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Don DeLillo's Myth of the Underworld

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Abstract: This study strives to examine Don DeLillo's reinvention of the underworld myth in his magnum opus *Underworld*, demonstrating how the novel transposes classical *katabasis* (descent into the underworld) and *nekyia* (invocation of the dead) into a modern socio-political and psychological framework. Through a fragmented narrative structure, DeLillo constructs the underworld as a liminal space where repressed histories, ideological forces, and systemic anxieties converge. Interweaving intertextual references – from Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* to Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* – the novel interrogates the subterranean forces that shape contemporary existence. Central to this exploration is DeLillo's treatment of waste, both material and symbolic, as a signifier of cultural entropy and historical erasure. This study argues that *Underworld* redefines the mythic underworld not merely as a metaphor but as an epistemological site where dominant power structures are exposed and subverted through an intricate dialectic of concealment and revelation. Unlike prior scholarship, which situates *Underworld* within Cold War historiography or postmodern historiographical critique, this research foregrounds its mythological dimensions, tracing how DeLillo appropriates and reconfigures ancient descent narratives to critique modernity's crisis of memory, control, and ideological stratification. Ultimately, *Underworld* challenges linear historical frameworks, offering a counter-history that amplifies the voices of the forgotten and destabilizes the boundaries between past and present, surface and depth, official record and suppressed truth.

Keywords: Underworld; Myth; New York subway system; *Katabasis*; *Nekyia*; *Underworld*; DeLillo; *The Triumph of Death*; Waste; Plutonium; Narrative fragmentation

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Радое В. Шошкич[1] | **Миф подземного мира у Дона Делилло**

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Аннотация: Настоящее исследование рассматривает переосмысление мифа о подземном мире в романе Дона Делилло *Подземный мир*, демонстрируя, как автор трансформирует классические *катабасис* (нисхождение в подземный мир) и *некйию* (призывание мертвых) в современный социополитический и психологический контекст. Посредством фрагментарной нарративной структуры Делилло конструирует подземный мир как лиминальное пространство, в котором сходятся подавленные исторические пласты, идеологические силы и системные тревожности. Переплетая интертекстуальные отсылки – от *Триумфа смерти* Брейгеля до *Записок из подполья* Достоевского, *Бесплодной земли* и *Полых людей* Т. С. Элиота – роман исследует глубинные, скрытые механизмы, формирующие современное бытие. Центральным аспектом данного исследования является трактовка Делилло отходов — как материальных, так и символических – в качестве знака культурной энтропии и исторического забвения. В отличие от прежних исследований, помещающих *Подземный мир* в рамки историографии холодной войны или постмодернистской критики историописания, данная статья акцентирует мифологическое измерение романа, выявляя, как Делилло заимствует и переосмысляет нарративы нисхождения в подземный мир для критики кризиса памяти, контроля и идеологической стратификации в условиях модерности. В конечном итоге *Подземный мир* ставит под вопрос линейные модели исторического осмысления, предлагая контр-историю, которая усиливает голоса забытых и дестабилизирует границы между прошлым и настоящим, поверхностью и глубиной, официальным дискурсом и вытесненной истиной.

Ключевые слова: Подземный мир; Миф; Система метро Нью-Йорка; Катабасис; Некия; *Подземный мир*; Делилло; *Триумф смерти*; Отходы; Плутоний; Фрагментация нарратива

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Introduction

Over the course of its millennia-long history, the notion of the underworld, or subterranean realm, has evolved into a multifaceted construct, rich with implications and references that permeate the domains of religion, social and political order, popular culture, art, politics, and urbanism. This concept has accrued a vast network of associations that shape the cultural imagination, generating an expansive and often ethically and emotionally divergent array of images, metaphors, allegories, and symbols. This cultural imagination is not merely an intellectual construct; it embodies an existential dread that permeates myths and literature alike. As T. S. Eliot famously writes in *The Waste Land*, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (Eliot, 1948: 42), capturing the deep-seated anxieties surrounding decay, transience, and the inevitability of loss – concepts central to the mythology of the underworld. In many traditions, descent into the underworld is not only a journey through physical or mythic landscapes but also a confrontation with the very nature of mortality and the fragility of human existence. Almost all world mythologies and religions, whether ancient or still practiced, include conceptions of the underworld, varying in complexity and detail. These conceptions encompass its topography, the nature of existence within it, and the structure of its inhabitants, presenting it as either one of, or the sole, otherworldly realm, distinct from the visible aspects of life on earth. Predominantly, the underworld is conceived as the domain of what persists beyond human life, though in certain traditions, it also encompasses what precedes human existence. Although designated for the afterlife, the underworld is never absolutely and invariably separate from this world. This is evidenced by the widespread cultural practices of honoring the dead, rituals that periodically renew the symbolic connection with the deceased, particularly ancestors, and the various beliefs in spirits or other forms of presence/return of the dead. Additionally, numerous rites of passage or initiation into higher states of existence or different age, status, or professional categories involve symbolic death, a psycho-physical state representing temporary death and a temporary sojourn in the world of the dead.

The significance of symbolic death in initiation processes, as well as in the philosophical-psychological concepts of influential thinkers such as Jung and Hillman, underscores the ambiguity and evaluative ambivalence of death/the death drive and the underworld. This realm is simultaneously terrifying and repulsive, yet also fruitful, maintaining a connection with the creative and life-giving forces symbolized by the earth and its interior. Without delving into the specifics of numerous world mythologies and religions, whose conceptions of the underworld often have multiple versions, it can be observed that for all these traditions, if the world of the dead is equated with or partially situated in the underworld, there are commonalities. These include ritualistic, recurring journeys through the underworld – where death for the deceased is not immediate but, as in Orphism or Buddhism, a kind of adventure and journey – as well as individual descents into the underworld on a mission, such as those of Odysseus, Aeneas, Enkidu, Osiris, and Christ. These journeys are typically referred to by the ancient Greek term for descent – *katabasis*.[1]

[1] Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* outlines the monomyth, or hero's journey, which consists of stages such as the Call to Adventure, the Descent into the Underworld, and the Return. In *Underworld*, DeLillo reworks this mythic structure in a postmodern context, using fragmented narratives and historical layers to explore America's collective subconscious.

Nick Shay, the novel's central figure, can be interpreted as an anti-hero navigating a metaphorical underworld. His journey involves a descent into the past, revisiting traumas, moral ambiguities, and the Cold War's shadow. Instead of the traditional hero's quest leading to enlightenment, Nick's journey exposes the disintegration of meaning in a media-saturated world. The "underworld" here is not just a psychological or mythical space but also a historical

In this latter case, the descent into the underworld is undertaken to retrieve something – knowledge or objects symbolizing enlightenment, initiation into secret knowledge, revelation, and the like – or to bring someone back to the earth. While many literary works, particularly those from antiquity and the medieval period, depict the underworld and *katabasis* directly, drawing characters, situations, and episodes straight from mythology and religion, there is also a significant number of works that evoke these elements indirectly. These works use imagery with connotations and allusive potential to evoke the sense of the underworld in the reader, employing depictions of descent, well-known symbols of chthonic worlds and their deities, encounters, and other events that suggest or invoke similar elements of mythic descent.

Among the works that portray *katabasis* literally, not only do *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* play crucial roles as the most famous and influential models, but a series of so-called Menippean satires also contribute significantly. These satires often involve a fantastical journey, with the underworld frequently serving as the setting, an alternative realm through which the real world is subjected to satire. This tradition offers parodic, burlesque, and farcical versions of *katabasis*, using the theme to scrutinize, relativize, and ironize, demystifying power, knowledge, established values and attitudes, and the social and political order.

We must also bear in mind that modern writers incorporate mythic images and symbols into their works, along with specific modes of understanding and interpreting myths and mythology in general. These authors not only recontextualize and reinterpret specific myths or mythemes but also connect these mythemes to cosmic forces, abstract spiritual principles, psycho-physical processes and phenomena, social and political events, etc. This can be done either to build upon and extend certain interpretations or to scrutinize or parody them.

Originally, the mythological and religious concept of the underworld was based on the practice of burying the dead in the earth. Over time, however, the underworld (underworld, underground, subterranean) came to metaphorically represent other hidden, largely invisible worlds. It symbolizes realms of immorality, crime, and illicit activities, reflecting the fact that the haunts of criminals were, and sometimes still are, located in “underground” structures such as basements, tunnels, and catacombs. As “underground,” the term also refers to genres and forms of popular culture that emerge independently of major institutions, production-distribution chains, and corporations. In this context, the opposition between mainstream and underground is metaphorically based on geological and hydrological concepts, suggesting not only life beneath the earth’s surface but also underground water and streams, which in many mythologies – whether as a source to be drunk from, a lake, a river, or a boundary to be crossed – play a significant role in the topography of the underworld.

Additionally, various natural or artificial underground forms – caves, tunnels, catacombs, subterranean corridors, crypts, as well as atomic shelters and other post-war hideouts stemming from fears of nuclear or similar catastrophes – are inseparable elements of histories filled with secrets. These include political, religious, romantic, or clandestine operations and organizations, whether involving secretive power plays or subversive, sectarian, illegal, heretical, or adulterous activities. In the novel under

and cultural one, filled with nuclear anxieties, waste, and lost time.

Campbell’s notion of the *belly of the whale* – where the hero is swallowed into darkness before transformation – resonates with Nick’s existential reflections, particularly in his return to the Bronx and his entanglement with waste management, a symbolic purgatory of discarded histories. However, DeLillo subverts the final stage of Campbell’s journey, the Return with the Elixir. Instead of bringing wisdom back to society, Nick remains in an unresolved, liminal space, mirroring the entropy and instability of the world around him (cf. Campbell, 2008).

discussion here, the term explicitly refers to social, cultural, class, racial, ideological, and gender stratifications and the relative positions of different groups and classes.

Although Freud's most famous metaphor for the human mind is the iceberg, the underworld is also a common psychoanalytic metaphor for the subconscious, particularly in the works of C. G. Jung and his followers. For instance, for Hillman, descent into the underworld represents a necessary journey: "underworld is psyche," and to understand it, the dominant aspect of the self, the ego, must die (Hillman, 1979: 46). Hillman's view of the human psyche does not aim at the fulfillment, strengthening, or regeneration of ego wholeness but rather its desubstantialization and dispersion – an idea that aligns with postmodern notions of subject and identity. According to Hillman, Hades represents a "shift in consciousness" (Hillman, 1979: 66) and a radical plunge into the meaning of death itself, not merely as physical demise but as the immanent presence of inherent oppositional psychic forces that cannot be co-opted by consciousness and must not be neutralized through rationalization and interpretation. Dreams, in this context, are one way to descend into the underworld, reaching deeper than the repressed individual layers.

The underworld as an existential state, depicted dramatically by F. M. Dostoevsky in his novel *Notes from Underground*, portrays a torturous, anxious, and irresolvable condition of the human spirit and mind entangled in doubts and contradictions. The underground man himself states, "I am a sick man... I am a wicked man. An unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased", immediately establishing his alienation from society and his descent into self-destructive introspection (Dostoevsky, 1961: 3). This psychological entrapment mirrors the motif of katabasis, where descent into the underworld signifies confrontation with one's own fragmented self. Dostoevsky's protagonist further reflects: "to be overly conscious is a sickness, a real, thorough sickness", reinforcing the idea that excessive self-awareness leads to paralysis and existential torment (Dostoevsky, 1961: 5). This depiction of the human condition has resonated widely, notably influencing Albert Camus, who redefined the fate of one of the mythological inhabitants of the Greek Hades as a universal image of human destiny. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus states, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1955: 78).[2] This notion transforms the underworld from a space of punishment to one of existential defiance, where meaning is derived not from external salvation but from individual perseverance. Camus, in direct contrast to Dostoevsky, rejects divine redemption, instead suggesting that "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn" (Camus, 1955: 77). Thus, while Dostoevsky's underground man remains trapped in his own self-conscious despair, Camus' Sisyphus finds meaning in the very act of resistance against his fate. In the twentieth century, this recontextualized and reevaluated Plato's image of the earthly world as an underground cave, a famous allegory from *The Republic*. Plato's cave, where prisoners, shackled in place, mistake shadows for reality, serves as a foundational metaphor for the limitations of human perception. As Plato describes, "Anyone who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light" (Plato, 1979: 376).[3] According to this tradition, an inverted relationship between two planes of existence is posited, with the underworld depicted as the normal mode of human existence – an entrapment in a world

[2] Here, Camus transforms the eternal torment of Sisyphus into a metaphor for the human condition, making the relentless struggle—whether for meaning or purpose—into a defining aspect of existence.

[3] This duality is evident in both Dostoevsky's and Camus' works—where the underground man recoils from illumination, embracing his exile, while Camus' Sisyphus, though condemned to darkness, finds personal meaning in his defiance.

of bodiless, insubstantial, yet deceptive and alluring shadows, representing ontological and epistemological inferiority (Plato, 1979: 177-178).

Thus, the underworld no longer merely signifies the realm of the dead but also denotes certain phenomena and aspects of earthly life. Specifically, it represents unique forms of human existence on earth that, in relation to dominant forces and official, desirable, or imposed orders – both socio-political and psychological-spiritual – contravene conventional, ingrained, majority-held beliefs. These phenomena represent the "other," the unrecognized, secret, prohibited, suppressed, and hidden aspects of life.

The purpose of this study is to examine how DeLillo's *Underworld* repurposes the classical underworld myth, incorporating elements of *katabasis* and *nekyia* to explore themes of memory, historical erasure, and ideological structures. By analyzing the novel's engagement with intertextual references and its depiction of waste as a metaphor for cultural entropy, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on mythological adaptation in contemporary literature. Unlike prior scholarship, which primarily situates *Underworld* within Cold War historiography or postmodern historiographical critique, this research foregrounds its mythological dimensions, analyzing how DeLillo appropriates and reconfigures ancient descent narratives to critique modernity's crisis of memory, control, and ideological stratification.

The primary **research material** consists of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, a novel that intricately reconfigures classical myth through a fragmented, multi-perspective narrative. Additionally, the study engages with a range of intertextual sources, including Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*, Homeric and Virgilian descent narratives, and psychoanalytic interpretations of the underworld by thinkers such as Jung and Hillman. By situating DeLillo's work within this broader literary and philosophical tradition, the paper seeks to illuminate the novel's complex reimagining of subterranean spaces as both literal and metaphorical landscapes of cultural entropy.

This study employs **a multidisciplinary methodological approach** that combines intertextual analysis, literary close reading, mythological criticism, and psychoanalytic theory. Through intertextual analysis, the research identifies how DeLillo engages with and transforms classical and literary antecedents, drawing from ancient descent narratives and modern reinterpretations of the underworld. Close reading is employed to analyze the novel's intricate narrative structure, fragmentation, and symbolic motifs – particularly its treatment of waste, decay, and liminality.

The mythological framework is informed by classical katabasis narratives, examining how DeLillo reconstructs the journey to the underworld as a meditation on historical and ideological amnesia. Additionally, the research incorporates psychoanalytic theory, particularly Jungian and Hillmanian perspectives, to explore the underworld as a representation of the repressed unconscious – both individual and collective. Furthermore, this study engages with postmodern historiographical perspectives, investigating how *Underworld* destabilizes linear historical narratives and challenges official memory structures.

By synthesizing these methodologies, the research not only situates *Underworld* within contemporary mythological discourse but also elucidates its broader implications for literary and cultural studies, particularly in its critique of ideological formations and its reconceptualization of historical memory.

Results and Discussion

DeLillo's reinvention of the myth of the underworld in *Underworld*

DeLillo's magnum opus *Underworld* (1997), among others, demonstrates not only the relevance of thinking about the underworld in the contemporary world but

also the proliferation of these "other" realms within the one we believe we inhabit. These worlds are shaped by forces of power and control, rebellion, resistance, or fear and retreat into invisibility. Therefore, we can argue that this descent into the underworld, akin to Plato's, becomes an ethical-political obligation (cf. Plato, 1979: 180-181). However, the meaning of this obligation has evolved – it is no longer about illuminating the underworld with the light of reason and true knowledge but about encountering one's own cultural-historical and collective underworld. Through dense, almost ethnographic yet fragmentary descriptions of various aspects of everyday life in America in the second half of the twentieth century, Don DeLillo, in *Underworld*, explores the ethical, ideological, psychological, and anthropological meanings and consequences of the omnipresence of the underworld.

In *Underworld*, which encompasses much of DeLillo's previous work and reflects his fascination with the underworld in various forms, allusions to the underworld emerge as early as the prologue, through Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *The Triumph of Death*. In the painting itself, fragments of which are described as falling onto FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, there is not a descent into the underworld but rather an "overflowing" or inversion of the earth/hell, a return of the dead. Hoover's association between the entrance to hell and the entrance to the subway, with which he begins to imbue the image of a sixteenth-century painter using medieval iconography and a preoccupation with death, reflects his era, personal phobias, and premonitions. Later in the novel, this interpretation is affirmed and continued by Hoover's doppelgänger, his sister Edgar, who states: "these are the dead who will come out of the earth to lash and cudgel the living, to punish the sins of the living – death, yes, triumphant" (DeLillo, 1997: 246). Bruegel's painting becomes the subtext of the text because not only is DeLillo's structuring of the city space analogous to Bruegel's structuring of the painting (a multitude of unconnected small figures or groups of figures in a vast space), but also many details from the novel are ekphrases or quotations from elements of the painting (the dance of death, the fool, etc.). Bruegel's painting enters the world of the novel like his dead from hell. This not only points to paranoia, apocalyptic fears, eschatology, and the constant threat of global nuclear destruction as distinctive characteristics of the period whose cultural history DeLillo portrays but also to the essential ambiguity regarding death, which is reflected in the relationship with phenomena metonymically or associatively linked to death – such as the relationship with the material remains of the past and with memory and remembrance as spiritual and mental traces of individual and collective pasts.

The fact that parts of the reproduction through which Hoover begins to view himself and the world in the light of information about Soviet nuclear tests, seemingly summoning the dead, come from the famous American magazine *Life* introduces the theme of death in life, which DeLillo will gradually develop through the montage of this and other Bruegel paintings, such as *Children's Games*, into a representation of the immanence of death. However, with this initial appearance of death in the world of the novel, death as revenge and violence in a moment of ecstatic celebration and carnival-like relativization of physical and conceptual boundaries, one of the commonsense assumptions that DeLillo will examine is ironically inverted – namely, that death triumphs at the end, not at the beginning. It is precisely because of such a beginning that the entire novel is experienced as an attempt to challenge that triumph. Thus, in conjunction with the title, certain cultural reminiscences essential for the continuation of the narrative are activated – in ancient cultures (myths, epics), descent into the underworld is often motivated by the desire to overcome death, one's own or another's, to abolish death, or to rescue someone/something from death as the final end.

The motif of the descent into the underworld is primarily evoked in connection with the main character and sole first-person narrator, the waste management executive and "cosmologist" of waste, Nick Shay. From the rooftop where he first appears in the novel to the basement where he seemingly accidentally, but not entirely, kills a man who played a paternal role in his life, thus symbolically liberating himself from the subconscious Oedipus complex, Nick moves on the vertical plot plane in a direction opposite to that of the narrative plot, which depicts his success as a rise from the Bronx to "the bronze tower." The inversion on the chronological plane allows DeLillo to portray life as bidirectional movement, so with each new chapter, time shifts backward, into the more distant past, and forward, on the level of that chapter itself. Nick's descent into the past, mirroring the novel's reverse chronology, reflects the liminality of his existence – a man suspended between memory and reality, between action and inertia. His journey is not merely an exploration of retrospection but an encounter with its inherent fragmentation, where history resists coherence and identity remains in flux. As T. S. Eliot articulates in *The Hollow Men*, "Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow" (Eliot, 1948: 65). This "Shadow" signifies the inescapable void between intention and realization, between past and present, mirroring Nick's struggle to reconcile his personal history with his constructed identity. His descent, much like that of classical figures undertaking katabasis, is neither wholly illuminating nor redemptive but rather an unsettling confrontation with unresolved trauma. Just as Eliot's *hollow men* exist in a space of perpetual suspension, incapable of fully inhabiting their own reality, Nick remains trapped within the contradictions of memory and self-perception, reinforcing DeLillo's broader critique of historical and personal dislocation.

The central part of the novel begins after an ellipse that encompasses the period from the end of 1951 to the beginning of 1992, a little over forty years, which, given that the first scene takes place in the desert, evokes the biblical forty years in the wilderness, for example, "The Lord's anger burned against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years until the whole generation that had done what was evil in the Lord's sight was gone" (*The Holy Bible*, "The Fourth Book of Moses", Numbers, 32:13).[4] This evokes a period of suffering and redemption, echoing the apocalyptic tone of the novel's prologue. However, considering that biblical symbolism also influenced Dostoevsky, whose unnamed protagonist in *Notes from Underground* "spent all the forty years of [his] life in a mousehole under the floor" (Dostoevsky, 1961: 112), this ellipse will also suggest to us that DeLillo's novel will not only address the nation's position on a global scale, undermining the imperialistic and colonialist pretensions of the nation in expansion as postulated by the first sentence but also the spiritual and existential state of the protagonist who will represent the fate of that nation. The dense network of evocations, reminiscences, and quotations that constructs the first scene of the first part – Nick contemplating the automobile industry as he drives through the desert – already hints at a kind of underworld: "Hollow bodies coming in endless sequence" (DeLillo, 1997: 63), simultaneously evoking the mute, empty, dreamlike shadows of the dead that surge before Odysseus (Homer, 1998: 190, 195, 200)[5] and, even more so, in conjunction with

[4] Retrieved from: https://biblia.com/books/csb/Nu32.13

[5] "The Realm of Shadows," as the Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey* might be titled, encompasses both the *nekyia* – the summoning of the shades of the deceased – and the *katabasis*, i.e. descent into the underworld. *Nekyia*, a term derived from the Greek word νεκυΐα, refers to a ritual in ancient Greek literature, particularly in Homer's *Odyssey*, where the living communicate with the dead. In the Book XI of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus performs a *nekyia* to summon and speak with the spirits of the dead in the underworld. This ritual involves sacrifices and the invocation of spirits to gain knowledge or guidance from those who have passed away. It is closely associated with the theme of

the sound of rustling wind, "The Hollow Men" by T. S. Eliot.[6]

Events from this first part of the novel should further serve as motivation for delving into the past and its novelistic excavation, transitioning from spatial to temporal underground. One such event is Nick's sudden urge to visit the place where the artist Klara, his former lover, creates, and his encounter with her, which includes an interview she is giving for television at that moment. Her thoughts move in a direction that corresponds to contemporary theories of the loss of the Real, with her sense of unreality linked to the experience of closure – her reflections on the end of the so-called Cold War and the changes she observes on the ideological and existential-epistemological level highlight the theme of closure, characteristic of the end of the millennium. And her work is indeed a vision of a past from the perspective of its end, not the past as such. This sense of closure makes the future opaque, too indefinite and unpredictable for one to face – it seems there is nowhere to go forward, so returning to the past is the only way to survive: when Nick recounts his everyday life in the next section of the first part, the flow of his thoughts, which form a rhythmic, associative alternation of several loosely connected themes, as well as the unfinished and iterative nature of his evocations, evoke a consciousness revolving in a narrow circle of obsessive images and ideas, needing some resolution, a movement in some direction, and this movement will unfold towards the past. Nick's resistance to Klara's view of the fictitiousness of individual destiny and her imposition of reacting to the past and assimilating the past as soon as it is thematized, precisely because Nick is aware of it, because he needs to defend himself against it before himself. The fact that the decision to visit the site of Klara's installation itself is "the debt to memory" becomes a reference point for memory and introspection (DeLillo, 1997: 64). In constructing his descent into the past, DeLillo has assigned Klara the role that Circe and the Sibyl have in *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, respectively. As Homer's Circe instructs Odysseus, "You must go to the house of Hades, to the world of the dead, to consult the ghost of Tiresias", guiding him on his own descent into the underworld (Homer, 1998: XI.10-11). Similarly, in *The Aeneid*, the Sibyl warns Aeneas: "The way is easy, but the return is hard", marking the foreboding journey into the underworld, much as DeLillo's narrative suggests that spiritual stagnation precedes a descent into the past (Vergilije, 1970: VI.81-82).[7] Here, the descent into the underworld is preceded by an atmosphere of resignation and inertia, despite external signs of success and meaning. Conversations with colleagues and friends, along with recollections of the game from the prologue in which Nick "participated" via radio broadcast from the roof of his building, his purchase of the ball that brought shame to the team he supported, and the dream in which it is suggested that Nick may have once killed someone – all converge to evoke a cascade of memories, leading him to grasp for the same ball as a form of salvation and solace. DeLillo's novel mirrors the classical katabasis structure, where, like Odysseus and Aeneas, Nick embarks on a journey that begins in a state of disillusionment and spiritual paralysis. His descent into memory does not merely seek resolution but instead confronts the persistence of the past in shaping contemporary anxieties. This echoes the treatment of trauma in post-9/11 literature, where, despite narratives of resilience, trauma remains inescapable. However, unlike the first part of the novel, where Nick is the sole narrator, each subsequent section introduces an increasing number of character-focalizers – ranging from members of his immediate

katabasis, or descent into the underworld, where the protagonist often seeks wisdom or prophetic insights from the dead.

[6] "We are the hollow men […] Our dried voices, when / We whisper together / Are quiet and meaningless / As wind in dry grass […]" (Eliot, 1948: 63).

[7] Translated into English by the author of the paper.

family to individuals with whom he has only indirect, associative, or symbolic connections. As the narrative expands, it reflects a broader mythological framework, where katabasis is not merely a literal or psychological journey but also a confrontation with the past through multiple perspectives. In this way, his personal past becomes part of others' lives, assimilating situations and events from their lives, with the backward progression of time, the reevaluation and reconstruction of the past involving the reader's knowledge of what Nick has become, uniquely shaping the relationship between the present and the past and questioning Nick's notion of identity constructed through the cumulative accumulation of selected experiences and of life as a coherent linear narrative (cf. Hagan, 2021). As the range of characters expands, so does the space the novel encompasses, including new, very specific types of places – marked by class, ethnic identity, status, race, profession – such as specific New York neighborhoods, the subway, bars, landfills, highways, etc.

By intertwining Nick's individual past with America's past, DeLillo creates a character in whom the characters of two key epic heroes converge (although, of course, not only them): Odysseus and Aeneas. The former meets the world of the dead to learn from Tiresias how to return home – a symbolic return home is implied in the first chapter: when Klara laconically states that they are a long way from home, Nick assumes she means the Bronx – the place they both come from, even though they have not lived there for decades; after visiting Klara's installation, Nick got into his car and "looked for a sign that would point [him] home" (DeLillo, 1997: 84). Odysseus in the underworld learns what happened in his homeland during his absence, just as events from Nick's past will be placed in the context of what happened in the region he comes from in this novel. On the other hand, the future for which Aeneas descends into the underworld is not personal but state-building and national, so his katabasis is part of the story of the nation's destiny and mission. Additionally, both Odysseus and Aeneas come to crucial realizations through conversations with their deceased ancestors: Odysseus with his mother, although Tiresias was the true purpose of his visit, and Aeneas with his father. Given Nick's obsession with his father's sudden disappearance, his return to the past is a kind of search for his father – whom he killed in two ways: by inventing his death in the absence of any evidence that he is really dead and by shooting his substitute, George Manza – a search during which he will, in fact, find his mother. The highly suggestive, lyrical scene of Nick and his mother, who, like Odysseus and Anticleia, become closer thanks to the intervention of a "spirit" – in this case the spirit produced by the media and technology, the spirit from the TV set, the already dead comedian Gleason – has its Odyssean completion in the Epilogue when, after his mother's death, Nick feels that he is suffused with her, and that she has "entered the deepest place [he] could provide", after which Nick truly opens up to his wife for the first time and reveals his past to her (DeLillo, 1997: 804). Similarly, Anticleia's instruction to Odysseus was to remember what he would see in Hades to relay it to his wife (cf. Homer, 1998: 195). Therefore, in the Epilogue, in the dehistoricized, derealized, timeless, twilight, and melancholic world in which we last find Nick, his life is presented as a process shaped by both the visible and manifest disintegration of life into periods defined by crisis moments and their overcoming, and by something imperceptible and unrepresentable, inaccessible to narrative and memory, which made the entire past alive and active and variable in every individual moment, with each moment assimilating the past anew.

With the introduction of each new character in the novel, a plethora of objects emblematic of their lifestyles accompanies them – television shows, or in more distant eras, radio broadcasts they faithfully follow, advertising slogans, preferred film genres, and other visible markers of the epoch. In this sense, the plunge into personal and national past is presented in the form of a cultural and

historical exploration of media and technologies, with DeLillo primarily interested in the mutual relationship between everyday life and official history. The novel inevitably prompts us to ask: is everyday life, the ephemeral, the banal, the powerless, the underground of history produced by powerful global forces, politics, and economy, or is history the underground of everyday life, what invisibly and decisively, secretly, governs life? "Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?" (DeLillo, 1997: 826). The antinomy of the external and internal is manifested not only through the relationship between the physical, the real, and the virtual world of the internet, with which the novel ends, but also on other levels. Observing this relationship between everyday life and history in this novel, we may recall Bakhtin's idea of the hidden chronotope (Bakhtin, 1989: 284), which occurs when the world of the novel is constructed by analogy with some other distinctive "world" – the underworld referred to by the novel's title, which is its hidden chronotope, whether in a mythological-religious sense, in the sense of the world of crime, in the sense of the subconscious, not only individual but also in terms of introducing history into the order of desire, and thus into the order of the subconscious (which DeLillo does by stating that "longing on a large scale is what makes history" (DeLillo, 1997: 11), or in a geological sense, is never completely separate from the aboveground or this world, but neither is it in it; the boundaries between them are porous, so sporadic and ambivalent communication and circulation of elements occur among them, which includes transformations, "noises," resistance "from down below," eruptions, necessary mediators / interpreters.

Edgar Hoover and stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce, the official face and protean reverse of American paranoia, play the role of these mediators in the novel. The fact that it is Edgar Hoover, with all his pathological fears (mysophobia, bacteriophobia, haphephobia), with his repressed homoeroticism, with his unquenchable desire for control and surveillance, whose product is secret dossiers, which simultaneously reflect and continue to produce and spread the paranoid obsession with conspiracies of forces beyond the power of comprehension and control, lends history, which that power manages, the character of hypertrophied desires and fears. The introduction of this character speaks to DeLillo's interest in the almost inextricable tangles of relationships between the public and the secret, and the public's attitude towards the very idea of secrecy, i.e. secret services, secret dossiers, secret reports, secret experiments, secret armament, etc. Is Hoover's service really secret, and as such, truly powerful and influential on a broader level, or is it presented as secret in order to control the public through the mystified and hyperbolized conception of something hidden and powerful, or are fears and obsessions produced within the public itself supported and nurtured by the bureaucracy by introducing figures like Hoover? DeLillo's Hoover is not an answer to the question of the nature of power but a means to problematize it.

On the other hand, DeLillo's portrayal of Lenny Bruce, a drug-addicted comedian, represents a nexus where all the "underground" and official voices of America intersect: Black, Jewish, Hispanic, and others. The character of Lenny Bruce encompasses the voices of presidents, prerecorded instructions to airplane passengers, actors' voices, voices from television commercials, voices of manipulators and brute force, as well as neurotic, cynical, paranoid, terrified voices, voices of children, lunatics, jazz, and more. Bruce embodies a parody and distortion of these voices, blending characters reminiscent of a series of black street preachers sporadically appearing throughout the novel in various settings and times, as if they were always one and the same – DeLillo's "Tiresias." If the "removed arguments" of these preachers are already "the multiplying into millions of the little do's and don'ts [carried] around every day" (DeLillo, 1997: 353), then Bruce's voice

stretches those doubts, do's and don'ts, apocalyptic visions, conspiracy theories, and Freemason beliefs to the utmost limits of exaggeration and hyperbole. In dimly lit, smoky, overcrowded venues, whose heterogeneous audience – a catalog of visitors featured in each episode where Bruce appears – reflects Bruce's ability for constant identity transformation, the secret history "that never appears in the written accounts of the time or in the public statements of the men in power", is preserved precisely thanks to his artistry (DeLillo, 1997: 594). Is history behind conspiracies/a series of conspiracies, or merely conspiracy theories, i.e., paranoia? Paranoia here emerges as the product of a contradictory, yet universally present desire among all characters, to establish control over life and the world, while simultaneously evading control (O'Donnell, 2008: 117).

Many of the novel's minor chronotopes can also be categorized under the overarching concept of the "underworld." Foremost among these is the landfill. Nick and Klara, by the nature of their respective engagements, frequently find themselves visiting several monumental landfills. From these visits and their discussions on waste and landfill construction emerges a philosophy of waste, most radically advocated by Jesse Detwiler. DeLillo's depiction of landfills as vast repositories of discarded matter – both physical and ideological – parallels T.S.Eliot's vision of modern civilization as a fragmented and barren landscape (cf. Dini, 2024). As T. S. Eliot writes in *The Waste Land*, "A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief" (Eliot, 1948: 42). Eliot's desolate imagery, evoking a world of shattered meaning and existential exhaustion, resonates with DeLillo's portrayal of waste as the material residue of cultural amnesia. The landfill, much like Eliot's wasteland, is more than a repository of discarded objects – it is an uncanny monument to what has been forgotten, an accumulation of abandoned histories and obsolete narratives. Just as Eliot's poetic landscape denies shelter or relief, DeLillo's landfills become spaces where time itself collapses, where what is meant to be buried instead lingers, resisting erasure. In this way, both *The Waste Land* and *Underworld* interrogate the tension between permanence and decay, revealing how modernity's detritus – whether in language, memory, or material culture – continues to shape the present from beneath the surface. The most provocative aspect of Jesse Detwiler's views involves a historical inversion, suggesting that waste is not merely a byproduct of civilization's development; rather, civilization itself serves as the means by which humans defend themselves against waste, suppressing it. In this way, waste becomes a metonymic and metaphorical substitution for the subconscious, particularly the collective subconscious – Delillo hinted at this at the outset by describing every piece of garbage and debris thrown by fans in the stadium as if "[carrying] a shadow identity" (DeLillo, 1997: 45). Thus, the landfill becomes a site of intersection between the sacred, the auratic, and the mundane – a ubiquitous yet ignored, hence invisible, repressed, and unrecognized facet of history. It is a historical legacy that is "science fiction and prehistory" at the same time (DeLillo, 1997: 184), both terrifying, monstrous, grotesque, yet also redeeming residues of human desires and longings, rather than achievements. Landfills are explicitly linked to pyramids, hence tombs and the cult of the dead (DeLillo, 1997: 106, 184).

The fascination that waste, in its various forms and origins, elicits from Nick and Klara, provoking several idiosyncratic modes of creative response, attests to humanity's loss of essential and authoritative control over things and reality (O'Donnell, 2008: 109, 116), which, in turn, is one of the reasons why the fundamental organizing principle in this novel is the dynamic configuration of connections among objects, places, and events. As the novel progresses, establishing an analogy between certain elements of the past that have not entered official history and waste, Nick and Klara's attitudes toward

waste become a model for their relationship with the past, memory, and recollection (cf. Schneeberger, 2024). Thus, negligence, pushing aside, storage, recycling, burial, exposure, destruction, and what we might call desecration, primarily associated with Klara's artistic endeavors, represent not only the ways in which individuals, institutions, communities, or society at a given moment relate to their own or others' waste but also different types of relationships between the present and the past and ways of sustaining and manifesting individual and collective memory.

Furthermore, there is Martin's basement-museum, the desert bunker where the operation Desert Pocket unfolds, in which Matthew, Nick's brother, is involved. Then there is a series of peculiar shops for collectors, enthusiasts, fans, and fetishists along the Float Street in San Francisco, as well as a grotesque gathering of tunnel inhabitants in the New York subway, comprising of the poor, homosexuals, and that Pynchonesque waste. There is also the semi- destroyed, contaminated, simultaneously tragic and eerie world behind the so-called Wall, overseen by Ismael Muñoz – alias Moonman 157 – a leader of a group of graffiti artists and waste collectors. Each of these objects or places seems to represent a self- contained world, with its own language, myths, and legends, such as the legend of the Bird (Charlie Parker) in the tunnels or the monstrous transformations suffered by the radiation-exposed villagers, propagated by the so-called bombheads from the Desert Pocket. These micro-worlds adhere to their own time, a time that flows at a different pace and in a different direction and, in historical terms, falls outside the present. Therefore, each of them exhibits a certain parodic and perverse element through which they establish a relationship with the rest of the world – tunnel dwellers have shopping carts and wear slippers before bedtime; children from Muñoz's enclave generate electricity for the television by pedaling a bicycle, while they are offered as a tourist attraction by the media and tourist agencies under the name "South Bronx Surreal"; Marvin, in his quest for the ball, simulates actions carried out by investigative teams during the infamous American "witch hunts" for communists. Each of these worlds is, therefore, simultaneously within and beyond the world governed by official and institutionalized order of life. Each of them is a subversive farce of the official world, its face, and its image. Each of them is also a place of collecting, transforming, and repurposing waste and bric-a-brac.

The symbolism of descent into the underworld is most explicit in the depiction of Brian's visit to Marvin – a baseball memorabilia collector. Similar to, for instance, Oedipa Maas's wandering through San Francisco, this visit to the underworld begins on a bridge. Brian's fear of crossing the bridge is depicted as a temporary plunge into a different plane of existence: "The truth of bridges is that made him feel he was doing some möbius gyration [...] hanging sort of unborn in generic space" (DeLillo, 1997: 167). This fear of abyss, of depth, contributes to Brian's vision of the radio as a medium in an occult sense – the radio becomes akin to that hole dug in Homer's world to access the dead, before which columns of silent souls wait to sound off. Their voice is comforting and protective, which, together with addressing dead presidents (as it is a historically significant place) as protectors, evokes the notion of summoning of dead shades, which marks the beginning of Odysseus' descent into Hades. Moreover, the traditional motif of the river as an obstacle to be overcome on the journey to the underworld, the river as a boundary and fence, precisely because here the river evokes events fundamental to the constitution of the American nation, suggests history and origin as hurdles – to reach Marvin's world, one must overcome, not bypass or discard, official history. Marvin's connection to Tiresias is established by comparing his character to the comedian, and it has been mentioned that the comedian Lenny Bruce in the novel functions as a prophet from the underworld.

Furthermore, the tone and content of Marvin's statements have the character of a prophet's and a mystagogue's speech, guiding followers into secret knowledge and revealing to them the hidden meaning of ordinary things. Marvin's basement is the last page of history: "From end to beginning."

In this way, aside from functioning as one of the many generic models within the novel itself, the basement also serves as a site of revelation regarding the nature of history: by recognizing in Marvin's life an exaggerated and caricaturally recontextualized logic of a political ideology, Brian, upon exiting his basement, becomes inclined to recognize the same duplication, self-reproduction, a closed system of signs that produce tension and fear in the everyday world. However, as much as it grotesquely mimics the official, Marvin's underworld is also its subversion: two completely arbitrary, degrading, rather than synthetic catalogs, catalogs of people, things, places, and atmospheres, comical in their lyrical digressions and disorientation in time and space, through which Marvin sums up his epic quest for a baseball across the American continent, are a parody of official history and historiography and a parody of the system and interconnectedness. History as disorder and chaos – the possibility of "losing yourself to time" (DeLillo, 1997: 319). Marvin is, therefore, an adequate guide – of his wife and the reader, simultaneously – through another underground, Pynchonesque. The depiction of Float Street in San Francisco is a direct reference to Oedipa's nocturnal wanderings and discoveries. It is a world of fetishists, a place of satisfying perverse desires and needs, twisted interests, a gathering place for fanatics of all kinds and those whose measures – physical and any other – are not standard. But that street, with its bars and shops, reflects and multiplies contemporary tendencies towards atomization and segmentation, both of society, community, and the individual, towards isolating each individual fragment of desire and need as a separate element in the market and a separate target of production and marketing. At the bottom of that underworld, and literally underground, the local pub of Marvin's acquaintance, "the underground of memory and collection" (DeLillo, 1997: 321), a junkyard-bar, reveals the political aspect of seemingly psychological and individual deviations – collecting the most ephemeral and worn-out remnants becomes a form of resistance, a form of struggle for independence from the system – "[trying] to match the enormousness of the known forces in the world with something powerful in your own life" (DeLillo, 1997: 323). It is precisely in its chaotic nature that waste provides insight into what DeLillo, in his autopoetic text, referred to as counter-history (DeLillo, 1997), i.e. insight into the multitude of divergent underground currents that do not flow into a coherent and uniform stream.

However, the waste that DeLillo also contemplates, and with which Nick's firm is engaged, is radioactive waste that is buried underground, isolated with the expectation that its radioactivity will eventually diminish until it disappears. Thus, it is invisible and subterranean, and therefore all the more dangerous. This waste is destroyed in the epilogue of the novel through an underground detonation at the same site where the nuclear test was conducted in the prologue, a place described as "frozen away" like Dante's Cocytus[8], the lowest circle of hell (cf. Alighieri, 2003: Canto XXXII). In this manner, the fate of nuclear waste, as a byproduct of the American-Soviet arms race and militaristic power, reflects the trajectory of the political economy that initiated this race – from the surface to the depths, from visible "mushrooms" to invisible networks, from the public to the secret, from the understandable, albeit rigid and terrifying,

[8] In Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, specifically in the *Inferno*, Cocytus is depicted as a frozen lake in the ninth circle of Hell, where traitors are punished by being encased in ice. This portrayal differs from the traditional depiction of Cocytus as a river but emphasizes its association with extreme sorrow and suffering. The name "Cocytus" comes from the Greek word *kokytos*, meaning "lamentation" or "wailing."

binary logic of Cold War ideology to elusive and protean, subterranean flows and incomprehensible connections (cf. Lane, 2020).

Nuclear waste is the product of plutonium degradation, a chemical element whose name is derived from one of the names of the Greek-Roman god (Pluto) of the dead and ruler of the underworld, and a term for the underworld itself. The fate of this name somewhat parallels the fate of the lexeme "waste," whose etymology Nick investigates, as he is also, on occasion, a professor of Latin – a language officially dead, yet alive in a multitude of other languages and thus a linguistic underground, a mine of forgotten meanings. Just as "waste" means barren, desolate, consumed, to consume, and so forth, but also waste (rubbish, trash, refuse, depending on the value and emotional context), the world of the novel, literally inundated with waste, suggests a world simultaneously empty and full. Similarly, the name of this deity (and the underworld itself) connotes a related paradox, undoubtedly known to DeLillo. Pluto emerged from the amalgamation of Hades (the invisible one, he who makes invisible) and the Greek god Plutus – one of the older, forgotten deities of fertility and abundance (Hesiod, 1975). Consequently, the Roman Pluto became both a symbol of death, the world of the dead, and a symbol of abundance, even money, or, as we would say today – capital. Marx's *Das Kapital* serves as the eponym for the epilogue, which, in conjunction with the eponymous prologue, Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, suggests this nexus of death and money as the framework of events, portraying the novel's world as Pluto's realm. Capital, owing to the development of information technology, the concept of networking, systemic administrative structures, and globalist tendencies, has become invisible and acquired the formidable aura of the ancient ruler of the underworld.

As an element of Roman-Italian tradition, Pluto in the novel, through the consciousness of Nick Shay, a descendant of an Italian immigrant, merges with another icon of the underworld and the subversion of one culture by another – the gangster. When Nick reflects on the etymology of the term "plutonium," part of his conception of this deity includes: "They took him out to the marshes and wasted him" (DeLillo, 1997: 106), indicating that he, in fact, represents the wars of criminal underworlds as a modern theogony. On one hand, he constructs this theogony according to media-produced cultural stereotypes. The swamp he evokes is the Stygian swamp or a manifestation of the River Styx, which in various versions of Greek and Roman mythology, as well as in their literary adaptations, inevitably features in the topography of the underworld, often as a part of the boundary between this world and the next. As a swamp, it appears in Virgil (Vergilije, 1970: 150), from whom Dante Alighieri (Alighieri, 2003: 44) later adopted it as a passage between the various forms of excess (the first four circles) and violence, which are, without a doubt, relevant frameworks for DeLillo's America. The Stygian swamp, therefore, forms the fifth circle of hell, where the wrathful and sullen float, and in whose mud the spiritually slothful are submerged. Wrath, Achilles' hubris, is at the core of trauma/sin – the anger caused by loss (which, further, produces the Oedipus complex, rather than being its product) to which Nick's inverted story and his confrontation with himself lead us: "I was dumb-muscled and angry and real […] and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself " (DeLillo, 1997: 810). The image of the swamp also encourages reading Nick's "bronze tower" as a version of Dante's "ancient tower," i.e., as the gate to the blazing City of Dis. Nick's vision of Pluto in the swamp closely resembles his conception of how his father perished in an alleged mafia confrontation, how they dragged him out to the marshes and "lowered [him] into the underworld" (DeLillo, 1997: 121), wherein this fixed idea of Nick's, the idea with which he fills his father's absence, as well as his later flirtation with the image of the Italian

mafioso, is modeled according to cinematic templates. Nick, at times, pretends to act like a gangster, imitating film characters, while internally sensing that his real life is, in fact, a performance, and that this performance is closer to his true self than his official, public persona. Thus, Nick's character is marked by a sense of division, a gap between his image and some elusive self, so we can say that the underworld to which his story leads us is precisely this gap within the self, this fissure in identity. On the other hand, Nick's reliance on cinematic archetypes carries additional significance – in a world completely mediated by the media, film is not merely one among many cultural artifacts, entertainment, or art; it has become an integral part of human psyche and consciousness, infiltrating, so to speak, the mechanisms of perception, cognition, and experience. Therefore, the recognition of filmic qualities in certain experiences or the perception of the world as though through a lens, as framing, which is a frequent occurrence in this novel, as much as the simulation of cinematic techniques, is part of the narrative strategy to highlight the subliminal effects of media and media technologies. Through the theoretical discourse on the function of the camera's gaze, DeLillo further develops and illustrates Walter Benjamin's thesis on the "optical unconscious" (Benjamin, 2015: 68–69). In other words, instead of illuminating or exposing the external world, the camera "inverts," turning the observer into the object of observation, drawing his subconscious to the surface as something simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar to him, certainly unsettling (cf. Radin-Sabadoš, 2017). It often seems as though the characters are caught in the gap between the place from which they observe and the place into which they observe. Thus, film contributes to the construction of temporary spaces and times that, through other means as well, are continually produced in the novel. This also explains the fact that Nick's past, although narrated in the past tense, does not truly take the form of memory – the nature of evoking the past is suggested by the final sentence of the first part of the novel, after which time begins to move backward, in which a faded film of memory is mentioned.

The narrative time, marked by numerous ellipses, encompasses scenes and events spanning almost half a century (cf. Martín-Salván, 2025). This, combined with the descent evoked by the novel's title – suggesting that each individual part of the novel could represent a floor or a lower circle of the underworld – also provokes an association with the archaeological uncovering and the never entirely certain reconstruction of increasingly deeper, but often seemingly unrelated, layers of material culture traces within a single space. Each of the novel's nine sections is further subdivided into segments, with shifts in points of view and narrative styles that constantly adapt on lexical, syntactic, and stylistic levels to the character and world to which they belong, at least at that given moment. This all together produces an ostensibly arbitrary collage of fragments, which is, in fact, supported by a fascinating, multi-dimensional, yet open narrative network. This involves, above all, a series of details that can be considered variations on the same "theme" – an object, image, or idea that undergoes multiple transformations throughout the narrative, as if lines of plots are formed within the novel beyond the comprehension of any single character. Dozens of other stories, which are overwhelmed and concealed by the narratives about Nick, Matthew, Klara, and others, seem, to stay within the themes of the novel itself, to be recycled, transformed, and recontextualized, thus enduring. These stories resemble a New York subway train, which plays an exceptionally significant role in the novel – movements through the "underground" to connect certain points on the surface, with occasional emergence to the surface itself. If we consider the image of the subway implied by the painter Esther's statement – "The IND plowing under Sixth Avenue with its cargo of human souls." (DeLillo, 1997: 432) – then the connection

between the narrative and death becomes explicit.

The central section of the novel is deeply imbued with the motif of the underworld, though its very structure might also evoke the concept of the *axis mundi*, given that the year 1974 occupies the center of the period which begins in 1951 (the year of the novel's Prologue) and concludes in 1997, the year the novel was published and the presumed present of the novel's narrative time. Furthermore, this chapter symbolically encompasses the entire cosmos, extending vertically from the underground (the subway) to the rooftops, and horizontally from New York – from the semi-dilapidated Bronx to the bohemian East Village – to the deserts of the American South. This span, with its spatial oppositions, is simultaneously social and ideological. For example, the opposition between the rooftop and the subway reflects the opposition between the gallery-recognized artist (Klara) and the anarchist artist (Muñoz, alias Moonman 157).

In the novel, Moonman represents one of the New York graffiti artists who drew on subway trains, a subculture that emerged in the 1960s and became a model for similar forms of verbal-visual expression in public spaces worldwide. The very name of this practice preserves the memory of decay and death, as graffiti initially referred to inscriptions and drawings found on the walls of ancient tombs, Roman catacombs, and ruins. This phenomenon was regarded as a form of transgression, an act of vandalism. Given that the graffiti artists of the period in question, including Moonman, were predominantly immigrants and other marginalized, discriminated groups, this form of vandalism was not only an expression of resistance and provocation against the system by the youth, akin to other youth subcultures, but also a form of political protest. "Bombing" a train, as this activity is referred to in slang, signifies the occupation of public space and resistance to the city's administrative-informational system, as the inscriptions compete with, overshadow, or cover official notices, warnings, and other signs intended to inform the public. Graffiti are not merely a product of so-called street art; they embody the characteristics of life on the street. The artist expresses themselves as a representative of their street, and since streets, neighborhoods, and districts in American cities are often defined by race, nationality, and class, the use of a street number as part of a nickname or pseudonym further underscores the political nature of this gesture – for the city in which they live, the graffiti artist is a faceless number. It is as if the artists feel they lack the possibility or even the right to mobility, both in the literal sense and in terms of class migration, and that they are significantly deprived when it comes to informational and communicational means.[9]

In DeLillo's character Ismael, the awareness of the relationship between identity, rights, and place is quite clear. Therefore, the choice of trains as the means of transportation that connect the entire city symbolizes the symbolic movement of the author and their work, their virtual omnipresence, serving as both a warning and a threat: "[…] you get inside people's heads and vandalize their eyeballs" (DeLillo, 1997: 435). In the 1990s, Moonman no longer exists – Ismael no longer draws on trains but on the Wall. This new form of critical activity, within a new context and style, consists of creating massive murals depicting children from Ismael's ghetto who have died due to violence and disease, with their names and birth and

[9] According to Jeff Ferrell, author of *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*, "the contrast between graffiti art and the "art" of the corporation and the government, and the link between graffiti writing, busking, and other forms of anarchist entertainment, both point to a final dimension of graffiti writing as anarchist resistance. Graffiti writing breaks the hegemonic hold of corporate / governmental style over the urban environment and the situations of daily life. As a form of aesthetic sabotage, it interrupts the pleasant, efficient uniformity of "planned" urban space and predictable urban living. For the writers graffiti disrupts the lived experience of mass culture, the passivity of mediated consumption" (Ferrell, 1996: 175–176).

death dates inscribed as on a tombstone (which these children likely never received) (cf. Strombeck, 2023). The rhythm of these graffiti's appearance mirrors the rhythm of dying. These new graffiti are also signs of existence, boldly and vividly announcing to the world both the fact that certain "unofficial" individuals existed and disappeared without leaving any other trace, and that certain modes of dying, which most people ignore, are present. They are memorials, but also parodically grotesque distortions of advertising strategies – large scale, bright colors, sharp contrasts – visual stimuli that the eye can hardly avoid. The association of children's deaths with recognizable signs of consumer culture – brands, clothing styles, types of products aimed at much wealthier and more protected segments of the population that exist only in the context of advertising – produces unsettling effects. The angel in Nike sneakers seems to address a world in which the concept of Heaven or Paradise has been equated with financial prosperity and material possession.

The appropriation and co-optation of signs, representations, and ideas that have already taken root in the collective consciousness, becoming spontaneously recognizable, and their ironic inversion, recontextualization that produces opposing, intriguing, and shocking effects, along with the play on polysemy, constitute a strategy whose various forms are recognizable in multiple places within the novel: although Klara and Moonman never meet, through her reception of his graffiti, she adopts some of his strategies of using signs foreign to his world. This underscores the significance of the creator's position and the place of creation in determining the nature and meaning of the work in the contemporary world. Ismael's Wall, like Klara's desert – formerly a site for nuclear tests and other secret militaristic operations – is a liminal or liminoid zone, simultaneously within and outside the social order; both places have been produced by society as its shameful reverse.

In the heart of the novel lies another "underworld" beyond the literal subterranean realm: *Unterwelt* – a fictional film credited by DeLillo to the renowned Russian director Sergei Eisenstein. This film unfolds in a secret laboratory beneath the earth's surface, evoking not only the literal underground but also the atmosphere of the real 1927 Hollywood gangster film of the same name. Klara is particularly struck by this connection, likely due to the haunting mood set in the silent film's opening titles: "A great city in the dead of night...streets lonely...moon clouded...buildings as empty as the cave dwellings of a forgotten age" (Sternberg, 1927). Eisenstein, in Klara's vision, is portrayed as a figure deeply enmeshed in multiple "underworlds" – sexual, psychological, and political. He is depicted as a man torn between his suppressed desires and the rigid confines of official ideology, between utopian dreams and harsh realities, ultimately crafting a film that culminates in an underground bunker. This fictional film becomes a potent metaphor within the novel, embodying DeLillo's broader exploration of the "underworld." Set in the 1930s, the film depicts the scientific and technological dehumanization of individuals, screened in a cosmopolitan Art Deco theater – an architectural marvel from the same era. The audience, representing the camp subculture – still emerging and provocative at the time – embodies the contradictions and tensions inherent in the film and its context. Moonman's "bombing" of the subway train, depicted only through sound and the rumbling vibrations it causes underground, serves as an invisible interlude within the film, further expanding the notion of the "underworld" to encompass realms of suppression, concealment, and repression. This includes political dissidents and victims of technological and scientific experiments, whom Nick encounters in Russian hospitals in the novel's Epilogue, as if they have emerged directly from this fictional "Unterwelt."

As Klara immerses herself in the film, it seems as though the underworld itself begins to permeate her being, becoming an inescapable part of her perception of the

world. It is as if she, like Pynchon's Oedipa Maas, has become a projector – but in DeLillo's universe, these projections take on a tangible reality: "She felt she was wearing the film instead of a skirt and blouse" (DeLillo, 1997: 445). This sense of dislocation created by the film mirrors the effect on people's eyeballs described by both Moonman (DeLillo, 1997: 435) and advertising agent Charlie Wainwright who claims that "once we get the consumer by the eyeballs, we have complete mastery of the marketing process" (DeLillo, 1997: 531), with a key distinction: while avant-garde, anarchistic, underground art seeks to violently disrupt perception, forcing itself upon a gaze that might otherwise avoid or ignore it, advertising employs subtle control and manipulation to achieve its ends. By drawing a parallel between the mindset of a young, angry homeless man and that of a successful advertising executive, DeLillo highlights how subcultures adopt and repurpose the strategies of consumer culture, transforming them into tools for their own survival and visibility. In this way, the novel underscores the fluid, often contentious, relationship between art, power, and the means by which marginalized voices assert themselves in a world dominated by commodification and control.

Moreover, the manner in which the musicians altered Prokofiev's music during the screening of Eisenstein's film – specifically the "March" from the opera *The Love for Three Oranges*, which itself includes a scene set in an underworld – by embedding auditory allusions to the 1950s and evoking the ideological and social atmosphere of a more innocent and naive era, only to later reveal the threatening and controlling aspects of entertainment through the same music, directs Klara's reflections toward the idea of a conflict not between different languages, but within the very system of signs that generates power. Resistance to dominant representations is not manifested through open confrontation, but rather through the subversive reconfiguration of the elements by which these representations are produced. This can be described as a form of semiotic guerrilla warfare. A parallel can be drawn to DeLillo's method of inserting subversive elements into historical narratives, such as the inclusion of a performance by an underground theater troupe depicting a dance of death at Capote's black-and-white ball, which serves as another example of such artistic and cultural guerrilla tactics.

The triptych "Manx Martin" deserves particular scrutiny as it visually, through graphic means, evokes a void – possibly akin to Odysseus's own void, though in this instance, DeLillo himself assumes the role of Odysseus, "excavating" American history and its images and conceptions. Following every two chapters, DeLillo introduces, through the use of graphically distinct black pages, interpolated segments that directly continue the narrative from the prologue. These segments, among other revelations, elucidate the enigma surrounding the initial trajectory of the baseball from the game – a mystery that remains unresolved for the characters in the main narrative. The use of black pages for these interpolated sections creates the impression of a "black hole," a space where gravity is so intense that matter becomes wholly opaque and impermeable. This device relates to the theme of black-and-white opposition, which is one of the novel's thematic threads. This opposition is not only relevant on a racial level (as the Martin family is African-American) but also serves as a metaphorical underpinning for the mythic concept of an utterly dark world with no escape, a realm that renders itself invisible. The narrative about Manx's sale of his son's baseball illustrates what Martin, despite advanced technology, was unable to discover – information that would have completed the genealogical puzzle and confirmed the ball's authenticity for both him and Nick. The importance of these episodes lies in their exploration of the hidden origins and the impossibility of ever accessing the true beginning of something. By situating this inaccessible origin within an African-American family, DeLillo links the failure of the quest to the repression of the "other." Additionally, by

weaving together a chaotic, contingent, and inverted narrative with a coherent, linear story that progresses in the present, despite chronologically preceding the events into which it is integrated, DeLillo formalizes tensions, polarities, and the often invisible intersections of opposites and heterogeneous elements. Through the continuation of the story about Cotter Martin and his father – who represents a selfish betrayal of his son's trust and the commodification of memories and cultural artifacts – DeLillo suggests that these "present" sections of the novel reflect archetypal and paradigmatic aspects of the events depicted.

By magnifying the dots of the panoramic mosaic of (post)modern daily life – which itself constitutes a kind of spiritual underworld, a habitat of "images" encompassing the dependence on progress through the space of temptation from the power of precise naming, as in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* – DeLillo unveils another subterranean world. More specifically, he reveals a labyrinth of multiple, already layered, abyssal underworlds that continuously breach and deconstruct the organized, smooth, tightly networked, and coherent surface from within. Maintaining the ambiguity and duality of Pynchon's underworlds – which are both a byproduct of systems and products of resistance and subversion against those systems; mechanisms of control and total surveillance as well as means of fruitful, though (self)destructive chaos; apparent oppositions created by the order itself and zones torn from the influence of their creators – DeLillo's subterranean realms consistently assert a new liminal position, "torn on the horn between season and season / time and time, between / Hour and hour, word and word, power and power" (Eliot, 1948: 75), and the permanent undermining of homologous and monological practices.

Conclusion

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* reimagines the myth of the underworld as a dynamic and multifaceted construct, embedding it within the sociopolitical, cultural, and psychological landscape of modernity. By engaging with classical and literary traditions of *katabasis* and *nekyia*, DeLillo's narrative interrogates the subterranean forces shaping historical memory, power structures, and personal identity. The novel's fragmented structure mirrors the disjointed and elusive nature of the underworld, reinforcing its role as a space of both concealment and revelation. One of the central findings of this study is that DeLillo's underworld operates not merely as a mythological or symbolic construct but as an epistemological framework that critiques the mechanisms of control, repression, and historical erasure. The interplay between waste – both as material residue and as a metaphor for societal and ideological decay – further underscores the novel's concern with what is discarded, forgotten, or suppressed. By drawing on intertextual references, from Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* to Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, *Underworld* foregrounds the cyclical nature of history, exposing the tension between visibility and obscurity, surface and depth, the official and the clandestine.

Ultimately, DeLillo's exploration of the underworld destabilizes linear historical narratives and dominant ideological frameworks, offering a counter-history that amplifies the voices of the forgotten and marginalized. The novel constructs an alternative cartography of the modern world – one where the subterranean is not only a site of death and decay but also of resistance, subversion, and potential transformation. In doing so, *Underworld* challenges the reader to reconsider the boundaries between past and present, the visible and the invisible, and the forces that shape collective and individual consciousness. DeLillo's narrative resists conventional notions of historical resolution, portraying the past not as a closed chapter but as an ever-repeating cycle of erasure and return. His depiction of history, memory, and power mirrors the desolate fatalism of T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, where the world does not end in dramatic finality but in a slow, muted dissolution: "*This is the way the world ends* / *Not with a bang but a whimper*"

(Eliot, 1948: 66). Much like Eliot's vision of a world fading into insignificance, *Underworld* suggests that history's grand narratives unravel not through decisive ruptures but through fragmentation and entropy. In DeLillo's America, the Cold War's ideological struggles, the detritus of consumerism, and the remnants of forgotten lives accumulate in the underworld of cultural memory – not as definitive conclusions but as lingering echoes, whispering beneath the surface of contemporary existence.

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