Truth and (Mis)Information in the High-Tech Empires: Case Study: *Cosmopolis: a novel*, by Don DeLillo

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Abstract— *Our contemporary time is marked by an endless flow of data that is exchanged between nations, companies, and individuals at a nanosecond timescale. All this data flow, which Katherine Hales calls "information overload", is facilitated by the spread of computer software and digital devices that have colonized every corner on the globe. Today no secret is hidden; information is available and access to it is getting liberated from the confines of the enclosed files. Entrepreneurs, decision-makers, politicians, researchers and even common people, to mention just a few categories, each has built some kind of a digital fortress that secures its data and transmits only the information that suits its interests to the (digital) world. Yet, high-tech empires are no more than a double-edged weapon that (mis)informs not only consumers and adversaries but also the high-tech owners themselves. While high-technologies have been viewed as a sign of extreme knowledge, power and wealth, they have in fact deprived humans of their natural 'humanity' one way or another. More than that, instead of providing absolute knowledge as they are supposed to do, they hide the dark truth and what they really provide is no more than a mere illusion. Taking the example of Don DeLillo's Cosmopolis: a novel, this novel envisages the influence of high-technologies on the contemporary Man and exposes the double facets of the computer and wireless networks. Through the protagonist Eric Packer, DeLillo portrays the digital world from different perspectives and lays bare the inconveniences of high-technologies as they eventually turn out to hide the 'truth' instead of revealing it to their owner. Indeed, the protagonist's blind trust in his high-tech empire was caused by misinformation rather than by objective recognition of the concrete world that surrounds him. In Cosmopolis: a novel the author warns his readers that it is wiser to keep a certain amount of doubt and criticism while dealing with Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality.*

Keywords— *capitalism, high-technologies, (mis)information, power, virtual reality*

The contemporary world is ruled by empires. Yet, these empires are not territories which are governed by an emperor or empress. Today, it's rare to find the conventional empires coexisting within the global transformations that have turned the world into a reduced space whose inhabitants share to a certain extent the same life-styles, mindsets, customs and traditions. The present empires are no more than "large industrial organization[s] with many ramifications, esp [..] multinational corporation[s]" (dictionary.com, n.d., Definition 1) which are owned or controlled by one person or group of people.

Predefined by the capitalist economic system and the sophisticated high-technologies, these multinational corporations have created a bridge between their owners and their consumers; this bridge is 'wired' by 'wireless networks'. Computers, high-tech devices and gadgets, the Internet and Artificial Intelligence, all of them have been playing a crucial role in collecting, exchanging, saving and transferring all kinds of information between individuals, corporations, and nations. As a consequence of the high-tech revolution and the globalization of the capitalist system, postmodern societies have undergone continuous

renovations that reshape people's views of their own lives. To epitomize the condition of the new millennium's individuals, Don DeLillo presents the dilemmas of both capital owners and common citizens in a cosmopolitan information-based society.

But first of all, what does the term 'information' refer to? Generally speaking, "information" is usually explained as the synonym of "news, facts, or knowledge" or "facts or details about a person, company, product, etc." (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d., Definition 2). It may also connote "news or knowledge [that is] received or given" (yourdictionary.com, n.d., Definition 3); therefore information does not consist of a one way transmission of 'facts' but also the exchange of everything via multiple trajectories. Also, it is "knowledge acquired in any manner; facts; data; learning; lore" (ibid); this means that regardless of the medium used, the process of data or ideas alters the individual's perception of the world. This perception is regularly updated as far as the person interacts with people, nature, objects, narratives, mass-media, or the surroundings. With reference to computers, "information" refers to "any data that can be stored in and retrieved from a computer" or generally describes "[p]rocessed, stored, or transmitted data" (ibid). The computer's central processing unit is compared to the human's brain; then, information storage and processing is the typical function of both of them. From another perspective, in a 'posthuman' era, information has to be 'disembodied'. The idea of the "erasure of embodiment" (Hayles, 1999, p. 4) is the key concept advocated by posthumanist thinkers. "In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (Hayles, 1999, p. 3). From a capitalist perspective, data values financial profit. Undoubtedly, the contemporary world has witnessed global transformations that bring together opposing powers: those of information ownership and knowledge manipulation from one side and those of the flow of capital and commodification of knowledge from the other side. Hence, Delillo depicts the modern Man's approach to 'information' through his *Cosmopolis, a novel*.

Published in the eve of the third millennium, that is to say in 2003, DeLillo's *Cosmopolis, a novel* exposes the pitfalls of being too dependent on 'information'. Because of the "information overload" (Hayles, 1999), the contemporary individual struggles to have adequate command of what he 'knows' and seeks to transform his 'knowledge' into wealth, power and eternity. Don DeLillo's story delves into the intricate and often perplexing relationship between information and new technologies, offering a thought-provoking exploration of the impact these elements have on the individual and society as a whole. This narrative anticipates the profound influence of technology on contemporary life and paints a surreal yet eerily familiar portrait of a world saturated with information.

Cosmopolis, a novel is structured as a story within a story. The main story is told from a third person point of view; its protagonist is Eric Michael Packer, 28-year-old billionaire who lives in a luxurious apartment in a skyscraper located in a wealthy area of Manhattan. The main events of the story take place in his high-tech equipped limousine; a car that symbolizes the blurred boundaries between the physical space and the 'spaceless' cyberspace where the notion of 'limits' does not exist. Eric Packer is the employer who owns assets as well as information; he believes that he is 'all-knowing' and because of his great knowledge he should be the only source of information, the manipulator of his employees' minds and therefore the one who creates their 'reality'. As far as the secondary story is concerned, it represents the opposite side of the coin; in other words, the version where an ordinary individual, who is deprived of knowledge and wealth, tells about his reality and how he has been victimized by the capitalist system. The secondary story is entitled 'Confessions of Benno Levin'; narrated from a first person point of view, the story represents Richard sheets (the double of Benno Levin), a 41 year-old fired employee who tells how he is deeply influenced by his employer – or more precisely his idol: the employee reads about his leader, stalks him, learns from him and becomes obsessed by his character and achievements. The protagonist of the secondary story is deprived of information and knows only what his employer allows him to know: Richard Sheets has been informed through the person who holds power: "I loved the cross-harmonies between nature and data. You taught me this." (DeLillo, 2003, p. 200) Because of his lack of knowledge, he is prevented from realizing his dream of following his idol's footsteps and becoming wealthy; he is even deprived of his job and his 'identity'. Feeling useless and incompetent, Richard Sheets decides to kill Eric Packer; and this, therefore, has given him a sense of achievement.

At the heart of *Cosmopolis* lies the pervasive presence of the Information Age. The protagonist, Eric Packer, is a master of the financial universe who embarks on a surreal odyssey across New York City in a stretch limousine. As Packer navigates the city's overcrowded streets, he is driven in dream-like vehicle equipped by the latest technologies; a car that is both as a mobile office and a living space. The story of *Cosmopolis, a novel* highlights how an entrepreneur whose last day in his life summarizes what he has built throughout his lifetime and how he has

lost everything because of a fatal interpretation of the information he has acquired. Eric Packer's obsession with money, numerals, and the most advanced technologies has allowed him to build a high-tech empire, a territory that possesses and processes information of any kind: "He absorbed this material in a couple of long still seconds" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 11). He uses his senses to detect and learn about everything: "Once you'd looked, there was nothing else to know" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 11); in fact, the verbs 'look', 'see', 'notice' and 'watch' reiterate throughout the novel. In addition to using his senses, Packer is curious to know more from others through direct speech; he also 'talks' to everyone, except with his bodyguard 'Torval' because communication between them is through codes: "He coded a word to Torval up front" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 16), or through gestures and body language which implies the absence of direct communication between them. In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo constructs a narrative that reflects the evolving nature of language in the digital age. The characters communicate in a disconnected style, reminiscent of online discourse or text messages. The novel's language mirrors the fragmented and fast-paced nature of contemporary communication, capturing the essence of a society immersed in a constant stream of information.

Eric Packer surrounds himself by knowledgeable workers. The role of his bodyguard, Torval, is to get information about potential threats and to ensure his employer's safety. As for the Chief of Technology, Shiner, he is in charge of the company's website and secures Packer's technology from hackers. The Currency Analyst, Michael Chin, has an advanced degree in mathematics and economics and controls the status of the currency. Jane Melman is his Chief of Finance who supervises the market and the consumers' expenditure. Packer enjoys the mental exchanges with his Chief of Theory, Vija Kinski, who theorizes about everything including technology, economy, social movements etc. He finds theorizing about any idea alluring and exciting for his mental wellbeing. For instance, one of his Chief of Theory's suggestions is that "[w]e need a new theory of time" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 86); appreciating this very idea, Packer confirms what the modern entrepreneurs believe: i.e. time equals money.

In addition to the employees who provide him with the requested information, Packer collects more and more data from a variety of sources. Starting from the city of Manhattan itself, it is a place where all sorts of information reside: it is a multicultural city where different cultures and different people representing a rich source of backgrounds and knowledge coexist. Manhattan also symbolizes the vastness of space and extreme prosperity since the giant corporations and owners of capital are established there. With its numerous skyscrapers, Manhattan reflects a complex architecture, power and highness of status; it is the symbol of manhood for an entrepreneur like Packer. Besides the city, the protagonist has equipped his limousine with the latest high-technologies and screens that enable him to access the Internet, surf websites, and check what is going on around him through 'spycams'; those spy cameras do not only record what happens around the car but also predict the future. The car is where Packer spends most of his time doing everything, including work; it shows how the boundaries between means of transport, means of entertainment and work are blurred. It is also a fortress that protects its passengers from criminal attempts and has the most advanced security systems that prevent hackers from stealing data. More than that, the protagonist wears a special cristal watch that tells the time, works as a camera that records what happens nearby, and forecasts what will happen to its owner. To expand his knowledge, Packer does not hesitate to read whatever comes in front of his sight: from books, to advertisements, to poems; ironically, he constantly compares the poems he reads to the poems his wife writes.

Undoubtedly, Eric Packer is a man of great knowledge: he knows a lot about currency conditions and market deals; he has learned how to transform data into concrete wealth that manifest in his well-equipped apartment located in an astonishing skyscraper, his rarely found possessions, and especially his very special vehicle, the limousine. The protagonist has a "mechanical mind" (Crane, 2016) that works like a computer's central processing unit; he thinks about minute details and analyzes every idea that his memory could recall or any image that might be caught by his sight. Knowing everything, from what happens in the exterior world and the role of global systems to the working of his body cells and organs, Packer is convinced that his mental power, his technological fortress and his financial status would secure him from threats or even let him fulfill his dream for eternity. The novel, indeed, presents a hyper-realistic vision of a world dominated by screens, data, and constant connectivity that transorm the 'natural humans' into 'posthumans'.

The protagonist is first depicted as a sleepless man who has been depending on sedatives and hypnotics that have lost their effect through time. His inability to sleep is explained by his computer-like brain that continuously processes old and new information at a nanosecond timescale. "Every act he performed was self-haunted and synthetic. […] There was only the noise in his head, the mind in time" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 1). Eric Packer's brain is not a usual one, it has evolved and is programmed to store and assimilate numerals and alphabetic codes. He gathers

information not only from what he reads in books, websites and screens, but also from 'noticing' and scrutinizing everything surrounding him and from listening to what others say. He may be described as the kind of 'posthuman' that marked the transition phase between human condition and the machine. For him, "Freud is finished, Einstein's next" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 1). Packer views himself as a genius whose great knowledge ensures his power and dominance over the world.

Power is represented through financial wealth, property, and knowledge. It is both exposed through concrete objects, abstract numerical data that pertain to the owner's currency investments, or even from his own image broadcast by mass media. Packer's status as a wealthy and powerful individual magnifies the impact of his actions and decisions. The media's portrayal of him as a 'larger-than-life' figure contributes to the distortion of reality, blurring the lines between truth and fiction. Power is hardly gained and easily lost. Eric Packer has experienced a journey on his last day in his life from the First Avenue where skyscrapers, the symbol of power and manhood reside, to the Eleventh Avenue where decaying buildings and poverty predominate; this journey in an influential person's life unveils the truth behind the alluring face of high-technologies and capitalism. They do not only claim control over the future and the new world order, they also sacrifice the lives of the majority for the sake of the minority. DeLillo uses Packer's wealth and status to explore the interconnectedness of global financial systems. The protagonist's relentless pursuit of information reflects the hyperactive nature of financial markets, where milliseconds can make the difference between success and failure. Information is what the capital holder provides: "He thought of the people who used to visit his website back in the days when he was forecasting stocks, when forecasting stocks was pure power, when he'd tout a technology stock or bless an entire sector and automatically cause doubling in share price and the shifting in the world views […]" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 75). Packer's obsession with predicting currency fluctuations and market trends mirrors a modern society's growing dependence on information for financial success and control.

In Delillo's novel, information and cultures are digitized and commodified. For the protagonist, "Property is no longer about power, personality and command. It's not about vulgar display or tasteful display. It no longer has weight or shape. The only thing that matters is the price you pay" (DeLillo, 2003, p.78). Even time is commodified since entrepreneurs see that time equals money: "It's cyber-capital that creates the future" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 79). Data, on the other hand, becomes a more real human

attribute that an individual's existence and success depend on:

> In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole. (DeLillo, 2003, p. 24)

For business people, it's data and information that create and define the identity of humans; human beings are no more than units of data that can be manipulated and used in one's favor.

Due to the dominion of high-technologies on humans' lives and way of thinking since the computer machine as we know it today has been upgraded in the mid-twentieth century, scientists, researchers, economists, and intellectuals of any kind have admitted the role which high-tech devices and the World Wide Web have been playing in altering humans' life-style, decision-making and fate. Advocates of the new technologies see that:

> the computer […] was an icon of progress, autonomy, and individual empowerment. […] Businesses, initially overtaken by the fast pace of innovation in digital technology, also began to adopt computers in large numbers to carry out a wide range of tasks from record-keeping and accounting to inventory control, production, and advertising. (Connor, 2004, p. 139).

Emerging in an era when the capitalist system has imposed its regulations on the world, high-technologies have allowed the spread and appropriation of this system's values at a global level. "Globalization, [which is the] integrated circuitboard of contemporary capitalism" (Connor, 2004, p. 130) has facilitated the transition of mass-mediated societies to the third millennium. It is behind the creation of what is called "information society" which is defined according to "technological", "economic", "occupational", "special" and "cultural" criteria as well as the "theoretical knowledge/information [which] is at the core of how we conduct ourselves these days" (Webster, 2006, p. 8). Thus, humans are being prescribed, united and at the same time separated by information.

Delillo's *Cosmopolis* represents the shape and functions of the information society in the new millennium. "An information society" consists of "a society in which the creation, distribution, diffusion, use, integration, and manipulation of information is a significant economic,

political, and cultural activity" (igi-global.com). The contemporary individuals' behavior, drives and perception of their reality are nurtured by the quality and the amount of information they are exposed to; and the ones who decide which type of information that needs to be diffused to the common individuals are no more that big entrepreneurs, wealth holders or distributors and owners of high-tech giants. An information society is basically defined according to certain criteria: "technological", "economic", "occupational", "spatial", or "cultural" and essentially when "theoretical knowledge /information is at the core of how we conduct ourselves these days" (Webster, 2006, p. 8). Deciphering the contemporary individuals' tendencies could help businesses influence social trends to let them work in their own favor, and hence make more profit and ensure stable economic empires.

Going back to Don DeLillo's novel, it epitomizes the influence of high-technologies on the contemporary Man – whether it is an affluent individual of any kind or a common citizen struggling to survive in a world abiding by the rules of the capitalist system. The new millennium's generations are destined by (mis)information. The author of *Cosmopolis, a novel* shows the impact of both the capitalist economic system and the information and communication technologies on individuals of different social groups. On the one hand, there are the wealthy groups that comprise the entrepreneurs, asset owners, bank investors, software entrepreneurs, or head of states whose power emanates from their great knowledge about their domains and their ability to manipulate information to make it work for their own interest; on the other hand, there are the ordinary people who work for them or the consumers who pay them for their products or services. The second category of people is helplessly doing what the wealthy groups want them to do. They are deprived of their will to decide and prevented from acquiring enough knowledge about what's really happening to them or to the world in which they live. Information is in fact prescribed and transferred through cultural and social communication

> [n]ot only through a technological regime but also through the circulation of rhetorical tropes between wider cultural domains, technologies emerge in both design and social meaning. Cultural metaphors act as influences on technological designs (for example, computers should act like the mind) that then, in turn, influence larger cultural realms (for example, the mind should act with the instrumentality of a computer). (E. Day, 2001, p. 11)

What the author of this novel reveals is not only the importance of knowing how to control data and the other people's decisions, but also the misleading nature of information itself. Also, what has been considered as facts can turn into a destructive delusion.

While Packer is surrounded by a barrage of information, *Cosmopolis* also explores the paradoxical sense of disconnection that arises from this inundation. The novel questions whether the constant flow of data truly connects individuals or, in fact, creates isolation. Packer's quest for information distances him from the tangible realities of life, emphasizing the dehumanizing effects of technological saturation. DeLillo raises cautionary flags about the consequences of unbridled technological progress. The novel suggests that the relentless pursuit of efficiency, speed, and information can lead to a loss of humanity. Packer's detachment from the consequences of his actions, facilitated by technology, highlights the potential dangers of being insulated from the real world. From another standpoint, a close scrutiny of the plotline and of the themes of the novel suggests that the more individuals struggle to stay in touch with humanity and maintain human attributes the more likely they witness economic troubles, psychological unrest, sense of insecurity and constant threat to their survival.

The absence of doubt and the risks of being misinformed due to the blind trust in high-technologies are the main causes of the protagonist's fatal end. Initially, Packer believes that knowledge eliminates doubt: "Doubt? What is doubt?" [He said,] "There is no doubt. Nobody doubts anymore" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 31). For him, computers and the free access to unlimited amounts of data can grant him enough certainty and allow him to gain control over everything. Even his Chief of theory has misled him with her assumptions: "Doubt. What is doubt? You don't believe in doubt. You've told me this. Computer power eliminates doubt. All doubt rises from past experience. But the past is disappearing. We used to know the past but not the future. This is changing" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 86). Because he blindly trusts her, he fails to interpret the 'paralanguage', i.e. the facial expressions and the ironic tone, of his chief of theory. He *couldn't know* that what is speculative does not necessarily become concretized.

On the other side, the narrator of the secondary story is suspicious of everything surrounding him, except for his employer's knowledge. Richard Sheets calls himself 'Benno Levin'; he is 'doubtful' of his own identity, his abilities and his knowledge of the world. For him as a failed man, everything is doubtful. he told Eric: "I'm helpless in their system that makes no sense to me. You wanted me to be a helpless robot soldier but all I could be

was helpless" (DeLillo, 2003, p.195). Yet, because he has constantly followed him, this ex-employee turns out to know more about his employer than the latter has known about himself.

New technologies and mobile devices can be a source of information as well as a source of mis-information. In order to keep track of every detail and learn about the latest actualities, Eric Packer carried a WAP phone that provided him with immediate online access to information; finding that it was easy to borrow more and more money to beat the yen, he did not listened to the warnings of his chief of finance and his currency analyst; instead, he proceeded with his uncalculated actions till he lost all his fortune. In order to save his capital from permanent loss, he created an online fake bank account to appropriate his wife's identity then stole her money; therefore, he illegally misused his knowledge and turned his back to ethical manners. Another instance of mis-information is revealed when Packer failed to take the messages behind the social protest movement seriously; he just saw "something theatrical" (DeLillo, 2003, p.99) about it. He was upset when a man burned himself; but the only excuse he reached was that his chief of theory "had been wrong" in that "the market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 100). Here, Packer epitomizes the capitalist entrepreneur who cares only about self-interest and financial growth, at the expense of the innocent common individuals.

Another side of mis-information lies in how information is perceived and interpreted. For example, his bodyguard used the most recent version of weapons that relied on voice recognition to shoot. Since he didn't know the code and his voice didn't match, Packer deceived his bodyguard; pretending that he wanted to test the gun, he ordered his chief of security to utter the code while he (the employer) targeted him (the employee). The employer killed the person who was supposed to keep him secure because he felt that his presence threatened his own sense of power and manhood. Furthermore, When he "made a phone threat" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 56) to the company, the antagonist Richard Sheets did not take his act seriously; yet, the company's security officials did. Ironically, they failed to identify the source of threat although they already had his record as an ex-employee; on the other hand, Sheets made his claim come true when Packer was sent by his fate to his enemy's building. Eliminating the capitalist representative was the key for the survival of the ordinary man.

From the illustrations of Eric Packer and Richard Sheets, it is noteworthy that transmitting, sharing and learning information in the age of high-technologies and the global capitalist system necessitates maintaining balance; otherwise the consequences may be incurable. While Sheets has his syndrome: "The Korean panic attack" that resulted from holding in his anger for long years, Packer has a complex called "Icarius Falling" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 202), alluding to a Greek mythology whose lesson was "not to fly too close to the sun" and the need to maintain "balance, equilibrium, and moderation" (Ancarola, 2024). Packer's fatal mistake made him bankrupt; he failed to maintain balance: "You were looking for balance. Beautiful balance, equal parts, equal sides. I know this. I know you. But you should have been tracking the yen in its tics and quirks. The little quirk. The mishap. [Benno said]" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 200). DeLillo skillfully uses misinformation as a distorting mirror, reflecting the fractured nature of truth in the novel's universe. Packer's quest for information becomes a journey through a hall of mirrors, where reality is elusive, and facts are malleable. In short, the novel raises poignant questions about the reliability of information sources and the susceptibility of individuals to manipulation.

To conclude, *Cosmopolis: a novel* stands as a prescient exploration of the intersection between information and new technologies in the 21st century. DeLillo's narrative serves as a cautionary tale, urging readers to critically examine the impact of technology on their lives. As we continue to struggle with the escalating role of information in our society, this novel remains a relevant and thought-provoking work that challenges us to reflect on the consequences of our technological pursuits. In *Cosmopolis, a novel* Don DeLillo paints a vivid portrait of a society trapped in the labyrinth of information and misinformation. The novel urges readers to confront the disorienting effects of living in an era where truth is elusive and misinformation abounds. As we struggle with the complexities of the digital age, *Cosmopolis* remains an accurate and inspiring exploration of the challenges posed by the blurred boundaries between reality and illusion in our information-driven world.

Information is a double-edged sword, it can be constructive or destructive. Indeed, the commodification of information may lead to the commodification of the human being; then ethical issues might be raised. Maintaining balance is vital: no profit would be reached without the 'inclusion' of most social groups. Besides, information and communication technologies were developed and transmitted to most nations through a double-faceted process: by revealing the right to free access to information for each individual in any corner in the world, and by hiding the attempts of different users to breach the private life, business plans, or secret files that concern only the owner of the information. High-

technologies have certainly established an empire that holds absolute control over both their creators and users; yet, despite these sophisticated components and services, and even if Artificial Intelligence and capital have claimed authority of the contemporary world's economic systems, it is through the right handling of information that individuals may maintain balance. (Mis)nformation in an empire where high-technologies and ICTs prevail can be both (mis)instructive; being aware of this is vital for self-security and for preserving one's existence in a world that is shaped, transformed and maintained by an infinite amount of data.

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