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New York Writing: Urban Art in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

Wendy HARDING*

RESUME

A travers les descriptions ekphrastiques de Underworld, Don DeLillo définit la place et la nature de l'art dans la société américaine postmoderne tout en affirmant son art du roman. Dans la métropole postmoderne l'espace public est saturé par les signes et les systèmes de l'activité mercantile. Les artistes représentés dans le roman doivent regagner l'attention du public et proposer leur propre forme de communication. Ils doivent se réapproprier les surfaces disponibles et y superposer leurs images et leurs couleurs. En explorant l'esthétique de ces artistes de fiction et du graphiste Ismael Muñoz en particulier, DeLillo nous livre son propre manifeste esthétique. Son roman laisse entendre qu'à la fin du XXème siècle, le rôle de l'artiste est de répondre aux sollicitations visuelles et intellectuelles que les médias font subir au public, d'abord en plaçant les productions dominantes sous un jour ironique, et en transformant ensuite ces modes d'expression discrédités en de nouvelles formes culturelles. Le roman accueille et même adopte l'impulsion des graffitis urbains tout en leur donnant certaines dimensions inaccessibles aux arts visuels. Ainsi se trouvent rassemblés, dans un récit à la fois temporel et spatial, les images fragmentaires et éparpillées de la ville. A partir des débris du capitalisme contemporain Underworld crée de nouveaux mythes qui réhumanisent une culture déshumanisée par sa propre technologie.

Keywords: DeLillo; graffiti; urban art; writing; aura; capitalism

In the American cities represented in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, public space has become saturated with the signs and systems of commercial activity. This overabundance of visual stimuli paradoxically prevents city dwellers from seeing their surroundings: "She realized how rare it was to see what stands before you, what a novelty of basic sensation in the grinding life of the city—to look across a measured space and be undistracted by signs and streetlights and taxis and scaffolding" (379). In drawing attention to the erasure of the city's distinctive landmarks and to its conversion into something like a "grinding" machine, DeLillo's novel poses the problem of how human values survive in the denatured, depersonalized urban environment. In the postmodern metropolis, corporate interests have taken over the terrain that in earlier times was shaped by the activities and aspirations of city dwellers. Klara Sax's complaint recalls Baudrillard's assertion about contemporary urban space: "Advertising ... invades everything, as public

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space (the street, monument, market, scene) disappears. It ... monopolizes public life in its exhibition" (Baudrillard 129-30). The difficulty of seeing beyond all this commercial clutter is particularly acute for the artists represented in *Underworld*. Klara and the others must try to win back an audience captivated through the media by the hegemonic forces of capitalism.

DeLillo's novel offers a reflection on the place and nature of art in postmodern American society. The artists of *Underworld* work to counter the saturation of public and private space and to impose their own forms of communication. They have to reappropriate available surfaces and superscript them with their own images. In this struggle, the novel's most contestatory figure is the graffitiist, Ismael Muñoz, although he shares common features with the novel's other artists. The prominence given the visual arts in this *magnum opus* raises the question of whether DeLillo is not disqualifying his own art of writing in focusing on painters, sculptors, and graffitiists. Quite the contrary, in exploring the aesthetics of these fictional artists, and of the graffiti writer in particular, DeLillo presents his own aesthetic manifesto. His novel suggests that the role of the late-twentieth-century American artist is to respond to the visual and intellectual assault that the media have mounted against the public, first by placing dominant productions at an ironic distance, and then by transforming discredited modes of expression into new cultural forms. The novel embraces and even adopts the urban graffiti impulse while adding other dimensions not available to the visual arts.

"Get the consumer by the eyeballs"

Underworld begins with an evocation of a now dismantled New York site, the Polo Grounds, where two local teams opposed each other in the 1951 World Series final. Immediately evident in the opening scene is the narrator's focus on individual and collective responses to urban space. Internal focalization suffuses the scene with the intensity of individual and collective desire:

It's a school day, sure, but he's nowhere near the classroom. He wants to be here instead, standing in the shadow of this old rust-hulk of a structure, and it's hard to blame him—this metropolis of steel and concrete and flaky paint and cropped grass and enormous Chesterfield packs aslant on the scoreboards, a couple of cigarettes jutting from each. (U 11)¹

The ballpark may not seem sufficiently remarkable to evoke the consensus demanded by the narrator in the phrase "it's hard to blame him", unless readers accept the identification offered in the novel's opening sentence—"He speaks in your voice, American ..."—(U 11). Besides placing us in the now demolished stadium and asking us to share the truant schoolboy's longing to be part of the event, the narrator demands that we see the Polo Grounds as a microcosm of the city. The "metropolis" is a magnet for commercial interests. Giant cigarette packets dominate

¹ Quotations from DeLillo's *Underworld* will be signalled by the abbreviation U.

the scene. Though they are not the origin of the crowd's "yearning", the commercial icons vie with the game itself as the focus of desire.

The novel's descriptions of the urban landscape bear out the late capitalist credo proclaimed by one of its characters: "There is only one truth", says Charlie Wainwright, "Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world" (U 530). The advertising industry brings together technology and design to control consumers: "Once we get the consumer by the eyeballs, we have complete mastery of the marketing process" (U 531). Wainwright's distorted echo of the Vietnam era saying, "If you've got them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow",² links the advertising media to the military industrial complex whose deadly products like the atom bomb and Agent Orange are significant parts of the fabric of the novel. Desire and terror are twinned facets of American domination, and they frequently converge in *Underworld*. The fears and longings generated by the media penetrate the psyches of the ordinary Americans DeLillo depicts. Passages of free indirect discourse depict subjects whose hearts and minds have been infiltrated by commercial and political messages. This is seen to comic effect in DeLillo's amusing caricature of a 1950s housewife, Erica Deming. Erica counts on "Doing things with Jell-O ... to improve her mood" (U 514), though she has begun to mistrust her "new satellite-shaped vacuum cleaner" because she associates it with the Soviet Sputnik (U 520).

By reducing images and messages for maximum impact, the media assure their retention by the public. Indeed media messages penetrate the most private recesses of memory and thought. Nick Shay's meditation on his father's disappearance is overprinted with the commercial logo and the advertising slogan of the man's preferred brand of cigarettes:

My father smoked Lucky Strikes. The pack has a design that could easily be called a target but then maybe not—there's no small central circle or bull's eye. The circle is large. (U 87)

"They said L.S./M.F.T.—Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco. Lucky Strike, in quotes, they said—"It's toasted". (U 809)

The arresting visual icon and the advertising catchphrase remain even after Nick's memories of his father have faded. Brands and slogans substitute for personal memory, so that corporate communication seems to replace even the quintessentially human rituals of grieving for loss.

Graphic oversimplification allows messages to pass into the public consciousness. At the start of the novel's Epilogue, "Das Kapital", the narrator states: "Capital burns off the nuance in a culture" (U 785). Though this statement

² Tellingly, the segment in which Wainwright's speech occurs is dated "December 19, 1961" (U 526), which puts it just over a week after the U.S. aircraft carrier "Core" arrived in Saigon with the first major contingent of U.S. troops and weapons. The precise origin of the Vietnam-related phrase is uncertain, though Nixon's general counsel, Charles Colson, apparently had a plaque in his office with the words inscribed on it (Keyes 8).

refers to contemporary global capitalism, the reduction of human complexity to exchangeable constituents is also already a feature of Cold War America in DeLillo's novel.

Although the world has become more intricately interconnected, the terms for thinking about the global situation have been reduced. Thus J. Edgar Hoover imagines the nuclear weapons race as a conflict between "Us and Them", although in this polar opposition there is also a profound, almost erotic connection: "the two of you bring each other to deep completion" (U 51). Later in the novel, Charlie Wainwright's advertising agency projects the binary split onto the world of commerce in a television commercial in which a car filled with Equinox premium gasoline races a vehicle filled with the competitor's brand: "White car versus black car. Clear implication. U.S. versus USSR" (U 529). These colors, or rather non-colors, are repeatedly linked to exhibitions of power in *Underworld*. Truman Capote's black and white ball brings together "famous people and powerful people" (79), the darlings of the media, in a monochromatic display of success that renders them indistinguishable from one another.

Technology and the media combine to eliminate nuance and to present the world literally in black and white. The videotape showing the victim of the Texas Highway killer mobilizes viewers' attention precisely because of its reductiveness: "There's something about the nature of the tape, the grain of the image, the sputtering black and white tones, the starkness—you think this is more real, truer-to-life than anything around you" (U 157). In reducing events information bits, technology somehow concentrates their power: "The more you watch the tape, the deader and colder and more relentless it becomes. The tape sucks the air right out of your chest but you watch it every time" (U 160). In simplifying reality, the murder tape concentrates and magnifies its violence, passing it on to viewers.

Reproducibility is another major feature of hegemonic productions in *Underworld*. Television rebroadcasts the tape of the Texas Highway shooting endlessly, "a thousand times a day" (U 160). Not only does the unique tape represent metonymically all of killer's acts, but also the medium itself seems to reduplicate the original violence: "the serial murder has found its medium or vice versa—an act of shadow technology, of compressed time and repeated images, stark and glary and unremarkable" (U 159). The endless replays made possible by the film remove the event from history, making it "unremarkable", but somehow enhancing its fascination. No longer unique and consigned to the past, terror operates in an infinitely renewable present.

Indeed, in the consumer culture of *Underworld*, power and prestige are no longer attached to unique events or objects, as they were in a pre-mechanical age where patrons commissioned individual works of art. Instead, the ability to double has become a sign of dominance. Significantly the bomb that explodes on the day the New York Giants win the World Series is "their second atomic explosion" (U 23), meaning that the U.S.S.R. has an arsenal that can compete with U.S.A.'s. Similarly, New York proclaims its status as a world capital through its twin towers. Klara Sax regards them as "a model of behemoth mass production, units that roll identically off the line and end up in your supermarket, stamped with the day's

prices" (U 377-78). The towers are giant icons of capitalist culture, products of a nation that can produce anything on any scale. In *Underworld's* America, weapons roll off the assembly line at the same rate as supermarket products. In fact, they even resemble each other. American products are intimately connected to deadly weapons through the same ideological mechanisms: "And how can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?" (U 465). The system's engines of production and reproduction—manufacturing, advertising, politics and the media—use similar strategies of simplification, multiplication, and repetition, with the shared aim of winning the hearts and minds of the American public.

"Get inside people's heads and vandalize their eyeballs"

In a culture where political and commercial interests have so successfully mobilized technology to influence the public, artists have to struggle to win back their attention. The first task of the artists in *Underworld* is to recapture spaces dedicated to commercial and political ends, because these are the only sites available to creators. That done, they call attention to alternative forms of discourse inscribed or embedded in the dominant mode of expression, and thereby work to undermine the control exerted over the collective mind. One of the central figures in this repossession is the graffiti artist, Ismael Muñoz, alias Moonman 157. More than the other artists Moonman has "to be on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing'" (Certeau xix). His victories are never permanent but have to be constantly reenacted, like his paintings. Nevertheless, his tactics of recuperation and reinscription connect him with *Underworld's* other artist figures.

DeLillo's artists have to recover space from official control. Ismael Muñoz exercises his painterly talents on the carriages of New York's subway and the wall of a derelict tenement in New York's urban wasteland. In so doing, he follows in the footsteps of Los Angeles's Sabato Rodia, the creator of Watts Towers, a group of seventeen hand-built spires, stretching into the Los Angeles sky and adding texture and excitement to Watts's "bungalow slum" (U 276) and to the city's depressingly uniform urban grid.

DeLillo's late-twentieth-century artists work both on and with elements provided by consumer culture. To decorate the subway cars or the Wall, Moonman uses spray paints stolen from hardware stores. Though many of Klara Sax's materials are donated, she admits that: "we still have to scratch and steal to get many of the things we need" (U 69). This practice is consonant with her earlier work with found objects, which earned her the title of "The Bag Lady". Her recycling of discarded objects links her with Sabato Rodia, who built his towers from "steel rods and broken crockery and pebbles and seashells and soda bottles and wire mesh" (U 276).

Underworld's artists may seem to bear out the facetious assertion of one of the novel's waste management experts, the "waste theorist", Jesse Detwiler:

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. (U 287)

Reinterpreting art history as a history of waste-treatment, this self-aggrandizing remark illustrates how American industry creates its own self-justifying ideology along with the goods and weapons it manufactures. In fact the waste disposal industry satirized in *Underworld* is devoted to concealing the obscene surpluses and by-products of a culture whose mandate is "Consume or die" (U 287). The novel's artists work, on the contrary, to recover and reuse what has been discarded.

By bringing back into public circulation material that is otherwise concealed or thrown away, DeLillo's artist figures open the public's eyes to the culture they live in. Klara Sax explains: "We took junk and saved it for art. Which sounds nobler than it was. It was just a way of looking at something more carefully" (U 393). Ismael Muñoz transforms the drab subway trains and opens people's eyes: "They reacted to the train, their heads went wow. Some shocked looks too, they're seeing hell on wheels, but mostly the eyes go yes and the faces open up" (U 434). Besides enabling people simply to see, graffiti also draws public attention to the urban ghetto communities that mainstream America does not want to acknowledge: "The whole point of Moonman's tag was how the letters and numbers told a story of backstreet life" (U 434). The "graffiti façade" of the Wall, with its blue and pink angels and its elliptic epitaphs, depicts another America within one of the nation's richest cities, a place where children are abandoned, slaughtered and allowed to die.

Whether or not the artists intend it, making people see has a subversive thrust, for it reveals what the authorities want hidden. Despite Klara Sax's definition of her work in Arizona as "an art project, not a peace project" (U 70), she recognizes its transgressive nature:

See, we're painting, hand-painting in some cases, putting our puny hands to great weapons systems, to systems that came out of the factories and assembly halls as near alike as possible, millions of components stamped out, repeated endlessly, and we're trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life, and maybe there's a sort of survival instinct here, a graffiti instinct—to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are. (U 77)

This comment on the B-52 project sounds rather like a manifesto for graffiti art, and more generally, like an expression of the aesthetic and political impulses motivating all DeLillo's artist figures. In seeking to "unrepeat" what the machines have made, the graffiti artist asserts the value of the human hand in a culture dominated by technology. The "graffiti instinct" repersonalizes social life, striking a blow for human agency and creativity in an era of alienation. Moreover, in bringing color, individuality, and humanity to the surfaces occupied by hegemonic powers, graffiti constitutes a gesture of revolt against the order that "burns off the nuance in a culture" (U 785). Reacting against visual clichés and simplistic slogans, it makes visible the complexity in social life.

This is the impulse motivating Klara Sax when she sees an old photograph of herself at the black and white ball, standing next to someone who is. Failing to recognize herself in the picture or to differentiate between "either Truman Capote or J. Edgar Hoover" (U 79), she feels the need to change the image by painting over it in "orange and blue and burgundy" (U 79). Like a graffiti artist, she wants to appropriate an official "text" and efface its neutralizing monochrome with strokes of color. Such is the intuitive protest behind the B-52 project, made explicit when one of Klara's young helpers ironically inverts the Cold War Era cliché, changing it to: "Better red than dead" (U 79). Klara's passion for color reveals her kinship with the protesters pursuing J. Edgar Hoover's car in their brightly painted Volkswagen bug (U 568).

To win public attention, *Underworld's* artists have to outperform the politicians and admen. Bright colors, gigantic letters, saturated surfaces, and repeated motifs draw attention to forms of existence outside those represented by the dominant culture. Ismael Muñoz describes the urge prompting him to paint the trains: "The trains come roaring down the rat alleys all alike and then you hit a train and it is yours, seen everywhere in the system, and you get inside people's heads and vandalize their eyeballs" (U 435). In reclaiming space from "the system", the graffiti artist commits an act of vandalism, but at the same time, he renews the ancient connection between art and place that Walter Benjamin felt had been lost once art could be mechanically reproduced.³ In this way, urban artists could be said to restore what Walter Benjamin calls the "aura" of the artwork, except that there are important differences. Graffiti art is not produced for an elite nor viewed in a private context, rather it circulates through the city, piggybacking on a system that moves people and goods for maximum profit. Graffiti constitutes a new form of art positioned in an unstable border zone between the permanent and the ephemeral, between the remote and the immediate. Its subversive power to "get inside people's heads and vandalize their eyeballs" derives from this marginal situation.

DeLillo's "painterly textures"

The most representative artist figure in *Underworld*, the one whose work connects most with all the others, is the marginal and subversive graffiti writer who refuses gallery space and official recognition. Significantly, the novel positions graffiti at the juncture of image and text:

'There's this kid she's looking for. Graffiti artist'.
'Graffiti writer'.
'Yes, well, it's so completely everywhere, this writing'. (U 381)

³ "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin section II).

In referring to this distinctively urban art form as "writing", the novel insists on the kinship between the artist persona and the writer himself. The invitation to comparison allows us to make a step forward in understanding DeLillo's art.⁴

Repeatedly in interviews and articles the writer has stated the importance of the visual dimension of his own writing. At times, his comments on the process of writing could almost refer to painting: "The other thing [the writer] has is a flat surface that he will decorate, fitfully, with words" (DeLillo 1997, section 3). So important are the visual and tactile dimensions of composition that DeLillo persists in using a typewriter well into the age of the computer:

And the words typed on the white page have a sculptural quality. They form odd correspondences. They match up not just through meaning but through sound and look. (DeLillo 2005, 91-92)

In insisting on the graphic and even "sculptural" aspects of his work, DeLillo places himself in the company of *Underworld's* urban artists. Given his appreciation of the visual quality of his own writing, DeLillo's poetic descriptions of Moonman's lettering in *Underworld* come as no surprise. However his aesthetic affinity with graffiti writers goes deeper than the mere pleasure of creating bold letters.

Like them he takes over an already saturated surface in order to clear a space for creation. Then, writing is, for him, a visual and spatial art. He makes patterns with the typeface by repeating letters, words and phrases. Moreover, like the visual artist, DeLillo expresses rather than conceptualizes. His language relates to the body and its sounds, inflections and gestures. Finally, *Underworld*, like his other books, explores the personal implications of history. So, in representing facets of American culture and history that are missing from official accounts, DeLillo's art has the subversive force of the graffiti writer's signature.

Like the artists who have to reclaim space from the saturated surfaces of the American city, DeLillo has to resist the endlessly proliferating messages of late capitalist culture: "[T]he culture continues its drive to imitate itself endlessly—the rerun, the sequel, the theme park, the designer outlet—because this is the means it has devised to disremember the past" (DeLillo 1997, section 5). The endless replication of images saturates the public's mind, so that to evoke the past the novelist needs first to rescue it from the selective and mutilating forces that have dis(re)membered it.

The inspiration for *Underworld*, like some of DeLillo's other novels, was found in the archives, where the novelist unearthed an official text that evoked a forgotten era:

Front page of *The New York Times*. Oct. 4, 1951. A pair of mated headlines, top of the page. ...

⁴ For Timothy L. Parrish all the artists depicted in the novel recall DeLillo, in that: "[They] employ available technologies in order to write narratives that express their particular sensibilities. Of all these characters, the graffiti artist seems closest to DeLillo's public conception of himself as a novelist in opposition to society" (Parrish 91).

Giants capture pennant—this was the dramatic substance of the first headline.
Soviets explode atomic bomb—this was the ominous threat of the second. (DeLillo 1997, section 1)

DeLillo "vandalizes" this official text in order to represent people and events marginalized in American history. He recenters the account of the 1951 World Series on a historically insignificant figure who slips into the stadium without paying, the "youngest" and "scrawniest" of the local boys who try to gain entry (U 12). *Underworld* thus diverts attention from cultural icons and gives it over to the city's outcasts and outsiders. Like Moonman's writing on the New York subway cars and on the Wall, the novel tells "a story of backstreet life" (U 434). It recovers the forgotten voices of a bygone era and calls attention to the diversity of lived experience. It restores the flesh and blood humanity that has been evacuated from what DeLillo describes as "*history's flat, thin, tight and relentless designs, its arrangement of stark pages*" (DeLillo 1997, section 3).

The aesthetic pleasure of reading DeLillo's prose lies not only in its precise and loving evocation of human voices but also in the patterns created from the recurrences of characters' signature refrains.⁵ As readers notice these repetitions, they experience the pleasure of recognition. As opposed to the sterile repetitions of a culture "drive[n] to imitate itself endlessly" (DeLillo 1997, 5), the recurrences in *Underworld* create complexity through significant re-connection and suggestive association.

Each character has his own idiolect, like a graffiti writer's signature. Manx Martin speaks with a jazzy rhythm, his conversations characteristically consisting of riffs on his interlocutor's words. For example, in his exchange with the superintendent of his apartment building about two missing snow shovels, repetition allows him to avoid answering challenging questions:

'You seen those shovels?'
 'What shovels?' Manx says.
 'Because they're missing out of the basement'.
 'Things always missing. Bought a new pair of socks missing in the wash'.
 'Two snow shovels missing from the utility room standing against the wall this morning'.
 'We expecting snow?' Manx says.
 And he looks heavenward. Look like snow to you? Don't look like snow to me.
 Weatherman say snow? (U 349)

⁵ DeLillo describes art as "one of the consolation prizes we receive for having lived in a difficult and sometimes chaotic world. We seek pattern in art that eludes us in natural experience". See his interview with Anthony DeCurtis in *Lentricchia* p. 66. Peter Boxall discusses the recurrence of motifs in *Underworld*, concentrating on the recurrence of references to Breughel (Boxall 180) and also on the "innocent shoe" (Boxall 197). David Cowart has also examined some of the novel's recurring motifs, like the baseball, which he sees as "the story's grail, brimming with the redemptive blood of historical truth" (Cowart 53-54).

In this passage where a conversation becomes a call and response duet, then drifts into free indirect discourse, the narrator maintains not only Manx's Harlem dialect but also his distinctive choric repetitions, his musical refrains.

As the novel's idiosyncratic voices recur in the novel, they create pleasing patterns and also surprising connections. For example, through the repetition of the phrase "reached around" (U 435; 436; 573) Ismael Munos's recurring memory of his first sexual experience finds a surprising echo in J. Edgar Hoover's repressed homoerotic longings and Clyde Tolson's ambition and loyalty. Having established the memory of "the guy who reached around" as Ismael's (U 435), the narrative goes on to link the sexual fantasies of the ghetto dweller with two of America's most powerful men in a subversive textual coupling.

DeLillo's language can evoke the past with both accuracy and feeling, poeticizing the mundane and giving readers access to the texture of ordinary life. Take for example, the description of Rick Deming waxing his Ford Fairlane:

Rick ... could look at himself in a strip of chrome, warp-eyed and hydrocephalic, and feel some of the power of the automobile, the horsepower, the decibel rumble of dual exhausts, the pedal tension of Ford-O-Matic drive. (U 516)

With incredible economy, this passage recreates the feel of being American in the 1950's and experiencing the erotic charge of its sexy rocket-like cars, all fins and flashing chrome. From the narrator's well-chosen metaphor describing the warped image of a man's face mirrored in a car's polished chrome, the text slips almost imperceptibly into what sounds like the character's inner voice as it admiringly quotes the snappy publicity material. In representing various moments, historical or imaginary, from the decades of the second half of the twentieth century, *Underworld* chronicles what DeLillo describes as "the small anonymous corners of human experience" (DeLillo 1997, section 3). In spite of the novel's impressive length, like Klara Sax's aircraft project, its "intentions [remain] small and human" (78).

Each character has his or her private obsessions or memories that return regularly within the interior monologues, like the graffiti writer's recurring tags.⁶ One of Nick Shay's signatures is his rehearsal of the family's recycling ritual:

At home we separated our waste into glass and cans and paper products. Then we did clear glass versus colored glass. Then we did tin versus aluminum. We did plastic containers, without caps or lids, on Tuesdays only. (U 89)

Variations on this list of environmentally responsible acts return during Nick's sections, sounding more and more like a comforting litany to lull the mind and assuage the conscience.⁷ They provide a counterpoint of reassuring normality to his more disquieting thoughts about his father's disappearance or the shooting of George Manza.

⁶ Coward calls this trait, quite appropriately, "verbal recycling" (Coward 59).

⁷ Variations on this signature refrain can be found on pages 102-3, 803-4, and 806-7, for example.

Repressed or lost memories of these two father figures seem to merge in suggestive ways in Nick's meditation on the Lucky Strike motif. DeLillo takes over the corporate logo in order to suggest something about Nick that the character is unable to articulate. There is a ritualistic quality about his fascination with the image that seems to substitute for the unaccomplished mourning ceremony. At the same time, the remembered logo and text also focalize Nick's uncertainty about his father's disappearance. Has his father been assassinated by the Mafia—was he "a target?" (has he been "toasted?")—or has he simply abandoned the family, turning the "small central circle" into a gaping hole? This example shows that like the graffiti artist, DeLillo appropriates all kinds of official icons and discourses in order to parody them, personalize them, and otherwise divert them from their intended purposes.

Indeed, in the past he has been criticized for acts "of literary vandalism and bad citizenship" (DeLillo 2005, 141). But far from defending himself against such charges, DeLillo states:

[B]eing called a bad citizen is a compliment to a novelist, at least to my mind. That's exactly what we ought to do. We ought to be bad citizens. We ought to, in the sense that we're writing against what power represents, and often what government represents, and what the corporation dictates, and what consumer consciousness has come to mean (DeLillo 2005, 142)

Underworld offers a kind of underground history of New York and the U.S.A., showing the tactics of the weak and ordinary in a world dominated by the powerful and famous. By pillaging dominant productions in order to create his understories of America's cities,⁸ DeLillo mounts a critique of his culture's "white hot consumption and instant waste" (DeLillo 1997, section 2).

"Everything connects"

Underworld offers a meditation on the kind of art America's cities produce. At the same time, the novel offers an undercover representation of DeLillo's own art of fiction. But DeLillo's work goes beyond that of his fictional painters and sculptors. It brings together the fragmented and disjunctive images of city life into a narrative, adding a temporal as well as spatial dimension.

The novel's unusual structure—at once projective and retrospective—means that time loops back on itself, making beginnings and endings impossible to locate, subsuming them in pattern, but paradoxically, rendering them all the more significant. The force and energy of the work centers on ambiguous and irretrievable moments of origin and terminus—like the source of the baseball or the moment of George Manza's death. In its resistance to closure, the novel keeps open the circulation of meaning, introducing free movement into the system's "relentless"

⁸ I am thinking of the alternative discourse that the novel calls the "undervoice that spoke through the cannon fire and ack-ack" (U 563).

design. Rather than simply "vandaliz[ing readers'] eyeballs", the novel poses questions about the nature of memory and the reliability of history.

Underworld recycles cultural material, retrieving what is lost or forgotten and renewing its significance through recontextualization. It retrieves the personal and the human, re-membering America's cities and restoring particularity to their faceless and voiceless inhabitants. The vision DeLillo creates of New York encompasses not only the skyscrapers of Manhattan but also the neighborhoods of the Bronx and Harlem, the streets and subways that connect them, and most importantly, the people who inhabit them. DeLillo weaves a richly human web of words out of the endlessly reproducible icons and discourses that saturate the postmodern metropolis. From the detritus of contemporary capitalism *Underworld* creates new myths that restore humanity to a culture dehumanized by its own technology.

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