

Anxiety Writing in Don DeLillo's Cosmopolis in a Threshold Perspective

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Abstract: Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* depicts the anxiety that generally pervades postmodern society with the last day of financial tycoon Eric's life as he roams across the New York metropolitan area to get a haircut. This paper analyses the different anxieties in the novel from three different levels: the lift and the limousine, as the threshold field connecting private and public space, show Eric's possession anxiety; insomnia and asymmetrical hairstyle are the external manifestations of Eric's life anxiety; and the mass demonstration and Benno Levin's confession are the author's voices for the minor characters, expressing his existential anxiety. *Cosmopolis* reflects Don DeLillo's profound reflection on the social problem of spiritual emptiness and anxiety in postmodern society.

1. Introduction

Don DeLillo (1936-) is a famous American postmodern novelist, his most popular works include *White Noise*, *The Libra Constellation* and *Underworld*, among which *White Noise* is regarded as "the most classic masterpiece of American postmodernist literature". Published in 2003, *Cosmopolis* is DeLillo's thirteenth novel, and critics consider it to be the *Ulysses* of the postmodern era.

The protagonist of the novel Eric Parker is a young billionaire. On a day in April 2000, he attempts to cross the bustling streets of Manhattan, New York, in a luxury car to get a haircut, only to encounter a series of thrilling and dramatic events along the way. In the car, he discusses with his subordinates the change of the Japanese currency exchange rate and has a medical check-up; on the way, he encounters a demonstration against globalization and witnesses the self-immolation of protesters in Times Square; indoors, he recovers childhood memories at the barber's office, and confronts an ex-employee, who has been trying to kill him for a long time, in an abandoned building. "The novel demonstrates alienation and paranoia, art and commerce, reality and imagination, sex and death, the global market and terrorism, as if it were a kaleidoscope of postmodern discourse" and is a concentrated reference to the postmodern context showing the modern society, the confusion, anxiety and emptiness of the people living in the city.^[10]

Studies have been conducted to focus on other themes such as urban writing, postmodern urban identity, ethical redemption, and spiritual alienation in the novel. For example, Bagherzadeh Samani (2018) and others draw on Paul Virilio's theories to examine postmodern urban writing in *Cosmopolis*; ^[8] and Ajitabh Hazarika's (2022) study reveals the novel's radical reconfiguration of the cognitive iconography of human beings in contemporary capitalist culture.

Huang Xianghui (2012) looks at the two dimensions of the traveller and masculinity in the city, focusing on the everyday life pictures in the novel and the spiritual qualities of Americans in the context of the globalization era;^[3] Li Nan (2014) explores the urban machinic representations of physical and non-physical entities in the novel;^[5] Zhang Qi (2017) discusses the spatial imagery of the limousine of the protagonist, Parker, and comprehends the implied meaning behind the car imagery characterization, social conflicts and significance of the times.^[7]

Synthesizing the current status of research at home and abroad, *Cosmopolis*, as a novel in the postmodern context, has received extensive attention from scholars at home and abroad, with a rich variety of research themes. However, the author finds that there is still room for excavation and discussion in interpreting the novel from the threshold perspective. The physical spaces in the novel, such as the lift and the car, the external representations of the characters' bodies, such as insomnia and asymmetrical hairstyles, and even the demonstrations of the masses, serve as the figurative carriers of the threshold space, which profoundly embodies the qualities of transitivity, hybridity and uncertainty. These elements are not only the background and medium for plot development, but also an important mirror to reflect the psychological state of the characters, especially their anxiety. Therefore, interpreting the novel from the threshold theory and exploring the anxiety shown by the characters in the novel not only has a high theoretical fit, but also contains rich social significance and a profound view of reality.

The term Liminality was first proposed by Arnold Van Gennep in his book *The Rites of Passage*, and later developed by Victor Turner, and gradually became an important concept in anthropological research. "Liminality refers to a transitional state of a socio-cultural structure in between, characterized by anti-structure", and can be used to denote the transition period between one state and another, a state of transition, hybridity, uncertainty, and infinite possibilities, where the old and the new are intertwined.

As the wave of globalization continues to deepen, the world's metabolism speeds up, emerging borders and orders break the original paradigm, and in this period, ushering in a thousand sails, "the compression of space and time brought about by science and technology allows liminalities to present themselves in a variety of new forms and unpredictable ways" (Wang Hua, 2022). De Lillo is far-sighted enough to foresee this and present it in a unique way in his novel, expressing the anxiety of possession, life and survival that exists in the context of modern society through various threshold spaces, physical threshold metaphors and socially marginalized threshold characters.

2. Physical Threshold Spaces: Possession Anxiety

In physical space, threshold space specifically refers to the transitional region between two stable states or structures, and it is inextricably linked to anxiety. Threshold space firstly has the functional value of connection and transition on the physical level, allowing people to transition from one space to another, and thus has a certain ambiguity, unable to have a clear functional division like a specific space, and becoming a kind of "liminal zone", neither belonging to this space nor to that space. When people are in such a "liminal zone", threshold space often brings different special emotional experiences on the psychological level, such as the experience of uncertainty that is neither here nor there, and this uncertainty may trigger anxiety, uneasiness, or confusion, etc. For some people, threshold space has a certain ambiguity and cannot be clearly delineated as a specific space. For some people, the dissociative effect of threshold space on determinate space may also serve as a place for reflection, relaxation, or preparation before entering certain space.

2.1 Control Anxiety in Elevator Velocity

Elevator, a common means of vertical transportation in urban life, is also one of the

indispensable equipments for high-rise buildings. “The elevator, as the gateway and starting point of the modern urbanite into the city, connects the urbanite’s private domestic space with the public urban space. The urbanite’s experience of riding an elevator thus has the mediating character of transitioning between private and public space.” (Li Nan, 2014)^[5] The protagonist of the novel, Parker, lives in an 89-story skyscraper, and the elevator is the essential space he must pass through to travel from his private residential area to the urban ground level. Since the elevator connects the private space on one end and the public space on the other, it becomes a liminal space with transitional characteristics. He installed two private elevators in the building, “*One programmed to play Satie’s piano music and running at a quarter of the normal speed. This elevator is suitable for playing Satie’s music and is the one I ride in when I am less emotionally stable; it calms me down and normalizes my mood*” (*Cosmopolis*, 26).^[9] Whereas humans originally built the lift to shorten passage times and increase efficiency, Parker now actively reduces the speed of its operation, which prolongs this transitional journey before he enters the public spaces of the city. He also refers to the lift as being used for “unstable moods”, suggesting that it has become a special elevator for him to relax and prepare himself for the spaces at either end of the lift.

The requisition of the second private elevator “sparked public resentment.” Even though he was well aware that people bitterly complained about his monopolizing two elevators, Eric showed no regard for their grievances. Beyond housing Eric and his private luxury residence, the skyscraper also accommodated other companies and their employees. The privatization of both elevators meant less available space for others, leading to longer commute time, while Eric’s own elevator space expanded. The two elevators—one fast, one slow—reflected not only his resistance to entering the city’s public sphere but also his anxiety over asserting dominance within the building’s shared spaces. A single elevator would have sufficed for his needs, yet he deliberately monopolized two, encroaching on communal resources to carve out a larger private domain. As automated systems, the elevators operated with inherent unpredictability, beyond full human control. This loss of agency unsettled him, intensifying his possessive anxiety. To reclaim absolute authority, he slowed the elevators’ speed and installed music programs, attempting to exert maximum control. His fixation on ownership stemmed from a craving for both public space and dominance—an urge inextricably tied to the rapid pace and uncertainties of modern society.

2.2 Existential Anxiety in Car Interiors/Exteriors

The car serves as a significant motif in *Cosmopolis*—not merely as Eric Parker’s means of transportation but also as a liminal space that both separates and connects him to the urban public sphere and its crowds. During his journey from home to the barbershop, the car provides a transitional zone, allowing him to enter a state of relative privacy while remaining inextricably linked to the outside world. Though the car’s interior is a semi-enclosed space, its occupants can still observe the external environment through the windows and perceive ambient sounds, rendering the car a classic liminal space.

“*He liked that the cars were virtually identical. He needed this car because he saw it as a Platonic replica, its specifications irrelevant; less an object than an idea. But he knew this wasn’t true. It was what he told others, though he never believed it himself—except for a fleeting moment. He wanted this car precisely because it was oversized and domineering, a grotesque monolith that towered imperiously over every criticism*”. (*Cosmopolis*, 9)^[4]

Externally, his luxury sedan appears “featureless and inconspicuous,” yet it is armored with impenetrable bulletproof glass. Internally, it is equipped with electronic screens, cork-lined walls to mute street noise, a liquor cabinet, a microwave, a heart monitor, and even a foldable toilet. This fully loaded, high-security vehicle is not just a symbol of Eric’s wealth and status but also a

manifestation of his possessiveness: On the one hand, material possessiveness. The car draws gazes from pedestrians, and Eric admits he needs its imposing presence to assert his identity; On the other hand, spatial dominance. “The machine of the car bifurcates urban space: the expansion of the driver’s mobility inevitably shrinks the space available to public transport users.” (Li Nan, 2014)^[5] The author further notes in the novel that some luxury car owners would specifically request their vehicles to be one or two feet longer than others. These elongated limousines serve a similar function to the dual elevators - as public space gets compressed, the private space under one’s control expands accordingly. The greater the sphere of control, the more privileges Eric Parker enjoys, and the more his sense of security is reinforced.

Inside the car, Eric Parker conducts meetings, undergoes medical checks, and socializes with employees, transforming it into an office, clinic, and lounge. Outside, traffic jams, protests, and chaos slow his journey to a crawl. The stark contrast between these worlds fuels his anxiety—a fear that without the car’s armor, he too would be swallowed by the disorder. His dread escalates when street noises evoke primal rituals, or when the heart monitor underscores his insignificance. Later, his sexual advances toward his finance chief and wife betray a desperate urge to combat existential void through raw impulse.

3. Corporeal Threshold Representations: Life Anxiety

3.1 Hypnagogic Anxiety in Pre-Sleep Hallucinations

The novel opens with a striking portrayal of Eric Parker’s debilitating insomnia - an affliction that renders him incapable of normal sleep, plaguing him four to five nights weekly. His desperate attempts to induce slumber form a tragic catalog of failed remedies: from poring over scientific treatises and poetry, to maintaining upright postures to force drowsiness, to developing pharmacological dependence on sedatives and hypnotics - all culminating in abject failure. In this perpetual state of sleep deprivation, Eric exists in the hypnagogic limbo, that ambiguous threshold between wakefulness and sleep where consciousness flickers at the edge of dissolution. Hypnagogia refers to a state of sleep that is moving towards or away from true sleep and involves a transition between consciousness and loss of consciousness, a transition between waking and sleeping, and a transition between daytime everyday consciousness and nighttime vague consciousness.

Academics give mixed analyses about the reasons for the protagonist's insomnia. Some scholars pointed out that his insomnia is affected by his work; the currency market never closes and trades all the time, and Eric’s physiological clock has been disturbed by the restless virtual time and space (Zhang Qi, 2017).^[7] Eric’s job faces great risks and pressure, he needs to make judgement in the rapidly changing exchange rate market, the pressure comes not only from the work itself, but also from his desire for success and fear of failure; some people also believe that it is the concept of consumerism that alienates people, “he is surrounded by nothing but the cacophony of sounds and the concept of time in his mind”, “manipulating a materialistic society where the protagonist enjoys the world’s luxury items but feels empty, left with the meaning or symbols left behind by the social discourse constructs” (Tang Jiannan, 2020).^[11] He possessed everything, yet still couldn’t grasp the meaning of existence, leading to insomnia and anxiety. Moreover, “he didn’t have any close friends to call for a chat—what was there to talk about? It was a silent question, not something words could solve” (*Cosmopolis*, 1).^[4] Without true friends and trapped in a marriage with his wife that existed in name only, sustained only by financial ties, he had no one to confide in about his loneliness and emptiness. This left him restless at night, lost in endless anxiety and suffering. The immense work pressure, the alienation of interpersonal relationships, and the self-estrangement wrought by technology and consumerism—these are the underlying causes of Eric’s insomnia, and indeed, the common afflictions of modern society. Readers may glimpse their own reflections in the protagonist,

a testament to DeLillo's extraordinary literary prescience.

Insomnia plunged his thoughts into the abyss of nothingness— "*the palest of thoughts cast shadows of anxiety.*" Suspended in the liminal space between wakefulness and sleep, his prolonged struggle to rest birthed a gnawing sleep anxiety, dragging him into a trance-like state. This daze was a manifestation of his uncertainty toward the essence of time and his deep-seated suspicion of everything around him. Such doubt and instability seeped into every facet of his ensuing day, staining all his actions with unease. For instance, he perceived his bodyguard Tovah's imposing stature as a personal provocation. After abruptly gunning Tovah down, he felt no remorse—only the cold rationale that, having lost his company and fortune, he needed an outlet. "*Tovah's death eliminated the possibility of further confrontation tonight.*" His detachment extended to others; he no longer acknowledged Shiner, "*He hadn't looked Shiner in the eye for three years. And even if you did look, you wouldn't learn anything new. One glance would pierce straight through to his spinal cord*" (*Cosmopolis*, 10)^[6] During his aimless journey through the city, he crossed paths with his wife three times. "*She was a poet, a descendant of the Schiffrin dynasty, whose banking empire spanned Europe and the world... As for her poetry—it was garbage.*" Their marriage, entangled in financial interests, meant nothing to him. He disdained her vocation and saw draining her wealth as his rightful due. "Eric utterly disregarded—even inverted—the ethical duties and obligations of matrimony" (Niu Xiaohong, 2019).^[10]

Embodied cognition theory holds that the formation of human cognition stems from bodily activities and environmental perception, with physical states significantly influencing cognitive processes. The anxiety, doubt, and uncertainty induced by insomnia profoundly distorted Eric's cognition, emotions, and behavioral patterns. He perceived his bodyguard's imposing physique as a threat to his personal dignity, displayed utter disregard for existential values, vacillated between binge eating and starvation, and engaged in compulsive sexual encounters. Evidently, trapped in the hypnagogic threshold between wakefulness and sleep, Eric was being consumed by the torment of insomnia.

3.2 Defiant Anxiety in Asymmetrical Hairstyling

"Symmetry" remains a leitmotif throughout Eric's discourse in *Cosmopolis*. "He felt an abnormal reverence for the word. It frightened him, keeping him at a respectful distance" (*Cosmopolis*, 47).^[4] This fixation explains his superstitious silence upon learning of his "*asymmetrical prostate*" from doctors - a terror of becoming aberrant or deformed. Professionally, his dogmatic pursuit of symmetry manifested as an unshakable belief in the yen's stability. Despite repeated warnings from subordinates, this rigidity ultimately bankrupted him. Only during his confrontation with Benno Levin did the epiphany strike: Benno exposed Eric's fatal blindness to "*the significance of asymmetry, or rather the importance of deviation*", revealing how his downfall stemmed from ignoring market oscillations and distortions - the very essence of asymmetry. Yet before this climactic reckoning, Eric's subconscious had already staged its own revolt against symmetry.

After a long day, Eric finally arrived at the final destination of his journey, the barber shop. Inside, "*the paint was peeling off the walls, exposing flecks of light red plaster. There were multiple cracks in the ceiling*", and the dilapidated environment seemed out of place for Eric, a billionaire who was worth more than \$100 million. But it is this humble barbershop that carries Eric's warm childhood memories, and becomes his temporary escape from the real world and the harbor of urban life, this small shop "*for him to escape from the plight of insomnia at night to open up a channel*". It is only when he chats with the barber and begins to cut his hair that he can find a moment of comfort and peace within himself. But this rare peace soon vanishes.

He could sit no longer.

He sprang up from the chair and threw back his head, draining the glass in one gulp.

Anthony stood with a comb in one hand and scissors in the other, suddenly diminished. "What's wrong?"

"I have to go. I don't know what's wrong. That's what's wrong."

"But at least let me finish the right side. Then both sides will be even."

Anthony cared deeply about this. It was clear the sides should be symmetrical.

"I'll come back. Believe me, I'll sit here and let you finish." (Cosmopolis, 144)^[2]

The purpose of Eric's visit was to get a haircut, but halfway through the haircut, he chose to discontinue the activity, leaving his hair in an "asymmetrical" state, and he did not return to the barbershop as he had promised to do. This aborted transition between old and new hairstyles suspended his physical being in liminality, while the disrupted exterior mirrored the churning amalgam of his psyche—where transient calm and restless indeterminacy swirled in uneasy coexistence. He had been deeply disturbed and anxious ever since he had received the danger signal from headquarters. The familiar surroundings of the barbershop allowed him to let down his guard for a while and find a long-lost sleep. But the threat to his life from the reality of the situation never subsided, *"He was alert and his mind was anxious to solve the problem. Things must be coming to a head soon. The man's plan of action had been devised and was clearly visible."* Benno Levin's anonymous email is like the sword of Damocles hanging over Eric's head, always reminding him of the danger he is facing, so when the haircut has not yet been completed but is about to be completed, he decides to abandon the principle of symmetry that he has been following, and take the initiative to face the threat of the threat and face up to the anxiety of life.

4. Social Threshold Characters: Survival Anxiety

4.1 Resistance Anxiety in Protest Movements

In his book *Transitional Rituals*, Van Gennep divides all transitional rituals into three phases: separation, liminality (or threshold), and convergence. "During the threshold period of interregnum, the state of the ritual subject (i.e., the transitioner) is ambiguous, and he passes through a realm that bears little or no character of any past or impending state," (*The Forest of Symbols*, 379)^[1] Mass processions are large-scale collective actions in which participants experience a shift from ordinary roles in everyday life to collective identities in the procession, immersed in a special state beyond everyday life, the masses of people participating in the procession come together for the sake of a certain common will or demand, and their actions have the potential to temporarily change the participants' relationship with the social structure, so that the procession belongs to a kind of transitional rite of passage and carries a liminal characteristics. "A few blocks away at the Nasdaq Stock Exchange, there was also a commotion outside the building. People of different sizes and colours came and went. The entrance was packed." (*Cosmopolis*, 74)^[4]

This group of protesters from forty countries, anarchists, who most likely did not know each other before they walked into the threshold stage of the march, have now come together temporarily for a common goal and become a threshold community. During the march, they rushed towards white limousines representing money and power and smashed them beyond recognition, threw smoke bombs at the police, blew up the building of an investment bank, built barricades with burning tires, and some even set themselves on fire. Their actions were organized, planned and premeditated, displaying the transitional nature of a threshold community, i.e. spontaneity, immediacy and concreteness; they challenged the authority of the capitalist society and wanted to break through the existing rules and constraints, and were surprisingly full of *"fearlessness and moral force"*.

As to why they act the way they do, the author suggests, through Eric, “*These people are freaks spawned by the market. They cannot survive outside the market. They have no choice but to go anywhere outside the market.*” In the post-modern industrial society of financial globalization and capital digitization, there is a serious polarization between the rich and the poor, and the people at the bottom who cannot adapt to the rules of operation of the capitalist society are living a life of survival, and are regarded as “freaks”, and in order to obtain the resources and space for their survival, they rise up in revolt, and become the “gravediggers” of capitalism. After the end of the march, this threshold community enters the post-threshold stage, withdrawing from the special state of collective activities to return to its original daily life. The extreme behavior during the march is a means for the marchers, who are all in the same threshold stage, to fight for survival space and gain social attention. Yet their survival anxiety still lingers, whether they are in the pre-threshold, threshold or post-threshold stage.

4.2 Marginality Anxiety in Peripheral Identities

“People in transition are also characterised by another structural negativity, namely that they have nothing. They have no status, possessions, markings, worldly clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing that would structurally define them as distinct from their fellows.” (*The Forest of Symbols*, 395)^[1] Benno Levin, the mysterious man who tries to assassinate Eric in the novel, is one such threshold man in transition, without visible social markers, constantly wandering on the fringes of society.

The appearance of Benno Levin is very special as the author uses a special narrative technique to present Benno’s journey as a confession. He used to “have a job and a family”, and he “fought hard” to support his family, but he was still in financial straits, and in the end, his wife abandoned him, and he quit his old job as a teacher to become an ordinary employee of Eric’s company. Like the values of the American dream, Benno believes that if you work hard, you can change your fate, but the reality is always the opposite. “*People always said he was eccentric, that he had personality and physical problems*”, and even his way of walking was criticized. He was demoted and paid less because he was considered to be psychologically disturbed, and was dismissed without prior notice and without termination indemnity.

Unsatisfactory family, life, work, and relationships have made him passive and a marginalized figure in society. “Threshold focuses on mingled spaces that cannot be dichotomized, and man is essentially a spatial being that tends to belong to a certain group in search of identity and protection.” (Qin Mengyun, Liu Yuhong, 2023) After being sacked from his job, he lives in an abandoned building with no water, heating or light, steals electricity from street lamp posts, and uses his meagre cash to buy bottled water for drinking and bathing. Abandoned by his loved ones, fired from his job, unable to find a place to live, unable to seek acceptance and protection, and with no sense of belonging to society. As a result, Benno Levin has become a threshold person with a distinctly transitional nature, and the uncertainty brought about by his threshold identity has directly led to his anxious behavior and extreme confusion.

There were larger themes lingering in my mind. It was a theme about loneliness and the aspect of human abandonment, as well as a theme about who else I could hate when there was no one left. (Cosmopolis, 52)

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However, to take another human life? It was a vision of a new age. I finally resolved to do it. Only violent action can change history, change the past. But how to envision that moment? I couldn’t be sure of being mentally ready to do it, since we were both mortals dressed in nondescript mixed colors. (Cosmopolis, 131)^[4]

Hating society, hoping for violence, stalking and watching Eric's every move and planning an assassination attempt are the very symptoms of Benno Levin's existential anxiety in action. Because he has been ignored for so long, he is determined to regain his sense of existence and value through extreme acts of violence such as murder. And later when Eric recognizes him, "*For the moment, the man showed a glimmer in his eyes, despite his haggard, lackluster and despairing display. He thought that Eric had recognized him, and this encouraged him*" (*Cosmopolis*,160),^[4] and the long-lost sense of existence sprouted again, as if reconnecting with society. This shows his existential anxiety, out of a long unfulfilled need for belonging, respect and self-realization.

5. Conclusion

The writing of anxiety in *Cosmopolis* is author DeLillo's forward-looking reflection on the gradual increase in the level of urbanization in modern society, and it is also a delicate portrayal of the deep-seated anxiety of various classes of people living in the city. Various threshold spaces, threshold states and threshold processes make every choice made by the characters in the book full of unknowns and uncertainties. Eric, who belongs to the elite class, after a day's journey, finally goes to his death in the overlap of imagination and reality, and he will no longer be trapped in anxiety because of his fearfulness all day long and his inability to sleep. As for Benno and the crowds who take to the streets to demonstrate, their anxiety still lingers in the shadows of their daily lives. They are like a mirror reflecting the anxiety we may feel in the face of various unknown situations in modern society, stimulating readers to reflect deeply on the current social reality and self-examination.

In an interview, DeLillo said, "The novel is confined to the period between the end of the Cold War era and the beginning of the age of terror." The novel was published shortly after the September 11th terrorist attacks, which left a deep mark on the hearts and minds of many people for the terrible damage they caused. Therefore, *Cosmopolis* itself is a work in the age of threshold, and it is natural that we cannot escape from threshold thinking when analyzing the plot of its characters. By analyzing the causes of possession anxiety, life anxiety and survival anxiety in the novel, we can get a glimpse of the common dilemma faced by human beings in the post-modern society, in which material abundance is extremely rich while the spirit is becoming increasingly empty, and the pursuit of efficiency and rationality ignores the importance of emotion and asymmetry. With his keen insight and insightful writing, DeLillo reveals the root causes of anxiety and guides readers to think about how to find a physical and spiritual home in modern society and ultimately return to peace.

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