Space, Time and the Subject in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

by

Kirsten Jane Benzon

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Department of **ENGLISH**

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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Abstract

This paper considers the relationship between space and history as presented in Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997). I will argue that the historical conceptions articulated in this novel both formally and thematically subvert the conventional notion that history is a primarily temporal and linear construct. I will examine how DeLillo's essentially spatial mode of narrativity works to destabilize political, economic and military orders which regulate individual activity. Further, I hope to show how this mode works to reposition the individual subject as an agent in the historical text.

Drawing on theoretical conceptions of Freud, Fromm, Foucault and Jameson, this paper investigates the various cultural patterns that, inasmuch as they define modernity, depend upon linear notions of time and progress for the proliferation of their hegemonic structures. DeLillo's text, an excavation of the raw material that exists beneath the surface of the "official" past, throws these patterns into question by asserting the necessary layerdness and multiplicity of experience. By casting its gaze equally at marginal and celebrated figures and dissembling the sequential patterns of supposedly finite incidence, *Underworld* coalesces the epistemological influences of modernity with the ontological concerns of postmodernity.
Further, DeLillo's project marks a digression from the depthlessness and amorality associated with postmodern art by depicting the subject as part of a network of commodities and images, signifying, as DeLillo's protagonist remarks, "We are not excluded from our own lives" (Underworld 84).

The decomposition of linear signifying chains and their attendant tyrannical regimes is achieved by the distinctly spatial metaphors and mechanisms at play in the narrative. Linear trajectories are exploded into nodal stars, or intersections, of perception and experience. This paper is concerned primarily with the various hypertextual assemblages in Underworld, and how the intermeshing of media forms evinces a tolerating and coordinating historical configuration.
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A contemporary portrait no longer directs our attention to an authoritative lineage, to evocations of heritage and tradition alone. Simultaneities intervene, extending our point of view outward to an infinite number of lines connecting the subject to a whole world of comparable instances, complicating the temporal flow of meaning, short-circuiting the fabulous stringing-out of 'one damned thing after another'. The new, the novel, must now involve an explicitly geographical as well as historical configuration and projection.

-Edward Soja, Postmodern Geographies

Albert Bronzini walks along the dense streets of the Bronx and ponders the comic double-take, reflecting that it embodies the lapsed moment where a life used to be. His eyes settle on "an aproned boy [wrapping a] fish in a major headline" (\textit{UW} 661); given the cold war context, the gesture is a poignant coalescence of the mundane and the cataclysmic. Though but one isolated gesture of the thousands that compose Don DeLillo's \textit{Underworld}, Bronzini's glance epitomizes the novelist's own examination of the material that exists in the neglected space between any two moments. Like Bronzini's double take, DeLillo's text loops back on time, excavating the raw substance of experience that constitutes history and diffusing the weight--the often tyrannical gravity--of those calamitous events, or "major headlines", that make up our official collective past.

The relationship between the infinitesimal and the cosmic (the fish and the headline) is a central issue in \textit{Underworld}. The novel is quite literally a compendium of cultural concerns with identity, and considers, in particular, how technological and economical forces affect individual and social development. From the blurring of the
self and the mass, to the incorporation of the self into the machine (and vise versa), *Underworld* addresses the mental and physical dynamics of late capitalism with unique observational clarity. DeLillo attacks the integrity of hegemonic systems not through a quasi-mathematical, inductive dismantling, but by situating these systems in relation to the human subject, and defining the relationships between the two forces in practical, concrete terms. Such juxtapositions characterize the development of systematization that defines the latter half of this century, by paying close and various attention to the effects, both micro and macro, such systems have upon citizens.

Like many of DeLillo's novels, *Underworld* is concerned with the subjugation of the individual by the forces of technology, the marketplace, and history. But whereas in *Mao II* artistic power is compromised and eroded through duplication and commodification, the present work depicts art that actively reconfigures systems of production and reproduction. Decorated bombers compose a sublime landscape painting. Garbage dumps become the "national parks of the future" (*UW* 289). Oppressive constructs are diffused through artistic reinterpretation and the cultivation of dimensions that were previously obscured by a thick lacquer of power and image. Where previous novels such as *Libra* and Great Jones Street depict subjects in solitary confinement, crippled by professional insecurity and the pressure of public demand, *Underworld* places these "men in small rooms" within a greater
scheme, offsetting their passive seclusion with men and women of action and desire. The industrial, specialist modalities of baseball are compromised by the ejection and circulation of the ball—a projectile which ties peripheral subjectivities into the closed system of the game, and other seemingly impermeable cultural machines. These reformulations, I suggest, not only constitute the culmination of themes which flow throughout the corpus of DeLillo's writing, but they also work towards a depiction of the anxiety of powerlessness that characterizes the last half-century.

Unfortunately, the sheer bulk and complexity of Underworld cannot be dealt with comprehensively in a short paper. Indeed, each segment of DeLillo's novel is deserving of extensive and varied deliberation. Considering this, I wish to limit my inquiry to the work's pervasive examination of the relationship between space and history in narrative. I am interested primarily in the mechanics of the text as they formally subvert notions of time and progress in favour of simultaneity and stasis.

The first section of the paper outlines various cultural patterns that have achieved momentum through the social and political inflections of a distinctly linear view of history. In general terms, I will situate DeLillo's work as one which both synthesizes and retaliates against these patterns by retracing the evolution and fallout of hegemonic "mastery" and accessing a dormant, but distinctly humanist, "mystery"
of historical understanding. The second and third sections of the essay look at the ways in which DeLillo's narrative subverts and neutralizes historical conventions—namely, the deflation of political and popular celebrity, and the dismembering and reformulation of temporal and associative narrative sequences. The final section details the spatial qualities of the text, and pays particular attention to substitution of plot with hypertext and causal lines with nodal stars.

1. The Invisible Gloved Hand of Dr. Strangelove

Fifty years ago, the threat of nuclear holocaust sprang from the relationship that existed between two antagonistic megastates, and as an expression of their enmity, the threat had a meaning. Since then, the nature of the nuclear menace has undergone a rather peculiar, almost farcical transformation. As we approach the year 2000, we are reminded that the peril of nuclear exchange is no longer contingent upon the albeit erratic whim of a military commander; it is, rather, left up to the misfirings of a computer system gone haywire. While the talking heads at the U.S. military assert that the millennial computer glitch is under control, there is no reason not to conceal the truth in matters where culpability has no legal precedent. Russia, oddly to its credit, has issued a statement that its impoverished government cannot even begin to fund reparations of weapons
systems; their plan, resolutely, is to "wait and see". We'll just have to stand at the mercy of our machines, computer-programming fingers crossed.

This Armageddon-as-blunder scenario is but one version of a more general pattern that has emerged since the advancement and proliferation of industrial and technological systems. In practically every cultural function, the reins of control, and thus responsibility, have shifted from a human being to a precariously designed robot. The effect this displacement is having on conceptions of identity is severe, but, as yet, difficult to fully ascertain. In Civilization and its Discontents, Freud contends that culture necessarily develops in a fashion at odds with the individual, where the universal needs of man are overshadowed by the inclination to "progress"; this discrepancy gives rise not only to neuroses but also to an array of practical problems. Unintentional nuclear warfare is one extreme consequence, but arguably, it is not the most detrimental—at least our degradation would be swift and absolute. More portentous are those insidious systems, amorphous entities of disconnected signifiers and indecipherable code, that have assumed powers once wielded by human beings. They are contingent upon time and the regulated, predictable flow of events. Since these systems cannot be described in mechanical or physical terms, they cannot be pinpointed or isolated. They cannot be challenged, let alone amended or abolished.
In an unnerving paradox, such faulty, omnipotent orders compose the very framework of cultural life, yet they are perfectly cloaked by culture itself. Foucault uses the principle of "the Normal", a paradigmatically clever regime, to illustrate the mechanisms and effects of elusive cultural orders (*Discipline and Punish* 184). According to Foucault, the concept of "normalcy" is so totally ingrained into mass consciousness that it is practically indistinguishable from culture itself. It operates through negation, emphasizing difference to the point where all persons are inclined to operate in unison. The value of such social homogeneity is, of course, its propensity to adopt practices desirable to governing and marketing bodies and to cast critical and radical elements into the unfavoured margins. The Normal thereby ensures that certain defects can flourish without being seen as illnesses; as Spinoza argues, "factually, greediness, ambition and so forth are forms of insanity, although one does not think of them as an 'illness'" (*Ethics*, Proposition 44). Indeed, we do not consider mercenary and cutthroat behavior to be defective because such qualities are evident in the most "successful" among us and adhere to and propagate the strictures of the Normal.

The Normal epitomizes the tricky nature of our invisible cultural regimes. Their omnipotence is inextricable from their elusiveness; the more deeply buried the design, the more stable and total the power. Erich Fromm notes similar principles at work in capitalism, "a system which has no
purpose and goal transcending it, and which makes man its appendix" (87). There may, indeed, be "purpose" to the specific coercion of capital, but, as with Hegel's teleological view of history, it is not one of which we have any existential understanding. In its massive grid of causality, the behavior of capital's subjects must be consistent with the patterns it requires, while those deviating atoms are swiftly buried or expelled like so much toxic waste. As Nick Shay says in Underworld, corporations use "smiles and nods, a collective inflection of the voice," in order to "twist and shape you . . . without persuasion" (282). The result of this set-up, is, of course, the necessary abdication of individual agency, in appeasement of the behemothic, invisible hand.

So much cultural theory of the day has regarded this problem with a critical, though intrinsically complacent, eye. Surprisingly, the most passionate admonitions of the subjugation of the individual came before our own time, written before suspect systems had reached their insurmountable perfection. Adlai Stevenson, for one, warned in 1954 that "we are not in danger of becoming slaves anymore, but of becoming robots" (Fromm 102). Now that we are robots, no one seems to care. As Jameson says of labour under late capitalism, "it seems a 'natural' part of life" (25).

But it may be that theoretical explanations for the automatization of people are inherently ineffectual. It may be, too, that understanding the intricacies of such a broad
and abstract process requires a suitably metaphorical medium of expression. Theory itself becomes another oppressive regime in its effort to create a totalizing dynamic: "the more powerful the logical system, the more powerless the reader comes to feel" (Jameson 5). The theorist's object, the creation of an impenetrable arrangement of ideas and explications, is ultimately his bane because the reader's capacity for revolution is paralyzed by the very impenetrability of the theorist's argument. In other words, if the aim of cultural critique is to incite revolt—to assess and alter an unhealthy status quo—then the means and form of expression cannot be rational and totalizing, but must instead be aesthetic, metaphorical and flexible.

The exposure and dismembering of tyrannical orders is what Underworld takes as its object. At first glance, Underworld appears to fit nicely into the parameters of "postmodern fiction", an admittedly sketchy category of literature that, by nature, may include just about anything; the book is full of "representational inconsistencies and dilemmas" (Jameson xxii). For example, in Underworld there is the grotesque Jackie Gleason puking into the stands at an historic baseball game. There is epic cataloguing at a condom emporium, a reinvoking of, perhaps, Homer's Troy-bound fleets. And there is a private screening of the not-yet-notorious Zapruder film by a pretentious clique of New York artists. But these historical perversions, though in part ironic and alienating, are not simply the cultural excavation
and recycling associated with a self-consciously clever postmodernity. They do not signify that which is, according to Baudrillard, our era's particular lust for revisionism, or "retrospective apocalypse" (22). Rather, DeLillo's historical cognizance and recreation tries to re-familiarize and integrate items and constructs which, through extensive commodification, have become foreign to us. The retrospection is less a mourning of a shattered past or cosmetic surgery on a vacant present, than it is a convergence of the two spheres. DeLillo's is a studied attempt to address contemporary problems through productive juxtaposition of current dislocations—for one, how we might cohabitate with "drudges who do not dream of family dead" (UW 63), our machines, without becoming like them.

Underworld depicts the deep structures, the hidden strata of experience, that exist beneath the epidermis of history. This subterranean focus problematizes the dogmatically linear understanding of history, as well as other similar sociopolitical structures (capitalism, militarism, technology) which seek to assimilate and control individual identity. For example, Marvin Lundy's quest to determine the lineage of those who temporarily owned a legendary baseball, collapses the hierarchical doctrine of "Things are higher than Man" (Fromm 95) and intimates a fusion of man with his "things". In this respect, the novel marks a departure from the flatness and depthlessness associated with postmodern art (pastiche) and the
predominance of simulacra. True, DeLillo's narrative frequently invokes two-dimensional, representational figures and images that are the stuff of commodification, but these are not dislocated and distressing signs, dangling in the air like so many Warholian shoes. Instead, DeLillo sets the objects of the marketplace into the hands and minds of perceiving subjects. Thus the baseball and the Lucky Strikes "target" icon are not merely significations or emblems of human endeavor, but rather they compose part of the real symbology of experience and memory. The ceaseless spew of products piles up in the dumps, but the dumps are meaningful, even mythologized by any interested observer; the splatter of discarded merchandise is a source of meditation for Brian Glassic who realizes that "the biggest secrets are the ones spread out before us" (UW 185). Autonomous images, by nature solitary and saturated with their own ontological power, are placed in community with each other and in harmony with the beholder. Glassic spies in the Gizaesque heaps a teal bikini brief and imagines the owner, a secretary from Queens who "is dark-eyed and reads the tabloids and paints her nails and eats lunch out of molded styrofoam" (185). This networking of images diffuses the authoritarian nature of our representations and industrial production by drawing them together in a narrative arrangement.

Though heavily revisionist in both structure and content, the novel's ultimate focal point is the present, an accumulation of detritus both physical and psychic, no more
fathomable than a New Jersey garbage dump. DeLillo's project is analogous to Benjamin's interpretation of Klee's Angelus Novus: a looking back at the wreckage of human experience—progress—while moving forward through space. The angel of history, as Benjamin calls it, "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (257). Similarly, for DeLillo, reviewing the past is not so much "collective self-flagellation" (Baudrillard 22), but an attempt to reveal processes which have now reached maximum velocity, and to make legible the necessarily jumbled condition of the past.

The angel of history may have more aptly been called the angel of space. As Benjamin notes, "where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (257). The past is a layered, not a linear, entity, and it is the expression of this layeredness which permits DeLillo's reintegration of sentient, participating subjects into the reductive scheme of history—to prove, as Nick Shay tells us, that "we are not excluded from our own lives" (UW 82). A dense polyphony of multifaceted, fluctuating, and conflicting incidents gives credence to subjective experience, not because it transcends the structure of a particular historical narrative, but because it is in fact the hidden underpinning of those structures, and composes the swirling dynamo that moves forward both mass and individual identity.
The reintegration of the individual subject into the fabric of culture and the past is primarily brought about through the supplanting of historical time, a regulated and fixed document, by space, a dimension more conducive to the fluxion that defines subjective action. Such a shift in focus undermines those oppressive forces which thrive upon linear conceptions of cultural development. "History, like politics," says Lyotard, "seems to have a need of a unique point of perspective, a place of synthesis, a head or eye, developing the diversity of movements in the unification of a single volume" (164). In Western thought, historical time has been the primary dimension because it is a totalizing, "synthesizing" force that lends itself easily to the formation of categories and patterns. It follows that whatever social theory is developed under this conception will invariably conflate diversity into a single strand, privileging time and viewing space as contingent rather than fundamental to human action. Time, as Kristin Ross says, "excludes and subordinates, while space coordinates and tolerates" (8).

We need only glance at the miserable occupants of a Le Corbusier complex to see the stiff repercussions of a life regulated by straight lines, what David Harvey calls a "structured coherence" (375). Through a variety of formal innovations, DeLillo breaks down the serial constructs which regulate and control activity like the lines on a baseball diamond. This demolition is evinced by the narrative's
generally backwards pattern; the story begins in the present and jumps back in textual chunks through the decades. The diametrical flow of events is braided or criss-crossed by anachronistic trajectories and isolated vignettes, thereby creating a nodal network through which experience permeates. This narrative construct is similar to Edward Soja’s Postmodern Geographies, which begins with a coalescent “Preface and Postscript”; this combination, Soja says, signals an “intention to tamper with familiar modalities of time, to shake up the formal flow of linear text to allow other, more ‘lateral’ connections to be made” (1). The sequentially unfolding narrative, Soja suggests, predisposes the reader to think historically; such temporal thinking, ‘one damned thing after another’, is the basic apparatus of hegemonic systems, invoking always the threat of suffering or the promise of reward to follow.

As Soja says, and as DeLillo’s work confirms, “We can no longer depend on a story-line marching straight forward in plot and denouement, for too much is happening against the grain of time, too much is continually traversing the storyline laterally” (23). We can no longer depend upon verisimilitude and factuality in historical fiction; look, for instance, at Michael Ondaatje’s burnt patient, Almáasy, who vindicates Herodotus’s Histories because it is “both ancient and modern” and is composed of “supposed lies”. Just as Almásy “sketch[es] men in skirts with faded unknown animals beside [the lies]” (246) in celebration of the text’s
inaccuracies, DeLillo describes in detail a shot-by-shot account of an imaginary Eisenstein film, and unites Sister Edgar with J. Edgar Hoover as hermaphroditic counterparts. DeLillo tosses together various media and perspectives, mixing film footage, photographs, news reportage, and omniscient narration to create a multidimensional--at times, impossibly paradoxical--aggregate of experience.

"Our experience of the world," said Foucault in a lecture on heterotopias, "is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" ("Of Other Spaces" 22). DeLillo's novel captures this concept of life-as-network through his presentation of memory. Although it is apparent that memory is instrumental in allotting primacy to subjectivity, DeLillo's formulation of memory is unique because it operates according to a spatial rather than temporal paradigm. Its principal analogous body is the garbage dump--embers of experience whose accumulation both is and shapes the subject's thought, desire and action. As a memorial of humanity, waste counterbalances linear understandings of time and experience, coalescing, as Heidegger would have it, Becoming and Being. Further, the stacking of refuse is replicated in the mind, where gestures and thoughts are continually repeated and restructured, effectively breaking temporal lines and stacking them on top of one another. Moments, like objects, circle back on themselves, in the fashion of Douglas Hofstatder's Strange
Loops: "by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system we unexpectedly find ourselves back where we started" (10). With this understanding of history—an entity which includes but is not exclusive to time—DeLillo attributes to his characters a high degree of agency which, in turn, suggests the inherently reactionary capabilities of the human mind.

2. The Subject in History

The writer wants to see inside the human works, down to dreams and routine rambling thoughts, in order to locate the neural strands that link him to men and women that shape history.

-DeLillo, "The Power of History"

"Pause for a moment, you wretched weakling, and take stock of yourself" (295); it's a line Nick Shay remembers from The Cloud of Unknowing, a medieval religious tract that is also the title of one of DeLillo's chapters. Underworld itself is a kind of "un-knowing" semantic cloud, which, through the condensation of time and space, decomposes accepted lines of narrative causality. It asks that we pause, in the midst of progressive and cumulative flow, and recognize the unknowable schemes that emerge from the intersections of variable and layered experience. In its explicitly retrograde chronology, the novel tries to remodel cultural conceptions which have taken shape under a decisively historical mode of apprehension. The epistemological thrust of modernism is replaced by the distinctly ontological concerns of
postmodernism; while the dominant paradigm of thought of the preceding decades considers the relative meaning of events as they pertain to economic and national expansion, the current moment, entrenched in the quagmire of unbridled progress, wonders how these events, piled mile high atop one another, impinge upon the subjects with which they coexist.

It might have been by accident that DeLillo came across a 1951 New York Times, whose front page sets side by side the headlines: "Giants Capture Pennant" and "Soviets Explode Atomic Bomb". But it is of no small consequence that the long and heterogeneous novel which ensued covers the latter half of the twentieth century. Where the early part of the century saw, as Soja notes, a "rejection of environmental causality and all physical or external explanations of social processes in the formation of human consciousness" (35), DeLillo insists that there are ineluctable connections among things, though they might operate according to commonly overlooked schemes. Thomas LeClair says in his treatment of DeLillo's work, that the equifinal form of the "systems novel" provides the novelist with an "extraliterary conception of man and behavior that confirms or extends modernist experiments with character and plot" (10). Indeed, Underworld squelches the elitism and formalism associated with modernist writing and undercuts the modernists' attempt to be outside history—as well as their reliance upon pure form, myth, abstraction and

1 starting in '51 perhaps accounts for Dionysius Exiguus's (a.k.a. Dennis the Short) sixth century error of beginning the Christian calender at year one instead of zero.
other theoretical models of closure—in the construction of a well-wrought urn. Just as the thieving Manx Martin wears his children’s clothing and wonders “how it happened that they’re not wearing his hand-me down jackets” (150), the undertakings which characterize modern culture are collapsed together with our present circumstance through DeLillo’s reconstruction of history; in effect, the future clothes the past, reversing conventional views of inheritance.

With the anatomical precision of a coroner, DeLillo dissects history as if it were a living organism—separating pristine bits of skeleton from broken vessels, pulling apart the most resilient tissue to reveal the inflamed tumors within. But the dissection is more a process of productive unraveling, or deconstruction, than it is a destruction. As DeLillo said in an article for New York Times Magazine, "The novel is the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements" ("The Power of History" 61). This narrative model, an intrinsically manumitting form, “may problematize the conventions of teleological closure or developmental continuity, but that is not to ‘banish’ them from the scene” (Hutcheon 94). Such a "decreation" of history, as that which Hutcheon attributes to her historical metafictions, though formally encoded into DeLillo’s narrative and executed in the characters' actions, must be viewed as a commingling of the epistemological with the ontological. If "Longing on a large scale is what makes
history" (UW 11), then any historical examination must first account for varieties of longing and willfulness.

A baseball game, then, is an appropriate event to initiate a semifictional retelling of history because it is a place wherein multiple consciousnesses, agendas, and fictions gather to participate in a simultaneously public and personal activity. It is, as Marshall McLuhan says, an "outer model of inner psychological life" (237) as well as "the elegant abstract image of industrial society" (239). On the field, the batter paradoxically represents both himself and his team, the individual and the community, in a struggle against an enemy force bent on putting both him and his allies "out". In the stands, amidst intimate conversations, "the crowd repeats the sorry arc of the baseball, a moaned vowel falling softly to earth" (35). A whole system erupts according to the variable trajectory of the ball--the individual narratives of pitcher, batter, fielders, and crowd join in an abstract, unknowable geometric unity. This kind of subjective expansion "[renders] inextricable the public and the historic and the private and the biographical" (Hutchison 94). In Underworld, as in baseball, there is no clear primacy allotted to either of the two modes, and their integration creates a third, hybrid animal.

DeLillo probes the deep structures of history in the same manner that Marvin Lundy scrutinizes the photographs from the momentous 1951 ball game:
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He rephotographed the footage. He enlarged, repositioned, analyzed. He step-framed the action to slow it down, to combine several seconds of film into one image. It was a work of Talmudic refinement, zooming in and fading out, trying to bring a man’s face into definition, read a woman’s ankle bracelet engraved with a name. (177)

Marvin sees the composition of the crowd as a universe of dots, and “once you get inside a dot, you gain access to hidden information, you slide inside the smallest event” (177). At first, Cotter Martin is that dot, a shadowy and elusive one, who darts among the thousands gathered to witness a crucial moment of triumph and defeat. While there is a distinctiveness, a marginality to his position—young, black, broke—there is also a sense that he is but one element in an unfathomably complicated compound, a mixture that is at least partly composed of “Dodgers scoring runs, a man dancing down an aisle, a goateed black in a Bing Crosby shirt” (33) and, extending from the game, a “woman cooking cabbage” and a “man who wishes he could be done with drink” (32).

Like Cotter, the mass itself is an energetic and unruly creature, looking for a similarly untainted experience. This is just a kid with a local yearning but he is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing-bridge above the river, and
even if they are not a migration or revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries of desperation, the unseen something that haunts the day—men in fedoras and sailors on short leave, the stray tumble of their thoughts, going to a game. (11)

This equalization of the single and the many, unified in diversity and desire, implies a dissolution of the binary of the crowd and the individual, and, by extension, the public and the private. While the characters in Mao II, for example, represent distinct spheres of community (the social, the secluded), with the artist/activist on the extreme perimeter, Underworld disallows such bold juxtapositions. Indeed, the city itself is both unified entity and aggregate, with a "body heat" and stray, tumbling thoughts.

The concept that "small reveries of desperation" are commensurate with greater historical measures such as "migration and revolution" is carried forth into the configuration of the crowd itself, a jumble of commoners and celebrities. This arrangement is reminiscent of Doctorow's Ragtime in its depiction of ex-centric members of society, traditionally excluded from history, riding in tandem with figures of notable historical import. On Hammerstein's rooftop garden, Freud eats a cup of custard and later has "one of the fainting fits that had lately plagued him when Jung was around" (Doctorow 33); performing a break-out from
Murderer's Row, Houdini is flashed by a lewd inmate, but "was to tell no one of this strange confrontation" (26). In *Underworld*, portraits of historically prominent figures are even more incisive as they are both spatially and ideologically integrated into the middling masses with great deliberation: A drunk and slobbering Jackie Gleason, "sending quidbits of meat and bread in many directions, pellets and smithereens, spitball flybys" (18), and a puke-splattered Frank Sinatra, in "an awe of muted disgust", blend seamlessly into the confetti decadence of the crowd.

Apart from such grotesquery, historical figures are further deflated by their own disengagement with celebrityhood. Jackie, for one, is skipping rehearsal, but he still thrives at the game, hurling insults at awed spectators—whereas Frank is made uneasy by the attentive crowd and "the way they use him as a reference for everything that's happening" (24). His image, his casting as salable goods, has, from his perspective, become a foreign entity; he "didn't know he was in this month's Life until the page fell out of the sky" (39). His ignorance, further, is attributable to a superstructure which regulates the dissemination of his image, the "people who are supposed to tell him these things" (39). He disinterestedly glances over advertisements for Quaker State, RCA Victor and General Motors, "the venerated emblems of the burgeoning economy, easier to identify than the names of battle fields and dead presidents," but he is otherwise preoccupied, "sunk in deep inertia, a rancid sweat
developing, his mouth filled with the foretaste of massive inner shiftings" (39). There is a sense that the human icon, whose fame is instrumental to the proliferation of marketing regimes, is at bottom dissociated from his ostensible role in capitalist machinery.

DeLillo's deflation of, as Hegel calls them, "real historical figures" is most palpable in his representation of J. Edgar Hoover. Edgar is ostensibly the most socially-powerful of the gaggle but he exemplifies the most serious forms of reverie and desperation. This duality makes his character ripe terrain for the novel's historical perversions. "Hoover is a disinvention," DeLillo maintains, "real, conjured, gambled on, guessed at. Hoover is taut and raging selfhood. Hoover in his impregnability, an incitement to the novelist's perennial effort to detect the hidden nature of things" ("The Power of History" 62). Though integral to the political ramifications of the game (he alone is informed of Russia's concomitant nuclear testing), Edgar's presence, and specifically his painful self-consciousness, evinces the frail humanity behind every political enigma.

[Edgar] admires the rough assurance of these men. It seems to flush from their pores. They have a size to them, a natural stamina that mocks his own bible-school indoctrination even as it draws him to the noise. He's a self-perfected American who must respect the saga of the knockabout boy emerging from tenement culture, from the backstreets slant
with danger. It makes for gutsy egos, it makes for appetites. (29)

Edgar's groomed and meticulous heritage wavers against the crass, oddly authoritarian natures of the other backstreet boys. He is "self-perfected"--constructed, synthesized--quite apart from the "perfect American" for which he's striving. His political largesse, further, shrivels alongside the immensity of character and stage-intensity, the "natural stamina" that Gleason and Frank exhibit. Despite the clout, Edgar is, basically, stout. He is utterly swayable--"drawn to the noise" as far as the game and everything else go--and without rooting interest. "Whoever wins," he says, "That's my team" (29).

This leveling and dampening of culturally agreed-upon authorities raises the question of where power is in fact located. Surely it cannot be with the brutish and bashful specimens offered here. The answer lies, obliquely, in minuscule, barely-traceable stuff--particles that cannot be known but for their effects. Edgar, for instance, is moved to act, to flee the scene, when Gleason coughs up "an all-pervading medium of pathogens, microbes, floating colonies of spirochetes that fuse and separate and elongate and spiral and engulf" (19). These exotic and minute strains of agency, ironically, are persuasive and elemental forms of mediation. They incite action. Their power subverts Le Corbusier's idea that "society [is] controlled by the enlightened businessman and the architect, both products of an impersonal, universal
transhistorical force symbolized by the machine" (Hutcheon 28). It is, rather, the imperceptible positrons of life and energy that control the behavior of our mechanized businessmen and architects.

In DeLillo's text, such "all-pervading" media take various manifestations, from microbial to psychological. In addition to phlegmatic debris, subtle patterns of thought pressurize the subject, as in Edgar's paranoid fear that discussion of his short namesake (Edgar Gaedel, a jockey) will open him up to a gush of ridicule at the hands of Jackie (18). Words, then, are tangible pathogens. Language translates mysterious particles into units of perception, the microscopic details of synaptic activity. Textual articulation--Edgar worries, for example, that "a man can wish his phantom torment into print" (18)--can cause even more profound anxiety. Accordingly, Russ Hodges, the radio announcer, marvels at what power there is as he decodes the letters and numbers handed to him; he remarks "how much earthly disturbance, how much summer and dust the mind can manage to order up from a single Latin letter lying flat" (25).

The baseball game balances and intermingles three primary loci of perception: the individual subject (say, Cotter Martin), the radio broadcast or broadcaster, and the author. As in a fugue, no voice in the conversation dominates. The mixture works not only to set up a broad and indeterminate point of view but also, with seeming paradox,
to detract from the significance of the event proper. Look, for instance, at the way in which the scene's sequencing gradually distorts the action of the ball game. After a break in the text and a tie in the score, there is Cotter's stripped-down viewpoint: "He watches Maglie bounce a curve in the dirt" (32). This is followed by the somewhat obtuse, digressive position of Russ Hodges: "He hears the announcer from St. Louis on the other side of the blanket, it is Harry Caray . . . and Russ thinks of the Japanese term for disembowelment and figures he and Harry ought to switch names right about now" (33). The authorial voice then intervenes with "Light washing down from the sky," and an interpretive note that "Everything is changing shape, becoming something else" (33). The level of perception becomes progressively abstract and subjective, ranging from the visual, to the aural, to the metaphorical.

Although these shifting perspectives coordinate with the multitudinous and deflationary aspects of the text, they also work to synchronize the authorial voice with the other voices it governs. As with Libra's Nicholas Branch, ever-investigating the Kennedy assassination, "the author becomes part of the event itself, his fiction an addition to the historical fact" (Civello 123). This situation is necessary since, as Hodges says of a pivotal boxing match, "When you see a thing like that, a thing that becomes a newsreel, you begin to feel you are a carrier of a solemn scrap of history" (16). Further, the authorial involvement recognizes that "The
observer or theorist, unlike the physicist who stands apart from his experiment, is part of the system that is under investigation" (LeClair 4). DeLillo asserts a presence at the game through his staccato remarks: "Pafko moves to the wall to play the carom", "Pafko throws smartly to Cox" (16), all intermingled with paper falling from the stands, the internal heavings of the particular viewers, and the general heaving of the crowd. Through the blunt descriptions of single movements on the field, the authorial voice positions itself at the scene as the carrier and remodeller of scraps of history.

3. The Discombobulated Search

The historically-destabilizing intersections of the solo and the choral increase in number as Underworld unfolds. Semblances among characters expand likewise, further compromising linear, segregationist ideas of history and experience. After the prologue, Cotter is usurped, or at least mirrored, by Nick Shay as the focal point in the narrative. And while Marvin traces the genealogy of the home-run ball, the concrete link between Nick and Cotter, Nick, a pacified waste manager, living "like someone in a witness protection program" (66), is ever retracing the pivotal and banal moments that have led up to his Phoenix existence. It is, perhaps, a search inspired by Dr. Lindbald, Nick's juvenile therapist, who tells him that he has a
responsibility to decode his own history—that he is "required to try to make sense of it" (152). But it is the inherently nonsensical nature, the blurry and unsystematic condition of his past that, from Nick's youthful perspective, makes it seem irreducible to explanation.

... it was hard for me to imagine that all the scuffle and boredom of those years, the criss-cross boredom and good times and the flare-ups and sameshit nights—I didn't understand how the streaky blur in my nighttime mind could have some kind of form or 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. (511)

Indeed, there is a difference between a life lived and the one recorded, dissected and analyzed. The patterns and connections, if they do exist, require a mediating perspective in order to make any kind of "sense"; they cannot simply sit in someone's "files", another official text beyond the subject's conception. It takes Nick's wife Marian, for instance, to point out that Nick, clutching the baseball in deep reverie and remorse, looks "like Hamlet gazing at Yorick's skull" (132).

Nick knows that "The third person watches the first person. The 'he' knows what the 'I' can't bear to think about" (119). Through this authorial "he", the "solemn
scrap[s] of history" (16) are organized into a non-causal, seemingly fragmented arrangement of ideas. Like the histories and isolated battles collected in the form of abandoned bombers at the site of Klara's landscape-sculpture, or the deceased children transformed into painted angels on a massive wall in the Bronx, memories are dumped into the textual space of the long chapter to form a new figure that is composed of recontextualized experiences. The section "Long Tall Sally", for example, is a bundle of episodic splinters, tied together by the prevailing notion of a search. This search is executed by both the characters and the narrative itself, excavating and relating the material from innumerable instances to wonder, as does Bronzini, "How deep is time?" (111). The section begins with Nick in the sterility of a rented Lexus streaking through the desert (with a vague purpose of retracing some lost romantic attachment), and ends with Manx Martin desperately and greedily swiping his son's trophy ball. The two scenarios, though geographically and temporally disparate, are positioned in the narrative as the alpha and omega of an obscure loop, outside time. Their association suggests that, as Nick says, "All mysteries of the family reach their culmination in the final passion of abandonment" (86).

The microscopic mnemonic associations bookended between the Lexus and the Manx episodes operate according to the same abstract principles as the scheme that contains them. Though textually slight, the connection between the ball and the
murder weapon is evoked through their adjacent positioning. Nick squeezes the ball in his hand and the thought flickers, "I hefted the weapon and pointed it" (132). The juxtaposition of the two motions suggests the connection between Nick's expensive acquisition, a signification of his multiple failures, and his as yet unilluminated role as a killer. Similarly, a description of the young Nick, "the older son with his distance and dimmed moods and undimmed rage, up on the roof in the evening sleet to smoke a cigarette," is poignantly postured against a strand of his "current" thought: "I look at the Lucky Strikes logotype and I think target" (122). These collations reveal the deep structures of the character's formation. The "undimmed rage" is connected to his father's favourite brand of smokes, a brand decorated with a "target", an abstract focal point of the rage that would later focus more concretely on George's head. It is a narrative tactic thatembodies the same type of riddling that Dr. Lindbald uses in her reconstruction of Nick's personal history; she assembles the impossible scenery, stating that Nick's "father was the third person in the room the day [he] shot George Manza" (512)—an impossibility that may nevertheless be true.

Throughout Underworld, time and linear association are broken down in this type of cognitive circumlocution. The designs of the "I", the means through which the subject metabolizes experience, are plotted out in unpredictable shards of mnemonic detail. The sequencing of these thoughts
and statements, a mingling of the "he", the "I", and numerable other avenues of perception, builds a unique epistemological and ontological framework. Here, for instance, Nick describes the process of breaking down household garbage for the recycling bin:

At home we wanted clean safe healthy garbage. We rinsed out old bottles and put them in 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. (119)

Accounting for "the small things"—the painstaking separation and compartmentalization of the self and one's past—is here translated into the diligent sorting of everyday refuse. Garbage, in this work, may be what Eliot called an "objective correlative" of experience. This notion is supported by the fragment which follows the above, a thought seemingly out of mode with what precedes it: "He never committed a figure to paper. He had a head for numbers, a memory for numbers" (119). This deep kernel of Nick's past, indeed, is the material "crinkly paper" in the subjective cereal box. Nick's sense of paternal abandonment is accented by both the conspicuous, disarming placement of the comment and by the underscoring of his father's specious mathematical prowess and aversion to "commitment".

The fragility and ambiguity of this connection (between garbage-sorting and Nick's father's gambling skills) is
counterbalanced and further complicated by yet another inapt statement. Nick recalls how "In the bronze tower I looked out at the umber hills and felt assured and well defended, safe in my office box and my crisp white shirt and connected to things that made me stronger" (119). The third segment, the reality of the "bronze tower", is the present scheme of things for Nick Shay—a strengthened and ordered position, complete with metal tower, pressed shirt, and the smell of industry. Nick's placement in this supremely constructed atmosphere, along with his diurnal jogging and suburban routine, is partly an answer to the ever-precarious and nagging problem of his negligent father. These three paragraphs, though divergent from a logical consideration of the subject's trauma, identify essential, buried operations and relations which linear causal connections cannot include.

This breaking-up and reconstruction of thought and incidence at times becomes an erratic pendulum—most notably after the subject has had some type of interaction with media, human or otherwise. Nick Shay has one such experience while in a hotel, "waiting for room service to show up with his brandy" (208). The television is rebroadcasting a popular highway murder scene. The scene has meaning beyond the particular circumstances of the highway murder, as indicated by Nick's inertia and mental sifting. What follows is a dense jumble of impressions and anxieties. Nick, a version of LeClair's "Systems man", "is more a locus of communication of energy in a reciprocal relationship with his environment than
an entity exerting force and dictating linear cause-effect sequences" (10). In the hotel, the fixity of time and place is destabilized by the intervention of a cab driver, who "told Nick about the murders of gypsy drivers, a regular event lately, a game of chance you play every night" (209), and the narrator, who simply intones, "Nick did not like cats." Each utterance builds on the previous one in lateral, unprogrammatic fashion. The defeatist chant of a New Yorker, "Either they rob you and kill you or they rob you and let you live" (209) is counterbalanced by Nick's own personal mantra of stability, "I live a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix" (209). This stability elicits the inclination to place all variables (in this case, his mother) into proper domestic ziplock: "Once he got her to say yes, they'd be able to spend untrammeled time remembering together" (209). There is then another recoiling to the cabby whom, Nick assures himself, "He'd tipped . . . nicely" (209). Finally, the sequence is concluded as "He look[s] at the TV screen, where the tape was nearing the point when the driver waves, the crisp wave from the top of the steering wheel, and he wait[s] for room service to knock on his door" (209).

The perverse narrative sequencing—or, more precisely, "snowballing"—as illustrated above is a formal attempt to provide alternative perspectives and interpretations of both the single, fixed act, and what is acknowledged as the orderly flow of experience contingent upon time. The text
formally resembles a piece of garborator-twisted string depicted in White Noise:

There was a long piece of twine that contained a series of knots and loops. It seemed at first a random construction. Looking more closely I thought I detected a complex relationship between the size of the loops, the degree of the knots (single or double) and the intervals between knots with loops and freestanding knots. (259)

Scrutinizing the looping intervals, DeLillo wonders, in the words of Bronzini, "what we'd learn by going deeper into structures beneath the standard model, down under the quantum, a million times smaller than the old Greek atom" (222). DeLillo thus introduces tensions, dislocations and associations that exist despite the long periods that separate them, as if the straight line of time had been looped and knotted prior to its inspection. This expression and reconfiguration of deep, elongated time has notable effects upon the characterization of the subject.

The manslaughter/suicide scene between Nick and George illustrates the depth that is accomplished by temporal contortion. The "he" tells how "In the extended interval of the trigger pull, the long quarter second, with the action of the trigger sluggish and rough, Nick saw into the smile on the other man's face" (780). Nick sees into the smile, effectively piercing the veil of countenance and accessing the subjective intention behind it. The dispensing of
temporal strictures allows for further, more inherently spatial maneuvering. It is not clearly articulated what is "seen" behind the smile of one who has tricked a teenaged boy into blowing his head off. Nor is it detailed what particular reaction this blunder incites in Nick. Rather, the fallout of the shooting is imparted by textual expansion, where the terms and motions of the act repeat themselves, continually set-up against one another in slightly variable shades. Each bolt of text, arranged in single-sentence paragraphs, emulates the firing of the gun—as well as the synaptic misfirings of the stunned observer.

He felt the trigger pull and then the gun went off and he was left there thinking weakly he didn't do it.

But first he pointed the gun at the man's head and asked if it was loaded. (780)

While the first sentence expresses a passivity on the part of the shooter, the second sentence highlights the subject's deliberate involvement in the act. The question of culpability is tossed around from one textual bullet to the next. Several times, there is a flashing disclaimer, "And the way the man said no when he asked if it was loaded." Conversely, the sequence of the motion and the perception is inverted, as in the following:

Then the noise busted through the room and he stood there thinking weakly he didn't do it.
But first he force-squeezed the trigger and saw into the smile and it seemed to have the spirit of a dare. (780)

This reiteration obstructs the logical-temporal progression of the scene just as a skipping record halts musical momentum. The first words of most statements propose a cycle wherein the subject ("He") is stymied by both cognitive ("But") and temporal ("Then") obstacles. But, as with hip-hop's repetitious tripping of the needle atop vinyl, the clogging and stagnancy evident in this depiction create the background for a new discourse that operates within the expansion-space of a single point in time.

4. Towards a Spatial Narrative

It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. That is to say, we are always aware of what is traversing the story laterally. And instead of being aware of a point as an infinitely small part of a straight line, we are aware of it as an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the center of a star of lines. Such awareness is the result of our constantly having to take into account the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities.

- Berger, The Look of Things

DeLillo's decomposition of linear signifying chains, as presented in his networked modeling of incidence and perception, is the fundamental means of destabilizing temporal structures in Underworld. The interfacing of public and private, as well as large- and small-scale historical
figures, and the excavation of random dietrologia,\(^1\) contributes further to a sense of inter-historicity where the mechanisms of power are dispersed amongst minuscule and infinitely variable agents. This suggests, both formally and thematically, that history is neither finite nor solely temporal in nature, but rather the cumulative result of endless circumlocution—in other words, DeLillo extends into infinity the traditional notion of history as a process of continual change or "progress" to produce an amplified, crystalline, and irreducible stasis of spatio-temporal interconnectivity. This view of history is conducive to the needs of the individual because it permits the expression of relationships and connections which the linear model, ever-advancing and accumulating debris, does not allow. It interrupts those systems which rely upon the uniform straightness of time through the coalescence of the one to the many, the substitution of the line with the star.

The variability and hypertextuality of the narrative is epitomized most keenly in the structures of baseball. Like chess, baseball is a game of "location, situation and memory" (674). Baseball operates upon the tension between regiment and randomness. The diamond insists on a basic, unwavering route of progress. "For baseball," as McLuhan says, "is a game of one-thing-at-a-time, fixed positions and visibly delegated specialist jobs . . . with its fragmented tasks and staff and line in management organization" (239). But this

\(^1\) Nick's term for "the science that is behind something" (UN 280).
fixity is repeatedly upset by the intersecting arc of the ball and the infinity of possible plays. In this sense, the ball is itself a type of media, as its movement at once dictates and reflects the course of events; once it is hit, "nothing is the same" (27).

The men are moving, coming out of their crouches, and everything submits to the pebble-skip of the ball, to rotations and backspins and airstreams. There are drag coefficients. There are trailing vortices. There are things that replay unrepeatably, muscle memory and pumping blood and jots of dust, the narrative that lives in the spaces of the official play-by-play. (27)

If it is the unpredictable atom, the ball, and its attendant physical properties which precipitate and govern action, then the "official play-by-play" is at bottom a fallacy, or at least a gross approximation. Further, the variable "coefficients" and "vortices"—expressions of a distinctly inhuman or unconscious reality—extend beyond the game through the ball, which permeates the world and the narrative like a virus or radioactive fallout. As Andrew Paulus declares, "our wins and losses tend to have impact well beyond our borders" (670); similarly, Edgar muses that "pathogenic bacteria could be every bit as destructive as megaton bombs. Worse, in a way, because the sense of infiltration [is] itself a form of death" (57). The ball, despite its tininess, has the hegemonic power of state
weaponry, made explicit by Marvin's trivia: "when they make an atomic bomb, listen to this, they make the radioactive core the same size as a baseball" (172). Thus the game is not, as John Duvall suggests, simply an "auratic frenzy" (286), which can "eclipse a moment crucial to the construction of the Cold War" (287), but it is another echo of the distant conflict, part of the intersection which forms the node of the historical moment.

Through inherently spatial metaphors such as baseball, *Underworld* explores the multiplicity and the "network" of history. In so doing, it instills the "coordination and toleration" that Kristin Ross noted is absent in social theories that try to situate concepts into devisable patterns and sequences. DeLillo's chief, and perhaps most coarse, means of creating this spatial network is the intermeshing of a variety of media forms. A collage of film, photographs, news reportage, and omniscient or subjective observation, the novel forms a quasi-hypertextual space through which ideas and events circulate. Klara, for example, looks at a photograph of Truman Capote's Black & White Ball and is forced to contextualize her work in the desert. She wonders, "What is it about this picture that makes it so hard for me to remember myself?" (79).

Surrounded by famous people and powerful people, men in the administration who were running the war, and I want to paint it over . . . maybe this is
what I'm doing, I don't know, it's a work in progress. (79)

As Thomas Carmichael notes in his discussion of intertextuality in *Mao II* (a novel which opens with an image of a mass Moonie wedding), the photograph "invites us to consider . . . the nexus that fully characterizes the field of postmodern intertextuality" (215). But Klara's self-perception steps beyond what is apparent in *Mao II* where Brita, the thieving photographer, "shoots and shoots and shoots" (54) enough to make her object feel "flat as birdshit on a Buick" (54). Conversely, in *Underworld*, the image is a catalyst for subjective reflection rather than degradation.

And even Klara's epiphanies are not the end of the hypertextual scheme; rather, they become units in a larger, compound construction. The event depicted by the photograph is combed back into the fabric of the text, and the consciousness of other subjects: Capote's ball is later retold from star-struck Hoover's point of view, and Klara is reduced to the memory of "a middling painter called whatever she's called. Sax or Wax or something" (574). In this sense, the recontextualized narration of visual media—written and not merely inserted pictorially—allows juxtapositions and connections that each medium alone would not be capable of portraying or producing. The "jostled footage" (488) of the Zapruder film, to take another example, is perceived by an audience that has to "contend with the impact" (488). And Mick Jagger in *Cocksucker Blues* makes Klara think how
"everything that everyone has eaten in the last ten years has gone into that mouth" (382). The material imparted by the medium is situated alongside the subject, whose participation and perception add dimension to the event, thereby creating a matrix, or an intersection of lines which form a star.

The Texas Highway Killer is one such star, whose various narrative incarnations emanate from a brutal crime mediated by videotape. The footage thus works "to make a channeled path through time, to give things a shape and a destiny" (157). The killing, because it is random (and in that sense a vaguely democratic gesture) is "a crime designed for taping and immediate playing" (159). Indeed, the shooting is "replayed" in various instances throughout DeLillo's text, indicating as much about those who watch it, or ignore it, as it does about the crime itself. Matty, for one, watches the news report with deep interest and is "not able to look at the tape without wanting to call out to Janet" (217) each time they air the exploding head. Nick, however, does not pay attention to it; he knows first hand what it's like to shoot a man and doesn't need a video to tell him. Nick's son, whose personal computer "had a multimedia function that allowed him to look at a copy of the famous videotape showing a driver being shot" (118), displays the endgame that results from this combination of innocence and technology. The multiplicity of narratives that the computer provides, later picked up in the novel's culminating description of the world wide web, epitomizes the liberties afforded by
interconnectedness. With the computer, the acts of the Texas Highway Killer are drawn out of obscurity, and Jeff, a completely dislocated subject, can effectively plunge into and manipulate the details of the shooting.

Jeff became absorbed in these images, devising routines and programs, using filtering techniques to remove background texture. He was looking for lost information. (118)

Rather than passively absorbing the scenario, Jeff, enabled by his computer system, scrutinizes and manipulates the image so as to find something hidden in the blur of pixels. And unlike Nicholas Branch, whose search for the "hidden principle" (171) of the Kennedy assassination has him suffocating in a "room of growing old" (14), the details, variables, and permutations through which Jeff sifts are invigorating and regenerative.

The integrity of the perceiver is not squelched even in a clinical retelling of the shooting incident, which begins "Elegy for the Left hand Alone". The initial statements link the document, the recorded data, to the unsuspecting person behind the recorder: "It shows a man driving a car. It is the simplest sort of family video. You see a man at the wheel of a medium Dodge" (155). The video, as an "It" which "shows", mutates into the "You" who "sees". The mediating agent between the object and the subject is the girl, simply "aiming her camera through her rear window" (155). She captures the world that is "already lurking in the camera,
already framed, waiting" (156). This suggestion, that the world awaits film and that it is in a sense the same as footage, relieves the media of any accountability. Rather, the film is pure agency, as the pathogens that are coughed up and scattered from Gleason's mouth. In their randomness and crudity, there is a direct correlation between the film and the mind: "It is the jostled part of your mind, the film that runs through your hotel brain under all the thoughts you know you're thinking" (156).

Another spindle projected from the shooting incident is the Highway Killer himself. He turns out to be a grocery clerk, Richard. His life is markedly banal, spent diligently administering Nitrospan to his father and occasionally eating "a muffin standing up, a hand cupped under his chin to catch the crumbs" (272). He has a crush on his friend's wife and leaves milk out for a stray cat. Though there is nothing to explain his murderous tendencies, microscopic glimpses into the workings of his mind reveal acute dislocation caused by a paucity of social intercourse. Again it is the materialization of the killings—the video and the green eyes of Sue Ann the anchorwoman—that provides both evidence of this dislocation as well as a sense of intimacy and completeness.

He watched her over there and talked to her over here. . . . He talked to her on the phone and made eye contact with the TV. This was the waking of the
knowledge that he was real. . . . He needed her to keep him whole. (270)

This mediated self-realization reminds one of Oswald who, in Libra, could "see himself shot as the camera caught it" and saw, as if through Ruby and the millions in their living rooms, "the twisted picture of his face on TV" (440). Similarly, the television figure is, for Richard, a face to meet; the TV is itself the locus of an impossible discussion. The sense of "realness" comes with the situation of the self on television, the life-giving force. The distancing from the self, processed and distorted through equipment, is a liberation, as "the altered voice went on, talking in that flat-graphed way, he was actually chatting now, confident, getting the feel of the medium, the format" (270).

Through the description of Eisenstein's "lost" film, the author creates yet another intertext, this time linking with Underworld itself. Though it is a somewhat hyperbolic analogy, the fragmentary construction of Eisenstein's film is a reflection of DeLillo's text: "The plot was hard to follow. There was no plot. Just loneliness, barrenness, men hunted and ray-gunned" (431). Still, the deep focus in each segment of film, its emphasis on space and physical detail, illuminates those variables that permeate the novel as a whole.

Overcomposed closeups, momentous gesturing, actors trailing their immense blended shadows, and there was something to study in every frame, in every
camera placement, the shapes and planes and then
the juxtaposition shots, the sense of rhythmic
contradiction, it was all spaces and volumes, it
was tempo, mass and stress (429)

DeLillo's closeups—the Demming's Jello (513), Condomology
(109), the garbage dump (185)—are similarly "overcomposed",
as is the "rhythmic contradiction" of the George Manza
shooting a matter of "tempo, mass and stress". The action
depicted is a grotesque counterpart to the events of the
novel, a heightened version of Nick's boyhood shooting as
well as a commentary on the perverse consequences of
scientific inquiry.

The mad scientist aims his gun.
A figure stands against a wall, his body going
white.

The scientist shows a tight smile.
The victim is transfigured, pain-racked, his
lower lip dribbling off his face, a growth
appearing at the side of his neck, a radiant time-
lapse melanoma. (431)

The sly smile of George is transferred into the tight smile
of the scientist. A sci-fi version of Nick's rifle brings
about a "transformation" more obscene than death, rendering
the victim a cancerous blob of radioactivity.

The moving image is repeatedly evoked in Underworld as a
means of reflecting and energizing character because,
particularly over the past fifty years, it has been the
dominant mediator of popular consciousness. Film is poignant because it makes concrete and visible those structures and simultaneities that logic negates. It has the involving property of what McLuhan calls "cool media", as "the head-camera shows by projection both scene and the eye movement simultaneously" (309). It is a means through which symmetries can be known, as the Texas Highway Killer footage expresses "Random energies that approach a common point" (157), a collision which works upon principles incommensurate with conventional logical systems and patterns.

There's something here that speaks to you directly, saying terrible things about forces beyond your control, lines of intersection that cut through history and logic and every reasonable layer of human expectation. (157)

This integral "randomness" culminates in the two final episodes of the book, both of which are built upon peculiar "intersections" which verge upon the sublime. There is, first, the awe and fear brought about by the appearance of Esmerelda's face upon a Manhattan billboard. Hundreds congregate and "stare stupidly at the juice" (821); unlike Klara's Black & White photograph and Bruegel's The Triumph of Death, the advertisement on the board is but another veil through which an alternate information-form emerges. Esmerelda's image, like the literary works in Borges' library, is a node which appears in the random, fleeting collision of disparate energies. It appears "when the train
lights hit the dimmest part of the billboard . . . under the rainbow of bounteous juice and above the little suburban lake and there is a sense of someone living in the image, an animating spirit" (882).

Esmerelda's image, like the taped murders on the Texas highway, is the material product of opposing impulses. The impossibility of what is revealed by the passing train is evinced by "the sound of the crowd . . . a gasp that shoots into sobs and moans and the cry of some unnamable pain of elation" (821). This visionary episode is, in the last pages of the novel, reiterated in the more viable, though perhaps blasphemous connection between the Internet and heaven. The World Wide Web, with its "billion distant net nodes" (825) and merging of places and moments in time, is the supreme metaphor of spatiality.

Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password—world without end, amen. (825)

Though it is Sister Edgar who is entrenched in this information matrix, the narrative incorporates the reader as well, signifying that the complicity of all subjectivity extends beyond the pages of the novel—from fiction to reality and back again: "When you decide to visit the H-bomb home page she begins to understand" (825). This convergence of subjectivity, as with the unification of the two Edgars,
"Sister and Brother" (826), is the antithesis of the fusion bomb; it is "a way of seeing the other side and a settling of difference" (826).

_Life_ magazine appears sporadically throughout the narrative like a priest in a morality play. Most significantly, it's among the fluttering pages that pour over the crowd at the 1951 ball game. In contrast with its name, the magazine's images function to connect the morbidity of two realms, despite their temporal disparity. Bruegel's _The Triumph of Death_, "a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin" (41), falls upon J. Edgar Hoover's shoulder; he is fascinated by its "cankers, lesions and rotting bodies so long as his connection to the source is strictly pictorial" (50). But, of course, it's not. The image echoes the ball game's carnivalesque atmosphere, with the fans "all around him cheering" (50), but it also conveys the pillaging and polluting Edgar associates with himself. The image contains the "black and white" (50) of Capote's ball, which is packed with a medieval gamut of monks and executioners, "skeleton men and raven women" (576), who form "a death rank on the dance floor" (576). The painting reaffirms to Edgar what he already knows, that "the living are sinners" (50). But Bruegel's painting offers as well an eerie parallel between the ball game and the effects of a simultaneous Russian nuclear test--a correlation that would later form the dual headline. To Edgar, entranced by the painting, the connection is all too clear.
The meatblood colors and massed bodies, this is a census-taking of awful ways to die. He looks at the flaring sky in the deep distance out beyond the headlands on the left-hand page—Death elsewhere, Conflagration in many places, Terror universal, the crows, the ravens in silent glide, the raven perched on the white nag's rump, black and white forever, and he thinks of a lonely tower standing in the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb. (50)

His personal terror is mediated by the painting into a "Terror universal". Similarly, "The homerun that won the game," says DeLillo, that was "soon to be known as the 'shot heard around the world' had found its awful counterpoint. A Russian mushroom cloud" ("The Power of History" 63).

This connection between the game and the mushroom cloud is corroborated in the narrative, which, in the final chapter, produces scenes of nuclear holocaust that replicate those in Bruegel's depiction of Death and Conflagration. Nick and Brian are escorted through the Kazakh Test Site by Viktor Maltsev of the Tchaika company. They tour the Museum of Mishaps which catalogues and archives the residual effects of the 1951 nuclear test, a virtual incarnation of Bruegel's "meatblood colors and massed bodies" (50).

It is the boy with the skin where his eyes ought to be, a bolus of spongy flesh, oddly like a mushroom cap, springing from each brow. It is the bald-
headed children standing along a wall in their underwear, waiting to be examined. It is the man with the growth beneath his chin, a thing with a life of its own, embryonic and pulsing. (800)

The very mushroomy and "embryonic" autonomy of their deformed tissue embodies the shape of the explosion that ravaged them, reaffirming that processes, fractal-like, repeat infinitely down the chain of scale. As with the ball game, signs of the western marketplace riddle the scene, at once terribly out of sync with the despair at hand and indicative of capital's stake in the nuclear program. Items and products are inexplicably but inextricably part of the suffering at the Test Site. Nick sees "the dwarf girl who wears a t-shirt advertising a Gay and Lesbian festival in Hamburg, Germany, bottom edge dragging on the floor" (800) and fetuses "preserved in Heinz pickle jars" (799). The products and slogans are morbid testimony that the bomb with its "Many buzzing neutrons [and] very little blast [is] The perfect capitalist tool" (790). Its perfection is, as Viktor says, that the bomb will "Kill people, [but] spare property" (790).

The nuclear weapon is a perversion of those lucky collisions that, in their randomness, somehow lead to productive explorations of the self and culture. The weapon, rather, is the dark side of fusion: linear thinking disguised as a star. It emerges from a logic that is correct and workable but ultimately redundant; "Once they imagine the bomb, write down equations," says Viktor, "they see it's
possible to build, they build it" (791). And though DeLillo's various formal ploys and historical subversions attempt to retrace and reformulate the mechanisms of linear thought, regimental time and progress have remarkable, chameleonesque staying power. Because mass desire demands "A method of production that will custom cater to cultural and personal needs, not to cold war ideologies of massive uniformity" (786), the systems mutate into something that resembles diversity and egalitarianism; tyrannical structures "fade and wane, states disintegrate, assembly lines shorten their runs and interact with lines in other countries" (786). But look at the kids at the Kazakh Test Site, who, despite blindness, still "are playing follow the leader. A boy falls down, gets up. They all fall down, get up" (802). Likewise, the machinery of capital, though it may demonstrate a kind of ubiquitous presence in global culture, will eventually degrade into the same homogeneity; that is, capital continues to "[burn] off the nuance in a culture" (785).

And the system pretends to go along, to become more supple and resourceful, less dependent on rigid categories. But even as desire tends to specialize, going silky and intimate, the force of converging markets produces an instantaneous capital that shoots across horizons at the speed of light, making for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars that affects everything from
architecture to leisure time to the way people eat
and sleep and dream. (786)
The fusion of "converging markets" is a "furtive" version of
the atomic explosion. As in any perfect system, any
retaliatory action taken against it is reduced to submission.
"Consume or die," says garbage guru Detwiler, "That's the
mandate of the culture" (287). Even the baseball, at once a
medium for social coalescence and action, is also a product
with value attached to it—a value contingent upon time and
the forces of inflation—worth to Manx "thirty-two dollars
and change" (655) and to Nick, decades later, "thirty-four
thousand five hundred dollars" (132).

For DeLillo, waste and weapons are "mystical twins"
(791), though their respective forces have antithetical
effects. Waste is the spatial manifestation of "the secret
history, the underhistory" (791) that Underworld tries to
present and validate. The garbage dump is a node of activity,
a "culminating structure" where "all the great works of
transport, trade and linkage [are] directed to in the end"
(184). Its expanse and volume are generative forces that, as
Detwiler maintains, "rose first, inciting people to build
civilization in response" (287). In effect, the heaps of
debris are memories made tangible. And, as David Harvey says,
"If it is true that time is always memorialized not as a
flow, but as memories of experiences of places and spaces,
then history must indeed give way to poetry, and time to
space, as the fundamental material of social expression" (7).
Works Cited


