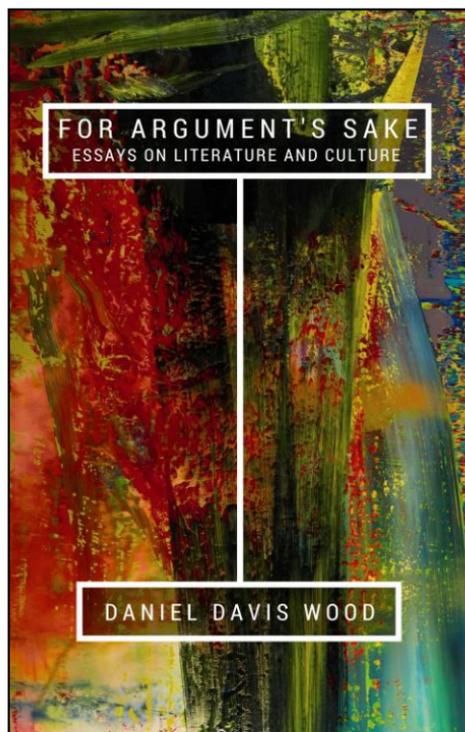


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 127-132.

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[www.danieldaviswood.com](http://www.danieldaviswood.com)

# UNDER THE SWAY OF THE CINEMATIC IMAGINATION

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IN AN ESSAY PUBLISHED ON THE EVE OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2011, John Freeman, the editor of *Granta*, attempted both to commemorate the tenth anniversary of “9/11” and to assess its impact on contemporary American literature. The essay reads as a work of stunning oversimplification, beginning with the most reductive possible reading of some unfathomably complex novels:

Europe may be the birthplace of the all-encompassing philosophers... who attempted to stuff the whole world into a theoretical system, but the U.S. is where this urge found root in storytelling. Or at least it was.

In every decade from the 1950s to the year 2000, the U.S. produced a novel that took a great deep breath and attempted to capture all the systems of modern life at work: William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* (1955), Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1966 and 1973), Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996).

All these novels bulge and hum with a theory of how the world is run: the market economy and the economy of language — the twin broadcast networks of global power. You see in each of these books how the systems interlock, creating what Fredric Jameson described as ‘the spectacle of a world from which nature as such has been eliminated, a world saturated with messages and information, whose intricate commodity network may be seen as the very prototype of a system of signs.’

In other words, this generation of postwar novelists foresaw how alienated we would all feel. They imagined our pain and dislocation. They understood how this malaise would be a gateway to the domestication of imperial violence and the circular logic of compulsive capitalism: I exist to spend, I spend to exist. (‘Rise’)

That’s all debatable enough on its own — and I’ll return to it in a moment — but then, for reasons only he can understand, Freeman

takes a flying leap from his discussion of the above novels to a discussion of their authors' biographies, essentially construing the lives of the authors as "systems novels" experienced by flesh-and-blood human beings:

[I]n many ways, these novelists were perfectly placed to tell this story. They had all spent time in the industries that slowly helped the U.S. enärde the globe: Gaddis, whose father worked on Wall Street and in politics; Pynchon, the one-time Boeing employee; DeLillo, the former copywriter for Ogilvy & Mather; and Wallace, the former addict, dependent of anti-depressants.

In their collective biographies one glimpses a world where language was a system for control, for abstraction and for destruction. They were perfectly placed to interpret the new world order. ('Rise')

If only Freeman were to spend less time considering the role of language in the *lives* of these authors and more time considering how they use it in their novels, he might gain a better sense of their achievement. Instead, he passes over the language of the novels — their very literariness — and treats each one as simply an author's attempt at representing and commenting on the real world. Then he suggests that they fail at their ostensible task of representing and commenting on the totality of the world because their authors were not relegated to America's socio-political margins, and, in consequence, he celebrates the post-9/11 demise of the systems novel:

Even the best of those novels from postwar America, such as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, with its Shakespearean language and awful knowledge of war's lethal algorithms, was not a complete world. It was constructed to feel like one but it abstracted at the edges, as did DeLillo's *White Noise* and especially Gaddis's *The Recognitions*.

After all, they all presume a world in which the U.S. is the centre; all of them narrate a tale in which whiteness is the neutral value; their leaps to the other side, the U.S. within a U.S. that does not see itself as part of a dominant narrative, are not

nearly as broad as books that were being published around the same time, such as the early novels of Toni Morrison or the stories of Raymond Carver. There is not much of a glimpse into how the rest of the world lived. In other words, as much as these novels reveal the systems that would enable the U.S. to become an imperial power, they have imperial blind spots. ('Rise')

Why Freeman believes that these conspicuously overwritten and absurd novels should be viewed as works of social realism — or should try to be — is beyond me. His ultimate aim, of course, is to depreciate the value of these novels, and to downgrade the reputations of the novelists who wrote them, in order to champion the work of novelists on the political margins of the contemporary world. Such marginal novelists, he says when he names names, are “important young storytellers,” “artists who can channel the anxieties of their time into powerful narratives” ('Rise') — and there's the rub. You can hardly fault Gaddis, Pynchon, DeLillo, and Wallace for being inattentive to storytelling. Indeed, one of the most famous and most persistent criticisms of such systems novelists is that their work overflows with stories, and stories within stories. What really irks Freeman is that these novelists don't write narratives with his degree of interest in what he thinks of as verisimilitude, and — what is perhaps worse — they don't use the form of the novel as exclusively, or even primarily, a means to a narrative end. He's offering a warmed-over version of the shtick we heard last year from David Shields, Ted Genoways, and Lee Siegel in 2010: that fiction broadly conceived, and American fiction in particular, once was and should still be — but is no longer — journalistic reportage with a light veneer of imaginative content.

To take this view of fiction, however, is ultimately to be less interested in reading and evaluating literary work on literary terms than in doing so on terms that are essentially cinematic. For the cinematic imagination, the value of a novel lies in its capacity to show, to illustrate, to depict; and the task of a novelist is to observe and understand the workings of the contemporary world and then to manipulate characters, storylines, settings, and so on, in order to

show, to illustrate, to depict what has been understood. Readers shouldn't think about the ways in which the novelist might instead manipulate the very concept of depiction, or toy with the supposition that he or she carries some responsibility towards depiction, in order to generate a particular reading experience. If the world as depicted in a novel becomes "abstracted at the edges" (Freeman, 'Rise'), this is a flaw in the novel rather than a product of deliberate and purposeful aesthetic decisions made by the novel's author. If the post-9/11 world seems increasingly small, increasingly connected, increasingly transnational, then a pre-9/11 novel that seems, on the surface, to "fore[see] how alienated we would all feel" (Freeman, 'Rise') is clearly a failure. The purpose of using words to create a work of fiction is to offer a reader a clear vision of the workings of the world, and any other use of words — to overwhelm or mystify, to provoke or to irritate, to offer ambiguity instead of clarity, even to use words for their own sake — is self-indulgent frivolity.

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