
Peter Boxall. *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2006. 252p.

RANDY LAIST
UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

Vince Passaro reports that Don DeLillo, upon being told that his name was on a lot of people's lips in the wake of 9/11, simply replied, "Well, I wish it weren't." Whether he likes it or not, DeLillo is indisputably the American novelist whose works seem most uncannily to have anticipated the millennial moment embodied in those horrific attacks. In retrospect, it is impossible to look at the cover of *Underworld*, a photograph of the Twin Towers shrouded in tombstone gloom, or to read *Players*, which juxtaposes scenes of a Wall Street terrorist attack with rhapsodic passages on the monumental unreality of the World Trade Center, without imagining that DeLillo has peered into those latent sub-structures of social consciousness which give shape to the future of history. Peter Boxall's book *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* deliberately adopts the frame of 9/11 as a way of reading DeLillo's novels. Boxall charts a decade-by-decade trajectory from the '70s into the '00s according to which DeLillo portrays globalization as a trend that inexorably draws together the forces of economic power and the forces of violent dissent, of technology and art, of transformation and continuity, and of temporality and death until these binaries shed their antagonistic identities and imbue one another with the characteristics of their ostensible opposites.

This historical analysis of DeLillo's oeuvre within the context of the temporality of late capitalism and the millennial moment is one of the strengths which make Boxall's book arguably the best full-length study of DeLillo (there are, to date, seven other such published studies). It is a common and frequently observed aspect of DeLillo criticism that critics tend to split over the issue of whether DeLillo is an unregenerate postmodernist, as Frank Lentricchia has said, or a "High Romantic Transcendentalist" as Harold Bloom has called him. In both kinds of interpretation, however, the historical situatedness which is so distinctive of all of DeLillo's writing tends to be overlooked in favor of one school or another of literary theory. Boxall's technique of locating DeLillo within contemporary history is a critical strategy that overcomes the postmodern-romantic dualism by demonstrating how DeLillo's novels illustrate the contradictions between the historical and the transhistorical ways of seeing which permeate his characters' perception of their millennial age.

Boxall's persistent theme is that paradox is the centerpiece of all of DeLillo's most central images. Boxall's model here, and conceivably DeLillo's, is Samuel Beckett, who teaches us that failure is inevitable, but simultaneously that the artist

creates a space in which it is possible to “fail better.” The world is finished, but we nevertheless carry on. This variety of “but”-construction proliferates throughout Boxall’s analyses. DeLillo confronts us with the triumph of death, but death is the shadowy space necessary for the emergence of creative possibility. DeLillo points us toward the emergence of creative possibility, but only as it manifests itself through the specter of death. Boxall’s DeLillo is always giving and taking with the same gesture. Boxall demonstrates however that this level of poetic complexity and paradox is essential to teasing out the kind of ontological short circuits that are DeLillo’s stock in trade. Peace, apocalypse, technology, and, most emphatically, death, are all ambivalently signifiers of transcendence and facticity, of opening and closing, of termination and possibility.

There are very few notes in Boxall’s long study that ring false. A long section on the references to Vietnam in *White Noise* is unconvincing, an extended discussion of Milton seems out of place, and the discussion of *Running Dog* is disproportionately meager. But the breadth and ambition of the book easily overwhelm the impact of any such missteps. In the increasingly crowded field of DeLillo studies, Boxall manages continually to present novel and surprising insights. There is an impressive balance between the comprehensive reach of Boxall’s discussion and close readings of minute passages and images; a balance which many other DeLillo studies fail to achieve. This combination enables Boxall to draw compelling intertextual connections among DeLillo’s thirteen novels which manage to gather together the author’s diverse output in ways that the many individual journal articles about separate DeLillo novels rarely do. Boxall draws our attention to the Oedipal motif which not only recurs but develops and matures along with DeLillo’s prose, the manner in which DeLillo traces the progressive virtualization of the technologies he describes from book to book, and, most delightfully, there is a long passage tracing the image of the empty shoe as it manifests itself from the first chapter of DeLillo’s first novel into his pair of 21st-century books. And most centrally, Boxall gives his reader a view of the progression of DeLillian temporality as it moves up toward the millennial moment and then persists, Beckettianly, beyond it, into the shapeless temporality of this current decade for which, as Boxall trenchantly observes, we have no name (the naughts? the zeroes?). The implications of Boxall’s book push beyond the study of DeLillo’s novels themselves to suggest a starting point for broader research into the time-sense of the Cold War and the post-millennial moment.

Finally, Boxall has handled the awkwardness of writing about a living, working author with honesty and aplomb. Early on in his study, he makes the astute observation that the manner in which canonization has attempted to “close the book” on DeLillo before he has stopped writing is analogous to a persistent theme

in DeLillo's novels themselves, the premature "rush to the post" that attempts to declare an end to history even as history continues to well up all around us. Part of the manner in which Boxall is true to the "possibility" of his book's title is by leaving the conversation open and keeping his statements about DeLillo from narrowing down into an easy definitiveness. In this sense, the last image that Boxall describes, the final paragraph of *Cosmopolis*, is ideal. Eric Packer's death, completed in virtual space but yet unconsummated in "original space"—poised between the actual and the possible—provides a compelling metaphor for all of DeLillo's novels as Boxall has explicated them; they represent a completion in process, a dying that lives beyond its death. ✱