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Article

Local and Spectral Violence in Don DeLillo's Underworld

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THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN NOVELIST DON DELILLO'S *UNDERWORLD* (1996) offers insight into a transformation that took place in political understandings of violence at the end of the twentieth century. DeLillo's presentation of a shift in understandings of violence in the years after the Cold War is not focused on an 'end of history' but rather on the experience of a continued sense of violent threat during and after the source of that threat's dismantling. By proposing the concept of a 'spectre' of violence, I examine how DeLillo traces the epistemological and psychological fragmentation that results from the end of the Cold War into the behaviour and thought patterns of his characters, in which it emerges as a response to a trauma yet to be perpetrated. Alongside this attempt to elucidate the particular nuances of DeLillo's depiction of late twentieth century violence, I also consider the shift that takes place in DeLillo's own thought about the practice of writing at the end of this 'post-Cold War' period, with a particular focus on the relationship between these changes and the formal practice of listing that DeLillo employs in both his novel *Underworld* and his essay 'In the Ruins of the Future' (2001).

Recording the 'smaller objects and more marginal stories' is a necessity, DeLillo says in 'Ruins', as a way of beginning to map the 'massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable'.¹ The gathering of these 'smaller objects' into extensive lists is a technique that we see throughout his writing: 'Bridges, tunnels, scows, tugs, graving docks, container ships' all lead towards a gigantic waste site in *Underworld*,² and a longer list in 'Ruins' begins

‘The cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs [...]’.³ But DeLillo’s listing strategy is diversely employed and radically paratactical in *Underworld*, and even in ‘Ruins’, an essay which moves through time and space non-linearly, DeLillo’s lists become divergent and disordered. Cognitively mapping the ‘massive spectacle’ of modern industrial society in the wake of the collapse of the structural categories of the Cold War is the project of *Underworld*, but it is a project that presents itself as consciously incomplete, and aware of the evasive nature of the spectacle it is mapping. At the time DeLillo writes ‘Ruins’, a new urgency has emerged, and the project has become a political necessity with less room either for failure or experiment; or for concessions to poststructuralist uncertainties, even as those uncertainties manifest themselves in the essay’s form.

This indication of a pragmatic turn in DeLillo’s understanding of the use-value of writing is an expression of a radical shift in context. The ‘massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable’ that DeLillo is referring to in ‘Ruins’ is different to the Debordian ‘society of the spectacle’ that *Underworld* attempted to chart,⁴ in which violence is dispersed and unpredictable, blankly apolitical, and packaged as something between news and entertainment, as in the case of the ‘Texas Highway Killer’,⁵ whose murders play on repeat on the television screens of the characters of *Underworld*. ‘Ruins’, as its name suggests, is concerned with a related but fundamentally distinct spectacle: that of 9/11 and the collapse of the Twin Towers.

This new demand for purpose and direction, for the real, for use-value, and so for a kind of formal economy that is so antithetical to the 800-page project of *Underworld* is a product of a shift prompted by the September attacks which is nothing less than epistemological. ‘In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky’.⁶ In the months following the events, a spectre haunts the gap in the New York skyline. DeLillo’s essay suggests writing should take part in the process of deconstructing the singularity of that absence. Though grief and confusion dominate, even in the months after the events the collapse of the towers cannot be allowed to become a Derridean ‘transcendental signified’ that denies ‘counter-narratives’, because this is precisely the kind of totalising principle that motivated the attacks. The ‘something empty in the sky’ exerts a pressure precisely through the invasiveness of its absence, a vacancy that must be filled with the specific and local, with lists and stories, in order to prevent it from pretending to the transcendental or spectral.

The collapse of the two towers reduced them to a singularising pile of national rubble. *Underworld*, by contrast, seemed to be a novel that was consciously situated in the midst of an inverse process of dispersal that had resulted from another collapse, that of the Berlin Wall and the dialectical tensions of the Cold War. In the ‘long nineties’ that followed this first collapse,⁷ the power of American central government was no longer held together by the grand narrative of ‘Self versus Other’ that characterises the foundational principle of centralised national power. Yet important cultural elements of this national self-conceptualisation remained intact even after its mandate was diminished. The peculiarity of living within the structures and categories of a value system that has lost its referent – of living within a narrative structure in the process of its own deconstruction – is a traumatic experience that results in epistemological fragmentation for the characters of *Underworld*, and the acuity of DeLillo’s presentation of this trauma is part of the novel’s unique value as a perspective on a changing conception of violence at the end of the twentieth century.

Klara Sax, an artist who organises the painting of dozens of decommissioned B-52 Nuclear Bombers in *Underworld*, explains this referent as power itself:

Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us [...] Many things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck.⁸

The destabilisation of power is where violence emerges, or rather, where violence no longer appears to be indistinct from power. This is a distinction that Hannah Arendt insists upon, even when power and violence appear together. Violence ‘appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance. [...] Wherever they are combined, power, we have found, is the primary and predominant factor’.⁹ Klara Sax’s theory of power during the Cold War offers a model of violence in which isolated and geographically distant acts of violence are understood as manifestations of a singular, delocalised spectral ‘power’ in the process of stabilising itself through localised instances of violence. Without this central ‘power’, the power to assure mutual destruction, violence loses its consequential referent: ‘Violence is undone, violence is easier now, it’s uprooted, out of control, it has no measure anymore, it has no level of values’.¹⁰ In the post-war period violence appears to be purely local, as opposed to the spectral violence of the Cold War, which was always a manifestation of a spectre of violence that was non-localised and, crucially, delocalising, in that local events could only be understood by deriving their meaning from elsewhere. Without this hermeneutic framework, violence not only reveals itself as meaningless but also as irremediable, a threat to the past, present and foreseeable future beyond any individual act of violence itself.

Aside from the various forms of local violence that characterised the Cold War – the external violence of proxy wars fought against Soviet satellites and the internal violence committed by and against groups and individuals identified as ‘communist’, including the Weather Underground and the Black Panthers – the Cold War’s primary violence was the universal threat of the nuclear warhead. It is with this spectral form of violence that *Underworld* is most concerned. The basis of stability which Klara Sax identifies as peculiar to the Cold War was the dream of a perfect homogeneity of threat, a liberal equality of violence meted out as atomic annihilation without concern for ethnicity, class, or politics, while reinforcing and making primary the category of nationhood. Retelling his experience of an atomic bomb test, Louis T. Bakey concentrates on the homogenising nature of atomic violence and its specific rejection of racial distinctions – so significant to the violence of the war that preceded it – in the application of its godlike power: ‘I thought, because, being a black man, I would be harder to see through. But I saw right through my skin to my bones. This flash too bright to make racial niceties’.¹¹

This fantasy emerges in the fictional J. Edgar Hoover’s erotic fascination with the ‘Terror universal’ in the Bruegel painting *The Triumph of Death*,¹² a reproduction of which floats into him during the celebrations for the ‘shot heard round the world’.¹³ This ‘shot’, for Hoover, is both the local shot of the baseball game he is watching and the spectral shot of the first successful detonation of a nuclear weapon by the USSR, signalling the birth of an episteme that perfectly subsumes all local violence within a spectral form of violence: the perpetual threat of total nuclear annihilation.

Death elsewhere, Conflagration in many places, Terror universal, the crows, the ravens in silent glide, the raven perched on the white nag's rump, black and white forever, and he thinks of a lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb, and he can almost hear the wind blowing across the Central Asian steppes, out where the enemy lives.¹⁴

Precisely through the universality of 'Terror' in the painting, its counterpart 'Death' has to be 'elsewhere'. Edgar's charged response to the painting is a reaction to the new world of delocalised violence and the stability it brings with it: the wind of the steppes now blows into the baseball stadium as easily as the double-page reproduction of Bruegel torn from *Life* magazine blows into Edgar. The newly totalised form of violence, with its patent disregard for distance or ethnicity, causes the various spaces of the scene – the ballgame, the bomb test, Bruegel's hell – to irrupt into one another, delocalising them and tearing them from time. Their simultaneous presence represents a new totality of violence with an erotic power for Edgar which 'causes a bristling of his body hair'.¹⁵

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the nuclear warhead loses its ghostly power as the stable physical embodiment of violence, and the 'shot' that is 'heard round the world' is no longer a bat connecting with a baseball or the detonation of an atomic bomb, but the mode of framing in a lost Eisenstein film, *Unterwelt*.¹⁶ The temporally and geographically localised event of the 'shot' is substituted for the auratic spectre of the auteur filmmaker: an inferred and mobile presence whose 'shot' is not locatable in any particular moment, but rather is derived from the movement of frames and framings across a light that projects a spectacle of 'style' that is always located elsewhere. The spectre of violence is no longer capable of offering a central logic of violence that provides meaning to violent events; instead it prompts, like Eisenstein's lost film, an endless deferral of meaning. This deferral exerts a dispersive pressure on the episteme of the period as powerfully as the warhead had exerted an organising one.

This pressure causes instances of local violence to suddenly appear to the characters of *Underworld* to be catastrophically multiplicitous and diversified. 'The great Terror gone [...] All terror is local now',¹⁷ thinks Sister Edgar, despairing over the rape and murder of a young woman, in words redolent of her counterpart J. Edgar's erotic embrace of the 'Terror universal'. Non-ideological 'local' violence is somehow made more difficult to deal with by the absence of a 'great Terror' for the neurotic Sister Edgar. Throughout the post-war period in which *Underworld* sits, it is precisely the absence of a meta-narrative of violence around which to organise and classify all other forms of violence that traumatises the nation's subjects, resulting in a form of psychological violence enacted through a perpetual but endlessly deferred threat of violence to come.

Klara Sax succinctly delineates the effect of living with this deferral of meaning as the experience that 'We have a number of postwar conditions without a war having been fought'.¹⁸ Klara identifies a spectral vacancy at the core of the post-Cold War episteme that is echoed in the central cavities of the gutted nuclear bombers that her team are painting. The planes have been emptied of their symbolic power before Klara strips them out for saleable parts as the precise condition of her being allowed to do so. But Klara's process is, like DeLillo's, the maintenance of a material history that refuses the 'unmanageable' singularity of a purely symbolic history. Her fragmented words are the testing ground for DeLillo's clearer invocation to chart the 'smaller objects and more marginal stories' in 'Ruins': 'any technological culture, we feel

we mustn't be overwhelmed by it. Awe and terror, you know. Unconductive'.¹⁹ Her project is one of preservation, not of the bombers' symbolic power, but of their discrete materiality as historical objects: 'we are not going to let these great machines expire in a field or get sold as scrap'.²⁰ In order to do this in a society that has lost its referent and now only exists on the plain of the symbolic, she has to turn the planes into surfaces, gutting them and painting their outsides.

This flattening effect causes DeLillo's characters to become decreasingly capable of distinguishing between inside and outside, and their sense of the symbolic leaks out into the material world. They begin to identify the spectre of violence in everything from transport to waste heaps. Nick Shay's son is terrified that just thinking about the emergence of violence could cause its arrival:

My son used to believe that he could look at a plane in flight and make it explode in midair by simply thinking it. He believed, at thirteen, that the border between himself and the world was thin and porous enough to allow him to affect the course of events.²¹

For Shay's son, local instances of violence have never been given meaning as local manifestations of a spectral principle. Without the sense of such an organising spectral objective there can be no pattern, no Poisson distribution drawn from the data,²² capable of assigning meaning to violence. In this situation, the concept of a 'border' between one's imaginary and the symbolic becomes 'porous'; it is no longer intuitive but must be learned. Nick's son identifies 'an element of catastrophe tacit in the very fact of a flying object filled with people',²³ providing a phenomenology of the spectre that haunts the Icarian project of human technology. The plane, a technology that once carried the nation's warhead and exerted a stabilising force on violence, but which has now been reduced to the primary symbol of international commercial travel, constantly threatens to become violence's embodiment in its failure to delimit the conditions of violence. Technology's own seeming invulnerability is imbued with the auratic vulnerability of its subjects, a vulnerability so total that it seems to invite catastrophe: 'An aircraft in flight was a provocation too strong to ignore'.²⁴

DeLillo's lists themselves become porous as a result of this technological violence, diverging and leaking into secondary and tertiary lists and spaces. Visiting a waste facility, Brian Glassic has an erotic interaction with violence that updates J. Edgar Hoover's experience at the Ball Game for the post-war period, when in the midst of his triumphant listing ('Bridges, tunnels, scows [...]')²⁵ he glimpses a 'teal thing' that could be a 'bikini brief that belonged to a secretary from Queens'.²⁶ This 'teal thing' ruptures the original list, splitting off into a sub-list of commodities admired, bought and exchanged with an imaginary mistress, as well as her itemised attributes:

She is dark-eyed and reads the tabloids and paints her nails and eats lunch out of molded Styrofoam, and he gives her gifts and she gives him condoms, and it all ends up here, newsprint, emery boards, sexy underwear, coaxed into high relief by the rumbling dozers.²⁷

Glassic's erotic response to a shred of material in a mountain of waste fetishizes the shred, first as a commodity and then as the woman who would have worn it and with whom Glassic has an imaginary sexual relationship. This relationship of domination over waste, its shredding and erotic subjection, evokes the

spectre of violence involved in the social relations that produce these piles of waste, which contains within it the reification not only of the social relations of labour but the social relations of the commodity itself: once worn, once discarded, now reduced to a 'teal thing', to the unnameable abjection of 'merde'.²⁸ Glassic imagines that in the construction of the mountain of waste he is witnessing 'the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza [...] He found the sight inspiring'.²⁹ Where the construction of the pyramids was a form of violence against the slaves who built them, the violence of the waste mountain is virtual, residing only in the machine-driven process of creating the unmanageable singularity of a 'mountain of wrack' which obliterates the human relations that created the waste.³⁰ There is a 'poetic balance',³¹ it strikes Glassic, between the feminine mound of waste and the phallic towers of the World Trade Centre that are visible in the distance, a relationship that imbues both with a shared spectre of violent technological threat.

Underworld closes with an invocation that hopes for the vanquishing, finally, of the spectre that haunts post-Cold War American society: 'Peace'.³² DeLillo recognises the interconnectivity of the internet as a model for our understanding of ourselves as part of a global whole, for a stable structure based on co-existence rather than violence, and an indication of the possibilities for fostering peace that technology offers, not in an uncritical prostration to technology but rather as an advocacy of its potential as a democratising tool. DeLillo's presentation of the spectre of violence in the 'long nineties' as both radically dispersed – imbuing non-violent technology with an unnameable sense of threat – as well as silent – in its refusal to give meaning to the local or to provide a release for that perpetual sense of threat – indicates a neurotic elision of the trauma of Cold War threat with the uncertainty of the violence to come. DeLillo presents a pre-traumatic stress disorder which precluded the possibility of identifying the spectre of peace haunting those very technologies that appeared to be only machineries of domination and subjection.

The fin de siècle prescience of DeLillo's novel appears remarkable in the wake, four years after its publication, of the collapse of the Twin Towers. *Underworld* appears to have pre-emptively offered a vocabulary for understanding the inauguration of the new episteme of violence that the September 11 attacks provoked, for identifying the re-emergence of an organising principle of violence, and for understanding the abandonment of any project for peace in favour of the comforting re-centralisation of national power. In 'Ruins', published three months after the events, DeLillo immediately indicated a relationship between the two violent epistemes *Underworld* identified and the new episteme capable of citing them both: 'The Bush administration was feeling a nostalgia for the Cold War. This is over now'.³³

The events of September 11 represented an embodiment of violence more 'real' than the perpetual threat of violence during the Cold War ever became, in that it took place on home soil and so at once became local even as it inaugurated the spectral. Simultaneously, however, it has proved to be more symbolically arresting than anything the Cold War period ever presented, though the Cold War's related symbolic promise was that of the atomic bomb. Indeed, we may feel that the events derived some of their significance from their seeming citation of the atomic mushroom cloud – delocalised, redoubled and dispersed like the power it represented – haunting the images of the dust cloud that spread across New York in the wake of the collapse. It is hard not to surmise that the psychological, cultural and political significance of the event was somehow connected to its dialectical synthesis of the perpetual threat of

the Cold War with this new spectacular *image* of violence as ‘Terror’, a term that so easily slipped into the categories already forged during the Cold War.

The spectre of violence came to re-embody itself in a way that neither of the previous dis/embodiments of the spectre ever allowed. Its referent became both the simulacrum of the images and video of the Towers’ collapse and the physical embodiment of the ‘real’ violence perpetrated on the lungs, eyes, noses, faces, minds and bodies of the victims of the attacks; the internal violence that escaped symbolic representation and the violence against those buried in a heap of debris and waste of comparable dimensions to the ‘mountain of wrack’ that Brian Glassic visits.³⁴ The event has since been so significantly over-determined by its mediation that DeLillo predicts for ‘the next 50 years, people who were not in the area when the attacks occurred will claim to have been there [...] Others will claim to have lost friends or relatives, although they did not’.³⁵ Yet even if such over-mediation prompts us to question our ability any longer to discern the ‘real’ of this violence from the archive of the events, the significance of the symbolic aspect of the attacks enables an aporetic, spectral violence to occur and recur in a spectacular version of the ‘real’, perpetually feeding-back *images* of wounds and the wounded into the symbolic violence that inscribed them on the bodies of the victims initially. A certain ‘real’ is created in this destructive process of re-inscribing real violence back into the symbolic; a twisting of the language of the events back upon themselves in a process of re-traumatizing that is veiled by an attempt at therapeutic repetition.

We may read a premonition of this new violent episteme, so similar to that of the Cold War and yet so fundamentally distinct (in that it speaks not in the language of the communist Other but in the language of the spectacle itself), already manifested in *Underworld* in the image of the murdered girl that appears beneath the surface of a billboard as the light from an oncoming train passes through it. The spectral image of ‘Angel Esmeralda’ emerges from the past through a juice advertisement,³⁶ momentarily exposing the concealed connectedness of the violence and poverty that underscores plenty – of Agent Orange and orange juice – as light flashes upon it in a moment of danger.³⁷ This angelic apparition establishes a fragile community in the midst of a global system of weaponry and commodity exchange, positioning Sister Edgar and the accompanying crowd simultaneously within this system but also together, localised, momentarily capable of seizing hold of a memory of violence to protect them against its spectre. DeLillo’s depiction of the epistemo-psychological consequences of the spectre of violence, of the pressure violence exerts both before and after the fact, as well as the work that goes into its maintenance and shaping by political forces and acts of violence, offers an insight for contemporary understandings of the role of violence in a political episteme founded again upon terror, which may have taken a new dispersed, dramatic form appropriate to the shifts that have taken place in the intervening period, but which remains nonetheless spectral in that its threat is – from the perspective of the United States – totalised and indiscriminate. Hannah Arendt’s indictment of terror, not as the act of ‘terrorism’ but as what remains when consent and power vacate, is particularly potent today in our perpetual ‘state of exception’.³⁸

Terror is not the same as violence; it is, rather, the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate but, on the contrary, remains in full control. It has often been noticed that the effectiveness of terror depends almost entirely on the degree of social atomization.³⁹

DeLillo's project to map the 'unmanageable' as well as the call for a renewed search for 'Peace' which closes *Underworld* is a demand for resistance to such social atomisation, through the charting of the specific presence of violence at the very moment when it appears to be absent, a period which we know better than to call 'peacetime'.

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Notes

- 1 Don DeLillo, 'In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September', *Harper's Magazine*, December 2001, pp. 33-40 (p. 35). Hereafter abbreviated as 'Ruins'.
- 2 Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998), p. 184.
- 3 'Ruins', p. 35.
- 4 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).
- 5 *Underworld*, p. 118.
- 6 'Ruins', p. 39.
- 7 Philip E. Wegner, *Life between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
- 8 *Underworld*, p. 76.
- 9 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1970), pp. 56-57.
- 10 *Underworld*, p. 76.
- 11 *Underworld*, p. 614.
- 12 *Underworld*, p. 50.
- 13 *Underworld*, p. 95.
- 14 *Underworld*, p. 50.
- 15 *Underworld*, p. 50.
- 16 *Underworld*, p. 424.
- 17 *Underworld*, p. 816.
- 18 *Underworld*, pp. 69-70.
- 19 *Underworld*, pp. 70-71.
- 20 *Underworld*, p. 70.
- 21 *Underworld*, p. 88.
- 22 The idea of predicting the distribution of violence using the mathematical principle of a Poisson distribution is central to Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.
- 23 *Underworld*, p. 88.
- 24 *Underworld*, p. 88.
- 25 *Underworld*, p. 184.
- 26 *Underworld*, p. 185.
- 27 *Underworld*, p. 185.
- 28 *Underworld*, p. 77.
- 29 *Underworld*, p. 184.
- 30 *Underworld*, p. 185.
- 31 *Underworld*, p. 184.
- 32 *Underworld*, p. 827.
- 33 'Ruins', p. 34.
- 34 *Underworld*, p. 185.
- 35 'Ruins', p. 35.
- 36 Don DeLillo, *Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories* (London: Picador, 2011). Though not referred to as the 'Angel Esmeralda' in *Underworld*, the passage is developed from DeLillo's 1994 short story *Angel Esmeralda*, later collected in this volume of stories.
- 37 *Underworld*, p. 465. "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it "the way it really was." It means to seize hold of a memory, as it flashes up at a moment of danger', Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations* (London: Random House, 2011), p. 247.

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- ³⁸ See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- ³⁹ Arendt, p. 55.

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- , 'In the Ruins of the Future', *The Guardian*, 22 December 2001
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo>>
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