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## Cosmopolis – review

David Cronenberg has made a riveting urban road movie of Don DeLillo's prophetic novel



**Philip French**

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Robert Pattinson as Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis*, 'a Gatsby-esque figure, remote, inscrutable and doomed'.

David Cronenberg made his name directing body horror movies of an often emetic kind that seemed aimed at drive-in audiences. But underneath the urge to shock there has always been as great an interest in mental transformations as in physical ones, and his movies nowadays seem closer to the art house than the grind house. Following his versions of William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, JG Ballard's *Crash* and Patrick McGrath's *Spider*, his elegant, eloquent adaptation of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* is the fourth time he's brought a work of literary fiction to the screen. And once again, it's both faithful to the text and a film that's very much Cronenberg's own.

### Cosmopolis

**Production year:**

2012

**Country:** Rest of the world

**Cert (UK):** 15

**Runtime:** 108 mins

**Directors:** David Cronenberg

**Cast:** Jay Baruchel, Juliette Binoche, Kevin Durand, Paul Giamatti, Robert Pattinson, Samantha Morton, Sarah Gadon

[More on this film](#)

*Cosmopolis* was published in 2003, and although on its first page DeLillo specifically states that the setting is April 2000, it was read at the time as a post-9/11 novel. We now see its account of Wall Street on the point of collapse and New York in a state of siege by angry anarchists as a prophetic anticipation of the banking crisis of 2008 and the Occupy Wall Street movement. The central character, Eric Packer, brings to mind two wilful financial anti-heroes, Sherman McCoy of *Bonfire of the Vanities* and Gordon Gekko of *Wall Street*. But the 28-year-old Packer is younger, infinitely richer, and altogether more self-knowing. As played with frightening conviction by Robert Pattinson he's a Gatsby-esque figure, remote, inscrutable and

doomed.

The film is an urban road movie, set largely within a white stretch limo driving from east to west across midtown Manhattan. It's taking Packer on a long day's journey into a dark night of the soul. The ostensible purpose of Packer's mission is to get a haircut

at some old, traditional place he presumably frequented in his childhood. But the film is a fable in which he appraises his life, and his ultimate appointment is with death. For much of the time he's in the sumptuously appointed car, packed with computer screens flashing out the latest financial information from around the world. The vehicle has been "Prousted" with cork-lined walls to exclude all outside noise, and it moves at around a mile an hour across the gridlocked city. Elsewhere on the island there's the funeral cortege of a Muslim rap star and a carefully guarded presidential motorcade with its echoes of the assassination in Dallas's Dealey Plaza. Everywhere there's rioting by anti-capitalist demonstrators, who deface Packer's immaculate car with their graffiti. But he remains inside, seemingly undisturbed. His bodyguards walk beside the car, and he's visited by a variety of colourful associates and employees. Among them is his doctor, there to make his daily examination, who comes to the startling conclusion that Packer has "an asymmetrical prostate". They all engage in cryptic, epigrammatic dialogues, often funny, stylised and obscure in a Pinter-esque way, about money, sex, power and such matters as where white limos are parked overnight. Virtually all the dialogue comes directly from the novel.

Packer's wife, a beautiful poet whom he seems hardly to know, turns up several times. None of the other characters, however, appears more than once, but each makes a singular impression, especially Juliette Binoche, Samantha Morton and Emily Hampshire as his advisers. Occasionally the impassive Packer leaves the car to visit an antiquarian bookshop, a theatre, a diner and a hotel, and steadily a sense of dread builds up as night comes on. Packer's wife represents old money, while he's a self-made billionaire. Having made himself he's now being unmade, seemingly of his own volition, by reckless investments in Chinese yuan (changed from the novel's Japanese yen). He appears worn out: a languid participant in sex, a bored observer of life, a man without purpose who perceives no meaning beyond making or spending money in "a system that is out of control". Death alone, we infer, is his only salvation.

Although the film is shot by Cronenberg's regular cinematographer Peter Suschitzky in a hard, sharp, gleaming way, much of the talk is about abstractions, and significantly the opening and closing credits are presented against a background of abstract-expressionist paintings by (or in the style of) Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. When Packer is advised to snap up a Rothko, he says he'd rather buy the whole Rothko chapel in Houston, walls and all. "All wealth has become wealth for its own sake. There's no other kind of enormous wealth," someone remarks. "Money has lost its narrative quality the way painting did once upon a time. Money is talking to itself."

Like a sleepwalker out of Kafka, Packer is drawn to a shabby, neglected apartment cluttered with the debris of a broken society, where he meets an aggrieved ex-employee ([Paul Giamatti](#) at his most forlorn and aggressive), his head in a towel that gives him the appearance of a Jewish mourner saying Kaddish or the cowed grim reaper. Packer's response is to shoot himself through the hand, producing what looks like one of Christ's stigmata. The two engage in a 20-minute dialogue as gripping as a one-act play. This is riveting cinema, as fine as anything Cronenberg has done, and I was reminded of John Cheever's *New Yorker* short story, *The Swimmer* (filmed in 1968 starring Burt Lancaster). A seemingly prosperous American businessman decides to make his way home by swimming across all his neighbours' pools. His nightmarish journey involves confrontations with failure and humiliation and ends with him arriving rain-soaked at a deserted boarded-up house. Cronenberg's film has a similar mordancy, though at the end – and probably deliberately – it doesn't touch the heart or elicit much compassion for the protagonist.