

Images of Death—Patterns of Dying: Death as a Boundary in Don DeLillo's Novels *White Noise*, *Underworld*, and *Cosmopolis*

Mirna Radin Sabadoš

In his essay “The Power of History” published in the *New York Times* in 1997, DeLillo speaks about the novel as a literary form and the impact of the sense of history on writing as a form of expression. Scratching the surface of “Americanness,” in the words of Willem de Koonig, the feeling American artists acquire from time to time is that they are team members participating in the joint effort of writing American history (see DeLillo, “The Power of History”). DeLillo explains that novelists are never team players, and that this process of creating American history also imposes its effects on the writer’s sense of self, or as much as the writer shapes the novel, the process is to the same extent reversal—he acquires formative elements by the result of his writing. Conducted in the environment of present day reality, the “evanescent spectacle of contemporary life,” the process of writing and its outcome are under a strong influence of the fact that “things flash and die,” that they are a process of collapsing time, and that the probably most significant feature of a “cultural drama” performed through the mediated environments is the accelerated consumption and the instant production of waste (“The Power of History”). Compared to the flashing images of the present, documented and locked in time, events from the past present themselves with an unmatched clarity and stability, a sense of greatness that arises from its iconography. Even so, such a recreated and reconstructed past in fiction still speaks not of itself but, in the process of intimization and re-centering by focusing public events through “the small anonymous corners of human experience” (“The Power of History”), it reshapes our perception of the time and social reality we inhabit. Determining the “fireball and mushroom cloud of the nuclear bomb” as the “final iconic fury” and the “final flash of the half-century” (“The Power of History”) DeLillo introduces the theme of death, transformed and transgressing, as one of the key features in the production and circulation of what is perceived as the social reality of the present.

In his study “The Hour of Our Death” Philippe Aries suggests that “there is a relationship between man’s attitude towards death and his awareness of self, of his existence or simply of his individuality” (40). DeLillo’s novels *White Noise*, *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*, work towards extending this relationship from individual and personal to an inherently cultural in accentuating perhaps not always the most prominent aspect of death in relation to the individual as a subject and in relation to the personal experience of death as a loss or a lack, but in presenting death as a public event related to a group and its collective identity. It functions in the intricate network of codes and meanings and juxtaposed to any other significant cultural feature it acquires a different scope of meanings. My intention here is to deal with its manifestations against the

framework of the waste culture, primarily as collective paranoia, then as mediated event becoming an act of consumption, and finally as personal intimate experience of time, space and social reality, a glimpse into history in a multitude of images.

One of DeLillo's motifs which constructs a joint pivotal point for all the three novels is precisely a glimpse into history by means of the multiplicity of a single image. It is presented in *Underworld* in its most elaborate form and delivered through the mind of the imaginary J. Edgar Hoover at the historic ballgame of October 3rd 1951:

He stands in the aisle and looks at the naked man pursued by dogs. He looks at the gaunt dog nibbling the baby in the dead woman's arms. These are long gaunt starveling hounds, they are war dogs, hell dogs, boneyard hounds beset by parasitic mites, by dog tumors and dog cancers... The dead have come to empty out the wine gourds, to serve a skull on a platter to gentlefolk at their meal. He sees gluttony, lust and greed. (*UW* 50)

It is a reproduction of the painting entitled *Triumph of Death* by Pieter Brueghel, torn from *Life* magazine that caught the attention of J. Edgar during the ballgame in the "Prologue" of *Underworld*. Almost at the same time he will find out about another triumph of death, the Russian nuclear bomb that exploded in Kazakhstan. In this particular context, death is filtered through the mind of the character of J. Edgar Hoover, and functions on multiple levels. First it exists as an image that can be reproduced, which immediately eliminates one of death's fundamental features, its finality. Death's inevitability is denied in the idea that it is "a punishment for the wicked," and finally, it is seen as humiliating, requiring submission (sexual aspect of the interpretation)—and becoming a force to be challenged. Consequently, death is not seen as the end of life, in the sense that it denies possibility of action, and in that aspect death ceases to be a boundary of life since it no longer assumes the real.

As Michael Hardin points out (21), death has been treated as an experience outside the realm of the real even before postmodernists posited death as simulacrum, since the idea of an "afterlife" already removed reality from death. He further quotes from Jean Baudrillard (21), who claims that death should be interpreted as a form, not as an event, but a form of social relations, automatically belonging to the domain of public, and it could never determine a subject or assume any value. Therefore, death as an idea contains no reference to subject, nor can it be approached from the standpoint of a subject. Death, thus, becomes an object, or a simulacrum in Baudrillardian terms, and introduces predominantly awareness not of self but of the domain of the social and the public. Or, as Hardin puts it, "American culture is permeated with death, yet that death 'has no sting'; it becomes just a step in the process of replication or recreation, both sexual and technological, for both the victim and the viewer" (37).

White Noise, first published in 1985, DeLillo wrote under a working title of "American Book of the Dead," and in many aspects it lived to the expectation. As Mark Osteen suggested, *White Noise* speaks of the postmodernist view of death, not

as a magnificent struggle with one's destiny, but as dying that occurs every minute of every day, and comes quietly and inconspicuously as the sound of rain falling (165), which we perceive as a type of white noise, as a resonance of souls whose favor we ask only through the spells of the Books of Dead. DeLillo's American book incorporates the sound and lists items and places which reflect the sacred in the secularity of the postmodern. Osteen perceives the characters of *White Noise* as people seeking their own enlightenment not in the ancient mysticism of Africa and Asia, but in their immediate surroundings, in the public spaces of supermarkets and shopping malls, but also in the privacy of their own homes, in front of the television screens. They expect to find absolution and self-fulfillment in the rituals of consumption, while television exists as the primary and only medium which distributes information through which reality becomes less real, or eventually unreal, in the first place promoting and protecting the ideas of capitalism. It creates channels of desires which recalibrate any social or political purposes individuals might have, into a single desire for possession of commodities. However, television also offers a glimpse into the broadcasting space of waves, an antecedent of cyberspace which offers a completely different mode of existence outside the linear time frame, thus offering an emergency exit for the death paranoia. One of the probably most significant messages of *White Noise* is a closer look into the noises of our own culture, into the temples of postmodernity—formal effects of a desire for collective identity and refuge in which we seek our own truths.

The novel is a structured sequence of loosely interrelated episodes, organized in three parts, *Waves and Radiation*, *Airborne Toxic Event* and *Dylarama*, while the typical plot scheme remains underdeveloped, since DeLillo incorporates a pastiche of popular genres mainly related to the television as a medium into the narrative structure. His focus is the language of images and words—a perception generated through the medium of mass communication. *White Noise* is a stream of words and images that announces the advent of a culture, the immediacy and scope of its static noise and the twist of the angle it would provide in the ultimate making of American history. Death paranoia dominates in all three parts, however, the focus shifts from the outside to the inside, prompted by the toxic waste disaster which functions as a sort of a catalyst, a way of personal unmediated contact with the certainty of dying. The paranoia would subsequently become a defense mechanism against the polluting effects of the mediated culture, becoming the only attribute of humanity which still cannot be alienated from a human individual through the mechanisms of consumption.

In a number of aspects DeLillo's play with the motif of death supports the assumption that death is predominantly a collective experience and materializes itself as paranoia, whether private and individualized in *White Noise*, or global and collective in *Underworld*, an intangible paralyzing fear that individuals need protection from, and they find it in belonging to a collective. The motif from the Brueghel's painting in *White Noise* resounds as "simulated mass-casualty scene":

In time I approached the volunteer victims. There were twenty or so, prone, supine, draped over curbstones, sitting in the street with woozy looks.

I was startled to see my daughter among them. She lay in the middle of the street, on her back, one arm flung out, her head tilted the other way. I could hardly bear to look. Is this how she thinks of herself at the age of nine—already a victim, trying to polish her skills? How natural she looked, how deeply imbued with the idea of a sweeping disaster. Is this the future she envisions? (*WN* 204-05)

Even though the Brueghel painting and its superimposition to the baseball field from *Underworld* and the SIMUVAC scenes of *White Noise* resemble one another, there is a rather significant difference in the context. *White Noise* is predominantly dealing with the fear of dying on a micro level, involving personal reactions of the characters in a number of situations in which they are required to respond to their own sense of fear. The “airborne toxic event,” which interrupts their existence in a consumer oriented community of the commodified world, functions also as a trigger event that signals death’s finality and inevitability, in a way emphasizing the difference between collective and individual by reinstating the threat of death to the domain of the real. DeLillo’s play with the identity of crowds in *White Noise* supports Hardin’s thesis (see Hardin 21), which claims that crowds form a collective that is protected from dying by its multitude—they keep death out—whether their reason to become a crowd is God, politics, or consumption:

Many of those crowds were assembled in the name of death. They were there to attend tributes to the dead. Processions, songs, speeches, dialogues with the dead, recitations of the names of the dead. They were there to see pyres and flaming wheels, thousands of flags dipped in salute, thousands of uniformed mourners. There were ranks and squadrons, elaborate backdrops, blood banners and black dress uniforms. Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. (*WN* 3)

Death in *White Noise* to the greatest extent belongs to the domain of the virtual, since it has no other immediate effect on reality but paranoia, which then constructs a framework of existence for an entire population. Even though it could be said that death permeates culture, it does so indirectly, it never establishes an immediate cause and effect relationship. Nor do the circumstances allow for death to be seen as the boundary of existence, since its own existence is being culturally denied. In *Underworld*, death anxiety assumes a global dimension and establishes itself as a threat that would be directed against mass population. Crowds would not function as a protective device any more, since there will be no one escaping should the death threat fulfill itself.

The chronology of *Underworld* is not linear, therefore it even augments the effect or the presence of death anxiety, and it does so especially because the threat has become more real: the contained effects to the actual world of thermo-nuclear bombs are available for inspection. Death of this magnitude produces waste as a completely separate category—nuclear waste lands, genetic material waste that came to existence—resulting in little shops of horror where all the abnormal and abhorrent specimens are being held in jars: no longer merely an impalpable threat, an allusion, but firmly, tangibly real. Crowds are no longer protected simply by becoming crowds. In *Underworld*, DeLillo develops the idea of death objectified through the system of media, its major icon still a fireball and a mushroom cloud, but also announcing a sort of a premonition of a multitude of deadly “anonymous corners of human experience” envisioned in the hints about the AIDS virus, stock market crashes, political riots, mass disasters, power blackouts and poverty as quiet processes of decay that all threaten the permanence of the collective which in the *Underworld* no longer functions as a single whole. It is a hint of a world ruled by “Pluto, the god of the dead and ruler of the underworld” containing under its “shiny metallic surface” (*UW* 106, 514) yet another underworld, the homeless of the Bronx, who live managing the waste of American consumerism, but also embody the waste and expose the faux of the American dream: that “us” vs. “them” in the global opposition, also contains a subdivision determining “us” through a multitude of criteria, class, race, color, ethnicity, income level, to name only the most obvious. What constitutes a social framework in *Underworld* is a number of collectives coexisting in a non-linear space and time defined by its cultural practices and joined into a Deleuzian machinic universe interconnected by desire. The space and time of the *Underworld* stretch for forty years, from the ‘50s to the ‘90s, and cover the grounds of the United States coast-to-coast, venture deeply into the deserts of Kazakhstan weapons test site and from there into the cyberspace. The realm of the real in *Underworld* is radically different from the one in *White Noise*, and perhaps that is the reason why the key link in this respect in the *Underworld* is devising a way to perpetuate the appearance of protected collective despite the non-existent equilibrium.

One of *Underworld*'s most striking mises-en-scène designed to illustrate the rather hollow shell of the collective protection mechanisms is the “Sputnik” episode, as it was published in *The New Yorker*, which is a part of the *Underworld*'s section “Better Worlds for Better Living Through Chemistry: Selected fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s” (499). It maintains the ideas of commodification and consumption introduced in *White Noise*, but also expands the process of commodification to Cold War paranoia and the period of the 1950s, along with addressing satirical remarks to the morally dubious activities of corporate capital. Presenting the processes of commodification and consumption as elements of American national identity, since they came as consequences of the nature of American economy, these processes also set up a positive pole of the US/USSR binary pair, firmly established in the fifties. As Duvall points out, “*Underworld* posits that America won the Cold War in large part

because, in the classic economic metaphor, it was able to have both guns and butter—both a strong military presence abroad and a proliferation of consumer goods at home. The Soviet Union may have been able to match US nuclear tonnage, but not its consumerism” (34). The material unity of the US also included ideological unity, which, by analogy, was in binary opposition to the USSR ideology, and the maintenance of the opposition produced the culture of the Cold War and promoted the idea of US overall superiority by analogy, since USSR economy is seen as “backward” (see Wallace, “Venerated Emblems” 368 citing Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* 71-73). This “commodity fetishism” introduced in “Sputnik” is recognized as the onset of the process that would further define social relationships as those between objects, which is one of the major themes in *White Noise* (304-21), and is to culminate in *Cosmopolis* reinstating the subject through the personal unmediated experience of death.

“Sputnik” is set in a typical (white) suburb of the 1950s and designed as a typical commercial break with an Underworld of its own—a representation of the American dream lived under the shadow of a Russian satellite. The narrative structure functions as a set of juxtapositions already indicated in the names of the Demings: Eric, Rick and Erica, and the story is saturated by the representations of the idea of package-as-identity. The desire of the consumer here, as well as in *White Noise*, is not for the products, but for the ideas they stand for, “for the talismanic signifiers and the systematic code of differences to which they belong” (Wallace 374). Duvall sees “Sputnik” as a “satirical set piece on an archetypal American nuclear family” in which the core of consumerism at its onset in the ‘50s is embodied in the new words “to believe in and live by”: Breezeway, Car pools, Crisper (*UW* 520), Jell-O chicken mousse the Honest John (*UW* 514), or Sputnik, which indicate “capitalism’s control of the image through saturation advertising on all forms of the electronic media” (35). Yet, the Demings’ world always contains its underlying opposite—the communists, the Soviets, the Vietnamese, the Black, the undifferentiated mass of “Other” that strikes an odd resemblance with the paranoia of J. Edgar Hoover, the “dear, germ free Edgar” (*UW* 50), and J. Edgar’s alter ego sister Edgar, with her obsessive desire “to disinfect” (*UW* 251), which accentuate the desire contained in any binary juxtaposition.

American military failures remain only hinted at, and the Vietnam War is present merely through remote references to people. However, imaging the corporate involvement in the political and military involvement, remains significantly present as a form of a subtext created through the power of the play of language and image. “Better things for better living through chemistry” as the chapter title and Dow industry advertising slogan remains a sinister and satiric emblem of the magnitude of the corporate capital effects. Terror produced by the collective, resulting in (possible) mass-deaths of another collective, fueled and instigated by the predominantly corporate interests that also maintain the illusion of the American dreams as DeLillo presents with the Demings, may as well be one of the subtexts feeding and perpetuating the paranoia of the Cold War beyond its formal boundaries.

The role of corporate capital in mass production of waste and death remains the

Demings' Underworld they are completely unaware of. Real death is something that happens to others, waste landfills are not to be visible, toxic waste dumps are below the grounds in the salt mines and those who know about it hope the barrels would not leak, and finally, at the Kazakh weapons testing site in the old mines, nuclear waste is exploded into nothingness "for a reasonable price" (*UW* 785-803). "Because waste is a secret history, the underhistory, the way archaeologists dig out the history of early culture [. . .], In our case, in our age. What we excrete comes back to consume us" (*UW* 791).

The thesis that death happens to others is strongly supported by the mediation of the environment which also began in the 1950s. The spread of the spectacle of dying on camera: documentaries, reconstructed documentaries, surveillance cameras, all this provides a personal encounter with death mediated by camera lenses, and subsequently becomes another acceptable way of dealing with human mortality, the first one being, as in *White Noise*, denial. Brought to the verge of the grotesque, the denial of death in American culture is probably the most obvious in burial practices which resonate with the ancient traditions adapted to the entirely new purpose. Relying on the vast imagery of popular culture, televised wars, disasters on screen that are also present in *White Noise*, in *Underworld* the idea of mediated dying, dying on camera, sometimes even live, further explores the possibilities of media saturation with images. In *Underworld*, the spectacle of death is predominantly a collective and mediated experience but works as a twofold process: on the one hand, it is a collective experience of deaths, or it can even be a collective perception of the entire existence of the person dying on screen. On the other, the mediated events of *Underworld* are made public either in the sense that the victim is a public person, or by the fact that the footage is being made public by the loop of repetition, which stripped all the aspects of its immediacy or effect it might have had in the domain of the actual which is fundamentally different from the effect of the disasters involving nameless victims in the news reflected upon the characters of *White Noise*. Gladney's wife, Babette searches for immortality and finds it for a brief moment by being televised into ether through the local television intranet. Much the same way, the Texas Highway Killer in *Underworld*, who is "for real" a shop assistant providing care for his elderly parents, assumes a completely different level of existence at the moment when a footage of the murder, made accidentally by a little girl from another car, is released in the news, and then repeated until it in a way becomes empty of its real content, turning into a "real" image of death. "The tape is surreal, or maybe unreal is the way you want to put it. It is what lies at the scraped bottom of all the layers you have added. And this is another reason why you keep on looking. The tape has a searing realness" (*UW* 155).

As Hardin comments, "the multiplicity of images of death in the media creates a scenario in which death does not exist unless it appears on television; essentially, the only "real death" is that which is televised" (23). The idea of dying and death as a form of existence is propelled further by introducing it to the mediated environment—to the multitude of images resounding and repeating the objectified experience

of someone else's death on camera. "The chance quality of the encounter. The victim, the killer and the child with a camera. Random energies that approach a common point. There's something here that speaks to you directly, saying terrible things about forces beyond your control, lines of intersection that cut through history and logic and every reasonable layer of human expectation" (*UW* 155).

The power of the image is undeniable. The tape is being played over and over again in the news, until it assumes time and space of its own. In his 1997 essay "The Power of History" DeLillo comments on the effects of the information loop:

The commonplace homicide that ensues is transformed in the image-act of your own witness. It is bare, it is real, it is live, it is taped. It is compelling, it is numbing, it is digitally microtimed and therefore filled with incessant information. And if you view the tape often enough, it tends to transform you, to make you a passive variation of the armed robber in his warped act of consumption. It is another set of images for you to want and need and get sick of and need nonetheless, and it separates you from the reality that beats ever more softly in the diminishing world outside the tape.

The effect of consuming images does not stop here. Starting from the onset of the television era, the images consumed—and inevitably edited, manipulated and en-framed—account for the collective memory and sense of history. Collapsing time into the sequences of deaths restores its linearity, provides it with a sense of flow, but at the same time annihilates all the other aspects of someone's existence. Death in public, the death of a public figure becomes a spectacle, and by being so becomes a piece of collective identity, a way of recording collective memory. DeLillo explores the subject of the Kennedy assassination in *Libra* reinventing Lee Harvey Oswald as a person. In *Underworld*, introducing the Zapruder movie and its "artistic" screening actually has a reverse effect on the person of J.F.K. As Hardin emphasizes, "for many people, John F. Kennedy's life consists of the few seconds of Zapruder film where he dies" (37). In *Underworld* DeLillo depicts a private party, an assembly of artistic people, presented with the home video footage. The passage runs uninterrupted, first telling about the quality of the recording as if it were seeking to establish its authenticity, then it describes the content. It is a limousine in the sunlight, there is a head, and then there is a shot to the head, and then there is the reaction of the people in the room, their shock and disbelief. It is the footage of the president's motorcade in Dallas, Texas, the video recording of President Kennedy being shot and killed.

The recording shocked the audience on two levels: it was the famous video suppressed for many years, a visual proof of what really had happened in Dallas, but the film projection also contained a shock of the impact "that any high-velocity bullet of a certain lethal engineering will make on any human head, and the sheering of tissue and braincase was a terrible revelation" (*UW* 488). The event and its participants seem to have gained authenticity entirely by the means of the film—the visual recording of

the Kennedy assassination assumed its content—the recording became the assassination. DeLillo is not only using the impact of the film in order to provide the perspective from the moment of time the public screening episode is set in. It also carries all the implications of what the “Zapruder movie” represents from the perspective of the cyberspatial universe and heavily emphasizes the thesis that Kennedy’s life boils down to a number of frames imaging his death. The film became a piece of popular culture, it is widely available on the Internet, also as a sequence of frames, which points to the precise moment in the film registered as frame 313 when the bullet from the gun actually hit the president’s head. The film has become an item of consumption, but has also assigned the aspect of commodification to the historic event it presumably recorded.

The particular motif of the bullet hitting its target is repeated in *Cosmopolis*; it was used to create an open ending where the target is left waiting for the video clip of his death to take place in real time. Nonetheless in *Cosmopolis* visual imaging and the patterns of dying work in an entirely different framework than the one presented in *Underworld*. In the words of Lawrence Daw, *Cosmopolis* is “a sonorous threnody on ambition, capital, information, technocracy, obsolescence, abstraction, cruelty, impersonality, hunger, sex, love, marriage, men, weapons, territory, terrorism, revolution, psychosis, distorted time, society, myth, culture, writing, Freud, Einstein, and Mircea Eliade” (Daw, “Cosmopolis”), a description which beautifully sums up an infinitely complex and condensed text that, regardless of its brevity, still carries the branding of *Underworld* and the thesis that “everything is connected,” elaborating on the thesis that the world is holding on to its interconnectedness: “There is no space or time out here, or in here, or wherever she is. There are only connections. Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password—world without end, amen” (*UW* 825).

The date of the story is set; it takes place in New York, April 2000. The setting, however, does not entirely correspond to any time of our own, and implies that the real time of the narrative is in the near future. It presents us with a day’s journey of the protagonist, a successful businessman and billionaire Eric Packer, living his contained life in his multistoried apartment where he keeps a shark in an aquarium, and suffers from insomnia during the night. On this day he decides to travel from the East side to the “old neighborhood” to have a haircut. The journey, however, turns into a time-travel, since he encounters various aspects of postmodernity, present, past and future, and finally leaves the scene awaiting his death. On the road, he gets into “midtown traffic, a presidential motorcade, a broken water main, a rap star’s funeral procession, an anti-global-capital riot” (McLaughlin 120), and his own misfortune. Eric has made his empire by predicting the patterns expressed in numbers, currency fluctuations, establishing the meaning of existence. However, the chain of events proves not to be entirely predictable, and the framework of his world seems to be collapsing, since he is losing enormous amounts of digital money on Japanese yen, and a number of other

completely unpredictable events lead him to a desire for the personal experience of death, first by becoming a murderer, and eventually turning into a victim. Pessimistic as it may seem, his desire and sudden urge to kill his security officer corresponds to his desire to break the containment of his living—and seeking his assassin turns death into a personal experience, in a way treading the uncharted territory, offering the excitement that equals life itself.

The chronological ordering of the events in the story is interrupted by two interlude-chapters, “The Confessions of Benno Levin” subtitled “Night” and “Morning,” respectively, which provide accurate and objective information about the outcome of Packer’s voyage: “He is dead, word for word. I turned him over and looked at him. His eyes were mercifully closed” (C 55). However, the outcome is not what matters. Before all, *Cosmopolis* is a tale about desire for an unmediated experience of living, death perhaps included as its element. The story of the unmediated experience of dying a violent death (and subsequently murder) in *Underworld* remains a raw event, charged with disbelief and denial—the protagonist, Nick kills a friend by accident. His experience is abrupt and unsought for. Yet, what remained only a hint in the scene in *Underworld*, would grow into a conscious desire in *Cosmopolis*:

He asked if the gun was loaded and the man said no and the smile was all about the risk, of course, the spirit of the dare of what they were doing. He felt the trigger pull and then the gun went off and he was left there thinking weakly he didn’t do it. But first he pointed the gun at the man’s head and asked if it was loaded. (UW 780)

The motif of emerging into an unmediated experience of dying, along with other aspects of shared cultural environment and its overwhelming influence over the individual choices, “maintains a sense of linear thematic continuity with the author’s other works” (Daw), perhaps not in the formal sense, but strikingly so in the scope of DeLillo’s writing. Eric’s personal involvement in the experience of dying by embracing the role of the killer is perhaps unexpected, but on the other hand, is not accidental or unwilling:

“But the voice is only half the operation,” Torval said, then paused invitingly.
 “You’re saying there’s a code as well.” “A preprogrammed spoken code.” Eric put on the glasses.
 “What is it?”

Torval smiled privately this time, then raised his eyes to Eric, who leveled the weapon now “Nancy Babich.”

He shot the man. A small white terror of disbelief flickered in Torval’s eye. He fired once and the man went down. All authority drained out of him. He

looked foolish and confused. (C 145-46)

The point of killing his head of security was the point of symbolically exiting the frames of protection—he saw Torval as his enemy, a threat to his self-regard because “[w]hen you pay a man to keep you alive he gains a psychic edge” (C 147). Eric’s descent into the “real” and the return to the world of subjects already begins with the onset of the journey, and the point of becoming a murderer is crucial in the sense that along with the assuming of the role of the subject, he also removes the obstacle towards becoming an object of the real world, through experiencing death from the perspective of a victim. The journey continues providing him with a simulation of the perspective of a victim in the “movie scene” where there are hundreds of naked people lying in the street. The setting is immediately defined as film making, but the scene resounds with Brueghel and “SIMUVAC” scenes from *White Noise* and *Underworld*:

There were three hundred naked people sprawled in the street. They filled the intersection, lying in haphazard positions, some bodies draped over others, some leveled, flattened, fetal, with children among them. No one was moving, no one’s eyes were open. They were a sight to come upon, a city of stunned flesh, the bareness, the bright lights, so many bodies unprotected and hard to credit in a place of ordinary human transit (C 172).

Finally resuming his role of a subject and an agent, Eric is liberated and free to engage in the act of intimacy with his own wife (whom he accidentally meets at the set), and finally to continue his search for the “serious threat to his life.” He finds it in the character of Benno Levin, a.k.a. Richard Sheets, a former employee whom he does not remember, present squatter and a person of no significance except for his obsessive and insatiable desire to provide purpose for his own existence by killing Eric Packer and becoming a subject himself (see C 187). Their personal encounter turns into expectation of closure, a conversation of two parties connected by desire for assertion of their own existence in death which materializes itself first as an image of death objectified in the screen of Eric’s watch: “There was an image, a face on the crystal, and it was his [. . .]. He saw a series of vaults, a wall of vaults or compartments, all sealed. Then he saw a vault slide open” (C 209), and then the desire emerges as an expectation, a delayed inevitable moment of reality, where reasons and drives no longer matter: “His murderer, Richard Sheets, sits facing him. He has lost interest in the man. His hand contains the pain of his life, all of it, emotional and other, and he closes his eyes one more time. This is not the end. He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound” (C 209).

Death in the fiction of DeLillo marks the boundary of the two worlds which often collide in the realms of postmodernity, but both arise from the infinite where virtually anything is a possibility. The worlds embodied in iconic characters like Eric Packer and Benno Levin, respectively, contain a desire for the assertion of human existence in surroundings often envisioned as dehumanized and barren. Both of the worlds meet

in death, which appears as a personal borderline stripped of its iconicity and mediated emblems, becoming not a gateway to another world, but also to this one. DeLillo's satirical and perhaps often drastic vision of the possibilities of postmodern humanity, however, clearly reflects the attitudes of many other postmodernist writers and their desire to set their pleasure, their Eros, their creative delight in language and their sense of self-preservation against the vast and uniform Death that history tends to fashion as its most enduring work (see DeLillo, "The Power of History").

WORKS CITED

- Aries, Philippe. "The Hour of our Death." *Death, Mourning and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. Ed. Antonius C.G.M. Robben. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004. 40-49.
- Daw, Laurence. Rev. of *Cosmopolis*. *The Modern Word* 21. Apr. 2003. <<http://www.themodernword.com>> Access: 12 July 2006.
- DeLillo, Don. *Cosmopolis*. New York: Scribner, 2003.
- . "The Power of History." *The New York Times Book Review* 7 Sept. 1997. <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html>> Access: 12 Nov. 2006.
- . *Underworld*. New York: Scribner, 1997.
- . *White Noise*. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Duvall, John. *Don DeLillo's Underworld: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Hardin, Michael. "Postmodernism's Desire For Simulated Death: Andy Warhol's *Car Crashes*, J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, And Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." *Literature Interpretation Theory* 13 (2002): 21-50. EBSCO. KOBSON. <<http://search.epnet.com>> Access: 1 Oct. 2005.
- McLaughlin, Robert L. Rev. of *Cosmopolis*. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 23.2 (2003):120. EBSCO. KOBSON. <<http://search.epnet.com>> Access: 1 Oct. 2005.
- Osteen, Mark. *American Magic and Dread*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2000.
- Wallace, Molly. "'Venerated Emblems': DeLillo's *Underworld* and the History-Commodity." *Critique* 42:4 (June 2001). <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3229/is_200106/ai_n7902575> Access: 1 Oct. 2005.