

“The Contrails Streaked Cleanly in the High Sky”

An Ecocritical Reading of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and *Underworld*

By

Thomas Gårder Brendefur



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Department of Foreign Languages

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Samandrag

Masteroppgåva tek for seg romanane *White Noise* (1985) og *Underworld* (1997) av den amerikanske forfattaren Don DeLillo (1936-), og gjev ein kort diskusjon av den siste romanen hans *Point Omega* (2010) i konklusjonskapittelet. Romanane er døme på den post-moderne litteraturen i USA, og gjev eit utvald bilete av den amerikanske tilstanden i den andre halvdelan av førre hundreåret. Tema som er typiske for forfattaren er korleis individet vert påverka av sosiale og politiske krefter, og korleis instansar som media, populærkultur og kapitalisme påverkar språk, handling og ei generell oppleving av verda. Oppgåva argumenterer for at litteratur kan gje eit innblikk i korleis haldninga vår til miljøspørsmål og natur kan verte styrt og endra av desse sosial-politiske kreftene, og at opplevinga av kva som er «naturleg» og kva som er «kulturelt» vert problematisert av desse kreftene.

Meir konkret, tek det første kapittelet for seg den litterære representasjonen av ein miljøkatastrofe i romanen *White Noise*. Drøftinga tek for seg korleis katastrofen vert opplevd, snakka om, og nærmast spelt ut av karakterane i romanen, mykje basert på forventningar og førestillingar skapa av ein overmett media-verkelegheit. I tillegg ser kapittelet på korleis gøymde trugslar mot miljøet vert hinta til i teksten.

Det andre kapittelet drøftar korleis romanen *Underworld* gjev eit tilbakeblikk på den siste halvdelan av det tjugande hundreåret, med fokus på utviklinga av eit seinkapitalistisk samfunn prega av den kalde krigen og krigsretorikk, reklame og konsumpsjon, avfall og avfallshandtering, atomkraft og forureining. Sentralt i framstillinga er korleis både naturlandskap og urbane landskap er påverka.

Mange tema og motiv frå dei tidlegare romanane finn ein att i *Point Omega*, som òg – om indirekte – tek for seg tilhøvet mellom menneskje og naturen, og som dermed gjev prov på eit vedvarande engasjementet hjå forfattaren når det gjeld økologiske problemstillingar.

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Introduction

Why in the world would we destroy the world in which we live, our own world, our only world? What drives that destruction? Why can't we stop it? (Bennett and Royle 138)

The representation of the environment as an important constituent in fiction has long been a neglected subject of literary study. By constructing a reading process on the basis of examining the description of the environment in a text, we may reach a new understanding of how environmental problems are inextricably connected to ideologies and cultural values, as well as assumptions of the time that we are living in. Literary representations of the environment can be thought of as stylized expressions that transcribe cultural attitudes concerning the relation between "human" and "nature." These expressions are sometimes voiced in a deliberately ecocritical manner, and can thus said to be attuned towards environmental issues of their time. In literary text, however, stylized expressions can just as well be products of the cultural attitudes dominant at that time, not necessarily the result of the writer's engagement in environmental issues. Either way, a text contains more information about the interaction between humans and nature than the author may have intended.

This thesis will examine the articulation, significance, and changing notion of the environment in two novels by the American author Don DeLillo: *White Noise* (1985) and *Underworld* (1997). DeLillo's most recent novel *Point Omega* (2010) will be shortly addressed in the conclusion, in order to see how the thematic concern of the environment are still present, developed, and echo motifs, themes, and scenes in the other two novels. In the reading of these novels, a special focus will be devoted to DeLillo's apparent interest in the signifying structures of the filmic image and the media; how these structures function as vehicles for both representing and creating reality, and how the ever-presence of the media influences how the characters perceive their surroundings. In the postmodern literature of

DeLillo, one often finds expressions *of* images and expressions *by* images: thematically in the role of the media, filmic images, and advertising, and stylistically in the montage. By “montage” I refer to a technique where contrasting images are juxtaposed in order to synthesize a new meaning.¹ This thesis will further examine how the “framed image” mediates a perception of the environment. I propose to borrow an aesthetic idiom from another branch of the visual arts that highlights a specific representation of the environment; the arrangement of a field of vision into a “landscape” or “cityscape.” An arrangement like the landscape, or the cityscape, presupposes setting up a frame around a selected part of the natural or built environment, which emphasizes or excludes certain features of the environment. This mode of representing the environment might include cultural imperatives that determine how we conceive specified types of scenes, for instance the pastoral, the sublime, and the wild. By focusing on environmental issues in the text, I will also extend the idea of the “framed image” to the level of discourse and culture. That is, we are presented with examples of how the characters of the novels perceive the environment, which is also projected in the way they conceive of environmental issues in different settings, such as academic discourse versus media discourse.

In addition to analyzing the novels from a general conjecture of how the media, the filmic image, and the framed landscape can influence the way the characters engage and perceive their surroundings, I will look at idiosyncrasies in each novel in the ways in which they thematize environmental issues. By doing this, one can trace a development in Don DeLillo’s authorship that shows a continued interest in environmental issues as well as changes in how they are expressed. In *White Noise* the thematizing of environmental issues is

¹ The use of montage is mainly associated with filmic images, and was theorized in the context of cinematography by the Soviet Russian director Sergei Eisenstein. There is however reason to believe that Eisenstein used a Japanese writing tradition as the basis for this technique, which resembles the dialectic form of “Thesis + Antithesis = Synthesis” (Christine Etherington-Wright and Ruth Doughty 46).

expressed by the trope of toxicity, in *Underworld* the dominant tropes are waste and nuclear power, while in *Point Omega* one finds elements of the pastoral.

In *White Noise* (1985) the setting is a fictional rural town in the Midwest in the USA. We follow protagonist Jack Gladney, professor of Hitler Studies at The-College-on-the-Hill, and his modern American “nuclear” family, consisting of his fourth wife Babette, and four children and step-children from previous relationships. Gladney is a protagonist that struggles with his position in a postmodern era. His struggle is concretized by the novel’s ironical treatment of a wide range of typical features of the postmodern state of society. For instance, contact – and communication – is often impersonalized through the media (TV, movies, computers), and a strong presence of the Baudrillard-esque simulacra blurs the traditional sense of what is real. For example, a state program called SIMUVAC makes use of an actual disaster as a model for rehearsing an evacuation (139). Indeed, this environmental disaster, named “the airborne toxic event,” functions as the focal point in *White Noise*, into which other themes such as constructed media reality, academic satire, and excessive fear of dying, are interwoven. In my reading of the novel I will refer to “the airborne toxic event” since it is an obvious point of reference to environmental issues in the text. This being said, I will also seek to examine other parts of the novel where environmental damage is not of immediate presence.

Structurally, the novel is divided into three parts, where in the second part the environmental disaster function as the principal event. The first part of the novel functions as an exposition of themes and characters, while the last part explores the anxieties endured in the aftermath of the disaster. Other critics have addressed the environmental aspect found in *White Noise*’s middle part, such as Garrard (14-15, 191-92) and Kerridge (182-95). Lawrence Buell argues in *Writing for an Endangered World* that “... the prospect of ecocatastrophe seems to be invoked mainly to be reduced to the status of catalyst to the unfolding of the

culturally symptomatic vacuousness of this professor of ‘Hitler Studies’” (51). Buell seems almost disappointed in the way the “toxic airborne event” fails to cause an environmental awakening for the protagonist in relation to consequences of human-made ecocatastrophes. By contrast, as a result of the event, Jack and Babette become even more obsessed with their personal death anxiety. Buell’s notion that the trope of the “airborne toxic event” capitulates in favor of personal drama, functions merely as its catalyst, and that this response indicates a weakened ecocritical aspect of the novel will be challenged in chapter one. One could rather argue that the “culturally symptomatic vacuousness” mediates the characters’ response to the ecocatastrophe, and that this phenomenon is examined at a greater extent throughout the novel. My reading will examine environmental issues that may be found also where the drama of the disaster is absent, for instance in the way the novel mediates ways in which the environmental is perceived. DeLillo does not only provide us with vivid scenes of catastrophes. The text also focuses on pollution at an “internal” level, namely in the way the postmodern lifestyle affects the human body.

Underworld (1997) is a comprehensive text that gives a complex portrayal of the social and political climate in the USA during the Cold War. This broad historical sweep includes a large character gallery (both historical persons such as J. Edgar Hoover and Lenny Bruce, as well as fictional characters), spatial diversity (the urban streets of New York and L.A., the deserts of New Mexico and Kazakhstan, private homes and public spaces), and a temporality that spans over forty years. The main protagonist Nick Shay, who lives through the five different decades, function as a structuring element in the novel along with a set of leitmotifs that converge in differing situations and that contribute in holding together the narrative, such as the baseball from the 1951 pennant and the different manifestations of waste. *Underworld*’s description of the Cold War era has been analyzed by different critics. Patrick O’Donnell reads it as a critical evaluation of (American) identity, arguing that it is

“..largely about th[e] transformation in the relation between subjects and objects ” (109). A gender-specific identity analysis can be seen in Ruth Helyer’s approach, using Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject in order to understand the symbolic proliferation of waste in the novel (987-1006). Peter Knight, on the other hand, traces the connection of Cold War paranoia and late capitalist forces: “... the novel creates a vast chain of intertextual links that ends up exceeding the simple Them/Us paranoid binary of the Cold War, sketching out new and at times barely perceptible ways of perceiving connections that global capitalism both enforces and makes possible” (“DeLillo” 36). DeLillo himself comments on *Underworld* in the essay “The Power of History”: “In a novel about conflict on many levels, this was the primal clash – the tendency of the language to work in opposition to the enormous technology of war that dominated the era and shaped the book’s themes” (7). Although identity, gender, and Cold War paranoia are important aspects of the novel, my reading will focus on a different set of frames that highlights environmental issues.

Point Omega (2010) is short novel that follows the retired war adviser Richard Elster who seeks solitude and isolation “somewhere south of nowhere” (*Point Omega* 25), after having become disillusioned and seemingly experiences a personal crisis, subsequent to a period of involvement in the Iraq War. A recent analysis of the novel by David Cowart (2012) focuses on the novel’s combination of “cinematic ekphrasis” and the “vexed question of just how an artist can, without didacticism, incorporate political perceptions into work that they might render tendentious” (“The Lady Vanishes” 32). The novel seems thus, as Cowart argues, to obliquely comment on contemporary political issues, similar to *Underworld*’s observation of the Cold War era.

Point Omega’s short narrative follows patterns similar to a crime novel. Richard Elster is tracked down by the young filmmaker Jim Finley that wants to do a film about Elster’s time in government: “His face, his words. That was all I needed” (26). A short time after he arrives

at Elster's home, Elster's daughter Jessie suddenly visits the two men, staying there for some days, then disappears without notice or a trace. The short narrative of the visit, divided into four small chapters, makes up the body of the novel. The main part of the novel is framed by two smaller parts where we witness a man who contemplates upon an installation at MOMA called *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) by the artist Douglas Gordon. This installation is a viewing of Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho* (1960), the speed of which is slowed down in order to last for 24 hours. It will be discussed how the strong focus on cinematic form and content relates to the articulation of the environment in this novel.

Don DeLillo: Postmodern Writer

Don DeLillo was born on November 20, 1936, in an Italian-American part of the North Bronx in New York. Having worked as a copywriter for the advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather in the period between 1959 and 1964, he began, relatively late, to write his first novel *Americana*, which was published in 1971. Since then, he has established a career as author and playwright, and his literary production to date includes fifteen novels and five plays. DeLillo has received critical acclaim and a number of awards, such as the National Book Award, the Jerusalem Prize, the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize, and most recently in 2010 the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for lifetime achievement in American literature.

Thematically, it is widely considered that DeLillo focuses on American postmodernity. This means in general terms that his works seek to illustrate the nuances of the socio-political and cultural climate in America after 1945. One might call this historical period, borrowing a term from Fredric Jameson, the era of "late capitalism" ("The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism"). This historical period is characterized by a new form of society that on a larger scale is driven by consumerism, media systems, large amounts of fleeting information, and electronic devices. Furthermore, late capitalism is the stage when capitalism

is no longer determined by (national) industrial production, but rather by service industries and global conglomerates, and has become integrated in the realms of art and mass culture. Capital has now acquired fleeting and fluxing characteristics, and has lost touch with physical measures. The consequential abstraction of capital is often found in DeLillo's works, and can be exemplified in the thinking of Eric Packer, the currency speculator in *Cosmopolis* (2003): "This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions" (24).

In DeLillo's description of the postmodern state of American society two major themes are dominant: the way in which reality is both constructed through and reliant on the media, and the relation that the contemporary American culture has to its history. These are quintessential features of the postmodern era, and Jameson recognizes these, among other traits, in his enumeration of postmodern characteristics: "... a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary 'theory' and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum; a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality ..." (6).

A large part of DeLillo's oeuvre features an interest in the media and the mediating structures of the postmodern Western world, such as film, television, music, words, and advertising. Particularly, the focus lies on the ways in which these aesthetic forms function in representing the world, either as mediums of attaining connection with the world, or as an obfuscating hindrance of direct connection with it. This can be illustrated by the way images of popular culture tend to generate self-referential representations detached from the external world. In DeLillo's sensibility to how different modes of reality are "produced," one will find the other dominant theme of his literary works; namely the sense of thinking historically. John N. Duvall, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* argues: "In his most

important novels, ... DeLillo explores the ways in which contemporary American personal identity (as fragmented as it may be) is related to larger social and cultural forces forged over time” (“Introduction” 2). Jameson’s warning about our weakened historicity can be recalled here, and although it seems to be a concern for DeLillo, his awareness of historical processes seems to merge with his interest in the image. It seems quintessential for DeLillo to show that a historical understanding of the social-cultural shaping of personal identity in post-WWII America, one has to acknowledge the media as a dominant social force, in producing the images that we rely on when we reconstruct the historical past. For example, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy is explored in *Libra* (1988), a novel in which filmic images and popular culture set the premises for modern myth making. The JFK assassination was the first of its kind captured on film (the Zapruder film). While historical accounts of the assassination may rely on the “objective” truth of the filmic images, they may also be influenced by popular myth making. That is, the myths of the assassination, which also rely on the “objective” truth of the filmic image, may in turn interfere with the construction of historical accounts.

The invitation to envisage history through the lens of the media is perhaps more clearly invoked in *Underworld*, a novel that spans from the 1950s to the 1990s with a focus on the Cold War’s effect on the public and private spheres of American culture. DeLillo’s engagement with the postmodern project of re-contextualizing and fragmentizing our historical remembrance, is done by reframing well known American socio-political icons such as J. Edgar Hoover, baseball, and consumerism. The novel makes use of a large repertoire of mediums in order to reflect and construct our conception of the modern American past and how these postmodern characteristics influence our relation to our surrounding world. Examples of advertising, repeated TV-images (the Texas Highway killer), film (the Zapruder film), and the radio broadcast of the 1952 pennant, are all examples of collective images or

sounds that resonate in the American mind, yet presented in an unexpected manner, calling our attention to why we relate to the world in the way we do.

Another feature of DeLillo's works is that they often are strongly attuned to contemporary issues, almost to the point of being prophetic. It has been argued that DeLillo's novels have more than once described and commented on incidents or currents in contemporary society, with a nearly eerie attention. Duvall points out that the novels *Players* (1977) and *Mao II* (1991) imagine the cultural role of terrorism, and provide us with a literary framework decades before the 9/11 attack (2). Similarly, when *White Noise* was published in January 1985, with its attentive emphasis on a fictional toxic disaster in a small town, it co-occurred by just some weeks with the Bhopal disaster in India, a chemical spill that had severe consequences for thousands of people, leaving many readers interpreting the novel as a direct comment on the disaster (2). Incidental as this may be, the simultaneity of the disaster and the publishing date demonstrate in an uncanny way the topicality of environmental topics. These general observations about Don DeLillo's choice of themes and his literary style, and the postmodern mode of representation that they convey, serve well to show how his works relate to contemporary American culture. It is the culture's way of "seeing" environmental issues that will be of interest in the analysis of *White Noise*, *Underworld*, and *Point Omega*.

Ecocriticism and Environmental Criticism

The theoretical backdrop of this thesis is founded in the connection of the disciplines ecology, culture, and literature. Several terms have been coined for this field of study, such as "environmental criticism," "green studies," or just "ecocriticism." I will not enter a discussion of the difference between the different terms, or whether one of them is more precise than another. For the sake of simplicity, the term ecocriticism will be used as a point of reference for this theoretical perspective throughout the thesis.

One can speak of two waves in the emergence of ecocritical studies of literature (Garrard 2012, Levin 2011, Buell 2005). The first one emerged in the United States during the 1960s and the 1970s, when a broader scientific and cultural interest in the field of ecology and nature preservation arose. This general interest appeared after controversies around the damming of the Colorado River in the first half of the twentieth century, and the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which articulated the severe consequences of DDT.² The second wave can be said to have emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, which acted as a more self-conscious but divergent movement. Lawrence Buell reminds us in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* that the interest in nature and how human cultures interact with it is not a new phenomenon (1-3). However, obvious as it may be, during the last decades of the twentieth century "the environment' became front-page news" (4), supported by scientific publications, primarily written by natural and social scientists.³ Scholars of the humanities, in comparison, came into the field of environmental studies at a later stage, but as Buell argues: "... issues of vision, value, culture, and imagination are keys to today's environmental crisis at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how, and legislative regulation" (5). Ecocriticism has grown to become a more significant movement during the last two decades. For example, ASLE – the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment – which was founded in 1992 has moved from being a small-scale North American group to a globally spanning organization with thousands of members, and has since 2009 published, in conjunction with the Oxford University Press, a quarterly journal, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*.

Ecocriticism is by nature interdisciplinary, and seeks to combine with literary study knowledge and insights from different fields of study such as geography, philosophy,

² DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) is an insecticide that was banned from agricultural use in the USA in 1972, and subsequently worldwide.

³ Buell's choice of words here unintentionally pinpoints one of this thesis' interests, namely that of the media's role in defining environmental problems.

climatology, and economics. The interdisciplinary nature of this direction of literary criticism and theory illustrates how questions related to environmental topics at the same time are deeply complex and relate to us all. The question of how we humans relate to the natural environment and the expressive role of language and literature in this relation represent a main focus in this field of literary study. One could easily find other issues interwoven in this inquiry. For instance, how is the relation between humans and nature influenced by processes of modernization and globalization? Should literature call for an ethical stance – or perhaps a commitment to environmentalism? Could one compare anthropocentric attitudes towards nature with attitudes of a patriarchal culture? And finally, how could one theorize the relationship between a constructed world represented in fiction with the “actual” world outside the covers of a book? These questions illustrate the special interest of different sub-groupings of ecocritical theory, for instance “deep ecology” and “ecofeminism,” and serve to show the wide range of different approaches that make it their aim to critically assess the environment and its place in literature.

This thesis will read DeLillo’s *White Noise* and *Underworld* from an ecocritical point of view in order to explore how his texts problematize postmodernity’s relation to what is “natural” and “constructed,” how damages and dangers to our environment are perceived in this context, and how a pliant use of the term “landscape” can open up a literary text for these questions. Ursula K. Heise argues in “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism” that, “... nature is now more often viewed as inextricably entwined with modernity—both as concept and in the material shape in which we experience it today,” which means that the “search for a more authentic relation to nature is itself a product of modernization” (508). In order to see the reach of this statement more clearly one could first consider another, and perhaps more “rooted” way of seeing the relationship between nature and modernity. The close relationship between the concept of nature and the progression of modernity is often thought of as one of

opposites, where modernity's advancement is based on nature's fall. This notion derives from the conception of nature as the physical world, the wild, and the unorganized, whereas the tradition of modernity can be understood as the coming of age where objective measurements of the physical world were accomplished by scientific methods, when technological progress made it possible to manipulate nature on a large scale, and when the natural world was exploited economically. There is no reason to doubt the validity of the claim that modernization took its toll on nature. Nevertheless, the main thought in Heise's observation seems to be that our worldview is established in and by the age of modernity. Further, the background knowledge we have received from history relating to our world is irreversible, and to such extent fundamental to our mode of thinking, that nature is defined on its basis. So, our idea of what is natural must be perceived through the lens of modernity, but at the same time, the natural expresses something that is in contrast to what is modern.

In the novels by DeLillo that I will discuss in this thesis, different modes of relating to the environment, such as arranging it into landscapes, cityscapes, or watching nature through TV images and talking about it in different settings, illustrate the interconnectedness of (post-) modernity and nature, both as concepts and as the material world that surrounds us. Linda Hutcheon argues that, "... the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us" (2). This statement, expressing one of the main traits of postmodernism, not only brings attention to the fact that we often uncritically believe that cultural constructions are "natural" (in the sense "that they have always been there"), but also illustrates that the way we perceive the natural environment, and concepts such as a sunset or a desert landscape, are also premised on cultural constructs. This blurring of what is

traditionally seen as “merely” natural with the concept of cultural construct is a pivotal aspect of DeLillo’s literary project.

Chapter one focuses on the toxic landscape that permeates the novel *White Noise*. The chapter will be divided into two major sections: the first focuses on the external and visible dangers that exist in the novel’s milieu, while the second focuses on the internal dangers and damages that lie within the environment and the human body. As already suggested, human descriptions of a specific type of scenery, such as landscape painting, is filled with symbolic meaning that speaks of cultural attitudes rather than the natural environment itself. DeLillo’s novel gives clear depictions of a culture that makes assumptions concerning the environment based on images ornamented by the paintbrush of the media. While the vivid images of toxins floating in the air establish the discourse of environmental hazard in *White Noise*, DeLillo also seems fully aware of the broader environmental crisis, here formulated by the words of Frederick Buell⁴: “Everywhere today, human bodies come into the world bearing the marks of environmental deformation already in place, not anticipated. ... Public health, which had been conventionally understood as societal, not environmental, reforms, turns out nowadays to be every bit as environmental in emphasis as public health advocates ...” (112-13). As a contrast to the palpable airborne toxic event, also hidden pollution is found on many levels in the novel.

Chapter two performs an ecocritical reading on how the Cold War era in the USA is represented in *Underworld*. The chapter is divided into three sections exploring the following: how representation of a “damaged” nature can be attributed with sublime and pastoral characteristics; how the images and words of an advertising and consumer culture and the military-industrial complex of the Cold War mirror each other, synthesizing a dangerous attitude towards environmental concerns; and finally how the urban cityscape and the desert

⁴ Not to be confused with his brother Lawrence Buell.

landscape have a prominent role in the novel in juxtaposing different settings for human activity, and in its montage blurring the line between built and natural environments. In addition, the chapter will address instances where *White Noise* and *Underworld* have striking similarities in metaphors and motifs representing environmental concerns.

In the conclusion, DeLillo's most recent novel *Point Omega* will be addressed. This will be done in order to consider the author's continued interest in the theme of the filmic image and cinematic aesthetics, and how this contributes in shaping his literary representation of the natural world, asking us to question our perception of it. Once again, a recycling of motifs and imagery used in *Point Omega* echoes the previous novels, two decades after *White Noise*, which exemplifies the author's continued interest in our environment and our postmodern culture's relation to it.

Chapter One: *White Noise*

Along Elm all the stores were dark, the two banks were dimly lit, the neon spectacles in the window of the optical shop cast a gimmicky light on the sidewalk.

Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex. (DeLillo, *White Noise* 52)

In the novel *White Noise*, Don DeLillo displays a fascination for the artificial, synthetic, and inorganic components of the postmodern world. Along with an active play with simulacrum and the recurrent theme of death, the trope of the artificial dominates the novel. Consequently, the trope of the artificial has its effect on how the novel portrays different environments.

Take for instance the quote at the top of the page. The protagonist Jack Gladney is walking along the streets one night with his wife Babette, after a visit to their friend Murray Jay Siskind, where they have discussed the impact that TV has had on American culture. In the sequence that follows, the novel emphasizes the impact of the media in the distribution of representation of “reality” and the implied conformity of perception and artificiality. Words and concepts that are associated with optics trigger immediate attention. The basics of natural physics associated with vision are manifested in the words “dark,” “lit,” and “light.” The motif of vision is further developed when objects that refract light are pointed out, such as “spectacles” and “window.” Finally, by placing the adjective “optical” at the center of the sentence, the paragraph seems to balance on this concept. The spectacles described in this sentence are, however, not transparent and do not serve to guide one’s vision, but the source of light itself is a neon sign whose light is “gimmicky.” Following this, a list of brand names of the synthetic products “Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex” is presented, seemingly not arriving from the context of optics, but as an interfering chant of commercial products – one of many examples of the sort in the novel. What is the relation in this paragraph between

synthetic products and optics, one might ask. The paragraph could be said to create a meta-comment on perception itself, using the quality of vision as material for the description of the environment. What is more, the paragraph reflects a general trait of the novel; the characters' engagement with their surroundings will in many instances bring up associations to brand names and commercial products. It seems as though their conception of the surrounding world is based on names and images of commercial products and popular culture. The brand names of commercial products have seeped into the way we discern nature, transforming it into disposable products – items without value.

In *White Noise*, both built environments and natural environments share the characteristics of being removed from nature. One could say that a built environment is in its own definition removed from nature, since it is a result of human ingenuity, as for instance a city, or a home. The natural environment, on the other hand, is in *White Noise* removed from nature due to the missing connection between the natural surroundings and the characters, in the way the surroundings are perceived and conceived. At times, the natural surroundings are presented through mediated images, such as TV broadcasted natural disasters, which bear with them the self-referential quality of Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacra; the copy that has replaced the original and is taken to express reality. One can see this aspect of the novel as a symptom of more general historical changes, in the way that the conceptions of nature and culture in the age of postmodernity and in postmodernist aesthetics both are superimposed and juxtaposed. Kate Soper comments on how the concept of nature may be understood in different ways:

... discourses which direct us to the 'nature' that we are destroying, wasting and polluting, and discourses that are focused on the ideological functions of the appeal to 'nature' and on the ways in which relations to the non-human world are always

historically mediated, and indeed ‘constructed’, through specific conceptions of human identity and difference. (*What is Nature?* 3-4)

Clear symptoms of pollution and destruction are found in the novel, but the presence of the constructed and artificial is so dominant in its environment that one might not speak of “natural” nature at all.

Lawrence Buell argues that the border between “natural” and “built” has been washed out: “Natural and built environments, revisionists point out, are long since all mixed up; the landscape of the American ‘West’ is increasingly the landscape of metropolitan sprawl rather than the outback of Rocky Mountain ‘Wilderness’ ...” (*The Future* 22). A severe consequence that arises when these lines are removed is that it may be difficult to see damage done to the natural environment, not to speak of potential dangers that are ignored, because they become “natural” constituents of the built environment. The novel illustrates this in an effective manner, when it hints towards pollution already from the beginning of the novel, but the danger is not perceived until the grand event in the mid-section of the novel spells it out in capital letters. Human-made ecocatastrophes (such as the “airborne toxic event” in the novel) raise attention because of their exiting dramaturgy.⁵ Also, it is suggested in the novel that an ecocatastrophe can be a chance for characters to perform a mode of response that is rehearsed through TV-images of natural disasters. Less visible dangers to the environment, such as bioaccumulation of toxins, will in comparison easily be placed in the background of one’s attention. An aspect that is striking with *White Noise*, is that the chemical substances and toxins that present themselves as a threat to both the built and the natural environment are often artificially constructed – they are products of human activity. For this reason, it will also

⁵ One may see similar media responses and voyeuristic fascination in relation to recent actual ecocatastrophes, such as the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster.

be of great interest to interpret the ardent fascination that the characters seem to have in relation to broadcasted natural disasters.

In the realm of artificial design one finds environmental threats that might supersede natural dangers, in terms of havoc. For instance, toxic substances found in the natural world will appear as feeble compared to constructed toxins. It is namely the trope of toxicity, exemplified by Nyodene D, which is central both to the dramatic action and thematic concerns of *White Noise*; it affects both humans and nature and contributes to the overall ecocritical aspect of the novel. In contrast to the obvious danger of this toxic substance that is let loose as a result of human error in the novel, the unexpected invoking of “Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex” (52) seems to hint at a subtler level of pollution, almost to the extent of a polluted culture. In this manner, the novel succeeds in producing references to various “disturbances” at different stages in the narrative. “Disturbances” can be understood as undefined forms of interferences in one’s surroundings, which are not necessarily toxic but nevertheless represent, or symbolize, a subtler level of pollution in the environment of postmodern civilization. The constant buzzing of technological apparatuses – which is fragmentally manifested in the novel as sounds and images streaming out of the TV and the radio in the family’s house and at the oasis of comfort in the city, the supermarket – underscores the feeling of a constructed human milieu that removes itself from nature.

For instance, the very title of the novel, *White Noise*, alludes to this ingrained humming of “disturbances” present in the novel. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, when the adjective “white” is placed before the noun “noise” it refers to a scientific and technical context applied to “(non-optical) radiation, esp. sound and X-rays, having approximately equal intensities at all the frequencies of its range; esp. *white noise* (also *fig.*)” (“White,” adj. def. 1f). The title *White Noise* refers then to the radiating and pervading presence of technology in our built environments. Moreover, it seems that it is the author’s

clear intent to allude in the novel's title to interferences in the natural environment. DeLillo initially intended to call the novel *Panasonic*, which would similarly have referred to an all-inclusive palette of sounds that permeate the environment. DeLillo explains in a letter to his editor, Elisabeth Sifton: "*Panasonic* as a title is crucial for a number of reasons.... The word 'panasonic,' split into its component parts—'pan,' from the Greek, meaning 'all,' and 'sonic,' from the Latin *sonus*, meaning 'sound'—strikes me as the one title that suggests the sound-saturation that is so vital to the book ..." (qtd. in Hearst). Effectively, both of the titles "White Noise" and "Panasonic" refer to sounds that pervade the surroundings. Similarly, both titles give an adequate impression of the general invasion of disturbances in the environment in the novel. By underlining the impression of sound saturation in the environment, the title "white noise" and its manifestations in the novel function as a motif representing the more general destructive elements that seep into nature, animals, and humans, at the same time as it serves as a metaphor for the technological age that produces it. One could extend the metaphor to include the hidden pollution that seeps into the environment, even though it is soundless.

This chapter will continue with a discussion of examples of toxicity and disturbances in the text, which will be divided into two categories: external dangers and internal dangers. The categorization aims to draw the divide between the dangers that exist external to the human (and animal) body, and internal to it. There is however no definite line between these categories; for example, the novel presents varying examples of substances and chemicals that the human body is exposed to both deliberately and incidentally. In turn, exposure of the kind we find in the novel gives rise to questions of bioaccumulation and persistency of toxins both in the human body and the natural environment, which will have severe consequences for future generations. By dividing the presence of dangers into two categories, it will be easier to discern them and see their differences and similarities.

External Dangers

Through the stark trees we saw it, the immense toxic cloud, lighted now by eighteen choppers—immense almost beyond comprehension, beyond legends and rumor, a roiling bloated slug-shaped mass. (157)

The most obvious example of how toxicity is defining the landscape in *White Noise* lies within the mid-section of the novel, aptly named: “The Airborne Toxic Event.” In this mid-section the Gladneys and their fellow citizens fully “act out” their underlying fear and fascination with death and accidents that have been hinted at in dialogues and strange occurrences earlier in the novel. The first chapter of this section opens with a paragraph in which the choice of words hints at a coming change:

After a night of dream-lit snows the air turned clear and still. There was a taut blue quality in the January light, a hardness and confidence. The sound of boots on packed snow, the contrails streaked cleanly in the high sky. Weather was very much the point, although I didn’t know it at first. (109)

The first sentence gives us an impression of a movement from a dream-like state towards an awakening of some sort. The anticipation of an upcoming event, a tenseness, is clearly reflected in the description of the light as “taut,” and our attention is led towards the sky by the unexpected observation of the contrails. By choosing the word “contrail,” which is an abbreviation of “condensation trail,” DeLillo draws attention to specific traces of human activity or interference with nature. The phrasing “the contrails streaked cleanly” could have been chosen for its rhythmic quality alone, or for the associations it evokes by juxtaposing “contrails” with “cleanly.” The image that it produces is twofold. The parallel lines of the

contrails on the sky are indeed clearly outlined and pure in an aesthetic way. But they are also inextricably linked to what produces them, namely aircrafts (or rockets), and the effect of this is more striking when considering that the pollutants are ironically outlined as “clean” objects on the sky. In addition, one finds here an example of the blurring of nature and technology, in an aesthetic naturalization of technology. The contrails are conceived as a natural part of the sky, because in the artificial milieu of *White Noise*, the sky is “completed” by evidence of human interference.

The novel implies also that the impact of technology and modernity is assimilated into the realm of the immediate physical environment of the setting. The home of the Gladneys, for example, is portrayed as set in what amounts to a postmodern pastoral revision of the suburbs, however far removed from untouched nature: “Babette and I and our children by previous marriages live at the end of a quiet street in what was once a wooded area with deep ravines” (4). The effects of human activity on the natural landscape have impacted what was once the result of a natural evolution of the landscape – the ravines. The passage continues: “There is an expressway beyond the backyard now, well below us, and at night as we settle into our brass bed the sparse traffic washes past, a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream” (4). The expressway with its murmuring traffic has replaced what could have been the burble of a river; nevertheless, it does seem to have the same lingering effect on the Gladneys. The technology of modernity has become an integrated part of the natural environment.

However, the paragraph discussed above ends with the laden expression “Weather was very much the point, although I didn’t know it at first,” which underscores the notion that something is going to happen, and foreshadowing “the airborne toxic event” that will be the center of attention in this part of the novel. Moreover, the expression, which seems more fitting in a crime novel or memoir, also contributes to the self-reflexive dimension of the text

in pointing to the text's own constructiveness. In fact, there have been hints earlier in the novel about the danger from above. The sky seems to play an active role as representing danger and anxiety throughout the novel. In chapter 4 Jack Gladney asks the question "Who will die first?" (15) for the first time in the novel. He wonders if this question is "... some inert element in the air we breathe, a rare thing like neon ..." (15). In addition, during the short sequence that precedes Gladney's question there are two independent sentences that at first glance do not seem to represent anything more than brief descriptions: "The sky was full of streaking clouds" (14) and "A small plane appeared over the threes" (15). Shortly after Gladney's existential reflections, he pays attention to the girls that are running around the field, seeing them almost flying off the ground:

They are strung out now, with faces and particular gaits, almost weightless in their craving, able to land lightly.

The Airport Marriott, the Downtown Travelodge, the Sheraton Inn and Conference Center. (15)

Again, the unexpected enumeration of companies, here represented by three hotels, is placed at the end of a paragraph. They appear unexplained and have more poetic quality than narrative purpose. The juxtaposition of the companies with the running girls serves to personify the hotels; one gets the impression that Jack names the girls by these company names. This reveals that brand names and company names appear unexpectedly as first-hand concepts when the characters need to describe their surroundings. The text suggests here that consumerism gives an "independent life" to these brands. At another level, the "flying" girls and the "Airport Marriott" sequence presents the motif of the sky/air as both a foreboder and amplifier of Gladney's death anxiety, which is a dynamic that one can find several places in the novel. Another example of where the motif of the sky/air functions as foreboder of danger

is perhaps most clearly developed in chapter 18. It precedes that of the “airborne toxic event,” and the link between “sky” and “danger” is clearly developed when Gladney’s daughter Bee is involved in a near-accident when the aircraft she is on loses engine power (91-92).

“The airborne toxic event” is the name given to the possible ecological disaster that takes place in Blacksmith when a tank car stored with toxic chemicals derailed. The disaster is gradually growing in scale and appearance, although it is unclear which chemicals are involved, and what consequences they may cause. This uncertainty stems from the lack of first-person contact with the “event,” and the lack of information provided by experts. It is through lenses such as the media, rumors, and even binoculars that the Gladneys learn that the “event” is actually a release of toxic chemicals. It is Jack’s son Heinrich who first warns Jack about the toxicity of the specific chemicals that have been emitted, having learned about the chemical in school: “It’s called Nyodene Derivative or Nyodene D. It was in a movie we saw in school on toxic wastes” (111). Jack learns that the school video informed about cases of “urgent lumps” in people who had been exposed to the chemical, but seemingly not trusting the school video alone, he searches for a second opinion, which happens to be another instance of the media: “That’s what the movie said. What does the radio say?” (111). Through radio reports and rumors the chemical emission changes name from “feathery plume” and “black billowing cloud” to “the airborne toxic event,” as information on the amount of toxic chemicals emitted and the range of expected consequences suggests the possibility of a disaster. One may ask why an ecocatastrophe is called an “event” and not an incident or accident. Bearing in mind that this is a novel that makes extensive use of satire, the association to the catastrophe is rendered more positive, or at least less threatening, which serves to highlight how the media tend to frame and manipulate their presentation of events and disasters. As Jonathan Levin points out: “DeLillo is especially attentive to the ways in

which language and visual media shape our awareness of environmental issues and crises” (1130).

From the beginning of the novel there has been a significant focus on how the Gladneys and other characters are enraptured by the media, and passively accept how they present natural disasters. The frequent appearances of televised natural disasters are hinted at in the following comment: “That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese. There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes” (64). The entire family, except for Babette, watch these disasters with silent attentiveness and apparent entertainment, but perhaps most of all, the scene displays how the TV-gathering function as a source of soothing stimulation: “Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” (64). Of course, the disasters are distant from the family and do not threaten their immediate environment, and can therefore be enjoyed as fascinating “events.”

A similar fascination with nature is shown earlier in the same chapter, already in the first sentence: “We crowded before the window in Steffie’s small room, watching the spectacular sunset. Only Heinrich stayed away, either because he distrusted wholesome communal pleasures or because he believed there was something ominous in the modern sunset” (61). In comparison to the disasters watched on TV, this “ominous” and “modern” sunset is close enough to have been a threat if that was the case, but in the same manner as the TV-disasters the sunset is not perceived as a threat (even though we learn that Heinrich might suspect that it is), but rather experienced as something spectacular.

In examining these two passages, where two different situations of viewing scenes from the natural world are described, one should pay attention to the “framing” of the natural scene that is hinted at in both sequences, which makes them stand out as two different framed landscapes. In landscape painting, the artist arranges and determines the viewing of a natural

scene in order to produce a certain response to it. By transferring this idea to the realm of literature one can perhaps shed some light on the way DeLillo arranges the environment in his text. Malcom Andrews argues in "Landscape and Western Art" that "... in the conversion of land into landscape a perceptual process has already begun whereby that material is prepared as an appropriate subject for the painter or photographer, or simply for absorption as a gratifying aesthetic experience" (3). Accordingly, a sense, an idea, or a perception of a particular feature of the environment's suitability to represent one's idea of it is already engaged before the process of articulating it starts. The aesthetic idea would be able to transfer from the sphere of painting to writing, since the process of converting land into landscape is highly different for a textual medium compared to a visual medium. DeLillo could be said to transpose a conception of the natural world into literature, and thereby functioning as a "perceptual agent" for his specific audience. At a textual level this is manifested, for instance, in the ways in which the natural world is conceived by the characters in the novel, as in the two passages discussed above.

The first example is most obvious, given the physical disconnection between the family watching the TV screen and the events that have taken place that are "re-played" on the screen. Here, the TV screen frames the image, and produces a structure similar to what one finds in a landscape picture. The framing is subtler in the second example. Here, the window in Steffie's room functions as the framing device, and DeLillo even places the family in a small room indoors, granting a view of the fantastic sunset outdoors. What is more, Heinrich is skeptical of the "modern sunset" for an unknown reason, foreshadowing the impact "the airborne toxic event" has on the sunsets in the latter part of the novel. The effect of juxtaposing these two different settings where the family "looks at" nature, using the frame as a structuring device for the image, highlights DeLillo's notion of how the Gladneys, perhaps representative of their time and place in history, relate to their surroundings. As in a

landscape painting, the environment is framed to produce a particular way of seeing that specific environment. When considering the different ways the characters behave in these settings one could even say that the natural environment framed by the bedroom window is seen by the family members as being artificial, whereas the “re-produced” environment of the TV images is seen as natural.

As revealed later in the novel, the spectacular sunset might be spectacular just because of the toxins and pollutants in the air, as suggested in this scene at the end of the novel:

“‘Could be the toxic residue in the atmosphere is diminishing.’ ...We stood there watching a surge of florid light, like a heart pumping in a documentary on color TV” (227). Nature itself is seen as artificial – the toxins in the sky cause the sunset’s visual quality, and the associations evoked by it are dependent on the TV images. Similarly, what is seen on TV and heard on the radio verifies for the characters in the novel what is to be believed as true. A consequence of this is that the novel almost suggests that a natural disaster or an environmental threat becomes real only when it is reconstructed by the media. Also, this demonstrates that the only point of reference that the characters have to nature must be made through the language and images of the media. Distanced and estranged from any “direct” contact with nature, they rely on the media as a mediator or translator.

The issue of how natural disasters are conceived and reported in the media becomes the main topic during Jack’s lunch at the College-on-the-Hill. The following passage provides no description of the characters’ perceptions; it is rather the dialogue that frames the view on the environment:

“Japan is pretty good for disaster footage,” Alfonse said. “India remains largely untapped. They have tremendous potential with their famines, monsoons, religious strife, train wrecks, boat sinking, et cetera. But their disasters tend to go unrecorded.

Three lines in the newspaper. No film footage, no satellite hookup. That is why California is so important.... The cameras are right there. They're standing by. Nothing terrible escapes their scrutiny."

"You're saying it's more or less universal, to be fascinated by TV disasters."

"For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set." (66)

That "their disasters tend to go unrecorded" is here regarded a pity simply because of the lost entertainment. Since the media did not reconstruct it, it might as well not have happened. It is in passages like these in *White Noise* that one can find an inherent critique of contemporary attitudes towards environmental issues. Similar to Baudrillard's use of the simulacra, contact with the natural environment is often made through a mediated and constructed image. This consequently defines the concepts, terms, and associations one uses when experiencing the natural world, and the language one uses to describe it.

Jack and his family, along with the citizens of the town, experience their need of describing the natural reality in terms of constructed images when they for the first time are actual witnesses to a real natural disaster – "the airborne toxic event": "It was the black billowing cloud, the airborne toxic event, lighted by the clear beams of seven army helicopters.... The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings" (127). It is clear that the Gladneys are not sure how to interpret the situation. They are heavily indoctrinated by the media's description of the event, which defines their expectations. Just as the presence of the contrails on the sky commented on above, the helicopters that appear function here as normal constituents in the sky, and the way the helicopters manage the toxic cloud apparently relieves

the spectators. Fantastic images recalled from legends and myths contribute as well in defining the scenario:

It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzines, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content. But it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event, like the vivid scene in the switching yard or the people trudging across the snowy overpass with children, food, belongings, a tragic army of the dispossessed. (127)

Although the chemical disaster is immediate, intense and local, it is also very much a product defined by the media. In fact, the characters in the novel apparently need the media's recognition of the accident in order to validate its danger, and their fears. This becomes very clear when the media coverage evaporates after the first intense hours of the disaster, leaving the shock-stricken victims feeling betrayed. A man with a TV set gets support from his co-evacuees for his frustration at the lack of media interest: "Is it possible nobody gives substantial coverage to such a thing? Half a minute, twenty seconds? Are they telling us it was insignificant, it was piddling?" (162).

As experienced by the characters, "the airborne toxic event" is highly dramatic, and it is initially featured as a newsworthy case, but it is not dramatic enough to attract the media's attention for long. It is symptomatic that disasters attract attention for their immediate effect and their grandeur, whereas knowledge of the underlying causes and long-term effects seems almost suppressed by the general public as well as the media. Jack reflects upon this briefly when he first observes the derailed tank car: "Fire and explosion were not the inherent dangers here. This death would penetrate, seep into the genes, show itself in bodies not yet born" (116). However, on the surface he seems as shallow, and as ignorant about facts, as the

media coverage when he tries to reassure his son that there is no danger for them: “I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of a department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are” (117). While the humor and irony are evident, the statement is also a clear example of denial behavior. Jack refers to his own person and status as belonging to a privileged group, the middle class and intellectually gifted (as a professor in Hitler studies), and refuses to be a victim of an environmental disaster. He is however eventually forced to recognize the event, which does not discriminate among people but rather breaks down the barriers that Jack might have imagined between himself, others, and the natural environment. The “reality” of the TV disasters invades their constructed sense of homely security. Most of all, Jack’s exposure to the toxic substance Nyodene D. dramatically reflects how the damage done to the environment invades his own body, and consequently triggers his death angst.

“The airborne toxic event” is the principal example of toxicity presented as an external danger in *White Noise*. The main characteristic that makes it stand out is the intensity and peril due to the proximity of the event. But what then about the death that penetrates the human body, and “seep[s] into the genes”? Throughout the novel, in paragraphs and sentences, the white noise is heard—or seen—in glimpses of underlying dangers or interferences in the environment, or in concrete descriptions of the culture we live in at the end of the twentieth century. This is especially relevant for the first and the last part of the novel, and has often been overlooked by critics who focus solely on “the airborne toxic event.”

Internal Dangers

It was as though we'd been forced to recognize the existence of a second kind of death. One was real, the other synthetic. (240)

After “the toxic airborne event” takes place, the idea of death and disease haunts the protagonist and his family. Jack is forced to live with the uncertain possibility that the toxic exposure he experienced might be lethal. However, as the SIMUVAC⁶ computer technician vaguely proclaims at the location of the evacuation: “It’s a question of years. We’ll know more in fifteen years. In the meantime we definitely have a situation.... If you’re still alive at the time, we’ll know that much more than we do now. Nyodene D. has a life span of thirty years. You’ll have made it halfway through” (140-41). Jack knows that he has been exposed to something; however, due to the nature of “the toxic airborne event” – its unclear origin, appearance and consequences – he does not know what will happen to him or when it will happen. This uncertainty contributes to the growing obsession with death that has been evident throughout the novel, but now culminates in the third, and last part of the novel, entitled “Dylarama.”

One could give the presence of the fear of death in the novel a new name – toxic fear – in reference to how Jack’s fear is a consequence of toxic exposure at the same time as the fear itself becomes toxic, permeating the consciousness of the characters. Whereas Jack’s fear of death comes as a consequence of direct exposure to concrete hazards, his wife Babette reveals that her death anxiety derives from an unclear origin, and torments her into a state of desperation, where she sees herself being unfaithful to her husband in order to get access to an unregistered new drug – Dylar (191-203). Her use of this drug functions both as an enforcement and as a contrasting motif in relation to the trope of the toxic and the artificial,

⁶ SIMUVAC is the abbreviation for “simulated evacuation,” the emergency group that makes use of “the airborne toxic event” as an apt rehearsal for a disaster (*White Noise* 139).

which in this part of the novel manifests itself in reference to bioaccumulation and persistency of toxic substances in the natural environment as well as the human body. The way in which Babette's self-medication serves as a supportive motif of the trope of toxicity, as well as a contrast to it, can be seen in the motivation for her actions. Babette is consciously drugging herself to attain a desirable state of mind, knowing that there could be unforeseen consequences. This short-cut mode of thinking could easily be transferred from the universe of the novel to the culture DeLillo is writing out of and about. The use of the medicament is an example of escapism from what seems to be one of the last "real" natural feelings at work in *White Noise*, namely the fear of death. Babette's use of Dylar becomes a numbing achieved by synthetic escape. Jack is likewise "drugged," in the sense of being exposed to toxins, but unwillingly. For Jack, this has unforeseen consequences, such as the "nebulous mass" that grows within his body (280). Similar to the prelude before "the toxic airborne event," the novel makes use of motifs on the sky to mirror Jack's misfortunes when he learns that his exposure has led to a "nebulous mass" growing in him. After his appointment at the "Autumn Harvest Farms" (275-81) where he is thoroughly analyzed with the newest equipment available and given the diagnosis, he walks out and observes that "[i]t was a partially cloudy day with winds diminishing toward sunset" (281). The observation is strikingly similar to that of a weather cast heard or seen on radio or TV. Jack seems thus unable to relate to his surroundings in an autonomous manner – his choice of words is determined by the media.

There is in this part of the novel a noticeable shift in focus concerning where the environmental dangers are perceived to lie. This shift goes from a depiction of the characters' relation to their environment, generated by various channels of "questionable" information formed by the media and in the language they use, to a closer attention to how the damage to the environment directly affects the environment itself and thereby also the characters, as we

will see below when we return to a closer examination of some selected sequences of the novel.

Chapter 22, which opens the last part of the novel, is suffused with an overwhelming sense of death. Set in the supermarket, a “natural” setting for postmodern life, Jack is out shopping with his youngest child, Wilder, when he meets Murray who informs him that a colleague has died, “lost in the surf off Malibu” (168). Learning this, Jack’s perceptions are triggered and he seems at once aware of the “white noise” surrounding him, as the supermarket comes to life: “I was suddenly aware of the dense environmental texture. The automatic doors opened and closed, breathing abruptly. Colors and odors seemed sharper. The sound of gliding feet emerged from a dozen other noises, from the sublittoral drone of maintenance systems ...” (168). Here, DeLillo gives a detailed description of Jack’s immediate sense perceptions. It is striking that organic imagery, such as the “breathing” doors, renders the associations evoked in Jack by his surroundings when he is faced with issues concerning death. The “abrupt breathing” gives associations to a heightened pulse, and in this context, cardiac arrest. Choosing the word “sublittoral” to describe the point of origin of the sounds of the maintenance systems is perhaps most striking. The term “sublittoral” is mostly used in ecology, referring to the zone extending from the point of the seashore at low tide to the continental shelf, or to something relating to this area (“Sublittoral”). Thus, it seems as though the “white noise” from the maintenance systems emerges in Jack’s consciousness in a way similar to the way that sounds would emerge from the sea.

One could argue that the contrast between Jack standing in the postmodern construction of the supermarket and the evoking of nature imagery is made deliberately, so as to connect Jack’s growing fear of death to other topics, such as the rift between natural and built environments. In addition, by simply using the term “sublittoral” DeLillo refers directly back to the cause of death of his colleague, Cotsakis, who was lost in the surf – perhaps in the

sublittoral zone – and thereby reinforces the allusions made to death. DeLillo continues the chapter with a close attention to the topic of death and the dichotomy of polluted and untouched nature:

“It’s strange in a way, isn’t it,” he said, “that we can picture the dead.”

I took Wilder along the fruit bins. The fruit was gleaming and wet, hard-edged. There was a self-conscious quality about it. It looked carefully observed, like four-color fruit in a guide to photography. We veered right at the plastic jugs of spring water and headed for the checkout. (170)

There is an abrupt shift from the talk of death to the observation of the “self-conscious” fruit, which in the supermarket resembles perfected plastic imitations of the original. Along with the fruit the “plastic jugs of spring water” suggest patterns of associations, similar to what Jack has experienced earlier in the novel. The artificiality of the fruit and water that Jack finds in the supermarket is related to the spectacular sunsets charged by pollutants seen earlier in the novel. It is as if the natural scenes and products that one experiences in “real” life are artificially amplified replicas, whereas “real” nature is seen on TV. The “photographic” quality of the fruit makes this clear. Still, the supermarket is referred to as the foundation for their wellbeing: “Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip” (170).

It is evident that Jack experiences radical changes in how he interacts with his surroundings and his community after “the toxic airborne event.” Quite explicitly, the environment around Jack seems to decay as he becomes more and more obsessed with the thought of him having toxic substances in his body: “Some of the houses in town were showing signs of neglect. The park benches needed repair, the broken streets needed

resurfacing. Signs of the times” (170). Finding the surroundings becoming damaged like him, Jack seems to long for the purity and innocence represented in his youngest children: “I liked being with Wilder. The world was a series of fleeting gratifications. He took what he could, then immediately forgot it in the rush of a subsequent pleasure. It was this forgetfulness I envied and admired” (170). Perhaps most challenging for Jack is the changing relation to his wife after the “airborne toxic event.” The trope of toxicity can here almost be seen as the third wheel in their relationship, metaphorically functioning as an active agent in the melodrama by its poisonous presence. The trope of toxicity is on this level inextricably connected with the trope of death, which is exemplified by the competitive manner in which they argue about who is most terrorized by the thought of death (197-99).

In addition to “the signs of the times” that he observes, such as the decaying environment of his local community, his wife’s secret use of an unchecked medicament, and the sudden death of his colleague, Jack is ultimately forced to acknowledge the illness that may lie hidden within his own body. To Jack’s despair, the theme of death and disease is also brought up in the lunch talk at the College-on-the-Hill:

“In New York,” he said, looking directly at me, “people ask if you have a good internist. This is where true power lies. The inner organs.... ‘Who’s your internist?’ someone will say in a challenging tone. The question implies that if your internist’s name is unfamiliar, you are certain to die of a mushroom-shaped tumor on your pancreas. (217)

Alfonse’s comment is not only bragging New York jargon, it also points inwards to the hidden. Unintentionally, Alfonse reminds Jack of how his body may be banefully affected by toxic exposure. The invisible quality of toxins combined with their escalation over time

highlights one of the greatest dangers to humans when the environment is subject to damage. David B. Morris argues in the article “Environment: The White Noise of Health” that our immediate concern should not be only what we humans do to damage the environment; we also have to “rethink the ways in which the environments we inhabit, ancient or modern, have to do with health” (8). He points out that since the age of modernity, humans have to a significant extent contributed to affecting our surroundings, in a way and a tempo that has not been matched before. Human interference leads not only to possible damage to the environment, such as species extinctions and climate change, but will also have direct consequences for human health.

There seems to be no peace of mind for Jack, even as time passes and the everyday life settles around him: “The *déjà vu* crisis centers closed down. The hotline was quietly discontinued. People seemed on the verge on forgetting” (221). “Forgetting” is the clue here, as it is also the sought-after quality of the young ones. “Forgetting,” however, does not solve the underlying problem here, but seems to be an inevitable human response to the environmental crisis of modernity. Jack’s envy of the young ones’ ability of forgetting things as they pass, combined with the novel’s emphasis on the media’s quick and catchy coverage of natural disasters, underlines that there is something substantial that lacks in this fictional world, or perhaps that there is something wrong with the substance of this fictional universe.

The failure of effective response to the environmental problems by the characters in the novel can be seen in relation to the lack of organic and natural substance in their milieu. Simulations, artificiality and synthetic matter are prevalent throughout their existence, and the characters even start to define themselves as such: “There’s something artificial about my death. It’s shallow, unfulfilling. I don’t belong to the earth or sky. They ought to carve an aerosol can on my tombstone” (283). As the text infuses the natural and organic with artificial attributes, it seems to invite a critically distanced notion that language no longer can escape

the plasticity of a synthetic reality. Just as DeLillo's text is being attentive to how the images and language of the postmodern consumer culture shape how his characters respond to their surroundings during an environmental disaster, the text is similarly attentive to how certain patterns of thought determine their response to what is happening with their own bodies. Moreover, the text imitates the language of the media and can therefore be seen to embrace one of its cultural megaphones; nevertheless, the embrace is done by satiric distance.

The toxic danger in *White Noise* is both an invisible and a visible presence in the environment of the novel. The visible can be seen in the examples of how human perception is "framed." However, the environmental crisis exists also as a danger within the characters. The body itself becomes a reservoir of alien toxic substances.

Chapter Two: *Underworld*

Underworld, which was published in 1997, is generally considered to be DeLillo's magnum opus. The novel expands on a number of themes that can be found in other novels by DeLillo, such as the impact of technology on human life, an awareness of national and international political issues, and of the subject's relation to the world, to name a few. Waste is one of the main themes in *Underworld*, and this is also noted by several critics that have written on this subject in relation to *Underworld*, such as Patrick O'Donnell, David H. Evans, Ruth Helyer, and Jonathan Levin. The theme of waste appears throughout the novel in various forms and substances, in the context of the different decades covered in the six parts of the novel, as a basis for professions and artistic work, and as a counterforce to both the late-capitalist consumer culture and the politics of the Cold War. One sees this clearly in the duality of Klara Sax's project of turning rubbish to rubles on the one hand, and in Nick Shay's moral struggle with his dealings with waste on the other.

The novel's structure is based on a reverse chronology from 1992 to 1951, using fragmentary sequences and a large gallery of characters. Initiated by a prologue that is set on October 3, 1951 (23), the novel opens with the juxtaposition of two "shots." The famous "Shot Heard 'Round the World" when the New York Giants defeated the Brooklyn Dodgers at Polo Grounds is a landmark moment in American baseball history, and also an important reference in American culture.⁷ The other "shot" is revealed when we learn through J. Edgar Hoover, present at the Polo Grounds, that the Soviet Union has conducted an atomic test (23). Immediately, DeLillo sets the tone for a reminiscence of the Cold War era, decade by decade,

⁷ The significance of the "Shot Heard 'Round the World" in American culture is in this context important because it symbolizes the chance of victory for the "underdog." The phrase has been used and re-used in different settings, and has its origins in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Concord Hymn" (1837), where it refers to the American Revolutionary War.

from 1992 till this moment in the 1950s. In this account DeLillo reveals the fears and joys of the era and the effects of the growing consumer society from the 1950s and onward.

Underworld, whose apparent ambition is to render an image of the American society during the last half of the twentieth century, inevitably touches upon key questions in the environmental debate due to the intertwinement of the Western late-capitalist mode of living and its consequences for human and non-human life. This chapter will in three different sections provide close readings of passages that raise the interconnected issues of consumerism, advertising, waste, and Cold War rhetoric, which are overtly present in the novel, and argue how these concepts frame the portrayal of both built and natural environments. In short, the first section will look at the evocation of sublime aesthetics in the polluted. In the second section, the connection and interrelation between advertisements, war rhetoric and the environment will be addressed. Lastly, the final section will propose a reading of the “cityscape,” and how it functions in the novel as a point of departure in order to mirror and problematize notions of the landscape. Overall, we will see how the grand narrative of the novel – the era of the Cold War – is evoked through certain motifs throughout the novel, and how these motifs invite an ecocritical reading of both the novel and the forty-year-long era it represents. These motifs range from the general, such as nuclear power, differing manifestations of waste, the filmic image, the desert and the sky, to the specific, including references to the World Trade Centre and DuPont Inc.

Re-framing the Landscape

When we move from *White Noise* to *Underworld*, a continued interest in certain issues of environmental concern can be noticed. For instance, substances that are dangerous or infectious to the environment, such as spills of chemical matter, toxic- and nuclear waste, are recurrent challenges that the characters deal and live with. The ways in which these

substances both influence and define the human relation to the environment, are central to the novel. The novel highlights several moments where descriptions of the landscape and the cityscape are strongly related to refuse, waste, and other trails of discarded objects that are accumulated throughout history. Consequently, the novel's thematic concerns open up for an ecocritical reading. However, further analysis can be made if one observes how the novel portrays different ways in which the postmodern landscape is perceived by the characters. For instance, elements of the pastoral function as conflicting concepts in the description of the characters' experiences of their built environment. This means that, in a state of postmodernity – where the pristine nature and the wild have become archaic concepts – one finds a projection of pastoral aesthetic ideals onto the environment that is built and constructed. In this manner, one sees a sublimation of the built landscape.

A section from *Underworld* (183-86), which presents an image of a manipulated sunset similar to the ones found in *White Noise* (22, 61, 227, 324), could be said to speak in dialogue with the former novel on the subject matter of the chemical and the toxic. In the section describing the sunset from Part 2 of *Underworld*, we follow Brian Glassic, a colleague and friend of the main protagonist Nick Shay, in his car on his way to Manhattan:

He drove along turnpikes and skyways, seeing Manhattan come and go in a valium sunset, smoky and golden. The car wobbled in the sound booms of highballing trucks, drivers perched in tall cabs with food, drink, dope and pornography, and the rigs seemed to draw the little car down the pike in their sheering wind. (183)

At the beginning of this extract the image of the sunset is described as having the quality of valium. *Valium* is a trademark for diazepam, a tranquilizing muscle-relaxant drug used chiefly to relieve anxiety. However, in this sentence valium is used as an adjective. It is striking that

DeLillo is once more “infecting” the natural image of the sunset with a human engineered chemical substance. The parallel with the novel discussed in chapter one is striking. Clearly, the theme of anxiety and fear of dying that is central in *White Noise* is invoked as well here. The anesthetizing of fears and anxieties, which is desired by the characters in *White Noise*, is hinted at by the choice of *valium* to describe the sunset in *Underworld*. One could say that Brian consumes the sunset in order to be calmed. As a contrast to the media-saturated environment of *White Noise*, terminology from chemical substances is used by the text in order to describe Brian’s relation to the sunset. This natural phenomenon is thus synthesized. Further, the passage echoes the trope of manipulated nature exemplified by the sunsets that became crowd-gathering events in the aftermath of the “airborne toxic event,” being perceived as more spectacular and beautiful than “natural” sunsets (*White Noise* 227). One should perhaps remind oneself that the whole event of eying a sunset is only filled with particular feelings because we as humans have attributed meanings to this regular natural cycle. When the sunsets in *White Noise* appear to be enhanced by the “airborne toxic event,” one may question whether humans favor an artificial landscape above a pristine landscape, that is, a landscape unchanged by human interference, if it appears in a more aesthetically pleasing manner.

In *White Noise* we find the following passage:

The edge of the earth trembled in a darkish haze. Upon it lay the sun, going down like a ship in a burning sea. Another postmodern sunset, rich in romantic imagery ... Not that this was one of the stronger sunsets. There had been more dynamic colors, a deeper sense of narrative sweep. (227)

The “postmodern sunset” can be understood here as far removed from a pastoral image; instead, for the spectators, it becomes a suitable product, which they overlay with “romantic imagery.” This is not to say that the sunset hereby is removed from its original state. The tradition of the pastoral is indeed merely another form of structuring one’s vision, and could also easily be filled with “romantic imagery.” Here, a regularly recurring natural phenomenon such as the sunset has come under the domination of a man-made economic system, which in this novel is capitalism. The reevaluation of nature thus involves a transition from the pastoral to consumption.

The motif of toxicity is not as overtly present in *Underworld* as it is in *White Noise*, but it is definitely in the air. The sunset that Brian Glassic is watching is not only “valium,” but it is also “smoky and golden,” and the passage continues with a compelling description of a hub of traffic madness:

He drove into the spewing smoke of acres of burning truck tires and the planes descended and the transit cranes stood in rows at the marine terminal and he saw billboards for Hertz and Avis and Chevy Blazer, for Marlboro, Continental and Goodyear, and he realized that all the things around him, the planes taking off and landing, the streaking cars, the tires on the cars, the cigarettes that the drivers of the cars were dousing in their ashtrays—all these were on the billboards around him, systematically linked in some self-referring relationship that had a kind of neurotic tightness, an inescapability, as if the billboards were generating reality... (183)

The image of smoke is enforced in the text by phrases like “the spewing smoke of acres of burning truck tires” and “the cigarettes that the drivers of the cars were dousing in their ashtrays” (183), in addition to the traffic that surrounds Brian. We are invited to participate in

Brian's "moment of epiphany," when he discovers that all of the products and companies that are represented on the billboards around him in fact are products of consumption at the same time as they construct the environment around him. This "epiphany" works well at the level of the personal experience of a given character in this sequence in the novel, but it can be transferred to reflect the society as a whole. One may wonder why DeLillo has chosen to include exclusively companies and products that represent the automotive and tobacco industries in this sequence. The result is both a suffocating environment and an environment of suffocation. Brian experiences that it is the billboards that are generating reality, and this experience has a "neurotic tightness" to it – a strangling sensation. The environment is also suffocating Brian, so to speak, given the air pollution that these industries generate. The short glimpse of the sunset – or, one might say, the image of the image of the sunset – seems to be the only sign of nature not affected by human interference. This feeling of a further distancing to nature is even more brought into question when Brian invokes an image of a desert landscape while in fact looking at the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island:

... he looked across a narrow body of water to a terraced elevation on the other side. It was reddish brown, flat-topped, monumental, sunset burning in the heights, and Brian thought he was hallucinating an Arizona butte. But it was real and it was man-made, swept by wheeling gulls, and he knew it could be only one thing—the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. (183-84)

The images evoked in this sequence might reverse normal expectations regarding the representation of reality. Objects that perhaps would be thought of as artificial in a landscape, such as the Fresh Kills Landfill, become the object of awe – "it was real and it was man-made." On the other hand, a hallucination of a natural landscape like the "Arizona butte"

manifests itself as the artificial object. For Brian, this sight invites other associations of reversals: “He imagined he was watching the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza—only this was twenty-five times bigger ... The towers of the World Trade Center were visible in the distance and he sensed a poetic balance between that idea and this one” (184). The juxtaposing of the two images of Fresh Kills and the World Trade Center illustrates a general theme of this novel, the consequences of late capitalist mass consumption: the landfill on Staten Island is a direct result of a consumer society that leaves visible marks on the earth. Moreover, this representation of the landfill and the skyscrapers indicates a shift in how a postmodern culture can see these objects as “natural” landmarks in the environment. They acquire the aura of natural phenomena in the sense that they are conceived to be a part of that which has always been there.

With the visions of the Fresh Kills landfill in mind it seems appropriate to take a step back in order to give a brief outline of the commercial consumer society, and how the issue of consumerism directly leads up to the question of waste. In his essay “Consumption,” Mark Sagoff argues that modern usage of the term in short encompasses two different conceptions. The first refers to the level of buying, using and discarding various items and products, while the second refers to how the natural ecosystem is disturbed by a level of consumption of natural resources that exhausts the sustainability of the earth (483). This latter perspective also includes emissions and effluents created in the process, which the earth is not capable to absorb (473). As Sagoff points out, many critics agree that an increase in consumption according to the first sense of the term leads to an increase of the second sense of the term, and that the expected standard of living in modernity is not compatible with maintaining the balance of our ecological system.

Furthermore, Sagoff argues that it is possible to envision a future where one could consume at the current level – or more – provided that technology and industry were more

energy efficient and were using fewer raw materials. However, Sagoff also predicts that even if this were the case, it would still be an empty pursuit of happiness (483). For example, although production and consumption is higher now than it was during the 1950s, the level of contentment and satisfaction has little, or no, correlation to this (476). As Sagoff points out: “Critics since Thoreau have pointed out time and again that people, after their basic needs are met, do not generally view themselves as happier after they have acquired some consumer good they coveted” (476). At the core of Sagoff’s thinking one finds (perhaps a quite well-established idea) that consumerism, even if it based on a sustainable production, is not meaningful in itself: “Consumption . . . must serve a purpose, such as satisfying basic needs or embodying cultural aspirations and ideals” (483). One of these ideals, he argues, is the experience of and respect for nature of and for itself. But where Sagoff divides the experiences of nature into two main categories – making a distinction between those who see nature as a reservoir of resources for humans to use, and those who look to nature with reverence and respect – in *Underworld* one can see manifestations of a third route. The reverence and respect, which one should think would be reserved for a natural scenery as an antithesis to a materialistic view of nature, can also be found in passages where the characters engage in the landscapes and sites that represent human consumption, and where the natural environment is exhausted. That is, in *Underworld*, there are examples of sublime representations of a corrupted nature, which problematize the way the culture of postmodernity relates to its surroundings.

The experience Brian has at the Fresh Kills landfill is described with a reverence and awe that traditionally has been used in pastoral writing, for instance when the reader learns that “Brian felt invigorated, looking at this scene” (184). Brian is acknowledging an aesthetic quality of the landfill that impresses him. At the same time, the text conveys an acute sense of the effects of consumerism, and the (false) hope for happiness it is driven by, which is

inconsistent with the view that the environment is primarily a source for humans to use. Brian's train of thought continues: "... appetites and hankerings, the sodden second thoughts came runneling out, the things you wanted ardently and then did not. He'd seen a hundred landfills but none so vast as this. Yes, impressive and distressing" (185). Although this is the reflection of a single character who contemplates his field of work as a waste manager, the theme of consumption and waste "piles up" throughout the novel. But still, it is unclear whether the novel is only articulating a call for ethical rethinking of our responsibility for the environment, or whether it invites us to step aside from environmental issues and rather contemplate our relation to the human-made landscape.

Nick Shay, who is also employed by Whiz Co, displays similar traits as Brian regarding his view on the grandness of waste. When first taking the job during the 1970s, he experiences the massive impact that the firm's endeavor has on him:

You stand at the head of a corridor and by the time you walk to the far end you have adopted the comprehensive philosophy of the firm, the *Weltanschauung*. I use this grave and layered word because somewhere in its depths there is a whisper of mystical contemplation that seems totally appropriate to the subject of waste. (282)

The novel's self-reflexive comments on the importance of the word "Weltanschauung" is striking. The word "grave" is in this context used as an adjective, and suggests the solemnity and seriousness of the subject of waste. However, the philosophical concept that enshrines the firm's guiding principles is also described as "layered," and when Nick hears "whisper[s]" "in its depths," the association to an actual grave in the ground is established. His new employment can in this sense be thought of as an undertaker – he is now ready to take his culture's refuse to the underworld. Further, the noun "Weltanschauung" means world-view,

and denotes in this context how one looks at the world in terms of ideology, philosophy or paradigm. The roots of this word, however, can also be translated from the German “Welt” – *world* and “Anschauung” – *perception* (“Weltanschauung”). In this sense a new perceptive engagement between the subject and the physical world is drawn. Nick Shay has not only accepted the firm’s ideological and philosophical vision, he has also acquired a new way of perceiving his physical surroundings.

The novel presents, then, a variety of built environments such as landfills and cityscapes that contrast the natural landscapes. However, as the natural landscape often appears polluted by human activity, such as deserts used for waste management or as nuclear test sites, the opposition between pristine nature and culture is smudged.

As a contrast to the view of the landfills, in different chapters in Part 4, we follow the artist Klara Sax’s rooftop summer during the summer of 1974, when parts of the World Trade Center complex were built – “[s]he saw it almost everywhere she went” (372) – and when she during a garbage strike in New York “found a hidden city above the grid of fever streets” (371). The presence of the World Trade Center is once again brought forward in the novel and functions as a linking motif, along with the waste, between Sax’s presence in New York during the 1970s and Brian Glassic’s vision of the Fresh Kills in the 1990s. The connection seems to be clear; in the 1970s we are presented to the birth of the towers that were to become icons of global capitalism along with garbage floating in the streets during the workers’ strike, and in the 1990s we see the full-grown landfill with the twin towers in the background, merging into the cityscape. The juxtaposition of these two images may be read as a direct appeal to the reader’s environmental conscience.

As a contrast, later in the chapter, Klara Sax’ observation at a rooftop party voices the fascination for the polluted, the sublimation of the adulterated environment: “ ... and it was a beautiful thing to see, the woman’s lightsome stride and the great faded day that shows

burningly in the glass slabs and then the power-company smokestacks down near the river, blowing gorgeous poisons” (470). In contrast to Brian’s neurotic experience of the smoke-infested and self-referring commercial reality, we are now seeing the anonymous power-company’s poisonous smoke, which Klara finds beautiful. The pastoral tradition is once again used in a reversed manner, as well in a subversive manner. It seems to be a character trait of Klara Sax to be fascinated by the re-contextualization of things that are discarded from use. A similar response is seen when she visits the Watts Towers in Los Angeles⁸: “She didn’t know what this was exactly. ... A place riddled with epiphanies, that’s what it was” (492). Her character can also be seen as a mirroring of the author himself. As Peter Knight aptly observes, Klara Sax figures in the novel as “a model of an artist whose originality consists in recycling ..., in the same way that the novel itself constitutes a recycling of both literary antecedents and DeLillo’s own oeuvre” (“DeLillo” 29).

Klara Sax’s latest project, when Shay finds her in the 1990s, is an installation of scrapped B-52 bombers that she and her crew paint in the desert of New Mexico; “Planes that used to carry nuclear bombs, ta-da, ta-da, out across the world” (70). By bringing these outdated military aircraft back to the sites where nuclear weapons were developed and tested, Sax is making a political comment, although she refuses to see it that way herself: “This is an art project, not a peace project. This is a landscape painting in which we use the landscape itself. The desert is central to this piece. It’s the surround. It’s the framing device. It’s the four-part horizon” (70). However, in creating her “landscape painting” she is, as it were, editing waste, and even with the desert landscape as a “framing device,” she could be considered to be an artist of recycling. Importance is also given to the political-historical context in this project by the specific use of location – the desert landscapes of New Mexico and Nevada – that later in the novel are revealed to be sites for nuclear experimenting. In fact,

⁸ Also called the Towers of Simon Rodia, the Watts Towers is a construction made of steel, glass, tiles, porcelain, and a variety of discarded and “found” items.

we learn that Nick's brother Matt was employed here in 1978: "He worked with data from real events. There was the thing that fell to earth on Albuquerque in 1957, a thermonuclear bomb of jumbo tonnage mistakenly released from a B-36" (401-02). An eerie palimpsestic effect is created in this sequence, where the different layers of the palimpsest display a movement from beauty to destruction, and from destruction to beauty, blurring the lines of recognition. The war machines become decorative elements of the once original pristine Western landscape that was corrupted by the military-industrial complex of the Cold War.

Advertising: Consumerism and Cold War Rhetoric

Advertising employs a specific rhetoric that is closely connected to the machinery of consumer culture that proliferated in post-WWII America. Further, the frequent references that are made in *Underworld* to advertising, commercial products and phrases of jingles all contribute to a discursive framing of a commercial culture's environmental attitudes. In addition, the frequent ads echo what was referred to as "disturbances" in *White Noise*, for instance in the buzzing of the radios and TVs in the homes of the Gladneys. However, whereas *White Noise* describes the effects of advertising and the media on a local level, *Underworld* aims at describing larger traits on the national level. One could speculate whether DeLillo, who has a background in the advertising business of the early 1960s, has a "knack" of seeing how things were done. Evident in *Underworld*, at least, is the cynicism of particular major companies in the way they promote their products. Knowledge (or perhaps sheer ignorance) about how manufacturing of various products and their use impacted the natural environment is not a general concern when the main goal is to make profit. When stating that the saturation of waste resulting from excessive consumer culture is a major theme of *Underworld*, one must also look at how the novel points to the defining roles of the media and advertising in promoting consumption.

The power of the advertising industry in enunciating the needs and urges of the society is pinpointed by one of the characters in *Underworld*, the ad-man Charles Wainwright, when he says: “There is only one truth. Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world” (530). This quote emphasizes that the power of advertising companies resides in their ability of gaining a person’s attention and not letting it go, and purposefully influencing this process towards economic revenue. Indirectly, the statement also suggests that our immediate examination of the world – visual perception – seems to be corrupted, since the source of one’s experience could be manipulated. However, such power given to the commercial companies and their advertising agencies cannot be easily accepted. Knowledge of, and moral response to, damages done to the natural environment make us question the rhetoric of advertisement and other defining images and words that commodify the natural world, or that damage it for the sake of production and profit. The novel suggests how knowledge about the world can be constructed both from an empiricist and rationalist point of view when the Jesuit Father instructs Nick Shay: “You didn’t see the thing because you don’t know how to look. And you don’t know how to look because you don’t know the names” (540).

In various sequences in Part 5 of the novel, DeLillo effectively links together fragments describing the American society during the 1950s and 60s, where voices representing different occupational situations and social strata articulate the interrelationship between consumer society, advertising, Cold War mentality, and environmental questions. This era, “the placid nineteen-fifties,” as it is referred to by Eric Deming earlier in the novel (410), and the 1960s, are characterized by general prosperity, the rise of the suburbs, a growing middle class and conformity, but it was also a time of dismay and uprising in domestic policy and society as well as running wars abroad (J. M. Faragher et al. 739-57). This tension is additionally fueled by the climate of the Cold War, which functions as a binding motif throughout the fragments in this part of the novel.

For example, the language and the images that the ad-men in the advertising company “Parmelee Lockhart & Keown” (527) use for their commercials, evidences a heavy internalization of Cold War rhetoric: “The creative types here in the shop wanted to do a Bomb Your Lawn campaign. A little twist on the fact that these fertilizer ingredients, plus fuel oil, could produce a rather loud disturbance if ignited. ... *Bomb your lawn with Nitrotex.*” (528). The novel here gives a glimpse of the socio-political climate in the United States at the onset of the 1960s. The black-white rhetoric of “us versus them,” expressed as ideological supremacy defined by militaristic power, makes its way into commercial marketing in order to sell products that were conceived as “truly American.” The text states this quite explicitly: “Every third campaign featured some kind of play on weapons. The agency was still in shock over the Equinox Oil campaign. ... a sixty-second commercial shot in the Jornada del Muerto in remotest New Mexico. Site of the first atomic test shot ever made” (529). The novel imagines how the impact of Cold War rhetoric and NASA’s space program could influence consumers of this era, and especially children, when we are presented to the Demings: “All the other kids ate Oreo cookies. Eric ate Hydrox cookies because the name sounded like rocket fuel” (519). The way in which words and images that are connected to militaristic power are used in marketing consumer products suggests that the general attitude towards militaristic technology is positive. For Eric Deming, the public discourse of advertising merges with his personal desires.

In *Underworld*, the link that is made between Cold War rhetoric and consumerism can be interpreted as a warning about threats towards the natural environment, especially when considering the companies that the novel alludes to. For instance, the novel’s use of the slogan “Better Things for Better Living ... Through Chemistry” (499, 602), is a direct reference to E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company, also known as DuPont, which is one of the most influential chemical industrial companies of the twentieth century. As their slogan

states, they have developed many polymer products that are daily used throughout the world, making “living better,” such as Teflon, nylon, and neoprene. However, the company was also active in the development and use of chlorofluorocarbon (CFC), which is an ozone-depleting chemical that was extensively used in refrigerants and aerosol sprays up till the late 1980s. The profound irony of repeating the slogan “Better Living ... Through Chemistry” is obvious when considering the fatal consequences that the holes in the ozone layer will lead to. DuPont has not only contributed to concrete damage to the natural environment, but also warfare technology. In the 1930s the company was known as the “Merchants of Death,” having profited on World War I weapon and munitions production (Goldberg 48). What is more, the head of the Manhattan project Leslie Groves (1896-1970) worked hard to contract DuPont to participate in the project, and succeeded: “On December 1, 1942, the company entered into a formal cost-plus-fixed-fee agreement to design (subject to Met Lab approval), build, and operate all plutonium production for MED [Manhattan Engineer District]” (Goldberg 48). The connotations evoked by the word “plutonium” speak directly to sections of the novel dealing with nuclear weapons: the gruesome consequences they effect on the natural and the human environment, the difficult issue of disposal of radioactive waste, and the cultural fascination evoked by its awesome power.

Another major chemical company that is mentioned in *Underworld* is The Dow Chemical Company, referred to as just Dow in a fragment dated October 18, 1967 (596-604). However, as a contrast to the positive-sounding marketing of DuPont and other advertisements earlier in the text, Dow does not present itself on behalf of its own marketing, but rather via students protesting against the Vietnam War on a so called “Dow Day” in Madison, Wisconsin: “The radio said, DowDay DowDay DowDay DowDay” (598). “DowDay” could perhaps function as a twist on “doomsday,” considering the involvement of the Dow Company in the Vietnam War. In this war they were the sole producer of napalm B

for use by the United States military when other producers stopped production after being met with similar protests and negative responses. (Hay 4) Dow's commercial is, however, subject to parody on the radio: "Common Sense, Uncommon Chemistry. This was Dow's catchy ad slogan and the woman read it on the air repeatedly in a soft and sexy voice" (601). The social response towards Dow is in this sequence articulated as being quite confrontational:

Yes, we are talking about waste, we are talking about fertilizer, we are talking about waste and weapons, we are talking about ANFO, the bomb that begins in the asshole of a barnyard pig.

PigPigPigPigPigPigPig. (600)

The context is shifted when a later fragment in the same part of the novel, dated December 1, 1969, gives an account of the experience of a B-52 bomber flying over Vietnam.

Approximately eight years after Charles Wainwright was composing catchy ads grounded in the rhetoric of the Cold War, he finds himself now in the midst of real warfare, growing tired of destruction: "He didn't want to kill any more VC. And he was developing a curious concern for the local landscape. Tired of killing the forest, the trees of the forest, the birds that inhabit the trees, the insects that live their whole karmic lives nestled in the wing feathers of the birds" (614). The paragraph renders a view of the environment from the sky, circling in on Charles' associations into smaller and smaller units, from the panoramic view of "the local landscape" down to the insects living in the "wing feathers of the birds." One sees here that the ad man Charles is facing a different reality compared to the war-rhetoric of his advertisement business. In Charles' insight, the novel realigns its focus through the contrast between ads, which represent the non-substantial, and practice, which in this case is the reality of war.

Moreover, the movement from the general to the specific in the sentence mirrors the novel's take on the Cold War. The structure resembles an ecosystem, where the small units take part in the whole. The "local landscape" represents the socio-political stratum of the Cold War, the forest and its trees represent cultural instances, companies, buildings and debris, while the birds and its insects reflect classes of people and their individual members.

A Historical Perspective: Fragmented Images of the Environment

Jennifer Ladino argues for the view that the concept of "nostalgia" may open up for an ecocritical reading of the novel: "*Underworld's* reverse chronology enables us to flash back from a waste-ridden future and reflect on how the rise of consumer culture in the 1950s contributed directly to the present-day global capitalist economy" (8). As noted, Part 5, which concerns itself with the 1950s and 1960s, provides glances into the elements that drive consumer culture, and how products are conceived by consumers. In addition to this, the narrative is fragmentary and episodic, arranged on a wide historical-political horizontal line – from Vietnam to suburbia, and from J. Edgar Hoover to Lenny Bruce.

Consequently, when one looks at Part 6 of the novel, which deals with life in the old Italian Bronx during the fall of 1951 till the summer of 1952, a nostalgic reading could "open up" the text and give the impression that "things were better before," not only from a political and social point of view, but also from an environmental perspective. The global and the national perspective that has been aimed at throughout the novel, is at this point in the novel narrowed down to focusing solely on the Bronx, which also contributes to the impression of a simpler and safer time. To think that "things were better before" may also be said to be a trick of memory, a romanticizing of one's younger years, which is how nostalgia inevitably works. DeLillo, who grew up in the Bronx, has said himself of this specific part of the novel: "It was enormously pleasurable for me to write Part 6. It was an act of memory that I could not have

undertaken without a typewriter and a piece of paper, because writing, ultimately, I think, is a concentrated form of thinking” (DeLillo, “An Interview” 103). This could also explain the change of structure from Part 5 to 6, and the warmer, more intimate mood of this part.

Nevertheless, the characters in the novel, as well as the reader, perceive that the surroundings in the novel change throughout the last five decades of the twentieth century. The change of the surroundings is an expression of damage done and dangers to the natural environment. These are consequences that extend far beyond the range of *Underworld*, but nevertheless are articulated within the novel. Using the Bronx as a point of departure, the discussion that follows will move on to a close reading on different types of “framed landscapes” that highlight the environmental issues in the novel. This is often achieved in the text when the urban landscape of New York is juxtaposed to images of desert landscapes, and through associations made to objects in the sky.

The Bronx of the 1950s is described as a pulsating force of life in the novel. Following Albert Bronzini through the streets one witnesses the children play, the old tradition of butchers, barbers and family cafés, and the fragrance of fruit that gives association to exotic bazaars (661-66). This is the Bronx that the reader is presented to, going back forty years since Part 1 of the novel. The reexamination of the Bronx that one is presented with in Part 6 works like a reversed retrospection due to the reverse chronology of the novel. In a way, one experiences – via the characters – the streets of old Bronx after having visited the same place in the 1980s at an earlier stage in the novel, and one is therefore presented with the past from a present perspective. In this sense, one can also conceptualize the landscape of the Bronx as it is presented in the text as an instance of palimpsestic play. The new layers of meaning added through time have been removed, peeled off, so to speak. Accordingly, when one considers the way in which the text calls attention to the environmental damage in the 1980s

and 1990s as a result of Cold War politics and consumer culture, one might be inclined to think that “things were better before.”

In Part 2, which is set to the early 1990s and mid-80s, the novel gives an account of how it is to return to the Bronx for the Shay brothers, as well as glimpses into the old age of Albert Bronzini and Sister Edgar. The return to the Bronx in Part 2 is consequently juxtaposed with the later renderings of the Bronx in Part 6, and speaks of the changes that have taken place within this specific place. The urban landscape of the 1980s and 1990s is radically changed as compared to the later account of the 1950s. However, in the case of Bronzini, one finds an embodiment of tradition and craftsmanship that refers to the past, like the baseball from the 1951 pennant. Through the insistency and the seriousness enacted in the process of cutting the hair of his old friend Eddie (225-27) one is brought back to the atmosphere of the old Bronx. Strikingly, the novel produces a new image on the same page (227), almost in the manner of montage, producing an *intratextual* as well as an *intertextual* frame of reference:

Space burial. He thought of the contrails on that blue day out over that ocean, two years ago if that's when it was—how the boosters sailed apart and hung the terrible letter Y in the still air. The vapor stayed intact for some time, the astronauts fallen to the sea but also still up there, graved in frozen smoke, and he lay awake in the night and saw that deep Atlantic sky and thought this death was soaring and clean, an exalted thing, a passing of the troubled body into vapor and flame, out above the world, monogrammed, the Y of dying young.

He wasn't sure people wanted to see this. Willing to see the systems failure and the human suffering. But the beauty, the high faith of space, how could such qualities be linked to death? (227)

In all likelihood, the reference is here made to the disaster of the Space Shuttle *Challenger*, which exploded about a minute after take-off on January 28, 1986. These are the night-time reflections of old Bronzini, whose thoughts, for some unforeseen reason after his visit at Eddie and Mercedes, drift to this disaster that happened two years earlier. In this section the trope of the Cold War appears in the context of the space race, linked to the *Challenger*. Further, one might say that the end of the Cold War is indicated by the words “Space burial,” suggesting the exhaustion of the two superpowers, after decades of technological power struggle. It could also, then, be a comment on the technological limits and the finiteness of human reach, in space, and on earth. Even the most ingenious technological innovations could collapse, “the systems failure and the human suffering,” thus eventually breaking the “high faith of space,” the idea of constant progression of human endeavor.

It is, above all, the language of this sequence that draws the reader’s attention to it. An intratextual reference is made to an earlier sequence in *Underworld*, and both of these connect in an intertextual dialogue with *White Noise*. Once again, as in Jack Gladney’s warning from the sky (109), DeLillo uses the image of contrails on the sky in order to activate a chain of thoughts. In *Underworld*, the sequence with Bronzini points back to the previous chapter of the novel (Part 2, chapter 6), where Nick and Matt visit their mother in the Bronx. In a short section in this chapter (214-15) Matt is on his way back to his mother’s house bringing dinner – repeating the daily routine of his childhood when he was coming home from the butcher as a kid – when he looks up towards the sky:

Out over the trees he saw the residue of a jet contrail, the vapor losing its shape, beginning to spread and rib out, and he thought of the desert of course, the weapons range and flypaths and the way the condensation in the sky was the only sign of human endeavor as far as he could see, a city boy out camping, taking his soul struggle

to the backcountry, and the mach-2 booms came skylapping down and the vapor formed an ice trail in the heavens. (214-15)

This sequence, as the one above, repeats imagery and language found in the earlier novel. In *White Noise*, we find only a brief observation of the sky, and the observation of the contrails functions primarily as a bad omen for Jack Gladney, signifying “the airborne toxic event.” Jack Gladney’s failure of seeing “the signs of the times,” which the contrails on the sky represent, reflects the novel’s projection of the environment as having acquired a normal presence of the synthetic. The environmental damage is in *White Noise* expressed through manifestations in the human body and in changing modes of perception, and in the characters’ fear. In *Underworld*, the contrails on the sky are not ignored, but could rather be argued to activate further reflection on the past of the characters. In relation to the blindness of Jack Gladney, due to the naturalization of technology in the novel, the contrails in *Underworld* trigger associations of human endeavor.

The situation is, however, different in the cases of Matt and Bronzini. The associations that Matt makes are triggered by his physical engagement with his surroundings; it is an event happening at that specific moment when he walks the street of the Bronx. In contrast, Bronzini uses his imagination rather than his perceptions to recall the past event: “he thought of the contrails on that blue day...” (227). The language in the two sequences emphasizes the notion of how the characters experience the event in time, and in different situations. For Matt, the vapor of the contrail is vanishing, dissolving into the air by seconds, which underlines the immediacy of the situation, while for Bronzini “the vapor stayed intact for some time,” the smoke is thought of as frozen, and he even sees the contrails in the shape of Y – signaling the question “why?” The evocation of these images, in one case triggered by visual perception and in the other by memory, share the quality of leaping from the level of

the individual character to the larger political-historical scope of *Underworld*. In this sense one can see environmental issues presented by the grander themes of the novel, such as the Cold War nuclear race.

The sequence focused on Matt produces a juxtaposition of urban and desert landscapes, two landscapes that each bring with them different places of memory, in terms of childhood and young adulthood. One could see a continuum be drawn, extending from Matt's childhood in the Bronx, shopping for his mother, to his engagement with nuclear weapons in the desert, and back to the streets of New York. Moreover, DeLillo is recycling the motif of the contrails from *White Noise*, and the associations made to these, in order to activate a certain trope. In *White Noise* the trope was toxicity, but in the examples discussed above the tropes of human involvement and destruction are dominant. The contrails represent signs of ambitious political endeavors that result in catastrophes, such as the *Challenger* disaster, or military rearmament that is linked to nuclear weapons. Even when Matt brings his girlfriend to the desert for a reclusive weekend the signals from the sky haunt them, leaving no room for doubt that the sky has now become the domain of humans: "They needed a moment to collect themselves, speechless in the wake of a power and thrust snatched from nature's own greatness, or how men bend heaven to their methods" (468).

In chapter 8 of Part 2 the reader is presented with the urban landscape of the Bronx from another perspective, by which the text evokes the trope of waste. Driving through the poor neighborhoods of Bronx, the Catholic Sisters Alma Edgar and Grace Fahey observe: "... a landscape of vacant lots filled with years of stratified deposits—the age of house garbage, the age of construction debris and vandalized car bodies, the age of moldering mobster parts" (238). The garbage and waste collected over the years pile up around them, denoting an underworld of physical waste, but also the presence of the city's past in the refuse. The scene with the tourist bus conveying the sign "South Bronx Surreal" (247), which guides foreign

tourists whose desire is to take pictures of the poor and devastated neighborhoods, harks back to the TV-mediated natural disasters, as well as “the most photographed barn” in *White Noise* (12). The fascination the tourists have for the district is presented as genuine, as if they were on a safari in Kenya: “They saw the ailanthus jungle and the smash heap of mortified cars and they looked at the six-story slab of painted angels with streamers rippled above their cherub heads” (247). The recycling of ideas from *White Noise* is clearly evident. Here, the urban landscape is described as if it had wild and “exotic” characteristics. In a way, the traits of the Bronx Zoo have been taken out on the streets. Gracie, in anger, shouts to the tourists that “Brussels is surreal, Milan is surreal. This is real. The Bronx is real” (247), but one could perhaps rather say that the urban landscape of the Bronx, as “the most photographed barn” in *White Noise*, in this case has become hyperreal. To paraphrase Murray – who leans on Walter Benjamin⁹ in his social critique – the Sisters have become an integrated part of the aura (*White Noise* 13).

The reading of *Underworld's* urban landscapes in New York has so far concerned itself with an understanding of how the idea of “landscape” may function as an aesthetic mode of framing selected parts of the environment, and how this framing articulates associations connected to the place, at the same time as it brings attention to transformative changes in a place over time. A more pragmatic way of analyzing the landscape’s relation to the people that inhabit it is provided by J. B. Jackson’s definition of the term: “a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence” (8). The larger reach of Jackson’s definition becomes clear if one compares his understanding of the term with a more general usage, for instance in reference to scenery viewed from a point of view, such as Central Park. Central Park is generally considered as an example of a landscape in New York that is a built environment, which

⁹ For a closer look at Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the artwork’s loss of “the aura,” see “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin).

imitates pristine nature. Anthony Lioi argues that Central Park is a constructed landscape within the city; it was constructed with the aim of creating a space in the city that resembled a pastoral scene, where the middle-class could enjoy their newfound leisure (in Newman and Walls 60). Given the pastoral aspect of Central Park, one intuitively thinks of it as being a landscape. However, recalling Jackson's definition of "landscape," the whole city of New York could be defined as a landscape, because the city is a space that serves as infrastructure for the people living within it. Looking back to the reading of the Bronx, one could narrow down the scope of landscape from the city to the district, and say that the pragmatic landscape of the Bronx that the Sisters live in shows clear signs of decay – in other words, the infrastructure needs caretaking.

The deterioration of the Bronx can be an example of what David E. Nye calls the anti-landscape, in *When the Lights Went Out* (131). This term expresses the consequences when the infrastructure that Jackson sees as functioning in a landscape fails to work. Nye gives an account of the history of blackouts in America, and he argues that when electric failure impacted large landscapes like New York they turn into anti-landscapes. Actually, *Underworld* gives, in the last fragment in Part 5, dated November 9 1965, a glimpse into how it could have been to experience the Northeastern Blackout of 1965, where electrical power was gone for about 12 hours:

The streets began to darken, drained of traffic and headlights, and an odd calm set in, edged with apprehension. ... The always seeping suspicion, paralysis, the thing implicit in the push-button city, that it will stop cold, leaving us helpless in the rat-eye dark, and then we begin to wonder, as I did, how the whole thing works anyway. (635)

“The odd calm” signifies the estrangement that silence and darkness can produce in an urban environment. The natural elements of sound (or silence) and vision appear as a reminder of the inherent fragility of the built environment. The breakdown of a landscape into an anti-landscape, such as through a major blackout, poses fundamental questions on how we conceive of the built environment as something that has always been taken to be our “natural” existence.

Throughout this chapter, it has been argued that the novel’s narrative shifts between interconnected lines of Cold War politics, environmental issues, and modes of articulating these through different aesthetic forms of the media. Some final remarks on how these linked themes come across will take us to the front-rows at Radio City Music Hall. In the New York sequence that was discussed earlier in the first part of this chapter – the summer of 1974 – Klara Sax and her cinephile companion Miles go to a viewing of a “lost film” by the Soviet movie director Sergei Eisenstein titled “Unterwelt.” This is a sneaky rewriting of history on the part of DeLillo. There was indeed a movie shot in Mexico by Eisenstein during the 1930s that was not released until the 1970s, but it was not entitled “Unterwelt” but “¡Que viva México!” However, DeLillo rewrites history and re-titles the film in order to bring together the dominant themes of the novel in this film viewing. Sax recalls the showing on the movie, and a scene that resembled a war landscape projected on the screen:

Yes, the film has climbed to the surface, to a landscape shocked by light, pervasive and overexposed. The escaped prisoners move across flat terrain, some of them hooded, the most disfigured ones, and there are fires in the distance, the horizon line throbbing in smoke and ash. You wonder if he shot these scenes in Mexico, or could it be Kazakhstan, where he went to shoot *Ivan the Terrible*, later, during the war? (442)

This short paragraph includes several references to other parts of the novel, and to the general theme of the Cold War. The landscape is “shocked by light, pervasive and overexposed” and some of the people are “disfigured,” evoking associations of nuclear warfare, possibly the worst scenery of an actual war. The allusions to Mexican and Kazakhstan landscapes enforce the association of nuclear activity, at least within the context of the novel, due to the chapters with Matt Shay that proceed and follow Klara Sax’s New York stories (401-422 and 446-468), and the epilogue of the novel that is set in Kazakhstan.

Suitably, in order to play out this film, DeLillo chooses Eisenstein, who is often referred to as the pioneer of montage-technique in cinema, a film technique where an image is juxtaposed with a contrasting image in order to produce a new meaning (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 46). This gives new meaning when one learns that in the *New York Times* issue from 1951, which inspired DeLillo to write the novel, two articles were juxtaposed. One of the articles was entitled “Giants capture pennant,” and the other “Soviets explode atomic bomb” (DeLillo, “The Power of History”).

Conclusion

... He no longer describes the earth as a library globe or a map that has come alive, as a cosmic eye staring into deep space. ... The earth is land and water, the dwelling place of mortal men, in elevated dictionary terms. He doesn't see it anymore (storm-spiraled, sea-bright, breathing heat and haze and color) as an occasion for picturesque language, for easeful play or speculation (DeLillo, "Human Moments in World War III" 25).

In DeLillo's short story "Human Moments in World War III" from 1983 we find this reflection on how a description of the earth might change over time, after having gained new insights. The reflection is made by an astronaut in a space capsule that circles the earth, and his view of the earth seems to be a suitable starting point for a conclusion to a discussion of environmental concerns in DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Underworld*. The paragraph displays a humble and respectful observation of the earth; it is "land and water, the dwelling place of mortal men," and the narrator finds no room for play and speculation. Also, one may easily associate this view of the earth with the famous picture of the earth that was taken by the Apollo crew from the moon. Interestingly, Greg Garrard sees a connection between this awe-striking photo and the way in which it may function as a symbol of environmental danger: "The astronauts' pictures of the planet were won at considerable cost to it, not only in terms of the \$25 billion space programme, or the 5.6 million pounds of fuel on each Saturn 5 rocket, but also the interrelations between the Apollo programme and the Cold War military-industrial complex" (183). This link can also be seen in my discussion of the explosion of the *Challenger* space shuttle in chapter two. How, then, are the earth and its environments viewed in *White Noise* and *Underworld*?

Obviously, the scope that we find in these two novels by DeLillo is limited, if one compares them with a view from space. As stated in the introduction, we get a glimpse of the

era of late capitalism in the USA in these two novels. In which way do the “flatness” of this era, the weakened historicity, and our dependence on stimuli (images) affect the way we relate to our environment? It has been argued that the individual’s conception of his or her place in the natural world, of culture, and of the historical era is influenced by larger forces such as cultural institutions, the media, and history itself. Our environmental consciousness can therefore be said to be formed by the crossing of lines between the individual’s perceptive and cognitive engagement with the natural world, and by the defining role that the media and other cultural institutions have acquired for our worldview and our language.

This thesis has moved from a reading of *White Noise*, where one could find a clear division between tangible and hidden dangers to the natural environment, on to *Underworld*, where manifestations of the damage done appears almost at every page. The two novels also exemplify a shift in focus from the personal, the local, and the episodic towards the national, the global, and the permanent. In *White Noise* we find an interest for environmental attitudes on the personal and interpersonal level, which is staged in a limited and well-defined fictional milieu. As a contrast, in *Underworld* we find a literary imitation of a given historical era and its events, and populated with historical characters mixed with fictional characters. The different scopes exemplified by the two novels, each in their turn, give us good examples of how environmental issues are posed, articulated, and mediated between the level of the cultural institutions and the individual.

One may also register a shift of style and tone in the novels, as the irony clearly evident in passages from *White Noise* seems to be omitted in *Underworld*. This change of strategy suggests that DeLillo is engaging with a different rhetoric of “world-making”; the irony in *White Noise* that establishes critical distance between the reader and the text, and which enforces the self-reflexive quality of the novel, is in *Underworld* replaced with a more sincere and observing mood. One gets the impression that DeLillo has here constructed a

literary universe based more on personal experience and his own reflections of the past, rather than relying on the models of parody and pastiche that construct the tone of *White Noise*. What one finds in *Underworld* is a palimpsestic layering, both in terms of a rewriting of themes and motifs from *White Noise* and of the historical past it depicts. The large number of characters, the wide geographical span (although largely limited to the USA alone), and the broad historical period, contribute to the creation of a literary universe that presents a kaleidoscopic view of recent American history and culture. *White Noise*, on the other hand, provides us with a slice of life, a microcosm that also serves to bring out aspects of contemporary culture. In their different ways both novels bring attention to the consequences of modern life for the environment.

As stated in the introduction, DeLillo's most recent novel *Point Omega* (2010) will now be brought to attention. This will be a brief look on a brief novel, before bringing the discussion of the environmental concerns in DeLillo's writings to a close. There are two main reasons for this choice. First, when including the author's latest novel, one can see a consistency of interest for the human relation to the environment in DeLillo's métier. It seems both to be an indelible interest, spanning nearly four decades, up to the present time. Second, in *Point Omega* one finds an idiosyncratic use of language and form, whose motifs and themes show a strong fidelity towards *White Noise* and *Underworld*, also in terms of ecocritical interest, which supports the notion that DeLillo's novels articulate a specific call for environmental responsibility.

Regarding *Point Omega*

DeLillo's latest novel *Point Omega* (2010) is a short and concentrated text in which one finds a continued interest in the individual's relation to the natural world and how this is bound up with larger socio-political forces. Another element that echoes specific themes of the earlier

novels is the focus on the filmic image. Timothy Morton argues in *Ecology Without Nature* that: “As well as producing arguments, ecological writers fashion compelling *images*—literally, a *view* of the world. These images rely upon a sense of *nature*. But nature keeps giving writers the slip” (2). DeLillo’s works seem to be genuine examples of how nature escapes the vision of postmodernity, not because nature is a non-existing concept, but because our conceptions of it do not fit its frame.

In *Point Omega*, I see two distinctive levels of expression that each echo aspects of both *White Noise* and *Underworld* that are pointed out in my ecocritical reading of these novels. These levels are exemplified by the formal construction of the novel and in its thematic concerns. On the formal level, the novel is both imitating and dependent on the filmic image, recalling the cinematic “Unterwelt” and “Zapruder” sequences in *Underworld*, as well as the TV-broadcasted natural disasters in *White Noise*. The two different parts of the novel, the frame story and the body narrative, seem to mirror each other through the movie *Psycho* (not present, however, in its original form). The mirroring is for example expressed in the narrative when the circumstances of Jessie’s disappearance are associated with the narrative in *Psycho*, as when Jim in a state of panic looks for her and “threw back the shower curtain, making more noise than [he’d] intended” (96), and when he learns that the “[s]earcher had found a knife” (114). Similar points of reference are found in the frame story, such as when the anonymous watcher is intensely paying attention to every detail provided by the extreme slow motion screening: “He counted six rings. The rings spinning on the curtain rod when she pulls the curtain down with her. The knife, the silence, the spinning rings” (16). Similarly, one can also see the slow motion film in the frame story as a metaphor for Elster’s recurrent longing for a genuine feeling of time (24, 30, 56, 91). Elster often reflects on the shifting sense of time that he experiences in the desert as compared to in the city: “‘Time falling away. That’s what I feel here,’ he said. ‘Time becoming slowly older’” (91). It is

Elster's meditation on the nature of time, observations of the landscape, and alienation from the postmodern society that stand out as having ecocritical importance in the novel.

On a thematic level, as well as in the structure of the text, the novel articulates a schism between the urban cityscape and desert landscape, which represent two different aspects of the postmodern world. The urban is in *Point Omega* associated with strict measurement of time, politics, and the saturating presence of the media, whereas the desert is associated with a longing for solitude, "deep time," and existentialist reflection. Moreover, the desert is also associated with the random violence and power of nature, such as Jessie's disappearance and the unbearable heat. The portrayal of this schism can be said to refer to an ongoing debate that harks back to discussions in the early modern period concerning new measurements of time, which was caused by the rapid urbanization brought on by industrialization.

Point Omega could also be said to engage in the pastoral tradition, in the way that the novel "describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban," which is defined by Gifford as one of the main usages of the pastoral (*Pastoral 2*). Further, in *Point Omega* one finds elements of a specific American pastoral tradition, such as the individual's search for solitude, peace and divine transcendence within the wild (as in Thoreau's *Walden* and John Muir's writings) and the geographical setting of the southwest. As argued in chapter two, the desert landscape has a prominent role also in *Underworld*. One recalls the scenes of the desert landscapes portrayed in *Underworld*, as sites of nuclear testing and storage, as sites for landfills, and as the site for Sax's art project: "This is a landscape painting in which we use the landscape itself" (70). In *Underworld* the desert becomes both the playground and storage chamber of human activity. The human activity in this novel represents an anthropocentric interference in a desert landscape, which is a natural environment conceived to represent desolation, quietness and isolation. One recalls the "waste theoretician" Jesse

Detwiler in *Underworld* who argues “Civilization is built, history is driven” (287), while admiring the construction of great landfills in the desert. Richard Elster displays a different view when he argues that “[c]ities were built to measure time, to remove time from nature” (57). Naturally, this could be why Elster escapes to this place. This could be the reason why he proclaims:

“Look at all this,” he said, not looking at it, the landscape and sky, which he’d indicated with a backwards sweep of the arm.

We didn’t look at it either.

”Day turns to night eventually but it’s a matter of light and darkness, it’s not time passing, mortal time. There’s none of the usual terror. It’s different here, time is enormous, that’s what I feel here, palpably. Time that precedes us and survives us.”
(56)

The protagonist invites us to pay attention to the landscape and the sky, however, not caring, or perhaps not able, to look at it himself. Neither do Jim or Jessie. One might be inclined to think that the formal structure of the novel, which is heavily dependent on the frame story with the *24 Hour Psycho* as well as the meta-frame of the film *Psycho*, causes the characters to appear as on a screen. We as readers, and watchers, can see, but they do not see because they are a part of the environment. This notion is enhanced on the last page of the novel, when the watcher in the frame story “separates himself from the wall and waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates” (148).

For Jim, the filmmaker, his stay in the desert seems to change him; the pastoral distance to all that the city represents nurtures him: “I didn’t miss movies. The landscape began to seem normal, distance was normal, heat was weather and weather was heat” (81).

The landscape seems normal for Jim, because he has now become assimilated to the filmic presentation of nature. The distance seems normal, because he acts within this filmic environment. This reaffirms the text's strong focus on representing a reality that is dependent on the form and content of the media.

When the trope of the sunset finally appears in *Point Omega*, it establishes itself as the core leitmotif that connects all three novels. The different depictions of the sunset have in some passages striking resemblance to *White Noise* and *Underworld* in their phrasing. The sky and the sunset function also in this novel as an overarching presence of "nature," and a reminder of the human relation to the natural world, which continue the text's problematization of postmodernity's relation to what is "natural" and "constructed."

For Elster, the pastoral distance to his culture and his engagement with warfare establishes that: "[t]hese were not glorious retirement sunsets of stocks and bonds. ...sunset was a human invention, our perceptual arrangement of light and space into elements of wonder. We looked and wondered" (22). The late capitalist era has, in Elster's view, succeeded in defining an image of the sunset in terms of profit. The cultural sunset of the city has become "stocks" and "bonds." Further, the novel emphasizes the perceptive observation of the natural phenomena, as a contrast to its cultural constructs: "Sunsets were nothing more than dying light now, the dimming of chance" (110).

Postmodernity's complicated relation to the natural world and to its own self-referring image appears as an overarching theme between the novels, where the motifs of the sunset and the sky function as a universal point of reference in the natural world, in which the cultural conceptions of the viewer is mirrored. The toxic sunsets in *White Noise* are admired for their fantastic colors and vivid scenes, mirroring the artificiality of the milieu in the novel. The Valium sunset in *Underworld* becomes a numbed presence representing the distance between

the pristine nature and a culture where landfills stand out as grand landmarks and waste is re-contextualized in the realm of art. In *Point Omega*, the sunset is rendered explicitly capitalistic, and a pastoral call for seclusion and metaphysical reflection is voiced.

Perhaps the reason why there are no contrails in the sky in Point Omega, is that the novel's narrative environment is constructed within a film?

On DeLillo's writings' relation to his own culture, Peter Knight asks the vexing question: "is his writing a symptom, a diagnosis, or an endorsement of the condition of postmodernity?" ("DeLillo" 27). It is difficult to escape the notion that it might be all three. His writing must be "a symptom," due to the fact that he is writing out of his background knowledge of the world and thereby mediates some of its qualities, much similar to Murray's observations concerning the postmodern aura commented on above (*White Noise* 13). There is an ambiguous endorsement of this age, though, such as it is hinted at in the nostalgic qualities of *Underworld*. Were some things genuinely better before? The diagnosis, in terms of an ecocritical stance, seems to be clear. In the way that DeLillo's texts speak out of and to the world, the message strikes me clear. The world is damaged, and our vision needs repair.

When you decide to on a whim to visit the H-bomb home page, she begins to understand. Everything in your computer, the plastic, silicon and mylar, every logical operation and processing function, the memory, the hardware, the software, the ones and zeros, the triads inside the pixels that form the on-screen image—it all culminates here. (*Underworld* 825)

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