Trauma, Paranoia, and Ecological Fantasy in
Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*: Toward a
Psychoanalytic Ethics of Waste

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Abstract

Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997) depicts contemporary American realities across a span from the 1950s to 1990s. The novel’s narrative, however expansive and digressive, consistently develops around waste and trauma. This paper, in the light of Lacanian/Žižekian psychoanalytic theory, looks at waste/trauma not as a fully present object of the novel’s representation but as an excess, a remainder of Cold-War politics and capitalist industrial-military modes of production, and more significantly, the object *a* that arouses the subject’s fascination and fear at the same time. Such an understanding especially pertains to the novel’s protagonist, Nick Shay. Further, the novel narrativizes the paranoid-conspiratorial belief that “everything is connected” and that there are always larger forces beyond the subject. This paper will also examine such an ideological contradiction and work out an ethics, both psychoanalytic and ecological, that departs from political and moral sentimentalism, from cynicism and apathy, and sees in waste something more than danger, threat, or even doom. This paper, then, aims at the possibility of working through ecological fantasy toward a psychoanalytic ethics of waste.

Keywords

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

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1 This paper is a partial fulfillment of my NSC research project “Paranoia and Conspiracy in Postmodern Society of Enjoyment” (2007-08) (NSC 96-2411-H032- 008)
Reading the above two quotes together, we cannot help noticing their uncanny, frighteningly coincidental correspondence: shit or, more generally, waste in DeLillo’s Underworld fits in Žižek’s elaborations of the Lacanian Real, something that is fully immanent to the symbolic order but “eludes naming” or resists symbolization. Does waste not thus acquire the status of the extimacy, the alien kernel to our existence, society or even civilization, something that we produce, bury, recycle, and abject, but something that always deviates from our technological, epistemological domestication? By means of a critical reading of DeLillo’s Underworld, this paper argues that if an ethics of waste is possible, it must be grounded in the psychoanalytic conception of the Real: hence, a psychoanalytic ethics of waste that places upon us the encounter with the Real as an ethical necessity, registers the impossibility of full symbolization and breaks with the ecological ideology of recycling, sublimation of waste and Nature as a balanced system.

DeLillo’s fiction is often labeled as “postmodernist” for its representation of the predominance of the spectacle and commodity and the consequent decline of historical consciousness (Osteen 2). His characters are Individuals who are circumscribed by complicatedly interconnected global systems beyond their reach and comprehension. In spite of their paranoid suspicion that totalized explanations and interpretations may be ultimately futile, however, they also yearn for religious, spiritual transcendence over contemporary immanent techno-cultural realities of spectacle and commodity (Coale 2, 91, 97). In other words, to what extent a postmodernist reading of DeLillo’s fiction sustains and how it distinguishes itself from other postmodernist fictions remain to be clarified. For example, placing the focus on environmental consciousness, we may see DeLillo’s departure from the
typical postmodern conception of “the end of Nature” (Martucci 10-12), one among
the many postmodern death announcements including the end or death of body,
subject, nation state, ideology . . . and so on, as Nature as such is believed to be
replaced by technological reproduction and simulation. The possibility that
prelapsarian, Eden-like Nature may be unmasked as ideological mystification
problematises Nature as a conceptual and experiential category but does not explain
away its irrelevance in DeLillo as well as in today’s ecological discourse.

Cynthia Deitering in her essay “The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness
in Fiction of the 1980s,” a milestone in eco-literary study, positions DeLillo among
the novelists since the 1980s characterized with “toxic consciousness,” which
“[offers] insight into a culture’s shifting relation to nature and to the environment at
a time when the imminence of ecological collapse was, and is, part of the public
mind and of individual imaginations” (196). According to Deitering, novels
including Saul Bellow’s The Dean’s December, John Cheever’s Oh What a
Paradise It Seems, John Gardner’s Mickelsson’s Ghosts, Don DeLillo’s White Noise,
Walker Percy’s The Thanatos Syndrome, Paul Theroux’s O-Zone, T. Coraghessan
Boyle’s World’s End, Richard Russo’s Mohawk, and Margaret Atwood’s The
Handmaid’s Tale (196-97) provide representations of individuals’ complicity in the
postindustrial, postnatural culture, nation and ecosystem that are defined by waste
and pollution, and, with ethical and political critique in view, “raise the
environmental consciousness of the society that sees itself in the mirror” (202).

Drawing on Lawrence Buell’s Writing for an Endangered World (2002), Elise A.
Martucci coins the term “the environmental unconscious” to designate the
impossibility and potentiality in representing Nature as culturally constructed in
DeLillo through the images of garbage and toxicity. Although using terminology
different from Deitering’s, Martucci also points to the “molecular transformation of
the environment” as a central motif in DeLillo’s fiction after the ’80s, which
subverts the American pastoral or idyllic image of Nature (19).

Our understanding of the central position of waste in Underworld can be
distinctly delimited within the literary and socio-cultural context as depicted above. Underworld depicts contemporary American realities across the span from the
1950s to 1990s; it “encompasses some five decades of history, both the hard, bright
world of public events and the more subterranean world of private emotions in
which individuals are connected by a secret calculus of hope and loss” (Kakutani
para. 2). However expansive and digressive, the novel’s narrative consistently
develops in the background of ubiquitous but interconnected waste of various kinds:
nuclear waste, disused arms, architectural ruins, urban slums, household garbage,
etc. In addition to the paranoid, public, macrocosmic American Cold-War history, of which the connection of waste and weapons functions as the major organizational principle, we also see in the underworld of the novel the shared traumatic sense of insecurity, confusion, alienation, dread, and loss (Osteen 216). In fact, the novel’s narrative connects everything and moves in the tension between the apocalyptic completion of American collective history and identity (especially in Prologue) and the distant, alienated otherness within individuals’ “small” history of ordinary life (Boxall 192). In this aspect, the novel’s narrative through its backward-running structure registers the belated devastating, traumatic physical and psychological effects of Cold-War paranoid mentality and the proliferation of weapons and waste or, put in properly psychoanalytic terms, “the ‘residue’ of the real in the cultural unconscious” (Wilcox 122): trauma is always beyond words, unable to be totalized; it is a kind of residue, surplus and, hence, waste of the symbolic order.

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

Set on Oct. 3, 1951, the Giants-Dodgers ballgame in the Prologue testifies to the fact that American collective identity and history are developed, or imagined, under the threatening shadow of Cold-War politics, as can be seen from the title “The Triumph of Death.” The whole novel begins with detailed descriptions of the history-making game that brings together such VIPs as Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, Toots Shor and, more significantly, Edgar Hoover, and embodies “longing on a large scale” (Underworld 11). The crowd at the ballgame is described as a kinesthetic collectivity with the power that “will make something happen, change the structure of the game and get them leaping to their feet, flying up together in a free thunder that shakes the place crazy” (19). The crowd’s allegedly “unmediated” participation in the game, however, has its uncanny, spectral doubles that support and undermine American identity and history in the making at the same time. Russ Hodges, the live reporter of the game, confesses that he has spent years in the studio recreating big league games or, in his own terms, doing “ghost games,” which are equal to simulating, fictionalizing immediate experience, for those who are connected to the games through radio. Even Brian Glassic’s nostalgic recall of the game that people rushed outside and wanted to be together when Thomson hit the homerun (94) does not dispense with the simulation, fictionalization of experience, identity and history always already there. And one truth about the Giants-Dodgers game, which is not revealed until decades later, is that the Polo Grounds on the day of the game is not actually “crowded”: many people stay home for fear of nuclear disasters in public gathering (171). In fact, such paranoid fear persists through the whole game owing to Edgar Hoover’s presence. For Hoover, American identity is formed not so much by common language, climate, popular songs, breakfast foods, jokes and cars as by the threats of destruction or the strength of the enemy (28). Hoover’s paranoid-conspiratorial perspective, however, should not be downplayed as individual psychopathology; it characteristically manifests American politics of fear in the 1950s and 60s, as can be corroborated by Klara’s nostalgic reminiscence in 1992:

Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all

References to Underworld will hereafter be directly indicated by page number in parenthesis.
those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction. (76)

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

The recession of paranoid fear of invasion and destruction, with its residual, traumatic effects, corresponds to the transformation of political, techno-cultural realities and, of course, paranoid-conspiratorial thinking in contemporary America. Peter Knight in his *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to The X Files* (2000) and other essays with similar concerns terms the transformation at issue here as “insecure paranoia,” in contrast to “secure paranoia” (especially pertaining to Cold-War politics). Knight’s distinction, however, symptomatically manifests the
controversies over applying the term “paranoia” and the relevance or irrelevance of its psychoanalytic clinical origin to cultural, political analysis. To fully engage in those controversies is beyond the scope of this article, but some clarifications at this point may help to illuminate what follows. Even in the clinical situation, paranoia is never “secure” and free of tension and ambivalence, and the differentiation of the normal and pathological looks “insecure.” For example, in some parts of his reading of Paul Schreber’s case history of paranoia,3 Freud admires Schreber’s good personality traits including his good memory and sound judgment. Although Schreber is suspicious of the realities he is living in, he is certain of his direct communication with God: hence, the paradox of doubt and certainty. Schreber withdraws from external realities and regresses into his hallucinatory world, and he imagines the plot of the apocalyptic destruction of the world, so we see in his case the paradox of regression and aggression, since no other fantasy can be more aggressive than the fantasy of the end of the world. Put in more explicit terms, Freud’s reading of Schreber’s case does not limit paranoia to individual pathology but relates it to unconscious mechanism per se. Later, Lacan broaches how paranoia functions through “foreclosure,” the radical rejection of the Name-of-the-Father, and identification with imaginary others and, therefore, lays a more philosophical grounding for “paranoia” than its purely clinical assessment.

My application of psychoanalytic theory in this essay has two politicizing concerns. On the one hand, I take issue with the stereotypical reproach against applying psychoanalysis, as is often misconstrued as concerning nothing but individual trauma or as pathologizing, even demonizing its objects of study,4 to socio-ideological processes; I demonstrate how it is not only possible but necessary to extend psychoanalytic framework from its clinical context to ethico-political and cultural thinking. On the other hand, rather than reducing paranoia to its psychotic


4 The stereotypical reproach in question may go as follows:

The problem of a purely psychoanalytic approach is that it would posit [the interpretive desire of conspiracy theory] as simply symptomatic of some greater individual trauma: the subject does not know what it wants, but the cause of this ignorance and the resulting pathologies can be found by the analyst and theorist. (Fenster 93)

For critical responses to the reproaches in the same vein, see my “Conspiracy and Paranoid-Cynical Subjectivity in the Society of Enjoyment: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Ideology.” For publication data, see Works Cited.
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extreme, I explore the significant possibility of applying paranoia as a fantasy framework that covers antagonisms and traumas on both the individual and collective levels and displaces them to others, but what are repressed and displaced, always return with ambivalence or contradiction and disrupt our sense of reality. Certain exemplifications will suffice at this point. In political paranoia, for example, Richard Hofstadter’s essay on “the paranoid style in American politics” has been widely criticized for the term “paranoid style,” which is manifested in distorted rhetoric, taste and judgment, and converts concrete issues into ideological contentions with moral and emotional charges, turns out to be a functional label that he ascribes to those who stand on the political stance incompatible with or opposite to his own. However, the basic elements of political paranoia he abstracts, including the vast conspiracy that threatens to destroy our ways of life, apocalyptic life and death struggles, and more crucially, the figure of the Enemy which arouses fear but at the same time embodies a society’s internal antagonism, are all tainted with ambivalence, as can be elaborated in light of Žižek’s theory of “theft of enjoyment”: we imagine that there is a precious essence in our way of life—more accurately put in Žižek’s terms, a Nation-Thing that is known and possessed by us only—but at the same time, we imagine that such a Nation-Thing is to be taken away by the Other (Tarrying 201). Therefore, every encounter with our political or ethnic Other always involves struggle for the enjoyment which always derails our life and is always unbalanced, traumatic to us. Theft of enjoyment, however, is not limited to ethnic, national antagonism; it has permeated our daily multicultural life or so-called permissive “society of enjoyment,” an issue that preoccupies Žižek’s work in the last decade. It is also in such culture of excess that I address a “conspiracy culture” in this essay.

Though with their own particular approaches and concerns, critics of contemporary conspiracy culture such as Peter Knight, Mark Fenster and Michael Barkum commonly address the ubiquity of conspiracy theories in politics, literature, entertainment, media, spirituality, and so on. These various conspiracy theories, which cover a wide range of topics and scenarios from the WTO and terrorism to immigrants and contaminated food, never cease to affect us with the paranoid anxiety that realities are not what they appear to be, and hidden agendas, dark plots, threat and danger are all around us but beyond our control. Events like J. F. Kennedy’s assassination and the attacks of September 11, 2001 are elevated to the

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5 Michael Barkun’s enumeration of the conspiratorial reports on the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 succinctly exemplifies my point here:
status of, in Lacanian terms, the traumatic kernel of the Real, around which paranoid-conspiratorial narratives circle; and the acts of remembering or writing these events generate excessive enjoyment. However, it is misleading to posit any direct causality between trauma as such and conspiracy theory. The argument here concerns not so much the accuracy or inaccuracy of historical descriptions as a proper understanding that trauma qua the Lacanian Real is always retroactively (re)constructed, signified or fantasized, but disrupts the symbolizing process, fantasmatic framework, and causal link. Under such formulations, conspiracy theory functions as the ideological text proper that registers its failures, traumatic disruption in advance. Besides, the causality in question is symptomatic of the resistance to interpreting the complex realities of, say, hegemony of mass communications and consumption, pervasive political disillusionment, new multicultural and global orders, and so on. Grand theories now are allegedly replaced by theories of complexity and chaos, which take on the impossible task of describing the complex systems with emergence, distribution, decentralization and self-organization as their functional principles and with consequences unable to be totalized and fully predicted; such systems, as can be located in human behaviors, social organization, genetic structure, artificial life, cyberspace, and so on, have impacts on our notions of causality, agency and control (Knight 213-15). In such contexts, where DeLillo’s Underworld should be positioned, paranoia and conspiracy theories can be read as the provisional form of representation and strategic gesture in response to the complex, unstable realities and identities and the loss of grand narratives in the age of global capitalism: hence, the pervasive circulation of stories of control, surveillance, viral infection, and so on (Knight 209-12).

In Underworld, as can be seen from Klara’s and Brian’s nostalgic perspectives, “secure,” Cold-War paranoia, on the one hand, offers comforting solidarity or functions as a defense mentality against complex techno-cultural realities, but, on the other hand, leaves indelible traumatic effects in both individual and national terms (Knight 229), with which most characters in the novel never cease to struggle among them were that Nostradamus had foretold the attacks; that a UFO had happened near one of the World Trade Center towers just as a plane crashed into it; that the attacks had been planned by a secret society called the Illuminati; that U.S. president George W. Bush and British prime minister Tony Blair had advance knowledge of the attacks; and that the attacks signaled the coming of the millennial end-times prophesied in the Bible. (1-2)

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

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

“Jimmy,” as a signifier devoid of the anchor in any signified, embodies trauma as such: it irrupts in unexpected moments but is never fully symbolized, integrated into the narrative of the novel, and, accordingly, retroactively connects everything in a disjunctive, non-totalized way. Nick’s paranoid-conspiratorial

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7 Before Marvin Lundy, the ball is possessed by Juddy Rauch, who purchases the ball from Charles Wainwright, who buys the history-making ball from Cotter’s father, Manx Martin. Nick becomes the final owner of the ball after paying US$34,500.
fantasy, in other words, circles around but never reaches such an absent, unrepresentable traumatic kernel. It is at this point that we can perceive the doubling between the hyperlinked, uncanny—conveniently conceived as “what should be concealed but is revealed”—nature of the trauma in question and Sister Edgar’s perception of the complex system of cyberspace, which is no less paranoid than Nick’s conspiracy theory: “There is no space or time out here, or in here, or wherever she is. There are only connections. Everything is connected. All human knowledge fathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password—world without end, amen” (825). Both Nick and Sister Edgar, as well as most characters in Underworld, posit and cling to the paranoid suspicion and belief that “everything is connected” because it is impossible to be grasped as a verifiable fact: such impossibility constitutes the (psychical, techno-cultural) Real that sustains but at the same time undermines their identities, understanding of knowledge, and sense of reality, all of which no longer remain confined within the Cold-War paranoid politics of fear and divide between “Us” and “Them.” Ultimately, what they posit through their paranoid-conspiratorial fantasy is nothing less than, in Lacanian terms, “the Other of the Other,” the impossible full knowledge of the complex techno-cultural system as a whole, in order to sustain a place for desiring (McGowan 133). Their suspicion and uncertainty turn out to be part of their postmodern routinized, ritualized cynical survival gesture and strategy par excellence, which, as we are justified to suspect in our turn, are likely to “[become] complicit with the situation that they sought to reject” (McGowan 134) and “leave intact the universe of global capitalism” (McGowan 140). Their work of “waste management,” in one word, does not change “the very parameters of what is considered ‘possible’ in the existing constellation” (Žižek, Ticklish 199) and, therefore, fails to accomplish the authentic ethical act, according to psychoanalytic ethics.8

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8 Besides Žižek and McGowan as cited here, Timothy Bewes also conceptualizes cynicism in relation to global capitalism, postmodern culture of fetishism and, more significant, “impoverishment of the political processes, where political is increasingly replaced by “an ethos of supply and demand” and becomes a “realm of consumer sovereignty” (3). Contemporary critiques of cynicism, to a great extent, are illuminated by Peter Sloterdijk’s Critique of Cynical Reason (1987). For more detailed discussions of the ideological contradictions of cynicism, see my “Conspiracy and Paranoid-Cynical Subjectivity in the Society of Enjoyment: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Ideology.”
Waste and Culture of Excess

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

[C]ities rose on garbage, inch by inch, gaining elevation through the decades as buried debris increased. Garbage always got layered over or pushed to the edges. . . . But it had its own momentum. It pushed back. It pushed into every space available, dictating construction patterns and altering systems of ritual. And it produced rats and paranoia. People were compelled to develop an organized response. . . . Civilization is built, history is driven . . . . (287)

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

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

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

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

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

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

What understanding do the above digressive theoretical argumentations lead to, if not that of waste, both in the novel and contemporary ecological discourse, as a problem of desire, fantasy, enjoyment and encounter with the Other? The proliferation of waste does not constitute an ecological crisis in itself; it must be understood in relation to the fantasy or mode of desire in the age of globalization when, as Nick describes in Epilogue, all solid, rigid (geographical, temporal, national, cultural and ideological) boundaries are dissolved, the principle of hyper-connectivity prevails, while even people’s leisure and unconscious are penetrated by the converging force of markets (785-86). Put in Lacanian terms, contemporary world as depicted in Underworld suffers from the lack of lack—the Lacanian definition of anxiety proper—and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of desiring under the impact of the overproximity of the Other or too much libidinal attachment to the Other’s enjoyment, rather than the “growing lack of interest in and connection with the Other” as McGowan claims (127). Therefore, the site of lack, the object a, must be recreated to guarantee the minimal consistency of the subject’s being. Is the Thomson baseball not a piece of shit raised to the status of the object a, the sublime, fetish object in ideological field, as its value leaps from US$23 to US$34,500, the price Nick pays? The Thomson baseball qua the object a represents to Nick what it fails to represent. As Nick reveals, “It’s about the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss. I don’t know. I keep saying I don’t know and I don’t. But it’s the only thing in my life that I absolutely had to own” (97). In other words, it is a leftover, excess of the game, a witness to his traumatic memories (of his father’s disappearance, affair with Klara, and murder of George) and American post-Cold War history. The ball seems to connect Nick to his past, as well as the collective experience and identity, but always bespeaks missing parts and links to him (Osteen 233). It is, however, such lack of connection that sustains the minimal consistency of his life.

Both literally and symbolically, Nick’s life is built on waste: hence, the significance of waste management as both his work and life that connects personal and collective traumatic memories. It is also in Nick that we see the convergence of individual’s waste management and capitalist modes of production and reproduction. Growing up in the shadow of nuclear destruction, loss of the father, sex with the

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* For the paradoxical nature and vicious circle of the superego, also see Huang, Horror and Evil in the Name of Enjoyment 85-87.
wife of his brother’s teacher and accidental shooting of a good friend, Nick continuously, obsessively struggles with but does not succeed in domesticating, rationalizing the threats of existential lack and extinction in both physical and spiritual sense. The novel’s Part One begins with Nick’s meeting with Klara in the desert four decades after the “primal scene” and, through backward-moving narrative, returns to the day he shoots George in the last chapter. When the narrative moves back to the present in 1990s in Epilogue, however, Nick’s confession of his longing seems to problematize our evaluation of his “waste management”:

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

Such nostalgic sentiment, to a great extent, negates his spontaneous determination to meet Klara again and to “discharge the debt to memory” (64). The negation and psychical ambivalence at work here show that he is still struggling to come to terms with all the traumatic residues of his earlier life. What his work and life of waste management ends up with, therefore, may not be explained away as downright failure. Or more accurately, it is exactly the detouring itinerary of failures that sustains his desire, as already verified by his earlier recognition of “a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach” (803). At this point, we encounter the logic of negation of negation again: first, we encounter some traumatic loss or failure that disrupts the consistency of our life and escapes symbolization; then, in the second negation, we are compelled to recognize that those excess, residues or remainders of the Real turn out to be the supports of the minimal consistency of our life. Is the “minimal consistency” in question not exactly what enjoyment is all about? Nick’s, and other characters’ as well, compulsive repetition of and return to the traumatic points, around which the novel’s narrative circles through metonymic chain of associations, does not merely suggest “a mental block, a failure of the imagination, an aporia in representation . . . an absence that cannot produce itself except by repetition,” as Wilcox claims (125). The traumatized subject’s acting-out of symptomatic compulsion to repeat is already a way of bypassing mental block, failure and aporia or avoiding the encounter with the Real; it embodies the message to the Other and, of course,
surplus enjoyment in serving and being traumatized by the Other. It is for these reasons that Nick’s waste management does not accomplish the authentic ethical act which, from psychoanalytic ethical perspectives, demands a task of identifying with the symptom that is equal to “recogniz[ing] in the ‘excess,’ in the disruptions of the ‘normal’ way of things, the key offering us access to its true functioning” (Žižek, *Sublime* 128), readjusting our distance toward enjoyment and maintaining a certain breathing space from the Other. In fact, the enlightenment Brian feels when looking at the Fresh Kills landfill already paves the way to our ethical understanding of waste management at issue here: waste management concerns humans’ behavior, habits, impulses, uncontrollable needs, innocent wishes, passions, excesses, indulgences, kindness, generosity, and so on—simply put in psychoanalytic terms, desire, fantasy and enjoyment—and “the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us” (184). Does Nick’s case not synecdochically represent the general difficulty of desiring in the society of enjoyment as delineated above, the difficulty as the consequence to the compulsive repetition and, hence, enjoyment of traumatic memories, since enjoyment is always repetitious and traumatic in nature, something that sustains our life but can never really be claimed as ours?

Waste management as the central preoccupation of *Underworld* undoubtedly includes artistic creation in response to the proliferation of military and commercial waste in the post-Cold War environment and global capitalism. Works such as Klara Sax’s repainted B-52s, Sabato Rodia’s Watts Towers, and the Wall, an urban debris “designed” by Ismael and Muñoz and his crews, take various types of waste as backgrounds and materials: deactivated bomb heads and aircrafts, geographical and architectural ruins, steel rods, pebbles, seashells, vandalized car bodies, and whatever thinkable or unthinkable dumped objects. Critics, though from different perspectives, tend to think together the processing, recycling, and sublimation of waste at work in these works and argue for the political protest or spiritual redemption that DeLillo claim through *Underworld*. For example, Mark Osteen holds the perspective that “[t]hese works—salvage operations, recycling projects—redeem and transmogrify the refuse of consumerism and the Cold War. DeLillo offers *Underworld* as a similar act of resistance and redemption, submerging us in the culture of weapons and waste so that we may reemerge transformed” (216); he highlights “the uncontainability of human aspiration” (245) and “phoenix-like resurrection out of the ashes of capital” (254) as the most politically active messages of the novel. From such perspectives, not only new connections are made out of the fragments of postmodern wasteland, but also
human life-affirming expressiveness is celebrated and, ultimately, spiritual redemption can be realized.

The psychoanalytic ethical interpretation of *Underworld* this paper proposes opposes the redemptive effect of artistic creation, as well as all forms of transcendence and the balance, if there is any, between “spirituality and paranoia, the sense of connectedness and loneliness, and communication and silence” (Kavadlo 112); no order of balance, harmony or any other good can be and should be presumptively posited. Accordingly, this paper does not look at the Internet in the novel as “a vast embracing system that both grants transcendence from bothersome physical limitations and offers generous webbing of an immeasurable community, both long the privileges of the Christian afterlife” (Dewey 114). As commented previously in this paper, paranoid cynicism is likely to end up with leaving the status quo intact and becoming complicit with it. We must oppose all the perspectives that, knowingly or unknowingly, depoliticize waste management and artistic creation grounded in the principles of sublimation and transcendence, as both attest to the ideological function of the object a in commodity fetishism as elaborated previously. Nick’s intense mystic experience of exaltation when he sees a landfill under construction is juxtaposed with Jesse Detwiler’s vision that “the more toxic the waste, the greater the effort and expense a tourist will be willing to tolerate in order to visit the site” (286). Everywhere in the novel is waste, as well as waste recycling and management, elevated to the sublime, sacred Thing, but its transcendent, quasi-religious status outside of the commodification process is always a product of global capitalism (McGowan 136).

**Traversing Ecological Fantasy?**

*Underworld*, through its hypertextual narrative, depicts the contemporary American culture of excess, as is permeated with various kinds of commodity as waste, and vice versa, and nostalgic sentiment, paranoid-conspiratorial thinking and cynical self-irony. Characters’ various works of waste management in *Underworld*, put in psychoanalytic terms, disavow the irreducibility of waste, its status as the traumatic residues of Cold-War politics and global capitalism, the object a to the characters’ paranoid-conspiratorial fantasy framework. These works of waste management embody but do not radicalize, politicize ideological contradictions and, in the last analysis, remain bound with the status quo.

So, what ecological apocalypse can we discern in DeLillo’s *Underworld?* As shown in previous discussions of contemporary culture of excess, the drive to
(surplus) enjoyment and allowed transgression or, in Žižekian terms, the passion for the Real, deprives the Other of its Otherness and avoids the encounter with the Real—hence, keeps intact the fantasmatic framework and status—in responding to the anxiety engendered by the overproximity to the Other’s enjoyment. Within such a milieu, we are justified to suspect that today’s ecology based on apocalyptic visions or disastrous fantasy is an ecology of fear, which, as “the predominant form of ideology of global capitalism,” offers the masses a new opium in response to the declining religion and loss of transcendence (Žižek, *Defense* 439). The warning signals such as “what we produce will return to overwhelm, consume us” and “we are unable to contain waste; it contains us” as critics receive from *Underworld* are definitively not sophisticated enough. From Žižekian perspectives, reality is already on the side of fantasy; there is no sense of reality without its fantasmatic support. Any fundamental transformation of reality and power system, therefore, cannot be achieved without a radical dissolution of fantasmatic framework. The issue with which today’s authentically eco-ethical discourse should urgently engage is not so much what ecological crises or disasters are as how “realities” appear to us or how we imagine realities. Moreover, what lurks behind all the warning signals may be “a deep distrust of change, of development, of progress: every radical change can have the unintended consequence of triggering a catastrophe” (Žižek, *Defense* 439-40). This is the problem of contemporary culture of paranoia and conspiracy, which is saturated in an atmosphere of general cynical distrust, disillusionment, and apathy, and ends up with foreclosing impossible antagonisms and, hence, collective acts and fundamental social, political transformation. However, our psychoanalytic-ethical critique must go farther than merely exposing how fear as a human emotion is susceptible to ideological process, a lesson we have—have we?—learned from Franco Moretti’s 1982 study of the “sociology of modern monster,” “strategy of terror” and identity of fear and attraction. What if, from the Lacanian anamorphic perspective, the regressiveness and passivity that lie underneath the ecology of fear are aggression or violence in disguise? Do we not encounter in contemporary deconstructive ethics as well a similar ideological inversion or short circuit: our asymmetrical, non-reciprocal radical responsibility for the Other is symptomatic of our fear that each of our moves will harm the Other, a fear that disguises our self-privileging through the semblance of self-questioning? Does all this not pertain to “human-right politics of suffering Third World,” since only when human individuals are denied all their human rights, hence, reduced to Agambenian

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10 See Duvall 278 and Osteen 236.
homo sacer can they be elevated to the ideal bearers of human rights and sublime human essence (Žižek, *Parallax* 340-42)?

As the recognition of the non-existence of the Other—namely, there is no Other to answer our question of desire “Che vuoi?” and guarantee our being—is the aim of traversing the fantasy, what we need today may be an “ecology without Nature,” since Nature is always already a “second nature” supported by fantasy. To traverse ecological ideology, we need to understand that “the ultimate obstacle to protecting nature is the very notion of nature we rely on” (Žižek, *Defense* 445). In other words, nature as a domain of balanced functioning, development and reproduction with its own pattern of regular rhythms that is disturbed by humans’ overproduction and overconsumption is an outcome of ecological-ideological fantasy. Accordingly, we need to complete the gesture of negation of negation: nature, as well as the subject, is from its very beginning split in itself and never identical with itself. Such a task also requires us to desublimate such sublime objects of ideology as “nature,” “sustainability,” “harmony,” and so on: simply put, all the moral goods in ecology, which are always conceived within the existing parameters of what is possible, pleasurable or even useful and remain bound with the status quo. The psychoanalytic ethics of waste/trauma resists the will to recycling, sublimation and redemption of waste and does not anticipate any deeper meaning or moral good from catastrophic scenarios, actual, potential or illusory. What does traversing ecological fantasy lead to, if not accepting that “nature does not exist,” the fact of “the utter groundlessness of our existence” (Žižek, *Defense* 442)? Such recognition of the non-existence also designates the impossibility of synthesis between our ontic activities and ontological Nature-in-itself. And we are thus brought from “politics of fear” to “emancipatory politics of terror,” waken out of our postmodern self-ironical Last Man indulgence to the gap between the possible and impossible, the abyssal dispossessedness, and the radical, fundamental transformation of our enjoyment and socio-political structure.

Coda: To traverse ecological fantasy, we must be claimed by causal predictions and strategic considerations more than ever and carried to their deadlocks and be ready for the worst. Are we?

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