

**MATERIAL ENCODING AND LIBIDINAL EXCHANGE:
THE CAPITAL CULTURE UNDERNEATH
DON DELILLO'S *UNDERWORLD***

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ABSTRACT

Whereas much critical attention has focused upon how Don DeLillo's novels offer a sustained critique of the postmodern condition within American culture, this essay uses DeLillo's most recent novel, *Underworld*, as a lens to explore how American postmodernity has manifested as a limbo where certainty and value have drifted free from the "real." The essay traces how the fracturing of the real has historical precedent in American Puritan ideology, and how the postmodern rendition of Puritanism in twentieth century is characterized best as empty materialism and displaced spiritual desire that departs from the Puritan stance of material wealth as the sign of divine calling. Drawing upon DeLillo's critique, I argue that the "real" and the spiritual in American culture have been erased by the pervasive force of despiritualized capitalism.

The American landscape of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* is a veritable limbo, an in-between realm where the objects, ideas, and words that delineate the world have no bearing upon the "real." Furthermore, the vacuous sound bites and images propagated by the media, technology, and popular culture blur the boundaries between image and reality, creating an endless stream of conflicting perspectives and, concomitantly, ambiguities. Whereas the possibility of there being a "Reality" is called into question throughout all of DeLillo's novels, *Underworld* focuses upon "the sense of irrevocable loss and incurable fault" (Taylor 515) of the postmodern condition, which has caused certainty and value to drift free from the circumference of the "real." While all facets of human existence are deeply impacted by this crisis in value, the

two realms in *Underworld* most affected are materiality and spirituality. In essence, the novel presents a spiritually and philosophically bankrupt society blindly grasping for fulfillment via rampant consumerism and empty materialism. As DeLillo remarked during an interview,

I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America... I see this desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and products and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go. (DeCurtis 57-58)

Ultimately, the loop of unfulfilled desire and relentless consumerism is the inescapable trap of America's postmodern condition whereby material objects are perceived as the only means to mediate the loss of value and counter the dissipation of the real. But the novel argues that such responses only further contribute to the rupturing of the real and the emptying of its latent value.

I. FROM REAL TO SIMULACRUM: THE PITCH OF GARBAGE

Underworld presents the emptiness of materialism and the loss of value via a surprising but distinctively American object, a baseball. The narrative as a whole is woven together through the ideational motif of the homerun baseball hit by Bobby Thomson in the 1951 playoff game between the Dodgers and the Giants. The baseball, as it passes through the hands of various owners, sutures the seemingly disparate narratives together and presents a tapestry of interconnected figures and events which, as is repeated throughout *Underworld*, demonstrates the degree to which "Everything is connected" [emphasis mine]. As the novel follows the fifty-year trajectory of the ball, it illuminates the slow effacement of reality in American culture. Consequently, the ball, as a recurring presence, offers a window onto DeLillo's assessment of materialism and the condition of contemporary American culture, whereby the loss of value has manifest as the proliferation of material objects and the subsequent emptying of the real.

Within the historical sweep of *Underworld*, which opens at the 1951 ball-game, jumps to the early 1990s, flows backwards in time to the 1950s, and culminates in the mid-1990s, the slow deterioration of value is revealed through the shift in connotations of the ball itself. During the 1951 game, the baseball is described as a sacred relic loaded with cultural significance: "[T]his five ounce sphere of cork, rubber, yarn, horsehide and spiral stitching, a souvenir baseball, a *priceless* thing somehow, a thing that seems to recapitulate the whole history of the game everytime it is thrown or hit or touched" (26) [emphasis mine]. Within such a romanticized (and fetishized) economy, the baseball is a relic that invokes a sacred past. Yet the novel suggests that the baseball cannot transcend its materiality and how its promise "to recapitulate the whole history" cannot be fulfilled. The schism between the real and any representational image of that real is emphasized by the baseball's inability to transcend history. It is part of an indelible past that is impossible to recapture:

All the fragments of the afternoon collect around his airborne form. 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. (60)

The baseball only gestures towards a past that, in effect, was never rendered or captured because of the implicit “manyess” of the moment. Subsequently, the baseball is not a means of possessing *the* history but rather a surrogate for the real — a real that began dissolving instantaneously with the dialectic slippage of the present into the past. The baseball represents the attempt to inscribe value and meaning onto a historically fluid world, and given the inability to penetrate to the real and presence the moment, the ball can only be a marker within the ebb and flow of time. As such, the ball loses its one-to-one contingency with its “real” history.

Once the ball no longer can presence the “basic reality” of 1950s America, it becomes a simulacrum, which “bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 11). The ball is a signifier without a signified and therefore, within the novel, an apt illustration of the dissolution of the real into a surface of materiality. As Nick Shay, the main character of *Underworld* and current owner of the baseball, explains, the baseball has become an object devoid of any value beyond its assigned cost. Despite the fact that Shay has purchased the ball for \$34,500 (thereby undermining its “priceless” character), he is unaware of any other intrinsic value. When asked why he bought it, Shay replies,

It's all about losing... It's about the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss. I don't know. I keep saying I don't know and I don't. But it's the only thing in my life that I absolutely had to own. (97)

The ball embodies the irretrievable loss by presencing its own inaccessible and undisclosed “priceless” value.

The need to own something that has no discernable value provides an invaluable perspective into the schism between the human and the real. The inability of the baseball to signify is a trope for the larger social condition seething below the surface of materialism and consumerism. Klara Sax, an artist in the novel who, perhaps, most accurately mirrors DeLillo's own critical stance, offers an astute assessment of American culture:

Many things that were anchored in the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck. Things have no limits now. Money has not limits. I don't understand money anymore. Money is undone. Violence is undone, violence is easier now, it's uprooted, out of control, it has not measure anymore, it has no level of values. (76)

The contiguous relationship of object and its “reality” has been ruptured, and value as a measurable sum has slipped from the grasp of the human. The dis-ease between material objects and the real is the fundamental characteristic of American culture. Eugene Goodheart succinctly observes in his reading of DeLillo's *White Noise*,

What the supermarket gives us is not real food but its representation. The food is chemically composed, canned, packaged, advertised: we consume it all. The supermarket (a trope for all sites of consumption) is filled with an abundance of items, but the main staple of that world is not the tangible item, the real thing, but what stimulates and sustains it in an endless deferment. (121-22)

The consumer fluctuates between image and the real, signifier and signified, in an unending loop that perpetuates itself along the displaced chain of fetishized objects, which are utterly incapable of fulfilling the “promise” of satisfaction. Goodheart interprets this relentless circle as “meditations [that] serve as a revelation of and a sort of defense against a killer boredom to which our consuming society vainly tries to provide an antidote” (121). While this self-perpetuating cycle is certainly the manifestation of boredom, it is also an ennui that springs from a lack of being in the world. That is, the individual floats in a sea of packaged goods, but without an anchor in the “real,” those goods merely generate a ceaseless field of despair, desperation, and unfulfilled desire. The consumer, in effect, cannot discern *why* he or she *must* own something, and, subsequently, the inherent emptiness of object is confirmed.

Within *Underworld* that despair, desperation, and unsatiated desire manifests as garbage—the remnants of some consumer’s latent but now emptied site of desire. In effect, garbage is the empty husk of value: as the garbage deteriorates and rots or as its materials are recycled into future desirable but equally vacuous items, the products reveal their detachment from and inherent lack of value. “Marian [Nick Shay’s wife] and I saw products as garbage,” Shay comments, “even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought” (121). The products, despite their “newness,” cannot transcend their truth as garbage. Instead of the assertion of the “real,” the promise of consumer happiness contributes to the proliferation of garbage, which, as the novel emphasizes, results in the “highest mountain on the Atlantic Coast between Boston and Miami,” Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. The garbage is integral to the American landscape and conscious, which Brian Glassic, a waste broker in *Underworld*, stresses when he

looked at all that soaring garbage and knew for the first time what his job was all about. Not engineering or transportation or source reduction. He dealt in human behavior, people’s habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes, maybe their passions, certainly their excesses and indulges... (184)

Garbage is the cultural condition as well as the manifestation of the “material” American dream. The novel, though, refutes the positive ethnographic spin placed upon garbage and the role of the waste manager with the line “the wind carried the stink from the mountain of wrack” (185), which reinforces the implicit decay and falsity of such an anthropological stance that valorizes a material culture.

Within such an economy devoid of permanent value, all objects are subject to instant transformation from “goods” to garbage, including the “priceless” baseball. The interchangeability of relic and trash of the baseball is emphasized when Chuckie Wainwright, the fourth “owner” of the ball, remarks that he regrets that he lost “the baseball his dad had given him as a trust, a peace offering, a form of desperate love

and a spiritual hand-me-down" (611). The ball is "recycled," a "*hand-me-down*." The lack of value is highlighted by the fact that either Chuckie's "wife had snatched [the ball] when they split. Or he'd accidentally dumped [it] with the household trash" (611). More importantly, though, the baseball is not merely a "hand-me-down" but a "spiritual" hand-me-down. In the transference from father to son, the ball has become merely a material object that has lost whatever "spirit" with which it had been imbued: trust, love, and peace. As this essay will demonstrate later, "peace" is a word loaded with great significance within DeLillo's critique of American culture.

Such spiritual emptiness parallels the economics of consumerism and the malaise of an American culture displaced between the "real" and the signs that attempt to articulate the real. *Underworld* further amplifies the parallels between spiritual and consumer desire through Nick Shay, a CEO for the same waste brokerage as Brian Glassic, and the current owner of the baseball. Shay describes his role within society: "We were waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste... Waste is a religious thing" (88). If waste is religious, then these "waste handlers" are the postmodern inception of priests and shamans. As the logic of garbage dictates, these people are priests of nothingness, and twentieth-century American culture, therefore, has replaced the "divine" and the real with a surrogate idol created out of garbage. As in any libidinal economy, the displacement of desire and the fetishization of surrogates only exacerbate primal emptiness and lack that such a substitute attempts to remedy.

II. *TODO Y NADA*: FROM CITY ON THE HILL TO SPIRITUAL LANDFILL

The merging of consumerism and religion has precedent in American history. The "founding" of America by the Pilgrims, the group of Puritans fleeing religious persecution in Great Britain, is the originating source of the blending of materialism, capitalism, and spirituality. In this regard, the postmodern American landscape is a direct extension of America's Puritan heritage, and within DeLillo's view, America is the postmodern bastard of Puritanism. DeLillo's first novel, *Americana* (1971), alludes to this cultural inheritance when a character remarks that television came over on the *Mayflower* with the Pilgrims. In his analysis of *White Noise*, Frank Lentricchia offers a variation on this phrase from *Americana*, but instead of television, Lentricchia traces postmodernity to the *Mayflower* ("Tales of the Electronic Tribe" 113). In Lentricchia's reading, postmodernity as a coherent set of communal values has its origins in Puritan ideology. In order to demonstrate the genealogical trace of the inception and transformation of Puritan ideology into its contemporary image, it is necessary to offer a brief sketch of Puritanism and its basic principles of divine will, the election of the "saved," and the forms through which one's "calling" are recognized.

Max Weber in his classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* defines the basic spirit of Puritanism as the "absolute obedience to God's will, with absolute acceptance as things as they were" (85). The American Pilgrims adhered to their "calling" from God and their belief in divine providence despite the fact that God is an invisible force that the individual is not capable of fully discerning. That is, the individual

can only hold to these fragments of eternal truth. Everything else, including the meaning of our individual destiny, is hidden in dark mystery which it would be both impossible to pierce and presumptuous to question. (Weber 103)

These “fragments” shore the individual against the bleakness of the situation and, operating like a synecdoche, gesture towards an unattainable whole.

Inscribed within the impenetrable “dark mystery” of divine presence is individual destiny, but the Puritans, turning toward divinely inscribed fragments portent with meaning, looked towards their own lives for the signs of providence and the mark of their election. The individual’s success in the fulfillment of his/her social responsibilities as predetermined by providence and as the manifestation of divine will, was actualized as personal wealth. Material success was a fragmentary revelation of divine success. Consequently, the Puritans placed immense importance upon labor, which they translated as “worldly duty,” and encoded economic success and the accoutrements of such success with divinity. These material fragments signified the presence of a hidden God, and provided a glimpse into the divine order that remained distinct from human logos but which imbued the universe with meaning.

The Puritans sidestepped the infinite loop of consumer desire and the lack of “transcendence” by imbuing material goods with the metonymic propensity to signify the divine and by encoding the acquirement of wealth as an act of devotion and faith. The anchor to the “real” remained intact by an established logical chain. “For if that God, whose hand the Puritan sees in all the occurrences of life, shows one of His [sic] elect a chance for profit, he must do it with a purpose” (Weber 162). Profit and all that comes with it unveils a predestined divine will that is *the* “sign.” Puritan ideology circumnavigates the trap of consumer desire by acknowledging two synchronous systems of signification—one divine, which is the primary cause of all things and which partially reveals its order to the elect, and the other human, who are wholly subject to divine order. Despite the Puritan propensity for accumulating wealth and desiring capital—and Sacvan Bercovitch correctly identifies the Puritans as proto-capitalists—the “spirit” of Puritan capitalism was located within a divine logos that anchored materiality to faith. Consequently, the impetus of the Protestant work ethic and capitalism is predicated upon the a priori assumption of a divine order/origin. But behind the (otherwise impenetrable) sheen of causality, the hand of God slowly reveals his “elect” and by doing so offers a view of his order—the divine “science” (Sign/signature) behind all causation. The surface (material and economic success) connotes a depth of meaning (divine presence cum “election”) that is mediated by an unwavering faith and devotion.

To return to *Underworld*, reading the materiality of postmodern America against the historical backdrop of Puritan ideology and faith illuminates some fascinating aspects of DeLillo’s critique of material culture. Moreover, *Underworld* is not devoid of faithful and devoted people including Father Paulus, a Jesuit Priest, and Sister Edgar. But in the third part of the novel, “The Cloud of Unknowing,” which is set in the late 1970s, Nick Shay, the shaman of garbage, offers an interesting perspective of the cultural transformation from religious devotion to material faith. His shift from spiritual devotee to postmodern priest amplifies the dynamic where the “real” and

divinity have been placed under erasure and the secret of divinity has been transformed from Puritan calling into the postmodern secret of garbage.

While attending a waste management seminar in Mojave Springs, California, Nick Shay discovers that a group of married swingers also are using the conference center. Shay describes them as forty couples “who were here to trade sexual partners and talk about their feelings” (278). The pairing of waste and sex amplifies how consumer desire and sexual desire mirror one another, but it also introduces a third desire into this nexus—the spiritual—when Nick and one of the swingers, Donna, have a conversation about God as an erotic prelude to sex. During their dialogue Nick discusses the significance of the book by an anonymous British mystic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written during the 14th century and in the time of the Black Death. Shay offers his interpretation of the book:

And I read this book and began to think of God as a secret, a long unlighted tunnel, on and on. This was my wretched attempt to understand our blankness in the face of God’s enormity. This is what I respected about God. He keeps his secret. And I tried to approach God through his secret, his unknowability. (295)

The book fuels Shay’s desire to approach the unknowable secret. Despite the argument from the original author, who asserts that “Yes, let him think what he will; he will always find that a cloud of unknowing is between him and God” (*The Cloud of Unknowing* 144), Shay attempts to find a word—a mantra—that can “edge closer to God’s unknowable self” (296). Ultimately, he decides upon a phrase from St. John of the Cross, which becomes his “naked edge, my edging into darkness, into the secret of God. And I repeated it, repeated it, repeated it. *Todo y nada*” (297). Shay’s phrase is intended as a prayer that will, in the words of St. John of the Cross, “ris[e] beyond all science” (59). But when Donna interprets the phrase “todo y nada” as the best sex, the subject is re-situated within the economics of desire (material/sexual/spiritual).

Shay informs Donna that this phrase was an extension of the “priestly part of my life” (295). When he later disavows the phrase (and the devoted “priestly” life that goes with it) for the material surrogate of the baseball, he demonstrates that his need is not to “rise above science” but rather to reduce his devotion and the divine “secret” to a material form. Shay succumbs to the force of postmodernity where devotion has mutated into a structure that simulates spirit, but is, ultimately, empty: all the signs that attempt to mediate the real and presence the divine lack substance since they are wholly man-made images incapable of eliding their own self-referentiality. Shay’s transformation into a waste guru and empty consumer parallels the larger cultural shift from the spiritual to the material. Desperate for substance and feeling the presence of such spiritual nullity, American culture spends its time searching for transcendence among the garbage including the signs, billboards, and the products that are destined to become tomorrow’s waste. The exchange of spiritual desire for a materiality devoid of spirit is central to DeLillo’s critique of American society, and the “miracle” that occurs at the close of the novel demonstrates how spirituality as well as the real are displaced and erased within consumer capitalism.

III. ANTI-THAUMATOLOGY: FROM MIRACLE TO SPACE AVAILABLE

Seven pages from the close of the novel, a homeless twelve-year old girl named Esmeralda Lopez is raped and murdered in the Bronx by a deranged man. Soon after her murder, stories begin to circulate that Esmeralda's image can be seen in a billboard under a highway. DeLillo's description of the scene foregrounds the lush tones of the billboard. Because the passage is extremely provocative and highlights the interwoven layering of consumerism and religion, it is quoted at length:

They follow the crowd's stoked gaze. They stand and look. The billboard is unevenly lighted, dim in spots, several bulbs blown and unreplaced, but the central elements are clear, a vast cascade of orange juice pouring diagonally from top right into a goblet that is handheld at lower left—the perfectly formed hand of a female caucasian of the middle suburbs. Distant willows and a vaguish lake view set the social locus. But it is the juice that commands the eye, thick and pulpy with a ruddled flush that matches the madder moon. And the first detailed drops splashing at the bottom of the goblet with a scatter of spindrift, each fleck embellished with the finicky rigor of some precisionist painting. What a lavishment of effort and technique, no refinement spared—the equivalent, [Sister] Edgar thinks, of medieval church architecture. And the six-ounce cans of Minute Maid arrayed across the bottom of the board, a hundred identical cans so familiar in design and color and typeface that they have personality, the convivial cuteness of little orange-and-black people. (820)

DeLillo tips his hand in a number of substantial ways in this passage. By locating the scene of the advertisement in the white middle suburbs, the locus mirrors the “economic trappings” of middle-class desire that Nick Shay represents. Read through a Puritan lens, the woman pictured is clearly among the “elect”: in fact, she is placed in a veritable Eden of suburbia. Such religious implications are accentuated further by the equating of the painterly technique of the advertisement with medieval churches. Yet whereas the Cathedral is the “house of God” intended for worship of the divine, the billboard presents the suburban middle class home as the site of worship of material objects and status, replacing faith with the potential to be consumers. Clearly the scene is loaded with irony when this simulated suburban setting is the site of the religious “miracle” of Esmeralda's manifestation:

The headlights [of the train] sweep the billboard and [Edgar] hears a sound from the crowd, a gasp that shoots into sobs and moans and the cry of some unnamable painful elation. A blurted sort of whoop, the holler of unstoppered belief. 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 women clutch their heads, they whoop and sob, a spirit, a godsbreath passing through the crowd. *Esmeralda*. (821)

The certainty proposed in the passage—namely, that the image “belongs to the murdered girl” and the “spirit, a godsbreath” that sweeps through the crowd—is

undercut by an ambiguity, the mystery of the moment, that is presented through the subject positioning of Sister Edgar: “Sister is in body shock. She has seen it but so fleetingly, too fast to absorb—she wants the girl to reappear” (821). The fleeting image lacks the pervasive iconic stature of the static billboard, and Sister Edgar’s desire, momentarily met, returns in a barrage of questions that reduce the spiritual appearance to the language of the billboard’s representation and readability: Did you see her? Did it look like her? As Baudrillard remarks, “All content is neutralized by a continual procedure of directed interrogation, of verdicts and ultimatums to decode” (115). To quell her uncertainty, Sister Edgar waits for the next train when the image again appears. She then waits for the next three trains, where the image appears again and again and again.

Like Shay’s repetition of “todo y nada” intended to “edge in” to God, all those in the crowd are transfixed by the billboard and “replay” its “image” as a way of fixing a “divine” presence. Yet the urge to repeat the image reduces the miracle to the iconic language of the media, thereby negating its divine primacy. The novel reinforces this process when the image becomes “super-real,” a film clip, shot by helicopter news crew and television trucks, that is repeated over and over on the news (823-824). As Baudrillard argues in the chapter “The Divine Irreference of Images” from *Simulations*, “To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn’t. One implies a presence, the other an absence” (5). The desire to replicate and redo the “divine” moment suggests the primal unanswerability of the question, a fundamental doubt that places certainty into a state of suspended ambiguity. The replication of the experience and the image gestures to an originary emptiness where the divine that is supposedly presented is, in fact, erased by the very evidence that purports to reveal it. As Baudrillard asks,

But what if God himself [sic] can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest to his existence. Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum —not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. (10-11)

One of the nuns accompanying Sister Edgar remarks upon this “uninterrupted circuit” in regards to the billboard itself: “It’s just the undersheet... A technical flaw that causes the image underneath, the image from the papered-over ad to show through the current ad” (822). The purported miracle is in fact the palimpsest of simulated goods that has become the shared character and language of culture as a whole: “all these [products] were on the billboards... systematically linked in some self-referring relationship that had a kind of neurotic tightness, an inescapability” (183). The network is wholly self-contained and inescapable and, therefore, offers no possibility for anything that resides outside of its closed logic: the divine, the real, the mysterious, within such limitations, are erased.

Nevertheless, the crowd, desperate for some confirmation of the divine, mistakenly perceives the system that imbues the image with meaning —consumerism and capitalism— as the divine image itself: “Women holding babies up to the sign, to the flowing juice, let it bathe them in baptismal balsam and oil” (821). The desire is

clearly misdirected. But even as Henry David Thoreau warned nineteenth-century American society of the implicit dangers of superficial cultural consciousness, the propensity to remain on the surface has remained an American characteristic. Thoreau observes,

I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that what *is* which *appears* to be [italics in original]. (177)

Clearly the surface in *Underworld* has taken over entirely, and even when the “depths” are plumbed, all that remains are multiple layers of surface like the papered over billboard advertisements. In fact, there is no depth outside of the exchange of surface goods. The novel poignantly demonstrates the lack of depth when two nights after the sighting,

the sign is blank. What a hole it makes in space. People come and don’t know what to say or think, where to look or what to believe. The sign is a white sheet with two lonely words, *Space Available*, followed by a phone number in tasteful type. (824)

The economics of the image is complete when its foundation, the layers of selling the space and products, is unveiled. When confronted with the emptiness of the space—an echo of the absence of God from *The Cloud of Unknowing* as well as Puritan rhetoric—the people are confused, and their belief is shaken because the familiar system of commodified exchange has been usurped by a primal, unreadable sign.

“The billboards,” the novel insists, “were generating reality” (183). Once the sign is “erased,” the “real” is erased as well, which leaves in its place an abyss of perennial doubt:

And what do you remember, finally, when everyone 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? (824)

The passage offers an either/or: either the experience was “untrue,” a sham, and a projection of hopeless desire; or it was a holy, divine sign. The passage certainly does not discount the latter, and DeLillo himself remarks that there is always “a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just behind our vision” (DeCurtis 63). Nevertheless, because of the “signs” and markers that delineate postmodern culture, the people of *Underworld* are entirely removed from the possibility of transcendence and mystery.

The simultaneous desire for and displacement of the divine (which causes its erasure) marks the departure of contemporary America from Puritanism. Moreover, *Underworld* posits that most Americans are incapable of remaining within the “holy,”

the “mysterious.” Klara Sax, a character in *Underworld*, accurately describes this condition by remarking that much of the America experience has been relegated “to the status of shit. You can’t name it. It’s too big or evil or outside your experience. It’s also shit because it’s garbage, it’s waste material” (77). The critique of the novel is leveled against a culture that reduces divinity to a human logos of signs and products, which, materialize as the constant proliferation of garbage—cardboard surrogates of divinity that are a pretense of belief and the assertion of doubt.

The crisis of faith is not restricted to only the masses in *Underworld*. The “pretense” of faith has penetrated into religious institutions as well. As Sister Hermann Marie, a nun in *White Noise*, explains, faith, even among the nuns, is simulated, and instead of serving as an act of worship, that pretense of faith has a prescribed social function.

Our pretense is a dedication. Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that *someone* believe. Wild-eyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are left to believe. Fools, children. Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure that they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely. Hell is when no one believes. There must always be believers. Fools, idiots, those who hear voices, those who speak in tongues. We are your lunatics. We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible. You are sure that you are right but you don’t want everyone to think as you do. There is no truth without fools. We are your fools, your madwomen, rising at dawn to pray, light candles, asking statues for good health, long life. (319)

Without the simulation of faith, value will entirely evaporate and hell will become real. The hell alluded to in *White Noise* is manifested in *Underworld* not as the disappearance of faith, but a faith absorbed by materiality that results in a desert of garbage, loneliness, isolation, and emptiness. As Donna, the swinger in *Underworld*, emphasizes, “There’s too much loneliness in America[.] Too many secrets” (298).

In this light, Jean Baudrillard’s assessment in *America* that American culture is without hope—in his words, it is “no desire: the desert” (123)—coincides with DeLillo’s. Baudrillard’s equating American culture with the mirages and the seemingly limitless horizons of the desert is accurate, yet his claim that there is no desire clearly erroneous. In fact, as DeLillo demonstrates, in America there is only desire—albeit misdirected—but a real yearning for substance and the grasping for “ordinary life behind the thing.” *Underworld* confirms the character of the desert while refuting the absence of desire in the very closing of the novel with its emphasis upon one word that permeates American consciousness:

A word appears in the lunar milk of the data stream. You see it on your monitor... A single seraphic word. You can examine the word with a click, tracing its origins, development, earliest known use, its passage between languages, and you can summon the word in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Arabic, in a thousand languages and dialects living and dead, and locate literary citations, and follow the word through the tunneled underworld of its ancestral roots. (826)

Like consumer desire, the chain of “meanings” of the word can be traced without arriving at its “essence,” a mystery. The “signs” are merely a trail of substitutes. Nevertheless, the word “spreads a longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bournes and orchards to the solitary hills” (827). The unrealized and longed for word is “peace.” Given the logic of *Underworld*, peace, like the spirit of the baseball, was lost somewhere in the inheritance and recycling of goods.

DeLillo’s America is a land without peace not merely because desire in a capitalist culture cannot be quenched, but because that desire is misdirected towards substitutes incapable of yielding substance. The desire for the simulacrum of the “good life,” so carefully rendered in the Minute Maid billboard, erases the possibility of “peace” and eradicates the spiritual connoted by the Latin word for peace, “pax.” The wasteland of simulacrum places the “real” out of reach and imposes an impenetrable boundary between the human and the divine. As John McClure notes, DeLillo’s novels depict “the emptiness of a world without God” (113). Yet it is an empty world because it is built upon simulacrum of divinity and not because God is dead as in Nietzsche’s famous proclamation. The emptiness is in fact man-made and the inescapable purgatory of self-referentiality and surface is self-imposed. In his depiction of the early American Puritans, Max Weber referred to the Pilgrims as “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (182). This nullity, though, would acquire its greatest depth in DeLillo’s postmodern America where a prosperous material culture would no longer be the calling of the elect but the mark of a hell-on-earth, an underworld built upon the garbage of despiritualized Puritan capitalism.

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