

Postmodern Fiction

Eric Packer, the 28-year-old billionaire protagonist, has embarked on a journey across Manhattan with his bodyguard Torval to get a haircut. His limousine has been caught in traffic as they come across a funeral procession for a rap star.

5 There were police barricades just ahead, blocking access to Ninth Avenue. At first Torval believed this was related to the flooded streets. But there were no clean-up crews on the other side of the avenue. Then he thought the president's motorcade was on the way downtown to some official function after finally shaking free of midtown traffic. But there was music in the distance and people beginning to gather, too many, too young, with headsets attached, to account for a presidential drive-by. Finally he talked to one of the cops at the barricades.

There was a funeral on the way.

10 Eric got out of the car and stood near the bicycle shop on the corner, with Torval planted nearby. An enormous man approached through the gathering crowd, broad, meaty, solemn, wearing pale linen slacks and a black leather shirt, sleeveless, with platinum accessories here and there. It was Kozmo Thomas, who managed a dozen rappers and had once owned a stable of racehorses in partnership with Eric.

They did the handclasp and half hug. "Why are we here?"

"You ain't heard?"

Eric said, "What?"

15 Kozmo batted himself in the chest, reverently. "Brutha Fez."

"What?"

"Dead."

"No. What. Can't be."

"Dead. Died. Early today."

20 "I don't know this?"

"Funeral's been in progress all day. The family wants to give the city a chance to pay respect. The record label wants an exploitation event. Big and loud. Street to street. Right through the night."

"I don't know this? How can this be? I love his music. I have his music in my elevator. I know the man."

25 He knew the man. The sadness, the plangency of this remark was echoed in the music itself, the gawwali* model of devotional rhythms and improvisations, over a thousand years old, growing louder now as the funeral cortege came down the avenue, which had been cleared of extraneous traffic and parked cars.

"What, they shot him?"

30 First the squad of motorcycles, city police in wedge formation. Two private security vans followed, flanking a police cruiser. It was so completely clear, another dead rapper, the protocol of the rap star who goes down humming in a spatter of gunshots after he fails to pay feudal tribute in the form of respect or money or women to some skittish individual. This was the day, was it not, for influential men to come to sudden messy ends.

Kozmo was looking askance.

35 "Fez been having cardiac problems for years. Since high school. Been seeing specialists, been seeing faith healers. Heart just wore out. This ain't a thug down some alley. The man never been breathalyzed, barely, since he was seventeen."

Then came the flower cars, ten of them, banked with white roses rippling in the breeze. The hearse came next, an open car with Fez lying in state at the rear in a coffin angled upward to make the body visible,

40 asphodels everywhere, fleshy pink, the flowers of Hades, where souls of the dead come to find meadowy rest.

The dead man's amplified voice sounded from farther back in the procession, singing in slow hypnotic syncopation, accompanied by harmonium and hand drums.

"Hope you're not disappointed."

"Disappointed."

45 "That our man here wasn't shot. Hope he didn't let you down. Natural causes. That's a letdown."

Kozmo jabbed a thumb back over his shoulder.

"What happened to your stretch? Letting a fine machine degrade in public. That's a scandal, man."

"Everything's a scandal. Dying's a scandal. But we all do it."

"I'm hearing voices in the night. Because I know it can't be you that's saying this."

50 Scores of women walked alongside the limousines, in headscarves and djellabas, hands stained with henna, and barefoot, and wailing. Kozmo struck his chest again and so did Eric. He thought his friend was impressive in repose, wearing a full beard and a white silk caftan with hood folded back and the iconic red fez on his head, stylishly tilted, and how affecting it was for the man to be lying in the spiral of his own vocal adaptations of ancient Sufi music, rapping in Punjabi and Urdu and in the blackswagger English of the street.

*Gettin' shot is easy
Tried it seven times
Now I'm just a solo poet
Workin' on my rhymes*

60 The crowd was large and hushed, deepening along the sidewalks, and people in nightclothes watched from tenement windows. Four of Fez's personal bodyguards accompanied the hearse, slow-marching, one off each point of the car. They were in Western dress, dark suits and ties, polished oxfords, with combat shotguns held at port arms.

Eric liked that. Bodyguards even in death. Eric thought yes.

65 Then came the breakdancers, in pressed jeans and sneakers, here to affirm the history of the deceased, born Raymond Gathers in the Bronx, once a breaker of some fame. These were his contemporaries, six men ranged across the six lanes of the avenue, in their mid-thirties now, back in the streets after all these years to do their windmills and reels, their impossible axial headspins.

"Ask me do I love this shit," said Kozmo.

70 But the energy and dazzle brought something melancholy to the crowd, more regret than excitement. Even the younger people seemed subdued, over-respectful, as the breakers wheeled on their elbows and flared their bodies parallel to the ground, running in horizontal frenzy.

Grief should be powerful, Eric thought. But the crowd was still learning how to mourn a singular rapper such as Fez, who mixed languages, tempos and themes.

75 Only Kozmo was alive and popping.

"Me being big as I am, and a retro-nigger, I have to love what I'm seeing. Because this is something I could never dream of doing in my thinnest day on earth."

80 Yes, they spun on their heads, bodies upright and legs spread slightly, and one of the breakers had his hands cuffed behind his back. Eric thought there was something mystical about this, well beyond the scan of human encompassment, the half-crazed passion of a desert saint. How lost to the world he must be, here in the grease and tar of Ninth Avenue.

Suggested Outline

Prendre des précautions avec l'analyse du point de vue dans ce passage: début pas forcément de la focalisation interne sur Torval, peut-être du discours rapporté ; pas de signe majeur d'omniscience du narrateur ici (plutôt *limited point of view with focal shifts* dans le roman, le focalisateur central demeurant Eric)

Possible themes

- **life and death**: mournful atmosphere vs music/dance, structure of the funeral (ritual, organisation, procession as chronology), funeral as spectacle, ontology, personal narratives / destiny,
- **art and culture**: postmodernism, cultural appropriation, mainstream culture vs fringe culture, traditional culture vs contemporary culture, low culture vs high culture, art vs money, music and spirituality, art and creation...
- **the individual and the community**: self and other, rejection of American values or melting pot, urbanity vs spirituality, cultural integration

Elements for a Commentary

/!\ Don DeLillo rarely praises anything unequivocally → his novels usually include layers of subtle, darkly humorous criticism

↳ “Does DeLillo applaud this individual’s [Brutha Fez] alleged spiritual integrity . . . , his engagement with Sufism and its ancient musical forms? Does he pay solemn tribute to rap as latter-day refuge to that figure of decadent romanticism, the artist outlaw? I think not.”
(David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*)

/!\ Rap culture (originally as “hip hop”) born in the 1970s in the Bronx → cf. breakdancers in their thirties

/!\ Procession does not gather the whole of NYC society, far from it, mostly communitarian gathering, with the various sides of African-American culture

/!\ Story takes place in April 2000 → be careful when mentioning 9/11 and the ensuing rise in Islamophobia

Cosmopolis = mock-epic subversion of the classical motif of the odyssey (transformed into a quest for a hairdresser’s); vignette-based narrative structured by various significant episodes, echoing the tales of Odysseus’ adventures in Homer’s epic poem

narrator and main focalizer = billionaire trader Eric Packer

here, twofold experience of otherness, both culturally (cultural hybridity of Brutha Fez’s art) and ontologically (death)

I. Life and Death

Mournful atmosphere of the funeral, despite the energy of the dancers → power of sadness, l. 71

Loss of a close friend for Eric (use of internal focalisation to capture his sadness) → given apparently “mystical” (l. 77) depth by the music (l. 24-26 and l. 40-41), and dance (l. 68-69)

Eric waxes philosophical, almost in spite of himself: “Why are we here?” (l.12) → as if he were asking a question about the meaning of life

But egotistically centred on himself (cf. dialogue and extensive use of the first person singular: “I don’t know this”, “I love his music” → focused on how it affects him, and not Brutha Fez or even Kozmo Thomas), which is conveyed stylistically by the extensive use of internal focalization and free indirect speech to capture Eric’s inner thoughts and reactions

↳ Brutha Fez and Eric Packer “are two sides of the same . . . coin” (David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*)

For instance, recognizes his own idea of pain in the experience of the crowd: “Grief should be powerful” (l. 71) → the modal betrays a strong involvement of the speaker, Eric, to express the idea that this display of “grief” fits his moral conception of how one should feel upon learning of someone’s death

Even Kozmo humours him (l. 44) + exemplified by his thoughts about the bodyguards (l. 62): it can be surmised that, since he is an “influential m[a]n” (l. 31), he envisions the kind of funeral he would like to have, with his bodyguards (including Torval) showing their devotion to his power even after he has passed away

Helps build up tragic irony: “This was the day, was it not, for influential men to come to sudden messy end” (l. 31-32)

↳ Eric’s vicarious experience of death foreshadows the end of the novel, as he ends up being murdered after becoming a murderer himself

⇒ the whole experience is a way for Eric to reflect upon his own power and the kind of respect he would expect to be shown in death

Dignified and solemn, associated with a certain beauty “white roses rippling in the breeze” (l. 37), but sense of failed elevation: the coffin is only “angled upward” (l. 38) + horizontal movement of the breakers (l. 69-70)

Displaced symbolism of the “asphodels” (l. 39) → traditionally associated with the Elysian Fields, but here with Hades and the infernal regions of the Greek underworld

↳ cultural note: the Asphodels Meadows were probably originally meant to be the place where the people who had a mediocre life went after they died, but Greek poetry after Homer tends to associate them with a generally positive form of afterlife

+ “spiral” of the rapper’s song evokes the spiralling motion of the lovers’ dead souls found in Canto V of Dante’s *Inferno*



William BLAKE, *The Circle of the Lustful: Francesca Da Rimini (The Whirlwind of Lovers)*, c. 1824-7

Especially as the lines from Brutha Fez's song (l. 54-57) are anything but poetic, and fail to bring a true sense of beauty, or even artistry to the funeral

↳ described as “cringe-worthy rap lyrics” by critic Richard Dragan

His music is only worthy of being played in Eric's “elevator” (l. 23), associated with downward movement at the beginning of the novel

↳ cf. Eminem, “I make elevating music, you make elevator music” (“Rap God”, *The Marshall Matters LP2*, 2013)[†]

All the religious references are coloured with a sense of inadequacy: the breaker who looks like a “desert saint” is experiencing “half-crazed passion”, the crows if “over-respectful”

⇒ extract ends on the abrupt failure of transcendence at the end because of the final focus on “the grease and tar of Ninth Avenue”

Tension at the heart of the passage captured by Kozmo's words: “The family wants to give the city a chance to pay respect. The record label wants an exploitation event.”

⇒ art and culture vs. money and business

II. Art and Money

In the postmodern world, the “culture industry” tends to transform knowledge and art into commodities to be monetized and traded

↳ cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (1974): “The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume—that is, the form of value. **Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be**

consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange.”

Death itself might be part of a marketing strategy: “gangsta narrative” ingrained in Eric’s mind (l. 29-31) and works as a preconception before Kozmo sets him right (l. 34-36)

↳ best exemplified by the murder of Tupac Shakur (a.k.a. 2Pac), who was shot in 1996, reportedly because of his rivalry with another rapper, Christopher Wallace (a.k.a. The Notorious B.I.G.). Although 2Pac’s murder remains unsolved, recent inquiries into his death have shown that he was probably shot by the Crips, a Californian gang

→ “Fez’s character seems to be based on the rappers Tupac Shakur and especially Notorious B.I.G., both rapper[s] dying in the 1990s. DeLillo retained newspaper clippings from coverage of Notorious B.I.G.’s funeral in his notebooks in preparation for *Cosmopolis*” (James Gourley, *Terrorism and Temporality in the Works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo*)

That it should also be included in Brutha Fez’s song lyrics (l. 54-55) points to the artificiality of the rapper’s persona, which was derived from this stereotypical conception of rap culture while rejecting it through the inclusion of gawwali

This public image that can possibly be a source of income for a rapper. Possible interpretations of “Hope he didn’t let you down. Natural causes. That’s a letdown.” (l. 44):

1. his death belies the cliché of “the rap star who goes down humming in a spatter of gunshot” (l. 29-30), which tarnishes his image
2. that he should not have died violently means that record sales might not increase as much as they would have if he had
3. Kozmo’s words are ironical and betray his condemnation of Eric’s prejudices (cf. “Kozmo was looking askance”, l. 33, a possible sign of his disapproval of Eric’s previous remark about Brutha Fez getting shot)

(Kozmo Thomas managing rappers just as he had managed racehorses?)

Whatever Kozmo Thomas’s meaning might be, it appears that both halves of Brutha Fez’s public persona are at least in part stereotyped and unoriginal despite his purported singularity: cf. use of words “model” (l. 25) to describe his music and “protocol” (l. 29) to describe the clichés about the violence of rap culture

⇒ Brutha Fez’s whole persona is at least partly based on an artificial marketing strategy aimed to help him achieve the status of an icon (focus on outward appearance: “iconic red fez”, l. 51)

↳ there is even something artificial about the “dead man’s amplified voice” (l. 40) since it is but a recording and therefore but a partly dehumanized technological trace of the rapper’s artistic identity

↳ cf. “He wanted to see the hearse pass by again, the body tilted for viewing, a digital corpse, a loop, a recitation. It did not seem right that the hearse has come and gone” later on in the novel, as if life needed to aspire to the status of technology, which can be replayed and reexperienced

Whole scene is steeped in the presence of business, from the setting (“bicycle shop”, l. 8) to death itself (“The record label wants an exploitation event”, l. 21-22)

↳ “his funeral travesties every great procession since Roman times, including the grand march in *Aida* and the funerals of President Kennedy and Princess Di” (David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*)

cf. accumulation, numbers (e.g., “scores of women”, l. 49) and extensive use of plural forms → grandiose event meant to market the image of the rapper even in death: the funeral procession is moving because it has good presentation (l. 50-53)

↳ this marketability of the whole event would explain why “Only Kozmo was alive and popping” (l. 73), as he is the representative of the music industry in the passage and might delight in the success such a lavish display might have among Brutha Fez’s fans

but Kozmo is also fascinated because he could never be fit enough to dance like the breakdancers: “being as big as I am . . . this is something I could never dream of doing on my thinnest day on earth” (l. 74-75) even though he identifies with old-school African-American artistic expression (“retro-nigger”, l. 74)

⇒ funeral is likely to be exploited commercially because it brings together the apparently incompatible facets of black culture, as if Brutha Fez were the embodiment of multicultural New York, the titular “cosmopolis”

III. Culture and Fragmentation

cosmopolis → a city inhabited by people from many different nations, a cosmopolitan city

relevance here is reactivated since it is punningly associated with Kozmo Thomas and birth name of the rapper, Raymond Gathers, but possibly ironical

Apparent cultural syncretism embodied by Brutha Fez (“a singular rapper such as Fez, who mixed languages, tempos and themes”, l. 71-72)

Encapsulated by his music: “his own vocal adaptations of ancient Sufi music, rapping in Punjabi and Urdu and in the blackswagger English of the stress”, l. 52-53)

Bringing together the ancient and the modern? → Brutha Fez as a profoundly postmodern artist who takes pieces from the “trash heap of history” to offer new, original combinations through artistic creation? (not very likely)

Brutha Fez might also embody the transition for traditional African-American culture to non-Protestant counterculture, as if he stood for the whole of African-American experience in the US

↳ rejection of WASP culture embodied most famously by boxer Muhammad Ali < development of the Nation of Islam, under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, in the 1960s, as an alternative to MLK’s leadership → Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1992)

rejection of Protestantism because accused of having been imposed by slaveowners, b/c Islam as a more culturally appropriate religion for African-Americans as linked to their African roots

⇒ possible idea reinvention / rewriting of the self, cf. line 63-64

“iconic red fez” (l. 51) = possibly reference to Muhammad Ali (more recently: Beyoncé, “Formation”)



(but somewhat ridiculous for the rapper to be called “Brother Fez”...!)

Funeral procession itself is a combination of disparate elements: clothes, tradition of female lament (l. 49-50) vs. breakdancers...

but borders on the incongruous (cf. the combination of Sufi music and the lyrics included in the passage could be very strange), leading critics to assert that the scene is “a veritable parody of multicultural diversity, where politically antagonistic positions are momentarily united in the shared sentiments of mourning” (Rolf J. Goebel, “From Postcoloniality to Global Media Culture”)

↳ Fez cannot be an embodiment of the writer himself, since Brutha Fez’s culture is almost completely foreign to DeLillo (although it may be a darkly humorous reference to R. Barthes’s critical concept, the death of the author)

Hence a sense of fragmentation and separation: difference the crowd watching Brutha Fez’s funeral procession and the type of people attending mainstream events (“too many, too young, with headsets attached, to account for a presidential drive-by”, l. 4-5)

↳ sense of communitarian belonging around the various facets of African-American experience, but only one facet of the New York’s multicultural “salad bowl”

link between Eric Packer (who is most probably white, as evidenced by his being portrayed by Robert Pattinson in the 2012 film adaptation of DeLillo’s novel by David Cronenberg) and the dead rapper = money

⇒ artistic experimentations of the rapper cannot entirely be integrated into Eric Packer’s experience (cf. “anti-matter rap”, as BF’s music is called later in the novel), see end of the passage + rapper’s hearse can be seen as “a foil for [Eric Packer’s] own [white] limousine” (Jesse Kavadio, *American Popular Culture in the Era of Terror*)

No links except that of accumulation (first, then, then + numbers)

Even apparently syncretic identity of the rapper is diffracted in the procession (“the breakdancers . . . here to affirm the history of the deceased, born Raymond Gathers in the Bronx”, l. 63-64)

↳ “In many ways . . . Brutha Fez personifies an updated, multimedia version of Bhabba’s theory of the uncanny appearance of postcolonial alterity in the heart of the Western capitalist metropolis, whose multicultural topography the rapper simultaneously energizes and disrupts through the multiply coded signifiers of his musical self-articulation” (Rolf J. Goebel, “From Postcoloniality to Global Media Culture”)

⇒ even though might ultimately partake of the formation of a new sense of communion/community among his fans (l. 71-72), there are also unsettling implications in the hybridized form of culture and art embodied by Brutha Fez

cf. more important for the young than a “presidential drive-by” (l. 5) as if traditional political culture and institutions could be rejected entirely by Brutha Fez’s fans

other critics disagree with this view, arguing that Brutha Fez, as a syncretic rapper, allows for the integration of extraneous cultural elements into the American mainstream, most notably through the commercialisation of his music

Whatever the actual symbolic meaning of this profoundly unusual rapper, what matters is that he is ambiguous, a possibly socially and culturally disruptive figure that nonetheless remains one of the rare people capable of making Eric Packer experience true human emotions (cf. Eric Packer bursts into tears at the end of the funeral, later in the novel) when he realizes that he pales in comparison and that his own contribution as a businessman amounts to nothing truly lasting:

“Then he thought about his own funeral. He felt unworthy and pathetic. Never mind the bodyguards, four versus three. What set of elements might be configured that could possibly match what was happening here? Who would come to see him laid out? (An embalmed term in search of a matching cadaver.) Men he’d crushed, to nourish their rancor. Those he’d presumed to be wallpaper, to stand over him and gloat. He would be the powdered body in the mummy case, the one they’d all lived long enough to mock.

It was dispiriting, then, to think about this collection of mourners. Here was a spectacle he could clearly not command. And the funeral wasn’t over yet.”

⇒ funeral as modern-day *vanitas*, a *memento mori* that helps Eric Packer contemplate the implications of his own mortality through the experience of “his friend[’s]” (l. 50) death

* **gawwali**: a style of Muslim devotional music now associated particularly with Sufis. Translate « qawwali ».

† Many thanks to Zoé H. for the reference.