
Jesse Kavadlo. *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004. 170p.

RANDY LAIST
UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief is one of several recent book-length studies of DeLillo to make the argument that the author must at long last be rescued from the critical excesses of postmodern theory. In harmony with Joseph Dewey's *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo* (2006) and David Cowart's *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (2004), Kavadlo's book advocates a reading of Don DeLillo that depicts the author as writing against postmodern conceits rather than in sympathy with them. Kavadlo gives this argument a humanist spin; his DeLillo is a detective of basic human experiences. "DeLillo does nothing less than locate and expose fear, love, and evil in the world" (7). Despite Kavadlo's opening remark that "we live in DeLillo-esque times" (1), his DeLillo is a champion of the transhistorical values of "unironic faith" and "unambiguous reality." One cannot avoid Kavadlo's implication that an optimistic reading of DeLillo implies an optimistic reading of these "DeLillo-esque times."

Of course, all that stands between Kavadlo and the humanistic reading he proposes is the totality of DeLillo's written output, which has continually revealed in depictions of faith as infinitely ironized and reality as constitutionally warped into radical ambiguity. Kavadlo does not pretend that this is not the case, and most of the text of his book is dedicated to unraveling the complexities of DeLillo's depictions of deconstructionist semantics or hyperreal subjectivities. Nevertheless, his thesis insists, DeLillo persistently suggests the transcendence of belief and selfhood. Although Kavadlo's title and his rhetoric both suggest the metaphor of "balance" as a way of reconciling the humanistic and the post-humanistic strains in DeLillo's artistry, Kavadlo repeatedly tips the scales in favor of the former. Consequently, his DeLillo comes off sounding a little more like Saul Bellow or Toni Morrison than like Don DeLillo. To add to the difficulty, while *Underworld* may be an easier text to read from a humanist perspective, *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Mao II*, the three other texts that Kavadlo considers, put up much more resistance. It is easy to read these three novels as a trilogy about the dismantling of humanist values in the contemporary era. Kavadlo's arguments to the contrary, although full of insight and wit, fail to convince. After several pages about the labyrinthine postmodern puzzles DeLillo has constructed, Kavadlo regularly jumps abruptly to some humanist image that supposedly eliminates the implications of everything else. One feels that if he had read *through* the irony rather than merely against it, he would come to a truer position on the character of DeLillo's writing.

For example, Kavadlo reads *White Noise* as “an old-fashioned cautionary tale, recast in the language of postmodernity” (41). Kavadlo admits that love is “seldom mentioned” in the novel, and that “passion and grace” are “completely ignored,” but nevertheless insists that these are the central themes of the novel, as if depicting the absence of faith and love were only another, functionally identical way of depicting the triumph of faith and love. Kavadlo insists that “Beneath its postmodern and paranoid guise, *Libra* presents characters yearning for a kind of salvation that is more spiritual than political or even personal” (47). If there is any crucial difference between the yearning that finds expression in gunning down the president and the yearning that wishes on a star, Kavadlo does not say. The discussion of *Mao II*, similarly, recognizes that there is a problematic oxymoron in DeLillo’s depiction of “spiritual consumerism” (98), but Kavadlo’s rhetoric picks up on the word “spiritual” and easily disregards whatever violent, banal, or paranoiac activity it describes. Kavadlo’s best chapter is about *Underworld*, not only because this is the DeLillo novel that is probably most conducive to the humanist reading, but also because it seems like Kavadlo has loosened up on his strangling thesis a little bit and is more willing to acknowledge ambiguity. Whereas Kavadlo had tried unconvincingly to depict the dehumanizing crowds in *Mao II* as expressions of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, the crowds in *Underworld* really do suggest the more democratic, humanistic values that Kavadlo is looking for. At the same time, Kavadlo’s *Underworld* chapter sustains an open-ended balance between images of romanticism and images of nihilism; between the kinds of connections that are humanistic and the kinds of connections that are paranoid. Kavadlo’s consideration of the instability which DeLillo brings to bear on humanist assumptions comes closest to exposing what is so unsettling in DeLillo’s writing.

Kavadlo’s book is the only one of seven published full-length studies of DeLillo to focus specifically on a handful books, rather than sweeping through the entirety of the DeLillo’s 30-year output. This is a great strength of Kavadlo’s book. It is not as rushed and manic as many other books on DeLillo; Kavadlo takes the necessary time to do justice to the rich texture and thematic complexity of the novels he considers. This technique, along with his sympathetic, humanistic reading of DeLillo’s characters, allows Kavadlo to point out many compelling nuances that have been overlooked in previous studies. Particularly noteworthy are Kavadlo’s discussions of the intimate human moments shared by members of the Gladney family, the rampant doubling which turns *Libra* into a dizzying game of mirrors, and the Oedipal undercurrents in *Mao II*. Kavadlo’s final chapter presents an amusing and insightful critique of DeLillo’s public persona. Kavadlo turns Barthes on his head by claiming that, rather than having died leaving nothing but a text, the 20th-century author

has evolved into a talk show icon, a figure of authority whose cultural relevance far outdistances the status of his or her poor unread text. In addition to parodying this turn of events in his novels, Kavadlo argues, DeLillo's own self-creation as a figure who is part priest and part garbage man represents a self-effacing response to cultural attitudes about authors.

The book certainly lends a fresh perspective to DeLillo studies, but one is left with a lingering doubt as to whether it elevates or reduces DeLillo's artistry to consider it as an expression of transhistorical values. DeLillo is such a creature of the contemporary world. His stylistic uniqueness seems to echo the historical uniqueness of our contemporary situation within an unprecedented media ecology. But such techno-historical change is only meaningful against a background of values that persist, and to lose sight of the "spiritual yearning that will transcend our present state, just as it has preceded it" (154) would, Kavadlo argues, diminish our appreciation of DeLillo's accomplishment. ✱