

Otmar Lichtenwörther

Don DeLillo's "Underworld": The artful
reality of simulacra

Diploma Thesis

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Bibliographic information published by the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de> .

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Imprint:

Copyright © 2002 GRIN Verlag
ISBN: 9783638307215

This book at GRIN:

<https://www.grin.com/document/29113>

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Don DeLillo's *Underworld*: The Artful Reality of
Simulacra

Diplomarbeit

zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades eines Magisters der Philosophie

an der Geisteswissenschaftlichen Fakultät
der Karl Franzens Universität Graz

vorgelegt von
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am Institut für Amerikanistik

Graz, 2002

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1. Introduction

1.1 Some Evidence of Don DeLillo's soon-to- be Canonical Status within the Academy

On 23 June 1999 Don DeLillo was awarded the Jerusalem Prize for his “unrelenting struggle against even the most sophisticated forms of repression of individual and public freedom during the last half century” (19th Jerusalem). He was the first American recipient of the award and joined “[a]n international group of distinguished novelists, playwrights, and philosophers that includes Bertrand Russell, Simone de Beauvoir, Jorge Luis Borges, Eugene Ionesco, V.S. Naipaul, Milan Kundera, and Mario Vargas Llosa.” (Duvall 563)¹

Moreover, *Modern Fiction Studies*, one of the most influential journals on contemporary literature, dedicated an entire special issue, *Modern Fiction Studies* 45.3 Fall 1999, to criticism on the work of Don DeLillo, an honor and privilege he only shared with Toni Morrison, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf in the 1990ies.

Finally, Don DeLillo received the 2000 William Dean Howells Medal for *Underworld*. “[T]he award [...] marks what the (American) Academy (of Arts and Letters) deems to be ‘the most distinguished work of American fiction published in the previous five years’.” (Duvall, 2002 77)

So much about the status quo of Don DeLillo and his works in the process of canonization.

On 11 September 2001 something completely different happened. We all know what I am talking about here. “It”, or the first big event promoting “[t]he radical uncertainty of the terrorism of micro-power”, the challenge “[o]f the always suspended fanaticism of technological holocaust by the fanaticism of religious zealotry.” (Kroker) did not only give terrorism a formerly unconceivable dimension—unconceivable, at

¹ Don DeLillo has also won the National Book Award (for *White Noise*), the Irish Times-Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize (for *Libra*) and the PEN/Faulkner Award (for *Mao II*).

least, on the level of flesh-and-blood and off-Hollywood reality—and shook the “New World Order” already right at the beginning of its very creation², but also strikes more than a chord if we regard some of the main themes of Don DeLillo’s writing³: e.g. the cultural and political state of “late capitalism” (to borrow Fredric Jameson’s much-quoted umbrella term) and the state of mind of individuals living in a late-capitalist society (keywords: postmodern subjectivity, decentered /fragmented self, alienation), the “[I]egitimacy of multinational capitalism and its manipulation of the image through media and advertising” (Duvall 563), terrorism, violence, the crowd, the spectacle (in Guy Debord’s sense), and the fragmentation of the grand narratives of history.

So it is no surprise that the Don DeLillo Society called for papers with the working title “Don DeLillo and Sept. 11th” to be presented at the MLA Annual Convention, New Orleans, LA on December 27-30, 2001.

1.2 Getting in Touch with Don DeLillo

It has been a long way from DeLillo’s early short-stories published in the beginning of the sixties and his first novel *Americana* (1971) and his current status as one of the great contemporary American writers, in a row with Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, William S. Burroughs, Ursula LeGuin, or Philip Roth, just to name a few.

² Of course, the “New World Order” was already a bit prematurely proclaimed by George Bush, the Elder in the early nineties. To quote Don DeLillo here:

“We’re in between two historical periods, the Cold War and whatever it is that follows it. I’m not sure that this is what follows it. This may just be the interim.” (qtd. in Knight 823)

³ You needn’t even read *Underworld* to see the connection. Just have a brief look on the novel’s front cover and you see what I mean. It is a stark and slightly blurred black-and-white photograph of—in the front—something looking like a church tower topped by a massive cross and in the center of the background the all-too-familiar twin construction circled by a black bird. Of course, I do not want to insinuate here that Don DeLillo actually is a writer in possession of supernatural faculties, but in the morning of 11 September 2001 a book cover that *had* already been highly loaded symbolically accumulated extra-meaning Don DeLillo, his publishing house, Scribner’s, and the rest of the civilized world would have been glad to do without. For more background information and comment on this spooky interrelationship see Duvall 2002, 51-52.

As a matter of fact, Don DeLillo's reputation grew rather slowly. Frank Lentricchia states that "[u]ntil the publication of *White Noise* in 1985 DeLillo was a pretty obscure object of acclaim, both in and out of the academy." (*Introducing* 1). Then *White Noise* won the American Book Award for 1985, and *Libra* (1988) even hit the best-seller list for several weeks during the summer of that year. *Mao II* followed in 1992 but it hadn't been until the publication of his opus magnum *Underworld* (1997) that Don DeLillo reached a really wide audience both in- and outside the USA.

One important reason why DeLillo's early novels remained "pretty obscure objects" for such a long time might be his tendency to mix ideas and stories in a way that, though his novels *seemed* to be written according to well-established genres like the thriller (*Running Dog*, *Players*), more often than not frustrated readers with rather traditional genre-oriented expectations. Or is it, as Tom LeClair has pointed out, the fact that "[m]ost of [...] DeLillo's novels promise like popular films and withdraw like serious novels; they adhere to a double-binding aesthetic, [...] a mixture of 'good company' and 'madness' " (LeClair, *Loop* 57), so that many readers were simply overtaxed. The following passage by Duglore Pizzini in a review of *Bluthunde* (*Running Dog*) in the Austrian quality paper *Die Presse* of 5 April 1999, published in the aftermath of *Underworld*'s success in its German translation and the book market's subsequent rush for translations of early DeLillo novels, shall briefly demonstrate how Don DeLillo can be read "alternatively". Here is the reviews concluding paragraph.

[A]m Ende eines Buches, das sich in seinen geglückten Passagen mit einem schwächeren Grisham vergleichen läßt, hat der gute Geheimdienstler ein Messer im Herzen, und der Film hält auch nicht, was er versprochen hat. Und selbst die attraktive Journalistin des Enthüllungsmagazins "Bluthunde", die nicht nur herausgefunden hat, daß sowjetische Parapsychologen die Fernermordung ihrer Gegner mittels Telepathie perfektionieren, sondern auch hinter dem Reichskanzleifilm her ist, kann dann die ganze wüste Story nicht mehr durchschauen. Dem Leser geht es wahrscheinlich nicht anders.⁴

⁴ I am not going to elaborate too much on this quote, because, firstly, the early novels of Don DeLillo are not subject of my paper and, secondly, a book review is after all just a book review and need not necessarily be an intellectual enterprise undertaken by a scholar being acquainted with the state of the

Don DeLillo's novels, from *Americana* (1971) to *The Body Artist* (2001) are difficult. Yet, they are not only difficult along the premises of a typical mainstream /off-mainstream binary. Even readers whose aesthetic and theoretical horizon is not limited by the rather tightly knit and stereotyped coordinates of mainstream literature *do* have their problems.

His novels come up in the guise of spy thrillers (see above), conspiracy thrillers (*Libra*), campus novels (*White Noise*), *Bildungsroman* / *Kuenstlerroman* (*Americana*), 'quest-tale meets expatriate novel' (*The Names*), science-fiction novels (*Ratner's Star*), and sports novels (*End Zone*, *Amazons*) only to subvert the reader expectations linked with the respective genres.

So far, so easy. Disregard of generic conventions or simulation of traditional stories / story elements is a feature that might place DeLillo in the postmodernist camp of literature. Yet, if we compare John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Ronald Sukenick to Don DeLillo, we may assume that in no way Don DeLillo is a postmodernist writer. At least, that was my first impression when I came across DeLillo almost five years ago. And in a way this assumption seems to be workable because, if we separate the concept of 'postmodernism' as a literary and critical practice in its own right, founded on an own aesthetic and philosophical basis from the much wider concept of 'postmodernism'⁵ as a contemporary cultural and social

art of high-brow literary theory, yet the mentioning of John Grisham should ring a bell. Grisham is employed for evaluative purposes here, for aesthetic judgment. How is this possible? Isn't perhaps, the "wide audience" DeLillo has reached with *Underworld* rather a marginal one compared to the audience of mega-selling mainstream authors like Grisham or Michael Crichton whose output, though more or less ridiculized or neglected by serious critics, forms popular consciousness to an extent even canonized authors like Pynchon, Morrison, or DeLillo can only dream of. This insight is, of course, no flash of genius, but should nonetheless be included in a discussion of Don DeLillo, at least in a footnote.

⁵I would have preferred to use the term 'postmodernity' here for the sake of clarity but the term 'postmodernism' is also used by most scholars to cover this aspect. For example, a recent discussion of *White Noise* starts like this: "[P]ostmodernism is not only the catch-all term that covers most of the events taking place in Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise* [...]" (Eid) Yet, the term 'postmodernity' can also be found, e.g. in John Duvall's criticism: [...]"Baudrillard's sense of postmodernity [...]" (Duvall,

phenomenon that was first observed in the sixties and has, on the one hand, produced a gigantic output of theory, and on the other, together with enormous technological progress, shaped the way we perceive our world and constitute ourselves in it, we might indeed come to the conclusion that Don DeLillo is not really a postmodernist writer.

Perhaps the major reason why DeLillo was so long ignored by the academy was that his work was in a way at odds with the dominant theoretical and critical discourse. Tom LeClair, in his introduction to *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1987), which among other things offers some insight into literary criticism in America in the seventies and eighties, even explicitly names the “enemy”.

In the criticism of contemporary fiction, Jerome Klinkowitz's *Literary Disruptions*, a book published in 1975 that has apparently influenced the selection and methods of many subsequent critics, is representative of academic values and methods. Grouping together writers of the late 1960s and 1970s who were self-consciously disrupting realistic conventions, Klinkowitz dismissed Barth and Pynchon as “regressive parodists,” elevated to academic status popular writers (Vonnegut, Brautigan, Barthelme, Kosinski), included writers such as Gass and Coover with some previous academic reputations, and introduced relatively unknown writers such as Gilbert Sorrentino, Ronald Sukenick, Raymond Federman, Steve Katz, and Clarence Major, most of whom would be associated with the Fiction Collective. While directing serious attention to several interesting writers, *Literary Disruptions* also introduced a number of problems into the criticism of contemporary fiction. Klinkowitz defined his group of postmodernists primarily in negative terms—how they deconstructed the conventions of 1950s realism, how they substituted fragmentation, play, and self-reflexivity for referentiality and a constructive engagement with the world. Because Klinkowitz's most important category was “the new,” he failed to draw the continuities of his writers with modernism and he failed to make aesthetic value judgments among the books of the postmoderns. These shortcomings of description, categorization, and evaluation, along with Klinkowitz's polemical hyperbole, would do much to identify American postmodern fiction as negative and reductive. Klinkowitz's version of postmodern fiction then became open to an equally one-sided

backlash of conservative, even premodernist, criticism in books such as John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* [...] (Loop 23)

Indeed, DeLillo's "referentiality and constructive engagement with the world" cancelled him from the list of writers worth closer academic examination for almost 20 years.

Yet DeLillo has always been highly interested in the state of contemporary culture *and* its theories. I would even suggest that he is obsessed with the symptoms of our postmodern world (see 1.1). Moreover, many aspects of DeLillo's novels *can* be, and, of course, have already been dissected along the premises of postmodern theory, most prominently exemplified in the work of French theorists like Jean Baudrillard, Jean François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, or Roland Barthes. Beside those philosophers satirized by Malcolm Bradbury as the "finest Gallic minds" [who] "probably started the whole Perrier revolution" (*Mensonge* 1 -2) Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, and—as a rather new turn in the DeLillo—exegesis—Slavoj Žižek⁶ come up again and again in criticism dealing with Don DeLillo.

Taking the premises mentioned above into consideration one might come up with a wide variety of assumptions, some of them even mutually exclusive. I am going to formulate at least some of them:

1. Don DeLillo is not a postmodernist writer.
2. Don DeLillo's novels are postmodern theory put into fictional practice.
3. (As a logical consequence of point 2) DeLillo embraces e.g. Baudrillard's radically skeptic view of the postmodern world where "[t]here is nothing outside of the play of simulations, no real in which a radical critique of the simulational society might be grounded." (Leonard Wilcox qtd. in Nel 749)
4. DeLillo (as another consequence of point 2) thinks that the breakdown of Lyotard's *grands récits*, i.e. 'master discourses' or

⁶ especially to be seen in the critical approaches of Patrick O'Donnell and Skip Willman