

Sublimity and History in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

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### Abstract

Don DeLillo's work has long been concerned with the effacement of the individual consciousness and the decay of a social context by the technologies of a simulacrum culture. DeLillo echoes Jean Baudrillard's concern that image technologies make it so that "people no longer project themselves into their objects" ("The Ecstasy of Communication" 127). For DeLillo, the "psychological dimension" that Baudrillard eulogized has been similarly effaced by our concern with money and advertising values and ideals (127). This totalizing, effacing force of the capitalist culture and ideology in DeLillo's work has been characterized by Joseph Tabbi as the technological or postmodern sublime: the "large forces of corporate organization that control the social and economic relations among human beings" (7). In *Underworld*, DeLillo complicates a sublime aesthetic to demonstrate how these ideological forces constitute a negative sublime that represses history and constrains consciousness, and how a positive sublime lies in fiction's power to reveal lost histories and realities. For DeLillo, this is a moral obligation on the part of the novelist and reader to face personal and social history and trauma.

In this essay, I will assess why Don DeLillo uses an aesthetic of sublimity to define what his idea of sublime power is today, investigating how the novel represents the totalitarian power of capitalist ideology repressing certain human realities, in official cultural media and historical records. I will use psychoanalytic ideas of sublimity as a source of fascination and a mechanism of repression, and Slavoj Žižek's transposition of those psychological structures onto the larger culture. In the final section, I will demonstrate how *Underworld* is an example of DeLillo's aesthetic philosophy: the power

of fiction to use those ideological mechanisms of repression to access repressed history, in personal and cultural memory. Using Herbert Marcuse's ideas of the political function of art, I will argue that *Underworld* is not an ahistorical postmodern pastiche of fragments, but instead represents a turn in DeLillo's work towards a new spirituality or humanism, one which preserves a postmodern aesthetic of plurality and reaches beyond the sometimes banal issues of regionalism.

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## Introduction

In a review of *Underworld*, John Leonard declared that Don DeLillo had finally “come up with a miracle, even if what this miracle amounts to is an airborne optical illusion--a conjoining, in the spangled sky above the Bronx, of billboard, commuter train, sunset, orange juice, and the Angel Esmeralda. The poster boy of postmodernism is a secret Holy Roller” (“American Jitters” 1). But if there is a miracle in this novel about “the deep eros of memory,” both personal and cultural, it is that the narrative could imagine a person--living, breathing, running, sleeping on rooftops--beyond the billboard (171).

The culture chooses to paper over the girl with the idealized billboard image because it is easier to forget than remember and act on the underlying story of a rape and murder. The billboard is part of the ideological apparatus that maintains social unity, the 50s suburban dream of a tupperwared totality, or an enclosed Stadium, that protects you from social disease by fronting a homogenized culture; that way, or so the mantra goes, “Everything is connected in the end,” or looks that way in the representation (826). This fantasy unity, and the official histories and media scripted to perpetuate it, leaves outside its lines society’s “inconvenient secrets,” as in the imagined Eisenstein movie *Unterwelt*, allowing us to forget the people whose individual histories and memories do not comport with the billboard dream:

These deformed faces, these were people who existed outside nationality and strict historical context. Eisenstein’s method of immediate characterization, called typage, seemed self-parodied and shattered here,

intentionally. Because the external features of the men and women did not tell you anything about class or social mission. They were people persecuted and altered, this was their typology—they were an inconvenient secret of the society around them. (443)

And it is not just on the basis of race and class and nationality that micro-histories and personal experience are left out of official records. Don DeLillo's work has long been concerned with the effacement of the individual consciousness and the decay of a social context by the technologies of a simulacrum culture. For DeLillo, the ways we go about inserting ourselves back into historical agency and context--being attuned to what's on the news or what's on the billboards, for example--only augment the ideological "game and its extensions," and distract us from the human real around and *in* us (32).

Baudrillard felt that image technologies made it so that "people no longer project themselves into their objects, with their affects and their representations, their fantasies of possession, loss, mourning, jealousy" ("The Ecstasy of Communication" 127). For DeLillo, the "psychological dimension" that Baudrillard eulogized has been similarly effaced by our concern with money and advertising values and ideals (127). We drive through life, according to DeLillo and Baudrillard, shielded from contact with humans either literally (by the windscreen on the Lexus) or figuratively (our concerns with other humans displaced in our mental and emotional priority list by ideological values). The Triumph of Death in *Underworld* is largely the death of the psychological and social dimensions in our quotidian mental and emotional experience.

Joseph Tabbi has characterized this totalizing, effacing force of the culture as the technological or postmodern sublime: the "large forces of corporate organization that

control the social and economic relations among human beings,” that are everywhere around us and have become replicated in our own consciousness (of the world and ourselves) and our desires:

The most effective and potentially dangerous ideological force at this moment is to be found in those things we do every day to sustain the technological culture, whether what we do is explicitly technological or not, unconscious and internalized, or, if conscious, sweetened with a suitably hip postmodern irony. (7)

It is this ideology, and the official history or cultural record it writes, that forms the major conflict in what DeLillo calls “a novel about conflicts on many levels” (“Power” 6). History represses society’s traumatic or discordant memories, just as the individual does his, often because his own situation does not comport with his unrealistic expectations of that same cultural ideology. The human tendency is not to *find* a lost history or memory, as that eros suggests, but to forget it, bury it in some impervious wall, repress the secret, because of the pain involved in fessing up to our mistakes and transgressions.

Where DeLillo’s J. Edgar Hoover sees in the Brueghel painting that “gluttony, lust and greed” have created this “landscape of visionary havoc and ruin” (50), Thomas Pynchon has suggested that our moral sloth, or acedia, is responsible for the cover-up of the aftermath:

In this century we have come to think of Sloth as primarily political, a failure of the public will allowing the introduction of evil policies and the rise of evil regimes, the worldwide fascist ascendancy of the 1920’s and 30’s being perhaps Sloth’s finest hour, though the Vietnam era and the



Reagan-Bush years are not far behind. . . . Occasions for choosing good present themselves in public and private for us every day, and we pass them by. Acedia is the vernacular of everyday moral life. Though it has never lost its deepest notes of mortal anxiety, it never gets as painful as outright despair, for it is despair bought at a discount price, a deliberate turning against faith in anything because of the inconvenience faith presents to the pursuit of quotidian lusts, angers and the rest. The compulsive pessimist's last defense—stay still enough and the blade of the scythe, somehow, will pass by—Sloth is our background radiation, our easy-listening station—it is everywhere, and no longer noticed. (19-20)

In *Underworld*, they only break into the Muzak to give the ball game score, the aestheticized morality play of the day, that is comfortably largely white, all-American, keeping the “obscure danger” of race--the major domestic failure of the Vietnam and Reagan-Bush, as well as the Eisenhower and Kennedy years of the novel--under wraps, much as the bomb blast is superceded in the news by the Thompson homer (20). Likewise, the individual, like Nick Shay, keeps the trauma in his personal experience at a remove, despite its attempts to irrupt into his suburban lifestyle, “the neater package” of Phoenix and waste removal (341).

But in *Underworld*, the “ghosts” of the dead are walking the earth again, as in the Brueghel painting of “The Triumph of Death.” DeLillo's narrative resurrects the personal and cultural memories--the sensuous particulars of real events and people--which have been paved over by ideology and official History that the “denizens” of the Underworld, like Cotter, must memorize (621). From the Post-war culture's “used and

lost and eroded object of desire" (185), the novelist divines a real human consciousness in all its idiosyncrasy, and "the narrative that lives in the spaces of the official play-by-play" (27). *Underworld* therefore makes us regress "to penetrate this secret" of the ghetto kids, "the real terror of the streets" as Sister Edgar dubs it (248), the Museum of Misshapens, the radiation victims, and on a personal level the traumatic memories that we repress (or which we are semi-blind to in the first place), buried in the waste dump of History, as in the sealed memory of the narrator's Bronx childhood (185). Like the little girl with the Sony digital, we sometimes have to wander "clear-eyed into horror" (157).

As with any sublime encounter, the price of this one is pain, the trauma of the re-entry of the real, and it is the moral ante. DeLillo reminds us of the moral nature of the book through Dr. Lingblad's words to Nick: "'You have a history,' she said, 'that you are responsible to. . . . You're answerable. You're required to make sense of it. You owe it your complete attention'" (512). In an essay entitled "The Power of History," published just prior to *Underworld's* release, DeLillo himself says much the same thing. He finds that the culture wants to forget, having created its official History as an ideological technology, not unlike material ones like "the rerun, the sequel, the theme park, the designer outlet. . . . to disremember the past" and "to be ruthless in our forgetting" (7, 1). DeLillo makes the claim that the novelist writes a "counterhistory" to remember the stuff the official record left out, setting "his eros, his creative delight in language and his sense of self-preservation against the vast and uniform Death that history tends to fashion as its most enduring work" (4,7). He finishes dramatically, saying first that "fiction is a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition and awe," and finally that "fiction is all about reliving things. It is our second chance" to resuscitate those citizens

of the Underworld of personal and cultural consciousness (8). For DeLillo, I believe, this is an oldschool, humanist obligation on the part of both the author and the reader: we are morally obliged to offer these lost souls an audience in fiction, in much the same way that Odysseus, his dead friend Elpenor tells him, must hear out the dead:

I ask that you remember me,  
and do not go and leave me behind unwept, unburied,  
when you leave, for fear I might become the gods' curse upon you;  
but burn me there with all my armor that belongs to me,  
and heap up a grave mound beside the beach of the gray sea,  
for an unhappy man, so that those to come will know of me.

(XI: 71-6)

Just as an individual has to face his history and trauma, so does the society. Otherwise, history repeats, and the traumatic memory comes back, mercilessly, like the “push pull click click” jingle holding Willy Mays’s brain hostage mid-game. With the sublime ideological structure of *Das Kapital* unmolested and in place, the system (like its avatar, Nick’s Lexus) “flows forever onward,” void of “human presence” (63). Fiction “is how consciousness is extended and human truth is seen new,” so that we need not repeat past crimes (“Power” 6). At the very least, “there’s a shine in his eye that’s halfway hopeful” (11).

In this essay, using psychoanalytic and popular/literary ideas of sublimity, I will assess why DeLillo uses an aesthetic of sublimity to define what his idea of sublime power is today. In the first section, I will briefly fit *Underworld* into a literary-historical continuum of the sublime stretching from the Greek world to Edmund Burke's 18<sup>th</sup>

century, to the Romantics, and finally to political-cum-economic totalitarianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the second section I will investigate how the novel represents the totalitarian power of capitalist ideology repressing certain human realities, in official cultural media and historical records. I will use psychoanalytic ideas of sublimity as a source of fascination and a mechanism of repression, and Zizek's transposition of those psychological structures onto the larger culture. In the third and final section, I will demonstrate how *Underworld* is an example of DeLillo's aesthetic philosophy--what I call sublime realism, or the power of fiction to use those ideological mechanisms of repression as points of entry into what has been forgotten, in both personal and cultural memory. I will demonstrate, using Herbert Marcuse's ideas of the political function of art, that DeLillo's novel is far from an ahistorical postmodern pastiche of fragments. Rather, I believe, along with a small but growing crowd of DeLillo critics, that *Underworld* represents a late development in DeLillo's work (if not in postmodern fiction in general) towards a new spirituality or even humanism in fiction, one which preserves a postmodern aesthetic of plurality and reaches beyond the sometimes banal issues of regionalism.

## 1. The Sublime

“Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks. In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures.”

--Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents

The sublime is literary code for a combination sensory-affective/spiritual/cognitive experience of pleasurable pain--a fascinating terror, anxiety, and awe--that provokes a search for a means of transcending this pain. The subject perceives some sensorially and/or symbolically overwhelming phenomenon or object, the instinctual (psycho-physiological) and/or culturally prescribed reaction to which is to look for some signifier or explanation for such awesome power. But because the extreme pleasure/pain we feel in the presence of sublime objects is untellable, (perhaps, in turn, because it is psycho-physiologically unbearable), we resort to mystical, religious, or otherwise totalizing symbolism and imagery to represent the sublime force--however inadequately. As Thomas Weiskel puts it in his 1976 study of *The Romantic Sublime*, “The affective aggrandizement of the sublime moment supports an illusion, a metaphorical union with the creator” (4). The idea of this secret universal power, located beyond normal human limits of perception, is comforting, allowing for a transcendence of the pain of this anxiety. Once you imagine a final answer or explanation for something threatening and seemingly sourceless, you anaesthetize the pain of the encounter.

Edmund Burke, of course, was the voice of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that helped put the sublime into heavy rotation on the literary scene, officializing a vocabulary for this encounter. As he saw it, something 'obscure' and 'powerful' threatens harm and provokes 'terror,' 'awe' and 'astonishment' in the subject:

The passion caused by the great and sublime. . . . is astonishment: and astonishment is the state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequences reason on that object which employs it. . . . No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. (256)

Burke gives many examples of sublime objects and experiences, from vast landscapes and other terrestrial signs of deity to extremely loud noises. In *The Romantic Sublime*, Thomas Weiskel extends Burke's list; he notes that in the history of the sublime, anything unknown or not readily identifiable and that makes the subject uneasy or terrified, could be construed on a semantic level as sublime, as "an excess on the plane of either the signifier or the signified" (26). In *Underworld*, an example of this micro-sublime is the awning cracks that fill Klara Sax with something like a minor form of dread because the noise is untellable (unidentifiable), until she is able to supply a visual and linguistic signifier for the obscure noise. The sublime, for Burke as for DeLillo, is found in a range of experiences and objects, from the quotidian to the extraordinary. This follows from a diverse literary-cultural and materialist history of the sublime. Weiskel

notes that “the essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human,--God or the gods, the daemon or Nature--is matter for great disagreement” (3). And in what Fredric Jameson calls a “depthless” postmodern age, we can extend that list with secular forms of oneness (sex, drugs, rock and roll, highway violence, film and television content and mentality) and only vaguely awesome objects and sensations (MacClure 144). This is what makes the sublime *the* postmodern emotion, according to Lyotard<sup>1</sup>: that, in Weiskel’s poststructuralist terms, “what happens to you standing at the edge of the infinite spaces can be made, theoretically, to ‘mean’ just about anything” (28).

Burke, like DeLillo, was especially concerned with human disaster and extreme historical experiences (of which in the politically charged 18<sup>th</sup> century there was much, and hence the preoccupation in that century, as for the Greeks before them and maybe just about every period before and since, with order and balance). Burke thought the terror summoned by witnessing an inferno or a battlefield would be morally therapeutic, making us feel sympathy with the human victims and forging a transcendent fellow-feeling, as well as faith in a power beyond this disastrous terrestrial realm that might connect us yet through charity.

But, as Burke’s description indicates, this revelation might not indicate a principle of human connectivity (metaphysical or otherwise) and an intimate historical, psychological and emotional awareness of humanity, but rather a forgetting or blindness

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Tabbi observes in *Postmodern Sublime* that “Jean-Francois Lyotard, for his part, identifies the pleasure that can derive from the pain of such representational insufficiency as *the* postmodern emotion” (x).

to human matters. We tend to believe that sublime experiences yield revelations (especially of metaphysical power) along with pain. But, especially in the days of Fox TV snuff films and emergency room gore, scenes of sublime violence and suffering have become only more aestheticized (rather than morally improving) than they were in Burke's time, and perhaps even pornographically affective, through the distancing and remove of electronic image media and serial retellings. The simulated disaster response in *White Noise* and the Aparthied Simulation Day in *Underworld* are places where DeLillo's novels act out their sensitivity to this aestheticized, morally evacuated quality in postmodern life and culture.

As Burke's description indicates, the problem with the sublime is that it allows for a forgetting or avoidance of the threatening object, by supplying a totalizing, absolute signifier for them. In *Underworld*, DeLillo investigates the sublime means by which we forge this forgetting of cultural as well as personal anxiety. The tension here is between official History, viewed by the selective eye of ideologically motivated modern media, and "the lost history that becomes the detailed weave of novels," to which the sublime force of official History blinds us ("The Power of History" 8). Going back to Burke's setup, the astonishment phase of the sublime encounter denotes first a heightened sense of pleasure/pain, and then a kind of cognitive breakdown and a numbing of the senses. This numbing is achieved as we reach for some explanation or escape, in feeling connected to God or some universal power, or in being connected to what we imagine are all the facts and signifiers of what it is we experience. The real source of our pain and anxiety (in cultural memory this could be a war, and in personal memory some traumatic childhood moment) is repressed by the sublime signifier, distracting us from it in some



way (to be pursued below). Weiskel's sublime moment of aporia or a gap in meaning "at the edge of the infinite spaces" is where "ideological unanimity" threatens, because we would rather choose a fake something and live with the lie of calling it real (and commit the crimes necessary to make it seem real, such as writing palimpsest histories, both personal and cultural) than suffer the anxiety of a real nothing (28). For this reason, Nick trades the fatherless nothingness of the Bronx for the illusory stability and substance of Phoenix. He reasons (as he watches TV in his motel) that

I lived responsibly in the real. I didn't accept 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. (82)

But Nick's notion of historical reality, poststructuralist thought tells us, is constructed. Jean Baudrillard would amend this by saying our notions of reality are derived from images of reality, which, in their extreme, pervasive form, become simulacra, totally eclipsing any connection they once had to their real reference.<sup>2</sup> Put another way, the power of the image (as DeLillo represents it and probably as we experience it, too) is sublime power. Sublimity, in its totalizing tendencies and shock value, can distract us from real people, things and events. In this capacity, our

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<sup>2</sup> (see "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*).

representation of the sublime object does not suggest a way of being aware of and connected to the rest of humanity and human events through the agency of universal power; it is instead an *idea* of a higher power or level of being, a closed system of language and ideology and official historical explanation for chaotic and painful phenomena. Nick denies entrance to “ghosts” from his past that are too painful to reckon with, just as Hoover’s files exclude America’s ghosts, at a political level (82).

In both cases, a form of sublimely blinding and idealizing media or technology effects a repression, denying the witness the opportunity Burke anticipated from traumatic, historical events to create empathy and political action. This is the sublime transcendence of personal and historical pain. And if “pain is another form of information,” then it is human information--real community--from which we are protected by sublime media (338). In *Underworld*, for example, Nick finds that witnessing the Texas Highway Killer tape is more of an obscene thrill than a morally improving or cautionary experience. And the systematic repeatability of the snuff film, in DeLillo’s view, only alienates us further from the human experience on the tape. In “The Power of History,” he observes that

The microwave, the VCR remote, the telephone redial button and other time-collapsing devices may make us feel that our ordinary household technology reflects something that flows through the deep mind of the culture, an impatient craving for time itself to move faster. (3)

Owing to “the debasing process of frantic repetition” perpetrated by modern media technology, we have actually removed ourselves from our senses or sensation of human experience and microhistory--the hidden story of psychology, emotion, sensation:

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You're watching a video-tape of hooded men emerging from a bank and they move with a certain choreographed flair, firing virtuoso bursts from automatic weapons, and you wonder if they are repeating a scene from a recent movie, the one that disappeared overnight when the weekend gross was flat, and the tape is played and replayed, exhausting all the reality stored in its magnetic pores, and then another tape replaces it. . . . you're staring at the inside of a convenience store on a humdrum night in July. This is a surveillance video with a video display that marks off the tenths of seconds. Then you see a shuffling man with a handgun enter the frame. The commonplace homicide that ensues is transformed in the image-act of your own witness. It is bare, it is real, it is live, it is taped. It is compelling, it is numbing, it is digitally microtimed and therefore filled with incessant information. And if you view the tape often enough, it tends to transform you, to make you a passive variation of the armed robber in his warped act of consumption. It is another set of images for you to want and need and get sick of and need nonetheless, and it separates you from the reality that beats ever more softly in the diminishing world outside the tape. (7)

The video camera in *Underworld* shows the child-filmmaker that "every subject is potentially charged, a million things they never see with the unaided eye" (155). The THK tape (for a historiographic imagination such as DeLillo's, or a documentary intelligence like Jeff Shay's) might yield some sensuous hidden reality or human story. Similarly, the nostalgic waste strewn about the novel--the baseball, the dated language,

the abandoned B52s, song fragments, the quasi-historical snapshots of celebrity and riot and event--all of these may be used as technologies in the service of Marvin Lundy's "dot theory of reality," as they are by Bronzini, Klara, Marvin Lundy, Lenny Bruce, and other imaginative personae in the text--avatars, you might say, of DeLillo himself (175). They take the documentary waste material that forms the novel's magnum metaphor and create psychologically and politically (spiritually even) meaningful stories from them. Documentary material of the 1951 playoff game and the bomb blast were what inspired DeLillo to write the novel in the first place--not to mythologize the Cold War years, but to enter history, and bring some lost humanity to life again:

A fiction writer feels the nearly palpable lure of large events and it can make him want to enter the narrative. The passionate mastering of documentary material is a bracing cure for the self-spiralings and unremitting inwardness that a long novel can inflict on a writer. And the prospect of recovering a nearly lost language, the idiom and scrappy slang of the postwar period, the writer's own lifetime but misted, much of it, in deep distance--what manias of unanticipated pleasure this can summon. A language to reinvigorate the senses. A subject of strong and absorbing proportions. ("Power" 2)

DeLillo, like Lundy, is hopeful that this is what technology can do: "It peels back the shadows and redeems the dazed and rambling past. It makes reality come true" (177).

But DeLillo sees modern electronic visual media in particular as a technology of sublimity, having the opposite effect of the "slow water-torture business" of fiction writing and fictional imagining (3). These media end up idealizing (reifying) or even

politically purifying historical moments, limiting them to what appears in the ideological frame. The Zapruder film of *Libra* makes a reappearance in *Underworld* emphasizing this tendency:

...it was glary and artless and completely steeped in being what it was, in being film. It carried a kind of inner life, something unconnected to the things we call phenomena. The footage seemed to advance some argument about the nature of film itself. The progress of the car down Elm street, the movement of the film through the camera body, some sharable darkness—this was a death that seemed to rise from the steamy debris of the mind, there was some trick of film emulsion that showed the ghost of consciousness. Or so she thought to wonder. She thought to wonder if this home movie was some crude living likeness of the mind, because it seemed so familiar, the footage did—it seemed a thing we might see, not see but know, a model of the nights when we are intimate with our own dying. (496)

Our dying, it seems, is our natural alienation from other people, compounded by our alienation from the reality on the tape, from history and memory. A tape is a technology, a piece of “pornographic nostalgia” like the ball, that does your remembering for you, if you choose not to think too deeply about it (320). It will record ideological, mythical sequences unconnected to any immediate sense impression or anecdote you might have experienced, removing you from people and events and any empathy or deep understanding you might feel. Sometimes this is unavoidable, however, even for the most delinquent forgetters: the power of his real, felt past irrupts into Nick’s dreams, and

he reaches for the more salutary, nostalgic past of the ball, as a force of repression and a palliative measure, such as Freud describes in the epigraph to this section.

Klara is more open to the real, human past than Nick (a condition determined perhaps only by her superior age and experience). She is one of those (not infallible) intelligences (which might only mean she has a longer attention span than most people born after the fifties) who can see the humanity beyond the tape's sublime emulsion. But the tape is everywhere in its serial replays (in our television experience of it, as well as in the quadruple screens in this scene), like the mythos of the ball game, inculcating a different reality, unconnected to Kennedy the person, or the event in historical context. It is sublimely

“outside language,” Miles said, which was his way of saying far-out, or too much, or the other things they used to say, and here was an event that took place at the beginning of the sixties, seen belatedly, that now marked the conceptual end, carrying all the delirium that floated through the age, and people stood around and talked, a man and a woman made out in a closet with the door open, remotely, and the pot fumes grew stronger, and people said, “Let’s go eat,” or whatever people say when a thing begins to be over. (496)

In “Power,” DeLillo elaborates on these parallel mental “technologies” (strictly speaking, technologies as expediting measures, short-cuts, etc., material or intellectual) that bring on this apathy and ignorance, which he dubs “the fame-making apparatus”:

Maybe it is the evanescent spectacle of contemporary life that makes the novel so nervous. Things flash and die. A face appears, a movie actor’s,

say, and it seems to be everywhere, suddenly; or it is an entire movie that's everywhere, with enormous feature stories about special effects and global marketing and tie-in merchandise; or it is just an individual's name that haunts every informational nook, and you can't figure out who the person is inside the name or what the context is that gave such abrupt prominence to the name, but it never actually matters and this is the point.

(3)

The point, rather, is that "this is how time is collapsed. And this is how the larger cultural drama of white-hot consumption and instant waste is performed" (3). History (big h) truncates the whole story (whatever its limits are). The sublime spectacle of postmodern life, powered by the ideal history of its media, entails a death of the subject, and a death of the historical "narrative that lives in the spaces of the official play-by-play" (27). In Burke's words, again, "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequences reason on that object which employs it." And this American political and historical blindness, owing to the sublimity of American media and capitalist ethos, has produced the human waste of the novel, the cultural "landscape of visionary havoc and ruin" (as well as physical and urban, and suburban, psychologically and spiritually speaking) (41).

These days we see the notion of sublime power--Burke's object--as an illusive and "surreal" structure (as it is repeatedly called in *Underworld*), a Longinian flight not into a real metaphysical force in the universe beyond the human, but into ideological fantasy. The postmodern mind is absorbed by an ideological object, as previous eras were absorbed by their own, and its technologies (ideological and material) have messed

with our cognitive apparatus in order to view the real in a certain way that works for the larger game of capitalism to play on. Wordsworth's Romantic ideology, for example, prescribed an escape, into Nature and Imagination, from the trauma and alienation of everyday industrial life. Kant conceived of ultimate sublime power as the supposedly universal totality of how Reason (the cognitive apparatus) perceives the world. Political ideology--particularly totalitarian--allows for a forgetting of real social disease, or at least a utopian way out.

Each of these structures gives an official version of the way things are, a comfortable ideal construct enframed and reified--like the nightly news or the billboards that Gracie and Edgar witness, coming into the Bronx one last time--so that we forget (either deliberately or accidentally) the anxiety of personal or social conflict. And because our minds are occupied by this one reified capitalist Way Of It, we also miss the little things, smells and sights and sounds that are also often embedded with personal and historical significance. A character in DeLillo's *Mao II* calls this "sense memory" (90).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The character, Brita Nilsson, experiences a memory rush at the instigation of the feel of a cat she is stroking. The memory is impacted with a complex of sensations and ideas associated with past cat-stroking: "...she rubbed the cat's fur and felt her childhood there. It was complete in a touch, everything intact, carried out of old lost houses and fields and summer days into the river of her hand" (90-1). This moment is preceded by its obverse, a sensory rush instigated by a memory: "Soon the road replayed itself in her mind, the raveled passage down the hours. It was strange to lie still in a small corner and feel the power of movement, the gull-rush of air over the hood. A sense memory pulsing in the skin." The moment represents a kind of sublime *omphalos* of sensation, emotion and



In a parallel, political manner, the sublime removes us from our senses of the stench of large and small historical events--the grift that the "mighty Wurlitzer" (CIA) and the FBI, for example, pull on the People without most knowing it, sure, but also the real facts staring you in the nose concerning your father's disappearance, or at least what a deadbeat he really was (441). In this manner, the personal and political jc's of the world become holy JCs, reified sublime myths that numb the pain involved in facing the facts. Perhaps this is why, later in life, Nick makes a joke of Mario Badalato: because it was Badalato who made the painful truth a little clearer.

Sublime ideologies are a kind of secret service/protection racket. They are the "*Malavita*" in *Underworld*, the sublime something more ("far more deeply interfused,"

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concept, but the power it manifests is a human sublime, a principle of historical connectivity and transcendence, while preserving a sense of historical chronology and human agency: synchronicity and diachronicity at the same time (to echo the "everything's at the same time" repeated throughout *Underworld*, first in the Prologue [13]). DeLillo's sublime finds overwhelming power in small things (what Linda Munk has termed the "trivial sublime")--human moments, rather than large ideological structures or invisible, unifying power. DeLillo's sublime is, then, one that is reconcilable with an inclusive sense of history.

The sense memory is not unlike the concept represented by Proust's madeleine cake in Walter Benjamin's essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in *Illuminations*: "One afternoon the taste of a kind of pastry called madeleine. . . . transports him [Proust] back to the past, whereas before then he had been limited to the promptings of a memory which obeyed the call of attentiveness" (158).

in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" jive [line 97], "*Dietrologia*" in DeLillo's [280]), that lies above and beyond and eclipsing the everyday real: "That particular life. Under the surface of ordinary things. And organized so that it makes more sense in a way, if you understand what I mean. It makes more sense than the horseshit life most of us live" (761). But the *Malavita* is a glamorizing front, a mythical underworld in denial of the real underworld. Here, DeLillo seems to be spelling out an oldschool humanist and Romantic notion of an authentic, underlying reality (if not a stable, shared experience of it), that decades of postmodern destabilization seems to have denied, in the course of subverting official histories.

In his treatise on *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Herbert Marcuse (who makes an appearance or two in *Underworld*) accepts Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's position that "all reification is a form of forgetting"; Marcuse, in turn, hopes that "the remembrance of things past would become a motive power in the struggle for changing the world" (73). *Underworld* answers Marcuse's call to aesthetic arms, by revealing the machinations of those sublime ideological technologies that reify and eclipse real people and phenomena in the historical underworld, on the micro (personal) and macro (political) levels. At the same time, the book reveals the hidden personal histories of several Americans, some trying to revisit the past, but many actively engaged in trying to avoid it (and their senses) by merging with a narcotizing power (for George Manza, "*Eroina*" [726]; for Manx, money; for Nick, the corporation). They can't seem to merge on a personal level with other humans, because of some fundamental loneliness--call it a postmodern alienation of subjects, but it is amplified by this ideological distraction. These histories and identities are part of the real that is eclipsed in our cognition by the

surreal sublime power that is everywhere in *Underworld's* discussion of Burke's trajectory from terror to transcendence. And the novel seems to be a warning that for ideology, as for heroin, we should maybe "skeeve that like death" (727).

The baseball game announces the "local yearning" for transcendence of the reality of social and psychological pain that is the desire that permeates *Underworld* (11). Cotter Martin is part of the baseball crowd, feeling "...the fans' intimate wish to be connected to the event, unendably" (45), that allows him to have "stepped outside of his life" (14). The crowd is hypnotized by "the static crackle of some libidinous thing in the world" which allows a numbing of their "sense memory" of whatever quotidian dying causes their "bringdown", protecting them "in some undetermined way" (58, 60).

On one level, DeLillo's fictionalization of the ball game depicts the simple and generic human desire for society and entertainment. But this desire, on an ideological level, is also another version of the Bombheads' "afterglow of sixties incandescence, a readiness to give themselves compulsively to something" (404), a considerably more dangerous proposition. As John Duvall has pointed out (with reference to Walter Benjamin's theories of aura)<sup>4</sup> this willingness abets the crowd's willful ignorance of "crucial political realities" (292). If the aim of the sublime is to escape danger in the peace of being connected to the crowd by some unifying power, for Cotter the danger is racial politics: "Cotter feels an obscure danger here. The guy is making him visible. . . . black rays phasing from his hands" (20). And the peace he finds in the crowd and with "good neighbor Bill flashing a cutthroat smile" is false (49).

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<sup>4</sup> see "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*.

Duvall locates this power to create a false peace or social adhesive in the auratic experience of baseball, and the Baudrillardian media simulation of the game: "...something more than baseball in its quasi-religious function is the opiate of the American masses. . . . When people seek a surrender to a transcendent power, the Führer figure will always appear to emerge, if only as pure media construct" (305). But that "something more" or sublime, transcendent Other--the same "something" that the Bombheads would surrender to--should be broadened to encompass capitalist ideology, which in *Underworld* makes it so that "everything is connected in the end" (826). Where the baseball game is an escape from the social disease and personal bringdowns beyond Pafko's Wall, it is a metaphor for the ideological "game and its extensions" (32).

## 2. The Sublime Object of Ideology

In his association of personal and cultural forgetting and repression of traumatic elements, by way of refuge/oblivion in higher powers of the crowd and the almighty dollar, DeLillo's book invites us to look at Slavoj Žižek's social/ideological treatment of Lacan's sublime object. Joseph Tabbi's book on the *Postmodern Sublime* isolates Žižek's sublime object of (capitalist) ideology as our peculiar form of "postmodern domination," which "...tends to manifest itself not in offensive individual attitudes that are easy to denounce, but in large forces of corporate organization that control the social and economic relations among human beings" (6-7). The sublime object of ideology, not unlike Kant's Reason or Wordsworth's Imagination, is not really sublime, that is, the totality of life, except that, on a cognitive and sensory level it is. The selective realities of

capital's media--TV, video, movies, newspapers, etc.--tend to monopolize our mental bandwidth, to the exclusion of the real, sensory and human activity around us. DeLillo's novels are filled with people in these ideological "roomlets in the beaten streets," those closed mental and emotional spaces that admit only to what the ideology and its technologies can bear (*Underworld* 12). The sublime object of ideology--the complex of capitalist values and media and billboardified representations of the American Dream, as well as the mental and sensory-cognitive apparatus that it fosters in us--is a "false faith," in Sister Edgar's words (825). This idol stands in for something that lies behind it, the terrible or anxiety-inducing thing that prevents the ideological fantasy from being reality.

Following Zizek's politicized explanation, if the ideological sublime object is a fantasy of social homogeneity, prosperity, and harmony, then what lies beyond it, at the political level in the Cold War period represented by *Underworld*, is nothing<sup>5</sup>--or, more precisely, the thing that negates the fantasy and prevents its realization: plurality, poverty. That Thing is then eliminated, repressed, or forgotten by individual and cultural consciousness:

...fantasy is precisely the way an antagonistic fissure is masked. In other words, *fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance*. . . . The function of ideological fantasy is to mask

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<sup>5</sup> In his discussion of the sublime moment as one of linguistic aporia and aphasia, Weiskel draws upon this Lacanian concept of the sublime object masking a gap or lack, which in Zizek's political context becomes the Thing that challenges what Weiskel calls "ideological unanimity" (28).

this inconsistency, the fact that ‘Society doesn’t exist’, and thus to compensate us for the failed identification. (Zizek 126-7)

It is repressed by any means necessary, often violent, which is another reason DeLillo invokes an aesthetic of the sublime.<sup>6</sup> Zizek uses the Nazi example of a fantasy of the totality of the *volk*. The Jew becomes the scapegoat for the failure of the *volk*: “the greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetrated in the name of man as harmonious being” (5).

The sublime ideology in *Underworld* is the white suburban/corporate ideology of wealth, of “Better Things For Better Living Through Chemistry,” lived by the “invisible middle” of Demings (592). It is the thing that makes Klara Sax and Lenny Bruce change

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<sup>6</sup> From its western literary roots in Longinus’s *Peri Hypsous* (*On Great Writing*), the sublime has been about violence, psychological or otherwise. Weiskel on the Longinian perspective:

...hypsos brings “power and irresistible might to bear” (1.4); it aims at transport (*ekstasis*) and is always cloaked in metaphors of aggression. Discourse, in the *Peri Hypsous* (*On Great Writing*), is a power struggle. Vivid imagery, for example, is recommended for the “enthralment” (*ekpleksis*) of the poor reader (15.2), who is scorched, pierced, inundated, blown down, and generally knocked about by the sublime, if Longinus is any guide. At other times the reader is in the feared position. . . . These shifting confrontations, the turns and reversals of literary power, are what seem to be the timeless elements of the sublime, requiring only some kind of auxiliary idealism for their local support.” (5)

their names, making us homogenized, "All the same in God's eyes" (614), god in this case being wealth:

Capital burns off the nuance in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of the attenuating influence of money that's electronic and sex that's cyberspaced, untouched money and computer-safe sex, the convergence of consumer desire—not that people want the same things, necessarily, but they want the same range of choices. (785)

Like "the business executives, the fashion photographers, the government officials, the industrialists, the writers, the bankers, the academics, the pig-faced aristocrats in exile" at the Black and White Ball, "they're all part of the same motherfucking thing," that is, the American ideology of wealth (575). And as Lenny says, one must "Mix or die" (625). The History that capital writes, and our quotidian awareness of things and people around us, is limited to what counts in the fantasy, "And that's what this crisis is about, incidentally. Instant mashed potatoes. The whole technology, man, of instant and quick, because we don't have the attention span for normal wars anymore..." (544-5). "But maybe some of us are more powerful than others. It's a white bomb, dig" (547). History in the hands of the winners.

This is hardly a difficult achievement, for one thing because the effect of the ideology is highly desirable: protection from pain and anxiety, a way of combating the anxiety of social or personal difference or conflict, in a nation bent on a Dream of uniformity, and "all conflict programmed out" (826). Cotter is safer in the crowd at the ball game, just as Erica is safer in the crowd of Kelvinator owners, or Edgar in the

company of strictly red white and blue. For Nick, the corporate/suburban fantasy of Phoenix is a refuge from the Bronx:

Phoenix is a neater package for me. I needed a private life. How could you have a private life in a place where all your isolated feelings are out in the open, where the tension in your heart, the thing you've been able to restrict to small, closed rooms, is everywhere exposed to the whitish light and grown so large and firmly fixed that you can't separate it from the landscape and the sky? (341)

Where Longinus saw the sublime's spiritual flight or *hypsos* in great writing, and the Romantics in Imagination, DeLillo sees Cold War-era America's sublime transcendence in the White Flight to the suburbs.

Suburban life is a giant metaphor in the novel for the ideological/mental life of the culture, and points to another reason why we mix so well. That is the sublime omnipresence of the media and material technologies imprinting us with versions of the American Dream and the desire for strict sameness: the "superreal, or maybe underreal" media simulations of reality (157) (the THK tape, and the billboards that Brian Glassic sees "generating reality", the internet, for example [183]), the nightly news, language itself, and the many technologies of forgetting the real that are appendages of the homogenizing ideology of American capital. The death that *Underworld's* prologue denotes is the death of the real under the ideological "cloud of unknowing," recalling the Airborne Toxic Event of DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*.



The corporation is another figuration of the fantasy sublime power that removes you from the real, while assuring you of a total connection to it. "The corporation," says Nick,

is supposed to take us outside ourselves. We design these organized bodies to respond to the market, face foursquare into the world. . . . You feel the contact points around you, the caress of linked grids that give you a sense of order and command. It's there in the warbling banks of phones, in the fax machines and photocopiers and all the oceanic logic stored in your computer. Bemoan technology all you want. It expands your self-esteem and connects you in your well-pressed suit to the things that slip through the world otherwise unperceived. (89)

But some people, Sims for instance, would say that in playing the ideological game, "you got rooked," that the "whole thing's phoney," like John Duvall's mythos of the Thompson ball (96). The fantasy rooks us into believing in a false peace. Bronzini, "who shunned any form of organized worship and thought God was a mass delusion" (683), echoes Freud, who explained the "illusion" of religion's sublime feelings psychophysically. A friend of Freud suggested in a letter that religious sentiment

consists in a peculiar feeling. . . . which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity,' a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded--as it were, 'oceanic'. . . . is a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole. (11-12)

"It is," the friend opines, "the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels and

doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the grounds of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion" (11). For Freud, this feeling does not point to any one patently sublime object, but to a "psycho-analytic—that is, a genetic—explanation," which he deems to be the feeling of being in love, or in a pathological state (12). In both of these states, "the boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain or [in the latter state] in which they are actually drawn incorrectly" (13). Ideology is a kind of pathological lie, the misplaced faith in which allows the subject to believe (falsely) that he is connected to everything when he is not. Nick, in this case, is this "one," and his corporate-capitalist-suburban-media propagated ideology is his replaceable, arbitrary sublime object, a place to put his faith and numb his memories (although he would see it otherwise, as a remembering).

But while it allows the real, along with its inconvenient secrets, to slip through the cracks in the ideological fabric, the secrets tend to come back. These secrets, social and personal, are what Lacan would call the real traumatic kernel. They are found in the order of the real, beyond the unconscious (in *Underworld*, the unconscious of the society as well as the individual), that harbours the antagonistic element in your experience that messes with normal cognitive and emotional operating procedure. To ensure the normal functioning of the world, you have to talk the language that everyone else does, imprinted with the same desires--hypertext, say, or the desire of capital to keep information and money flowing, no matter how many mass graves it digs, as Nick and Victor say. This common language ensures the homeostatic balance of the symbolic order, the language

that inscribes us with the homogenizing values of the ideology. To maintain this balance, the symbolic order, of which ideological fantasy is a radical extension, masks the real:

it is. . . . the symbolic order itself which is identified with the pleasure principle. . . . what lies behind is. . . . a real kernel, a traumatic core. To designate it, Lacan uses a Freudian term: *das Ding*, the Thing . . . . (the term Thing is to be taken here with all the connotation it possesses in the domain of horror science fiction: the 'alien' from the film of the same name is a pre-symbolic, maternal Thing *par excellence*).

The symbolic order is striving for a homeostatic balance, but there is in its kernel, at its very center, some strange, traumatic element which cannot be symbolized, integrated into the symbolic order – the Thing. (Zizek 132)

The pleasure principle, or symbolic order (of which fantasy is an extreme), "is the law which maintains the subject at a certain distance from the Thing. . . . making the subject circle round it without ever attaining it"; if you get too close, you have "suffering/evil" (Evans 205).

An image in *Underworld* of this is the South Bronx Surreal bus approaching/circling the society's real traumatic kernels, but not getting too close. Gracie has it right, in a Lacanian sense--the busload of middle class tourists is the surreal ideological perspective visiting "the real terror of the streets," but at the safe remove of plexiglass and limited daytrip exposure (248). They can retreat into their fantasy, whereas Esmeralda has no practical way out, into their consciousness.

The ideology, like the individual, represses the traumatic Thing in the real because it is fearsome. In Burke's terms, as in Freud's, it threatens pain or death, whether real or figurative. Within the context of the novel, this the pain of a threat to life[style], the cultural homogeneity underpinning the ideology.

Fear and doubt provoke faith in ideology, because of the protection package it offers, of repression and fantasy. As professor of pop culture Murray Siskind puts it,

Fear is unnatural. Lightning and thunder are unnatural. Pain, death, reality, these are all unnatural. We can't bear these things as they are. We know too much. So we resort to repression, compromise and disguise. This is how we survive in the universe. This is the natural language of the species. (*White Noise* 289)

Awe and terror, refrains Klara Sax, are "unconducive" to the normal operation of the cultural ideology of "industry and progress and so forth" (*Underworld* 71). So the "inconvenient secrets" of the ghetto, and the Museum of Misshapens in the Kazakh, need to be hidden. The bigger the secret, the bigger the protection, says the Russian neo-capitalist inheritor of this sublime ideology:

"You have your own capitalist tools now. Don't you, Viktor?"

"You mean my company?"

"A Small private army, I hear."

"Also intelligence unit. To protect our assets."

"And scare the hell out of the competition." (790)

Hoover's dossiers are another sublime ideological technology to hide certain Things in social reality, a cultural prophylactic such as you might buy at Condomology, or that the censors roll onto Lenny's tongue:

The dossier was a deeper form of truth, transcending facts and actuality. The second you placed an item in the file, a fuzzy photograph, an unfounded rumor, it became promiscuously true. It was a truth without authority and therefore incontestable. Factoids seeped out of the file and crept across the horizon, consuming bodies and minds. The file was everything, the life nothing. (559)

Erica Deming takes refuge in the symbolic order of industrial-domestic language, into which DeLillo has the real of Eric's bedroom activities dangerously irrupt, like symptoms of Lacan's real irrupting into the consciousness and symbolic order. The fantasy of a perfect 50s kitchenette is a distraction from the anxiety she feels about the real organic Things going down in the next room:

...because if you don't get every smidge of organic murk off the fork tines and out of the pans before you run the dishwasher, it could come back to haunt you in the morning. . . . All the things around her were important. Things and words. Words to believe in and live by.

Breezeway

Car pools

Crisper

Bridge Parties

Sectional

Broadloom (519-20)

For Cotter, the awesome, oceanic thrill of the capitalist dream game is a way to ditch the ghetto real (and school) for a while, providing "...a sense of something protective and

enclosing that will help him absorb the loss if it should come to that" (31). And for Edgar, "...latex was necessary here. Protection against the spurt of blood or pus and the viral entities hidden within, submicroscopic parasites in their soviet socialist protein coats" (241).

Protection is repression, the individual and cultural "mind closing closing down" to these traumatic Things. The crime Nick commits and the psychology of that moment as described by Dr. Lingblad is a microcosm of what is happening in the Cold War period at a political level in "Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s." The terror and awe all over the novel are a product of renewed sensitivity to and consciousness of these traumatic elements. In *Underworld*, ideology is the shooter, the novel's Esmeraldas and Cotters and Ismaels are the victims, their preterite histories the sacrifice, and the reader their witness:

...you were the shooter and the witness both and you can separate these roles. The second was helpless to prevent the first from acting. The second could not stop this act, could not manage it, and finally did not know how to perceive it. It was too deep down even as it reached his eyes, your eyes. . . . Dr Lingblad might have said, "The gesture is extreme because the mind is shutting down. It's the end of consciousness. So the body goes berserk. The body shows you what's happening to the mind. The way a person's grief bends the body. This is how consciousness looks. This is how it flails and thrashes when the end is sudden and violent and the mind is unprepared."

And I might have said, "You're talking about his mind, how the end is sudden, or mine?"

But she didn't say it and I didn't say it because I wasn't talking much. (510-1)

The novel's fragments at first perhaps seem like disjointed historical waste, meaningless postmodern pastiche. But it is not just dehistoricized novelistic garbage cargo, like that of the "Flying Liberian," going from the author's port to yours without finding permanent harbour, morally or spiritually (278). But how exactly are all these disparate people connected? For one thing, they are figures of the repressed historical real, the dead souls, like those in Hades, that the novelist resurrects. And the author makes you feel the trauma and rapture of perceiving this real, despite your (and Nick's) recalcitrance.

The Manx Martin sections culminate in a moment of this sublime blindness and forgetting. Manx perpetrates a repression of an intensely immediate human real (the reality of his son's need for love). Seduced by the sublime ideology of wealth as some kind of alleviation of his socio-economic "bringdown," Manx takes the baseball not as an opportunity to get to know his son, though he knows he should. Instead, the ball becomes a thing to sell, its personal symbolic significance outshined by the glare of the dollar value it represents. The moment of sublime rapture, the false epiphany revealing the ideological fraud and not the underlying real of his son, comes when he hears the capitalist theme song, "Yankee Doodle," floating across the river. It is also one of those minor sublime epiphanies of the mind's power, of which DeLillo is so fond, like that featuring Klara and the awnings. But the phenomenal moment is contaminated when the

song, the sublime sensory-symbolic experience, points him to an ideology of wealth, a place where he can sell out his son and his soul to the highest bidder. (This just happens to be Chuckie Wainwright Sr., a high practitioner of that sublime ideology, one of those “creative [advertising] minds and their sublimated forms of destruction” [529]. Everything, it turns out, *is* connected.) Manx takes the easy ideological way out of his funk, trying to play the ideological game: “He feels a little empty. He feels low and put off and frankly humanly disgusted and he wants to lie down and sleep. He feels a little messed with. He wants to, somehow, from someone, make some money” (364). Years later, the gangsta rap that Nick’s CEO listens to on the car system, while it wants to fight racial and economic oppression with bullets and the occasional ballot, mainly wants a piece of capitalist action, the quicker way to “getting even,” as well as a way out of economic anxiety and racial alienation (119).

But getting even is strictly getting even, or strictly commercial, if you ask Frank Zappa (another dead piece of the real maybe). Gangsta rap (which should include a few other genre splices, like Hip Hop and, perversely, R&B) is the ‘authentic’ black ghetto real that, like everything else, “submits to the pebble skip of the [ideological] ball” (27). The ideological language of dollar value, like computer language, desires “massive uniformity”, at the price of some cultural plurality and reality (786). So, just as the individual man forgets his son, the white ideology forgets the race, and the market forgets the whole notion of humanity:

I thought leaders and nations used to dream of vast land empires—  
expansion, annexation, troop movements, armored units driving in dusty  
juggernauts over the plains, the forced march of language and appetite, the



digging of mass graves. They wanted to extend their shadows across the territories...

Brian says, "Now they want computer chips."

"Exactly. Thank you."

And Viktor Maltsev says, "Yes, it's true that geography has moved inward and smallward. But we still have mass graves, I think." (787-8)

As Nick notes, "This is all part of the same surreal, isn't it, that started on the forty-second floor of that Moscow tower" (800). That surreal is the ideological sublime object that kills something in our conception of reality.

### 3. The Power of Fiction, or Sublime Realism

All the same, something is being revealed in *Underworld*. As Russ says in the prologue, "something big's in the works, something's building" (15). It is the sublime "excitement of a revealed thing" (14). It is not the ecstasy of the false faith of ideology. But those same surreal, sublime technological structures of the ideology that blinded us in fictional imagining now provide a way of seeing what was repressed. The aesthetic form of the novel presents new perspectives, as from Nick and Marian's balloon, from which "Everything we saw was ominous and shining, tense with the beauty of things that are normally unseen, even the cars gone to canker and rust" (126). While the novel presents us with the anatomy of the ideological game, and the power of capital to erase difference, the novel also reveals "a second force that runs parallel to the game" (38). This is the sensory-spiritual force of the real. And the reader wonders, like Marian, "how could this

be here without my knowing?" (125). The sublime, then, can be turned into a tool for remembering the historical and psychological real, in its sensory plenitude.

As in the sublime trajectory from terror to transcendence described by Burke, and the trauma experienced by the Lacanian subject when faced with the symptom of the real Thing, this sublime rapture and epiphany can be painful, the resensitizing "trauma of perception" (509). After Nick's personal real traumatic kernel is finally revealed, at the end of "Arrangement in Gray and Black", we follow with capitalist ideology's RTK, when Brian and Nick visit the Kazakh victims: "We drive out there [to the clinic] in a mood of some disgruntlement (Brian and I), even if we are unresisting, too stilled by the pickle jars to make an open complaint" (799-800). Instead of ideology, the pickle jars--Zizek's Thing, the monstrous secret of the real--occupies their minds so totally as Burke noted, that they can't think about anything else. "He is taking us, basically, downwind. . . . Victor takes us inside and we're not in a museum this time" (800). In Lacanian terms, you can't really access the real, but this is close enough for the purposes of resensitizing our political and social consciousness. The novel, similarly, cannot repeat real, lived history, but it can take us downwind, historically, into the symptoms and effects and the sensuous quality of an experience in history or memory. In this scene, Brian and Nick encounter one of the real victims blinded (or otherwise maimed) by the sublime object of ideology (in this case the literal ideological technology of the bomb). Nick finds that it is Victor, the Russian capitalist, who is blinded by his ideological values to the real effects they are having on his country:

This is a man who is trying to merchandise nuclear explosions--using safer methods, no doubt--and he comes here to challenge himself perhaps, to

prove to himself he is not blind to the consequences. It is the victims who are blind. (800)

*Underworld* illustrates that "all are brutalized," by the ideology, if I can lift a phrase concerning the institution of slavery without being insensitive (Oates 153).<sup>7</sup>

But the traumatic energy of these real Things, like the radiation coming out of the vent tubes from the underground detonations, presents itself to our consciousness, in Lacan's understanding, in the form of symptom. "The mine shafts they dug for underground detonations were not deep enough to preclude the venting of dangerous levels of radiation" (798). Similarly, on a personal level, Nick's traumatic kernel leaks its own radiation into his consciousness via nightmare and Badalato jokes (not to mention profound loneliness and unaccountable anxiety). The fragments of the B52s that Klara reconstitutes, the broken soda bottles forming Watts Towers, the secret of the garbage dump, the dots in the remote sensors' photographs--all are potential symptoms, historiographic tools for the novelist to exploit, though hopefully not to make "the bullshit readings" of the culture's laypeople "image interpreters" (612). So even if the ideology's technologies manage to repress some elements of human reality, "no act, no event falls empty. . . . everything we do is written down, registered somewhere, as a trace which for the time being remains meaningless but which, in the moment of final settling, will receive its proper place" (Zizek 142). The only difference being that, for DeLillo, there is no 'proper' place, except within one ideology or another. Marcuse

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<sup>7</sup> In *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*, Stephen B. Oates borrows these words from Frederick Douglass, who was discussing "the brutalizing effects of slavery on both slave and slaveowner" (xi).

argued that art is an ideology also, but a paradoxical ideology of plurality.<sup>8</sup> Bill Readings has called this notion of a socio-political multiplicity within unity a “sublime dissensus”:

Sublime politics, then, would open what is called a horizon of dissensus, in that no consensual answer can take away the question mark that the social bond (the fact of other people and language) raises, no universal community can embody the answer. To preserve the question of the social bond as a question is to tolerate difference without saying, “We are all white,” “We are all American,” or even “We are all human”; it is to understand the obligation of the social bond as one to which we are answerable but to which we cannot supply an answer, and that runs something like: Live together in difference but not indifferently. (425)

Likewise, in *Underworld*, art’s historical gaze, if it is ideological, is not limited to one perspective.

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<sup>8</sup> The context is Marcuse’s criticism of Marxist aesthetics, whose reification of individual consciousness as class consciousness “depreciates and distorts the truth expressed in this universe—it minimizes the cognitive function of art as ideology. For the radical potential of art lies precisely in its ideological character, in its transcendent relation to the ‘basis.’ Ideology is not always mere ideology, false consciousness. The consciousness and the representation of truths which appear as abstract in relation to the established process of production are also ideological functions. Art presents one of these truths. As ideology, it opposes the given society. The autonomy of art contains the categorical imperative: ‘things must change’” (13).

On a micro-sensory level, this idea of symptom or trace presents itself in *Underworld*, again, as “sense memory” (*Mao II* 90). As Bronzini says to his (probably unwitting) class, “This is the real power. How the mind operates. How the mind identifies, analyzes and represents. What beauty and power” (735). But then he goes a little too far, rhapsodizing about “What marvel of imagination does it require to reduce the complex forces of nature, all those unseeable magical actions inside the atom--to express all this with a bang and a bang on the blackboard” (735-6). The problem is that this reverse-telescopic perspective becomes a reifying tendency, the same one that produces ideologically slanted, racist and elitist Histories, that trains the camera eye of society’s self-reflection on only parts of certain stories, and that makes a bomb of destruction out of atomic knowledge. In short, if you don’t reverse this perspective, it has the tendency to simplify and destroy complexity and, on a social level, plurality.

Sensuousness in *Underworld* complicates reality, on a small and large scale. DeLillo explodes “Phenomena. Things perceptible to the senses” (734). This is powerful enough on a physiological level to awe the subject, but sense memories also have that mnemonic way of being embedded with other realities: psychological, familial, political, social, historical. This is the “deep truth” of Rosemary Shay’s ironic meat sauce:

This food, this family meal, this meat sauce simmering in a big pot with sausage and spareribs and onions and garlic, this was their loyalty and bond and well-being, and the aroma was in the halls for Rosemary to smell when she climbed the flights, rolled beef, meatballs, basil, and the savor had an irony that was painful. (699)

The deep truth, the lost husband and father, is what she, like Nick, conceals, but which is summoned by its symptom. For Rosemary, symptom is the smell of the sauce, and for Nick it is the Lucky Strike logotype.

For the purposes of recovering lost (micro)historical reality, it is in this mnemonic aspect of the sensuous that DeLillo finds power, all over *Underworld*. The sound of the foghorns that Klara and Carlo Strasser hear “had an element of formal awe”, not unlike the awning cracks (386). And for Matty Shay, witnessing the bomb tests in the desert, it is not the spectacle so much as the under-manipulated (ideologically speaking, in this visual century) sonic element that astounds him: “It was the drag and sonic shock, this is what awed and moved him, and then the afterclap rolling off the mountains, like they were blowing out a seam in the world” (408). Smell also, such as that of the garbage in Antoine’s car, as a symptom outshines the visual. The visual has become the preferred ideological-simulacrum perspective, the billboard surreal superimposed on Esmeralda’s ghost. But viewed another way, in fiction, Esmeralda’s symptom shows up on top of the ideological record. So it is not the visual that Sister Edgar remembers, but the unconventional, underused sense of smell:

...she holds the image tight in her mind, the fleeting face on the lighted board, her virgin twin who is also her daughter. And she recalls the smell of jet fuel. This is the incense of her experience, the burnt cedar and gum, a retaining medium that keeps the moment whole, all the moments, the swaying soulclap raptures and the unspoken closeness, a fellowship of deep belief. (824)

This is all complicated, in typical DeLillo fashion, by the fact that this is all happening on the quasi-ahistorical web, where connections are promiscuously made and unmade without any sense of cause and effect or historical agency, or any real permanency of sense. Art and artistic sensibility are always against the wall of ideology.

Language, of course, like the visual is also fortified with ideological value. It can reify the real signified it represents, like any other ideological technology. Erica's language tends to dominate and form her life, leaving out the uncomfortable, undesirable secrets. "And you can't fight a war without acronyms. This is a fact of modern combat, according to Louis T. Bakey" (606). Language, if removed from the "certain funky something" of reality underlying it, is an agent of reification and forgetting. This has been a career-long fascination for DeLillo. In *The Names*, a character only half-facetiously complains that even murderers are removed, morally and sensorially, from their human "settings," meaning the reality of their act. They become a strangely passive-yet-active shooter not unlike the convenience-store-video witness:

"We thought we knew this setting. The mass killer in his furnished room, in his century, feeding Gaines-burgers to a German shepherd. The news is full of settings, isn't it, James? You said it yourself one night. Men firing from overpasses, attic rooms. Unconnected to the earth. By which I think you mean nonpolitical in the broad sense. Murders that drift away from us. What waste." (171)

The gun is a technology for killing without remembering or sensing the act, thus removing the shooter from the historical reality and meaning of suffering. Forgetting or leaving the earth (literally) via plane travel is another favorite image of DeLillo:

Along some northern coast at sundown a beaten gold light is waterborne, sweeping across lakes and tracing zigzag rivers to the sea, and we know we're in transit again, half numb to the secluded beauty down there, the slate land we're leaving behind, the peneplain, to cross these rainbands in deep night. This is time totally lost to us. We don't remember it. We take to sense impressions with us, no voices, none of the windy blast of aircraft on the tarmac, or the white noise of flight, or the hours of waiting. Nothing sticks to us but smoke in our hair and clothes. It is dead time. It never happened until it happens again. Then it never happened. (*The Names* 7)

In *The Names*, as in *Underworld*'s acronyms and dossiers and so on, language in a similar way is unconnected to the earth. The alphabet cult in that novel makes a ritual evacuation of proper names by killing the bearer. In *underworld*, the sublime language of the ideology of *Das Kapital* evacuates the historical record of certain realities, but DeLillo's fiction makes a political matter of this poststructural formal observation.

Used another way, in fictional imagining, language can be used as a symptom of sensuous reality, just as the visual is not patently ideological. This is what Bronzini means by "Tangerine": "How language is webbed into the senses" (683). For DeLillo, it is by virtue of this connection to the sensuous world that language and fiction constitute "The Eros of Language," a principle of life and pleasure. In "Power," he believes (emphatically enough to repeat three times) that

There is pleasure to be found, the writer's, the reader's, in a version of the past that escapes the coils of established history and biography and that



finds a language, scented, dripping, detailed, for such routine realities as sex, weather, and food, for the ravel of a red thread on a woman's velvet sleeve. (3)

But again, along with the physiological rush that a naturalistic perspective would be limited to, DeLillo also finds in these moments of intense, sublime reality a "moral burnish", an aura of "integrity" and truth (to counterpoint and counteract Edgar's fabrications) (7). This is because the sensuous, revelatory function of language can become politically significant.

For DeLillo, it is the ability of novels to attune us to lived experience, of others as well as of ourselves perhaps, that is the fascination:

Fiction slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and head colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror of restless nights. This is how consciousness is extended and human truth is seen new. (6)

This consciousness extending is itself a political act. By spreading the word,

Language can be a form of counterhistory. The writer wants to construct a language that will be the book's life-giving force. He wants to submit to it. Let language shape the world. Let it break the faith of conventional recreation. (5)

DeLillo is echoing Marcuse, who calls this capacity to extend our awareness of reality art's "counterconsciousness":

...the aesthetic form reveals tabooed and repressed dimensions of reality: aspects of liberation. The poetry of Mallarmé is an extreme example; his

poems conjure up modes of perception, imagination, gestures--a feast of sensuousness which shatters everyday experience and anticipates a different reality principle. (19)

For Marcuse, as for DeLillo, this consciousness-extending arms us with sense-memory knowledge, ultimately connected to broader historical patterns of reality, which then connects us sensorially and politically as social beings. "Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world" (32-3).

In terms of the sublime, this is the gap in cognition, the cognitive breakdown moment of aporia, the abyss between signifier and signified, because no signifier could stand for the massive thing that the sublime represents. In psychoanalytic theory, this is the height metaphor, except the ideological sublime object is a stand-in Freudian illusion that masks the lack/gap beyond. For Lacan, as for DeLillo, no object is inherently sublime. It becomes sublime by virtue of its location in a fantasy frame (Evans 198). In the sublime trajectory from terror to transcendence, the moment where you hit cognitive breakdown, where something "far more deeply interfused" is announced by that physiological "oceanic" rush, you can insert any signifier, or sublime ideological technology.

The sensuousness of art--which may or may not include Freud's oceanic feeling--attunes us to other people's subjectivity, and on the basis of that connection forges empathy, deep personal knowledge, and perhaps faith not in a false god, but in that fellow-feeling Burke hoped for, a faith in human charity. Both Marcuse and DeLillo refer to this power of language and fiction as Eros, defined as a form of pleasure and

love. Marcuse says this political sensuousness constitutes "The commitment of art to Eros, the deep affirmation of the Life Instincts in their fight against instinctual and social oppression" (11).

This is the "radical political potential of this dimension" (Marcuse 17). Sensuousness gives us a way of feeling for a minute, Klara imagines, "the mystery of living in her skin" (498). It is the basis for real empathy, of connecting on a real, human level, rather than an ideological level. Marcuse's logic for this sensory-political empathy is that humans are "species-beings," with common drives and sensations: "Solidarity would be on weak grounds were it not rooted in the instinctual structure of individuals" (17).

If we can connect on a sensory level, through language, then we can perhaps understand other consciousnesses and subjectivities as well, without becoming clones in the process. DeLillo claims that "fiction is a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition and awe" ("Power" 5). If this is so, it is because the medium is tricked out to explore and complicate consciousness, to sensitize us to human stories and feelings. For DeLillo, as for Klara Sax and others, this is the really massive thing, the real sublime revelation: "all that consciousness powering down" (379). Consciousness figures in Marvin's list of ball-related symptom-discoveries: "6. The shock, the power of an ordinary life. It is a thing you could not invent with banks of computers in a dust-free room" (308). It is the human stories and consciousness represented by the ball that attracts Marvin, as well as one of the ball's six degrees, Chuckie Wainwright Jr., who only wants the ball if it means something personal about his father.

These symptoms, in short, find their political function in their potential for amplifying the preterite consciousnesses that Edgar's files try to silence:

Through the embattled century of world wars and massive violence by other means, there had always been an undervoice that spoke through the cannon fire and ack-ack and that sometimes grew strong enough to merge with the battle sounds. It was a struggle between the state and secret groups of insurgents, state-born, wild-eyed—the anarchists, terrorists, assassins and revolutionaries who tried to bring about apocalyptic change.  
(563)

It grows strong enough in language (and art in general) that is not a stale, rigid structure, but a living, feeling complex of history and sensation and consciousness. This represents a political threat to the ideological stranglehold on mass consciousness, because it makes people aware of realities outside ideological fantasy. Fiction is the real better thing for better living. As Lenny says,

“Never underestimate the power of language. I carry a rubber with me at all times because I don't want to inseminate someone by schmoozing with her. Some innocent teenage girl asks for directions to State Street. Zap. A virgin birth.” (582)

If ideology represents a prophylaxis against thought and feeling, art in *Underworld* is a weapon against this censor. Moonman's trains are how “you get inside people's heads and vandalize their eyeballs,” by letting them know and feel that his reality is real (435). In this same way, gangsta rap might be about money and playing the ideological game, but it is also about protest and political action, through a renewed sense of ghetto reality.

NWA's loop "Kamurshol" is an instance of the more self-reflexive, ironic and politicized side of rap, that identifies itself as both inside and outside this ideology of wealth. It gets beyond itself and makes itself a political agent of change sonically, "the world's most dangerous group once again beatin on yo muthafuckin eardrums" ("100 Miles & Runnin'," track 5).

Here, sensuous art becomes political and sublime and real all at the same time, because it has the power to transcend racial boundaries. Art, like religion and love, is like Ismael's cars: "the subway's where the races mix" (434). They mix, but the individual consciousness behind them does not die, as Lenny feared. This is the basis for the sublime realism of the psycho-sensory-historical revelation in *Underworld*. The subway (art) articulates the real unseen power that preserves plurality while allowing connection, not just on a racial level, but on a psychological one--a sublime multiplicity in unity. This revealed thing is the real real in *Underworld*. It opposes Nick's real, the phoney revealed thing of ideology, which also connects you to an "oceanic" religious feeling (as Freud's friend called it), but in the process sacrifices some part of your agency as a distinct psychological and social being on the altar of ideological wholeness. The dominant ideology doesn't like this sensuousness. Marcuse notes that

The sensuous substance of the Beautiful is preserved in aesthetic sublimation. The autonomy of art and its political potential manifest themselves in the cognitive and emancipatory power of this sensuousness. It is therefore not surprising that, historically, the attack on autonomous art is linked with the denunciation of sensuousness in the name of morality and religion.

Horst Bredekamp has shown that the systematic mobilization of the populace against the emancipation of art from religious ritual [ideology] has its roots in the ascetic movements of the High Middle Ages. Autonomous art is condemned as infamous sensuality. "Release of aesthetic-sensuous stimuli," "artistic tickling of the senses" are presented as "basic conditions for the automatization of art." The burning of paintings and statues is not an "expression of a blinding raging fanaticism", but rather a "consequence of a petty bourgeois anti-intellectualistic ideal of life. . . . Similarly Adorno: "hostility against happiness, asceticism, that sort of ethos which constantly babbles names like Luther and Bismarck, does not want aesthetic autonomy". . . . Adorno finds here traces of the "petty bourgeois' hatred of sex. (66)

Hence in *Underworld*, Hoover objects to the "free-fucking" masses, and Erica would prefer not to know what Eric does in his bedroom (564). But their repression is in vain, and constitutes "Danger. Contents under pressure" (516). Whatever reality is conformed over is going to bust through the latex. The Thing, as for Nick,

kept coming back to me and I tried to get inside it, inside the tremor, our faces sort of double-framed over the ice cubes in our drinks, flying out of focus, then in again—not to detail my own feelings but only to understand the hidden triggers of experience, the little delves and swerves that make a state of being. (338)

He could be talking about the pain-information of his random bar rumble with Sims, and what lies behind Sims' face, but this phrase represents the consciousness plumbing going

on novel-wide, psychologically and socially: “ordinary life trying to reassert itself. That’s the secret meaning of this week. The secret history that never appears in the written accounts of the time or in the public statements of the men in power. Those beautiful bombs and missiles. Those planes and submarines. Ever see anything so gorgeous?” (594).

DeLillo has an obvious admiration for Lenny Bruce, possibly because he sees a little of the novelist intelligence in the comic. In his dialogues with the culture and its language, Lenny pulls a sublime conjuring himself, giving life to a reified, effaced Esmeralda figure, and an old black street preacher, among others.

Where the ideology behind those gorgeous planes and bombs aborts certain undesirable realities, imaginative intelligence and language such as Lenny’s and DeLillo’s revives those lost souls. *Underworld* induces “a strange shaded grief” for the Cotters and Esmeraldas of the world, such as Nick’s on the occasion of his first child’s death; but the novel lets you “think yourself into the middle of the child’s unlive life” (589). Not incidentally, Esmeralda comes from the Spanish meaning “emerald” and “polished.” She represents the duality of sublimity in DeLillo’s fiction, the sublimity that obscures (Thanatos) and the sublimity that reveals (Eros). The novel form improves or sublimates Esmeralda--and us--not by idealizing her as the billboard does, but by making her subjectivity, however ghettoized, accessible to other subjectivities. Lenny, like DeLillo, wants to sublimate or improve his subject by realizing her psychologically, by making us feel what she feels. “Let’s make her human. She’s real like us”; the trained audience doesn’t want reality, though, but “some epic sicko finish” (632).

Nevertheless, the politically hip artist wants to offer a human sublime, an improvement, not reification, through sensuousness and empathy, a crossing of languages and voices:

Lenny seemed half lost in reverie, in conjure, and maybe people began to feel uncomfortable because he could not seem to stop doing the voice. It was as if the voice had been crossed with his own. It was as if cross-voices were unavoidable, whether you knew it or not, whether you liked it or not, and maybe this old man spoke in Lenny's voice at times, alone, unknowing, in his room, on some level, hearing the bandy scales in his head, the push and shove of Lenny's own music, and Lenny did the old man's, spoke in the old man's, unavoidably. (628)

For DeLillo, the real political glue is empathy, love, which preserves difference. It's a little arrogant, perhaps, but for DeLillo it is the artist's language—or maybe just sensuous language in general, “where the nighthawks congregate, and it was Lenny's own hard bop, his speeches to the people that rode the broad Chicago night” (586).

Language in its sensuousness can unite us while preserving human difference, but this peace is complicated. The novel begins by claiming that Cotter “speaks in your voice, American” (11). The crossover here is peace through empathy, not homogeneity. This hope for real peace is still around for the end of the novel, but this peace is threatened:

...you can glance out the window, distracted by the sound of small kids playing a made-up game in a neighbor's yard, some kind of kickball maybe, and it's your voice you hear, essentially, under the glimmerglass



sky, and you look at the things in the room, offscreen, unwebbed, the tissues grain of the deskwood alive in light, the thick lived tenor of things to be seen and eaten, the apple core going sepia in the lunch tray, and the dense measures of experience in a random glance. . . . and you try to imagine a thing on the screen becoming a thing in the world, taking all its meanings, its sense of serenities and contentments out into the streets somehow, its whisper of reconciliation, a word extending itself ever outward. . . . but it's only a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen and all it can do is make you pensive—a word that spreads a longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bourns and orchards to the solitary hills.

Peace. (827)

The novel or any work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction can open up the files and let the Cotters and Esmeraldas out, but can it bring them into our consciousness, or peace into the world off the screen? Not quite, says Marcuse. At least, art can't do it alone. Indeed, "Only in the 'illusory world' [of art] do things appear as what they are and what they can be" (*The Aesthetic Dimension* 54). But at the same time,

There is in art inevitably an element of hubris: art cannot translate its vision into reality. It remains a 'fictitious' world, though as such it sees through and anticipates reality. Thus art corrects its ideality: the hope which it represents ought not to remain mere ideal. This is the hidden imperative of art. Its realization lies outside of art. (57-8)

Through the agency of the novel's historical sensuousness, the Nighthawks inside and (hopefully) outside the novel have been brought closer together, at least in understanding each other: towards the end, Nick says, "Marian and I are closer now, more intimate than we've ever been" (803). But Nick's loneliness persists to the end: "Most of our longings go unfulfilled. This is the word's wistful implication--a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach" (803). Real peace, unfortunately, is the novel's and the culture's lost sublime object.

### Epilogue

The fact that DeLillo presumes to access some reality principle, or human connectivity beyond ideology, constitutes a part of a larger cultural (or literary maybe) tidal shift. DeLillo's sublime realism is part of larger trend of what John MacClure calls a "post-secular project of resacralization" of fiction's representations of the world. DeLillo's work is postmodern, notes MacClure, in that it conceives human society as a radical plurality (145). But it is post-postmodern, or "post-secular," because "his work, while less formally and ontologically playful than that of other postmoderns, insistently interrogates secular conceptions of the real, both by focusing the reader's attention on events that remain mysterious or even 'miraculous,' and by making all sorts of room for religious or spiritual discourses and styles of seeing" (143). In other words, DeLillo sees spiritual principles of connection between sometimes radically different consciousnesses. The power to see these connections lies in a sensuous art and language. It is a sublime power or spirituality not in a totalizing, homogenizing force, but in the ongoing attempt at

mutual understanding through language and sense, the trading of sense and feeling through language (as with Lenny's "trading fours"). DeLillo recognizes a human need for transcendence and universals, but finds them in language and art that preserves plurality, a kind of multiplicity in unity. So while, for the moment, we are divided, lonely Nighthawks, we might achieve some kind of rapture in discovering our differences, and similarities.

Also, where postmodern art is characterized by irony and Jameson's "depthlessness" and "effortless secularity," DeLillo's work is post-postmodern, a mixed bag of irony and parody but also earnestness (MacClure 144, 146). DeLillo's aesthetic "moaning in earnest and in parody at the same time" spells out his ultimate ambivalence about--and perhaps the only aesthetic response/cure for--the postmodern heebiejeebies about the world being a meaningless, antisocial place. DeLillo's fiction and the medium itself are outfitted to explore the plurality of consciousness, perspectives, and feelings, like no other form can. And it is the postmodernist's guarantee that nothing is for certain that sustains personal freedom from ideological constraint. Fiction is the spiritual place where the author and the reader keep going after the not-quite-tellable sublime realities, the darker, noumenal forces of consciousness that operate below the surface of perceptible phenomena.

Language and fiction is the place where the sublime secrets of reality are "...retrieved, remarkably, in the sensuous drenching play of memory" ("Power" 7-8). And it is in language and fiction that we can find a sense of guilt-free political and spiritual connectivity. The alternative, to give up, is alienation.

It might be trite, but DeLillo is going after nothing more than Faulkner's old eternal verities, only in a newer time and argot. There *are* truths and secrets, and human universals and commonalities, despite the poststructuralist Baudrillardian hype. To deny this is to deny any sense of social and political responsibility, and forget spiritual feeling. Like Rosemary says: "A deep truth is what you want not a shallow truth. You want a position worth defending to the death. . . . if you could feel the soul of an experience, then you earned the right to say, Who's better than me?" (698, 700). And what else is art, but a restating of old truths in new language, and in an idiosyncratic syntax and intersection of experiences, voices, moods?

On the other hand, *Underworld* raises the question: are most people more like Edgar, actually fond of destruction--Fox TV programs that push stereotypes and snuff films? Burke thought for sure no one could really be into destruction, especially of other humans. But clearly the world (and its representation in DeLillo's novels) is full of sadists and pathologically apathetic proto-THKs, fully aware of themselves, but radically alienated from the rest of the planet: "I know who I am. Who is he?" (272). Immediately following this is that culture-wide lack of connectivity and empathy, an ideology of "The Cloud of Unknowing," beginning with Nick's statement of "*lontonanza*": "I've always been a country of one" (275). Eric Deming and the Bombheads in the Pocket suffer from the same condition, as well as Edgar Hoover:

Edgar looks at the faces around him, open and hopeful. He wants to feel a compatriot's nearness and affinity. All these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting

in the furrow of destruction. He tries to feel a belonging, an opening of his old stop-cocked soul. But there is some bitter condition he has never been able to name and when he encounters a threat from outside, from the moral wane that is everywhere in effect, he finds it is a balance to this state, a restoring force. (28)

You explain 20,000 empty seats, in other words, by our basic ambivalence, and maybe sadism? "It is clear to Edgar that the page is from *Life* and he tries to work up an anger, he asks himself why a magazine called *Life* would want to reproduce a painting of such lurid and dreadful dimensions. But he can't take his eyes off the page" (41). "Edgar loves this stuff. Edgar, Jedgar. Admit it--you love it" (50). He can barely take his eyes from "The Triumph of Death" to see "those who will light the city with their bliss" (51), just as Bill "barely shows an awareness that Cotter exists" (52). Or maybe we just don't know, or care to know, the facts of the real. That DeLillo's fiction takes on an aesthetic of sublimity and tries to turn it to social and spiritual good indicates that the chances increase for art's political message, as Marcuse hoped, and the novel form itself will be attended. But that's what good art always does--it makes us interested again in other human beings.

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