
Paul Giaimo’s *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer’s Work* is a study of morality and religion in Don DeLillo’s oeuvre of fiction. Giaimo continues Amy Hungerford and John Paul Russo’s insights into the trope of religion, but vitally fleshes it out into a book-length examination of DeLillo’s Jesuit influences. As Giaimo states in the preface, his purpose centres on the ‘underlying moral lessons of DeLillo’s work’ (p.v). Such an investigation into the novelist’s religious roots and consequential literary influences is well overdue in DeLillo scholarship. With the book divided into seven chapters, I now give attention to each turn.

In Chapter 1, ‘Don DeLillo and the Novel – Neither Modern nor Postmodern’, Giaimo makes the case that ‘DeLillo’s tendency is to show some elements of mimetic realism as well as those features of modernism and postmodernism’ (p.1). He begins by rightly noting that the defining trend of DeLillo criticism is to align his works with postmodernism, and he deviates from this through a discussion of the unflattering presentation of postmodern theorists in DeLillo’s works. He states clearly that ‘[n]either modernism nor postmodernism really applies as a label for DeLillo’s work’ (p.16), and shows how DeLillo’s characters’ self-destruction and lack of morality are detrimental to their lives, although hope continues as a ‘potent moral force’ (p.21).

Chapter 2 delves into fascinating examples of morality presented in DeLillo’s early novels, *Americana*, *Great Jones Street*, *Ratner’s Star*, *Running Dog*, and *Players*. Antiwar imagery occurs in these texts, as well as a ‘preoccupation with resistance to the contemporary mediated attack on the subject’ (p.23). Giaimo brings to the light the way hypocritical American morality is presented in *Americana*, and how the artist or creative person is destroyed by the ‘market processes of commoditization’ (p.34) in *Great Jones Street*. Finally, *End Zone*’s nuclear warfare overtakes DeLillo’s other novels on terrorism and media de-individuation by prefiguring his attitude towards moral issues in his later novels.

*The Names* and *White Noise* feature as the texts presented in Chapter 3, analysed in terms of a new faith in the power of language. Here Giaimo takes a risky venture by suggesting that language ‘can possibly provide a way out of catastrophe in our troubled times’ (p.67). Moving onto *White Noise*, Giaimo again notes DeLillo’s ‘more hopeful theme of the power of language’ (p.80). The lingo of postmodern academe is presented comedically in *White Noise*; Giaimo could have emphasised this point more strongly, since DeLillo’s use of parody so effectively signifies the deep human need to find meaning and a moral core.

In Chapter 4, ‘Unspeakable Evil in *Libra*, *Mao II*, and *Cosmopolis*’, the concept of unspeakable evil, although defined, is not carried throughout. Giaimo argues that all three novels show a ‘total eclipse of the subject’s power to process his own identity by virtue of media’s all encompassing influence’ (p.94). *Cosmopolis* is given greatest weight, although the blow-by-blow recount of the novella could have been shortened and replaced by the worthy subjects of the moral consequences of Eric’s actions and the morality tales of Icarus and Narcissus, which are unfortunately left until the final pages (p.111-113).

Giaimo’s fifth and sixth chapters are excellent nuanced examinations into the ‘filming’ of Italian Americans, and the Roman Catholic Church in *Underworld*. Here the author is at his best, and the subject matter lends itself well to his overarching interest in DeLillo’s moral force. In Chapter 5 Giaimo draws parallels between DeLillo’s Italian
American characters and mafia stereotypes, Fellini films, DeLillo’s own youth, and gangsters. In Chapter 6 he makes two particularly strong points: first, DeLillo’s Catholics are under-the-radar because ‘they care about those people whom society avoids’ (p.140), setting them up as healers of the oppressed; and second, DeLillo’s position on the Church is ‘dialectical in nature’ (p.141), both oppressive and liberating, and with nuns and priests in moral conflict with themselves. Most importantly, Giaimo acknowledges that DeLillo strikes a balance between positive and negative portrayals of the Church, reaching a fair representation of its clerical members.

Finally, the moral accountability of the individual writer and artist forms the concluding Chapter 7 of Giaimo’s book. He notes that DeLillo’s characters fail more often than they succeed, owing to the ‘American artist’s struggle to reconcile personal and social spheres of morality’ (p.161). He then moves onto an overview of DeLillo’s most recent works, The Body Artist, Falling Man, and Point Omega, and concludes strongly by acknowledging DeLillo’s own political activism where ‘the author has fulfilled the demands of a leadership role by engaging personal and social ethics so frequently’ (p.178).

One must admit that in some passages Giaimo’s sentences feel rushed and repetitive. He also strays by using oddly informal turns of phrases, though this could well be an advantage in classes where students may appreciate the accessible tone. All in all, though, Giaimo gives a very worthwhile examination of morality and religion in DeLillo’s works. DeLillo scholars would benefit from Giaimo’s ideas, as they would enhance any DeLillo text by drawing out the moral and the spiritual. Crucially, Appreciating Don DeLillo presents the novels in a light that is rare in DeLillo criticism: only occasionally mentioning postmodernism or technology, it delves instead headlong into the human struggles characters face when choosing to do good or otherwise.

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