

**Imagining the End**  
**Don DeLillo's *Underworld* as Counterhistory of the Cold War**

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“My means are sane, my motive and my object mad.”

- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

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## 1 Introduction

“Longing on a large scale is what makes history” (*Underworld* 11)<sup>1</sup>. Out of numerous intelligent, amusing and often highly insightful quotes from Don DeLillo’s epic novel *Underworld* (1997), this is perhaps the most revealing one in regards to the author’s interpretation of the recent American past.

*Underworld* can justifiably be interpreted as DeLillo’s attempt to reclaim the Cold War decades and its “haunting geographies of American strangeness” (Howard, ‘American Strangeness’ 119) for memory, to reclaim it as a patchwork story told by dissonant voices instead of a master narrative that can be successfully contained in the history books. It is a composite work that makes no brash claims to moral authority and holds no definite answers, a novel in which personal memory and collective imagination, rigid political ideologies and global capitalism, issues of family, race, gender, and generation are integrated into what Jesse Kavadlo suspects to be “DeLillo’s most openly idealistic novel” (108).

This thesis explores several of the reoccurring themes of the novel, such as the struggle of the individual for a lasting sense of identity, the media and its production of a serialized *hyperreality*<sup>2</sup>, historiography as an unstable and subjective construction and the tentative hints to a new kind of spirituality that may (or may not) enable us to see the postmodern existence in a different light. Other aspects such as the work’s thematization of race, sexuality and gender would surely merit further study, but for practical reasons I have chosen to largely omit them in this paper. Both to the reader and the scholar of literature *Underworld*’s level of complexity can be quite overwhelming, therefore I have limited my scope to those subject areas which I believe to be at its core, well aware that the notion of an absolute center is something the novel strongly contends.

I will begin by providing a short survey of the author’s to-date work, his own comments on *Underworld*, and reviews of the novel. The successive subchapter tries to unravel the book’s immensely complex structure by focusing on selected narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviated as *U* in future quotations.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term *hyperreality* with the common meaning given to it by scholars such as Jean Baudrillard, Daniel Boorstin, and Umberto Eco. As I do not aim to place theory at the center of this thesis, I have refrained from any far-reaching direct discussion of their works, but instead focused on the implications of concepts such as hyperreality for my reading of *Underworld*. See Eco’s *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986) and Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981).

threads which I believe exemplify the ubiquity of its implied motto: that everything is connected.

The Chapters 2 through 6 subsequently outline five thematic ledgers central to the novel, from the conflict between personal and collective historical imagination to the reoccurring motifs of waste and weapons. Chapter 7 critically discusses *Underworld* in the context of contemporary historical fiction, specifically in relation to Linda Hutcheon's definition of *historiographic metafiction*, also taking into account the works of Hayden White and other leading theorists. The final chapter explores the narrative's linguistic modes of slang, ad-speak and dialect and attempts to demonstrate how their usage reflects the author's aesthetic principles, as well as his belief in the redemptive power of fiction.

### 1.1 Author, work and reception

*Underworld* is DeLillo's eleventh novel and without doubt his most ambitious work to date. As in *Libra* (1988), DeLillo again thematizes decisive events of American history, but this time the compressed shock of John F. Kennedy's assassination is replaced by the decades-long tensions of the Cold War. In an essay accompanying the publication DeLillo revealed the source that had been his inspiration:

Front page of The New York Times. Oct. 4, 1951. A pair of mated headlines, top of the page. Same typeface, same size type. Each headline three columns wide, three lines deep. *Giants capture pennant* – this was the dramatic substance of the first headline. *Soviets explode atomic bomb* – this was the ominous threat of the second. (*The Power of History*, emphasis DeLillo's)<sup>3</sup>

The unusual pairing of the two headlines was the result of two major events which had occurred on the previous day, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1951: a decisive baseball game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers which the Giants had won dramatically and against all odds, and the second confirmed successful nuclear test in the Soviet Union. After conducting further research, DeLillo decided to fictionalize first only the ballgame (released as the novella *Pafko at the Wall* in 1991) and then the entire Cold War period, using the game as a kind of nexus point for the larger narrative. In an interview with Gerald Howard, conducted in 1997, he described his fascination with the game:

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<sup>3</sup> In accordance with MLA citation standards all works are referenced in the text by the name of their respective authors. Because a large number of works by and interviews with Don DeLillo are cited, I have chosen to exempt them from this rule. Instead, they are cited by the name of the publication.

It seemed to be a kind of unrepeatable event, the kind of thing that binds people in a certain way. [...] There was a sense, at least for me, that this was the last such binding event that mainly involved jubilation rather than disaster of some sort. ('American Strangeness' 121)

The day of the epic game simultaneously marked the beginning of the Cold War, at least in the sense that a nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers became imminent. While to the non-fan (or possibly the non-American reader) the game is likely to seem less significant than the beginning of the nuclear arms race it was an awe-inspiring spectacle to contemporary New Yorkers. The winning home run scored by Bobby Thomson was soon dubbed *The Shot Heard 'Round the World*, a title which alludes to the Battle of Lexington and Concord and the *Concord Hymn* written by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1837 to commemorate the first battle of the American Revolution.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the best indication for the scope of the event in baseball history was provided by Red Smith, one of America's most popular sportswriters:

Now it is done. Now the story ends. And there is no way to tell it. *The art of fiction is dead*. Reality has strangled invention. Only the utterly impossible, the inexpressibly fantastic, can ever be plausible again. (Wikipedia: Baseball's Shot Heard 'Round the World)

The defeat of the highly favored Dodgers was thus as unimaginable as Soviet Russia's nuclear capabilities – perhaps even more so – and appears to eerily foreshadow the assertion of one character in the novel that “nothing you can believe is not coming true” (*U* 802).

DeLillo's previous work had already established him as a talented novelist often associated with Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis for the sense of social and political paranoia visible in his fiction. His first novel *Americana* (1971) depicts the odyssey of a television executive through late 1960s America. It was followed by *End Zone* (1972) in which the dualism of war and professional sports (football) is exemplified, especially in terms of the use (and abuse) of language. *Great Jones Street* (1973) sketches the efforts of rock star Bucky Wunderlick to retain some form of privacy from the prying eyes of the media – an attempt that fails because his exile makes his image even more valuable to the ravenous public. In *Ratner's Star* (1976), DeLillo abandoned popular culture for science and let mathematician-genius Billig Twillig, only fourteen years old, decipher a radio message from space, the result being

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<sup>4</sup> One could also argue that the phrase invokes the assassination of John F. Kennedy, an event which had global repercussions.

a novel which, according to the author, “is almost all structure” (‘An Outsider in This Society’ 59). Intermingling political and personal issues as well as acts of terrorism are introduced in *Players* (1977) and further developed in *The Names* (1982), though in the latter it is again language itself which takes the center stage. The bizarre tale of a pornographic film made by Hitler, *Running Dog* (1978) has been described by the author as a parody of “the terrible acquisitiveness in which we live, coupled with a final indifference to the object” (‘An Outsider in This Society’ 64) and can further be read as an attempt to capture the mood of the late 1970s.

DeLillo was elevated to a new degree of critical acclaim when he won the American Book Award for *White Noise* in 1985. The novel explores the fear of opaque technological systems which would characterize his later work and connects it to the broader social and political anxieties of American. His next publication, *Libra* (1988), was the first to provoke both praise and fierce criticism, critic George Will calling it “an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship” (A25) in his review for the *Washington Post*.<sup>5</sup> *Libra* retells the events leading to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy from the perspective of Harvey Lee Oswald and most strongly indicated DeLillo’s interest in this traumatic event in American history, which again plays a role in *Underworld*. Finally, the anatomy of crowds and the role of the writer come into play in *Mao II* (1991), the title a reference to the painting by Andy Warhol also reproduced on the paperback edition’s cover. Following *Underworld*, DeLillo published *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Cosmopolis* (2003), the first a meditation on time and human perception and the second a panorama of the 1990s and its boredom and decadence shortly before the end of the dotcom boom.

In the spring of 1998 the level of anticipation for *Underworld*’s release was only rivaled by the intensity of discussion over Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason and Dixon*, his first novel in seven years. DeLillo partly broke with his reluctance to comment on his work and gave a series of interviews, though he refrained from revealing too much of his novelistic philosophy. *Underworld* was received positively, with only a small number of openly hostile reviews.<sup>6</sup> In his book report for the *Washington Post* Michael Dirda observed that “as we read, we penetrate beneath history’s surface, gradually descending into the past, that underworld which shapes our lives” (78). But

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<sup>5</sup> Other critics who have pummelled DeLillo for his supposed left-wing political views include Bruce Bawer and Jonathan Yardley (see Remnick 141).

<sup>6</sup> See Duvall (2002) 70-75 for an overview.

while DeLillo was widely lauded for the refinement of his prose, the structure, scope, and conceptual approach of the novel was partly criticized. In his review for *Dissent*, George Packer lamented:

On the level of structure, it travels through half a century in roughly reverse chronology and through a symphony of motifs whose interconnections demand another reading and another. But it's impossible for me to contemplate reading *Underworld* again. It fails the most basic tests of narrative. It has no forward drive, or backward drive. Its incidents are random and without consequences. Its central characters have perceptions without lives, are largely unknowable and leave you cold. Every page is of the deepest interest, and yet the novel as a whole is boring. (124)

Sadly, Packer leaves the questions of whether in the end the novel's lack of "drive", its "characters [...] without lives", and overall perceived plotlessness serve a purpose unanswered. DeLillo had previously been criticized for the detachedness of his characters, their tendency to say things which seem overly elaborate in regards to their social background, age or education, but most critics saw a positive development in that respect in *Underworld*, Michiko Kakutani praising it as "a distillation of the America glimpsed in earlier DeLillo books".<sup>7</sup> Packer's broader criticism, however, was not pointed towards how the author develops his characters but to his general conception of history. Comparing *Underworld* with John Dos Passos' *USA Trilogy*, Packer observes that in contrast to DeLillo, Dos Passos "doesn't fictionalize his historical characters because he doesn't need to, because the actual lives of Woodrow Wilson and Randolph Bourne in the frame of an objective history give his narrative its thrust and meaning". It is enlightening to observe Packer – himself a writer – making a case for framing a novel and its characters in "objective history". He is highly observant when concluding that "a novelist who starts with the idea that historical coherence was lost in the nuclear age will pay a high price", but the readiness to pay that price – in contrast to conforming with absolutist ideas – is what separates him from DeLillo. Fixed notions of what the reader expects, the conviction that history can be fictionalized objectively, and the presumption that linear historiographies can still be a source of "thrust and meaning" in today's globalized world indicate very traditional concepts of historiography and fiction, both of which are challenged in *Underworld*. Contrary to Packer, the novel's fleeting center does have room for the individual and his struggle with upper world (i.e. official) history, but this individual is detached, fragmented and kept at distance

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. <<http://www.pulitzer.org/year/1998/criticism/works/8.html>>.

because the intimacy of direct personal introspections is inevitably *constructed*; it is a form of literary artifice that DeLillo regards as insufficient for his purposes. *Underworld* has no plot in the traditional sense because history itself, when seen as a set of disparate events, lacks one. Instead, its perceived deficiencies allow the reader to see five decades of American history from multiple angles, and because these angles shift relentlessly from one milieu to another there is not climax or grand resolution.<sup>8</sup>

While Packer's criticism was also voiced with minor variations by other reviewers, most felt it to be of minor importance. What left some baffled was the ending of the novel which sees a crowd of New Yorkers rapt by the vision of a murdered girl projected on a dilapidated billboard in the Bronx. Startled but also intrigued, Michael Bérubé asks:

Is the billboard a sign of transfiguration, of the holy transformation of the profane by the sacred, or a sign of how sorry and sordid our ideas of salvation have become, that a mere trick of the light can lead us to embrace Sister Grace?<sup>9</sup>

There is of course no definite answer to the question, but the overall lack of obvious 'reader deception' in *Underworld* makes it unlikely that DeLillo is presenting Esmeralda's apparition tongue-in-cheek. More likely, it is precisely the ambivalence of the vision – is it real or not? What constitutes realness in regards to a moment of transcendence anyway? – that he seeks to bring to our attention. The event simply shows that the energies of collective desire will find an object, regardless of whether that object is a prized baseball or the image of a murdered girl. Bérubé concludes his 'Endpaper on *Underworld*' with an interesting assertion:

But I'll say this much--I know we've got us a novel here that draws on narrative strategies that have nothing to do with what people like to call postmodernism. Working backward toward beginnings, making and unmaking our sense of an ending, opening onto the possibility of the sacred, and asking, with its last breath, how do things end, finally, things such as this?

Of course the notion that something cannot be called postmodern if it works "backward toward beginnings" and engenders "the possibility of the sacred" reveals quite a limited concept of postmodernism. But Bérubé is right in pointing out that

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<sup>8</sup> In this vein David Cowart observes: "[a]s a postmodernist committed to representing the discontinuous contemporary moment, DeLillo is resistant to the seductive appeal of totalizing theories, comprehensive accounts of the phenomenal world and the human place in it" (9).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. <<http://www.centerforbookculture.org/context/no5/berube.html>>.

these are new (or in fact quite old) and unusual concerns which mark a clear departure from the author's earlier work and from earlier tendencies in postmodernism. One such new aspect is the novel's sense of genealogy and origins, resonating noticeably in its highly complex structure. I will review this matter more closely before returning to the question of how *Underworld* can be read in the context of other works which re- and underwrite the official historical record.

## **1.2 Structure and content**

Meticulously structured, *Underworld* follows a stringent organizational pattern. The novel's prologue 'The Triumph of Death' opens with a baseball game, the legendary play-off match between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers that took place on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1951 and that the Giants won with a spectacular home run. Initially, the perspective is that of Cotter Martin, an African-American boy from Brooklyn who skips school and crashes the gate in order to see the ballgame. The focus then shifts to the game itself and to a group of famous spectators that counterpoint the dodging Cotter with their fame and power: singer/actor Frank Sinatra, comedian Jackie Gleason, celebrity barman Toots Shor and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. In the final dramatic moments of the game Hoover learns that the Soviet Union has conducted its second successful nuclear test and seeing a reproduction of the Renaissance painting *The Triumph of Death* in *Life* magazine he morbidly imagines the apocalyptic consequences of a nuclear confrontation. Observing the structural significance of the prologue, John Duvall notes:

At its simplest level, the prologue serves as a moment of origin, both of the history of the baseball Thomson hit and of the Cold War. (2002, 29)

In the consecutive first part of the novel, named 'Long Tall Sally' and set forty years after the game, the narrative of protagonist Nick Shay begins. Nick is a successful but spiritually hollow waste manager, husband, and father, who fails in his repeated attempts to bury the past, most notably the trauma of his father's disappearance and a murder that he has committed in his youth. Moving backwards chronologically, *Underworld* explores Nick's submerged personal history, but simultaneously it

restages the entire half century of the Cold War and retells it from countless perspectives.<sup>10</sup>

The Prologue is followed by seven chapters (Part 1), set in the spring and summer of 1992, which are succeeded by the first part of the odyssey of Manx Martin, Cotter's father. Part 2 covers the mid-eighties and early nineties and has ten chapters, while Part 3 relates the events of spring 1978 and contains three; after this, Manx's next segment is inserted. In Part 4, which consists of five chapters, DeLillo rewinds the tape further, to the summer of 1974. Part 5 recalls the fifties and sixties and again contains seven chapters. It is succeeded by the last Manx Martin segment and Part 6, which returns the reader to 1951/1952 and the day after the Giants-Dodgers game. This last section consists of eight chapters followed by an epilogue. The entire novel thus has exactly 40 chapters, many of which are again subdivided into segments told from the perspective of different characters.<sup>11</sup> It is an episodic narrative as well as a *pastiche* of fictional and historical characters and events for which the decisive baseball game serves as a focal point. The chapters following the game take the reader further and further into the past until he reaches the day immediately after the Giants' victory, told from Nick's perspective. The events of the missing twelve hours are revealed in the three Manx Martin segments inserted after Parts 1, 3 and 5. Manx's story is relevant especially to the genealogy of the Thompson baseball, that totemic fan collectible caught by Cotter Martin and sold by his father, which Nick purchases from collector Marvin Lundy in the late 1980s. The baseball, however, is not the only hidden connection that the characters unknowingly share.

Growing up in the Bronx of the 1950s, Nick and his brother Matt are haunted by the absence of their father, Jimmy Constanza. While Nick engages in petty theft and casual sex, Matt becomes a chess apprentice of science teacher Albert Bronzini, with whose wife Klara Sachs Nick has an affair. While Nick passes through the juvenile corrections system for unintentionally shooting the heroin-addicted waiter George Manza, Matt first enlists for military service in Vietnam to then develop safing mechanisms for atomic bombs at a secret weapons facility. Both Shays are equally incapable of deflecting feelings of guilt and loss – while Nick is estranged from his

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<sup>10</sup> A helpful distinction here is that between *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot). While Nick's shooting of George Manza takes place at the beginning of the *fabula*, it concludes the *syuzhet*; only through the reader's reconstruction of the chronology can the event be attributed.

<sup>11</sup> It is also, as Jesse Kavadlo observes, "[a]n example of chiasmus [...] the chapters lay out in a palindrome formation, perfectly balanced, perfectly reversible from either end" (116).

family and himself, Matt channels his anger into abstract confrontations, first on the chess board and then as a weapons designer. Though Nick acquires the coveted Thomson baseball, it can neither undo the crime he has committed nor counterbalance his loss. Instead, he remains a member of what Marvin Lundy calls “the fraternity of missing men” (*U* 182). Imitating Jimmy who has gone missing literally, Nick is a tourist of his own life. The motif of the disturbed father-son relationship echoes in the stories of Manx and Cotter Martin – the father betraying the son by selling his prized baseball –, as well as in the segments of Charles Wainwright and his son Chuckie. The ad-man Wainwright (who buys the ball from Manx on the night after the game) intends it to be a peace offering to his estranged son, but at the same time he is trying to validate his own life by buying the ‘authentic’ ball in a transaction based more on faith than facts.<sup>12</sup> Chuckie Wainwright becomes a navigator on a B-52 during the Vietnam War, bombing the targets that Matt has mapped out from a plane that will later be turned into a work of art by Klara Sachs. Interwoven segments such as the ‘atomic family’ scene of Matt’s colleague Eric Deming’s youth, the introspections of the so-called Texas Highway Killer, Richard Henry Gilkey, and the work of catholic nun Sister Edgar in the dilapidated Bronx of the 1980s and 1990s further add to the scope of the novel.

All of these intersections and narrative cross-references are painted on the canvas of broader history, a history that is not the creation of ‘directors’ such as J. Edgar Hoover but idiosyncratic, organic, and utterly uncontrollable. Matt Shay’s drug-aided epiphany that “everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to only because it does” (*U* 465) is thus, as Mark Osteen observes, both “the major theme and organizational principle of *Underworld*” (214). The reader bears witness to two major shifts: first from an (undramatized and hypothetical) pre-Cold War innocence to what could be called an ‘Age of Containment’, both politically and spiritually, and then to the rampant consumption of products and images which replaces containment in the 1990s.

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<sup>12</sup> Manx Martin can never prove the authenticity of the baseball, a problem that reflects his deeper self-contradictions as a husband and father. The buyer of the ball, Charles Wainwright, is equally unable to undo his cynical existence as an ‘ad-man’. Both fathers are eventually denied redemption, but the loss which they share in spite of their different racial and social backgrounds has strong implications. The novel’s third neglectful father is of course Jimmy Constanza, who has abandoned Rosemary Shay and her sons for unknown reasons.

In terms of structure the juxtaposition of using a traditional chronology only in Manx's segments, while moving backward in the six parts which compose most of the novel's bulk minimizes any suspense the reader might feel otherwise – we already know where Nick's journey will lead, what we lack are answers to the mysteries of his past. Jesse Kavadlo derides that “[t]he novel is anticlimactic; in fact, if the novel has any climax at all, it is the Prologue's home run, not even a part of the novel proper” (116). What does however create a certain tension is the lack of origins and causality which the reader hopes will gradually be found. Or, as John Duvall phrases it,

[s]ince so many things are plotted in reverse chronological order, the things we don't know about characters create plot tensions that simply would disappear if one were to retell the story by reconstructing a conventional timeframe. (2002, 25)

DeLillo himself explained his reasons for abandoning a traditional chronology in an interview with Maria Moss as follows:

What it allowed me to do was to create a counter chronology, that is, as the book moves backwards over forty years or so there's this character, Manx Martin, trying to save a baseball while moving forward over a period of one life. [...] Manx Martin is one little chronological stream moving against the huge flow of the river in the rest of the novel. ('Writing as a Deeper Form of Concentration' 159)

The implication of such a “counter chronology” is that the recovery of origins and the genealogy of events supplant traditional causalities that would lead the reader to a definite conclusion on a predetermined path. It is this literary urge to recover and retrace which makes the reverse chronology a logical way of structuring the sheer bulk of five decades of history. Contrasting Manx's trip through the cold New York City night with the political ice age that has just begun is more than a mere stylistic stunt – the missing hours in the baseball's history are only disclosed to the reader, whereas the characters remain in the dark. In addition, the fact that the unemployed colored dodger Manx Martin is chosen as the missing link in the story's network has implications for the further reading of *Underworld*.

The Prologue's title is not the only instance of borrowing that can be retraced. Part 1 ('Long Tall Sally'), is named after a song by Little Richard<sup>13</sup>; Part 3 ('The Cloud of Unknowing') refers to a text of mysticism from the 14<sup>th</sup> century; Part 4 ('Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry') to an advertising slogan for DuPont; Part 5 ('Cocksucker Blues') is named after the Robert Franks documentary on the Rolling

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<sup>13</sup> See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little\\_Richard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Richard)> for a full biography.

Stones and Part 6 ('Arrangement in Gray and Black') derives its title from the famous painting by James Whistler. Part 2 ('Elegy for Left Hand Alone') is most likely an allusion to the work of Polish pianist Leopold Godowsky, who lived and worked in New York City from 1890 to 1938 and reinterpreted the works of Saint-Saëns (the composer Albert Bronzini favors) and Chopin for the left hand after suffering from a stroke.<sup>14,15</sup> More importantly, it is a reference to Richard Henry Gilkey, the so-called Texas Highway Killer, who first appears in this segment and has taught himself to shoot his victims with the left hand.

Stepping back to examine the way the novel's individual segments are linked together, Patrick O'Donnell observes:

Structurally, the massive assemblage of *Underworld* can be viewed as a historical ruin collapsed around the sundered foundation of a monumental history. (150)

Salvaging something from this ruin is what DeLillo sets out to do, because, as the counter-chronological approach he uses illustrates, only the past can – if tentatively – give benediction to the present. His history of individual and national longing and sin is the realization of a postmodern epistemology that attempts to find harmony and perhaps even redemption in fragmentation and dissonance.

The following chapters will explore some of the broader themes which Don DeLillo has incorporated into *Underworld*, fully aware that a definite review of all aspects is utterly impossible to write, not only because they are so numerous but also because they are almost infinitely interconnected – a testament to what could be called the author's 'disparate-holistic' philosophy.

## **2 Individual and collective memory as forms of counterhistory**

In *Modernization and the Crisis of Memory*, scholar Philipp Wolf describes *Underworld* as a novel "which deals with the condition, the objects, functions and possibilities of both public and private memory in modern and postmodern America" (169). Finding ways to relate past events from a distinctly subjective and personalized angle is one central goal of the book, even when the narrative voice blends individual

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<sup>14</sup> See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leopold\\_Godowsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leopold_Godowsky)> for further information on Godowsky.

<sup>15</sup> Further research will inspire glee in all conspiracy theorists – Godowsky's wife was named Frieda Saxe.

and crowd sentiments such as in the Prologue. This chapter explores the multiple layers of nostalgia, national remembrance, and personal memory which characterize *Underworld*, first by closely scrutinizing the way in which the characters reconstruct their own past, and then by placing the narrative and its “diasporic senses of history” (O’Donnell 153) in a broader context with the numerous other works to which it intertextually refers.

## **2.1 Personal myth, self-construction, and collective imagination**

A fundamental conflict in the novel that is brought to the surface through the plights of multiple characters – most notably Nick and Matt Shay – is the struggle between individualistic and conformist tendencies. While Nick wants to “escape the things that made [him]” (*U* 543), Matt feels a sense of belonging in the air raid drills he and his classmates have to perform under the regiment of Sister Alma Edgar. Both seek to rid themselves of the taint of their father’s disappearance, Nick by shooting George Manza and Matt by going to Vietnam to fight an unseen enemy from a safe (and obscuring) distance. While Nick shields himself from his guilt – a guilt that stems both from his accidental shooting of George and the latent notion that he may be responsible for Jimmy’s cop-out – by constructing the myth that his father was killed by the mafia, Matt aims to become the opposite of his shifty parent: a good student, a soldier, a scientist. Even though Nick thinks that “[i]t is necessary to respect what we discard” (*U* 88), he is also afraid that “[w]hat we excrete comes back to consume us” (*U* 791). The past represents both mystery and danger, as memories – just like waste – are recycled and relived.

As Mark Osteen notes, the dualism of the Shay brothers begins with their names: ‘Old Nick’ is a traditional moniker for the Devil, while ‘Matthew’ invokes the evangelist of the bible. Nick has “fallen from grace” (*U* 95) and “the novel’s title indicates his metaphoric place of residence” (Osteen 222). Whereas Matt builds weapons, Nick must dispose of the waste they produce. His story begins in the *fall* of 1951 with the baseball game that prefigures his loss, a loss he will continuously restage and for which the Thomson ball becomes the anchor point. His crimes – killing the father figure (George Manza) and sleeping with the iconic mother (Klara Sachs) – cast him a quasi-Oedipal role and further add to the degree of his detachment from others. His father, Jimmy Constanza, is not only absent from the brothers’ lives but also from the

narrative – he only exists in the family’s memory.<sup>16</sup> Like Manx Martin, he is a stranger in his own family, with the same kind of dysfunctional relationship to Nick as it exists between Charles Wainwright and his son Chuckie. The fact that a single day in the life of the Martin family is landlocked by the vast narrative of Nick’s life suggests that the individual’s journey is in a quest for lost origins and underlines the marginalized role of the African-American community – their narrative is incomplete but central at the same time. The reader never witnesses how Cotter Martin grows up or how his father’s betrayal affects him.<sup>17</sup> Manx and Cotter are outside of time; their story is without a conclusion and at the same time prefigured by the novel’s other father-son sagas.<sup>18</sup>

While Matt attempts to create himself as the counter-image of his father, Nick’s relationship to his family’s history is more ambivalent. After being released from the correctional facility in Staatsburg, he is sent to a Jesuit college where the scholarly Father Paulus becomes his mentor. In a situation that recalls Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Paulus lets Nick name the parts of a shoe in order to teach him “the physics of language” (*U* 542). Not only does Nick redefine the world with a (new) language, he also becomes a scholar of origins, a private etymologist and waste researcher because of this encounter. He attempts to unravel the unanswered questions of his life and escape his former violent self, but at the same time his longing for purpose collides with a longing for mystery in a conflict that cannot be resolved.<sup>19</sup> Nick is estranged from his own life and the fictions that surround it to the point that he feels unremorsefully about being “relieved of my phony role as husband and father, high corporate officer” (*U* 796) when he uncovers that his wife is having an affair with his colleague Brian Glassic. He concludes:

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<sup>16</sup> Jimmy assumes an almost legendary status in the memory of his wife and children, existing not so much as verifiable father but more as a disembodied ghost (see *U* 199).

<sup>17</sup> This paternal betrayal repeats itself several times throughout the novel. The Shay brothers are no more abandoned by Jimmy than Cotter is by Manx, who sells the ball that his son fought over passionately for \$32.

<sup>18</sup> Commenting to Kim Echlin on the theme of paternal absence and betrayal, DeLillo explained:

Whatever else *Underworld* is about, things and people disappear and are betrayed. A baseball disappears and a boy is betrayed, twice. A father disappears and a son is betrayed. Plutonium disappears and a land is betrayed. The book turns on loss and reversing the flow of time. (*‘Baseball and the Cold War’* 149)

<sup>19</sup> See Cowart (50) and Jose Liste Noya’s essay ‘Naming the Secret: Don DeLillo’s *Libra*’ for a further study of mystery and secrecy in DeLillo’s work.

But it was also satisfying, for just a moment, to think of giving it all up, letting them have it all, the children of both marriages, the grandchild, they could keep the two houses, all the cars, he could have both wives if he wanted them. None of it ever belonged to me except in the sense that I filled out the forms. (U 796)

Nick is thus not much more than *filling out a form*, playing a role that he has assigned himself without any true conviction. The constant, monotonous repetitions in his life – separating his garbage, business trips to Europe, running the metric mile – show that he is recycling much more than waste: his life as such is cyclical, with the events of his youth (the shooting, the baseball game, his father's disappearance) as the anchors of his idiosyncratic personality.

Both the isolation and subsequent fragmentation of the individual voice are again central in the narration of Richard Henry Gilkey, the Texas Highway Killer. Gilkey seeks to overcome his detachment and inner rage by forcefully inserting himself into the lives of his victims' families:

He was not left-handed but taught himself to shoot with the left hand. This is what Bud would never understand, how he had to take his feelings outside himself so's to escape his isolation. [...] [H]e would never understand how Richard had to take everything outside, share it with others, because this was the only way to escape, to get out from under the pissant details of who he was. (U 266)

Gilkey's self-taught left-handedness is the expression of an extreme personal deviancy and self-estrangement. While Nick Shay successfully rehabilitates himself after his unintentional shooting of George Manza, Gilkey cannot escape his violent pathology. Instead of burying his urges he commits random murders which become hyperreal media events because they are (again randomly) taped. His attempts to write himself into the broader national conscience through violent acts perversely mirror the artistic self-declarations of Klara Sachs and Ismael Munoz – he declares himself, but his message is without any content.

Another scholar of time and memory is Albert Bronzini, the first husband of artist Klara Sachs and Matt Shay's chess teacher. Together with Rosemary Shay he is one of the few survivors of the old Bronx, an aging self-taught philosopher who asks himself: "[h]ow far down into the life of matter do we have to go before we understand what time is?" (U 222). Unlike many of the other characters Albert is not without a source of orientation, but firmly rooted in the Italianate Bronx of the past. He is both unwilling and unable to move on, to recreate and 'uproot' himself. Instead, he listens

to Saint-Saëns' piano works and cares for his sister Laura, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease<sup>20</sup>, thinking:

And this was the other thing they shared, the sadness and clarity of time, time mourned in the music – how the sound, the shaped vibrations made by hammers striking wire strings made them feel an odd sorrow not for particular things but for time itself, the material feel of a year or an age, the textures of unmeasured time that were lost to them now, and she turned away, looking past her lifted hand into some transparent thing he thought he could call her life. (*U* 229)

The mourning of these “textures of unmeasured time” is not merely a lament to past events, but to a different way of experiencing and measuring time altogether. Childhood and youth seem compressed and hurried in retrospective, pivotal memories become clearer the further in the past they occurred. This is especially true in regards to Laura, whose mnemonic coherence is failing her – she is *losing memory*, not merely in the sense of past events, but as the ability to chronologically order these events and ascribe meaning to them. Her repeated request to Albert (“But you have to tell me”, *U* 229) is an expression of the human need to communicate, even when the informational content of the message is lost. In this context the end of communication equates death.<sup>21</sup> Despite the caring togetherness of the two siblings their time together is running out, their run-down apartment resembling a prison with junkies and thugs lurking in the hallway. Just as the omniscient voice that opens the prologue has already predicted, “[i]t is all falling indelibly into the past” (*U* 60). Albert is the chronicler and caretaker of that past; his rootedness is also what condemns him to stasis.

*Underworld's* prime historian-in-hiding, however, is the baseball collector Marvin Lundy. For twenty-two years Marvin has chased after the Thompson home-run ball<sup>22</sup>, his odyssey through the postwar U.S. giving him the sense of “being lost in America, wandering through cities with no downtowns” (*U* 176). His quest for the ball is a quest for lost coherence, a ‘big picture’ of the United States, because he believes firmly that “all knowledge is available if you analyze the dots” (*U* 175). Baseball is the key to this suppressed *underhistory* because, as John Duvall suspects, “in American consciousness, Cold War history is overwhelmed by baseball legend” (2002, 33).

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<sup>20</sup> It is no coincidence in this context that Alzheimer's most noticeable early symptom is memory loss.

<sup>21</sup> This notion is also prevalent in modern drama, e.g. in the plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, among others.

<sup>22</sup> Mikko Keskinen calls the Thompson ball a “collective memento” and a “relic” (68).

The monolithic qualities of official history have alienated conspiracy theorists like Marvin and those who are politically marginalized.<sup>23</sup> Cotter Martin summarizes this absurdity and the strong interdependence of war and consumerism in American culture when he puns: “[w]ar and treaties, eat your Wheaties” (*U* 141). War and breakfast foods are equally relevant to those who inhabit America’s social underworld because they have no influence on the grand schemes of history. “The downfall of the empire and the emergence of detergents” (*U* 141) both leave Cotter cold – he is a lot more interested in the legends of the ballpark than in what the history books can offer.<sup>24</sup> The novel in its entirety, however, shows that when mass desire coalesces into a civil movement it can leave its imprint on history. As Patrick O’Donnell argues:

[...] official history is represented only indirectly as the symptomatic, destined, yet processional outcome of underhistory. This inverted relation is one in which historical symptomaticity is located in the official version documented in headlines and on the news, while the real history of desiring ‘underneath’ accumulates, transforming the quantity of desire into the qualitative change that is registered *as* history, producing as its residue both waste and event. (157)

Notably, O’Donnell does not differentiate between those historical developments which are the result of ‘mass desire’ (e.g. the Civil Rights Movement) and others, which are ‘scripted’ by political power-players such as J. Edgar Hoover. The novel consciously avoids dichotomizing these two sides; instead it remains unclear whether the state has taken on the paranoia of the individual or vice versa. Interestingly enough, the two products of accumulating desire – waste and event – are presented in *Underworld* at points antipodal to the general structure: the explosion of a Russian nuclear device occurs in the Prologue, the disposal of the resulting waste by Viktor Maltsev and his company through *controlled* explosions takes place in the Epilogue. The same holds true for the two spectacular mass events of the narrative: the Giants-Dodgers game (again in the Prologue) and the adoration of Esmeralda (Epilogue). Waste and event function as brackets around the characters’ fragmented biographies; they are the ying and yang of DeLillo’s American cosmos.

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<sup>23</sup> For a closer look at manifestations of paranoia in *Underworld*, see Chapter 5.

<sup>24</sup> Both quotations highlight the interrelation of consumerism and war (“Wheaties” and “treaties”) which is thematized on several occasions in the novel, most markedly in Charles Wainwright’s segment (*U* 526-535).

Waste's symbolic qualities undergo significant shifts from one chapter to the next.<sup>25</sup> It mutates from the happy garbage of the sports fans at the Giants-Dodgers game into dangerous toxic leftovers, just as the authentic experience of the game is transformed into a simulation. Baseball eventually becomes just another commodity, with games ubiquitously available through the digital media. As Brian Glassic observes when attending another game between the two teams (now the San Francisco Giants and the L.A. Dodgers) in the 1990s: “[w]e had the real Giants and Dodgers [...] [n]ow we have the holograms” (*U* 95). For this precise reason the merchandize of Marvin has become invaluable – the fact that the memorabilia which he collects are time-worn, unpolished, and unique makes them more authentic than the game itself in the way that it is played and mediated in the postmodern present. To the dedicated collector, these items prove an actual past which cannot be otherwise referenced because of the achrony of contemporary objects of mass production. Philipp Wolf observes:

Through the completed narrative or genealogy of the medium, Marvin and [...] Nick Shay are secretly hoping to be linked with and to ground themselves in communal memory, founding an identity in historical time. (171)

Only the reader is granted the final confirmation of the game-winning ball's authenticity; to Nick and Marvin the lost twenty-four hours in the collectible's genealogy remain shrouded in mystery. The fact that neither Nick, Marvin, nor Albert Bronzini is present when the crowd witnesses the apparition of Esmeralda is quite significant because it implies that the resolution of their conflicts lies in their own private universe. Nick is characterized as an outsider throughout the novel, the Giants-Dodgers game reminding him not of communal joy but of lonely loss. Like Nick, Marvin is also geographically removed when Thompson hits the crucial home run of the game; he is on a train racing through the Alps.<sup>26</sup> Albert Bronzini simply misses the event altogether – he finds his community in his local neighbors and not in the roaring crowds of the ballpark. To these three characters the challenge posed is to overcome and outlive their personal past, not to blissfully loose themselves in the

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<sup>25</sup> Unsurprisingly, as waste is by its very nature fluent and mutable.

<sup>26</sup> Elevation plays a pivotal role throughout the novel: Nick Shay is on a rooftop in the Bronx when listening to the game, while Marvin Lundy is traveling through the Alps; Klara Sachs sees New York from a new perspective during her 'rooftop summer' of 1974; Chuckie Wainwright bombs Vietnamese villages from high above; Matt Shay works in a subterranean military installation during the 1970s; Nick shoots George Manza in a cellar room in 1951.

crowd. They long for the *home run*, the figural return to a fixed point of origin that only memory can recover.

When baseball is romanticized to a certain degree in *Underworld's* prologue<sup>27</sup>, it is done with a slight but noticeable distance. DeLillo lets legendary sports commentator Russ Hodges reflect that the game is “another kind of history” (*U* 59), something which “joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power” (*U* 59). The match achieves its legendary status because it is only sparsely documented and not available to a national audience via television. However, while the positive experience of communal joy is highlighted, the spectators remain oblivious to the schemes of men like J. Edgar Hoover, one director of official history. The *New York Times* headline that juxtaposed the ballgame with the explosion of a Russian nuclear bomb oddly reflects two paradigms of orientation for the American public, one directed inward to the national pastime and the typically American virtues associated with it, and the other directed outward to ambitions of global military dominance. The memory of the game and the human drama of victory and loss it brought forth is the counterpoint to what Klara Sachs describes when she asks “didn’t life take an unreal turn at some point?” (*U*73). Formative experiences such as triumph, belonging and loss are all individually associated with baseball. But because they depend on the subjective angle of the spectator and on his imperfect reconstruction in memory, the game loses its mnemonic function when it is commodified and serialized. All that remains as the physical proof of these legendary events is Marvin’s shrine of memorabilia. The contrast to the earlier match is astonishing in Nick’s description of the game that he and his colleagues watch in Los Angeles:

We were set apart from the field, glassed in at press level, and even with a table by the window we heard only muffled sounds from the crowd. The radio announcer’s voice shot in clearly, transmitted from the booth, but the crowd remained at an eerie distance, soul-moaning like some lost battalion. (*U* 91)

The distance to the field automatically distances the spectators from the event. The argument that they cannot drink and eat in the lower stands is enough to deter the waste managers and their guest, a BBC reporter investigating American culture, from getting closer to the game play. The presence of the English journalist makes it appear even more as though what is being played is a *simulation of baseball* rather

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<sup>27</sup> See John Duvall’s ‘Baseball As Aesthetic Ideology’ (1995).

than baseball itself – the game is being exhibited as a cultural attraction to a curious tourist.

A different and profoundly political aspect of history – race – is taken up in Rosie Martin’s description of the ‘Freedom Summer’ of 1964.<sup>28</sup> Situated in one chapter with the description of the Deming family and the professional life of advertising executive Charles Wainwright, Rosie’s struggle for civil rights in Jackson, Mississippi<sup>29</sup> is representative of the entire African American movement against ongoing (if unofficial) segregation – a movement which is thematized in this segment while white people advertise napalm and are delighted by their breezeways and crispers. The political violence of the 1960s completes the picture of war waged within and without, against communism on a global, and ethnic minorities and political dissenters on a national level. DeLillo does not shy away from depicting characters outside his own milieu, but the slightly stronger focus on Nick Shay and postwar New York reveals an attachment to his own biography, perhaps even an attempt to historicize his own origins as part of the larger American narrative. Despite this, *Underworld* refuses to partake in what could be called literary ghettoization, the tendency to consciously detach one ethnic or religious narrative from the whole and make it appear to exist in isolation. Instead, the reader is presented with an “assemblage” (O’Donnell 150) of milieus: DeLillo lets nuns, soldiers, businessmen and baseball enthusiasts all contribute their snap-shot introspections to the historical *pastiche* of the novel. Memory is desegregated and jumbled, mixing different voices (often in the same chapter) and constantly mingling fact with fiction to create a narrative montage. The juxtaposition of segments told from the point of view of alternating characters is one key ingredient to the novel’s composition, and it is nowhere done as skillfully as in the triad sequence of Part 5, Chapter 2 (the Demings – Rosie Martin – Charles Wainwright) which drastically contrasts the different ethnic realities of the late 1950s and early 1960s. While making the narration appear disparate on the surface, this technique in fact binds the different strands closely together because it allows the larger, submerged context of American Cold War history to emerge, a context that is amiss in the history books.

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<sup>28</sup> See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom\\_Summer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_Summer)>.

<sup>29</sup> The demonstration in which Rosie participates takes place on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1964, ten days after the bodies of the three civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner had been found in Mississippi.

All of the abovementioned characters are in their own way lost to official history, and it is at least in parts lost to them. They are incapable of reassembling the fragments of personal and political events into a coherent whole, a narrative of their lives that can point them towards a definite spiritual destination. While the grand narrative of official history has initially marginalized some of them (the Martins, Ismael Munoz, Esmeralda, Lenny Bruce) and incorporated others (J. Edgar Hoover, Matt Shay and his bombhead colleagues) it has dissolved into a multifaceted tangle of stories with the end of the Cold War confrontation. The subsequent dissolution of place (the Bronx) and referent (the oral tradition of 1950s Italian immigrants) into the white noise of the contemporary mediasphere has brought memory as such under fire. The old modes of epistemologically anchoring oneself in the past are no longer available to the postmodern individual, unless – like Albert Bronzini – he chooses not to live in the present at all, or only in a very limited version of it.

## **2.2 Memory and media conformism**

While the events of Nick's youth in the Bronx are recorded only in his personal memories, this subjective angle of past events comes under considerable pressure in the 80s and 90s through the spread of visual media, television in particular. At the second Giants-Dodgers game in 1992, Brian Glassic reflects on the impact of the Kennedy assassination and contrasts it with how the 1951 pennant game was received:

When JFK was shot, people went inside. We watched TV in dark rooms and talked on the phone with friends and relatives. We were all separate and alone. But when Thompson hit the homer, people rushed outside. People wanted to be together. Maybe it was the last time people spontaneously went out of their houses for something. Some wonder, some amazement. Like a footnote at the end of the war. (*U* 94)

Here the communal joy of the Giants' underdog victory is replaced by lonely mourning.<sup>30</sup> While the pennant game was not filmed and only one accidental recording of Russ Hodges' commentary exists, the Kennedy assassination was of course taped, the footage by Dallas dressmaker Abraham Zapruder achieving tragic fame. Contemporary television news is dominated by disaster footage, recordings of explosions, earthquakes, floods, and violent crime, often accidentally taped by

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<sup>30</sup> Especially the way in which the description of how "people went inside" is contrasted with how they "rushed outside" is significant. The former marks the retreat into the private sphere, while the latter motion is decidedly public.

bystanders. In his essay *The Power of History*, DeLillo explained that “[a]gainst these flashes, these lonely fleeting images, against the ritual arrangement of these serial replays, events and documents of the past have a clarity and intactness that amount to a moral burnish”. The statement emphasizes his distinction between “documents of the past” and “lonely fleeting images”, the former being items that enable us to remember the past, while the latter are simply imitations of such events, without depth or lasting significance to them.<sup>31</sup> Since, however, television is so dominant in American culture (and Western culture in general), a crisis of memory is the logical consequence. In accordance to this, Wolf concludes that the visual media has hastened “the decline of organic memory” (172). Because all events seem to be our disposal without geography, time, or the subjectivity of a storyteller to limit us, all events are rendered equally insignificant.

In *Underworld*, all attempts made to consolidate the fragments of personal memory into a coherent narrative – one that will rectify the self and make the present explicable – are under constant attack by what could be called a *consensus of the hyperreal*. This consensus is created alternately by Cold War ideologists and the news media, both of which impose a reality on their subjects that is nearly powerful enough to obliterate all personal ‘undernarratives’. However, while the reality of the Cold War is based partly on facts (the Soviet Union’s nuclear capabilities) and partly on fictions (e.g. disinformation and half-truths spread consciously by the intelligence agencies) and narrated with the purpose of legitimizing a political conflict, the reality of television is ‘beyond real’ and exists without such a motivation – it is solely created to market products and images. The problem is not so much that it misrepresents the way in which an event actually took place, but that the representation supercedes the event. The representation is torn away from its context – it is all surface with no depth. Because of the visual clarity of a filmed event, the viewer is prone to the assumption that he can uncover a hidden meaning if he looks closely enough and ‘connects the dots’. Marvin Lundy follows this logic when he observes:

This is what technology does. It peels back the shadows and redeems the dazed and rambling past. It makes reality come true. (*U* 177)

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<sup>31</sup> Jeremy Green sees this kind of disaster footage and especially the screenings of the Texas Highway Killer tapes as likely to “assault memory, efface the distinction between the real and insinuate a complicitous relationship between viewer and viewed” (572).

The idea that some form of ‘pattern recognition’ is the key to a greater truth, a deeper mystery waiting to be uncovered, is also formulated by Matt Shay. When watching the video footage of one of the Texas Highway Killer’s murders, Matt comments:

The world is lurking in the camera, already framed, waiting for the boy or girl who will come along and take up the device, learn the instrument, shooting old granddad at breakfast, all stroked out so his nostrils gape, the cereal spoon baby-gripped in his pale fist. (*U* 156)

The clarity achieved here by the camera is an exposing, voyeuristic one, which deprives the subject of his dignity. The latent brutality of the language used to describe the scene can hardly be overlooked: the grandfather is “shot” and the video camera is referred to as a “device”, the term which the researchers of the Manhattan Project used for the first atomic bomb. What is “lurking in the camera” is thus the possibility to voyeuristically expose others, while the one wielding the device remains safe, anonymous, and emotionally distant. The culmination of this logic of violence and violation *in the medium* and *through the medium* are the serial murders of the Texas Highway Killer, who kills random strangers in order to attain a televised rebirth that will allow him to “get out from under the pissant details of who he was” (*U* 266). It is again Matt, watching the tape with his wife Janet, who notes:

You sit there thinking that the serial murder has found its medium, or vice versa – an act of shadow technology, of compressed time and repeated images, stark and glary and unremarkable (*U* 159).

The fact that the footage shows an actual event is used by Matt as an excuse to legitimize his voyeuristic interest in the unfiltered violence of the tape. While what is shown is real, it tells the viewer nothing – it serves no other function than to visually wear out the murder and make it unremarkable and utterly banal. Because the reality of the recording eventually overtakes the reality of the event itself, personalized memory becomes impossible. The recording is without the subjective impurity of memory and it is therefore likely to be considered more trustworthy by the audience. DeLillo repeatedly juxtaposes subjective memory with media recordings in *Underworld* to reveal the latter’s deficiencies. Cultural fixtures, such as the games played both by the children in the Bronx and the ‘downwinders’ in Kazakhstan are presented as enduring and universal. The passage in the Prologue in which Russ Hodges describes how the Giants-Dodgers game is enshrined in memory is perhaps the most apposite example of this tendency:

Russ wants to believe a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way. This is the thing that will pulse in his head come old age and double vision and dizzy spells – the surge sensation, the leap of people already standing, that bolt of noise and joy when the ball went in. This is *the people's history* and it has flesh and breath that quicken to the force of this old safe game of ours. And fans at the Polo Grounds today will be able to tell their grandchildren – they'll be gassy old men leaning into the next century and trying to convince anyone willing to listen, pressing in with medicine breath, that they were here when it happened. (U 60, emphasis mine)

The immediacy of the moment, the fact that it takes place *here* and *now* and only a select few are present to experience it is the counterpoint to the voyeuristic detachment of the Texas Highway Killer's taped murder which is replayed ad nauseam on the cable news. The line drawn is not such much between mediated and unmediated event as such – Russ Hodges' radiocast of the game is clearly not en par with the homicide tape of Richard Henry Gilkey or the Zapruder film. DeLillo seems to mark the authenticity of a recording by its degree of spontaneity and scarcity. Is it ubiquitous or rare? Was the event itself staged in some way or was it unforeseeable? Is it replayed and redistributed infinitely or is it unique? These questions seem more relevant to how a mediation is evaluated in the novel than whether or not an event is mediated at all. Despite this, the deciding aspect appears to be that of human inflection, i.e. the process of tale-telling that places human subjectivity in the center. Nick Shay, when watching reruns of the classic 1950s TV show *The Honeymooners* with his mother, reasons:

We felt more closely bound with Gleason in the room. He gave us the line, gave us the sure laugh, the one we needed at the end of the day. Gleason aggrieved. Pounding the table-top and bending his knees and tilting the great head skyward. He was the joke that carried a missing history – the fat joke, the dumb joke, the joke about the rabbi and the priest, the honeymoon joke, the dialect joke, the punch line that survives long after the joke is forgotten. We felt better with Jackie in the room, transparent in his pain, alive and dead in Arizona. (U 106)

It is Gleason's persona that makes it possible for the show to become a lasting record of a past decade, regardless of the fact that it appears on the surface to be nothing more than harmless entertainment. DeLillo's verdict seems to acknowledge the circumstance that television is a fixture of American culture and that, because the medium has accumulated so much history of its own since its advent in the 1950s, it too has become a part of national memory, with shows like *The Honeymooners* and *I Love Lucy* as relevant as the political schemes of the Cold War. The author's criticism of media seriality is therefore hardly a criticism of the technology as such, but of the

intrusive and voyeuristic human tendencies which it brings to the surface. He reveals the misassumption that it is possible to remember an event purely on the basis of a recording if the recording omits the subjective voice of a narrator or commentator. While the camera reveals the physical nature of things, it cannot capture the greater truths of individual and collective struggle and yearning unless its wielder self-consciously develops his own dialectic, his own personal means of telling a story through images.<sup>32</sup> The potential to record is always the potential to merely produce serialized articles of visual consumption which eventually dehumanize both their object and the viewer.

### **2.3 Intertextuality as a form of literary memory**

Since *Underworld* consistently presents itself as web of intratextual connections, it is hardly surprising to find intertextual links abounding as well. For example, Nick Shay can be read with a little creativity as the lost post-war cousin of Nick Carraway, chronicler of Jay Gatsby's America of lost illusions. While F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is a portrait of New York's money aristocracy during the 'Jazz Age' of the 1920s, with a more limited scope (in terms of volume) than *Underworld*, both works have certain common themes: racism and social inequality, the longing to "repeat the past" (116) and the vagueness and mutability of personal biographies play a role in both works. It is *Gatsby's* beautiful concluding sentence "[s]o we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (182) which seems to inspire the Prologue's final line: "[i]t is all falling indelibly into the past" (*U* 60).

Both Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* and the work of another famous American writer – T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) – are informed by temporality and dilapidation, the former more in terms of social and economic decline, the latter (certainly among many other things) by the horrors of modern warfare (World War I), and both in the form of personal loss and grievance. DeLillo modernizes Fitzgerald's valley of ashes and Eliot's wasteland into the landfills of Phoenix, Arizona to rephrase the question "what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?".<sup>33,34</sup> The literary reference to these two epitomic works of high modernism cannot be overlooked, independently of

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<sup>32</sup> DeLillo's treatment of the fictional Eisenstein film *Unterwelt* is significant in that regard, which will be discussed in greater detail later.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *The Waste Land* (20) <<http://www.bartleby.com/201/1.html>>.

<sup>34</sup> John Duvall supports this, noting that "[l]ike Eliot, DeLillo uses a literal wasteland – the recurring representation of massive landfills – to figure spiritually wasted lives" (2002, 24).

whether one sees fit to stamp the label of neo-realism, *historiographic metafiction*, or something else on the author's work.

Another interesting textual reference is that to Ernest Hemingway's short story *Indian Camp* (published in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Short Stories*, 1932). In the short piece, a young boy named Nick accompanies his physicist father who is called to perform a Caesarean on a Native American woman. The procedure is successful, but the child's father commits suicide in the course of the night. Nick's father and his helper (whose name, interestingly enough, is Uncle *George*) cannot avert the tragedy. The doctor explains the suicide laconically to his son: "[h]e couldn't stand things, I guess" (46). While in Hemingway's short story, young Nick's father appears as a responsible man and capable physicist, he is neither qualified to explain the tragedy to his son, nor can he do anything to avert it. The Indian father-to-be kills himself in a desperate attempt to dodge responsibility – the child's birth demands the father's death, precisely the origin of Nick Shay's haunting in *Underworld*.

Perhaps most obviously, DeLillo invokes his fellow New Yorker Thomas Pynchon with his repeated allusions to waste, weapons, and secret information. Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) features an underground postal system which has survived since the time of the Renaissance, referred to by the acronym W.A.S.T.E ("We Await Silent Tristero's Empire"). DeLillo and Pynchon are often named in one breath in literary reviews, both dubbed somewhat simplistically as 'high priests of the paranoid'. While this ignores the notable difference in the stylistic and conceptual approaches of both authors, it can hardly be denied that the literary deconstruction and subversion of postmodern U.S. society are equally interesting to both.

Another reference, one which seems much more remote on the surface, is that to the anonymous medieval mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The 14<sup>th</sup> century treatise was most likely composed by a cleric in the north-eastern English midlands and thematizes "the gulf between man and God and [...] how to bridge it and prepare mind and body for mystical experience" (Holtei). In the very first chapter of the voluminous work, the author describes four stations in man's journey to enlightenment: *Common*, *Special*, *Singular* and *Perfect*. While in the first stage man is ignorant of God's love (*Common*), he is touched by divine epiphany once he attains the *Special* state. The next level, *Singular*, is attained by deep contemplation and solitude (the life of the monk) and allows an even higher degree of spiritual self-focusing. The author outlines that, in contrast to the first three steps, the final state of *Perfect* "may by grace be begun here, but it shall ever last without end in the bliss of

Heaven”.<sup>35</sup> Arguably, Nick Shay follows a contemporary version of this path: first he is an angry youth, careless and with little education, then he is enlightened by Father Paulus who teaches him to define the world by naming its physical objects, and then he becomes one of “the Church Fathers of waste in all its transmutations” (*U* 102). His retreat into a sort of private, secular monasticism thus closely resembles the *Cloud’s* ontological philosophy, albeit in a way that is more broadly spiritual than specifically church-Christian.

Finally, the rat story that Nick tells Matt in Chapter 5 of Part 2 appears to be somewhat reminiscent of Ian McEwan’s early short prose work *First Love, Last Rites*. The piece, published in 1975, could be characterized as something of a shocker. It tells the story of a young couple living in a dilapidated apartment and having sex incessantly, interrupted only when they find that a giant rat is nesting in the walls. The narrator kills the rat and realizes that it was pregnant, the violence of the act vividly associating the motifs of sex, death, and taboo. In DeLillo’s version, the young Nick Shay follows his date, “a German woman, a philosophy student [...] and a sort of future [...] terrorist type” (*U* 205) to her apartment where they too discover a rat. While the normally charge-taking Nick is standing by, the girl (unsuccessfully) hunts the rat.

It is striking that not only do both stories associate the rat with sexuality and violence (Nick comically states that “[m]y desire has frozen in my loins”, *U* 206), but that they specifically deal with the male role and paternal responsibility, though with very different outcomes. Nick is reduced to impotence by his romantic interest’s rat-hunting, while the protagonist of *First Love* kills the mother-rat (and figuratively his own offspring) out of a primal instinct: progeny poses a danger to his hedonism. Neither of the two characters is interested in or ready for taking on a paternal role and, in defiance of cultural standards, both pursue a lifestyle of unrestrained egoism. Just as *First Love* fictionally sketches youth and the drastic changes that young adults go through, *Underworld* has a critical outlook on Nick Shay’s coming-of-age, specifically on his masculinity. Another interesting aspect of the two narratives is how they are told. Nick tells his story to his brother, who is “strangling with pleasure” (*U* 206) to hear something this outrageous and farcical from his normally-solemn elder brother:

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<sup>35</sup> See <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anonymous2/cloud.htm>> for a Modern English translation of the text, accompanied by a commentary written by Evelyn Underhill.

Nick could see the pleasure of the kid brother who is invited into the action, given the privileged details of some infamous event. All the more dimensional, the rarer and sweeter when the narrator allows an element of foolery to attach itself to his sober persona, some haplessness or slippery shame. All the more intimate and appealing. (U 206)

The decisive element here is not so much the story's content but the act of telling it. The chapter opens with Nick's observation that "[w]hen people tell rat stories, the rat is always tremendous" (U 194), a promise on which he makes good in his own self-ridiculing anecdote. The "rat story" as a genre is characterized by Nick as a modern *farce par excellence*; it is the tall tale of sexual encounters, not necessarily true in its details but entertaining to the listener because of its frivolity and because the storyteller engages in the telling in such a spirited way. The end of Nick's story is not related in dialogue; instead the story slowly peters out because there is no decisive endpoint to it. One might conclude from this that what DeLillo does here is intertextually wink at Ian McEwan, who, after all, described his first published work as "a kind of laboratory for me".<sup>36</sup> Telling a good story that includes rats, sex, and decadence is a writer's way of achieving maturity, one that leaves the audience in shock and the auteur giggling gleefully behind the curtain. Nick's self-conscious narration of the story is important because through it he bonds with his otherwise distant brother. By effectively satirizing himself and his macho persona, he shows his brother that he is after all human and that their relationship is important to him. Communication is again ascribed a crucial role here. Nick comes alive in his own story by un-muting himself and reaching out to Matt. What DeLillo consciously associates with other postmodernists – through reference to McEwan – are thus postmodernisms most prominent techniques: satire, textual self-reflexivity<sup>37</sup>, and an obsession with tale-telling, always under the assumption that no human account of anything is ever purely factual and objective.

The aforementioned examples make clear that DeLillo's work is informed by the legacy of many prolific writers who preceded him. Because their works have themselves become part of American culture, it is only logical to revisit their sites and characters in a work that intends to be a narrative of America's post-war history.

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<sup>36</sup> McEwan stated this in an interview with Christopher Ricks in 1979. The citation was taken from <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Love,\\_Last\\_Rites](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Love,_Last_Rites)>.

<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that it is not the text as such here which is self-reflective, but only Nick's way of narrating his story. DeLillo and his auctorial self never completely cross the line between the author's desk and the world on the page, instead preferring to leave the narrative internally uncontaminated.

Written fiction is only one of the areas from which DeLillo draws artistically, however. His affinity for the visual arts, film in particular, and for music is evident in the naming of the eight parts (including Pro- and Epilogue) of the novel. That *Underworld* begins with Bruegel's apocalyptic 'Triumph of Death' and ends with Marx's *Das Kapital* underscores how the world has changed from a Cold War battleground to a globalized marketplace.

### **3 Cold War pathology and paranoia**

One of *Underworld's* distinct concerns is the question of how the Manichean paradigm of 'Us vs. Them' manifested itself in American culture during the Cold War period, and which 'new faith' came to replace it. On a larger scale, the fear of the political enemy (the Soviet Union) was gradually replaced by the fear of conspiracies and plots in one's own country, the idea that the state is spying on the citizens whom it is meant to protect. Larger still is the scope of paranoia suggested by the web of connections and references that can be found throughout the novel – its 'meta-paranoia' –, which goes beyond J. Edgar Hoover's fears of Russian nukes and Marvin Lundy's conspiracy theories. In this chapter, I will look at the relationship between the Cold War as an 'upper world' political phenomenon and its recreation in the 'lower world' of the novel. Subsequently, I will outline how different forms of paranoia resonate in the perceptions of characters such as Matt Shay, Marvin Lundy, and J. Edgar Hoover.

In an essay on the effect of the Cold War on literature, Frederick Halliday, professor for International Relations at the London School of Economics, remarked that with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 history "appeared to sweep this period into the dustbin or the unconscious" (691). Radical political change ended the threat of a looming nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, "the overarching, if unrealized drama of the whole four decades" (697) – unrealized only by a narrow margin. In the September 15, 1961 edition of *Life* magazine, President John F. Kennedy published a short letter to the American people<sup>38</sup>. While the cover headline read "How You Can Survive Fallout", readers were told in various articles how they could be "among the 97 percent to survive if you follow the advice on these pages". In his letter, the president first warned of the possibility of a nuclear war to

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<sup>38</sup> See <<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/experience/the.bomb/jfk.essay/>> for the text of the letter.

then point to the means of protection available: fallout shelters “in new and in some existing federal buildings”, as well as “improved warning systems which will make it possible to sound attack warning (sic) on buzzers right in your homes”. The letter closed ominously with the promise that “more comprehensive measures than these lie ahead, but they cannot be brought to completion in the immediate future”. Only one year later, the object of the president’s warnings materialized in the form of Soviet long-range missiles en route to Cuba.

### 3.1 Political dread and binary thinking

In *Underworld* this crisis is the main subject of comedian Lenny Bruce’s stand-up performances. While the world seems on the brink of atomic destruction, Bruce yells “We’re all gonna die!” (*U* 547) at the top of his lungs and then asks hilariously: “[h]ow can they justify the inconvenience of a war that’s gonna break out over the weekend?” (*U* 584). His anarchic diatribes echo the fear and frustration felt by many in the face of nuclear holocaust, but they also transgress the borders of political correctness and mock those in power:

[T]heir names are where it’s at. Adlai Stevenson. *Adlai*. Gases you right down to your Capezios, right? It’s so exclusive it has no gender. This little boy is so special we don’t want anyone to know he’s a boy. Because ultimately, dig, being a boy or a girl is so fucking common. (*U* 591)

Bruce’s cynicism exemplifies what DeLillo in a 1998 interview with Anthony DeCurtis called “[t]he humor of political dread” (‘An Outsider in This Society’ 66).<sup>39</sup> His depiction of the political upper class as a cabal of detached technocrats shows a mistrust of those in power which is characteristic for what Peter Knight defines as *insecure paranoia*. In his essay ‘Everything is Connected: *Underworld*’s Secret History of Paranoia’, Knight points out the differences between the fear of Soviet communism, which is (at least initially) directed outward, and the belief of conspiracy theorists that unseen forces are plotting to secretly manipulate America from the inside. The former can be characterized as *secure paranoia* because of its solidifying effect on the nation – the enemy is the inversion of one’s own society, dangerous but clearly visible. Erica Deming mirrors this anxiety with her fearful reaction to the launch of Sputnik:

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<sup>39</sup> DeLillo observes that “[w]e ourselves almost instantaneously use humor to offset a particular moment of discomfort or fear, but this reflex is so deeply woven into the original fear that they almost become the same thing” (‘An Outsider in This Society’ 66).

Erica felt a twisted sort of disappointment. It was theirs, not ours. It flew at an amazing rate of speed over the North Pole, *beep beep beep*, passing just above us, evidently, at certain times. She could not understand how this could happen. Were there other surprises coming, things we haven't been told about them? Did they have crispers and breezeways? It was not a simple matter, adjusting to the news. (*U* 518-519)

Not only is there a feeling of impotence in the face of the Soviets' technological achievement (which then prompted the American race to the moon); Erica begins to suspect that there are "things we haven't been told about them".

'They' are also the antagonists that haunt J. Edgar Hoover, the novel's figurehead of state-induced paranoia. When he sees a reproduction of Bruegel's 'The Triumph of Death', Hoover immediately connects the judgment of the dead over the living depicted in the painting with the United States' epic confrontation with what Ronald Reagan infamously dubbed "the Evil Empire":<sup>40,41</sup>

He looks at the flaring sky [...] and he thinks of a lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb and he can almost hear the wind blowing across the Central Asian steppes, out where the enemy lives in long coats and fur caps, speaking that old weighted language of theirs, liturgical and grave. What secret history are they writing? [...] And what is the connection between Us and Them [...]? (*U* 50-51)

His doppelganger, Sister Alma Edgar, shares these sentiments. Both are equally fascinated by the prospect of apocalyptic suffering and death, acted out by ambitious super-powers and/or a wrathful god. The line between religion and ideology (and between the two characters) is blurred when Sister reflects on:

The faith of suspicion and unreality. The faith that replaces god with radioactivity, the power of alpha particles and the all-knowing systems that shape them, the endless fitted links. (*U* 251)

The looming nuclear confrontation is the result of a political antagonism which has seeped into the conscience of private citizens in a way previously thought unimaginable. When baseball collector and historian manqué Marvin Lundy and his wife travel to the Eastern Bloc in the early 1950s to find a lost relative, Marvin begins to suffer from vicious bowl movements which he believes to be a physical reaction to his contamination with communism. The arguments he has with his half-brother are

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<sup>40</sup> See Duvall (2002) 67 for a definition of the role that Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) played in establishing what he calls a "master Us-Them binary".

<sup>41</sup> Cf. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reagan/sfeature/quotes.html>>.

infused with an “undercurrent of contention” (*U* 312) and he cannot comprehend how a devoted socialist could be so convinced of his own moral superiority.

The fear of infiltration by and contamination with the parasitic forces of communism found its reflection in the popular culture of the 1950s, especially in films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)<sup>42</sup> and *Village of the Damned* (1960)<sup>43</sup>, in which extraterrestrial pod-people seek to covertly overtake America. Among the political manifestations of these anxieties were McCarthyism<sup>44</sup> and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).<sup>45</sup> The irony which DeLillo reveals is that once these anxieties have disappeared we are left in an ideological void, and the old modes of binary thinking and the safety which they provided are sorely missed. Klara Sachs formulates this ambivalent nostalgia in her memories of the 1950s:

I think if you maintain a force in the world that comes into people’s sleep, you are exercising a meaningful power. Because I respect power. Now that power is in shatters or tatters and now that those Soviet borders don’t even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. Power meant something, thirty, forty years ago It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction. (*U* 76)

Again the power of an aggressive Cold War state is likened to a higher (i.e. divine) power. In Klara’s yearning, as in Sister Edgar’s and Hoover’s, the state’s possession of the bomb makes it the object of reverences and awe – it is the atomic god of the secular worldview.<sup>46</sup> Klara distances herself from an outright nostalgia for these old dichotomies, but clearly acknowledges their attractiveness as ideologically unambiguous absolutes. At the same time it is this fear of an evil twin state which inspires the half-yoking remark of her assistant that the fall of the Soviet Union is only “a plot to trick the West” (*U* 81). The overarching conspiracy theory is that even

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<sup>42</sup> See <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049366/>>.

<sup>43</sup> See <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054443/>>.

<sup>44</sup> See <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McCarthyism>>.

<sup>45</sup> See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House\\_Un-American\\_Activities\\_Committee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_Un-American_Activities_Committee)>.

<sup>46</sup> Commenting on DeLillo’s work in general, John McClure acknowledges the significance of conspiracy theory which “replaces religion as a means of mapping the world without disenchanting it [...] [f]or conspiracy theory explains the world, as religion does [...] by positing the existence of hidden forces which permeate and transcend the realm of ordinary life” (103).

the demise of communism was only staged – all history is plotted and the schemes are beyond the ordinary citizen’s control.

It is possible, again following Knight, to identify *insecure paranoia* as a logical reaction to the unresolved political murders of the 1960s. While J. Edgar Hoover and his counterpart Sister Edgar are fearful of communism to the point of phobia, Marvin Lundy goes a step further when he questions the existence of Greenland and speculates that the birthmark on Mikhail Gorbachev’s head resembles a map of Latvia (*U* 173). His theory that “all knowledge is available if you analyze the dots” (*U* 175) is characteristic of a new type of paranoia, one that is directed inward. Along with Lundy there are others: Nick’s colleague Big Sims believes that the true size of the African-American population is being kept a secret, while the Harlem street preacher whom both Manx Martin and Lenny Bruce encounter suspects government plotters to encode secret messages on U.S. Dollar bills (*U* 352-354; 627-628). Eric Deming spreads rumors about the effects of radioactive fallout for “[t]he existential burn” (*U* 406) they provide and the streetwise graffiti artist Ismael Munoz doesn’t want to reveal his identity to the public because he mistrusts the authorities. Divisions of race, color and class have created an atmosphere of paranoia in which trust has become a liability. Knight concludes:

The Kennedy assassination might indeed have set the American public to thinking that everything is connected in a sinister fashion. But that paranoid realization is ultimately experienced as a loss, a fall into an epistemological – and social – fragmentation. (812-813)

The loss of a structure that can be relied on inevitably leads to fragmentation – this is the helplessness that Marvin Lundy describes when he predicts that with the end of the Cold War “[a]ll the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream” (*U* 170). The political myth of ‘Us vs. Them’ has faded from consciousness and along with it the plots of a generation of Hoovers (on both sides) have collapsed. Something else has emerged to replace both the fear of a nuclear counterforce and of the powerful men who control it. Commenting on his previous novel *Libra*, Don DeLillo asserted in an interview:

The paranoia in *Libra* flows from the unknowable plots being worked in hidden corners. In *Underworld* it comes from the overarching presence of technological systems. (‘American Strangeness’ 124)

This new technological paranoia is what affects Matt Shay while working as a weapons developer in the secret government installation known as The Pocket.<sup>47</sup> Matt is ambiguous about the moral implications of his work – on the one hand he is fascinated by the power of his country’s nuclear arsenal and the scientific challenge his work poses, on the other hand he senses the immense destructive potential he is helping to harness. His confusion is further increased by the opaqueness of the systems he and his colleagues construct, systems which mirror the Byzantine power structure of the American military industrial complex. The fascination of the bombheads with the ability to insert themselves into the everyday lives of the civilian population through technology is revealed by Matt’s observation:

Everything connected at some undisclosed point down the systems line. This caused a certain select disquiet. But it was a splendid mystery in a way, a source of wonder, how a brief equation that you tentatively enter on your screen might alter the course of many lives, might cause the blood to rush through the body of a woman on a tram many thousands of miles away, and how do you define this kind of relationship? (*U* 408-409)

This “splendid mystery” described by Matt is akin to the fascination of Richard Henry Gilkey with the way that his killings allow him to penetrate the memory of his victims’ families. Matt’s quest for a solution to his dilemma leads him into the desert (the place of spiritual self-realization) where he finds that “he’d been facing in the wrong direction all along” (*U* 467). His strategy of self-containment has forced his aggression outward, making him complicit with the plots of an aggressive and increasingly paranoid state. A central element in Matt’s assessment of his morals is the remark of his colleague Eric Deming that one should “never underestimate the willingness of the state to act out of its own massive fantasies” (*U* 421). The cynical Eric unknowingly points Matt to his personal pathology – the state’s massive fantasies are the vehicle for his own. The same process is at work with Chuckie Wainwright, the forlorn son of advertising executive Charles Wainwright, who serves as a navigator on a B-52 bomber plane during the Vietnam War. Chuckie describes the brutally simple logic of his bombing runs:

The bombs also fell on the Vietcong, the Viet Minh, the French, the Laotians, the Cambodians, the Pathet Lao, the Khmer Rouge, the Montagnards, the Hmong, the Maoists, the Taoists, the Buddhists, the monks, the nuns, the rice

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<sup>47</sup> I interpret the name both as an indication for the secrecy of the work which is conducted there and as a hint to the misdeed of Matt Shay and his fellow scientists – they are in the government’s pocket, i.e. they have been bought.

farmers, the pig farmers, the student protesters and war resisters and flower people, the Chicago 7, the Chicago 8, the Catonsville 9 – they were all, pretty much, the enemy. (U 612)

The motto “[f]irst we bomb them [...] [t]hen we fuck them” (U 607) that Chuckie and his comrade Louis T. Bakey recite on their runs makes it clear that their assigned role is to languorously bomb whatever people the state wants exterminated. Theirs is the power to destroy and that power is bestowed to them by the efficient and unyielding machinery of war. DeLillo exposes the deadly spectacle of the then-hot Cold War and points to its roots: a latent form of American fascism, paired with the thanatotic urge to undo oneself with weapons of mass destruction.

### **3.2 Structural organicity vs. paranoia**

Another variant of paranoia that transcends Hoover’s ‘Red Threat’ paradigm and the conspiracy theories of Marvin Lundy is the overarching structural connectedness of the novel itself. The striking difference is that the way in which events, objects and characters are linked together does not imply paranoia in the conventional, negative sense. Instead, “[p]aranoia becomes both trope and metaphor for the connectedness of the novel” (Kavadlo 108), an organicity of characters and events that functions as an antidote to the isolation accompanying the demolition of old ideologies and faiths in the postmodern age. After witnessing the ecstatic celebration of the crowd at the Giants-Dodgers game, radio commentator Russ Hodges concludes:

[T]his is another kind of history. He thinks they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power. [...] Isn’t it possible that this midcentury moment enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders, generals steely in their sunglasses – the mapped visions that pierce our dreams? (U 59-60)

Armin von Büchau refers to this duality as “the binary of harmony and paranoia” (251, my translation) – harmony in the togetherness of the crowd, and paranoia (in its broader sense) as the fear of the other. All (hi)stories in *Underworld* intersect because they relate the experience of the American journey from the beginning of the Cold War to the postmodern present. O’Donnell concludes:

The sense of history conveyed by DeLillo’s knotted fictionalization of the United States during the cold war is that cultural paranoia is not a social disorder, or merely a form of public hysteria [...], but an integral part of what constitutes postmodern history. (149)

Postmodern history is thus both the content and the theme of the novel – both the means of relating the events and the events themselves are thematized. Alternately exploring the underworlds of personal and public paranoia and pathology, DeLillo presents history as a “conspiracy without conspiring” (Knight 823) in which the plots of the powerful are outdone by connections and interrelations beyond their control. This degree of plotlessness is exemplified when Nick Shay and Brian Glassic travel to Russia to witness the technique of nuclear waste processing practiced by Viktor Maltsev and his company Tchaika. There Nick finds “[g]uilt in every dosed object, the weathered posts and I-beams left to the wind, things made and shaped by men, old schemes gone wrong” (*U* 792) and realizes that the postwar era has made possible “[a] method of production that will custom-cater to cultural and personal needs, not to cold war ideologies of massive uniformity” (*U* 785-786). But the liberation from these “ideologies of massive uniformity” may be a pyrrhic victory. Along with the fear of the enemy, the self-affirming quality of binary thinking has also disappeared, leaving the individual without orientation. The beliefs of conspiracy theorists “can hardly be said to maintain a stable sense of self, whether personal or national” (Knight 822). One bizarre manifestation of the yearning for rigid ideologies is the enthusiasm of Brian’s daughter Brittany for ‘Apartheid Simulation Day’:

They attempt to simulate the culture of apartheid. A lesson for the kids. They all wore armbands. [...] Brittany volunteered for the oppressed class and now she won’t take her armband off. [...] She restricts her access to the lunchroom, ten minutes a day. She only rides on certain buses at certain times. She sits in a specified area of the classroom. (*U* 112)

Not only has the simulation overtaken reality, it has also completely defeated the purpose intended by Brittany’s teachers. Instead of being repulsed by the horrors of fascism, the strict uniformity that it provides is appreciated – being part of the oppressed class still makes you a part of something.<sup>48</sup> Fred Halliday’s remark that “[a] world after the cold war may be a safer, less ideologically illusory world” (706) leaves us with the conclusion that – at least in DeLillo’s narrative underworld – a loss of illusions may equal a loss of perspective.

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<sup>48</sup> This repeating pattern of characters who find safety in ritualistic practices and codes is examined more closely by Mark Osteen, who points out that “the pursuit of such perfect structures paves the way to fascism” (2).

## 4 Waste, filth, and the Bomb

One of *Underworld*'s central motifs is waste and the constantly changing forms that it assumes. Not only is Nick Shay a professional waste manager, but there are reoccurring references to household garbage, nuclear waste, sludge, human excrement and other, more abstract manifestations of waste which appear throughout the novel. Nick believes that his runaway father has been 'wasted' by the mafia – a personal myth that he carefully develops to shield himself from a simpler (and harsher) truth. J. Edgar Hoover is panic-stricken when he finds out that a group of self-styled 'garbage guerillas'<sup>49</sup> plans to steal his household trash to "rub it on their naked bodies [...] [m]ore or less have sex with it [...] [a]nd finally, in the last city of the tour, they plan to eat it" (*U* 558), while his agents practice a similar form of garbage theft to spy on American citizens. Both the (fictional) painter Klara Sachs and the (historical) émigré sculptor Sabato Rodia use waste as the raw material for their art, Sachs first by recycling ordinary junk and later by painting discharged bomber planes and Rodia by building the so-called Watts Towers, a structure composed almost entirely of old bottles, scrap metal and pieces of broken pottery.<sup>50</sup> Human waste is revealed to be the cargo of the ghost ship that appears frequently in the rumor stories told by Nick's colleague Big Sims, the mystery being the result of a simple confusion over the slang term 'shit' for heroin. Finally, when Nick and Brian Classic go on a business trip to Kazakhstan in the Epilogue of the novel, they witness the destruction of radioactive waste through a controlled nuclear explosion – waste being wasted.

Beyond its literal manifestation as trash, garbage and excrement, waste is also an ever-present metaphor that represents all at once the horrors of nuclear confrontation, the burden of individual memory, and the raw material for a new form of artistic expression.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> One of these activists is Jesse Detwiler, the eccentric speaker at a business convention that Nick attends in Los Angeles (*U* 286).

<sup>50</sup> See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watts\\_Towers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watts_Towers)> for more information on Rodia and his work.

<sup>51</sup> In addition, "waste relates to death but also to transcendence and to the sublime [...] [it] is a reminder of the inevitable transience of most objects, including human beings" (Keskinen 77).

#### 4.1 Containment and contamination

Nick Shay is rapt by the beauty of the landfills that he and his fellow waste managers build, his description of their work evoking a sense of spirituality that seems almost comical:

It was a religious conviction in our business that these deposits of rock salt would not leak radiation. Waste is a religious thing. We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread. It is necessary that we respect what we discard. (U 88)

His enthusiasm for entombing and burying the discarded articles of consumerism – after all, everything can be relegated to the status of waste in the blink of an eye in a society that practices consumption for the sake of consumption – is an expression of his desire to do away with the sins of his youth, i.e. the killing of George Manza, as well as the trauma of his father’s disappearance. Waste is the secret, the taboo, the shameful excretion of the past life which must be left behind. In an essay on the function of waste in *Underworld*, Ruth Heyler remarks: “[t]he terror is that the undifferentiated mass of waste we dispose of [...] will force its way back into our life, insisting on revealing itself as a part of us” (988) – a deduction that is in perfect accordance with Jesse Detwiler’s subversive theory of garbage as the decisive force behind human civilization:

No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response. [...] Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music and mathematics. (U 287)

To be overwhelmed by waste is to be swallowed by the past, and thus Nick has to flee from the Bronx to Phoenix (the city of rebirth) where “[t]hey segregated visible history” (U 86). Despite this rebirth, or possibly because it is haphazard and incomplete, he visits Klara Sachs in the desert, describing his own motivation as wanting to “discharge the debt to memory” (U 64). Nick’s association of waste with his personal history is contrasted with the observation of Brian Glassic:

He dealt in human behavior, people’s habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes, maybe their passions, certainly their excesses and indulgences but their kindness too, their generosity, and the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us. (U 184)

While to Nick waste is a burden that needs to be buried in the same way that he insulates himself from his past self, Brian sees it as the definite communal process,

the core material of modern society.<sup>52</sup> It is a reminder of human mortality as well as a sign for regeneration and renewal, a function it assumes most vividly in Klara's desert project and the Watts Towers. The fact that the materials which Klara uses are both weapons of the Cold War (now defunct) and items of mass production is telling in regards to her artistic philosophy:

[W]e're trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life, and maybe there's a sort of survival instinct here, a graffiti instinct – to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are. (*U* 77)

The discharged tactical bombers stranded in the desert – by itself a potent allusion to the dangerous 'baggage' of the Cold War – are "unrepeated"; they are made unique and meaning-bearing, both out of the desire to fill an aesthetic vacuum and to save them from being replaced by context-less bullet items in the history books. The fate of the bombers' atomic payload is resolved in the novel's Epilogue, tellingly entitled 'Das Kapital', when Nick and Brian Glassic visit Kazakhstan and witness the destruction of nuclear waste by means of a controlled nuclear explosion. While the toxic waste is successfully obliterated, the victims of nuclear armament continue to suffer – they are the Soviet version of the 'downwinders' who inhabit the gruesome tales of Matt Shay's bombhead colleagues in the 1970s.<sup>53</sup> What the two businessmen encounter is not merely a post-Cold War Russia; it is a profoundly changed reality in which the old binary oppositions of East and West have given way to a seemingly limitless new form of capitalism. Their ironically named Russian guide Viktor Maltsev explains:

Once they imagine the bomb, write down equations, they see it's possible to build, they build, they test in the American desert, they drop on the Japanese, but once they imagine in the beginning, it makes everything true [...] Nothing you imagine is not coming true. (*U* 801/802)

The double negative of Viktor's deduction ("Nothing you imagine is not coming true") underscores a critical view of postmodern society that borders on cynicism. The Cold War may be over, but the horrible innovations that it has inspired are "all out here now, seeping invisibly into the land and air, into the marrowed folds of the bone" (*U* 803). The denizens of the 1990s Bronx are also downwinders in a sense. They live in an "area [that] was called the Wall, partly for the graffiti façade and partly the general sense of exclusion – it was a tuck of land adrift from the social order" (*U* 239). The

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<sup>52</sup> Patrick O'Donnell believes that to DeLillo "waste represents human desire historicized" (155).

<sup>53</sup> Eric Deming spreads rumors about Americans affected by radioactive fallout from test explosions (*U* 405-406).

Wall is, of course, another reference to the Cold War; while the iron curtain has been lifted a wall that separates the sick, poor, and drug-addicted outcasts of U.S. society from the social 'upper-world' has been erected in its place. Whereas to middle-class Americans waste is invisible, hidden away in the artfully constructed landfills of Nick Shay and other 'waste professionals', the Bronx has become a single uncontrolled garbage dump where the wretched waste (kill) each other.

Yet another manifestation of waste haunts the paranoid director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, and his namesake, Sister Alma Edgar: dirt. Both the scheming bureaucrat and the rigorous nun are terrified by germs, diseases, and other agents of infiltration, both literally and ideologically. When visiting the inhabitants of the Wall, Sister Edgar uses protective gloves because:

[L]atex was necessary here. Protection against the spurt of blood or pus and the viral entities hidden within, submicroscopic parasites in their soviet socialist protein coats. (*U* 241)

Her xenophobic counterpart is weary of "unseeable life-forms [...]"; germs which in his mind are "rudimentary and deadly" (*U* 18, 19). To the two Edgars, waste is dangerous because it threatens to contaminate the self with something foreign; it brings the hidden inner being in contact with a potentially corrosive otherness. The phobic reaction to dirt is ultimately a fear of the repressed self and an unyielding belief in rigid systems and hierarchies the only available counterforce. This is illustrated by Hoover's remark to his companion Clyde Tolson:

It begins in the inmost person [...] [o]nce you yield to random sexual urges, you want to see everything come loose. (*U* 564)

Only one of the Edgars (the nun) is forced to witness this dreaded 'looseness' in the postmodern 1990s, leading her to question her faith and almost trading it for a numb fatalism that the reader can hardly find comforting. It should be pointed out that DeLillo refrains from blaming America's Cold War paranoia on the pathology of a single government power-player. Whether the state has taken on the fears of the individual or vice versa remains unanswered.

#### **4.2 Learning to love the bomb**

The ultimate icon of waste in *Underworld* is the atomic bomb. In Chapter 1, Klara Sachs quotes J. Robert Oppenheimer, the 'father of the bomb':

They didn't even know what to call the early bomb. The thing or the gadget or something. And Oppenheimer said, It is merde. [...] He meant something that

eludes naming is automatically relegated, he is saying, to the status of shit. You can't name it. It's too big or evil or outside your experience. It's also shit because it's garbage, it's waste material. (U 76/77)

The term for the early bomb that Klara cannot remember is 'the device'. Semantically the bomb is a null object, something that defies naming because it stands not *for something* but *against everything*. Because of its ability to undo human existence on a hitherto unknown scale, the bomb has effectively replaced God<sup>54</sup>. Conversely, it is both waste and waste-maker, something that has no other function than to reduce things to the status of waste and that ultimately becomes dangerous toxic residue itself. J. Edgar Hoover in particular is morbidly attracted to the bomb's destructive potential and connects it to the apocalyptic depiction of 'The Triumph of Death'. Observing Hoover's reaction, Mark Osteen traces "our fascination with nuclear holocaust tales to an ascetic desire for violent purification" and comes to the conclusion that "our fictions manifest a deep attraction to terminality" (4). He also highlights the dualistic nature of weapons and waste, an interdependence that is exemplified by the radio broadcasts of the violent antiwar protesters that Marian Shay listens to in the late 1960s:

Yes, we are talking about waste, we are talking about fertilizer, we are talking about waste and weapons, we are talking about ANFO, the bomb that begins in the ass-hole of a barnyard pig. PigPigPigPigPigPigPig. (U 600)

DeLillo not only points to the fact that weapons ultimately convert things into waste, he also contrasts the process of naming things (and thus bringing them into being, following the biblical paradigm) with the process of *unnaming* them: the serialized products of consumerism eventually turn into a featureless muck that has to be contained by professionals such as Nick Shay.

The spectrum of connotations that waste is assigned is, however, not limited to purely negative ones. In the novel's Prologue, the fans who witness the spectacular victory of the Giants over the Dodgers shower the players and the field with their pocket litter:

It is coming down from all points, laundry tickets, envelopes swiped from the office, there are crushed cigarette packs and sticky wraps from ice-cream sandwiches, pages from memo pads and pocket calendars, they are throwing faded dollar bills, snapshots torn to pieces, ruffled paper swaddles for cupcakes, they are tearing up letters they've been carrying around for years pressed into their wallets, the residue of love affairs and college friendships, it

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<sup>54</sup> In *American History And Dread* Mark Osteen identifies it as the *Deus Otiosus*, the 'Hidden God' (220).

is happy garbage now, the fans' intimate wish to be connected to the event, unendably, in the form of pocket litter, personal waste, a thing that carries a shadow identity – rolls of toilet tissue unbolting lyrically in streamers. (U 44/45)

Here, the personal debt to memory is released instead of being buried. The fans commune by sharing their personal history and at the same time they are cleansing themselves of it – the opposite of the containment strategy utilized by J. Edgar Hoover (politically) and Nick Shay (privately). The connectedness that they experience is a counterpoint to the ensuing isolation of the Cold War 1950s, where *Containment* is the official government policy against communism.<sup>55</sup> This approach bears similarities to the artistic work of Klara Sachs, Ismael Munoz, and Sabato Rodia, who re-appropriate trash (Sachs and Rodia) or public property (Munoz) and recreate it as art, bringing it out into the open. However, while their art is an individual self-declaration, the happy garbage of the sports fans is an expression of communal joy and longing.

## **5 Mass media, consumerism, and the scripted self**

While far from being blunt or simplistic, a clear and unapologetic criticism of contemporary consumer culture and its most prominent outlet – television – is noticeable throughout Don DeLillo's rewriting of Cold War history. While the author has repeatedly emphasized his interest in cinema and its great significance as an innovative art form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he is much less generous with television which he largely shuns. He sees consumerism and television as deeply co-referential, both in the sense that television is one important tool for the marketing of consumer products and because images are themselves products, dished out by the cable news networks and consumed by a national audience twenty-four hours a day.<sup>56</sup>

This chapter closely examines how television (and especially cable news) and consumerism are presented in *Underworld* as an amalgam entity that has replaced the ideological framework of uniformity predominant during the Cold War era with narcissism and indifference.

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<sup>55</sup> See <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Containment>>.

<sup>56</sup> DeLillo told Gerald Howard in relation to the relevance of the visual media:

I don't think any attempt to understand the way we live and the way we think and the way we feel about ourselves can proceed without a deep consideration of the power of the image. ('The American Strangeness' 125)

## 5.1 The seriality of violence, violation through serialization

During the late 1980s and early 1990 – that is, in Part 2 of *Underworld* – one figure repeatedly intrudes into the narrations of the other characters with his televised presence: the co-called Texas Highway Killer, Richard Henry Gilkey. Gilkey, whose own deviant introspections are provided in Chapter 10 of Part 2, is a fictional replica of the numerous serial murderers who have inscribed themselves into the modern American conscience since World War II. The most prominent model for the character is probably John Warnock Hinckley, Jr., who attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan on March 30, 1981 on the steps of the Hilton Hotel in Washington, DC. Apart from the magnitude of the attempted murder – again a U.S. president being the target – it was Hinckley's bizarre motive that shocked the American public. After repeated viewings of the film *Taxi Driver* (1976, by Martin Scorsese), Hinckley became obsessed with the idea of having a romantic relationship with actress Jodie Foster who portrays Iris, a teen prostitute, in the movie. *Taxi Driver's* protagonist Travis Bickle (played by Robert De Niro) fantasizes to kill the American president to impress Iris and exactly this notion was taken up by Hinckley who sought to impress the (real) actress Jodie Foster with his deed.<sup>57</sup>

In a letter composed immediately before the assassination attempt, Hinckley, revealing his identity to Foster, wrote:

I will admit to you that the reason I'm going ahead with this attempt now is because I cannot wait any longer to impress you. I've got to do something now to make you understand, in no uncertain terms, that I'm doing all of this for your sake! By sacrificing my freedom and possibly my life, I hope to change your mind about me. This letter is being written only an hour before I leave for the Hilton Hotel. Jodie, I'm asking you to please look into your heart and at least give the chance, with this *historical deed*, to gain your love and respect. (Hinckley, UMKC School of Law Homepage, emphasis mine)

While the pathology of the fictional Richard Henry Gilkey is undoubtedly different from Hinckley's, what they share is the existential need to become a part of history, an obsession that is also at the center of DeLillo's portrayal of another assassin – Harvey Lee Oswald – in his previous novel *Libra*. Hinckley, to whom historical events were apparently prefigured by fictional plots, not only reconstructed a fictional

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<sup>57</sup> DeLillo's comments on both the Kennedy assassination and Hinckley are quite revealing:

We've developed almost a sense of performance as it applies to televised events [...] particularly violent events and particularly people like Arthur Bremer and John Hinckley [...] have a sense of the way in which their acts will be perceived by the rest of us, even as they commit the acts. ('An Outsider in this Society' 57)

murder but also made *Taxi Driver's* official tagline his personal motto: “[o]n every street in every city, there's a nobody who dreams of being a somebody”.<sup>58</sup> ‘Being somebody’ in the age of the visual media means being televised, and ironically enough Hinckley’s conclusion – that he would become a historical figure through the assassination attempt – has indeed proven to be true.

While the Texas Highway Killer does not share the fixation on a particular person with Hinckley (he kills indiscriminately and randomly), he also seeks to overcome his feelings of inferiority by birthing a superior, mediated version of himself. The degree of his sociopathic detachment is fully revealed when he calls the TV station that incessantly shows the footage of his killings, but in the segment the bizarre relation of the news media to violent events is also treated. The anchorwoman starts the interview by stating that the “caller’s credentials” (U 216) have been verified – he indeed is the Texas Highway Killer, because he has information that is only known to the killer and the authorities. He is treated basically like a subject-matter expert, but one whose field of expertise is murder and not the economy or international relations. This trivialization manifests itself again in Gilkey’s remark that “[...] the police have their job and I have mine” (U 217). He is fully aware of his role as an actor, plotter and entertainer who caters to the American public in the same way that any televised celebrity would, his only concern being that “my situation has been twisted in with the profiles of a hundred other individuals in the crime computer” (U 216). As he wants to construct a distinctly new persona through his acts – a version of himself that is free of the inferiority complex of his private self – he cannot bear the thought of copycats who emulate his acts. His mistake in the case is twofold: firstly he does not realize that any form of singularity and uniqueness is unattainable through a medium which mass-produces imitations, and secondly he overlooks the fact that the shaping of his media persona is undertaken by the network producers who market it for their purposes, and not by him. Desperate to impress the public much like Hinckley was desperate to impress Jodie Foster, he stresses the technical aspects of his shootings:

Which the correct term for this is not sniper by the way. This is not an individual with a rifle working more or less long-range. You’re mobile here, you’re moving, you want to get as close to the situation as humanly possible without bringing the two vehicles into contact, whereby a paint mark might result. (U 217)

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0075314/>>.

The description is in essence an aesthetic assessment of the murder. By stressing his ‘artistic capabilities’, Gilkey fully reveals that he has absolutely no conventional motif for his crimes – the victim is never mentioned in his description. The language of his commentary is also highly revealing. First, no referent exists at all (the first two sentences), then “you” is used, encouraging the viewer to feel as though he is listening to the instructions of a TV chef (e.g. “You chop the onions...”), again an attempt to trivialize the act. Gilkey never refers to himself in the first person because that most natural point of view is simply unavailable to him – he is a spectator of his own actions. His overblown attempts to sound sophisticated (“whereby a paint mark might result”) are meant to mask the fact that he has nothing to say, resulting in stilted, patronizing, and erroneous over-constructions (“[w]hich the correct term for this is not sniper by the way”). The description he provides perversely applies to a paparazzi journalist just as much as it does to the killer (“you want to get as close to the situation as humanly possible”) *and* to the audience as well. He wants (and so does the audience, he asserts) “to get as close [...] as possible” without coming into contact – the definition of a voyeur.<sup>59</sup>

Despite his attempts to aestheticize his acts, the product of Gilkey’s efforts is not art – not even a perverted form of art – but a fully commoditized visual gag. His effort to construct a singular and interesting celebrity self has earned him the 15 minutes of fame that Andy Warhol prognosticated everyone on the planet, but not a second more. The line between shooting film and shooting people has been irreversibly blurred; the killer, the TV station and the audience are all morally complicit in the crime, but following another logic all three are merely part of a cycle of visual consumption.

Another instance in which the connection between violence and its mediation is thematized is the showing of the so-called Zapruder film which Klara Sachs attends at a video artist’s studio in New York. The relentlessness of the footage which is part of a larger installation is captured by Klara:

The footage started rolling in one room but not the others and it was filled with slurs and jostles, it was totally jostled footage, a home movie shot with a Super 8, and the limousine came down the street, muddied by sunglint, and the head dipped out of the frame and reappeared and then the force of the shot that

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<sup>59</sup> It is this degree of authenticity that the recording of a random violent crime emits which DeLillo describes as “our last experience of nature; seeing a guy with a gun totally separate from choreographed movie violence” (Remnick 144). Matt Shay fully assumes the role of the voyeur in his description of the tape (*U* 155-160).

killed him, unexpectedly, the headshot, and people in the room went ohh, the same release of breath every time, like blurts of disbelief, and a woman seated on the floor spun away and covered her face because it was completely new, you see, suppressed all the years, this was the famous headshot and they had to contend with the impact – aside from the fact that this was the President being shot, past the outer limits of this fact they had to contend with the impact that any high-velocity bullet of a certain lethal engineering will make on any human head, and the sheering of tissue and braincase was a terrible revelation. (U 488-489)

A breathless quality resonates in this seemingly endless sentence and underlines how a quick succession of images is capable of overwhelming the viewer with its perceived realness. The impact of the bullet that hits the president is felt physically by the viewers, a woman “spinning away” as though she herself had been hit. Both Kennedy and the audience must equally “content with the impact” of the shot (literal and filmic), the former being attacked physically, the latter psychologically. Again the idea that what is shown constitutes a revelation (“[...] it was completely new, you see”) is exposed as being erroneous: what is shown is *real but not true*, i.e. not conducive in gaining an understanding of who shot the president or why. However, because the viewers have been led to believe, as Marvin Lundy does, that “all knowledge is available if you analyze the dots” the footage is replayed incessantly, wearing it out and emotionally numbing the recipients with every repetition, until any significance has been drained from it.<sup>60</sup> The installation seems almost to parody this effect with its out-of-sync replays and its theme appears not so much to be the assassination but the footage of it and the reinforcement of the footage’s aura through repetition<sup>61</sup>. Again the underlying assertion here is that once an image has become ubiquitously available it is commoditized and ultimately fetishized as a visual product. It becomes an eyeball stimulus that is almost unrelated to the event which it depicts, much like the colorful array of products that young Eric Deming marvels over when surveying the contents of the family fridge.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Eugene Goodheart alludes to this with his assertion that “[t]he apocalypse may be the dominant media trop of our time; its endless replay has inured us to the real suffering it might entail” (122).

<sup>61</sup> DeLillo plays with the classical notion of Walter Benjamin formulated in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) that the auratic quality of an object can be diminished by reproducing it. Clearly, in the postmodern age reproductions are fetishized as easily as ‘authentic’ objects are, something acknowledged by DeLillo in *White Noise* where “the most photographed barn in America” is ironically described as a grand attraction.

<sup>62</sup> See U 513-521.

## 5.2 Deconstructing the Jell-O family

The second chapter of Part 5 of *Underworld*, which relates the domestic life of the Deming family in the late 1950s, is among the most amusing and – through its biting sarcasm – also most revealing segments of the novel. The parents Rick and Erica and their son Eric (who has already made an appearance as Matt Shay’s cynical bombhead colleague, roughly one hundred pages before) are described as the epitome of the fifties baby-boomer family, inhabiting a sort of suburban middle-class theme park, complete with breezeway, Kelvinator, and a two-tone Ford Fairlane convertible.

While Erica reflects ecstatically about her recipe for Jell-O chicken mousse (in the kitchen, of course) and husband Rick is simonizing the car, young Eric is secretly masturbating to a photograph of Jayne Mansfield. Each of the three is equally rapt by the marvels of modern consumer products, Erica fetishizing her kitchen and household utensils, Rick the elegant Ford convertible, and young Eric the condom he uses “because it had a sleek metallic shimmer, like his favorite weapons system, the Honest John, a surface-to-surface missile with a warhead that carried yields of up to forty kilotons” (*U* 514). Reflecting on his stimulus, the Mansfield picture, he realizes that “Jayne’s breasts were not as real-looking as he’d thought [...] [t]hey reminded him of [...] [t]he bumper bullets on a Cadillac” (*U* 517). What is at the center of this family portrait is the adulation of products, including the weapons systems that Eric is so fond of. The pictorial reproduction of Jayne Mansfield in all her platinum-blond fakeness is just as much a fetish as the Hoover and the Kelvinator – products which are personalized by the way that they are named vs. people who are objectified by their glossy representations (i.e. Mansfield). Of the three it is Erica who most strongly associates consumerism with progress and social status:

There were people out there on the Old Farm Road, where the front porches sag badly and the grass goes unmowed and the Duck River Baptists worship in a squat building that sits in the weeds on the way to the dump, who didn’t know what a crisper was, who had iceboxes instead of refrigerators, or who had refrigerators that lacked crispers, or who had crispers in their refrigerators but didn’t know what they were for or what they were called, who put tubs of butter in the crisper instead of lettuce, or eggs instead of carrots. (*U* 516)

Her disdain is not only for those who cannot afford the modern innovations found in her kitchen, but also for those who lack her grade of technological affinity, or, put more radically, her blind belief in progress through consumption. She is strongly class-conscious and clearly proud of her status as a well-to-do modern housewife. Her

need to accessorize goes well beyond the household, but is also evident in her list of favorite words (“Breezeway – Crisper – Sectional – Car pools [...]”, *U* 520). Not just physical objects but language itself is consciously accessorized by her. On the one hand it is used productively to describe the new suburban lifestyle and its ontological center – consumer articles –, on the other hand it is itself a status symbol and a product, available only to those who are profiting from the post-war economic growth. All of Erica’s favorite words either describe products (and have been invented by advertising), relate to ‘social innovations’ of the middle class (“Car pools”, “Bridge parties”), or characterize social tendencies to insulate, separate and segregate (“Sectional”). It is a language that has been drained of ambiguity, irony, ugliness and – consequently – of complexity and impact. This is confirmed when Erica thinks about her Jell-O recipes:

Sometimes she called it her Jell-O chicken mousse and sometimes she called it her chicken mousse Jell-O. This was one of a thousand convenient things about Jell-O. The word went anywhere, front or back or in the middle. It was a push-button word, the way so many things were push-button now, the way the whole world opened behind a button that you pushed. (*U* 517)

The mutability of the composite term “Jell-O chicken mousse” aptly reflects the mutability of the substance itself. Jell-O is based on gelatin, which is created by prolonged boiling of animal skin and connective tissue and is regarded as a versatile product basis for medicine, manufacturing, and foodstuffs, because it is colorless, tasteless and odorless. It is devoid of any inherent traits or qualities, a completely mutable slush that can consequently be combined with almost anything else. “Jell-O chicken mousse” and “chicken mousse Jell-O” are one and the same muck in the end; the word goes “anywhere, front or back” because it doesn’t mean anything, due to the fact that *its object of reference is nothing*. Eric, Rick and Erica – three ‘flavors’ of the same name – are Jell-O characters, every bit as mutable and moldable as the housewife’s favorite dish.

Two lurking anxieties, one directed in- and the other outward haunt Erica: her son’s awakening sexuality, which scares her to the point that “she had to put on gloves just to talk to him”, and the successful launch of Sputnik.<sup>63</sup> Her prudishness is not only highlighted to point out the different moral standards of the 1950s, it underlines the overall psychology of repression and latent anxieties of the period. Fears of ‘moral

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<sup>63</sup> See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sputnik\\_crisis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sputnik_crisis)>. These two ‘launches into unexplored space’ are comically associated with one another.

decay', crumbling social institutions, ethnic tensions, and another World War all coalesce into a tendency of the white middle class to retreat into the private, isolate itself, and be pliant and uncritical. Freedom of expression and deviation from norms is largely replaced by the freedom to consume, a quite limited form of freedom. Latent sexuality and aggression is 'condomed over' and suppressed for the moment, but a decade later it will find its outlet in the political and social movements of the 1960s.

The impending danger and the fear it inspires are imminent in the warning messages inserted into the description in regular intervals ("Danger. Contents under pressure [...] Do not puncture or incinerate", *U* 516/519). These warning messages are the hidden subtext of suburban life in the 1950s – only the upper world of the white middle class is seemingly peaceful, underneath it the social and political pressure is mounting.<sup>64</sup> Erica's uneasiness reveals this impending crisis:

From the kitchen window she could see the lawn, neat and trimmed, low-hedged, open and approachable. The trees at the edge of the lawn were new, like everything else in the area. All up and down the curving streets there were young trees and small new box shrubs and a sense of openness, a sense of seeing everything there is to see at a single glance, with nothing shrouded or walled or protected from the glare. (*U* 514)

This peaceful setting is all at once open and closed: it is unprotected from the dangers of nuclear confrontation and at the same time it has locked out those of the 'wrong' color and ethnicity, those who cannot (or will not) keep up with progress, and those who refuse to be ideologically docile. The openness of the suburban landscape resembles the naivety and – to some degree – the innocence of the decade, a decade which unreflectingly associated technological innovations with progress and in which the dangers of radioactive waste, air pollution, and general environmental exploitation were still largely unknown.

In the clockwork of the U.S. economic machinery it is advertising specialists such as Charles Wainwright who provide the grease, who motivate consumers to buy and spend, because, as Frank Lentricchia points out, "[t]o buy is merely an effect, but to dream is a cause – the motor principle [...] of consumer capitalism" (194). Wainwright's segment follows that of Rosie Martin and is the logical follow-up to the portrait of the Deming family. The introspection into the advertising industry is

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<sup>64</sup> See Rosie Martin's protest segment which is inserted right after the Deming family passage (*U* 521-526).

clearly infused with DeLillo's personal experiences as a copywriter for Ogilvy and Mather during the 1960s, a job that he gave up for writing.<sup>65</sup> It is both a sketch of that particular business and of Corporate America in its entirety during that that period, a time in which Cold War paradigms had seeped into daily life to such a degree that they became viable for ad campaigns like the "Bomb Your Lawn" (*U* 528) television spot that Charles thinks about. The *raison d'être* of advertising is aptly summarized by him in two sentences: "[w]hoever controls your eyeballs runs the world" (*U* 530) and "[o]nce we have the consumer by the eyeballs, we have complete mastery of the marketing process" (*U* 531). These assumptions reiterate a thought previously expressed by Ismael Munoz, who wants his graffiti to "get inside people's heads and vandalize their eyeballs" (*U* 435), but while the ad-men want to control the visual stimulus for the purpose of selling products, Ismael and his fellow sprayers seek a spontaneous and unpredictable effect. Charles Wainwright recognizes the persuasive power of images but his understanding of political power is hardly different from that of J. Edgar Hoover and other schemers. Advertising – like cable news in the Texas Highway Killer segment – is characterized as complicit in the system of production and consumption, powerful but absolutely dedicated to selling that power to its clients. Both the disregard for anything other than profit and the personal self-deception which follows working in an industry which incessantly produces fabrications have their impact Charles. He reflects on the common practice of (married) account managers and copywriters to sleep with their secretaries:

And yes, it's true, Charlie has practiced this kind of erotic disport himself, off and on, with one or another single young woman working in the production department or some such level of the mothership, belowdecks and lonesome and not always, actually, very young. But did he enjoy these interludes or were they sad entertainments he inflicted on himself in the stark space of a convertible sofa turned open to span the room so that he had to walk upon the bedding to go and pee? He had lovely sex with his wife in an antique bed with carved oak posts, so what are you doing here, Charlie, balling this morose media clerk. It was an odd form of mortification for some pattern of behavior, or grain of being, too transparent for this adman to fathom. (*U* 534)

His affairs are ultimately his means of asserting his own fakeness and hypocrisy. Since he is always play-acting and entertaining, as required by his job, it is hardly surprising that his marriage and family life are not 'authentic' either. All aspects of his life are shaped by the culture that he himself propagates – it is all effect and little

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<sup>65</sup> See the biography section of the website [Don DeLillo's America](http://perival.com/delillo/ddbio.html) for a very comprehensive summary (<<http://perival.com/delillo/ddbio.html>>).

substance and he is at least somewhat conscious of the dilemma. Like Nick Shay and Marvin Lundy, Charles too is a baseball collector, but while Nick seeks to recover a past which remains elusive to him even after decades have passed, and Marvin seeks to conserve it because he senses that time will eventually rob him of his wife, Charles needs the Thompson homer to 'save the future'. The baseball is a heritage to his estranged son Chucky, "a gift, a peace offering, a form of desperate love and a spiritual hand-me-down" (*U* 611) and once again it is needed to provide the solidity, the grounding-in-the-real, which the personal biography fails to establish.

It is the glossy billboard advertising orange juice that Charles imagines which will eventually be the canvas on which the apparition of Esmeralda appears. The fact that a seemingly mundane billboard provides the surface on which a divine manifestation is projected is not an expression of cynicism or a tongue-in-cheek machination of the author, but a logical answer to the question of how it is possible to find spirituality in a fully economized society. DeLillo merely makes the claim – tentative, assailable and vague as it may be – that miracles and mysteries inevitably achieve a great significance in a world where everything has become repeatable, mutable, consumable, and unauthentic. Posing the question of the miracle's physical authenticity is misinterpreting the event altogether. What counts is its perceived quality to transcend the mundane and as long as people communally acknowledge this quality, a miracle remains miraculous. Focusing solely on the factual aspects of an event omits the various interpretations it allows and misses that these interpretations ultimately shape a nation's conscience – historiography as an ongoing debate. What informs Don DeLillo's writing is the deep-rooted conviction that the power of contemporary postmodern culture – in advertising, television, the internet, etc. – is a force worth beholding and acknowledging. While he is certainly critical of many aspects of our modern-day (hyper)reality, his writing is not a condemnation of this culture or a radical inversion of it. *Underworld* reverses structures of agency – among other things in terms of political power – to show that while consumerism and the visual media seduce us, we in turn use and abuse them. They constitute modern reality, be it based on fiction or on facts, and the individual must contend with their impact as well as he can.

## **6 Art and counter-aesthetics**

The key instrument through which the two dominant ideologies of Cold War militarism and contemporary consumerism are challenged in *Underworld* is art. It is

the “sign against death” (*U* 78) that Klara Sachs seeks to create with her massive installation of colorfully painted discharged bomber planes. It is alive in the graffiti of Ismael Munoz, a.k.a. Moonman 157, which commemorates the deaths of nameless children in the decrepit Bronx of the 1990s. The novel makes the argument that the artistic re-appropriation of public space, consumer waste and – eventually – other works of art enables us to change our perspective of modern culture and history, making it possible to aesthetically redefine the mundane. DeLillo’s artists are both fictional (Klara Sachs) and historical (Sergei Eisenstein, Sabato Rodia); they are career professionals (Klara’s friend Acey Greene) and underground improvisers (Ismael Munoz). And, unsurprisingly, the author adapts the same ‘graffiti instinct’ they also utilize, for example when he invents the lost Eisenstein film *Unterwelt* which compresses the novel’s central themes of political powerplay and submerged history.

### **6.1 Inter-artistic references in *Underworld***

Perhaps the novel’s most conspicuous intertextual (or inter-artistic) reference is to Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s 16<sup>th</sup> century painting ‘The Triumph of Death’, which lends its name to the prologue and appears as a reproduction in the edition of *Life* magazine that J. Edgar Hoover picks up during the Giants-Dodgers game at the Polo Grounds in 1951. Its “panoramic deathscape” (*U* 574) is in stark contrast to the context in which it is presented: here the joy and celebration of the fans, there the carnage and suffering of the painting. Hoover in particular is morbidly fascinated by the apocalyptic vision, connecting it with the Kazakh nuclear testing site where the Russian military has recently detonated its second nuclear device. The horror of the painting seems to come alive roughly fifteen years later when it is again Hoover, this time accompanied by his aide Clyde Tolson, who attends Truman Capote’s Black & White Ball at the Plaza Hotel, again in New York City, and witnesses “[p]olitical power mingling lubriciously with art and literature” (*U* 571).<sup>66</sup> The masked ball is hijacked by a group of political activists known as Terminal Theater, whose motivation (and existence) is the subject of much speculation:

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<sup>66</sup> The underlying criticism of writers (and artists in general) that readily associated themselves with those in power should not be overlooked. It is in accord with DeLillo’s broader conception of the author on the margins of society.

An executioner and a nun did a pas de deux, a round of simple circling steps, and then the others gradually joined, the skeleton men and raven women, and in the end it was a graceful pavane they did, courtly and deadly and slow, with gestures so deliberate they seemed acted as well as danced, and Clyde saw his young partner move silkenly in their midst. [...] When they were finished the troupe stood in a line and removed their headpieces and masks. Then they opened their mouths, saying nothing, and directed hollow stares at the guests. An extended moment, a long gaping silence in the columned hall. (U 576)

The choreography performed by the activists is at least somewhat reminiscent of a *Totentanz*, both because of the macabre masks worn (raven, nun, executioner) and because it mimics a pavane, a courtly dance popular at Europe's courts from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This is reinforced by the decadent atmosphere of the ball – the nation's elite throws a lavish party while its youth is fighting (and dying) for a lost cause overseas in Vietnam.

A special quality of the event and of Terminal Theater's subversion of it is the irreversible confusion of action and acting, reality and simulation, genuine activism and staged performance. The *director* J. Edgar Hoover himself loses the overview of what is real and what isn't because this distinction seems to have been lost by society as such at the end of the 1960s. The ensuing chaos – inside the grand ballroom and outside – sees a fractured nation waging war on itself over communism, Vietnam, race, gender, and social issues, and all moral guidance has been lost in the mayhem. Both the subversive activists who tell Hoover that they won't rest “until you're in a landfill with your trash” (U 569) and the Nobel Prize laureates, the businessmen and politicians, the poets and the wives of presidents are masked actors and all appear to have lost track of who is playing which part. This complete lack of coherence is manifest in Tolson's helpless remark to his boss after the spectacle is over: “[n]o one in Internal Security has come up with a name for the group [...] [t]hey've been known to act out protests, playing all the roles, even the police” (U 576), to which Hoover replies: “[f]ind the links [...] [i]t's all linked [...] [t]he war protesters, the garbage thieves, the rock bands, the promiscuity, the drugs, the hair” (U 577).

The Black & White Ball is sketched as the realization of Bruegel's painting. America's internal stability is fundamentally challenged in what seems to be a struggle between morality and depravity to some, and a struggle for personal freedom and liberalism and against outdated social and political norms to others. Both sides have become equally militant in their antagonism of the other, a polarization that people like Hoover interpret as a sign of Last Things. The dualism of joy and death – through the painting and the ball as its *tableau vivante* extension – is another literary bracket

formed around the narratives of the other characters. It is notable that the context in which the painting is originally presented – the Giants-Dodgers game – is in many ways the inversion of the Black & White Ball: one closed to the general public, the other open and accessible; one a high society event, the other concerned with ‘America’s pastime’. Both historical events are structural cornerstones of the novel, blurring (as all historical elements in *Underworld* do) the line between historicized and fictionalized past to create an organic whole. The agent in this artistic process is itself a piece of art – Bruegel’s painting – and involving it in the action emphasizes art’s versatility for the process of remembrance.

Some of the other works of art used to title the eight parts of the novel are detached from their historical origin (*The Cloud of Unknowing*), while others are presented in their chronological context (*Cocksucker Blues*, the title of the Robert Frank documentary on the Rolling Stones that Klara Sachs and Acey Green watch). Most are referred to directly, the exceptions being ‘Elegy for Left Hand Alone’ (Part 2) and *Das Kapital* (Epilogue), the latter being, along with the DuPont slogan ‘Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry’ (Part 5), no art at all in the conventional sense.<sup>67</sup> The names are used both for their emblematic cultural significance and the spectrum of associations they allow. *The Cloud of Unknowing* becomes the epistemological status report of Nick Shay, referring to his inability to share his secrets with those close to him while confessing to a random stranger in a rented room. *Cocksucker Blues* is both a critique of the commoditization of counterculture prevalent in the 1970s – the Stones are unflatteringly described as a “motherfucking band of emaciated millionaire pricks” (U 385) by Acey Green – and a reference to Ismael Munoz’ and Sergei Eisenstein’s bisexuality. Paradoxically, all examples serve to make the novel appear ‘more real’ (i.e. more solidly grounded in history and culture) because of their ubiquity, but at the same time their status as invention or the result of a creative process calls the definition of what is real itself into question. An advertising slogan such as ‘Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry’ embodies the 1950s more authentically than a direct reference to an event like the Sputnik launch would, because it ironically points to the blind belief in *Better Things* that can be attained in all areas of life – innovation as missiles, satellites, breezeways and the Kelvinator. DeLillo adeptly pilfers the trash heap of American culture and

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<sup>67</sup> Of course its contemporaries will hardly have regarded *The Cloud of Unknowing* as ‘art’ as we use the term today either, which goes to show the fluency and broadness of the concept.

incorporates the old slogans, jokes, and mottos into his work. By using these invented phrases which constituted cultural fixtures in their time, he makes *Underworld* 'more authentic' in a profoundly postmodern way: though recycling and fusing together existing objects.

## 6.2 Establishment art vs. underground art

Art's power to recontextualize objects of daily use and make them part of an aesthetic reconstruction of the past is what drives the work of Klara Sax. When Nick Shay visits her in the desert, Klara is working on the most significant project of her career: a massive outdoor installation consisting of hundreds of discharged bomber planes. The painter, who has gathered a large number of assistants and art enthusiasts around herself to complete the piece, gives an interview<sup>68</sup> and outlines her artistic strategy. She is particularly fascinated by the so-called 'nose art' on one of the planes, the image of a sexy blonde girl that is sprayed onto the fuselage:

I thought even if she has to be painted over, and maybe she will and maybe she won't, I thought we will definitely have to salvage her name. I thought we will title our work after this young woman, after then men who fixed her image to the aircraft, after the song that inspired them to do it. She inspired the songwriter or the nose painter or the crew that flew the plane. Maybe she was a waitress in an airman's bar. Or somebody's hometown girl. On somebody's first love. But this is an individual life. And I want this life to be part of our project. This luck, this sign against death. (*U* 78)

The Long Tall Sally of Little Richard's thus-titled song and her identity are also discussed by two men who man that very aircraft during the Vietnam War – Louis T. Bakey and Chuckie Wainwright. The assumption shared by both Chuckie and Klara, though voiced with four decades between them, is that Sally is "a cheerleader type [...] very girl-next-doorish" (*U* 607), "a waitress bedraggled" (*U* 78), and – implicitly – that she is white. It is the "scornful black" (*U* 608) Louis Bakey who counters Chuckie's romantic fantasies regarding Sally with the remark that she wouldn't be interested in him "[b]ecause she black and she bad" (*U* 609). Bakey goes on to claim that Sally was in fact a prostitute and that the song was written by "a black woman from Apaloosa, Mississippi" (*U* 610) and merely adapted by Little Richard, despite

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<sup>68</sup> This strategy is used again when Nick and his colleagues attempt to explain baseball to a BBC reporter accompanying them to a game in Los Angeles. The reader assumes the role of the TV audience listening eagerly to her explanations. The negative inversion of this intimacy is the direct address in the Texas Highway Killer's segments, which makes the reader complicit with his murders.

Chuckie's contention that "this girl out there is good luck for us" (U 610). The origin of the name remains unresolved, what is pivotal is the metamorphosis of the lucky charm, the sex symbol, the iconic Sally, from a black prostitute into an innocent white girl-next-door. While Klara Sax's artwork attempts to refer back to the biographical person and those who believed in her (Chuckie Wainwright), Don DeLillo, by giving Bakey's point of view, frames an even wider picture, one that includes the other (black) Sally and those who see her as the inspiration of that myth. It is no coincidence that Klara asserts that "even if she [Sally] has to be painted over [...] we will definitely have to salvage her name" (U 78). The name is the figural anchor to both the traditional (white) concept of American self-conceptualization and its (black) counterpoint. Innocence and subversion, rich and poor, black and white – DeLillo reveals an underworld of concepts in which a familiar sign is associated with a multiplicity of concepts and longings which are submerged and outside the characters' reach. What Klara – consciously or not – points to with her work is thus not the authentic recreation of *one definite past*, but the reconstruction of the past as a patchwork of diverse human experiences shaped by class, race, and gender. This is supported by her reaction to a photograph taken at the Black & White Ball:

[...] I looked at the picture and I realized this was the famous party, the famous event of the era, Truman Capote's Black & White Ball at the Plaza Hotel in New York in the dark days of Vietnam, and I was completely sort of out-of-body looking at this scene because it took me maybe half a minute to understand that the woman at the edge of the frame was me. Absolutely. And I'm standing next to a man who is either Truman Capote or J. Edgar Hoover, one or the other because they had heads which were shaped alike, and the mask and the angle and the shadows make it hard to tell which one it is, and I am wearing a long black sheathy dress that I simply can't believe I ever wore although there I am, it's me, and a little white feline mask. And I thought, What is it about this picture that makes it so hard for me to remember myself? I thought, I don't know who that person is. Why is she there exactly. What is she thinking about? What sort of underwear is she wearing under the stupid dress and I can swear to you that I don't know. Surrounded by famous people and powerful people, men in the administration who were running the war, and I want to paint it over, paint the photograph orange and blue and burgundy and paint the tuxedos and long dresses and paint the grand ballroom of the Plaza Hotel and maybe this is what I'm doing [...] (U 78-79)

Klara is alienated by the photograph because it constitutes a historical record which includes herself. But while she is physically present in the photo, she has no memory of the event or her motivation at the time. This distance and the shame associated with having attended a social event of the political upper crust – the administration responsible for organizing the Vietnam War – inform her reaction. She wants to

‘paint over’ the image not so much to hide her presence at the event, but to make it explicable, to make the decade and the situation in which it was produced explicable both to herself and to others, something that the black-and-white simplicity of the record makes impossible. Once again, it is the overpowering quality of images which is thematized here. That the “angle and the shadows” make it hard to tell J. Edgar Hoover and Truman Capote apart hints not only at how art, entertainment and politics had all become complicit in legitimizing the war, but also at the narrowness and transience of the official historical perspective. Klara’s work seeks both to locate the subjective individual in the picture of history and to redraw, repaint and recolor it, so that those parts of it that have thus far been suppressed are taken into account.

On a political level, Klara takes on a stance which goes beyond an easy identification with those who believe that the absence of weapons guarantees peace. She argues about her installation that “[t]his is an art project, not a peace project” (*U* 70) and that part of her motivation was to “not [...] let these great machines expire in a field or get sold as scrap” (*U* 70). Her memory to the ideological struggles of the Cold War and of the Beat Generation in particular is far from apologetic: “[t]he poets wrote long poems with dirty words and that’s about as close as we came, actually, to a thoughtful response” (*U* 76) is her take on anti-war activism.<sup>69</sup> Her self-ascribed respect for power (represented by the decommissioned B-52s) is paired with skepticism of the seemingly uncontrollable present where “[t]hings have no limit [...]” (*U* 76)<sup>70</sup>. In her pragmatic view, the Cold War offered “the balance of power and the balance of terror” (*U* 76), both of which have disappeared with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While ambivalent in regards to the uniformity and dangerous simplicity of the old schemes, she is determined to save them from forgetfulness by integrating them into her repainted American portrait.

In terms of artistic recognition – at least in mainstream society – wildstyle graffiti painter Ismael Munoz is the opposite of the well-to-do Klara Sachs. Munoz, who is known by his tag Moonman 157, goes from a 16-year-old misfit spraying subway trains in 1974 to a Bronx survivalist who helps Sister Edgar and Sister Gracie in their

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<sup>69</sup> Especially the subversive mime group Terminal Theater plays a role in this regard (*U* 576, 601), pointing towards to fanatical tendencies on both sides of the political spectrum during the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>70</sup> Klara’s likening of the strategic bombers to a divine apparition, noted previously, is also recognized by Arthur Saltzman: “[w]hen she recalls her history of response [...] aesthetic and religious inspirations seem easily to conspire” (306).

efforts to help the inhabitants of the ghetto during the 1990s. His social outlook is entirely different from that of Klara who mingles with other artists, intellectuals and businessmen, attends parties and reviews the work of her friend Acey Green. While in terms of social status Klara lives in the upper world of the Manhattan rooftops, Ismael roams the lower world of the subway “where the races mix” (*U* 434). But even though their gender, age, and social environment are so markedly different, the outlook on their art seems somewhat similar. Klara paints her bed after she divorces her second husband (see *U* 70), whereas “the whole point of Moonman’s tag was how the letters and numbers told a story of backstreet life” (*U* 434). Both create art out of objects of daily use – the one using household garbage and the other public space (subway trains, walls) – which they recognize as the ideal canvas for their work. For both the process of creation is largely intuitive, spontaneous, and deeply personal. However, while Klara’s art is recognized as such and consequently ‘enshrined’ in museums to be exhibited before an affluent audience, Ismael’s graffiti is not limited in such a way, reaching the entire spectrum of New Yorkers (and tourists) who use the subway. When Klara’s agent Esther makes the attempt to contact Ismael and convince him to exhibit his work to make it presentable (in her view), his sly reaction is surely amusing to the reader:

Forget it, man. He could easily envision a case where the whole gallery scene is a scam by the police to get writers out of the tunnels and train yards and into the open, identified by name and face. (*U* 436)

Ismael’s weariness exemplifies yet another type of paranoia – that of the artist in the face of state authority. His work is under constant danger of being eradicated by the transit police with “an orange juice mixture” (*U* 433)<sup>71</sup> and he must fear being arrested for his wildstyle tagging. His status as an outsider makes him superior to Klara in some regards; because he has no interests associated with his work other than his personal fulfillment he is not restrained by anxieties of establishment artists such as her. In fact, he is more than convinced of his own potential, and it is this self-

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<sup>71</sup> This is another element in the orange juice/Agent Orange cluster. Agent Orange is the defoliating chemical used during the Vietnam War (possibly by Chuckie Wainwright); it is also mentioned by Matt Shay who associates it with “cans of frozen Minute Maid [orange juice] enlarged by a crazed strain of DNA” (*U* 463). Charles Wainwright Sr. envisions an ad campaign for orange juice which later appears on the billboard in the Bronx on which the rapt crowd believes to see the face of the murdered girl Esmeralda. Klara Sachs wears an orange t-shirt when Nick visits her in the desert.

confidence and his streetwise, born-tough attitude that informs and shapes his art. He reflects about the thrill of tagging a train top to bottom:

But you have to stand on a platform and see it coming or you can't know the feeling a writer gets, how the number 5 train comes roaring down the rat alleys and slams out of the tunnel, going whop-pop onto the high tracks, and suddenly there it is, Moonman riding the sky in the heart of the Bronx, over the whole burnt and rusted country, and this is the art of the backstreets talking, all the way from Bird, and you can't *not* see us anymore, you can't *not* know who we are, we got total notoriety now, Momzo Tops and Rimester and me, we're getting fame, we ain't ashamed, and the train go rattling over the garbagy streets and past the dead-eye windows of all those empty tenements that have people living there even though you don't see them, but you have to see our tags and cartoon figures and bright and rhyming poems, this is the art that can't stand still, it climbs across your eyeballs night and day, the flickery jumping art of the slums and dumpsters, flashing those colors in your face – like I'm your movie, motherfucker. (*U* 440-441, emphasis DeLillo's)

This relentless rap held without any interruption summarizes both Ismael's self understanding and the urge that fuels his art: to declare himself and the Bronx, decrepit as it is, to the broader American public without any shame or concession. The "empty tenements that have people living there though you don't see them" and the subway tunnels with their unseen society are the lower world of a rich nation, a lower world that is unearthed by the social archeologist Ismael through his graffiti'd trains that emerge into the high tracks of the city to be seen by all.

Ismael's brief segment is implemented at a crucial point in the novel. It is inserted into Klara's recollection of the screening of the lost Eisenstein film *Unterwelt*, a sort of novellistic *Mousetrap* that compresses the Cold War theme into a sequence of eerie black-and-white images. Ismael, whose name is of course reminiscent of Melville's Ismael – the antetype of the American storyteller –, articulates the aims of his work in close proximity to those of the author. His graffiti is a modernization both of the story told by the fictional sailor Ismael of *Moby Dick* and the factual writer Herman Melville, by the historical director Sergej Eisenstein and his invented film, and eventually by Don DeLillo himself. All reveal a hidden aspect of American society, a part of the nation that is marginalized, endangered, and unseen, and all do so with art as their conductive medium. While DeLillo cannot claim Ismael's air of subversiveness for himself – after all, he is like Klara Sachs a part of the 'established' art scene – he does appear to understand art as the process of aesthetically articulating oneself in a dialogue with culture, history, and – consequently – with other art and artists. The fact that numerous other works of art – jazz music, medieval mystical texts, avant-garde cinema, Renaissance paintings and a

documentary on the Rolling Stones, to name only a few – are used to reference both the contexts in which they were produced *and* the present-day context of the novel (for example Bruegel’s painting as a prefiguring of nuclear holocaust), shows that in the postmodern conscience the historical and stylistic barriers between these renderings have been diluted. All art in *Underworld* is conflated into one massive pastiche, a composite work that draws both from historical events and other works of art and fuses them into a unity through its positive-paranoid associations. At the same time the novel actively engages with other art and artists and uses them as structural cornerstones, working under the assumption that only by taking these past reflections on American culture into account a faithful picture of its richness and diversity can be drawn.

### **6.3 *Unterwelt* as ‘veiled metadrama’**

When watching the (fictional) rediscovered Eisenstein film *Unterwelt* together with her friends, Klara Sachs notes that “[t]he plot was hard to follow [...] [t]here was no plot” (*U* 430). This and the following observations made by Klara about other aspects of the film read almost like a description of *Underworld* itself, a moment of textual self-reflection placed strategically at the center of the book. Eisenstein’s fictitious film is shown at New York’s Radio City Music Hall and framed in a somewhat surreal performance by the precision dancing group The Rockettes – surreal, because the dancers wear bondage collars and their act composes the pre-show to the work of a famous communist filmmaker.<sup>72</sup> As the show proceeds, further contradictions unfold. Klara observes:

There was an ambivalence that vitalized the crowd [...] you were here to enjoy the contradictions. Think of the relationship between the film and the theater in which it was showing – the work of a renowned master of world cinema screened in the camp environment of the Rockettes and the mighty Wurlitzer. But a theater of a certain impressive shapeliness, a breathtaking place even, for all its exaggerations and vanities, with roundels of enameled brass on the outer walls and handsome display cases in the ticket lobby and nickel bronze stair rails here in the foyer, a space that resembled the hushed and sunken saloon of an ocean liner. And possible a film, you’re not likely to forget this, that will be riddled with mannerisms whatever the level of seriousness. At least you hope so. Didn’t *Ivan the Terrible* contain scenes so comically overwrought, amid the

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<sup>72</sup> The sense of parody is underlined by Klara’s whispered suspicion: “[h]ow do we know it’s really the Rockettes and not a troupe of female impersonators?” (*U* 428). Again it is unclear whether the performance might not actually be a meta-performance.

undeniable power of the montage, that you laughed and caught your breath more or less simultaneously? (*U* 425)

The unplotted film with its montage technique and dialectic of images can be likened to the equally plotless novel – plotless in the sense that there is no real climax<sup>73</sup> and no artfully constructed master scheme that makes what is narrated dramatically necessary. While there are connections and entanglements abounding they are not organized in a hierarchical fashion and the events of the novel do not lead us to some grand conclusion – “everything is connected but nothing adds up” (Knight 823).

The postmodern conflation of opposites continues as the performers do a series of military dance routines (or perhaps the parody of one – who can tell) that are “so impeccably smooth and serious, so nineteen-thirties in dynamic alignments, and isn’t that when the movie was made?” (*U* 428). When the march shifts to a Russian theme, Klara is amused and thinks of the strange resonance in this particular place, the epitaph of Broadway entertainment, with its “Easter shows and Lassie movies” (*U* 429).

The film’s images are described by her as disparate and unconnected. A mad scientist shoots his deformed victims with a kind of ray gun, reminding her of the monster movies of the 1950s and innocent teenage necking in drive-in theaters. The gulag-like situation leads her to the assumption that with the film Eisenstein criticizes socialist realism and the Stalinist censors who forced their views upon contemporary Soviet artists, and she notes that “this strange draggy set of images” is “a statement of outrage and independence” (*U* 431). During the intermission, Klara and her agent Esther discuss the latent hints to homosexuality in the movie. The discussion is cut short by the immediate insertion of Ismael Munoz’s segment, in which the fact that he is bisexual is first mentioned<sup>74</sup>. When the film (and the narrative) continues after the intermission (in which we also learn about Ismael’s graffiti art) an organist accompanies it with Prokofiev’s ‘The Love for Three Oranges’, which, as Esther’s

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<sup>73</sup> One could argue that Nick’s shooting of George Manza constitutes *Underworld’s* climactic moment. Since, however, the shooting takes place in Nick’s memory and has no effect on the story’s development but only on the reconstruction of the events by the reader, it is not a classical climax. The fact that (to the reader) the circumstances of the murder retrospectively show Nick in a different light marks an important motive of the novel – only by revealing the buried past does the present become explicable.

<sup>74</sup> The cinematic cut to Ismael is supported by another association: Esther and Klara hear the rumbling of the Sixth Avenue subway train beneath them while at the powder room.

husband notes, is also the theme music of the 50s radio program *The FBI in Peace and War* – an obvious allusion to J. Edgar Hoover. The prisoners of the subterranean gulag have climbed to the surface, “to a landscape that is shocked by light, pervasive and overexposed” (U 442). Now that they are no longer in the dark their significance changes drastically, from a shady mass to markedly singular beings:

These deformed faces, these were people who existed outside nationality and strict historical context. Eisenstein’s immediate characterization, called *typage*, seemed self-parodied and shattered here, intentionally. Because the external features of the men and women did not tell you anything about class or social mission. They were people persecuted and altered, this was their typology – they were an inconvenient secret of the society around them. (U 443)

Klara’s interpretation seems to mix with the author’s own, or at the very least the degree of familiarity with Eisenstein’s technique and the notable parallels to the novel’s own technique is striking. The “deformed faces” could just as well belong to the Kazakh<sup>75</sup> ‘downwinders’ that will later appear in the Epilogue, or to the crack babies dying in the 1990s Bronx to whose memory Ismael Munoz dedicates his murals. They have changed from purely functional entities meant to act out a political play – the struggle of the oppressed worker class against the czarist bourgeoisie – to actual individuals, oppressed and mutilated by a paranoid regime. Klara’s observation continues:

This is a film about Us and Them, isn’t it? They can say who they are, you have to lie. They control the language, you have to improvise and dissemble. They establish the limits of your existence. And the camp elements of the program, the choreography and some of the music, now tended to resemble sneak attacks on the dominant culture. (U 444)

The referents used let the passage clearly transcend the purely literal level: “Us” and “Them” historically refers to the United States vs. the Soviet Union as much as to the dominating state vs. the disfranchised individual in any historical context. “They” signifies this oppressive state, while “you” means all at once Klara Sachs in her role as an artist, Don DeLillo in that very same role, and – lastly – the reader. Again *Unterwelt* seems to double for the novel itself here, the entire segment expressing a veiled kind of self-reflexivity. There is no overt discussion of the text itself or its

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<sup>75</sup> Kazakhstan is also referenced repeatedly. It is the site of the Soviet nuclear test of which J. Edgar Hoover learn in the Prologue, the place where Nick Shay and Brian Glassic see the victims of the radiation caused by these tests in the Epilogue and, finally, the site where Klara suspects parts of *Unterwelt* to have been shot.

fictionality, but an assessment of something that stands in for the text (the Eisenstein film) and is itself fictional.<sup>76</sup> Klara is the reader of this *imitatio* and simultaneously she is herself being read by the reader of the novel. What DeLillo achieves through this covert approach is to conserve *Underworld's* internal stability. He leaves it structurally intact because constantly calling the text's reliability into question would undermine its function as a counter-narrative – it is not devised to be a word game but a re-appropriation of history. The “camp elements of the program” that “resemble sneak attacks on the dominant culture” run parallel to the “sneak attacks” inside the novel; this cultural critique comes from someone who is himself closely connected to the target of his criticism, not standing safely detached from it. Klara again spells this out in her introspection<sup>77</sup>:

All Eisenstein wants you to see, in the end, are the contradictions of being. You look at the faces on the screen and you see the mutilated yearning, the inner divisions of people and systems, and how forces will clash and fasten, compelling the swerve from evenness that marks a thing lastingly. (U 444)

The longing for a stability and solidity of the self, but also of ideologies and systems of government is contrasted with a desire to “clash” and “swerve from evenness”. When “inner divisions” break down (for better or for worse) stability is always endangered, but simultaneously the absence of these conflicts leads to stasis and stagnation – this is “the contradiction of being”, a contradiction that can only be reconciled through art, because it is able to do both these things.

*Unterwelt* is the quintessentialized version of *Underworld*, a film-within-the-novel that allows a certain degree of self-reflexivity<sup>78</sup> without destroying the text's embeddedness in real events and thus limiting its function as counterhistory.

## 7 *Underworld* as a work of historiographic metafiction

With any work of art the question of how (or whether at all) it can be classified and labeled as part of a larger artistic movement is among the most interesting and at the

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<sup>76</sup> The other, more obvious link is of course the film's title.

<sup>77</sup> Mark Osteen identifies Eisenstein himself as the origin of the phrase “the contradictions of being” (253). Whether or not Klara is conscious of the fact that she is quoting Eisenstein is deliberately left unexplained.

<sup>78</sup> Timothy L. Parrish comes to a similar conclusion when he derides: “[p]resenting his novel *Underworld* as the double to the film *Unterwelt*, DeLillo invokes the possibility of mimicking something that does not exist not to assert through the form of the novel his status as creator” (699).

same time most challenging to the critic. It is pointless attempting to find a definite and final answer, especially with a contemporary work such as *Underworld*, but there is still merit in reviewing and discussing different possibilities in regards to the novel's status as neo-realism, neo-historicism, postmodernism etc. I believe that *Underworld* manifests many of the qualities of what Linda Hutcheon refers to as *historiographic metafiction*, but with affinities that are more conceptual than stylistic. *Underworld's* approach (building a cultural and historical *bricolage*) and object (American life from the Cold War period to the 1990s) appear to me to be postmodern, because the reality of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century society which it describes is. The fact that it manifests tendencies of realism hardly contends this: a higher degree of solidity and stability is simply necessary when the goal is to write an 'underhistory' that seeks to amend the official record, not to demolish history as such.

Following this assumption, it is appropriate to examine *Underworld* in context with the significant changes which have affected history as an area of study and its evaluation by scholars and artists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. When in the 1800s historian Leopold von Ranke formulated his goal to depict history 'as it really was', he started an academic trend which gradually shifted the common approach to historiography from a strongly judgmental and subjective narrative to an exact science. The historical novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which had been popularized especially by the works of Sir Walter Scott (*Waverly*, *Rob Roy*, *Ivanhoe*) was closely attached to this concept of an accurate depiction of history. The means of aestheticizing the past and the legitimacy of its 'upper world' historiographies was later called into question by modernist thinkers and artists who felt that the traditional techniques were no longer capable of capturing the bizarre nature of modern warfare and mechanization. While history was at least by some discarded in favor of myth, psychology, ideology, and other ontological cornerstones, it returned to the center of attention in the period following World War II. However, the belief that history 'as it really was' could be accurately reproduced in historiographies came under fire during the 1960s and was increasingly criticized by a new generation of historians.<sup>79</sup>

It has been argued by literary scholar Linda Hutcheon that the need to return to history can be explained by "our beliefs in origins and ends, unity and totalization, logic and reason, consciousness and human nature, progress and fate, representation

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<sup>79</sup> In this context E.H. Carr's 1961 publication *What is History?* should be mentioned for its significant influence on the discipline.

and truth, not to mention the notions of causality and temporal homogeneity, linearity, and continuity” (1988, 87). As Hutcheon notes, the need for unity and causality has not been diminished, despite the postmodern scholar’s awareness of his own subjectivity and cultural bias. According to Hayden White, the work of modernists such as Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and Mann expresses an “underlying conviction that the historical consciousness must be obliterated” in order to artistically examine the modern condition and experience of 20<sup>th</sup> century life, a process in which the subject is placed center-stage. Postmodernism submits to the urge to again think historically, albeit with strong contextual provisions and the awareness that historiography is discursive, subjective, and therefore literally inconclusive. Instead, it recognizes that “there can be no single, essentialized, transcendent concept of ‘genuine history’ [...], no matter what the nostalgia [...] for such an entity” (Hutcheon 1988, 89).

How does the context of a past event shape the perception which we have of it today? Which aspects of our interpretation (or of past interpretations made by historians, politicians, novelists, etc.) are constituted by gender, ethnicity, and political beliefs? Are those things that we regard as historical *facts* anything more than snapshots of isolated *events*, interpretations which are singled out while others are suppressed, both individually (in memory) and collectively (in history)?<sup>80</sup> While these questions are at the center of the examples cited by Hutcheon, DeLillo incorporates and at the same time moves beyond them. When Hutcheon observes that “[t]oday [...] it is less the problem of how to narrate time than the issue of the nature and status of our information about the past that makes postmodern history, theory, and art share certain concerns”, she has her finger on that very issue – “how to narrate time”. *Underworld’s* unmasking of how the historical record was warped by the prevalent ideologies of the post-war period – communism and anti-communism – takes place side by side with another implicit question: how individual memory can be sustained for a better self-understanding (personally and nationally) in the age of media-induced hyperrealities. DeLillo goes beyond pointing out the narrowness of traditional historiography because he assumes that the (paranoid) reader is already conscious of the flawed nature of the record. He rewrites history not in terms of *recorded events* (*Underworld* blends fictional elements with fictionalized historical events and characters in a conscious effort to make the differences almost impossible

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<sup>80</sup> See also Hutcheon (1989) 57.

to spot), but in regards to *who relates them* and *what the implications are*. Phillip E. Wegner points out:

If the classical historical novel narrates the rise of the centralized and homogenized space of the modern nation-state, DeLillo's neo-realist fiction focuses on the emergent decentered and chaotic landscape of the post-Cold War world. (54)

*Underworld* cannot relive the historical novel's fantasy of a coherent, definite account of the past, but at the same time it is unwilling to merely challenge the notion that some kind of larger truth may be hidden in forgotten origins and leave it at that. Instead it seeks to be a 'story of stories', the account in which nothing is left out. This approach is the logical result of the postmodern realization that all narratives are equally relevant – that there is no single authoritative voice that can tell us all there is to know –, but at the same time it is informed by the need to connect these accounts and place them into a common frame. By going beyond a mere refutation of both history and historiography and instead actively engaging with both, the author hopes to reactivate *history as a means of self-reference*. The achievement of earlier postmodern historical fiction – to have overcome the antiquated notion of the sanctity of historical events as opposed to 'mere fiction' – is used productively by DeLillo when he amends or alters historical facts. While in the historical novel, facts and inventions are markedly segregated from one another, this no longer applies to *Underworld*. It appears as if, from the author's point of view, coherence and truth are not endangered by invention, and that conversely the accurate representation of events alone does not automatically produce these things either. While DeLillo calls the "nature and status of our information" (Hutcheon 1988, 90) about historical events into question, he seems just as interested in their implications. The question seems to hinge on *what an event means*, in contrast to *what exactly occurred*. Following this line of thought, a linear narrative told by a single voice inside a strict chronology must not be re-assembled and brought into coherence by the reader, and it therefore inevitably has a narrower historical scope than an assemblage such as *Underworld*, which thematizes both the modern individual's crisis of memory and the network of historical events which are the result of a larger, paranoid national imagination. Because the origins of this imagination are submerged and obscured, only a multitude of narrative voices can give an account which, while still inconclusive, may be regarded as *truthful*. Of course DeLillo is hardly the first novelist to critically assess the facts of history and the means by which they are

assembled from past events. But that he does so without any notable formal experiments (i.e. overt self-reflexivity) and without challenging the assumption that history 'really happened' is significant. Instead, he is interested in making history usable again, in freeing it from the narrowness of a single authoritative voice which would not do justice to its complexity, and at the same time in making it a means of legitimizing the present in its richer context. The past must both be re-remembered and re-invented in order for this to happen, and it is ultimately the reader's task to contribute to this process by reassembling the fragments of the narrative into a coherent whole. *Underworld's* objective (if one decides to call it that), is thus not to *undo* history, but to *reclaim* and *retell* it. That the narrator may take the liberty of 'editing' historically proven facts simply because he deems it artistically appropriate is one of the innovations of this new, still profoundly postmodern historical fiction. As Hayden White points out in regards to Oliver Stone's film *JFK* (1991):

All of the events depicted in the film – whether arrested by historical evidence, based on conjecture, or simply made up in order to help the plot along or to lend credence to Stone's paranoid fantasies – are presented as if they were equally historical, which is to say, equally real, or as if they had really happened. And this in spite of the fact that Stone is on record as professing not to know the difference between history and something that people make up, in other words, as viewing all events as equally imaginary, at least insofar as they are *represented* events. (1999, 69)

Other examples of historical bricolage cited by White are Norman Mailer's *Executioner's Song* (1979), E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), and DeLillo's own *Libra*, but while he summarizes all of them as belonging to "new genres of postmodernist parahistorical representation" (1999, 69), it is possible to make out distinctive differences between them and *Underworld*. In contrast to *Libra*, which – like Stone's movie – also retells the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, *Underworld's* cast of characters is largely fictional. While *Libra* zooms in on a single event (the assassination), *Underworld* is a reconstruction of four decades of Cold War history in their entirety, that is, it paints a panorama of the society which brought forth consumerism and McCarthyism, Lenny Bruce and Marilyn Monroe, Lee Harvey Oswald and John Warnock Hinckley, baseball and the bomb. While *Libra* synchronically explores the genealogy of one man (Oswald) and one day (November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963) and its offshoots and aftershocks in American history, *Underworld* diachronically assembles fifty years of unwritten and unheard memories into a whole on top of "the sundered foundation of a monumental history" (O'Donnell 150).

The question, then, of how to ‘classify’ the novel cannot be answered with precision. While Phillip E. Wegner argues that “DeLillo revives and reworks one of the most significant of modern realist narrative forms, the historical novel [...]” (51) and Vera Laschinger thinks that “in his writing, DeLillo has successfully shifted to the nearealist paradigm” (138, my translation), others seem to regard the novel more as a kind of conflation of modernist and postmodernist concerns. Ruth Heyler believes that “*Underworld* emphasizes the dichotomy between the modernist faith in origins and logical cognition and the postmodernist lack of cerebral justification, chronology and causality” (988), John Duvall notes that “its story of memory and desire recalls the chronological disruptions of modernist narration” (2002, 21) and Jesse Kavadlo speculates that “DeLillo’s excessive realism recycles, almost parodies, traditional realism into something closer to avant-garde” (133). One could reason that DeLillo’s realism is excessive because it describes an excessive reality. It is certainly modern in its affinity for origins and submerged memory, and certainly postmodern in its repeated thematization of the official historical record as a fiction. It does not merely contend the authority of this record, but seeks to replace or at least amend it, because the need to ‘ground oneself in time’ is nearing desperation in an era which is characterized by border- and timelessness, loss of agency, and lack of comprehensible context. This larger inherent ambition is what makes *Underworld* more a novel about historicity as such than only about the Cold War period in U.S. history, and – apparently – a novel to which a colorful array of genre labels can be applied all at once.

## **8 Writing counterhistory**

Asserting that “[l]onging on a large scale is what makes history” (*U* 11) reverses the traditional notion of history as the sum of recorded events. A longing for personal fulfillment and coherence on one end and dread of political machinations beyond the individual’s control on the other are the pillars on which *Underworld*’s oppositional mode of historiography is built. The conflicting tendencies of individual and collective self-realization are both played out against one another repeatedly, leaving neither as the victor but successfully consoling the two with each other. To write a harmonized fictional history – not harmonized in the sense that there are no inherent contradictions, but asserting that no individual event takes place in isolation – means to see history as such from a new perspective: as the subjective, flawed and incomplete narrative of many, bound together by culture and coincidence.

This final chapter of my thesis examines Don DeLillo's approach to language as his conductive medium for creating such a work of counterhistory and the artistic philosophy which it reveals.

### **8.1 The physics of language**

In an interview published in 1999, Don DeLillo asserted that “[b]efore history and before politics there’s language” (Moss 164). To DeLillo, what the author does is not merely to engage in some arbitrary mode of artistic production, but the creative use of human language on all levels of the register: street slang, idioms, business-speak, the language of war and the language of advertisement – all are at his disposal. When he further comments “I don’t think of language in a theoretical way [...] I approach it at street level” (DeCurtis 69), he reveals his genealogical understanding of language. To him, communication carries the characteristics of its speakers, and its diversity and richness is the hallmark of a culture which is both rich and diverse. Language precedes history and politics because it is needed to produce both, and both in turn leave their mark on language, as many of the jokes, slogans, and names in *Underworld* aptly demonstrate.

The novel’s prime objective – the re-appropriation of history by fiction – is realized through language, and it is especially the language of the two structural brackets around the narration proper, the Pro- and Epilogue, that specifies and supports this goal. The Prologue’s fictional account of the Giants-Dodgers game is written in the present tense and characterized by what DeLillo calls “a sort of super-omniscience” (‘Exile on Main Street’ 136). It follows the ball’s trajectory, cutting from the field to the stands and back again, from Cotter Martin to Russ Hodges, and from Hodges to Hoover, Shor, Gleason, and Sinatra. The ‘camera-eye’ perspective used gives the impression of a free-floating narrator who is able to suddenly merge with one of the characters. Cotter, Russ Hodges, and lastly J. Edgar Hoover all assume control of the narrative for a short while, coloring it with their subjective impressions. From the group of celebrities it darts back to the field, to locate first Giants outfielder Willie Mays (who would eventually become one of baseball’s most famous African-American players) and then Cotter:

Sinatra saying, “Jack, I thought I told you to stay in the car until you’re all done eating.” Mays takes a mellow cut but gets under the ball, sending a routine fly into the low October day. The sound of the ash bat making contact with the ball reaches Cotter Martin in the left field stands, where he sits in a bony-shouldered hunch. (U 19)

After staying with Cotter and Bill Waterson for a while, it again arcs across the field to Ralph Branca, then Hoover, and eventually back to Russ Hodges. The dynamicity of the game is transferred directly to its narration; it seems as if history has found a focal point at this very moment at the Polo Grounds. The fact that the account of the game is given as if it were taking place in the present is noted by Mark Osteen, who further observes that “the game continues to take place in the minds of Americans” (219).

The section of the Epilogue which describes the miraculous appearance of the murdered Esmeralda Lopez on a billboard in the Bronx is also told in the present tense. Here too a crowd of spectators witnesses a miracle, though this time it is truly inexplicable and not just unlikely, as was the case with the underdog victory of the Giants. In contrast to the game’s narration, the focus in this part stays solidly on Sister Edgar, for whom the event offers redemption and final peace – she passes away shortly afterwards, because “[t]here is nothing left to do but die” (*U* 824). Nowhere is it as difficult to pinpoint a definite narrator as on the last pages of the Epilogue. Whereas in most of *Underworld* individual characteristics and viewpoints will surface in what only appears to be an objective third-person narration, the Keystroke 1 and Keystroke 2 segments seem to be told by a disembodied voice<sup>81</sup>, or a conflation of multiple voices.

Throughout the novel DeLillo draws from different linguistic registers to create a sense of close affinity for his characters. The inflections of speech that characterize Klara Sachs, Lenny Bruce, Marvin Lundy, etc. are all markedly individual, but the strongest foregrounding takes place in Part 6, in the account of life in the Bronx of the 1950s. A significant portion of the part is composed in dialogue, a dialogue that overpowers indirect description as the ensemble of Italian immigrants – DeLillo’s own biographic background – pushes to the front: loud-mouthed, honest, unpretentious, and thoroughly authentic. This culture continues to exist in language while its other points of reference, its buildings, people, and traditions have disappeared. The author yet again shows a faith to origins – to his own origin to be

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<sup>81</sup> One could argue that it is Nick Shay’s web-surfing son who relates these parts, but the extremely poetic language and his lack of any perceivable connection to Sister Edgar make this unlikely. I believe that the connection is latently suggested, but that this does not imply that Jeff Shay is truly *the narrator*, only that he has been integrated into a larger narrational conscience.

precise – when he recalls the inflections of the street vocabulary that is part of his personal underworld.

## **8.2 Redemptive fiction?**

The author's claim is that fiction is able to provide an epistemological clarity which traditional historiography denies us. The missing links that the narrative reveals allow the reader a glimpse of a larger socio-historical tapestry which cannot be assembled from the narrow viewpoint of official records. Only through the act of storytelling can such a tapestry be woven, because the encoding of historical reality by the author and the subsequent decoding of the reader leaves enough room to allow a subjective human interpretation of the past as lived experience.

Language is the medium through which this en- and decoding is achieved, and it is precisely because of the ambiguous and flexible nature of language that the author mistrusts television so profoundly – it is after all wordless, without inflection, and always on the verge of overpowering the reality it is thought to accurately record.<sup>82</sup> The lack of an interpretative human voice that relieves the images of their contextual flatness is what the author fears, because it relegates him to the role of spectator. It is precisely the short perceptual distance between the image and its observer that empowers television. The interpretation of an image takes place in a split second; it occurs without any willed thought process on the recipient's end. Because we believe that what is depicted (a natural disaster, a political assassination, etc.) is shown in perfect physical clarity we deride that a deeper contextual interpretation of the event must also be close at hand – or that such a more thorough interpretation is unnecessary in the first place. At the same time we are paradoxically left without being physically affected by the mediated event – we miss the impact of a subjective experience that would place us among those who were there instead of the disembodied spectators. It is the gleaming surface-perfection of the camera, the seeming clarity it allows us while denying the depth of a truly subjective experience, which makes it so difficult to remember through mediated images.

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<sup>82</sup> As has been noted before, DeLillo is very interested in cinema while having a decidedly negative view of television. Cinema, especially the films of the French *nouvelle vague*, is in his view able to establish its own dialectic, something that television does not accomplish ('An Outsider in This Society' 67).

It is however unquestionable that a new, technology-aided method of historicizing personal memory must be found, because the old way of self-affirmation by placing oneself in a neighborhood, nation, or speech community is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain with the spread of economic globalization and digital communication.

*Underworld* is a democratized narrative, a narrative that constantly shifts mode and perspective as it moves from the 1950s to the 1990s. But while the reader may be overwhelmed by the many constantly intersecting segments of which it is composed, he is in no danger of being deceived or confused by unreliable narrators telling willfully deceiving stories. Deceit and plot exist in *Underworld* only in terms of political machinations and the lull of media reality – fiction, conversely, is the purveyor of truth. Even the segments of the Texas Highway Killer, while making the reader complicitous with his crimes through their perspective, leave an interpretative space between event and recipient. To DeLillo, as to most of his contemporaries, the time of narrative play-making seems to be over; the present demands structure instead of its subversion, it demands a genealogy that can reveal origins instead of an obliteration of causality. The ever-present links and connections in the novel are not the manifestations of a paranoid world-view imposed on objective reality to contaminate it, but only the augmentation of an already infinitely interconnected world, a world connected by hyperlinks, intercontinental flights, and a drastic ubiquity of products and images. Like the historical novel of Sir Walter Scott it too points towards something like a national identity, but while the historical novel is ‘all answer’, *Underworld* is at least ‘half question’. The tracing which it performs is deliberately disparate and incomplete, creating an inversion of the monolithic national narratives of the past. At the end stands the dissolution of place, the coalescence of all voices in cyberspace, where the old schemes have become obsolete and the upper and lower worlds have merged. While the net’s lack of agency and physicality make it confusing to navigate, it is the only available substitute for both older forms of historiography, the politically motivated master narratives of nations and the localized ghettos of memory cultivated in close-knit communities, because neither can be reactivated.

*Underworld* can alternately be read as a work of postmodernism in the guise of realism or as realism empowered by a postmodern philosophy which has largely abandoned the concept of reality and fiction as a dichotomy. It uses realism’s air of authority, its ability to outdo fiction that is clearly fictional, to legitimate its claim of

being *historical*, not merely in the sense of incorporating events of the past, but in giving an interpretation of their significance. At the same time, however, it is informed by postmodernism's urge to disassemble, play out, subvert, diversify, and underwrite history, because all 'definite' and 'objective' accounts of the past have already been called into question. It is as much metahistorical as it is metafictional, but because fiction is seen as a component in the production of history (e.g. in the machinations of J. Edgar Hoover) the line between the two is elusive. It is never purely self-reflexive, but comes close to being so at certain pivotal points, for example the screening of *Unterwelt* and to a certain degree in the Prologue and Epilogue. I believe the motive behind this approach is to give the reader a greater degree of freedom, to let him assess the significance of the text for himself. Instead of constantly calling the authority of the text into question and reminding us of its inventedness, DeLillo wants it to be able to fulfill a redemptive function, something it cannot do if it is conceived as a self-reflexive word-game. The idea that fiction can (and perhaps must) be re-empowered to make history accessible again in times in which the production of historiographies is undertaken largely with the aid of traditional methods of fiction-writing is what ultimately propels the novel forward. If memory can no longer be brought into a coherent form naturally, i.e. by slow, personal transmission from one generation to the next, biographies must instead be assembled through fiction. The question of whether they are based on fact, invention, or a blending of both is secondary, because DeLillo, like director Oliver Stone, seems to see no difference between history and something that people make up.<sup>83</sup> This does not mean that he contends the existence of past events, but merely that in his understanding only the records of these events (which are always interpretative) can impart any form of truth to us, in the sense of an evaluation of their relevance for our contemporary existence. The visual media is characterized by him as largely unconductive to memory, because its perceived realness is in truth the equivalent of a reflective surface – we do not gain a better understanding of past events by 'connecting the dots', but instead limit ourselves to a perspective that omits more than it allows us to see. Instead, the image itself becomes the focus of our attention; it dominates our impression of what really happened, and because we are uncontent with a history that does not conform to our push-button paradigm, we choose to fetishize reproductions.

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<sup>83</sup> See White 69.

The novel seeks to solve this dilemma. It acknowledges the fact that the old modes of historiography no longer suffice to explain the present, while television, the chronicler of contemporary history, captures and relentlessly replays events, but provides no commentary to them. It attempts to overcome this divide by filling in gaps, such as the missing twenty-four hours in the genealogy of the Thompson homer, and through the huge web-work of connections between places, dates, and characters that it weaves relentlessly. And in the end it seems itself to be “halfway hopeful” (*U* 11), just like Cotter Martin is when anticipating the ballgame at the Polo Grounds. The apparition of the murdered street urchin Esmeralda mesmerizes a large crowd of onlookers; they believe to witness a miracle when her face is projected on an advertising billboard in the wasteland of the Bronx. Whether or not the miracle is real is largely insignificant. The rapture of the crowd is real and it reiterates the enthusiasm of the baseball fans – though sixty years have passed and the world has changed dramatically, the individual’s need for a spiritual anchor point in a hostile and chaotic world persists.

*Underworld* tries to be such an anchor point, or at something that can make this uncontrollable reality cohere in spite of both its strangeness and mounting contradictions. It is history reconstructed in fiction, bottom-up instead of top-down. The contradictions of being to which it points with powerful language and an artfully crafted structure concern Don DeLillo more than the need to lecture the reader on history’s great blunders.

Everything may fall into the past eventually, but as long as that past can be recovered we will not be without a source of orientation in the hyperlinked future.

## 9 Illustrations



Illustration 1 - J. Edgar Hoover and Clyde Tolson  
<[http://perival.com/delillo/edgar\\_and\\_clyde.jpeg](http://perival.com/delillo/edgar_and_clyde.jpeg)>



Illustration 2 - Lenny Bruce <<http://www.agiftforlaughter.com/images/lennybruce.jpg>>



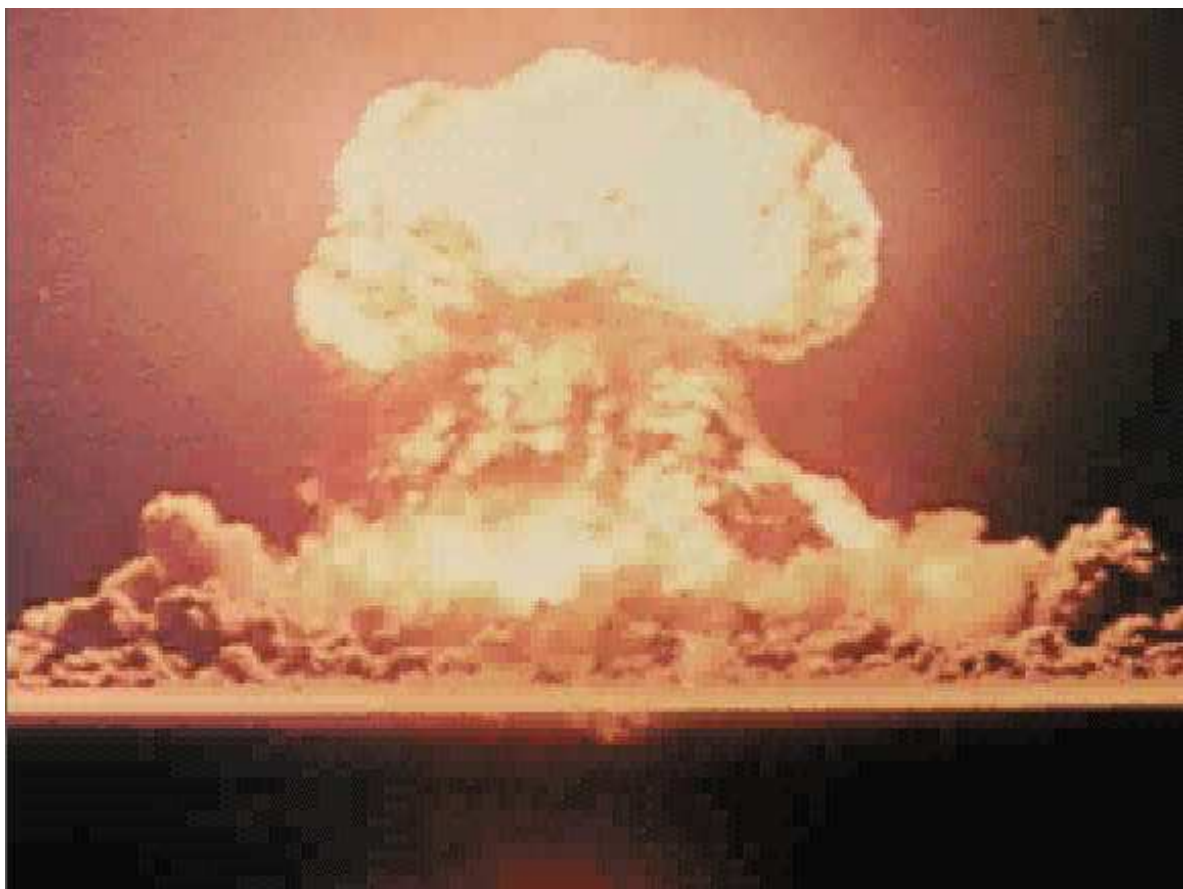
Illustration 3 - Jell-O <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:JelloDesserts.JPG>>



Illustration 4 - Cover of Life Magazine, September 15, 1961  
<<http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/experience/the.bomb/jfk.essay/life.cover.lg.jpg>>



**Illustration 5 - Pafko at the Wall** <<http://perival.com/delillo/pafko.jpeg>>



**Illustration 6 - Trinity Explosion, July 16, 1945**  
<[http://www.voyager.co.jp/news/img\\_jpg/trinity\\_bomb.jpg](http://www.voyager.co.jp/news/img_jpg/trinity_bomb.jpg)>



**Illustration 7 - The Triumph of Death, Pieter Bruegel the Elder**  
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:The triumph of death.jpg>>

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## **Eidesstattliche Versicherung**

Hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich die Magisterarbeit mit dem Titel

### **Imagining the End: Don DeLillo's *Underworld* as Counterhistory of the Cold War**

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Duisburg, den 18.11.2005

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