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## POSTMODERN VISION OF HISTORY IN THE NOVELS OF DON DELILLO

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*The research examines the manifestation of postmodernist paradigms in historical discourse through the literary works of Don DeLillo, particularly focusing on how contemporary fiction interrogates traditional notions of historical objectivity and narrative construction. The study explores the transformation of historiographical approaches under postmodernist influence, tracing the evolution from modernist conceptions of linear, objective historical truth to fragmented, subjective interpretations of the past. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks established by H. White (1973), M. Foucault (1984), and other postmodernist thinkers, this investigation analyses DeLillo's novels – including *Americana* (1971), *End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Running Dog* (1978), and *Libra* (1988) – as literary laboratories for examining the crisis of historical representation in the late twentieth century. The research demonstrates how DeLillo's fictional works embody key postmodernist concerns about the relationship between language, reality, and historical truth. Through detailed textual analysis, the study reveals how characters in DeLillo's novels struggle with the burden of historical consciousness, attempting to escape or reconstruct their relationship with the past. The investigation focuses on "hidden history" and the problematic distinction between recorded and unrecorded events, examining how postmodernist thought challenges conventional historiographical boundaries. Central to this analysis is DeLillo's treatment of the John F. Kennedy (JFK) assassination in "Libra" (1988), which serves as a paradigmatic example of what the author terms "the first postmodern event". The novel illustrates the impossibility of achieving an objective historical narrative while simultaneously demonstrating the necessity of storytelling for human comprehension of traumatic historical moments. The research concludes that DeLillo's works reflect broader epistemological shifts in postmodernist thought, where the distinction between fact and fiction becomes increasingly problematic, and historical truth emerges not as discoverable reality but as constructed narrative shaped by linguistic, ideological, and cultural forces.*

**Keywords:** *postmodernism, historical narrative, Don DeLillo, historiography, metafiction, epistemology, JFK assassination, narrative theory, cultural memory, postmodernist literature.*

**The statement of the problem.** The postmodern paradigm affected a significant part of the spheres of social life in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The influence of postmodernism has spread, in particular, to the sphere of the humanities, as a result of which the paradigm of scientific thinking has found a new vector in development – new directions have appeared in sociology, philosophy, philology, history, etc. Historical science in the postmodern context raises the question of the objectivity of historiography – various thinkers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century single out several factors that cast doubt on the possibility of an accurate, true description of history.

The problem of the subjectivity of the perception of history began to be considered as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century (judgments on this subject are, in particular, in Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)); at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such thinkers as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), Max Weber (1864–1920), Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) and several

others contributed to the study of this issue. A qualitative leap was made by the French Annales school, founded by Lucien Febvre (1878–1956) and Marc Bloch (1886–1944).

The question of historical research is expanded due to the influence of the linguistic turn in the field of social sciences (the world given to the individual in language does not provide objective knowledge); the consequence of this influence is the development of theories of historical narrative, historical reason, etc. Since the 1980s, the discussion of historical science has been experiencing a crisis due to the uncertainty of the relationship between the system of symbols and the outside world. Attempts are being made to go beyond the linguistic framework (neomentalist (cognitivism), natural science approaches). In other words, postmodernism penetrates the sphere of scientific historical knowledge with its multiplicity of interpretations.

**The object of this research** encompasses the literary representation of historical consciousness and narrativity within the framework of postmodernist aesthetics and philosophy. Specifically, the study focuses on the textual manifestations of postmodernist historical paradigms as they appear in contemporary American fiction. It examines how literary works function as sites of epistemological inquiry into the nature of historical knowledge and representation.

**The subject of this investigation** is the complex interplay between postmodernist theoretical frameworks and their artistic embodiment in Don DeLillo's literary corpus, with particular emphasis on the author's exploration of historical narrative construction, the problematisation of objective historical truth, and the relationship between individual consciousness and collective historical memory. The study examines how DeLillo's fictional works serve as critical interventions in contemporary debates about historiography, narrative theory, and the epistemological foundations of historical knowledge.

**The tasks of the research** are to examine the development of postmodernist approaches to historical discourse, to conduct a comprehensive literary analysis of selected Don DeLillo novels, to analyse the portrayal of characters who embody different approaches to historical consciousness, and to establish connections between DeLillo's literary techniques and broader postmodernist literary and philosophical movements.

**Presentation of the main material.** The philosophy of history does not become a "sphere of principled coordination" (Parsons, 1953) but a "set of chances" (Bauman, 2009) – chances that are not fully determined and never fully determined. Paraphrasing G. Simmel, we can say that in the postmodern paradigm, history consists of snapshots, moments of movement, processes that are equally understanding and cooperation along with antagonism and struggle, mutual coordination of efforts and simultaneously mutual obstacles. Postmodernism raises the question of the quality of specific historical events and phenomena, offering alternative models in considering the past.

Essential in the postmodern paradigm of history is the revision of the figure of the historian. In particular, the American researcher H. White (1928), using philological tools, considers the thinking of the historian as the thinking of a writer, with whom the former has many standard analysis methods. According to H. White's concept, the historiographical style is built on parameters such as plot, form of argumentation, and ideological subtext; each is divided into four types so that different combina-

tions can create the basis for a historical narrative. However, H. White (1928) demonstrates that such a state, at least in historical reality, is almost the only way for it to exist. In his article "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality", H. White, considering non-narrative forms of recording historical events, emphasises the need for narrative and cites as an argument the desire to give real events completeness, "closure": "Unlike chronicles, the reality presented in historical narrative, which speaks 'from itself', speaks to us, calls us from afar (this 'far' is the land of forms), and demonstrates to us a formal coherence that we do not have. Historical narrative, unlike chronicles, presents us with a world that is supposedly 'completed', finished with, but it has not dissolved, has not fallen apart. In this world, reality wears a mask of meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, but never experience". Thus, narrating events from the researcher's point of view is a condition for maximum proximity to objectivity (Babelyuk et al., 2021).

In this context, the genealogical method of the French philosopher M. Foucault is also essential. In the article "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", M. Foucault analyses Nietzsche's attitude to the search for origins, for the first principle in history. *"'True' history forces the event to reveal itself again uniquely and acutely. An event, and by this we should understand not a decision, a limit, a manifestation or a battle, but a changing balance of forces, a power taken away, taken away and turned against its users of vocabulary; one domination that weakens and poisons itself, and another that sneaks up and disguises itself. The forces operating in history obey neither fate nor mechanism, but only the variability of the struggle. They do not manifest as consistent forms of the original intention; they have no significance for the outcome. They always manifest themselves in the unique contingency of the event. In contrast to the Christian world, woven everywhere by divine providence, in contrast to the Greek world, divided between the rule of will and the rule of a great cosmic absurdity, the world of real history knows only one kingdom, in which there is neither providence nor final cause, but only 'the iron hand of necessity shaking the horn of chance'".* This concept is based primarily on the most detailed collection of facts and offers a different approach to historical knowledge; M. Foucault's ideas contradict H. White's (Shoemaker, 2008).

In the works of Don DeLillo, the question of the quality of history in the modern world is most thoroughly considered in the novels "Libra" and "Underworld", but the author begins to develop

this problem already in his early works. In the 1971 novel “Americana”, there is a reflection on modern history. One of the novel’s heroines, the artist Sullivan, recounts her experience with a century-old Indian named Black Knife, whose worldview is parodically inverted – the fundamental principles of his tribe are asceticism and practicality. When Sullivan asks what has changed since Black Knife was a child, he replies: “*Nothing has changed. Only the materials and technology have changed; we were still the same nation of ascetics, efficiency experts, and waste haters. All these years we have been rebuilding our landscape in such a way as to remove unnecessary objects like trees, mountains and all these buildings that did not use every inch of space for practical purposes. Ascetics hate junk. We plan to destroy everything that does not serve the purpose of efficiency. It is hard to believe, he said, that we are ascetics. But we are, to a greater extent than all these imaginary saints across the sea*” (DeLillo, 1989).

The worldview of Black Knife expresses the historical idea of a “native” American, not a representative of the Indians, but of the first English settlers who arrived on the Mayflower in 1620. Asceticism and practicality are close to the Protestant consciousness, which later determined the cultural development of the United States of America. The character of Black Knife is opposed to the image of the Indian created by the culture of white Americans: he becomes a mirror of modern American society. In his story, the observation that only materials and technologies have changed in a historical perspective is essential. This observation concludes that events and things, such as artefacts, determine history.

A society under the influence of the postmodern paradigm makes attempts to build a system in conditions of chaos and to assimilate; History, in turn, imposes specific moral frameworks and, despite its random (chaotic) nature (from the point of view of the modern worldview), cannot exist within such an order.

In the novel “*The End Zone*”, the historical question is examined through the storyline of the character Anatole Blumberg. In Blumberg’s understanding, history is guilt (“*History is guilt*”): in other words, from a historical perspective, a moral component burdens an individual with a postmodern worldview. Blumberg’s character purposefully tries to eradicate Jewish individuality in himself, to “unjew” himself because of the historical burden that Jews carry. Blumberg also seeks to get rid of his name because of its “Europeanness” (...*the Europeaness of my name. Its Europicity*): in giving up his name, the hero gives up the historical “ex-

cess” that European culture is filled with compared to American culture. The character departs from historicity by “sterilising” his individuality. Here, the “junk” is communication with Jews, syntax, vocabulary, phraseology, folklore, melody, pace of speech, etc. Language and speech themselves become burdened with a specific historical knowledge created by society unconsciously, in many ways. Just as in the case of the worldview of the character Black Knife in “The American”, here there is a consideration of history as a sphere that in many ways contradicts and is opposed to the postmodern paradigm, in which the individual tries to distance himself as much as possible from the meaningful component of the signs surrounding him.

In the novel “Great Jones Street”, the concept of history is reflected in a monologue by one of the characters, the Morehouse Professor of Latent History at the Osmond Institute, who explains one of the principles of working with history: “*This professorship deals with events that have practically happened, with events that have certainly happened but have remained unnoticed and uncommented, like the actions of bacteria or the uplift and collapse of mountain ranges, and with events that most likely happened but have not been recorded in the chronicle. Possible events often turn out to be more critical than actual events. Real events that were not recorded are usually more important than recorded events, whether potential or real*” (DeLillo, 1994).

Potential events are often more important than real events. Real events that remain unrecorded are often more critical than recorded events, whether real or possible. Under the mask of the professor is the character of Dr. Pepper, associated with the fictional “Happy Valley Farm Commune”. Dr. Pepper is written in the novel as a hero with shifting characteristics, so his portrait is always inaccurate. The Happy Valley Farm commune protects the privacy interests of American life. In this regard, Dr. Pepper is an exemplary follower of this ideology. In the work, the character is presented primarily as a mediator, whose personal life is not revealed, and the name refers to a non-alcoholic carbonated drink. His interest in “hidden history” can be explained by the individual, personal content of the subject, which goes beyond the “sterile” postmodern world controlled by the masses (in the image of a professor, the character emphasises that “history is never clean”). “Hidden history” is characterised by taking into account all events that have occurred, as well as theoretically possible ones – thus, the concept is expressed here in which history is represented not only by a selected narrative that creates the idea of order and sequence, but also by the coverage of all



facts. This does not mean that this concept provides an outlet for actual knowledge, but it has more outlets for objectivity by considering unrecorded events that did not occur. In the novel "Great Jones Street", the problem of history is already considered not only through elements "removed" from the dominant narrative, but also through the question of the ratio of the real and the fictional (or possible).

In the 1978 novel "The Running Dog", the problem of history is also considered through the prism of "unrecorded" events. The novel's plot is built around a historical artefact – a film reflecting the latest events in the Führerbunker (Adolf Hitler's refuge). The movie in the novel represents "hidden" history and the basis for creating a particular order. In this context, the character of Lightbourne is primarily interesting. Lightbourne is a collector of erotic objects and at the same time he is interested in the history of Nazi Germany. About history in general, Lightbourne says the following: *"History is very calming <...> Isn't that why people collect? To have a fragment of tangible history. Life is fleeting, and we seek consolation in durable things"*. History for Lightbourne is an element of stability and order in life; the same judgment is relevant for the hero Earl Madger, who seeks to build his life as it was during the years of the Vietnam War. That is why, after watching the film, Lightbourne is disappointed in his find: to the heroine Molly Robinson's remark that Hitler is shown human on the recording, he reacts as follows: *"It's disgusting. <...> What do I do with a thing like this? Who needs it?"* (DeLillo, 1989).

The problem of history is one of the key ones in the 1988 novel "Libra", whose plot focuses on the figure of Lee Harvey Oswald, the man who assassinated American President John F. Kennedy in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Don DeLillo considers this historical event in a fictional way and deliberately does not claim objectivity, as stated in the author's note after the novel's text: *"This work is fictional. Although the historical record has guided me, I have not attempted to provide factual answers to the questions raised by the assassination. <...> Any novel about a significant unsolved event will seek to fill in the gaps in the known documents. To do this, I have changed and embellished reality, transferred real people to an imaginary space and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters"* (DeLillo, 1991).

Despite this author's approach, the text reflects on historiography in the modern world – the historiographer is in the same position as the writer. Therefore, he is forced to invent the narrative of history. The work can be divided into three parts depending on the central characters: the novel has

a biographical story about the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, a plot related to former CIA operatives who plan an unsuccessful assassination of the president to draw the government's attention to Cuba, and the story of Nicholas Brancha Dallas. Finally, Nicholas Branch attempts to write the story of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in a situation where the facts of the past are constantly being added to. In trying to create a coherent narrative, the characters lose control of their own story, the ending of which is beyond their control.

The conspiracy constructed by the character of Vin Everett is an attempt to influence the "official" history. Researcher Skip Willman in the article "Crossing the JFK Assassination Fantasies: Conspiracy and Contingencies in Don DeLillo's novel "Libra" ("wants to expose Kennedy, the man responsible for the failure of the Bay of Pigs operation, and her conspiracy is only honored with a record in the "secret history" of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, which is within the CIA, while the "official history" that he is trying to manipulate remains unchanged". The problem with plotting a story is that an element of chance, of unforeseen circumstances, turns out to be essential in the story itself. A plot implies a network of various elements influenced by the external environment, resulting in the end of the plot acquiring a natural character. In his reflections, Everett notes: *"Plots carry their logic. Plots tend to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the essence of any plot"*. The problem with death is that it does not obey the laws of plot narrative, so its ending is not built according to an already constructed scheme, but moves in the direction set by circumstances. Thus, an attempt to control the historical process turns out to be futile due to the influence of external factors and the openness of history to the random and unpredictable.

Nicholas Branch's narrative line shows the figure of a modern historiographer dealing with an event for which the sources of information vary in their level of fiction and are numerous.

Lee Harvey Oswald's storyline is primarily connected with his desire to inscribe himself in history. Unlike Win Everett, Oswald is not only the subject of historiography but also its object. The hero tries to express himself individually in the history of the postmodern period, but his narrative also changes under the influence of external forces. DeLillo shows the futility of Oswald's attempts to describe himself objectively due to his dyslexia. This creates additional obstacles for the character in fully mastering the language; the communication system does not allow the hero to express himself objectively. In the previously mentioned article,

Th. Carmichael says about the linguistic failure to express oneself: "*Oswald's painstakingly created texts are original representations of the inevitably failed attempt to create one's voice in postmodern history*" (Carmichael, 1993).

The next problem in describing oneself objectively in postmodern history is the individual's perception of himself. Oswald sees himself in projection, through the Other in the Lacanian sense. This idea is confirmed by how often the hero sees himself "outside" – as a person who writes the "Historical Diary", like Lee Harvey Oswald, who is reported on television, etc. Oswald's problem is that he can avoid the splitting of the individual that occurs in those simulations. Here, it is worth referring to the novel's epigraph, a quote from Oswald's letter to his brother: "*Happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small house, of taking and receiving. Happiness is to participate in a struggle where there is no border between one's world and the world, and the world in general*" (Carmichael, 1993). At the same time, the letter reads a Marxist position (in the aforementioned article by Skip Willman, "Crossing the fantasies of the JFK assassination: Conspiracy and contingency in Don DeLillo's novel 'Libra'"), the character is considered in the context of economic systems. The postmodern world's relationship between the individual and the external world is simultaneously closed and open. The individual never enters the external world in its entirety, it is copied and transferred to various codes established by society, starting from language and ending with the media – thus, the individual interacts with the external world, but as a result his interaction is separated from his essence and moves in the direction indicated by the world of simulation. In the novel, Oswald himself, after the Kennedy assassination, wants to become a historiographer of events, to analyse it from the outside; in other words, Oswald the killer is no longer identified with Oswald sitting in the cell. The conclusion of Oswald's narrative also turns out to be death. This unforeseen circumstance destroys the possibility of controlling one's history in general postmodern history.

An essential point in postmodern history is the relationship between fact and fiction. In the novel "Libra", the universal symbol of this relationship is made in the title; Libra is the zodiac sign of Lee Harvey Oswald. The hero of Clay Shaw describes the character of people born under the sign of Libra as follows: "*We have a positive Libra, a person who has achieved self-control. He is a well-balanced, sensible guy, respected by everyone. We have a negative Libra, a person who is, let's say, a little unstable and impulsive. Very, very, very easily influ-*

*enced. Ready to take a dangerous step. In any case, balance is the key*"

Each storyline is balanced because they have equal factual and fictional components. The biography of Lee Harvey Oswald claims to be objective because the novel records all the important events in his life; on the other hand, the author "finishes" the portrait of Oswald and the people around him. The storyline related to the conspirators is fictional in its basis, since it originates from speculation. Still, at the same time, there are elements in this story that allow us to see the factual material from a different perspective: a fictional element is introduced into the map of events, as a result of which the facts become more detailed. Finally, the line of Nicholas Branch, also invented by the author, opens up a new perspective in considering how the investigation of the Kennedy assassination took place. The plot of the novel "Libra", in this way, can be compared to the difficulty of a historiographer trying to construct a coherent historical narrative; in both cases, there is a moral setting that defines the story. The novel "Libra" poses the problem of history and historical narrative using the example of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, "the first postmodern event". The work shows how fiction and fact interact and considers the impossibility of objectively describing and controlling history.

**Conclusions.** This research demonstrates that Don DeLillo's literary works significantly contribute to postmodernist interrogations of historical discourse and narrative theory. Through sophisticated fictional explorations of historical consciousness, DeLillo's novels reveal the fundamental instability of traditional historiographical approaches while simultaneously acknowledging the inescapable human need for narrative coherence and meaning-making.

The analysis reveals several key findings regarding the intersection of postmodernist thought and historical representation. First, DeLillo's works illustrate the impossibility of achieving an objective historical narrative, as demonstrated by the characters' unsuccessful struggle to control or accurately represent historical events. The failure of figures like Win Everett to manipulate historical outcomes and Lee Harvey Oswald to inscribe himself coherently within historical narrative suggests that postmodernist historical consciousness is characterised by fundamental uncertainty and the recognition of contingency as a governing principle.

The concept of "hidden history" emerges as a crucial element in DeLillo's exploration of postmodernist historiography. Through characters like the Professor of Latent History in "Great Jones Street" and collectors like Lightbourne in "Running

Dog", DeLillo suggests that traditional historical narratives are necessarily incomplete and that alternative approaches to historical knowledge – including attention to unrecorded events and theoretical possibilities – may offer more comprehensive, if not more accurate, understanding of the past.

Third, the research demonstrates that DeLillo's treatment of language and representation reflects broader postmodernist concerns about the relationship between symbolic systems and reality. The linguistic failures experienced by characters such as Lee Harvey Oswald illustrate the postmodernist position that language does not provide transparent access to truth but instead constitutes a system of representation that shapes and constrains human understanding of reality, including historical reality.

The study of "Libra" as DeLillo's most comprehensive exploration of postmodernist historical themes reveals the author's sophisticated under-

standing of contemporary historiography's epistemological challenges. The novel's structure, which balances factual and fictional elements while acknowledging its constructedness, serves as a meta-fictional commentary on the broader problem of historical representation in the postmodern era. The research concludes that DeLillo's works suggest a nuanced position regarding postmodernist scepticism about historical knowledge. While acknowledging the impossibility of objective historical truth and the constructed nature of historical narratives, DeLillo's fiction does not embrace complete relativism or nihilism. Instead, his works propose that recognising history's constructed nature may paradoxically enable more honest and ethically responsible approaches to understanding the past, which acknowledge their limitations while maintaining commitment to the importance of historical consciousness for human identity and cultural continuity.

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## ПОСТМОДЕРНІСТСЬКИЙ ПОГЛЯД НА ІСТОРІЮ В РОМАНАХ ДОН ДЕЛІЛЛО

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Дослідження аналізує прояви постмодерністських парадигм в історичному дискурсі через літературні твори Дона ДеЛілло, зосереджуючись, зокрема, на тому, як сучасна художня література ставить під сумнів традиційні уявлення про історичну об'єктивність та побудову наративу. Дослідження вивчає трансформацію історіографічних підходів під впливом постмодернізму, простежуючи еволюцію від модерністських уявлень про лінійну, об'єктивну історичну правду до фрагментованих, суб'єктивних інтерпретацій минулого. Спираючись на теоретичні рамки, встановлені Г. Вайтом (1973), М. Фуко (1984) та інших постмодерністських мислителів, це дослідження аналізує романи ДеЛілло – зокрема «Американа» (1971), «Енд Зон» (1972), «Грейт Джонс Стріт» (1973), «Раннінг Дог» (1978) та «Лібра» (1988) – як літературні лабораторії для вивчення кризи історичного представлення наприкінці ХХ століття. Дослідження демонструє, як художні твори ДеЛілло втілюють ключові постмодерністські проблеми щодо взаємозв'язку між мовою, реальністю та історичною правдою. За допомогою детального текстового аналізу дослідження показує, як персонажі романів ДеЛілло борються з тягарем історичної свідомості, намагаючись втекти від минулого або реконструювати свої стосунки з ним. Дослідження зосереджується на «прихованій історії» та проблематичному розрізненні між зафіксованими та незафіксованими подіями, аналізуючи, як постмодерністська думка кидає виклик традиційним межам історіографії. Центральне місце в цьому аналізі займає трактування ДеЛілло вбивства Джона Ф. Кеннеді (JFK) у романі «Терези» (1988), яке слугує парадигматичним прикладом того, що автор називає «першою постмодерністською подією». Роман ілюструє неможливість досягнення об'єктивного історичного наративу, одночасно демонструючи необхідність розповіді для людського розуміння травматичних історичних моментів. Дослідження доходить висновку, що твори ДеЛілло відображають ширші епістемологічні зрушення в постмодерністській думці, де розмежування між фактом і вигадкою стає дедалі проблематичнішим, а історична правда постає не як реальність, яку можна відкрити, а як конструйована розповідь, сформована лінгвістичними, ідеологічними та культурними силами.

**Ключові слова:** постмодернізм, історична розповідь, Дон ДеЛілло, історіографія, метафікція, епістемологія, вбивство Джона Кеннеді, теорія розповіді, культурна пам'ять, постмодерністська література.