Postmodernity in Don DeLillo’s
*White Noise, Underworld, and Cosmopolis.*

Student: Barbara Kraf
Student number: 2054124
Lecturer: Dr Visser
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Introduction

Contemporary society and its obsession with consumption, possession, and the individual rather than the collective has by theorists and critics such as Baudrillard, Bauman, and Lyotard been defined as postmodern. Pertaining to all aspects of society, such as politics, economy, art, and culture, the concepts of postmodernism have taken on behemoth like proportions since they first emerged as a theory in the late twentieth century. It is thus important to point out and clarify the aspects that are used here.

Postmodernity has by Habib been defined as the “[...] latest phase in the broad evolution of capitalist economics and culture [...]” (113). Postmodernism, or postmodern theory, is the theory which is used to interpret the world as it developed through postmodernity. Referring to the period after modernism it is still not clear entirely what the boundaries of this period are, or when exactly it began, but it focusses on the latter part of the twentieth century.

Jean Baudrillard’s work on postmodernism has mainly been concerned with the fading reality principle and the emergence of the hyperreal. Reality in Baudrillard’s sense relates to truth and the opposite of illusion, while the real refers to the personal experience and individual sense of self. Being the opposite of the imagined, the real deals with what an individual experiences as reality in the narrow context of their lives, rather than the broader context of society or existence. Baudrillard states that because images and representations of reality are omnipresent in postmodern society, the distinction between reality and illusion is lost. He suggests that there are “[...] [four] successive phases of the image” (6) through which the development of the hyperreal occurs. In first phase, the image is a reflection of reality: a “good appearance” (6). In the second phase, the image masks reality, obscuring it from view. The third phase masks the absence of reality with the image
now playing at being a reflection of reality. In the fourth and final phase, the image no longer has any connection to reality at all: it has become the hyperreal. While this replacement of reality by simulacra, namely images and models of reality, is Baudrillard’s main concern, Barry rightly points out that careful consideration of its implications is needed with regards to dismissing the image as nothing but a simulation. He notes that “in this extreme Baudrillardian form, the ‘loss of the real’ may seem to legitimise a callous indifference to suffering” (Barry 86), since there is no need to acknowledge what is observed as real. He uses the Holocaust as a grim example to illustrate how something might be interpreted as having not really happened since the information of its occurrence stems from images, not first-hand experience. This slippery slope indicates that while Baudrillard’s work on the fading of reality and the real provides a very useful and interesting take on postmodernism in society, careful consideration is needed before a truth is dismissed solely because of its foundations in representation.

While Jean-François Lyotard also wrote about the concept of reality, in particular the interpretation of what is real from different points of view, his concern with regard to postmodernity was of a wider scope. The individualization of society under the influence of postmodernism is described by Lyotard by means of the lacking need for “[...] grand narratives [...]” (83). These grand narratives are totalizing theories which were previously valued by society as universal truths, such as the view of history “as a steady progress towards civilization or moral well-being” (Williams 33). Opposing these totalizing, conformist theories, Lyotard emphasises the diversity and difference in society. As a result, rather than a universal truth or reality provided by the grand narrative, postmodern society consists of multiple interpretations of reality and the real, may it be on the level of the individual, politics, or economics. It is important to note here that in the context of Lyotard, the term
politics does not refer to government, but rather to “the wide sense of reflection on acts designated to change society or to change specific elements in society” (Williams 7). This diversity combined with capitalism results in a market system fully focussed on consumer desires and individual needs. Another major aspect of Lyotard’s writings which is of importance here, draws on Kant’s notion of the sublime. The sublime as according to Kant involves a negative pleasure caused by the imagination’s inability to comprehend the image presented to full understanding. The appreciation in the form of pleasure and simultaneous dread in the form of incomprehensibility is what is defined as the sublime. As such it can be applied to art as well as nature, according to Lyotard, as art “withdraws from the real and attempts to present, to make visible, that the unpresentable exists” (Habib 125), much like the natural sublime raises awareness of the imagination’s limitations. Lyotard’s ideas of the sublime and of diversity and difference as opposed to mass-conformism and the collective are of importance in this essay.

Where Lyotard already declared the individual’s departure from security in the form of grand narratives, Zygmunt Bauman notes that “the postmodern world is bracing itself for life under a condition of uncertainty which is permanent and irreducible” (21). This permanent state of uncertainty results in a society saturated with anxiety, its people constantly looking for “a rightful and secure position in society” (26). Bauman points to the current lack of clear-cut divisions in the world-order, as opposed to for example the simple East vs. West situation, and universal deregulation, or “the unbound freedom granted to capital and finance at the expense of all other freedoms” (22), among the reasons for this development. The lack of clear political power blocks causes insecurity with regard to place, while the prioritising of the free market economy results in the abolishment of the welfare state and the disappearance of “socially woven and societally maintained safety nets” (23). It is
clear that capitalism and free market economy have facilitated the change of society to its contemporary, consumption driven form. Pointing to increasing polarization between groups of people and the growing correlation between happiness and consumption, Bauman, as opposed to Baudrillard and Lyotard, addresses application and implications of theory, rather than theory itself. This application and the way in which postmodernity manifests itself in society and its people is very important in the context of this work.

This essay examines the representation of postmodern society in literature and its connection to contemporary society. By analysing the themes of the media, waste and consumption, I will demonstrate the progression of postmodernity over time in three works of fiction by Don DeLillo, and draw parallels between the fictional and real contemporary society. I chose the themes of the media, waste and consumption as they are directly related to postmodernism and thus provide straight insights into the consequences of postmodernity in society and its inhabitants. The media by definition project images and representations instead of reality, consumption is the power that drives contemporary society and capitalist economy, and waste in all shapes and sizes is the inevitable consequence of this consumer society. The three novels I have selected are *White Noise*, *Underworld*, and *Cosmopolis*, published in 1985, 1997, and 2003 respectively.

Don DeLillo is an American author who has been celebrated by critics for his ability to describe contemporary society and its struggles. In the words of Molesworth: “[...] no other contemporary novelist could be said to outstrip DeLillo in his ability to depict that larger social environment we blandly call everyday life” (143). Since he became a full-time writer in the nineteen sixties he has published sixteen novels, eight (screen)plays, and numerous short stories and essays. His fiction has been awarded the American Book Award (*White Noise*, 1985), and the PEN/Faulkner
Award (Mao II, 1991) among others, and his 1997 novel Underworld was the runner-up in the New York Times’ ‘Best Work of American Fiction of the Last 25 Years’ competition. His past works have included subjects such as the Kennedy assassination (Libra, 1988), foreign and domestic terrorism (Falling Man, 2007 and Players, 1977 respectively), and isolation (Great Jones Street, 1973). The three novels I chose to work with spread over three decades of his career, namely the eighties, nineties, and zeroes.

White Noise is a first person narrative from the perspective of Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies at the local college of his hometown of Blacksmith. His family consists of himself, his wife Babette, and their four children Wilder, Heinrich, Steffi and Denise, who have all resulted from previous marriages. Central in the novel are the setting of the quiet town of Blacksmith and the focus on family life. Both of these are disrupted directly through an ecological disaster called the Toxic Airborne Event, and indirectly through the fear of death and Jack and Babette’s involvement with its supposed cure, Dylar. Considering both Baudrillard’s notion of simulacrum, Lyotard’s emphasis on the sublime, and Bauman’s idea of fear as a reflection of society itself, White Noise is very suitable for the purposes of this essay, as I will demonstrate.

Underworld relates the lives of a number of interrelated characters over the course of decades, spanning from the late fifties to the early nineteen-nineties. With Nick Shay as the main protagonist, the novel’s changing setting shows the manner in which he is shaped as a person and how both himself and the people (in)directly connected to him are shaped by time and changing society. I selected Underworld as it captures the changes taking place in society over time, as well as the visible consequences of postmodernity on this society and its people.
"Cosmopolis" accounts one day in the life of a young billionaire named Eric Packer who spends it almost entirely in his stretch limousine on his way to get a haircut. His view of society and the world as a whole both demonstrate the extreme effects postmodernity can have on people, and exemplify Baudrillard’s notion of the hyperreal.

The text is divided into two major chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter deals with the media, the manner in which it creates and validates reality, and how this relates to Baudrillard’s notion of fading reality. The second chapter is devoted to the themes of waste and consumption. The two are discussed simultaneously because their interdependence and cause and effect relationship are the main focus. Key elements here are waste as a result and by-product of consumption, the boundaries of what constitutes waste and the depiction of people as rejects and trash. The chapters contain examples from the novels and explanations as to how these are connected to postmodernism and postmodernity. Where appropriate, parallels between real contemporary society and Don DeLillo’s fictional ones are drawn, leading up to the conclusion with regard to the progression and advancement of postmodernity in both worlds.
1. The Media

The manner in, and extent to, which the media influence contemporary society is an important aspect of postmodernism. Not in the least because it directly relates to Baudrillard’s notion of the fading of reality and its replacement by images and simulacra. The visibility of this process in DeLillo’s novels is the focus of this chapter as through it the existence of Baudrillard’s phases is demonstrated and the consequences of fading reality are shown.

America is the setting for each of the novels and thus American society is the focus of this essay, unless otherwise indicated. Theorist of communications James Carey has stated that “modern communications have drastically altered the ordinary terms of experience and consciousness, the ordinary structures of interest and feeling, the normal sense of being alive, of having a social relation” (2). What this statement indicates foremost is the total effect modern communication has on people in society, influencing every aspect of life. Although this pertains to all types and forms of communication, it is undeniable that the media make up a great, if not the greatest, part of it. This power of being able to influence what is considered normal by society, what its inhabitants should feel, what they should be interested in, and how life should be experienced by them, is strong on its own, but even more so when combined with Baudrillard’s notion of images and simulacra.

Postmodernity has caused people to no longer be able to make the distinction between reality and representation. As a result, the representations seen on TV or read about in the paper are valued as truth. With the media’s omnipresence in society, their role shifts from providing people with information, phase one on Baudrillard’s scale, to providing them with reality, phase four. On that same token people turn to the media in order to find acknowledgement for the real as experienced by them. This results in a situation in which the media both project
reality as it should be accepted by postmodern society, and appoint importance and truth value to the real as experienced by the people. Using examples from *White Noise*, *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*, I demonstrate this situation in the societies depicted by DeLillo, and discuss the implications.

Reality is not acknowledged as such unless it is validated by the media. The validation of reality by the media plays a large role in all three of the novels. The characters’ need for confirmation that what it is they are experiencing as the real is, in fact, real, is recurring, but it takes different forms.

Baudrillard’s phases of the image can be seen in Jack Gladney’s supposed death sentence. A large part of the plot of *White Noise* deals with the ecological disaster called the Toxic Airborne Event which takes place in the Gladney family’s hometown of Blacksmith. The Event constitutes a chemical spill which results in the release of a large cloud of a toxic chemical called Nyodyne Derivative, or Nyodyne D. The town is subsequently evacuated by an organization called SIMUVAC and Jack Gladney and his family are directed to a nearby refugee camp for the time being. On their way to the camp, Jack is exposed to the substance when he stops at a gas station to refill the car. At the refugee center, Jack talks to a SIMUVAC employee in order to find out what damage his being outside during the Toxic Airborne Event has done to his health. He is confronted with computer generated data appearing on a screen in front of him. Gathering from the information that his exposure means that he is going to die, Jack remarks that “it is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself” (*White Noise* 165). Thus Jack only starts to understand the severity of the Toxic Airborne Event after he has seen his data on a screen. He needs a medium to establish the reality of the situation. With regards to death, Hardin describes this notion as follows: “The multiplicity of images of death in the media creates a scenario
in which death does not exist unless it appears on television; essentially, the only ‘real
death” is that which is televised” (22). What Hardin essentially indicates is that the
massive exposure to images and simulations of death has rendered people unable to
identify the real with regard to their mortality and experience. In the terms of
Baudrillard, this refers to the second phase of the image: the masking of reality.
Through the constant projection of simulated death, the media have successfully
obscured the reality of death from view, leading to a need for verification in order to
accept its existence.

The third phase, the masking of the absence of reality, takes place through
Jack’s interpretation of the situation: he does not realize that his death sentence is
not real. What both the SIMUVAC employee, and his doctors at a later point in time,
essentially tell Jack is that he will sooner or later die, just like every human being. For
all their technology they are unable to be more specific than that he will die at some
point in the future. When Jack breaks this news to his wife Babette he explains: “I’m
tentatively scheduled to die. It won’t happen tomorrow or the next day. But it is in the
works” (White Noise, 232). This statement is true for everyone alive, regardless of
their having been exposed to a chemical substance, and shows that the image has
successfully tricked Jack into thinking that his death sentence is real. Furthermore,
the possibility of him dying the next day or even that same night is not considered by
Jack to be real, indicating he is solely and only focused on the image rather than
reality.

Death is interpreted by Jack as a condition which leads to the attempted
separation between the condition and the person. Asked if he does not feel that death
is a part of life and that life would be incomplete without it, Jack tellingly replies that
“death is what makes life incomplete” (327). This implies that he would rather live
forever and that he does not see death as a necessary part of life. On the concept of
immortality Bauman notes that death “[...] fills life with meaning, while immortal life, if ever achieved would only bring the death of meaning” (153). From this stance, detaching death from life essentially equals detaching meaning from life. Jack’s assertion that life and death are separate entities cause the illusion that death is something that can be fended off. This idea that the self can be protected from the external threat that is death is expressed by Jack through stating “I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses” (White Noise 165). Jack’s representation of himself as a professor of Hitler studies has been characterized by Martucci as an attempt “[...] to hide from death by creating an image of himself as powerful” (94), and his colleague Murray notes that “Hitler is larger than death, you thought he would protect you” (White Noise 330). In order to live up to the standards of power that Hitler has set, and be protected from death through this power, Jack needs to disguise himself by means of a created identity. It is possible for Jack to do so because in postmodern society “the world construed of durable objects has been replaced with the disposable products designed for immediate obsolescence. In such a world, identities can be adopted and discarded like a change of costume” (Bauman 88). What this means is that Jack’s state of mind is facilitated by consumer society and capitalist economy, and is as such a full result of postmodernity. The confrontation with what he believes to be his death on the computer screen subsequently makes him long for his image in order to counter and fend off the external threat.

The co-dependency between life and death is established through the attempted murder of Willie Mink. The character of Jack’s colleague and friend Murray Siskind is saturated with notions of postmodernism, evident from his obsession with the media, consumerism, and the representation of society and life through these elements, not actual life and society themselves. After Jack confides in Murray about his supposed death sentence, they engage in a long conversation about
death and dying, eventually resulting in Murray saying that “I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers” (White Noise 333). He continues explaining that “in theory, violence is a form of rebirth” (334) and that the killer gains credits by killing, preventing his own death through the act. Inexplicably intertwined with Murray’s fascination with consumerism, he states that the killer “buys time, he buys life” (334). Although Murray insists on multiple occasions that he is merely talking theory, Jack’s idea of death as a condition that can be overcome causes him to plan on applying Murray’s idea. He does so by plotting the murder of Willie Mink, the man with whom his wife Babette has been having an affair. On his failed attempt to kill Mink, Hayles notes that “the act that Jack intended to mark his difference from those who die ends by establishing his connection to mortality” (412). What this means is that while Jack tries to assassinate Mink in order to establish himself as a killer rather than a dier in Murray’s theory, his getting shot by Mink causes him to understand the co-dependency between life and death through the confrontation with the reality of his mortality. Murray’s theory is solely based upon the notion of life and death being separate, independent entities with life represented in the killer and death in the dier. Jack’s confrontation with the real and his mortality leads to him abandoning his plan to kill Mink as he understands that no such separation can be, and that thus Murray’s theory cannot hold up. This leaves Jack with a renewed outlook, enabling him to look past the simulacra and images he has thus far accepted as reality. This new insight is demonstrated in his subsequent encounter with a nun who acknowledges that she does not actually believe in heaven, but only pretends to because “it is our task in the world to believe things that no one else takes seriously” (White Noise, 366). The nuns at the hospital are essentially an embodiment of Baudrillard’s third phase: simulating to be a reflection of a reality which they know does not exist. In the wider scope, Jack’s newly found insight shows that it is possible
for people in a society saturated with postmodern influences and images to see through these and find reality. However, the fact that he has to get shot in order to be able to do so also indicates that this is not easy.

The Toxic Airborne Event exemplifies not only the media’s function of validating reality, but also the polarizing effect of postmodernity. Jack’s initial assumption that the Gladney family will not be affected by the Toxic Airborne Event is based solely upon the image created by the media and his faith in that image. Jack’s statement that “society is set up in such a way that it’s the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters” (White Noise 133) is founded only on what he has seen on TV, and thus on experiencing the representation of disaster, not disaster itself. His statement furthermore implies that the media actively differentiate between classes and broadcast value judgements.

Bauman parallels the deconstruction of the welfare state to the increasing number of people imprisoned in Western society. Referring to this as “the criminalization of poverty” (Bauman 59), his point is simple: with the rise of consumer society and free market economy, the poor and unemployed have become redundant and useless. Being reduced to nothing but a burden on the taxpayer, the poor embody the people of society that are “unfit to put their freedom of choice to good use: people who are, in the last account, unfit to be free” (59). Bauman argues that this development results from the progression of capitalism and consumer driven society and I will not dispute his claim. However, I would like to point out the role of the media with regards to the planting and nurturing of this notion of poverty as an offence through Jack’s reaction to the Toxic Airborne Event. Interpreting the representation of disaster as shown on TV as reality, Jack feels safe in his assumption that he will not be affected by the Toxic Airborne Event because “I’m a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in
one of those TV floods?” (White Noise 133). Implying that the numerous floods he has seen on TV have been orchestrated in order to be televised confirms not only that Jack believes that his status ensures his immunity to disaster, but also that the man-made TV floods affect the poor to provide entertainment for the rich. Since the rich should not provide entertainment for the poor, they are merely a burden to society after all, Jack cannot comprehend how the Toxic Airborne Event could possibly threaten him and his family.

The reality and severity of the Toxic Airborne Event is established by the its representation in the media. Another reason for Jack’s inability to deal with the Toxic Airborne Event as a serious threat is explained as being the result of the “[...] benign label assigned to the hazard” (Martucci 84). What this means is that people depend on the media to inform them of the severity of a situation and to confirm or dismiss the reality of what is right in front of them by providing a representation or image. The most striking and straightforward example of this validation of reality through the media is illustrated in a scene in which Jack’s son Heinrich bases his assessment of the weather on the radio report rather than on looking out the window. Although this astonishes Jack, he does the same thing when it comes to assessing the Toxic Airborne Event, basing his judgement of its severity on what its being called on the radio rather than looking at it. Martucci points out that “Jack seems to believe, as his colleague earlier informs him, that there are only ‘two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set’ (WN, 78), and is convinced that the disasters he sees on TV cannot occur to him in Blacksmith” (85).

The second evacuation affirms the media’s function of determining reality through representation. Upon the arrival in Iron City, one of the refugees brings out a TV set and subsequently starts to speech about the lack of coverage, making statements such as “don’t they know it’s real? Shouldn’t the streets be crawling with
cameramen and soundmen and reporters?” (White Noise 189). The discrepancy between the real as experienced by the refugees and reality as broadcast by the media causes feelings of unease and confusion because it directly confronts the people with the second phase image, the masking of reality, and makes them aware of its existence. On the subject of validation, MacGowan has stated that “such is the intrusion of the media that its presence or absence can dictate the significance of events” (321). This in reference to a scene in which Jack’s daughter Bee states that the people who just barely avoided a catastrophe when their plane appears to crash but does not, went through the experience for nothing as there is no media at the airport to represent what happened. The lack of attention from the media for both the Toxic Airborne Event and the near plane crash indicates the insignificance of the events from MacGowan’s perspective. However, considering the media’s role in emphasising the differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps the suffering of the rich is not considered entertainment and is thus not broadcast on a large scale.

The Toxic Airborne Event symbolizes the uncontrollable nature and unpredictability of society and people. Postmodernity causes people to have specific expectations based on the images and representations provided by the media. The resulting separation between rich and poor and prejudices attached to this division are affirmed by the media, but only because of people’s blind acceptance of the presented images as truth. Through the Toxic Airborne Event, DeLillo shows that not only are certain occurrences beyond control, but also that what people accept as reality because it is presented as such by the media, should not be taken at face value. Instead, people need a degree of awareness with regard to their dependence on the media to provide them with reality and confirmation of the real. This awareness surfaces in Jack at a number of occasions throughout the novel, such as the moment he realizes his own disappointment upon hearing that the number of bodies found at
a supposed mass grave turns out to be limited to two (White Noise, 256). Apart from his awareness, this sense of disappointment also shows the diminishing shock effect caused by overexposure and saturation.

Large scale exposure to violence and horrible images through the media has a numbing effect on people. The extent to which this effect is rooted in the society depicted in White Noise is demonstrated through Jack’s profession. The Department of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill is founded by Jack as if it were a product for which a niche market has occurred. The emphasis in this situation is on Jack as a marketer and entrepreneur, rather than a teacher, which is evident from his inability to speak German and the lack of need to do so in his profession. Cantor refers to the establishment of the department as a “characteristically American phenomenon” (43) due to the businesslike approach Jack takes toward the subject. He furthermore emphasizes the domestification of Hitler through the media, specifically television, and academic treatment, climaxing in the three day international Hitler conference which Jack organizes. Noting that the “irrational and dangerous forces that have destabilized modern life” have turned into the “solid foundation of a successful career” (Cantor 44) for Jack. This means that because of the public’s prolonged exposure to the horror that was Hitler, his shock value has been diminished to near zero. This exposure is exemplified in the novel through a conversation between Jack and his daughter Steffie when she notes that “he was on again last night” (White Noise 75), to which Jack responds “he’s always on. We couldn’t have television without him” (75). Through this “[...] increasing familiarity and reproducibility of his image in the market place [...]” (Cantor 44) the horror that was once associated with Hitler has shrunken to become nothing more than a mere academic fact and field of study. Paradoxically, widely exposing the horrors committed by Hitler was originally
meant to put in place a lasting awareness, a confrontation intended to ensure people would not forget.

The reducing shock effect as a result of overexposure is exemplified in *Underworld* by the videos of the murder committed by the Texas Highway Killer and the Zapruder film. The Texas Highway Killer is a minor character in the novel *Underworld*. His character is one of the elements in the novel taken from real contemporary society in order to establish the time frame, drawing on the Freeway Killer, a serial killer active in the USA during the late seventies and eighties. The fictional killer, identified as Richard, shoots his victims while they are driving their cars, hence his nickname. One of his murders is filmed by a young girl playing with a video camera in the backseat of the car driving in front of the victim. The footage is repeatedly shown on TV and Nick Shay’s brother Matt is one of the viewers watching it. When Matt describes his experience of watching the footage of the murder, his reaction reflects the numbing effect of mass media exposure. Matt is fascinated by the tape, watching it over and over, remarking that “it is awful and unremarkable at the same time” (*Underworld*, 158). This conflicting assessment demonstrates that although Matt knows what is happening on the tape is horrible, he lacks an actual emotional response. His pointing out that in the scenes in which the victim is being shot “the twist of the head only gives you a partial profile and it’s the wrong side, it’s not the side where he was hit” (159) breathes a sense of disappointment at not being able to actually see the shattered skull. This craving for more detail has replaced the shock of watching another human being die. Mass media exposure has ensured society to have witnessed such instances on repeat, or as Matt himself puts it “this is why they’re out there, to provide our entertainment” (160). What this remark shows is that the reality that someone has died is not registered by Matt in any other sense than as a form of entertainment. The conflict here is the function of the media as
providing information and reality on the one hand, and entertainment on the other. As postmodernity in society progresses these two become more and more intertwined, because reality fades and is replaced by simulacra. Confusion with regard to the function of the image results in reality as presented by the media to be interpreted as entertainment. Matt is going through this process, which is demonstrated by his acknowledgement that “the tape has a searing realness” (157). This illustrates how he thinks the tape seems real, indicating his incomprehension of the fact that it is. His statement that “the tape sucks the air right out of your chest but you watch it every time” (160) exemplifies the conflict of the function of the media.

The Zapruder film demonstrates real violence presented as entertainment and the numbing effect of overexposure. The Zapruder film is the home video of the Kennedy assassination in 1963. In Underworld, one of the main characters, an artist named Klara Sax, attends a show at an art studio held especially for the showing of the film, meaning that its sole and only purpose in that context is to provide entertainment for the guests. Although the initial response of the viewers is one of shock, this effect wanes fast. The reason for this is the fact that none of the guests, apart from Klara, knew what it was they were about to see. The numerous televisions divided over multiple rooms relentlessly bombarding the guests with the film on repeat causes for the novelty to quickly wear off. Like Matt, the reality of the death of a person is not registered in the context of it being projected as entertainment at an art show. Klara herself is not shocked by the footage because she already knows what is about to be shown as is clarified by the narrator of the scene: “she’d begun detaching herself from the event long before she got here because she’d been told what it was at some point but still had to see it” (488). Her foreknowledge of what is on the tape results in her inability to be shocked because for her the novelty is not there to begin with. The fact that she goes to the event anyway, not to participate but
merely to see the tape, shows her desire to be entertained by a video of a man being assassinated. As genuine consumers, once the entertainment value of the film has worn off, the guests of the exhibition continue on their way, go out to eat, play cards and do not think about it again. This provides a powerful contrast between the reality of the Kennedy assassination and its representation through the Zapruder film, as rather than being a life changing event, such as the actual assassination was, the Zapruder film is forgotten by the time the sun goes down.

The existence of the Texas Highway Killer is validated through the media’s conflicting roles of providing the people with reality and entertainment. At a certain point Richard decides to contact the news station that covers the story of his killing spree and continuously broadcasts the video of his latest victim. The paradox here is that he disagrees with, and challenges, the way he is being depicted in the media, whilst at the same time acknowledging that they validate his existence. In the phone call Richard makes to Sue Ann, the news anchor of the station, he indicates that he feels his person is being generalized based on already existing profiles, rather than on him personally. This generalization is expressed through characterizations such as low self-esteem and childhood abuse which are in turn countered by Richard in the interview in an attempt “[...] to set the record straight” (216). Richard’s insistence of being judged and portrayed as an individual rather than a generic concept echoes Lyotard’s notion of prioritizing diversity and individuality over the collective and grand total in postmodern society. Richard’s preference of isolation over companionship and his general dislike of human interaction demonstrate a (yet) unmatched detachment from other people. The statement that “the only person he ever talked to from the heart was Sue Ann. She made him feel real, talking on the phone” (269) not only confirms this detachment, but also shows how images and representations have become his reality. Not only is their conversation taking place
over the phone, therefore void of any actual visual interaction, but Richard uses a
voice distorber to ensure she will never really hear his voice. Furthermore, unlike a
normal phone call, Sue Ann is broadcasting the conversation live, not actually holding
a phone but solely hearing Richard’s words resound through the studio: “he talked to
her on the phone and made eye contact with the TV. This was the waking of the
knowledge that he was real” (270). Based on this, Richard’s live is saturated with
postmodern notions of individuality and images to such an extent that he has no need
for actual human contact to feel real, but merely requires the validation of his
existence in the representation of contact through the media, or in this case Sue Ann.
For Richard, the hyperreal, or fourth phase of the image, has become his reality.

The consequence of the media’s projection of the hyperreal and the
interpretation of it both as reality, as well as entertainment is visible in Cosmopolis.
For Eric Packer, the representations broadcasted by the media have become the only
reality he knows, yet at the same time, these are still being perceived by him as
entertainment. No authenticity is left in the hyperreal and everything is shaped
through representations and images, or in the words of Chandler: “Packer sees and
commands the world through surrogates” (245). One of the consequences of this is
that, unlike Richard in Underworld, Eric's existence is not validated through these
images because they are not perceived by him as reality, but as entertainment. Unable
to deal with reality, Eric has a preference for representation through media rather
than encountering the real. This can for example be seen when limousine in which
Eric spends his day gets caught up in an anti-globalization protest. At first, Eric
watches the scene unfold while standing through his sunroof, thus with his own eyes.
He then lowers himself into the car, however not in order to protect himself, but
because “it made more sense on TV” (Cosmopolis, 89). Taking in the action
happening around them on the screens in the car, Eric and his chief of theory Kinski
are drinking vodka and trust in what they see because it is projected on a screen (89). The incident means nothing to Eric apart from it being entertaining, stating how “he was enjoying this” (89) and smiling at Kinski when the protesters start rocking the car. The violence of what is happening around them does not affect Eric in any sense other than him finding it interesting. In reference to *White Noise*, but just as appropriate here, Martucci points out that “[...] nothing actually happens on TV.” (78), thus indicating that the action as displayed on the screen is in reality happening elsewhere, in this case only a few meters away. Again, the poor provide the rich with entertainment, in this case in the form of anarchists and people protesting the advancement of capitalism and free market economy performing for the rich people that have benefitted greatly from this advancement.

Eric’s perception of what is real is based on Hollywood. This leads to him acting accordingly in his encounters with his wife Elise and Richard Sheets, the former employee out on a mission to kill him. Eric seeks out Richard late at night, and finds him in an abandoned, slummy building. He parallels his behavior to the movies he has seen growing up, indicating that for him there is no distinction between the movies and the real he is experiencing. After walking into the building, Eric notices two rats and considers them “fine and right, thematically sound” (183), fitting with the ruin of a complex he has wandered into. The setting is such that he expects things such as rats to make an appearance. Upon arrival at the only room with a door, he places himself next to the door, with his back against the wall holding the gun “alongside his face” (183). His subsequent monologue emphasizes his submergence in the hyperreal as he claims familiarity with the situation by saying “I’ve seen a hundred situations like this. A man and a gun and a locked door” (183). Through this statement he not only shows that he believes that seeing something on screen is the same as experiencing them first hand, but also the consequence of this:
he assumes the door is locked while in fact the door might simply be closed. He continues to explain how he and his mother went to the movies together, and relates how he used to tell her that it’s not possible to open a solid door by only kicking it once. This statement conflicts with his subsequent behavior as he follows the movie script to the letter and kicks in the door. This shows that while he once was able to distinguish between reality and representation he can no longer, indicating his progression through the phases of the image.

The image of life in the form of a movie set enables Eric to connect to other people. The film set Eric inserts himself into consists out of “extras in a crowd scene” (174) who lie still and naked on the street together. The fact that this connection to other people takes place in a setting which dictates pretending makes that Eric feels safe enough to participate. Because for Eric the hyperreal, and movie set, is reality the setting confuses him: “Were they pretending to be naked or were they naked? It was no longer clear to him” (176). His ensuing train of thought, namely that “It tore his mind apart, trying to see them here and real, independent of the image on a screen in Oslo or Caracas. Or were those places indistinguishable from this one?” (176) attest to Eric’s inability to escape the hyperreal and distinguish between reality and image. The following encounter with his wife Elise affirms this, as he only manages to connect with her at the moment she presents herself as an actress, and thus as a representation of a person. He realizes he loves her when she “was cool and silvery slim, and walking head-high, with technical precision, towards the last trailer in the service station, where she would find her clothes, dress quickly and disappear” (178). This elusive description goes to show that while the inauthentic surroundings have provided Eric with a certain clarity with regards to his wife, this is only the case when she presented as an image.
The scripted nature of *Cosmopolis* illustrates the manifestation of the hyperreal. The fourth phase of the image, or hyperreal, has no connection to reality anymore and can as such be planned and scripted much like a film. The death, and in particular the funeral, of Brutha Fez illustrates the extent to which existence in the postmodern society that is the setting of Cosmopolis is scripted. Brutha Fez is a rapstar known for utilizing different genres and forming musical hybrids. This manner of creating a personal style breathes postmodern theory in the sense of not only Lyotard’s notion of individuality, but also of Bauman’s emphasis on the importance of claiming a space “unquestionably one’s own” (*Postmodernity and its Discontents*, 26). Upon his encounter with the funeral procession, after being told who it is that has died, Eric considers “the protocol of the rap star who goes down humming in a spatter of gunshots” (*Cosmopolis*, 132). His assumption regarding the manner of Fez’s death demonstrates Eric’s stock character assessment of Fez, whose lyrics such as “getting shot is easy, tried it seven times” (133), serve to affirm the stereotype, even though he was, in fact, not a streetwise criminal at all. This indicates that Fez during his life played a role and the presence of the armed bodyguards accompanying the hearse, confirms this role in his death. In concordance with this role, Fez’s manager Kozmo acknowledges that Fez’s dying of natural causes is “[...] a letdown” (132).

The sheer magnitude of the funeral procession, and the fact that it cruises through downtown New York, would imply that a lot of time has been invested in its planning, however Fez only died earlier that same day. This means that the planning of the parade that is his funeral would have been conducted while Fez was still alive, indicating that not only his funeral procession, but even his death itself has been orchestrated. For both Eric and the crowd of onlookers, the funeral has more characteristics of an event, even being literally named such by Eric (136), including
break dancers, music, a parade of various religious representatives, and press. It is not until the parade is practically over that people start showing an emotional response to Fez’s death, and even then it only happens because it is supposed to happen, because according to the script “when people die, you weep” (139). Taking this notion of the planned and scripted one step further, Heyne has argued that the novel is essentially a graphic novel in which Eric plays the role of the supervillain, complete with a lair containing a shark tank, Packermobile, and “a plan for world domination by conquering the currency markets” (439). In this light, it should be noted that the comic, or graphic novel, when pertaining to superheroes and villains exemplify a scripted, predetermined hyperreal with no connection to reality at all.

Eric’s inability to perceive the real, and thus validate his own existence, accounts for his self-destructive behavior and eventual downfall. This self-destructive tendency is pointed out when Kinski asks Eric what capitalism produces according to Marx and Engels, and Eric answers “Its own grave-diggers” (Cosmopolis 90). What this indicates is that Eric’s condition is not an isolated occurrence, but rather a result of capitalist economy and the postmodern, consumption driven society that accompanies it. A development which has been foreseen by Marx and Engels long before it happened.

The hyperreal has resulted in Eric’s having no regard for life, or death for that matter, which is illustrated in his killing of Torval. By the time Eric’s chief of security’s life comes to a sudden end, the lack of a personal connection between the two people that spend so much time in each other’s company is already firmly established. Early on in the novel, Eric remarks that he noticed how Torval has stopped using his name and instead does no longer address him personally and that “this omission left a space in nature large enough for a man to walk through” (Cosmopolis 20). The use of a name, and thus reflection of a person, enables Eric to
connect to that person, meaning that Torval’s refraining from using Eric’s name causes for the connection to break. Eric’s detachment from Torval is such that he does not value his life in any way, which is evident both at the moment of the shooting, as well as in the immediate aftermath. The moment Torval activates the gun by saying the spoken code out loud whilst Eric is holding it, he entrusts his life to Eric, the way the latter usually does to him. What Eric notices at the moment he pulls the trigger is how quickly Torval goes down and how “he looked foolish and confused” (146). For Eric, his killing Torval, and especially catching him off guard, is a victory of his hyperreal over the real. Noticing earlier that “Torval’s burly presence was a provocation” and that this “[...] engaged Eric’s sense of physical authority” (20), watching how “all authority drained out of him” (146) after being shot reinforces Eric’s sense of the real. His understanding of reality only as an image causes him to focus solely on the visual, criticizing the aesthetic aspects of Torval’s dying by contemplating that “he had mass, but no flow” and how he has “no true fluency of movement” (146). His final, and harshest, action indicating his detachment from what has just happened, is a small and simple hand gesture, indicating that the kids playing basketball nearby should continue their game because “nothing so meaningful has happened that they were required to stop playing” (146).

The disregard for life and death manifests itself in Eric’s sense of self-annihilation and is caused by his inability to experience the real. Voelz points out that “Packer repeatedly turns security measures inside out, against himself” (33). He undercribes this statement by noting that Eric not only kills his own chief of security, but also lets himself get shot with a stun gun by one of his bodyguards, and uses his means of protection from Richard Sheets, namely his gun, on himself. This recurrence of harming himself, be it directly or indirectly, can be viewed as his attempt to establish and experience the real in the same sense as Richard in
**Underworld** who required news anchor Sue Ann to validate his existence. Being fully absorbed by the hyperreal, there is no way for Eric to be authentic or real other than through death and pain. As Voelz puts it: “death signifies a triumphant return of the real” (35), causing Eric to chase the notion of authenticity through his own bodily suffering. In the final moments of the novel, he appears to succeed when “he's come to know himself, untranslatably, through his pain” (*Cosmopolis*, 207), indicating that he realizes that his translation of reality, or hyperreal, is simulated. This is affirmed in his contemplations regarding the next step in the technological advancement of capitalism and the concept of a fully digitalized life. He realizes that “it would never happen” because “his pain interfered with his immortality” (207). This implies that pain and death remain authentic in the virtual world of the hyperreal, even though there is no emotional attachment to either concept. The fact that Eric is watching his own murder take place on the watch which project images of events that are still in the process of developing reinforces the planned and scripted nature of life and death in *Cosmopolis*. The anonymity and meaninglessness of death in the postmodern world of *Cosmopolis* is illustrated in the fact that in spite of him being one of the most powerful and influential people on the planet, the image on his watch shows that Eric’s body in the morgue is labeled Male Z.

The three novels depict different phases of the image. I have shown and explained how Baudrillard’s fading reality principle is featured in *White Noise*, *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*. Considering the order in which the novels were published, *White Noise* first, *Underworld* second and finally *Cosmopolis*, an escalation can be seen. In *White Noise*, the characters are to some extent aware of their dependence on the media and the influence it has on them. In Underworld, no such awareness is present and the conflict between the media’s function of providing reality and entertainment simultaneously is illustrated. The last of the three novels
shows a protagonist who is dependent on the media to provide him with reality as a whole, not a mere verification. This escalation or advancement of the fading of reality indicates that over the years postmodernity has progressed in the societies depicted by DeLillo.

The fictional societies depicted in the novels can be connected to real American society through satire. While humor is often a key feature of satire, it is meant as a form of criticism. The satirical nature of in particular *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* then adds to their meaning because the depiction of people and the society that produced and facilitates them criticizes contemporary American society. By using satire, DeLillo manages to trigger an awareness in the reader of the extent to which the influence of the media and the fading of reality is happening in real life.
2. Waste and Consumption

In the postmodern American society of DeLillo’s works, the themes of waste and consumption are intertwined. Waste as a result of consumption and consumer society and thus as a result of postmodernity is a prominent feature in each of the novels. The way in which waste is presented and how this relates to consumption and postmodernity is the focus of this chapter. By analysing examples I will establish a connection between the societies depicted in the novels and the real world.

Waste is accepted by society as a by-product of consumption. Society’s response to the accumulation of waste and garbage as a result of its own actions and consumption, is one of resignation. DeLillo’s postmodern society is one in which, for most people, ignorance is bliss when it comes to dealing with the garbage it has created. The descriptions of landfills and nuclear waste sites in Underworld are not as shocking or impressive in themselves as much as in the way they are perceived by the characters in the novel. Nick’s colleague Brian experiences a moment of awe when he has a chance encounter with the Fresh Kills Landfill whilst visiting New York. Taking in the sheer size of the landfill, contemplating its growth over the coming years, and the 24/7 operation that the waste management industry has become he feels “[…]a sting of enlightenment” (Underworld 184). The combination of these two terms draws a connection to the sublime, as Brian is on the one hand ecstatic about the sight, but on the other intimidated by its magnitude. His sudden clarity about working not with waste but with “[…] people’s habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs […]”(184) shows the effect of the subliminal experience. His inability to comprehend the magnitude of the pile of garbage makes him consider it in the wider context of society. This is affirmed through his consideration of the towers of the World Trade Center which cause him to “[…] sense a poetical balance between that idea and this one” (184). In this sense, the idea of the World Trade Center is
capitalism and its 24/7 operating global market economy, and the idea of Fresh Kills is the effect of postmodernity in the shape of garbage accumulating and forming towers of their own. This balance indicates the direct relationship between the two concepts and Brian’s sublime experience allows him to see this connection.

The people in society choose to ignore the problems posed by the increase of garbage and waste. Nick’s job as a waste manager takes him all over the world to speak at conferences, yet he himself points out that the crisis of waste “[…] doesn’t really seem to be taking place except in the conference reports and the newspapers” (805). The crisis of waste Nick refers to is the exponential increase of waste and garbage of all natures as a result of a society driven by consumption. As Bauman describes it: “[…] possessing and consuming certain objects and practising certain lifestyles is the necessary condition of happiness; perhaps even of human dignity” (40). This knowledge combined with the inseparable cause-effect relationship between consumption and waste means that one cannot exist without the other, and thus that the choice to accept one automatically means the acceptance of the second. The apathy and resignation with which the presence of waste as accepted as a part of life is for example visible in the recurrence of characters being either literally or metaphorically surrounded by garbage throughout Underworld. May it be the strike of the garbage collectors in the backdrop, causing large numbers of trash bags to accumulate on the New York streets for all to see and smell, or the occasional references to the sewage systems and pipes running throughout the city, to and from every home, just below the surface and out of sight; the message that everyone in society is surrounded by waste is clear. The passive response to being confronted with larger or smaller amounts of trash and waste is central in the novel and not exclusively attributed to a single character, demonstrating its relevance on the level of society rather than the individual. While the characters do take notice of the
situation, for example the strike, they do not consider its implications or consequences, nor do they feel responsible. This aligns with Nick’s pointing out that although the media pay attention to the issue it is still ignored. The most revealing instance of actively ignoring the problems surrounding waste and garbage in Underworld, is depicted by means of a ship carrying waste of an unknown quality that has been out on the ocean looking for a place to dump its contents for months, if not years. Not only has the ship been unsuccessful in finding a country willing to take it in and deal with its cargo, subsequently indicating the issue to be global rather than local, but when asked for a comment on the matter, Nick’s colleague Sims simply states: “I’m looking the other way” (Underworld 288).

The lack of responsibility for the growing problem of waste exists both in the novels as well as real contemporary society. Both in Underworld and White Noise, a stoic acceptance of waste as a part of everyday life is visible. The Toxic Airborne Event as it occurs in Blacksmith effectively is a direct side-effect of consumption and postmodern society, as has been pointed out by Lentricchia: “[...] the novel’s true setting. Not Blacksmith, middle America, but the environment unintentionally produced by advanced technology, the effects of technology, the by-products, the fallout” (99). The toxic cloud in itself is a literal side-effect, consisting out of by-products and leftovers from the production of insecticides. The society which desires such pesticides to be produced is therefore also responsible for the production of these by-products which because “[...] global toxification [...]” (Buell 39). The problem regarding the question of responsibility has been explained by Bauman as having to do with the deregulation of the free market economy. As a result “the sheer size of the main players in the global markets today far exceeds the interfering capacity of most, if not all, elected state governments” (56). What this implies is that because free market economy has been
allowed to run its course without any form of political interference it has become impossible for government to intervene. People in society are looking for someone to take responsibility, the Gladney family for example talk about how *someone should* be taking responsibility, but who it is that controls the people in the Mylex suits, or how they manage to clean-up the toxic cloud remains a mystery. What is interesting about the question of responsibility is that people easily accept waste, garbage and pollution as a part of life, but do not feel responsible for it. While it is a direct result of the consumer desire and consumption driven society, people do not feel obligated to change their behaviour in order to reduce the impact. This is a situation which can both be witnessed in the novels, as life after the Toxic Airborne Event continues as if nothing ever happened, but also in the real world of contemporary Western society. Consider for example BP Oil and the widespread scandal of the sinking of the drilling platform Deep Water Horizon in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 causing the largest oil spill in history. BP Oil is still in business, in spite of the global outrage over the lack of supervision and regulations on board the platform and the company’s slow response in trying to contain the disaster and cap the well. What this indicates is that society has not yet found a way to abandon the current status quo with regard to waste and pollution which consists of acknowledging the problem and assigning blame to large corporations, but is void of any actual action. With free market economy being fully driven by consumer desires and needs, the responsibility for the results of this situation is shared between consumers and corporations alike. So long as consumers maintain their appetite for specific products, the market will produce them, effectively maintaining the status quo. The wish for politics to establish boundaries with regard to the lengths corporations are allowed to go to when striving for efficiency, or as Lyotard called it performativity, is in that sense a dodging of the responsibility on the part of the consumers. This contradiction can for example be
seen in the current attempts of animal rights groups to force Dutch supermarkets to discontinue the sale of cheap fast bred factory broilers in favour of more expensive, more animal friendly produced meat. The consumer desire for cheap chicken filet has led to farming techniques that people disapprove of, but they do not take responsibility for the situation by refusing to purchase the product. Instead, the consumer places the responsibility for dealing with these issues and attempting to solve the problems with pressure groups, environmentalist lobby’s, and government agencies, relieving themselves of the burden.

The power of consumer desire is illustrated in *White Noise* through the drug Dylar. The experimental drug called Dylar is designed to eradicate a person’s fear of death. Babette suffers from this anxiety to such an extent that she cannot think about anything other than death. Her fear of death and dying is so great that she is willing to go to extreme lengths to obtain the drug which has not even yet been proven to work. The fact that she pays for the drugs with sex demonstrates a high level of emotional detachment, enabling her to use her body and sexuality as commodities in order to participate in a commodity exchange, characterized by Gregory as “[...] an exchange of alienable objects between people who are in a state of reciprocal independence that establishes a quantitative relationship between the objects transacted [...]” (Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture* 121). Thus to Babette, sex is a method of payment, a commodity which can be exchanged for another commodity, namely Dylar, of equal value. When coming clean to Jack about the affair, she explains that “I was remote. I was operating outside of myself. It was a capitalist transaction.” (*White Noise* 223). In saying this, Babette acknowledges her emotional detachment and the commodification of herself. Her fear of death is the result of consumer society and capitalism which has left her unable to deal with abstract notions because it presents everything as objects and commodities. Furthermore,
Bauman points to the structural condition of uncertainty that exists in postmodern society. Leading to fears which “[...] permeate its daily life [...] threaten its identity”, and which should be “[...] moulded into an alien body: into a tangible enemy whom one can fight, and fight again, and even hope to conquer” (38). Like Jack, Babette attempts to approach the concept of death as an external threat which can be eliminated. Because of this, the possibility of purchasing a cure for her anxiety strikes her as reasonable rather than absurd. The difference is that Babette attempts to fight her fear rather than death itself, leaving intact the co-dependency between life and death, and thus retaining the significance and meaning that death brings to the concept of life.

Dylar symbolizes the desire to approach abstracts as objects in order to be able to deal with them. The most noteworthy side-effect Dylar causes when used excessively is the inability to distinguish between the representation and the real. This is a literal application of Baudrillard’s phases of the image, indicating the presence of postmodern concepts in society. The tendency of approaching abstracts as objects is emphasised in the connection between fear and the self and the thought that the two can be separated. As Jack states to his colleague Winnie “Fear is self-awareness raised to a higher level.” (White Noise 263). Asking her subsequently what then death is, Winnie replies by explaining “Self, self, self. If death can be seen as less strange and unreferenced, your sense of self in relation to death will diminish, and so will you fear.” (263). This indicates that the if the threat, in this case of death, can be detached from the identity and thus approached as an external concept, the threat no longer needs to be feared by the self. This does not mean that the threat is gone, but merely that the self no longer feels any emotional attachment to it, eradicating fear. Combined with the side-effect of being unable to make distinctions between words and their meaning, Willie Mink’s Dylar induced delirium is expressed through a
schizophrenia confirming the “[...] complete disintegration of the humanist sense of self” (Olster 90). Being the result of his excessive intake of Dylar, what can be concluded from Mink’s state of mind is that the attempt to approach abstracts as objects and to control them leads to the inevitable collapse of identity. This idea is confirmed through Jack’s assassination plan which is based on and fails through the same principles, and the reason why Jack suspects Babette of taking something to begin with, namely that her behaviour has changed and she does not seem like her normal self. In this sense, the consumption of Dylar can be seen causing identity to be reduced to waste.

Groups of people are presented as waste resulting from consumption and postmodernity. Presented as another side-effect of consumer society, the people that do not fit in are discarded and illustrated as metaphorical waste. The people left behind by consumer society are depicted through the people living in the Wall in *Underworld*, and the anti-globalizing protesters in *Cosmopolis*. Bauman presents the notion of the stranger in order to illustrate how people perceive each other, especially those from other social orders than themselves. According to him “In the postmodern city, the strangers mean one thing to those for whom ‘no-go area’ (the ‘mean streets’, the ‘rough districts’) means ‘I won’t go in’, and another to those for whom ‘no go’ means ‘I can’t go out’” (28). For the first group, the stranger presents an exotic change from ordinary life by means of people that can be paid for services, offering “[...] a break in the tedium” (28). In this sense, the latter group that consists out of the poor, unemployed and those “[...] unfit to be free” (59) provide entertainment for the first in the form of experiences which can be consumed. This is clearly visible in *Underworld* during the scene in which tourists come visit the Wall. The Wall is a part of the Bronx, New York and is described as “[...] a tuck of land adrift from the social order, where life and death touch, where trees and vines grow over and around
garbage, which includes limbs and hospital waste” (Helyer 991). The slum that is the Wall attracts tourists on a bus tour which is called *South Bronx Surreal*. One of the nuns devoted to aiding the people living in the Wall named SiSter Grace is outraged by the presence of the bus and tourists and starts yelling that “It’s not surreal. It’s real, it’s real. Your bus is surreal. You’re surreal.” (*Underworld*, 247). The scene affirms the inequality between rich and poor as a result of postmodernity and free market economy, but can also be connected to the fading reality principle. The lives of the rich people on the bus have been influenced by postmodernity in a different way than the lives of the people living in the Wall. Where the rich have been saturated by images presented through the media and as such can no longer distinguish between reality and representation, Ismael Muñoz and his crew only come to possess a TV set in the final part of the novel. This discrepancy can be connected to the characterization of tourism made by MacCannell, who values tourism as a “[...] quest for the authentic experience” (Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture* 70). The authentic in this case is the lost perception of reality because as indicated by Baudrillard “when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (6). What this means is that the nostalgic longing for the past and the authentic only occurs when the images and representation have fully taken over reality. Paralleling this notion to the real world in 2014, I would like to point out that a firm called Real Bronx Tours stopped offering a tour to “[...] New York’s more deprived districts” (Smith par. 1) after politicians and residents had complained in May of 2013. This means that fifteen years after the publication of *Underworld* the rich people in society are indeed looking at the poor to provide them with an authentic experience. A local politician noted that to “[...] gawk at a long line of people who are less fortunate than they are” and “[...] view them as they are some sort of entertainment is pretty disgusting” (Smith par.5). Considering the township tours
that have been organized for the benefit of Western tourists visiting third world countries for many years, it seems that it is not the idea of the poor providing entertainment for the rich that is the issue, but the fact that it happens within confines of contemporary American society. This illustrates that postmodernity and free market economy cause growing inequality between the poor and the rich through the fact that the poor are no longer a part of distant countries that have been unable to keep up with the pace of the development of global capitalism. Instead, they are perceived by the rich as the strangers of contemporary society; as the providers of exotic experiences and entertainment. The fact that the tour stopped taking place due to external pressure and not for lack of interest, indicates that the conditions with regard to the fading of reality as according to Baudrillard remain the same.

Authenticity and nostalgia are directly related to waste and garbage. All garbage and trash were objects meant for consumption or use by consumers in one way or another. Through this function garbage provides a reflection of society and its history or as Wolf puts it: “Garbage dumps are latent archives or memories of civilization” (77). The idea that waste is not only the product of its society, but also of its time is presented in Underworld through the recurring issue of dealing with nuclear waste throughout the novel. With the narrative spanning from the nineteen fifties to the early nineteen nineties, the Cold War makes for the backdrop of a large part of it. The consequences of the nuclear arms race that occurred during the Cold War are being illustrated by DeLillo not only in the threat of a possible explosion at the time itself, but also through the abundance of radio-active waste and the problems concerned with handling it. This makes for nuclear waste to be the legacy of the Cold War, memorializing the time-period and continuously confronting society with its past due to its indestructibility. Jesse Detwiler, the waste theorist that Nick and Sims meet up with, talks about this notion of time reflected in waste and
hypothesises about a future in which landfills and waste sites will have fully assumed their nostalgic form and attract tourists that wish to visit the relics of the past. These theme park like institutions then cater to the “nostalgia for the banned materials of civilization, for the brute force of old industries and old conflicts” (*Underworld* 286). According to Detwiler, and in full accordance with consumer society, the more exclusive the product, or, in this case, waste, the more appeal it will have for the consumer: “The more toxic the waste, the greater the effort and expense a tourist will be willing to tolerate in order to visit the site” (286). Drawing another connection to Western society as it is today, I would like to point out that Detwiler is not wrong because tour operators in Ukraine have been offering trips to Chernobyl for years. This desire to visit what has been left behind can in contemporary society be linked to both the Chernobyl example, but also to the Real Bronx Tour which will undoubtedly resume operations at some point in the future as inequality between the rich and the poor continues to grow.

The waste of postmodernity and capitalism is depicted in *Cosmopolis* by means of the anti-globalizing protesters. Upon encountering the protest during the ride across New York, Eric’s chief of theory Kinnski explains the connection between the protesters and society as follows: “The more visionary the idea, the more people it leaves behind. This is what the protest is all about. Visions of technology and wealth. The force of cyber-capital that will send people into the gutter to retch and die” (*Cosmopolis* 90). This statement acknowledges Bauman’s explanation with regard to the shift from modernity to postmodernity. He indicates that while in the former the unemployed were considered the “[...] reserve army of labour” (36), the latter does not require this army because “rationalizing now means cutting, not creating jobs, and technological and managerial progress is measured by ‘slimming down’ the work force [...]” (*Cosmopolis* 36). Anticipating the progression of capitalism and
postmodernity, Kinski indicates that in essence “This is a protest against the future. They want to hold off the future” (91). Indicating the expectation of not only growing inequality between the rich and the poor, but also rising numbers of people being left behind. The rejects of postmodern society will accumulate, just like its waste, but this fact merely reinforces the system and pushes it forward, resulting in tourist attractions made up of supposed authenticity and nostalgia found in the people that did not manage to keep up with the advancement. In this sense, the role of the poor and unemployed in society can be seen to change from being the reserve army of labour supported by the welfare state during modernity, to being the strangers that provide entertainment and acknowledge the past for the benefits of the rich.

The Toxic Airborne Event illustrates another side effect of progressing society, namely that on nature. Jack remarks that since the Toxic Airborne Event the sunsets “[...] had become almost unbearably beautiful” (White Noise 197), but he is quick to add that there was no “[...] measurable connection” (197). While this indicates that the influence of the chemical substance that was released during the Toxic Airborne Event cannot be confirmed, as “[...] no one had been able to prove it” (197), the situation can neither be explained otherwise and the cause-effect relationship between the two is thus assumed. The beauty of the sunsets and their duration draw crowds of people to the highway overpass each day to enjoy them, to consume their aesthetic pleasure so to speak. These sunsets would not have occurred if it had not been for the accidental release of Nyodyne D into the air, confirming the notion that “Industrial poison is a crucial component of the postmodern aesthetic” (Frow, Time & Commodity Culture 13). Apart from their beauty, the sunsets have another quality, namely their recurrence. This mass production of chemically altered sunsets and the way in which they are integrated into everyday life in Blacksmith is acknowledged by Jack when he notes “Another postmodern sunset [...]” (260) and “[...] nothing to do
but wait for the next sunset [...]” (369). This lines up with Jameson’s observation that “What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally [...]” (56), meaning that aesthetically pleasing objects, concepts, or experiences have become part of mass production.

The uncertainty with regard to the effects of pollution on nature is depicted through the sublime experience of watching the sunset. In spite of their beauty and subsequent attraction, the sunsets are by the onlookers also perceived as scary and “[...] tinged with dread [...]” (197). What this implies is that the cause-effect relationship between postmodernity, waste, and nature has as of yet unknown implications, and the unknown is something people tend to fear. In short, while the people enjoy the sunsets, they fear both the uncharted territory to which the progression of society leads, and the unknown consequences of this progression. The direct and indirect effects of industrialization, pollution, and capitalism on the environment and especially the climate has been the subject of debate among scientists and politicians for many years now. Studies both proving and disproving the impact of people on climate change are being published and while most research indicates that humans do have an influence on the process, the extent of this influence varies from great to slight, depending on the publication. The complexity of for example the measuring of greenhouse gas emission makes it difficult to interpret the progress of the only major international treaty concerning the environment, namely the Kyoto treaty. In spite of it being the only of this magnitude, critics have pointed out that the targets set in the treaty are not only too low to really affect a change, but also that the set time span for targets is too wide. Not to mention the fact that a number of countries, among which the USA, chose no longer to participate after the first round ended in 2012. In short, the uncertainty and fear which is illustrated in White Noise through the chemically induced sunsets in Blacksmith can
be seen as a reflection of real society’s awkwardness in dealing with the environment and climate change. The fact that Nyodyne D has a positive impact on the visual aspects of the sunsets furthermore indicates that not all waste needs to be a bad thing by definition.

The potential value of waste depends on the interpretation of the object. One of the main characters in the novel *Underworld*, Klara, is an artist who at a certain point in her life decides to create art out of trash and garbage. One of her major projects is called Long Tall Sally and takes place in the desert. Named after one of the planes, the project consists out of painting decommissioned B52 bombers. As noted earlier, one of the qualities of waste is its ability to show the past because “Effects are the objects left over, the consequences of the consumed life, or possessions that become waste. Objects remind their owners of what is past and passing and to come” (Schaub 72). Klara’s art project can in this sense be seen as not only a form of recycling, of creating a new purpose for items otherwise discarded, but also as memorial and reminder of times past, in particular the Cold War. The direct connection to the past is established by means of the pin-up drawing of Long Tall Sally on one the planes which features in two different sections in the novel, and thus two different time periods.

The baseball exemplifies the importance of the past and memories in establishing the function of an object. Nick’s description of the ball shows it to be “[...] veneered with dirt and turf and generational sweat-it was old, bunged up, it was bashed and tobacco-juiced and stained by natural processes and by the lives behind it [...]” (*Underworld* 131). This depiction of an old ball implies that it is no longer able to fulfil its original function and could thus be regarded as waste. However the history of the ball has ensured its transformation from consumer product to valuable memory of days past. What is striking in this context is that Nick cannot actually be
sure that this is in fact the baseball that was used in Thomson’s homerun, since in spite of his efforts, the previous owner Marvin does not “[...] have the lineage all the way” (192). Marvin’s dedication to tracing the lineage of the ball shows its importance to the transformation and value of the object, but more importantly his desire to hold on to the past. As Wolf points out: “The characters’ pervasive desire to preserve some tangibly tactile and non-alienated memory of the past is also, of course, an unmistakable symptom of its loss [...]” (83). This loss of the past and memory in postmodern society and the desire to hold on to it is also reflected in the previously discussed nostalgia based tourism. The preservation of the past and memories in discarded items, and the function of waste as the representation of society’s past makes for blurring boundaries of what is garbage.

Following his idea of fragmentation as opposed to totalization, Lyotard has proposed that it is not possible for different orders, such as art and science, to agree upon one notion of truth due to the different boundaries and rules each uses in their determination. Williams explains this idea by using the example of curing an illness and the best way to do so: “There may be ‘best’ treatments from many different point of view: the most effective, the most economical, one that saves the most valuable live (the young for instance)” (5). This same principle can be applied to both Klara’s art project and the baseball since the value of the objects is decided by interpretation based on personal guidelines and rules. The potential Klara sees in the abandoned B52’s is not shared by for example the department of defence, who assess them as nothing more than scrap metal.

All three novels present waste as a result of consumption. The three different forms waste can take are physical garbage, such as in Underworld, pollution, such as in White Noise, and the human rejects, as in Cosmopolis. While not all forms are equally represented in all novels, the point that DeLillo is making, namely that the
waste of postmodernity is omnipresent in society, is loud and clear. I have shown how this notion is presented in the novels, how it is connected to postmodernity, and how it can be interpreted in the context of present day Western society.

The parallels between the fictional societies and situations and the real world show a progression of postmodernity. Although presented at times in a comical and satirical manner, certain developments in DeLillo’s fictional society can be seen taking place in the real world at a later stage. The examples I used regarding Chernobyl and Real Bronx Tours are only a start and as postmodernity progresses, its effects on society increases. This is visible not only in the individual novels, but also when considering their chronology as from White Noise to Underworld to Cosmopolis a growing gap between the rich and the poor can been witnessed.
Conclusion

I set out on this journey through Don DeLillo’s novels in order to examine the representation of postmodern society and its connection to contemporary society, aiming to demonstrate the progression of postmodernity over time in the novels and parallel this progression to the real world. Based on my analysis, I draw the following conclusions.

DeLillo’s interpretation and depiction of progressing consumer society and postmodernity accurately reflect the social developments taking place over the past two decades. In this sense, his writings can be interpreted as the first phase of the image: a good reflection of reality. The society that DeLillo depicts appears to be that of what society will be like if the it is allowed to continue developing the way it is at the time of writing. This can be drawn from both the use of satire as a tool for social criticism, and the literal development of society in the years following the publications. Consider for example how White Noise was published in the middle of the nineteen eighties, but large scale public awareness regarding the problem of global warming and the unknown impact of postmodernity on the environment did not really arise until the late eighties and early nineties. In that sense, Cosmopolis would be the most interesting and relevant novel to consider as it was published the most recent of the three. The implosion of the international financial markets depicted in the novel, has since in fact happened on a global scale resulting in a recession that many countries are still struggling to overcome. The global outrage over the greed, self-enrichment, and complete lack of empathy for other people in society displayed by the bankers, hedge fund managers, and stockbrokers who brought about the collapse of the financial system in 2007, and the resulting Occupy Wall Street movement, can be viewed on miniature scale in Cosmopolis’s anti-
globalization protest. Not to mention the fact that the characteristics I just listed have Eric Packer written all over them.

DeLillo deals merely in reflections, not in solutions. His writings are observations, as he himself has stated in an interview: “This is the shape my books take because it is the reality I see” (DeCurtis 66). The illustration of how society will develop if postmodernity is allowed to run its course without any interference would qualify DeLillo’s works as dystopian. However, his characters’ lack of insight into what is happening, why it is happening, and how and why the situation should change make this qualification incorrect. In short, his works lack the hero protagonist who questions the status quo and initiates action to change life for the better to be proper dystopian fiction. While all three novels contain indisputably dystopian elements, Underworld in particular breathes an almost apocalyptic atmosphere, DeLillo does not indicate what should change, nor how or why. He suffices in painting a picture of society as he thinks it will develop based on the contemporary situation. By using exaggeration and satire to raise awareness he does not completely refrain from social criticism, but at no point does this become the main concern of any of the novels.

While the novels are set in American society, the developments foreshadowed apply to the whole of the Western capitalist world. The liberty which America has granted to free market economy and postmodernity is unmatched by any other Western country. This does however not mean that the development of society in developed countries other than the USA will significantly differ from how it is portrayed in the novels. The pace with which this progression takes place may be different and so may its scope, but eventually the consequences remain the same because they are the result of postmodernity and the principles of free market economy, not of being American.
The future is not set in stone. For all its predictive qualities, DeLillo’s fiction is still that: fiction. The heyday of postmodern theory has come and gone and it is in need of an update, especially considering the technological advancement of the past ten years. On that same token the question could be posed that if postmodernity is the latest phase of the development of capitalism, when does it end? When does capitalism stop being capitalism and become something else, or when is it ‘done’ developing? It is possible that we are headed towards a future as foreseen by Eric Packer involving cyber capital and immortality through digital lives. To a certain extent, the internet has already brought us halfway there in a mere decade. On the other hand, however controversial and disputed it may be, the enactment of ObamaCare essentially marks the return of the welfare state. This would imply a development in the opposite direction. What I mean to say is that although I have shown the progression of postmodernity and its consequences on society and people both in DeLillo’s fictional world and the real contemporary one, there is no telling how this process will continue.
Works Cited


