Recycling the American Wasteland: Don DeLillo’s Underworld

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Introduction

“The writer is the man or woman who automatically takes a stance against his or her government. There are so many temptations for American writers to become part of the system and part of the structure that now, more than ever, we have to resist. American writers ought to stand and live in the margins, and be more dangerous.”

(Don DeLillo, in an interview from 1988)

The ‘Great American Novel’: it is a widely debated and commented-on literary label, assigned throughout the history of American literature to those novels which attempt (and achieve) to grasp the American experience in its enormous, diverse and paradoxical nature. This dissertation will focus on what many critics, writers and readers consider the Great American Novel of the 1990s: Don DeLillo’s 1997 magnum opus Underworld. The work became a worldwide bestseller soon after its release, and up to today the literary critique on Underworld is booming. In 2006, DeLillo’s major novel was elected the runner-up in a list of the best American novels of the past twenty-five years by other contemporary American writers and literary critics in The New York Times (DeLillo had to leave the first place to Toni Morisson’s Beloved).

Don DeLillo (°1936), a son of Catholic Italian immigrants, was born and raised in the Italian Bronx neighborhood of New York City. He still lives in New York today. Don DeLillo published his first novel, Americana, in 1971 and has since written fourteen novels and three plays; his new novel Falling Man is about to be released at this moment (May 2007). DeLillo’s work explores the nature of American culture in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, with recurring themes such as violence (for example Libra, a novel about the Kennedy assassination, dating from 1988), the role of the mass media (for example White Noise, the 1985 National Book Award winner) and the excesses of capitalism (for example Cosmopolis, dating from 2003). In Underworld, DeLillo’s history of the Cold War and its end, these and other of his traditional themes culminate. Moreover, because of its attention to ethnic minorities (such as the Italian-Americans) and domestic life, Underworld has repeatedly been called DeLillo’s most autobiographic and intimate work. The dedication of Underworld, “to the memory of my mother and father”, contributes to this view.

Underworld is a massive historical novel, which in 827 pages tells the story, or better, the stories, of the second half of the twentieth century as it was experienced in America. The work’s structure is complex and original: the six main chapters proceed counter-clockwise from 1992 to 1951, while one storyline (“Manx Martin”) proceeds chronologically through one day: the third of October, 1951. Within the separate parts, moreover, there are shifts between different storylines, events and voices. Because of its wide scope, both panoramic and intimate, Underworld becomes what is often called an ‘encyclopedic’ novel: a work with a great variety of themes, characters, idioms and perspectives.

DeLillo’s 1997 novel surely is a great work of art. Is it also a ‘great’ American novel? In any case, Underworld succeeds in grasping the complexity of American society, the meaning of the Cold War and the crumbling of American Dreams. In doing so, Underworld shows the other side of America’s ‘greatness’. The novel provides a new perspective on American history and culture. The extremely allusive title of DeLillo’s major historical novel refers to the ‘underside’ of the United States: the side that the state and its discourse tend to mask or forget. Ten years after the publication of Underworld, the work still helps us understand our changing world. One could even say that DeLillo’s 1997 magnum opus becomes all the more interesting in a post-9/11 perspective. The novel is a warning for a new Cold War and ‘Us and Them’ distinctions, and resists a global, colonizing American discourse.

This dissertation will focus on the metaphor of waste in Underworld: an image which unites different levels of America’s underworld. The first chapter will deal with the more material, straightforward types of ‘waste’: waste as the counterpart of consumption and an indicator of toxicity, but also a new source of identity construction in contemporary American society. Therefore, I will depict the evolution in American culture that Underworld sketches, from the Cold War order to a ‘wasteland’. In the second chapter, I will investigate the more intimate level of ‘waste’ in Underworld, that of the personal trauma and memory of the ‘American self’. In doing so, I will focus on the main characters of the novel and their Bildung. The third and last chapter will study the link between art and waste in the novel, as it is by means of art that Underworld engages to recycle the American wasteland. The references made in this dissertation to Underworld (UW) concern the 1999 paperback edition from Picador.

This dissertation is an attempt to synthesize and contribute to the extensive critical literature on Underworld, as I believe that DeLillo’s novel is still highly relevant, both artistically and contextually. I would like to thank my promotor, professor Kristiaan Versluys, for his constructive criticism, clear commentary and encouraging tips. Thanks also go to guest professor Dennis Berthold from Texas A&M University, for his interesting and clarifying classes on American culture and literature. Of course, I also want to thank all my friends and loved ones in Ghent (especially Peter, Tom and Marieke from Luxemburgstraat 11) and my family and lifelong friends in Vorselaar. One more word of gratitude goes to the University of Santiago de Compostela and the wonderful people, from all over the world, that I met there. From all these people I drew the energy and courage to keep on asking questions and writing this dissertation.
Chapter I
Underworld and Waste as the Underside of the American Geoculture

I would like to salute
The ashes of American flags
And all the fallen leaves
Filling up shopping bags

(Jeff Tweedy, “Ashes of American Flags”, 2002)

1. Introduction & Theoretical Framework

In the words of a New York Times review, Don DeLillo’s Underworld is a novel about “America as a splendid junk heap” (Kakutani, 1997, no paging). Waste, indeed, could be considered the novel’s most prominent metaphor, as it appears all over the work: from recycling cans in family households, reused B-52 aircrafts in an artist’s atelier and remote storage sites for nuclear waste, to the wasted corners of The Bronx where the body of a murdered child is found. The author’s extensive spreading of waste and rubbish throughout the work, to achieve the allusion of its different meanings and shapes, is his main device in connecting the undercurrents of a half-century of changes in American society from the Cold War to a new, ‘more complex’ world order. By exposing undercurrents and interweaving multiple types of histories, Underworld provides a particular view on the nature of postwar American culture.

These connections, rather than a traditional narrative plot, constitute the thematic and formal structure of the work, as Gerald Howard says: “The unity of the book, its vast tapestry of characters, settings, and episodes, is created not so much by plot as by a weave of thematic connections.” (1997, no paging). To speak with the ‘slogan’ that returns as a refrain throughout Underworld: “everything is connected”- a refrain which refers to the American paranoid worldview (as Emily Apter (2006) suggests), but also a motto which might as well have preceded the novel itself, as a challenging thesis about contemporary culture and the way America perceives its own culture as well as the rest of the world. It is a bottom-line which challenges the American concept of history and image of present-day reality: what is real, what is unreal, and why?

Covering household garbage and memorabilia junk as well as nuclear waste, Underworld connects the stories of Americans living in a wasteland and dives into the lost histories that might account for this contemporary human condition. Therefore, “waste” is one of the novel’s most prominent binding leitmotifs. In his historically ambitious Underworld, dating from 1997, DeLillo is particularly concerned with the arrival of the twenty-first century, the third millennium. The evolution that America, and by expansion the whole modern world-system, experienced from the ‘Roaring 20s’ after World War I up to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the ‘new world order’, is
that of the expansion of capitalism and consumerism, paralleled by an accumulation of social inequality, trauma and, inevitably, waste.

Because of its semiotic richness in literature, but also its daily omnipresence in our lives, waste is an adequate image to express the *fin de siècle* crisis of a culture. It is a trope which synthesises the accumulation of different types of history and symbolizes the asymptote of a world-system in crisis, as waste is intrinsic to gain, and thus to the ‘welfare’ this system has generated. In this chapter, I will discuss the theme of waste in *Underworld* within a larger world-systemic and culture-critical framework. I will engage here in a reading of the novel on the level of American culture as part of a global system and generator of a global overruling discourse. Special attention will be paid to the problematic accumulation of waste, in its different forms. After a discussion of the prologue, the role of the Thomson baseball will be discussed. Then, I will discuss the way in which waste in *Underworld* becomes a symbol of paranoia, religion, and consequently, a means of identity construction in contemporary American society. Finally, the more toxic and ecological type of waste will be considered, that of weaponry and the decay in the Bronx. In a broader cultural sense, I will relate *Underworld*’s waste metaphor to the waning (or wasting) of the myths at the heart of the American Dream.

By way of introduction to a culture-critical framework on contemporary consumer culture and its underworld of waste, I would like to refer here to Baudrillard’s theory of consumption and Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis. Both critics offer relevant ideas with regard to the structures and dynamics that underlie contemporary (American) society and the ways in which American consumerism has come to dominate the world-system with its own discourse, supported by the expansion of technological power. *Underworld*, after all, is a reflection on the power of such global systems in opposition to humanity- to our own hearts and minds. In an interview with Maria Moss, Don DeLillo says:

> Nobody has more freedom than an American writer. But at the same time I think the writer in opposition is an idea that one has to take seriously. The writer opposed -in theory, in general principle- to the state, the corporation and to the endless cycle of consumption and instantaneous waste. In sort of an unconscious way, I think this is why writers, some of us, write long, complicated, challenging novels. As a way of stating our opposition to the requirements of the market. (DeLillo in Moss, 1997 : 94)

As well on a theoretical as on a thematic level, then, DeLillo seems to take a stance of opposition to the overarching system of the state and its discourse of consumption. Waste is an image *Underworld* uses to draw attention to the underside of this system.

### 1.1. Civilisation of the Object : The American Discourse as a Geoculture

I have already mentioned the term ‘(world-)system’ to refer to DeLillo’s preoccupation with global structures and powers, as well as their cultural effects. It seems relevant to me to frame DeLillo’s concern with system(s) in *Underworld*, as an ambitious historical novel, within the open paradigm of world-systems analysis. It was Immanuel Wallerstein, together with several other thinkers, who in
the 1960s and 70s developed the principles of this multidisciplinary analytical framework. World-systems analysis crosses the boundaries between different areas of scientific knowledge (Wallerstein, 2004 : x), uniting historical, sociological, economical and political aspects. The result is a useful framework for a better understanding of processes of globalisation, even for the study of fiction. As a descendant of Marxist thought, world-systems analysis -structuring the rise and self-declared future fall of the capitalist system in linear processes throughout time- is, however, often subject to critique because of its deterministic character. Wallerstein defines “three important turning points of our modern world-system”: The origin of the capitalist world-economy during the sixteenth century, the French Revolution of 1789 which accounted for the rise of centrist liberalism and the ‘world revolution’ of 1968 which initiated the final phase of the world-system we find ourselves in today: the decline of the “centrist liberal geoculture” (2004 : x).

One the one hand, then, world-systems analysis presents itself as an open paradigm, leaving space for the input of different branches of scientific knowledge. On the other hand, though, its fixed belief in determinism and world-economic “secular trends” (Wallerstein, 2004 : 31) does not allow for the introduction of other types of trends. Still, Wallerstein provides enough credible evidence for the idea that there are limits to capitalism’s “endless accumulation” (2004 : 24) and that the actual system cannot but come to an end, when it will “encounter problems that it can no longer resolve” (2004 : 76). DeLillo’s novel, as a movement of twentieth century American history towards an uncertain endpoint or apocalypse, a movement of accumulating waste, seems preoccupied with a similar idea. The question of ‘what comes after’ this phase of capitalism is a concern of both DeLillo and Wallerstein. It should be noted, of course, that as an American novelist, DeLillo is primarily concerned with the effects of this evolution on his country and its population.

Wallerstein is not ambiguous about the role of The United States in the modern world-system. In his 2006 essay “The Curve of American power”, he states that in the period from about 1945 until 1970, the USA “exercised unquestioned hegemony in the world-system” (2006 : 77). "Hegemony", in world-systems analysis, refers to “those situations in which one state combines economic, political, and financial superiority over other strong states, and therefore has both military and cultural leadership as well” (2004 : 94). Especially this element of “cultural leadership” (also called “geoculture”) is interesting here. The endless belief in ‘progress’ and individual freedom at the heart of American culture, then, is what seems to make capitalism a system that fits the American nation-state so well. To make clear how contemporary consumerism relates to the workings of the modern world-system and is part of that same discourse, I will turn to Baudrillard.

The French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard is one of the most prominent and ardent critics of contemporary consumerism. In The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures, 2 “Geoculture” is a term which “refers to norms and modes of discourse that are widely accepted as legitimate within the world-system” (Wallerstein, 2004 : 93).
Baudrillard investigates the motivations and forces that underlie the system of consumerism and finds that

\[ \ldots \text{the freedom and sovereignty of the consumer are mystification pure and simple. This carefully sustained mystique (preserved first and foremost by economists) of individual satisfaction and choice, which is the culmination of a whole civilization of 'freedom', is the very ideology of the industrial system, justifying its arbitrary power and all the collective nuisances it generates: dirt, pollution, deculturation. In fact, the consumer is sovereign in a jungle of ugliness where freedom of choice has been forced upon him.} \quad (1970 : 72, \text{Baudrillard's italics}) \]

In Baudrillard's radical view, consumer society is an inescapable prison trellised by the interdependence of the oppressing systems of needs and production. The liberal individuality of the Subject is a myth to Baudrillard, who considers human beings merely slaves of 'the Object'. He speaks of a "system of needs" because he finds that "needs are not produced one by one, (...) but are produced as consumption power (...)" (1970 : 74-75, his italics). There are of course natural and basic needs in any society, Baudrillard acknowledges, but

\[ \ldots \text{which marks our age as an age of consumption, is precisely the generalized reorganization of this primary level into a system of signs which reveals itself to be one of the specific modes, and perhaps the specific mode, of transition from nature to culture in our era.} \quad (\text{Baudrillard, 1970 : 79, his italics}) \]

According to Baudrillard then, consumerism has become a specific discourse, a mode of thinking, communicating and acting, and this is what differentiates our contemporary culture from any other era. This discourse has its counter-discourse or critical denunciations, but "the two sides taken together constitute the myth" (Baudrillard, 1970 : 195, his italics). This idea that the struggle of discourse versus counter-discourse is inherent to the system, is present in DeLillo's narrative as well. Part 4 of Underworld, for example, which is set in summer 1974, is entitled "Cocksucker Blues", after a Rolling Stones tour documentary which depicts the later decadence of the band. Mark Osteen remarks that "the title alludes to capitalism's capacity to consume its own opposition" (2000 : 249).

According to Baudrillard's radical pessimism, human identity is inevitably lost in this discourse of consumption:

\[ \text{In the generalized process of consumption, there is no longer any soul, no shadow, no double, and no image in the peculiar sense. There is no longer any contradiction within being, or any problematic of being and appearance. There is no longer anything but the transmission and reception of signs, and the individual being vanishes in this combinatory and calculus of signs.} \quad (1970 : 191). \]

Baudrillard thinks that our culture is defined by hyperrealist semiotics: we are consumed by a diabolic system of signs. The workings of such a “triumphant” system could have serious consequences, Baudrillard wrote in 1970 :

\[ \text{Now, we know that the Object is nothing and that behind it stands the tangled void of human relations, the negative imprint of the immense mobilization of productive and social forces which have become reified in it. We shall await the violent irruptions and sudden disintegrations which will come, just as unforeseeably and as certainly as May 1968, to wreck this white Mass.} \quad (1970 : 196) \]

Wallerstein marks this 'world revolution' of 1968 as the turning point in the struggle of the “antisystemic discourses”: "It was the combination of long-existing anger about the workings of the
world-system and disappointment with the capacity of the antisystemic movements to transform the world that led to the world revolution of 1968.” (2004 : 84). To Wallerstein, then, 1968 was a culmination point in the resistance against the dominating structures of the world-system. Baudrillard, however, holds a more sceptic position: “The rebels of May 1968 did not escape this trap of reifying objects and consumption excessively by according them diabolical value (…) Just as medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption and its denunciation.” (1970 : 195-196, Baudrillard’s emphasis). According to Baudrillard, then, denunciation is inherently included in the system and thus becomes consumed like any other object. The “world revolution” seems another symptom of an individualized culture to him, centralized around the Object. Wallerstein admits that the antisystemic movements only succeeded partly in their goals:

The long-term history of these movements is that by the late twentieth century, they had all achieved their ostensible primary objective: formal integration into citizenship- and none had achieved their subsequent objective, using their control of the states to transform societies. (2004 : 73).

Baudrillard (1970 : 196) states that we have come to a point at which we should realize that the Object is meaningless. If we assume, with Wallerstein (2004), that in the modern world-system the causes for cultural, economic and political oppositions are closely interwoven and consider “lonely chrome America” (UW, 84) as the prototype of the Object, we can say that with 9/11 the world has felt such a “sudden disintegration” and “violent interruption” of the overruling American discourse. The reasons for the finiteness of the modern world-system, both critics point out very logically, lie in its costs.

1.2. Waste as a Counterpart of the American Discourse

Indeed, in describing the processes of production and consumption that rule our modern world-system, Wallerstein and Baudrillard have pointed at the costs or consequences of such a system. Baudrillard, as cited above, refers to the “collective nuisances it generates: dirt, pollution, deculturation” (1970 : 72). Wallerstein discusses the “externalization of costs” (2004 : 47-48), an essential dynamic to the system, but one that will finally bring it down, when the system will not be able to pay or externalize its own costs anymore. Externalizing costs means that “a certain part of the costs of production are shifted from the balance sheet of the firm to that amorphous external entity, society” (Wallerstein, 2004 : 47). Among such costs are costs of toxicity:

Almost all production processes involve some kind of toxicity, that is, some kind of residual damage to the environment, whether it is disposal of material or chemical waste, or simply long-term transformation of the ecology. (2004 : 48)

Toxicity is one the reasons for the actual state of chaos in the world-system, according to Wallerstein (2004 : 81-82). When looking at the United States, we find that the country is responsible for the production of 200 million tons of household garbage each year, a disposal equal to that of Europe and followed by China (with 170 million tons). In an estimated yearly total of 3
billion tons of household garbage produced worldwide, then, The States hold a share of 6.6%. The average American individual disposes of 700 kilograms of household garbage a year. These figures are unmistakably indicative of the reverse of American consumerism: the huge amount of waste the country discards.

In the light of Baudrillard and Wallerstein, we could say that Underworld, as a complex and vast literary work of art, raises the question about the “possibility of fiction” (cfr. the title of a 2006 book on DeLillo by Peter Boxall) in a system that has the capability to devour its own counter-discourses. The novel expresses a state of distress about the millennial status of the geoculture that America has shaped. Its first line, “He speaks in your voice, American, and there’s a shine in his eye that’s halfway hopeful” (UW, 11), already suggests this tension between the overarching American discourse and its diversity of counter-discourses. The shine in the eye of the black Harlem kid Cotter, who attempts to sneak into the Polo Grounds stadium to watch a 1951 baseball game, is merely the hope of an insignificant individual from a minority group, consumed by a “metropolis of steel and concrete” (UW, 11). The narrator tells us that “it is hard to blame him”, as he “is just a kid with a local yearning but he is part of an assembling crowd” (UW, 11). Peter Boxall goes so far as to remark: “The casual and brutal colonisation of a billion voices with which Underworld begins is an expression of this control, a demonstration of the triumph of a global American power which is also a vast American death” (2006: 176).

Underworld pays a great deal of attention to the accumulation of waste that the dominating American geoculture has engendered; the novel even has its own ‘waste theorist’. As Nate Chinen states in his review of the novel, “DeLillo hides his most poignant commentary amidst the novel’s marginalia” (Chinen, 1997, no paging). This commentary is reserved for the minor character Jesse Detwiler, once a garbage guerrillero in the sixties and a waste analyst in the 1978 scenes of the novel. Detwiler has a specific theory about the accumulation of waste:

Civilization did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense. We had to find ways to discard our waste, to use what we couldn’t discard, to reprocess what we couldn’t use. Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics (UW, 287)

Jesse Detwiler’s theory seems merely a very short reflection within the massiveness of Underworld, but it summarizes an interesting idea behind the waste metaphor of the novel. Giving waste a prominent role in the novel is DeLillo’s means to point at an undercurrent of consumer culture and, in a historical sense, at its accumulative character. Of course, Detwiler’s theory might seem a pseudoscientific fantasy, but the point here is just that DeLillo wants his readers to look at (our) culture differently: we should think about what we leave behind, what we bury or discard and take

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3 Figures published in a newspaper article from De Standaard (26/12/2006), which refers to a not further specified “study published in France”; translation mine.
into account the consequences of this disposal. Therefore, looking at waste means looking at cultural (American) history in a different way.

Baudrillard’s and Wallerstein’s ideas about the modern world-system, the role of America and the toll of the system, then, form a useful framework in the analysis of the waste metaphor in *Underworld*. In the novel itself, we find Jesse Detwiler summarizing in a way this criticism on capitalism and its consumer society. The accumulation of waste has reached a point at which it cannot be ignored anymore, leading up to another view on American culture. “Consume or die. That’s the mandate of our culture”, Jesse Detwiler thinks. “And it all ends up in the dump” (*UW, 287-288*).

It should be noted, however, that DeLillo does not directly subscribe to the determinism of Wallerstein or the radical diabolism of Baudrillard. DeLillo does not speak of the ‘end of capitalism’ like Wallerstein (2006), who predicts that 2025 will bring the end of the modern world-economy, the moment when endless accumulation of capital will no longer be possible. Neither does DeLillo subscribe to Baudrillard’s idea of ‘hyperreality’, as Nicolas Marichal states: “*Underworld* is for the greater part a realistic work, and by no means a cybernovel as the final pages would suggest.” (*Marichal, 1999 : 55*). *Underworld* is preoccupied with the de- and reconstruction of ‘real’ meaning, but in doing so, the work precisely emphasizes the contradiction within being that Baudrillard so fiercely denies. The work is concerned with the gap between past and present and schizophrenic aspects of ‘the American self’, but if *Underworld* does make statements about reality and ‘unreality’ at all, the work’s philosophy comes closer to the point of view of Jonathan Culler, who states that “[one] of the characteristics of modernity is the belief that authenticity has been lost and exists only in the past (…)” (*Culler 1985 : 5*). As an American novelist concerned with the evolution of his country’s recent history, DeLillo investigates the effects of its cultural waste. This is what a writer can do to protest the toll of capitalism and the effects of an exaggerated consumerist discourse.

In the following, I will discuss David Evans’ view of the novel, pointing to his observation that waste in this stage of capitalism, ‘liquid modernity’, is reintegrated in production cycles. However, I believe that DeLillo’s attention to garbage is not merely an expression of nostalgia, as he states, but a broader concern about, and a parody on, the construction of identity in contemporary America.

### 1.2.1. Under-history and ‘Liquid Modernity’

When Brian Glassic, a waste manager of the waste management firm Whiz Co, stares at a huge landfill on Staten Island, he comes to the following insight:

He looked at all that soaring garbage and knew for the first time what his job was all about. (…) He dealt in human behaviour, people’s habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes, maybe their passions, certainly their excesses and indulgences but their kindness too, their
generosity, and the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us. The landfill showed him smack-on how the waste stream ended (...) (UW, 184)

All we can do, Brian Glassic thinks, is invent ways to deal with this enormous junk heap. Waste is history, as the critic Patrick O'Donell points out: “For Glassic, clearly relying on the figural cliché of ‘the trash heap of history’, the transportation and accumulation of waste represents human desire historicized.” (2000 : 155). This idea can be linked to Elisabeth Wesseling’s postmodernist conception of ‘alternate histories’: Underworld shows us “history turned upside down” (1991 : 164). Among many other examples (see for example Marichal : 1999), waste is a type of ‘counterhistory’ in Underworld, as the underside of the human consumption desires that have shaped contemporary society.

The place of waste in the recent history of the modern world-system is not unambiguous. In “Taking Out the Trash: Don DeLillo’s Underworld, Liquid Modernity, and the End of Garbage”, David Evans, referring to the theory of Zygmunt Bauman (2000), suggests that in the history of the modern world-system a shift from “heavy modernity” to “liquid modernity” takes place. In heavy modernity, “everything which cannot be converted into a functioning part of the system must not be simply ignored, but, one might say ‘included out’ ” (Evans, 2006 : 106). As a consequence, waste in heavy modernity is a typical category of “exclusion” from the system- a system which defined itself against those parts which were not organised, and which remained obdurately purposeless and unproductive. But it is in those parts that the individual and the particular- whatever resists conversion into a useful element in a larger process- finds the possibility of survival. (Evans, 2006 : 107)

In heavy modernity, then, Evans argues, there was a place for garbage in society, as it marked clear distinctions between the valuable or useful and the worth- or useless. It marked clear boundaries between order and disorder. In our contemporary stage of modernity, that of liquid modernity, “what counts is the rapidity with which participants can reconfigure and recycle assets, and mutate into new forms. Economic, and political, ascendency is no longer a matter of having, but of passing.” (Evans, 2006 : 108). As a consequence, Evans says, there is no place for garbage in liquid modernity, no place for “the real”, “idiosyncratic”, simply useless thing (Evans, 2006 : 109). Waste in liquid modernity, then, becomes integrated in “the cycle of production, consumption, and reproduction” (Evans, 2006 : 109).

In Underworld, indeed, the modern world-system stands on the threshold of liquid modernity- the stage of modernity that reaches its extremes in Cosmopolis. The waste that has accumulated throughout the history of modernity reaches problematic proportions in Underworld, and the novel searches for ways to deal with the problem of omnipresent waste. Turning waste into a consumer object itself, is, indeed, one of the proposed possibilities in the novel: “Bring garbage into the open (…)”, waste analyst Jesse Detwiler suggests. “Make an architecture of waste.” (UW, 286). However, I would not go so far as to say that DeLillo announces the “End of Garbage” in the sense that Evans suggests. Instead of celebrating waste as a reification of ‘the real’,
the undertone of the novel whispers that garbage is exactly the effect of what has estranged us from ‘the real’.

In Underworld, I would suggest, waste figures as an all-round preoccupation with the actual status of the world-system and the American geoculture. To state that DeLillo just writes about garbage because it is part of everyday life and triggers a nostalgia for ‘reality’, would be underestimating his metaphorical craftwork. Daily garbage, after all, remains merely one of the aspects of waste in the novel. There is nuclear waste, memorabilia rubbish and waste management as well. Interestingly, Don DeLillo sees himself as a writer in opposition to the “endless cycle of consumption and instantaneous waste” (DeLillo in Moss, 1997 : 94). Underworld’s interest in garbage is not so much a nostalgia for heavy modernity, but rather a societal and ecological concern. Waste tells us something about how we have shaped the world as a collectivity of human beings, and how it falsely presents an excessive consumerist culture as our nature.

Evans resists the many different interpretations of Underworld’s garbage trope in literary criticism, for “what all these interpretations share is an unwillingness to let garbage be garbage.” (Evans, 2006 : 111). In Evans’ reading of the novel, DeLillo’s attention to garbage is merely a celebration of our daily reminders of reality: “Underworld is itself an attempt to make space available for such everyday things- or more precisely the novel is that space” (Evans, 2006 : 131). This is of course partly true. Underworld is, amongst other things, a microscopic study of daily American life throughout the last decades of the twentieth century and certainly a quest for “the real”.

I agree, then, with David Evans when he finds that “one of the things that inspires the immense effort of [Underworld] is a conviction that the fate of garbage is closely connected to the fate of realism, and to the fate of whatever remains to us of reality as well” (Evans, 2006 : 104). But it is not a nostalgia for “real” things such as garbage that DeLillo expresses, but a longing for the world under this garbage. If objects of rubbish, like the baseball (see part 2 of this chapter), trigger memories of the past and therefore glimpses of “the real”, DeLillo rather parodizes the idea that waste is a postmodernist way to construct identity in American culture. Waste in Underworld, indeed, is also a metaphor of parody: it expresses new, artificial ways of imposing meaning and order onto a disordered culture that finds itself in crisis. When Nick Shay, as a waste analyst, “longs for the days of disorder” (UW, 810), he expresses a desire to escape this artificial order he is confronted with daily. With his job as a “waste executive”, he feels fake, a made man: “The corporation is supposed to take us outside ourselves” (UW, 89). Nevertheless, Nick tries to believe that he “lived responsibly in the real” (UW, 82). Not coincidentally, Underworld’s structure goes back in time, undoing the landfill that America has become.

Even in the era of liquid modernity, landfills are still necessary and nuclear waste -being traded or not- keeps adding up. Therefore, the problem of waste in Underworld is situated in its process of accumulation, disposal and recycling and not in a nostalgia for the times when garbage was just out on the streets, real and useless. The waste metaphor of Underworld confronts humanity with the effects of its culture. The novel is a quest for new forms of human community,
but also questions the unequal equilibrium between humanity and its environment: an ecological
disconnection with cultural effects. Therefore, we should not be misled by the suggestion of “false
spirituality” in many of the voices in Underworld and make a distinction between the way in which
DeLillo uses the image of waste often as a figure of parody, and the broader subtext that underlies
this narrative, to which we will return.

1.3. Conclusion
It is clear by now that DeLillo’s concern with waste, as the underworld of production and
consumption, should be read as a broader concern about the effects of America’s geoculture and
the future of its society. From the preceding theoretical framework on world-systems analysis,
consumerism as a discourse and the meaning of waste in Underworld, I will now turn to the
evolution of American postwar culture in Underworld, focussing on how the tension between the
Bomb and consumerist optimism is replaced by the omnipresence of waste. In this way, I want to
extend on Nicolas Marichal’s U.S. Orpheus (1999), in which the decline of the Cold War as a
metanarrative is studied. First, I will engage in a discussion of the Prologue and the role of the
Thomson homer baseball in the novel, pointing out how the baseball forms a counterpart to
DeLillo’s dramatization of American mass culture, as a means to retrace the past and an ‘American
self’.

2. The Baseball Myth

2.1. The Triumph of Death
The American 1950s were a decade of new welfare that revived the ideal of the American Dream,
as A People and a Nation tells us:

Television gave Americans a shared set of experiences and helped create a homogeneous, white-
focused, middle-class culture. Americans also found common ground in a new abundance of
consumer goods. After decades of scarcity, Americans had a dazzling array of consumer goods from
which to choose, and even utilitarian objects got two-tone paint jobs or rocket-ship details. People
used consumer choices to express personal identities and claim status. (Norton e.a., 2007 : 545).

During the 1950s, then, The United States reconstructed itself as a nation, reaping the benefits of
its new economic boom. “The placid nineteen-fifties”, a character in a 1974 scene of the novel
muses. “Everybody dressed and spoke the same way. It was all kitchens and cars and TV sets” (UW,
410). In the Prologue to Underworld, the narrator tells us: “In a country that’s in a hurry to make
the future, the names attached to the products are an enduring reassurance.” (UW, 39). He thus
suggests that in the American society of the 1950s, as a result of rapid technological development
and Cold War tensions, consumerism became a resort for Americans to reconstruct certainty and

The opening fifty pages of Underworld, which were already published earlier as the short story Pafko at the Wall, are a dazzling panoramic description of the legendary 1951 baseball game between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants. The Giants won the pennant thanks to a home run by Bobby Thomson. In this prologue, entitled “The Triumph of Death”, we find DeLillo vividly rendering a legendary American mass gathering. In her introduction to Reminiscence and Recreation in Contemporary American Fiction Stacey Olster writes:

In accounting for shifts in historical perspective, critics like to single out the impact of overwhelming events, working on the assumption that great events alone produce great change in consciousness. But the 1950’s, sandwiched between two especially explosive decades, was a relatively placid period that still produced the origins of that radical redirection of sensibility that we call post-modernism. (Olster, 1989 : 5)

The 1951 baseball game is an event that reappears throughout the rest of the novel, living on in the memory of different characters. DeLillo has singled out this game as “an example of some unrepeatable social phenomenon” (DeLillo, 1997a, no paging). Being a typical example of the author’s interest in counterhistory, the game is actually represented as an “overwhelming event”, marginalizing another historical “shot heard around the world”: the exploding of an atomic bomb by the Soviets. Juxtaposing the beginning of the Cold War and an unrepeatable type of American union, Underworld starts at a breaking point indeed. This is the end of an era and the beginning of a new one, leading us into the “placid” fifties which, however, as Olster points out, already carry the undertone of a “radical redirection of sensibility”. In this respect, the mid-century image of America in Underworld is actually redirected by three shots: Thomson’s homer, the Soviet atomic explosion and –later in the novel, but in 1952 in historical chronology- Nick’s shooting of the mysterious waiter George (see Chapter 2). As David Evans states: “[If] [The Prologue] is, in some sense, an allegory of Cold War anxieties, it also need to be read as a metaphor for the final stage of heavy modernity” (Evans, 2006 : 117). With the Prologue, DeLillo shifts from a united perspective on American history to a fragmented one. It marks the ‘beginning of waste’ in Underworld, the beginning of a shattered America.

But why does DeLillo open his novel with a baseball game? “Longing on a large scale is what makes history” (UW, 11), we read in the first page of the novel. Mark Osteen remarks:

What better emblem of such longing than baseball? (…) Baseball has long been associated -sometimes unconvincingly- with fundamental American myths and ideologies: rags-to-riches individualism, the relationship between fathers and sons, the demise of the pastoral, and most of all with a nostalgic desire to return home that is incorporated into the very structure of the game. (Osteen, 2000 : 218)

Baseball obviously has a significant presence in the novel, albeit mostly in an indirect form, as a trigger for memory. As Osteen points out in the excerpt quoted above, baseball is a typical metaphor for the American Dream. Baseball divides America into winners and losers, but at the same time unites people in the magnetic power of the game, its “longing” and “nostalgic desire”. Therefore it is one of the many examples of the central tension between fusion and fission in the
In “Baseball as Aesthetic Ideology”, John Duvall (1995) discusses how baseball in American culture has the hidden meaning of ‘the game of the nation’, with the intention to serve as a nationalistic melting element and thus to overarch the pluralistic nature of the United States. Throughout Underworld, DeLillo shows how this American baseball myth, that is represented so triumphantly at the beginning of the novel and functions as a symbol for the Cold War, is wasted.

American mass culture, symbolized in Underworld by baseball, masks exclusion from the system, as John Duvall (1995) points out. Just like waste is excluded from the system of consumerism, but inherent to it, so are people excluded from the society this system has generated. In Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis, this exclusion -most significantly, but not merely, of racial minorities- is a central concept:

The political history of the modern world-system in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries became the history of a debate about the line that divides the included from the excluded, but this debate was occurring within the framework of a geoculture that proclaimed the inclusion of all as the definition of good society. (Wallerstein, 2004 : 60, his italics)

Wallerstein thus (indirectly) points to another paradox at the heart of American culture: while in theory the American Dream promises to each individual the inclusion and fulfilment of his own longings, this in reality becomes the privilege of only a part of America. “Inclusion of All” is another American myth which throughout Underworld is proved to be hypocritical. Exclusion, and especially racial issues, receive attention at different times in the novel, especially in DeLillo’s depiction of the 50s and 60s decades, as these were turbulent times in terms of the struggle of the antisystemic movements in the USA.

Also in the prologue, DeLillo is concerned with the issue of racial minorities. The 1951 baseball game brings together Cotter Martin and Bill Waterson, a black kid from Harlem and a middle-class white businessman. Once both start to struggle to get hold of the baseball Bobby Thomson hit into the stands, however, their initial comradeship suddenly seems to be undone, Bill “flashing a cutthroat smile” at Cotter (UW, 49). This struggle for the baseball at the end of the Prologue is an allegory for the capitalistic dog-eat-dog race for possession and accumulation in American society. The fact that black boy Cotter finally runs away with the baseball instead of the white businessman Bill Waterson, is one of the whispers of minority resistance that are amplified in Underworld, as opposed to the dominant discourse, “the American voice” of capitalism. John Duvall thinks:

What Bill fails to realize is the contradictory nature of the discourse surrounding (and constituting his belief in) baseball; that is, the very sport that is supposed to insure the stability of the status quo of America as a world superpower, of middle-class hegemony at home and of the subjection of the racial other (the Japanese, the African American)- also is supposed to teach courage, independence, and risk-taking. (1995 : 299)

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4 Throughout their writings on Underworld, both Mark Osteen (2000) in “Containment and Counterhistory in Underworld” and Nicholas Marichal (1998 ) in U.S. Orpheus: Descending into Don DeLillo’s Underworld also refer to the nuclear structures of fusion and fission in the novel. They do not, however, directly apply this idea to the baseball theme of the novel.
The black kid Cotter, then, is eventually the one who has the ‘real American’ courage, independence and risk.

In opposition to the poor Harlem kid Cotter stands the other side of America: the decadence of fictionalized showbiz stars Frank Sinatra and Jackie Gleason, the legendary restaurant-holder Toots Shor and FBI-director John Edgar (‘Jedgar’) Hoover, who were all historically there at the day of the game. Especially the fact that Hoover attended the game was appropriate to the DeLillo, as “it meant that [he] had someone in the Polo Grounds who was intimately connected to what had happened in Kazakhstan” (DeLillo in Howard, 1997, no paging). In Underworld, the fictionalized Edgar receives the news about the Soviet explosion while he is watching the game, which makes him think about the two events in a different, connected way:

All these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction. (UW, 28)

This is when waste appears. In contrast to the Triumph of America and its Consumerist Dream stands the Triumph of Death (or the Triumph of Waste). The narrator of The Prologue sees the crowd as “generational tides of beer and shit and cigarettes and peanut shells and disinfectants and pisses in the untold millions” (UW, 21), in other words as streams of consumers who come and go, leaving behind their waste. During the game, spectators throw all kinds of paper snippets from the stands, as a sort of confetti rain celebrating the grandeur of the game. At one point, the narrator of the Prologue focuses on a man tearing pages from the magazine Life:

He is moved to do this by the paper falling elsewhere, the contagion of paper- it is giddy and unformulated fun. (…) It brings him into contact with the other paper throwers and with the fans in the lower deck who reach for his pages and catch them- they are all a second force that runs parallel to the game. (UW, 38)

Symbolically, a magazine page from Life falls down on J. Edgar Hoover’s shoulder: a reproduction of the Brueghel painting The Triumph of Death:

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. (UW, 41)

This paper rain or “happy garbage” (UW 45) thus creates a sense of community among the spectators of the game, but at the same time these snippets are no more than shared litter which is infused with a new meaning. Life is symbolically torn apart, as an omen for the emergence of the wasteland suggested by “The Triumph of Death”. It is no coincidence that at the beginning of the actual first part of the novel (“Long Tall Sally”), set forty-one years later, we find ourselves suddenly in a desert scenery.

It is obvious by now that The Prologue of Underworld launches one of the main paradoxes upon which the rest of the novel is constructed. Patrick O’Donnell observes:
The prologue of *Underworld* offers a theatricalization of the conflicting senses of history that inform the novel’s multiple narratives, but all—no matter how contradictory—reflect identifications between individuals or the crowd and history as the record of collective desire. (2000: 151).

The power of the crowd and the optimistic, capitalist American Dream—with baseball as its ultimate symbol—stand in grim contrast to the tone of exclusion and morbidity that underlies the description of the game. Generating divisions between individuals, but at the same time a sense of belonging together, the game and the waste that surrounds it are an adequate parallel to the Cold War itself, referring to the balance of power and the meta-frame that held together the USA in anxious days inherent to it.

DeLillo’s approach of the baseball theme must thus be read as a wider interest in different kinds of history. In his essay “The Power of History”, DeLillo explains how he came to the idea of connecting the Soviet atomic explosion with Thomson’s legendary homer:

> What did I see in this juxtaposition? Two kinds of conflict, certainly, but something else, maybe many things—I could not have said at the time. Mostly, though, the power of history. (...) The home run that won the game—soon to be known, vaingloriously, as “The Shot Heard ’Round the World”—had found its vast and awful counterpoint. A Russian mushroom cloud. (DeLillo, 1997a)

In the Bronx, 1951, the science teacher Albert Bronzini learns about the events in a similar way (UW, 668). This is the central undercurrent that flows through The Prologue, as much as through the rest of the novel’s Cold War scenes: the conflict creates a sense of morbidity and threat, paradoxically overarching mid-century American optimism; a tension which will define the following decades significantly. This sense of *vanitas* is evoked as the 1951 pennant is gradually wasted: “Shouts, bat-cracks, full bladders and stray yawns, the sand-grain manyness of things that can’t be counted. It’s all falling indelibly into the past” (UW, 60). What remains, is the Thomson baseball itself.

### 2.2. A Tradition of Rubbish: The Thomson Baseball

“Fiction”, DeLillo says at the conclusion of his essay “The Power of History”, “is all about reliving things. It is our second chance” (DeLillo, 1997a, no paging). Waste is a type of counterhistory in *Underworld*: it can function as the small, tangible and real thing remaining from the fast-forward streams of the consumption which characterize the actual workings of the modern world-system. Waste, then, can be about “reliving things”. In “Junk and Rubbish: A Semiotic Approach", Jonathan Culler, discussing the work of Mary Douglas and Michael Thompson, studies the meaning of “stuff that does not pollute or defile, that is not taboo but just junk” (Culler, 1985: 4):

> (...) a lot of the junk people collect is of this sort: relics, remnants, and representations of things done, seen, and admired. This is rubbish because it has no use value, nor any value in an economic system of exchange; it has only the signifying function of a marker, and its very inferiority to what it marks makes it rubbish. (Culler, 1985: 5)

Being a special, personal type of waste, memorabilia and other “used stuff” play a significant role in *Underworld*. 17
Culler writes that “one aspect of the problem of cultural rubbish is the conflict between the value systems of transience and durability” (Culler, 1985 : 10). It is obvious that this tension controls Underworld to a large extent, as several characters deal with rubbish as a way of working through the past or in order to reclaim a lost era. The artist Klara Sax repaints B52’s, and colleagues Big Sims and Nick Shay discuss a Charlie ‘Bird’ Parker photograph from the 50’s and the legendary 1951 baseball goes through a whole chain of possession. “With the predominance in our culture of the system of transience, rubbish has come to be more important, since it is the point of interchange, the only way the transient can become durable”, Culler writes (1985 : 10). In Underworld, the most significant example of such rubbish that is used to make the transient durable is the Thomson homer baseball. As Osteen says, “each owner then imbues [the ball] with his own personality” (Osteen, 2000 : 232). The ball goes through a chain of American hands and is a symbol of the “E Pluribus Unum”-motto of fusion and fission at the heart of American culture. The varying ownership of the baseball connects characters in their collective memory, but intrinsically has a divisive power. The ball, after all, remains an object of individual possession, with personal meanings and memories attached to it.

In his book Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative, Patrick O’Donnel analyses the treatment of postmodern history in contemporary American literature and film. He states:

Underworld simply proposes that paranoia is not all of the story: there are other historical processes at work, that are partially reliant on and yet radical departures from the paranoid view of history that seems so symptomatic of the postmodern condition. (O’Donnel, 2000 : 149)

Indeed, in the study of postmodern culture, and with it in the study of DeLillo’s oeuvre as well, the main focus has most often been on contemporary cultural paranoia: critics like to refer to the significance of media and violence, like for example Johnston (1998) and Simmons (1997). Of course, these aspects are main concerns in DeLillo’s magnus opus too. But Underworld makes clear that to understand our “postmodern human condition”, if there were ever such a thing, we must consider other historical forces as well. The baseball lineage, as one of the structuring ‘waste’ elements of the novel, is an example of how the American history of private longings creates other stories than merely an overarching discourse of Cold War or contemporary paranoia. The leitmotif of the baseball is one of DeLillo’s means to connect the more intimate American stories of longing contained in Underworld- the stories of how transience is sought to be contained in a durable object. As Evans remarks:

The ball, by its exit from the field of play, becomes simultaneously useless and intensely valuable. As it ceases to serve a purpose in the closed circuit of the baseball game, as one ball interchangeable with others, it becomes a singular non-identical object, the synecdoche of the singular event it commemorates. (Evans, 2006 : 119).

DeLillo devotes several intervals to the fate of the 1951 baseball. While the reader follows a piece of rubbish, moreover, DeLillo consigns another myth (that of baseball as a father-and-son tradition) to the dustbin of American culture.
The three “Manx Martin” intersections of the novel, which progress chronologically as opposed to the main parts that count down from the 90s to the 50s, are characterized by unity of time and place: they are set in Harlem on the third of October 1951, the day of the game. In this way, DeLillo explores one intimate father-and-son history and at the same time wants to illustrate that the game -and its broader significance in American culture- has actually never stopped happening. The first one in the chain of possession to take home the Thomson baseball is Cotter Martin, a black kid from Harlem who skips school to watch the game and manages to sneak in without a ticket. He feels the game is an opportunity to him, a chance he just cannot miss. He is running freely, finding his own way into the stadium:

(...) this is how the dark-skinned kid seems to open to the world, how the bloodrush of a dozen strides brings him into eloquence. Then he leaves his feet and is in the air, feeling sleek and unmussed and sort of businesslike, flying in from Kansas City with a briefcase full of bank drafts (UW, 13).

It is Cotter’s American Dream to be part of the crowd that gathers to watch the game. The thousands of lives that cross that third of October at the Polo Grounds, the day the Cold War “begins”, merge into one piece of memorabilia junk as Bobby Thomson hits the ball into the stands. If the falling paper snippets paradoxically refer to how fragmentation and waste are collective phenomena or create “many out of one”, the compactness of the baseball makes “one out of many”. Cotter, in his own home run, takes home the most precious souvenir one could ever think of to remember the game.

The ball in itself has no meaning or value and its image functions rather as a sort of mockery in Underworld. Its value is merely situated it what it refers to: “it has only the signifying function of a marker, and its very inferiority to what it marks makes it rubbish” (Culler, 1985 : 5). Its metaphorical infinite roundness and endlessly generated network of connections make the ball a piece of rubbish that is the subject of a quest throughout the novel, as a sort of grail with an uncanny attractive power. Just for a day, Cotter becomes the “Lord of the Ball” and seems to have run from rags to riches, were his father Manx not to intrude in his Dream.

The father-and-son myth is inversed and parodied in Underworld. To Cotter, baseball has more meaning than to Manx. Cotter has to convince his father that he really owns the ball from the home run that won the pennant and later Manx feels “separated from what he’s saying” (UW, 539) when showing the ball to his friends. Being raised in a poor black family, Cotter strikes his father emotionally when he explains how he entered the stadium without paying for a ticket:

Cotter sees a kind of panic building, an intimate guilt that he has brought about by mentioning money, the ancient subject of being broke. (...) This is a terrible moment, one of those times when Cotter realizes he has won a struggle he didn’t know was taking place. He has beat his father into surrender, into awful withdrawal. (UW, 147).

As Mark Osteen writes, Manx and his family represent the “specific economic and social trauma of African-American men and their erasure from official records” (Osteen, 2000 : 231). Manx feels disappointed and angry, but at the same time he also wants to make baseball a secretive and binding
thing between his son and him, as the American myth wants it. Eventually however, he cannot stand
the presence of this rubbish in his house and steals the ball from his son to sell it, as a way of taking
revenge for, on the one hand, the distance between him and his son, and, on the other hand, the
American mythology that he resist to take part in. Cotter’s mother tells Manx that their son wants
to be “left alone to grow up without advice from you” (UW, 149). Cotter indeed wants to realize
his personal longings. The baseball is his way to escape from his roots, albeit an escape that, as far
as we now, reaches not further than memories or dreams. Cotter longs for “the world out there”:

In school they tell him sometimes to stop looking out the window. This teacher or that teacher.
The answer is not out there, they tell him. And he always wants to say that’s exactly where the
answer is. (UW, 147).

The fact that Manx steals the ball from his son, punishing him in a way for what Cotter has done to
Manx’ pride, illustrates Manx’ resistance to Cotter’s personal home run: he cannot be a father like
other American fathers and feels separated from the America of baseball. At the same time though,
Manx too is fascinated by the ball and proud that his son got hold of it.

In his nightly trip through Harlem, looking for baseball fanatics who might be interested to
buy the Thomson baseball, Manx meets Charlie Wainwright and his son Chuckie. They start talking
and Manx tells Charlie that he has four children:

“Four,” Charlie says, and in his look there is admiration, sympathy and some wonder as well, and
something else Manx can’t quite identify- maybe just the sense of different lives, a thing that has
nothing directly to do with the number of kids. (…) But not just different lives. Completely other
ways of thinking and doing. And Manx isn’t sure if they’re supposed to be sad about this. He’s ready
to do whatever’s called for. (UW, 648-649)

The sense of estranging otherness that Manx feels, meeting a different father and son, seems to be
surmounted when Charlie and he “do the honors” (UW, 649): they exchange the flask of whiskey
and the ball for a while, as a way of creating comradeship in the streets. After a while, they come to
the point of the bargain: Manx finally sells the baseball to Charles for all the money he has got with
him, not knowing exactly whether he has made a good deal or not. The attention DeLillo pays to
this particular bargain is not coincidental. The scene describes a type of trade that stands in grim
contrast to the anonymous and countless streams of products and money today and triggers a
nostalgic sense of lost community. A mystifying, unique object is being exchanged in a slow and
personal way, between two very different American fathers, each of which catches a glimpse of the
other’s different life. The Manx Martin story ends when Manx goes back home, waiting for Cotter
to wake up. The reader, in this way, never gets to know Cotter’s reaction. This ends the Manx
Martin story in an open, but also rather saddening way, as Cotter’s longings eventually seem to end
up unfulfilled.

The transition of the ball from Charles to Chuckie Wainwright is a second denunciation of
the father-and-son baseball myth. Flying above Vietnam in a B52-bomber in 1969, Chuckie thinks
about his father and the baseball from the 1951 game: “But he couldn’t think of his father without
regretting the loss of the one thing he'd wanted to maintain between them. That was the baseball his dad had given him as a trust, a gift, a peace offering, a form of desperate love and a spiritual hand-me-down" (UW, 611). Chuckie’s father is a fan who even has his own “baseball shrine” (UW, 528) with memorabilia. He knows that his son does not care about anything that has to do with baseball, and this hurts him:

Chuckie didn’t care. But Charlie did and it was painful. How could he give such an emotional object, whatever ambiguity throbbed in the ball's corked heart, to his aimless wayward aging kid, a displaced person in his own life? (UW, 531)

Like Cotter hurts his father with his confession about sneaking in at the Polo Grounds without paying for a ticket, Chuckie hurts Charles with his indifference about the game. He is more generally worried about the distance between his son and him, much like Manx Martin and Nick Shay have the feeling that there is an unbridgeable generational gap between their sons and themselves. With Chuckie, the ball seems to get lost: “The ball he’d more or less lost. (…) One of those distracted events that seemed to mark the inner nature of the age” (UW, 611). Losing such rubbish, or disposing of it, seems a natural thing to Chuckie: he belongs to a new generation who cannot retrace the meaning of the ball. Nevertheless, his loss of the baseball causes a feeling of guilt towards his father.

The man who reveals the connections and retraces the baseball after its loss by Chuckie is baseball lunatic Marvin Lundy. When he is waiting for Chuckie Wainwright in his quest for the baseball in 1978, a smell reminds him of his honeymoon through Eastern Europe. Marvin is extremely paranoid about anything that has to do with Soviets or The East, a phobia which is expressed by his bowel movements or “BMs” (UW, 310). Baseball to Marvin Lundy is intrinsically connected with the Cold War, another conflict about winners and losers. In a 1980s scene where Brian Glassic visits Marvin, Marvin wants Brian to think about the link between baseball memorabilia and the Cold War. Brian initially does not understand this deeper meaning of baseball:

“I thought we were going to talk baseball.”
“We’re talking baseball. This is baseball. You see the clock,” Marvin said. “Stopped at three fifty-eight. Why? Is it because that’s when Thomson hit the homer off Branca?”
He called him Branker.
“Or because that’s the day we found out the Russians exploded an atom bomb (…)” (UW, 171)

This dialogue between Brian Glassic and Marvin Lundy is I believe one of the earliest crucial scenes in Underworld, as it is one of the passages in which DeLillo straightforwardly unfolds the Cold War philosophy upon which the novel, to a large extent, is constructed. In Underworld, artifacts from the Cold War period, with the 1951 baseball as the most important example, constitute missing connections between past and present and trigger reflection about contemporary alienation, longing for clear-cut meanings and the construction of identity.

Every baseball owner in Underworld tries to make the transient durable, through rubbish that is over and over reinserted with identity. In this way, possessing the ball is an attempt to deal
with a personal past. As a Dodger fan and the final owner of the baseball, having bought the ball from Marvin, protagonist Nick Shay (as we will see more extensively in Chapter 2) remembers the 1951 baseball game as a loser: he symbolically confesses that he “died inside when they lost” (UW, 93). A waste analyst with a well-paid job and “a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix” (UW, 66), Nick at the end of the novel thinks that “most of our longings go unfulfilled” (UW, 803). The Dodgers’ defeat against The Giants more or less runs parallel to the close of an episode in Nick’s life, viz. the days when he was “alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real” (UW, 810). The Dodgers lost the pennant, but Nick also lost his father Jimmy, who disappeared mysteriously one day when he “went out to buy cigarettes”. In this way, Nick never experienced baseball as a father-and-son tradition. The ball to him is the reification of loss, much like Marvin’s memorabilia mania is a way of working through the loss of his wife Eleanor. Towards the end of the novel, Nick links his estrangement from his wife Marian to the presence of collected objects in his house:

I think I sense Marian missing in the objects on the walls and shelves. There is something somber about the things we’ve collected and own, the household effects, there is something about the word itself, effects, the lacquered chest in the alcove, that breathes a kind of sadness- the wall hangings and artifacts and valuables- and I feel a loneliness, a loss, all the greater and stranger when the object is relatively rare and it’s the hour after sunset in a stillness that feels unceasing. (…) This is how I came to the baseball, rearranging books on the shelves. I look at it and squeeze it hard and put it back on the shelf, wedged between a slanted book and a straight-up book, an expensive and beautiful object that I keep half hidden, maybe because I tend to forget why I bought it. (UW, 808-809)

Nick’s “mystery of loss” (UW, 97) is another thread of the wired texture that constitutes the ball. As a ball is round, it can be turned over and over again in search of its essential core or meaning, which, however, can never be discovered:

Marian caught me once looking at the ball. I was standing at the bookshelves with the ball in my hand and she thought it was like Hamlet gazing on Yorick’s skull or maybe Aristotle, even better she said, contemplating the bust of Homer. That was nice, we thought. Rembrandt’s Homer and Thomson’s Homer. We smiled at that. (UW, 132)

Peter Boxall (2000 : 185) suggests that this parallel with Yorick’s skull in Shakespeare’s Hamlet means that both the ball and the skull function as existential symbols, referring to the mystery of transience and durability, of death and life.

The ball is also seen as an object which has the ability to fill the ellipses in the record of history. Marvin Lundy himself confesses that the ball is merely rubbish, whose meaning lies in its connecting power:

Strange how he was compiling a record of the object’s recent forward motion while simultaneously tracking it backwards to the distant past. Sometimes he thought he was seeing the ball sort of fly by. (…) The ball brought no luck, good or bad. It was an object passing through. But it inspired people to tell him things, to entrust family secrets and unbreathable personal tales, emit heartfelt sobs onto his shoulder. (UW, 318).

The baseball is rubbish, but it is recycled rubbish- moreover, rubbish that is over and over being recycled. The recycling power of the baseball is most obvious in the hands of its final owner,
protagonist Nick Shay. As Peter Boxall writes: “It is perhaps this capacity of the baseball to yield up historical secrets that makes it so valuable to Nick Shay.” (Boxall, 2006 : 184). The ball is merely one of the dots of the junk heap America, but one which thanks to its semiotic richness generates or recycles many other connections and in this way can be considered the core Object of Underworld.

Nevertheless, there is an ironic layer to the important role of the baseball, as “we know that the Object is nothing and that behind it stands the tangled void of human relations” (Baudrillard, 1970 : 196). Big Sims, the negro director of the waste management company Whiz Co, for example suggests that baseball even has a divine status:

“You believe in God ?”, he said.
“Yes, I think so.”
“We’ll go to a ball game sometime.”
(UW, 303)

Big Sims does not, however, understand that Nick attaches so much value to the baseball of the 1951 pennant: “I deal in other kinds of waste. The real stuff of the world. Give me disposable diapers by the ton. Not the melancholy junk from yesteryear” (UW, 99). Brian Glassic, another one of Nick’s colleagues, tries to explain to Big Sims the value the ball has to Nick:

“He thinks about what it means”, Glassic said. “It’s an object with a history. He thinks about losing. He wonders what it is that brings bad luck to one person and the sweetest of fortune to another. It’s a lovely thing in itself besides. An old baseball? It’s a lovely thing, Sims. And this one’s got a pedigree like no other.”

“He got taken big time,” Sims said. “He’s holding a worthless object.”
(UW, 99)

Ruth Helyer remarks that “(…) like the corpse of a loved one, none of [the Thomson baseball’s] recipients ever seems to know what to do with it, other than revere it and put it away somewhere safe” (1998 : 993).

Cold War memorabilia rubbish such as the baseball, as waste of an uncanny paradoxical era, is not meaningful in itself. It is only valuable because of its semiotic richness, which makes it -as a metaphor- all the more interesting to a novelist like DeLillo. The dot theory of reality, which brought Marvin to the baseball, is also the theory of how the baseball, as an artifact, is itself a dot which generates countless other dots. Meaning and authenticity might be lost in contemporary culture, but Underworld is exactly an attempt to retrace and recreate such meanings, as Tanenbaum suggests, in discussing Jameson’s Postmodernism:

Underworld thereby approaches the particular artifacts of the Cold War period not with the fetishism Jameson identifies in nostalgic representations of the period and of the fifties in particular but with an attention to their context that serves to recreate rather than diminish notions of authenticity, originality and meaning. (Tanenbaum, 2003 : 60).

Underworld’s position towards such waste does neither abide with Baudrillard’s hyperrealism. The characters in the novel are more than just receivers and transmitters of signs. If not, Marvin Lundy and the other baseball owners, connected by waste, would not be able to infuse their possession of
the baseball with such individual meanings and reflections in the first place. As an object remaining from the American Dream of baseball, the mass culture of the Cold War, the characters in Underworld who experienced these times try to access an uncanny period through this small and infinite object. Hereby, Underworld suggests that the past is not a finite story, but one that is over and over recycled into new meanings.

The Thomson baseball in Underworld, then, fulfils the role of a Cold War artifact that triggers connections, and therefore meanings. Its presence as a leitmotif must be read as a (nostalgic) celebration of meaning and a reflection about transience and durability. At the same time, there remains the ironic -but realistic- undertone of parody that waste during the recent history of American culture has become a meaningful thing.

3. Containment: From Cold War Ideology to Waste Management

We have seen how the Prologue of Underworld, with the baseball as rubbish remaining from it, announces the novel’s tension between the individual and the mass, (heavy) modernity and (liquid) postmodernity, the Cold War and waste. The ball is a specific type of waste, viz. the rubbish that triggers the recreation of meanings. This “tradition of rubbish”, satirically, unites the different possessors of the baseball in their quest for a contemporary American identity and a personal past.

I will now focus on the further evolution of the American geoculture and the accumulation of waste in Underworld. As the decades pass in Underworld, the layer of waste that overshadows the American culture becomes more dominant. As Mark Osteen points out: “The novel dramatizes how the proliferation of weapons and waste has fuelled a rigid binary thinking, an ‘Us versus Them’ mentality, that has alienated us from nature and from our own better nature” (2000 : 215).

The nature of postwar American culture, then, is defined by two major symbols in Underworld: the Bomb and waste.

In U.S. Orpheus: Descending into Don DeLillo’s ‘Underworld’, Nicolas Marichal studies the crumbling of the metanarrative of the Cold War and states that “The Cold War literally turns to waste in Underworld” (Marichal, 1999 : 51). Looking at the (de)construction of the novel, we notice, indeed, that there are -roughly taken- two covering frameworks or general tendencies that structure the novel: that of the Cold War order and paranoia, and that of the crumbling of this overarching model into a wasted, toxic world. The 50s up to 70s scenes in the novel are characterized by nuclear threat, but at the same time by the uncanny attraction towards the grandeur of America, the possibilities and promises its society creates. “The whole point of the missile crisis is the sexual opportunity it offers”, the fictionalized stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce jokes during one of his shows (UW, 586). The Cold War and its consumerist optimism are represented in the novel as a single, connected system of order, which gradually becomes disordered and crumbles into waste in the later decades of the twentieth century. In the scenes that are set in the late 70s up to the 90s, the environment of the characters gradually becomes
intoxicated and waste is everywhere, intriguing but also disquieting the characters. The underworld of nuclear threat gradually gives way to an underworld of waste.

Two types of “containment”, then, structure American society in the post-war decades, as Mark Osteen points out in a key passage from “Everything is connected: Containment and Counterhistory in Underworld”:

Two such massive systems -capitalism (and the consumer society it has engendered) and what President Eisenhower called “the military industrial complex”- combined in the Cold War era, whose history is underwritten by the mountains of waste it left behind. The architects of waste and weapon systems also colluded to devise a totalizing ideology of containment: just as the U.S. government tried to contain the Soviet Union by building more and more nuclear weapons that it could never use, so we also built landfills to house the remains of our rampant consumption. (2000 : 215)

In distinguishing between the nature of the American post-war decades in Underworld, I will use the dividing lines that Immanuel Wallerstein suggests in his study of American hegemony:

From 1945 until around 1970 the US exercised unquestioned hegemony in the world-system. This began to decline during the period between 1970 and 2001, but the extent of the decline was limited by the strategy that the US evolved to delay and minimize the effects of its loss of ascendancy. (Wallerstein, 2006 : 77)

This decline of American hegemony runs parallel to the accumulation of waste in DeLillo’s novel and, on a more symbolic level, the dismissing of the American Cold War Dream to ‘contain’ the world.

3.1. The Bomb

At a certain point in the novel, DeLillo writes a passage that could almost have been written by Immanuel Wallerstein:

Through the battered 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 the 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. And sometimes of course succeeded. The passionate task of the state was to hold on, stiffening its grip and preserving its claim to the most destructive power available. With nuclear weapons, this power became identified totally with the state. The mushroom cloud was the godhead of Annihilation and Ruin. The state controlled the means of apocalypse. (UW, 563)

Few passages in Underworld are more straightforward about the novel’s vision on the power of the American geoculture as a consuming system. The Bomb can be considered the most powerful ‘Object’ during the Cold War years of Underworld, its omnidestructive capacity controlling the world-system. The Bomb, DeLillo suggests, is also the means that the state uses to control its counter-discourses, subscribing to Baudrillard’s (1970) view that capitalism has the power to consume these forms of resistance.

At the dawn of the Cold War, president Harry Truman’s ‘Containment Doctrine’ set out to foster American influence, both economical and political, in the rest of the world. The Truman Doctrine, in this way, attempted to keep the Soviets from establishing Red dominance in especially European countries, which lay in ruins after the Second World War and welcomed American help.
At the same time, at home, America experienced a baby-boom, and a new middle-class culture of television, cars and consumer goods developed itself. As a result, the American discourse of consumerism, which already emerged in the “roaring 20s”\(^5\), gradually achieved the status of what Wallerstein calls a geoculture, a term which “refers to norms and modes of discourse that are widely accepted as legitimate within the world-system” (Wallerstein, 2004 : 93). By spreading this discourse around the globe, America tried to contain, but also consume communism.

Consumerist optimism was at the same time overshadowed and inspired by Cold War tensions: the ‘Us versus Them’ distinctions generated both a feeling of cohesion among Americans and a sense of paranoia or Red Scare. When artist Klara Sax meets her former lover Nick Shay again in 1992, she looks back on the Cold War balance of power:

> Now that power is in shatters and tatters and now that those Soviet borders don’t exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. (UW, 76)

Klara thus suggests that there used to be a system of powers that “held the world together”. This system, as Mark Osteen remarks in the passage quoted above, consisted of “capitalism (and the consumer society it has engendered) and what President Eisenhower called ‘the military industrial complex’ ” (Osteen, 2000 : 215). Underworld deals with the effects on America’s population of a war that was never really a war (except of course for the wars in Korea and Vietnam), but an exploration into the destructive possibilities of industrial technology. What defined (early) Cold War America almost as much as the war and the weapon proliferation itself, however, was the new impulse of its consumer society.

The frenzy and paranoia that the worship of The Bomb caused, is most obviously mirrored in Part 5 of Underworld (“Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry”). This part consists of a criss-cross collection of fragments, set in different times and places in the 50s and 60s. In an interview, DeLillo explains: “I wanted the 60s in particular to jump back and forth. I wanted them to be frenetic and unpredictable” (DeLillo in Moss, 1999 : 89). The title of Part 5 refers to the slogan of a radio advertisement. DeLillo suggests that this slogan has a sort of liturgical character:

> Three voices chanting liturgically, a priest reciting the same line over and over and two altar boys delivering fixed responses.
> Better things for better living.
> Through chemistry.
> (UW, 603)

In an excerpt from Part 5, DeLillo depicts the household of a typical American middle-class family, the Demings. It is October 8, 1957, some days after the Soviets launched the Sputnik satellite. Eric, the son, who later in the novel will be employed in secretive weapon business, is masturbating in a condom in his room. Meanwhile, his mother Erica is preparing Jell-O chicken mousse. Erica’s

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\(^5\) The birth of an American mass consumer culture is a phenomenon of the 1920s (see Norton e.a., 2007 : 438-443), but the evolution towards a global discourse of consumerism is typical of its new impulse during the 1950s.
husband Rick is fascinated by the Sputnik and wants to go out to watch it. Erica, however, feels disquieted:

It wasn’t until that moment that Erica understood why her day had felt shadowed and ominous from the time she opened her eyes and stared at the Mikado yellow walls with patina green fleecing. Yes, that satellite they put into orbit a few days ago. (…) Erica felt a twisted sort of disappointment. It was theirs, not ours. (…) Were there other surprises coming, things we haven’t been told about them? Did they have crispers and breezeways? It was not a simple matter of adjusting to the news. (UW, 518-519).

In this satirical scene, DeLillo characteristically connects the new consumerism of the 1950s -condoms, chicken mousse- with Soviet paranoia. Erica, in her supposedly sterile American household (she obsessively wears gloves, for example), is disturbed by the presence of a Russian satellite orbiting in space. In spite of her gloves, hygienic rituals and “push-button words” (UW, 517), Erica cannot cope with the paranoia which emerges “from the huge overarching presence of highly complex and interconnected technological systems” (DeLillo in Howard, 1997, no paging).

The new mass culture of the 1950s becomes a discourse in itself, a new way of perceiving reality and construct certainty:

All the things around her were important. Things and words. Words to believe in and live by.

- Breezeway
- Crisper
- Sectional
- Car pools
- Bridge parties
- Broadloom

(UW, 520)

This brings us to another undercurrent which should not be overlooked when linking the waste metaphor in Underworld to the American discourse of consumerism: that of (Cold War) paranoia. In “On Oneworldedness: Or Paranoia as a World System”, Emily Apter mentions the component of paranoia -as a general sentiment, but also a particular worldview- as a defining factor of American culture:

Oneworldedness, in contradistinction to these paradigms of world systems, planetarity, and transnationalism, envisages the planet as an extension of paranoid subjectivity vulnerable to persecutory fantasy, catastrophism, and monomania. Like globalization, oneworldedness traduces territorial sovereignty and often masks its identity as another name for “America”. (Apter, 2006: 366)

“Oneworldedness” thus refers to an America-centrist worldview, with a specific paranoia for external threats. This, in fact, is a sentiment many of the characters in Underworld are permeated with; it is another undercurrent of the hierarchy of America and its expanding technological power during the second half of the twentieth century- the urge to ‘contain’. Matt Shay, working in a secretive weapon device centre, in a 1974 scene of the novel thinks: “Ideas used to come from below. Now they’re everywhere around you, connecting things and grids universally. (…) All technology refers to the bomb” (UW, 466-467). Expanding technology and excessive consumerism relate to the same geoculture- to the idea of the world as American property, a product or object, with the Soviets as only threat to the status of America in the world-system. The Bomb is the ultimate illustration of the technological excesses of oneworldedness, standing on a level which
transcends human comprehension. Therefore, the Bomb is a cause of paranoia, fear and even religious worship. As Nicolas Marichal points out, the Bomb is associated with a divinity all throughout the novel (1999 : 40). DeLillo thinks that in this way a “false faith” originated among Americans (DeLillo in Howard, 1997, no paging): the faith in the overwhelming power of technology.

This issue of religion -with the Bomb and waste as their substitutes- is a major concern in *Underworld*. If the title of Part 5 refers to the optimism of the early post-war years and the cult of consumer products as a result of the era’s underlying fear, it also has a religious connotation. During the Cold War, people turned to the churches for answers to their apocalyptic anxiety. At the same time, religion became a part of consumer and media culture, as *A People and a Nation* tells:

> The uncertainties of the nuclear age likely contributed to the resurgence of religion, as church membership doubled (primarily in mainline Christian churches) between the end of World War II and the early 1960s. The media played a role, as preachers such as Billy Graham created national congregations from television audiences, preaching a message that combined salvation with Cold War patriotism. (Norton e.a., 2007 : 545)

Religion thus becomes integrated in the overarching consumerist and patriotic discourse of America, and the Bomb replaces God (see also Marichal, 1999 : 41). Just as “Cocksucker Blues”, the title of the 1974 part of the novel, refers to the absorption by the system of the counter-discourse of rock-'n- roll, so does the advertising slogan “Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry” ironically serve as a liturgical line, a prayer in anxious days.

One of the most prominent voices in Part 5 is that of the fictionalized stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce. Through the shows of Lenny Bruce, DeLillo synthesises most adequately the Cold War paradox between consumerist optimism and nuclear fear. The Lenny Bruce passages are set in October 1962, during the days of the Cuban Missile Crisis- a period when the fear of nuclear apocalypse among Americans was at its highest, as Elizabeth Rosen remarks: “*Underworld* is a meditation on the End. The Cuban Missile Crisis is pivotal to the novel as a point in American history in which the End was, perhaps for the first time for Americans, very clearly in sight” (Rosen, 2006 : 99). Indeed, Lenny Bruce’s words return as a refrain throughout the collage of Part 5: “‘We’re all gonna die!’ Lenny loves the postexistential bent of this line. In his giddy shriek the audience can hear the obliteration of the idea of uniqueness and free choice. They can hear the replacement of human isolation by massive and unvaried ruin” (*UW*, 507). Lenny Bruce makes jokes, plays with the feelings of his audience and analyzes the Cold War situation in his own jargon. Like J. Edgar Hoover, Frank Sinatra and others, he appears as a fictionalized historical character:

> DeLillo has captured more than just the Yiddish argot and hip neologisms of Bruce’s performances. In his description of Bruce’s weird segues, discomforting pauses, and edgy physicality, DeLillo seems

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6 Baudrillard speaks of the “formal liturgy of the Object” (1970 : 196).
7 Mark Osteen suggests that ‘Cocksucker Blues’ “alludes to capitalism’s capacity to consume its own opposition” (Osteen 2000 : 249).
almost to have channelled the dead comedian. Yet, remarkably, none of the dialogue DeLillo writes for his Lenny Bruce is authentic, and little of his depiction is historically accurate. (Rosen, 2006 : 98)

Remarkable is a scene in which Lenny, during a show on the day of the Missile Crisis's climax, plays with a condom by stretching it over his tongue and making jokes about Saran Wrap, a brand of plastic foil. He concludes: “This is what the twentieth century feels like” (UW, 584). In Part 5, then, Lenny Bruce is the central character which connects the “selected fragments public and private” (UW, 499). He voices what his audience feels, but cannot express, much like DeLillo attempts to do with Underworld as a whole. Lenny Bruce and Don DeLillo, in a similar way, bring to the surface the hidden connections between nuclear fear and consumption. Elizabeth Rosen considers Lenny Bruce, together with Marvin Lundy, as the most important apocalyptic prophet of the novel (Rosen, 2006 : 100). He is one of the characters in Underworld who understands (and makes fun of) the “false faith” (DeLillo in Howard, 1997, no paging) that has come to dominate American culture.

Lenny Bruce is not the only ‘prophet’ in Underworld who sees what the Bomb does to America. In Harlem, 1951, Manx Martin is hanging around in the streets to find someone who is interested to buy the ball from him. “Nobody knows the day or the hour”, he hears a black street preacher convey (UW, 352). It turns out that this Harlem street preacher, making up his own conspiracy theory, blames white, middle-class America and its cult of money for the apocalypse that the Cold War could cause. The Cold War, then, also exposes inequalities in American society. The black street preacher attempts to decode dollar bills, in search of hidden messages announcing such doom scenarios:

“(…) But right now, this here minute, while I’m talking and you’re listening, officials making plans to build bomb shelters all over this city. (…) Every one of those people standing in those shelters while the bombs raining down is a white person. (…) Because not one single shelter’s being built in Harlem. (…) They predicting the day and the hour. They telling each other when the time is come. You can’t find the answer in the Bible or the Bill of Rights. I’m talking to you. I’m saying history is written on the commonest piece of paper in your pocket” (UW, 353-354).

This “commonest piece of paper in your pocket”, the American dollar bill, is the source of all evil to this black street preacher. He sees Black America as excluded from the American promise of “Rags to Riches” and thinks that the blacks will be left to die when a nuclear catastrophe might occur. To him, the history of America -and the Cold War conflict in itself- is not about the Bible or the Bill of Rights, but about dollars.

The Bomb, then, closely linked with undercurrents of paranoia, patriotism and consumerist hedonism, constitutes the heart of the American culture during the heydays of the Cold War. The anxiety caused by the threat of nuclear annihilation widens the gap between the day-to-day lives of Americans and the overarching powers of the state, technology and capital, giving way to distrust and uncertainties, which the state however tries to masks by means of its patriotic ideology of ‘containment’ and ‘Us and Them’. The Bomb, we read in Underworld, is the “perfect capitalist tool.
Kill people, spare property” (UW, 790). The atomic bomb becomes a new, overwhelming and omnipresent force, and is even associated with a divine being. Underworld shows, however, how the Bomb is another American myth that is gradually shattered. The hidden heritage of the Cold War, the novel makes clear, is an American wasteland.

3.2. Towards Toxicity

Just as in the earlier decades of Underworld the Bomb is the omnipresent motif and central undercurrent of American culture, waste dominates the later decades of the novel. Nicolas Marichal has already pointed out that “(...) gradually the metanarrative loses its dominance. From the seventies onwards it increasingly crumbles into waste. (...) Both the bomb and waste are sanctified in the novel because of their basic enormity (...)” (1999 : 47, 51). DeLillo uses waste as a central image in his depiction of recent American history. With the disappearing nuclear threat in American society, Underworld shifts its focus to the counterpart of the excessive hedonism of the Cold War: waste, and the problems of its containment. As Marichal writes: “Waste, (...), as the counterpart of consumption, is omnipresent in the novel, and the metanarrative of the Cold War degenerates into superficiality without being replaced with a valuable alternative” (1999 : 57). I have already discussed the role of the Thomson homer baseball, as a piece of ‘rubbish’ which is infused with new meanings. There is, however, more waste in Underworld than just the (innocent) Cold War memorabilia rubbish. Waste is also a broader societal problem and can be read as a symbol for the awakening from the Cold War Dream.

In its shifting focus from the Bomb, and the consumerist optimism inherent to it, to waste, Underworld dramatizes changing times for the role of America in the world-system. In “The Curve of American Power”, Wallerstein marks 1970 as a turning point for the hegemony of the United States in the world-system. Distrust (especially at home) in America as a military force increased after the Vietnam war, Western Europe and Japan became more autonomous economic powers, and in March 1970, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons between the USA, the Soviet Union, France, Great Britain and China entered into force (Wallerstein, 2006 : 84-85). At the same time, the 1970s were the decade of new cultural undercurrents, such as women’s, racial and ecological movements. The darker effects of the Cold War on America become increasingly visible.

“This goddamn country has garbage you can eat, garbage that’s better to eat than the food on the table in other countries”, a janitor from the Italian Bronx muses in Underworld. “They have garbage here you can furnish your house and feed your kids”(UW, 766-767). Garbage is not so significant in the early decades of the novel as it is in the later, but there are some earlier passages in which the novel already pays attention to the underside of America’s consumption. In a 1966 scene, we meet the “garbage guerrilla”, a remarkable “antisystemic group” of protesters planning to make the garbage of FBI director John Edgar Hoover public:
“Confidential source says they intend to take your garbage on tour. Rent halls in major cities. Get lefty sociologists to analyze the garbage item by item. Get hippies to rub it on their naked bodies. More or less have sex with it. Get poets to write poems about it. And finally, in the last city on the tour, they plan to eat it.” (UW, 558)

The garbage guerrilla in this way wants to parody the methods of the FBI, who steal crime suspects’ garbage in order to detect evidence in trash items: the FBI takes away the suspect’s garbage and replace it with fake garbage. One of the most famous garbage guerrilleros is Jesse Detwiler, the waste specialist whom the Waste Containment staff meet in 1978 (UW, 287). To the garbage guerrilla, John Edgar Hoover is the embodiment of American decadence. Therefore, this “antisystemic movement” (cfr. Wallerstein 2004: 91) wants to bring Hoover’s private consumption behaviour under public scrutiny. Eventually, however, garbage specialist Jesse Detwiler appears to give up his student pastime, having “earned a brief feverish fame in the chronicles of the time” (UW, 287). Twelve years later, Detwiler wants to make tourist business of waste: “The scenery of the future. Eventually the only scenery left. (...) Bring garbage into the open” (UW, 286). Detwiler, on the one hand criticizing civilization’s excessive consumerism, but on the other hand suggesting to make money out of waste, is another example of “capitalism’s capacity to consume its own opposition” (Osteen 2000: 249). He has adapted himself to the era of “liquid modernity” (cfr. Bauman 2000), which as Dave Evans states, reintegrates garbage in “the cycle of production, consumption, and reproduction” (2006: 109).

Order and disorder have become unclear distinctions in the later decades of Underworld, as the Cold War certainties are now shattered. Therefore, several characters try to find their own way of creating order in their lives. At the end of the novel, protagonist Nick Shay dutifully separates his household garbage, as an everyday reality that helps him to structure his ‘American self’, a dedication which even brings him to a spiritual state of ease:

We remove the wax paper from the cereal boxes before we put the boxes out for collection. The streets are dark and empty. We do clear glass versus colored glass and it is remarkable how quiet it is, a stillness that feels old and settled, with landmark status, the yard waste, the paper bags pressed flat, the hour after sunset when a pause obtains in the world and you forget for a second where you are (UW, 806-807).

Indeed, the older Nick Shay finds religious meaning in waste. When speaking of his firm’s philosophy, he finds that in the word Weltanschauung “there is a whisper of mystical contemplation that seems totally appropriate to the subject of waste” (UW, 282). Nick looks at the world in terms of waste. “Waste is a religious thing”, he believes: “We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread. It is necessary to respect what we discard.” (UW, 88); and towards the end of the novel Nick thinks: “Maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard.” (UW, 809). Nick, as the protagonist of the novel, has a prominent voice in Underworld, of course. In DeLillo’s treatment of the “larger cultural drama of white-hot consumption and instant waste” (DeLillo 1997a), the question rises as to how to reconstruct meanings or even spiritual sense from a society full of dirt. Nick ironically tries to find this redemption exactly in his devotion to waste. He considers himself one of “the Church Fathers of
waste in all its transmutations” (UW, 102) and discusses this philosophical, pseudo-religious aspect of his job with his chef Big Simms:

"From the first day I find that everything I see is garbage. (…) I’m doing real work, important work. Landfills are important. Trouble is, the job follows me. The subject follows me (…)"

"You see it everywhere because it is everywhere’’.

"But I didn’t see it before:"

"You’re enlightened now. Be grateful,” I said. (UW, 283)

The waste managers’ treatment of waste is a way of making sense and creating order in a disordered society and, more generally, a world-system in chaos (cfr. Wallerstein, 2004). The idea of trash as something huge and timeless is what makes characters like Nick Shay look for spiritual meanings in it. People live, consume and die, but their waste remains.

In American culture, then, Underworld suggests, waste ironically has come to replace the Bomb as a new source of identity construction. Laura Tanenbaum makes clear that in Underworld, “(…) looking for meaning in waste is (…) a reflection of the longing displaced onto strange artifacts by the gaps in our experiences of technology and commodity culture” (2003 : 59). Because waste, just like the Bomb, is inherently connected with large-scale systems of capital and technology, it becomes an overwhelming force to human beings, and this is what makes several characters in Underworld look for meaning in the ultimately meaningless.

If the Thomson homer baseball, then, as an image of parody, functions as a piece of Cold War memorabilia rubbish which is over and over infused with (individual) meanings reconstructed from the past, the daily leftovers of excessive consumption in a similar way represent the end of a curious era- the meaning of which the characters of Underworld only begin to grasp when the ‘war’ is over. The narrative of the Bomb is dismissed as the decades proceed, and the accumulation of waste becomes a more overt and problematic counter-discourse. DeLillo suggests that the capitalist discourse of liquid modernity might attempt to commercialize waste: the system can integrate the undercurrent of excessive consumerism so that it becomes a new source of constructing American identity and even a new religious fundament. However, this form of ‘recycling’ will not solve America’s waste problem, as there remains waste that is more difficult to dispose of.

“People look at their garbage differently now”, protagonist and waste analyst Nick Shay thinks in a 1992 passage, “seeing every bottle and crushed carton in a planetary context” (UW, 88).

Don DeLillo’s concern with the future of the world-system and American society also has an ecological dimension. In his essay “Toxic Discourse”, published in Critical Inquiry, Lawrence Buell focuses on the interdependence of the ecocritical movement and cultural studies in the study of discourse. “The fear of a poisoned world”, he writes, “is being increasingly (…) debated. Seldom however is toxicity discussed as a discourse” (Buell, 1998 : 639). Buell discusses the role of ecological awareness and environmentalism in present-day America, remarking that this concern is a major theme in contemporary cultural studies as well as literature. In times when ex-vice-
president Al Gore tours the world with a documentary to raise awareness about the dangers of global warming and Kyoto is bound to become a ‘hot’ item on political agendas, Buell makes a relevant point when he states that

[even if] the theory of environmental justice proves too idealistic or partisan for most legislators to endorse, the fear of environmental poisoning that energizes it will likely have at least as good a chance of remaining a compelling public issue as nuclear fear during the cold war era. (Buell 1998 : 644)

In another essay, Lawrence Buell refers to W.E.B. Dubois, who stated that “it is not at all unlikely that the twenty-first century’s most pressing problem will be the sustainability of earth’s environment” (1999 : 695). Wallerstein, also, in “The Curve of American Power”, concludes that:

(…) lurking behind any possible reconfiguration of world politics would be questions of access to energy and to water, in a world beset by ecological dilemmas and potentially producing vastly more than existing capacities of capitalist accumulation. Here could be the most explosive issues of all, for which no geopolitical manoeuvring or reshuffling offers any solution. (2006 : 94)

From the Cold War to toxicity, then, Underworld also integrates elements of toxic discourse into its counternarratives. The novel presents waste as a new “compelling public issue”, an ecological problem that should be taken into account, although the novel’s characters may fail to see this point and try to turn waste into a profit-engendering consumer product.

Lawrence Buell writes that “(…) toxic discourse calls for a way of imagining physical environments that fuses a social constructivist with an environmental restorationist perspective” (1998 : 656). It seems that Underworld, in its depiction of the late 20th century Bronx, subscribes to this idea. DeLillo’s concern with ecological, but also social decay in America, is most obviously mirrored in his description of the evolution of this neighborhood, the place where DeLillo himself spent his youth. The Bronx, once a warm and safe neighborhood (cfr. Chapter 2 of this dissertation), is increasingly wasted and forgotten in Underworld. In the light of Buell’s essay, the Bronx could be called an “urban pastoral” community where a “rude awakening” takes place:

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find contemporary toxic discourse retelling narratives of rude awakening from simple pastoral to complex. As historians of architecture and city planning have shown, the cultural construction of suburbia in the U.S. and often even of urban neighbourhoods as well has drawn heavily upon pastoral imagery and values (…) (Buell 1998 : 647)

In one passage, the nun Sister Edgar and her younger colleague Gracie, who devote their life to the poor inhabitants of this neighborhood, see a tourist bus driving through the streets of The Bronx, guiding Europeans on a tour called South Bronx Surreal. Gracie angrily shouts: “It’s not surreal. It’s real, it’s real. Your bus is surreal. You’re surreal” (UW, 247). The Bronx, and especially its wasted sub-area The Wall, is the place where this decay reaches its most extreme forms: even the life of a child -Esmeralda- is brutally wasted (see Chapter 3). She is raped and her body is found amid the dirt. The death of Esmeralda is an example of what Buell calls the “gothicism of toxic discourse”, which is “most lurid when the victim has no choice” (Buell 1998 : 653-54).

Jeff, the son of protagonist Nick Shay who grew up in The Bronx, feels a little shy and guilty about the Bronx, considering his father’s roots: “He thinks it is part of the American gulag, a place
so distant from his experience that those who’ve emerged can’t possibly be willing to spend a moment in a room with someone like him” (UW, 808). Jeff has never lived in the Bronx, in opposition to Nick or the artist Klara Sax, who in 1974 revisits the neighborhood she lived in during the 1950s:

They watched in silence and it was hard to bridge the distance. They couldn’t quite place the thing in context. It was like a newsreel of some factional war in a remote province, where generals cook the livers of their rivals and keep them in plastic baggies. A thing totally spooked by otherness.

Esther finally spoke. “This is where you used to live?”

“No. I lived about a mile north of here.”

“Still, I have to show you more respect.”

“Thank you, Esther. But it wasn’t like this at the time.” (UW, 395)

The Bronx is DeLillo’s case-study of an undercurrent in American society: mass consumption leads to massive amounts of waste, which must be gotten rid of in one way or another. As some waste is never definitively discarded, it keeps affecting people’s lives and leads to inequality. Just as America’s consumerism leads to more waste, so has this system even consumed whole neighborhoods. The Bronx, where the piling of waste reaches excessive heights, is confronted with “a rude awakening” indeed. DeLillo himself said in an interview that “the Wall is a particular part of the waste- the part that includes human lives” (DeLillo in Howard, 1997, no paging). However, as we will see in Chapter 3, the Bronx is also the place where DeLillo situates his hope for the future.

Underworld also captures the “fear of environmental poisoning” (Buell, 1998 : 644). In 1974, stories are told in a secret weapon device center in New Mexico about people who live “downwind”, near a test site in Nevada, exposed to nuclear fallout:

“What’s the secret?” Matt said.

“Multiple myelonas. Kidney failures. Or you wake up one morning and you’re three inches shorter.”

“You mean exposure to fallout.”

“Or you start throwing up one day and you throw up every succeeding day for seven, eight weeks.” (UW, 405)

Although the workers of ‘the Pocket’ (as the weapon center is called) do not believe these stories to be true, they tell them for “the edge. The bite. The existential burn” (UW, 406). Waste, in this case, nuclear waste, has become a new generator of paranoia. Instead of the Bomb itself, it is the effects of the Bomb that begin to haunt the characters of Underworld. The danger of nuclear radiation becomes even more confronting in the novel’s epilogue, when Waste Containment colleagues Nick Shay and Brian Glassic visit the ‘Museum of Misshapens’ in Kazakhstan. This museum shows a morbid gallery of foetuses who are preserved in jars, deformed as a consequence of nuclear radiation (UW, 799). Afterwards, they visit a clinic near a test site:

“Sickness everywhere around”, their Russian trade partner says (UW, 801).

In another scene which emphasizes toxicity as a new form of paranoia and environmental reality, the garbage archaeologist Jesse Detwiler, Big Sims -the director of the waste management firm Whiz Co- and Nick Shay -waste analyst and protagonist of the novel- are talking about a mysterious ship that keeps cruising the oceans without hitting land. The waste analysts think that the ship carries a possibly dangerous or toxic load. When the ship is discussed in a conversation, it
becomes clear that Sims dislikes Detwiler and his theory, because he is disquieted by Detwiler’s other, new perspective:

“You tracking the rumors, Sims? This ship you’ve got.”
“It’s not my area.”
“Cruising the oceans of the world trying to dump some hellish substance.”
“I’m looking the other way,” Sims said.
“Look this way. I hear it’s headed back to the U.S.”
“You know more than we do.” Sims hated saying this. “What do we know, Nick?”
“We’re not sixties people. We’re forties and fifties people.”

(UW, 288)

In this interesting dialogue, Detwiler suggests that the ship, with its dangerous substance, might return to the U.S. In other words, the possible apocalyptic or toxic consequences will have to be dealt with by America itself, as waste finally returns to its consumers. Although the ship is merely another story, Sims does not like the idea that he cannot get rid of it. Nick thinks of the differences between Detwiler, on the one hand, and Sims and himself, on the other hand, as a difference of generations. In his eyes, Detwiler belongs to the “sixties people”, the generation, indeed, of deconstructionist thought and revolutionary theories. The suggestion here is that the U.S. should adjust its belief in endless “progress” and accumulation of capital, as there is a counterpart to this evolution: the accumulation of waste, which cannot be externalized or hidden forever.

The Cold War, as a weapon proliferation race left America with a huge amount of highly toxic nuclear waste. In Underworld’s epilogue, Nick Shay in Kazakhstan meets Viktor Maltsev, who works for a waste trading company. He tells Nick:

All those decades, he says, when we thought about weapons all the time and never thought about the dark multiplying byproduct.
“And in this case,” I say. “In our case, in our age. What we excrete comes back to consume us.”
We don’t dig it up, he says. We try to bury it. But maybe this is not enough. That’s why we have this idea. Kill the devil. And he smiles from his steeple perch. The fusion of two streams of history, weapons and waste. We destroy contaminated nuclear waste by means of nuclear explosions. (UW, 791)

The ultimate capitalist solution to deal with nuclear waste, then, is to trade it, as David Evans points out, referring to the “era of liquid modernity” (2006). Symbolically, American nuclear waste is exploded in underground test sites in Kazakhstan. At the end of the novel, The Cold War conflict has become a business relationship in toxicity: “Brian says the gate resembles the entrance to a national park. Viktor says don’t be surprised there will be tourists here someday” (UW, 792).
4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued how *Underworld* can be read on a large-scale, systemic level, regarding ‘waste’ as the novel’s central metaphor. I have used the framework of Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis to refer to the novel’s concern with the hegemonic position of America and the role of its consumerist geoculture in the world-system. With regard to this geoculture, I have referred to certain aspects of the writings of Baudrillard.

The rise and decline of American hegemony in the world-system runs more or less parallel to the main structure of *Underworld*. During the first two decades of the Cold War (1950-1970) ‘the Bomb’ is the central overarching element in American culture, intrinsically connected, as a means of the state, with the powers of capital and technology and generating a general tendency towards consumerist hedonism. The Prologue to *Underworld*, the 1951 baseball game, can in this respect be regarded as a dramatization of Cold War America, merging the elements of mass culture, consumption and the beginning of nuclear paranoia. It is, *Underworld* suggests, the turnstile between two phases in American history. The Prologue marks the beginning of ‘the Bomb-era’, but is already characterized by another central undercurrent in the novel: that of the accumulation of waste.

From about 1970 onwards, this date being marked by Wallerstein (2006) as the beginning of American hegemonic decline in the world-system, the Bomb begins to be replaced by waste. America now enters ‘the Wasteland-era’, as a result of the accumulation of different types of waste during the Cold War.

The Thomson homer baseball is a first, more ‘innocent’ type of waste, belonging to the category of Cold War memorabilia rubbish. DeLillo mocks the way in which each baseball owner infuses the object with his own meanings, suggesting that in contemporary America identity is (re)constructed on the basis of waste. At the same, though, the baseball functions as a more serious reflection on how to reconstruct meanings from the past.

Waste becomes a new generator of paranoia, and in the same way as happens with the Thomson homer baseball, characters attempt to reconstruct (religious) meaning from daily waste. The containment ideology of the Cold War is replaced by the environmentalist problem of containing waste, as Mark Osteen (2000) remarks. In the new phase of capitalism, ‘liquid modernity’ as Evans (2006) and Bauman (2000) call it, waste can be traded or reintegrated in the production cycle. *Underworld* suggests, however, that there is more waste to deal with, which simply cannot be directly contained, and expresses therefore also a more ecological concern.
Chapter II
Recycling an American Self:
Bildung and Trauma in Underworld

“I think the country has entered a curious time warp. Time moves faster, memory is more or less obliterated, events seem to repeat themselves endlessly.”

(Don DeLillo, in Howard, 1997)

1.
Introduction & Theoretical Framework

In the previous chapter, I have discussed Underworld as a novel concerned with the postwar history of America in the light of the workings of the modern world-system, and (material) waste as the counterpart of the geoculture this system has generated. Underworld is, however, more than a 'system novel', and can be read on a very intimate, personal level as well. Several critics consider the novel DeLillo’s most autobiographic work so far. Martin Amis, in his review of the novel, remarks that “Underworld is his most demanding novel but it is also his most transparent. It has an undertow of personal pain (…)” (Amis, 1997, no paging).

The main question in this chapter is how DeLillo depicts the evolution of postwar America on the level of the American individual. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the two main characters of Underworld, Nick Shay and -to a lesser extent- Klara Sax, and their evolution throughout the novel. Their Bildungsprocess is connected with different other characters that populate the cast of the novel. DeLillo’s exploration of forty-one years (1951-1992) in the lives of Nick and Klara, and the lives of the characters that are closely connected with them, is the author’s means to reflect on the more personal type of waste at the heart of American culture. On a more philosophical level, DeLillo explores the nature of time in postwar America and its effects on the human condition. The ‘forgotten time’ of the second half of the twentieth century, the intimate pieces of human time, are another type of waste that Underworld sets out to recycle.

Dealing with the past is central to Underworld’s character depiction. This past can be considered another type of waste, albeit more symbolical. In “Refuse heaped many stories high: DeLillo, Dirt and Disorder”, Ruth Helyer writes:

In the struggle between subject and object, abjection represents the underside of that which professes to be clearly figurative. The subject must reject the abject and attempt to conceal and contain it. Underworld attempts to reveal this “underside” and in the process confirms the abject as whatever disturbs socially imposed limits. The subject claims to exclude the abject but must acknowledge its existence; (...) (Helyer, 1999: 991)

Indeed, in their struggle for a certain goal or ‘object’, the ‘subjects’ in Underworld experience the force of a problematic past, ‘the abject’. Memory is a central preoccupation of Underworld. The formal conception of the work, its chapters jumping back and forth in time, mirrors the
whimsical psychological nature of personal histories and reflects on how the past keeps on defining or haunting people’s lives. The Cold War, as a historical process, but also a personal experience, is the source of a problematic (traumatic) experience of the past to several characters in *Underworld*. As Patrick O’Donnel points out, “*Underworld* shows the extent to which history in these times is a process that is entangled but not whole, narratable but not complete” (2000: 149). The true nature of the Cold War, to DeLillo, can only be understood through narratives that form a counterpart to an overarching, canonized version of history: we have to look at what happens *under* the shadow of the Bomb and America’s ‘junk heap’. Marichal remarks that “the Cold War narrative can be called a ‘metanarrative’ or ‘grand narrative’ ” (1999: 38). *Underworld*’s attention to minor (or counter-) histories, the uncountable personal garbage cans of a half-century, is a study of human experience, as opposed to the anonymity of increasingly distant and distrusted technological and political powers. *Underworld*’s concern with trauma can be studied in the light of the theories of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra.

Caruth and LaCapra, inspired by the work of -amongst others- Freud, question the nature of traumatic memories and the possibility of dealing with such memories through (literary) representation. It should be noted that whereas Caruth and LaCapra focus on the representation in art of (huge) historical traumas (such as the Holocaust, slavery, etc.), DeLillo depicts the characters’ fictional traumas, whose origins lie in fictional events taking place during the Cold War years in America as described in the novel. Nevertheless, Caruth’s and LaCapra’s trauma theories are useful in the analysis of *Underworld*’s concept of memory and trauma representation. The Cold War as a whole can without any doubt be considered a major historical trauma to the U.S.A., with landmarks such as the nuclear quasi-apocalypse of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the assassination of (amongst others) J.F.K. and Martin Luther King, and the debacle in Vietnam. *Underworld* does not directly investigate the personal traumas resulting from these events, but it does frame the fictional personal events of its narrative within the Cold War as an overall traumatic period to American society and one which challenges classical modes of representation.

In “Recapturing the Past: Introduction”, Cathy Caruth suggests that the recurring nature of a traumatic event is due to the way in which it enters one’s consciousness only partially as it happens:

> The ability to recover the past is thus closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it. And this suggests that what returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness. Indeed, the literal registration of an event- the capacity to continually, in the flashback, reproduce it in exact detail- appears to be connected, in traumatic experience, precisely with the way it escapes full consciousness as it occurs. (Caruth, 1995: 153, her italics)

A traumatic experience, then, is shattered from the beginning, and this is what accounts for its recurring character. Cathy Caruth thinks the true narration of a traumatic experience, therefore, should be essentially characterized by its implied ‘failure of representation’. Only by refusing a
classical ontological framework, Caruth argues, and thus by the acknowledgement of its own incompleteness, can a narrative do justice to the complexity of the human psyche (1995 : 155).

This postmodernist position towards the acquisition of knowledge about traumatic history returns in the writings of Dominick LaCapra:

I have already indicated that working-through need not to be understood to imply the integration or transformation of past trauma into a seamless narrative memory and total meaning or knowledge. Narrative at best helps one not to change the past through a dubious rewriting of history but to work through posttraumatic symptoms in the present in a manner that opens possible futures. It also enables one to recount events and perhaps to evoke experience, typically through nonlinear movements that allow trauma to register in language and its hesitations, indirections, pauses, and silences. And, particularly by bearing witness and giving testimony, narrative may help performatively to create openings in existence that did not exist before. (La Capra 2004 : 123)

To LaCapra, narrative is a possible way of working-through trauma. This narrative must, however, represent the ellipses in the particular history or histories it depicts and admit its own failure to provide a complete or definitive account of the traumatic experience. Under these conditions, LaCapra states, fiction can have a useful role in dealing with trauma:

Indeed in trying to account for or evoke experience, history must turn to testimony, oral reports, inferences from documents such as diaries and memoirs, and a carefully framed and qualified reading of fiction and art. Fiction, if it makes historical truth claims at all, does so in a more indirect but still possibly informative, thought-provoking, at times disconcerting manner with respect to the understanding or “reading” of events, experience and memory. (La Capra 2004 : 132)

*Underworld* analyzes the effects on human beings of the undercurrents of the Cold War, as Mark Osteen points out when he refers to “the broad streams of weapons and waste, and the shared sense of unconnectedness- of loss, alienation, dread, and confusion- that those streams feed.” (Osteen, 2000 : 216, his italics). Therefore, trauma in *Underworld* is also the larger cultural trauma of American postwar history, which is characterized by violence, technological expansion and mounting consumption. In “Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* and the Return of the Real”, Leonard Wilcox remarks:

(…) *Underworld* is concerned, among other things, with the belated traumatic effects of the bomb, both individually and socially, in postwar America. On one level, *Underworld*'s narrative project is precisely to construct traumatic experience in the only way it can be, after the fact. (…) Yet in its exploration of traumatic alterity, the novel explores the residue of the real harboured in the cultural unconscious. (2002 : 123)

The novel subscribes to Caruth’s, LaCapra’s and Wilcox’s ideas about the psychological nature and artistic representation of trauma. Looking back from the nineties at the fifties, protagonist Nick Shay (the first person-narrator of the novel; in several sections also focalized in the third person) shares with us his personal history of the Cold War. In *Writing History as a Prophet* Elisabeth Wesseling, with regard to (one of) the postmodernist conception(s) of the relation between historical reality and fiction, remarks: “Narrative is not a transparent medium for representing historical reality (…) but it entails a specific mode of understanding the past” (1991 : 128). The underlying truth about the grand narrative or overarching discourse of the Cold War can only be understood through its shattered experience: the counter-discourses, the small narratives of (fictional) ordinary Americans. In the same way, the larger historical trauma of the Cold War can
only be narrated through a particular form of art that is aware of its own limitations, that implies its own failure of representation. As Patrick O’Donnel (2000 : 149) points out, *Underworld*, however ambitious the work may still be, does not claim to give the history of the Cold War in America: there remain ellipses and unsolved questions. Therefore, DeLillo’s major work is inherently a plea for plurality: the plurality of narratives and voices -especially the voices that are generally not listened to- but also the plurality of (unrealized) possibilities. Narrating about a traumatic past, then, additionally has an ethical dimension:

In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves. (Caruth 1995 : 11)

When reading *Underworld* on the level of the narrative of its main characters, then, keeping in mind Caruth’s and LaCapra’s trauma theory within the larger framework of postmodernist thought, one can interpret DeLillo’s analysis of memory, trauma and time as a broader ethical concern about human community in a country in which “memory is more or less obliterated [and] events seem to repeat themselves endlessly” (DeLillo in Howard, 1997, no paging).

2. **American Dreamers: Nick Shay and Klara Sax**

In a novel like *Underworld*, with such an extensive cast and so many different settings, it might initially seem hard to tell who the protagonists are or what the main storyline is. The characters who are generally considered the main characters of the novel, Nick Shay and Klara Sax, are those whose course of life in postwar America is most fully depicted in the novel. Their personal evolution constitutes the more intimate framework of the novel. In “Reluctant Warriors: Reading DeLillo’s Cold War”, Laura Tanenbaum remarks:

Most reviews and critical articles treat the novel’s historical Cold War frame, its use of public figures, its treatment of paranoia and of themes running from waste to conceptual art, but pay little attention to domestic aspects of the story. One could even imagine a complete novel with all the much-commented on features from the baseball game to J. Edgar Hoover to the descriptions of waste stripped away. *Underworld* would still contain the rich and coherent story of a middle-aged man (…) (2003 : 42)

Indeed, as I have already suggested, *Underworld* should be read on a larger, systemic level, but also on an intimately personal one. In her reading of the novel, Tanenbaum “underscores not only the novel’s pointed and poignant treatment of the domestic, but the extent to which the transformations of private life, sexuality, and gender relations shape the novel’s vision of the recent historical past” (2003 : 43). She discusses *Underworld* as an account of social American history, subscribing to the view that “these [domestic] changes represent the ‘real’ legacy of the sixties” (2003 : 43). Tanenbaum’s views on social history, together with trauma theory (as outlined above), form a useful background in an analysis of *Underworld*’s main storyline.
The main narratives of *Underworld* move backwards in time, but in this character discussion I will proceed chronologically through the half-century time span of the novel, starting in the Bronx and ending in the Texas desert.

2.1. The Bronx Revisited

The sixth and last part of the novel, “Arrangement in Gray and Black”, is in fact where *Underworld* starts, as far as the story of its main characters is concerned. This part of the novel is set in the Bronx neighbourhood in New York, from fall 1951 to summer 1952. As a counterpart to the 1951 prologue, which is a description of mass-culture America and its morbid underside, this part of the novel depicts an intimate community, almost a separate universe in American society. It is a “compact neighborhood” (*UW*, 661), where time seems to stand still and all inhabitants appear to know each other. As Nicolas Marichal states: “In *Underworld*, the Italian neighbourhood in the Bronx of the 1950s is that lost world anchored to balance; it is where things still have distinct limits” (1999: 41).

We are introduced to the Italian Bronx of the 1950s through the eyes of the science teacher Albert Bronzini, Klara Sax’s husband. By opening this part of the novel with Albert Bronzini, DeLillo immediately links the Bronx to a sense of timelessness. Bronzini is the incarnation of tangible time, of slowness. Significantly, in a car-dominated culture, “Bronzini didn’t own a car, didn’t drive a car, didn’t want one, didn’t need one, wouldn’t take one if somebody gave it to him. Stop walking, he thought, and you die” (*UW*, 662). Neither is he interested in baseball (*UW*, 670). Albert Bronzini seems to stand at the center of a forgotten type of time in America. Laura Tanenbaum remarks: “Albert’s Bronx, the setting of Parts II and VI, forms a frame around the novel, managing to fill the reader with a sense of lost time even as we move temporally backwards” (2003: 54). Indeed, when we meet Bronzini in the mid 80s-early 90s section of the novel, the science teacher is still there in the Bronx, asking himself: “How deep is time? How far down into the life of matter do we have to go before we understand what time is?” (*UW*, 222). Bronzini seems to speak for DeLillo here, as *Underworld* as a whole is a journey into the depths of time. Bronzini, in Part 2, keeps on passing his days in the same way as he has always done: walking the streets, meeting friends, playing chess, philosophizing about scientific phenomena (such as “space burials” (*UW*, 225)). Other characters, by that time, have left the Bronx. Klara Sax is a popular artist in New York City and Nick Shay has moved southwest to lead a life as a waste executive in Phoenix, Arizona.

Although in the Bronx a process of ecological and social decay might have taken place throughout the decades (see Chapter 1), and DeLillo, as Gerald Howard suggests, seems “saddened by the terrible betray of the American promise represented by the social disaster that has been visited on these areas” (1997, no paging), Laura Tanenbaum makes a good point in stating that “the Bronx of the eighties and nineties is marked by loss, but never becomes the dead
landscape of ‘nothing ever again’ (…)’ (2003 : 55). As Nicolas Marichal makes clear, we should not be misled by the sentiments of nostalgia that characters like Nick Shay express when they later “long for the days of disorder” (UW, 810): “Rather than directly by the finished Cold War itself, nostalgia is triggered by the association of the Cold War with an entire world that felt more ‘real’, namely the Bronx in the 1950s” (Marichal, 1999 : 41, his italics). The associations or connections that characters make or try to make, mirrors exactly the way in which DeLillo depicts the misleading nature of memory. The past, to DeLillo, is not a priori a better time to live, although one could argue for a nostalgic reading of Underworld. From these reflections on the character of Albert Bronzini and Underworld’s conception of time and memory, I will now return to the Bronx of the 1950s.

Bronzini leads the reader to the most significant characters from the Bronx sections. George Manza (also called George ‘the Waiter’), together with the Texas Highway Killer and J. Edgar Hoover one of the most miserable and misanthrope Americans of the novel, is introduced with a sense of dramatic irony, as we know that he will later in the novel let himself be killed by Nick:

He was George the Waiter in a second sense, that his life seemed suspended in some dire expectation. What is George waiting for? Bronzini couldn’t help seeing a challenge here. He liked to elicit comment from the untalkative man, draw him forth, make him understand that his wish to be friendless was not readily respected here. (UW, 663)

The only way Albert can get George to talk is through the subject of children’s games (UW, 664). Ironically, George is the one who makes the “child” Nick lose his innocence by letting him “play” with a gun. With a reference to T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land and, thus, to death, Albert asks George whether he remembers the “drowned man” (UW, 665). George himself is also ‘drowned’, drowned in the Styx of America’s darker underworld.

The image of children’s games returns at various intervals in the novel. In Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction, Peter Boxall suggests that the reference in the novel to Breughel’s painting Children’s Games (UW, 682) forms a counterpart to his painting The Triumph of Death and that the two paintings “are organised around a secret identity between the beginning and end of life, between the beginning and the end of history, an identity which is ciphered in ritual, in medieval awe” (2006 : 183). Father Andrew Paulus thinks that children “sidestep time, as it were, and the ravages of progress” (UW, 673). The nostalgia for innocence suggested by the motif of children’s games in Underworld, indeed, stand in contrast to the atmosphere of apocalypse that the Cold War and its crumbling into waste generate. In the same way, the Bronx in Underworld, with its children’s games and sense of community, is depicted as an America that initially seems different from that of the prologue. The Bronx, however, will finally be the place where death and guilt find their entrance too. Symbolically, Bronzini thinks: “It’s a dying practice, kids playing in city streets” (UW, 673).
Sixteen-year old Nick Shay is a ‘playing kid’ in the city streets of the Italian neighborhood of the Bronx. As Nick is introduced in this section of the novel, he is represented as a sort of ‘rebel without a cause’, always out on the street, looking for some adventure and at times involved in criminal practices. As a pastime, Nick and his friend Juju hang around in the streets—stealing cars, smoking and drinking, going out with girls. Nick, as a teenager, does not feel all too positive about a ‘nine to five’ life, finding an example in people like George Manza, “who’d survived the loss of these things [a job for life, a family] - not the loss but the never-having” (UW, 685, 724). Eventually, however, Nick too will end up living “a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix” (UW, 66). Looking back, therefore, his youth in the Bronx represents to the elder Nick a romantic period of “the days of disarray, when I didn’t give a damn or a fuck or a farthing” (UW, 806). In a conversation with Father Paulus, Nick’s ex-teacher Albert Bronzini talks about Nick as “[b]right (…) but lazy and unmotivated. He’s sixteen and can quit school any time he likes” (UW, 671). Nick’s real school is out on the street. His personality stands in remarkable contrast to that of his eleven-year old brother Matt(y), the more protected family boy, who “believe[s] in the Baltimore Catechism” (UW, 716) and devotes his time to developing his chess talent, “beginning to think in systems” (UW, 707). Nick and Matt live with their mother, Rosemary Shay, an Irish Catholic. The father, Jimmy Costanza, has ‘disappeared’ (see below).

We meet Nick the day after the 1951 baseball game between the Giants and the Dodgers. As the Dodgers, Nick’s favourite team, have lost, Nick starts to see bad luck everywhere—his paranoia for the number thirteen indicates (UW, 678). Interestingly, Nick is (anonymously) focalized in the Prologue by the omnipresent narrator:

There’s a sixteen-year-old in the Bronx who takes his radio up to the roof of his building so he can listen alone, a Dodger fan slouched in the gloaming, and he hears the account of the misplayed bunt and the fly ball that scores the tying run and he looks out over the rooftops, the tar beaches with their clotheslines and pigeon coops and splatted condoms, and he gets the cold creeps. The game doesn’t change the way you sleep or wash your face or chew your food. It changes nothing but your life. (UW, 32)

Nick’s disappointment in baseball can be read as a broader disappointment in his country: from this moment on, he feels a sense of exclusion: “He was done with baseball now, he thought, the last thin thread connecting him to another life” (UW, 679). As we get to know later, Nick, however, wants to own the Thomson homer baseball as a reification of his loss (see Chapter 1). The idea that he is predestined for bad luck will remain one of Nick’s constant obsessions throughout the novel. As a man well in his fifties, Nick in a 1992 scene of the novel still thinks: “Bad luck, Branca luck. From him to me. The moment that makes the life” (UW, 132).

A second event that isolates Nick in his young rebellious existence is the disappearance of his father. His father’s repeatedly emphasized absence from Nick’s life suggests that his disappearance is a trauma that defines the life and personality of Nick to a large extent. The absence of the father causes an emptiness in the Shay family, as his widow Rosemary thinks: “Jimmy was central now. That was the trick, the strange thing. Jimmy was the heartbeat, the missing
heartbeat” (UW, 700). She believes that her husband, who regularly partook in gambling practices, just left his family behind: “It did not happen violent. This was a thing she would never believe, that they took him away in a car. The man went out for cigarettes and just kept walking” (UW, 698). The novel makes clear that Nick, in his alienation and city ramble sometimes reminding us of Holden Caulfield from Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, has become an ‘angry young man’ because of his father’s absence: “He was angry about something but it was something else, not the car or the girlfriend- the thing that ran through his mind even in his sleep” (UW, 705).

In his character analysis of Nick, Mark Osteen in American Magic and Dread (2000 : 223) remarks that Nick makes a sort of mythical voyage through different underworlds in the novel, from George Manza’s basement in the Bronx to his waste firm in Arizona. Osteen thinks that Nick “finds [a replacement father] in George Manza, a waiter who serves as his Virgilian guide to crime (…)” (2000 : 224). Indeed, just as Matty finds a father in Albert Bronzini, his chess teacher, Nick finds one in George, his ‘crime teacher’. Both kids seem to feel a need to work out their anger for the mystery of their father’s disappearance. Ruth Helyer remarks: “Their father’s desertion (…) simultaneously divid[es] and unit[es] them” (1999 : 992). Matt finds pleasure in the violent connotation of chess: “He loved winning at chess and he loved hearing the loser declare himself dead. Because that’s what he was, kaput, and it was Matty who’d crushed him” (UW, 707). Nick is the less disciplined one, channelling his anger through passing his days in the raw reality of the street. He finally, as we will see, dismisses his ‘second father’ by killing him.

Nick after a while decides to leave his life of crime behind and take a job (UW, 691). This is how he meets the painter Klara Sax, Albert Bronzini’s wife, on the street while unloading a truck. Merely having offered him a drag of her cigarette at first encounter, Klara a few days later lets Nick enter her apartment and they have sex (UW, 731-733). Klara thinks of Nick in terms of a sudden passionate wave:

At first she thought it might be nice to think of him as the Young Man, like a character in a coming-of-age novel, but she only thought of him in motion, and nameless, and nonfictional, a sort of rotary blur that hovered just off her right shoulder somewhere, the thing her brain condensed from all that pleasure and wet. (UW, 747)

Indeed, as Mark Osteen remarks, Klara Sax “envision[s] her life as an artwork in progress” (2000 : 224). To her, Nick seems more real than anything else in her ‘fictional life’. Nick, actually, is a character in a coming-of-age novel, fascinated by an adult woman, as his description of their third encounter points out: “A naked woman was amazing. He’d never seen in it this way, in a full light, without half-off clothes or a beach blanket across the lap or sex in a dark car” (UW, 750). Osteen thinks that “[i]n having sex with her, Nick can replace his father and take revenge on the mother who wasn’t attractive enough to keep him” (2000 : 224). Although Osteen’s remark might be a little far-fetched, I think it is right to believe that Nick sees in Klara a second mother, exposing his secrets to her (UW, 751). Ironically, his brother is a pupil of his mistress’ husband. When Klara tells Nick that they should quit their affair, Nick seems to feel even more fascinated by and attracted to her:
Never mind the body. He’s never looked at a woman’s face so closely. How he thinks he knows who she is from her face, what she eats and how she sleeps, from the lookaway smile and the uncombed hair, the hair over the right eye, how her face becomes everything she is that he can’t put into words. (UW, 752)

Nick here seems to have moved beyond his feeling of merely sexual attraction and is represented as an adolescent in need of someone to care about him. Later in the chronology of the novel, there is an echo of Nick’s affair with Klara, in his one-night stand with Donna. Laura Tanenbaum remarks that “critical readings of the novel have read sexuality as a subtext to political and historical discourse rather than the explicit text it has since become” (2003: 44). Sexuality, indeed, appears in Underworld merely in short scenes. Nevertheless, sexual issues form an essential undercurrent in the Bildung of and the relationship between its characters— an issue to which I will return.

The title of this sixth part of the novel, “Arrangement in Black and Grey”, refers to the famous painting Whistler’s Mother—a timeless scene of quietness, domestic satisfaction and simplicity. To Peter Boxall, the painting represents “the mother (...) [who] turns her back to the future, and looks longingly, elegiacally, to a lost era from which she has been displaced” and at the same time “the desire of a son for his mother” (2006: 209). The symbolism of the painting then, fittingly applies to Nick’s situation, but also to the household of Klara, Albert and Albert’s mother. Klara finds herself thinking about the mother in the painting as a “figure lifted out of her time into the abstract arrangements of the twentieth century” (UW, 748). The house of Klara and Albert is the house where women are significantly in the majority: Klara, her friend Rochelle who comes to visit her at times, Albert’s mother, the daughter Teresa. Therefore, the household stands in opposition to the male-dominated world of the Bronx streets outside the house. The domestic life of Albert Bronzini and Klara Sax forms a remarkable contrast with that of the Shay family. The science teacher and the artist live a seemingly unproblematic family life with Albert’s ill mother and their two-year old daughter Teresa. In spite of the apparent domestic happiness, Klara does not seem completely satisfied or at ease with her life in the Bronx with Albert. She does not feel too good about her artistic work and is worried about her daughter (UW, 712). There remains a distance between her and Albert, but Albert thinks time can bridge this emptiness: “He wasn’t sure who she was, lying next to him in the dark, but this was something they could overcome together” (UW, 770). As we know, however, Klara commits adultery and the couple will be divorced several years later.

A sudden event brings an end to the communal Bronx years of Underworld: Nick Shay’s shooting of George Manza. George, in his dark basement (another ‘underworld’ setting, as Osteen (2000: 224) remarks) tries to push Nick to certain limits, even though Nick has decided to leave his life of crime behind. George, for example, wants to force Nick to use heroine (UW, 726). From the heroine scene onwards, Nick feels more uneasy about George (UW, 760), whom he considers “the loneliest man he’d ever known” (UW, 724). During their final encounter, George shows an old
shotgun to Nick, one he has found in a stolen car (UW, 779-780). Nick poses with the gun -as George tells him it is not loaded-, points it at George and then, eventually, pulls the trigger to find out that the gun was loaded (UW, 780). In connection with Caruth’s trauma theory (1995 : 153), Nick’s shooting of George can be regarded as the main traumatic event of the novel. Later, Nick himself describes: “(…) your own shock, the trauma of perception- how can you tell what’s going on if you’re in shock yourself?” (UW, 509). Nick does not seem to experience his overwhelming, accidental deed fully, as if time is at the same time rewinding and speeding forward:

But first he pointed the gun at the man’s head and asked if it was loaded.
Then he felt the trigger pull and heard the gun go off and the man and the chair went different ways.
And the way the man said no when he asked if it was loaded.
He asked if the thing was loaded and the man said no and now he has a weapon in his hands that has just apparently been fired.
He force-squeezed the trigger and looked into the smile on the other man’s face.
But first he posed with the gun and pointed it at the man and asked if it was loaded.
(…)
But first he went through the sequence and it played out the same. (UW, 781)

As Leonard Wilcox points out: “This locus of the traumatic real is the empty place of the father, for George Manza’s death echoes and redoubles the trauma of abandonment by Nick’s father” (2002 : 125). When, forty years later, Nick wakes up from a dream, his traumatic memory seems to keep on haunting his unconsciousness:

Then I came up out of a dream and felt my way to the armchair, breathing funny, and switched on the small reading lamp. (…) I hefted the weapon and pointed it and saw an interested smile fall across his face, the sliest kind of shit-eating grin.
Maybe that was the dream- I wasn’t sure. (UW, 132)

Mark Osteen remarks that “[the] murder of George completes the Oedipal pattern, and both marks the end of Nick Shay’s boyhood and closes the curtain on the Bronx as it was- a lively community where everyone was connected” (2000 : 225). George, here, emerges as an ultimately corrupted character, taking Nick with him in his complete self-destruction- consumed by “weapons and waste” (Osteen 2000 : 224): two of the defining elements, DeLillo suggests throughout the novel, of American postwar culture. In bringing together Nick’s complex psychology, George’s challenging behavior and the workings of the dominating culture, then, this scene is one of the most crucial ones in Underworld. It marks a turning point in the community which -although not completely romanticized in the novel- was so far enclosed from the America ‘out there’. The ‘shot heard around the Bronx’ stands as a counterpart to the ‘shot(s) heard around the world’: just like the Soviet’s atomic test and Thomson’s homer, “this was a kind of history taking place” (UW, 781).

2.2. Nick Shay: From Rebel without a Cause to Waste Executive
To David Cowart, “Nick’s murder of George is a slaying of the double, the self that by rights Nick (a drop-out at sixteen) was destined to be” (2002 : 190). Indeed, this defining deed in his life brings along a change in Nick’s Bildungprocess, from a more instinctive and impulsive personality towards the acquisition of discipline and what Mark Osteen calls “containment” (2000 : 225).
After his killing of George, Nick enters correction in Staatsburg, upstate New York. Nick repeatedly affirms that he “wanted things to make sense (...) The minute I entered correction I was a convert to the system (...) I believed in the stern logic of correction (...) all I wanted from the system was method and regularity” (UW, 502-503). Nick does not want a soft treatment or psychological help, and he sometimes has the feeling that the people at Staatsburg do not take him too seriously (UW, 503). Staatsburg is where Nick’s reform begins, a point in his life which he considers the beginning of his shaping an American self: “this was how I began to build an individual” (UW, 503). Nick regularly has conversations with Dr. Lindblad, a psychologist who wants Nick to talk about his shooting of George (UW, 509). Trying to come to terms with the American ideal that you can always ‘start anew’, Nick does not really accept “the idea that [he] ha[s] a history” (UW, 511). Dr. Lindblad analyzes Nick’s crime in terms of something happening to his (un)consciousness:

“The gesture is extreme because the mind is closing down. It’s the end of consciousness. So the body goes beserk. The body shows you what’s happening to the mind. The way a person’s grief bends to the body. This is how consciousness looks. This is how it flails and trashes 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?” (UW, 511)

Nick does not want to accept Dr. Lindblad’s theories about his consciousness, as she links the trauma of his shooting to the trauma of his father’s disappearance: “She told me that my father was the third person in the room the day I shot George Manza” (UW, 512).

Nick at this moment does not consider his days in the Bronx the romantic period of his life as he sees them in his fifties:

She kept talking about history in her tight blouse. But all I saw was the crazy-armed man, his body spinning one way, the chair going another. And all I saw was the rough slur of those narrow streets, the streets going narrower all the time, collapsing in on themselves, and the dumb sad sameness of the days. (UW, 512)

Nick here suggests that the Bronx increasingly became too small a world to him and admits that his life as a street kid did not really make him happy. Maybe this could be read as an echo from DeLillo’s personal life- that he left the Bronx (with paradoxical feelings) to broaden his world and become a writer. What Nick remembers from the Bronx, is his traumatic experience of shooting a man, in contrast to the “sameness of the days”.

As a man in his fifties, then, living a routine family and job life, Nick’s memories of the Bronx seem to be distorted (UW, 810): DeLillo suggests that memory is something changeable, something one cannot rely on. Memory creates different narratives at different times in someone’s life, and therefore Underworld presents human memory -or perception of historical reality as a whole- as essentially shaped by language, the foundation of every narrative. What keeps returning throughout these narratives, however diverging their contexts might be, are traumatic experiences. Narratives, then, are necessary as a way of working-through (traumatic) memory (La Capra, 2004 : 123). In the light of Elisabeth Wesseling’s postmodernist theory: “causality and teleology which
were previously thought to inhere in historical reality are now conceptualized as linguistic phenomena” (1991: 128).

The importance of language in constructing a self in Underworld is discussed most clearly during Nick’s stay with the Jesuits (after his release from correction), further northwest, in Minnesota. “How everyday things lie hidden”, his mentor Father Paulus thinks. “Because we don’t know what they’re called” (UW, 541). Father Paulus takes Nick through a session entitled “A young man’s progress” (UW, 537). He wants to “help a young man toward an ethical strength that makes him decisive, that shows him precisely who he is” (UW, 538). As a result of his Jesuit education, language becomes a way of constructing reality to Nick, as becomes clear from the classical scene in which Father Paulus asks Nick to name the parts of his shoe (UW, 540). Nick himself tells: “I wanted to look up words (…) This is the only way in the world you can escape the things that made you” (UW, 543). David Cowart in this respect notices a parallel with Don DeLillo: “Like a writer, then, Nick transcends his background through language” (2002: 185). Underworld suggests that language is a way of creating individuality in a country that has the ability to shape your personality with its dominating discourse.

Referring to Derrida’s “No Apocalypse, Not Now”, Leonard Wilcox argues: “DeLillo’s Underworld suggests that nuclear catastrophe is the primary historical possibility that cannot be assimilated by the symbolic and is therefore the one referent that is the most literary”. Language, then, is also a way to get a grip on “the unthinkable’ and “the impossible” (2002: 135)- the trauma of nuclear threat. In the same way, Nick uses language to work-through the traumas from his Bronx life (his father’s disappearance, the Dodgers’ loss, his abandonment by Klara and murder of George). Language is Nick Shay’s and Don DeLillo’s tool to construct a new American self, looking back on a mysterious era.

By 1957, after his stay with the Jesuits, Nick works as a text editor. In June 1957, we see him undertaking a road trip through the mid- and south-western states of his country with his girlfriend Amy, slightly reminding us of David Bell in DeLillo’s first novel Americana. Nick learns things about his country he did not know before: “And this was a thing I did not know existed (…), people living permanently in trailers, and Amy called me a foreigner from New York” (UW, 552). At the same time, Nick learns about the difficulties of a relationship. Nick and Amy experience problems in communicating- they regularly quarrel and get mad at each other. In an interesting dialogue, Nick makes the following analysis of their situation:

(…) you know what you are? A practical hardheaded more or less calculating individual who is planning ten years ahead and knows every passing minute for what it is.”

“What is it ?”

“A thing you drain every drop of juice from so you can forget it in the morning.” (UW, 550)

Nick blames Amy for doing what he has been trying to do himself, during correction and Jesuit education: to obliterate memory and to think only in terms of future and progress- the American ideal of time. Many years later, after having had sex with his wife Marian before leaving for a meeting in Houston, Nick says a similar thing: “And why is it that when I get back, the whole thing’s
gone and lost and forgotten?” (UW, 253). Nick struggles with the impossibility to make transient moments of intensity last forever: even in a relationship, there seems no place for cherished memories.

Getting to see the darker sides of his country and increasingly confronted with his personal estrangement, Nick becomes disappointed in the promise of America:

(...) I felt a sadness I could not exactly locate, a feeling that could have been mine or could have been theirs, the little families with food on paper plates, the unhappy man slouched on the bench, the place itself, the bench itself, the trash cans that didn’t have lids. (UW, 554)

Two years later, Nick drives Amy to the hospital for the abortion of their child. At this point in his life, Nick seems to have lost every sense of stability or certainty, as expressed by the following moving excerpt:

I was willing to make sacrifices and be responsible. This is what I told myself. I wanted to fix myself to something strong, to a wife, I thought, and child.

But it wasn’t strong at all. It was hopeless, worthless and weak. We wouldn’t last a week together. We were restless and grasping, we were a fling that had run intermittently for two years only because we lived in different cities, and we were religious in our attachment to risk, and she was the last thing I needed in this world.

And you felt a strange shaded grief, didn’t you, sitting in the room, a sadness shaded by distance, and you tried to think yourself into the middle of the child’s unlived life. (UW, 589)

Nick, then, having made an American journey from the Bronx to upstate New York, Minnesota, South-Dakota, California, Arizona and the Mexican border, by his early twenties eventually finds himself ending up with nothing. He goes through a process of estrangement as he is thrown into the wider world of the America outside the Bronx. Trying to contain his personal waste (Osteen 2000: 225), Nick is incessantly confronted with an accumulation of traumas: from the Dodgers’ symbolical loss in the 1951 baseball game to the loss of a child. Nick’s desire to leave the past behind leads him into situations he cannot handle, as he is confronted with his own incapability of dealing with personal loss, being moreover merely an insignificant individual in a huge country he feels disconnected from. Nick is torn between the need to impose order and discipline onto his life and the sheer impossibility of working-through his past. This is how DeLillo, through Underworld’s protagonist, challenges the ‘American promise’ that each individual can freely realize his own longings.

In 1965, when visiting New York for his work on a project about alternative schooling methods, Nick coincidentally meets Jeremiah Sullivan, an old school mate from the Bronx. Nick by now has a relationship with Marian, his later wife, but he tells Jeremiah that he’s not interested in marriage (UW, 618)- having gone through the disappointments of earlier relationships. Nick feels there are unbridgeable differences between his life and that of Jeremiah, “(…) all because [Jeremiah]’s never killed a man” (UW, 621). He refuses Jeremiah’s offer to pay a visit to the Bronx and instead takes a walk through the city, which is completely darkened because of an electricity
supply interruption (UW, 634-635). During his underworld-like trip through Manhattan, which in a prophetic reading alludes to a 9/11 setting, Nick thinks:

The always seeping suspicion, paralysis, the thing implicit in the push-button city, that it will stop cold, leaving us helpless in the rat-eye dark, and then we begin to wonder, as I did, how the whole thing works anyway. (UW, 635)

Nick is fascinated by this city’s dependence on technology: only when a severe interruption of the system occurs, we start to wonder about its workings. Later, looking at the city through the window of his hotel room on the fifth floor, Nick conveys: “I felt a loneliness, for lack of a better word, but that’s the word in fact, a thing I tried never to admit to and knew how to step outside of” (UW, 637). Nick thus admits that he cannot escape his feeling of loneliness- a sentiment caused by what Leonard Wilcox describes as “the inaccessibility and otherness of trauma” (2002 : 135).

In an October 1967 scene, we see Marian making a phone call to Nick:

Then she told him she wanted to get married. She wanted to marry him and live with him, anywhere, wherever he wanted, and not have kids and not have friends and never go to dinner with her parents. There was a silence at the other end that she could not read. A telephone silence can be hard to read, grim and deep and sometimes unsettling. You don’t have the softening aspect of the eyes or even the lookaway glance while he ponders. There’s nothing in the silence but the deep distance between you. (UW, 604)

Nick seems to have doubts about marriage, but one year later Marian and he are married anyway; their first daughter is born in 1970 (UW, 636). This is when Nick’s settling process begins, a point in American history symbolically coinciding with what Wallerstein (2006) marks as the beginning of declining American hegemony in the world-system. Both the dream of the Cold War and Nick’s personal dream of constructing a satisfactory self are gradually adapted to changing times.

In the 1974 part of Underworld (“Cocksucker Blues”), Nick and Marian disappear from the scene for a while. This is the section in which DeLillo centralizes, most importantly, the artist world of Klara Sax (discussed in 2.3 below) and the life of Nick’s brother Matt Shay. In this way, we also get a picture of Nick through the eyes of his brother. Anno 1974, Matt works in a secretive weapon device center, ‘the Pocket’, in the New Mexico desert. Matt thinks about how he went to the movie theatre Loew’s Paradise in the Bronx eight days after his father had disappeared (UW, 406), a scene which reminds us of Cotter’s entrance into the baseball stadium in the prologue: little kids confronted with the ‘cathedrals’ of their country’s culture. Matt thinks it “was a thousand times more holy than church” (UW, 407). In the midst of the spectacle of the movie theatre, Matt “waited for his father, for the ghost or soul of his father to make a visitation” (UW, 408). Loew’s Paradise has an important place in Matt’s memory; he “sees all this as a grown-up who has never smoked a cigarette, who barely drives a car and no longer plays chess and loves a woman who’s a nurse in Boston” (UW, 407-408). Matt, then, lives a more or less settled life by the mid-seventies, but he also is still haunted and traumatized by his memories of the Bronx, including his father’s disappearance. His girlfriend Janet aptly works in a “trauma unit” (UW, 412). The magic and splendour of Loew’s Paradise has by now made place, in Matt’s day-to-day life, for the secrecy and
power of the Pocket, another ‘underworld’ setting in the novel. His job is a way of getting hold of
the mystery of the Cold War; a job which at the same time fascinates him and makes him feel
disquieted (UW, 408-409). As Nicolas Marichal points out, Matt starts to feel “unreal” and
uncertain about his job as the Cold War dream begins to shatter (1999 : 47). At such times, Matt
often thinks of Nick, needing his older brother’s support:

Nick had a graveness that was European in a way. He was shaped and made. First unmade and then
reimagined and strongly shaped and made again. And he was somber and self-restrained at times
and not free-giving but maybe he would give the kid advice about the moral and ethical aspects of
this kind of work. Mainly what Matt wanted was a show of interest. This was more important than
outright counsel, a recommendation or judgment, but he wanted that too- a judgment in his
brother’s voice. (UW, 416)

Matt, then, sees in Nick a “European” aspect, referring both to the brothers’ immigrant
parents (an Irish mother and Italian father) and Nick’s difficulties to adapt to an American ideal of
“made” selfhood. Matt considers his brother as an individual with a deep history, which he has
recycled and reshaped into a new self- maintaining however a very mysterious trait. The
disappearance of Jimmy Costanza is, as Ruth Hel yer points out (1999 : 992), what causes the
paradoxical relationship of kinship versus distance between Matt and Nick. Matt thinks that Nick’s
personality will remain an inscrutable mystery forever: “When Nick dies a team of metaphysicians
will examine the black box, the personal flight recorder that’s designed to tell them how his mind
worked and why he did what he did and what he thought about it all, but there’s no guarantee
they’ll find the slightest clue” (UW, 447).

Nick is well aware of the fact that he is a ‘made man’, using his Bildung as a protection from
his real, traumatized, self. When we meet Nick again in Los Angeles in spring 1978, he affirms:
“There’s a certain distance in my makeup, a measured separation like my old man’s, I guess (…) Once you’re a made man, you don’t need the constant living influences of sources outside yourself”
(UW, 275). Nick, then, sees a parallel between his personality and that of his father. The best word
to describe his condition, Nick thinks, is the Italian word for “distance or remoteness: lontananza”
(UW, 275). Each language is another reality, and the Italian language seems to fit him best (Nick for
teaches Latin for a while, too).

Nick tries to make up his own narrative about his father’s life and disappearance. Looking at
the Watts Towers, Sabato Rodia’s major artwork of recycled waste, Nick finds that “the power of
the thing, for me, the deep disturbance, was that my own ghost father was living in the walls” (UW,
277). He associates Rodia, also an Italian immigrant, with his father, and tries to imagine his father’s
presence in LA: “This was the contradiction. Jimmy’s future closed down the night he went out for
cigarettes. Why would I even try to imagine him in an alternative reality, coming out here, half here,
escaping into the Angeleno light, the Mediterranean weather?” (UW, 276). Just as language is Nick’s
way to build a self (he has been working as a Latin teacher, for example), the Watts Towers are a
form of working-through (literal, material) waste by means of art. Even more suitably, Nick by now
works as an executive for ‘Waste Containment’ (or Whiz Co), as Mark Osteen notices:
How fittingly that Nick works for Waste Containment: he is engaged in a similar enterprise with his personal waste. Just as his company works to package and restrict hazardous waste, so Nick tries to contain his memories within carefully guarded boundaries that nonetheless permit traces of his internal poisons to leach from his psychic subterranean and taint his life. (2000 : 226)

DeLillo’s depiction of the late 1970s (as well as the 80s and 90s) is full of irony and comment on the more thorough effects of consumer society on human needs and longings. In a 1978 conference in L.A. about ‘The Future of Waste’, Nick meets Donna, a woman from another group in the conference center, “a smaller and more committed group, forty married couples who were here to trade sexual partners and talk about their feelings” (UW, 278). In studying Underworld's undercurrent of sexuality in the light of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Laura Tanenbaum states that the novel, also in terms of sexuality, “excavates contemporary consumerist desire to find the utopian impulses lying beneath while retaining a powerful sense of its destructive possibilities” (2003 : 45). Now the Cold War and the sexual revolution are absorbed into America’s culture and Nick feels ‘made’ by his country, he seems to feel an urge to re-experience the ‘purity’ that he associates with his life in the Bronx and his sexual affair with Klara Sax. However, times have changed, and the character of Donna, a ‘swinger’, is the personification of this ‘new sexuality’.

Tanenbaum remarks that Donna “plays the role of the post-sexual revolution ‘realist’ to Nick’s utopian longings” and “(…) comes to both embody and challenge the utopianism of a certain strain of the sexual revolution” (2003 : 45-46). Nick and Donna engage in a movie-like flirt (Nick notices himself: “These were movie scenes” (UW, 292) ) and explore the attractive danger of exposing oneself to a stranger. Nick tells Donna:

“You know what I like about you? You make me aggressive, a little reckless”, I said. “I’m having a relapse just sitting here. I’m backsliding a mile a minute.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that all the interesting things in my life happened young.” (UW, 293)

Nick here admits that Donna takes him back to his lost, ‘interesting’ life, as he sees in Donna an echo of Klara, and therefore, ‘a return of the real’ (Wilcox, 2002). In the dialogue that follows, one of the most powerful scenes of the novel, Nick talks about his obsession with secrets and God, and his idea that sex is a way to approach a transcendent state:

“And so I learned to respect the power of secrets. We approach God through his unmadness. We are made, created. God is unmade. How can we attempt to know such a being? (…) I’m not saying sex is our divinity. Please. Only that sex is the one secret we have that approximates an exalted state and that we share, two people share wordlessly more or less and equally more or less, and this makes it powerful and mysterious and worth sheltering.” (UW, 297)

Nick’s idealistic, religious conception of sexuality as a mysterious secret is challenged by Donna, who wants him to see that sex in contemporary society is a daily common good, not so wondrous and hidden anymore:

“Sex is not so secret anymore. The secret is out. You know what sex means to most people? (…) Sex is what you can get. For some people, most people it’s the most important thing they can get without being born rich or smart or stealing. This is what life can give you that’s equal to others or better, even, that you don’t have to go to college six years to get. And it’s not religion and it’s not
science but you can explore it and learn things about yourself. (…) There's too much loneliness in America? Too many secrets? Let them out, open them up. (…)” (UW, 297-298)

Donna makes Nick even reveal a secret that he has not even told his own wife: the fact that he has killed a man at seventeen. Laura Tanenbaum notices that sexuality in Underworld is an essential dynamic to its storyline, as “a catalyst for further revelation, creating a temporary connection far different from what the utopian vision anticipated” (2003 : 46). Nick, then, is confronted with the changing place of sexuality in American culture. Whereas he holds on to his quasi-religious, secretive ideal of sex, Donna embodies the post-revolutionary reality of sexual relationships, as Tanenbaum (2003 : 45-46) points out; a New Left ideal that has been integrated into a liberal consumer culture. Ruth Helyer rightly summarizes: “Donna reiterates that life's complexities make it impossible to identify yourself using only such grand narratives as science and religion. Sexual identity can never be so straightforward. Sex is expelled, like a waste product (…)” (1999 : 1002).

Eventually, his encounter with Donna is an intensive but swift flirt Nick later regrets, as he feels guilty towards Marian (UW, 344-345). Underworld's subtext of sexuality, then, is another undercurrent that emphasizes changing, estranging times. None of Nick’s relationships are really satisfactory, and therefore maybe Nick tries to see in Donna a return of the woman who holds an idealized position in his memory of the Bronx, Klara Sax. Nick held on to the romantic ideal that sex could ‘unmake’ his ‘made’ self. Sex, however, is no longer secret or sacred in an advanced consumer society. His encounter with Donna will lead up to another point of awakening from this dream, only leaving him with more estrangement and another uncertainty (cfr. the title of this part of the novel, “The Cloud of Unknowing”): “You withhold the deepest thing from those who are closest and then talk to a stranger in a numbered room. What’s the point of asking why?” (UW, 301).

From the end of the 1970s onwards, Nick lives a settled life in Phoenix, Arizona: “Phoenix was a neater package for me. I needed a private life” (UW, 340-341). Nick considers himself living in “a package”, geographically, but also personally, hiding from his real self. His journey to the southwest of the country parallels an evolution in his construction of an American identity. Nick thinks of “back east” as a “reference to time, a statement about time, about all the densities of being and experience” (UW, 333). An important element in ‘the making of Nick’ is the firm Whiz Co: “The corporation is supposed to take us outside ourselves. (…) Corporations are great and appalling things.” (UW, 89, 282). The corporation and its business, waste, become central and almost religious to Nick’s life (see Chapter 1). This narrative, the liturgical discourse of the corporation, becomes Nick’s way of working-through his traumas. The routine and monotony of his job and family life forms a remarkable contrast with Nick’s youth in the Bronx. Also in his daily life, waste opens to him a new way of looking at reality: “Marian and I saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought. (…) We said, What kind of garbage
will that make? Safe, clean, neat, easily disposed of?” (UW, 121). Nick, symbolically, has started thinking about life in terms of recycling, while he is at the same over and over reliving his own past.

Even in his own family, Nick at times feels a stranger. As Nicolas Marichal says, his children are rarely given any screen time (1999: 44-45). Just as Nick commits adultery with Donna in 1978, his wife Marian has an adulterous affair with Nick’s colleague Brian Glassic in the mid 1980s-early 90s. When Nick eventually finds out about the affair, he strikes Brian with a blow in the face (UW, 797). At the same, Nick wonders: “When I found out about him and Marian I felt some element of stoic surrender. (...) and I was hereby relieved of my phony role as husband and father, high corporate officer (...) Did I feel free for just a moment, myself again, hearing the story of their affair?” (UW, 796). Nick, then, in spite of wanting to keep up his pride, at times feels attracted to the idea of escaping the ‘roles’ he is playing.

When Nick visits his mother Rosemary and his brother Matt in the Bronx in the late 80s-early 1990s, the same emptiness in the family, the absence of the father, is still there: “It was the thing that made them a family, still, after all the silences and distances” (UW, 199). Nick by now seems to have acquired more affection for his mother, as he “opened himself to everything inside her, to the past that never stops happening” (UW, 201). Matt and Nick still dispute about the reason for their father’s disappearance:

“He did the unthinkable Italian crime. He walked out on his family. They don’t even have a name for this.”

“He didn’t walk out. They came and got him.”

“Keep believing it”, Matt said. (UW, 204)

Matt and Nick have their own narratives to live with, both trying to work-through the loss of their father in their own way. When his mother eventually dies, Nick thinks “it is not a sadness to acknowledge that she had to die before I could know her fully. It is only a statement of the power of what comes after” (UW, 804). Nick finds comfort in the catholic conviction that death is not the end.

The eight pages (UW 803-810) in which Nick disappears from the novel constitute a brilliantly written coda to the Bildungsprozess he went through, and provide at the same time a moving reflection on the human condition as it is perceived in Underworld. The story of Nick Shay, characterized by an accumulation of traumas and the struggle to contain them, does not end in either a positive or negative tone, although to most readers and critics it might be the sadness and nostalgia that eventually ring through. Nick’s last words in the novel might express a nostalgic desire to return to the Bronx (UW, 810), but on the other hand this is the place where the origins of several of Nick’s traumas lie; moreover, the difference between the description of a character’s feelings and the novel’s subtext, that memory is not a transparent medium, should be taken into account. Nick himself explains: “You know how certain places grow powerful in the mind with passing time” (UW, 74).
Nick Shay will forever wrestle with his feelings of loneliness and estrangement, but he seems to have accepted that this is part of his personality, which he tries to work-through by means of the ‘shaped’ side of his self, shaped by the corporation- the new center of power in America. The ambiguous position towards his father’s disappearance, of both understanding and blame, to a large extent accounts for his Weitschmerz: “I think he just went under. The failure it brought down on us does not diminish” (UW, 809). “Most of our longings go unfulfilled”, Nick has learnt by now. “This is the word’s wistful implication- a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach”. On the other hand: “Marian and I are closer now, more intimate than we’ve ever been” (UW, 803). Laura Tanenbaum, then, is I believe not completely right when she speaks of “Nick’s increased distance from his family life” (2003 : 48). In the same way, I think Mark Osteen is overstating the case when he concludes that Nick’s life is symbolized by the closed landfill he looks at (UW, 809-810), which in Osteen’s opinion represents “both his self-containment and the radiant life from which he seems forever exiled. What remains is not light, but darkness visible” (2000 : 230). I would suggest that Nick’s reflections on visiting this closed landfill represent an elegiac visit to the underside of his country’s culture, as Nick thinks that the landfill “is like a fable in the writhing air of some ghost civilization, a shimmer of desert ruin” (UW, 810). Nick has learnt that The American Dream is a myth, and against his disappointment he tries to place idiosyncratic “intimacies” (UW, 808).

Nick, then, as an immigrant son, makes a journey from the Bronx to Phoenix, seeing the American Dream crumble as the Cold War discourse dissolves and his personal traumas accumulate. He goes through a Bildung of increasing estrangement, but in certain ways he eventually seems to come to terms with his past. Peter Boxall rightly remarks: “It is the central narrative of Nick’s Bildungsromanic progress towards peace and reconciliation that this working contradiction between belonging and alienation makes itself felt most forcefully” (2006 : 191). In connection with trauma theory, Underworld indeed suggests that (shattered) narratives are necessary in working-through trauma. Just as Nick builds a self through language and waste management, Underworld tries to grasp the larger cultural trauma that the Cold War caused to America. At the same time, the novel investigates the nature of memory, suggesting that “the past never stops happening” (UW, 201). Just as one narrative will never lead to the truth, however, one man’s memory is only one way of representing a certain part of history, subject to changes and deformations.

2.3. Klara Sax: Portrait of the Artist as a Woman

In “Reluctant Warriors: Reading DeLillo’s Cold War”, Laura Tanenbaum states that “Klara’s progression from housewife to artist, while far from wholly utopian, is consistently presented as a process of liberation” (2003 : 49). She sees in the Bildung of Klara Sax an evolution of “greater empowerment” (2003: 48). Klara is less of a protagonist in Underworld than Nick and, as Nicholas
Marichal finds, it is difficult to figure her out (1999: 45). In the critical literature on the novel, she is also a much less commented-on character than Nick Shay. Nevertheless, almost a complete section of the novel (Part 4: “Cocksucker Blues”) is devoted to her life amidst the artist scene of New York in the seventies.

If Nick, as Mark Osteen (2000) suggests, makes a mythical journey through several American underworlds, Klara confines herself to more or less one: the underworld of the artist. After she has left the Bronx, Klara goes to live in Manhattan, where we meet her again in 1974- the year of Nixon’s resign from office and the garbage strike in New York. The seventies in the United States were ‘an era of cultural transformation’ (Norton e.a., 2007: 590): ecological awareness (see Chapter 1), the sexual revolution and an awakening for racial diversity were some of the cultural undercurrents that defined the decade, entailing new impulses for artistic creativity. At the opening of Part 4, we find fifty-four year old Klara standing on a factory rooftop in Manhattan, a clear contrast with the many ‘underworld’ settings of the novel. Symbolically, she can “see the thing distinct” (UW, 371) from her panoramic standpoint- a reference to DeLillo’s own artistic perception in Underworld. Klara belongs to an ‘underground’ scene, but she stands on top of the city. An artist, DeLillo suggests, has to see things in the city that are generally not seen (UW, 379).

Klara can see the construction of the World Trade Center (UW, 372) -in a post 9/11 reading of the novel an interesting detail. The towers, “Titans of Finance” (UW, 385), stand in symbolical contrast to the countercultural artistic movement of the New Left to which Klara belongs, and more specifically to the Watts Towers in California, the work of art Klara visits at the end of Part 4 (UW, 492).

Whereas Nick by 1974 is married and has a child, Klara is at this time an independent woman who has freed herself from the ties of “rancorous marriages” (UW, 374). She has a special friend whom she particularly likes, the film maker Miles Lightman, but it is never explicitly made clear whether Klara and he have a love relationship. Klara is not successful in her role as a mother, as becomes clear from her encounters with her now twenty-five year old daughter Teresa: “(…) the hardest part of the visit for Klara was sitting in the loft talking, or waiting out the silences, or finding out her daughter took sugar in her tea and not having sugar in the house” (UW, 375). Teresa wants her mother to pay a visit to Albert in the Bronx, just as Nick’s old friend Jeremiah proposed to take a walk to their old neighborhood. Just like Nick, Klara does not consider this a good idea (UW, 375). Klara has left her life as a housewife behind and does not want to take a step back in her process of self-empowerment. As Marichal writes: “The flightly artist clearly does not belong in the closed-off micro-society of the neighborhood” (1999: 45). However, Klara cherishes the past and does not consider herself a ‘typical American’ artist: “Art in which the moment is heroic, American art, the do-it-now, the fuck-the-past- she could not follow that” (UW, 377). Similarly, she disapproves of “the romance of the ego” (UW, 394). As we will see in Chapter 3, Klara will later engage in a greater historical art project, repainting B-52s from the Cold War.
Interestingly, Klara’s friend and ‘artist coach’ Esther Winship wants Klara to take her to the Bronx. There is a graffiti artist, ‘Moonman 157’, whom Esther considers very talented. She wants to find him and make his work more public (UW, 377). As we know, ‘Moonman 157’ is the pseudonym of Ismael Muñoz, a homosexual Puerto Rican artist living in the Wall, an utterly poor section of the Bronx (UW, 245). “It’s women”, we read in Underworld, “who take the lead in recovering lost careers (...) even when the artist is a man” (UW, 388-389). Klara and Esther eventually go to the Bronx, to ‘the underworld’ of New York, symbolically taking the subway and seeing a train, painted over by Moonman, rushing by (UW, 394-395). In Chapter 3, I will return to Moonman. Interesting here is that Klara is confronted with the evolution of the Bronx: the place where she used to live once, now seems another America- almost a foreign, impoverished country (UW, 395). The Bronx marks a clear contrast with Klara’s actual artist life in ‘rooftop’ Manhattan. Klara at times seems to miss her youth, as becomes apparent from her memories of her friend Rochelle and the way they together went through “the intricate thing of men and sex and personal needs” (UW, 398). Klara thinks “she could never again have a friend like Rochelle or a mother like her mother for that matter” (UW, 400).

Klara’s parents have Jewish roots. Her father changed the name Sachs into Sax on his business card: “at first she thought he had the card printed because he did not want people to make the mistake of thinking he was German and then she thought he had the card printed because he did not want people to know he was a Jew” (UW, 483). As a way of affirming her artistic self, Klara uses Sax as her name after having divorced Albert (UW, 483). Language, then, also in Klara’s life has a significant role in shaping a self and freeing herself from her Jewish roots. Her short sexual affair with Nick, also, is considered a step in her liberation process, as she tells her friend Acey:

“Yes, well, maybe it’s true. Seventeen’s a man,” Klara said. “And I’ve asked myself was the thing more important than I was willing to admit?”
“ln other words did it show you a way out?”
“Which you didn’t want to think about at the time.”
(...) “And he didn’t seem to make too much of it himself. He was, I thought, remarkably unconfused and even-keeled was my impression” (UW, 484)

If Nick admires Klara, then, Klara is also intrigued by Nick. His ‘freedom’ and maturity inspire Klara, indirectly, in finding a liberated place for herself. By changing her name again and having sex with Nick, she moves away from Albert. As Laura Tanenbaum remarks, “Albert, the old-world and old-school husband left behind, suffers because these transformations leave him behind: bound by duty, he lacks the self-knowledge promised by liberationist ideology” (2003 : 49).

Like Nick, Klara pays a visit to the Watts Towers in California. Whereas Nick is fascinated by the work because he feels his father’s presence in it, Klara thinks: “Such a splendid independence this man was gifted with, or likely fought for, and now she wanted to leave” (UW, 492). To Klara then, the Towers represent the ultimate symbol of artistic independence, an immigrant constructing his own masterpiece out of American waste. Underworld, then, is to DeLillo what the Watts Towers were to Sabato Rodia, as Mark Osteen remarks: “DeLillo has designed Underworld as
a similar act of artistic resistance and redemption, using the same techniques of montage and bricolage to generate artistic grace” (2000: 246). This is an issue to which I will return in Chapter 3.

At the end of Part 4, Klara Sax marries Carlo Strasser, a marriage that represents far from a climax in Klara’s life, as Nicolas Marichal points out (1999: 45). The marriage takes place on “one of those taut autumn days”, “one of those days in Central Park when there’s a distilled sense of perception” (UW, 497). In a similar way as Nick, Klara seems to have ambiguous feelings about her marriage. “How nice to be a family again, even if fleeting and incomplete”, Klara thinks, but at the same time the whole ritual of wedding seems not unique or special to her: “what the hell it’s only marriage” (UW, 497). The last sentence of this part of the novel emphasizes this ambiguity in her personality and the difficulty of getting hold on her as a reader: “They thought they knew the mystery of living in her skin” (UW, 498).

Klara Sax undergoes a Bildung from family housewife to independent artist, an evolution seen by Laura Tanenbaum (2003) as a post-sixties self-empowerment of the woman artist. Klara leaves her Jewish roots and family life with Albert Bronzini behind to construct an American self as an artist. In this sense, she works-through her past by means of art and stands in contrast to Nick Shay, who is eventually ‘shaped’ by his waste management corporation. Klara Sax and her artist surroundings, which include especially women, can be read as an ode of Don DeLillo to the ‘strongest of the two genders’, as well as to the role of the idiosyncratic artist in America (cfr. DeLillo’s The Power of History). It must be noted, however, that DeLillo depicts Klara Sax as a rather floating, vague character, with contradictory feelings. This makes it hard for the reader to make a definitive judgement about her.

2.4. Synthesis: Retrospective Reunion in the Desert

In November 1989, the Berlin Wall was torn down, marking the definitive end of an era. In the spring of 1992, Nick Shay and Klara Sax meet again, when Nick pays a visit to Klara Sax’s art project in the Texas desert. This excerpt of the novel could be considered an epilogue to the stories of Nick Shay and Klara Sax, although in the novel it is actually one of the earliest scenes. Nick and Klara, in their reunion, look back on a bygone era- that of the Cold War. Throughout their Bildungsprocess, this dominating conflict in the world-system during the second half of the twentieth century, and its influence on America, are hardly directly discussed. As Leonard Wilcox writes: “Underworld’s narrative project is precisely to construct traumatic experience in the only way it can be, after the fact” (2002: 123). It is only when the Cold War is over that its real meaning can be understood. So do Nick Shay and Klara Sax look back, from the nineties, on both their own personal lives as on the Cold War frame that overarched the American culture in those days.
When Nick meets Klara Sax, who is seventy-two by now, he still cannot bring up the subject of their sexual encounter forty years earlier: “the subject was not speakable—too secret, still, even between the secret-keepers” (UW, 73). Despite of his earlier encounter with Donna, Nick still wants sex to be something secretive. Klara thinks that life has taken a “fictitious” or “unreal” turn (UW, 73), which Nick does not accept, trying to believe that he “lived responsibly in the real” (UW, 82). This is an ambiguous statement, as it can both mean that Nick considers his actual shaped, stoic existence ‘real’ and that he still lives in his traumatic ‘real’. The character differences between Nick and Klara still exist. Remarkably, Klara Sax here for the first time confesses that her life in the Bronx seemed more real to her, in spite of all her struggle for artistic independence. Albert Bronzini has died two weeks ago (UW, 74), which suggests that her last connection with the Bronx has disappeared by now. On a personal level, Nick and Klara soon do not have to say much more to each other: “We’d said what we were going to say and exchanged all the looks and remembered the dead and missing and now it was time for me to become a functioning adult again” (UW, 75).

As a consequence, Nick and Klara start reflecting on the Cold War. “Now that power is in shatters or tatters and now those Soviet borders don’t even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well,” Klara Sax thinks (UW, 76). She is coordinating an art project with B-52 bombers, to which I will return in Chapter 3. Interestingly, she states that she wants to “unrepeat” the “endlessly repeated systems” of the war industry (UW, 77). Don DeLillo uses the same words in a 1997 interview with Gerald Howard, thinking that in America “events are repeated endlessly”- thus referring to the way in which such events enter the collective unconsciousness and become a reality in themselves. In U.S. Orpheus, Nicolas Marichal in this respect refers to the endless reruns of the Texas Highway Killer footage in the novel, explaining that the killer can only integrate himself into society by means of murder and the mediatisation of this murder (1999 : 53). Another example of mediatised violence is the recurring appearance of the Zapruder tape, a registration of the murder on JFK. Violence, Underworld makes clear, is a collective trauma in American culture, an obsession which is even more emphasized and eventually creates a narrative on its own through excessive mediatisation. Moreover, it is no coincidence that the main event in the life of Underworld’s protagonist is the murder of a man. Violence, of course, was also an essential undercurrent of the Cold War, with the inconceivable threat of nuclear destruction as its major stake. Although the U.S. and the S.U. never engaged in a violent conflict with each other, wars were fought out in Korea and Vietnam and the sixties in America were defined by political murders.

All this, Klara Sax and Nick Shay seem to understand now, the general ‘Us and Them’ ideology that brainwashed the country, had an impact on American culture and their own lives. Klara Sax states that she does not want to return to the Cold War years, but she is nevertheless left with a feeling of incompleation: “We all tried to think about war but I’m not sure we knew how to do this. (…) What I really want to get at is the ordinary thing, the ordinary life behind the thing.
Because that’s the heart and soul of what we’re doing here” (UW, 76-77). Klara Sax wants to understand what the Cold War meant to America, to its ordinary people. Therefore, a “nontotalizing form” of art (LaCapra 2004 : 123) is a form of working-through the Cold War trauma; it is a medium to speak about the unspeakable.

3. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed -in the light of Caruth, La Capra and Wilcox- how Underworld deals with the cultural trauma of the Cold War through the narratives of fictional characters, who in their turn try to find ways to work-through a problematic past during their Bildung. Nick Shay is the character who is most poignantly confronted with personal losses, whereas Klara Sax has achieved her desire to be an independent female artist (Tanenbaum 2003 : 49). Nick tries to shape and “contain” (Osteen 2000 : 226) himself first through language and later through dealing with waste as an executive in a waste management firm. Klara Sax works-through the Cold War by means of her painting work. Although the stories of both characters end in an open way, Underworld suggests that Nick and Klara have gone through a process of estrangement and disappointment in the American Dream.

The Bronx, with Albert Bronzini as its symbolical representative, form next to a geographical also a chronological contrast with the America that the characters explore after their life in their cherished neighborhood. Both Nick and Klara, although having “paradoxical feelings about their past in the Bronx” (Marichal 1999 : 45), regularly express feelings of nostalgia about their time in the Bronx. Nevertheless, Underworld represents these feelings as merely perspectives, and certainly not as definitive, enclosed narratives: memory does not lead to an objective truth. Underworld’s investigation of the nature of time in America and its emphasis on personal histories is a plea for an inquiry into the country’s past, as a protest against the “obliteration” of memory (DeLillo in Howard 1997) and the endlessly repeated, mediatised versions of history in American society.

DeLillo’s representation of the Cold War trauma subscribes to both the poetical and ethical dimensions of Dominick LaCapra’s (2004) and Cathy Caruth’s (1995) trauma theory. The shattered experience of the Cold War, with the Bomb being the “most literary referent” (Wilcox 2002), is represented through nontotalizing narratives, with attention to the undercurrents (violence, for example) that are part of America’s collective unconsciousness. An American self can only be reconstructed from this atomized perspective on the history of the Cold War, from the underworld of “personal waste” (Osteen 2000 : 246). As a plea for the plurality of narratives, DeLillo attempts to reconstruct the soul of America, its undercurrents eventually and symbolically, in the structure of the novel, linking back to the intimate community of the Bronx. As opposed to the westward conquest of America, DeLillo’s narrative travels back east, to the immigrant land
where also the Bronx is part of. Next to an (autobiographical) trip back to DeLillo’s roots, the novel’s symbolical structure expresses a desire to ‘start anew’ and undo estrangement, maintaining however a strong sense of the past. It is this issue of ‘future possibilities’ that I will further investigate in the following and last chapter of this dissertation.
Chapter III
Redeeming the American Wasteland: *Underworld* and Art

*These fragments I have shored against my ruins.*

I.
Introduction & Theoretical Framework

In *Underworld*, DeLillo suggests that the second half of the twentieth century in America has led up to a huge amount of waste. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I have focused on the waste metaphor of the novel from a macro perspective: waste is a material, ecological concern in *Underworld* and a way of looking at American geoculture and the modern world-system from its underside. In the second chapter, I have focused on the micro level of the novel: *Underworld* is also a very intimate work, dealing with ‘personal waste’, and as several critics have pointed out, it is moreover DeLillo’s most autobiographic novel so far. The third and last chapter of this dissertation will deal with the question of how DeLillo proposes to ‘recycle’ the contemporary American wasteland in a meaningful way- that is, how America should deal with the heritage of fifty years of nuclear fear, excessive consumerism and human estrangement, in order to strive for a possibly ‘better future’. The focus in this chapter lies on the poetics of DeLillo’s major historical novel and the novel’s view on the function of art and language. It is through these final elements, eventually, that redemption is offered.

Critics of DeLillo have often pointed at the ‘lack of heart’ in his work. David Walsh, for example, in “The serious artist and the Cold War”, criticizes *Underworld* because of the work’s cold and pitiless view of humanity and artistic self-consciousness:

> To put it crudely, isn’t the cult of language, which DeLillo’s book suffers from- it is annoyingly over-written, self-conscious, too often the work of a show-off- related to a disappointment in human beings ? Doesn’t the fear of demonstrating warmth emerge, in the case of a serious individual like DeLillo- but not only in his case- at least in part from the nagging feeling that one cannot have too much sympathy for a population that seems to have acquiesced to dreadful social and political conditions ? (...) My contention is that his scepticism about humanity and about the objective power of art encourage a self-referential, pedantic, rigid, overly-mediated kind of fiction, one that is not spontaneous enough, not sympathetic enough, not liberating enough. (Walsh 1998, no paging)

*Underworld*, of course, is to a large extent a sad novel, for its societal critique, disappointment in America, omnipresence of death and estrangement of its characters. Often subscribing to the views of Baudrillard, DeLillo depicts an evolution in American society that moves from community towards isolation, from authenticity towards unreality, from hedonist optimism towards waste. As far as the self-consciousness of DeLillo’s prose is concerned, I believe this is a stylistic matter which one might or might not appreciate.
However, I do not agree with Walsh when he states that DeLillo’s “fear of demonstrating warmth” results from a critique on human beings for their incapability to change a dreadful state of affairs. DeLillo rather locates the reason for human failure more in the inhuman nature of an overwhelming system and the (geo)culture this system has engendered, than in human nature itself. One cannot ignore Underworld’s elegiac undertone, but the novel’s ultimate suggestion is one of hope. Just the fact that a writer invests so much time in studying the effects of a half century of changes in American society on the lives of ordinary human beings, is a proof of interest and belief in humanity. As DeLillo himself explains: “There’s a strong element of faith involved when a writer works on a book of this length” (DeLillo in Howard, 1997, no paging). As we will see, this “faith” is a faith in language as well as in humanity, and Underworld sets out to unite both in offering an antidote to waste.

I will first return here to the waste metaphor of the novel, situating the trope within a broader literary tradition to study the deeper meaning of Underworld’s concern with waste in relation to the artistic tradition (in this case Anglo-American poetry). Then, we will see why Underworld is a postmodernist historical novel, exactly because of its interest in waste and art.

1.1. Underworld’s Waste Metaphor in the Literary Tradition

With its centrality of waste, Underworld does not stand alone in its literary tradition. In “Taking out the Trash”, David Evans states: “With Anglo-American modernists, one might venture the generalisation that the role of refuse becomes more symbolic than aesthetic” (2006 : 113). Evans in this same article refers to T.S. Eliot. His The Waste Land (1922), written during America’s ‘Roaring 20s’, protests the spiritual aridity of a modernizing world, by means of a waste metaphor that reaches from the poetical level of the work to a more spiritual concern. Reading Underworld, one is at times reminded of Eliot’s innovative and allusive work. In content, as well as form, many critics (like Tom LeClair, 1997) have compared both works. A complete comparison of The Waste Land and Underworld would lead us too far here, but there are some interesting and relevant parallels between the ways in which both Eliot and DeLillo are concerned with ‘waste’. This comparison moreover helps us to understand more thoroughly Underworld’s connection between waste, art and history.

The Waste Land is a highly intertextual work, drawing on sources from different literary traditions, such as the bible, Shakespeare and Dante. However, the poem as a whole can also be read and understood with a minimum of background, without tracing all the different allusions to other texts and their contexts. T.S. Eliot himself provided notes to help his readers understand the allusions he makes during the poem, but in these notes he mostly mentions a sentiment or suggestion about that particular fragment, rather than a complete intellectual background about its source. It is the central meaning created by the assemblage of images that remains from all the recycled ‘literary waste’ and which overrules the separate contexts of the allusions.
The intertextuality in Eliot’s work, then, is primarily a device to create a network of images which in their collision and coherence create the meaning(s) of the poem; it is a technique and not a goal in itself. Reading DeLillo’s *Underworld*, one could try, in a similar way, to figure out all the intertextual connections the work suggests and possibly find a great deal of intellectual pleasure in such an analysis. But *Underworld*, as well, does not set intertextuality as its main objective. The work can be read -as any major literary work- on a ‘superficial’, merely narrative level, without losing its meaning. Otherwise, it would never have achieved the status of international bestseller in the first place.

Much like *The Waste Land*, then, the texture of *Underworld* is constituted by leitmotifs and cross-references, which structure its fragmentary character. In *The Waste Land*, these motifs are for example water, the Drowned Man, the rat (rats, by the way, also regularly appear in *Underworld*) and Tiresias (whom Eliot considers the protagonist of the poem). In *Underworld* some of these returning images are -of course- garbage, orange (juice), baseball and a mysterious ship

The sequence of images is what generates the meaning(s) of *The Waste Land*. *Underworld*, as a vast novel and not a poem, of course cannot merely rely on a masterfully assembled series of images like that of Eliot. But as both authors are concerned with similar themes and use comparable literary techniques such as collage and switching voices, it is no wonder that several passages, images or narrative techniques from *Underworld* trigger comparisons with *The Waste Land*.

London, the “Unreal City” of *The Waste Land*, becomes New York in *Underworld*. In *The Wall*, the poorest and most wasted part of The Bronx, DeLillo suggests that a “vast American death” (Boxall, 2006 : 177) has already set in: “People in The Wall liked to say, When hell fills up, the dead will walk the streets. It was happening a little sooner than they thought.” (UW, 245). This image could be seen as an echo from the *The Waste Land*: “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,/ I had not thought death had undone so many” (Eliot 1922, v. 62-63, in Greenblatt e.a. 2001). In another excerpt, the “I”-person of the poem (Tiresias) feels: “I was neither/Living nor dead, and I knew nothing./Looking into the heart of light, the silence” (Eliot, 1922, v. 39-41, in Greenblatt e.a., 2001). Characters like protagonist Nick Shay in *Underworld* in the later scenes of the novel also have the feeling that they live a life that they are not really actively or consciously living; somewhere, we could say, in between life and death. When reflecting on his mother’s death, at the end of the novel, Nick opens himself, in a similar way as Tiresias, to the mystery of death: “The long ghosts are walking the halls. When my mother died I felt expanded, slowly, durably, over time. I felt suffused with her truth, spread through, as with water, color or light” (UW, 804).

These examples, which illustrate similarities in imagery and form, lead us to the issue of the works’ deeper meanings- their analysis of the human condition by means of their central waste metaphor. As pointed out above, a lot of the imagery in both *The Waste Land* and *Underworld* refers to death. On a larger level, the death in both works is the death of an entire culture. Eliot and

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DeLillo wrote their works in ‘golden ages’, as both the 1920s and the 1990s were periods of great optimism and economic welfare in America. Eliot, who left America for London, had an eye for the ‘underside’ of his times, much like DeLillo. Therefore, the major works of both authors, read from a present-day perspective, seem to include prophetic whispers. In 1929, the stock market crashed; in 2001, the Twin Towers collapsed. David Evans remarks that

(…) the ecological devastation of Eliot’s landscape is the sign of a crisis of moral sterility. But it is useful to remember that waste also means something much more material and actual, and a poet so rooted in the life of the city would have been well aware of the more practical crisis created by overproduction and the subsequent problem of mounting trash. (Evans 2006 : 113)

What Eliot had to tell at the beginning of the twentieth century, then, DeLillo seems to repeat at the end of that century, as David Wiegand remarks:

When the century was new, T.S. Eliot in “The Waste Land” and F. Scott Fitzgerald in “The Great Gatsby” heralded its dawn with a warning about cultural and moral decay. In saying Kaddish for the end of the century, DeLillo acknowledges the truth of those early warnings but offers an ironic suggestion of hope as well: As long as time is not finite and the past is never over, humankind is given a renewable chance for a future. (1997, no paging)

In both works, waste is an allegory for moral and communal decay, but also a straightforward material, societal and ecological problem. The Waste Land’s issues of (early) consumerism, pollution, sexual corruption and religious crisis are main themes in Underworld as well, although DeLillo deals with a further and more complex state of this cultural crisis and, of course, a later stage of modernity. As Wiegand proposes, one could, indeed, say that the relevance of Eliot’s preoccupation with the accumulation of cultural waste -symbolically and literally- is affirmed with Underworld.

David Evans suggests:

What compelled Eliot’s imagination about garbage, perhaps, was its condition of exclusion, which aligns it thematically with the missing spiritual dimension of modern life, and poetically with Eliot’s own technique of elision and repression. (…) At the same time, it is only that which is defined as refuse, declared to be useless, that really holds the promise of any true value, so that even Christ seems present in the poem only as a kind of garbage (…) (Evans, 2006 : 113)

Evans here captures three different aspects of meaning that I suggest should be considered together in order to come to a complete understanding of the literary waste metaphor: There is the material garbage, but also the spiritual void and art (literature) as garbage. These levels can be found in DeLillo’s Underworld too. On the poetic level, literature, in the case of Eliot and DeLillo, is a sort of garbage, a form of art “picking assiduously through piles of garbage in the hope of finding traces of what makes us who we are” (Evans, 2006 : 104). In contemporary Anglo-American literature, DeLillo, with this technique, stands in the company of for example E.L. Doctorow. In “Literary Narrative and Information Culture: Garbage, Waste, and Residue in the Work of E.L. Doctorow”, Michael Wutz writes that “the novel can be seen as transforming ‘nondisciplinary’ debris or leftovers into forms of telling knowledge that can speak volumes about a culture’s historical moment” (2003 : 502). Steffen Hantke, in “Lessons in Latent History”, similarly finds that “[w]ith the garbage metaphor, DeLillo has discovered the missing link between history and the
body, between the abstract text and the concrete reality of living in the physical body." Hantke also refers to other contemporary novels that use garbage as a central metaphor, such as William Gass’s *The Tunnel* (1997, no paging).

With waste, Eliot and DeLillo seem to have found a hidden but binding element in the margins of (American) culture, a discourse which moreover can be interpreted on a highly symbolic level as well. In the case of *Underworld*, this discourse contains a collection of small stories, leftovers, of a half-century of American life, but also the larger under-history of accumulating waste. Maybe then, although I have argued for a specific postmodernist historical reading of *Underworld*, Don DeLillo rather sees his magnum opus in certain ways related to Eliot’s high modernism, because of its fragmentary character and different types of ellipsis and opposition. Critics like LeClair and Philip Nell have made such comparisons between DeLillo’s style and Eliot’s high modernist work (Nell, 1999: 739).

But this still leaves us with the level of waste as the material thing itself. In *The Waste Land*, this type of waste appears for example in “The Fire Sermon” (v. 177-179):

> The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed. (Eliot 1922, in Greenblatt e.a., 2001)

However, this type of waste in *The Waste Land* is just of minor importance - the spiritual, symbolical connotation overrules the literal one. Therefore, *The Waste Land* is not so much concerned with waste as a societal problem as *Underworld*. This can of course be explained by the fact that Eliot’s work was written during a relatively ‘early’ state of modernism and DeLillo deals with what Wallerstein would call “the final phase of the world-system” (Wallerstein, 2004: x). In *Underworld*, as already pointed out, daily trash is omnipresent, as the ‘underside’ of our excessive consumerist behaviour and the systemic expansion of capitalism. Some of this trash becomes memorabilia rubbish: objects which linger a while and are rediscovered again, triggering memories and therefore meanings. Other dirt enters, in the words of the anthropologist Mary Douglas, “the mass of common rubbish” (1966: 160), for example landfills, which have to be managed as well. Then there is the toxic trash: nuclear waste and weaponry. Finally, there is the Bronx, “the waste that includes human lives” (DeLillo in Howard, 1997). Different types of trash collide, then, merging into a broader literary metaphor and alluding to different meanings.

Next to T.S. Eliot, therefore, it is relevant to situate *Underworld*’s concern with waste in the more recent tradition of A.R. Ammons’ 1993 poem *Garbage*. In this poem, the lyrical voice investigates the relation between natural life and human cultural aspects, centralized around the image of the “spindle of energy” (Ammons 1993: 25). Just like *The Waste Land* or *Underworld*, *Garbage* sets out to reclaim a wasteland, by using the creative power of art as a synthesizing and redemptive force. The lyrical voice of *Garbage*, much like several characters in *Underworld*, attempts
to integrate waste into his human nature, as a way of restoring the disconnection between himself and his culturally multilayered environment. Therefore, there is also here a postmodernist paradoxical element to the discourse of waste, as the poem attempts to turn the simulacrum into something pure and natural. Poems like Garbage emphasize the omnipresent and accumulating character of waste. As Bonnie Costello points out, this type of ‘waste-art’ sets out to find a dynamic balance between cultural and natural environment:

As these poems encounter the environment it is not a pristine Otherness on which they can engender or discover meaning. It has no “primacy” for them experientially since the residue of past meaning, the dust and waste of previous imaginings and organizations, is thick upon it, to be dredged, dismantled, rearranged, but not erased. But neither is environment for them a mere hyperreality or social construct. Abstraction is not only a condition of the mind and culture, but also a part of a “spindle of energy” that draws us back to the material world. These poets retain the fluent, flexible referent of nature, distinct from culture but not separable from it. Within this highly qualified condition of engagement modern American poetry persists in celebrating the importance of the nonhuman environment in satisfying the needs and desires of the imagination. These poets are alive to the attractions of the natural world and troubled by the abuse of it. (…) But the human place in nature is dynamic and productive, not static and receptive. (Costello 1998 : 602, my italics)

Therefore, it is art that can manage garbage, that can recycle it meaningfully and find a place for Humanity somewhere in between the realms of nature and culture. At the beginning of Part 2, the lyrical voice of Garbage tells us that

garbage has to be the poem of our time because
garbage is spiritual, believable enough

to get our attention, getting in the way, piling up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and

creamy white: what else deflects us from the errors of our illusionary ways, not a temptation
to trashlessness, that is too far off, and, anyway, unimaginable, unrealistic (…)

(Ammons 1993 : 18)

“Trashlessness”, in other words a world without waste, is not a realistic ideal. We have to face garbage and deal with it, because the heaps of waste in our culture have reached such heights that we simply cannot ignore garbage anymore. Ammons’ poem is drenched in garbage, in contrast with different images of nature and cosmos. A returning motif is that of the “garbage trucks” and the “birds”, circling above landfills in search for food- an example of nature adapting itself to human culture. Garbage is seen as an accumulation point, but also the beginning of something new:

(…) here, the driver knows,

where the consummations gather, where the disposal flows out of form, where the last translations

cast away their immutable bits and scraps, flits of steel, shivers of bottle and tumbler,

here is the gateway to beginning, here the portal of renewing change, the birdshit, even, melding
enrichingly in with debris, a loam for the roots of placenta: oh, nature, the man on the edge of the cardboard-laced cliff exclaims, that there could be a straightaway from the toxic past into the fusion-lit reaches of a coming time! Our sins are so many, here heaped, shapes given to false matter, hamburger meat left out

(Ammons 1993 : 29)

Art can be this "gateway to beginning" between waste and future. This is how waste, as a literary metaphor, captures the condition of modern Man: Humanity is involved in an inevitable struggle between past and present, life and death, nature and culture and, eventually, production and waste. If The Waste Land moves towards a restoration of spirituality and fertility and Garbage is an attempt to integrate culture and nature in a larger harmony through art, Underworld's ultimate longing is also one for an equilibrium -albeit merely in language- between these opposite forces, as expressed by the novel's very last lines: “(...) – 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.” (UW, 827, my emphasis). The city, as opposed to the solitary hills, expresses next to an ecological contrast also a more symbolical, existential one. This is how DeLillo's novel proposes harmony and plurality as an antidote to the excesses that the twentieth century has brought about. Garbage, in all its cultural forms, from daily waste to history, must be considered and dealt with. At the same time, though, there is the warning that waste can become a false form of faith in itself. Art seems the only way to recycle waste meaningfully, to Eliot, Ammons and DeLillo.

1.2. Underworld: Postmodernist Historical Novel?

Underworld has repeatedly been welcomed as not only a brilliant historical novel, for the scope of its content, but also a highly innovative one in formal terms; a work which to many critics and academics marked a new challenge to the study of postmodernist fiction. I am not concerned, in this dissertation, with a definition of Underworld as either a purely modernist or postmodernist work, but it is nevertheless interesting to mention that DeLillo does not “see Underworld as postmodern. Maybe it’s the last modernist gasp”10. Critics like Philip Nel have argued how Underworld combines aspects of high modernism and avant-garde styles, stating that “Underworld complicates traditional distinctions between modern and postmodern” (1999 : 725).

I will argue that in its particular treatment of history, Underworld has characteristics of a postmodernist historical novel, at least within the framework of Elisabeth Wesseling’s theory as expounded in Writing History as a Prophet. In U.S. Orpheus, Nicolas Marichal (1999), referring to amongst others Lyotard and Hutcheon, has already discussed the novel’s mixture of facts and

fiction, its reflection on metanarratives and the author’s self-reflexivity. I would like to touch upon another aspect here, which is interesting in relation to the novel’s waste metaphor and the issue of recycling. Wesseling considers postmodernist historical novels as a particular corpus of novels from diffuse origin, reaching from Carlos Fuentes’s *Terra Nostra* and Louis Ferron’s *Turkenvespers* to Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. We will see that *Underworld* for several reasons can be added to this list.

Wesseling takes an interesting stance towards the definition of ‘the postmodernist historical novel’:

> In my view, critics of postmodernist historical fiction are inclined to overemphasize its nihilistic element at the expense of its political commitment. Postmodernist historical fiction makes fun of canonized history, it is true, but not at random. (...) I have divided the corpus of postmodernist counterfactual historical fiction into negational and confirmational parodies of history. The first category comprises novels which haphazardly transform history. The second category includes works which unfold alternate histories inspired, with varying degrees of emphasis, by emancipating, utopian ideals. (1991: 156-157)

*Underworld* certainly does not belong to the first category of ‘negational counterfactual conjecture’. Novels which “expose the falsity of canonized history” (Wesseling 1991: 157) are often characterized by a tone of nihilism and do not reflect on a hopeful future. *Underworld* very clearly affirms the course of American postwar history as a real, political and societal process, as we have seen in the first chapter of this dissertation. The novel does not contradict or doubt the truthfulness of canonized historical events. Nixon appears on television during his impeachment procedure (*UW*, 475), one character is fighting in the Vietnam war (*UW*, 606) and the novel is full of details from American postwar history, reaching from the 1951 playoff between the Dodgers and the Giants to the construction of the World Trade Center in 1974.

This does not mean, however, that DeLillo states that the canonized version of history is the only possible version. Therefore, I suggest that the novel can be categorized under the heading of what Wesseling labels as ‘uchronian fantasies’ (1991: 162-164):

> Uchronian fictions differ from self-reflexive historical fiction in that they move beyond the project of striving after a valid interpretation of the past. They do not turn to the past in a quest for authentic historical knowledge, but in pursuit of dormant possibilities that may figure a new beginning of history after Western history has run its course. (...) Postmodernist uchronian fictions are given to dreaming about ways for transcending historical repetition, but they do not present us with over-idealistic historical utopias which naively underestimate the stronghold of the established order (...). Rather, they project temporary suspensions of the status quo as to make alternate possibilities visible, but they usually do not fail to return to the final defeat of the groups that they had almost caused to metamorphose from the losers into the winners of history. They tend to end on the note of the “not yet”, indicating that although the utopian alternative almost came into being, the times were apparently not yet ripe for such a revolution, whereby hope for their full realization is deferred to the future.

One instance on the basis of which *Underworld* fits into this definition of ‘uchronian fantasy’ is, of course, the novel’s attention to racial minorities in America. The whole Bronx section (part 6) of the novel is, as we have seen in the second chapter of this dissertation, a realistic description of the Italian ethnic minority in New York during the fifties. The novel opens with the black Harlem kid Cotter, who after the baseball game steals away with the Thomson baseball and later appears to be

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the ‘missing link’ in the chain of possession (UW, 181). Cotter’s sister Rosie participates in civil right manifestations (UW, 521) and the Puerto Rican child Esmeralda is the main actor in one of the novel’s climaxes (UW, 821)- as we will see. These are people from America’s underworld, and their histories throw another light on American history, in a similar way as the waste metaphor does. In the terms of Wallerstein (2004), they belong to “antisystemic groups”, who, however, did not manage to change the established order significantly. DeLillo thus subscribes to Wesseling’s definition, in that the novel does not “naively underestimate[s] the stronghold of the established order” but is “given to dreaming about ways for transcending historical repetition” (1991 : 163-164).

The nuclear threat of the Cold War alluded ‘the end of history’, an idea which in Underworld is launched in the prologue, “The Triumph of Death” and dominates a large part of the novel. Nevertheless, the feared apocalypse did not occur; instead, Underworld suggests, the Cold War turned America into a moral and ecological wasteland. As Martin Amis states: “In the end, death didn’t triumph. It just ruled, for 50 years” (1997, no paging). In this respect, DeLillo seems to relate to Thomas Pynchon, as Wesseling writes: “Pynchon’s vision of the end of history relates to the destructive nature of the forces unleashed by technological progress” (1991 : 166). In the following, I will argue how the central waste and recycling tension of the novel fits within Wesseling’s concept of ‘uchronian fantasy’, stating that Underworld situates its hope for the future in art and, especially, art from the Bronx.

2.
Art in Underworld

2.1. Reclaiming the Cold War

“Capital burns off the nuance in a culture”, DeLillo writes in Underworld’s epilogue, entitled “Das Kapital” after Karl Marx’s famous manifest: “(…) not that people want the same things, necessarily, but that they want the same range of choices” (UW, 785). As we have seen in Chapter 1, there are several intervals in Underworld where the author makes references to the capacity of the capitalist system to overarch its counter-discourses, or in other words, to burn off nuances in a culture. Therefore, Underworld itself, for its wide scope and plurality of voices, is a form of resistance to the erasure of nuances from a culture. Timothy Parrish rightly remarks: “DeLillo’s work raises the question: is it possible for a writer to produce fictions that are not in turn absorbed by the cultural forces out of which they are made ?” (1999 : 696). We have already seen how Underworld, with its waste metaphor, relates to The Waste Land and Garbage. It seems that Underworld exactly situates the possibility of its own survival in the other works of art the novel explicitly or implicitly refers to, and which emerge from the same cultural forces or undercurrents DeLillo’s novel tries to channel. Mark Osteen thinks: “Only art can link the writer’s
desire and our own to engender that large-scale longing that remakes history” (2000 : 260). Indeed, in recycling the Cold War, DeLillo restores a cultural and artistic dialogue, as an antidote to the actual conflict that shaped canonized history.

With another reference to the Soviet system, and to Marxism, DeLillo adds a very clear nuance to the Cold War America of Underworld : a screening of a fictitious film by Sergei Eisenstein, the Soviet pioneer of modern cinema. Eisenstein, who never lived to experience the actual Cold War (he died in 1948), “was a contemporary Marxist intellectual whose vibrantly revolutionary films, while few in number and seen mainly by other intellectuals, left an indelible mark on history and cinema alike” (Cook 2004 : 122). In the 1974 part of the novel, which is almost completely devoted to the New York artist scene, Klara Sax attends the screening of Unterwelt in the Radio City Music Hall- which as Nicolas Marichal points out is “an all-American kitsch stronghold” (1999 : 48). The screening scene is full of irony on part of the author, in his description of the seventies artists as well as in his comment on the event itself. Nevertheless, the Unterwelt screening remains one of the central scenes in the novel.

This invented 1930s film, which is said to be recovered after having been hidden for decades in East Germany (UW, 424), is represented as an -anachronistic- allegory for the Cold War. “This is a film about Us and Them, isn’t it ?”, Klara Sax thinks (UW, 444). DeLillo in this way brings the Soviet Union to America, in a cultural dialogue that gives the spectators an unsettled feeling:

And how strange it was to see a thing like this, a red star of such political and military moment, plunked down here, the grim signet of the Soviet Union, in the Music Hall of all places- think of all the Easter shows and Lassie movies. (…)

[ Klara] felt she was in some ambiguous filmscape somewhere between the Soviet model and Hollywood’s vaulted heaven of love, sex, crime and individual heroism, of scenery and luxury and gorgeous toilets.

All you have to do is think of the other Underworld, a 1927 gangster film and box office smash. (UW, 428-429, 431)

In “Don DeLillo’s Transatlantic Dialogue with Sergei Eisenstein”, Catherine Morley points out how DeLillo uses Eisenstein both in terms of similar poetic techniques (to which I will return) as by way of deconstructing the Cold War dichotomy between East and West:

Indeed, by engaging with the techniques of the Soviet, Communistic filmmaking within a text which has been hailed as a so-called “great American novel” and, furthermore, by merging a Communist play with the archetype of American gangster movies in an almost unrecognizable intertextual labyrinth of factual happening and fictional event, DeLillo compels the reader to reconsider his/her accepted history of the previous half-century. (2006 : 27-28)

Mark Osteen comes to a similar conclusion: “The similarities between Underworld and Unterwelt involve content as well as form” (2000 : 252). If, as Nicolas Marichal (1999 : 48) states, this film screening is symbolical of the vanishing Cold War tension, it must also be read as a plea for intercultural exchange. The film makes the two continents touch each other, challenging traditional mutual prejudices and threats. Unterwelt after all, in a similar way as Brueghel’s painting The Triumph of Death, depicts a wasteland which might as well be Russian as American: “There was
no plot. Just loneliness, barrenness, men hunted and ray-gunned, all happening in some netherland crevice”. Klara Sax thinks that maybe Eisenstein was “prescient about nuclear menace” (UW, 430). Catherine Morley remarks that by using Eisenstein, DeLillo situates the film maker in the novel’s “wider narrative project of complicating the myths of national identity, to demonstrate the necessary dialogue and interaction of cultures in the creation of a cultural memory and national identity” (2006 : 20). By tracing his novel’s title back to Eisenstein as well as to an all-American gangster movie, DeLillo indeed suggests that art has the power to transcend the differences between cultures and therefore surmount the Cold War conflict- albeit merely in retrospection and not as a force that can undo the actual course of world history.

With the similar titles of the two works, the novel Underworld and the film Unterwelt, DeLillo also refers to the fact that he is stylistically indebted to Eisenstein. Philip Nel observes that “the fictional Eisenstein film Unterwelt is at the book’s very center because the montage technique has profoundly influenced DeLillo’s style” (1999 : 727). Eisenstein was particularly interested in the ‘clash’ of images, inspired by Marx, Freud and Pavlov. As we read in Cook’s A History of Narrative Film, the Soviet cinematographer was fascinated by “the psychological effects of the aesthetic experience: specifically, the question of what combination of aesthetic stimuli will produce what responses in the perceiver under what conditions” (2004 : 123). In Underworld, the narrator tells us: “In Eisenstein you note that the camera angle is a kind of dialectic. Arguments are raised and made, theories drift across the screen and instantly shatter- there’s a lot of opposition and conflict” (UW, 429). Underworld shows similarities with this style: DeLillo’s camera shifts from one perspective to another, recording contrasting images and ideas. Klara Sax thinks:

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

These “contradictions of being”, are very much the subject of Underworld too. The Cold War is about contrasting cultures and systems, but the conflict divides and deforms people’s inner nature as well. By connecting his novel with Eisenstein’s Unterwelt, DeLillo tries to achieve a form of posthumous, artistic peace.

The Cold War in Underworld is not only artistically reclaimed through Eisenstein’s film, but also by Klara Sax’s work at the chronologic end of the novel (near the beginning in the actual structure of the work). In “Semiotics of Junk and Rubbish”, Jonathan Culler writes: “Rubbish has become an essential resource for modern art”. He adds that “(…) in junk and rubbish lie the possibilities for change within the artistic system” (1985 : 10-11). In a 1974 passage from Underworld, Klara affirms: “We took junk and saved it for art” (UW, 393). In 1992, we find her in her desert atelier, repainting B-52 bombers, which were for example used during the Vietnam War. During a balloon flight, Nick Shay and his wife Marian watch Klara’s masterpiece from the sky:
And truly I thought they were great things, painted to remark the end of an age and the beginning of something so different only a vision such as this might suffice to augur it. (…) Marian said, “I can never look at a painting the same way again.”
“I can never look at an airplane.”
“Or an airplane,” she said.
And I wondered if the piece was visible from space like the land art of some lost Andean people. (UW, 126)

Cold War weaponry is recycled into pieces of art, which cannot undo the violent nature of the basic materials, but nevertheless mark the beginning of a new, panoramic perspective on the conflict. In a similar way as DeLillo tries to do with his novel, Klara Sax attempts to grasp the mystery of the Cold War, a war that was never really fought. Mark Osteen observes:

Klara has been working with “castoffs” for years, but this enterprise marks a new stage because it operates on the very symbols of the Cold War, transforming the waste that was weapons into works of singular beauty. (…) From within the heart of war and capitalism DeLillo discovers an economy of grace. (2000 : 256)

To Klara Sax, as much as to Don DeLillo, rubbish from the Cold War functions as a major source of inspiration. Recycling such relics into new pieces of art appears to have a reclaiming effect on the artist; it is a way of “transcending historical repetition” (Wesseling, 1991 : 164).

2.2. Reimagining the American Community: Art and Miracle in the Bronx

During the Cold War and its degeneration into waste, the Bronx neighborhood in Underworld is subject to social and ecological decay, as we have seen in Chapter I. In the second Chapter of this dissertation, however, I have added the nuance, with Laura Tanenbaum (2003 : 55), that the Bronx “never becomes the dead landscape of ‘nothing ever again’ (…)”. Underworld’s journey back to the Bronx expresses next to a whisper of nostalgia and personal pain also one of hope. It is in the Bronx neighborhood of New York, near the east coast of the United States where John Winthrop in the seventeenth century declared his puritan ‘city upon a hill’ ideal, that a new America is eventually reinvented. Out of the trash concentration of American postwar history, a note of hope arises, offering a meaningful way to recycle the American wasteland; a note which expresses a longing for a better future. Unlike David Walsh (1998), I believe that Underworld demonstrates plenty of human warmth- but this warmth is simply all too often overshadowed in the novel by the very cold, indeed, reality of an ‘unreal’ war. Now that this Cold War is over, DeLillo suggests, America has to find new ways to situate itself in a changed world, but also to reconstruct its own community.

The Bronx is where the warmth and compassion of Underworld is most intensely felt. Not only in his description of the fifties Bronx scenes, but also the later ones, DeLillo implicitly tells us that his roots have a special and sensitive place in his heart. In the earlier scenes, of course, this affection is expressed by Underworld’s return to the Italian immigrant community at mid-century, as Marichal (1999 : 42) writes. In the later Bronx scenes (from the mid 80s onwards), the author seems to sympathize with the inhabitants of the Wall -the poorest and most forgotten
section of the Bronx- and the community work of Sister Edgar and her younger assistant Gracie. The conservative neo-liberal policy of the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations turns the Bronx into a wasteland during the 1980s and early 90s.

Sister Edgar has a lifelong dedication to the Bronx: during the early Cold War years she is a rigid teacher in the school of Matt and Nick Shay, obsessively inciting her pupils for example to wear their ‘tags’: “The tags were designed to help rescue workers identify children who were lost, missing, injured, maimed, mutilated, unconscious or dead in the hours following the onset of atomic war” (UW, 717). DeLillo depicts her paranoia and dogmas with a lot of irony, in a similar manner as he pictures her counterpart, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. In the later scenes of the novel, Sister Edgar is a community worker in the Wall, but she always keeps at a safe distance from the real waste of this part of American society. For this behavior, she feels “sinfully complicit with some process she only half understood, the force in the world, the array of systems that displaces religious faith with paranoia” (UW, 241). Sister Edgar for example believes that the AIDS virus is spread in the Wall by the Soviet KGB (UW, 243). If she cannot be completely sympathetic, DeLillo thus suggests, this is a consequence of a general oppressing undercurrent in American society and not a fault of human nature. Her noble mission, after all, lies in the Bronx and nowhere else: “She did not yearn for life upstate. This was the truth of the world, right here, her soul’s own home, herself- she saw herself, the fraidy child who must face the real terror of the streets to cure the linger of destruction in her” (UW, 248). Sister Edgar’s colleague Gracie represents a younger generation, her name of course suggests ‘grace’, and in opposition to “the linger of destruction” in Edgar, her motto is: “Be positive” (UW, 239). A clear contrast between the personalities of Sister Edgar and Gracie is obvious in their attitude towards Ismael Muñoz, a Puerto Rican homosexual living in the Wall with his crew of graffiti artists:

“Don’t get too close to him,” Edgar said.
“Who ?”
“Ismael.”
“Why ?”
“He’s not well.”
“I saw him three days ago. I was here. You weren’t, Sister. How do you know he’s not well ?”
“I can sense it.”
“He’s well. He’s fine,” Gracie said.
“I’ve sensed it for some time.”
“What do you sense ?”
“AIDS,” Edgar said.
Gracie studied old Edgar. She looked at the latex gloves. She looked at the nun’s face, emphatic of feature, eyes bird-bright. She looked and thought and said nothing. (UW, 242-243)

Ismael Muñoz is the ‘Moonman 157’ from the 1974 sections of the novel: an at that time sixteen-year old kid who spends most of his time in the subway, tagging trains with graffiti. Klara Sax’s friend and ‘talent watcher’ Esther thinks that he is “a goddamn master” (UW, 377). However, when Klara and Esther go looking for him in the Bronx, they never find him- they only see the tagged trains rushing by. Ismael remains ‘underground’, in the subway, “where the races mix” (UW, 434). Mark Osteen interprets Ismael’s resistance as an artist in the following way:
His work, like Eisenstein’s, celebrates the marginalized, the backstreet life of those invisible people who live in the shadows (...). According to the authorities (...), his graffiti are just dirt, waste (...). Indeed, Ismael’s work is multiply subversive: in writing his name with stolen materials, he ironically appropriates the consumer society’s fixation on brand names and transforms it into an attack on private property (2000 : 254).

Ismael’s work is, indeed, a counter-discourse from the underworld which symbolically ‘rushes’ through American society:

(...) suddenly there it is, Moonman riding the sky in the heart of the Bronx, over the whole burnt and rusted country, and this is the art of the backstreets talking (...) we’re getting fame, we ain’t ashamed (...) the flickery jumping art of the slums and dumpsters, flashing those colors in your face-like I’m your movie, motherfuckers. (UW, 440-441)

In the Bronx of the early 1990s, Ismael is still ‘underground’, doing community work with street kids in the Wall. Sister Edgar, once again, is plagued by her own unsympathetic and paranoid feelings:

Why does she want to see him suffer? Isn’t he one of the affirmative forces in the Wall, earning money with his salvage business, using it more or less altruistically, teaching his crew of stray kids, abandoned some of them, pregnant one or two, runaways, throwaways- giving them a sense of responsibility and self-worth? And doesn’t he help the nuns feed the hungry? (UW, 813)

Ismael’s “salvage business” implies the spraying of graffiti, but also the creation of a device on the basis of recycled waste which allows, by means of a bike and a generator, to produce enough electricity to watch television. This is the point at which the most wasted section of the Bronx appears to have entered the era of advanced globalisation, an evolution which Sister Edgar cannot accept: “Gracie is delighted (...) Edgar disapproves of course. This is her mission, to disapprove. One of the stern mercies of the Wall, a place unlinked to the usual services, is that TV has not been available. Now here it is, suddenly” (UW, 812). Indeed, “the convergence of consumer desire” (UW, 785) the narrator speaks of at the beginning of the epilogue, seems to have found its way into the Bronx too. Ismael is “planning to go on-line real soon” with his junk cars business, teasingly stating: “Some people have a personal god, okay. I’m looking to get a personal computer. What’s the difference, right?” (UW 812-813).

In his essay “In the Ruins of the Future”, written in response to the 9/11 events, DeLillo thinks that one of the reasons for the terrorist attacks on the WTC is “the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind” (2001a, no paging). It is this same power, capitalism burning off cultural nuances, that makes the people from the Wall want to watch television and go online. DeLillo does not state that television or the Internet are diabolic inventions. On the contrary, he is probably one of the contemporary Western writers who are most eager to borrow formal and thematic aspects from various multimedia branches. Timothy Parish clarifies that “it is misleading to think that DeLillo writes against technology; rather, he strives to explore as thoroughly as possible how we invent and sometimes destroy ourselves by postmodern technologies that threaten to produce a new Cold War from within” (1999 : 719). What DeLillo does criticize, then, is the obsessive, religious American tendency to rely on technology: “Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only
superpower on the planet (…) For all those who may want what we’ve got, there are all those who
do not” (DeLillo 2001a, no paging).

When Ismael and his crew, then, seem to have entered the world of global communication,
this is a realistic evolution: the world wide web, amongst other exponents of the (American) global
market and media, seemed the future when DeLillo in the late 1990s finished his novel. Internet still
is ‘the future’, ten years later, but this American Dream, also, in the meantime has been adjusted by
9/11. It is, in any case, no coincidence that Underworld ends in cyberspace. The internet where
Underworld ‘closes’ (this being a problematic term, as the world wide web has no beginning or end),
however, is “a counternarrative, shaped in part by rumour, fantasy and mystical reverberation”
(DeLillo, 2001a, no paging). It is the internet in its artistic conception where the allegorical finale of
the novel must be situated.

This is how we arrive at the death of the Puerto Rican girl Esmeralda. She is mentioned for
the first time when Brother Mike, a Franciscan monk who is also performing charity work in the
Wall, asks Gracie to look around for a twelve year-old girl he thinks is “living in the ruins” (UW,
240). Ismael tells Gracie that she is a shy but quickly running girl, who always hides away from
other people and is left behind by her drug-addicted mother (UW, 244). The next time the reader
sees her is in the format of a quasi-mythical narrative on a ‘miraculum’ website, where she is
presented as “a girl who forages in empty lots for discarded cloths, plucks spoiled fruit from
garbage bags behind bodegas, who is sometimes seen running through the trees and weeds (...) a
tactful runner with the sweet and easy stride of some creature of sylvan myth. The nuns have been
trying to find her” (UW, 810). Sister Edgar sees “a radiant grace in the girl, a reprieve from the
Wall’s endless distress, even a source of personal hope” (UW, 811). Esmeralda is thus associated
with a sort of ungraspable, mythical being from ‘the underworld’.

Three weeks later, the nuns receive the news that Esmeralda is found, dead (UW, 814).
Indeed, on another website we see how she is brutally raped, murdered and thrown off the
rooftop where she usually sleeps (UW, 817-818). Ismael and his crew commemorate the girl by
spraying her image and name on a wall: she is depicted as a pink angel, with Nike running shoes.
The image is an example of “the great gone era of wildstyle graffiti” (UW, 815). To Ismael, as
opposed to Gracie, commemorating Esmeralda in art seems the only thing he can do:

“Ismael. You have to find out who this guy is that did this thing.”
“You think I’m running here? El Lay Pee Dee?”
“You have contacts in the neighborhood that no one else has.”
“What neighborhood? The neighborhood’s over there. This here’s the Wall. It’s all I can do to get
these kids so they spell a word correct when they spray their paint. When I was writing we did
subway cars in the dark without a letter misspell.”
“Who cares about spelling?” Gracie says. (UW, 816)

To Sister Edgar, the death of little Esmeralda seems to mark the definitive end of an era: “She feels
weak and lost. The great terror gone, the great thrown shadow dismantled (...) All terror is local
now” (UW, 816). The kids in the Wall, amazed by the footage of their neighborhood, see how the
death of Esmeralda has made it into the CNN news (UW, 816-817).

Little time later, rumors begin to spread in the Bronx that Esmeralda has risen from the
dead: her face appears, at night, on a billboard in the Bronx (UW, 821). Sister Edgar wants to go
and experience the vision of Esmeralda, although Gracie tries to convince her that it “is the worst
kind of tabloid superstition. (…) The poor need visions, okay?” (UW, 819). Eventually, however,
they both go to the busy traffic island in the Bronx where a large crowd has gathered: “(…) some
of them go and look and tell others, stirring the hope that grows when things surpass their limits”
(UW, 818). The image of Esmeralda appears when a train passes by:

Because when the train lights hit the dimmest part of the billboard a face appears above the misty
lake and it belongs to the murdered girl. A dozen woman clutch their heads, they whoop and sob, a
spirit, a godsbreath passing through the crowd.

Esmeralda.
Esmeralda.
(UW, 821)

Edgar is deeply moved by the image, she believes in it, but Gracie thinks that “it was just a trick of
light” (UW, 821). Underworld does not clearly take a stance of either belief or disbelief towards such
visionary phenomena:

And what do you remember, finally, when everybody has gone home and the streets are empty of
devotion and hope, swept by river wind? Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with
its fundamental untruth- all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence
linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot
horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt? (UW, 824)

Gerald Howard has called the story of Esmeralda “one of the few convincing manifestations
of grace, in the precise Catholic sense, in American fiction since Flannery O’Connor” (1997, no
paging). Esmeralda’s death and people’s belief in her resurrection, indeed, can be read as an allegory
for the rebirth of Christ. In this sense, Underworld could be considered to contain a similar
redemptive ending as T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, in which the coming of water to the dry and
‘unreal’ wasteland parallels references to Jesus’ resurrection:

Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop
But there is no water
Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
(…)
What is that sound high in the air
(…)
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal
(…)
In a flash of lighting. Then a damp gust
Bringing rain
(Eliot 1922, in Greenblatt e.a., 2001, v. 356-394)
The (religious) hope that Eliot turns to, just like that of DeLillo, is expressed in a symbolical and allegorical way. The last word of Underworld, “peace”, is an echo of the repeated word “shantih” at the end of The Waste Land, which means “the peace which passeth understanding” (Eliot 1922, in Greenblatt e.a. 2001 ), a point which Tom LeClair (1997) also makes. DeLillo has explained to Maria Moss that the word ‘peace’ “is not meant ironically, it is meant seriously. But it’s all about longing, it’s certainly not a realistic expectation” (DeLillo in Moss, 1998 : 86).

With the scene of Esmeralda’s resurrection, Underworld merges an all-American phenomenon with a symbolical touch of hope. In the same interview by Maria Moss, DeLillo explains that “[i]t has happened in the U.S. that people see religious imagery on totally commonplace backgrounds. (...) I didn’t mean it as some kind of mockery, I meant it as something that happens. Popular culture is inescapable in the U.S. Why not use it?” (DeLillo, in Moss, 1998 : 87). Mark Osteen rightly observes that “(...) if the billboard (...) can be read as another example of the inauthenticity of postmodern culture, it also suggests that the same forces and conditions that create bad faith and rampant waste may also germinate effective counterfaiths (...)” (2000 : 257). Timothy Parrish similarly thinks that “DeLillo thus concludes Underworld with a weird melding of technology and grace” (1999 : 719). Together with Ismael and the other artists in the novel, then, Esmeralda to DeLillo represents hope for the future. One can only agree with Mark Osteen when he concludes:

Underworld’s hope for renewal lies in the work of artists like Ismael and in the collective faith of the disenfranchised communities for which he speaks. In the efforts of Ismael, Sabato Rodia, and Klara Sax, and in the ambiguous transformation of a dead girl into an angel, DeLillo offers the potential for phoenixlike resurrection out of the ashes of capital, holding out the bare possibility for a new connection, one that replaces massive, dehumanizing systems with “the argument of binding touch” (UW, 827). In these scenes, Underworld moves from criticism to celebration, championing those who forge economies of grace from the dead matter of weapons and waste. (2000 : 254)

From the internet, where Sister Edgar after her death is connected with J. Edgar Hoover and has visions of nuclear explosions (UW, 826), Underworld eventually returns to the real world, to the ‘you’-person- the American voice that the narrator throughout the novel addresses. The death and resurrection of Esmeralda in the Bronx, as an event that is covered by the mass media and represented as a miraculous story that lives on online, is also an expression of hope for a new America. Technology, DeLillo suggests with Esmeralda’s mythical story, can also be used in a constructive way, to create community, justice and belief. Esmeralda, as Underworld’s weakest and most vulnerable character, an innocent immigrant girl in front of the overwhelming power of state, capital and technology, is brutally murdered. Nevertheless, she rises from the dead and from a forgotten part of American society.

Underworld invites the reader to bring the novel’s “peace” from the author’s mythical underworld into the real world: “(...) and you try to imagine the word 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 outward, the tone of agreement or treaty (...)” (UW, 827). This makes Underworld, in the end, a cry against the America
of war and waste, and a plea for a new America of peace. Art, despite its economic and political ‘uselessness’, can bring us a little closer to this peace, as a “gateway to beginning” (Ammons 1993: 29) between the waste of history and a hopefully better future.

3.

Conclusion

_Underworld_ thus ends “on the note of the ‘not yet’ ”, in the words of Elizabeth Wesseling’s Writing History as a Prophet, “indicating that although the utopian alternative almost came into being, the times were apparently not yet ripe for such a revolution, whereby hope for [postmodernist counterfactual conjectures] full realization is deferred to the future” (1991: 164). The rebirth of Esmeralda, as an icon for another America, takes place in a utopian, graceful version of internet. At the novel’s ending this utopia is merely a longing, a fantasy: Esmeralda’s appearance is still a doubtful phenomenon. However, “longing on a large scale is what makes history” (UW, 11), and the novel’s project of renewal leads up to a final expression of hope to ‘remake history’, and thus a new America.

_Underworld_ also subscribes to Wesseling’s definition of ‘uchronian fiction’ in the sense that DeLillo can be ranked, at least as far as _Underworld_ is concerned, among the writers who “attempt to invent alternate histories that try to compensate for the major defects of history: ethnocentrism, androcentrism, and imperialism. This project is emphatically linked to the supposedly moribund nature of Western history” (1991: 165). Against the destructive possibilities of nuclear weapons and “the force of converging markets” (UW, 786), DeLillo places art and alternate histories. The little girl Esmeralda belongs to an ethnic minority, excluded from canonized American history. Nevertheless, she stands at the center of DeLillo’s own American myth which concludes _Underworld_ and functions as an antidote to the waste of American history.

This waste, _Underworld_ makes clear, can be overcome through art. The work implicitly and explicitly places itself alongside other artists, real and fictional, to underline the importance of their counter-discourses as a resistance against the colonizing discourse of the American geoculture. The collective power of art, DeLillo suggests, cannot be consumed by the capitalist system. David Cowart points out that “language, [DeLillo’s] story suggests, is a power greater than the inexorable forces of social decline, greater than history itself” (2002: 184). Probably this is the reason why an American writer like DeLillo devotes his time to the writing of novels such as _Underworld_.

Conclusion: The American Wasteland Recycled?

In this dissertation, I have studied the evolution of postwar American culture in Don DeLillo’s 1997 magnum opus *Underworld*, taking the novel’s waste metaphor as a starting point. This waste metaphor unites different levels of America’s underworld, both literally and symbolically. The evolution from a Cold War America to an American Wasteland is central in *Underworld*, and the novel’s recycling mechanism eventually leads up to a suggestion of hope for a ‘new’ America.

In the first chapter, I have discussed waste as the counterpart of the American geoculture, within the light of Wallerstein, Baudrillard and others. *Underworld* makes clear that an excessive consumerist culture, as it has evolved during the second half of the twentieth century, leaves behind debris from which another American history can be reconstructed. The prologue of *Underworld*, “The Triumph of Death”, is a dramatization of American mass culture and at the same time the starting point for the central tension in the novel between the Cold War and waste, with the baseball as rubbish remaining from the 1951 baseball game. This baseball at the same time functions as an item of parody throughout the novel, as it is on the basis of this waste that different characters in the novel reconstruct the past and their American identity.

The Cold War, with the fear of the bomb and its connections with paranoia and consumerist hedonism, finds its counterpart in the toxic waste that resulted from it. The crumbling of the Cold War, which in Wallerstein’s view coincides with the decline of American hegemony, leads to an America where environmentalist toxicity is omnipresent. The waste management firm Whiz Co, the storage sites for nuclear waste and the decay in the Bronx are all examples of this new threat. In *Underworld*’s epilogue, the Cold War gap between the USA and the Soviet Union is symbolically bridged when American nuclear waste is exploded by a Russian firm in Kazakhstan. The reintegration of waste into the capitalist cycle, *Underworld* suggests, is one way in which waste is dealt with, but not the solution to all of America’s waste problems.

Also on a personal level, *Underworld* is concerned with working-through ‘waste’. *Underworld* explores the larger trauma of the Cold War by means of non-totalizing narratives. In the second chapter, I have discussed the *Bildung* of Nick Shay and Klara Sax, the two main characters, within the light of trauma theory (of Caruth, LaCapra and Wilcox). I have illustrated that Nick and Klara find (or sometimes cannot find) different ways during their *Bildungsprozess* to deal with trauma. The tension and gap between past and present is central to the character depiction of *Underworld*. Both Nick and Klara ‘recycle’ an American self by dealing with the waste from their personal histories. Nick does this by means of language and, later, his ‘containment’ in his job as a waste manager. In depicting the *Bildungsprozess* of Nick and Klara, *Underworld* at the same time explores other undercurrents in American culture, such as violence, sexuality and gender aspects. As they
lie hidden, buried in America’s unconsciousness, these undercurrents can be considered a particular type of waste, too.

In the third part of this dissertation, I have studied Underworld’s connection between waste and art. By implicitly and explicitly referring to other artists and works of art, Underworld proposes a form of recycling waste by means of art, a type of recycling that forms a counterweight to endless capitalist, consumerist reruns of the same americana. The novel deals with history in a way that celebrates diversity, creativity and peace.

Underworld itself can be compared, in its use of waste as a literary trope, with poems such as T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land and A.R. Ammons’s Garbage. As I have argued for a postmodernist historical reading of the novel as a ‘uchronian fantasy’, we could say that the novel situates its fantasy exactly in the aspects of art that the novel contains. Through Eisenstein, for example, Underworld engages in a dialogue with the East that forms a counterpart to the explosion of American nuclear waste in Kazakhstan. Klara Sax, too, recycles Cold War weaponry into art. In the Bronx, a center of ethnic minorities, Ismael Muñoz and his crew constitute an artistic counter-discourse as graffiti artists. And eventually, in DeLillo’s ‘fable’ of Esmeralda and her resurrection, there is a final note of hope to renew America which arises from the wasteland.

This all leads up to the conclusion that Underworld searches and finds it own way to recycle the American wasteland. On a poetic level, this means that the work itself functions as an artistic counterweight to the American discourse and capitalist ‘solutions’ of recycling. America is not too bad a country, Underworld eventually suggests, but it must deal with its waste and open its eyes to the heart of its culture. This heart does not lie in the supermarkets and weapon arsenals, but in the plurality of voices that have found its way into the novel, in a miraculous Bronx and the creative power of the artist. The longing for peace that the novel ends on, is of course an artistic, imagined peace, but in resisting clearly to the state and its inhuman system, this longing might also be interpreted as a political and cultural statement. Underworld draws lessons and strength out of hidden histories, in the hope that America might become a better place to live. The American Dream has all too often served as a masquerade for capitalist and military conquest, and resulted in nightmares. But still, there appear to be powerful Americans who keep on recycling the mistakes of history, even if the same ideologies have earlier, time and again, turned out to be worthless. The novel is a small step in bridging waste and a hopefully better future, but it is a step.
Bibliography


