Underworld

"Encyclopedic in scope, as convoluted as a chambered nautilus in design, this novel, with its intricately crafted episodes, is almost impossible to summarize." So does Michael Mewshaw characterize Don DeLillo's *Underworld* in a review entitled "The Uses of Junk,"[1] pointing the reader's attention to the encyclopedic and exhaustive character of the book. Indeed, the sheer size of the novel that completes and, simultaneously, recapitulates the evolving picture of America presented in this study, thwarts any attempts to encapsulate it or hold it within the fixed limits of literary discourse. *Underworld*, on the one hand, summons up a great number of themes and concerns of DeLillo's earlier fictions discussed in this study in order to bring them up to date with the fast-changing face of American reality. On the other hand, however, by leaving the reader "suspended" in the Gibsonian cyberspace at the end of this Great American Novel, the narrator invites him to look into the future whose roots, *as Underworld* demonstrates it, can be dug out from the obliterated layers of the past. Such an extrapolation helps the reader to understand and come to terms with a number of phenomena whose at first glance fragmented and chaotic character renders modern man lost and confused. Interestingly, as many critics seem to agree, while uncontainable itself, *Underworld* is about containment, the U.S. foreign policy doctrine which sought to prevent the expansion of Communist power as well as containment as an act of restraining the ideological or political power of a hostile country or the operations of a hostile military force. By defying these traditional definitions, *Underworld* offers new insights into the apparently clear divisions into "Us" and "Them," "Friends" and "Enemies," "White" and "Black." The picture may at first glance diverge from the accustomed "battlefields" of the Cold War, leaving the disconcerted observer pondering the conventions neither "we" or "they" were familiar with or had access to. On the other hand, however, the power of DeLillo's narrative lies exactly in the

[1] Michael Mewshaw, "The Uses of Junk," *New Statesman*, 01/02/98, Volume 127, 4366: 52.

demystification of the "official" history and replacing it, or, rather, supplementing it with what Mark Osteen calls "Counter-history,"[2] or, as Molly Wallace puts it, "the production of history as a commodity."[3] Adherence to individual "facts" is less important here than providing the reader with an alternative to the versions authorized by the government, the media, or some other power controllers, and imposed as the only valid representations. Once the reader begins to contest the official stories by allowing other interpretations to enter his mind, he may realize that many of his ideas and notions had been in the past fed by the power systems presenting themselves as the "right" ones even though their claim to such authority can be doubted.. We, Americans, are "right," whereas it is, of course, the Soviets who are "wrong." Having accepted this somewhat painful disillusionment, the reader may, in turn, come to terms with the fact that what he deemed black may not necessarily be black, nor white, either. DeLillo's famous "third line," which, in the case of *Libra*, bridges the path generated by the line of Oswald's life and the line[4] of the CIA conspiracy, oftentimes merges the private and the public spheres, which *Underworld* shows as overlapping and connected by the least traceable nodes. The emergence of many such lines precipitated by DeLillo's narrative casts doubt upon or even calls into question the validity of various strictly personal credos. One may discover, for instance, that the phenomenal aura which came to be attached to a particular baseball game had been deliberately fuelled for years in an attempt to mythologize this specific moment in the past and to camouflage other momentous events, happening at the same time in what may be called a blunt case of aestheticizing the political. Or one may appreciate that a spooky graffiti on a New York subway train is an example of free and "uncontained" art, art not "walled" by city galleries and "cured" of its edge by museum curators, which may be called a case of politicizing the aesthetic. Vince Passaro calls these merging and emerging lines "the

[2] Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000) 214.
[3] Molly Wallace, "'Venerated Emblems': DeLillo's *Underworld* and the History-commodity," *Critique*, Summer 2001, Volume 42, 4: 369.
[4] Called often "contingency."

fusion of the personal with the historical," comparing the author to such celebrated writers as T.S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, and Joseph Conrad and offering high praise for his achievement: "This capacity to imagine the world in a woven language of the personal and intimate as well as the social, political, and historical--to give each its own reality as well as to enable each to function as a metaphor for the other--has been the highest measure of literary art in English."[5]

Mentioning these old masters brings forth the question of their writings' legacy and influence on the new masters, still young at heart but inevitably aging in body. Whereas the relation of *Underworld* to modernism, represented by and identified with the three authors mentioned above, will be discussed later, it is worthwhile to note at this point that the last decade of the 20th century abounded in large-scale volumes published by American literary "heavy-weights." Norman Mailer brought out his *Harlot's Ghost* in 1991, John Updike *In the Beauty of the Lilies* in1996,[6] DeLillo *Underworld* in 1997, Pynchon *Mason & Dixon* in 1997,[7] Robert Coover *John's Wife* in 1998. Most of these texts seem to embody their authors' more or less conscious responses to the approaching end of the century – "a sprawling catalogue of the past half century," [8] as Don Gillmor puts it – and envisage the onset of the new millennium, with a note of apprehension and disquietude. Gillmor is right that the century which follows what came to be called the American Century, may not be as bountiful to the Land of Plenty as the 1990s proved to be. The narratives mentioned above may then be treated as a form of settling accounts with the past and, at the same time, recapitulating the stages of America's (r)evolutionary

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[5] Vince Passaro, "The unsparing vision of Don DeLillo," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1997, Volume 295, 1770: 76.

[6] DeLillo's and Updike's treatment of myths is discussed by Donald J. Greiner in his essay "Don DeLillo, John Updike, and the Sustaining Power of Myth." For more details see Donald J. Greiner, "Don DeLillo, John Updike, and the Sustaining Power of Myth," in J. Dewey, G. Kellman and I. Malin ed., *UnderWords: Perspectives on Don DeLillo's Underworld* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 103-113.

[7] An interesting analysis of the themes of conspiracy and paranoia in *Mason & Dixon* and *Underworld* is presented by Carl Ostrowski in his essay "Conspirational Jesuits in the Postmodern Novel: *Mason & Dixon* and *Underworld*. For more details see Carl Ostrowski, "Conspirational Jesuits in the Postmodern Novel: *Mason & Dixon* and *Underworld*," in J. Dewey, G. Kellman and I. Malin ed., 93-102.

[8] Don Gillmor, "Baseball and Bombs," *Maclean's*, 02/23/98, Volume 111, 8: 66.

development after World War II: a kind of balance sheet of the country's gains and losses. According to James Wolcott, "like Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, *Underworld* undertakes a master surveyor's summing-up of America as idea and ideal, an investigation of what makes America so unique and Faustian on the world stage."[9]

Bearing in mind publishers' games, all types of marketing ploys as well as the notoriety of certain authors, which frequently contributes to the aura surrounding their works,[10] it may be said that *Underworld* is probably one of the most accessible of all the narratives listed above, lacking Pynchon's hermeticism, Coover's sweeping metafictionality, or Mailer's seriousness turning sometimes into pompousness. Being approachable does not, of course, mean being completely manageable. The sequence of events in the novel, which may be called here a reverse trajectory, constitutes the very first problem the reader has to tackle in his search for meaning. Starting at New York's Polo Grounds in 1951, the story leaps into the future (Spring 1992) to then gradually slide back into the past in the following sections (mid 1980s-early 1990s; Spring 1978; Summer 1974; 1950s-1960s; Fall 1951-Summer 1952). The trip into the "gneiss" of the Cold War is eventually concluded by an Epilogue, set in Baudrillard's hyperreality of computer networks and global capital. For some critics this convoluted structure creates unnecessary complications, needlessly perplexing the reader. Tony Tanner writes, for instance, that "in a work of art, unless it is avowedly or manifestly aleatory, you usually feel that the scramblings and wrenched juxtapositionings have some point. But--it may of course be my obtuseness--I just did not see the point of DeLillo's randomizings."[11] Such negative reactions to *Underworld* will be addressed later.

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[9] James Wolcott, "Blasts from the past," *New Criterion*, December 1997, Volume 16, 4: 71.

[10] Pynchon's and Salinger's (in)famous reclusiveness, as well as the fact that the auction of rights for *Underworld* on October 29, 1996 was ended by Nan Graham of Scribner deciding to pay a staggering $1.3 million for the hardcover and paperback rights for the book. DeLillo himself, previously notorious for refusing to teach classes in writing or comment upon his own fiction, let himself be photographed and even interviewed.

[11] Tony Tanner, "Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo's *Underworld*," *Raritan*, Spring 1998, Volume 17, 4: 56.

At the same time, however, Tanner does take notice of the influence of Jean-Luc Godard's cinematic techniques on DeLillo and the adoption of the methods of montage in the structure of the novel. And, by bringing up the name of Joseph Conrad, Tanner in a sense prompts the modernist roots of *Underworld*. Of course calling DeLillo a modernist may seem surprising, as he himself does not object to *White Noise* being labeled as a postmodern oeuvre. Yet his debt to Joyce, for instance, represented by the sheer size of the novel, the meticulous attention paid to even minor details and, finally, by the brilliant use of language, calls into question the division between the modern and the postmodern. That DeLillo is very familiar with the ins and outs of the postmodern is more than obvious from his previous books – *White Noise* and *Libra* in particular – and even in *Underworld* he acknowledges his acquaintance with such "avant-garde" tropes as simulacrum or fractal theory on the "technical" level, or postmodern paranoia or historiography on the thematic. It is this last facet, however, upon which the whole account is constructed. Subscribing to the tradition of "well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages,"[12] *Underworld* recreates a lost history, by offering a story that is parallel to the official path. This line may be pursued in the spirit of Gertrude Stein's definition of the lost generation, where the "lost" means "disabled" by the burden of history, rather than irrevocably erased from it. It may also be explored through the Pynchonesque perspective of Oedipa Maas, without, however, applying her prober of truth, the merciless logic of the binary code: either the Trystero exists, or it does not.

Therefore, neither the structure of the novel nor the arrangement of events are accidental. By breaking the sequential logic of *Underworld,* DeLillo invites the reader to actively participate in the excitement of searching and furnishing his own picture of what the Cold War might have been and what shadow it might cast upon the present. Indeed it is a very traditional way of

[12] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989) 5.

pursuing things, much different from and even at variance with today's "fast-food" dispensing of information, available to anyone, anywhere. In the closing pages of *Underworld* DeLillo alludes to this situation, pointing to the "flattening" and noisy character of any data we can retrieve in a matter of seconds:

> A word appears in the lunar milk of the data stream. You see it on your monitor, replacing the tower shots and airbursts, the detonations of high-yielded devices set on barges or dangled from balloons, replacing the comprehensive text displays that accompany the bombs. A single seraphic word. You can examine the world with a click, tracing its origins, development, earliest known use, its passages between languages, and you can summon the word in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Arabic, in a thousand languages and dialects living and dead, and locate literary citations, and follow the word through the tunneled underworld of its ancestral roots.[13]

Underworld is just the kind of "comprehensive text display" that digital information, through its accessibility and ease of use, is stamping out. It is a tribute to the old masters, who had the reader walk the streets of Dublin for six days in a slowly-paced epistemological search. Reading the novel, the reader-detective is supposed to take in information slowly, chew it well before digesting it, and only then make connections, trace the missing nodes, recognize relations. By re-reading passages and turning back the pages he himself realizes this is how history is recreated and reenacted, that it is not an easy linear process. But the effort invested in such an investigation makes the discovery even more precious and earned. Of course, were we to rearrange the structure of *Underworld*, introducing chronology by simply cutting and pasting the chapters into the order in which they supposedly "belong," we would destroy the dramatic tension of the novel, which results from suspended or delayed climaxes, foreshadowings that the reader is looking forward to exploring as well as blank spaces, which become partly filled only at the novel's denouement. Such "unchronological" pursuit further problematizes the nature of the reader's unpremeditated discoveries, making

[13] Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997) 826. Further references will be parenthetical. (*U*)

him aware that there are large strata of data he will not simply chance upon; as in any history, some deposits will never become unveiled.

Another trace of the legacy of modernism in DeLillo's *Underworld* is the author's use of language that he has turned over the years into unmatched craft and his distinguishing badge. DeLillo has always stressed, that language mattered a lot to him and that he saw his characters take form through language. "Accused" on numerous occasions of presenting "voices" rather than characters, he, nevertheless, never abandoned the practice of having his characters speak first and only then emerge as physical subjects. "He speaks in your voice," begins *Underworld,* instantly heralding a much wider representation of disparate utterances (*U* 11). Language is DeLillo's vehicle to enter worlds and underworlds, to excavate jargons of lonely tunnel writers, to blend with the people he is writing about. According to Passaro, it is "DeLillo's music, the titat rhythms of everyday, intimate conversation, the jazz of improvisational, gestural, truncated speech--a fascination that reaches symphonic levels in *Underworld*."[14] Passaro is apt to notice what other critics tend to overlook, namely the fact that the old Emersonian maxim – "I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived through the poverty or splendor of his speech"[15] – is truer than ever in the millennial America of so many disparate voices. DeLillo's method of building his characters is traditional in the sense that he constructs them from the textual rather than the visual; a conscious gesture, one could infer, of resisting the overwhelming flow of images and pictures, the ominous glow of millions of TVs set to the same global channels. "Visualizing" such characters is perhaps more problematic than reading into them, but the rewards awaiting the reader are certainly more promising. This is an intended maneuver on the part of the author, since, as Passaro observes, "DeLillo's books are purposely suffused with the language of the culture, the jargons and lingos of the public discourse of our time, snatches caught in

[14] Passaro, 75.
[15] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in McMichael, ed., *Anthology of American Literature,* (Macmillan: New York, 1985) 1044.

supermarket aisles and on talk shows, the overpowering declamatory voice of the marketplace, of television, of business memos and the financial pages."[16] Language is the key to America, and, as *Underworld* demonstrates, someone speaking the language of baseball may not necessarily be understood by someone speaking the language of science. Language, according to DeLillo, can introduce a new angle on historical records and call into question the validity of the existing texts. He explains that

> Language lives in everything it touches and can be an agent of redemption, the thing that delivers us, paradoxically, from history's flat, thin, tight and relentless design, its arrangement of stark pages, and that allows us to find an unconstraining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate.[17]

Given its encyclopedic scope,[18] its preoccupation with the low and the downtrodden as well as the rich and the powerful, and its embodiment of the American magic and dread which Mark Osteen treats as inseparable elements of DeLillo's dialogue with culture,[19] *Underworld* seems to stand out from the other "millennial frenzy" narratives mentioned above. For one, the author's misgivings about the nostalgia for the past fed by people's delusions about it are not particularly concealed here. Nor are his premonitions about the future, the future that makes people miss the Cold War as a period of certain order, a clear and manageable division into "Us" and "Them." Such attitudes represent, according to DeLillo, triumphs of various systems of power, which at the end of the 20th century, merged into the omnipresent tentacles of global capitalism. DeLillo is still someone who cares, who despite charging the high price for the manuscript of *Underworld*, stands in opposition to the "official," authoritarian system, realizing that such systems, be it our systems or their systems, misuse their power in order to

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[16] Passaro, 75.
[17] Don DeLillo, "The Power of History," *New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 1997, 62.
[18] Arthur Saltzman believes that *Underworld* is indeed one of the most complete novels written in recent years: "The profundity of *Underworld* is undeniable; its massive erudition, enterprising lyricism, and sociopolitical reach compel us to include it along with Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity Rainbow*, William Gass's *The Tunnel*, and David Foster's *Infinite Jests* among the chief 'meganovels' in contemporary American fiction." Arthur Saltzman, "Awful Symmetries in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*," in Tim Engles and Hugh Ruppersburg, ed., *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo* (New York: G.K.Hall & Co, 2000) 303-304.
[19] Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

control the way history is written. And he shares his preoccupation with the reader in a less avant-garde way than does Pynchon, for instance.[20]

All inclusive as it is, *Underworld* can be viewed as a climax of DeLillo's writing to date, both in terms of the range of themes covered and the appropriation of many tropes that the novel imports from the author's earlier writings. Such self-reflexiveness was, of course, practiced by DeLillo in many a novel before, yet *Underworld* is probably to them what, according to LeClair, *White Noise* was to its predecessors: a closing of the loop. Reading *White Noise* as "the ghostly double, the photographic negative, of *The Names*" and investigating a number of structures designed by the characters of *White Noise* for self protection, LeClair calls the novel "DeLillo's subtractive or retractive achievement, a deepening of the American and human mystery…."[21] *Underworld*, quite predictably, refers on a number of occasions to the novels discussed in the previous chapters of this study. Thus the nun from *White Noise* teaching Jack German in the old German districts changes into Sister Edgar, equally zealous in applying fascist methods to "propagate" faith. Murray Siskind's cynical commentary on the surrounding reality is voiced in *Underworld* by Lenny Bruce, a "contestor" of the system and a small cog in the system himself.[22] The infamous Zapruder home video of JFK's shooting – "the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century"[23] – rerun a thousand times by the CIA archivist Nicholas Branch in *Libra*, returns again in *Underworld* during an underground screening for the artists and their patrons. But *Underworld*'s motto, similar to *Libra*'s "Where were you when Kennedy was shot?," turns into "Where were you when Thomson hit the homer?" A lonely boy roaming the streets of New York at the beginning of *Libra* bears a striking resemblance to *Underworld's* Cotter Martin, an

[20] In terms of the general spirit and the way of writing about things, *Underworld* is probably closer to Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), a comprehensive purchase on civilization, history and, of course, race, written in a brilliant language as well, than to any of the novels listed above as "millennial."
[21] Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987) 207.
[22] Before *White Noise*, Murray appears in *The Amazons*, DeLillo's novel written under the pseudonym of Cleo Birdwell.
[23] Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 181. Further references will be parenthetical. (*L*)

equally underprivileged representative of the black community. The discussion on the position and function of art initiated in *Mao II* by Bill Gray, is now continued by a bohemian artist Klara Sax or an "underworld" graffiti painter, Ismael Munoz. The crowds from the prologue to *Mao II* awaiting the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's blessing in Yankee stadium, reemerge at New York's Polo Grounds in the prologue to *Underworld*. But *Underworld* does not pick up only on the themes and characters DeLillo had already explored or touched upon in *White Noise*, *Libra*, or *Mao II*. In a truly encyclopedic manner, it returns to the novels and systems that LeClair deemed closed by the "promulgation" of *White Noise*. Thus a careful reader will be able to connect *End Zone*'s football players with the inseparable duo of *Underworld*, Bobby Thomson and Ralph Branca; David Bell from *Americana*, renouncing his position in television and Nick Shay, running away to the desert; Bucky Wunderlick from *Great Jones Street*, whose escape from his rock group becomes the food for the media and the media in *Underworld* which produces the food for the masses; the prodigy mathematician Billy Twilig from *Ratner's Star* and Matt Shay from *Underworld*, working in so called "think tank;" *Running Dog*'s obsessive theme of a pornographic movie shot in Hitler's bunker and Eisenstein's *Unterwelt*, a fictitious movie "miraculously" saved by DeLillo's imagination. *Underworld* changes then into a doubly, triply, or even multiply closed loop, a creative "recycling" of DeLillo's tropes, up-to-the-minute and as fresh as it can get. It is indeed a genuine summation of the author's writing and the themes he has been pursuing for decades. And it is exactly this conclusive character of the novel that this chapter seeks to investigate in order to demonstrate how *Underworld* expands and, in a sense, closes the picture of America that DeLillo was furnishing in the novels discussed in the previous chapters. How the general presentation of the postmodern condition from *White Noise* is amended here, how the conspiracy of *Libra* suddenly acquires a global aspect, how the doubts of Bill Gray and his unstable position as an artist are incarnated by *Underworld*'s practitioners of art; how the end of the millennium indeed brings to an end a momentous chapter in American

history. Obviously, closure in the sense LaClair understood it no longer holds , it is precluded, as a rule, by the multifariousness of themes, approaches, and systems that the novel portrays. And much as the novel is about the past entering the present, it also makes a rather gloomy prophecy about the future: the Twin Towers that the reader sees being erected throughout the course of the novel, are veiled in dark clouds on the cover of *Underworld*, with a bird-like/plane-like object flying toward them.

Much as it is difficult to encapsulate *Underworld*, it is not an easy task, either, to locate its main thematic focuses. What looks like an apparently critical path leads to many at first glance less significant tracks, establishing hardly awaited connections, strange juxtapositions, unexpected turns. It turns out, for instance, that such contradictory areas as "waste management" and "weapons management" have more in common than the reader may initially appreciate. Both are sustained by the same system of decision-makers, and the final metaphor of managing waste by means of nuclear weapons marks the culmination of this long-lived co-existence. Waste is an interesting example, because even the forms of garbage presented throughout the novel vary considerably. It is garbage that connects in *Underworld* every facet of life, exquisite garbage in the form of a baseball, "conspiracy" garbage in the form of heroin, hi-tech garbage in the form of atomic waste, or ordinary garbage in the form of shit: "waste is the secret history, the underhistory"(*U* 791). Orange juice, a product from *White Noise's* global supermarket,[24] is used in *Underworld* to remove graffiti from trains, thanks to the chemical substance that it contains; it appears that the substance of which orange juice consists is part of napalm used to such destructive effect in Vietnam; it is also an element of subliminal advertising campaign, whose main purpose is to control the customer by hitting his "eyeballs." Long Tall

[24] Mark Osteen argues in *American Magic* that the availability of orange juice across the U.S. – a product essentially not American – and the presence of it in practically every household, is a sign of global economy, where borders are marked by income levels rather than "traditional" boundaries. However, one may not buy Osteen's argument about orange juice not being American. Indeed maybe the first orange trees were imported into Florida from the tropics but for a century now Florida has been a major producer of oranges, grapefruit etc. Long before "globalization" oranges became domesticated in the U.S.

Sally is an old Cliff Richard song, a nose painting on a B-52 bomber, as well as a name of a large arts project that Klara Sax is carrying out in the desert.

However, despite the mesh of fine lines spun by the spinnerets of the novel, a scrutinizing eye will without doubt discover the major threads around which *Underworld* oscillates. Calling them the novel's major themes may be somewhat misleading, since none of them can be unanimously defined as *the* major theme; nor can the reader name the character in which DeLillo had invested most of his artistic energy, although Nick Shay does appear as most eminent. Both themes and characters, however, once they appear in the novel are instantly contextualized by the wide frame of references within which they are set. Klara's project of painting "retired" military bombers is a "consummation" of the disparate artistic utterances she has been exposed to throughout her whole life. Nick, for instance, would never make a round and plausible character were it not for his foil, his brother Matt Shay. Whereas Nick spends his youth shooting pool and harassing people, Matt is a prodigy chess player, a sort of intellectual wunderkind destined to be a scholar. The paths of the "thug" and the wizard will cross one day, landing the first in the waste management business, and the latter in weapons construction. Therefore, none of the themes presented in the novel should be considered definitively explored, and none of the characters absolutely developed. This clearly demonstrates the author's acknowledgment of his own cognitive limitations but also serves as an invitation to the reader to fill in the blanks himself or, at least, to comprehend that they are either "unfillable" or open to many "interpolations."

Much as any containments contradict the open structure of *Underworld*, some general foci of the novel will be distinguished here for the purpose of supplying this study with a frame of reference. Incomplete and somewhat artificial, they are the prominent areas that most critics single out for further discussion. They are also a good starting point for a more thorough and deeper investigation of the buried recesses that the novel brings back to life. The very title of the

novel, for instance, presupposes the existence of several nether regions, gangster networks, underground activities. It also alludes to the under- or counter-history that is being written in DeLillo's opus. The prologue of *Underworld* throws the reader into the middle of a baseball game, America's leisure pastime and obsession, as it will later appear. Another general theme that is in a sense an inseparable component of this alternative history or historiographic metafiction, as some would prefer to call it, is the recapitulation of the Cold War, whose convoluted mechanisms *Underworld* examines, questioning the deeply rooted dichotomies of "Us" and "Them." *Underworld* is about waste and the negative feedback on our culture that it produces, about outputs turning back into inputs and reversing the order of things, turning our civilization into one large landfill. It is about the media's appropriation and seizure of reality, which, consequently, transmutes events into dots and pixels, images devoid of any lasting influence. This theme, preying on DeLillo's mind ever since he started writing, is enlarged in the novel, to embrace all the latest technological findings that the media are eager to deploy. *Underworld* brings back the problem of art, and the artist's position in a world dominated by cultural terrorism and controlled by global patrons and publishers. More than ever before, art is now considered in strictly economic terms of preempting new markets, sustaining competitive advantage, and bringing high profits; an investment, in other words, like any other. *Underworld* turns a cold eye on the expansion of consumer culture, first making us want things and then stuffing us with them. A culture whose superfluity manifests itself in always better, newer, and more efficient condoms, washing machines, and cars, which DeLillo ironically labels "Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry"[25] (*U* 499). The novel also demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between products of consumer culture and products of the military industry, manufactured, not infrequently, in the same plants with the same technology. On a

[25] DuPont's advertising slogan, hiding the company's involvement in the production of many toxic chemicals.

more universal scale, *Underworld* revisits the notions of contemporary historiography or postmodern paranoia.

Apart from these "global" problems, which have long since crossed the borders of the United States, DeLillo's novel engages in a dialogue on several smaller and more intimate issues: the fact that "We're all gonna die," a recurrent *memento mori* repeated several times by *Underworld*'s jester Lenny Bruce; the sad conclusion that people's luck has been running out, represented by the ubiquitous appearance of number thirteen throughout the novel; the important assumption that "Longing on a large scale is what makes history," a motif that may clarify several of *Underworld*'s mysteries; and that, all in all, whatever we do is influenced by the mythologized past, from which we will never break free. This thought was already expressed by another modernist master, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, in the final paragraph of *The Great Gatsby*: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."[26]

Quite obviously the list drawn above does not fully explore the comprehensiveness of the novel, nor does it offer a structured approach to *Underworld*. Using the terms of contemporary computer jargon that DeLillo evokes in the final pages of his work, the novel resembles a relational data-base, which is normally represented in the form of a cube. The user, by means of an interface, a computer terminal, can access the specific data that he is seeking in the process of so-called direct sorting and also perform a number of *relational* operations, the purpose of which is to collect individual pieces of information that may together constitute a new piece in itself.[27] Concurrent access to such a database by multiple users is supported and the type of user's

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[26] Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993) 163. Joanne Gass draws an analogy between Nick Carraway and Nick Shay in her interesting essay "In the Nick of Time: DeLillo's Nick Shay, Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, and the Myth of the American Adam." For more details see Joanne Gass, "In the Nick of Time: DeLillo's Nick Shay, Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, and the Myth of the American Adam" in J. Dewey, G. Kellman and I. Malin ed, 114-129.

[27] For instance, a cellular phone company may be interested in a customer of a) certain income level, b) age group, c) with a preference for a certain product brand. This information can be retrieved individually and the query would be "List all customers earning more than $20,00 per year." When launching an advertising campaign for a fancy new Nokia phone for instance, the company may submit a query for a young, well-off sucker for gadgets. The system, having determined the relations between individual fields (income level, age, brand used) and combined them together, will generate a list of customers the company may be interested in.

operations may either be retrieval or update, or both. In this case, the user is the reader, the interface the novel, the data-base the novel's contents, the retrieval the information supplied by *Underworld*'s narrator, the update the relations the reader works out *himself* in the novel. Learning at one point that Nick Shay is having a series of trysts with his brother's teacher's wife and at another point that Nick's father had abandoned his family, the reader may conclude that the act is actually an embodiment of the Oedipus complex. Such synergy provides the reader with the most unanticipated discoveries, the more precious the more effort is invested into them.

One thing that the critical discourse fails to give due attention to, is *Underworld's* endeavor to summon up the world of the everyday and inconspicuous, places and people whose names will never go down in history. Not surprisingly, DeLillo himself believes he can save them from oblivion by commemorating their language: "And the prospect of recovering a nearly lost language, the idiom and scrappy slang of the postwar period, the writer's own lifetime but misted, much of it, in deep distance--what manias of anticipated pleasure this can summon."[28] Vince Passaro is one of the few critics who notices that under the thick deposits of the political and historical layers lie ordinary American people for whom the end of the Cold War did not restore the order for which they so desperately longed:

> And that's the final and all-important meaning of the title Underworld. DeLillo wants us to see the things beneath our eyes, right on the surface but below the fantasies we insist on looking at, ordinary life as it has expressed itself among the people of a nation involved in a prolonged technological fantasy war, a fifty-year piece of theater at the end of the twentieth century, played out in the masks of strategic nuclear weapons and machines of despoilment.[29]

"He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eyes that's halfway hopeful," begins the first line of *Underworld*, already concretising the novel's "undecidability" and equivocality as well as the tensions upon which it is built (*U* 11). The "he" who speaks *your* voice is Cotter Martin, a black kid from Harlem, who decided to skip

[28] DeLillo, 60.
[29] Passaro, 75.

school on this day in order to attend a baseball game. "Your language" is the language of the predominantly white audience of the game, whom the narrator addresses in his invocation. This is the first "Us" and "Them" division in America that the narrator examines, stressing that the distance between Harlem and the Polo Grounds is farther than anyone can imagine. John Duvall rightly observes that the remoteness of the these two spaces is irremediable rather than reformable, ironically presupposed by the kid's name:[30] "By beginning his novel with a focus on this African-American youth, DeLillo signals that American identity is in fact constituted by what it marks as the culturally abject; the racial Other, in other words, is crucial to rather than separate from such identity."[31] Cotter's apparent attempt to blend into the crowd is, at first sight, a success. He jumps the gate with several other black and white kids and then he develops a sort of rapport with the person he is sitting by: Bill Waterson, a white entrepreneur, skipped work in order to watch the game. Baseball unites people, it seems.

The other phrase that signals *Underworld's* main preoccupation is another magically enigmatic sentence, stating that "Longing on a large scale is what makes history" (*U* 11). The double meaning of the verb "long" signifies the novel's rewriting of the history of people's nostalgia for the past – the longing for "good old days" – as well as the search for the ball hit by Bobby Thomson, which turns into a search for characters' lost identity. The more the ball changes hands, the more personal attachments and stories it acquires, the greater its sentimental and thus material value. At the end of the day, Nick Shay pays a lot of money for the ball, and he would have paid much more had the seller been able to absolutely "prove" the ball's origin, the so called "lineage."

It is not pure accident that as the prologue of *Underworld* DeLillo should have decided to present a particular ball game played on a particular date at a particular place. The game, the famous third play-off game in the 1951 pennant race between the Giants and the

[30] Pointing to Cotton Mather, of course, who visualized American's "uniqueness" in his *Magnalia Christi Americana*.
[31] Duvall, 34.

Dodgers at the Polo Grounds, went down in the history of baseball and also America after Bobby Thomson's "last-minute" "homer" that reversed the course of the game, "sent the Dodgers home," and secured the Giants a place in World Series. Thomson's home run came eventually to be called "The Shot Heard Round the World."

The game of October 3, 1951, gathered quite a mixed crowd at the stadium, as sports events often do in the States. The "carnivalesque" character of the contest may be stressed by the presence of many major "players" of America's social and political life. Of course there were the usual fans, a nondescript crowd of "anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing bridge above the river," the supporters of both teams from every walk of life: "men in fedoras and sailors on shore leave" (*U* 11). But there were also the then contemporary "celebrities," agents of the two spheres that make America go round: politics and show business. The "White House" circles were represented by John Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI (1924-72) and the propagator of the new "scientific" methods of combating crime. The show biz crew consisted of Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, the star of the TV series *The Honeymooners*, and the famous New York barman Toots Shor. The person who is sitting in the broadcast booth and whose mass appeal will be explored later, is Russ Hodges, the Giants' radio commentator "airing" the game for fans listening to their wirelesses. As Duval rightly observes, their presence during the game turns it into an extraordinary and timeless event, the epitome of culture at large:

> All three strands work together to show how baseball serves in popular culture a function equivalent to T. S. Eliot's high-culture tradition: baseball, like Eliot's poetic tradition, is an aestheticized space that allows the reader/viewer to experience a sense of transcendence, a removal into a realm of the timeless and universal; in short, like Eliot's tradition, baseball's tradition is ahistorical.[32]

[32] John Duvall, "Baseball As Aesthetic Ideology: Cold War History, Race, and DeLillo's 'Pafko at the Wall,'" *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1995, Volume 41, 2: 292.

Of course the actual presence of all these figures at the game, despite DeLillo's solemn assurance[33] that all of them did attend it, cannot be taken too seriously. Rather, to follow Linda Hutcheon, it should draw the reader's attention to the "fragility" of so-called facts, whose ontological status quo is oftentimes established by written accounts of them, namely texts: "they juxtapose what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological question of the nature of historical knowledge. Which 'facts' make it into history? And whose facts?"[34] On the other hand, however, DeLillo's having them gather together at the Polo Grounds, a "comic and nostalgic" gesture, as John Duvall sees it in his article on baseball as aesthetic ideology,[35] seems to confirm the game's special status.

For the game is as important to the fans, as sport at large is to America. The special position held by various sports in the United States evokes the notion of the American Dream and the realization of the dream through athletic perfection.[36] Even the vocabulary used for particular sports events or performances – the World Series for baseball playoff or the World Championships for NBA games – indicates the uniqueness and exquisiteness of American sports. The very phrase professional sport used in America and the West is a paradox in itself; pastime and amusement, on the one hand and a deadly serious part of big business, on the other. However, as anything so uniquely American,[37] baseball is perceived by many countries as a form of America's cultural imperialism and a sign of its economic and cultural

[33] DeLillo said that he did manage to establish that all these characters were present during the game.
[34] Hutcheon, 71.
[35] Duvall, 286.
[36] Mark Osteen expands this list stating that "Baseball has long been associated – sometimes unconvincingly – with fundamental American myths and ideologies: rags-to-riches individualism, the relationship between fathers and sons, the demise of the pastoral, and most of all with a nostalgic desire to return home that is incorporated into the very structure of the game." (Osteen, 218)
[37] Played in other countries like Cuba and Japan, for instance, baseball is not typically seen as the *national* sport there; in the case of Japan it is sumo for instance, in the case of Cuba it is boxing. Even if it is, however, no one treats it as a form of cultural/imperial expansion, because of the simple fact that none of these countries is a superpower, whose growth threatens the cultural or political independence of other states.

hegemony. If the dominance of Hollywood movies sustained by advertising campaigns other countries cannot afford is a fact, if the McDonaldization of the world continues, should we not expect a "baseballization" of the earth soon? Exaggerated as they are, these remarks correspond with the connotations of baseball attached to the game by some Americans themselves, for whom baseball is clearly no longer an aesthetic domain, but a political one. In his revealing essay on the game, Duvall recalls a post-World War II discussion on the nature of the game in the media:

> The print media representing the interests of the middle class published articles on baseball that imply the following three interrelated points: 1) baseball is why we defeated Germany and Japan; 2) baseball is a justified form of cultural imperialism since the game embodies our democratic principles; thus, 3) baseball should be mobilized in the Cold War effort to help define America's difference from communism and the Soviet Union.[38]

Obviously no sports fan these days deems baseball and other games "innocent" and free from external influence. Sport, like art and other ostensibly "liberated" areas, is part of commerce.

This extraordinary game played at the Polo Grounds a half-century ago, however, seems to retain all the qualities of a "real" game, at least for the "real" fans who were there. Unlike them, however, Hoover is not there for the game only, but for the aura, a by-product of the game that the chronicles will save for posterity. "What's the nation's number one G-Man doing with these crumbums?" asks the narrator, and the answer echoes the true explanation for Edgar's being there: "He likes to be around movie idols and celebrity athletes. […] fame and secrecy are the high and low ends of the same fascination, the static crackle of some libidinous thing in the world…." (*U* 17). As it turns out, for Hoover presence at the game is a way of keeping things under control, checking the pulse of the country, and updating his infinite files. He'd much rather be somewhere else, "at the racetrack" for instance, but feels,

[38] Duvall, 288. For more details, see Duvall's "Baseball As Aesthetic Ideology: Cold War History, Race, and DeLillo's 'Pafko at the Wall.'"

simultaneously, that such a gathering may give him a significant insight into people's lives: "He wants to be their dearly devoted friend provided their hidden lives are in his private files, all the rumors collected and indexed, the shadow facts made real" (*U* 17).

Hoover is portrayed in *Underworld* as someone who translates his personal fears, phobias, and beliefs into a system of controlling others, sustained by the power he possesses. A careful reader will without trouble recognize his impulses and actions as fascist, absolutely undemocratic. Duvall does not hesitate to call Hoover the Himmler of post-war America: "In 1951, Hoover was the chief of what amounted to a kinder, gentler American Gestapo, a secret police with almost unchecked power to use electronic surveillance to spy on American citizens."[39]

But whereas some of the critics see him as a real "master" of *Underworld*, thanks to his access to multi-layered strata of information and his ability to control it, in fact he does not translate this knowledge into meaningful and creative actions. He is a collector, whose obsession is possessing information. A double of the character of Jack Gladney, who believes that the size and number of possessions will protect him from his deepest fears. Here Hoover's personal fears coincide with McCarthy's panic, which led to the notorious investigations of alleged Communist infiltration of the U.S. government. But without Hoover, McCarthy would never have been able to effectuate his paranoia. They are partners, hand in glove.

Hoover's position and intelligence, however, may sometimes be a serious burden for him, making him the best informed public person in the U.S. and the most solitary citizen of the country. During the game at the Polo Grounds he is suddenly made aware of his precarious situation when one of his aides informs Hoover that the Soviets have exploded their second atomic bomb in Kazakhstan. The moment he learns the news is reminiscent of

[39] Duvall, 294-295.

those suspense flashes in a movie when the music suddenly goes down and the audience is able to predict that something terrible is on the verge of happening. Not accidentally, the whole situation is taking place at the moment of Ralph Branca's home run pitch to Thomson, the culmination of the game proper. While both Gleason and Sinatra are still having a "good time" – Gleason "puking up" the hotdogs he'd devoured and Sinatra trying to avoid being "puked upon" – Hoover catches a torn page thrown like confettiti by a fan cheering his team. The page, a scrap from *Life* magazine, epitomizes the prologue's title, "The Triumph of Death," and annotates the beginning of a new deadly game, the Cold War:

> It is a color reproduction of a painting crowded with medieval figures who are dying or dead – a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin. Edgar has never seen a painting quite like this. Across the red-brown earth, skeleton armies on the march. Men impaled on lances, hung from gibbets, drawn on spoked wheels fixed to the tops of bare trees. Legions of the dead forming up behind shields made of coffin lids. Death himself astride a slat-ribbed hack, he is peaked for blood, his scythe held ready as he presses people in haunted swarms toward the entrance of some helltrap, an oddly modern construction that could be a subway tunnel or office corridor. […] he can't take his eyes off the page. (*U* 41)

Hoover cannot take his eyes off the reproduction of Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death,* and he cannot follow the game any longer, either. Bruegel's painting establishes a logical link between the news he has just received and the likely consequences of a nuclear war. At the same time Hoover is mesmerized by the sight – "Edgar loves this stuff. Admit it – you love it" – as he witnesses history in the making and himself becoming part of history (*U* 41). This gives him the feeling that he is in control of things, a chosen one admitted to the highest secrets.

However, when he later catches another scrap from *Life* with the missing part of the picture, presenting even more atrocious scenes and making Hoover think of the Kazakh Test Site, the director begins to appreciate that his power is but illusive and that he will never fully investigate the history that he himself has been contributing to:

> What secret history are they writing? There is the secret of the bomb and there are the secrets that the bomb inspires, things even the director cannot guess – a man whose own sequestered heart holds every festering secret in the Western world – because these plots are only now evolving. This is what he knows, that the genius of the bomb is printed not only in its physics of particles and rays but in the occasion it creates for new secrets. For every atmospheric blast, every glimpse we get of the bared force of nature, that weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert – for every one of these he reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein (*U* 51).

Hoover is to learn one more thing from his experience, namely that the division into "Us" and "Them" has acquired a completely new dimension since the Soviets blew up the bomb: "And what is the connection between Us and Them, how many bundled links do we find in the neural labyrinth? You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to deep completion"(*U* 51). Having mastered nuclear weapons, the Soviets have more in common with Americans now than they had before. The arms race "unites" both countries, and its intensification promises "real" battlefields, even more startling than those of Bruegel.

Hoover's sense of history in the making is shared by the ignorant crowd, for whom, however, it is the players who are writing history. But there is also one more historian – "the radio voice of the Giants"[40] – Russ Hodges, whose broadcasting of the game could well be called a fabricating of a myth. Feeling himself that the game he is watching is a special one, Hodges must do his best to distinguish it from other, less noteworthy games he has broadcast. If he gave his listeners facts only – a bunch of dry statistics and the score – the game would never stand out from other matches. Having been taken by his father to watch the Dempsey-Willard fight in Toledo, Hodges believes in the power of the media to actually stage and create events: "When you see a thing like that, a thing that becomes a newsreel, you begin to feel you are a carrier of some solemn scrap of history"(*U* 16). Knowing that his listeners can only "see" what they hear, Hodges uses his old strategy, honed in the days before he became the Giants' broadcaster, of making up his *own* games: "I spent years in a studio doing re-creations of big league games. The telegraph bug clacking in the background and

[40] Duvall, 292.

blabbermouth Hodges inventing ninety-nine percent of the action" (*U* 25). He says he is doing it with a view to his listeners' getting a kick out of the game and feeling part of it. "Shameless, ain't I," he adds at one point and indeed he looks unblushing[41] (*U* 26). Such broadcasting of the Giants vs. Dodgers game turns it into a Russ Hodges game, a figment of his imagination and an embodiment of his personal passion for the event: "He thinks everybody who's here ought to feel lucky because something big's in the works, something building" (*U* 15). His orgasmic repetition of the phrase "The Giants win the pennant," provides his commentary with a quality of a prayer or chanting and already repeats the moment for future fans. It has very little to do with the actual game and its course. Examining the event one may then be tempted to ask the question which Murray Siskind has already posed in *White Noise*, "What was the game like before it was broadcast by Russ Hodges?" Whereas no convincing answer may be given to this inquiry, one thing can be stated for sure: that by celebrating what one believes the game was and what in fact is Hodges's subjective account of the game, it is not the game that one glorifies but the verbal acrobatics of the commentator. To refer once again to *White Noise*, asking questions about the nature of various *mediated* events, "we can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura"[42] (*WN* 12-13). Like "the most photographed barn" in *White Noise*, the game at the Polo Grounds is an example of Baudrillard's simulacrum.

The notion of a copy without original is further problematized by DeLillo by his "deconstruction" of the myth-creating methods, as presented in *Underworld*. Hodges's broadcast of the game was not "challenged" by television, whose range and appeal in 1951

[41] Of course, these days providing sports commentaries with some extra information seems *de rigueur*. It is practiced on television as well as on the radio.
[42] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 12-13.

were not as dominant as they became later.[43] Hodges's broadcast, as the reader learns in the course of the novel, was taped by a fan, and this turned out to be the only recording of the game. The recording becomes then part of the aura of unreleased tapes, postmortem releases, bootlegged versions, amateur footage, and all types of underground productions, where the form – the feeling that the customer has access to a special secret others do not share – is often more important than the contents. Such objects become aesthetic designs or, at least, cultural artefacts, where stories attached to them increase the sentimental value of these "memorabilia." And it is the media, as *Cocksucker Blues* or the Zapruder footage will demonstrate later, that creates and sustains the aura.

The celebration *after* the game, further raises the status of what, it should be clear now, is not purely a sports event. The spontaneous reactions of fans "climbing lampposts on Amsterdam Avenue, tooting car horns in Little Italy," will eventually come to stand for one of the country's last natural gatherings, America's uniting moments when people went outdoors (*U* 59). As the narrator observes later, momentous future events consolidating Americans – like Kennedy's assassination – made people stay in, rather than go out; stay in, apparently, to watch television. The celebration is then the *last* such celebration, a symbolic moment of innocence on the verge of being lost, a legendary time when Russian missiles did not loom over the American sky. DeLillo, somewhat ironically it seems, turns the fans' joy into a serious spectacle of history in the writing: "Isn't it possible, that this mid-century 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* 60). Indeed it does, yet what enters the skin is a vague semblance of the event proper separated from the "real thing." People falling into the trap of longing for auras are like Gatsby longing for his Daisy; it is not a woman with money in her voice that he is pursuing, but his ideal and dream.

[43] However, DeLillo said in an interview that the game was in fact televised. Commenting on the footage, he stressed that it looked like a pre-war black-and-white silent movie.

Because, as DeLillo stresses in the last line of the prologue, "It is all falling indelibly into the past" (*U* 60).

The famous press coverage of the game does not detract from its already extraordinary character, just the reverse, it nurtures the aura that Hodges began to fabricate. The front page of *New York Times* is divided into two halves, which discuss the two important events that took place the previous day:[44]

> The front page astonished him, a pair of three-column headlines dominating. To his left the Giants capture the pennant, beating the Dodgers on a dramatic home run in the ninth inning. And to the right, symmetrically mated, same typeface, same-size type, same number of lines, the USSR explodes an atomic bomb – *kaboom* – details kept secret. (*U* 668)

Both events are, it seems, of almost equal importance,[45] and such a juxtaposition may be explained by the editor's being unaware of the actual weight of the information put in the right column; on the other hand, however, such layout of the page may represent a symbolic border between the past and the present, peace and war, joy and gloom. What is characteristic of people's reactions to the two articles is a lack of proper separation between their significance. A discussion between two "savants," Albert Bronzini, a science teacher and Andrew Paulus, a Harvard-educated church scholar, is illustrative of this disorientation:

> "Did you see the paper, Father? "
> "Yes, I stole a long look at someone's Daily News. They're calling it the Shot Heard Round the World."
> "How did we detect evidence of the blast, I wonder. We must have aircraft flying near their borders with instruments that measure radiation. Or well-placed agents perhaps."
> "No no no no. We're speaking about the home run. The tabloids have dubbed it for posterity."

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[44] Examining the newspaper Duvall discovers the third major story featured on the front page, pointing to the connectedness of things that DeLillo stresses so much in *Underworld*: "It may be useful to note here the third major story on the front page of the *New York Times* the day after the big game: under the headline of the Giants' win is a photo of Leo Durocher hugging Bobby Thomson; balancing the page, under the headline of the Soviet blast is a photo of Philip Jessup denying Senator Joseph McCarthy's charges of communist sympathies at a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee. The Dodgers-Giants game is played a year and half after McCarthy's famous charges about the 205 Communists working in the State Department. McCarthy's biggest problem, of course, was that he had no list and so turned to Hoover, a friend since he arrived in Washington in 1947, for help in keeping the issue alive." (Duvall, 295)

[45] In fact, the right column above the fold is where the *New York Times* always places its most important story.

> "The Shot Heard Round the World? Is the rest of the world all that interested? This is baseball. I was barely aware. I myself barely knew that something was going on. Heard round the world? I almost missed it completely." (*U* 69-670)

Paulus verbalizes a typically American interest in the local and close and the proverbial ignorance of more universal matters. Bronzini, on the other hand, crosses the boundaries of his Bronx walks, representing a much broader viewpoint. It is not accidental then that DeLillo makes him a solitary person, whose wife betrays him with a sweaty blue-collar macho youth and eventually walks out on him.

The discussion above proves that baseball at large escapes easy categorizations and that the particular game played at the Polo Grounds on October 3, 1951, has merged with various other cultural "games" that create the mythos of America. Much of its appeal resides in the areas of the unspeakable, of intuitive overtones rather than facts. Years later, DeLillo invites the reader to watch another Dodgers vs. Giants game, played this time in California, where the teams had been transplanted by their capitalist owners. The sense of displacement is exacerbated by a glass separating Nick Shay and his companions from the game. When trying to explain baseball to a BBC correspondent – who, in her ignorance of the basic rules, undoubtedly feels like many of *Underworld*'s readers – Nick and his friends are actually at a loss for words and resemble "three mathematicians so lost in their highly refined work that they haven't noticed how quaint and opaque the terminology is, how double-meaning'd" (*U* 93). But even Sims, someone who is American and loves baseball, needs to be told about "the old Brooklyn Dodgers" simply because "No one could explain the Dodgers who wasn't there" (*U* 93). And no one is able to trace all the connections that the famous game has established.

As a matter of fact even the seemingly redeeming aura of baseball, the mixed crowd in the stadium where the racial differences are blurred by the feeling of fan fraternity, is subverted by DeLillo right after the game, when Cotter Martin walks away from the stadium

with the famous ball that he managed to rescue from the stands. As it turns out, he wrestled it from his partner in "indiligence," Bill Waterson, who then tries to "retrieve" the ball from Cotter by offering him financial incentives. Cotter is tempted to run away from him, yet he realizes that running would instantly single him out from the white crowd. A running black boy means, as a rule, an offence or misdeed: "But if he starts running at this point, what we have is a black kid running in a mainly white crowd and he's being followed by a pair of irate whites yelling thief or grief or something" (*U* 52). Eventually Bill renounces his mask of a good buddy and addresses Cotter in racially charged speech, claiming that Cotter had no right to lay his hand on the ball, because of the very fact that he comes from an underprivileged group: "I look at you scrunched up in your seat and I thought I'd found a pal. This is a baseball fan, I thought, not some delinquent in the streets. You seem to be dead set on disappointing me. Cotter? Buddies sit down and work things out" (*U* 56). Then he becomes more categorical, hardly masking his "Us" and "Them" demeanor: "I want that cotton-pickin' ball. Hey goofus I'm talking to you. You maybe think this is some cheapo entertainment" (*U* 56). Clearly, the initial comradely spirit of the game is lost in this encounter.

A careful reader should also notice that DeLillo's account itself is a meta-fictional addition to the aura the game has been casting. However, like Robert Coover or John Barth commenting upon the nature of the fiction-making process – DeLillo throws the mask off the myth-making mechanisms deployed here. The fact that he debunks the pretensions and falseness of such myths already in the prologue, should help the reader approach the subsequent parts with his eyes peeled for similar traps. As may be anticipated, baseball's recurrence in later chapters will be frequent and significant and, again, doubled with meaning. Few critics seem to have noticed, that whereas the game's main heroes – Thomson and Branca – are "abducted" by the public sphere, appearing side by side with famous politicians and heads of state, the search for the ball that Bobby hit sets the reader on a cross-national,

cross-social, and cross-time trip, a tour de force of post-war America. It gives the reader an insight into poor black districts, suburban houses of freak collectors, underground memorabilia stores – namely the most intimate and *private* recesses of American life. DeLillo fills up those passages with an exhaustive catalogue of American characters or, as some prefer, voices.

Even with DeLillo's help, however, tracing the ball is a hard task because there are gaps that will never be bridged. It may be very rewarding, though, since the ball, on the one hand, epitomizes the game of baseball: "this five-ounce sphere of cork, rubber, yarn, horsehide and spiral stitching, a souvenir baseball, a priceless thing somehow, a thing that seems to recapitulate the whole history of the game every time it is thrown or it or touched" (*U* 26). On the other hand, however, throughout the novel it becomes a priceless repository of its subsequent owners' stories, a private record of personal successes and failures. The first "owner" of the sacred souvenir is Cotter Martin whose chances of holding onto the ball, given his social under-position, are almost none. It is his father, Manx Martin, who steals it from the boy the day he brought it home, mumbling the cynical words under his nose: "They obtain a valuable thing and don't even bother to hide it. Protect what's yours" (*U* 149). Manx, a drunkard and a bum, wants to sell the ball yet he realizes no one will believe him when he claims that this is *the ball*. His ploy works out in the end, when he approaches fans queuing for World Series tickets at Yankee Stadium. He locates a father and a son standing together and targets them as his potential customers, hoping against hope the father will buy the ball for the son to strengthen the family ties. Indeed Charles Wainwright purchases it, paying $ 32.45. His son, however, does not seem to be particularly interested in the new toy, and all he wants to do is go to sleep. The moment he sells the ball Manx realizes that his tactic of finding a father and a son and trading it to them has weakened his own family ties, alienating

him from his own son: “He feels the familiar stab of betrayal. The baseball’s bound to appreciate is the word. And the cash be worth less by the minute” (*U* 654).

Cotter and his father disappear from *Underworld* at that point, which may symbolically represent the scarce existence of men of color in American history. Mark Osteen, quite rightly, treats this vanishing point as an erasure of African-Americans from official records: “Manx’s internal exile further represents not only the fragmentation of families and community, but also the specific economic and social trauma of African-American men and their erasure from official records.”[46] Wainwright, the new owner of the ball, will later give it to his son, which clearly represents the opposite of Manx’s stealing it from Cotter.

Wainwright is the first character in *Underworld* who begins treating the ball with reference and imbuing it with his own personal meanings. He puts it on the credenza in his office and almost prays to it as Queequeq in *Moby Dick* used to pray to his pagan god. For Wainwright, the ball is in a sense something that represents his ties with reality – “yes, the baseball that marked him as a regular fellow with a soft streak despite his milled-steel veneer” – and is a metaphor for the fatherly love that he has for his son: “yes, the baseball he dearly wanted to entrust to his son Chuckie” (*U* 530-531). He notices that Chuckie has gone a bit astray in the meantime and has become “[an] aimless wayward aging kid, a displaced person in his own life” (*U* 531). But Charlie hopes that giving the ball to the boy will somehow resolve these problems and will become an act of hereditary succession. Chuckie gets the ball but then loses it, in what looks like DeLillo’s symbolic shift of focus. He regrets breaking the link that his father tried to establish – “a gift, a peace offering, a form of desperate love and a spiritual hand-me-down” – but cannot help observing that “Bobby Thomson and Ralph Branca meant nothing to him” (*U* 611). Chuckie is a navigator on the B-52 bomber, whose

[46] Osteen, 231.

nose painting of a woman called Long Tall Sally recurs several times in the novel, and his lack of interest in the ball suggests that the nostalgic aura that the ball creates is deactivated by the actuality of the napalm raids they are making. The bomb displaces the ball, at least for Churckie.

Chuckie is the missing link in the almost paranoid search for evidence of *Underworld*'s most notorious memorabilia man, Marvin Lundy. As it turns out, Lundy cares not for the ball only and its sentimental residue, but also for the human moss it has gathered throughout all these years. "What good's a story without an ending?," asks his wife, and Lundy will do his best to complete the story (*U* 314). It is Lundy who proves that the high price people are ready to pay for the souvenir does not have to do with the mythical homer it was part of. On the contrary, it is the weight of human attachments to it – the hands that touched, the places it was taken to, the people it "saw" – that determine the actual value of the object:

> The ball brought no luck, good or bad. It was an object passing through. But it inspired people to tell him things, to entrust family secrets and unbreathable personal tales, emit heartful sobs onto his shoulder. Because they knew he was their what, their medium of release. Their stories would be exalted, absorbed by something larger, the long arching journey of the baseball itself and is own cockeyed march through the decades. (*U* 318)

By having their stories heard and memorized by other people, the ball's owners become part of history themselves and are saved from oblivion. Actually, the *story* of the ball that Lundy tells Brian Glassic, when the entrepreneur visits him on an impulse having read Lundy's story in an airline magazine, is a story of his life and a history of the places and countries he has visited. This human touch that the ball radiates will be later supplemented by yet another meaning that the object has for Nick Shay.

Lundy's search for the ball introduces the reader to the psychic world of "collector's item" people, "antiquated" figures who can spend the whole day waiting for customers in

their underground stores and yet never be disheartened if customers do not turn up. They sell all types of memorabilia, ranging from old newspapers to sex movies to famous people's garbage. Lundy believes that such "researches" may be more than elucidating, since they help us to determine who we really are: "[…] you could flow through the zone, finding out who you were by your attachments, slice by slice, tasting the deli specials of the street. You were defined by your fixation" (*U* 319). The locations and names of those places – "Conspiracy Theory Café" – seem to imply that the whole business is underground rather than mainstream, clandestine rather than manifest. The catalog of peculiarities includes apparel made from skins of strange animals, tapes of people's conversations, autopsy photos; all predecessors of the memorabilia for which people these days pay exorbitant prices. An ardent believer in all types of conspiracy theories – "And there was a back room, because isn't there always a back room" – Lundy pierces the emblematic character of all these oldies searching for his personal blank spaces (*U* 320). The "small rooms" mentioned above echo, of course, *Libra* and its treatment of conspiracies: "Men in small rooms. Men reading and waiting, struggling with secret and feverish ideas." (*L* 41) Lundy's final epiphany, however, comes not from underground stories but from a seemingly "innocent" conversation with Nick Shay, who is interested in purchasing the ball despite the missing link in its provenance. Nick does not give "aficionado" answers to Lundy's questions, as the latter could expect from a devoted fan. Shay says that he is not a fan anymore and that he does not exactly know why he wants to buy the ball. As a matter of fact he does, as is explained somewhere else in the novel. For him the ball is not about Bobby Thomson's fantastic home run, a victory, but about the other member of the duo, Ralph Branca, who gave up the run. The ball personifies losing then, a sad embodiment of Shay's own life: seducing his brother's teacher's wife, shooting a man, and then finally being cuckolded by his friend Brian Glassic. Nick says "I didn't buy the object for the glory and drama attached to it. It's not about Thomson making the homer. It's

about Branca making the pitch. It's about losing" (*U* 97). When Shay says he is not sure why he wants the ball so badly, Lundy suddenly appreciates what the real value of memorabilia is for him:

> For years he didn't know why he was chasing down exhausted objects. All that frantic passion for a baseball and he finally understood it was Eleanor on his mind, it was some terror working deep beneath the skin that made him gather up things, amass possessions and effects against the dark shape of some unshoulderable loss. Memorabilia. What he remembered, what lived in the old smoked leather of the catcher's mitt in the basement was the touch of his Eleanor, those were his wife's eyes in the oval photographs of men with handlebar mustaches. The state of loss, the fact, the facticity in its lonely length. This was a word he never thought he'd need to use but here it was, crouched for years in his secluded brain, coming out to elongate loss. (*U* 192)

In his conversation earlier with Brian Glassic Lundy compares the ball to "the radioactive core" of the atomic bomb; then he adds that it has openings for "human waste to detour," to conclude that he himself has a "mushroom-shaped tumor" (*U* 172; 191; 192). The ball is then a reminder and carrier of human troubles as well as the atomic spirit of the epoch dominated by the two blasts. It seems that Nick Shay wants to buy it to remember the past which, painful as it was, shaped him as a man. The price he finally pays for the ball is a thousand times the price Charles Wainwright paid to Manx Martin.

As was mentioned earlier, whereas by following the ball the reader follows the trajectory of personal fates, by following the main players, Branca and Thomson, he is allowed to take a peep at the actual rulers of the contemporary world. The appropriation of baseball and sports in general by the world of politics is not hard to account for and, according to DeLillo, has continued for decades now. In a clear attempt to capitalize on the athletes' success, politicians also "raise" sportsmen's social status, by posing in photographs with them and making sports further cross the borders of the pitch and stadium. Interestingly, it is athletes who seem to benefit more from this parasitic symbiosis. In *Underworld* we get snapshots of Thomson and Branca accompanied by or, rather, accompanying presidents Bush,

Reagan, Carter, Nixon, and Eisenhower. Grey-haired by the time they met Bush Senior, they are "the longest-running act in show business" (*U* 98). Effigies of nostalgia and capitalism.

DeLillo's treatment of baseball, his home run bringing the reader home to the end of the 20th century, illustrates both the aura and the ambiguities that are inseparably connected with the game. Warning the reader of all the misconceptions that people may have about the game and the process of turning sports into mythology, DeLillo does not seem to perceive the universal appeal of baseball as a major threat to the well-being of America. What certainly arises as such a menace in *Underworld* is waste, whose taking over of the American landscape is as alarming as it is oftentimes ignored. DeLillo's starting point for a discussion of waste is his conviction, repeated several times in the novel, that we no longer manage waste but are managed by it: "Look how they come back to us, alight with a kind of brave aging" (*U* 809). America has become then one massive landfill whose borders are constantly expanding, a ludicrous imitation of the trash compactor from *White Noise* standing as a warning against all types of rubbish – material, information, and psychic – piling up in the lives of Americans. The various forms of waste described in the novel – ranging from "innocent" garbage to heroin (shit) to radioactive material from nuclear explosions – epitomize particular stages of waste's development in America after the war. They are logical consequences of the country's economic growth, linked to the strategy of the Cold War drawn by the U.S. government and to the outburst of insatiable consumerism which started in the 1950s. Like everything in *Underworld*, waste is coherent and intelligible.[47]

DeLillo imposes his own frame on the treatment of waste, beginning with the "conventional" garbage dominating the prologue of *Underworld*. Such conventional rubbish represents the times when the threat of radioactive fallout was still in America's future, and

[47] Molly Wallace makes an interesting remark about America's consumer culture: "This focus on the American economy was inextricably caught up with the question of national identity. In the face of an enemy defined primarily by its differing economic system, celebration of the American economy was virtually mandatory." Wallace, 368.

people were not afraid to go out. Filthy as it is, such trash is removable and manageable, absolutely harmless to people. The passage in which fans are throwing different objects onto the field exposes both the fans' joy and the main accessories of the popular culture. The narrator calls it "happy garbage," pointing to its inherently innocuous nature:

> But the paper keeps falling. If the early paper waves were slightly hostile and mocking, and the middle waves a form of fan commonality, then this last demonstration has a softness, a selfness. It is coming down from all points, laundry tickets, envelopes swiped from the office, there are crushed cigarette packs and sticky wrap from icecream 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 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 streams (*U* 44).

Garbage is here personal belongings rather than displaced objects, the fans' contribution to the game proper; no one feels threatened by the falling objects, tokens of personal satisfaction with the result of the game.

A completely reversed situation is presented in the novels' epilogue, when Nick and Brian take a trip to Kazakhstan, the test site of Russia's first atomic explosions. Accompanied by representatives of various world institutions, they set out to see a test of a potential application of nuclear energy for destroying hazardous waste. John Duvall sees this event as one of the most disconcerting consequences of the end of the Cold War: "The losers of the Cold War will 'clean up' by literally cleaning up for the winners."[48] All these years of waste's development as a side product of consumer culture have led to a situation where the only way to curb its abnormal and uncontrolled spread is to apply the most destructive weapon that the human has at his disposal. By having them observe the test at the infamous Kazakh site, DeLillo brings the reader full circle, bridging the October 3, 1951 game and the

[48] Duvall, 66.

message Hoover gets from his aide, with the late 1990s. The "in-between" sections describe how waste developed from fans' "happy garbage" into numerous airborne, ground, and subterranean "toxic events."

The chief engineer of waste in *Underworld* is Nick Shay, whose passage from the rags of his earlier adolescent life to the riches of waste management DeLillo never really explains. This is yet another missing link in the novel that the reader is encouraged to complete by giving free rein to his imagination. Although the parallels between Shay and Jack Gladney from *White Noise* may at first glance look remote, it is conceivable that choosing a career in waste management is Nick's own self-protective measure, helping him come to terms with the waste of his own life. Gladney invents the Hitler Studies department in order to hide his own fear of death behind the atrocities committed by Hitler. Both men look similar, heavy-set and big, as if weight was another means of self-defence. Both are cuckolded in the novels, both have wives using drugs and both confront their wives' lovers at the end of *Underworld* and *White Noise* in semi-ironic, semi-cinematic conventions. Both seem to realize, eventually, that neither Hitler nor waste can save them from the ups and downs of everyday life.

Garbage in *Underworld* increases in size and develops throughout individual sections, assuming increasingly advanced forms and occupying more and more space. In order to trace its expansion, the chronological order of the novel will be restored in this part with a view to providing the reader with a more or less systematic purchase on garbage.

After the prologue in which happy fans celebrate their team's victory throwing various personal scraps in the air, garbage is mentioned in "Manx Martin," the part which *chronologically* follows the prologue. Here, garbage is foul and stinky as it can be – "the stink is killing him, lifting him out of the insulated state of a day's slow whiskey burn" – yet it is still the regular garbage we are used to, kept in paper bags, cardboard boxes, and metal cans. (*U* 363). Hours after the Cold War started, of which Manx, for instance, can hardly be aware,

waste is not a problem yet; it can be contained and boxed, which implies that it is still the human who manages it, rather than the opposite.

However, in the next part, "Arrangement in Gray and Black: Fall 1951 – Summer 1952" – the presence of garbage begins to grow and is no longer confined to waste containers. Reminiscing with other card players about the times he spent working as a janitor, Albert Bronzini observes that garbage was everywhere: "in large apartment buildings, elevators, doormen, dry cleaning delivered, taxis left and right" (*U* 766). At this point he also mentions the method of garbage disposals used by the ancient Mayans, who would bury their trash with their dead. His remarks foreshadow massive landfills that will fill large portions of the American landscape in the subsequent parts of *Underworld.*

In "Cocksucker Blues: Summer 1974," garbage is still "conventional," i.e. no radioactive substances are mentioned, yet it is no longer completely manageable. There is a strike of garbage collectors, and stacks of black bags – a nuisance to city inhabitants – fill the streets of New York; those who tried to remove them from there, almost get beaten to death by the angry strikers. The treatment of waste in this chapter seems to be a warning that, if mismanaged, garbage may become a menacing indication of some biological disaster at hand. The pungent reek of the garbage in the streets almost etherizes the dwellers: "a smell so summer-lush it enveloped the whole body, pressing in like a weather system" (*U* 376).

It is the next section – "The Cloud of the Unknowing: Spring 1978" – where the presence of waste in its different forms suddenly culminates, reaching larger and larger areas of American life. It is also in this section that Jesse Detwiler, a garbage archaeologist, tries to explain the undergrounds of waste management. Detwiler embodies two interesting features of American mentality, the first one being the conviction that everything can be studied, researched, and turned into scientific reports. In his "close reading" of garbage, he is a bit like Nicholas Branch, the CIA archivist from *Libra*, writing the secret history of the

assassination of President Kennedy. But whereas Branch is commissioned to do the job by an official government agency and still shares with the reader many of his doubts about the quality of the data he was given, Detwiler himself subscribes to the conspiracy theory, by which so many American mysteries are explained. He says that "waste is the best-kept secret in the world," and whether he is right or wrong (he probably *is* right), the fact that he says those words is significant. For conspiracy theories usually surround momentous events, information about which the public fears is being purposefully withheld by official agencies. Of course, as in the case of baseball, such theories create auras rather than recreate events proper, yet it may not do to dismiss them completely. Detwiler's controversial statement, that civilization was built as a response to garbage, as a form of self-defense, is a metaphor for America being surrounded by multiple layers of consumer waste. Garbage, it seems, strikes back: "Garbage always got layered over or pushed to the edges, in a room or in a landscape. But it had its own momentum. It pushed back. It pushed into every space available, dictating construction patterns and altering systems of rituals. And it produced rats and paranoia" (*U* 287). The weight of these words is emphasized by Nick Shay's own epiphany about waste, by his finally absorbing the power of garbage:

> We stood above a hole in the earth, an engineered crater five hundred feet deep, maybe a mile across, strewn with snub-nosed machines along the terraced stretches and covered across much of the sloped bottom by the immense shimmering sheet, a polyethylene skin, silvery blue, that caught cloudmotion and rolled in the wind. I was taken by surprise. The sight of this thing, the enormous gauged bowl lined with artful plastic, was the first material sign I'd had that this was a business of a certain drastic grandeur, even a kind of greatness, maybe – the red-tailed hawks transparent in the setting sun and the spring stalks of yucca tall as wishing wands and this high density membrane that was oddly and equally beautiful in way, a prophylactic device, a gas control system, and the crater it layered that would accept thousands of tons of garbage a day, your trash and mine, for desert burial. (*U* 285)

Not yet lethal at that point, garbage belongs to the future and will one day fill the landfills to their very brims. This is what Detwiler believes will happen, making another futuristic prediction. He surmises that one day such sites will attract sightseers from all over

the country, travelers in search of spectacular tourist attractions: "The more toxic the waste, the greater the effort and expense a tourist will be willing to tolerate in order to visit the site" (*U* 286). Detwiler does not add that such trip may be a regressive journey into the history of human waste.

The section also describes some underground practices of dumping waste in less developed countries. Typically, a country is offered a fee – "four times its gross national product" – and then toxic waste gets dumped on it (*U* 278). No one knows and no one wants to know what happens with that waste. The section finishes on a sad note when one of the characters states that "all waste defers to shit," and when the omnipresence of waste becomes more than clear to its managers: they see it on people's plates, in restaurants and ashtrays (*U* 302). Whereas the prologue of *Underworld* is called "The Triumph of Death," this section could well be titled "The Triumph of Waste."

In the following part "Elegy for Left Hand Alone: Mid-1980s-Early 1990s," Brian Glassic's experiences the sort of epiphany Nick went through in the previous section. His revelation, however, turns into knowledge when he realizes that the waste he deals in is not meaningless objects but something that resembles a history of people:

> 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)

In this section waste is already *organic*, living its own life independent of the lives of the people who generated it. It keeps developing and growing, forming what will eventually be, according to Brian, the highest mountain on the Atlantic Coast. The reader is also introduced to the whole layers of what will be called here urban waste. In New York, such repository of the epoch's rubbish consists of vandalized cars, used packages, and all types of debris. But there is also the human waste, people taking *shit* – which is one of the names for heroin – and

turning themselves into human rubbish. There are people with AIDS, TB, measles, asthma, and so forth. There is what the narrator calls "hospital waste, laboratory waste": "nonbabies of abortion, a cosmic cloud of slushed fetuses floating in the rings of Saturn, and babies born without immune systems, bubble children raised by computer, and babies born addicted" (*U* 246). This is the reality of the Bronx, the wasteland of America.[49]

The last chronological section on waste before the epilogue already sees it as something that has acquired an aura of solemnity and ubiquity. This makes Nick believe that the business he is working in is almost a religious matter and that they are "cosmologists of waste" (*U* 88). This special status of waste, marked by the deadly hazards that it poses, seems to finally imply that we no longer ignore it: "It is necessary to respect what we discard" (*U* 88). The tomb built in this section for contaminated waste completes the picture of the waste pyramid, presented in the previous part. Waste is one of the most significant connections that the reader establishes between *Underworld*'s major preoccupations and the novel's title:

> We build pyramids of waste above and below the earth. The more hazardous the waste, the deeper we tried to sink it. The word plutonium comes from Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld. They took him out to the marshes and wasted him as we say today, or used to say until it got changed to something else. (*U* 106)

Sacred as it may be for Shay, waste becomes, particularly in the last part and the epilogue, a commodity that can be traded, exchanged, dumped, and, finally, exploded by means of an atomic bomb. After the end of the Cold War there are no borders, prohibitions, and old sentimental attachments. It is "Das Kapital" that rules the world, the merciless law of the market economy. Having taken years to establish his position as a waste manager and recognize its "prestige," Nick has to deal now with ruthless Russian capitalism, a product of America's urging Russia to free its markets. It is really difficult to say which Russia is worse,

[49] Paul Gleason further explores the analogies between DeLillo's and Elliot's wastelands in his essay "Don DeLillo, T.S. Elliot, and the Redemption of America's Atomic Wasteland." For more details see Paul Gleason, "Don DeLillo, T.S. Elliot, and the Redemption of America's Atomic Wasteland," in J. Dewey, G. Kellman and I. Malin ed., 130-143.

the one that exploded its second atomic bomb on October 3, 1951, or the one that bred this Tchaika waste specialist: “He needs to get adjusted to an environment in which fixing and hustling have come out of the shadows of the black-market speculation to create a wholly open economy of plunder and corruption” (*U* 795).

Underworld presents not only the highest pyramid of waste in America and the deepest tomb for radioactive waste, but also the “greatest” garbage collector in the country’s post-war history. It is J. Edgar Hoover, driven by his paranoiac idea of “filing people up,” collecting any piece of junk information that may prove useful in the future. People are files for Hoover, and the more data he can have on them, the more secure he feels. This is obviously a case of a paranoid application of power, says DeLillo, diagnosing Hoover’s condition as a case of full-blown disease: “Where the current of one’s need for control met the tide of one’s paranoia, this was where the dossier was reciprocally satisfying. You fed both forces in a single stroke” (*U* 559). Not surprisingly, Hoover falls prey to his own system when he learns that a group of garbage guerillas – led by Detwiler himself – wants to steal his garbage with a view to exposing it to the public eye:

> Confidential source says they intend to take your garbage on tour. Rent halls in major cities. Get left sociologists to analyze the garbage item by item. Get hippies to rub it on their naked bodies. More or less have sex with it. Get poets to write poems about it. And finally, in the last city on the tour, they plan to eat it. (*U* 558)

Himself a believer in the metaphysics of “used tampons” and food pieces, Hoover is scared to death by the vision of having his own waste “publicized.” He even comes up with the idea of putting out simulated garbage, that would be of no use to the guerillas. DeLillo completes the story of the Cold War’s most notorious collector by mentioning that after his death, word got out that it was a plot of foreign governments.

One will apparently notice, that the position of DeLillo himself, also the collector and manager of Cold War waste, is somewhat similar to that of Hoover.[50] The main difference, however, seems to lie in DeLillo's awareness of the limitations of the fiction that he is writing. As exact as historiography and self-reflexiveness allow him to be, DeLillo does not expect his reader to take his story for granted; rather, he coaches him on the intricate mechanisms of the fiction and myth-making process, providing him, at the same time, with an extensive and *plausible* panorama of post-war America. On the one hand, then he is an Elliot walking together with his reader through the retreats of modern America, on the other hand, however, he is a Coover reminding his reader not to plunge too deeply into the waters of fiction. In his interesting essay on the role of the author in contemporary literature, Jesse Kavadlo remarks on the position of DeLillo in *Underworld*:

> Don DeLillo's authority comes from observing, excavating, collecting, and finally remaking cultural material in the form of the novel. In this way, DeLillo seems to be rekindling the concept of author for the new millennium, taking both the modernist's author-priest and the now-waning postmodernist's authorial diminishment in anticipation of the new author's role. The contemporary author, standing between reverence and irreverence, romantic imagination and journalistic note taking, understands his importance but also his tenuous, precarious place in the world.[51]

One has to admit that the rapid and alarming development of at least the most toxic forms of waste presented above can be regarded as an effect of adopting war applications for civilian use, a process that many military inventions undergo. Such a connection is established both by the novel's general spirit of connectivity – everything does stem from something and leads to something else – and by the characters' direct linking of these two areas. Klara Sax calls the bomb "shit" for example, as it cannot be defined with the existing human vocabulary: "I will use the French. J. Robert Oppenheimer. It is merde. He meant something that eludes naming is automatically relegated, he is saying, to the status of shit.

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[50] DeLillo, however, seems to follow the rule "Speak your language to me and I will tell you who you are," whereas Hoover's maxim is "Show me your garbage and we'll see if we have something on you."

[51] Jesse Kavadlo, "Recycling Authority: Don DeLillo's Waste Management," *Critique*, Summer 2001, Volume 42, 4: 386.

You can't name it. It's also shit because it's garbage, it's waste material" (*U* 77). *Underworld* presents numerous examples of explosions, napalm dropping, or B-52s in flight, scenes that in the media-saturated reality can have little effect on the reader. There are, however, three extremely painful exhibitions of the power of weapons going beyond the accustomed television footage. Interestingly, they also blur the differences between such oppositions as "Black" and "White" or "Us" and "Them."

The first scene involves a black man Louis Bakey, part of Chuckie Wainwright's crew, dropping bombs over Vietnam from *Long Tall Sally*. Louis, straight from bombardier school, participated at one point in a simulation release of a "fifty-kiloton nuclear bomb over the Nevada Test Site" (*U* 613). When the bomb finally explodes the picture is like heaven, Louis can see through things – the plane, his and his crew member's bodies – as if he had an X-ray machine in his eyes. In his naiveté he believes being black will save him from being translucent but of course it does not. Louis realizes that the moment the bomb goes off, he has death planted in his body: "And I kept seeing the flying dead through closed eyes, skeleton men with knee bone connected to the thigh bone, I hear the word of the Lord" (*U* 613-614). Like Jack Gladney from *White Noise*, exposed to the toxic cloud, Louis becomes a carrier of waste in the form of radioactivity. What follows are, quite predictably, symptoms indicative of an incurable disease: he loses his skills of handwriting, has problems peeing and seeing.

The other two scenes present closed enclaves on both sides of the Iron Curtain where atomic weapons are being developed. The American one, called the Pocket, is located in New Mexico in a supposedly safe niche. It is believed to be safe, because the whole project has been surrounded with an aura of the most highly classified information and the best kept state secret. Employees have access only to the cells they are working in, information on other branches is scarce. Matt Shay, who is on his way to being admitted to the actual secrets of

bomb production, uses a semi-mystical, semi-clouded language when talking about the project to his girl-friend: "He told her about the Pocket. The Pocket was just a cozy donut-dunk in a vast hidden system. A system predicated on death from the sky" (*U* 458). The existence of such a system predicates, however, the inevitable proliferation of typically suspicious reactions, people's self-defensive measures against being small cogs in the wheel of the unknown. Workers at the Pocket do believe that "Everything [is] connected at some undisclosed point down the systems line. This caused a certain select disquiet" (*U* 408). The other danger that the (non)existence of such a Pynchonesque system creates is the spread of rumors. When actually asked whether he believes in those rumors Eric Deming, the chief rumor shaman, answers that he does not and that he spreads them "for the edge, the existential burn" (*U* 406). These rumors include stories of people from Nevada and Utah – so called downwinders – being exposed to fallout, the results of which are, again, easy to predict: multiple myelomas, kidney failures, kids wearing wigs, splotches and rashes (*U* 405-406). Mark Osteen rightly sees such a case of the highest secrecy as a paranoia-generating factor: "These cases reveal how, rather then reinforcing citizens' faith in the government, the pursuit of perfect security bred a paranoia that Deming articulates when he warns Matt 'never underestimate the willingness of the state to act out its own massive fantasies' (*U* 422)."[52]

Probably the most excruciating case of the consequences of nuclear energy getting out of hand is presented towards the end of *Underworld*, when Viktor Maltsev, the manager of the white space on the map where Nick and Brian go to see the test, takes them to the Museum of Misshapens, part of the Medical Institute. Ruthless as he looks at the beginning, Maltsev seems to try to avoid completely selling himself out to capitalism. He is well aware of the side-effects that if not his, then the previous tests, brought about:

[52] Osteen, 238.

> Victor has been here four times, he says. Every time he has gone to the Polygon he has also come here. This is a man who is trying to merchandise nuclear explosions – using safer methods, no doubt, and he comes here to challenge himself perhaps, to prove to himself he is not blind to the consequences. (*U* 800)

The Museum of Misshapens the reader is invited to tour has "exhibits" that roughly correspond to the years during which five hundred nuclear tests were conducted. They include two-headed fetuses, cyclops, heads with missing mouths. Yet a more surreal scene is still to come when Maltsev takes his guests to a radiation clinic: he takes them "downwind," since, as DeLillo seems to repeat several times in the novel, we are all "downwinders." The sight of the patients presented here makes the reader reflect on Lenny Bruce's motto of *Underworld* – "we're all gonna die" – and wish this death had nothing to do with radioactive fallout. Consider the following quotation:

> It is the victims who are blind. It is the boy with skin where his eyes ought to be, a bolus of spongy flesh, oddly like a mushroom cap, springing from each brow. It is the bald-headed children standing along the wall in their underwear, waiting to be examined. It is the man with the growth beneath his chin, a thing with a life of its own, embryonic and pulsing. It is the cheerful cretin who walks the halls with his arms folded. It is the woman with features intact but only half a face somehow, everything fitted into a tilted arc that floats above her shoulders like the crescent moon. The clinic has disfigurations, leukemias, thyroid cancers, immune systems that do not function. (*U* 800)

It appears that by drawing up the list and writing his *memento mori*, DeLillo managed to complete the catalog of contemporary contaminations.

Neither the spreading waste nor the calamitous arms race mentioned above, should be viewed as disconnected from their absolute prime mover, the beginning of the Cold War. Whereas the Soviet Union could only afford to construct weapons and space craft,[53] America was able to combat the Russians by what DeLillo clearly treats as an echo of the blast the

[53] The fact that the Russians managed to launch their *sputnik* before the Americans, caused a feeling of disquietude among the characters of *Underworld*: the underlying assumption is, of course, they may in fact be better if they are first. No one thought at that time about the price that both nations had to pay for "pre-empting" the market.

reader can hear during the baseball game, namely consumer culture.[54] Consumer culture in *Underworld* first makes people want to possess things then floods them with merchandise. Customers are assured that by having things the Russians never dream of having, they are better and, paradoxically, more secure. It is the size and number of things, Gladney's tactics of self-defense from *White Noise*, in which people trust. Needless to say, insatiable consumption creates surplus waste, and it is precisely consumption that completes in *Underworld* this eternal triangle of production, prodigality, and protection. This idea is voiced by waste managers themselves, aware of the "uncontainability" of both waste and consumerism and conscious of people's reactionary treatment of both:

> Consume or die. That's the mandate of the culture. And it all ends up in the dump. We make stupendous amounts of garbage, then we react to it, not only technologically but in our hearts and minds. We let it shape us. We let it control our thinking. Garbage comes first, then we build a system to deal with it. (*U* 287-288)

At the end of the day, when Americans have had a good war, they are not remembered by the other side for the betterment of world's problems, of which they are so proud. All they are remembered for are the consumer products that in the course of the Cold War became symbols of desire for America.[55] In the final sections of *Underworld* at the Russian test site there is a "shrine" constructed by the KGB, proud to "assemble a faithful domestic setting" (*U* 793). It consists of the objects that hit all Nick's and Brian's buttons as the products displayed there are cultural artefacts of their childhood and youth, and the sight of them triggers a nostalgia trip. Neither Nick nor Brian seems to notice, however, that their nostalgia for the past has a very consumerist character: "Nostalgia for the "fifties" is thus both a nostalgia for 1950s commodities (or what such commodities signify), and a nostalgia for the "fifties" as a

[54] John Duvall is right in summarizing DeLillo's take on America's victory in the Cold War in the following way: "*Underworld* posits that America won the Cold War in large part because, in the classic economic metaphor, it was able to have both guns and butter – both a strong military presence abroad and a proliferation of consumer goods at home. The Soviet Union may have been able to match US nuclear tonnage, but not its consumerism." (Duvall, 23)

[55] Children from Eastern Europe would send letters virtually begging the Coca Cola company to send them a bunch of Coke stickers. These days, when they can get those stickers any time they want, they are simply not interested. Coca Cola is no longer a desire-making factor for former Soviet Bloc children.

commodity, as a "package."[56] This container for sacred relics holds "Old Dutch Cleanser and Rinso White, all those half-lost icons of the old life, Ipana and Chase & Sanborn, still intact out here in this nowhere near Mongolia" (*U* 793). Still intact and still displaced and decontextualized, should perhaps be added. Besides "vulture capitalism," this is a surprisingly small legacy that Russia inherited from America.

DeLillo's best purchase on consumer culture is Part 5 "Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry: Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s." Looking into the Demings' typical suburban house, the reader becomes acquainted with a well-off American family, at the climax of their "media-advertised" activities. Erica, the wife, is making Jell-O chicken mousse while her husband Rick is "simonizing" their Ford Fairlane convertible (*U* 515). In "American Blood" DeLillo reminds the reader that even such popular consumer products as Jell-O may hide strata of psychic meaning. He sees it as consumerism's ability "to absorb social disruptions and dangers into the molded jell of mass-brand production."[57] Molly Wallace develops this remark, stating that "commodities, or more precisely brand names, provide a sense of belonging to a larger social system, 'cold war ideologies of massive uniformity' (786) and to a social system different from that of the Soviet Union."[58] This somewhat idyllic atmosphere is spoilt by the third member of the nuclear family, young Eric, who is sitting in his room jerking off into a condom. This boyish act, however, is at least to some extent "staged" by what must have helped his parents choose the products they are using, namely the media. The boy is masturbating to a picture of Jayne Mansfield, a cultural icon at that time, and his use of the condom is also relevant because it indicates Eric's fascination with the military and reverberates the Cold War which by then had already started: "He liked using a condom because it had a sleek metallic shimmer, like his favorite weapons system, the Honest

[56] Wallace, 371.
[57] Don DeLillo, "American Blood; A Journey Through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK," *Rolling Stone*, December 8, 1983: 27.
[58] Wallace, 367.

John, a surface-to-surface missile with a warhead that carried yields of up to forty kilotons" (*U* 514). The whole section is full of artefacts of America's consumer life, ranging from Oreo and Hydrox cookies to automatic dishwashers and television sets. It finishes with a graphically laid out list of the then new words – including breezeway, car pools, broadloom, or fruit juicer – captioned by a very important commentary: "All the things around her were important. Things and words. Words to believe in and live by" (*U* 520). This statement – presenting commodity products as mantras almost – demonstrates that the strategy of fighting the Cold War by means of the demand-and-supply chain has proved fully successful.

The composition of this section is based, as Osteen points out, on the montage technique which juxtaposes Eric's masturbatory endeavors with warnings one can find on containers for cleaning products or toiletries: "Avoid contact with the eyes, open cuts, or running sores" (*U* 514). Apart from the obvious comic undertones, such a technique makes the reader realize that the picture Eric is masturbating to and the method he is using manifest Eric's earlier exposures to media celebrities (Jayne Mansfield) and military equipment (the warhead), both of which he appropriates into his adolescent discourse. The montage technique that exhibits all those links is then, as Osteen believes, DeLillo's encouragement for the reader to probe all these underlying connections:

> The operations of the "massive system" that Matt recognizes is thus embodied in the novel's fragmentary structure, which dramatizes alienation and helplessness and forges a relationship among consumerism, war, and waste. Upon recognizing these links, the reader is asked to do what society has failed to do: perform fusion, execute a salvage operation. [59]

An example of pure consumerism turning into a lifestyle or an aesthetics is a store selling condoms, to which Brian Glassic drives Nick Shay one day. Both men, "products" of the 1950s, are somewhat surprised by the fact that the function of the condom has long since exceeded its basic applications as a "container" or disease protector. There are Pepsi condoms, Roman coins

[59] Osteen, 240.

condoms, and graffiti condoms, and the whole catalog is supplemented, in a truly capitalistic spirit, by latex gloves, videos, and even caps with baseball logos (*U* 109-111). John Duvall rightly sees these condoms as "an index to postmodernity."[60] The mural on the wall of the store presenting a 1950s couple, a boy and a girl eating their ice-creams, as well as the oldies muzak pouring from the loudspeakers, turn the place into a museum of condom's evolution. Of course, the purpose of this subliminal aura is to make the reader purchase his or *her* condom, or a lifestyle. Whereas to Nick these mechanisms may still be quite conspicuous – "Behind the products and their uses we glimpsed the industry of vivid description" – they remain largely invisible to contemporary buyers of today's lifestyle products: cars, call-phones, and even condoms. Duvall also notices that *Underworld* itself is a bit like a condom – dealing with contemporary waste and various ways of containing it. Having grown out of control waste cannot be completely contained, but it may at least be considerably reduced by conscious consumers.

Without drawing further examples of the obsessive advocacy of a high rate of consumption and spending, it is interesting to have a look at the factors that fostered this process. Much as any decision-makers would have liked to spread the idea of mass consumption, they would never have achieved it without the help of the media. The media is then the agent of change that translates the government's "marketing policy" into actual purchases. As shown by many examples in *Underworld* and DeLillo's other books as well, it is the mass media which still rules the world.

The chief adman of the novel is Charles Wainwright, whom the reader already met when he purchased the ball from Manx Martin, hoping it would draw him closer to his son. Wainwright has two major advertising strategies that he religiously pursues; one is to determine what particular products excite the human eye the most and then launch the whole

[60] Duvall, 44.

advertising campaign based on “visual orgasms” hitting the customer’s nervous system. As simple as that, such a campaign is supposed to help the company achieve total control over the customer: “We correlate high discharge events with the particular items that caused them and then we design our products and packaging accordingly. Once we get the customer by the eyeballs, we have complete mastery of the marketing process” (*U* 531). The quote illustrates, with the thinly veiled pun “to get someone by the balls,” both the ruthlessness of the agency and its appropriation of military language (“to discharge”). Actually, he does get young Eric by the eyeballs, when Eric opens the refrigerator and is stunned by the choice of products he has: “The bright colors, the product names and logos, the array of familiar shapes, the tinsel glitter of things in foil wrap, the general sense of benevolent gleam, of eyeball surprise” (*U* 517). The picture recalls the radioactive glitter of the poetics of the Cold War.

The second remorseless credo of Wainwright is to employ the imagery of the Cold War for promoting products by persuading customers to subscribe to “our” products and not to “theirs.” In a campaign designed to be an absolute hit, Wainwright rents a remote place in New Mexico, the site of the very first nuclear test in the U.S. He has two cars filled with fuel, his client’s Equinox Oil gasoline and the leading competitive brand, and races them across the desert. Obviously the white color of the Equinox car and the black color of the other symbolize the race between “Us” and “Them,” the U.S. and the USSR. The finish line is exactly where the bomb went off. To Wainwright’s surprise, the whole campaign ends in a complete fiasco. Instead of enthusiastic praise, Equinox Oil gets letters from angry African-American organizations, accusing the company of propagating racism. Wainwright believes that the lesson he learnt from his failure is that metaphors should not be mixed.

Wainwright’s dream is to prepare an advertising campaign for the Minute Maid account. His urge is probably part of a deeper realization that under the product’s different applications – a drink, graffiti cleaner, or weapons – one can trace the unblended power of

American capital. Wainwright senses what Matt Shay verbalizes in Vietnam: "And how can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?" (*U* 465). His way of promoting Minute Maid is a compendium of modern advertising, appealing to the senses and instincts of the customer and turning form into message. It is packages with promises that people buy and not actual products:

> He knew how to advertise orange juice. Forget Florida. You have to go for appetite appeal, for the visual hit, because this is a beautiful and enticing beverage and women's eyeballs reach high levels of excitation when they see bright orange cans in the freezer, gleaming with rime ice. But you can suggest, you can make inferences, you can promise the consumer the experience of citrusy bits of real pulp. You show it. You photograph it lovingly and microscopically. If the can or package can be orgasmically visual, so can the product inside. (*U* 533)

Whereas the role of the media in creating consumer behavior is indeed one of the facets of the novel, *Underworld* also recommences the discussion on the media's reality-shaping quality that the reader was already engaged in while reading *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Mao II*, or the other books by DeLillo. What seems to recur as DeLillo's idée fixe, is in fact the semblance of the reality taken over by images. As in the case of Russ Hodges's transmission of the baseball game, what we see is what is broadcast to us; we become passive recipients of someone else's illusions. The examples listed below should demonstrate how the visual media blurs the "real" nature of the events that it is supposed to recreate.

The first two cases involve America's fascination with amateur footage, which, unlike "official" footage, is supposed to represent an objective take on the events mainly due to the fact that shooting them is not an intentional act and that the camera is usually a passive "eye" in the hands of an accidental witness. When Klara Sax and her artists colleagues watch the Zapruder tape shot by an amateur in Dallas on the day Kennedy was killed, the initial reaction is one of shock and disbelief; people are struck by the closeness and clarity of the vision. However, when they watch the footage for the second time, their reactions become more

controlled and balanced. It turns out then that the movie is played from many projectors in different rooms, presenting a sort of collage of Kennedy's death. Each of these projectors shows different phases of the event, some play them in slow motion, some in an X pattern. Klara is apt to observe that the footage is no longer footage of Kennedy's assassination, but the "Zapruder Museum" (*U* 495). What it means is that the film is not a political or social document, providing the viewer with more information on the nature of a given event. The tape is an aesthetic object, that people are supposed to contemplate; the meaning disappears in the multiplicity of shots. As on television, the actual implications of such an image are momentarily flattened out. Klara and her friends watch the tape at a time when it was mainly watched by government representatives. It may be assumed that after being released to a wider public, it had more or less the same effect it had on the artists. After the initial shock, people got used to it. Played a million times on television, the tape was also supposed to attract viewers to the station, turning into commodity. As many have noticed, such tapes do not help to solve mysteries, rather, they further problematize them. For Klara's boyfriend Miles the tape illustrates "the secret manipulation of history" (*U* 495).

Another similar case of amateur footage turning into a relic is the tape presenting a murder committed by the "famous" Texas Highway Killer. Shot by a girl who came to be called the Video Kid, the tape presents a man driving a Dodge, waving briefly to the kid filming him, and then dropping dead after the invisible killer fired the shot. DeLillo pays a lot of attention here to the supposed "innocence" of such footage, pointing the reader's attention to the fact, that anonymous as she might be, the girl becomes an inseparable part of the spectacle. DeLillo observes that "it is not just another video homicide. It is a homicide recorded by a child who thought she was doing something simple and maybe halfway clever, shooting some tape of a man in a car" (*U* 156). The girl is connected to the scene and already framed by it by the camera that she is holding: "It is the camera that puts her in the tale" (*U*

157). She is no longer an outsider but, like Zapruder in the case of Kennedy's assassination, part of the event and part of the aura that it generates. It makes one wonder how she felt shooting the scene, why she did not turn her camera from the sight, what thoughts were driving her. The narrator comments upon it saying "at some level the girl has to be present here, watching what you're watching, unprepared – the girl is seeing this cold and you have to marvel at the fact that she keeps the tape rolling" (*U* 158). DeLillo's sad conclusion about this passage is that the media's turning of the anonymous into the public – amateur footage into repeated TV news and anonymous shooters into "celebrities" – makes people plan and commit such "anonymous" and "accidental" acts in hope of capturing something extraordinary and being captured themselves: "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 real turns instantly into footage or a simulacrum; the camera "filters it" or contextualizes it and actually makes it happen. Another motto of *Underworld* repeats then that "reality doesn't happen until you analyze the dots" (*U* 182).

The Texas Highway Killer himself, Richard Henry Gilkey, in his private life a supermarket clerk who cares for his elderly parents,[61] is a construct of the media, without which he would just be an anonymous psychopath. When he learns that there have been some copycat murders that he did not commit, he calls the superstation in Atlanta and talks to Sue Ann in order to affirm his identity and deny his participation in the other acts. In a beautifully ironic passage, DeLillo affirms that Gilkey's identity disappears once the viewer switches off the TV: "He talked to her on the phone and made eye contact with the TV. This was the waking of the knowledge that he was real" (*U* 270). Later, Gilkey would have liked to

[61] It is an iconic or a media presentation of a serial killer, who, in his private life, loves kids and animals but is able, nevertheless, to shoot twenty people at one go.

surrender completely to the TV woman, give her his name and address; he cannot, because after numerous "copycat" calls to the station, they refuse to put him through.

The third example of "underground" footage is the screening of *Cocksucker Blues*, a rare projection showing the Rolling Stones on their 1972 tour of scandal and overdose. Klara's first reaction to seeing the movie is to make a connection between Jagger's notorious mouth and "the corporate logo of the Western world" (*U* 382). Starting as alternative and revolutionary, the group had by 1972 been "sucked in" by the forces of show business, joining the parasitic symbiosis of cashing in on their popularity and being cashed in on. The tour is a never-ending stream of drug abuse, throwing TVs from hotel rooms, and sex: "the whole jerk-off monotonic airborne erotikon" (*U* 384). At the end of the chapter, one of the characters calls the band "millionaire pricks," icons not of revolution but of commercial devolution. Mark Osteen sees this passage as an example of the commodification of all once spontaneous and unconstrained impulses:

> The film dramatizes how the subversive energy of rock 'n' roll has been deflected into wasteful addictions, devolving into just another form of consumerism. In this sense, the title alludes to capitalism's capacity to consume its own oppositions, to seduce and subdue threatening impulses and render them harmlessly submissive.[62]

Underworld does not complete the discussion of the media's intrusion into reality by presenting its long-lasting focuses, the bad and the famous. However, it does reveal that, unless attracted by the aura of sensation and tension, the media rarely enters the territories where its presence could actually make a difference. The first coverage of the Bronx surreal – the territory where nuns try to help people through their charity work and Ismael Munoz commemorates them through his graffiti work – happens when an adolescent homeless girl is brutally raped and thrown off a building roof to her death. Unexpected as it is, the presence of the media suddenly makes the project crew realize that their lives – shown on a national

[62] Osteen, 249-250.

channel – are not in fact what they really are. They feel as if they have been robbed of something: “They gawk and buzz, charged with a kind of second sight, the things they know so well seen inside out, made new and nationwide. They stand there smeared in other people’s seeing” (*U* 817). The aura in which they see themselves in not dissimilar to the reactions of Babette’s family in *White Noise*, mesmerized by the image of their wife and mother on television. Wilder, the youngest kid, does not even seem to see any difference between the real Babette and the pixelized copy.

DeLillo’s treatment of the media in *Underworld* has also semi-humorous, semi-serious undertones when he presents how the media “incur” on the areas one would expect most resistant to the glitz and glamour of the visual culture, namely the “sacred.” Sister Edgar, for instance, seems to be the embodiment of “nuclear” Catholicism, whose methods of exerting control upon students are not much different from the methods of the other Edgar in the novel. When she asks Matt Shay to stay after class and tell her what magazine the boys were looking at the previous day, she embarrasses the kid who senses punishment at hand for contravening the Legion of Decency. However, when he explains they were talking about movie stars, he is surprised to find out that the sister is enjoying his story. He makes up more details, feeding the appetite of a hungry but not an ignorant fan: “She knew a lot about stars. Their basic everydayness inside the cosmetic surgeries and tragic marriages. She […] asked him sly testing questions and dropped little comments here and there” (*U* 720). The most hilarious example of the appropriation of the Hollywood “poetics” by the “poetics of the sacred” comes during a scholarly discussion between Albert Bronzini and Andrew Paulus. When asked by the teacher whether he ever regretted not getting married, the priest answers in the way that leaves poor Albert completely open-mouthed: “I don’t want to marry. I just want to screw. I would like to screw a movie start, Albert. The greatest, blondest, biggest-titted goddess

Hollywood is able to produce. I want to screw her in the worst way possible and I mean that in every sense" (*U* 672).

Given the above consideration of the elements that have become both inseparable and ubiquitous marks of the history of the Cold War and America's contemporary face as well – the omnipresence of waste, the unstoppable arms race, and the reality-bending media – the question arises whether DeLillo sees any antidote for them, an area that could redeem at least part of the lost territory. The novel suggests that such a domain is created by art or, rather, by particular artistic voices, which at least to some extent neutralize or mitigate the effects of the perils listed above. The four examples that will be discussed here illustrate both this redeeming effort and DeLillo's own subscription to them.

The biggest, most ambitious, and most meaningful arts project in *Underworld* is carried out by Klara Sax, DeLillo's kindred spirit and to some extent his *porte-parole*. Changing her name from Sachs to Sax, Klara demonstrates the somewhat unstable position of an artist in the world where any successful project is instantly in danger of being devoured by capitalism, not unlike the Rolling Stones mythos. Klara's project consists of painting "demobilized" U.S. bombers in the Arizona desert, and turning them into an enormous piece of art, that can only be viewed from the sky. Initially, the location of the project seems to imply that by bringing it back to where the whole terror actually started – the site of atomic tests – the artist makes a truly compensating gesture:

> But the beauty of the desert. It's so old and strong. I think it makes us feel, makes us a culture, any technological culture, we feel we mustn't be overwhelmed by it. Awe. Terror, you know. Unconducive to industry and progress and so forth. So we use this place to test our weapons. It's only logical of course. And it enables us to show our mastery. The desert bears the visible signs of all the detonations we set off. All the craters and warning signs and no-go areas and burial makers, the sites where debris is buried. (*U* 70-71)

However, the effort of the artist who made herself famous during the 1960s by creating art from people's waste is not as unproblematic as it may seem at first glance. On the

one hand, she brings waste back to life, aestheticizes the remnants of the Cold War, rendering them less evil and petrifying. This is a way of claiming back small pieces of the American landfill. Her work owes a lot to Sabato Rodia, the "architect" of L.A.'s Watts Towers built from litter, which Osteen sees "as an economic and moral art of redemption."[63] On the other hand, she strips her avant-garde art of any political connotations, claiming that "this is an art project, not a peace project" (*U* 70). Of course the reader can interpret her art in his own way, ignoring her auctorial commentary, yet even the accessibility of such art precludes its mass appeal. In order to appreciate the scale of the project and get the whole view of it, Nick rents a balloon from which he and his wife admire its aesthetic value. This is not, certainly, sightseeing everybody can afford. Besides, doing a project on such a large scale requires substantial funds, which Klara must have raised through selling her earlier works. Little is possible, it appears, without the help of capital. Duvall rightly characterizes Klara's position, seeing her work as more meaningful than Hodges's mythologizing of material objects: "Still, her self-conscious attempt to create art out of waste is an incremental improvement over Hodges's mythologizing role that can turn trash (a used baseball) into a valuable commodity."[64]

The artist who does save local people and places from oblivion is the aforementioned Ismael Munoz, a Melvillian searcher for the meaning of life and a graffiti painter from the Bronx. He does not need capital, as he has his sprays and Perrier water stolen for him by his fanatic crew. He does not want to participate in the flow of capital either, refusing Klara's patron's invitation to organize a gallery exhibition for him. He senses some mischievous motives behind the offer, maybe the police trying to lay their hands on him. Munoz paints what the CNN will never cover and sends it on to a wider public on subway trains, keen himself to observe the reactions of his audience. His graffiti – variations on "his name and his street

[63] Osteen, 255.
[64] Duvall, 48.

number" – is striking even for Klara Sax as the Moonman uses in art what Charles Wainwright deemed the most efficient code of advertising: visual appeal. When Klara and Esther see the train, they observe that "the letters and numbers fairly exploded in your face and they had a relationship, they were plaited and knotted, pop-eyed cartoon humanoids, winding in and out of each other and sweaty hot and passion dancing" (*U* 395). Clearly it has an enormous impact on Klara, whose own art is at one point questioned by her protégée, Acey, voicing the doubts many people have about experimental art:

> Because I understand up to a point. You take your object out of the dusty grubby studio and stick it in a museum with white walls and classical paintings and it becomes a forceful thing in this context, it becomes a kind of argument. And what it is actually? Old factory window glass and burlap sacking. It becomes very, I don't know, philosophical. (*U* 393)

Ismael's art is not philosophical, it is political. It tells the story of the backstreet life, paying tribute to anonymous heroes of the Bronx retreats. When he grows older, he becomes a leader of a squat community in the Bronx, helping the nuns distribute food and take care of the poor. His own way of memorializing the anonymous victims of drugs, gang wars, or sexual abuse is painting the pictures of the dead as angels on a wall located near the squat that eventually comes to be called the Wall. Soon, there is hardly any room for new angels. The graffiti presenting Esmeralda, the "runaway" girl thrown off a rooftop, recapitulates both the girl's story and the power of Ismael's art to move the viewer. The picture is probably as distressing as the images of the "atomic" children described earlier: "A winged figure in a pink sweatshirt and pink and aqua pants and a pair of white Nike Air Jordans with the logo prominent – she was a running girl so they gave her running shoes: Esmeralda Lopezs, 12 year, Petected in Heven" (*U* 816).

It is probably Munoz together with his crew that work out the only miracle that happens in *Underworld*. Word spreads after her death that the girl appears on an advertising billboard every time an evening commuter train passes by. Tempted by the miraculous, Sister

Edgar wants to go and see the wonder, despite Gracie, her fellow sister's, disbelief. When they go there and when a train passes, indeed it is the face of Esmeralda that appears on the billboard. Feeling in the seventh heaven, Sister Edgar for the first time during her work in the Bronx takes off her latex gloves and touches the people around her. Her presence and joy – "the verifying force" – is what the presence of the nuns was for people in *White Noise*; they were there for them to believe (*U* 822). Without detracting from the sister's joy, a careful reader will no doubt notice Munoz and his boys looking carefully at the crowd and the billboard. The billboard advertises – quite predictably, orange juice, Minute Maid – and even the sister's eye is hit by "a lavishment of effort and technique, of medieval church architecture" (*U* 820). The face of Esmeralda appears only when a train passes, and DeLillo italicizes the word "train," pointing to Munoz's legendary past as a graffiti writer and also to the play of light from the coming trains against the texture of the billboard. One day, when the ad is removed from the billboard, the girl disappears. Miracles do not just happen.

The third major artistic statement in *Underworld* is a movie that DeLillo calls *Unterwelt* and attributes to the legendary Russian director, Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein. The correspondence between the title of the novel and the title of the movie is striking, it is worthwhile therefore to take a closer look at the production. *Unterwelt* is interestingly located in the novel, almost half-way through it, as if to recapitulate the Dantesque scenes from the prologue – *The Triumph of Death* – and foreshadow the equally atrocious sights from the epilogue. It is also placed between *Cocksucker Blues* and the Zapruder tape discussed earlier, as if to occupy a central position. Recalling the discussion on DeLillo's drifting towards modernism or postmodernism in *Underworld*, and remembering that both *Cocksucker Blues* and the Zapruder tape are treated as postmodern voices, given *Unterwelt*'s location one can assume that the author owes more to modernism, than to postmodernism. Again, it should be emphasized that Eisenstein's movie escapes easy generalizations and is not unlike *Underworld*

in its convoluted structure and the myriad of voices that it presents: “In Eisenstein you note that the camera angle is a kind of dialectic. Arguments are raised and made, theories drift across the screen and instantly shatter – there’s a lot of opposition and conflict” (*U* 429).

The screening of the movie is introduced by the Rockettes show, a weird performance of dancers wearing West Point gray and slave collars and doing strange sexual routines. The show that bewilders many people because of its strangeness, turns out to be a proper prologue to the movie, which is not easy to grasp either: “Of course the film was strange at first, elusive in its references and filled with baroque apparitions and hard to adapt to – you wouldn’t want it any other way” (*U* 429). The movie seems to be – and DeLillo *seems* to use this word consciously – about a mad scientist who at one point fires his ray gun at the victim. When the victim begins to glow, the reader is instantly reconnected to what is one of the main themes of *Underworld.* The moment Klara sees the scene, she is reminded of Japanese science fiction movies with the monsters they depict; her reminiscence will be later materialized in *Underworld* when Nick and Brian see the real post-atomic monsters. Klara thinks that because Eisenstein’s creatures are human, it “complicates the fun,” as if not wanting to admit that the real ones might ever be developed (*U* 430). The movie is silent because, as Klara surmises, “maybe silence suited the development of his themes” (*U* 431). His themes may be read as the oppression and enslaving of an individual by the state, something that Eisenstein experienced several times himself and something that corresponds very closely to the theme of *Underworld*. Unless the paths of an artist are convergent with the state’s plans – as was the case with Leni Riefenstahl for instance – artistic freedom is always in danger. *Unterwelt* is, as Klara believes, “a statement of outrage and independence” anticipating “the secret police, the arrests, the torture, the disappearances, the executions” (*U* 431).

The second part of the movie is even more important, picturing runaway prisoners climbing up from some underground vaults to the surface of the earth. The names that the

audience and the narrator drop during their march are not accidental: "Three Oranges March," Kazakhstan, the FBI. They keep the reader aware that what is happening in Eisenstein's *Unterwelt* has already been or will be paralleled in *Underworld.* When the deformed faces, "people who existed outside nationality and strict historical contexts," finally come to the surface, the orchestra falls silent (*U* 444). But soon the oppressors follow, catching the dazed and confused figures. Klara's epiphany comes when she realizes that the movie epitomizes the dichotomies existing in her own culture: "This is a film about Us and Them, isn't it?" (*U* 444). The mentioning of bisexual Berlin establishes Eisenstein as a person oppressed both by the state and his own sexual orientation. It connects him to the gay audience that turned out at the Radio Musical Hall to see his movie and to one of the protagonists of *Underworld*, J. Edgar Hoover, whose gayness the reader may infer in the novel. *Unterwelt* is, then, like *Underworld*, a film about contradictions that trigger unexpected connections among the audience. Consider the narrator's comment on Eisenstein's work:

> All Eisenstein wants you to see, in the end, are the contradictions of being. You look at these 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 next section in the novel, right after the movie's end, presents the secrets of the Pocket, the American test site for nuclear weapons, adding to *Underworld*'s spirit of connectivity and ubiquity.

The discussion of art in *Underworld* will be concluded with the penetrating and sometimes biting voice of Lenny Bruce, who coined the phrase "we're all gonna die," a footnote to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 and an articulation of his audience's fears during that time. Bruce is one of the novel's major supporters of various conspiracy theories – DeLillo's nod in the direction of *Libra* – that he thinks brought about the present crisis. A man of show business himself, Bruce speaks to his audience during half-performances, half-one-man-plays,

refusing to surrender to the power of audio-visual media. In his soliloquies he mentions "secret societies, secret codes" etc., suggesting, again, that no major event or crisis can be explained without the information that is purposefully withheld from people by the government (*U* 506-507). He also makes note of America's obsessive consumption, stating that the whole crisis is about "instant mashed potatoes" (*U* 544). Saying "instant" he means the speed that characterizes modern life in the U.S. – "quick, because we don't have the attention span for normal wars" – and by "mashed potatoes" he means the consumer pulp, eaten and then excreted by Americans (*U* 544). By bringing up the "sexual opportunity" of the crisis, Bruce predicts the U.S. war strategy in Vietnam, expressed by Chuckie Wainwright in one of the previous chapters: "First we fuck them. Then we bomb them" (*U* 586). The end of the missile crisis sees his verbal acrobatics depreciate, when he loses himself in self-metanarratives.

Lenny's disappearance does not exhaust *Underworld*'s potential for offering its own commentary on issues that the novel reexamines with a view of making a fresh appraisal of their validity in contemporary America. On top of all the major problems mentioned above, *Underworld* brings back the questions that were major foci in *Libra* or *White Noise* and in *Underworld*, given the encyclopedic scope of the novel, constitute relevant but not critical paths. Such examples include, for instance, the treatment of postmodern paranoia, one of *Libra*'s main themes, that in *Underworld* evolves in an interesting way.

Tracing the baseball, the novel revisits or revises the subject which during the McCarthy era and later, as an attitude of the counter-culture during the 1960s, became one of the most important landmarks of contemporary America. Yet whereas for many the Kennedy assassination – another shot heard around the world – marks the division between an old sense of faith in "controllable" reality and the emergence of plotting forces on a scale previously unwitnessed, DeLillo's picture of paranoia does not easily fall into black and white categories. As Peter Knight rightly argues, "it is strategically projected backwards through the lens of

nostalgia and [DeLillo] calls up an earlier form of paranoia that in retrospect can be oddly comforting."[65] Such "odd comforts" are actually evoked several times in the novel, when some characters pine for the sense of belonging that the Cold War offered. Such "secure" paranoia is also presented through the characters' nostalgia for the paranoia of the nuclear age, which for many offered a sense of paranoid order. Even such an articulate and enlightened voice in the novel as Klara Sax, seems to miss the Cold War. She says:

> Now that power is in shatters or tatters and now that those Soviet borders don't 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 focussed, 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. Not that I want to bring it back. It's gone, good riddance. But the fact is. (*U* 76)

The new reality that has taken over is, according to Klara, based on "freeing" things that were somehow controlled by the looming danger of nuclear destruction. Now we have "free economy," "free terrorism," "free violence." Klara's view is very much congruent with the assumption that American paranoia can be perceived as what Knight calls "a psychic strategy for maintaining a stable sense of identity, whether on the individual or national level."[66] Of course DeLillo does not even seem to imply that through its "hundreds of plots that go underground, to spawn and skein," the paranoia of the nuclear age was in any way redeeming; it was simply a defense strategy employed in the times when the state projected its power and surveillance into the lives of its citizens (*U* 51).

Underworld also abounds in individual, more traditional, and "unstable" paranoias, having nothing to do with the period of the Cold War. As was noted before, Ismael Munoz is afraid that a gallery's interest in buying his art is a plot to trap him. Sims reckons the government is altering the census report on the number of African Americans living in the

[65] Peter Knight, "Everything Is Connected: *Underworld's* Secret History of Paranoia," *Modern Fiction Studies*, Fall 1999, Volume 45, 3: 815.
[66] Knight, 817.

U.S. Sister Edgar believes the KGB stood behind introducing AIDS into ghettos. It seems, however, that the "real" history of paranoia in *Underworld* is "an underground current of increasing awareness and consternation that slowly everything is becoming connected."[67] In his moment of clarity Matt Shay, a systems analyst working for the nuclear industry, envisions this connection:

> He was thinking about his paranoid episode at the bombhead party the night before. He felt he'd glimpsed some horrific system of connections in which you can't tell the difference between one thing and another, between a soup can and a car bomb, because they are made by the same people in the same way and ultimately refer to the same thing. (*U* 446)

The picture of paranoia presented here can be completed with Patrick O'Donnell's notion of cultural paranoia, pointing to the paranoid notions of history or knowledge being legitimized by the fact that the "real truth" may not necessarily be seen by everybody; most people will see it as disconnected pieces, whereas it is only some who can perceive the formal ties binding these elements. The reason why it is only the paranoid who can see those ties, pieces of the real present in such narratives, can only be found when the whole issue is analyzed through the perspective of the paranoid mind. According to O'Donnell *Underworld* can be read as an illustration of the paranoia underlying the history of the Cold War, which he calls, in *Latent Destinies; Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative*, "underhistory."[68] O'Donnell is right seeing many historical facts in *Underworld* "explained" to the reader by paranoids themselves: Edgar Hoover eliminating (un)real dangers to the system, Lenny Bruce providing the reader with details of the Cuban Missile Crisis, or Ismael Munoz paranoically afraid of being stigmatized by the system. O'Donnell is apt to observe, that the "real" or official history in *Underworld* is but symptomatic:

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[67] Knight, 825.

[68] Patrick O'Donnell, *Latent Destinies; Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000) 147-159.

> DeLillo replaces history with a patchwork of underhistories that collectively accumulate as massive, monumental desire whose quantifiable metabolism produces qualitative changes that materialize in the events of public history. It is the relation between history under the ground and the history of the official record – between the history of desire marked by waste and loss, and the history of nation or world – that DeLillo pursues in *Underworld* through a narrative inversion in which official history is represented only indirectly as the symptomatic, destined, yet processional outcome of underhistory.[69]

Apart from its revised take on paranoia, *Underworld* summons up the discussion on so-called systems novels, inaugurated by one of the most careful readers of DeLillo's earlier fictions, Tom LeClair.[70] Without recalling all the details of the theory that were discussed more thoroughly elsewhere, it should be mentioned that the theory allows the reader to take a new look at the works of many acclaimed postmodern writers, by recognizing some otherwise mysterious mechanisms lying behind the characters' actions. These mechanisms fall into the categories of so called systems, which Hans-Ulrich Mohr defines as following: "One of the elementary assumptions of social systems theory is the notion of the collective constructedness of societies."[71] Such collective constructedness of societies results in the characters' employment of various jointly constructed strategies – systems – to cope with what oftentimes proves unmanageable on an individual basis. DeLillo's novels discussed in this study abound in such systems whose actual nature and significance the author not infrequently questions. For instance, Jack's and Babette's at first glance "normal" life is a systemic response to the thing that they both fear the most: death. To escape her condition, Babette enrolls in a medical experiment of very dubious reputation that will lead to the destruction of her and Jack's family life. All the moves that Jack makes – ranging from developing his successful career in Hitler Studies to obsessive shopping to finally attempting to kill a man to redeem his own death – are supposed to help them eliminate this fear. *Libra* can be labeled a systems novel itself, examining the working of the various plots,

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[69] O'Donnell, 156-157.
[70] Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
[71] Hans-Ulrich Mohr, "DeLillo's *Underworld*: Cold War History and Systemic Patterns," *European Journal of English Studies*, 2001, Volume 5, 3: 352.

conspiracies, contingencies, or systems that culminated in November 1963 in Dallas. *Libra* also gives an insight into the systems-making process, performed in the novel by the various agencies that may or may not have participated in the culmination of the novel. The paranoia portrayed there may also be seen as a systemic response to facts veiled by too many mysteries, thus wreaking havoc on characters' sense of reality, not unlike in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. *Mao II*, apart from the development of various systems of terror seen as a response to another division into "Us" and "Them," the rich and the poor, presents Bill Gray's individual system of masking his authorial impotence by escaping to a secluded place and turning into a cultural icon.

Underworld encapsulates all these reality- and fiction-making systems, as well as individual systems of managing the real and the now. Of course the major focus is laid on the novel's meta-systems, such as baseball, waste, or art, yet the proliferation of individual systems is still astounding. A good example is Marvin Lundy, the memorabilia collector, half a paranoid, half a system-inventor, who believes that "Reality doesn't happen until you analyze the dots" (*U* 182). His ways of looking for the ball include "rephotographing the footage, enlarging it, repositioning, analyzing" (*U* 177). This is his system for coping with the impossibility of tracing all the connections established by the ball, just as it is not plausible to investigate all the links that *Underworld* established.

Given its size, scope, and range, *Underworld* has generated, not surprisingly, some negative responses from the critics, whose approach to the novel does not seem to encompass all its complexity; rather, they focus on areas that may indeed appear incomplete, but only if the reader has an incomplete take on them. Tony Tanner writes, for instance, that *Underworld* relies very much on sensationalism, feeding the reader with "a string of more or less sensationalistic news: items or crises from 1951 to, presumably, the present day."[72] Whereas

[72] Tanner, 55.

accusing DeLillo of sensationalism sounds somewhat grotesque, it should be noted that the events and situations that Tanner mentions are indeed important episodes from the period in question and skipping them would render the novel defective. Tanner does not seem to notice that all this "sensationalist stuff" is balanced by completely tranquil pictures of America, taken inside the country's suburban houses. He does not see the point, either, of DeLillo's "randomizing"[73] of the novel. To repeat part of the argument, the reader is simply encouraged to reconstruct the whole network *himself*, without taking for granted the suggestions given to him by the narrator. Finally, Tanner offers a critique of DeLillo's obsession with "endless connections," suggesting that as a matter of fact it is the word "connection" that links things in *Underworld.*[74] However, *Underworld is* full of connections between this particular novel and other DeLillo works, between such transparent issues as technology and consumer culture, but also between more clandestine areas of weapons production and conspiracy theories. Interestingly, Tanner juxtaposes DeLillo with Pynchon, deeming the latter "more economic" in the treatment of similar issues in *The Crying of Lot 49.*[75] Concise as he is, Pynchon may to many readers be very eclectic, setting perhaps too high the barriers to accessing his fictions. At one point the reader may find himself lost in one of his mazes, losing sight of the human aspect of a work of art, that DeLillo nourishes so much in his novels.

Another critical voice on *Underworld* comes from James Wolcott, whose first accusation concerns the novel's structure, which the author sees as unnecessarily perfectionist, leading to the blurring of the novel's message: "Perfectionism becomes a way of blocking out other, larger, more organic problems. The result is a finely calibrated morass, a jumble of big set-pieces."[76] Bearing in mind the size of the novel, it does appear that the unobtrusive and unpretentious way of connecting things is almost perfect. DeLillo's perfectionism cannot be

[73] Tanner, 56.
[74] Tanner, 57.
[75] Tanner, 67.
[76] Wolcott, 68.

termed flashy. Reading through the pages the reader frequently skips over seemingly trite details, to realize their importance for the whole of the novel only after coming back to a given passage. This is the case with oranges, appearing, unmasked, in orange juice, slightly covered in the graffiti-washing liquid, and completely "low-profile" in the name of the march that Klara listens to watching one of the movies. There are more perfectionisms like that, including the baseball – a sports accessory on the one hand and the core of the bomb on the other – or DuPont's ambiguous advertising slogan. Wolcott also believes that some scenes in the novel are unnecessary displays of the author's craft. Consider the following remark: "A scene in a condom shop seems to be included only so DeLillo could do a virtuoso riff on the varieties of latex on display, ditto a similar routine on the distinctive properties of Jell-O."[77] To answer this allegation on a less serious note, during a gig of any super-group there is always a time for a virtuoso riff by its distinguished member. If these two passages do indeed demonstrate DeLillo's mastery and dexterity, the reader may perhaps want to remember that they still account only for a small fraction of the whole *Underworld*. More seriously, ingenious as they are, they are *formal* comments on the superfluity and omnipresence of consumer culture, where DeLillo's text – the form – becomes the message: excessive words about excessive things. Wolcott's final point concerns the ending of *Underworld* and DeLillo's taking the position of God in the novel: "Underworld goes beyond the intellectual sovereignty of a godlike author, indulging in ponderous self-reflexive gamesmanship that seems like a fusion of man and computer."[78] This last remark may well serve as a pretext to discuss *Underworld's* epilogue – Das Kapital – and sum up the discussion of the novel.

Underworld's final pages present the harsh reality of late 1990s, where national borders have already been replaced by economic borders, the times of global capital and capitalism, the actual winners of the Cold War, as DeLillo believes. By the introduction of

[77] Wolcott, 68.
[78] Wolcott, 68.

cyberspace at the end of the epilogue, DeLillo, on the one hand, displays the major tool of globalization, an instrument which helps to retrieve any information one may need but also a channel that helps global capital create people's needs worldwide and then cater for them. Undoubtedly, however, DeLillo takes note of the good sides of the World Wide Web:

> A word appears in the lunar data stream. You see it on your monitor…. A single seraphic word. You can examine the words with a click, tracing its origins, development, earliest known use, its passage between languages, and you can summon the word in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Arabic, in a thousand languages and dialects living and dead, and locate literary citations, and follow the word through the tunneled underworld of its ancestral roots. (*U* 826)

It is not difficult to observe that DeLillo's novel is very much like cyberspace itself, the main difference being that it forces the reader to struggle through language and establish connections on his own.

On the other hand, however, the passage dedicated to cyberspace recreates the novel's major concerns and tropes: its connectivity and mutual permeation but also its "undecidability" and equivocality. If one pays enough attention to the heading of the chapter – *http://blk.www/dd.com/miraculum* – he will instantly realize that the "dd," Don DeLillo, warns the reader against taking his fictions as read (*U* 810). This is exactly what Donald Bartheleme does half way through his *Snow White*, asking the reader whether he has liked the book so far. This is what Robert Coover does introducing the writer-narrator of his *Pricksongs and Descants*. And this is finally what DeLillo does, in a timely and "updated" manner. All the subchapters in the cyberspace section are introduced by *Keystroke 1, and Keystroke 2*, not dissimilar to Coover's magic pokers with which he conjured up his magical things. Besides, the position of Sister Edgar who resides in this modern heaven is in no way comforting. Free as she seems to be, she still feels a lot of limitations and the new frontier is not heaven for certain: "But she is cyberspace, not heaven, and she feels the grip of systems. She senses the paranoia of the web, of the net. There's the perennial threat of virus, of course" (*U* 825). This is an

appropriate ending for *Underworld,* which, having guided us through the years of the Cold War and its "aftermath" and having closed multiple loops, is acutely aware and indicative of all the potential future impacts that the new frontier may have just inaugurated. Some of the most recent voices on *Underworld* manage to capture the cyberspatial character of the novel, making note, at the same time, of its nodes reaching deep into the past:

> It [*Underworld*] invites terror and awe. It intimidates. It has the heft and forbidding feel of serious fiction – not merely the weight of its more than 800 pages, but its massively conceived trajectories of multiple plotlines sustained across an investigation of American culture that begins in the early frost of the Cold War and closes in the contemporary virtual wonderland of cyberspace.[79]

Maybe cyberspace is to the world what Bobby Thomson's shot became for America. But at least for now, one can hardly go beyond what DeLillo clearly denotes as his fiction, making predictions about the future. So, as the master says at the end of *Underworld*, "Peace."

[79] Joseph Dewey, "A Gathering Under Words: An Introduction," in J. Dewey, G. Kellman and I. Malin ed., 9-10.