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## **Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and the Psychoanalytic Ethics of Waste<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) depicts contemporary American realities across the span from 1950s to 1990s. The novel's narrative, however expansive and digressive, consistently develops through various kinds of waste everywhere: nuclear waste, disused arms, architectural ruins, urban slums, household garbage, etc. This paper, in light of Lacanian/Žižekian psychoanalytic theory, looks at waste not as a fully present object of the novel's representation but as an excess, remainder of capitalist industrial-military modes of production and, more significant, the subject's desiring and fantasy. Waste is something that has to be buried and expunged to maintain the consistency of reality on both individual and collective level, but resists full domestication; it is, in Lacanian/Žižekian terms, the object *a* that has something in it more than itself and arouses fascination and fear at the same time. Such an understanding especially pertains to the novel's protagonist, Nick Shay, who works as a waste manager for a global corporate and is tormented by the traumas of the loss of Father, accidental murdering of his friend, and adulterous sex in his younger years: to a great extent, "trauma" as the waste *par excellence* (or *vice versa*) haunts and fascinates Nick Shay, as well as other characters, and hence problematizes his identity and sense of reality. The novel narrativizes the paranoid-conspiratorial belief that "everything is connected" *and* there are always larger forces beyond the subject. This paper will examine such an ideological contradiction and work out a psychoanalytic, and truly ecological as well, ethics that departs from political and moral sentimentalism, cynicism and apathy, and sees in waste something more than danger, threat, or even doom: namely, this paper aims at the possibility of working through ecological fantasy.

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## Keywords

conspiracy, enjoyment, fantasy, object *a*, paranoia, trauma, *Underworld*, waste

[S]omething that eludes naming is automatically relegated . . . to the status of shit. You can't name it. It's too big or evil or outside your experience.

(DeLillo, *Underworld* 77)

[T]he Real cannot be signified not because it is outside, external to the symbolic order, but precisely because it is inherent to it, its internal limit: the Real is the internal stumbling block on account of which the symbolic system can never "become itself," achieve its self-identity. Because of its absolute *immanence* to the symbolic, the Real cannot be positively *signified*; it can only be *shown*, in a negative gesture, as the inherent failure of symbolization.

(Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* 217)

Reading the above two quotes together, we cannot help noticing their uncanny, frighteningly coincidental correspondence: shit (or, more generally, waste) in DeLillo's *Underworld* fits in Žižek's elaborations of the Lacanian Real, something that is fully immanent to the symbolic order but "eludes naming" or resists symbolization. Does waste not thus acquire the status of the *extimacy*, the alien kernel to our existence, society or even civilization, something that we produce, bury, recycle, and abject, but something that always deviates from our technological, epistemological domestication? This paper, through a critical reading of DeLillo's *Underworld*, argues that if an ethics of waste is possible, it must be grounded in the psychoanalytic conception of the Real: hence, a psychoanalytic ethics of waste that places upon us the encounter with the Real as an ethical necessity, registers the impossibility of full symbolization and breaks with the "ecological" falsifications of the recycling, sublimation of waste and Nature as a balanced system.

DeLillo's fiction is often labeled as "postmodernist" for its representation of the predominance of the spectacle and commodity and the consequent decline of historical consciousness (Osteen 2). His characters are Individuals who are circumscribed by complicatedly interconnected global systems beyond their reach and comprehension. In spite of their paranoid suspicion that totalized explanations and interpretations may be ultimately futile, however, they also yearn for religious,

spiritual transcendence over contemporary immanent techno-cultural realities of spectacle and commodity (Coale 2, 91, 97). In other words, to what extent a postmodernist reading of DeLillo's fiction sustain and how it distinguishes itself from other postmodernist fictions remain to be qualified. For example, placing the focus on environmental consciousness, we may see DeLillo's departure from the typical postmodern conception of "the end of Nature" (Martucci 10-12), one among the many postmodern death announcements including the end or death of body, subject, nation state, ideology . . . and so on, as Nature as such is believed to be replaced by technological reproduction and simulation. That prelapsarian, Eden-like Nature may be unmasked as ideological mystification, however, does not explain the irrelevance of Nature as a conceptual and experiential category.

Cynthia Deitering in her essay "The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s," a milestone in eco-literary study, positions DeLillo among the fiction since 1980s characterized with "toxic consciousness," which "offers insight into a culture's shifting relation to nature and to the environment at a time when the imminence of ecological collapse was, and is, part of the public mind and of individual imaginations" (196). According to Deitering, novels including Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December*, John Cheever's *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, John Gardner's *Mickelsson's Ghosts*, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Walker Percer's *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Paul Therous's *O-Zone*, T. Coraghessan Boyle's *World's End*, Richard Russo's *Mohawk*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (196-97) provide representations of individuals' complicity in the postindustrial, postnatural culture, nation and ecosystem that are defined by waste and pollution, and, with ethical and political critique in view, "raise the environmental consciousness of the society that sees itself in the mirror" (202). Drawing on Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World* (2002), Elise A. Martucci coins the term "the environmental unconscious" to designate the impossibility and potentiality in the representation of Nature as culturally constructed in DeLillo through the images of garbage and toxicity. Though with the terminology different from Deitering's, Martucci also points to the "molecular transformation of the environment" as a central motif in DeLillo's fiction after 80's, which subverts the American pastoral or idyllic image of Nature (19).

Our understanding of the central position of waste in *Underworld* can be distinctly delimited within the literary and socio-cultural context as depicted above. *Underworld* depicts contemporary American realities across the span from 1950s to 1990s; it "encompasses some five decades of history, both the hard, bright world of public events and the more subterranean world of private emotions in which individuals are connected by a secret calculus of hope and loss" (Kakutani para. 2). However expansive and digressive, the novel's narrative consistently develops in the

background of ubiquitous but interconnected waste of various kinds: nuclear waste, disused arms, architectural ruins, urban slums, household garbage, etc. In addition to the paranoid, public, macrocosmic American Cold-War history, of which the connection of waste and weapons functions as the major organizational principle, we also see in the underworld of the novel the shared traumatic sense of insecurity, confusion, alienation, dread, and loss (Osteen 216). In fact, the novel's narrative, which connects everything, moves in the tension between the apocalyptic completion of American collective history and identity (especially in Prologue) and the distant, alienated otherness within individuals' "small" history of ordinary life (Boxall 192). In this aspect, the novel's narrative through its backward-running structure registers the belated devastating, traumatic physical and psychological effects of the Cold-War paranoid mentality and the proliferation of weapons and waste or, put in properly psychoanalytic terms, "the 'residue' of the real in the cultural unconscious" (Wilcox 122): trauma is always beyond words, unable to be totalized; it is a kind of residue, surplus and, hence, waste of the symbolic order.

This paper, in light of Lacanian/Žižekian psychoanalytic theory of ideological fantasy, looks at waste not as an fully present object of the novel's representation but as an excess, remainder of capitalist industrial-military modes of production and, more significant, the subject's desiring and fantasy. Waste is something that has to be buried and expunged to maintain the consistency of reality on both individual and collective level, but resists full domestication; it is, in Lacanian/Žižekian terms, the object *a* that has something in it more than itself and arouses fear and fascination at the same time. Such an understanding especially pertains to the novel's protagonist, Nick Shay, who works as a waste manager for a global corporate and is tormented by the traumas of the loss of Father, accidental murdering of his friend, and adulterous sex in his younger years: to a great extent, "trauma" as the waste *par excellence* (or *vice versa*) haunts and fascinates Nick Shay, as well as other main protagonists, and hence problematizes his identity and sense of reality. The novel narrativizes the paranoid-conspiratorial belief that "everything is connected" *and* there are always larger forces beyond the subject. This paper will examine such an ideological contradiction and work out a psychoanalytic, and truly ecological as well, ethics that departs from political and moral sentimentalism, cynicism and apathy, and sees in waste something more than danger, threat, or even doom: namely, the possibility of working through the fantasy, of holding a proper distance toward the enjoyment the subject acquires from serving the power system knowingly or unknowingly.

### **From Cold-War Politics of Fear to Conspiracy Theory of Complexity**

Set on 3 October 1951, the Giants-Dodgers ballgame in Prologue testifies to the fact that American collective identity and history are developed, or imagined, under the threatening shadow of American Cold-War politics, as can be seen from the title “The Triumph of Death.” The whole novel begins with detailed descriptions of the history-making game that brings together such VIPs as Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, Toots Shor and, more significant, Edgar Hoover, and embodies “longing on a large scale” (*Underworld* 11).<sup>2</sup> The crowd at the ballgame are described as a kinesthetic collectivity with the power that “will make something happen, change the structure of the game and get them leaping to their feet, flying up together in a free thunder that shakes the place crazy” (19). The crowd’s unmediated participation in the game, however, does not lack its uncanny doubles that support and undermine American identity and history in the making at the same time. Russ Hodges, the live reporter of the game, confesses that he has spent years in the studio recreating big league games or, in his own terms, doing “ghost games,” which are equal to simulating, fictionalizing immediate experience, for those who are connected to the games through radio. Not to be disregarded as having nothing whatsoever to do with truth, Brian Glassic’s nostalgic recall of the game that people rushed outside and wanted to be together when Thomson hit the homerun (94) does not dispense with the simulation, fictionalization of experience, identity and history always already there. And *one* truth about the Giants-Dodgers game, which is not revealed until decades later, is that the Polo Grounds on the day of the game is not actually “crowded”: many people stay home for fear of nuclear disasters in public gathering (171). In fact, such paranoid fear persists through the whole game owing to Edgar Hoover’s presence. For Hoover, American identity is formed not so much by common language, climate, popular songs, breakfast foods, jokes and cars as by the threats of destruction or the strength of the enemy (28). Hoover’s paranoid-conspiratorial perspective, however, should not be downplayed as individual psychopathology; it characteristically manifests American politics of fear in 1950s and 60s, as can be corroborated by Klara’s nostalgic reminiscence in 1992:

Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction. (76)

The paranoid identification with/through the figure of the Enemy reaches its most dramatic, apocalyptic apogee when the crowd celebrate the Giants’ triumph through

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<sup>2</sup> References to *Underworld* will hereafter be directly indicated by page number in parenthesis.

throwing all kinds of garbage representative of American life: laundry tickets, envelopes from the office, wrap from sandwiches, pages from memo pads and pocket calendars, dollar bills, love letters . . . (44-45). This scene of celebration embodies the making of American identity and history always in the shadow of waste and destruction on both literal and symbolic level. And the appearance of Pieter Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* on the torn magazine pages thrown by the crowd leads Hoover to the imaginary site of nuclear test in Kazakhstan and his contemplation on the ambivalent connection between Us and Them and the complication of waste, weapons and secrecy of power (51). Again, Hoover's paranoid, apocalyptic fantasy does not lack its correspondence in other characters. For example, Chapter 2, Part 5 (dated October 8, 1957), describes the commodity and appliances used in the Demings in close relation to weapons. Eric Denning (Matt Shay's colleague in the army) even ejaculates his sperm, as a kind of bodily waste, into a condom, because "it had a sleek metallic shimmer, like his favorite weapons system" (514), while the vacuum cleaner in his house is "satellite-shaped" (520). Near the ending of the whole novel, Nick's visit to the site of nuclear test in Kazakhstan in 1990s also constitutes an uncanny double of Hoover's appearance at the Giants-Dodgers game in 1951, since Nick recognizes a curious, mystical connection between waste and weapons too (791). In Eric's and Nick's cases, the Cold-War politics, the rigid ideological divide between "Us" and "Them," and the threats of nuclear destruction that pervade America in 1950s and 60s may have collapsed, but their residual, traumatic effects are continuously manifested in the proliferation of waste, always the spectral double of weapons, and, hence, the necessity of "waste management."

The collapse of paranoid fear of invasion and destruction, albeit with its residual, traumatic effects, corresponds to the transformation of political, techno-cultural realities and, of course, paranoid-conspiratorial thinking in contemporary America.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Knight in his *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to The X Files* (2000) and other essays terms such transformation as "insecure paranoia" in contrast to "secure paranoia" (especially pertaining to Cold-War politics). From psychoanalytic perspectives, paranoia, be it clinical, political or cultural, is never "secure" and free of tension and ambivalence. For example, in some parts of his reading of Paul Schreber's case history of paranoia, Freud quite admires Schreber's good personality traits including his good memory and sound judgment. Although Schreber is suspicious of the realities he is living in, he is certain of his direct communications with God: hence, the paradox of doubt and certainty. Schreber is withdrawn from external realities and regresses into his hallucinatory world, and he imagines the plot of the apocalyptic destruction of the world. So we see in his case the paradox of regression and aggression, since no other fantasy can be more aggressive than the fantasy of the end of the world. In political paranoia, for example, Richard Hofstadter's essay on "the paranoid style in American politics" has been widely

Many critics of contemporary postmodernity such as Peter Knight, Mark Fenster and Michael Barkum critically look at the emergence of “conspiracy culture.” Grand theories now are allegedly replaced by theories of complexity and chaos, which take on the impossible task of describing the complex systems with emergence, distribution, decentralization and self-organization as their functional principles and with consequences unable to be totalized and fully predicted; such systems, as can be located in human behaviors, social organization, genetic structure, artificial life, cyberspace, and so on, have impacts on our notions of causality, agency and control (Knight 213-15).<sup>4</sup> In such contexts, paranoia and conspiracy theories can be read as the provisional form of representation and strategic gesture in response to the complex, unstable realities and identities and the loss of grand narratives in the age of global capitalism: hence, the pervasive circulation of stories of control, surveillance, viral infection, and so on (Knight 209-12).

In *Underworld*, as can be seen from Klara’s and Brian’s nostalgic perspectives, “secure,” Cold-War paranoia, on the one hand, offers comforting solidarity or functions as a defense mentality against complex techno-cultural realities, but, on the other hand, leaves indelible traumatic effects in both individual and national terms (Knight 229), with which most characters in the novel never cease to struggle throughout their whole life: in this sense, they are all waste managers. Thus said, however, we must not fail to see that, for example, the conspiracies surrounding JFK

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criticized for the term “paranoid style,” which is manifested in distorted rhetoric, taste and judgment, and converts concrete issues into ideological contentions with moral and emotional charges, turns out to be a functional label that he ascribes to those who stand on the political stance incompatible with or opposite to his own. However, the basic elements of political paranoia he abstracts, including the vast conspiracy that threatens to destroy our ways of life, apocalyptic life and death struggles, and more crucially, the figure of Enemy which arouses fear but at the same time embodies a society’s internal antagonism, are all tainted with ambivalence, as can be elaborated in light of Žižek’s theory of “theft of enjoyment”: we imagine that there is a precious essence in our way of life—more accurately put in Žižek’s terms, a National Thing that is known and possessed by us only—but at the same time, we imagine that such a National Thing is to be taken away by the Other. Therefore, every encounter with our political or ethnic Other always involves struggle for the enjoyment which is always unbalanced. For more details, see Han-yu Huang, “Conspiracy and Paranoid-Cynical Subjectivity in the Society of Enjoyment: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Ideology,” *NTU Studies in Language and Literature* 17 (June 2007): 159-98.

<sup>4</sup> For more theoretical, technical explorations of complex system, see George Robertson, et al., eds, *FutureNatural: Nature, Science, Culture* (London: Routledge, 1996) and Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex System* (London: Routledge, 1998).

assassination in *Libra* may not fully apply to the more everyday paranoid-conspiratorial thinking in *Underworld* (Duvall 259), which is “a vision of conspiracy without conspiring” (Knight 233), a fantasy framework devoid of political plotting. Marvin Lundy, in order to relocate the Thomson homer, appeals to his self-invented “dot theory of reality” and examines “a million” enlarged and enhanced photographs of the audience that reconstruct every single dot of the trail of the ball and ultimately lead to its possessor, Cotter Martin (174-75).<sup>5</sup> His paranoid-conspiratorial mindset is also manifested in his mania for objects and details (Chapter 2 and 3, Part 2): the example *par excellence* is his foresight of the collapse of Soviet system from the map of Latvia he sees in Gorbachev’s birthmark on the head (173). In Nick’s case, paranoid conspiracy works as defense fantasy in response to traumatic events or realities beyond his understanding and control. After Dodgers, the team Nick supports, loses the game, Nick begins to “see all sorts of signs pointing to the number thirteen” (95): the date of the game (October third or ten-three), the number of the letters of his father’s name (“Jimmy Costanza”) and “Russ Hodges” (the reporter of the game), the number the Dodgers’ pitcher, Branca, wears, and so on (95, 102, 133, 678). Moreover, as a way of registering the traumatic effects of his father’s disappearance, Nick clings to the conspiracy theory that his father is murdered, and elevates it to a sublime, legendary status beyond American culture of conspiracy. As his brother Matt comments,

Nick could not afford to succumb to a general distrust. He had to protect his conviction about what happened to Jimmy. Jimmy’s murder was isolated and pure, uncorrupted by other secret alliances and criminal acts, other suspicions. Let the culture indulge in cheap conspiracy theories. Nick had the enduring stuff of narrative, the thing that doesn’t have to be filled in with speculation and hearsay. (454)

“Jimmy,” as a signifier devoid of the anchor in any signified, embodies trauma as such: it irrupts in unexpected moments but is never fully symbolized, integrated into the narrative of the novel, and, accordingly, retroactively connects everything in a disjunctive, non-totalized way. Nick’s paranoid-conspiratorial fantasy, in other words, circles around but never reaches such an absent, unrepresentable traumatic kernel. It is at this point that we can perceive the doubling between the hyperlinked, uncanny—conveniently conceived as “what should be concealed but is revealed”—nature of trauma in question and Sister Edgar’s perception of the complex system of cyberspace, which is no less paranoid than Nick’s conspiracy

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<sup>5</sup> Before Marvin Lundy, the ball is possessed by Juddy Rauch, who purchases the ball from Charles Wainwright, who buys the history-creating ball from Cotter’s father, Manx Martin. Nick becomes the final owner of the ball after paying 34,500 dollars.

theory: “There is no space or time out here, or in here, or wherever she is. There are only connections. Everything is connected. All human knowledge fathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password—world without end, amen” (825). Both Nick and Sister Edgar, as well as most characters in *Underworld*, posit and cling to the paranoid suspicion and belief that “everything is connected” because it is impossible to be grasped as a verifiable fact: such impossibility constitutes the (psychical, techno-cultural) Real that sustains but at the same time undermines their identities, understanding of knowledge, and sense of reality, all of which no longer remain confined within the Cold-War paranoid politics of fear and divide between “Us” and “Them.” Ultimately, what they posit through their paranoid-conspiratorial fantasy is nothing less than, in Lacanian terms, “the Other of the Other,” the impossible full knowledge of the complex techno-cultural system as a whole, in order to sustain a place for desiring (McGowan 133). Their suspicion and uncertainty turn out to be part of their postmodern routinized, ritualized cynical survival gesture and strategy *par excellence*, which, as we are justified to suspect in our turn, are likely to “[become] complicit with the situation that they sought to reject” (McGowan 134) and “leave intact the universe of global capitalism” (McGowan 140). Their work of “waste management,” in one word, does not change “the very parameters of what is considered ‘possible’ in the existing constellation” (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 199) and, therefore, fails to accomplish the authentic ethical act according to psychoanalytic ethics.

### **Waste and Culture of Excess**

It is already a commonplace interpretation that waste is the central preoccupation and the most explicit subject of *Underworld* in both literal and figurative terms (Boxall 196, Kavadlo 133): with various types of waste such as landfills, recycled garbage, excrement, nuclear waste, deactivated aircrafts, wasted lives and relationship, the novel interconnects various characters’ experiences in contemporary culture of excess. With ethics of waste as the main concern of this paper, one inevitable ethical position at this point is “not” to downplay the perspectives of Jesse Detwiler, the “waste theorist” according to Nick (285), or paranoid-conspiratorial theorist of waste in the novel:

[C]ities rose on garbage, inch by inch, gaining elevation through the decades as buried debris increased. Garbage always got layered over or pushed to the edges. . . . But it had its own momentum. It pushed back. It pushed into every space available, dictating construction patterns and

altering systems of ritual. And it produced rats and paranoia. People were compelled to develop an organized response. . . . Civilization is built, history is driven . . . . (287)

Waste in its various figurations is not a static, passive object. It traverses the boundaries between commodity, capitalist-military mode of production, urban construction, aesthetics, ideology, history and ecology. It is the residual excess of human civilization that has to be buried and expunged, but resists full domestication; it is, in Lacanian/Žižekian terms, the object *a* that has something in it more than itself and arouses fascination and fear at the same time. If an ethics of waste is possible, it must take such understanding as its point of departure.

Waste in *Underworld*, first of all, must be understood in the context of global capitalist military-industrial complex and culture of commodity: hence, the complex system of commodity and waste. Does Nick's work of waste management, put in the terms of the argument here, not involve the process how Cold-War politics, its waste and traumatic effects on both individual and national level are first "deterritorialized" and then "reterritorialized" into global capitalist system? Therefore, in his visit to Tchaika, an international trading company of waste set in the former Kazakh nuclear test site, he sees the assemblage of generals, uranium speculators, bureaucrats, industrialists, bomb designers, official observers, waste traders, venture capitalists, arm dealers, and so on (794). Waste qua commodity never stays in the same place; it is produced, destroyed, buried, and transmuted, and returns to consume humans and brings forth another process of production, destruction, burial, transmutation . . . . If commodity provides "a sense of belonging to a larger social system" (Wallace 367) and "a standardized common memory . . . and nostalgia for an integrated national identity" that is lost in the age of globalization (Wallace 371), waste is the underground, secret history or underhistory of such identification and memory. Various characters in the novel, as already pointed out above, are engaged in the practice of managing waste qua the indivisible remainder of the past, of "containing, recycling, or disguising waste of varying degrees of danger" (Noon 84). Therefore, we are justified to see waste as the *extimacy*, the most alien kernel of global capitalist military-industrial complex and culture of commodity, the excess or remainder of global capitalism that "circulates as models, codes, and media simulacra" (Wilcox 124), the absolute immanence to and inherent failure of the symbolic that prevents identity, desire, society, and history from becoming fully themselves but paradoxically sustains their functioning. "Most of our longings go unfulfilled," says Nick near the ending of the novel. "This is the word's wistful implication—a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach" (803).

The uncanny, *extimate* logic as conceptualized above has its most spectacular

illustration in the Wall, an area of “TB, AIDS, beatings, drive-by shootings, measles, asthma, abandonment at birth . . . partly for the graffiti façade and partly the general sense of exclusion . . . a tuck of land adrift from the social order” (239). What is at issue here is more complicated than environmental, ecological debris. The Wall, the urban ruin *par excellence*, is excluded in a particular sense: it is, more accurately, “included out.” The Wall and the village of “downwinders,” victims of radioactive infection who suffer blindness, disfigurements, leukemias, thyroid cancers, and dysfunctioning of immune system (800), are both the waste, excess of the global capitalist system, an absolute immanence that supports the latter but is left unrepresented: they are always the white space on the map.

From Lacanian psychoanalytic perspectives, feces qua the most primitive form of waste is what needs to be expunged, abjected to sustain the consistency of the subject’s existence and intersubjective relationship. Never a thing in-itself, feces is always inserted into the circuit of demand and, therefore, entangled with ambivalent affect (i.e. anxiety, grief, or anger.) As Richard Boothby elaborates, “This extranatural element, split off from the exigencies of biological need and established as an independent power, the eccentric locus around which the drive will perpetually revolve without ever achieving fulfillment, is the *objet a*” (151). Feces, voice and gaze—these Lacanian figurations of the object *a* all designate “a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained” (Lacan, *Seminar XI* 62). The object *a*, the object cause of desire, propels the subject to fill out the lack of the Other by responding to the desire of the Other qua the enigma of “Che vuoi? (what do you want from me); therefore, the object *a* traverses both the subject and the Other but belongs to neither. It is an impossible object, the lack as such in the form of remainder, residue, excess, and waste, sustaining the imaginary and the symbolic through its unassimilability. What is at issue here is the cunning logic of “negation of negation”:

[F]irst, we have the consistent “Other,” the self-enclosed symbolic order; then, in the first negation, this inconsistency is disturbed by the remainder of the real, a traumatic left-over which resists being integrated into the symbolic and thus disturbs its balance. . . . [I]n the second negation, however, one is compelled to accomplish a kind of shift of perspective and grasp this very intruding left-over of the Real as the only element that guarantees the minimal consistency of the inconsistent Other (Žižek, “From *Objet a* to Substraction” 134)

We can perceive from such a cunning logic the functioning of the object *a* in ideological field. Ideology, from Žižekian perspectives, takes its failure, inconsistency into account in advance: namely, an object is elevated to the status of the sublime

Thing with “something in it more than itself” and endowed with some enigmatic qualities that prevent the subject, society or nation from becoming itself. Such an understanding also applies to the paranoid politics of fear, the paranoid fantasy of the figure of Enemy that fascinates us, arouses our fear, and embodies a society’s internal antagonism at the same time. Moreover, today’s society of enjoyment, where commands to enjoy take the place of prohibitive laws, prevails by means of the proliferation of commodity of the object *a*, which seduce consumers’ excessive libidinal attachments to some illicit mode of enjoyment deprived of its threatening Otherness: namely, products that provide surplus enjoyment qua allowed transgression, including various kinds of pornography and sexual perversity (hardcore, obese, animal, SM, fetish . . . ), Internet identity play, cyber sex, and so on. It turns out, however, that the more the subject is offered more choices, namely, the more the subject listens to the superego’s commands to enjoy, the more likely it is to encounter the difficulty of desiring (Lacan, *Seminar VII* 302).<sup>6</sup> How to break with such a vicious circle of superego and to traverse the fantasy from psychoanalytic-ethical perspectives will be explored in the last section of this paper.

What understanding do the above digressive theoretical argumentations lead to, if not that of waste, both in the novel and contemporary ecological discourse, as a problem of desire, fantasy, enjoyment and encounter with the Other? The proliferation of waste does not constitute an ecological crisis in itself; it must be understood in relation to the fantasy or mode of desire in the age of globalization when, as Nick describes in Epilogue, all solid, rigid (geographical, temporal, national, cultural and ideological) boundaries are dissolved, the principle of hyper-connectivity prevails, while even people’s leisure and unconscious are penetrated by the converging force of markets (785-86). Put in Lacanian terms, contemporary world as depicted in *Underworld* suffers from the lack of lack—the Lacanian definition of anxiety proper—and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of desiring under the impact of the overproximity of the Other or too much libidinal attachment to the Other’s enjoyment, rather than the “growing lack of interest in and connection with the Other” as McGowan claims (127). Therefore, the site of lack, the object *a*, must be recreated to guarantee the minimal consistency of the subject’s being. Is the Thomson baseball not a piece of shit raised to the status of the object *a*, the sublime, fetish object in ideological field, as its value leaps from \$23 to 34,500, the price Nick pays? The Thomson baseball qua the object *a* represents to Nick what it fails to represent. As Nick reveals, “It’s about the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss. I don’t know. I keep saying I don’t know and I don’t. But it’s the only thing in my life

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<sup>6</sup> For the paradoxical nature and vicious circle of the superego, also see Huang, *Horror and Evil in the Name of Enjoyment* 85-87.

that I absolutely had to own" (97). In other words, it is a leftover, excess of the game, a witness to his traumatic memories (of his father's disappearance, affair with Klara, and murder of George) and American post-Cold War history. The ball seems to connect Nick to his past, as well as the collective experience and identity, but always bespeaks missing parts and links to him (Osteen 233). It is, however, such lack of connection that sustains the minimal consistency of his life.

Both literally and symbolically, Nick's life is built on waste: hence, the significance of waste management as both his work and life that connects personal and collective traumatic memories. Growing up in the shadow of nuclear destruction, loss of the father, sex with the wife of his brother's teacher and accidental shooting of a good friend, Nick continuously, obsessively struggles with but do not succeed in domesticating, rationalizing the threats of existential lack and extinction in both physical and spiritual sense. The novel's Part One begins with Nick's meeting with Klara in the desert four decades after the "primal scene" and, through backward-moving narrative, returns to the day he shoots George in the last chapter. When the narrative moves back to the present in 1990s in Epilogue, however, Nick's confession of his longing seems to problematize our evaluation of his "waste management":

I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself. (810)

Such nostalgic sentiment, to a great extent, negates his spontaneous determination to meet Klara again and to "discharge the debt to memory" (64). The negation and physical ambivalence at work here show that he does not leave behind all the traumatic residues of his earlier life. What his work and life of waste management ends up with, therefore, may not be explained away with downright failure. Or more accurately, it is exactly the detouring itinerary of failures that sustains his desire, as already verified by his earlier recognition of "a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach" (803). At this point, we encounter the logic of negation of negation again: first, we have some traumatic loss or failure that disrupts the consistency of our life and escapes symbolization; then, in the second negation, we are compelled to recognize that those excess, residues or remainders of the Real turn out to be the supports of the minimal consistency of our life. Is the "minimal consistency" in question not exactly what enjoyment is all about? Nick's, and other characters' as well, compulsive repetition of and return to the traumatic points,

around which the narrative circles through metonymic chain of associations, does not merely suggest “a mental block, a failure of the imagination, an aporia in representation . . . an absence that cannot produce itself except by repetition,” as Wilcox claims (125). The traumatized subject’s acting-out of symptomatic compulsion to repeat is already a way of bypassing mental block, failure and aporia or avoiding the encounter with the Real; it embodies the message to the Other and, of course, surplus enjoyment in serving and being traumatized by the Other. It is for these reasons that Nick’s waste management does not accomplish the authentic ethical act which, from psychoanalytic ethical perspectives, demands a task of identifying with the symptom that is equal to “recogniz[ing] in the ‘excess,’ in the disruptions of the ‘normal’ way of things, the key offering us access to its true functioning” (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 128), readjusting our distance toward enjoyment and maintaining a certain breathing space from the Other. In fact, the enlightenment Brian feels when looking at the Fresh Kills landfill already paves the way to our ethical understanding of waste management at issue here: waste management concerns humans’ behavior, habits, impulses, uncontrollable needs, innocent wishes, passions, excesses, indulgences, kindness, generosity, and so on—simply put in psychoanalytic terms, desire, fantasy and enjoyment—and “the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us” (184). Does Nick’s case not synecdochically represent the general difficulty of desiring in the society of enjoyment as delineated above, the difficulty as the consequence to the compulsive repetition and, hence, enjoyment of traumatic memories, since enjoyment always is always repetitious and traumatic in nature, something that sustains our life but can never really be claimed as ours?

Waste management as the central preoccupation of *Underworld* undoubtedly includes artistic creation in response to the proliferation of military and commercial waste in the post-Cold War environment and global capitalism. Works such as Klara Sax’s repainted B-52s, Sabato Rodia’s Watts Towers, and the Wall, an urban debris “designed” by Ismael and Muñoz and his crews, take various types of waste as backgrounds and materials: deactivated bomb heads and aircrafts, geographical and architectural ruins, steel rods, pebbles, seashells, vandalized car bodies, and whatever thinkable or unthinkable dumped objects. Critics, though from different perspectives, tend to think together the processing, recycling, and sublimation of waste at work in these works and argue for the political protest or spiritual redemption that DeLillo claim through *Underworld*. For example, Mark Osteen holds the perspective that “[t]hese works—salvage operations, recycling projects—redeem and transmogrify the refuse of consumerism and the Cold War. DeLillo offers *Underworld* as a similar act of resistance and redemption, submerging us in the

culture of weapons and waste so that we may reemerge transformed” (216); he highlights “the uncontainability of human aspiration” (245) and “phoenixlike resurrection out of the ashes of capital” (254) as the most politically active messages of the novel. From such perspectives, not only new connections are made out of the fragments of postmodern wasteland, but also human life-affirming expressiveness is celebrated and, ultimately, spiritual redemption can be realized.

The psychoanalytic ethical interpretation of *Underworld* this paper proposes does not overestimate the redemptive effect of artistic creation, as well as all forms of transcendence, neither does it embrace the balance, if there is any, between “spirituality and paranoia, the sense of connectedness and loneliness, and communication and silence” (Kavadlo 112); no order of balance, harmony or any other good can be and should be presumptively posited. Accordingly, it does not look at the Internet in the novel as “a vast embracing system that both grants transcendence from bothersome physical limitations and offers generous webbing of an immeasurable community, both long the privileges of the Christian afterlife” (Dewey 114). As commented previously in this paper, paranoid cynicism is likely to end up with leaving intact and becoming complicit with the status quo. And we must oppose to all the perspectives that, knowingly or unknowingly, depoliticize waste management and artistic creation grounded in the principles of sublimation and transcendence, as both attesting to the ideological function of the object *a* in commodity fetishism as elaborated previously. Nick’s intense mystic experience of exaltation when he sees a landfill under construction is juxtaposed with Jesse Detwiler’s vision that “the more toxic the waste, the greater the effort and expense a tourist will be willing to tolerate in order to visit the site” (286). Everywhere in the novel is waste, as well as waste recycling and management, elevated to the sublime, sacred Thing, but its transcendent, quasi-religious status outside of the commodification process is always a product of global capitalism (McGowan 136).

### **Ecological Apocalypse, or Traversing the Fantasy?**

This paper does not propose the position so cynical as to deny all transcendent, utopian impulses of redemption in the culture of excess as depicted in *Underworld*, where the proliferation of various kinds of waste as commodity and commodity as waste gives rise to overspreading nostalgic sentiment, paranoid-conspiratorial thinking and cynical self-irony. From psychoanalytic ethical perspectives, the transcendent qua the Real does happen in the form of encounter in the most unexpected moments and disrupts the subject’s sense of reality. Various work and life of waste management in *Underworld*, to a great extent, foreclose the

irreducibility of waste qua the object *a* to the fantasy framework and symbolic order. Some of them—for example, those situational art works—do embody ideological contradictions but do not radicalize, politicize them, and, in the last analysis, remain bound with the status quo.

So, what ecological apocalypse can we learn from DeLillo's *Underworld*? Whatever it is, the warning signals such as “what we produce will return to overwhelm, consume us” and “we are unable to contain waste; it contains us”<sup>7</sup> are definitively not sophisticated enough. From Žižekian perspectives, reality is already on the side of fantasy; there is no sense of reality without its fantasmatic support. Any fundamental transformation of reality and power system, therefore, cannot be achieved without a radical dissolution of fantasmatic framework. The issue with which today's authentically ethico-ecological discourse should urgently engage is not so much what ecological crises or disasters are as how “realities” appear to us or how we imagine realities. Mere calls for heeding realities however risky or disastrous only beg the question.

As shown in previous discussions of contemporary culture of excess, the drive to (surplus) enjoyment qua allowed transgression or, in Žižekian terms, the passion for the Real, deprives the Other of its Otherness and avoids the encounter with the Real—hence, keeps intact the fantasmatic framework and status—in responding to the anxiety engendered by the overproximity to the Other's enjoyment. Within such a milieu, we are justified to suspect that today's ecology based on apocalyptic visions or disastrous fantasy is an ecology of fear, which, as “the predominant form of ideology of global capitalism,” offers the masses a new opium in response to the declining religion and loss of transcendence (Žižek, “Censorship Today” para. 18). What lurks behind all the warning signals may be “a deep distrust of change, of development, of progress: every radical change can have the unintended consequence of triggering a catastrophe” (Žižek, “Censorship Today” para. 18). This is also the problem of contemporary culture of paranoia and conspiracy, which is saturated in an atmosphere of general cynical distrust, disillusionment, and apathy, and ends up with foreclosing impossible antagonisms and, hence, collective acts and fundamental social, political transformation.

As the recognition of the non-existence of the Other—namely, there is no Other to answer our question of desire “*Che vuoi?*” and guarantee our being—is the aim of Lacanian traversing the fantasy, what we need today may be an “ecology without Nature,” since Nature is always already a “second nature” supported by fantasy. To traverse ecological ideology, we need to understand that “the ultimate obstacle to protecting nature is the very notion of nature we rely on” (Žižek, “Censorship Today”

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<sup>7</sup> See Duvall 278 and Osteen 236.

para. 23). In other words, nature as a domain of balanced functioning, development and reproduction with its own pattern of regular rhythms which is disturbed by humans' overproduction and overconsumption is humans' fantasy. Again, we need to complete the gesture of negation of negation: nature, as well as the subject, is from its very beginning split in itself and never identical with itself. Such a task also requires us to desubliminate such sublime objects of ideology as "nature," "sustainability," "harmony," and so on: simply put, all the moral goods in ecology, which are always conceived within the existing parameters of what is possible, pleasurable or even useful and remain bound with the status quo. The psychoanalytic ethics of waste resists the will to recycling, sublimation and redemption of waste and does not anticipate any deeper meaning or moral good from catastrophic scenarios, actual, potential or illusory. What does traversing the fantasy lead to, if not the gap between the possible and impossible, the abyssal dispossessedness and freedom the subject thus feels, and the radical, fundamental transformation of the subject's enjoyment, socio-political structure, and the parameters of what is possible?

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