



University  
of Stavanger

**The Faculty of Arts and Education**

**MASTERS THESIS**

Study programme: LMLIMAS  
Advanced Teacher Education for Levels 8-13.

Spring term, 2022

Open

Author: Victor Bo Larsen

.....  
(signatur author)

Supervisor: Dr. Eric Dean Rasmussen

Title of thesis:

Don DeLillo's *Underworld*: Systems, Loops, and Contradictions

Keywords:

Don DeLillo; American literature - 20th century; American literature - 21st century; postmodernist fiction; novel, literary genre; systems novel; literary criticism.

Pages: .....62.....

+ attachment/other: .....

Stavanger, ...11.05.2022.....

date/year

## Abstract

This thesis attempts to continue Tom LeClair's studies on a critical genre of fiction named the systems novel. The thesis specifically analyzes *Underworld* (1997) by Don DeLillo, which has yet to be analyzed within LeClair's paradigm. Through engaging with LeClair's categorizations, scholarly arguments on DeLillo's writing, and expansions into extraliterary fields of theorizations of the contemporary world, the thesis uses close reading of specific parts of the novel that relates to systems and systems theory. It simultaneously attempts to configure the master system that the novel conveys by looking at its larger structures as a whole. Emerging from this comes a loop and network pattern that LeClair has also argued to be an integral part of DeLillo's fiction. As the systems novel concerns itself with representations of humans in their ecosystem, acting according to its laws, the thesis has paid close attention to the noise in the characters' communication loops and self-referential frames. Close reading passages that represented elements of loops and self-referentiality enabled an argument to be made that parts of the novel dictated the way the reader should approach the novel's representations to uncover its themes. Additionally, investigating the cultural understanding of criminal networks persists throughout specific characters' environments, becoming a symbol of noise, corruption, and survival. Finally, DeLillo proposes an immanent critique of the neoliberalist economy through the novel's epilogue. By closely reading the contradictions that emerge in the chapter, an argument appears for hope for fiction in a digital world. While this thesis is limited to a smaller account of systems theory, there is potential for this study to be expanded into a larger theoretical framework.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to my supervisor Eric Dean Rasmussen for your brilliant insights into systems and for repeatedly reinstating my faith and love for literature.

Thank you to Erle Ranges, your support, love, patience, and warmth always make me smile in the darkest of times. And for providing an external monitor as my laptop's screen slowly died during this long process.

Finally, to my parents who are always there when I need them the most.

## **Abbreviations**

### **Novels**

*UW* – *Underworld*. DeLillo, Don.

*WN* - *White Noise*. DeLillo, Don.

### **Critical literature**

*ITL* - *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*. LeClair, Tom.

*AOE* - *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*. LeClair. Tom.

Abstract .....	i
Acknowledgments .....	ii
Abbreviations .....	iii
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Definitions .....	4
CHAPTER TWO: Theory .....	6
2.1 Defining the Systems Novel.....	6
2.1.1The Distinction from Postmodernism .....	13
2.2 Analyzing the Systems Novel .....	15
2.3 <i>Underworld</i> 's Looped Connections .....	18
CHAPTER THREE: The Implications of Criminal Networks in <i>Underworld</i> .....	24
3.1 Introduction: "That Particular Life" .....	24
3.2 The Mobster as Survival in Nick's Ecosystem .....	25
3.3 Corruption of the Communication Loops .....	30
CHAPTER FOUR: The Self-Referring System.....	35
4.1 Introduction: Mirrors.....	35
4.2 <i>Unterwelt</i> as Mise en Abyme .....	38
4.2.1 Enabling Analysis of Contradictions.....	40
4.3 "The Pocket" and the Technological Sublime .....	44
CHAPTER FIVE: Fusion of Systems: "Das Kapital" .....	51
5.1 Introduction: Close reading of "Das Kapital" .....	51
5.2 The Contradictions in the Systems.....	52
5.2.1 "Production of Capital" .....	52
5.2.2 "Circulation of Capital" .....	55
5.3 Emancipation.....	56
Conclusion.....	59
Bibliography.....	63

## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

A dead nun takes over the focalization in the last pages of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997). After her death, she is enmeshed with the internet and connected to all points beyond her, finishing the loop of the novel.

Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password – world without end, amen.

But she is in cyberspace, not heaven and she feels the grip of systems. There is a presence here, a thing implied, something vast and bright. She senses the paranoia of the web, the net ... it's a glow, a lustrous rushing force that seems to flow from a billion distant net nodes. (DeLillo, *Underworld* 825)<sup>1</sup>

The insight that everything connects is a returning phrase throughout the novel and relates to its organizational principle as an extensive connected system. Through this net, DeLillo offers a counter-historical novel to the established history where the characters connect through objects, videos, allusions, and things existing outside their conception. It instills a master system of a network that, as Mark Osteen remarks in his chapter "Containment and Counterhistory in *Underworld*" (2000), "everything is connected in the novel and in the society it portrays – but only in the underworld" (215). The network is a personified and almost holy force that enables a reading of the novel as a systems novel as the passage intertwines religion with a technology that has globalized the economy where multiple human and technological systems interconnect simultaneously, this both frames the formal structures and represents the complex themes of the novel.

*Underworld* opens at the renowned baseball game at the Polo Grounds in New York City in 1951. In the voice of the American, the narrator brilliantly captures the essence of baseball as an American system of hopes and dreams. As Bobby Thomson hits the home run, the director of the FBI gets the news that the Soviet Union has tested an atomic bomb in Kazakhstan. One can regard the atomic blast in relation to the American institution of baseball as the input to the system because it fictionalizes an actual event and frames the novel, situating itself as a historical novel while simultaneously setting the subtext. A subtext that is America in the presence of the increasing omnipresent technologies. The atomic blast in a far-

---

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter all citations to *Underworld* will be abbreviated *UW*

away country becomes a metaphor for what the Cold War era of American history were about to become, the paranoia experienced in the presence of a looming fear. The novel informs a counter-history mediated through people in alternative systems and networks. *Underworld's* persistent representation of characters within rigid systems/environments forms the basis of it as a systems novel. The way DeLillo can explore various systems from the standpoint of the individual. Primarily set in the larger scale of America, the novel is structurally segmented into parts that move chronologically backward after the prologue. This forms a structural loop that temporally moves the narrative from 1951 to 1992 and then regressive through subsequent parts circling back to the 50s.

In part 1, Nick Shay, the novel's protagonist, lives a quotidian life with his family. The part explores America's corporate and family systems through Nick, who feels a sense of loss from his past that is yet to be revealed. Nick works for a corporation called Waste Containment, or Whiz Co, a waste management firm and large-scale human control system. *Underworld* explores a vast array of characters that are connected through direct links or hidden societal structures. For example, it explores the art world through an old lover of Nick called Klara Sax. The American military institution through Nick's brother, Matt Shay. To frame the novel, it uses allusions to various underworlds and plays with frames of art and cultural relics to capture an America symptomatic of underworldly connotation. The novel explores the hidden connections between people and systems as a form of alienation in the presence of great emerging technologies of the post-war era. The fragmentation of the narrative provides multiple perspectives of American post-war history. DeLillo introduces a multitude of characters, like artist figures, both fictional and fictionalized versions of known artists. For example, one follows Sister Edgar, a nun operating with a master graffiti artist to provide old, abandoned cars for paint. Connection happens through the TV when a murderer is filmed by a young girl from the back of a car. The home video shows a man shot from the side of a car on the highway. Questions are raised about the sexual orientation of the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover's dossier elicits an uncanny prediction of the data collection society we live in today. After the last revelations of Nick Shay's past are exposed in part 6 one is looped back to the 90s, where Nick is sent to the former Soviet Union to watch waste being vaporized with nuclear weapons for capital. *Underworld* is not some definitive space; it is a multitude of spaces, systems, and institutions, within a network system that represent the times, places, subconscious lives, and reveries of people in the presence of emerging technologies.

The systems novel is a long novel that totalizes the contemporary experience, science, and how we approach and analyze language into one grand narrative. The term comes from Tom LeClair's studies of Don DeLillo and other contemporary novelists that make fiction that captures and makes sense of the global conditions of technological and sociopolitical advancement that emerged in the post-war era. For example, global markets, media information, and the internet. LeClair provides a taxonomy of these novels with a structuralist view of their interrelation. To do this, the systems novelist will encapsulate their novel with a master system that becomes an explanatory model for the totalized world presented in the novel. While the systems novel is often related to works with a global setting, it could also try to convey vast cultures such as America or Europe. To emphasize that the systems novel tries to convey a specific system, it focuses on themes present in any living or mechanical system, such as process, multiplicity, and uncertainty. By stating systemic themes, the novel attacks the notion that modern society is too complex to explain fully. Don DeLillo is a systems novelist because of his persistent representation of man within his environments, the large ecosystem, and his survival in the age of information and technological totality. This enables the reader to appreciate DeLillo's mastery over the fictional systems that also master the reader.

Tom LeClair first coined the term with his study on the body of works by Don DeLillo up to his release of *White Noise* (1985)<sup>2</sup>. *Underworld* (1997) was written after LeClair wrote his books on the genre. In the first book, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1987)<sup>3</sup>, LeClair explores DeLillo's oeuvre, where he considers DeLillo a systems novelist by investigating the systemic plenitude and looping of DeLillo's fiction as a whole—in other words, collecting multiple fictions into one comprehensible system where DeLillo recycled many of his aesthetics so that the novels connect across their publications. This was written as a reaction, and the view, that DeLillo was not appreciated enough as a postmodernist writer in academia. The book establishes DeLillo's fiction within those writers who were already academically favored postmodernists, Robert Coover, William Gaddis, and Thomas Pynchon (LeClair, *ITL* xii). Writers who later were all analyzed in LeClair's *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* (1989)<sup>4</sup>. These writers are considered systems novelists because they strove to write fiction that resembled structures and models brought on

---

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter all citations to *White Noise* will be abbreviated as *WN*

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter all reference to *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* will be abbreviated as *ITL*

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter all reference to *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* will be abbreviated as *AOE*



from other sciences such as ecology, economy, mathematics, and physics. DeLillo would eventually be recognized with these “fathers” of postmodernist novels. When, with *White Noise* (1985), as stated in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (2017) by Amy Hungerford, wrote one of the “best fictional description of life in postmodern America” (1081). Yet, LeClair has never got to writing a comprehensive analysis about *Underworld* as a systems novel. Only in a later review of the novel does he consider DeLillo to have “produced a masterwork” (LeClair, “Underhistory”) which constitutes the novel within his definitions of the genre. This thesis seeks to further the investigation of DeLillo as a systems novelist with *Underworld* by using LeClair’s definitions of a specific genre of literary art that come to reflect and represent a much larger portion of the systems that make up our world.

This study aims to analyze Don DeLillo's *Underworld* as a systems novel. Firstly, I will provide insight into its connectedness and looping structure that makes it possible to treat it as a comprehensible system. Secondly, I analyze the protagonist, Nick Shay, within his ecosystem, explicitly paying close attention to the role that the mobster figure has in his life. Envisioning the mafia as a parasite in legitimate systems, it becomes apparent that DeLillo both plays with the conventional understanding of the mobster genre to highlight the processes within corporate structures and the effects of late capitalism on the individual. Thirdly, to provide insight into the workings of the novel as a system, DeLillo uses self-referential frames to enable the reader to reorient themselves to the systemic nature novel and to see how changes in perspectives within the novel enables us to see the world as a system of systems. Consequently, I provide a close reading of the novel’s epilogue “Das Kapital” where DeLillo fuses the novel into one interconnected system.

## **1.1 Definitions**

This small subchapter provides insight into the systems approach to literature and acts as a disclaimer for the rest of this thesis. Deriving from systems theory, one can review anything and call it a system. Through the processes and parts within that system, one can see their connections to a larger whole. In the thesis, several terms will be repeated regarding systems. Systems thinking is, at its core, ecocritical thinking that regards technologies, institutions, sects, religion, the computer, the internet, nature, the way we communicate, etc., as part of man's ecosystem. The *ecosystem* is defined and understood in this thesis through Ernest Callenbach, that writes in *Ecology: a pocket guide* (2008) that "An ecosystem is capable of the complete cycling of the basic elements" (56). This cycling can be framed within the tiniest

organic microsystems such as algae to the human cycling of energy circulating in and out. The onlooker defines the ecosystem, and "in natural systems, parts and wholes interact with and influence each other continually" (57). Therefore, when I write "Nick in his ecosystem", I refer to his exchange of energy in the framed environments of the novel. The environment refers to everything that surrounds the characters I am analyzing. All these terms can be defined as only systems through LeClair's approach because the systems approach seeks to find the similarities between unrelated or related systems to uncover a form of interconnectedness in the human experience. This thesis extends the definition of system from the mechanical to the abstract, as in relation to systems theory, to institutions, culture, technology, the novel, philosophy, theory, environment, the organism, the cell, the robot, the bicycle, or pretty much anything that can be isolated and similarly investigated.

## CHAPTER TWO: Theory

The purpose of chapter two is to define what the systems novel is in relation to *Underworld*. By specifically looking at the structures that Tom LeClair has classified in his two works about this type of fiction *ITL* and *AOE* and relating these to general scenes from the novel. Secondly, it attempts to dissect the methodology that a systems perspective on fiction can provide for analysis of *Underworld*, terminating in the concluding question: what kind of system is this? Thirdly, I attempt to answer the question that the following subchapter culminated in, through a look at the novel's larger structures and temporal jumps.

### 2.1 Defining the Systems Novel

I would like to start this chapter on a tantalizing quote by Timothy Morton from his "The Ecological Thought":

Ideology isn't just in your head. It's in the shape of a Coke bottle ... Ecology talks about areas of life that we find annoying, boring, and embarrassing. Art can help us, because it's a place in our culture that deals with intensity, shame, abjection, and loss. It also deals with reality and unreality, being and seeming. If ecology is about radical coexistence, then we must challenge our sense of what is real and what is unreal (2628).

Thinking about systems inside fiction is not just some mode to make it easier to understand. It serves the purpose of adding complexity to rethinking the structures and boundaries of text, author, and reader. DeLillo is a master at presenting the alternative, the mysteries surrounding our lives in an accessible form. And specifically, those alternative systems and mysteries that surround American life in a postindustrial world. As LeClair states, DeLillo's characters are reduced to "entities in motion" (*ITL* 2) or participators in their ecosystems. It is transparent that he revisions how the reader can see his world. Thinking about systems is thinking in terms of wholes, to imagine and reimagine how fiction and art provide the needed resistance to the machinery of the world. As Morton states, ideology is the shape of a cola bottle, and DeLillo shares this position. He represents the systems that seem natural but are just that, artificial systems. Morton's ecology and systems thinking share the same position: thinking critically about wholes is not just thinking about man's place in nature. It is about rethinking what is perceived as natural, and art plays a key role.

Defining the systems novel in one sentence is a daunting task without having the framework for what it builds on. In this subchapter, I will lay out LeClair's taxonomy and critical points and relate them to *Underworld* so that it is clear why one can consider it as a systems novel at all. LeClair formulates the systems novel by incorporating the idea of systems theory from an Austrian biologist named Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who sought to create a common framework between sciences. Definitions of systems as anything from an environment to an aggregate come from Bertalanffy and will be discussed later in this subchapter. The systems novel is a long text that enables the reader to see the world through a multitude of frames/systems. It is, as LeClair states, a text that "work the two extremes of low and high information." ("Preface" 14) Where low information is staying within the known settings, accessible syntax and conforming to "literary codes," and high information is to represent "multiple characters, abundant events, discontinuities and unpredictable connections, exactitude and opacity of language, unusual allusions, paradoxical metaphors, odd proportions and new systems" (LeClair, "Preface" 14). The system novelists deal with high and low information to capture a world in the new omnipresent technologies and the ecological dangers and unintended consequences the technologies have elicited. The novels are wide-ranging and can go beyond and before history itself. The characters are participators rather than agents to create the illusion of a "natural" world. They are also structured to replicate systems themselves, both representing and being systems. Consequently, possessing information from a wide variety of sciences to frame how an extensive living system, such as our world, works.

The systems novel is a reaction to the world of information, globalization, and communication that emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century written within a paradigm that recognizes the systemic nature of the world. Within a world which is now considered an ecological whole, as a world system, the systems novel is about the institutions which governs our world. The postindustrial world changed drastically in relation to information and communication. The systems novelist responds to this by making it key themes of the novel. The way a systems novelist would research a novel of this scale, is much more like how an academic would approach a paper. Through research of fields of science, but as well as the keen observations of a given culture. As LeClair writes that "for every global perspective, there are in DeLillo's novels specific human moments, details that prove his participation in systems small as well as large, in families and in space probes, in local fears and wide entertainments that hide those fears" (LeClair, *ITL* 27). The novel explores that global perspective, how the world became globalized and its effects on the specific humans of a culture. To do this the

systems novelist must employ a new reference to scale and time, the novels often having the focality of both the anthropological and the individual. Responding to a global market, themes of process and multiplicity through timelines that both precede and exceed our history are severely present in the genre.

The consideration of the world as a system of systems comes, according to LeClair, from the ideas of the Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy who in 1954 formulated *General Systems Theory* (1968), which tries to theorize the complex systems in nature, society, and science. Bertalanffy wants to expand the increased focus on systems within mathematical fields to the broader sciences like philosophy and social science (Bertalanffy vii). A system is defined as any group of elements or components that work together to produce an outcome, a definition that Bertalanffy expanded to other sciences other than the purely mechanical. Interestingly, Bertalanffy distinguishes between the systems analysis of a corporation as it has "definite answers and practical advice" through its material existence in the world to the systems analysis of socio-cultural systems, which is often a "man-created universe called culture," namely a system made up of symbols that the individuals relate to (Bertalanffy 196–97). Bertalanffy's idea of systems expands the definition of system to see institutions, culture, corporations, the environment, networks, and the family as systems that can be investigated similarly.

Bertalanffy set his goal with systems theory to make a language that would make it possible to understand the world by recognizing patterns and similarities between many scientific disciplines. In many ways, Bertalanffy wanted to make a language that could talk about wholes in a matter that could cross the human and natural sciences (LeClair, "Preface" 9). Because living systems are a combination of energy and information which dynamically change in time and cannot be separated into parts, and must be regarded as wholes. Systems theory seeks to find similarities or, in systems-related terms, homologies between sets of data. Its perspective allows us to see not only more information but also new "relations – patterns of connection, qualitative frames – among these" sets (LeClair, "Preface" 11).

*Underworld* presents an alternative to the American cold-war era through the mediation of major and minor historical events through characters participating in different systems to those expected to drive history. The novel can be seen as the alternative voice to history in many ways. For example, the Cuban missile crisis is mediated with comedy and pure satire by stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce in *Underworld's* part 5. Alternatively, how

New York's problematic relationship with garbage in the 70s is vividly described from the skyscraper rooftops by the artist Klara Sax. The novel questions history itself by a waste prodigy named Detwiler. Nick, Detwiler, and a couple of coworkers go to a great landfill, a large crater in the earth. Detwiler claims that cities rise on garbage. From garbage to cities to civilization, and out of that comes history. He takes students out to garbage landfills and shows them how "garbage comes first, then we make a system to deal with it," reverberating the new capitalist order "consume or die" (*UW* 287). These alternative frames enable the reader to reconstruct their perspective on history as a systemic term. By changing perspective both within environments/systems and with characters, one can see the alternative consequences to events presented in history.

LeClair writes that the systems novel primarily is about issues related to the explosion of varying degrees of technologies that have emerged after World War 2. Writing the relationship that humans have in the present to those technologies into fiction without fraying into science fiction and speculation is one of the tasks that the systems novel tries to master. The technologies mentioned relates to the increase in world populations relating to "global issues of energy," to the increase in "ad communications," and how specifically "networks" have changed the relationship of the human with "commerce, politics, history, science, and an endangered ecosystem" (LeClair, "Preface" 15). All these issues are related to separate and converging systems that make up the world we inhabit. A key point argued by LeClair is that we now recognize the earth as an ecological whole, which means that humans are now an integral part of the world system that endangers that ecosystem. The human race now has control systems for managing waste and informational data produced by us. The individual's relationship is not only regarded on the local level, but we can connect to the global world to a greater extent than before through the technological advancement in data and media. There now exists multinational corporations that stretch their networks of investment and power across the globe, changing the way humans relate to their reality. The novel that recognizes these systemic patterns in the contemporary world is part of the equation of what makes the systems novel.

*Underworld* explores the issues of omnipresent technologies and ecological disaster throughout its 827-page journey. Media of all kinds shows up in the discourse, and the novel even features a character named Charles Wainwright working at an ad agency. A videotape of a highway murder repeated on the TV, multiple films, and cinema are part of these emerging

technologies. Brian Gassic, one of Nick's coworkers, experiences inescapable awe concerning the repeating billboards he sees while driving. As he drives, he sees "all these billboards around him, systematically linked in some self-referring relationship that had a kind of neurotic tightness, an inescapability, is if the billboards were generating reality" (*UW* 183). DeLillo uses systems language to show the relationship between the psychological, "neurotic," and the images generated. There are extensive references to networks and systems, both material and unperceivable. This network of connections will be discussed later in this chapter and expanded upon in chapter 2. The ecological disaster is apparent in the atomic bomb, but not presented as a single event but has a looming presence that elicits paranoia and conspiracy. The paranoia of the bomb acts exactly how waste itself looms in the shadows and landfills, piling upwards, demanding a systemic response from the characters in their endangered ecosystem.

The systems novel particular involvement with scale, and perspectives in both the micro and the macro, engages the idea that systems, in general, are comprised of a whole and its subsequent sub-systems. LeClair states that "these novels explore the scale of information from minute particulars to huge abstractions, from pre-history to post-history, from family quarrels to world wars" (LeClair, "Preface" 15). The novels will slow down to look at particular details and long dialogues between characters, and in the next moment, jump in space and time to explain in abstract terms the environment that these characters engage. Time itself is often expanded into new systems, derailing from the notion of chronological order encompassing "multilayered, digressive, and looping structures rather than linear ones" (LeClair, "Preface" 15). Different scales and abstraction from linearity allow the novels to represent the looping of life and biological systems themselves. While the loop of *Underworld* will be addressed in detail later, it provides a framework to think of these novels in terms of natural systems. The systems novel is "Widely selected, imaginatively structured, oddly proportioned, and strangely scaled, the plenitude of information in systems novels demands from the reader systemic understanding, a recognition of the homologies between the systems novels and the ecosystem in which they are published, the world they master." (LeClair, "Preface" 15) The novels' structures can resemble the structural and mathematical loops of, for example, fractals and the Fibonacci curve. Mathematical numbers that go infinitely inwards or outwards are found in natural phenomena, from the black hole of the galaxy (macro) to the shell of a snail (micro). Therefore, the system novelist uses these techniques to resemble the systems of life itself.

*Underworld* juxtaposes the micro and macro, acts counter historic to imagine a networked future in the post-historic, and deals with the reveries within family life and the conflicts in the larger setting of American internal and external sociopolitical spheres. The macro in DeLillo's fiction and *Underworld*, in particular, can be seen in his representation of crowds. Both the prologue and the epilogue sets off to represent human gatherings around spectacles of mystical and almost religious events. The baseball game in the prologue and the emergence of a master artwork of a dead homeless girl on the billboard of an orange juice campaign in the epilogue gather vast crowds. Sister Edgar watches the event and describes the collective feeling by revealing the graffitied art "she feels the words before she sees the object. She feels the words although no one has spoken them. This is how a crowd brings things to a single consciousness" (*UW* 821). Additionally, DeLillo envisions a networked totality in the novel's last pages like a post-historic emblem of the increased embeddedness of American consciousness into networks. Simultaneously, the novel deals with the micro, with minute details about ordinary life, specifically through Nick Shay and his family. For example, passages about how they recycle their trash or how he has brought his mother out from the Bronx to live with his family. From the elements of subtle detail to the macroscopic view of human gatherings, DeLillo explores various systems.

LeClair states that to create the illusion of an open system, an environment, or an ecosystem, "The protagonists are more often producers, sorters, and consumers of information than agents of action" (LeClair, "Preface" 15) That the characters of the system novel possess these traits means that they are participators in the ecosystems, the setting, that the novelist tries to convey. The characters and protagonists are not the heroes from the epic poem, nor the character that achieves ultimate epiphany through their actions. As seen in how LeClair describes the Gladney family from *White Noise*, "the survivor style of Gladney suggests a shrunken reliability. The reader perceives evasion, rather than power" (LeClair, *ITL* 211). The reader cannot rely on the Gladney's for persistent action or redemption. They evade the problems instead of acting against them. Therefore, being part of the ecosystem rather than characters of action against it.

The protagonist Nick Shay is the most notable participator, collector, sorter, and consumer of the ecosystems in *Underworld*. His work literally translates to sorting American trash into landfills, which is the byproduct of consumption. While the novel itself is ambiguous on whether it has a protagonist, Nick Shay is the only character that gets the narrative first-person voice. That ambiguity reinstates the very essence of the characters of the



systems novel being part of something rather than it being about them specifically. Nick repeatedly states that he willingly accepts the environments/systems he participates. An example of this emerges when he goes to a juvenile facility in upstate New York for murder. Nick is disappointed every time the system fails, like the cantina catching on fire or people escaping. Therefore, he states, “We weren’t much if the system designed to contain us kept breaking down” (UW 503). Nick is also easily gulled into believing in conspiracy theories. He believes in the information that circulates in his material networks. For example, the belief that the mafia killed his father is an integral part of his character and a belief that sticks with him even though both his mother and brother try to deny it. This belief bleeds into his corporate work and subsequently shows how different systems embed themselves into each other.

The last point that LeClair stakes as an integral part of the systems novel are the novel's ability to convey "polydisciplinary" "intertextuality" (LeClair, “Preface” 15). LeClair invents words to explain the concept. We can understand the term as intertextuality from multiple disciplines, both in science and culture. This intertextuality means that the systems novel is referencing works that go beyond the written text in the canon. The novelist can reference other types of art, such as film, photography, or even architecture, as intertexts of the novel. It utilizes referencing something in the reader's world, which can be both material and theoretical and therefore be "polydisciplinary." Additionally, the systems novel "possess information (from anthropology, physics, cybernetics, biology, and ecology among other disciplines) and a systems perspective on that information that provide the means to analyze and criticize the master ideologies of American and multinational cultures" (LeClair, “Preface” 15–16).

*Underworld* elicits many "polydisciplinary" intertextual frames and prominent examples scattered throughout the novel. In the novel's prologue, a painting by Pieter Brueghel named "The Triumph of Death" lands on the shoulder of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. The painting additionally gives the name to the prologue and further reinstates the subtext of the novel. It shows "a color reproduction of a painting crowded with medieval figures who are dying or dead - a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin" (UW 41). However, this is not the only Bruegel painting in the novel. In part 6, another painting is referenced, namely "*Kinderspeilen*," (UW 682) or *Children's Games*, a painting that shows a landscape view of a street with hundreds of children playing in it. Once one chooses to shift the focus from the whole to the individual children depicted, one can see that they, as Albert states, "look like dwarves doing something awful" (UW 682). A third and essential intertext is

depicted towards the novel's middle, which shows a film with the German name for the underworld, "*Unterwelt*", by a Russian director named Sergei Eisenstein. While "*Unterwelt*" is a fictional movie, Eisenstein is not. All these artworks provide insight into the novel's systemic structuring and nature. If the novel itself is the landscape painting, the systems novel that encapsulates America, then one can see the grim nature of the underworld it depicts in its text. These intertexts show how the embeddedness of different systems, such as a painting or a cinematic film, can impact the understanding of the novel as a whole.

As LeClair repeatedly states in *AOE*, the system novel is a novel that masters the conditions and the recognition of the world as a systemic whole. Therefore, the novel that should be considered a masterwork masters the world it was created within. It does so by employing the strategies described in this subchapter. LeClair conveys three criteria for mastery. Firstly, a master novel considers global and cultural wholes. Secondly, the novel plays with the aesthetics of narrative. LeClair considers mastery in the novels that "flexibly employ postmodern methods to displace the priority of the individual and to deform the conventions of realism which encode an ideology of the local" (LeClair, "Preface" 2). LeClair argues that it is impossible to explore an ecological whole by staying within the standard linear narrative. Thirdly, the last criteria of mastery are the mastery of the reader. The master novel exceeds local conditions and is culturally more significant to a larger group of people. The reader of any group will, according to LeClair, be able to make a shift in their perspective from the personal and local to the global. He argues that the systems that any ethnicity, male, female, old, or young, are part of are braided into the fictional systems of the novel. The representation of the cultural whole makes its content relatable and catches the reader to then shift their interests from the local perspective to a global one. Therefore, mastery of the reader has a practical and real-world consequence.

### 2.1.1 The Distinction from Postmodernism

This thesis concerns itself with the systems novel and the terms that LeClair has provided in his critical analysis. However, LeClair uses the terms of the literary discussion to emphasize some of the points on what the systems novel does differently from other novels. Just because the category is called systems novel does not mean that it is wholly separated from other types of fiction. The works he presents, from Don DeLillo to Thomas Pynchon, are writers that are associated with the terms postmodernism and postmodernity. LeClair considers for the systems novel how these authors can use the conventions associated with

their peers to explore a grander experience of wholeness. The novel is realistic but uses metafiction, heavy dialogue, and fragmentation to explore and capture the systems that all humans experience. As LeClair continually argues throughout his analysis, the systems novel is a synthesizing of postmodernism and realism.

The idea of postmodernism is highly debated but must be briefly discussed in this thesis to reverberate the differences between the postmodern novel and the systems novel. Are there any differences at all? While postmodernism is a term that has emerged in multiple fields and has been widely discussed, it is generally stated in *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (2001) by David Macey as the type of art that translates the experience of postmodernity. Postmodernity is the historical period associated with life after modernism, a break characterized by the condition of a world immersed in late capitalism and new technologies that influence all spheres of human interaction (308). Themes of postmodernity are, in essence, those of the systems novel.

If we consider what Linda Hutcheon writes in her *the Politics of Postmodernism* (2003), a pattern of similarities emerges with the systems novel :

Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. (Hutcheon 2)

Therefore, the characteristic of a postmodern work is its capacity to display the conventions that it is associated with and dismiss them simultaneously. The systems novel also does this, and in many areas, a system novel could also be called a postmodern novel. Hutcheon uses the terms "doubleness, or duplicity," which seems similar to LeClair's discourse about "multiplicity." The similarity issues whether the systems novel is just a redefinition of the postmodern? In some ways, yes. However, LeClair emphasizes the systems novel's capability to explore systems from other scientific fields. A way of conceiving theoretical hypotheses about the contemporary world through fiction. Moreover, this is where the systems novel emerges from the postmodern ideas. The types of novels can also be characterized as postmodern or re-modern. However, their distinction lies in their global reach in their attention to specific and related systems of the contemporary experience. Concluding, not any postmodern novel can be considered a systems novel.

## 2.2 Analyzing the Systems Novel

How does one analyze a systems novel? From systems theory, one can understand the methodology LeClair lays out as his groundwork for analyzing and interpreting specific works as systems novels and ultimately identifying a "master system" (LeClair, "Preface" 94) that can resist deconstructive tendencies within the culture. These master systems are articulated in academic and scientific theories through cybernetics, social science, mathematics, network theory, or ecology. In *AOE*, LeClair critically analyzes several of the systems novelists and goes into more considerable detail about what the systems novel is. He proposes a new master system for each of the novels. For example, how he argues Pynchon's world to be understood through James Lovelock's Gaia in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), a personified, self-regulating, complex, and synergetic system (LeClair, "Preface" 42–43). Or the capitalist system of William Gaddis's *J R* (1975) as characteristic of economic theories by Anthony Wilden (LeClair, "Preface" 94). Within LeClair's structuralist view, the way we can find similarities between the different novels connecting them as a specific genre, there emerges a premise of systems thinking. As LeClair argues, the systems methodology is two-fold "In its approach to living systems it is mathematical and speculative, a hypothetical model-building; in its approach to scientific discourses it seeks to identify ... formal similarities and differences among systems of notation" (LeClair, *ITL* 3). The formal similarities between the different novels/systems of information resemble the way systems theory tries to convey meaning between sciences. These formal similarities are related to the novels' similar aesthetic strategies, briefly summarized and contextualized with *Underworld* in chapter 1.1. These aesthetics ultimately make the reader see the novel in systems terms and identify a master system of the novel that incorporates the abstract theorizations of systems in our contemporary world into fiction.

The methodology of systems analysis is related to LeClair's specific aesthetics because they emphasize the systems of the novel. LeClair lays out the strategies of the systems novel both in *ITL* and *AOE*, grouping the novels within general similarities within themes, characters, language, and literary devices. The aesthetic strategies of the systems novel are more concrete in *ITL*, and laid out by LeClair like this: (1) the novels are about an ecological and global view on institutions of society; (2) the exchange of abstract ideas as well as the man in the street; (3) Thematic multiplicity through pre and post-historic narrative and a subversion of scale to both the micro and the macro; (4) the protagonists as learners of processes; (5) the novels as imaginative models both part of and removed from empiricism;

(6) metafictional and large (LeClair, *ITL* 16–20). The five similar strategies are constructed like this in AOE: (1) Self-reflexive novels able to transform the reader; (2) comedic in premise, often trending towards dark satires; (3) the protagonist as a collector composing a synecdochic world; (4) a vast array of metafictional pointers which guides the reader; (5) culture as a series of displacements collected by the author as a parasite and the reader as a host (LeClair, “Preface” 22–25).

In investigating multiple systems of notation, it becomes impossible to conclude in binary terms, “The either/or logic of mechanism is inadequate for the both/and relations – the simultaneity -of living systems” (LeClair, *ITL* 4). We can therefore consider process and multiplicity as themes of a systems novel because both terms relate to how any system functions. A process has multiple definitions depending on the system of investigation. While it could refer to an object moving in space, it could also relate to the natural phenomenon of breathing or the process of evolutionary change in the species. A process could be the simple function of an aggregate system that produces an outcome from its input and a temporal phenomenon of vast scale. For example, Underworld's persistent representation of characters in increasing processes of technologies of computers, images and information that become part of the ecosystem shows this.

On the other hand, multiplicity is a system's capacity and state of being multiple or the various mechanisms in a system that act together to produce the outcome. Multiplicity also relates to the implication of synecdoche, the novel standing in for a larger whole or a character being representable for a large portion of culture. As a character would be able to say, “I am America,” acting as a living metaphor for a larger whole within the temporal and biological processes represented in the systems novel. Multiplicity also relates to the multiple components that go into the system's processes. Therefore, these terms are vastly important to the systems novel because their representations “force the reader to ask: What kind of system is this?” (LeClair, *ITL* 17). For example, how LeClair sees DeLillo's fiction within a looping structure resembling the closed systems of entropic loss that can be expanded from physics to social systems. Therefore, finding the processes and their multiple components being represented in a systems novel is key to figuring out which master system the novel tries to convey.

We learn from systems methodology that the formal similarities “in seemingly unrelated systems are relations, physically nonlocatable” (LeClair, *ITL* 4). So how is the novelist able to explain these similarities between the “unrelated systems”? To do this,

LeClair envisions the metaphor of the parasite. A parasite is an organism that latches on from one system to another and consequently becomes part of the whole. The author is the parasite and can manage the exchanges and displacement between systems of notation to allow the reader to see the similarities they share. Therefore, the parasite does not need to be an organism but could also be an abstract system. LeClair says that the parasite could be both an organism and "noise in an information channel" (LeClair, "Preface" 25). The parasitic qualities of the systems novel (information channel) act like this "noise." However, it also represents how noise bleeds between the various systems, ecosystems, institutions, identities, and networks in the novel's discourse. Because there is an energy exchange between the host (the reader) and the parasite (the author), this parasite latches on to the reader through the novel, rearranging the reader to accept that parasite. As if someone were to say that the systems of the book influenced the ecosystems of the world itself. Like a parasite would make the host accept it as part of himself, the reader can, according to LeClair, similarly be transformed to appreciate these exchanges.

The last point on systems methodology relates to its capacity to frame itself so that it can create modes of explanation for the depicted systems. LeClair states, "The description of living systems requires a hierarchy of abstraction, logical types, or frames to represent wholes within wholes" (LeClair, *ITL* 4). The systems novel creates this "hierarchy of abstraction" through self-reflexive discourse, meta-fictional pointers, multiple frames, and modeled systemic structuring. Like systems theory being a metascience, the systems novel is aware of what it is. However, the author implicitly makes the keen reader aware of the novel's conventions. The reader is made aware that the novel is depicting something fictitious. According to LeClair, this will again have transformative powers on the reader, as he will be able to understand the structuring of the novel through those cues that the author provides.

A small example of this is from part 3, chapter 2 of *Underworld*, where the baseball collector Marvin Lundy states that it is "Strange how he was compiling a record of the object's recent forward motion while simultaneously tracking it backwards to the distant past" (*UW* 318). Lundy tracing the baseball from the prologue is a self-reflexive phrase on the novel's structure, a metafictional pointer repeated throughout the novel by multiple characters. It calls attention to the fictive composition of the novel. As the novel is written chronologically backward, Lundy's remark reinstates that structure. LeClair argues that through these rhetorical devices, the reader will be able to see the systemic nature of his world. With the author pointing at the novel's artificial nature as a system of information,

LeClair says that the reader will be able to structure himself within the systemic conventions of the novel and the world.

One can analyze *Underworld* as a systems novel through this systemic framework and methodology. By investigating its attention to processes and simultaneity, the similarities between systems of notation, the noise generated between the different systems, and its frames within frames, we unlock the master system that it tries to convey - a reconfiguration of America in the cold-war era through a systems approach

### **2.3 *Underworld's* Looped Connections**

This subchapter argues that the "master system" of *Underworld* relates to its structure, creating a loop and signaling the embeddedness of American consciousness within a network. LeClair thoroughly investigates the loop itself in *ITL*, where he says that the "loop" is an integral part of DeLillo's fiction and the characters he represents are part of "multiple communications loops of contemporary life" in the spheres from "the personal to the social, the physical body to the body politic, the ecological to the technological" how our "postmodern condition unite in great knowledge and great danger" (LeClair, *ITL* 233). Loops are integral parts of systems thinking because they create models that work both in the machine and in a corporation. They work as frames for similarly investigating any system with an input and an output. Concludingly, it signals *Underworld* as a coherent, dense, and interconnected system that can be similarly investigated.

*Underworld* was never analyzed within LeClair's systems paradigm. Yet, with its metafictional qualities, scale, and culturally whole seeking narrative, it's almost like DeLillo read LeClair before sitting down and writing this block of a novel. DeLillo employs his aesthetic qualities that resemble those within LeClair's argument. The novel's focal shift in micro and macro, its systemic structuring that is referenced with meta-fictional pointers and frames throughout the novel, the vast array of characters all being collectors of excess, the mimesis of the cold-war era in America through focal shifts and deliberate framing, the additional themes of communication, globalization and information are all parts of a system of information which is both challenging and rewarding with the reader. If anyone were pictured as a parasite of culture, able to leech on to the hosts and accept him, I would argue it to be DeLillo. Exploring the nuances of systems within a work of fiction of such a scale, *Underworld* captures the counter essence of the Cold War.

According to LeClair in *ITL*, the loop is a predominant figure in the larger structures of DeLillo's fiction. This means that DeLillo returns to the methods and themes of his older novel. As LeClair argues, *White Noise* closes this loop through the return to the "small-town setting" of *American* and the combination of "large-scale ecological disaster" from *End Zone* (LeClair, *ITL* 207–08). With *Underworld*, DeLillo has achieved a fully closed loop, which also recycles these themes and methods. This is achieved structurally through the six main parts of the novel being segmented into different time periods that loop back to the time of the novel's prologue, as shown in *fig. 1* below.

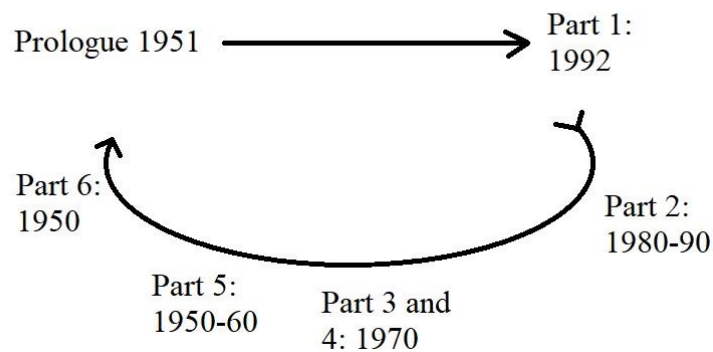


Fig. 1. *Underworld's* looping structure

The master system that sets out to connect these periods of time and the characters portrayed in the large loop is a network. That network is represented gradually through the novel's protagonist Nick Shay and the connections that emerge from him. While the network itself is not revealed before the epilogue, a returning premise throughout the novel states that "everything is connected" (*UW* 289, 408, 826). DeLillo suggests that the network of connection was already there in the beginning. The system of the network in *Underworld* is analyzed by Patrick Jagoda in his book *Network Aesthetics* (2016) where he argues that the novel "performs and encodes its sense of connectivity, at a formal level, in ways that are specific to an era saturated by networks" (46). *Underworld* suggests connectivity before the technological advancement of the world wide web. It explores those networks that existed pre-internet but uses the formal network structures to instill how this technological advancement has permeated itself onto the "bedrock of language and material consciousness" (Jagoda 59). The novel presents multiple connected American underworlds, like the mafia and waste management through Nick, the art scene through Klara Sax, military underground



bunkers through Matt, and suppressed emotions in various characters. Jagoda misses the resemblance between the buildup of material waste and informational waste that the network metaphor and structure instill. As the mounds of debris build up in *Underworld*, waste becomes valuable information. DeLillo has, in many ways, predicted the very nature of the value of wasteful data for large corporations. Like the internet, the novel explores existing information but provides it as a system of connections resembling the “hyperlinked” (*UW* 825) structures of the world wide web. As Nick’s brother, Matt Shay, remarks, “how can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?” (*UW* 465). A question that, as Mark Osteen argues in “Containment and Counterhistory in *Underworld*”, connects the two massive systems of capitalism and the “military-industrial complex” (215). Those network connections make this massive and complex novel a coherent system.

While the epilogue of *Underworld* jumps back to the 90s from the 50s in part 6, indicating an inevitable continuation of the system towards chronological order. However, the continuation also suggests a continuation of the loop into infinity, a closed chapter of history. As an ecological whole in time, that is infinitely connected. The closed, infinite loop of *Underworld* could resemble that of a closed-loop system of an air-conditioning. Still, its connected complexity opens the system to a larger whole that is less mechanical and requires many inputs to function. The novel is the counter to what LeClair argues *White Noise* to be “structurally and stylistically simple” (LeClair, *ITL* 210). As *Underworld* jumps between American cities, it dislocates itself temporally, puts frames for the extensive system within itself, and has multiple voices and subtexts.

The system of *Underworld* is a self-referring networked time loop as a reflection of the increased embeddedness of life into technological networks, an omnipresence that resembles the sublime. The novel articulates the change in the ecosystems of man where those technologies and the circulation of information seem now to be integral parts of those systems. LeClair states that this position has been expressed in systems theory in recent years, through "The recognition of information in living systems and the attendant rise of information and communications technology have also led in recent years to a sophisticated ecological/political analysis of postindustrial culture" (LeClair, *ITL* 6). This position relates to two particular French critics named Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Jean Baudrillard, who argue that contemporary culture is so saturated with images and information that the individual has lost a sense of their part in the ecosystem (LeClair, “Preface” 16)

Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), sets out to theorize the reality we live in as a "hyperreal" (2) where everything has become a copy of a copy separated from its original form. Additionally, the increase in information has led to "the implosion of meaning" (79). This thesis does not seek out to enmesh Baudrillard's or Dupuy's position on a hyperreal reality, but to establish the systems language that DeLillo engages with in *Underworld*. The sciences and DeLillo's fiction share a similar position on man's new relation to his ecosystem because of media, technology, and information.

The connections between the characters of *Underworld* and their inability to distinguish objects from each other in a system that they cannot comprehend can be read as a reflection of the "noise in the information channels" that LeClair conveys. The networked system of comprehension is essential in the systems novel because the characters of *Underworld* feel connected to something unexplainable. Some master force that they cannot grasp. This force of connection is in *Underworld* associated with technological networks. As Joseph Tabbi explains in the book *Postmodern Sublime* (1995), technology has become the way to represent the "faceless and impersonal forces that seem to conflict with the human imagination" (1). The romantic notion of representing some almighty greatness beyond human comprehension through nature, the sublime, has been replaced with technology. Incorporating the technological network in *Underworld*, both formally and structurally, reflects Tabbi's position on the new sublime.

Objects play an essential role in the networked connection happening outside the comprehension of the novel's characters. The baseball from the prologue is a prominent example of this when middle-aged Nick becomes its last owner. It moves through multiple hands throughout the novel. From Cotter Manx's father, who has stolen it from Cotter to sell it for a mere thirty dollars or so to an advertisement agent named Chuck Wainwright (*UW* 641–56), that gives it to his son, Chuckie. The son flies on the B-52 bomber planes that Klara Sax, who had a brief affair with Nick (*UW* 730–42), later makes into an art installation (*UW* 606–16). The ball's lineage is traced by a frantic memorabilia collector named Marvin Lundy, who traces its ownership after Chuckie to a guy named Judson Rauch (*UW* 179). Judson is the victim of a murder committed by the Texas Highway Killer filmed by a little girl on a home video camera and repeated almost endlessly on the TV in part 2 of the novel. A film that instills profound fascination in Nick's brother, Matt Shay (*UW* 217). The baseball links Nick, Klara, Matt, the Cotters, the Wainwrights, Rauch, the Texas Highway Killer, and Marvin. Not through literal connection, but through a network that, in the words of Sister Edgar, is

“hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that” (*UW* 825). Like how Marvin mentions the murdered Judson, leading to the connection between the ball and the killer. The ball is connected to the prologue, where Bobby Thomson hits a home run while the Soviet Union tests their nuclear bomb in the Kazakh desert (*UW* 9–60). Yet the characters are unaware of these extensive connections. Only the reader, through the lens of the novel, can make the connections reassuring the argument of the novel as a system.

Another example of the novel’s connections is through the images in art and advertisements represented in the settings of *Underworld*, permeating the life of the characters, and further connecting them. Like how Nick watches the Lucky Strike logo on a pack of cigarettes and thinks of his father disappearing when he was ten, thinking he must have been targeted by the mob (*UW* 80). Or the giant billboard with the Minute Maid orange juice attracts a vast crowd because the graffiti artist Ismael Munoz has painted a portrait of the dead Esmeralda on it (*UW* 820). Sister Edgar, who was Matt’s former teacher, watches the event and believes she is seeing the angel of Esmeralda. However, the advertisement is linked to Chuck Wainwright, who did the Minute Maid advertisement account in 1961 (*UW* 530). This reverberates Matt Shay’s words mentioned earlier in this chapter, where he cannot tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange – a type of chemical sprayed on the Vietnam jungle to make the plants die so that the guerilla could not hide. Agent orange was delivered from the B-52 plane that Chuckie Wainwright operates called “Long Tall Sally,” which later serves in Klara’s artwork (*UW* 463). It additionally connects to Ismael Munoz’s account of the chemicals made by the CIA to eat through painted graffiti in the city as he states, “forget orange juice, man. This is the new graffiti killer, some wierdshit chemical from the CIA” (*UW* 438). The advertisement links many characters, but it also acts as a simultaneous representation and convergence of important human themes such as the advertisement world, the corporation, the military, art, and technological advancement in the *Underworld* network.

The last point I will make about the network in *Underworld* is DeLillo’s recycling of the theme of waste that symbolizes how what is left behind becomes information in a network that represents the sublime. In *White Noise*, waste is our deepest secrets, but this notion is expanded to a global scale in *Underworld*. In chapter 34 of *White Noise*, Jack Gladney looks inside the trash compactor. He asks about his family’s garbage “Does it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one’s deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws?” (DeLillo, *WN* 259). In the network of *Underworld*, everything the characters leave

behind serves as information that connects them. If waste is the epitome of things left behind, then the words of Jack Gladney ring true when reading about the FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's collection of data for his dossier. Hoover says it "was a mistake to publicize" the FBI's "methods regarding organized crime figures," which references the method of "ransacking their garbage" (*UW* 557). The information that garbage provides for Hoover goes into his dossier, which he says is "a deeper form of truth, transcending facts and actuality" (*UW* 559). The transcendence of truth relates to the sublime, to the reaction that there are immaculate forces that cannot be represented accurately in art. The waste we leave behind becomes a network of information and an underworld that connects us. As Joseph Tabbi explains, "when literature fails to present an object for an idea of absolute power, the failure is associated with technological structures and global corporate systems beyond the comprehension of any one mind or imagination" (ix). Hoover figures that he holds such a transcendent power over his enemies through garbage. In many ways, this relates to how many of *Underworld's* characters feel connected without managing to explain why. Sometimes through technology or information that technology has saturated the daily with.

Based on LeClair's taxonomy and the examples from *Underworld*, where we can see DeLillo's engagement with systems thinking. From the novel's vast array of characters, shift in focus from a local to narrating American culture as a whole to the alternative views on historicized events, the circulatory relationship of the characters acting to stay in their environments, the array of different frames that mimics other systems, DeLillo's engagement with theories of the contemporary world and finally the structure of the novel as a giant loop within a network aesthetic. These examples make it possible to conclude that *Underworld* fits within the structures of the systems novel.

### **CHAPTER THREE: The Implications of Criminal Networks in *Underworld***

Chapter three tackles the represented systems in the novel in relation to its protagonist Nick Shay. By specifically investigating the role that criminal networks are in relation to Nick's material and technological networks. Part 3.2 contextualizes Nick's relationship with the mobster before analyzing specific scenes where criminal networks are represented. Through this it becomes clear that the mobster figure acts as a form of survival metaphor in Nick's environments/ecosystem. Part 3.3 investigates the mobster in relation to the larger dialogues in the novel, building on literary criticism on conspiracy in DeLillo's fiction it attempts to argue that the mobster is a form of noise that disrupts the communication loops of the novel.

#### **3.1 Introduction: "That Particular Life"**

"That particular life. Under the surface of ordinary things. And organized so it makes more sense" (*UW* 761). Says George, a heroin-addicted waiter to seventeen-year-old Nick Shay, who searches for answers for his father's disappearance. Standing in a bar playing pool, they see a man who attracts their attention because of his reputational aura. The man is Mario Badalato, a known figure from the mobster syndicate associated with the Bronx. George never tells Nick that Mario is part of the mafia but the organized underworld. George refers to the thin veil between ordinary life and organized crime, alluding to an organized corporation operating in the mundanity of the everyday.

In reading *Underworld* as a systems novel, this notion of secret organizations working beneath or with the abiding systems becomes an intriguing notion prompting the reader to think in terms of multiplicity and process. Because the novel alludes to the criminal networks, it becomes a representation that foregrounds the parallels between different processes involving a series of systems (institutions, corporations, persons, material- and technological networks) that *Underworld* depicts as being interconnected. In the process of Nick's integration into corporate America, his source of power comes from the cultural understanding of the mobster figure. It embodies the statement of those things that have a material existence in American life but is hard to see. Ultimately, the mob is a representation of survival and noise in the modern technological ecosystem.

There are two main modes that the representation of the mob within Nick's corporate life makes it possible to see the relations between unrelated systems. For example, how a

cultural phenomenon like the mobster figure can be mimicked in Nick's corporate settings to highlight the structures of the capitalist system. Firstly, there is an ironic implication in working for a waste company as the mob has long traditions of ties to the garbage industry. The ironic representation promotes an understanding of the interrelation of corporate power within legitimate and secretive systems. As a critical aesthetic of the systems novel, multiplicity is understood as how DeLillo adds multiple layers to his discourse. For example, using the waste industry with its various connotations and real-world connections to the mob often has double meanings in the novel. Multiplicity becomes a way to use the formal and the figurative to simultaneously represent a density of themes within sections of the novel. Secondly, if DeLillo's representation and allusion to the mob function as a metaphor for how Nick creates narratives to make sense of his environment, then Nick becomes a character who highlights the processes and private languages within institutions that expands from his family life to the technological network. Looking at Nick's trajectory from the local Bronx to the participation and transaction of waste in the global economy, both process and multiplicity are represented because Nick participates in the process of the major historical changes in the market, both the larger structures of ideological transformation to a neoliberalist market and the consequences that these have on the individual is simultaneously represented.

### **3.2 The Mobster as Survival in Nick's Ecosystem**

To understand how criminal networks are represented in *Underworld*, one can answer a simple question: Why is the mafia so crucial to Nick Shay? The mafia plays an essential role in Nick's life because he believes they killed his father. Because of *Underworld's* structure, the reader is introduced to the protagonist's beginning towards the novel's end. A concept that can be hard to grasp but must be understood to get Nick's subtle affinity for the mafia. When reading the book from page one to eight hundred and twenty-seven, the reader meets a middle-aged man getting younger through the succeeding parts of the novel. This formal element gradually exposes the reader to more details about Nick's past: part 1 is about Nick's nuclear family life, and part 6 is about his youthful day-laboring activities in the Bronx neighborhood. While middle-aged Nick keeps his past hidden from his family, there is one thing he never manages to shake from the core of his being: his father, Jimmy Constanza, an Italian immigrant, disappeared, going out for a pack of cigarettes when Nick was ten. This disappearance becomes a fundamental mystery instilled in Nick's being as his primary conclusion to his absence is that the mafia killed him.

Nick insists that the mob took Jimmy when discussing the father's disappearance with his brother, Matt Shay. In Part 2, chapter 5, Matt tells Nick that their mother has spoken to him about the truth behind Jimmy's disappearance, saying, "He did the unthinkable Italian crime. He walked out on his family," and Nick responds, "He didn't walk out. They came and got him." (*UW* 204). This scene is juxtaposed with Rosemary Shay's thoughts on the event when she thinks, "Nick might be right. Someone came and got him. This would make Jimmy innocent. Which Nick believed from an early age. But maybe the other was worse, the truth was worse. It did not happen violent" (*UW* 208). At the end of the quotation, Rosemary says that it is true that he left. However, a vague tone in her voice wants to believe Nick's story. Ultimately, Jimmy's absence from the two brother's life is an ambiguous one that never has a clear conclusion.

However, the novel does not directly represent the mobster figure or criminal networks of any sort. This lack of direct representation seems almost surprising based on the novel's title: *Underworld*. Allusion and inference are the prime modes of reference to criminal syndicates. It simmers in Nick's consciousness and bleeds into other systems. Almost as mimesis of how a criminal network works. In the real world, organized crime operates in secrecy and has consequences and ties to the legitimate systems, corporations, and institutions to remain secret. These systems have effects that we can characterize as economic. Patrick O'Donnell argues in "Underworld," that "the novel's underworlds are symptomatic of the pathologies and anxieties that afflict the quotidian world and its citizens as they go about their daily business" (105). O'Donnell's statement calls attention to DeLillo's affinity for the systems methodology. Namely, formal similarities in different systems of notations must be considered as relations. It shows how DeLillo's layered discourse can simultaneously represent the micro underworlds of the novel and relate these to a larger systemic premise. There is only one literal representation of a mobster figure in *Underworld* in the scene from part 6 where Nick meets Mario Badalato. However, in part 1, Nick embarks on two institutions, the nuclear family, and in 1978 he starts his corporate job for the waste company (Waste Containment) Whiz Co. The most significant allusion to the mob here is through Nick's corporate job. Firstly, he performs gangster remarks toward his coworkers to get things done at the workplace. Secondly, the waste company itself is an ironic statement of Nick's involvement with the mob.

The mafia as a cultural phenomenon is explored by Chris Messenger in "The Common Languages of Mob Narratives." Messenger argues that the mob narrative often is not

representative of the Italian American culture as a whole, but that the mobster "have everything you don't: power, money, women, cars, security, and most of all, a certain leverage" (12) therefore those types of narratives strive toward linking "systems of power and authority" with "how to survive economically and culturally in" America (12). The reference and allusion to the mob in DeLillo's fiction serve precisely this point toward multiplicity and linking between various systems of power, but also as a connection to Nick's past. In the process of Nick's integration into corporate America, his source of power comes from the cultural understanding of the mobster figure.

The corporation and the mafia are similar structures. They both operate in the capitalist system. They have hierarchal power and revolve around secrecy to gain a competitive advantage. The reminiscences of Nick's imaginary remain in his corporate job. His cultural understanding of the mobster figure interconnects the boundaries between the systems he acts within, especially within the corporation. A similar argument connects with what Ruth Helyer argues in "DeLillo and masculinity" that Nick embodies a hypermasculine identity similar to those identities portrayed in the "mediated images" of the mob, where Nick's actions are performances based on "insecure constructions based on societal norms" (125). She argues that Nick forms his masculine identity based on the cultural understanding of the mobster in various institutions. "Nick's narrative repeatedly returns to his childhood experience on the fringe 'The Family' – the mafia." Nick is excited by "the glamour of the mob" because his father disappeared when Nick was young. He keeps insisting that there are "suspicious circumstances behind his father's disappearance" (128). Heyler insinuates that there exists a cultural phenomenon that Nick carries with him to the other systems. A fragment of his past that remains in the process of integration. A process is seen through Nick's journey and his evident change in character from a day-laboring macho in the Bronx to a waste manager making transactions on the global market. Even though Nick and his family have been negatively affected by the mob, at least according to Nick's imagination, he still uses the trope of the Italian American gangster in his workday to assert dominance over coworkers. At his office in the Bronze tower in Phoenix, he uses "gangster threats that were comically effective" (UW 104) to meet deadlines. A gangster threat is a threat that makes another person do something because of the implication that there will be violence if the person does not meet the demands of the one making the threats. Nevertheless, it is also an implication of the multiple ways DeLillo explores the parallels between the structures of the



criminal underworld and the corporation. The hierarchical power of the mobster within the legitimate business.

In many ways are, the representation of the corporation that Nick works for a subtle allusion to the whole operation of the mob. The link between the mob and the waste industry demonstrates irony because the allusion plays with a historical and cultural trope but turns out to be Nick's genuine and legitimate job. Historically, the mafia monopolized the garbage collection market, extorting the competition and fixing the prizes to return big profits from contracts. In an article from Fortune magazine by American investigative journalist Richard Behar, he states that New York is "America's only Mob-entrenched commercial garbage market and a place where no public company dared to operate. Law enforcement experts believe it is now the Mob's most lucrative 'legitimate' business" (90). The irony here institutes how DeLillo uses multiplicity to represent two connected systems without representing the latter. Its allusion creates the effect where one starts to think of waste as an underworld in itself. This underworld is a consequence of the consumer ideology, similar to how the mob is a system that thrives in that same capitalist system.

DeLillo envisions the corporation as advanced technology, and the ironic element of the mob enables the reader to see Nick in his connected ecosystem of corporate culture and technology. The mob as survival and noise in Nick's environment. In Part 2, chapter 1, the connection is evident when Nick reflects on his job and the corporation.

The corporation is supposed to take us outside ourselves. We design these organized bodies to respond to the market, face foursquare into the world. But things tend to drift dimly inward. Gossip, rumor, promotions, personalities, it's only natural, isn't it – all the human lapses that take up space in the company soul. You feel the contact points around you, the caress of linked grids that give you a sense of order and command. It's there in the warbling banks of phones, in the fax machines and photocopiers and all the oceanic logic stored in your computer. Bemoan technology all you want. It expands your self-esteem and connects you in your well-pressed suit to the things that slip through the world otherwise unperceived. (*UW* 89)

In Nick's internal monologue, a persistent doubling is evident. Both the waste business and the mob are "organized bodies" responding to the market, to the capitalist system. And both are connotations and literal allusions to the other, from waste business, the mob infiltrating the garbage industry for capital gain, to wasting people like Nick envisions his father being

shot in the head by them. Furthermore, Nick refers to the organization as a living thing, a body. The distinction on whether he is referring to the company or the individual is unclear, and both can be "foursquare" because the company system is an ideology that the individual must fit himself into, a rigid category of sameness required to carry out company goals. The way the individual "face foursquare" outward hints at an interrelation or homology between the individual and the organized collective within legitimate and illegitimate systems because it showcases Nick's expression of the symptoms of the capitalist system. The representation of humanity that consequently can manipulate the corporate "soul" through "gossip, rumor, promotions" and "personalities" is such an interrelation between the mob and the corporation. As the mafia is often associated with who will take over in leading positions through "promotions," and their aura is represented through known "personalities." The subtle allusion to the mob is Nick's way of making sense of the corporate force, and the passage takes the reader into the power of technology that connects Nick with the global "world." It shows how technological information can be quantified and synthesized to gain over corporate competitors, like how the gangster in his "well-pressed suit" would try to make an advantage over his competition. Nick mediates the symptoms of the capitalist system through allusion to the mob in the ironic fact that he works for a waste company making sense of the enormous institutional power through its reference.

The gangster figure does not only serve as a form of Nick's survival in the corporate institution but also as a way to make the corporation survive in the competitive systems of capitalism. "In the bronze tower we used the rhetoric of aggrieved minorities to prevent legislation that would hurt our business. Arthur Blessing believed, our CEO, that true feeling flows upward from the street, fully accessible to corporate adaption." (*UW* 119). In the corporate processes of Whiz Co, they must take on street language so that they can make an impact on the legislative powers in Washington. As Nick narrates about his CEO, "Arthur listened to gangsta rap on the car radio every morning. Songs about getting mad and getting laid and getting even, taking what's rightfully ours by violent means if necessary. He believed this was the only form of address that made an impact on Washington." (*UW* 119–20). While this is not a direct representation of the mobster per se, it alludes to it through "aggrieved minorities" as the mob emerged through the ethnic group of Italians who had immigrated to America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, the acts described by Arthur are ones that the mafia is affiliated with "getting mad ... getting even ... by violent means." It is inevitably ironic, again, how the waste business must use gangster tactics to hold power in the legislative

processes of America. There is multiplicity evident here, as DeLillo concerns the writing on who could be in control in Washington by representing gangster tactics within the smaller scale of Whiz Co. Suggesting that you must be a gangster to be there or have anything to say at all. The passage shows how the minute and small details within Nick's corporate job reference larger societal structures like legislation and corruption. In hindsight of the Trump administration, DeLillo's fiction seems almost like a prophecy. As Trump's longtime lawyer, Michael Cohen, said in an interview with Rolling Stone magazine, "Trump acted like a mob boss and used mafia-type tactics to battle foes and advance his personal agenda" (Wade). This leads us into territory where Nick's gangster threats take a new meaning, a larger synecdoche. In the light of the Cold War, the gangster threat fueled the tension between the two superpowers, America and the Soviet Union. Leading the reader to think about the landscape of economic ideological systems that was merged into a global one.

The force and authority exerted by Nick in the smaller arena of Whiz Co echo the significant systemic symptoms in the global arena where his "gangster threats" (DeLillo, *UW* 104), as discussed earlier, seem to mimic the Cold War jargon between the superpowers. The mimesis is vital because it reverberates the thematic qualities of the systems novel: "excesses of power, force, and authority in arenas small and large." (LeClair, *AOE* 6). In the large global, the two superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union, stood in a state of balance through mutual plausible destruction. Nick's containment of his past misgivings, containment of plutonium waste underground through his job, resembles the historic containment strategy of America toward Soviet expansion. Nick and the mobster's synecdoche intrigues us to think about the change in man's ecosystem to a world of global markets, computers, instant information, and the repetition of infinite signs.

### **3.3 Corruption of the Communication Loops**

The noise of Nick's imaginary relationship with the mob extends itself to his regular communication loops in his conversations with colleagues and friends. Any communication is a form of a loop. As one delivers messages and responds to other communication, the individual is in a constant feedback and response relationship. Some of the more extended bits of dialogue in *Underworld* happen through a colleague of Nick named Simeon Bings, also called Big Sims. Their dialogues frequently resolve to conspiracy theories to explain the mysteries surrounding them. In "Everything is Connected: Underworld's Secret History of Paranoia," Peter Knight explores paranoia and conspiracy in the novel. We can define

conspiracy theory through Nick's explanation of his father's disappearance. Nick cannot control his father's leaving and blames it on a paranoid belief that a secretive group operating "under the surface" (*UW* 761) came and got him. He exemplifies how a conspiracy theory is a story about a covert group responsible for an event. Knight concludes that conspiracy functions as a way for the characters to make "sense of the world and giving narrative shape to fears that are more a reflection of the society at large than one's personal psychopathology" (Knight 819). As conspiracy is often associated with lone lunatics, Knight argues it to be part of a more prominent way for the American citizen to explain their society. The increased secrecy of the state in the age of the Cold War seems, therefore, to mimic the secret societies that have operated in American society for many years, like the mafia. That *Underworld's* conspiracy adds to "a sense that there are larger forces in our lives over which we have no control" as "an appropriate response to the bewildering complexities of the current world in which everything is connected but nothing adds up." (Knight 823).

In the dialogues of Nick and Big Sims, the mob becomes a metaphor for noise in the ecosystem. Corrupted information that does not relate to any truth. Since the post-war era was influenced by the paranoia of impending doom from the atomic bomb, it shows DeLillo's commitment to writing those fears into the language of Nick and Sims. His commitment to writing one system into the other and the unintended consequences extends like waves throughout Nick's networks. But it instills the statement on how fiction can provide a resistance to the reality of the systems that govern the world we live in and simultaneously represent those systems. DeLillo himself emphasizes this in an interview with the French journal *Revue française d'études américaines* where DeLillo says that "The writer poses his language, the writer poses his small puny indivisible self against the vast reality of history ... Because it's the only thing he has, it's his only defense against social reality and its enormous overpowering effect on our lives" (Chenetier and Happe 109). It reverberates the opening passage of the novel, where "Longing on a large scale is what makes history" (*UW* 11), where "longing" is a mere emotion not measurable in the aftermath of history but excels as a force that can create it. The fictitious explanation of Jimmy's disappearance acts as a call to his innocence for Nick, and this permeates Nick's understanding of the notions of silent forces implored on himself. The adolescent loss of a father is arguably a stability-disturbing force in anyone's life that will have psychological implications through adulthood. Nick invents a conspiracy theory for his father of people conspiring to get Jimmy which in turn suggests the

way DeLillo uses the mob to translate corruption into Nick's systems and his relationship with the world.

In part 3, chapter 1 of the novel, Nick travels to LA for a waste seminar representing Whiz Co to learn the ins and outs of the waste business. Sitting with Sims in the hotel restaurant, they discuss a mysterious ship drifting at sea carrying some unknown shipment. They are theorizing based on various rumors on what the shipment could be, from CIA-bought heroin to toxic waste. At some point, Big Sims says, "The mob has a lot of involvement in waste carting. So why not waste handling, waste shipment, waste everything? ... maybe it's our company. We're mob-owned. They're a silent partner" (*UW* 280). DeLillo packs the text with dense themes, bombarding the reader with information. Sims and Nick's dialogue revolves around mystery and conspiracy, Nick talks of "the science of dark forces," saying that "there's a word in Italian. *Dietrologia*. It means the science of what is behind something" (*UW* 280). At the same time, the reader and Nick are being notified of the nature of the corporate structure. A legitimate corporation has the mob as "a silent partner." In other words, the mafia has a majority share of Whiz Co. Sims indicates that the underworld could be part of the corporate world. Yet, their conversation only revolves around the conspiracy, the "science of what is behind something," adding to the argument that the mob becomes a way to bring states of disarray in information into equilibrium, which is in many ways ironic because within legitimate systems the mafia should not be a solution.

Again, there is a multiplicity in DeLillo's writing here because of the way he blitzes the reader with information and dense themes while simultaneously representing Nick and Sims as receptors in a world where the increase in complexity and denseness in communication seem to make any theory about the ghost-ship more plausible than the other. The conversation between Nick and Sims seems to resonate with the words of the narrator Jack Gladney from *White Noise* during "The Airborne Toxic Event", where "remarks existed in a state of permanent floatation. No one thing was either more or less plausible than any other thing" (DeLillo, *WN* 129). Thus far, they seem to discuss the notion of some corrupt conspiracy, that the mob owns the corporate, that the CIA is transporting heroin or that "toxic waste" is dumped in "LDCs," the abbreviation for "less developed country in the language of banks and other global entities" (*UW* 278). Where DeLillo uses the mob as a significant metaphor for the corruption within both the represented systems of the novel and the reflection that these have on the systems of the world and how information has been corrupted on its way from the original source in an increasingly mediated America. This is not only a

metaphor but suggests DeLillo's interest in the mafia's operation as something that really exists and has systemic effects. The suggestion is that the process of information is corrupted as a mimesis of the corrupted information within larger institutional structures of America. As a consequence of consumer capitalism, even information has become waste, which overflows the channels and disturbs the communication, depriving it from its original source. It even turns out, through a character named Marvin Lundy on the lookout for the baseball from the prologue in Part 3, chapter 2, that the actual content of the ship was shit, human waste, the ultimate irony to a giant conspiracy.

The continual mentions of the mobster figure in Nick's communications persist in connecting various systems such as Nick's imagination, the waste business, and media. The interconnected ecosystem of *Underworld* depicts a reality saturated with modern forms of communications and information. Nick and Sims are sitting in another bar than the previously described situation. A bar is a setting that often permeates the environment with noise, like how the TV in a room infiltrates the home settings in *White Noise*. The representation of the mob infiltrates the communications—representative of the paranoia and the conspiratory symptoms of American society of the era. At the bar with Sims, Nick mentions that he once met with the mobster Mario Bandalato whom Sims recently saw on the TV. Sims says, "He's always photographed on the courthouse steps. He's the king of steps" (*UW* 331). Nick answers that because there are implications of Mario being involved with his father, he has to show respect.

'In other words I have to show respect. I have to be reverent when I mention his name. This guy who runs a criminal enterprise in narcotics, extortion, what else. Murder, attempted murder, what else.'

'Waste carting,' I said. (*UW* 332)

The scene juxtaposes Sims' idea of Mario from the photographs he has seen on the TV with Nick's paranoid assumptions about his father. In the end, he realizes that he has to be respectful because Mario operates with real dangers and also "waste carting," the systemic approach to sorting human garbage. Nick uses the word "reverent" like Mario is a figure he has to worship, an ideal. The dialogues between Nick and Sims reverberate Knight's argument that "DeLillo's attempt to map the impossibly complex interactions in the age of globalization between individuals and larger social and economic forms that resemble but exceed the logic of conspiracy" (Knight 810).

Through the analysis and close reading of Nick's networks that extend to his family, his job, his communications, and the larger promise of an American economy, it becomes clear that the mobster figure and criminal networks are essential, not only to Nick but also to DeLillo. The importance prevails in DeLillo's attempt to convey the connectedness of the contemporary world. How alternative figures are integral parts of our society, especially in relation to other institutional forms such as the mafia. The mobster is, in general, a symbol of corruption, and this is transported into Nick's networks. The mobster emerges as both a symbol of survival and noise in the systems of America.

## CHAPTER FOUR: The Self-Referring System

Chapter four builds on LeClair's characterization of the systems novel to expand an understanding of how the internal metafictional frames of the novel acts as reorientations of how to perceive and interpret the novel itself. Firstly, it attempts to build on new criticism by Graley Herren to expand the notion of *mise en abyme* of the novel. Secondly, the chapter contextualizes the way an internal frame of a represented film becomes a mirror for the novel. The film enables the reader to see the contradictions that DeLillo presents in the novel throughout. The third part of the chapter attempts to argue that another self-reflexive frame is present in the novel midpoint. However, this frame contextualizes how the novel connects its characters in a vast network. It points at how the different systems that make up both the readers and the characters world connect us on the outside of our comprehension and ultimately mediates the wave of consequences that these interconnected systems instill. This position creates an understanding of representation of technology in DeLillo's fiction as a sublime.

### 4.1 Introduction: Mirrors

Towards the middle of *Underworld*, DeLillo holds up multiple mirrors to the novel itself and presents them to the reader. Matt Shay, Nick's brother, works in an underground military facility as a systems analyst. The location of his occupation keeps referring to the systems of the novel itself.

The pocket was one of those nice tight societies that replaces the real world. It was a world made personal and consistently interesting because it was what you did, and others like you, and it was self-enclosed and self-referring and you did it all together in a place and a language that were inaccessible to others (*UW* 412)

The connected network of the novel needs to be understood to fully appreciate the novel's nuances. Matt refers to the pocket as a "self-enclosed" and "self-referring" system. A closed ecosystem of sorts. As I have established earlier, *Underworld* is a connected network in a temporal infinity loop. This entails the question of how DeLillo explores a sense of referent to how his system works in *Underworld*? To understand a fragmented narrative that mimics forms of natural and artificial systems, the systems novelist must refer to its own conventions.



Through this, it can breach the barriers of fiction to the reader, imploring a sense that the reader must think of the systems that govern him.

One of the core aesthetics of the systems novel is its employment of "framing devices and metafictional pointers" to represent the very nature of how a system functions, namely, that a system is contrived of multiple wholes within a larger whole. LeClair continues to write that "both framing and self-reference contribute to the systems novelists' fundamental artistic accomplishment: the creation of imitative forms." (LeClair, *AOE* 23). While LeClair argues that self-referential frames or metafiction are devices that have been thoroughly worn in "postmodern experimentation," (LeClair, "Preface" 23) he positions the systems novel in another category to said experimentation. If the systems novel is a representation of wholes, the reader must be guided sufficiently to understand the systems that the novel tries to convey. The basic idea is that in natural systems, imitation is the form that makes it possible for the features of one system to be carried on to the next. For example, a human baby will imitate its parents as it grows. Even the baby itself is an imitation, a repetition of the gene pool carried from its parents. In the systems novel, metafiction imitates the novel's conventions both to present the reader with the system where the novel was created and explain the systems of the novel itself. This chapter will investigate how DeLillo uses imitation through the formal element of mise en abyme to guide the reader through *Underworld's* systems. Representations of such an aesthetic are evident in *Underworld's* part 4. Where both Matt's job in the self-referring network of "the pocket" and a showing of a mysterious and till now lost film called "*Unterwelt*" become mirrors for how to understand the system of the novel itself.

Graley Herren explores the use of art as mirrors for DeLillo's fiction in *The Self-Reflexive art of Don DeLillo* (2021). This well-known technique goes beyond fiction and is called mise en abyme. This term is defined in various ways, from an image replicating to infinity between two mirrors to placing the artwork (the whole) within a part (Herren 63). As Herren argues, Nick Shay is an embedded author of the novel, which emphasizes the use of the term in a narratological sense, the author within the artwork. In analyzing *Underworld* as a systems novel, DeLillo's use of mise en abyme serves another purpose. Namely to refer to the systems of the novel itself and to emphasize DeLillo's position on what this type of novel can do. At the structural midpoint of the book, quite literally on the page number, the reader follows two characters. The artist Klara Sax and the systems analyst Matt Shay in a period that is measured in a singularity. While that reference itself, "Summer 1974," indicates the singularity of a mirror, DeLillo implores other strategies to emphasize the systems of

*Underworld*. Not only to remind the reader that this is a network, but also on the themes and the way to formally contextualize the text.

<b>Background</b>	<b>Mirror</b>	<b>Reflection</b>
	<b>“the pocket”</b>	
	<b>“<i>Unterwelt</i>”</b>	
Prologue	Part 4	Part 5-6
Part 1-3	Cocksucker blues Summer 1974	Epilogue
pp. 1-366	pp. 371-498	pp. 498-827

Fig. 2. Part 4 as the novel’s structural midpoint and mirror

Timothy L. Parrish argues in *FBI TO EISENSTEIN'S "UNTERWELT": DELILLO DIRECTS THE POSTMODERN NOVEL* (1999) that the fictional “*Unterwelt*” depicts an omnipresent technology and how DeLillo sees himself as a writer. He writes that “DeLillo invokes the possibility of mimicking something that does not exist ... to assert ... his status as creator. Not only a novelist of technology, DeLillo is creating a new technology of the novel” (699). Parrish continues by saying that through the representation of “*Unterwelt*”, DeLillo has surrendered to the power of film, instituting that it has taken the novel’s place in the world. Or instead, DeLillo acknowledges “the aesthetic product created by the technological forces of reproduction to have achieved an augmented power that he wants to capture as an artist” (Parrish 699). This means that film is a technology easily reproduced for consumer needs and that DeLillo wants to capture the vast power that this has on culture within the structures of a novel. One can quickly see a systemic premise emerging when thinking about Parrish’s argument. Systems are not always some closed tangible thing, like the human body or a machine. Systems are also open environments susceptible to change in which the closed systems interact. Technology and systems are inevitably linked together at their definitional core because technology is the accumulation of knowledge and application and can be seen as a system in itself. Cinema is the advancement of narrative technology, where accumulated knowledge and application have changed how we now tell a story. And DeLillo wants, as Parrish says, to capture that change with “*Unterwelt*” within *Underworld*.

The narration of “*Unterwelt*” through an artist figure achieves contextualization to the way DeLillo envisions the artist in relation to a technological world. In part 4, chapter 3, the reader is introduced to the “*Unterwelt*” film through a third-person narration and focalization of the artist figure Klara Sax. The narration gives insight into the inner workings of Klara through the fact that the only direct discourse to her thought is through her. As an artist figure herself, this infuses a wariness or sensibility to the narration of a modern work of art. She is dating a movie distributor and documentarian named Miles Lightman, who belongs to a “film society” which has gotten a hold of the “legendary lost film of Sergei Eisenstein” (UW 424). In the opening page that explores the setting of where the film is about to be shown, the narrator mentions “draped mirrors” (UW 423) as part of the décor implying that the reader must uncover the novel’s mirror to understand the text as a whole.

#### **4.2 *Unterwelt* as Mise en Abyme**

A representation of mise en abyme is evident towards *Underworld’s* midpoint, where a showing of, till now, a lost film by Sergei Eisenstein functions as a metafictional pointer. The film itself is called “*Unterwelt*” and is a fictional movie within the novel by a real filmmaker. “*Unterwelt*” has presumably been held underground and suppressed in communist Europe and is given a one-time screening at the atmospheric Radio City Music Hall in New York to an assembling art milieu by Klara’s boyfriend, Miles. Before the screening, there is a dance performance by the American precision dance company the Rockettes and an orchestral seance. The screening represents multiple underworlds such as the underground social sphere of the art world, the film’s title being German for underworld, and the film’s narrative seems to happen in an underground institution revolving around forgotten disfigured individuals. By representing such a film, by stating it as a mirror for the novel itself, DeLillo contextualizes the novel within Eisenstein’s theories of montage and provides insight into the kind of analysis that the reader requires to interpret the novel’s complex themes.

Klara is an artist standing in the structural midpoint of the novel, reminding the reader of the novel’s conventions, themes, and power that art can assert in the world of the novel and the world. “*Unterwelt*” functions as a metafictional frame that lets the reader know of the aesthetic strategies of the novel itself. Where metafiction is understood as self-reflexive fiction in a discursive aesthetics that highlight its construction as fiction, for example how DeLillo imitates the form of juxtaposed montage throughout the novel. Additionally, with

“*Unterwelt*”, the reader is informed of the themes, techniques, and reception of the film but at the same time of those equal traits of the novel. As Miles says to Klara before the show starts, “Eisenstein made a film with a powerful theme and the footage has been hidden away all these decades because the theme deals on some level with people living in the shadows, and the government” (UW 424). Not only in the mirroring of the novel and film’s titles but also in their representations of people living in underworlds and the systems that govern them. As pointed out by Parrish, DeLillo puts a fictional movie by a real filmmaker in *Underworld*, which builds the claim of “*Unterwelt*” as a mirror’s reflection on the way other cultural forms have started to influence other types of art such as the novel.

In many ways, “*Unterwelt*” becomes a re-representation, a *mise en abyme*, of the novel because of their scenic similarities. Similar to what John Duvall has stated in *Underworld: a reader’s guide* (2002) that “*Unterwelt* is doubly contextualized in the novel” (Duvall 48). An obvious example is the way the two titles imitate the other. The narrator takes the reader closer to the formal elements of the film as it is shown on the screen, which resembles the prologue of the novel.

Overcomposed close-ups, momentous gesturing, actors trailing their immense bended shadows and there was something to study in every frame, the camera placement, the shapes and planes and then the juxtaposed shots, the sense of rhythmic contradiction, it was all spaces and volumes, it was tempo, mass and stress (UW 429).

In the first part of the narrated film, the reader is taken back to the prologue, where there is a similarity in the film’s formal elements to the baseball game of the prologue. With the shifting focalization between characters, in the “close-ups” of Frank Sinatra, the players of the game, and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, the stadium of “shapes and planes,” the “rhythmic contradiction” (UW 429) resembling the “rhythmic handclap” (UW 19) of the fans and the “tempo, mass and stress” (UW 429) of the game itself. Moreover, the latter part of “*Unterwelt*” alludes to and foreshadows Nick’s visit to the disfigured individuals living by the nuclear test sites of the Kazakh desert. As the film’s protagonist, a mad scientist, shoots at a prisoner with a ray gun in an underground complex, the victim becomes “transfigured, pain-racked, his lower lip dribbling off his face, a growth appearing at the side of his neck” (UW 431), Klara is contemplating this as Eisenstein’s possible critique of the rule to produce art for the Soviet state as a “statement of outrage and independence” (UW 431). The atrocities done against the disfigured prisoners of the movie share a solid connection to Nick’s observation of

mutated children playing in the dirt in the novel's epilogue where he sees a kid with "his head slightly oversized, face and forehead marked by tumors, and the spongy caps over the place where his eyes should have been" (UW 802).

#### 4.2.1 Enabling Analysis of Contradictions

While the Eisenstein film depicted in *Underworld* is a fictional one, Eisenstein himself is a celebrated Soviet director of cinema who pioneered theories of film editing. Ron Briley writes in "Sergei Eisenstein: The Artist in Service of the Revolution" that Eisenstein thought "that film editing had more impact upon audiences than the expression of actors" (527). He further articulates that Eisenstein's techniques matched the Soviet's state goals of creating propaganda films that departed from the "idealization of individual heroes" (527). Eisenstein's theories of montage catered to how films could show the power of the collective. Montage means that one takes dissimilar fragments and puts them side by side to create a thematic effect. As Eisenstein himself says in "Montage of Attractions", that montage is "arbitrarily selected independent ... effects (attractions) but with a view to establishing a certain final thematic effect" (Eisenstein 79).

Stefano Ercolino establishes cinema's influence on the systems novel in his book *The Maximalist Novel* (2014) by explicitly arguing that Sergei Eisenstein has affected the discursive aesthetics of novels like *Underworld*. He says that "Eisenstein's conception of montage as the juxtaposition of the heterogeneous seems in fact to be presumed in the segmentation of the plot into fragments" (Ercolino 124). This means that the novelist uses Eisenstein's concept of what he coined as montage theory in cinema as a structural and discursive part of the novel.

"*Unterwelt*" enables the reader to see how DeLillo uses contradictions between juxtaposed scenes and textual vignettes to provide its thematic effects. The text talks directly to the reader to emphasize that "you were here to enjoy the contradictions" (UW 425). DeLillo breaks the wall between the cinema, the text, and the reader to inform the reader how to think about his novel. As Klara watches the film, she sees the "rhythmic contradictions" (UW 429). It is important to note that Klara is an artist herself, and the narration focalized through her enables a view that captures her subjective emotions towards art in general. Her being an artist enables the reader to recognize "*Unterwelt's*" intrinsic values. Of course, DeLillo juxtaposes Klara's view with that of her art dealer friend, Esther Winship, who has come to see the movie, and remarks, "I don't need to see the movie. I already love it" (UW 425). While the film profoundly impacts Klara, Esther remarks that she does not have to see the movie to

enjoy it. In a way, Esther remarks that the event is something that will make her look cool and cultural, exposing her shallow nature. The contradiction exposes the reader to think about the value of art in the shallowness of material culture.

"*Unterwelt*" is also of a contradictory nature in and of itself. As an unreal piece of art by a real director, it highlights DeLillo's emphasis on creating a counter-history to the established and written history. In a way, DeLillo is creating something unreal, a fictional novel, from the perceived reality, written history, reflecting his own position that fiction is the only way we can act against the feeling of social force. In the essay "The Power of History" published in *the New York Times* in 1997, DeLillo expresses:

The novelist does not want to tell you things you already know about the great, the brave, the powerless and the cruel. Fiction slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and head colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror of restless nights. This is how consciousness is extended and human truth is seen new. (DeLillo, "The Power of History")

The unreality of the cinematic film mirrors DeLillo's position on writing a counter-historical novel. It exposes Klara to the mutilated people in the underground facility and is not about heroes or grand gestures in history. If anything, the movie exposes her to a deeper truth about history as she reflects, "Doesn't this movie seem to anticipate the terror that was mounted against Russian artists in the late nineteen-thirties?" (*UW* 431). In a way the novel itself offer a contradiction to the historized reality we experience.

DeLillo plays with the juxtaposition of vignettes or montages in the chapter and *Underworld* at large. In the chapter another thematic juxtaposition can be seen using the Rockettes as a preshow to the film in the chapter itself. The Rockettes are considered American icons who embody America's spirit and are used as a preshow to a soviet movie made by Eisenstein, who produced Soviet cinema that was supposed to symbolize the Soviet spirit. Whereas Eisenstein's films, as stated by the narrator, often had "crowd scenes or sense of social motive – the masses as hero, colossal crowd movements painstakingly organized and framed" (*UW* 430). Suddenly, the Rockettes are the crowd scene with their "symmetry and drill precision" (*UW* 428), juxtaposed to the soviet film where there is now none. The binary of the Cold War through communism and capitalism comes to an equal halt. A form of balanced singularity where the imitation of forms goes beyond that binary border. Similar to what the narrator states, "you were here to enjoy the contradictions" (*UW* 425).

Concludingly, one can see through "*Unterwelt*" how its contradictions play an essential part in the novel's thematic landscape as a whole. On a contextual level, it mirrors the binaries of the Cold War era, the free market against the state-regulated Soviet. Nevertheless, DeLillo informs the reader of the system itself and what to pay attention to when reading the novel. Seeing the contradictions it presents enables us to interpret its meanings, and I will use this technique in the last chapter of this thesis. On a representational level, the novel is full of these binary contradictions. There is a picture called "the triumph of death" in Life magazine in the prologue. The people cheer at the prologue baseball game while the Soviets test their nuclear bomb. Nick's associations of the mobster figure in the corporate world. The implications of J. Edgar Hoover being a homosexual while at the same time blaming the conflicts between the hippie generation and the American involvement in the Vietnam war on their "yield to random sexual urges" (*UW* 564). The real and unrealness of "*Unterwelt*" itself. The counter-historic logic to *Underworld*. Klara Sax attending the art "underworld" on the rooftops of New York. And finally, in the prologue, where the world is opened to a global economy, the transactions happen in an underground space, closed from the rest of the world. The list of these binary connections in the novel is endless, but it constitutes "*Unterwelt's*" functions as a *mise en abyme*, as a reframing of the novel's logic to make the reader appreciate its contradictions.

LeClair argues that there are two ways that the systems novel can counter a culture's dominant structures. One is to represent enough of its contradictions to enable the reader to see that there exist information and communication in their systems that seem natural but are, in fact, a product of production. The second is to provide alternative forms of information that can shed new light on the domination that culture's conventions hold. In LeClair's words:

the systems novelist have two strategies to counter the homogeneity of mass-produced and institutionally controlled information. One strategy is to collect to excess and thus use against the dominant culture its own information. The other strategy is to burrow into specialized and alternative sources of information that escapes and undermines the dominant culture's legitimation. (LeClair, "Preface" 16)

"*Unterwelt*" provide the reader with such alternative information. It uses the medium of cinema, a form of narrative technology with an endless possibility of reproduction, to frame the novel against the dominant culture. This framing means that DeLillo explores the "excess" of information by using that information and its conventions as a mirror that both contextualizes and makes the reader ready to analyze it. Because "*Unterwelt*" re-represents

the novel itself, it can call attention to the forms of self-parody that DeLillo uses to both escape and legitimize its value in the postmodern culture. As the technique of *mise en abyme* is associated with great authors of modernist and postmodernist literature (Herren 6–7), it becomes a way to self-parody the very element in itself. Since “*Unterwelt*” is a mirror for the novel, one can read the references to the film’s formal elements as references to the elements of the novel as the narrator states that “Eisenstein’s method of immediate characterization, called *typage*, seemed self-parodied and shattered here, intentionally. Because the external features of the men and women did not tell you anything about class or social mission” (UW 443). Here Klara remarks that it seems that Eisenstein is parodying his convention of *typage*. This is a form of casting that emphasizes physical appearance to represent social groups or classes. Because “*Unterwelt*” features mutilated and deformed characters, this form of characterization becomes muddled. This highlights the way DeLillo plays with the convention of *mise en abyme* by placing it in the novel through *Unterwelt* and referencing the formal elements of the film as intentional self-parody. It is the sort of frame that enables the reader to understand the novel and the systems in which the novel is written in exist.

“*Unterwelt*” also highlights, on a metalevel, the transformative effect a systems novel can have on the reader. This insinuates DeLillo’s view that art still holds power and authenticity in the postmodern culture. As Klara watches the movie coming to an end, she analyses and reflects on the film, realizing that its contradictions have uncovered a larger truth that marks her. She states, “you look at the faces on the screen and you see mutilated yearning, the inner divisions of people and systems, and how forces will clash and fasten, compelling the swerve from evenness that marks a thing lastingly” (UW 444). This quote highlights the formal element of “*Unterwelt*” as a mirror and the thematic implications of the systems novel that can transform the reader. She watches the “mutilated yearning” and the “inner divisions of people and systems,” which holds a solid connection to the opening passage of the novel “longing on a large scale” (UW 1). But in watching “*Unterwelt*”, Klara replaces the word longing with yearning. Two words that often define each other. Through the movie, the represented images, she sees into the systems themselves. Clashed and fastened forces implicating the network. What is interesting is how “*Unterwelt*” marks Klara profoundly, that the smallest motions of art have great force. It suggests that art still has the power to color the world. “The swerve from evenness” from symmetry, sameness, and saturation. As Klara leaves the movie theatre “she had the movie all around her, sitting in a



bar under walls of white neon beating in the Broadway heat” (UW 445). As the flat lights of the technological world bears down on her, the feelings invoked stays with her. The power of counter-history emerges from the depths of the mirror that DeLillo frames *Underworld* with.

### 4.3 “The Pocket” and the Technological Sublime

An additional self-referent is represented in the novel’s middle through Matt Shay working in an underground military facility called “the pocket.” As a framing of novelistic language within network form. Specifically through how Matt is able to describe a feeling of embeddedness in the system network. Growing up as Nick’s younger brother, Matt was a chess prodigy who lived in the shadow of Nick’s reputation. When he was an active chess player, he had a teacher called Albert Bronzini, Klara Sax’s husband at the time. Although Matt’s upbringing is narrated towards the end of the novel, his young self and ability to see beyond the grids of the text is stated by Bronzini when Klara asks him how it is going with the young student. Bronzini answers, “He’s beginning to think in systems” (UW 707). While Bronzini is referencing Matt’s ability to see the chess game in terms of larger systems, it is inevitably also a referent to his ability to see, as stated by Patrick Jagoda in *Network Aesthetics*, “a sense of interconnected totality that inspires both wonder and paralysis” (56). While his chess career does not amount to anything, he ends up in a systems job doing “weapons work” “of the soft-core type, involved with safing mechanisms mainly” (UW 402). This begs the question of how does Matt Shay and the Pocket provide a self-reference to an understanding of the interconnected system of *Underworld*?

Patrick Jagoda analyses the same chapter in his book on the networked aesthetics of *Underworld*, arguing that “The text explores the relationship between novelistic language and network form in order to elucidate how a late twentieth-century American historical consciousness is shaped through the perception of and embeddedness within networks” (Jagoda 56). While I can agree with this reading, I think it additionally adds to the system’s self-referentiality, as the mise en abyme that the mid structure chapters of Klara and Matt provide. If “*Unterwelt*” becomes a way to understand the novel itself through, how its contradictions leads the reader to its complex themes, then the system that Matt references become the understanding of the networked embeddedness in the culture that allows for the “evenness” that Klara “swerve” from (UW 444). Reading and analyzing *Underworld* as an interconnected systems novel, these two self-referring frames in the book’s middle become explanatory modes for the novel itself. Juxtaposed, they create an effect of how both art and

the individual relate to the postindustrial world. Considering Mark Osteen's argument that Matt's experience unravels the massive system of capitalism that transcends everything from "oranges, to toxic defoliants, to a solvent employed to clean graffiti" (Osteen 240), one can see the way Matt's self-reference to explore the way capitalism and technology are systems within the loop which connect the novel both as a convergence of theme and form. The system that Matt explains is the new ecosystem of man the "entities" of the novel move through, their environment. Through Matt specifically how, as Joseph Tabbi articulates, the representation of technology as the sublime has surpassed nature.

The sublime is defined through Immanuel Kant in Abrams and Harpham's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2015), the act of representing something that, firstly, in the subject's mind, is of "vastness in size or seeming limitlessness or infinitude in number." Secondly, the individual's forcelessness to the "overwhelming power of nature" in the "scenes and events of the natural world" (Abrams and Harpham 389). Joseph Tabbi explores the change in representing the sublime in his book and argues that "DeLillo has sought to an external ground, not 'in nature' but in every media and technological systems that have supplanted the natural world as a sublime object of contemplation." (Tabbi 173). What the self-reference to the network does, through Matt, is to represent this incorporation of technology into nature. As Matt struggles to distinguish between natural and technological systems, between objects and information he experiences the postmodern sublime.

The systems novel's relation to wholes within wholes, to systems and subsystems, and if a networked technology prevails the formal structuring of the novel that DeLillo uses, how is this presented to the reader? With "*Unterwelt*", the reader is presented with a fictional film, a finished whole, that comes to re-represent the novel itself. With Matt Shay working in "the Pocket" (*UW* 401), the reader is presented with another whole (hole) in the earth, a "cubbyhole in a concrete space about the size of a basketball court, somewhere under the gypsum hills of southern New Mexico" (*UW* 401), in there he does "systems business" that transcends connection from that small hole to the larger world through the networks. This alludes to the larger interconnectedness of the novel itself, where the characters are connected without their knowing. Both Matt and his co-workers are unaware of the networked totality they participate in. Or Matt has an insight and awe, but no explanation for his experience reimposing the statement of a sublime technology.

There were people who didn't know where their work ended up, how it might be applied. They didn't know how their arrays of numbers and symbols might enter

nature. It could conceivably happen in a flash. Everything connected at some undisclosed point down the systems line. This caused a certain select disquiet. But it was a splendid mystery in a way, a source of wonder, how a brief equation that you tentatively enter on your screen might alter the course of many lives (*UW* 408–09).

In the passage, the narrator insinuates the very essence of the sublime technology by entering “numbers and symbols” from a computer into “nature” that connects everything. There is also a multiplicity present as both the work of Matt and the novel’s premise connects characters through “numbers and symbols” or written language. The technological sublime becomes present in the collective feeling of “disquiet” that instills “splendid mystery,” the sense of overwhelmingness to the unknown forces presented in their work. This also relates to a larger scale as the systems business of Matt can “alter the course of many lives.” The networked totality is a union between theme and form, as the novel uses the aesthetics of a connected network to present it as a cohesive system and to reinstate the systems that govern that world. Capitalism, technology, and the military are part of the same connection that, as Osteen argues, are connected through their juxtaposition (Osteen 240).

The novel’s invisible and connected system enables the reader to see beyond the wonder of technology and think critically about the emergence of a master system that connects us and saturates a culture to where anything is indistinguishable from the other. Matt smokes some narcotic drug at a work party and becomes paralyzed in the moment where he is only able to observe the people around him. In this trance, he sees everyone as connections when it is narrated, “He was surrounded by enemies. Not enemies but connections, a network of things and people. Not people exactly but figures – things and figures and levels of knowledge that he was completely helpless to enter” (*UW* 421). Matt's sentences allude to the novel's accomplishment in linking various systems. As Osteen writes, "binaries are not opposed, but partake of each other" (240). From earlier in the chapter, we know that Matt works for the state, and we know that he started working with weapons because he felt that they gave him "edge" and "identity" (*UW* 402). However, throughout the chapter, there is increasing doubt in Matt. The more he sees the connected system he participates in, the more he would like to leave and be separated "someplace remote" (*UW* 420). His yearning for separation is because he starts to believe in the stories of his coworker Eric Deming who tells him of the atrocities that the American state has done on its people. As Eric says, "They knew the tests weren't safe but they went ahead anyway ... sent manned aircrafts through radiation clouds ... exposed troops to the atomic flash ... experimented on children, infants, fetuses, and

mental patients" (UW 418). In the culmination of the chapter where Matt has taken the "psychotomimetic agent" (UW 421) he overhears Eric saying, "You can never underestimate the willingness of the state to act out its own massive fantasies" (UW 421). Overhearing Eric is where Matt sees his state as the enemies, his coworkers in a connected system that only perpetuates the binaries of the cold-war. He sees the contradiction in his work, but he cannot adequately explain it. The massive technologies, the systems work on nuclear weapons, are linked to all other parts of American society.

Matt's struggles to explain the system he is experiencing continue to insinuate DeLillo's engagement with trying to mediate what the system of Cold War America ultimately is. When explaining his feelings toward his work to his girlfriend Janet, she remarks, "You make it sound like God" (UW 458). The chapters displace the idea of the all-powerful in relation to a hidden system of government that ultimately has control in and of the world. It reflects a paranoia that this enlists in the individual how one system has consequences in the larger realms of the biosphere, both on a structural and psychological level. Matt reflects on the episode from the party and realizes that there is no difference between the American systems:

He was thinking about his paranoid episode at the bombhead party the night before. He felt he'd glimpse some horrific system of connection in which you can't tell the difference between one thing and another, between a soup can and a car bomb, because they are made by the same people in the same way and ultimately refer to the same thing. (UW 446)

The systems of connection that Matt refers to is most likely what, as stated by Osteen, "President Eisenhower called the 'military industrial complex'" (Osteen 215) and its connection to capitalism's darkest corners. The military-industrial complex is generally understood through the definition by James Ledbetter in "Tracking the Unwarranted Influence" as "the network of public and private forces that combine a profit motive" (6) in the creation of weapons for the US military. Because the private organizations could make a profit from the US government's need to further their political interest in the Cold War, the other systems of America were left to disintegrate. "The MIC always finds ways to fund its needs, regardless of cost or necessity, while pressing American social problems such as poverty, illiteracy, infant mortality, and the shortage of affordable housing always seem to lack for money" (8).

Therefore, Matt is experiencing the "horrific system of connection," because the systems business that he participates in ultimately is connected to the larger structures of American society. As the narration states, "how a brief equation that you tentatively enter on your screen might alter the course of many lives, might cause the blood to rush through the body of a woman on a tram many thousands of miles away" (UW 408). History is not presented through Eisenhower but through Matt, a mere worker, and a cog of the American war machine. The alternative historicization is why Matt cannot describe the relationship with the abstract forces he is describing, why the technology becomes a sublime entity, and why "the pocket" becomes a mirror that explains the novel. It is as if DeLillo is describing the military-industrial complex in its most abstract form, through systems and unintended connections, through the paranoia experienced by Matt in the realization of those connections. The frame enables the reader to see the consequences of government economic spending that alleviates in alternative forms. Such as the poverty described by Sister Edgar or Nick's mobster allusions. The sentence "The pocket was one of those nice tight societies that replaces the world" (UW 412) becomes even more chilling in the argument that Matt is describing American economic relations that affect all parts of *Underworld's* environments. After Matt's reaction to the paranoid episode there is a description of a social turmoil that happens in New York as he is pressing the buttons on the systems switchboard. "There was a garbage strike in New York" (UW 446), the juxtaposition strengthens the belief of the pocket's actual consequences in relation to the whole.

As Matt's moral quarrels emerge from the interconnectedness of his work that transpires into the bedrock of America, he goes on a road trip with his girlfriend Janet. In part 4, chapter 4, Matt literally goes into nature to experience its greatness and incites "the landscape made him happy. It was a challenge to his lifelong citiness" (UW 449). They are driving in a "brimful" jeep, "a consumer cartoon bulging with equipment, clothing, luggage, and books" (UW 447). In trying to meet some sublime notion in nature, to escape the interconnectedness, Matt and his girlfriend bring the comforts of the consumer ideology with them. However, his escape is futile. The deeper they go into nature, the more he realizes that human presence has left everything touched. Seeing a bunker that has probably been used to observe the atomic bomb tests, he says, "I think we've seen everything there is to see ... I don't need to see the bighorns" (UW 461). They finally decide to reside in the bunker, where Matt realizes that he cannot sleep. Watching the sunset, he conveys the modern idea of the sublime in relation to the old conception of awe in nature.

The fragments of military presence left behind in the desert remind Matt of the bomb, of systems and technology, of his time spent in Vietnam, and ultimately refers to the change in the human relationship to the sublimity of nature. Tabbi writes that "the machine itself, emerges as a metaphor, a figure representing forces and systems that the human mind and imagination cannot hope to master or comprehend, but for which we are nonetheless responsible" (Tabbi 20). The bomb is the ultimate machine that can master man, and Matt reflects that "All technology refers to the bomb" (UW 467). In his translucent reflections, he juxtaposes the sublimity of the bomb to that of an old religious nation.

How can you know if the image existed before the bomb was invented? There may have been an underworld of images known only to tribal priests, mediums between visible reality and the spirit world, and they popped mushrooms and saw a fiery cloud that predated the image on the U.S. Army training film. (UW 466)

The "spirit world," the unattainable and mysterious, the explanation for the feeling of sublimity, has entered the world through the bomb. The "fiery cloud" that the "tribal priests" once saw when trying to find heightened states of being reduced to the image on the "U.S. Army training film." The chapter ends with a repetitive notion that hammers the idea of man's new relationship with nature. It begs the question of whether we, with the technology of the bomb, have achieved mastery of sublimity itself. Matt and Janet watch a pair of jet planes come roaring out of the desert, and when silence hits, "they needed a moment to collect themselves, speechless in the wake of a power and thrust snatched from nature's own greatness, and how men bend heaven to their methods" (UW 468).

This chapter uncovered the two "draped" mirrors of DeLillo's novel that works as a reflection of the novel itself. The systems novel uses internal frames that reorient the readers toward the systemic conventions of the novel to mimic the way a natural system has whole within wholes nature. *Underworld* features multiple such frames, but this chapter focused primarily on the two that appear in its middle section. Through Klara Sax, an artist figure, the reader was reoriented to the novel's thematic brother part, a fictional film by the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein named "*Unterwelt*." The film was revealed to be a *mise en abyme* of the novel that reflected the conventions of juxtapositions of scenic and thematic contradictions pointing to the way the reader should see the novel. The other mirror was through the systems analyst Matt Shay who works in an underground military facility called "the pocket." This mirror enabled the reader to understand the society and technological

context within which the novel's characters act, suggesting that the sublime previously associated with nature has been replaced with technology.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Fusion of Systems: “Das Kapital”

Chapter five attempts to use the idea of contradictory interpretation that DeLillo presents through the novel’s self-reflexive frames in a close reading of the novel’s epilogue “Das Kapital”. Through these frames it become apparent that DeLillo provide an immanent critique of the neoliberal economy that builds on the theories of Karl Marx. Part 5.2.1 investigates the contradictions presented in the first part of the epilogue as an attempt to show DeLillo’s alternative view on the neoliberalist economy. Part 5.2.2 frames the second part of the epilogue within the circulatory relationship of Nick’s ecosystem. Part 5.3 attempts to use the promise of emancipation that immanent critique presents to open the interpretation of the epilogues last sections.

### 5.1 Introduction: Close reading of “Das Kapital”

In cyberspace Sister Edgar finally meets the other Edgar of the novel. Everything fuses together, even their contradictions and difference. A fusion of church and state. “Atoms forcibly combined ... A click, a hit and Sister joins the other Edgar. A fellow celibate and more or less kindred spirit but her biological opposite, her male half, dead these many years” (UW 826). The sentences use the concepts from physics, of fusion from the atomic process of merging one with the other and connecting multiple deep themes about American society. Sister Edgar, a nun, FBI director J. Edgar a man of the state and the epitome of containment. Not only the containment through J. Edgar's actions in American society but his containment of his own sexual urges. They are intertwined in the internet. I think DeLillo achieves mastery because he is able to represent these themes without being cheesy. Even when writing this thesis in an age where the internet has been a part of our life for thirty years, and my education literally embedded with digital lectures replacing the physical realm, DeLillo's packed sentences still hold some power.

The novel's epilogue, "Das Kapital," uses systems language to depict the slow process of fusion of man’s ecosystem with the global technologies, which suggests DeLillo's immanent critique of the globalization of capitalism. Ultimately, the epilogue shows the systems novel's capability to weave complex theories into fiction. "Das Kapital" is where all of *Underworld's* systems overlap, and "everything connects." Immanent critique derives from critical theory by Hegel, Marx, and Adorno and is a way of critiquing a whole from within by looking at its contradictions. As stated by David Macey in *The Penguin dictionary of critical theory* (2001), "an immanent critique uses a theory's internal contradictions to criticize it in its



own terms” (76). In many ways, this is what a systems novel can depict: critique the system from within the system. *Underworld's* epilogue takes its name from Karl Marx's critical analysis of the capitalist system. Marx ultimately criticizes the separation of the individual from the powers of capital that creates the work that the individual must do. As a result of this, the individual becomes a commodity, alienated from his source of labor. As Karl Marx's giant theorization divides into three parts, analyzing "1. The Process of Production of Capital," "2. The Process of Circulation of Capital," and "3. The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole" (Leitch et al. 653), DeLillo's final chapter does a similar segmentation. The opening is about the creation of capital in a new economic market, the second part of Nick's longing for his past in a circulatory relationship with his environment, and finally, the fusion of the whole into the network. By investigating the contradictions represented in the chapter by DeLillo, as he frames in “*Unterwelt*”, one sees how it captures the immanent critique of the new global economy.

## **5.2 The Contradictions in the Systems**

### **5.2.1 “Production of Capital”**

In “*Das Kapital*,” DeLillo explores the fusing of the world markets into a new global system. That global system can be defined as neoliberalism. From *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) by David Harvey, we understand neoliberalism as how “human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade.” (1775). The opening passage of “*Das Kapital*” states that:

Capital burns off the nuances in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transnational media, the attenuating influence of money that's electronic and sex that's cyberspaced, untouched money and computer-safe sex, the convergence of consumer desire - not that people want the same things, necessarily, but they want the same range of choices (*UW* 785)

The passage fuses culture, investment, and markets into one system to instill the ultimate capitalist idea, freedom of choice. Neoliberalism fits the world's economic relations into one master system. “*Das Kapital*” provide an immanent critique of the new world system, as DeLillo picks it apart, looks at neoliberalism's very definition, and writes the emerging systems that will come out of it. The phrase “money that's electronic” seems almost chilling in the age of cryptocurrency. The network has opened the doors to intimate human desires, such

as "computer-safe sex" or porn. In the end, the new world system "shoots across horizons at the speed of light, making for a certain furtive sameness, a planning away of particulars that affects everything from architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream" (UW 786). In a way, DeLillo is describing the way economic powers inevitably impact the very bedrock of man's ecosystem. If Harvey's definition argues that neoliberalism is the understanding of what is best for the human race, then DeLillo points at its dangers. The human ecosystem is only perceived through our senses, but DeLillo warns the reader that in the end, it will affect our basic needs, our "leisure time," and the way we "eat and sleep and dream," our very consciousness.

The epilogue represents the ideas of entrepreneurial freedom and global markets through Nick and Brian Gassic flying to the Kazakh desert to meet the former Soviet Viktor Maltsev, now turned CEO of "Tchaika," who "sell nuclear explosions for ready cash" (UW 788) to witness a new way of destroying the leftover nuclear waste from the Cold War period through underground nuclear detonation for capital gain. Atomic fusion is quite literally represented in the pages that try to fuse the systems of *Underworld*, as reflected by Viktor, that says, "The fusion of two streams of history, weapons and waste" (UW 791). In this fusion, Nick recognizes a pattern of "displacement" (UW 786), which has redefined the spaces he now threads in. A club amid a "new office tower, filled with brokerage houses, software firms, import companies and foreign banks." And, of course, the "professional Lenin look-alike" (UW 786). Again, it is the way DeLillo deliberately pokes at capitalism through Nick's observations, not by taking a specific position but by seeming rather neutral. Because by sitting in a noisy club watching college boys "with fuzz heads and fatigue pants and bomb packs strapped to their bare chests" (UW 786), things do not seem to add up for Nick. It implores a sense of urgency that things changed too fast, a contradiction where the symmetry, structure, and order in the "banks" and "brokerage houses" are disrupted by the club's noise and radical characters. Of course, both of these business models are allowed to exist within the same free market. However, being radically different from one another. Nick mediates the adaptations of the free market in the former Soviet Union. These adaptations have made Lenin become replaced by an impersonator, the joke metaphor on the human as a commodity, in the replicating system of consumer behavior, where everything is a response to the market.

Another emerging contradiction in "Das Kapital" is that Nick sees Viktor Maltsev as a gangster figure. Through the systems approach, one can see how DeLillo uses Nick in the neoliberalist system to instill in the reader of the real-world consequences that this world

system equates. David Harvey writes on neoliberalism that as the worker becomes a commodity, he will turn to alternative social forms to create meaning.

Neoliberalization has transformed the positionality of labour ... by emphasizing that labour is a commodity like any other. Stripped of the protective cover of lively democratic institutions and threatened with all manner of social dislocations, a disposable workforce inevitably turns to other institutional forms through which to construct social solidarities and express a collective will. Everything from gangs and criminal cartels, narco-trafficking networks, mini-mafias ... to secular cults and religious sects proliferate. (Harvey 1779)

The alternative social relations and institutions are of profound interest in DeLillo's fiction in general. As written in chapter 2, Nick repeatedly turns to the mobster and conspiracy theory for alternative solutions in contemplating his ecosystem. When Nick and Brian are on a mission to make transactions in the neoliberalist economy where garbage has become a commodity, there seems to be a notion of invite-only and sect tendencies in the meetings. First Nick describes Viktor:

I begin to see him as a very improbable man, lean and dark with gray dyed out of his hair and a seeming need to look half gangsterish in that long slick coat. At a glance he belongs to these wild privatized times, to the marathon of danced-out plots. The get-rich-quick plot. The plot of members-only and crush-the-weak. Raw capital spewing out. The extortion-and-murder plot. But there are ironies and hesitations in Viktor's address to the moment. (*UW* 802)

Again, it shows DeLillo's attention to juxtaposing and interconnecting systems. Like the mobster in relation to waste, two things that must be contained and kept away from the public eye, hidden away, yet always there as a nuance to the systems. Nick knows that Viktor is not a criminal, yet he narrates him to be "gangsterish." In a world where everything has turned into a commodity, the only mode of survival is to toughen up and be a mobster to the system. The text does not state that the corrupted underworld wins in the neoliberal world but that the gangster tactics of Nick's CEO are the only means to get an advantage. The neoliberalist system is the "wild privatized times" where those who belong are part of a particular breed of humans willing to go through the gangster "plots" that contradict legitimacy and order. In many ways, it shows Harvey's position on how easily the individual will turn to alternative

illegitimate systems to make money. Even in Nick's legitimate corporate transactions, the mannerism of the mobster is present.

The sect and "member-only" (*UW 802*) tendencies of Nick's narration displace the idea of a wholly open market. When entering the bunker complex where they are going to watch the nuclear detonation, Nick observes "many chesty bureaucrats with interchangeable heads ... industrialists" and "a man and woman from the Bundesbank" (*UW 794*). The event is not some spectacle for anyone to see. There is an insinuation of invite-only. Again there is a literal allusion to fusion, as the top members of the global market are crammed into the confined space of the bunker—a closed hole in the earth where transactions can happen in secrecy. As the secrets of Brian's infidelity with Nick's wife Marian are brought to the surface, the ground rumble under their feet, "some far-off shift or heave that is also a local sensation, a hollow body sound" (DeLillo, *UW 798*). What they came for ends in an anticlimax, a contradiction to what nuclear detonation is perceived to be. As the bombs of the past are concealed in the earth, Nick's secrets are heaved to the surface, and the secrecy of transactions remains in the bunker. The new global economy happens in a confined space that leaves no trace, "no ascending cloudmass" (*UW 799*).

### 5.2.2 "Circulation of Capital"

Where the opening reflects on the new forms of capital in the 90s, the second part of "Das Kapital" instills a sense of order in Nick's material circulation of money and goods juxtaposed to his longing for a past of "disorder" (*UW 810*). There are multiple references to Nick organizing and making transactions. His family is organizing "waste according to the guidelines," "bulding new bookshelves," and "buying new carpets to set on top of the old ones" (*UW 803*). The Shay's are participating in the commodity circus. Nick feels an increased alienation from the rare objects he owns as he "look at the things we own and feel the odd mortality that clings to every object. The finer and rarer the object, the more lonely it makes me feel" (*UW 804*). Shay's actions of commodity behavior have a circulatory relationship because they buy, use, and recycle. The garbage they produce has become a commodity in itself, traded in "the commodity pits in Chicago" (*UW 804*). DeLillo's representation of Nick within an ecosystem where there is no distinction between waste and objects of value becomes his immanent critique, suggesting an infinite, flat, and inescapable loop.

The position of a cultural sameness produced by the deregulated market is shared by Mark Osteen's writing on DeLillo's "Das Kapital" in "Containment and Counterhistory in

*Underworld*” that with this change in the global market, the subsumption of capitalism, the desires of governments have been "clarified.» Here he refers to the deregulation of the market, which means that corporations, the flow of capital, and banks were under less control by the state. Adding to the consequences of deregulation, Osteen marks that "capital permits the illusion of individual preference" in contrast to the "clear" "Cold War ideologies of massive conformity" that came from the fears of the superpower's weapons (243–44).

Therefore, when Nick looks at the rare objects he owns, he feels alienated. The global free market system has instilled the idea that he needs these objects in his household, not because he needs them but because the market is regulating his "individual preference" (Osteen 243). The contradiction in Nick's being supports the alienation effect. Amidst the symmetry, organization, and commodity circulation, he says, "I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling the quick of my skin, heedless and real" (*UW* 810). Nick's longing is quite ironic because it references a time when the state had much more control over its citizens. However, the cultural flatness Nick experiences in the supposedly free-market strangle his sense of self implying that the commodification of the world has removed the intrinsic value of things. The materialistic culture is ultimately empty. The shift in focus from Nick's global transactions to his quotidian life ultimately exemplifies the systems novel capability to fictionalize theory and scale it from a global perspective and illustrate its effects on the different spheres/systems that Nick circulates.

### **5.3 Emancipation**

Marx's critique of capitalism comes from the belief that discovering the system's contradictions will emancipate, in other words free, the proletariat from their chains of being commodities. Robert J. Antonio reasons in "Immanent Critique as the Core of Critical Theory" that "Emancipation originates as a battle against domination in the natural sphere, but is later extended to society in reaction to human exploitation" (Antonio 344). If DeLillo's "Das Kapital" acts as an immanent critique of capitalism, how can the crowds transcend and emancipate from the domination materialized in Nick's longings?

The last part of "Das Kapital" revolves around a form of emancipation, as the last word of the novel is a single "Peace." (*UW* 827). The part starts by stating a single webpage, the first sign of the chapter's embeddedness into a network technology "<http://blk.www/dd.com/miraculum>" (*UW* 810). Sister Edgar and the nuns are looking for a

missing girl named Esmeralda. In their search, they meet with the master graffiti artist Ismael Munoz and his crew in "a slice of the Bronx called the Wall" (UW 810). The setting is one of "endless distress" (UW 811), as the poverty of the area reflects the harshness of American freedom. The nuns are usually in the area to help with delivering food to the "asthmatic children and sickle-cell adults"(UW 811). They wonder if they have actually made any difference to the area because its decay seems worse than when they first started. To Edgar's surprise, there is a TV present at the Wall. A bicycle powers its electrical unit. Exemplifying a fusion of man, media, and machine as one unit. The nuns learn that Esmeralda has been raped and murdered. With Ismael and his crew, the nuns watch the news on the bicycle TV depicting the "CNN-tragic life and death of homeless child" (UW 816). Crowds gather in the neighborhood because of Esmeralda's murder, "drawn by the word of one or two" (UW 818), quickly expanding to the hundreds. The crowds gather under a billboard of an orange juice ad, and suddenly, illuminated by the headlights of an oncoming train, the face of Esmeralda appears on the billboard. The crowd gasps, a gasp, "a sob, a godsbreath passing through the crowd" (UW 821). When the spectacle of the image calms down, the text is split by a "Keystroke" (UW 824), and Sister Edgar dies and becomes a part of cyberspace. There is a fusion with another Edgar from the novel in the network. Namely, the FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover. Finally, emancipation and "Peace." (UW 827)

"Was this a genuine spiritual manifestation?" (Osteen 258) asks Mark Osteen. His answer, the novel "In its embrace of the human yearning for transcendence and community ... *Underworld* reveals an author cautiously uncovering a belief in renewal" (Osteen 259). While Sister Edgar dies peacefully in her bed, clutching the "image" of Esmeralda "tight in her mind" (UW 824), the last part of "Das Kapital" illustrates DeLillo's persistence with picking apart the systems. Where we get the apparent religious experience through Sister Edgar, DeLillo effortlessly intertwines technology, fusion, media, and capitalism into the text. For example, the bicycle TV showing the news of Esmeraldas's death is a funny metaphor for the biological system in a slave relationship with the technological media system. Alternatively, in the wake of the vast crowds gathering under the billboard, "vendors move along the lines of stalled traffic selling flowers, soft drinks, and live kittens. They sell laminated images of Esmeralda printed on prayer cards." (UW 823). Even in an apparent miracle, the forces of the open market sneak in to gain capital. The reader knows that the graffiti artist Ismael has painted the face on the billboard, yet there is no simple answer to why it gathers such a massive crowd. Spiritual manifestation or not, I agree with Osteen's

position that there is a belief in renewal from the text. Not from the religious experience of the characters but from DeLillo's representation of the fact that art, the painted image, can give that experience juxtaposed with Nick's longing for the past.

In the final network embeddedness, the text calls out in a second-person narration to the reader. As if "you" are browsing a computer yourself, connected to the event unfolding in the novel. Like the prologue, which declares, "he speaks in your voice American" (*UW* 1), the epilogue speaks directly to the reader.

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

DeLillo reimagines the space where the reader and fiction culminate. In cyberspace, there is not only a fusion of atomic waste and historical forces. There is also a fusion between the reader and the novel. The reader, however, cannot exert any force on cyberspaced Sister Edgar, but it frames the way fiction leads to emancipation. To understand that you, the reader, are an integral part of an ecosystem where the novel you are reading exists. The formal element acts as a frame to reorient the reader to into systemic terms, and DeLillo even uses computer language to emphasize this point. The reader is part of a real ecosystem that in the late 90s saw the emergence of the world wide web. *Underworld* provides a form of resistance to the very framework of cultural, historical, and technological embeddedness into the network.

The last part of "Das Kapital" offers brief emancipation for the crowds visiting the miracle of the billboard. However, DeLillo juxtaposes this human tendency to gravitate toward mystery and miracles against the capitalist forces, against advertisements and people that would like to make fast money on large human gatherings, suggesting its permeation into all human spheres. However, one character, Sister Edgar, offers the focalization in a cyberspaced reality in which its last words say "Peace." In classic DeLillo fashion, the offering of emancipation through the internet is ambiguous. There ultimately is no answer, and maybe he is alluding to the end of the Cold War and the promise that the world wide web stood for. But the previous paragraph in the chapter promises that "the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world" (*UW* 827). Maybe DeLillo offers a hope that the textual medium of fiction will still be relevant in the internet age.

## Conclusion

This master's thesis set out to analyze Don DeLillo's *Underworld* as a systems novel, based on the critical literature by literary scholar Tom LeClair who has written two books on the subject. The first, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, focuses on DeLillo's fiction as a whole to conclude that his persistent representation of human's systems, recycling, and looping of similar themes throughout his oeuvre made it possible to call him a systems novelist. The other book, *The Art of Excess: Mastery in contemporary American fiction*, focuses on singular and massive novels that were written around the time of DeLillo's fiction, such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, which were stand-alone systems novels capable of being analyzed as stand-alone systems. LeClair's books were written before DeLillo publicized his own massive and counter-historical narrative of *Underworld*. This thesis has tried to add *Underworld* to the roster as a stand-alone systems novel, thus expanding LeClair's study.

Chapter one defines what the systems novel is and briefly summarizes *Underworld* in general terms. However, LeClair's definition of a systems novel is based on a structuralist view where he portrays a set of similar features from the novels he has analyzed. Ultimately, these types of novels respond to the paradigm shift in the post-industrial world that regards the world as a whole comprised of a multiplicity of sub-systems. These sub-systems include social systems, institutions, and even cultural practices. The systems novelist tries to respond to the question: how do we convey the complexity of the world into fiction? In a world with a globalized economy, all types of communication loops permeate the natural spheres, which include the mass-media and the internet. Where the boundaries of technology have started to fade into all areas of life, and the simple taxonomy of causality must be considered through a multitude of steps to determine a consequence. The systems novel ultimately draws on knowledge from academic and professional fields to represent the wholeness of vast cultures. In a systems novel, the author draws on experience from philosophy, physics, mathematics, ecology, art forms, history, counter-history, and all the other themes that regular fiction tries to convey. The systems novel mostly stays within a realistic frame. However, the usual story arc of rising and sinking action from a climax to an inevitable conclusion is reduced to characters reacting to their ecosystem. Reading a systems novel should be like reading a society, both from the inside and the outside of the networks of society. They are anthropological in scope and critical in their portrayals of the world. There is often a magnitude of character where determining a protagonist can be more difficult. The structures



of a systems novel often seem to replicate structures imitated from natural systems, fractals, loops, and discontinuity. The novelist will explore metafictional frames that imitate forms from the culture it portrays to encapsulate the reader in the systems of the novel. The system approach enables the reader to see the novel as a system in and of itself, a system of information that portrays the systems that make up the world.

Chapter two generally captures how *Underworld* can be considered a systems novel. How its counter-historical narrative, fragmented chronology, extensive metafictional frames, and investigation of the alternative American systems that made up the Cold War era. Ranging from politics, baseball, criminal networks, art underworlds, technology, media, and racial issues to a nun enmeshed with the internet. The novel is what one would call extensive and complex. Yet it is realistic and procures deep human behaviors like sex, infidelity, narcotics, suppressed emotions, hope, and love. Through LeClair's taxonomy from both of his books, I conclude that *Underworld* can be read as a systems novel and, therefore, can analyze it through the methodology that the systems approach entails.

The methodology of analyzing a systems novel boils into one question. What kind of system is this? In LeClairian fashion, the chapter concluded that based on the way the novel is structured that the narrative itself forms a temporal loop, a fixed object that stays in time. It also aestheticizes a network form to resemble the increasing embeddedness of American consciousness into technologies. While these are the large systems that make up the novel's whole, there is a multitude of represented sub-systems in the novel. There are both literal representations and allusions to various systems and institutions. The material networks of the characters, the way these networks connect through various objects and technologies, and how the bomb of the Cold War instilled a sense of collective consciousness in the American people.

Chapter three investigated *Underworld's* representations of criminal networks, specifically through the novel's most prominent character Nick Shay. Through the systems approach, the chapter investigated the way the mobster figure and its allusion play a key role in representing process and multiplicity. Two key factors to figuring the systems of the novel. Building on existing literary criticism on Nick and the mobster figure, the chapter attempted to expand the notions of Nick's individuality to a larger systemic whole. Looking at Nick's ecosystem, the first part of the chapter concludes that the mobster figure symbols a form of survival tactic in the multiple systems of Nick Shay. The last part investigated the larger pieces of dialogue or communications loops that DeLillo presents. Here, the mobster becomes

a noise resembling the conspiracies that circulated in America during the Cold War era. The criminal networks in Nick's life represent noise and as a metaphor for the muddled disruptions that conspiracy entails as a way of making sense of the world.

Chapter four used LeClair's argument that the systems novel incorporates frames that explains the novel and guides the reader. Through this approach, it became apparent that the middle section of this massive work, which is about a fictional film and a systems analyst, functioned as a mirror or *mise en abyme* for the rest of the novel. The argument is that these frames enable the reader to contextualize and analyze the novel properly. The film elicits a dialectic approach to seeing *Underworld*, where the contradictions it presents are integral to uncovering its meanings. The second frame attempts to mediate the more extensive systems the novel's characters participate in. Through this frame of a systems analyst working underneath the ground, it became clear that the novel contemplated the new relation that technology, such as the bomb and its related capitalist forces, instilled a representation of a technological sublime.

Chapter five contextualizes the dialectic approach that the previous chapter uncovers. This means that the novel's epilogue produces an immanent critique of the capitalist economy on a global scale. Associating this system with neoliberalism, the contradictions and the segmentation of the chapter allowed for a reading that followed the same structure as Karl Marx's work of the same name, "Das Kapital." "Das Kapital" is divided into three parts, where the first part of the epilogue looks at the creation of capital, the second at the circulation of capital, and the last part on the human emancipation into a network form. The immanent critique was presented through the contradictions that emerged in the chapter.

The constraints to this thesis come back to the idea that it is a contextualization of LeClair's account of systems theory. Where LeClair can draw from multiple and whole works from academic fields such as philosophy, ecology, and cybernetics, there are limitations to the amount of reading required to enable for such a reading of *Underworld*. However, there is excellent potential in expanding DeLillo's massive novel into a larger theoretical framework. DeLillo's conversations with theory from all fields of culture through fiction are inevitably what makes him such a great systems novelist. I hope that this thesis has translated some of those conversations between theory and fiction. Because the contextualization that fiction provides for the abstractions is what the systems approach entails. It enables the reader to think critically about the systems that make the novel and the systems that make the world. *Underworld* ultimately enables the reader to think about how a system can have

unintended consequences along a line of causations. The consequences can be seen from Nick's imaginary perpetuation through his adult life and into his networks to the military-industrial complex's consequences in all spheres of American life and how art can be delightful and provide resistance to the monotone and flat experience that the neoliberalist and commodity economy has made the world become.

## Bibliography

- Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 11th edition, Cengage Learning, 2015.
- Antonio, Robert J. "Immanent Critique as the Core of Critical Theory: Its Origins and Developments in Hegel, Marx and Contemporary Thought." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 32, no. 3, Sept. 1981, p. 330. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.2307/589281>.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Behar, Richard. "Talk about Tough Competition: How Bill Ruckelshaus Is Taking on the New York Mob." *Fortune*, vol. 133, no. 1, 1996, p. 90.
- Bertalanffy, Ludwig von. *General Systems Theory: Foundations, Development, Application*. Second Printing, George Braziller, Inc, 1968.
- Briley, Ron. "Sergei Eisenstein: The Artist in Service of the Revolution." *The History Teacher*, vol. 29, no. 4, Aug. 1996, p. 525. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.2307/494802>.
- Callenbach, Ernest. *Ecology: A Pocket Guide*. Rev. ed., 10th anniversary ed, University of California Press, 2008.
- Chenetier, Marc, and Francois Happe. "An Interview with Don DeLillo." *Revue Française d'études Américaines*, no. No. 87, Jan. 2001, pp. 102–11.
- DeLillo, Don. "The Power of History." *The New York Times Books*, 1997, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html>.
- . *Underworld*. First Scribner trade paperback edition 2003, Scribner, 1997.
- . *White Noise: Text and Criticism*. Edited by Mark Osteen, Penguin Books, 1998.
- Duvall, John N. *Don DeLillo's Underworld: A Reader's Guide*. Continuum, 2002.

- Eisenstein, Sergei. "Montage of Attractions: For *Enough Stupidity in Every Wiseman*." *The Drama Review*, translated by Daniel Gerould, vol. 18, no. 1, Mar. 1974, pp. 77–85. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144865>.
- Ercolino, Stefano. *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*. Paperback edition, Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Harvey, David. "A Brief History of Neoliberalism." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch et al., Third edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 1774–79.
- Helyer, Ruth. "DeLillo and Masculinity." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 125–36.
- Herren, Graley. *The Self-Reflexive Art of Don DeLillo*. Paperback edition, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.
- Hungerford, Amy. "Experiment and Play in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature." *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Robert S Levine, 9th ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2017, pp. 1081–84.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. 2003. *Open WorldCat*, <http://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=181639>.
- Jagoda, Patrick. "Introduction: Network Aesthetics." *Network Aesthetics*, University of Chicago Press, 2016, pp. 1–39.
- Knight, Peter. "Everything Is Connected: Underworld's Secret History of Paranoia." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1999, pp. 811–36. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.1999.0052>.
- LeClair, Tom. "An Underhistory of Mid-Century America." *The Atlantic*, 1 Oct. 1997, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1997/10/an-underhistory-of-mid-century-america/376979/>.

- . *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*. University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- . "Preface." *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*, University of Illinois Press, 1989, pp. i–ix.
- Ledbetter, James. "Tracking the Unwarranted Influence." *Unwarranted Influence : Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military-Industrial Complex*, Yale University Press, 2011, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uisbib/detail.action?docID=3420663>.
- Leitch, Vincent B., et al., editors. "Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Third edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 652–78.
- Macey, David. *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Penguin Books, 2001.
- Messenger, Chris. "The Common Languages of Mob Narrative." *The Godfather and American Culture: How the Corleones Became Our Gang*, State University of New York Press, 2002, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.uis.no/lib/uisbib/detail.action?docID=3408096>.
- Morton, Timothy. "The Ecological Thought." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch et al., Third edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 2621–30.
- O'Donnell, Patrick. "Underworld." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 108–21.
- Osteen, Mark. *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- Parrish, Timothy L. "From Hoover's FBI to Eisenstein's Unterwelt: DeLillo Directs the Postmodern Novel." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1999, pp. 696–723. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.1999.0055>.
- Tabbi, Joseph. *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*. Cornell University Press, 1995.

*Underworld*. First Scribner trade paperback edition 2003, Scribner, 1997.

Wade, Peter. "Michael Cohen: 'Trump Was a Mobster, Plain and Simple.'" *Rolling Stone*, 7 Sept. 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/michael-cohen-trump-was-a-mobster-1056098/>.