perhaps, Bucky seems to think, might only be possible when enclosed within the greatest possible expression of capitalist city space. However, as he approaches his flat in a taxi he describes the "industrial loft buildings" on the street, "half as tall as they should have been" (6), which might be because they are former factories, supporting the alternative interpretation that he has chosen this apartment because within the larger context of what Manhattan represents, the building he plans to inhabit is not precisely cutting edge.

Descriptions of the street later provided by Bucky give us information that helps us understand why he has chosen this specific location: "Some streets in their decline possess a kind of redemptive tenor, the suggestion of new forms about to evolve, and Great Jones was one of these, hovering on the edge of self-revelation" (18). It is clear from such depiction that Bucky perceives the apartment at Great Jones Street to have the potential for the creation of personal space outside the sphere of commodification. Even more so, when we consider Bucky's observations within the context of the history of Great Jones St. mentioned above, a street that transformed from being full of factories to hosting the artistic bohemia during the 70's. Nonetheless, the reader has learned some pages earlier that Transparanoia, the wonderfully named multinational corporation that manages Bucky, owns the building where Bucky's apartment is, which brings us back to the limitations of attempting to create such a space. Bucky expresses his desire for them to "get rid of building" (10) but he is met with a resounding negative from his personal manager Globke as to why they could never do so: "It's a business thing […] maximizing the growth potential" (10). This is manifestation of the sphere of commodification absorbing more and more personal and private spaces. It presents us with panoptic relations of power, where Transparanoia imposes discipline over Bucky through the ownership and control of spaces. Even under such circumstances, Bucky's

actions still need to be considered as possible ways to re-appropriate this space, and those are the ones that will inform us about the possibility of individually redefining a given space as an artist's enclave: the individual relationships one forges with it, both within enclosed space, and to the city space.

At the individual level, possibly the most basic form of relationship with space that we can find is movement: people moving through spaces or within an enclosed space. Bucky, early on in the narrative, decides on some form of "bodily economy" that will force him to take "the minimum number of steps to get from place to place" (19), until he asserts that Opel, his girlfriend, has robbed him of his immobility with her presence (85). Bucky's actions might be recognized as an attempt at staying put in his new space, sustaining the creation of his enclave. It seems that as soon as a character relates in any way to the space around himself or herself, they are at risk of being reabsorbed by the capitalist sphere of commodification. From a more negative perspective, we might also think about the impossibility of escaping in relation to the impossibility of movement: Bucky feels trapped one way or another. Such a negative standpoint seems less likely, considering that spatiality is a ubiquitous presence in Bucky's thoughts and way of understanding the world, which implies a high level of engagement with space and negates a total passivity or inability to move. The spatial as a form of description becomes notable as we move forward in the narrative. Through Bucky's observations, places where people come from, that is, streets and their surroundings, are often used to imply something about those people. Bucky describes how during a party thrown at his apartment the guests continuously speak of the areas and streets where they live. Space becomes intertwined with moods and personalities, which in turn become dependent on spatiality. One particularly interesting instance is when Bucky meets a secondary character named Lloyd Boyd during his birthday party. He tells Bucky that he has been living in Grand Central Station, which he tries to think of as "his apartment" (76). This is a place where people are not supposed to remain, but rather to pass through. However, he appears to have managed to redefine the uses of the space and the relationship that the individual is expected to establish.

It is also notable how the rooms themselves have greater power than the objects inside them when it comes to defining relationships between the individual and their surrounding space. For example, when Globke, the manager, finally succeeds in finding the mountain tapes he has been looking for, he describes the event by paying special attention to spatial descriptions of the room and the environment. He takes time to describe how he entered the room and found the package in the middle of it. This takes away importance from the other objects in the room, centering the attention on the room itself as a defining space. Finally, location is also relevant from the more

practical point of view. Bohack, a member of the Happy Valley Farm Commune, informs Bucky that they cannot locate any of the men involved with the product, and also do not know where the product itself is. They seem to be specifically concerned about Azarian, whom they know is in LA, yet they do not know the "street name and house number" (190). Finally, when they find him, they decide to kill him partly for having disappeared after being involved with the commune, but most importantly simply "because [they] found him" (240). All these instances talk about the importance that the novel places on the power associated with the ability to locate objects, places and people.

In terms of descriptions of the city spaces we see many places of transit come up in the narrative. First, Bucky is informed by Hanes—his manager's aide—that he has been seen, according to different media reports, in a drive-in restaurant and in an airport (14). And second, there are the hotels where Bucky stays while on tour (137). All these locations could be identified as *non-places,*[2] and they could be seen as the only spaces that, according to the narrative, the sphere of commodification allows for the famed artist. Another spatial reality that is found in the city turns out to be a different kind of enclave than the one the protagonist is looking for: actual ethnic minority enclaves. Azarian visits Bucky to offer his condolences for Opel's death. He talks to Bucky about his interest in blackness and makes an allusion to Harlem in order to describe what exactly he is interested in. He remarks that "it's the self-identification of the people on that street" that calls his attention. This conceptualization of collective identification with an area or neighborhood is informative about the formation of enclaves, which implies a collective effort and an acceptance of the outsiders of their definition as such.

Finally, the city as a whole is also a spatial element to consider in the book. The narrative comes to an end not long after Bucky moves out of his room in Great Jones St. Once he has exited the room, he walks on the street and looks at the building where the apartment is located, and seems to observe it for the first time, as he has "never considered it as a total unit" (213); an observation that almost contradicts his thoughts when he thinks about the size of the buildings on Great Jones St. in the opening chapter. Later on, Bucky wanders around Manhattan and makes observations about the city space under the influence of the drugs he has taken. Despite his conflicting thoughts about the building where he lives, his perception of the city does not seem to have greatly changed from what could be inferred from the beginning. He sees the city as somber and crowded (260),

[2] Concept introduced by Augé in 1992. See Augé, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: New York: Verso, 1995.

full of narrow streets (261), and most importantly, powerful (262). The protagonist's wanderings around the city in the last pages of the novel embody the impossibility of hiding in retreat. Nonetheless, this could be taken to be a more positive stance than it might seem at first glance. Bucky, via the drugs, rediscovers the lost space in the city and, having failed to make the apartment his own and in the light of language being temporarily lost to him–space has thus escaped any possible definition - he is maybe trying to claim open spaces as his own.

The enclave/s

Considering his relationships to space and places, protagonist Bucky Wunderlick serves as a clear embodiment of the struggle to find a new physical space outside the established value system. We meet him while he is in the process of abandoning his work and any sort of artistic production, as he renounces his public persona and reevaluates what it means to be an artist in his context. While describing his fame and his position, he refers to himself as a man who has to "inhabit these extreme regions" (1). The chosen words imply that there is a specific place that Bucky occupies as a famous rock star: that of a consumable commodity. His actions lead us to understand that Bucky not only questions his position in the music market but also criticizes it; hence he decides that he is not willing to remain in such a position. Faced with this conundrum, the most distinct plausible solution that Bucky seems to come up with is suicide. For Bucky, this endeavor implies a necessity of breaking away from his public persona prior to executing his plan, which in turn, requires him to be alone. Isolation here tells us that there is an intention to recover at least a minimum level of freedom.

This idea of isolation and privacy as freedom keeps reappearing and informs us about the conceptualization of space in the novel. Besides Bucky's own intentions and understanding of his desire for isolation, the idea of privacy is impacted by the underground terrorist organization, the Happy Valley Farm Commune. Skippy, one of the members of this group, not long after Bucky moves into the apartment on Great Jones St. asks him to hold something for them. He explains their motivations to the rock star: they want "to represent privacy" (16), and the reason for his being there is that they respect Bucky because they see what he is doing as "[r]eturning the idea of privacy to American life" (17). In the words of Opel, Bucky's girlfriend, the commune recognizes that privacy "is the only way to destroy the notion of mass man" (60). Their interest in individual privacy stems from their desire for greater individual freedom, which they imply has been lost in the era of mass media. On the whole, the commune's theory lines up with Bucky's intention to stay in his apartment and legitimizes his actions beyond his individual intentions. However, a

problem arises: the subjectively defined enclave he was pursuing has already moved beyond his own conceptualization to a place with deeper social significance. Yet up to this point, it seems to the reader that Bucky has successfully managed to inhabit a room that signifies a space outside the normative, due to his–however temporary–success in removing himself from the market sphere into seclusion. To gain a deeper understanding of how isolation influences and aids the construction of enclave-like personal spaces, it is worth looking at other characters presented in the narrative who are also living in isolation and seem to circle around Bucky.

Eddie Fenig, a writer and thus also an artist, is living in the same apartment building as Bucky. He is a frustrated, unpublished writer who lives upstairs from Bucky and has various encounters with him, usually consisting in remarkably bizarre conversations. Fenig is best known by Bucky for continuously pacing about in his flat. This character is introduced as a contrast to Bucky. Instead of trying to escape the mass market, he is trying to find a place in it. In this sense, his nervous pacing might be taken as a feeling of entrapment in such an isolated environment. Perhaps an even more interesting case of isolation is the deformed child who lives with his mother on the floor underneath Bucky's. Fenig explains to Bucky that the mother hides her son in the apartment so that nobody can see his appearance (48-51). Despite the fact that such isolation is forced upon the child, David Cowart, in *The Physics of Language*, defines the life of this deformed individual as the "ultimately private experience" (36). There is clearly no better way of situating a person outside the mainstream, completely on the margins of society. However, it is a condition that has been imposed, and what we truly need to understand, and is key to grasp DeLillo's consideration of the possibility of enclaves, is the question of who has the power to determine what could potentially be an enclave.

In the existing criticism on DeLillo's novels, one of the most noteworthy themes is this author's concern with the uses and limitations of language, something that provides an essential theoretical point of departure for looking at the presentation of power relations in his fiction. Language is also the medium through which spaces and places operate. In the case of *Great Jones Street* this could also include artistic language–music in Bucky's case, for instance, in how coherent language is lost in the lyrics, which are plagued with nonsensical words and baby-like repetition. Nevertheless, from the very beginning of the narrative, it is open to debate whether Bucky does actually possess the power to provide a specific definition and meaning to the space he inhabits. A direct connection between politics and language is assumed when we accept that language influences people's understanding of the world and themselves. This relation has been significant in postmodern thought, particularly in Michel Foucault's notion of discourse, and in

Fredric Jamenson's political unconscious. Such a perspective greatly limits the power that an individual has to project his or her own vision onto a certain place and spread this vision to others. If we compare then the Happy Valley Farm Commune's understanding of Bucky's apartment with his own we can clearly see that the former have greater power over language than Bucky does. The apartment at *Great Jones Street* becomes a metaphorical space for this group; they ascribe an inter-subjective signification to the room that Bucky inhabits, creating a discourse about it which forces itself beyond the subjective meaning that he intends.

This terrorist group is not the only one with the power to affect the meaning of the room on Great Jones Street. Throughout the narrative, Globke also appears on several occasions attempting to change Bucky's opinion about his seclusion. Firstly, he justifies his power over Bucky via their contract, but we get to truly witness his control when Bucky finally decides to go back to his music and his position in the market after his girlfriend's death. During a telephone conversation Globke reads out to him a list of cities where he is going to perform, despite Bucky's lack of interest (200). The decision to include such a conversation does not appear to be casual. It proves that Globke has recovered his power over Bucky, and most importantly, over where to place him, to locate him. In the same way that Globke reasserts his power over Bucky as the musician accepts returning to his job, Dr. Pepper wants him to return to the room on Great Jones Street and never leave the place (219). At this point, the room has become a very different kind of enclave from what Bucky had originally hoped for and it soon becomes a place he no longer wants to occupy.

The Manhattan apartment is not the only place where Bucky has confined himself and hence maybe not the only hope of an artistic enclave presented in the narrative. Months before his seclusion in Great Jones St. he had stayed in a remote house in the mountains, where he recorded a set of tapes known as "the mountain tapes," reminiscent of Bob Dylan's *The Basement Tapes*.[3] Although it still comes back to the use of language, this stresses how the uses of a certain space also have some effect when defining said space. Bucky describes his room studio in this mountain house as being "subject to no central thesis" (121) because nobody has used any specific language to define it, not even himself. The room becomes a sort of indefinable space that only retrospectively acquires a meaning, perhaps, when he realizes that the use he gave it is somehow akin to that of an artistic enclave. Conflictingly, during an interview, a reporter refers to Bucky's house in the mountains as a "retreat" (115). This gives the impression that the house has served the function of a vacation place, safely staying within the logic of the market place. In fact, Bucky

[3] On the analogies between Bucky Wunderlick and Bob Dylan see A. Smith, "Most Likely You Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine: A Rock Star's Guide to Abandoning Your Audience" (2002).

himself did not have the same intention for the mountain house as he had for the Great Jones St. apartment. Nonetheless, when thinking back to the time during which he was in his mountain house he appears to be apologetic about not having fully taken advantage of the potential that the place had for him. This house then turns out to be a hypocritical enclave, since it served to create something that he understands as non-marketable, but at the same time, he admits that while he was working in there "he felt an obligation" to the audience and he was not really working for himself (188). While Bucky argues that these tapes are for him a very subjective territory and he will not be able to reproduce them in a performance, Globke has already planned Bucky's public appearances for the following several months, irrevocably driving a reluctant Bucky to his dutiful position. These tapes, ironically, develop into a product that according to Globke could sell fantastically, although the reader never gets to find out whether this prediction come true or not.

Conclusion

Frank Lentricchia has argued that DeLillo's "mode of writing" is that of those writers who see their work as "an act of cultural criticism" (2). This view, also supported by other critics such as John N. Duvall and Philip Nel, is still debated, with other scholars such as John Kucich counter-arguing that DeLillo's body of work is an example of the postmodern artist's inadequacy to follow through with his or her criticism, taking a more passive attitude and assuming their work to be inevitably absorbed by the marketplace. It is in fact plausible that DeLillo does not simply introduce relevant elements in his narrative and engages with them, suggesting a deliberate and informed critique of late-capitalist American society at large. Nonetheless, in the light of the examination presented in this paper, Kucich's remarks add an interesting irony to the analysis of the ability of artists to find a space outside the sphere of commodification in DeLillo's fiction.

Marginal places in DeLillo's narrative are intended to present a potential getaway from all-consuming late capitalist society. However, constructing such a space and providing it with the meaning of an enclave does not appear to be easy or even possible for a single individual. At some point in the narrative, the room was what Bucky wanted it to be but its meaning vanished as soon as the Happy Valley Farm Commune appropriated his actions. Bucky does not possess the narrative power to will a specific space to become an enclave. This could be partially justified by the influence of all the external factors I have presented in the examination of the plot, but also, it is possible that DeLillo himself limits the narrative power of his characters, and does not allow Bucky to create such a space for himself.

Hence, Don DeLillo suggests in this novel that artistic enclaves become enclaves when they are not part of the outside world, which can only be achieved when the outside world and the ones in power allow it to exist–be it Bucky's manager and the terrorist group, or the writer deciding his fate. DeLillo maintains here his own postmodern outlook on the world, supporting Fredric Jameson's assertion that "postmodern hyperspace has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself" (44). Hence, this examination comes to the disappointing conclusion that, as drug legend Dr. Pepper tells Bucky near the conclusion of the novel, "your reality is managed by others" (254).

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