

162 QUOTATIONS



Don DeLillo

(1936-)

Don DeLillo wrote *White Noise* (1985), the best American academic novel and the best representation of Postmodernism, a funny satire of decadent higher education. Yet his most ambitious novel, *Underworld* (1997), is a Postmodernist pastiche. DeLillo embodies some characteristics of Postmodernism while also criticizing it, especially Atheism. Like Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, he is “bordering on religious.” DeLillo is more readable than other Postmodernists such as Thomas Pynchon, more humane than John Barth and a better writer than Philip Roth. He excels at satire and witty generalizations about contemporary American society. Some of his main targets—consumerism, pop culture, conformity—were those of Sinclair Lewis in *Main Street* and *Babbitt* back in the 1920s. DeLillo can be incisive and very funny, but his dramatic structures are weak, his style is frequently imprecise and his vision is vague—especially in *The Names* (1982): “I couldn’t make the leap out of my own soul into the soul of the universe.” He is most valuable for personifying contemporary uncertainty and ambivalence.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, Catholic upbringing, family, education, career, privacy, fame, entertainment, film, countercultural pastoralism, pacifism, love, sex, women, politics, terrorism, human nature, America, American tradition, society of kids, America as myth, pride in America, consumer capitalism, Postmodernism, urbanity, dehumanization, literary decadence, Political Correctness, Feminism, technology, disbelief, reticence, dead yet dangerous, rebellion, audience, writing, sentences, description, plots, primitive emotion, the novel, Realism, Expressionism, influences, death, Existentialism, hope:

YOUTH

I feel this immensity in my soul every second of my life.

I think there is a sense of last things in my work that probably comes from a Catholic childhood.

CATHOLIC UPBRINGING

A Catholic is raised with the idea that he will die at any minute now and if he doesn't live his life in a certain way, this death is an introduction to an eternity of pain.

Pain is just another form of information.

I was just enough of a puritan to think there must be some virtue in rigorous things.

FAMILY

The family was an art...and at the dinner table was the place it found expression.

You gave yourself away, word by word, every time you opened your trap to speak.

The family is the cradle of the world's misinformation. There must be something in family life that generates factual error.

We are not native. We have no generations of Americans behind us. We have roots elsewhere. We are looking in from the outside.

The writer stands outside society.

EDUCATION

I slept for four years. I didn't study much of anything. I majored in something called communication arts.

I hewed to the texture of collected knowledge.

I was too much of a Bronx kid to read Emerson or Hawthorne.

CAREER

Then it came time for me to make my journey—into America.

I quit my job just to quit. I didn't quit my job to write fiction. I just didn't want to work anymore.

The art of getting ahead in New York was based on learning how to express dissatisfaction in an interesting way.

PRIVACY

I'm not reclusive at all. Just private.

Off-camera lives are unverifiable.

I've always liked being relatively obscure. I feel that's where I belong, that's where my work belongs.

FAME

Fame and secrecy are the high and low ends of the same fascination.

Famous people don't want to be told that you have a quality in common with them.

Fame requires every kind of excess.

ENTERTAINMENT

A band played live Muzak.

Were people this dumb before television?

Television is just another name for junk mail.

Popular culture is inescapable in the U.S. Why not use it?

For most people, there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set.

“The boy is growing up without television,” I said, “which may make him worth talking to, Murray.”

People had no tolerance for your particular hardship unless you knew how to entertain them with it.

I watch movies occasionally, and I watch documentaries. Virtually nothing else.

Some people fake their death, I'm faking my life.

Everything seeks its own heightened version.

FILM

The twentieth century is on film. You have to ask yourself if there's anything about us more important than the fact that we're constantly on film constantly watching ourselves.

Film allows us to examine ourselves in ways earlier societies could not—examine ourselves, imitate ourselves, extend ourselves, reshape our reality. It permeates our lives, this double vision, and also detaches us, turns some of us into actors doing walk-throughs.

COUNTERCULTURAL PASTORALISM

We're our own children.

Decorative gestures add romance to a life.

May the days be aimless. Do not advance according to a plan.

It's so much simpler to bury reality than it is to dispose of dreams.

Once, probably, I used to think that vagueness was a loftier kind of poetry, truer to the depths of consciousness.

PACIFISM

War is the form nostalgia takes when men are hard-pressed to say something good about their country.

LOVE

Love helps us develop an identity secure enough to allow itself to be placed in another's care and protection.

SEX

“If this makes me sexier then where are you going?”

Mirrors and images. Or sex and love. These are two separate systems that we miserably try to link.

“I am advising you in this matter not only as your chief of finance, but as a woman who would still be married to her husbands if they had looked at her the way you have looked at me here today.”

I'm not saying sex is our divinity. Please. Only that sex is the one secret we have that approximates an exalted state and that we share, two people share wordlessly more or less and equally more or less, and this makes it powerful and mysterious and worth sheltering.

It's not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to deep completion.

That which we fear to touch is often the very fabric of our salvation.

WOMEN

Don't you realize that as long as you have to sit down to pee, you'll never be a dominant force in the world? You'll never be a convincing technocrat or middle manager. Because people will know. She's in there sitting down.

POLITICS

There's never a dearth of reasons to shoot at the President.

There is no lie in war or preparation for war that can't be defended.

Never underestimate the power of the State to act out its own massive fantasies.

People who are in power make their arrangements in secret, largely as a way of maintaining and furthering that power.

Their bumper sticker read GUN CONTROL IS MIND CONTROL. In situations like this, you want to stick close to people in right-wing fringe groups.

Writers in repressive societies are considered dangerous. That's why so many of them are in jail.

Rushdie is a hostage.

TERRORISM

Conspiracy offers coherence.

Hardship makes the world obscure.

People who are powerless make an open theater of violence.

Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death.

If you know you're worth nothing, only a gamble with death can gratify your vanity.

There is a deep narrative structure to terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to.

In a repressive society, a writer can be deeply influential, but in a society that's filled with glut and repetition and endless consumption [America], the act of terror may be the only meaningful act.

HUMAN NATURE

We know too much. So we resort to repression, compromise and disguise. This is how we survive the universe. This is the natural language of the species.

AMERICA

America was and is the immigrant's dream.

Everyone who does not live in Berlin lives in Brooklyn now.

That [America] became my subject, the subject that shaped my work.

Californians invented the concept of life-style. This alone merits their doom.

I've come to think of Europe as a hardcover book, America as the paperback version.

It's no accident that my first novel was called *Americana*. This was a private declaration of independence, a statement of my intention to use the whole picture, the whole culture.

AMERICAN TRADITION

That's the thing about baseball... You do what they did before you. That's the connection you make. There's a whole long line. A man takes his kid to a game and thirty years later this is what they talk about when the poor old mutt's wasting away in the hospital.

SOCIETY OF KIDS

This is a society of kids. I tell my students they're already too old to figure importantly in the making of society.

AMERICA AS MYTH

America is the world's living myth. There's no sense of wrong when you kill an American or blame America for some local disaster. This is our function, to be character types, to embody recurring themes that people can use to comfort themselves, justify themselves and so on. We're here to accommodate. Whatever people need, we provide.

[In] the American soul there is a lonely individual standing in a vast landscape. He is either on a horse or driving a car, depending, and either way he's carrying a gun. This is one of the essential images in American mythology.

PRIDE IN AMERICA

He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful.

I have only a bare working knowledge of the human brain but it's enough to make me proud to be an American.

CONSUMER CAPITALISM

Here we don't die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think.

Capital burns off the nuance in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transnational media, the attenuating influence of money that's electronic and sex that's cyberspaced, untouched money and computer-safe sex, the convergence of consumer desire—not that people want the same things, necessarily, but that they want the same range of choices.

I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America.... I see this desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and products and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go.

I think it's only in a crisis that Americans see other people. It has to be an American crisis, of course. If two countries fight that do not supply the Americans with some precious commodity, then the education of the public does not take place.

POSTMODERNISM

The future belongs to crowds.

To become a crowd is to keep out death.

The air was full of rage and complaint.

Longing on a large scale is what makes history.

California deserves whatever it gets.

Sometimes a thing that's hard is hard because you're doing it wrong.

How many beginnings before you see the lies in your excitement.

In the face of technology, everything becomes a little atavistic.

Sex is what you can get.

URBANITY

Cities were built to...remove time from nature.

New York seemed older than the cities of Europe, a sadistic gift of the sixteenth century, ever on the verge of plague.

Eye contact was a delicate matter. A quarter second of a shared glance was a violation of agreements that made the city operational.

"How do you know so much?" Babette said.

"I'm from New York."

"Aren't you going too far?"

"I'm from New York."

DEHUMANIZATION

Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How do you know whether something is really what you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain?

If you don't have the grace...to die early, you are forced to vanish, to hide as if in shame and apology.

POSTMODERN LITERARY DECADENCE

In novels lately the only real love, the unconditional love I ever come across is what people feel for animals.

Before pop art, there was such a thing as bad taste. Now there's kitsch, schlock, camp, and porn.

This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock.

No homesickness for lost values or for the way fiction used to be written.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Years ago I used to think it was possible to alter the inner life of the culture.... What writers used to do before we were all incorporated.

In this century the writer has carried on a conversation with madness.

FEMINISM

“As the male partner I think it’s my responsibility to please.”
“I’m not sure whether that’s a sensitive caring statement or a sexist remark.”

Babette, whatever she is doing, makes me feel sweetly rewarded, bound up with a full-souled woman, a lover of...families. I watch her all the time doing things in measured sequence, skillfully, with seeming ease, unlike my former wives, who had a tendency to feel estranged from the objective world—a self-absorbed and high-strung bunch, with ties to the intelligence community.

Perhaps I was beginning to understand my ex-wives and their ties to intelligence.... Some of my adoration of Babette must have been sheer relief.... This is the whole point of Babette. She’s a joyous person. She doesn’t succumb to gloom or self-pity.

“Every child ought to have the opportunity to travel thousands of miles alone,” Tweedy said, “for the sake of her self-esteem and independence of mind, with clothes and toiletries of her own choosing.”

I was startled to see my daughter among them. She lay in the middle of the street, on her back, one arm flung out, her head tilted the other way. I could hardly bear to look. I this how she thinks of herself at the age of nine—already a victim, trying to polish her skills?... She had a history of being devout in her victimhood.

TECHNOLOGY

Terrifying data is now an industry in itself.

People in free societies don’t have to fear the pathology of the state. We create our own frenzy, our own mass convulsions, driven by thinking machines that we have no final authority over.

What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything.

There’s a connection between the advances that are made in technology and the sense of primitive fear people develop in response to it.

You could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out. This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal existence on the other. Technology is lust removed from nature.

DISBELIEF

Disbelief was the line of travel that led to clarity of thought and purpose. Or was this simply another form of superstition?... God would crowd her, make her weaker.

As belief shrinks from the world, it is more necessary than ever that someone believe.... Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely.

America can be saved only by what it’s trying to destroy.

Hell is when no one believes.

RETICENCE

It's my nature to keep quiet about most things. Even the ideas in my work.

When you try to unravel something you've written, you belittle it in a way. It was created as a mystery.

If you reveal everything, bare every feeling, ask for understanding, you lose something crucial to your sense of yourself. You need to know things that others don't know. It's what no one knows about you that allows you to know yourself.

DEAD YET DANGEROUS

If I were a writer, how I would enjoy being told the novel is dead. [as by John Barth] How liberating to work the margins, outside a central perception.

American writers ought to stand up and live in the margins, and be more dangerous.

I want to rise up from the words on the page and do something, hurt someone.

REBELLION

Being called a "bad citizen" is a compliment to a novelist, at least to my mind. That's exactly what we ought to do. We ought to be bad citizens. We ought to, in the sense that we're writing against what power represents, and often what government represents, and what the corporation dictates, and what consumer consciousness has come to mean.

AUDIENCE

I don't have an audience; I have a set of standards.

WRITING

The language of my books has shaped me as a man.

The more things I threw away, the more I found.

Writing...frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us.

SENTENCES

There's a moral force in a sentence when it comes out right. It speaks the writer's will to live.

I've always seen myself in sentences. I begin to recognize myself, word by word, as I work through a sentence.

One truth is the swing of the sentence, the beat and poise, but down deeper it's the integrity of the writer as he matches with the language.

Every sentence has a truth waiting at the end of it and the writer learns how to know it when he finally gets there.

I like the construction of sentences and the juxtaposition of words—not just how they sound or what they mean, but even what they look like.

DESCRIPTION

Maybe when I started to read mathematics and science back in the mid-70s I found an unexpected lyricism in the necessarily precise language that scientists tend to use. My instinct, my superstition is that the closer

I see a thing and the more accurately I describe it, the better my chances of arriving at a certain sensuality of expression.

PLOTS

All plots tend to move deathward. That is the nature of plots.

When I think of highly plotted novels I think of detective fiction or mystery fiction, the kind of work that always produces a few dead bodies. But these bodies are basically plot points, not worked-out characters.

To plot, to take aim at something, to shape time and space. This is how we advance the art of human consciousness.

PRIMITIVE EMOTION

Stories have no point if they don't absorb our terror.

When you strip away all the surfaces, when you see into it, what's left is terror. This is the thing that literature was meant to cure.

I think if you maintain a force in the world that comes into people's sleep, you are exercising a meaningful power.

The genius of the primitive mind is that it can render human helplessness in noble and beautiful ways.

THE NOVEL

I think fiction rescues history from its confusions.

You become a serious novelist by living long enough.

Talent is everything. If you've got talent, nothing else matters.

It is the form that allows a writer the greatest opportunity to explore human experience.... Because there are so many varieties of human experience, so many kinds of interactions between humans, and so many ways of creating patterns in the novel that can't be created in a short story, a play, a poem or a movie. The novel, simply, offers more opportunities for a reader to understand the world better.

REALISM

The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever.

In the commonplace I find unexpected themes and intensities. [tradition of William Dean Howells]

When I work, I'm just translating the world around me in what seems to be straightforward terms. For my readers, this is sometimes a vision that's not familiar. But I'm not trying to manipulate reality. This is just what I see and hear.

EXPRESSIONISM

The cheesecake was smooth and lush, with the personality of a warm and well-to-do uncle who knows a hundred dirty jokes and will die of sexual exertions in the arms of his mistress.

INFLUENCES

The writer...stands outside society, independent of affiliation and independent of influence.

I felt Joyce was an influence on my fiction, but in a very general way, as a kind of inspiration and a model for the beauty of language.

I think more than writers, the major influences on me have been European movies, jazz, and Abstract Expressionism.

EXISTENTIALISM

The modern meaning of life's end—when does it end? How does it end? How should it end? What is the value of life? How do we measure it?

Nothingness is staring you in the face. Utter and permanent oblivion. You will cease to be.

DEATH

The power of numbers is never more evident than when we use them to speculate on the time of our dying.

Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit. [theme of "Sunday Morning" by Wallace Stevens]

Readers can play off their fears by encountering the death experience in a superficial way. A mystery novel localizes the awesome force of the real death outside the book, winds it tightly in a plot, makes it less fearful by containing it in a kind of game format.

Cracking jokes in the mandatory American manner of people self-conscious about death. This is the humor of violent surprise.

That's why people take vacations. Not to relax or find excitement or see new places. To escape the death that exists in routine things.

It was important for him to believe that he'd spent his life among people who kept missing the point.

The question of dying becomes a wise reminder. It cures us of our innocence of the future.

We seem to believe it is possible to ward off death by following rules of good grooming.

Dying was just an extended version of Ash Wednesday.

HOPE

Is there a level of energy composed solely of the dead?

