

JIHOČESKÁ UNIVERZITA V ČESKÝCH BUDĚJOVICÍCH
FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLISTIKY

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

THE STRANGE CASE OF DON DELILLO,
THE POSTMODERNIST MODERNIST

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Studijní obor: Český jazyk a literatura – Anglická a americká literatura

Ročník: 4.

2020

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I would like to thank doc. PhDr. Ladislav Nagy, PhD. for the patience and insight with which he supervised this thesis, and Mgr. David Vichnar, PhD., for his help in preparing the finalised version of the thesis.

Abstrakt

Diplomová práce se zaměřuje na čtyři romány amerického spisovatele Dona DeLilla: *Bílý šum*, *Podsvětí*, *Libra* a *Padající muž*, a jejich ne/zařaditelnost do dvou z hlavních literárních směrů 20. století: modernismu a postmodernismu. Analýze předchází teoretický úvod, který se věnuje uchopení autorovy tvorby a její pozice na rozhraní modernistické a postmoderní poetiky. Dále jsou zde definovány základní koncepty modernismu a postmodernismu, s přihlédnutím zejména k teoriím Briana McHalea, Lindy Hutcheon, Jean-François Lyotarda, Waltera Benjamina a Jeana Baudrillarda. Ve spojitosti s těmito koncepty se práce věnuje i tématu historie, identity a medializace v konexi s proměnou doby. Analýza DeLillových děl kriticky zkoumá jeho zařazení mezi postmoderní autory i proměny jeho tvorby v časovém období literárního postmodernismu. Práce mapuje a vyhodnocuje výskyt prvků obou literárních estetik ve čtyřech DeLillových románech a na základě jejich výskytu zdůvodňuje nejednoznačnost, s níž se nutně potýká snaha zařadit rozebíraná díla do toho či onoho směru.

Práce je napsána v anglickém jazyce.

Klíčová slova:

Don DeLillo, americká postmoderní literatura, trauma, média, hyperrealita

Abstract

This thesis explores DeLillo's four novels – *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Underworld* and *Falling Man* with regards to the difficulties surrounding their placement within post/modernist poetics. The analysis is preceded by a theoretical introduction devoted to conceiving of DeLillo's work and its position on the borderline between modernist and postmodernist poetics. Furthermore, it attempts to define the basic concepts of modernism and postmodernism with special regards to the theory of such literary critics as Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon, and such theoreticians as Jean-François Lyotard, Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard. In connection with these concepts the work deals with such topics as history, identity and medialisation in connection with the changing developments in post-war USA. The theoretical framework sketched in the theoretical introduction is drawn upon within the analysis of DeLillo's novels in the rest of the thesis, and applied to a critical examination of his difficult placement within the postmodern canon. Based on a close and critical reading of DeLillo's four novels, a detailed analysis of their (post)modernist features, the thesis documents the ambiguity facing every effort to co-opt DeLillo's fiction for either movement, displaying his work as a rather strange case of hybridity and non-binarity.

Key words:

Don DeLillo, American novel, postmodern fiction, history, hyperreality, media, trauma

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Theoretical Introduction

Don DeLillo on the List(s)

Don DeLillo has been one of the main figures on the American literary scene since the late 1960's. From his first novel *Americana* (1971) to *The Silence* (2020)—the latest so far—DeLillo's career spans no less than five decades of regular novelistic output. A lifelong inhabitant of the Bronx, DeLillo has frequently stated in the few interviews he agreed to give that he finds his surroundings more influential than his education at Fordham University. This combined with his double Italian/American heritage and his problematic Catholicism has given rise to a literary oeuvre of remarkable originality.

Starting his career in the early 1970s meant coming to terms with the then-newly promoted label of postmodern fiction – in both their timing and their scope, DeLillo's works brush shoulders with such authors as Nabokov, Pynchon, Coover, Barth, and Barthelme, and so they have usually been classified as exemplarily postmodern. In view of the relevant topics of the times and how the socio-political situation is reflected upon in his writing, critics have often placed him on their lists of other postmodernists active between 1960 and 1990. In his contribution to *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, Barry Lewis comments on another critic Malcolm Bradbury's inclusion of DeLillo in the company of other prominently postmodern authors:

Yet, despite this cosmopolitanism, Malcolm Bradbury has quipped that 'When something called postmodernism came along everyone thought it was American – even though its writers had names like Borges, Nabokov, Calvino and Eco.' This is because the number of Stateside

writers who can be placed under the postmodernist rubric is large. Here are twenty names usually included in such lists:

Walter Abish	Raymond Federman
Kathy Acker	William Gass
Paul Auster	Steve Katz
John Barth	Jerzy Kosinski
Donald Barthelme	Joseph McElroy
Richard Brautigan	Thomas Pynchon
William Burroughs	Ishmael Reed
Robert Coover	Gilbert Sorrentino
Don DeLillo	Ronald Sukenick
E. L. Doctorow	Kurt Vonnegut (Lewis 123, my highlight)

In his book on postmodernism (2003), Christopher Butler offers basically the same classification, grouping DeLillo with other postmodern writers of the last three decades of the 20th century:

The politics of the postmodernist era will probably take care of itself as the conditions under which it became popular change, but what will remain, if some sense of history and tradition also remains, is a sense of postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon, which has left us over the last 30 years of its influence with a canon of major works, particularly from writers like Abish, Barthelme, Coover, and DeLillo, and on through the alphabet. (Butler 123)

It seems then that in the alphabetical list of postmodern writers, the letter “D” has been reserved for Don D – even in the early 21st century, an era understood as no longer postmodern.

In 2003, Harold Bloom declared DeLillo one of the crucial novelists of American literature. His anthology puts him in the company of the “big four” postmodern American writers, praising three of his novels that for Bloom are of greatest significance of American fiction:

One can venture that the major American novelists now at work are Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy. They write the Style of our Age, and each has composed canonical works. For DeLillo, I would name these as *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Underworld*, certainly his principal book up to this time. (*Don DeLillo* 1)

The three novels viewed by Bloom as DeLillo’s canonical ones, *White Noise*, *Libra* and *Underworld* will form the basis of analysing DeLillo’s work in this thesis. The volume of “Bloom’s Modern Critical Views” series dedicated to *Don DeLillo* came out in 2003, a year in which *Cosmopolis* was published to the great surprise of some of the literary world expecting DeLillo to publish a novel on 9/11. That book came out four years later, in 2007, when *Falling Man* was published to some contradictory reactions from the public. I have decided to analyse it together with the other three novels mentioned by Bloom as I believe it belongs on, and expands, his list. 9/11 is also an event that has impacted the contemporary consciousness of the entire American society in very much the same way the assassination of JFK had done for the 1960s and 70s, and so it would be a pitiable omission not to include *Falling Man* in a thesis reviewing the 50 years of DeLillo’s remarkable writing career.

This writing career will be discussed in the tricky but hopefully productive terms of DeLillo’s modernist and postmodernist aesthetics, their tensions and contradictions, but also fruitful synergies. As has been shown, DeLillo’s postmodernity has been taken for granted by a number of critical authorities. On the other hand, it has also been

sometimes questioned by literary theoreticians who disagree with pigeonholing DeLillo within the postmodernist label, and instead offer analyses of his work that classify DeLillo as a strangely anachronistic modernist, or at least challenge the easy labelling of such a complex author. A good example of this tendency is Paul Giaimo in *Appreciating Don DeLillo*:

Despite the fact that many prior readers stress elements of DeLillo's work that are easily labeled "postmodern" or "modern," more important elements related to the moral force of DeLillo's work hearken back to older styles of the novel and are not quite so easily put into categories. More specifically, my case is that DeLillo's tendency is to show some elements of mimetic realism as well as those features of modernism and postmodernism. (Giaimo 1)

One could go on quoting critical views both for and against the strange case of a postmodernist DeLillo, but what about DeLillo's own views on his work and the postmodernist label? As mentioned already, DeLillo has not given many interviews, and even fewer of those he did give concerned his own work (an anecdote has him giving out cards printed with "I do not want to talk about it" to journalists). The few interviews published do however bring up DeLillo's uneasy attitudes towards critical attempts to box him into either of the two crucial literary movements of the 20th century. In an interview with Thomas LeClair, DeLillo is on record stating this:

So much modern fiction is located precisely nowhere. This is Beckett and Kafka insinuating themselves onto the page. Their work is so woven into the material of modern life that it's not surprising so many writers choose to live there, or choose to have their characters live there. Fiction without a sense of real place is automatically a fiction of estrangement, and of

course this is the point. As theory it has its attractions, but I can't write that way myself. I'm too interested in what real places look like and what names they have. Place is colour and texture. It's tied up with memory and roots and pigments and rough surfaces and language, too. (Leclair and DeLillo 31)

Here, DeLillo distances himself from a feature of modernist fiction he cannot embrace: its supposed placelessness and estrangement. On the other hand, there is clear admiration on DeLillo's part for the legacy of modernist writing. In another interview with Adam Begley, he claims that "it was through Joyce that I learned to see something in language that carried a radiance, something that made me feel the beauty and fervor of words, the sense that a word has a life and a history" (Begley 1993), admitting the importance of the modernist style in the process of finding his own path towards writing fiction. As argued in this thesis, his novels contain some direct references to such modernist classics as *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, and in addition to these DeLillo borrows the clearly modernist approach to creating his own "tradition", eclectically picking and connecting the exceptional writings of writers from previous period(s).

DeLillo claims he does not or cannot write as the modernists did while at the same time directly referring to them. The crucial questions for this thesis to answer will be: what makes DeLillo's fiction (post)modernist in the first place? How can we identify a (DeLillo) text as modern or postmodern when reading it? What are the features on the textual and narrative levels of (post)modernist writing – and how could we track those features in DeLillo's work? As a point of departure this thesis argues that there are echoes of modernist writing *inside* the style of DeLillo's fiction – not only in its frames of reference. Moving on in this direction, it will be crucial to determine which modernist and postmodernist concepts to look out for throughout DeLillo's four novels.

From Epistemology to Ontology: Brian McHale on modernism vs. postmodernism

To this day, one of the most useful aesthetic distinctions between modernist and postmodernist fiction has been offered in the work of Brian McHale. He works with the formalist/structuralist concept of the dominant defined as:

the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure...a poetic work [is] a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. (Jakobson qtd. in *Postmodernist Fiction* 6)

McHale argues that such a concept of the dominant is to be used in the plural, meaning that there are multiple different dominants. The choice among them depends on what we are to analyse – for example there would be different dominants when analysing prose and verse depending on the nature of their function. When it comes to postmodernism,

[c]atalogues of postmodernist features are typically organized in terms of oppositions with features of modernist poetics. Thus, for instance, David Lodge lists five strategies (contradiction, discontinuity, randomness, excess, short circuit) by which postmodernist writing seeks to avoid having to choose either of the poles of metaphoric (modernist) or metonymic (antimodernist) writing. Ihab Hassan gives us seven modernist rubrics (urbanism, technologism, dehumanization, primitivism, eroticism, antinomianism, experimentalism), indicating how postmodernist aesthetics modifies or extends each of them. (*Postmodernist Fiction* 7)

Usually, these are the terms on whose basis postmodernist aesthetics is tackled. McHale states that modernism and postmodernism are still only constructs and as such do not necessarily stand in opposition but, more importantly, one cannot exclude or deny the existence of the other, especially postmodernism will always be a reaction to previous aesthetics from which it also derives its name/label. The “post-” prefix does not indicate just its departure or denial, it also covers a certain kind of cooperation with concepts already present. McHale emphasises the close relationship between both:

Thus the term “postmodernism,” if we take it literally enough, *à la lettre*, signifies a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism, and not some hypothetical writing of the future. As for the prefix POST, here I want to emphasize the element of logical and historical *consequence* rather than sheer temporal *posteriority*. Postmodernism follows *from* modernism, in some sense, more than it follows *after* modernism. (*Postmodernist Fiction* 5)

Most importantly, McHale delivers a definition of the main difference between the two aesthetics that share certain features and at the same time differ from each other. Thanks to the concept of the dominant, he states that while modernism is epistemological, postmodernism shifted this dominant onto the ontological plane. He introduces these two concepts through questions that are tightly connected to either of the dominant. When he talks about modernist fiction, McHale declares that

the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as those mentioned by Dick Higgins in my epigraph: “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” Other typical

modernist questions might be added: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on. (*Postmodernist Fiction* 9)

According to McHale, it is through such questions that modernist fiction deals with its fictional “real”, and it is on their basis that we should approach it. For postmodernism, McHale argues, the dominant changed and so did the questions of this narrative discourse:

the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls “post-cognitive”: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (*Postmodernist Fiction* 10)

This might on the face of it seem like a theory of the differences between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics in the sense of the structuralist hierarchy of binary oppositions. Right at the beginning of the chapter, McHale stresses the

importance of the different meanings behind the “post-” prefix in postmodernism. In his book on *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), McHale challenges the concept of oppositions itself when he declares that “indeed, in a certain sense, something *is* wrong with the modernism vs. postmodernism opposition, and periodization in general is *all* wrong.” (*Constructing Postmodernism* 42)

He continues with analysing two post/modernist writers – James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon. McHale focuses on their narrative perspectives, stating that both aesthetics use *multiplicities* by grounding their narratives on the principle of fragmentation – but unlike in postmodernism, the modernist narrative works with a clear(er) distinction of who is telling/showing while postmodern perspectives/foci are usually blurred and harder to neatly distinguish among. Even though McHale himself is quick to declare that the boundaries between these two may blend. He uses the example of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* to put forth the somewhat unorthodox reading of the novel as half-modernist and half-postmodernist. Within his analysis, he shows how the dominant of the narrative can change even within a single text and that again we analyse only in terms of constructs that could not be objectified:

The awkward case of *Ulysses* makes it clear that any accounts we choose to give of the relations between modernism and postmodernism are only constructs, that there can be no strictly objective criteria for preferring one construct over its competitors, and that, on the contrary, choices among competing constructs can only be made strategically, in the light of the kind of work that the chosen construct might be expected to accomplish. (*Constructing Postmodernism* 10)

As much as McHale calls out the impossibility of objectively identifying any strict distinctions between modernist and postmodernist literary aesthetics, this thesis

will take cue from him by analysing DeLillo's use of both modernist and postmodernist techniques, and detailing his narratives deal with the fragmentation entailed both in fiction and history. These concerns will be supplemented by a further focus on some of the key themes of the four DeLillo novels analysed, that again cut across the modern/postmodern binary: namely history, media, trauma and death.

What "was" modernism and postmodernism with regards to DeLillo?

Modernist writers faced chaos – and responded with their attempts to find an order. The tendencies to find systems in times of uncertainty and disorder resonated throughout literature as a medium that created a space for the exploration of such “new” ideas of world construction. Such sentiments pushed the 19th-century sentiments to their limits – and together with them, the conventions of “realist” writing, on both the levels of narrative and language. As Peter Childs has argued, modernist art

is experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contains elements of decreation as well as creation, and tends to associate notions of the artist's freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster. (Childs 1)

Ellipsis and de-creation in Childs' definition bring up a cluster of modernist binaries important for DeLillo's aesthetics: chaos vs. cosmos, incompleteness vs. consummation, fragment vs. totality, the artistic whole vs. the omitted, the depicted vs. the “unsaid”. For instance, chaos will be seen as a strong motif throughout DeLillo's work, and its binary opposite of “order” as pointing to the omnipresent paranoia in his novels – the constant fear of the unknown and the systemless, accompanied with an equal fear of some hidden “system” at work, is to be found everywhere in DeLillo's texts.

DeLillo often invokes mystery in his work – another theme that looms large in his work. There are scenes in his work with an almost transcendent approach to storytelling – readers are often left feeling there is “something unsaid,” something hidden behind the text itself. The chief triggers of this feeling are the open-endedness and uncertainty of DeLillo’s narratives which again cannot be identified as either mainly modernist or postmodernist. The multiplicity of perspectives is crucial for both DeLillo and the modernists. The visual art of cubism is quite similar to what we see in the modernism narrative – characters that try to capture reality from multiple perspectives but as DeLillo points out, characters that “have a flattened existence – purposely – and many modern characters exist precisely nowhere” (DeCurtis and DeLillo 62). Modernists such as Virginia Woolf and others tend to play with focus even within one sentence and with multiple perspectives shown through it. Hence also another shared modernist/postmodernist narrative trait, the concept of the “unreliable narrator”, used very often by DeLillo and linked both to the consciousness of the character and to the perception of the reader.

Apart from these aesthetic concerns, clearly, there is a cluster of topics in DeLillo’s work connected to his modernist heritage revisited under a postmodernist rubric: history and storytelling, media and literature, the notions of trauma and trash, as well as questions to do with human finitude.

History versus/as Narrative: Lyotard, Hutcheon

DeLillo's books rely mostly on crucial developments in post-war American history that have shaped the US society throughout the second half of the 20th century – mainly the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and the many phases and faces of the Cold War. The question that arises is in what sense does DeLillo portray history and past? Does he use the modernist technique with reference towards myths, or does he stand with the postmodernists that banishes both the great narratives *and* mythopoeic base of history?

What is clearly influential on DeLillo from the modernist heritage is the concept of the material of the past as informing the present creation – in the form of quotation, allusion, parody and pastiche. The past as something kept alive by an act of present appropriation was something very dear to modernism, which drew heavily on the texts of previous eras using their different styles, methods and techniques. Robert Martin Adams in “What Was Modernism?” labelled modernism the “new primitivism” which:

sought a more remote past than people had been used to, and made very different applications of it. The polite, polished, Olympian side of the classic past was not what intrigued the modernists, rather it was the primitive, the barbaric, the mystery-side of the ancient world. (Adams 21)

The past and history are connected to the construction of the myth – a historical notion of modernist writers when trying to come to terms with the past. Modernists were fascinated with history, in the double sense of past events but also with the nature of history itself. They rejected the great Enlightenment narrative of human progress and accepted a mythical basis of history, circular narratives of creation and re-creation, classified as the fundamental or original tales playing crucial roles in forming societies.

In opposition to the great foundational narratives of the past, the modern myth was not the foundation of finding the objective truth of what history *is*, but rather a story of the processes that create our knowledge and enable an understanding of our origins.

Postmodernism renounces the modernist consolation in the objective truth of the myth, which does not mean it denies history's existence. What it does deny is the understanding of history as a "metanarrative" in Jean-François Lyotard's understanding:

I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. (Lyotard xxiv)

Lyotard conveys that the concept of understanding of history by means of the grand narratives is ill-conceived for it denies the unpredictability and chaos naturally present within the modern-day world. As the world itself becomes increasingly fragmented, such concept can no longer be sufficient for fiction. The archetypes of the great heroes have fallen from their pedestals to be replaced by complex characters that can hardly be labelled either heroes or anti-heroes. Lyotard here does not deny the presence of metanarratives, but he questions the tenability and usefulness of such narratives for our present context. And conversely, he declares that we are all part of complicated structures and systems that no metanarrative can ever be trusted to fully explain or substitute. Hence postmodernist fiction's interest in complex systems and narrative entanglements, and its refusal to ever arrive at any one resolution. Therefore, Lyotard not only opposes the realist narrative, he also opposes the modernist one as he challenges their notion of truth as product of mythical superstructures (and our knowledge of them).

Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) tries to set the boundaries between these two different approaches to the field of history by focusing mainly on the

difference between the modernist and postmodernist narrative. Hutcheon states that postmodernism differs from modernist writing

not in its humanistic contradictions, but in the provisionality of its response to them: it refuses to posit any structure or, what Lyotard calls, master narrative—such as art or myth—which, for such modernists, would have been consolatory. It argues that such systems are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary; but this does not make them any the less illusory. (Hutcheon 6)

What both Hutcheon and Lyotard posit is the significant difference in the approach towards history of/as narrative – history, after all, always being a story, always more or less different based on who is telling it. They do not deny the structuralist nature of such stories but warn against believing in any kind of “final” results or in settling for the illusion of some “objective” truth resulting from such structure. In other words, unlike the structuralists, Hutcheon and Lyotard work with endless structures of references pointing to other referents.

When labelling DeLillo as postmodern novelist, critics imply that his concept of history is closer to that of Hutcheon and Lyotard – but is it really the case? What makes DeLillo such an outstanding figure is his handling of history in his narratives, conceived as retellings of the (hi)story of the American consciousness. One needs to be careful when claiming this strategy to be purely postmodern, instead one could say that although DeLillo’s concepts of history and historiography are those of postmodern (fiction) writing, his methods remain by and large modernist.

Media: Benjamin, Baudrillard

The topic distinctive of DeLillo's fiction is the presence of media – mainly the radio and TV. Many critics argue that the narrative that dominates television is typically postmodern – and that the kind of writing focused on society under the impact of the TV technology is postmodern. That again is a simplification, as modernists too were very much concerned with technologies in relation to society – just with different kinds. Leaving aside the technology of the military sort, photography, the cinema and the radio were already the rage of the 1920s and the 30s, well before the postmodern era is supposed to have taken off. Post-war, these were replaced by their updates – first the TV, then the computers, and finally the internet. Even in his later work, DeLillo remains technologically conservative in focusing on the old-fashioned medium of the TV and its modes of affecting the consciousness of the American public. For indeed, the American society of the 1960s through the 1990s was very much a culture of television. The TV was a family gathering place, a window onto the world, a key factor in planning one's daily routine. Together with the culture of TV grew a culture of advertisement and commodity consumerism, something DeLillo had a first-hand experience of as he himself worked in the advertising business.

The pervasive interest in media in DeLillo's fiction has also to do with his fascination with the process of mediation, repetition and reproduction. He himself was born just one year after the publication of Walter Benjamin's 1935 seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which dealt with the position and condition of art under the circumstances of modern-age technology. DeLillo directly addresses Benjamin's concept of "aura" in *White Noise* in what is probably the most quoted passage of DeLillo's work in general – "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED

BARN IN AMERICA.” Benjamin connects the concept with the reproduction, authenticity and originality of art and defines it as follows:

What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. ... It rests on two circumstances, both linked to the increasing emergence of the masses and the growing intensity of their movements. Namely: the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction. (Benjamin 23)

This concept of Benjamin's is definitely relevant for DeLillo's work and possibly its "late modernist" investment in "getting closer" to things while "overcoming their uniqueness". Any notion of media and mediation requires a prior concept of reality. While reflecting the modernist theory of repetition and originality, we find the echoes of Benjamin's theory are later on developed in a postmodernist context by Jean Baudrillard. His theory radically questions Benjamin's sense of reference to reality – and also transforms all questions surrounding the dubious status of representation. Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* (1995) elaborated on this with his concept of 'hyperreality' and 'simulation' connected to a certain manipulation of reality challenging any kind of belief even in a reality seen through "one's own eyes":

Hyperreality and simulation are deterrents of every principle and every objective, they turn against power the deterrent that it used so well for such a long time. ... and if it is the one that fostered reality, the reality principle, it was also the first to liquidate it by exterminating all use value, all real equivalence of production and wealth, in the very sense we

have of the unreality of the stakes and the omnipotence of manipulation.

(Baudrillard 17)

DeLillo is often seen as a masterful manipulator of the reality and unreality of his own narratives. There is a uniqueness to how DeLillo portrays fictional reality, which is also strongly tied to his treatment of history. The sense of reality, past and present, as well as history is an important topic to explore in DeLillo's work as these also vary in modernist as opposed to postmodernist fiction. The thesis aims to tackle the questions surrounding DeLillo's (post)modernity on the basis of his treatment of our everchanging understanding of history and the increasing mediation of reality.

Trauma and Trash: Caruth, Evans

What also separates the postmodern exploration of history from the modernist kind is its interest in *trauma* (what separates the two historically is, after all, WW2 and the trauma of the Holocaust). Trauma is tied to memory: postmodern theorists declare the inability to remember to arise out of trauma, whether personal or collective, which in turn shapes how we remember or reimagine. Not only is there a notion of the impossibility of anchoring any past event as reliable history, but postmodernist historians bring forth the notion of trauma as a tool of our consciousness that can help form our knowledge of the past. In her *Unclaimed* (1996), historian and critic Cathy Caruth, conceives of trauma as “[t]he response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.” (Caruth 91)

Characters in DeLillo's books usually go through or have experienced some stage of trauma – whether personal or collective. In all four books analysed the traumatic experience is present, usually making DeLillo's characters all the less reliable

as narrators. But however much such characters find themselves stuck in repetition, they are also well aware they cannot hold on to it – an awareness of death is everywhere in DeLillo’s fiction. While death is of course a topic as old as human culture, in modernism as well as postmodernism, it itself becomes medialised, witnessed by proxy, thus less and less authentic. The postmodern era is that of death captured on tape and re-playable, of death less real. Parts of the thesis that follows will look at DeLillo’s treatment of life-threatening and changing events, and his characters’ relation to death.

What remains after death? Traces, relics, and waste. Not only in *Underworld* is the presence and manipulation of waste significant, but the odour of waste, decay and rotting wafts all over DeLillo’s work. In his obsession with garbage as an important key to understanding society and the processes in it, DeLillo again is contemporary while looking back to his modernist predecessors. The modernist monument to waste and recycling is of course T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* – itself a heap of broken text. As finely described in David H. Evans’s “Taking Out the Trash” (2006):

In the standard reading, ‘waste’ here has primarily mythical and spiritual connotations, and the ecological devastation of Eliot’s landscape is the sign of a crisis of moral sterility. But it is useful to remember that waste also means something much more material and actual, and a poet so rooted in the life of the city would have been well aware of the more practical crisis created by overproduction and the subsequent problem of mounting trash. (Evans 113)

If what is left after life has run its course is waste, this means that a lot of things can be read from it. It is the waste that speaks to our consumerism and ignorance of ecology. This is a theme from the early 20th century related to contemporary ecocriticism and related anthropological theories, but DeLillo does not feature garbage

in his narratives in order to raise ecological awareness. He is interested in what it means and what it says about us. As Evans comments:

In a curious way, garbage is that which maintains the most intimate and personal relation to the private self – our garbage is what remains after our participation in the cycle of production and consumption, what falls out of that cycle and marks the crossing of the particular with the general, the idiosyncratic with the interchangeable, the unique with the repeatable. In a very real sense, one’s garbage is the thing which is most one’s own – it is the end in a world defined by means. (Evans 109)

The concept of trauma mixed with history is to be followed in DeLillo’s work as both are strongly present in his novels. How does trauma affect DeLillo’s characters? To what extent is the trauma present in the texts? How it changes the notion of history and invades the creation of identity? In the following analysis, I aim to explore how DeLillo treats the formation of consciousness through the notion of rootlessness. In that sense, I touch upon waste as the medium to capture his characters’ nature in their most intimate and opened form.

Conclusion

It is along the lines of modernist and postmodernist poetics as charted out by McHale, Lyotard, Hutcheon, and some of the post/modernist topics as detailed by Benjamin, Baudrillard, and others, that this thesis proposes to evaluate the four DeLillo novels of its primary focus.

In Chapter One, dedicated to *White Noise*, I will discuss the novel as an exemplary postmodern text. In that sense it covers the presence of postmodern theories – especially Baudrillard’s theory of “hyperreality” and “simulation” and the departure

from Benjamin's theory of "aura" as concept of understanding modernist art. The analysis also covers the problems of media and advertisement connected to DeLillo's critique of consumerist capitalism, concluding with the exploration of the meaning of the topic of death that resonates throughout the novel.

Chapter Two on *Libra* will detail DeLillo's treatment of history and how it is portrayed in fiction. Going hand in hand with fragmentation of perspectives and mediation, history and trauma form the basis of the second chapter. The media coverage of the event that is said to be the beginning of the postmodern era in America, and its depiction in DeLillo's novel, is analysed in relation to the endless loop of reproductions possible only because of the presence of camera. The last part is concerned with language and language games that are quite distinct to DeLillo's other works.

Chapter Three, devoted to *Underworld*, will show that the novel is an epic, sometimes comparable to Joyce's *Ulysses*, parallels with which are elaborated on. The analysis follows the pattern of baseball–Cold war parallelism, with paranoia and fear invading the American consciousness. Again, history is touched upon, following Lyotard's and Hutcheon's theory of history and Caruth's notion of trauma. The characters in *Underworld* are analysed through two aspects: once through their cheating plots and how they deal with their aftermath, and through their manipulation with garbage. *Underworld* also works with the concept of dialogue not only among characters but between cultures and aesthetics – as also mentioned in the analysis.

In Chapter Four, a brief analysis of the most recent of DeLillo's novels, *Falling Man*, will revisit the question of his modernity vs. postmodernity from the viewpoint of his dealing with the 21st-century everydayness. The main topic here is trauma and how it affects his characters, their notion of identity and history. As stated in the chapter, the

event that (once again) changed the American consciousness also marked a change to DeLillo's manipulation of the literary form.

Finally, the conclusion will cast further critical light on the limits of the usefulness in applying these overarching concepts to as highly idiosyncratic a work as DeLillo's. There are indeed critics that have found in his work elements of transcendentalism, romanticism or realism, and many other -isms. This variety should not be seen as defeating the purpose of trying to understand this writer, but rather serve as reminder that literature for DeLillo is in the first place a *process* of synthesis, of writing about the present in the light of previous works and authors, in making his reaction to them. DeLillo's writing raises questions and calls for responses, it collects knowledge while showing its limitations. DeLillo's writing is first and foremost syncretic, and in being so, it is a singularity which does not fit the bill of either modernist or postmodernist fiction. As this thesis will aim to show, that is not its weakness, but precisely what gives DeLillo's writing its strength.

Chapter 1: Part of the aura

Man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death. (*White Noise* 22)

White Noise (1985) is partially a novel about the everyday life of an everyday American family with some features of the campus novel. It starts with a picture of the seemingly functional relationships between Jack and his family, whose gradual disintegration we witness throughout the novel. DeLillo sketches a social reality that might seem completely functional on the surface but also highlights the disruption hidden under the lid. Jack Gladney is a college professor of “Hitler studies” living with his wife Babette and four children. Both of them were married before and have children from previous relationships. Besides his family, Jack also have a friend and colleague Murray Jay Siskind who often theorizes about TV and media and his express intention to set up Elvis Presley studies, following the successful example of Jack and his Hitler studies.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part, “Waves and Radiation”, mainly focuses on introducing Jack, his family and his work. Through a thorough depiction of the triviality and emptiness of the “ordinary” life of the American society, DeLillo critiques its main features: its shallow consumerism, its oversaturation with commodities, its overproduction of waste, and its superficial obsession with the media. Jack’s project of Hitler studies is also a motif to mock and satirize the academia’s increasing segmentation of knowledge and remove from any meaningful engagement with the world’s problems. “The Airborne Toxic Event” marks a violation of American

idyll when a chemical spill from a nearby factory forces Jack's family to evacuate their home. This episode is interwoven with media reportage, omnipresent chaos, and fear of death. Also strongly related to death is the last part called "Dylarama," whose title refers to the drug Dylar which is supposed to "cure" people's consciousness of its fear of death. Throughout the novel, tensions in personal relationships are escalating to a point of revelation that the whole family and its relationships are barely functional. As the family falls apart, so do the characters themselves – at the end Jack shoots Willie Mink, a Dylar dealer, and lover of his wife. Presuming Willie to be dead, Jack tries to put the gun into his hand in order to stage a suicide, only to be shot by Willie in return. This experience results in Jack's presumed understanding of what death really means and his decision to save both of them by getting them both to hospital.

In other words, aptly summarized by Annjeanette Wiese in *Rethinking Postmodern Narrativity*: "DeLillo presents a world mired in simulation, hyperreality, consumerism, and often meaningless information and theory. Both historically contingent and hypernormal, the world of *White Noise* provides a new location for the contemporary tale: rather than far, far away, it could be anywhere within American suburbia." (Wiese 4)

Simulation & Aura

The novel raises many questions regarding the reliability of reality – especially in the first part where the main focus is on the ordinary life of an ordinary American family. The American culture in *White Noise* is marked by the omnipresence of media that are constantly affecting people's understanding of their lived and unlived reality – and the Gladneys repeatedly undergo the situation of facing a space and time that are

broadcasted to them through the radio and TV, and only vaguely being able to distinguish them from their directly-experienced reality.

Every family member is affected by the media in a different way – some of them strictly follow the daily routine as broadcasted through the TV or radio, some of them only see the benefits of their usage of these machines, while others are aware of some of the negative impact media can have. The whole sentiment is supported by the frequent occurrence of TV sets and radios throughout the whole novel. Sometimes these machines seem to somehow live a life of their own (for example when the radio goes off by itself with no-one around). The questions to what extent the virtual mediated reality is to be believed and whether it might be better to stop watching and listening to what the media have to say is not answered in the novel, but the family displays at least some awareness of the fake reality broadcasted. Each person of the family deals with this awareness differently. For Babette, for instance, watching TV becomes an enforced part of the routine of the family's social life and a preventive measure against becoming addicted to it:

Babette had made it a rule. She seemed to think that if kids watched television one night a week with parents or stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome domestic sport. Its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brainsucking power would be gradually reduced. (WN 16)

The different attitudes towards the medium are neatly drawn upon when it comes to Babette and Jack's son Heinrich. Unlike Babette, Heinrich who is interested in science relies more on the medium of the radio. There is a conversation between Jack and Heinrich about the weather where Heinrich says:

“It's going to rain tonight.”

“It's raining now,” I said.

“The radio said tonight.” (*WN 22*)

Jack is trying to convince Heinrich to look out and admit that it is raining – to believe more in what he sees than what he hears on the radio. Jack's attempt is nevertheless rejected when Heinrich declares that it is nonsense to rely on our experiences and senses:

“Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses.”

“Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. Don't you know about all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems? There's no past, present or future outside our own mind. The so-called laws of motion are a big hoax. Even sound can trick the mind. Just because you don't hear a sound doesn't mean it's not out there. Dogs can hear it. Other animals. And I'm sure there are sounds even dogs can't hear. But they exist in the air, in waves. Maybe they never stop. High, high, high-pitched. Coming from somewhere.” (*WN 22–23*)

Heinrich here is a strong voice of the postmodern scepticism regarding the knowability of reality. One might call it paranoia but this feeling comes from the conviction that the referent to our past and the reality is simply missing. In this regard, Heinrich's voiced views perfectly chime with Baudrillard's theory of 'hyperreality'. “There's no past, present or future outside our own mind” is basically the postmodern definition of our perception of the present and retention of the past and history – not only does Heinrich declare that it is our consciousness that creates our past, he directly points out that we cannot rely on any reference to our reality as “real”. Even if one

could find such a reference, there will always be something empty or unsaid within it (which Heinrich himself also points out above). This of course brings forth the feeling of paranoia – it is directly pointed out that there nothing objectively knowable within the world. For Wiese, this is a perfect example of Baudrillard’s theory as *White Noise* evinces the irony of ahistoricity in an age that can neither locate itself in reference to a concept of history that is structured around a metanarrative of progress nor understand the potential of small narratives as Lyotard described them. Indeed, according to Jameson, postmodern society is “bereft of all historicity.” He continues: “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” [...]. And in *White Noise* this effacement applies equally well to the present. (Wiese 4)

For a further description of our mediated existence with our increasingly “hyper” reality, DeLillo directly refers to Walter Benjamin’s concepts of *aura* during Jack and Murray’s trip to see “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA.” They see many billboards with this notice on their way to it and when they finally arrive, they cannot even see the barn, surrounded as it is by the many people taking photographs of it. But to be precise, they do not actually go there to see the barn. What do they go there for then? “We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies.” (WN 12)

For Benjamin, *aura* is the quality of a work of art connected to its presence in time and space, the particular moment of presence that we cannot replicate and which becomes increasingly rare in our age of “mechanical reproduction”, for indeed *aura* becomes destroyed for Benjamin through reproduction. But what DeLillo delivers in

this passage does not strictly follow Benjamin's late-modernist theory. In the scene, the notion of reproduction is crucial, but what is even more significant about DeLillo's scene is its discussion of a purposeful elision of any trace of presence or originality:

"They are taking pictures of taking pictures," he said.

He did not speak for a while. We listened to the incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rustling crank of levers that advanced the film.

"What was the barn like before it was photographed?" he said.

"What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? 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. We're here, we're now."

He seemed immensely pleased by this. (WN 13)

In this part, DeLillo contaminates Benjamin's concept with a touch of postmodernity declaring that instead of destroying aura through a reproduction of original, reproduction of another reproduction can itself generate its own aura. The sounds of cameras become the aura of the reproduction of reproduction. They attempt to capture the present moment. The people are aware they will not see the barn but still they come to be part of this "collective aura" of clicking and they surrender all their individual uniqueness in favour of the collectively agreed-upon aura. The visitors are not even for a moment disappointed, because they do not even expect to see the barn in the first place.

But DeLillo does not end with this sequence in the confirmation of Baudrillard and challenging Benjamin, he even further elaborates on Baudrillard's simulacrum by featuring as motif in his narrative "SIMUVAC" – a shortcut for 'Simulated Evacuation'.

SIMUVAC is an organisation in charge during the Airborne Toxic Event and their task is to get everyone to safety. The name itself would suggest DeLillo's elaboration on the already dealt-with concepts of simulation and hyperreality, but DeLillo treats us to even more when he includes information into the narrative that this organisation is actually only using this event in order to test the process of evacuation. The characters in *White Noise* are then treated as laboratory mice. SIMUVAC even creates fake evacuation-situations to be prepared to test their work on different simulated evacuations. The question becomes – why then is an organisation responsible for simulated evacuations called upon to help during a real disaster? DeLillo here suggests that not only is there a thin line between reality and simulation, there actually might not be one. It is impossible to grasp reality, a theme that is stressed upon throughout the whole novel, and SIMUVAC only validates this by being an organisation that simulates evacuation in order to be prepared during simulated evacuations.

Simulations are not only present in DeLillo's narrative, they are to be found also within his characters – especially in Jack. When faced with the non-referential world without roots, it is hard for one to build any “real” sense of identity. This then results in repetition and reproduction of events lived and people met, which is also to say a strong tendency to imitation. From the youth to the old – in DeLillo's world we all imitate and reproduce the processes that create our identity. There is an effort within to become something that is known, something reliable. In *White Noise* Jack's model to imitate is Hitler – not for who he “really” is but for what he represents in the narrative: his big achievement, almost pop-stardom with which he is both feared and admired, this without any connection to his real historical/political “achievement” and the horrors of WW2. Jack simply feels himself in miming the *aura* of such a figure, however much of

course taken out of context and reproduced in a different place and time, as well as for different purposes:

So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort. The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea, an alternative to the bushy beard that my wife of the period didn't want me to grow. Babette said she liked the series J. A. K. and didn't think it was attention-getting in a cheap sense. To her it intimated dignity, significance and prestige.

I am the false character that follows the name around. (WN 17)

And Jack is right – this very chapter started by declaring him to be a professor of Hitler studies. Besides that, he is also much more than a copy of Hitler, he is his imitation or rather the imitation of his aura with his personal twist in it. Hence he might be a “false character” in that there is no sense of originality in neither his world nor his identity, except he lives in a DeLillo world where everyone is imitating everyone else, and so any sense of “falsehood” becomes undermined.

Medialization

Every semester I arranged for a screening of background footage. This consisted of propaganda films, scenes shot at party congresses, outtakes from mystical epics featuring parades of gymnasts and mountaineers—a collection I'd edited into an impressionistic eighty-minute documentary. Crowd scenes predominated. (...) There was no narrative voice. Only chants, songs, arias, speeches, cries, cheers, accusations, shrieks. I got to my feet and took up a position at the front of the theatre, middle aisle, facing the entranceway. (WN 25-26)

In this passage, Jack is describing old short propaganda movies often used in WW2-documentaries. Through this attitude towards the movie narrative DeLillo stresses even more the significance and danger of the cinematic medium as a technology which could be used for making a spectacle of a rather horrific historical reality. To further highlight this, Jack is at the end positioned as a dictator speaking to the crowds. However, the truly disturbing part of this scene is that actually any kind of movie can be used as propaganda – and only sometimes can we identify it as such if we have recourse to the knowledge the difference between the spectacle and its referred-to reality. DeLillo is making here the point that reality can and has been manipulated through the technology of film or TV, and together with, people’s consciousness.

The ideal product of TV and media is the celebrity, a.k.a. person famous for being famous – and as such, even Hitler could be referred to as one. If one can study Elvis Presley at the university side by side with Hitler, why could Hitler not be considered celebrity? The boundaries here are clearly blurred or non-existing. Television therefore possesses the power not only to manipulate the form of information transmitted, it is a medium that also fabricates its content, making a celebrity out of everyone “famous” enough.

This difference in perception between reality as broadcasted and as lived is perfectly seen within Jack’s various perceptions of both. When a disaster is broadcasted on TV, everybody is watching it with a fascination and the desire for even more of this drama – even somewhere out there, this is reality, on TV it is a spectacle to be watched for the viewers’ pleasure. Nevertheless, their attitude and feeling change rapidly when in the second part (The Airborne Toxic Event) the family is directly affected by a disaster. The cloud full of toxins moving over their town has forced everyone to evacuate. Now, *they* have become people on TV, now *they* are the spectacle watched by other,

now *they* are the big news. Suddenly, nothing about this is quite as fascinating as when experienced it on TV. Even more, the media – especially the radio – switch from being the sources of some enjoyable virtual reality to functioning as sources of information. But it turns out that the media are not reliable information sources at all. Their information reportage is constantly changing and instead of imparting something helpful, the toxic cloud event becomes just yet another new media sensation.

So the media dispose not only with information but they also cover the persuasive function. Given that DeLillo himself worked in advertisement, it makes sense for his novel to be full of slogans and ads pointing out the power of rhetorical, persuasive function of language and visual manipulation in media space. These reflect the pervasiveness with which such language shapes our consciousness supporting the increase of consumerism across society. We are exposed to a violation of our consciousness through the language of advertising which seems to penetrate even further: into our unconscious. DeLillo displays such violation through an incident with Jack's daughter Steffie. Her father comes to her and finds her asleep. He hears her mumble something and as he comes nearer he is stunned by the fact that in her dreams his small girl is occupied with the name of a car:

I watched her face, waited. Ten minutes passed. She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

Toyota Celica. (WN 148)

Not only does DeLillo presents the impact of media on spectators, but he also plays out his characters' self-awareness of being in a story. Here, DeLillo merely touches on the line that he develops in his later works – the story as a central theme of

our lives, history and consciousness. *White Noise* offers a few memorable examples of this:

I found myself saying to the assembled heads, "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot."

Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean? (WN 26)

This is quite an unexpected departure on DeLillo's part from the structures of binary oppositions and finality. The plots here are put into fragments, consciously declaring the multiplicity of stories within one structure. On the other hand, these structures lead to a dead end – to the "death of plots". In that sense, DeLillo's position on this very result of such movements is unclear and tentative, assuming that there is an end to every plot. He plays with the delicate shadings of the modernist and postmodernist concepts of structures and their finality though with the three questions at the end of the paragraph, he fully aligns himself with the postmodern uncertainty principle and doubt even within his own statements. Not only then are media the manipulator of stories and people, the characters themselves are manipulators of their own lives, histories and identities.

But the media and new technology here are not only the bad guy. They offer more opportunities for the society to develop to next possible levels. DeLillo is not a denier of technological progress as is sometimes interpreted but he makes the point that not even the most advanced technology leads necessary to the advancement of humans. As seen for example in the scene where Jack is having a medical check due to his infection by the toxin from the cloud, and the diagnosis comes from a computer – and

he is diagnosed with death without any further specification. The situation is a warning in the sense that there is a human doctor who is managing the computer but it is still the computer that delivers the diagnosis – resulting in a situation where the computer is more credible than the doctor in person even in cases of death.

Eventually, dressed again, I sat across a desk from a nervous young man in a white smock. He studied my file, mumbling something about being new at this. I was surprised to find that this fact did not upset me. I think I was even relieved. "How long before the results are in?" "The results are in," he said. "I thought we were here for a general discussion. The human part. What the machines can't detect. (WN 263)

By raising the question of human vs. technological reliability, DeLillo exposes a problem of postmodern society where the human world and mind are by their nature unreliable. Therefore people tend to rely more on technology which is seen as less-inclined to the breaks and errors of human mind. Still DeLillo argues that we need to be aware that even such technology has its limits as much as the scope of human understanding.

But it is not just the virtual reality that affects us, DeLillo also stresses its connection to consumerism, and portrays his characters' obsession with buying unnecessary things, lost in their possessions, the supermarkets becoming new theatres and churches and mazes of slogans and advertisements that constantly entice people to buy more. The Gladneys actually spend a lot of their time in the supermarket which is the symbol for reproduced objects as well as mass overproduction of everyday objects and pop-culture. The space of the supermarket is almost infinite, it has no boundaries and lives a life of its own. There is even a case in *White Noise* of a person who dies after wandering lost around the supermarket for days:

Mr. Treadwell's sister died. Her first name was Gladys. The doctor said she died of lingering dread, a result of the four days and nights she and her brother had spent in the Mid-Village Mall, lost and confused. (WN 99)

It is obvious that the virtual world in connection to the society anchored in consumerism is interwoven with attempts to manipulate people just for the sake of more consumerism. This chapter argues that DeLillo does not directly state that technology, TV and radio are wicked as such, he just stresses the importance to engage the human mind and common sense in the space hardly identifiable as reliable, the space of pop-culture, consumption, mediation, and manipulation.

DeLillo elaborates on the topic of consumerism by focusing on the outcome – the waste. As pointed by critic Evans, our waste is our most intimate side of ourselves. Hence when Jack aim to gain evidence of his wife and her abuse of the drug Dylar, he examines the garbage and stresses the features of the importance of garbage by asking: “But why did I feel like a household spy? Is garbage so private? Does it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one's deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioral ruts?” (WN 247)

Death

Dylar also points to the topic of the omnipresent but suppressed death which is present in all four DeLillo's novels in this thesis though in *White Noise* it is turned into one of the main topics – chiefly through the characters of Jack and his wife Babette. The last part of the novel is even named after the drug that is supposed to relieve people's fear of death – “Dylarama”. The fear of death comes from the notion that life's only

certainty only brings more uncertainty, and so it paralyses the characters and forbids them to live their lives.

Throughout the novel, Jack is obsessed with death and he is terrified of the idea that every day he is closer and closer to experiencing it, almost haunted by the idea of death. But Jack is also aware of the accidentality with which death may enter one's life without any previous warnings. From the first pages to the last, this motif is still present within his character. His closeness to death is also represented in Hitler – the figure of his academic focus and success as elaborated on by Leonard Orr in *Don DeLillo's White Noise*: “Jack has several ways of displacing his fears of death. Most importantly, he has attached himself to the most horrible agent of death through the development of his Hitler Studies program.” (Orr 31).

Sometimes Jack is almost paranoid or hypochondriac and is worried that some of his physical process signal death. Even the small irregularities to his physical health are suspicious for him:

That night, seconds after going to sleep, I seemed to fall through myself, a shallow heartstopping plunge. Jarred awake, I stared into the dark, realizing I'd experienced the more or less normal muscular contraction known as the myoclonic jerk. Is this what it's like, abrupt, peremptory? Shouldn't death, I thought, be a swan dive, graceful, white-winged and smooth, leaving the surface undisturbed? (WN 18)

As Jack is not a doctor, this sequence is more likely to point out to his hypochondria than to the real state of his physical health. Even with no serious conditions of his body, he makes the connection to the possible death and what it feels like, becomes fascinated by the idea of experiencing what death is like. Obviously, he is trying to spare his nerves all the horrifying visions that he has exchanging them for calm

visions of human death which is clearly thought about in an ironical sense, as a race or competition between him and his wife:

Who will die first?

This question comes up from time to time, like where are the car keys. It ends a sentence, prolongs a glance between us. I wonder if the thought itself is part of the nature of physical love, a reverse Darwinism that awards sadness and fear to the survivor. Or is it some inert element in the air we breathe, a rare thing like neon, with a melting point, an atomic weight? (WN 15)

Death is omnipresent within everyday life, even in the most common moments of each day. Every now and then both Jack and his wife think about the possibility of death – even when one is reaching for the car keys. Jack asks the question what then is more terrifying, to face death or to be the one who has to deal with the loss. He points out that the survivor not only has to deal with the everyday omnipresence of the death of their own life, but also has to bear the enormous weight of loss of other lives. As also pointed out in “Baudrillard, DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative” by Leonard Wilcox: “[F]or both Baudrillard and DeLillo the symbolic mediations of contemporary society deprive the individual of an intimate relation with death, with result that society is haunted by the fear of mortality” (Wilcox 353).

Jack himself faces death twice – once being diagnosed by the computer after his intoxication and second during the mutual shootout with his wife’s dealer and lover. Murray is fascinated by death. Babette is taking drugs in order to lose the ability to fear death. Everything in the novel is tinged with the overtone of death: Hitler, consumerism, waste, history, and the fear of death itself. So, even though none of the main characters actually dies by the end of *White Noise*, the plot certainly leads

deathwards. Yet, the fact remains that death, the only “real” thing in their increasingly unreal lives, remains inaccessible to, and unexperienced by, DeLillo’s characters.

White Noise is indeed an exemplary postmodern novel, dealing with a number of basic postmodern concepts. The narrative also revisits Benjamin’s late-modernist media theory in order to apply it to the conditions of postmodernity. Manipulation, simulation, technology, death and media – the main topics in *White Noise* are definitely part of the postmodern discourse and are handled as such in the novel. As the narrative addresses the serious socio-cultural problems of postmodern America, even DeLillo’s language becomes burdened with heavy meanings and warns against the persuasiveness and seductiveness of the capitalist/consumerist society, which is represented through its surrender to media and advertisement.

Chapter 2: History as the Intriguing Systems of Assumption

Branch is stuck all right. He has abandoned his life to understanding that moment in Dallas, the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century. He has his forensic pathology rundown, his neutron activation analysis. There is also the Warren Report, of course, with its twenty-six accompanying volumes of testimony and exhibits, its millions of words. Branch thinks this is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred. (*Libra* 181)

The story of *Libra* is a story of a single historical moment. The novel focuses on the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy on 22 November 1963 – but DeLillo focuses not so much on the murdered president as on the figure of his murderer, Lee Harvey Oswald, and the conspiracy theories spawned by the assassination. One half of *Libra* follows an autobiographical path through Oswald's upbringing, depicting the difficult conditions of his family life and his immersion in the Marxist doctrine. The other story running parallel with the first one is the narrative of Nicolas Branch, accompanied by the "facts" and "fictions" of politics proliferating in the American consciousness after Kennedy's murder, with the Warren commission acting as the base for both of them. Those two levels intermingle through different chapters and different styles – even visually, DeLillo adheres to the stylistic features of letters and medical documentations.

The CIA, the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the crisis in Castro's Cuba, the KGB and the Cold war – all of these are detailed in DeLillo's novel. Rumoured to be behind the

whole assassination are the main CIA conspirators—Win Everett, Lawrence Parmenter, and Guy Banister—who also pick Oswald as the shooter after his return from Russia. His profile fits into the picture of a politically-driven presidential assassin – but Oswald in *Libra* is depicted as a scapegoat for those CIA conspirators attempting to remove the president. Part of that plan is also to get rid of Oswald in order to break the last possible connection. Oswald in the end does shoot Kennedy and is in turn shot by Dallas police for shooting an officer pulling him over for suspicious behaviour. And in the shadows of political conspiracies and history, Nicolas Branch deals with Warren report as the official document for the understanding of JFK’s assassination.

Camera & Perspectives

DeLillo describes the moment of JFK’s assassination in *Libra* as “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century,” and some critics take that to mean that this moment marked the beginning of the postmodern era in America. But it was not due to the fact of the presidential assassination (as America had experienced those before) but because everyone was allowed to witness it: to this day the footage of president Kennedy’s murder is freely wandering around the internet. The video is usually supplemented with conspiracy theories of various genres, which usually suggest one crucial point: it was hard not only to make out any sense of what people saw but also to believe in it.

The TV had been a platform of entertainment – as seen in *White Noise* people were aware that television was only virtual reality but relied on its credibility on different levels. So while in the world of *White Noise*, TV had been space of information, entertainment, news and advertisement, in *Libra*, the TV became a medium of a spectacle of horror. In the light of its ever-questioned credibility it is more than understandable that the spectators did not believe in the reality of what they were

watching – because it in some sense never was. In this footage of a fascinating capture of death in live-time, the incredulity towards TV as medium fused with an already ripe awareness of the discredit of the government. Peter Knight refers to this strategy of DeLillo's in "DeLillo, postmodernism, postmodernity" where he declares that

[t]he real significance of the assassination for DeLillo is the effect that endlessly watching the violent deaths of Kennedy and Oswald has on society at large, making Americans victims of the postmodern condition. (Knight 33)

And Lee Harvey Oswald, a more or less witting participant in the murderous conspiracy, is also aware that his intended actions will change the American consciousness on many levels. The presence of cameras has done him good as his action – the action of a man of no importance – has elevated him onto the status of a history-maker.

He held the rifle at port arms, more or less, and stood in plain view in the tall window. Everything looked so painfully clear. The President had chestnut hair and the First Lady was radiant in a pink suit and small round hat. Lee was glad she looked so good. For her own sake. For the cameras. For the pictures that would enter the permanent record. (*L* 395)

The president, for the first time in history, was shot dead in front of and to some extent *for* the cameras. For many present it was the TV that saw everything first: the instant chaos settling in, people running, hiding or just standing agape, with no clue as to what has happened. *Libra* entertains the theory promoted by the Zapruder film (which is also examined by Nicholas Branch) of multiple perspectives: more than one shooter, multiple cameras, many eyewitnesses and a lot of hearsay. This is also why so many theories enter the novel's structure – many people's versions shaped by the many

cracks of their own many traumas. DeLillo's focus lies in multiple angles: settings, cheering spectators, shooters, agents, cameras, witnesses, participants. All of that together creates a complex frame of an event filled with many smaller frames of events, a typical postmodern *mise en abyme* of focuses whose possibilities are infinite.

She thought John was dead. Then he moved just slightly and she thought at the same time that Jackie was out of the car, gone *off* the end of the car, but now was somehow back. John moved in her arms.

They were one heart pumping.

We are hit. Lancer is hit. Get us to Parkland fast.

The car picked up speed and everything went rushing past. Nellie thought how terrible this must be, what a terrible sight for people watching, to see the car speeding past with these shot-up men; what a horror, what a sight.

She heard Jackie say, "I have his brains in my hand."

Everything rushing past. (*L* 399)

One of the witnesses present in Kennedy's car was Nellie Conally. This sequence is her remembrance of the moment interrupted by internal communication of the president's team of bodyguards. There is a sense of action but also halt in this passage, as if everything were happening all at once but at the same time, as if time was put on a pause and the reader were watching a movie on slow motion – unreal. But even with time standing still, there is still "[t]he movie camera running" (*L* 400).

As in every good postmodern self-reflexive spectacle, the press and journalists writing about the sensational presidential visit to Dallas themselves become sensations. It is similar to *White Noise* where the Gladneys become the news they used to watch on TV. In *Libra* this moment is further emphasised through metanarrative sequences connected especially to camera:

A woman with a camera turned and saw that she was being photographed. A woman in a dark coat was aiming a Polaroid right at her. It was only then she realized she'd just seen someone shot in her own viewfinder. There was bloodspray on her face and arms. She thought, how strange, that the woman in the coat was her and she was the person who was shot. She felt so dazed and strange, with pale spray all over her. She sat down carefully on the grass. Just let herself down and sat there. (L 401)

DeLillo delivers here a perfect example of a *mise en abyme* structure in which he disrupts the notion of integrity and finality of one narrative frame by adding further narrative frames. So a woman filming Kennedy's car is in turn being photographed, this in a situation approached by us readers within an even broader scope of narrative. Using this technique, DeLillo follows his pattern of hyperreality, the conviction that there is no finality to any structure, and that to circumscribe is to do conceptual violence. DeLillo decides to repeat this technique on several occasions throughout the book – because the principle of such technique is of course the instant repetitions. In *Libra* it is described as “the world gone inside out” when Marina and Lee are walking around a store which has a TV set in the display window portraying those in front of the TV screen: “Marina looked at a television set in the window and saw the most remarkable thing, something so strange she had to stop and stare, grab hard at Lee” (L 227).

There is a certain fascination with both being on TV and standing in front of a TV screen that acts as a mirror capturing one's image – which could be also seen as a constant reflection of reflection. Of course there is an enormous power connected to being on TV – those present on TV screens have the power to manipulate the consciousness of those watching and also to influence their knowledge. Hence the

occasional voices against granting primetime to murderers and criminals whose presence in the media is regarded as potential inspiration for the committing of other horrifying crimes. DeLillo keeps pointing out that the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century also ushered in an era of murderer-celebrity culture – with Lee Harvey Oswald being something of a pioneer. TV has managed to save his name and crime in our permanent memory. Or in Knight’s words: “The aura of an authentic, heroic, existentialist sense of self that Oswald tries to cultivate through his act of violence is eroded by the infinite and increasingly commodified repetition of the shooting” (Knight 32-33).

At first, Oswald’s ambition regarding his celebrity status is pleasant to him because the only alternative available to him is being part of the faceless crowds that he resembles on the metro. Perhaps it was due to his ignorance that he did not notice the full extent to which his character was a puppet in the conspiracy guided by the CIA. But when Lee in turn is assassinated, the moment is again captured on camera which shows his painful grimace almost aware of its double exposure, which means that the moment of his death will again become subject to the same kinds of mechanical repetitions as that of JFK. It is, after all, through the camera that Oswald entered the American consciousness, and so it is fitting that it is through the camera that he takes his leave:

There was something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera before he was shot, that put him here in the audience, among the rest of us, sleepless in our homes—a glance, a way of telling us that he knows who we are and how we feel, that he has brought our perceptions and interpretations into his sense of the crime. (*L* 447)

The repetitive structure of DeLillo’s sentences here points to the gaps and elisions in every mimesis, the linguistic representation not excepting. To this day, one

of the main focal points of poststructuralist literary theory has been the question of how portrayals of “reality” vary across the many different media of our postmodern moment, and how they always leave out as much as they put in. It may seem that the camera is a technology better equipped to capture the elusive, the momentary, and the unique than fiction, but DeLillo’s *Libra* is at pains to show how close the camera remains to the possibilities of the narrative. It is, after all, still a specific frame imposed upon the real, shot from a certain angle and with a certain focus and however many frames we may attempt to put together, “reality” will still elude us. However many times we may wish to replay the archived tapes or videos they will not serve to pin reality down, rather they will keep opening up other structures of possible meanings and details that change not only in our consciousness but also over time.

The camera doesn't catch all of it. There seem to be missing frames, lost levels of information. Brief and simple as the shooting is, it is too much to take in, too mingled in jumped-up energies. Each new showing reveals a detail. (L 446)

History in Libra

The main topic of *Libra* is history, the historical moment to be captured on the page. In *White Noise* we have seen DeLillo exploring the (post)modernist idea of an autonomous non-referential world. He takes that in *Libra* even one step further by focusing on the postmodern milestone in American history. DeLillo’s goal is not to show history as an objective fact, since this would be against his conviction that there is no final objective truth and knowledge is always incomplete. He sets into play different narratives and focuses on different aspects of portraying a single event in order to offer an alternative understanding, stating at the same time the impossibility of getting hold of any historical act completely.

Nicholas Branch sits in the book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams. (...) Sometimes he looks around him, horrified by the weight of it all, the career of paper. He sits in the data-spew of hundreds of lives. There's no end in sight. (L 14–15)

Nicholas Branch is in a position to propose an understanding of JFK assassination, to make it understandable for others as well as himself. He has all the material available for accessing what happened on 22 November 1963, tons of books, reports, videos, evidence – one could say he has everything at hand he needs in order to make a statement, to declare the truth of JFK's assassination. Still he keeps struggling. “There's no end in sight” – even within one single piece of evidence, one textual item, there lurks the endless structure of remove that follows the pattern of *mise en abyme* – in other words each piece of evidence could be analysed infinitely without reaching the end of any such structure.

This impossibility of reaching the truth is what makes it open to incredulity, what leaves history open to the endless options of interpretations. It also creates the feeling of something hidden, unsaid, a secret behind the whole event.

We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams. (L 15)

Though one can model backward trajectories of bullets, replay all the tapes, analyse the moment from all perspectives available, still one will not arrive at any complete answers – these will be shrouded by “shadows” and resemble “dreams”. The word “dreams” is important here, as it points back not only to Joyce's/Stephen Dedalus' conception of history as “nightmare from which to awake”, but also suggests a

postmodern outlook on history as shaped by traumas: “The memory was a series of still images, a film broken down to components. He couldn't quite make it continuous” (L 72). Philip Nel also elaborates on modernist tendencies within DeLillo's direct reference to *Finnegans Wake*:

When interviewer Anthony DeCurtis pointed to Everett's description of the Warren Commission Report, DeLillo explained, “I asked myself what Joyce could possibly do after *Finnegans Wake*, and this was the answer.’ The document, DeLillo noted, is “a masterwork of trivia ranging from Jack Ruby's mother's dental records to photographs of knotted string.’” In other words, DeLillo makes the comparison not because *Finnegans Wake* and the Warren Report share stylistic similarities but because both harbor encyclopedic ambitions. As Branch notes in *Libra*, the Warren Report “is the Joycean Book of America, remember – the novel in which nothing is left out” (L 182). (Nel 15)

There is a strong sense of fragmentation throughout *Libra's* understanding of history. In this respect, DeLillo follows also the pattern of modernists: the “truth” about the JFK assassination amounts to the “heap of broken images” of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In *Libra*, history is fragments, tapes from different angles, incompleteness of understanding through one narrative as it is through stories that we come to understand the world around us. We use multiple perspectives, we analyse different sources and compare information in order to make our own truth – these are the fragments on whose basis in the end we form our arguments. But since for DeLillo we are never able to get to any original historical referent in history, this is where DeLillo's narrative takes its decidedly postmodern turn: the world might be multiply fragmented but unlike in Eliot it remains so, and it is impossible to connect all its fragments for the sake of objective

truth. There is no final understanding of history in DeLillo's *Libra*, only multiple interpretations of one historical moment – as DeLillo writes (and repeats actually) in the novel, “There is a world inside the world” (L 13), pointing out how the “truth” of the world becomes such a complexly endless structure it resembles the world “itself”, its perfect simulacrum.

The political implications of this lack of finality is its creation of an atmosphere of distrust towards political authority. In order to move on after a trauma, what is needed is closure, some kind of version of a “believable” truth one can live by. But even to this day there is still evidence regarding JFK's assassination that are not publicly accessible, missing pieces in the puzzle that might reshape the “true” story behind president's murder. What these omnipresent secrets creates is the typically postmodern condition of paranoia, pushing “truth-seekers” to find comfort in conspiracy theories that promise a comprehensive, full picture – no matter whether authentic or fake. But DeLillo's *Libra* is also partly a warning against conspiracy theories that offer easy truths by using conspiracy theory as the base of his narrative, basically saying that secrets are parts of our everyday lives as are the blind spots in our understandings. DeLillo's narrative leads to the conviction that we should attempt to understand things but we should never mistake our understanding for an overall conception of truth:

Historic names, pen names, names of war, party names, revolutionary names. These were men who lived in isolation for long periods, lived close to death through long winters in exile or prison, feeling history in the room, waiting for the moment when it would surge through the walls, taking them with it. History was a force to these men, a presence in the room. They felt it and waited. (L 34)

If *Libra* were a modernist text, this enumeration would look a lot different – a modernist author would hurry to list as many specific names as they could gather to display and pass on their knowledge onto the reader and foreground the necessity of educating themselves. Native to modernism is an elitist concept of culture and education, the knowledge of ancient and important figures and events is a necessary basis for the understanding of their text. Education is what makes it possible to put together fragments and make them solid. DeLillo stands against this elitism – all he does is point out the vagueness and incompleteness of any such knowledge project. It is not important to know every name, every book and event to make them understandable because they still remain mysterious and elusive, just moments of one perspective presented. Even the names themselves tend to be made up – as is pointed out in *Libra* – Trotsky’s name is not Trotsky, Lenin is not Lenin, even Stalin is not Stalin – who then is Stalin and what difference does the knowledge of his *name* make to one’s understanding of history? DeLillo sharply opposes modernists by answering such question with simply – none.

Mythological figures and objects occupy a limited space in DeLillo’s narrative (unless of course we take the JFK story for a postmodern “myth”). Not only does DeLillo push aside the importance of tremendous elite knowledge, he also uses his source texts not as access paths to understanding but as objects filled with multiple meanings, artefacts with their own structures, which do not always amount to much:

He found the books they wrote and the books written about them. Books wearing away at the edges. Books whose titles had disappeared from the spines, faded into time. Here was *Das Kapital*, three volumes with buckled spines and discolored pages, with underlinings, weird notes in an obsessive hand. He found mathematical formulas, sweeping theories of

capital and labor. He found The Communist Manifesto. It was here in German and in English. Marx and Engels. The workers, the class struggle, the exploitation of wage labor. Here were biographies and thick histories. (L 34)

Texts in *Libra* are artefacts, often historical artefacts, but they do not carry the knowledge of history. It is not only what is written inside them – after all they are just letters on the page put together into story. Even if the books themselves bear stories within their materiality, we are not able to identify their references, it just opens up another frame of different assumptions. How old is it? Where was it written? Who marked the pages? What did the person look like? What is their story? These are questions raised only by looking at books without actually reading them:

There is enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough of conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations.

There is no need, he thinks, to invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions. (L 58)

Such questions can be asked forever. Nicholas Branch is left to introduce an understanding of history *with* and *through* artefacts, but how could he understand it when even these artefacts as such are just referents of another referents? Of course, his effort is condemned to failure, as is even inscribed in his surname – a branch is always one of the trunk's many extensions, never able to grasp its own roots.

We understand the world through the story, we imagine the world through our narratives based on our experience and consciousness. In several parts DeLillo highlights that his characters are in the presence of fiction, a plot that has been written in advance for them – challenging us to examine this also in our own lives.

We lead more interesting lives than we think. We are characters in plots, without the compression and numinous sheen. Our lives, examined carefully in all their affinities and links, abound with suggestive meaning, with themes and involute turnings we have not allowed ourselves to see completely. He would show the secret symmetries in a nondescript life.
(L 78)

DeLillo's narrative is not obsessed with the weird or fantastic, it is usually concerned with everyday life, but following such modernists as James Joyce he shows that there is much more to our ordinary life than we usually think. He does not pick JFK or Jackie in order to create a narrative of different perspectives, rather he strives to show that there is a lot to be desired within the commonness of our own lives. In the same breath DeLillo adds that there is no "compression and numinous sheen" within our characters, breaking the notion of one's originality and exclusiveness.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo declares that "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots," and in *Libra* he repeats the same idea. Our lives are just plots and we plot them in order to understand them: "Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot" (L 221).

So the plots in DeLillo's narrative are not only stories with the one certain end in the future (the only certainty in life) but they also connote "com-plots" – conspiracies designed to hide shady operations from the public view. Plots might therefore have the negative connotations of manipulated structures of meaning. Also in that sense, the fact DeLillo's plot will end on the last page of the book does not prevent it from carrying on: its results may branch into infinite numbers of other plots. In other words, the end of a story in DeLillo's narrative not necessarily means that there is nothing left after the

story, it is just that one perspective within multiple stories/plots which were present has reached its “frame”, which can always be further reframed – ultimately in the “real” world outside the book. Just as in the case of JFK’s assassination, *Libra*’s own plots are tied together with complicated and complex systems of relationships and connections which never boil down to one single meaning, one definite beginning or end.

"Think of two parallel lines," he said. "One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny." (*L* 339)

Language

Libra brings home the point of “truth in plurality” by incorporating stylistic diversity: when a letter is read by the character, it is faithfully reproduced in all its formal features, and the same goes for the various medical records, signboards, plates with warning signs etc. DeLillo allows the novelistic flow of his narrative to be broken by non-novelistic entries – the formal stylistic norms of non-fictional genres enter the structure, perhaps to simulate to the readers the experience of Nicholas Branch.

DeLillo’s language in *Libra* is different from *White Noise*. Here, the difficulty of understanding the world through language is brought home through linguistic playfulness that brings forth their material constitution – how they look, how they sound, what they “are”: “He is commenting on the documentary footage even as it is being shot. Then he himself is shot, and shot, and shot, and the look becomes another

kind of knowledge” (L 447). In this sequence, DeLillo obviously brings forward the ambiguity of the word “shot” which also perfectly covers the double themes of the novel – the shooting of JFK and the shooting of the shooting through the camera. It also plays with the sound of several shots in a row – in both senses – the sound of firing the bullets and the sound of the clicking of cameras. But the wordplay is not always as “fatal” as here – there is also something obsessive in games played with abbreviations:

He read the *Daily Lass-O*. He read that the school chucked its original name in 1905 to call itself the College of Industrial Arts, or CIA. He was too tired to appreciate the irony, or coincidence, or whatever it was.

There were too many ironies and coincidences. A shrewd person would one day start a religion based on coincidence, if he hasn't already, and make a million. Yes yes yes yes. (L 79)

DeLillo here is obviously “too tired to appreciate the irony” as he decided to abandon it. Instead, he decides to just have fun with words – for the sake of mockery towards political institutions. CIA in the sense of Central Intelligence Agency is an esteemed institution, which many Americans feel harbours secrets of a political nature. Yet DeLillo’s narrative chooses not to engage in conspiracies for once, not to deepen the suspicions, doing the exact opposite –lightening the mood by just making fun of “the coincidence”. The College of Industrial Arts actually exists – and where should we find it but Texas. DeLillo here gives up the modernist search for meaning and indulges in a postmodernist emphasis on coincidence both in the world and language. Oh yes yes yes yes.

During two sequences in the novel, DeLillo goes even further and plays on a proper name, Hidell. In the meaning, he touches upon the sense of secrets and hidden

information that surrounds the event of JFK assassination and the conspiracies. But on the level of language, DeLillo just seems to be having fun with words:

Take the double-e from Lee.

Hide the double-/ in Hidell.

Hidell means hide the L.

Don't tell. (*L* 90)

(...)

Hidell means don't tell.

The *id* is hell.

Jerkle and Hide in their little cell. (*L* 101)

In a highly modernist example, DeLillo here uses language re-combinations in order to point out “hidden” meaning. He even uses childish rhymes in the second text, misspelling names of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. These are purely modernist techniques that destabilise the signifier and interrogate the properties of even such “basic” signifiers as proper names: indeed asking the question, “what’s in a name?” The later, “postmodern” sections of Joyce’s *Ulysses* recall similar permutations:

Nettled not a little by L. Boom (as it incorrectly stated) and the line of bitched type but tickled to death simultaneously by C. P. M'Coy and Stephen Dedalus B. A. who were conspicuous, needless to say, by their total absence (to say nothing of M'Intosh) L. Boom pointed it out to his companion B. A. engaged in stifling another yawn (*Ulysses* 16.1262-6)

In DeLillo, Jekyll becomes Jerkle, Hyde becomes Hide – and in *Ulysses* Leopold Bloom becomes L. Boom, or in another instance, “Stoom”, and Stephen, “Blephen”:

Substituting Stephen for Bloom Stoom would have passed successively through a dame's school and the high school. Substituting Bloom for

Stephen Blephen would have passed successively through the preparatory, junior, middle and senior grades of the intermediate and through the matriculation, first arts, second arts and arts degree courses of the royal university. (*Ulysses* 17.549-54)

Both DeLillo and Joyce do more than just create nonsense out of wordplay – on the contrary, by playing with language, they show its hidden sub- or unconscious possibilities. And of course it is not just a game for the sake of game, the words are chosen in order to make sense and to fit within the story. DeLillo's *Libra* brims with such exploratory language games perhaps out of necessity: if “ordinary” meaningful language fails to yield “truth” or even to “make sense”, then why not tackle meaninglessness and nonsense?

Libra is DeLillo's attempted message on the fragmental nature of history – and the importance of the multiplicity of perspectives needed for any effort at understanding. On the other hand, DeLillo stresses that his characters are unable to cover all of them in order to understand the world in the sense of general truth. He works with the concept of trauma as interfering with the construction of history as an overall picture of linear events happening through time. TV, media and the camera play a crucial role within *Libra*'s narrative as it is through them that DeLillo conveys the postmodern idea of the constructed character of history and identity. Nevertheless, unlike in *White Noise*, there is a certain attention to the medium of the language he uses in his postmodernist explorations that follows the modernist tradition. This entails both similar techniques of language manipulation / games and some direct references to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

Chapter 3: “The Shot Heard Round the World”

“When people say *White Noise* is post-modern, I don't really complain. I don't say it myself. But I don't see *Underworld* as post-modern. Maybe it's the last modernist gasp. I don't know.” (Williams and DeLillo 1998)

Underworld is so far DeLillo's longest novel. Sometimes it is compared to the great literary epics. Shortlisted for Pulitzer Prize, *Underworld* is one of the biggest DeLillo's literary achievements. Just what is *Underworld* about? About things, people, the present and history. Plenty of characters mixing their lives at different stages of their age on the common ground shaped by discourse of the era from 1951 to 1992 (and the fictional future). The political ambience is the base for DeLillo's novel, although his main focus is on the characters and how they make sense of the various stages of their ordinary lives, as seen through the eyes of the characters themselves.

Underworld is sometimes likened to Joyce's *Ulysses* and according to the quote of DeLillo's interview at the beginning of this chapter, DeLillo himself does not identify with labelling the novel as strictly postmodern. In his chapter in Duvall's *Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* Philip Nel quotes Catherine Morley to the effect of there being structural similarities between the two:

As Morley says of *Underworld* and *Ulysses*, “Both novels use the mythic structure of ancient epic, on one level, to provide a framework for post-/modernity within the work of art, to limit, contain and connect divergent strands with set patterns and structures.” (Nel 16)

The book is structured in six parts, with many chapters and interruptions of different perspectival narrative. Each section is focused on a different moment in each character's life over a period of 40 years, covering the process of the formation of their identity. There is a double temporal movement within the narrative structure – DeLillo uses both backward and forward representations of time in the character's lives. The self is usually connected to the national awareness against the background of American socio-political issues. DeLillo only developed this structuring technique during the process of writing *Underworld*:

This, I eventually came to realize, is also the form of a nuclear countdown: ten, nine, eight, seven... So essentially, the entire structure of the book was determined from one minute to the next, it wasn't a long process of planning. It was virtually instantaneous. And once that moment took place, I felt I had a novel. (Chénétier et. al. 104)

At the very beginning, in the Prologue, DeLillo delivers an American panorama, capturing both the masses, the individuals, the shared and the unique, all in a slow-motion from different perspectives, and all within the framework of a single baseball game, which creates a transcendental experience for everyone present.

And the crowd is also in this lost space, the crowd made over in that one-thousandth of a second when the bat and the baseball are in contact. A rustle of murmurs and course, people breathing soft moans, their faces changing as the play unrolls across the grassy scan. John Edgar Hoover stands among them. (*U* 27-28)

The Ball's Aura

The baseball match between Giants and Dogers on 3 October 1951 – prestigious event on which many celebrities and politicians are present at the stadium – one of them, J. Edgar Hoover, first director of the FBI, who accidentally eyes a picture in the newspaper – Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*. Suddenly, he is fascinated by the painting, closely examines dead bodies in their various positions and the skeletons that take over the world of the living. He is so captured by the painting that he detects only afterwards that Thomson has hit the homerun and as he turns his head up, he sees the crowds taken by emotions and links them in his mind links to Bruegel's painting. In that sequence DeLillo delivers a picture of the capitalist society ruining its future while having fun:

The dead have come to take the living. The dead in winding-sheets, the regimented dead on horseback, the skeleton that plays a hurdy-gurdy Edgar stands in the aisle fitting together the two facing pages of the reproduction. People are climbing over seats, calling hoarsely toward the field. He stands with the pages in his face. He hadn't realized he was seeing only half the painting until the left-hand page drifted down and he got a glimpse of rust brown terrain and a pair of skeletal men pulling on bell ropes. The page brushed against a woman's arm and spun into Edgar's godfearing breast. (U 49)

The second problem addressed in the Prologue is the racism within American culture. Cotter Martin, a character who is supposed to take home from the stadium the real ball with which the decisive homerun was hit, is obviously a pun on Cotton Mather (and the puritan history of America and its identity in *Magna Christi Americana*). Cotter is an African American who gets into a row with a white guy named Bill at the

game. Here again for DeLillo there is something transcendental about the aesthetics of baseball and the communal experience of fandom. The moment before the homerun creates a space of race and social equality when even Bill arrives at the conclusion that there is more in common between him and Cotter than what sets them apart, but soon after the homerun is hit, this moment of epiphany is gone. Bill and Cotter are fighting for the ball and Cotter wins and has to run away from the stadium chased by Bill. In this perspective DeLillo points to the racial problems that America faced (and to a large extent, still faces) – in one moment, he even closely observes the difference between Cotter’s dark skin and the whiteness of the most famous ball in baseball history, pointing to the problem of white supremacy. As stated by John N. Duvall:

If *Underworld* illustrates the dangerously tendency of baseball to aestheticize and erase international politics, it also comments on the way baseball can participate in a mystification of racial politics within America. Against the fame and aura of the celebrities the prologue portrays, there is the anonymity of Cotter Martin, a black member of the underclass, who along with a crowd of other black and white teenagers jumps the gates to get into the Polo Grounds for the big game. (Duvall 35)

This topic is later on developed in the novel through the heavy use of jargon revealing of the background of his characters. As DeLillo himself has spent the majority of his life in the Bronx, he witnessed the problems arising out of racial discrimination and diversity first-hand. He has stated in an interview with Thomas LeClair that he needs a spatial embedding when writing fiction – this time it is the Bronx neighbourhood that he projected into the identity of his characters.

I'm too interested in what real places look like and what names they have. Place is colour and texture. It's tied up with memory and roots and pigments and rough surfaces and language, too. (LeClair and DeLillo 31)

The last fragment of the Prologue is the very fundament of the novel, the spatial and temporal definition of *Underworld* – i.e. America during the years of Cold War. DeLillo uses Bobby Thomson's homerun (and the sound of shot that co-exists with it) as a parallel to the first Soviet tests of the hydrogen bomb. Both shots bear the heaviness of loss – one in sport and one on political field. It is no coincidence that DeLillo picked precisely this symbolism as this is what the 4 October 1951 issue cover page of *New York Times* looked like:



Figure 1: 4th October 1951, New York Times, page 1

Both events are covered on the same page, sports juxtaposed with politics, triviality with heaviness, a painful display of the binary of winning and losing. And

while Americans were celebrating the unexpected victory of the New York Giants, the peace of American lives further unravelled due to the enemy's activities, a process that injected people with paranoia and fear. Among other things, it was very difficult to come to terms with a political-historical process that threatened ordinary lives without being visible or present. Uncertainty entered the American mind. DeLillo here offers the motivation behind writing the novel: a path toward and inside American consciousness as affected by the Cold War. Strangely, the connective element of the narrative is the ball with which the homerun was hit – but was never actually verified as found. The trace of the aura of the ball in Benjamin's sense anchors the characters within a spatial/temporal framework. Unlike in *White Noise*, the ball in *Underworld* matches Benjamin's theory of aura rather neatly – DeLillo does not deny the presence of the original object here but again emphasises that the aura of the original object achieves the same importance as the original object itself, and can linger on even after the original has been lost. By stressing the role of the ball, he also touches upon the fluidity of the main connective element in the novel as if showing that there is always more to history than one neat linear link. The ball becomes also a symbol for loss not only in the political sense, but also as a loss of identity, its instability which depends on both the time and conditions of one's life.

In other words, *Underworld* is a fictional chronicle of the American culture post-World-War-II, covering the major changes to political-cultural consciousness from the omnipresent atmosphere of fear during Cold War – the “Us and Them” daily fear – via the Cuban Missile Crisis to the 70s disillusionments all the way to the 90s attempts at righting the wrong. The narrative is fragmented into frames that seem unrelated and yet connected. The sense of “something missing” is present through the structure – the incompleteness of any fictional capturing of the ‘real’ even within a scope of almost

900 pages. This scope allows DeLillo to elaborate on the lines sketched in *Libra* – mainly he plays out again the interlinkage of history, the continuity and breakage within American consciousness, only this time he opens up the narrative to yet more perspectives and other frames, inviting dialogues of various arguments to enter his novel. The different houses, different minds and different languages used in the novel have as their starting point the Bronx – making it the symbolic microcosm of the American macrocosm. Again, DeLillo delivers a novel about history – only this time, he leaves the “synchronic” single-event narrative and enters the “diachronic” structure of culture and American consciousness during the four decades of political discomfort.

History

I lived responsibly in the real. I didn't accept this business of life as a fiction, or whatever Klara Sax had meant when she said that things had become unreal. History was not a matter of missing minutes on the tape. I did not stand helpless before it. I hewed to the texture of collected knowledge, took faith from the solid and availing stuff of our experience. Even if we believe that history is a workwheel powered by human blood – read the speeches of Mussolini – at least we've known the thing together. A single narrative sweep, not ten thousand wisps of disinformation. (*U* 82)

Two contradictory understandings of ‘reality’ and history are present here in a single paragraph. Klara represents the postmodern attitude towards the narrative – the unreal (or hyperreal in Baudrillard’s sense) is her position towards the reference. History as story, narrative, fiction – history as an incomplete narrative of gaps. These blind spots are never to be filled fully – even if we were able to fill them, they would

only open up more gaps leaving us again within the postmodernist structure of *mise en abyme*. In a sense, it is a very disturbing concept for one wanting to get hold of their identity, and Nick would not accept a world based on assumptions and deduction, without any certainty in it. In his response, he decides to fight against it with knowledge summoning to arms the modernist approach. He believes that gaining knowledge by studying the materials will set him onto the path towards truth and understanding. “I did not stand helpless before it.” – meaning that one is able to have the power over the ‘reality’ and history if there is a single truth in the world to be found.

In other words, DeLillo here delivers a dialogue of two concepts of history by stating simply that modernist fragmentation offers a certain comfort with its movement towards a “whole” while postmodernism resists all of this, allowing only more questions and more dialogues to enter the narrative. DeLillo does not take sides here, but he is fully aware of some of the modernists’ political failures – as behind DeLillo mention of Mussolini’s speeches is the spectre of Ezra Pound’s fascist engagement. Paradoxically, to have a single outcome from several fragments of perspectives is to violate the language and leave out the other stories that potentially exist.

But I didn’t know if I accepted the idea that I had a history. She used that word a lot and it was hard for me to imagine that all the scuffle and boredom of those years, the crisscross boredom and good times and flare-ups and sameshit nights – I didn’t understand how the streaky blur in my nighttime mind could have some sort of form and coherence. Maybe there was a history in her files but the thing I felt about myself was that I’d leaned against a wall in a narrow street serving out some years of mostly aimless waiting. (*U* 511)

For Nick it is certainly hard to grasp history for in his conception history has to include this great narrative, something with a validity for the majority of at least a nation. Because of that he cannot understand how history can be made by him, living his ordinary life. It is a sequence of another criticism – this time against the concept of history as series of grand narratives on the timeline. The facts and information in the files are the narratives that are supposed to provide the narrative of our history. While describing it, DeLillo here calls attention to how such a concept of history is useless for our understanding of the past and identity, and how history is something we are responsible to:

"You have a history," she said, "that you are responsible to."

"What do you mean by responsible to?"

"You're responsible to it. You're answerable. You're required to try to make sense of it. You owe it your complete attention."

She kept talking about history in her tight blouse. But all I saw was the crazy-armed man, his body spinning one way, the chair going another.

And all I saw was the rough slur of those narrow streets, the streets going narrower all the time, collapsing in on themselves, and the dumb sad sameness of the days. (*U* 512)

In this passage, the psychologist does not necessarily refer to Nick's responsibility to his act of killing a man, but responsibility that he has for himself in order to justify his own existence. One is forced to make sense of one's past to understand the completeness of one's identity, while this violation creates an enormous pressure on each of us. Nick is lost in what is meant by history and as such is condemned to face himself as a stranger without roots. He does not have a father which makes it even harder for him to create a cohesive picture of who he is. He is nothing but

his trauma in Hutcheon's terms. There is no history in his mind as much as he can recall for it was overshadowed by his traumatic experience. All he can remember is a picture of the man he killed, his body and sequences connected to what sense he made of this moment. Later on, we learn that his father who left Nick and his mother was supposed to be at the crime scene which even more deepens the fact that his identity is just the continuation of his past trauma.

DeLillo touches upon history in two distinct ways in *Underworld* – he explores the theoretical (im)possibilities of capturing the history and understanding it and he also refers to historical events and conditions that caused history to become so difficult to bear witness to in the first place. Besides the omnipresent topic of the Cold War, the Soviet tests of nuclear weapons, and the tension between the two super-powers, DeLillo again highlights the importance of the JFK assassination and the impact it had even on future generations:

The footage started rolling in one room but not the others and it was filled with slurs and jostles, it was totally jostled footage, a home movie shot with a Super 8, and the limousine came down the street, muddied by sunglint, and the head dipped out of the frame and reappeared and then the force of the shot that killed him, unexpectedly, the headshot, and people in the room went ohh, and then the next ohh, and five seconds later the room at the back went ohh, the same release of breath every time, like blurts of disbelief, and a woman seated on the floor spun away and covered her face because it was completely new, you see, suppressed all these years, this was the famous headshot and they had to contend with the impact-aside from the fact that this was the President being shot, past the outer limits of this fact they had to contend with the impact that

any highvelocity bullet of a certain lethal engineering will make on any human head, and the sheering of tissue and braincase was a terrible revelation. (*U* 488-189)

Everyone watching the Zapruder film is astonished and horrified at the same time. Nevertheless what they witness through the screening is not only the assassination of the President, but also the end of American frivolity and confidence, taking place the minute they are made witnesses to such a milestone. The end of history, the end of political authenticity. Everything that happened after Kennedy's murder (until 9/11) is a series of events impossible to understand completely, becoming involuted and self-referential, detached from human understanding or emotional attachment.

DeLillo's favourite exercise delivered in his "historical" novels is the classic "Where were you when...?" question. Where were you when Kennedy was shot? Where were you when Thompson hit the homerun? Where were you when the planes hit the towers? All of these are crucial events in American history captured on camera – and because of that everyone can say where they were or what they were doing as EVERYONE alive then were made into a witness of the moment. And the more witnesses, the more theories or memories or imaginings. One of the perspectives is the Zapruder film and DeLillo uses it again in *Underworld* because of its openness to the multiple-shooters theory, hand in hand with its message of political involvement. Running at less than 27 seconds, it includes the entire 7 seconds that changed the American consciousness. This is also a very manipulative sequence of events as in DeLillo's narrative what is played is not the original footage of the JFK assassination, but a movie about the murder. Therefore its spectators face an already modified or improved, in any case manipulated footage of a previous footage of the murder. Hence

again DeLillo's attempt to depart from Benjamin's theory of aura and adapt it to the postmodern conditions where reproductions are just reproductions of reproductions.

A thorough knowledge of the Cold War complications would not be available to many people living at the time – but surely they would have heard of or watched or witnessed the incredible homerun of Bobby Thomson. The Cold War was not fought on their homeland and a war without direct clashes and devastation on both sides is rather too abstract a conflict to make any easy sense of. DeLillo therefore takes a particular sporting event that is rooted in general knowledge and applies it to the political problem of the Cold War and the Soviet hydrogen bomb. The shot heard during the homerun then became a symbol for an abstract moment of fear and suspicion towards the American enemy of that time. So when asking, “Where were you when Thomson hit the homer?”, DeLillo is not only asking about the baseball, he is also questioning the general knowledge of the Cold War, the moment when America experienced a loss in its status, and by doing so he displays the elusiveness of the years of political discomfort. Because at the end – “It's not about Thomson hitting the homer. It's about Branca making the pitch. *It's all about losing*” (U 97, my italics).

And not only is it about losing a game, losing on the political field, it is also about losing lives. Nick Shay accidentally shoots a man who tells him that the gun is not loaded – causing him a trauma which he consciously does not want to participate in. It is also about the loss of innocence – most notably in the concluding scene of Esmeralda's rape and killing on the street. Her sequence resonates in the narrative of Sister Edgar who faces yet another, general loss: the secularisation of America, and the loss of traditional religious faith.

Characters

Since the prologue emphasises how crowds absorb one's identity for the sake of a collective aura, the rest of the novel focuses on various characters following their paths of life. Nick Shay, Klara Sax, Albert Bronzini or Sister Edgar all lead more and less successful lives based on their private philosophies. Nick's story is the central one in *Underworld*. He works at a waste-managing company, is married to Marian but earlier in life had an affair with Klara Sax while Marian herself is also having an affair. Through the narrative's flashbacks, we get to know more about the characters. Klara Sax is an artist, who re-uses waste into making art. As a young middle-class woman, she married Albert, later divorced him and towards the end of her story, she became successful artist, a celebrity. Unlike Nick and Klara, Albert Bronzini leads a make-believe easy life whose development portrays the changes within American culture. Albert works as a scholar and chess teacher, spending his time lost in books. Once enjoying the Bronx neighbourhood, he slowly pictures the loss of friendliness within both the people and the place he lives in. He ends up shutting himself out from the world, finding consolation in books.

DeLillo's Italian-American Catholic roots mixed with growing up in the Bronx around the same time as his characters clearly show in the personality of his characters. It prejudices their socio-economic status and also determines their language. Sometimes DeLillo is said to speak through Albert Bronzini, some critics even call him the impersonator of Leopold Bloom as Philip Nel points out in "DeLillo and Modernism", the chapter of Duvall's *Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (2008):

Catherine Morley and Mark Osteen have made convincing cases for the strong influence of *Ulysses*. As Morley notes, both Nick Shay and Leopold Bloom are "without fathers and of uncertain roots," while both

“heroes constantly consider the nature of their identity, and, moreover, are forced to consider it in terms of the national identity.” Osteen, on the other hand, sees Albert Bronzini as DeLillo’s tribute to Bloom. Each character “enjoys walks around the city,” has a “voracious interest in and astute observation of people and material conditions,” and “both knows and suppresses the knowledge that his wife is cuckolding him.” (Nel 16)

There are some similarities between the two – both are *flaneurs*, walking around their cities watching the time fly by. Just as Bloom, Albert also knows his wife is cheating on him with Nick but accepts that with a similarly curious abandon. But DeLillo himself partially behave as Joyce when he decides to anchor the characters wandering around his real space, the city that he lived in majority of his life.

The Joycean reminiscences in *Underworld* are not limited to just the Bloom-like Albert but are also present in Nick’s character. Both struggle to rediscover their roots, both are fatherless, struggling to make sense of themselves and Nick, too, is cheated on by his wife Marian (Molly’s “real” official name, of course, being Marion). But while Nick has more of a Stephen Dedalus dandyish aesthetic personality, there is a certain wisdom and knowledge within Albert’s nature which reminiscences Leopold Bloom as presented in David Cowart’s *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (2003):

One’s understanding of *Underworld* also benefits from an awareness of, not the influence, exactly, but the looming, fraternal presence of certain of the big novels DeLillo has mentioned reading, notably *Ulysses*. Thus one discerns something of Joyce’s cuckolded *homme moyen sensuel*, Leopold Bloom, in DeLillo’s similarly cuckolded, similarly curious, similarly sympathetic Albert Bronzini. Similarly peripatetic as well, both

men walk the streets perpending odd words and their etymologies.

(Coward 201)

In the “Circe” episode, Bloom has a famous vision of his wife unfaithfulness with Blazes Boylan, a voyeuristic masochistic fantasy. In *Underworld* Nick does not catch Marian and Brian in the act, he observes them carefully during their tryst.

Assumes that his wife and his colleague are having an affair, Nick confronts Marian:

I stood looking at the books on the shelves. Then I got undressed and went to bed. She came in about fifteen minutes later. I waited for her to start undressing.

"What do I detect?"

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Between you and Brian."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"What do I detect? That's what I mean."

"He makes me laugh," she said finally.

"He makes his wife laugh too. But I don't detect anything between them."

(U 117)

Again DeLillo’s narrative works with assumptions (even though based on some evidence). Nick cannot confront his wife by presenting her with evidence as that would also include him being in turn marked as a stalker and believer in tall-tales. He would switch from being the interrogator to the position of the defendant. It is quite symptomatic of Nick to start with the word “detect,” as suspicion based on evidence in DeLillo’s fictional world means having no certainty. Hence DeLillo’s postmodernist confrontation of Joyce’s ‘Circe’ from *Ulysses* – Nick may have seen Marian and Brian hooking up, but unlike Leopold Bloom who confronts his ideas of his wife cheating on

him in a dream-like sequence (and later in “Ithaca” finds proof of its “fact”), DeLillo departs from his fantastical narrative to the presence of postmodern assumptions.

The many infidelities in *Underworld* are an index of the general state of deterioration of personal relationships. The way characters handle them shows their relation to others but also offers a glimpse into their psychological makeup. While Nick’s wife shrugs off the accusation without acknowledging any sense of shame or guilt, Nick’s state of mind when confronting her lover is very unstable. On the other hand, when Nick tells Marian of his own infidelities, she doesn’t make any scene and also the entire episode of Nick’s confession takes up a single paragraph while Marian’s cheating is a protracted theme running the length the novel:

I told Marian the next night about the thing I'd done, or the night after that, the thing with Donna at Mojave Springs. I thought I had to tell her. I owed it to her. I told her for our sake, for the good of the marriage. She was in bed reading when I told her. I'd anguished about the right time to tell her and then I told her suddenly, without immediate forethought. I didn't tell her what I'd said to Donna, or why Donna was at the hotel, and she didn't ask. I stood near the armchair with my shirt in my hand and I thought she took it well. She understood it was an isolated thing with a stranger in a hotel, a brief episode, finished forever. I told her I felt compelled to speak. I told her it was hard to speak about the matter but not as hard as withholding the truth and she nodded when I said this. I thought she took it fairly well. She didn't ask me to tell her anything more than I'd told her. There was an air of tact in the room, a sensitivity to feelings. I stood by the chair and waited for her to turn the page so I could get undressed and go to bed. (*U* 342)

What is striking in this passage is its mono-perspectival narrative focus. The whole situation is told from just Nick's perspective, with Marian allowed no interiorisation, also brought home by the rate of all the "I"s and "she"s at the beginning of successive sentences. As such, DeLillo here shows how the lack of multiple perspectives and obsession with one's self can miss even the notion of another character's insight as close as one's wife. Therefore, it is obvious that Nick does not care about Marian's thoughts on his cheating, he just needs to relieve himself of his guilt and restore the sense of his own honesty. But by choosing one-perspective narrative only, DeLillo points out that his character cannot feel gratified and consider the thing done as closure could only be achieved thanks to Marian's perspective entering the narrative.

When the tables have turned and Nick is in the position of his wife (about to confront her lover), the narrative is much more complex and any kind of parallel with Marian's situation is left to our assumption as readers. In the end Nick confronts Brian rather violently – but a genuine dialogue ensues, both perspectives enter the narrative to make it more complex and complete. What is interesting is how Nick approaches the presence of his wife's sleeping lover while experiencing the tension of the impending confrontation:

Brian thought I was the soul of self-completion. Maybe so. But I was also living in a state of quiet separation from all the things he might cite as the solid stuff of home and work and responsible reality. When I found out about him and Marian I felt some element of stoic surrender. Their names were nice together and they were the same age and I was hereby relieved of my phony role as husband and father, high corporate officer. Because even the job is an artificial limb. Did I feel free for just a moment, myself

again, hearing the story of their affair? I watch him sleep, thinking how satisfying it would be, ten serious smashes to his prep-school face. But it was also satisfying, for just a moment, to think of giving it all up, letting them have it all, the children of both marriages, the grandchild, they could keep the two houses, all the cars, he could have both wives if he wanted them. None of it ever belonged to me except in the sense that I filled out the forms. (*U* 796-797)

Again we are made aware that we are in the presence of a fictional narrative – just full of maybes. Even the characters lose their originality, their signature features, becoming mere names and ages on the page (the word “character”, after all, also meaning “written sign”). Suddenly, subjects become objects and are handled thus by the narrative. In his mind, Nick is able to cook up new stories which he excludes himself from though once he was part of them.

An even more interesting part is when Nick says he “was also living in a state of quiet separation from all the things he might cite as the solid stuff of home and work and responsible reality,” as if declaring his departure from the modernist concept of mythology. Nick has positioned himself in a situation where even the most solid citation would not matter, rejecting the very notion of any reliable myths. Once unbound from the day-to-day anchors that should shape his understanding (“home,” “work,” “reality”), his mind is set free to wander in multiple directions. In passages such as this, we can observe with Lyotard how DeLillo’s characters lose their credulity towards the metanarratives of American society.

Waste

Waste and its management are among the central topics of *Underworld*.

Handling garbage in the novel, DeLillo plays out its multiple meanings. On the one hand, there is always an ecological awareness present within the problem of garbage – especially as regards the residues of nuclear waste. In the light of American capitalist society, this is usually seen as the by-product of the consumerist approach of “good” American citizens. The ecological tendencies are not excessively present in *Underworld*, DeLillo also points out that garbage has always been part of advanced civilizations – and the more advanced the society is, the more sophisticated waste it produces. Time and again, the stress falls on how civilizations were built on garbage – hundreds of years of clay and thrown-out garbage are now the soil on which to erect our houses and skyscrapers. And still centuries after the Middle Ages, we lodge the nuclear weapon in the ground following the same pattern: “Detwiler said that cities rose on garbage, inch by inch, gaining elevation through the decades as buried debris increased. Garbage always got layered over or pushed to the edges, in a room or in a landscape.” (U 287)

Waste here is not only ecological problem, it is basically the evidence of the history of our civilization – and thusly approached:

At home we wanted clean safe healthy garbage. We rinsed out old bottles and put them in their proper bins. We faithfully removed the crinkly paper from our cereal boxes. It was like preparing a pharaoh for his death and burial. We wanted to do the small things right. (U 119)

Here, garbage is positioned in relation to our handling of history: which after all, is also what is “left over” from the past. Individuals act consciously towards the small

events of our present – we want to do the small things right, because we cannot influence the broader framework of our historical consciousness. The truth about civilization is fragmented into garbage bins around the world. DeLillo’s narrator also declares that we handle objects as waste even while we’re buying them, hence our material lives are shaped by garbage. Hence DeLillo’s postmodern idea that there is no beginning and end to garbage just as there is none for history either. And even if we are conscious of the national and global history, we are damned not to be able to affect the future on a global scale while forced to live under the conditions that result from the same processes of the past generations.

The trash was another form of accusation, it passed telepathically between them, a hundred bags on one corner and a smell so summer-lush it enveloped the whole body, pressing in like a weather system. (*U* 376)

As Evans points out in his essay “Taking Out the Trash: Don DeLillo’s ‘Underworld’, Liquid Modernity, and the End of Garbage.”, there also is huge intimacy within our garbage. Not only does DeLillo use garbage as a symbol for our position within our own history, he consciously uses it to depict the society and culture in its most raw and exposed form:

The Jesuits taught me to examine things for second meanings and deeper connections. Were they thinking about waste? We were waste managers, waste giants, we processed universal waste. Waste has a solemn aura now, an aspect of untouchability. White containers of plutonium waste with yellow caution tags. Handle carefully. Even the lowest household trash is closely observed. People look at their garbage differently now, seeing every bottle and crushed carton in a planetary context. (*U* 88)

Jesuits (who famously taught both Joyce and his alter ego Stephen) here are trying to break the notion of a single meaning within language. Again we face a dialogue between two theoretical frameworks of the 20th century – the knowledge of the modernist approach is questioned here. The waste in its natural fragmentation had been for modernists a symbol for chaos as elaborated on for example in *The Waste Land*. The reference here is not based on any name – DeLillo directly refers to T.S. Eliot’s poem at the very end of *Underworld* when he closes the whole novel with paraphrasing the ending of *The Waste Land* with the word “peace” – a possible reference to Eliot’s: “Shantih shantih shantih” which is translated from Sanskrit as “the peace that passeth understanding” (Laroque 2014). But DeLillo’s simple statement “peace” obviously seeks closure in a position different from Eliot’s. Throughout the novel DeLillo distinguishes waste as a global problem and garbage as a product of culture. He emphasizes the importance of understanding one’s garbage as understanding one’s roots, and at the same time he declares that though aware of being part of a larger system, it is not necessary to know its entirety in order to construct one’s own identity. By declaring that, DeLillo departs from the understanding of the culture/nature or rather waste/nature binary opposition, leaving his modernist credentials behind, welcoming the era of postmodernist recyculation:

Isolate the most toxic waste, okay. This makes it grander, more ominous and magical. But basic household waste ought to be placed in the cities that produce it. Bring garbage into the open. Let people see it and respect it. Don't hide your waste facilities. Make an architecture of waste. Design gorgeous buildings to recycle waste and invite people to collect their own garbage and bring it with them to the press rams and conveyors. Get to know your garbage. (U 286)

DeLillo does not focus on how waste is changing nature, he focuses on the cultural processes behind waste production and manipulation discovering another non-binary system within it. His ecological position is obviously pro-recycling, having his characters operate with garbage as objects for possible re-usage. Klara even bases her career on transforming garbage into art, furthering the Dadaist avantgarde of ecological awareness. Yet DeLillo's point is to focus on the triviality of everyday life, always more important than any "ominous and magical" objects that shape our material consciousness. Garbage tells a story about us all, our society and history – it presents powerful evidence of our existence:

When FBI agents stole off in the night with some mobster's household trash, they substituted fake garbage, to allay suspicion-aromatic food scraps, anchovy tins, used tampons prepared by the lab division. Then they took the real garbage back for analysis by forensic experts on gambling, handwriting, fragmented paper, crumpled photographs, food stains, bloodstains and every known subclass of scribbled Sicilian.

"Or do this," Edgar said. "Put out simulated garbage. Bland bits and pieces. Unnewsworthy." (*U* 558)

DeLillo here plays again on the postmodern notes of manipulation – where everything is fake, even the garbage could be fake – and in this case, our identity could be fake and "unnewsworthy". There is also strong stress on the importance of garbage as a relevant feature and production of our existence. But it also evokes the question of credibility as when garbage (which is an important feature of our identity and history) could be staged, then our whole existence could be so as well. Or to repeat with Baudrillard, in a world of simulation and simulacra, the notion of real becomes

embedded in the hyperreal, in the mediated and the indirect, which is also to say, in our identity and history.

In the motto of this chapter, DeLillo is quoted declaring that he does not see *Underworld* as a postmodern piece of fiction. On the one hand, he does follow certain patterns of his previous postmodern narratives such as dealing with the feelings of fear and paranoia as driving the political consciousness. He also departs from the modernist notion of binary oppositions and sticks to the postmodern understanding of history and trauma. On the other hand, in several sequences, DeLillo's *Underworld* points to some of the modernist classics. He uses the features of his character(s) to refer to the characters of *Ulysses* and uses specific words and thematic concerns that also directly point to *The Waste Land*. Around the time of writing *Underworld* DeLillo was inspired by the postmodern sentiment of paranoia which he balanced with a respect for modernist tradition and its features. As already mentioned, there is also a strong allusion to Joyce's work in *Underworld* in the sense of what it aspires to be—a Bible of the American postmodern era—as if DeLillo did not want to leave anything out while knowing he will very much have to. Yet, however much steeped in a world of fear-inducing political instability, DeLillo's *Underworld* could have no knowledge of the wave of trauma about to enter the American consciousness in just a few years.

Chapter 4: “This was the world now”

“The events of September 11 were covered unstintingly. There was no confusion of roles on TV. The raw event was one thing, the coverage another. The event dominated the medium. It was bright and totalising and some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions.” (DeLillo 2001)

Falling Man marks DeLillo's departure from his previous narratives as it deals with yet another crucial change within American consciousness, this time at the dawn of the 21st century, the crisis of political and cultural consciousness happening on and after September 11, 2001. Dozens of more or less successful books have been written about 9/11, steeped in typically playful ironic treatments of the power of the media, the proliferation of conspiracies, and the invasion of the unreal into the real. In December 2001, DeLillo published an essay called “In the Ruins of the Future” in *The Guardian* on the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, in which he criticised the phenomenon of terrorism and also debunked the notion of the end of history: “Ideas evolve and de-evolve, and history is turned on end” (DeLillo 2001). Both critics and the public were waiting for his novel on 9/11 to be published, which was slow in coming. DeLillo waited until 2007 to publish his 9/11 novel which has little in common with his essay – making the novel more testimony than fiction, the novel's space and setting real, all too real.

The novel opens right after the planes crash into the Towers and zooms in on one of the main characters, Keith Neudecker, who personally witnesses and manages to survive the 9/11 attacks. The rest of the story follows Keith searching for the compassion of someone who could understand what he has been through. He even reconnects with his long-time-no-see ex-wife but later on finds more understanding in a fellow survivor, a woman whose suitcase he managed to rescue from one of the Towers. Both relationships are marked by apathy and lethargy, almost as if together with the ability to make sense, Keith has also lost the capacity to feel. The main characters are people directly affected by the 9/11 event. Their actions do not add up, almost as if their minds were paused. DeLillo describes space in detail in order to capture the state of people's minds after the attacks. Through his precise descriptions he delivers a picture of the world that has become different and will not be the same again. As he says in the opening, "this is the world now" – somewhat empty, with something missing in it. Something that cannot be named and expressed by one word or sentence. It is through space that we get a perfect notion of how survivors and their families lived through the first moments after the fall of the World Trade Center towers.

DeLillo's narrative is fragmented into several perspectives of different characters at different times and in different places, ending the plot where it began – in the end DeLillo describes the moments in the Towers, why at the beginning Keith had a suitcase that was not his and answers questions that are present through the whole narrative offering the readers some sense of closure. The victims' plot is interrupted by the narrative line featuring Hammad and Amir – two Middle-Eastern men whose opinions and political convictions are followed. Later in the novel readers detect that they are the terrorists who hijack the planes that crash into the Towers. Here DeLillo draws a contrast between the aftermath of the terrorist attacks and the minds of the

offenders behind such a horrific event. This narrative double-line is similar to that in *Libra* where he portrays Oswald as a person with his own history, traumas and convictions – here the line is not quite as developed though DeLillo follows the same pattern – showing that behind this “unreal” or “too real” act there are person with their human complexity.

The Aftermath

In the novel, DeLillo does not focus on the act of terrorism itself, rather he is very much interested in the aftermath of a trauma, the impact on people’s minds. Hence DeLillo’s starting point *in medias res*, in the middle of the street, witnessing people’s shock, ashes falling and silence mixing with terror.

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking north through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads. They had handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths. They had shoes in their hands, a woman with a shoe in each hand, running past him. They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars.

The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, busting around corners, seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall. (*FM 3*)

As DeLillo said in his essay quoted at the beginning of this chapter, “The raw event was one thing, the coverage another,” and he apparently decides here to cover the raw event. Generally, there is a strong lack of media presence in *Falling Man*. Though the terrors of 9/11 are witnessed all around the world, DeLillo chooses to focus on the “raw event,” leaving his postmodernist sense of hyperreality and reproduction aside. Right at the beginning of the novel, DeLillo introduces us to a street covered in darkness. He pictures the horror of the directly experienced moment without any intrusion of the media or distraction by the spectators. The street disintegrates into a space of chaos, where history gets re-written or rather – ends and rebegins. Things become fragments of the devastation of consciousness, the terror of incomprehension and emptiness entered the identity. The ordinary became the “otherworldly” when an ordinary Manhattan street changes into a space beyond understanding.

Falling Man is a raw document on what happens to those affected directly by this event. DeLillo chooses not to cover what it was like to see it on TV – or whether 9/11 happened as “presented” or whether there was some conspired simulation behind it. The fall of the towers was such a horrible act that its “reality” is not to be doubted even by DeLillo. What *Falling Man* is interested is not in the who or how but in the effect: in the change of American consciousness irrespective of political ideology.

The narrative of history falls apart in the novel. While in *Libra* and *Underworld* DeLillo elaborates on the possibilities of history, roots and identity and how to comprehend them in the postmodern era, in *Falling Man*, he focuses on the post/traumatic experience:

“In those places where it happens, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of a better term, and it turns out this is caused by small fragments, tiny

fragments of the suicide bomber's body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who's in striking range. Do you believe it? A student is sitting in a café. She survives the attack. Then, months later, they find these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin. They call this organic shrapnel." (FM 16)

Every survivor bears their part of trauma. In this paragraph, DeLillo uses the suicide bomber "organic shrapnel" lodged in the bodies of survivors as a metaphor for the fragmentary afterlife of the event in the survivors' minds. As the relics afflict the survivors' skin, hair and belongings, the mind too becomes infected with the burden of witnessing. "The organic shrapnel" here is both what remains of people, of their history and the break of one's consciousness. After a suicide bombing, these shrapnels are deadly – if the bomb itself does not kill the witnesses, the shrapnel might. Following this pattern, this is the post-traumatic experience in *Falling Man* – not only are there people who survive and get over it, but the aftermath of being a witness can cause them both physical and mental problems that can still kill them even after the wrecks have long been cleared out. The shrapnel of 9/11 is the bearing-witness, whether direct or indirect, and the burden of coming to terms with it. As argued by Linda Wagner, together with 9/11, an unbearable trauma entered American consciousness:

For the terrorist attack to have moved into the heart of the United States posed a new kind of problem: millions of Americans felt the violation. Millions more felt the pangs of loss. Millions of others experienced the trauma of the unexpected invasion. For the brief moments of the two planes flying into the World Trade Center, the ramifications – as well as

the visual representations – of those attacks were indelibly captured in more millions of viewers’ eyes, minds, and consciousnesses. (Wagner-Martin 286)

These issues are so difficult to face and communicate that they result in apathy, the emptiness of gaze, a numbness of fear and a constant search for something reliable to hold onto. After the attacks, Keith goes straight to his ex-wife Lianne who welcomes him without question as she saw everything on TV and was afraid he might be dead. Obviously, Keith intends to reconnect with his previous life – the life before the attacks. The dialogues are almost frivolous as if afraid to touch upon the seriousness of experience that has compelling consequences. Lianne is approached by her mother Nina after she finds out Keith (whom she dislikes) has come back home to her and Nina pushes Lianne to confront Keith about their future relationship.

“What have you discussed?”

“No major problems, physical.”

“What have you discussed?” she said.

(...)

“There’s nothing to discuss right now. He needs to stay away from things, including discussions.” (*FM 9*)

Lianne makes a conscious effort not to disturb Keith, to protect him and to give him time to deal with his experience. In other words, she respects that his experience is beyond her imagination. This behaviour was also present in the families of holocaust survivors and is usually strongly connected with unspeakable trauma. Even Keith himself knows he cannot talk his way out of his insecurities with his wife and develops a love-affair with Florence – a woman whose suitcase he took on the stairway when escaping the Tower.

There was an element in Florence that was always close to some emotional distress, a memory of bearing injury or sustaining loss, possibly lifelong, and the laughter was a kind of shedding, a physical deliverance from old woe, dead skin, if only for a moment. (*FM* 90)

Florence embodies the partner, the companion which experience the same trauma. Keith starts a relationship with her though it is obviously based only on a shared experience, a non-transferable shock. So on the one hand, Keith searches for grit in his ex-wife because she represents the secure life before the attacks happened but at the same time he needs Florence in his life as she is the symbol for everything that happened after.

In time he heard the sound of the second fall. He crossed Canal Street and began to see things, somehow, differently. Things did not seem charged in the usual ways, the cobbled street, the cast-iron buildings. There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them. (*FM* 5)

American consciousness in *Falling Man* is overwhelmed by enormous trauma marking both a complete loss of historical reference and DeLillo's departure from the narrative of political paranoia. Throughout the narrative there is a strong sense of lacking or missing something as if the moment the Towers fell marked a new era of history as a sieve that – for all the things it captures – always loses something, leaves something out and missing. Featured heavily on the pages of the novel is the word “missing”, designating what is present through its absence, what cannot be expressed or

communicated. What is also “missing” from *Falling Man* are DeLillo’s typical games and ironic tropes as *Falling Man* is an emotional rollercoaster, a dark and empty narrative of coming to terms with unspeakable loss, marking a decisive break with his earlier postmodern approach to fiction.

The building of WTC symbolized the economic prosperity and shaped the New York skyline – and it is mentioned in DeLillo’s work as the fascinating building in process. “There was something critically missing from the things around him” – not only the Towers are gone, but everything that was part of the old world has suddenly stopped existing with its past as if things, space and people were born and dead and reborn at the same time in flash of time. There is a certain loss of memory within characters in the novel as we do not know much about their identity before the attacks. Such knowledge comes to the reader only through short and small flashbacks and usually from characters not directly involved in the attack.

The theme of the loss of memory is underlined through Lianne’s character who works with people affected by Alzheimer. Her deepest fear after the attack is that one day, she will end up like them – with either her life fragmented and at the mercy of oblivion, or with the inability to understand her identity. In this heightened situation, DeLillo repeats his favourite “Where were you when...?” question:

He said, “It still looks like an accident, the first one. Even from this distance, way outside the thing, how many days later, I’m standing here thinking it’s an accident.”

“Because it has to be.”

“It has to be,” he said.

“The way the camera sort of shows surprise.”

“But only the first one.”

“Only the first,” she said.

“The second plane, by the time the second plane appears,” he said,

“we’re all a little older and wiser.” (*FM* 135)

Here, DeLillo opposes his previous hyperreal/manipulation approach towards media. The notion of such a terrorist attack is beyond one’s comprehension – it would be easier to grasp the event as an accident. The camera in this passage becomes the spectator itself, losing its persuasive function and converts into a medium of display. At the same time, the time lag between the two hits, DeLillo’s viewers suggest, feels as if “staged” for the camera: 9/11 after all was also the ideal TV event. And yet 9/11 in *Falling Man* is not about a media event re-shaping American cognition, like in *Libra*, it is the very opposite: the novel is not about media manipulation and multi-perspective, it is about personal response, hurt, and healing. As this is “the world now.”

Names

Still, the novel’s title is obviously visual and “medial”, referring to a famous photograph by Richard Drew —an icon of the attacks—of a man jumping to his death from one of the towers of WTC; what supposedly fascinated DeLillo about it is its rendering of said man in a position almost arranged. This “arrangement”, however, is the only echo of DeLillo’s postmodern sensibilities in *Falling Man*:

A man named David Janiak, 39. The account of his life and death was brief and sketchy, written in haste to make a deadline, she thought. She thought there would be a complete report in the paper of the following day. There was no photograph, not of the man and not of the acts that had made him, for a time, a notorious figure. These acts were noted in a

single sentence, pointing out that he was the performance artist known as *Falling Man*. (FM 218-219)

The identity of the man from the photograph was never confirmed – though there are some speculations of who it might be. But there is a character in the novel called Falling Man – an artist who shows up to several locations hanging upside down dressed in a suit – obviously mimicking the real Falling Man. DeLillo here projects his fascination with the position in which the photograph managed to capture the unfortunate man jumping from one of the Towers. Lianne is searching for the artist's name only to learn on the internet that his name is David Janiak and unlike the man captured jumping to his death from the WTC, there is no visual evidence of his – quite opposite to what is known about the real Falling Man:

Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific. She clicked forward and there was the picture. She looked away, into the keyboard. It is the ideal falling motion of a body. (FM 222)

The photograph became a symbol for 9/11 horrors in the media. Lianne is disturbed that any artist should use such an iconic figure as target for parody, simulation and caricature, but in the end she comes to terms with him as bearing remembrance to the real Falling Man.

He brought it back, of course, those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump. He'd been seen dangling from a balcony in a hotel atrium and police had escorted him out of a concert hall and two or three apartment buildings with terraces or accessible rooftops. (FM 33)

While *Libra* amasses as much evidence as is humanly and fictionally possible about the JFK assassination, *Falling Man* keeps the historical facticity of 9/11 purposefully marginal, even shrouded by mystery. This is brought home also by the fact the event itself is never named in the book – it is referred to generally as “the planes”, as DeLillo is evidently uninterested in going into detail.

Each of the three parts of the book bears a certain name: David Janiak for one, the other two are named after Bill Lawton and Ernst Hechinger. Bill Lawton is created by some children overhearing the name of the terrorist supposed to be behind the attacks – Osama bin Laden. As the children are getting information only from hearsay, they “naturalise” bin Laden into Bill Lawton, adapting the name to something understandable in their own language. Indeed reposing the classic question, what’s in a name? Ernst Hechinger is actually Martin Ridnour, lover of Lianne’s mother Nina. He is alleged to be a radical activist (and possibly terrorist) linked to Germany and Italy, calling up the spectre of Europe’s own terrorist phase of fascist regimes in Germany and Italy and the holocaust traumas, not so long ago. As such, the experience and horrors which Europe had to face are the mirror of the trauma of the American consciousness cause by 9/11 attacks.

Falling Man stands out from DeLillo’s corpus as a very touching book written for the purpose of dealing with what has happened during and after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. There is no reality to be manipulated with as it deals with the moment, the world now with its crisis and raw reality of confusion. In *Falling Man* the reality and message are already created by true events, the fictional in the service of reporting on the description of reality that could be applicable to other people affected by 9/11. Unlike in *White Noise*, in *Falling Man*, disaster is not simulated but real, all too real,

and fiction's job seems no longer to be clever or canny about its manipulations, but to keep close to fact, feel it through, help to heal and carry on.

After 9/11 there is a change within DeLillo's work as seen here on the example of *Falling Man*. Leaving out the typical postmodern topics and manipulation, he draws nearer to modernist poetics, as also argued by David Cowart:

Language, for DeLillo, is the ground of all making, and no conceit is too extravagant to be essayed. He looks with unfailing, sympathetic attention at linguistic practices—glossolalia, for example—that others dismiss as psychopathology or simple fraud. Similarly, like Joyce, he can momentarily imagine language as a link to conceptual origins and human ontogeny, something like the omphalic telephone that Stephen Dedalus muses on. (Cowart 226)

Cowart here describes DeLillo's fiction after 9/11, less ironic and more serious, less simulated and more real. In *Falling Man* DeLillo also deals with history and trauma differently as if the past vanished and the only thing the characters have is *now*. As for the narrative, literature entered another era marked by the trauma of postmodern age. DeLillo's *Falling Man* is a watershed point of his work as it covers both the echoes of the trauma mirrored in previous novels and marks a new opening in terms of the tendencies within his narrative voices. As rightfully noted by critic Maurizio Ascari, this tendency has also to do with a farewell to a certain type of postmodernism:

After 9/11 a certain kind of postmodernism – with its jocular manner, its ostentatious irresponsibility, its deconstructive frenzy – suddenly appeared frivolous against the enormity and terrible novelty of this tragedy (...) along with the dust of the twin towers, a new craving for reality spread across the west. (Ascari 25)

Conclusion

“It could be argued, of course, that DeLillo is simply an aficionado of mystery in all its forms and that the deployment of different sorts of mystery in his work is one more sign of the playful eclecticism of a certain postmodern aesthetic.” (McClure 167)

The theoretical introduction implied that to attempt to define the modern vs. postmodern aesthetics as two completely diverse concepts is questionable. There are features that are likely to appear in both more or less identical, there are those that undergo variations, but it is impossible – or at least dogmatic – to define the presence of certain features as peculiar to either of them only. McHale argues that “something *is* wrong with the modernism vs postmodernism opposition” in general, to which one can only add that the same sentiment applies to DeLillo’s novels. The sheer fact of his novels’ placement in the postmodern era means they of course contain topics relevant for the period, but it is *how* DeLillo decides to display these topics that makes his novels unique and difficult to classify.

Mystery is indeed strongly present in DeLillo’s novel and it is precisely this mystery that one might identify as having to do with postmodern indeterminacy and open-endedness. Why is DeLillo such a strange case, then? First, let us look at the rest of the McClure quote that opened this conclusion:

But I will argue instead that DeLillo’s work urges the reader to perform a discrimination of mysteries – to check his or her fascination with forensic and esoteric mysteries and explore the possibility of apophatic and sacramental modes of being. Forensic and esoteric mysteries alike,

DeLillo's novels suggest, condition us to seek existential comfort in fragile or unattainable forms of knowledge and power: absolute rational knowledge and control in the case of forensic narratives, magical knowledge and control in the case of esoteric thrillers. (McClure 167)

To connect this with McHale's famous distinction, mystery for DeLillo is an *epistemological* category, not an *ontological* one: it has to do with our knowledge of the world, but is not necessarily a condition of it. In other words, the world is not unknowable *per se*, it is just that human knowledge of it is always imperfect. There are, to be sure, "unattainable" modes of knowledge (and this is DeLillo's postmodernist aspect), but this should not lead the reader towards apathetic irony – it should inspire in them a critical "discrimination."

In *White Noise* the narrative oscillates from hyperreality and manipulation towards something "beyond". The main focus here falls on space and its shaping by technology and media. This space is occupied by the Gladneys, trying to find their own functional space. The situations they are placed within assure them no "safe" space, and hence they are pushed to their limits, which results into the family's surrender to, and acceptance of, life in the hyperreal. This indeed is a very postmodern depiction of space and the loss of identity within it – and one can argue that *White Noise* is *the* DeLillo postmodern novel in the sense of its embrace of uncertainty and infinite regress. But the novel is a story of the family's *choice*, its own series of discriminations and compromises with the world, and far be it from DeLillo to suggest theirs is the correct, let alone only, choice.

DeLillo's narrative debunks the many metanarratives of 1980s America – of "authenticity," "family values," "consumerism," "the American dream" turned capitalist nightmare. But even within such critique, DeLillo includes in his narrative moments of

an almost mystical experience – as when Jack hears his dreaming daughter mumbling an advertisement jingle from her sleep. Initially, he is fascinated with it, the way it has invaded even her sleeping unconscious, the deepest recess of her being. This mystery and transcendence is strongly present in connection to the “airborne toxic event” and how people come to terms with it – as argued by Harold Bloom, DeLillo’s description of his characters’ fascination with the toxic sunset and their aura-like experience of it is “one of the most memorable passages in American writing of the later twentieth century” (*Don DeLillo’s White Noise* 2). Here is the finale of the passage to which Bloom refers:

The *spirit* of these warm evenings is hard to describe. There is *anticipation* in the air but it is not the expectant midsummer hum of a shirtsleeve crowd, a sandlot game, with coherent precedents, a history of secure response. The waiting is introverted, uneven, almost backward and shy, tending toward silence. *What else do we feel?* Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, *it transcends previous categories of awe*, but we don’t know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don’t know what we are watching or what it means, we don’t know whether it is permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which *our uncertainty will eventually be absorbed*, or just some atmospheric weirdness, soon to pass. (*WN* 308, my italics)

At the climax of DeLillo’s arguably most postmodern novel, and at the heart of its most “hyperreal” moment—in which a toxic sunset is turned into spectacle—is a collective experience of a clearly religious character. My italics aim to highlight the religiousness of DeLillo’s vocabulary: there is a *spirit of anticipation* being *felt* by us,

one that *transcends all previous categories*, and which will *absorb our uncertainty* — clearly the religiousness, albeit a secular one, is more than mere parody here.

In *Libra* DeLillo's many narratives play out the fragmentary nature of history and memory and again foreground the presence of media at one of the turning points of American history – and it is through the micro-historical narrative of the characters in the novel, that the macro-history of JFK assassination is recorded. The novel even ends on the word “history” as Oswald’s mother is dragged away from the grave of her son (buried under an alias). “Lee Harvey Oswald. No matter what happened, how hard they schemed against her, this was the one thing they could not take away—the true and lasting power of his name. It belonged to her now, and to history” (*L* 456). As conveyed in this passage, *Libra* examines the importance of individual experience as formative of the communal sense of history understood in its transcendental nature. Through the novel, the readers follow the individual isolated characters and their separate lives that seem to end in pointlessness and absurdity. Towards the end of the novel, however, these individual stories connect to construct the one supra-individual story of history in which Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra*, the unknown bullied loser, becomes immortalized as part of the general consciousness of modern American history, the pawn that decides the entire chess-game.

Unlike in *White Noise*, the camera and media in *Libra* function as mediators and not manipulators. The notion of the media being the perpetrator is lacking in *Libra*, rather they are made into a witness, a technology that can allow us to replay parts of history independently from our memory. Though definitely the sense of reproductions and the event’s infinite sets of referents is communicated with it.

What noticeably changes in *Libra* is DeLillo’s language. Manipulation has shifted from occupying a thematic plane to the level of language games, carefully

crafted with some special word-choice. The games within language structures are then in opposition to the notion of accidentality which is presented on the level of plot. In that sense *Libra* is at least partially a novel of a postmodern event written in a style whose language manipulations refer to the modernist tradition.

If *Libra* mimics some lines of the modernist approach to language, *Underworld* challenges the postmodern narrative conventions even on the level of structure. On almost nine hundred pages, DeLillo's narrative takes a path similar to *Ulysses* – only unlike its 24 hours, it covers 40 years. Albert Bronzini and Nick Shay even bear similar features to Joyce's characters – both are in search for identity and understanding of even the most ordinary things. *Underworld* deals with history – but unlike Joyce, it faces a history of individuals in the wake of both their personal and general traumas of time challenging socio-political credibility. Hence the thematic level of the narration is occupied with an ordinary man in a complicated world – almost a modernist character in a postmodernist space. Not only are there references to some canonical modernist authors on several pages but there is also certain admiration expressed for modernist writing and a continuation of its legacy suggested. Still, *Underworld* covers some typically postmodern topics, usually handled via some typically postmodern theories – obviously shaped by the discourse of the ages covered in it.

Following the line of mystery throughout DeLillo's novel, *Underworld* is no exception in picturing people in a common connection bearing strong transcendental features. In *Underworld*, the whole prologue dwells in the company of a crowd as a transcendental entity, while at the same time focusing on individuals and their experiences through every elusive moment, important as well as banal. Hence DeLillo's narrative is occupied with crowds not just for the sake of their unity-in-diversity but also because the aura of their communion-like existence creates a secular mimicry of

the experience of a spiritual gathering – as if the individualities became connected for the sake of a higher transcendental moment.

After 9/11, DeLillo's narrative underwent an even more visible change. If *Underworld* and *Libra* have been partially modernist and partially postmodernist, *Falling Man* is very different from both of them and stands in DeLillo's oeuvre worlds apart from both the time and aesthetics of *White Noise*. Unlike what one would expect DeLillo's book to focus on—capturing his critical historical event by means of its medialisations and its political backgrounds and impacts, as he did in *Libra*—*Falling Man* surprisingly departs from this approach, taking a very personal path. It leaves out the excess of hyperreality or manipulation, foregrounding the character's experiences, feelings and detailed apocalyptic images. Despair and emptiness with which DeLillo's narrative is full cast the reader into the position of witness and victim. *Falling Man* feels more as a document than fiction. *Libra* also dealt with a major event in American history but from the viewpoint of multiple perspectives, the conspiracies behind and the resistances to be overcome, while in *Falling Man* the characters are trapped in a deadlock of their own solitary mono-perspective with none other available. The heaviness and depression along with the notion of “something missing” marks yet another departure within DeLillo's work.

It is the topic of trauma that links *Falling Man* to the other three DeLillo novels here – 9/11 is first of all portrayed as shared trauma, impacting the entire scope of American society, covering the streets of Manhattan with ashes but also with an experience, however terrific and traumatic, of extreme solidarity and togetherness.

DeLillo's work is often connected to the omnipresence of manipulation and paranoia, the omnipresence of mystery within the everchanging consciousness. It is this mystery that brings elusiveness to DeLillo's work, that connects different narratives and

makes them unique. His novels take an interest in both the micro- and the macro-historical, in epoch-defining events as well as the everyday life of ordinary people presented as heroes surviving in the shadows of the postmodern society. In his narrative, DeLillo genuinely cares about the surroundings and conditions of his characters, handling them with civility and honesty. Of course, DeLillo's narrative in his novels covers the postmodern topics of the permeability of the "real" and "fictional" worlds – his novels always containing, in their fictional worlds, elements and parts of the "real" world of history and politics. In doing so, he might be seen as digressing from the postmodern scepticism about capturing the world. The purpose of his narratives is not to conjure up impossible words, but to make the readers think critically about the one they live in, to show the importance of the process of gaining knowledge and to ensure readers are alert when approaching any type of information. DeLillo's use of the sense of paranoia is not in service of an atmosphere of fear – its purpose is to advise the reader to think critically about the fine line to be crossed when going from the "fictional" into the "real," and vice versa.

If there is any modernist myth in DeLillo's novels, a metanarrative to which his fiction—even at its most postmodern heights—still clings, it is an almost transcendental faith in the importance of communion. His novels foreground the concept of religious transcendence while leaving out any dogmatic understanding of otherworldliness. There is a strong sense of spirituality within their mystical motifs, only the experience of transcendence is limited to a secular sense of communion. Hence also the notion of "something unsaid" in his novels as the crucial mystery for DeLillo's writing—pointing to that which lies beyond their fictional world, and perhaps beyond language: what lies in the here-and-now and what happens wherever one is confronted and comes together with another human being. This experience, to repeat, is utterly secular: the new

churches of DeLillo's postmodernity are supermarkets and baseball stadiums, its holy books are the reports of intelligence agencies and the TV guides. In the perfect modernist tradition of the Joycean epiphany or Woolfian "moment of being," DeLillo gestures towards transcendence in the most mundane and trivial parts of human experience. This importance of communion and commonality is the one myth DeLillo does not or cannot debunk, and which keeps his postmodernity deeply invested in the continuing modernist project.

This thesis has aimed to show that it is difficult, if not impossible, to pigeonhole DeLillo as either a modernist or postmodernist author. While bearing certain features of postmodernity on the level of themes and motifs, the language of DeLillo's fiction is used in a conscious continuation of the great modernist tradition. Also modernist is DeLillo's conception of a literary text as a complexity of fragments of other texts, whether from the "real" world outside or previous literary genres and periods. And as this conclusion has shown, permeating DeLillo's fiction is his stress on the "transcendent" importance of the common and communal, functioning as a quasi-religious metanarrative in his novels. It is his syncretic approach to tradition that gives DeLillo's narratives a touch of unmistakable authorial style, marked with deep humanism and empathy with its postmodern condition. But DeLillo's novels are much more than "merely" modernist or postmodernist, as also elements of mysticism and transcendence enter his narratives that deal with such timeless and burning issues as identity, guilt, aura, trauma, faith, and hope. The sorts of questions every generation of writers, whether modernist or postmodernist, has had to and will have to ask and answer for itself.

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