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Media History in DeLillo's *Underworld*

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Introduction

Underworld, Don DeLillo's Great American Novel, captures the unique American experience in the second half of the twentieth century. Besides many other phenomena, DeLillo is interested in the impact that various social and cultural changes had on the definition of identity over the course of the century. As the first aim of this paper was to delve into the issue of American national identity, which is an immensely complex topic on its own, it was necessary to isolate one of the socio-cultural forces and set it up as a primary focal point through which the subject would be approached. The one that features prominently in the novel and assists the author in depicting specific preoccupations of a certain decade is the media. Ergo, tracking the development of media and defining their transformative effect on society became a crucial part of the paper's framework. However, not far into the analysis of the interdependent relationship between identity and media, it became clear that there is a third factor involved – history – whose inclusion turned out to be mandatory for a comprehensive discussion on the subject. Therefore, national identity, history and media make up three focal points of the discussion. Their mutual dependency is apparent, but the exact relations among them, discussed in the paper, vary depending on the time period in question. These three notions are common preoccupation in many of DeLillo's works. In relation to the issue of media and history, it is enough to mention his essay “The Power of History” in which fiction is posited as means of reliving history, or his novel *White Noise*, where he more explicitly explores the fragmentation of modern society as a result of media saturation. When it comes to the issue of nation, DeLillo is preoccupied with the assassination of the JFK as a formative trauma of the American nation, which is not only mentioned in *Underworld*, but also at the centre of his another novel, *Libra*. Moreover, in order to present a comprehensive overview of the subject in question, the structure of the

paper follows the structure of the novel, which is why the headings match the chapter titles and are arranged in the correct chronological order. Organizing the paper thematically and separating the three main components from each other would not paint the topic in all its complexity and intricacy.

What a national identity as referred to in this paper implies, unless specified otherwise, is a distinct cultural construct which in the fifties upheld the illusion of collectivity and stability. This was made possible by appealing to a sense of nationalism, marked in this time of crisis and paranoia by the opposition to the Other. Paranoia is another notion whose relevance becomes evident, as it is revealed to be one of the defining elements of identity. By following media history in *Underworld*, it becomes evident how identity, both on the individual and national level, is formed by culture and, ultimately, the media. In other words, DeLillo shows us how the States entered the era of postmodernity and how media forms “must be reckoned with as social forces.” (Duvall 2) These social forces and their influence on the definition of identity were, of course, dependent on the current political and cultural preoccupations of the power structures. This is a general fact in which DeLillo takes a special interest in many of his works, not only *Underworld*. However, it is important to note that the problems discussed apply to and affect the dominant notion of national identity. Any national community is by its definition always fractured in many different ways, although the dominant ideological narratives, or should we call them national myths, tend to cover up these internal contradictions and struggles. The formative function of capitalism in the case of the United States cannot be disregarded, in any period of its history. From the sixties onwards the focus was shifting from the Cold War and eventually capitalism emerged as the new defining element of society. Consequently, as reflected on the content, media also shifted focus and contributed to dissolution of the previous version of national identity. The result

was a fragmentation of society and loss of a single unifying model identity, instead of which now a seemingly free choice of numerous identities and roles was offered, all with the ultimate goal of creating a perfect consumer. History – specifically, the period of the fifties – at that point emerged as a field of conflict. It became a source of nostalgia for the characters whose identity was still defined by the past, but from which they were being forcefully removed. The very media that helped in reinforcing the sense of the self in the fifties were now bringing it down, advancing instead a new model supported by the logic of capital.

The period was therefore revealed as a reference point for the whole novel, having a formative influence on the characters who could not adapt to a new progressive present. The whole novel is approached in relation to that decade and that specific identity set up in the Prologue, in order to reveal the inherently fragile nature of national identity. National identity is not only a product of current political and cultural circumstances, whose means of propagation include the media, but also a dynamic notion behind which usually stands the force that at the time has the most power, be it the Cold War or capitalism as such (because, it must not be forgotten, the Cold war and the issue of capital were intricately connected). The Epilogue, though, offers new technology and cyberspace as possible means of closure which enable the final consolidation of all possible realities, including the past. However, this came at the cost of the dissolution of the authentic individual and a new form of paranoia: that understanding of the world can only be possible through passive observance and simulacra.

Prologue: The Triumph of Death (October 3, 1951)

The main event around which the prologue revolves is a famous baseball game between the Giants and Dodgers that took place on October 3 in 1951 at the Polo Grounds in New York City. American society was at the time marked by global political tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as the Cold War paranoia. While the author touches upon this matter, he also, using the motif of the crowd at the stadium, explores how the crisis affects a sense of national collectivity that is heavily implied, although it is debatable whether the unity indeed is genuine or it serves only as a screen for the shaken up society. It is significant, however, that at the beginning the crowd is represented as a unified whole, a mass of people who not only act and respond in the same way, but also accumulate and possess a certain kind of power. (19) However, as J. Edgar Hoover, the Director of the FBI who was present at the game, receives the news about the Soviet testing of the nuclear bomb, “the crowd begin to lose its coherence” and everything is suddenly “changing shape, becoming something else.” (33) As the collectivity seems to bend under the pressure and dissolve, Hoover's paranoia is augmented by the reproduction of Bruegel's grotesque and horrifying *Triumph of Death* in *Life* magazine which simply flew down from the stands. At this moment the reader for the first time becomes aware of the Cold War crisis that dominated the period and whose impact will be felt throughout the novel. The prologue also, as further discussion shall clarify, functions as a reference point for the whole novel, while the fifties are at the same time represented as a formative epoch for the characters.

The narrator's portrayal of people outside the stadium, who are listening to the broadcast and are joined in euphoria – “still assembled in some recognizable manner, the kindred unite at the radio” – posits radio as a counterweight to the crisis and as one of the binding elements of society. (36) It was a matter of great importance to have access to the

radio broadcast, especially when it came to baseball which, as part of the American identity, evoked strong feelings of a national pride and unity. This is the reason why the “game is everywhere,” in every bar in town, (27) and why radios were even put in cell blocks in the city jail. (21) With the crucial role of the radio, the sport spectacle united people and created the atmosphere of collective euphoria despite deep social disturbances and political crisis: “[The event] makes people want to be in the streets, joined with others, telling others what has happened, those few who haven't heard – comparing faces and states of mind.” (47) As opposed to television which alienated people from one another and confined them in their living rooms, radio had the opposite effect. It was unable to transmit full experience of the event because it lacked the visual component, so people had to get together to relive it and let it sink in, while television presented them with a more engaging and complete experience. In other words, radio, by means of baseball, took part in shaping and strengthening the national identity: it created a sense of unity, if only a fragile and an apparent one. Radio stands in a certain opposition to other media by being the only one explicitly upholding the illusion of national unity and the dominant model of a constructed identity. In future, many characters would recollect their personal experience of the game and cherish it as part of their past in an attempt to restore a feeling of stable identity in their conflicted present.

The only mentions of print media include *Life* magazine with the reproduction of Bruegel's *Triumph of Death*, and ads from various magazines and newspapers. These ads dominated by company names, “venerated emblems of burgeoning economy, easier to identify than the names of battlefields or dead presidents”, (39) point out to an advertising role. More important for the discussion, though, is the opposition between history, represented as something obsolete and easily forgotten, and present, characterized by a prosperous economy. By encouraging such opposition, media would in subsequent decades

cause conflict within characters, as their attempts to reaffirm the illusion of a stable national identity by restoring the past – specifically, the era of the fifties – would be blocked by media and their emphasis on consumerism and instant present. Bruegel in *Life* magazine evokes feelings of terror and chaos in relation to current political climate and therefore reveals that the self, as well as the present, is underneath all euphoria fundamentally paranoid and fragile. Television still does not seem to influence the American identity that much in 1951, although the example of the cult of celebrities indicates its future popularity. A comedian, Jackie Gleason, is at the same time watching the game from the box at the stadium and being watched by fans that surround him: “They watch Gleason, they look at Sinatra for his reaction to Gleason, they watch the game, they listen to Jackie do running lines from his TV show...” (23) Models of behavior seen on the screen came to be regarded as desirable, while actors in the industry became a spectacle in themselves, as much as their shows were. This reveals the growing popularity of TV and movie industry, which helped in propagating new model identities as an alternative to the one already established under the influence of the Cold War.

The aim of this discussion is to make clear media's formative influence and involvement in everyday affairs, as well as their specific ways of communicating information that in result could have both individual and collective consequences, such as a change in the way of perceiving oneself, others, past and present. It is important to note that the Cold War crisis had a major role in shaping the national identity that was at the time heavily, if not in most part, characterized by the opposition to the USSR – the Other. Although war was persistently looming, collective identity was strongly defined and therefore perceived as stable. Precisely because of the crisis based on national opposition, people had a strong sense of national identity and it was easier for them to feel united in a shared experience. A sense of

national unity, so needed in the midst of Cold War crisis, was reinforced by radio, the medium which worked to support the established model of national identity, as seen in the example of the 1951 baseball game. The memory of the event would eventually endure the test of time and later on be regarded as a valuable personal memory. More than that, in future the characters would long for a sense of the firm national identity established here as a reaction to and consequence of the crisis. Media would, on the other hand, by adapting to current trends and being influenced by the workings of capital, reinforce the conflict by providing alternative models of both individual and national identity.

Benedict Anderson argued that as early as in the 18th century the novel and newspaper were the “two forms of imagining which provided the technical means” for representing the nation. (Anderson 25) The turning point was a new concept of homogeneous, empty time in which simultaneity is a temporal coincidence. (Anderson 24) It enabled for print languages to “lay the bases for national consciousness”, that is, to invent nationalism. This was accomplished by creating “unified fields of exchange and communication” which connected one to their fellow readers. (Anderson 44) An act as simple as reading the newspaper could make each reader aware that the activity they were engaged in was simultaneously being preformed by numerous other people “of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.” (Anderson 35) The result was a conception of the imagined community, the notion of which was maintained by print media. This means that national identity, in itself an ideological construct based on the imagined community, is prone to the influence of media. Even more so, media are a very part of the culture that takes part in forming the national identity. As the analysis has indicated, it seems that in the fifties the print media have in great part lost the role attributed to them by Anderson. Print media did continue to support the paradigm of We vs. the Other, but at the

same time, by invoking paranoia, they caused disintegration of the established model of national identity. Even more so, they advocated for a breakup with history, as well as the shift towards a more economy-oriented present. Radio took over the role of being a generator of the sense of national identity. The prologue thus registers a specific shift in time, a turning point in the complex relationship between history, media, and national identity. The fifties in this case function as a certain intermediate period in which power relations between the three previously mentioned factors are being realigned. As the following discussion will show, the fifties had formative influence on the characters in a sense of being the last decade in which a single model of national identity, characterized by a strong sense of unity, stability and national consciousness, was still actively propagated by the media.

Part 6: Arrangement in Gray and Black (Fall 1951 – Summer 1952)

The plot of “Arrangement in Gray and Black”, a chapter which chronologically immediately follows the famous baseball game in October 1951, is set in the Bronx. Albert Bronzini, one of the key protagonists, meets with Father Paulus and discusses with him the *Times* front page with juxtaposed and symmetrical headlines about the Giants capturing the pennant and the USSR exploding an atomic bomb: “[Albert] didn't understand why the *Times* would take a ball game off the sports page and juxtapose it with news of such ominous consequence.” (668) What is even more evident in this chapter – in the aftermath of sport euphoria, as feelings of triumph which clouded the looming danger of the bomb the previous day, have settled down a bit – is that American national identity is under the considerable influence of the Cold War. The *Times* cover is a curious example of the way in which print media can encourage feelings of paranoia, but at the same time counteract the shock and panic by providing entertainment. By presenting the Other as a threatening and militant force, and sport of national importance by its side, print media in fact reinforce a sense of national identity – and not just any national identity, but the one that was specifically marked by the polarizing political climate of the time. The nation at the same time has the opposition against which it can establish its identity, while sense of collectivity is strengthened by appealing to national pride via baseball. In the following decades the print media would, in line with cultural changes, abandon the logic of propagating a sole, unified, almost totalitarian model of national identity. It would become a thing of the past.

Radio in general has a prominent role within the Italian community of the Bronx, as Italian radio or radio tuned to the Italian stations are mentioned a few times. The characters are aware of their national origin and, while playing cards with his friends, Albert notices their accents and says that “English was the sound of the present and Italian took him

backwards, the merest intonation, a language marked inexhaustibly by the past.” (768) These references prove that radio in these cases served as an ethnically marked binding element and a form of identification that was associated with nostalgia for the collective past. Representing an already finished process of dissolving a sense of national identity, confining it to history and making it accessible only through the radio, it is an example in a nutshell of the same process which has already been under way in a broader sense. A politically charged and very dominant identity constructed as a product of a Cold War climate, actively upheld on all levels including the media, was now becoming obsolete. It was gradually being replaced by a variety (we could even say a more democratic version) of model identities, oriented towards consumerism and the present. At the same time, popularity of television and movie industry was experiencing rapid growth. They, more than anything else, provided alternative identities modeled on artificial and embellished public image of a movie star. They created what would appeal to consumers enough to set up a reference point upon which one could model their behavior, desires, and through which one could, ultimately, escape the reality.

It can be seen, therefore, that in the early fifties the Cold War was still a defining element of national identity although its dominance over the public imagination had started to wane, which was both perpetuated by the media and reflected on media content occupying most of the public space. Within much broader cultural and political mechanisms, media influenced the American identity by continuing to reinforce opposition to the Other. Print media strengthened a sense of collectivity by juxtaposing the American nation and the threatening Other, and appealing to a sense of national pride. Radio at the same time has already started to be associated with the past, that is, it was becoming a token of obsolete national consciousness that was removed from the present to make room for new cultural

constructs of identity in the making. TV and movie industry were part of the same process that was pushing forward this new trend. They provided an alternative to the old national identity marked by the crisis. Driven by profit, these industries produced celebrities who came to be regarded as someone to admire and model ourselves upon. In other words, they represented an alternative to the reality burdened by crisis and politics. What is, therefore, already noticeable in this chapter is the way in which media enforced conflict within the self, in the context of a national identity, by polarizing it. By suddenly providing alternatives to an already (if only seemingly) stable system which no longer appeals to power structures, conflict within the self, be it an individual or a nation, becomes a necessary consequence.

Part 5: Better Things For Better Living Through Chemistry (Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s)

The next chapter, which covers the period from late 1952 to late 1969, points out that the American reality was, even more evidently than before, disturbed by the Cold War crisis. The cause was a slow disintegration and a final collapse of the dominant model of national identity, which was being replaced by a variety of new ideological constructs in the making, that is, identities no longer based so predominantly on national consciousness. Once such supreme ideological model started to crumble, the process in which media also played their part, the illusion of a stable nation and collectivity could not longer be maintained. An example which does not deny a lingering presence of the Cold War in the American present, but which exposes it as something that has become absurd and hollow, involves a stand-up comedian, Lenny Bruce. His show in October 1962 is held on the day the president addressed the nation about the Soviets putting missiles on Cuba. Lenny parodied the situation by inventing an example of a woman in Centralia who comes home tired and turns on the TV. She hears the President of the US mentioning “abyss of destruction” and thinks this is a movie title: “Sure, it's one of those hard-boiled cynical crime dramas in moody black and white.” (508) The woman is trying hard to concentrate on the speech but cannot grasp either its point or the graveness of situation, so instead she calls her friend who “reviews movies for the cafeteria workers' newsletter” and asks her: “Who was in that movie the President's talking about on TV?” (508) The example clearly suggests that the Cold War has become incomprehensible and that people have become more preoccupied by the phenomenon of TV and movie industry, that is, entertainment. Lenny is there to help the audience make the transition to global, which means that a specific portion of the society has lost interest in the political tension with the Soviets, so to say, and has instead shifted their interest inward, that

is, towards their nation and its own problems. For the Beatniks it was America's degeneration that caused the bomb and crisis: "The whole beat landscape was bomb-shadowed. It always had been. The beats didn't need a missile crisis to make them think about the bomb. The bomb was their handiest reference to the moral squalor of America, the guilty place of smokestacks and robot corporations, Time-magazine and J. Edgar Hoovered." (545) At least one part of the society, therefore, was no longer disillusioned about the innocence of the nation, and no longer believed in a myth which helped in maintaining the constructed imagined community. This autocritique, something new in the context of the novel, represents a departure from the established model of national identity according to which the impeccability of the self was indisputable.

Another episode that testifies to the changing cultural landscape and uneasy social climate of the United States at the time is related to the Black and White Ball held in 1966 at the Plaza Hotel in New York, which J. Edgar Hoover and his partner Clyde attended. At the same time, outside the hotel, there were protests against America's military intervention in Vietnam. Clyde said that the protesters were mostly kids who waved flowers at the police, alluding to the hippie movement, and made the following remark: "Vietnam is the war, the reality. This is the movie, where the scripts are written and the actors perform. American kids don't want what we've got. They want movies, music." (256) It is this same new generation, more interested in movies, who not only resists the established model of national identity, but also questions and critiques it. Media's involvement in this consisted of providing the audience with the new content and, in turn, another reality free of the Cold War. This example summarizes previous two arguments: a demystification of the dominant model of national identity after a loss of the support system (part of which were the media), that resulted in either a more critical stance towards the nation, or a complete dismissal of matters of politics

and turn towards entertainment. A third consequence, illustrated by incidents such as the Cuban missile crisis or Sputnik satellite, was increased social tension and paranoia as the national identity was at last exposed as not stable.

Part 4: Cocksucker Blues (Summer 1974)

Because of a lack of immediate media presence in chapters “Cocksucker Blues”, set in summer 1974, and “The Cloud of Unknowing”, set in spring 1978, only a brief analysis of these chapters will focus more on the issue of identity and the changing relationship towards the past. The era of the fifties with the Cold War as its most defining element remained deeply embedded in the national subconsciousness and had a potential to resurface in the form of nostalgia for the past, mostly by means of the radio. Current priorities (such as America positioning itself as the leader of a globalized market and culture) were too numerous, dispersed and fragmented to unite the nation as successfully as the Cold War had. Media were also, under the influence of capital which had become the main driving force in society, providing new alternative identities and pushing society forward. In such circumstances, the characters who evaluate their present through the prism of the Cold War-affected past find themselves in conflict with the present and the new concept(s) of the national identity.

At the very beginning of the chapter, Klara reflects on the current state of art: “Art in which the moment is heroic, American art, the do-it-now, the fuck-the-past – she could not follow that. She could look at it and respect it, envy it, even, in a way, but not, herself, place hand to object and make some furious now, some brilliant jack-off gesture that asserts an independence.” (377) Klara, failing to adapt to new political and cultural reality, feels detached from the reformed version of the imagined community. As Damjana Mraović-O'Hare claims, certain characters in *Underworld* “reject their present because they recognize in it a source of their existential uneasiness caused by the changed historical conditions,” and long for the past, “a more structured world that is, paradoxically, marked by a threat of looming apocalypse.” (Mraović-O'Hare 214) What she means by the looming apocalypse is,

of course, the Cold War. Klara is disoriented in the new reality which in most part, excluding countercultural movements, still venerates America but without opposing it to the Other, and longs for the past that felt more stable precisely because it had the opposition against which it could define itself.

Miles, Klara's friend, was working on a documentary “about a woman who contracted the illnesses and diseases of celebrities,” and whose condition, which he terms “the modern stigmata,” was studied by the doctors sponsored by the tabloids. (378) Celebrities were culture's vehicle for providing people with alternative identities, in the same way in which previously a single nationally charged ideological construct based on the opposition to the Other was promoted by the media. Print media perpetuated sensationalism and, under the influence of TV, mastered the art of spectacle. According to Guy Debord, the spectacle can falsely be seen as a device of unification. He claims that the spectacle presents itself as a part of society and as such is “the focal point of all vision and all consciousness.” Nevertheless, the spectacle is in fact “the domain of delusion and false consciousness” that achieves nothing but universal separation. (Debord 7) The more people identify with the image presented by the media, says Debord, the less they understand their own lives and consequently “the individual's gestures are no longer their own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him.” (Debord 16) This unavoidably left a mark on the national identity: the illusion of a stable and unified community shattered and remained perceived as such by individuals like Klara, who could not get engaged in a new identity reconstruction by the media, this time largely based on a spectacle.

The screening event of *Unterwelt*, a fictitious 1930s film by the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, represents a platform for exploring the American psyche in the context of the post-Cold War trauma. As Catherine Morley claims, DeLillo used the example to explore the

possibility that Americans have not, in fact, been “unaltered by Communism and the Cold War” – or its demise. (Morley 27) One of the points that this paper is intended on putting forward is precisely the claim that the Cold War did not only alter the USA, but also functioned as key element in constructing the illusion of a stable and firm national identity. The link between mass entertainment (the Rockettes) and masses of troops (the military troops in the movie), according to Philip Nel, suggests that both have a similar effect of repression. (Nel 4) Klara, aware of the connection, immediately thought of the Cold War and said: “This is a film about Us and Them, isn't it? They can say who they are, you have to lie. ... They establish the limits of your existence. And the camp elements of the program [...] now tended to resemble sneak attack on the dominant culture.” (444) This movie, then, was invented by DeLillo in order to reveal paranoia within the American culture by appropriating the language of the Other. (Parrish 699) Moreover, it has revealed how dependable the definition of the self was on the Other.

Just as the Cold War crisis united people and strengthened, with the help of media, a sense of the self, so a collective mourning after JFK's death united the nation. Media – in this case television - enabled an episode from the past to become alive and at the same time devised means for devoiding it of the content. At the screening of *Zapruder*, a famous footage of the president J. F. Kennedy getting assassinated in 1963, the film ran in different ways on many TV screens. (495) By mechanically reproducing the tape countless times, as DeLillo wrote in his article, its reality “gets exhausted.” The result of this drive the culture has to imitate itself endlessly is in fact the disremembrance of the past, devised by the culture specifically for that purpose. (“The Power of History”) The example of *Zapruder* touches upon the role of media in one's struggle to restore the past and stable identity, but almost instantly breaks up the illusion of ever accomplishing that. As soon as numerous TV screens

started replaying the footage and turning it into an art, it became separated from the reality. In this way, people remained defined by history, but stayed outside of it. This condition, in a way reinforced by the media, is in fact the main source of conflict for most of the characters in *Underworld*.

Part 3: The Cloud of Unknowing (Spring 1978)

Nick and his friend, Sims, speak of themselves as limited “forties and fifties people” who “don't know much of anything”, who listened to the radio and know only the Lone Ranger and Tonto, “from out of the past.” (288) By making such statement, Nick reveals himself feeling estranged from the current reality. Nostalgia for the Cold War period and especially the fifties, so evident in the novel, is a type of longing, according to Mraović-O'Hare, “for a time that cannot be restored in the present.” (Mraović-O'Hare 214) Paradoxical issue of why would anyone want to restore such a traumatic past has already been explained in relation to the national identity. As Linda Hutcheon claims, nostalgia in general represents a desire to restore “a partial, idealized history [that] merges with a dissatisfaction with the present.” (Mraović-O'Hare 214) The main reason the so-called fifties people have to be dissatisfied with the present is the end of the Cold War threat and a loss of the sense of stable identity. Fifties come to represent a desired history once the period can be looked back at from a temporal distance; when the threat is no longer present.

Marvin is obsessed with tracking down the ball from the 1951 game. However, by tracking down its history, Marvin is in fact attempting to restore the past. As he says, once the threat created by the two great powers begins to fade, “you're the lost man of history.” (182) As Mraović-O'Hare explains, to him “the dominant sense of the end of the world”, a possibility that death could happen any moment, marks not only the Cold War era, but also “historicizes its own existence.” (Mraović-O'Hare 219) As he was visiting San Francisco, he discovered “near the old hippie district” a store specialized in used magazines. (318) Magazines still had labels with the “names and addresses of real people out there in magazine America.” Marvin believed that people there actually sought “a forgotten human murmur” and wondered if that was perhaps “a pornography of nostalgia”. (320) A store selling used

magazines was selling the past to those who longed for it, and therefore the history itself became a commodity. The store providing consumers with print media that they directly related to a long lost sense of collectivity, a forgotten human murmur in a culture that has shifted its focus towards individualism, seemingly satisfied the consumers' desire to restore the past. However, the print media are in this case clearly subjected to the logic of capital, which was the main force behind the process of reimagining the nation after the Cold War. Thus the desire stays ultimately unfulfilled, nostalgia is further enforced, and a seemingly stable national identity based on the Cold War model remains in the past, out of reach.

Part 2: Elegy For Left Hand Alone (Mid-1980s – Early 1990s)

Having lost the opposition – the Other epitomized by the Soviet Union – the American nation lost its counterbalance. If the sense of national collectivity achieved during the Cold War was to be maintained, a new unifying and supporting force had to be established, and new national myths created. In this post-Cold War process, as it has clearly been seen on the example of sixties and seventies, media represented a platform for generating new model or alternative identities, causing conflict within those individuals who could not find their place in the new circumstances and who rather turned to the past in an attempt to restore the sense of stable national identity and collectivity that was felt during the early phase of the Cold War. Even without the immediate presence of the media in this chapter, subtle hints make it clear that certain characters have continued to feel discomfort in the present and are still longing for the past, whereas media no longer play their part in uniting the nation. In the mid-eighties and early nineties, the overabundance of print media market and deeply diverse range of choice, combined with the rise of new media and more prominent visual stimuli which shortened the attention span of the audience, signified a highly fragmented society. As the characters find themselves in a situation in which it seems that a national identity cannot be strictly designated, individuals like Nick try to restore their past and in the process rely on whatever played the fundamental part in promoting the identity at the time, which is, in most of the cases, the radio. However, such desire to reinstate the lost sense of firm and homogeneous identity remains unfulfilled, as many forces, including the media, push the society forward and, by providing many capital-influenced alternatives, cause a state of conflict and confusion.

Besides Nick, Marvin is another character whose definition of himself is deeply rooted in the fifties and the Cold War era – to such an extent that he has developed a

mushroom-shaped tumor, a symbol of a nuclear bomb. (192) When Brian drove to see Marvin and talk to him about the famous 1951 ball and “surrender himself to longing”, Marvin started discussing politics and the Cold War. He described the Cold War as honest and dependable; in his opinion, “when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that's when your worst nightmares begin” because you will no longer be the main point of reference – other forces “will come rushing in, demanding and challenging.” (170) He was probably referring to various processes of globalization, as well as cultural and political reorganization that naturally follow after one era comes to an end. In other words, people like Marvin are the lost men of history who, in the aftermath of the Cold War crisis, do not see the purpose in their present. The demise of the threat ultimately meant the demise of stability, and the undermining of the national identity as it was. A new concept of the national identity that was in the making after the end of the Cold War crisis was, by the so-called fifties people, perceived as too unstable, unclear, undefined and fragmented. Billboards, an alternative medium format intended for advertising, caught Brian's attention as he was driving back home. He realized that all the things around him were on the billboards, “systematically linked in some self-referring relationship that had a kind of neurotic tightness, an incapability, as if the billboards were generating reality.” (183) Billboards are the perfect example of what Caton means by “forms of mass-marketing [that] construct how we experience the world.” (Caton 196) Instead of solidifying experience and a sense of identity, they divert attention in so many different directions that a coherent present and easily definable experience of reality remain unachieved. In this way, billboards generate a pseudo-reality in the same way in which media provide model identities. As an alternative to media which blur identity, Marvin sees technology as a possible vehicle for restoring the past. Since he had been able to track down the baseball by analyzing old photos, he believes that technology “redeems the dazed

and rambling past – it makes reality come true.” (177) The reality Marvin refers to is in fact history. The characters in *Underworld* are alienated from the reality which they feel is falsified with the help of media, but in which technology enables a dive into the past. As a consequence, they either allow themselves brief moments of nostalgia, like Brian, or, like Marvin, desperately seek to restore the past. Albert's nostalgia, similarly to Brian's, is spurred by a form of a medium, in this case a phonograph. He admired music played on his portable phonograph because it was a result of its “laboriously linked actions,” which “seemed to place him in some lost mechanical age.” (228) As opposed to Marvin, who found in technology a vehicle for reviving the past, Albert simply indulged himself in nostalgia. As he said, Albert did not mourn for particular things, such as the terror of the Cold War, but for the time itself, a time in which everything made more sense to him. A time in which, as Sister Edgar put it, everything was simpler: “Clothing was layered, life was not.” (238) What such present ultimately means is, according to Peter Knight, that authentic emotions, experience, or reality can no longer be directly accessed because “whatever we experience comes to us mediated through our endless consumption of electronic entertainment.” (Knight 30) In other words, media, among other forces, generate a pseudo-reality in which the sense of stability and collectivity is lost.

The most influential medium in terms of changing the perception of reality was television. Everything could find its place in the media, be advertised and sold, which signals the media being subjected to the workings of capital: Marvin was watching a hip replacement channel and said that there is “a channel for every body part.” (191) The trend of television reality having precedence over the nature and reality itself continued, as Nick's mother, Rosemary, said she had more animals on television than she could handle so she could not see the point of living breathing creatures. (196) When her son wanted to take her to the zoo,

she told him that these were animals who lived in the Bronx, while on television she could see animals in the rain forest or the desert, “so which is real and which is fake.” (207) Television provided the audience with a representation which came to be considered more truthful to life. A sense of national identity, in the way in which existed the fifties, was now definitely lost. Instead of a unified nation with a strong sense of the self, what was generated was, to use Guy Debord's term, a lonely crowd. He claims that the reigning economic system, capitalism, is responsible for the general sense of isolation. The technologies of capitalism contribute to the isolation because they themselves are based on it: “From automobiles to television, the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender lonely crowds.” (Debord 15) In this way media become nothing else but a vehicle in service of the capital, intended to simulate a desirable reality, as well as to create lonely crowds which are more passive and prone to manipulation – that is, better consumers. In such simulated or rather falsified reality, it becomes impossible to pinpoint the essence of the national identity. The present is too unstable for a clear definition of what should be the core elements of the national identity, in the way in which they were clearly defined in the fifties.

The infamous home video of the Texas Highway Killer, in which a little girl accidentally recorded his first murder, was commercially exploited by the media, primarily television, which were showing the footage “because this is why they're out there, to provide our entertainment.” (610) Timothy Parrish points out that the camera recorded the killer's act, but also changed the reality in which he had acted. (Parrish 710) This is the main reason why the tape was truer than life – because it had the ability to influence the reality of the very person responsible for the act. Its power of influence, as Wendy Harding says, comes from the ability to reduce information about the event and thus concentrate the video's power.

(Harding 470) Spectacularization and persistent reproduction resulted in creating a pseudo-reality. As Morley specifies in her article, the medium itself is responsible for fracturing the nature of reality because it “sublimates original thought.” With each re-showing the boundary between the reality is fiction is more and more blurred, and the image is taken further into the realm of hyper-real: “This falsification of reality, this blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction, is at the root of DeLillo's uncertainty regarding the mechanisms of media technology.” (Morley 33) DeLillo himself wrote in his article that it is as if the media reproduction exhausts all the reality. (“Power of History”) However, the media not only repeated the event, intensified the experience, exhausted the reality and replaced it with the hyper-reality, but also reduplicated the violence. Such ability to double something, as Harding puts it, “has become a sign of dominance” – the terror reduplicated is removed from the past and it “operates in an infinitely renewable present.” (Harding 470) To sum up, the media's reproduction of the spectacle was the culture's way of creating a hyper-reality which is superior to the original experience. Continuous playing and replaying of the video on television resulted in separating the event from its historical context, that is the past, and positioning it outside time – in the infinitely renewable present. Media in this context played their part in culture's drive to disremember the past, because what hyper-reproduction ultimately meant was removing history outside the category of time, or rather disbanding the whole category as such. The media, therefore, served as the platform for the nation's drive to abolish the notion of time and history, and for everything to be operating simultaneously and instantly in the present. What this emphasis on the present and falsified reality meant for the notion of national identity was a necessary conflict. Since history was perceived as a defining element of national and personal identity by the characters in *Underworld*, they naturally found themselves in the state of confusion. Aware of the current cultural and political

processes but unable to either reject them completely or conform to them, they entered a sort of a historical limbo – they were defined by history, but removed from it.

Part 1: Long Tall Sally (Spring – Summer 1992)

In terms of a national identity and media influence, “Long Tall Sally” continues to explore issues that were already identified and elaborated in previous chapters. At the center of the narrative is Nick, in his mid-fifties, who goes to the desert to see Klara, now a well-known artist currently working on a big project which involves repainting old bomber airplanes. Nick, who has not seen Klara since their affair a few decades ago, is dreading the visit because he thinks that meeting someone he knew intimately in the fifties would make him realize that he has reached this point of his life being too altered and unknown to himself; that he has reached this point so helpless against his own connivings that the truth has been obscured from him. (72) The anxiety expressed here is a reflection of the discomfort and confusion many of the characters in *Underworld*, such as Marvin, Albert or Klara, feel about their media-saturated reality in which previously instituted myths of national identity, based on the opposition between the United States and the Soviets, disintegrated. As a side-effect of the complexity of globalization, capital forces, and a rising power of new technology and media, a single stable and clearly defined model of national identity was failed to become established. Unable to determine the core fabric of the current self or to locate it in the array of possibilities for that matter, the characters turn to the past in an attempt to restore the sense of stability and collectivity present during the fifties. Nick, in fact, according to Mraović-O'Hare, wishes to “preserve the nostalgic notion” of the past by acquiring the baseball, “a piece of his history.” (Mraović-O'Hare 217) For the same reason he has decided to visit Klara after all these years. What he longs for are “action and the physical masculinity of his teenage years that happen to be a part of the Cold War era despite the horrifying moments that modeled his existence.” (Mraović-O'Hare 218) However, the fact that all the characters who express nostalgia for the past turn specifically to the fifties and the beginning of the Cold

War, implies it was indeed a period which had a formative influence on the national identity, marked above all things by stability and collectivity. These were lost in the subsequent decades when culture with the help of media, under the influence of capital and propelled by marketing forces, provided too many and too undefined alternatives.

In a previous discussion it was established that the media by repetition and simulation support a culture's drive to imitate itself endlessly and to create a hyper-reality. In this chapter, the characters have registered the trend and become aware of the disturbances. When Nick says to Klara that he thought he owed them a visit, she replies: "You feel a loyalty. The past brings out our patriotism, you know? We want to feel an allegiance. It's the one undivided allegiance, to all those people and things." Besides this remark which suggests a straight connection between the past (the fifties) and feelings of patriotism, loyalty and allegiance – all related to a sense of a strong national identity and collectivity – Klara admits that everything she has done since those years and everything around her is vaguely fictitious. She shakes off the notion that the reason is her fame and says that life simply took "an unreal turn at some point" and is now "just unreal." (73) Klara has already in the previous chapters expressed discomfort about the present and nostalgia for the past, but has never until now so explicitly addressed the issue. Even more so, she engaged her art in the conflict between the self and the present, and used it as a tool for satisfying the desire to restore the past. In an interview about her project, after describing the difference between the World War planes which actually engaged in the combat and the Cold War planes which carried bombs but never dropped them, she said: "The one difference is we haven't actually fought a war this time. We have a number of postwar conditions without a war having been fought. And second we are not going to let these great machines expire in a field or get sold as scrap." (69) Klara realized that the trauma has accumulated over time but remained sort of unrealized, which is

one of the reasons why these characters have a perpetuating desire to go back to the past. On the other hand, she looks back at the period with admiration and wants to preserve what is physically left of it – the planes. On a smaller scale, Marvin and Nick did just the same by tracking down and acquiring the 1951 baseball. Klara's perceiving analysis of the political situation now and then reflects a standpoint that probably most of the characters in *Underworld* share:

Because I respect power. Now that power is in shatters or tatters and now that those Soviet borders don't even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction. Not that I want to bring it back. It's gone, good riddance. But the fact is. (76)

What Klara insinuates by saying that power used to be focused, tangible and stable is that so did identity. Despite calling the dissolution of the conflict a good riddance, she nevertheless longs for the past. Mraović-O'Hare specifies that Klara does not really long for the Cold War “or its strict power structures,” but “for a time when there was an order, for the period when it was easy to position oneself and define one's identity through a simple opposition.” Moreover, she longs for a time when, despite a horrifying future prospect”, it was easy to imagine a future. (Mraović-O'Hare 216) During the Cold War it was easier to cope with the present because people knew what they can expect of it and, in turn, they could also hope for a better future. Now, according to Klara, they are uncertain of the reality they live in and do not know either how to cope with the present or what to think of the future. Klara's project of repainting the planes, which she sees as the symbols of the Cold War and a tangible evidence of a long lost time, is her attempt to get closer to the past and perhaps even revive it. Just like

Marvin who by way of technology seemingly succeeded in making the past come true, like Nick who hoped to preserve the past by obtaining the baseball and visiting Klara, or like Albert who indulged in nostalgia through music, so does Klara by repainting the old planes revive the past – the past common to all of these characters. As Mraović-O'Hare puts it, “Klara insists on the underlying unity of the generation exposed and involved in the Cold War conflict.” (Mraović-O'Hare 216) What the representatives of this generation in *Underworld* have in common is a feeling of uncertainty, instability and a lost identity in the aftermath of the Cold War. Klara's art project is, among other things, a way of repainting the past in a better light, and of adjusting the memory by stripping the history of all that is undesirable. The motif behind it is a wish for such a renewed version of the history to come alive.

In “Long Tall Sally” not much attention is devoted to the media. However, those few examples relevant for the discussion show that media continue to exert influence on the perception of reality and, therefore, their impact on the relation between identity and history must not be underestimated. The most important instance of the radio involves a sort of a recreation of the famous 1951 baseball game; a match between the same teams but four decades later, when it became obvious that everything underwent a dramatic change, especially a sense of reality and the perception of experience. Nick, who witnessed the original event and listened to the broadcast on a portable radio, noticed that this time he and his friends were set apart from the field by the glass wall and could hear only muffled sounds from the crowd. In contrast, “the radio announcer's voice shot in clearly, transmitted from the booth, but the crowd remained at an eerie distance.” (91) The experience was in almost every aspect different from the one forty years ago. A radio announcer without the crowd noise now represented an altered reality intended to improve and maximize the experience, but which was devoid of one thing that made it feel real – its imperfection and chaos, and integrity of

the crowd. A discussion ensued when Brian said that he needed to hear the crowd: “What's a ball game without crowd noise?” He continued: “We need video helmets and power gloves. Because this isn't reality. This is virtual reality. And we don't have the proper equipment.” (92) To them, the new experience was altered so much that it became unreal. An experience from the past, on the other hand, was so impelling that it remained embedded in people's consciousness and became a reference point for evaluating the present. When perceiving the present through the prism of the past in such a way, the characters realize how rehearsed and sterile their reality seems to be. The radio's role in the fifties – its influence on establishing a sense of collectivity and reinforcing the national identity – has already been discussed; now, the same medium stands in the way between the individual and the crowd, and no longer performs the role of unifying, but rather works on behalf of some other forces. Evans links this particular example to a new market organization, as well to an advanced, polished, more sophisticated and aggressive political system. In his words, the new Giants and Dodgers have been “packaged like a commodity and, like Nick himself, shipped west to a more lucrative and predictable market, where history did not run loose.” (Evans 118) He implies that an individual separated from history is a better consumer and relates this to a so-called era of liquid modernity, where there is no place for individuality, singularity or anything unpredictable. (Evans 119) Moreover, not only was a sense of the real experience lost, but so has “the authentic individual self” dissolved into what Evans calls a web of roles and relationships; “temporary modes embedded in networks of shared interests.” (Evans 124) In other words, everything has become subjected to making people more prone to consumption, and media were more than powerful tools for achieving that goal. It was only natural for the characters whose identity was shaped in the fifties to feel out of touch with themselves and such present, and to seek a way to restore the past.

Rare occurrences of television point out to the banalization of TV programme and the reliance on spectacle. Moreover, amidst a rising tendency of the culture to disremember the past by repeating itself endlessly and creating a hyper-reality, a process in which the media took a large part, memories were the most valuable tokens of the past left. Nick's friend, Brian, believed that the Thomson homer continued to live exactly because it happened so long ago, "when things were not replay and worn out and run down and used up before midnight the next day." He said that the older and scratchier a footage, the clearer the action, because "it is not in competition for our attention with a thousand other pieces of action." (98) In other words, amidst the visual and informational bombardment, events which had happened before the era of the electronic media remained vivid because memory had time to process them and preserve them as they were. Lastly, Nick's wife, Marian, needed silence and solitude while she was watching a movie so that she could concentrate on the plot. The another person's presence, according to her, "screws up the steady balance, the integrated company of the box." (116) The episode represents television as an isolating device which separates an individual from the crowd and offers an almost intimate relationship. Television's role was in this case twofold – it both spurred the nostalgia and attempted to divert the attention from the past. Because of the influence of capital and focus on the spectacle, it's goal was to create a lonely crowd devoid of every sense of individuality and a national unity which would vitalize the crowd. In this way, the crowd could be easily handled and, in the end, it would make for better consumers.

The way in which television affected society, contributed to its fragmentation and disintegration of the national identity can be perfectly illustrated by an example which compares the 1951 baseball game, centered around the radio, and the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963:

When JFK was shot, people went inside. We watched TV in dark rooms and talked on the phone with friends and relatives. We were all separate and alone. But when Thomson hit the homer, people rushed outside. People wanted to be together. Maybe it was the last time people spontaneously went out of their houses for something. Some wonder, some amazement. (94)

In the case of television, the experience was less collective, more private, and not as intensive. In the fifties the media, in this case the radio, helped to maintain the illusion of a stable national identity which was more than needed during the Cold War. Once the crisis passed, media got employed for other purposes and collectivity was no longer a priority, but just the opposite: lonely crowd became more desirable. Nowadays, television is considered to be the most attractive vehicle for mass advertising. The convenience stems from television's easy access to households and the ability to present consumer goods in a visually appealing way. As Maltby wrote, in a postmodern culture the media-powered expansion of advertising has reached the point where it colonizes not just the public sphere, but also the individual consciousness. (Maltby 53) Engles claims that the film has also saturated the social environment and influenced how the audience perceived, behaved and responded to reality. (Engles 68) DeLillo touches upon these phenomena in *Underworld* and explores how it feels to live in a postmodern culture when “media forms absorb increasingly more of our daily attention, so much that these forms cease to feel like meditations of the real and are simply experienced as the real itself” – a case encountered many times in the novel. (Duvall 4) However, it has been seen that Klara registered these processes and came to realize that everything in her life since the fifties has seemed fictitious. Nick was naively convincing himself, as he was watching TV in a motel, that he “lived responsibly in the real” and did not “accept this business of life as fiction, or whatever Klara Sax had meant when she said that things had become unreal.” (82) He clearly did not feel completely comfortable in the

present, at least consciously, otherwise he would not make the effort to acquire the 1951 baseball just because he had to have it: it was his way of bringing a part of the history back into his life. The inability and ultimate failure to recognize that one in fact lives in a pseudo-reality was explained by Nel: realness is more a quality of intensity than authenticity. (Nel 11) As long as the experience feels intense enough, its authenticity will not be questioned. In this way the media, relying on the form of a spectacle, can easily help the production of a hyper-reality, in which there is no place for the history or the sense of a strong and stable national identity, that could invest the crowd with power and independence.

“Long Tall Sally” is focused on the influence of technology on everyday life and a shift in the perception of reality, with little references to media that could contribute to the discussion or uphold the argument set up at the beginning of the paper. However, by observing the chaotic and decentered present in which the society struggles to come up with a consolidated and coherent definition of itself, the media's role in the processes in question can easily be recognized. Logically, the media are at this point closely tied to technology. Technology expanded its area of influence and showed some of its negative sides, such as the creation of a virtual reality which lacked the substance of the original experience. On the other hand, as in Marvin's case, technology could help to recreate a version of the past in the present and satisfy a desire to restore a lost sense of the self. Although he would extensively explore this phenomenon in the Epilogue, DeLillo already expressed skepticism about blind trust in technological progress. Nick, disillusioned about the reality he lives in and neglective of the influence history still has on him, said to bemoan technology all we want, but “it expands your self-esteem and connects you in your well-pressed suit to the things that slip through the world otherwise unperceived.” (89) However, according to Evans, this shift comes at a cost of the authentic individual self dissolving into a “web of roles and

relationships.” (Evans 124) The flow of data continued to increase at a high rate, systems got more complex, layered and inter-connected, and ideas more abstract. In such a decentered and ultimately falsified reality, a clear defining element of identity, such as the Cold War in the fifties, was non-existent or, at least, very difficult to discern. The authentic individual self, as Evans names it, is too torn between all the roles assigned to it. Those few who became aware of the fictitiousness of reality naturally turned to the past for a retreat, which was not an easy task since the culture perpetually pushed forward in attempt to obliterate the past. A part of Klara's art project in the desert were “burn-out hackers looking for the unwired world” who heard the call and came to work with the hands. (65) They chose to disconnect themselves from the endlessly connected and complex systems and join the outsiders in a project whose ultimate goal was to repaint the past and refresh a memory of it.

Epilogue: Das Kapital

The epilogue of *Underworld*, significantly named “Das Kapital”, is set in the mid-nineties and represents the chronological end of the novel. It provides an insight into the dawn of cyber age, preoccupied with the Web and virtual reality. DeLillo captured the moment when a new information culture, stimulated by new technologies and mass media, emerged. Cyberspace was established as a parallel to an actual reality, while information became free to flow globally through channels previously nonexistent and at speed unimaginable before. However, there were negative effects as well. According to Osteen, these are “the effacement of historical consciousness, dehumanization by institutions and technology, the power of image to shape human subjectivity and to blur differences between reality and representations, and the totalizing effects of consumer capitalism.” (Osteen 440)

These conditions not only occur in *Underworld*, but also make up the main underlying theme of the epilogue. The effacement of historical consciousness is an issue that is immediately linked to the main argument of this paper. As it has been emphasized numerous times throughout the discussion, since the sixties there has been a rising tendency within the culture to disremember the past, or at least to offer re-imagined historical counternarratives. Paranoia, and a sense of order and stability, ceased to be the defining elements of the present and the national identity. Instead, capital has become the main impulse behind the culture's drive to imitate itself endlessly and create a hyper-reality in which there would be no place for history; history was prevented from even being created. Since most of the characters in *Underworld* were unable to adjust to these changed social circumstances, they continued to evaluate the self through the past. The result was necessarily a feeling of alienation and discomfort in the present, whereas the past became a field of conflict – the prism through which the characters defined themselves, but from which they were being forcefully removed

by the culture. The power of image comes into picture when the role of media in the above-mentioned process is closely analyzed. Unlike in the fifties, when media upheld a single and coherent image of Americaness, now they offer numerous images and model identities which have a destabilizing effect on the nation. On the other hand, new technology and cyberspace have been crystallized as a possible solution to the problem; they not only enable the characters to recreate a version of the past, but present them with something much better – a possibility of closure, of satisfying the desire to restore the history, and to indulge in a virtual reality. Cyberspace is seen as a new free-floating reality where there is no space or time, where everybody is everywhere at the same time, and everything is inter-connected. At the same time, though, there is a hint of paranoia about the Internet, as the Epilogue concludes with the inability to materialize in the real world that which exists on the computer screen – the word “peace.”

Although the yellow press focused mostly on spectacle for the sake of profit, print media did participate in the creation of a separate reality and a false illusion of unification. A “miraculous” billboard with the appearing image of a dead girl Esmeralda, a sort of a martyr from the Bronx, is in fact nothing but an optical illusion. With all the surrounding publicity, though, it is a true spectacle, compared by Sister Grace to “the worst kind of tabloid superstition”, “the nightly” and “locals news at eleven with all the grotesque items”; it is a “gross exploitation of child murder” and something for the poor, who “need visions.” Moreover, it is said, the news does not need media anymore; this is the news invented by people and powerful enough to seem real. Lastly, Sister Edgar is being warned: “Pictures lie. Don't pray to pictures, pray to saints.” (819) This episode not only presents a harsh critique of print and TV media, and raises a concern about such artificially created reality in which the image is sacred and miraculous, but also poses a question about the existentiality of media,

which are no longer needed for news. Although not immediately related to the issue of national identity and history, these examples speak volumes about the current state of the nation in changing cultural circumstances. The image is shown to have power to change the perception of reality and to blur the boundary between the real and fictional. The antagonism between the pseudo-reality and faith is already hinted at, as the Epilogue in general represents cyberspace as a possible alternative to religion – a new safe haven. In such highly stimulative environment centered around spectacle and new realities, there is hardly any space left for reinforcing the sense of collectivity or national identity as it existed in the fifties. To the characters in *Underworld*, who have for so long been in conflict with the present which failed to offer them a single solid and coherent definition of the self, and whose desire to restore the past remained unfulfilled, a closure in the form of cyberspace has finally been offered.

In the Epilogue, television is portrayed as just as trivial and sensational as the print media. Teenagers from the Bronx were watching a TV report of Esmeralda's murder which happened in their neighborhood. They were astonished because they saw footage of the building they were in, “charged with a kind of second sight,” and the thing they had known so well was now seen inside out, made new - they stood there “smeared in other people's seeing.” (817) Having their lives contextualized and verbalized, described to them on TV, their reality was made unreal, fictional and global – it became someone else's. In this way, with the help of the medium, a large part of one's identity was depersonalized and publicized, so that the very sense of the self got blurred both on the individual and national level. These kids did not have any sense of a national identity either; their sense of the self was tied exclusively to the local community whose struggles they shared, while on the other hand a global and cosmopolitan lifestyle was augmented. As a new generation, grown up in an already visual and information-saturated hyper-reality, they did not have any nostalgic

sentiment towards the past because the past was never even emphasized as important to them. The appetite for visually charged spectacle was the main reason why capital stood behind the mechanisms of TV media: because the image had power to influence one's subjectivity and to blur the boundary between the real and simulated, and in the end to shape a desirable subject. As such, all those new realities – be it pseudo-reality, hyper-reality or virtual reality – were being imposed as better, improved and more desirable versions of the actuality, where capital functions as a an integrating element which “burns off the nuance in a culture.” (785)

In “Das Kapital”, to go on-line means to go global. (812) Power is concentrated in small objects like microchips, wanted by leaders of nations who “used to dream of vast land empires” before (787), while at the same time all physical boundaries are dissolved. In Hardack's words, “the web becomes the new transnational center without border.” (Hardack 172) Such dissolution of spatiality usually also signals a dissolution of the coherent national identity. In broad terms, geography is one of the basis upon which a concept of the nation, and therefore of national identity, is constructed. When one such notion ceases to be relevant and a new transnational realm is instituted instead, the illusion of a stable identity is undermined. A sense of order and command evoked by the drone of the computers (806), another nostalgic reference to the Cold War era characterized by the drone of airplanes and a sense of duty, points to homogenization and automation of society under the influence of new technologies. However, this homogeneity is very different from the one in the fifties. Whereas in the fifties homogeneity was based on unity in opposition to the Other, which necessarily implied engagement of national sentiment, in the context of “Das Kapital” homogeneity refers to members of the nation being assigned the same role, e.g. the role of consumers. Virilio refers to this phenomenon as polar inertia, explained by Spencer as “cultural standardization” and “personal immobility” resulting from the attainment of

instantaneous communication. Virilio wrote that past, present and future, as well as geographical separation, are replaced by “the real instant of the interval of light-speed”, as the consequence of real-time computer networks. (Spencer 97) In connection to that, Hardack talks about the fantasy that the Internet, “a connecting deus ex machina”, will generate universal consciousness. (Hardack 176) Such uniformity is something usually associated with military, and many have in their discussion of *Underworld* mentioned the militarizing effect of technology in the postmodern world. Spencer, for example, talks about military technologies that, through mutations with media, caused “deterioration of social space associated with the reconfiguration of time and space”, which is true for cyberspace. (Spencer 102) Thus the effacement of historical consciousness is easily explainable; new technologies, with their militarizing and homogenizing effects characteristic of globalization, and the instantaneous attainment of information, erased the category of time. Not only was the sense of national identity and collectivity from the fifties unattainable, but so was any other stable and clearly defined identity impossible to be established. The self was now free-floating outside time and space, outside reality.

Sister Edgar is a central figure in the Epilogue, which culminates in her death and ascent into a cyberspaced version of afterlife. She is the last in the row of characters who long for the specific period of the past – the Cold War era. Her longing is most clearly expressed at the beginning of the chapter, when Esmeralda's tragic death is mentioned: “Edgar used to care but not today and maybe never again. She feels weak and lost. The great Terror gone, the great thrown shadow dismantled – the launched object in the sky named for a Greek goddess on a bell krater in 500 B.C. All terror is local now.” (816) Her nostalgia for the history and the sense of seeming stability is evident, as well as her confusion about the present state in which the nation itself, so to speak, is its biggest enemy. There is no one else to take

responsibility for the poor social standard which eventually resulted in Esmeralda's death. There is no enemy to be blamed for the nation's internal struggles and Sister Edgar, understandably, longs for the old times and believes she is falling into crisis: "The serenity of immense design is missing from her life, authorship and moral form... It is not a question of disbelief. There is another kind of belief, a second force, insecure, untrusting, a faith that is spring-fed by the things we fear in the night, and she thinks she is succumbing." (817) Mraović-O'Hare explains that Edgar, just like Nick and Marvin, "longs for the apocalyptic times of the Cold War precisely because the apocalypse provided a seeming feeling of order." (Mraović-O'Hare 230) Although the author emphasizes the apocalypse as the object of desire, it comes down to the same thing: the characters wish to restore the sense of collectivity and firm national identity that was especially present during the crisis in the fifties. As the discussion has shown so far, neither of the media have since then provided them with a satisfying alternative identity, but have rather, tied closely to the workings of capital, created multiple realities, blurred the boundary between real and simulated, and pushed history aside. In the Epilogue, however, cyberspace is at last presented as a possible closure. When Sister Edgar dies, she finds herself "in cyberspace, not heaven, and she feels the grip of systems." The sensation is close to the atmosphere of the Cold War era: "This is why she's so uneasy. There is a presence here, a thing implied, something vast and bright. She senses the paranoia of the web, the net." (825) After having doubted her faith, she finally senses a presence, but it is not God she sees – it is a Soviet bomb. (826) This dramatic episode, in which God and heaven were replaced with the bomb and cyberspace, proves that the Cold War era indeed had a formative influence on the characters of *Underworld*, to such an extent that its recreation represented a new version of heaven. The wish, failed to be granted by the media, now finally has a way to be realized. As Nel notices, although the passage which describes the Web as a

“world without end, amen” seems to “posit the Internet as a means of transcending the material world”, the very next paragraph, which says that Sister Edgar is in “cyberspace, not heaven” (825), quickly confutes this notion. (Nel 12) According to Hardack, Edgar's “quasi-spiritual transcendence through the ultimate connectivity of the Web” (Hardack 162) means that there is no individual resurrection anymore, only fusion on the Internet. (Hardack 175) Religious faith is actualized as a belief in the omnipresence and omnipotency of the Web which enables the fulfillment of deepest desires, while postmodern paranoia is on one hand a reflection of the Cold War, but on the other a fear of simulation – Sister Edgar can rewatch the nuclear bomb explosions as many times as she wants and thus generate a hyper-reality of her own. In this sense, as Isaacson put it, Sister Edgar is able to “simultaneously experience religious faith and postmodern paranoia.” (Isaacson 53)

The last question explored in the epilogue concerns the relation between cyberspace and the real world: “Is cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?” (826) In other words, which is at this point more important and, in the end, feels more real? This dilemma represents DeLillo's and the novel's doubt about cyberspace; a concern about dehumanization, virtual reality, illusion, and the loss of the individual. Particularly in “Das Kapital”, DeLillo explores how new technologies and media influence individuals, how they shape them, change their way of perceiving the world, and how they can eventually destroy them. Slavoj Žižek in *The Parallax View* touched upon the same matter:

[Do we encounter some version of the Nietzschean Last Man in] the digital virtualization of our lives, the shift of our identity from hardware to software, our change from finite mortals to 'undead' virtual entities able to persist indefinitely, migrating from one material support to another – in short: the passage from human to posthuman[?] (qtd. in Hardack 171)

It is difficult to predict a long-term influence of cyberspace on humans, but the fact is that the two realities have already merged together and that the transition from virtual to actual reality is getting harder and harder. The last paragraph of *Underworld* describes a room, offscreen and unwebbed, and the word “peace” pulsing on the screen. In an attempt to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the real world, one realizes that it is only “a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen.” (827) A concept of peace, written on the computer, cannot extend outward into the real world because it has been converted into impulses. As the result, things now exist in cyberspace, while all that has remained of them in reality are only words.

Conclusion

After reading *Underworld* through the lens of media history it becomes evident how deeply entangled all media forms are in the process of directing and shaping the nation. The Prologue presented the dominant identity as unchallenged by any other, based on the notion of nationalism and opposition, upheld by a state of collective euphoria but also paranoia mediated by the radio. Other forms of media were already, influenced by the logic of capital, shifting their focus towards consumerism, instant present, spectacle and new simulated realities, leaving radio as the symbol of the past desired to be restored precisely because it epitomized the model identity which offered a sense of stability, collectivity and national consciousness. Since history as such became the unwanted category, it was replaced by the infinitely renewable and instant present. Realizing that the desire cannot be fulfilled, the characters turned to hyper- and pseudo-realities created by the media. New technology was revealed as only partially capable of making reality, which is in the characters' view the history, come true. Hence in the realm of cyberspace the two realities could be finally be joined, but at the cost of a new postmodern paranoia.

Abstract

Through cultural analysis of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, this paper analyzes media history in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. Media play a prominent role in everyday life of the characters and are revealed to be only one in the array of forces that shape not only their sense of the self, but also a sense of the national identity. An especially dominant model of identity was established in the fifties as a product of the Cold War paranoia. It was for a period of time upheld by the media, until a new powerful force, capital, emerged and employed the media for propagating a variety of model identities. Behind this process stood a single goal of shaping a desirable consumer. The characters had a hard time adjusting to the new present in which a single unifying factor and a sense of stability no longer existed. Therefore, the fifties came to be perceived as a period which had a formative influence, and the past was desired to be restored. Radio, which in the fifties most explicitly propagated the dominant model identity, turned out to be a symbol of nostalgia, while the other forms of media continued to advocate for spectacle, a phenomenon which falsely presented itself as a unifying force and, therefore, replacement for the collective paranoia of the fifties. The notion of history was expelled and instead a new instant and infinitely renewable present was instituted. Dematerialization of actual reality led to the emergence of cyberspace, which in its influence rose to spiritual proportions and represented itself as a sort of a closure, enabling the consolidation of all realities. However, at the same time, it also threatened to dissolve the individual self. For this exact reason, DeLillo concludes the novel vaguely and ambivalently: will the media-constructed reality prevail, or has it perhaps already had?

Key words: media, national identity, history, new technology, reality

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