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# Establishing Historical Consciousness via the Historical Novel: Don DeLillo and His Epic Work *Underworld*

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**Abstract**

The objective of this article is to render several definitions of the concept of historical consciousness which, as a notion, is a relatively young concept since the early studies on this issue emerged during 1970s and the major breakthrough came at the beginning of the 21st century. Hence, in the light of the recent studies on the nature and significance of this concept and the vanishing boundary between history and fiction within the postmodern context, the role of the historical novel in the establishment process of the historical consciousness became evident. In this respect, Don DeLillo's historical novel *Underworld (1997)* that covers almost fifty years of the United Sates, is selected in order to exemplify how a fictional text can contribute to the historical consciousness of its reader. By recreating the atmosphere of the Cold War period, the author presents a multilayered portrayal of the second half of the 20th century with its political, cultural and social agenda.

**Keywords:** American history, American novel, historical consciousness, historical novel, Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, postmodernism

# Tarihi Roman Üzerinden Tarihsel Bilinç Oluşturmak: Don DeLillo ve Epik Eseri *Underworld*


## Öz

Bu makalenin amacı, üzerinde ilk çalışmaların 1970lerde başlayıp asıl ilerlemenin yirmi birinci yüzyılın başında olduğu ve henüz yeni bir kavram olan Tarihsel Bilinç kavramının farklı tanımlarını değerlendirmektir. Bu yüzden, son zamanlarda bu kavramın doğası, önemi ve postmodern bağlamda tarih ve kurgunun arasındaki sınırların ortadan kalkması üzerine yapılan çalışmalar ışığında tarihsel bilincin ortaya çıkması sürecinde tarihsel romanın önemi ön plana çıkmaktadır. Bu açıdan, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin neredeyse elli yıllık bir dönemini kapsayan Don DeLillo'nun *Underworld* (*Yeraltı*, 1997) adlı tarihsel romanı, kurgusal bir eserin okurunun tarihsel bilincine nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu göstermesi açısından seçilmiştir. Yazar, Soğuk Savaş dönemi ortamını tekrar canlandırarak, yirminci yüzyılın ikinci yarısını politik, kültürel ve sosyal gündemi ile açığa vuran çok katmanlı bir tasvirini yaratmıştır.


**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Amerikan tarihi, Amerikan romanı, tarihsel bilinç, tarihi roman, Don DeLillo, *Underworld***,** postmodernism

*It's a history they feel they're part of.*

-Don DeLillo, *Underworld*

Historical consciousness indicates a complicated and multilayered perspective. The Center for the Study of Historical Consciousness, established in 2001 at the University of British Columbia, defines the term as follows: "individual and collective understanding of the past, the cognitive and cultural factors which shape understandings, as well as the relations of historical understandings to those of the present and the future" (Seixas 10). In other words, historical consciousness serves as a kind of a compass for people to help them connect the past to the present and make sense of the actual agenda. Besides the link between the past and the present, it also connects us to the future by providing

specific "lessons" that can project the alternative events in the future. Hayden White, in one of his most prominent works *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, analyzes the evolution of historical understanding throughout the nineteenth century and states that "'History' was considered to be a specific mode of existence, 'historical consciousness' a distinctive mode of thought, and 'historical knowledge' an autonomous domain in the spectrum of the human and physical sciences" (1). Hence the author reveals the difference between these three concepts and provides a definition that stresses the major characteristic of the historical consciousness which is the "mode of thought," or in other words we may also define it as an intellectual competence.

Theodor Schieder, in "The Role of Historical Consciousness in Political Action", brings a definition of the concept formulated by Arnold Gehlen who says that historical consciousness is "the ability to recognize the epochal quality of an event with the eyes of future generations" (1). The vital point here is that historical consciousness does not mean just the memory and transmission of the past, but the way we see and interpret our present or predict our alternative future. It "transcends the exclusive preoccupation with what happened in the past and has become history, and uses this knowledge as an element in shaping the thoughts and actions that will determine the future" states Schieder, who stresses that it "is not restricted to retrospective contemplation, but instead draws conclusions from the past and applies them to goals that lie in the future" (1). This connection of the past and the future is also evaluated by Jörn Rüsen, who while analyzing structure and ontogenetic development of the concept, underlines that "Historical consciousness should be conceptualized as an operation of human intellection rendering present actuality intelligible while fashioning its future perspectives" (67). So, intelligently analyzed historical events may, for example, provide a "safer" route for an individual as well as the states, its politicians and society in general during a turbulent period. Furthermore, according to the numerous critics, our perception of the outer world passes through the historical filters sometimes unconsciously and not just on the global level but also on a personal level as well:

> Our historical consciousness often shapes our autobiographical accounts and self-understanding quite directly. We understand both what happens to us and the attitude we assume

> toward it *historically*; we understand our present situation, our present activity or inactivity, and finally our plans for the future, in part *historically.* (Straub 44-45)

Here the perspective on the concept of culture, which emerged during the Romantic period, supports this point of view since our culture and history are two major factors that shape and determine our retrospective being. Georg Hegel's famous premise that we learn from history what we do not learn from it is also mentioned by Hayden White in his article "Burden of History," in which he asserts that people actually do not learn from history so why should we look back at all (120). However, it is inevitable to accept that a healthy historical consciousness can play a crucial role on a macro as well as a micro level.

Besides historiography, collective memory and history education, which are regarded by Peter Seixas as the major factors that play an important role in the formation process, fiction may also contribute to this discourse. Fiction does not have to be precisely correct from the scientific point of view; the reader already realizes that what s/he is reading is a work of fiction, but the atmosphere of the period or the perspective of the author on a particular historical moment may equally create a sense of historical consciousness. Moreover, if we assume that the number of people whose interest is piqued by a historical novel is relatively large, we may claim that a historical novel reaches a wider audience compared to the scientific sources. One of the interesting facts that proves this perspective is that the popularity of this particular genre rises especially in times of conflict.

Hence, besides the academic sources, which are basically engaged with registering and recording the events, one of the major sources of information that can infiltrate every part of the society are historical novels. And the major difference between these two is that the latter provides not only the specific event and the details about it, but also reflects the zeitgeist, the cultural, political and social agenda of a particular time. Although we may question the competence and objectivity (though this may also be questioned in a scientific history book as well) of such a source, it would be unwise to ignore this part of the history record. Lukacs' claims that "certain novels tell us more about a certain time and about certain people than even the best of histories," (9) and Southgate supports Lucaks' perception as follows:

> Despite their strictly speaking 'fictional' status, then, and despite possible anxieties about some circularity of argument … such obvious (or less than obvious) quarries of evidence for their respective times would be hard for historians to ignore; and this then argues further against any such rigid distinction between history and fiction as is often maintained by orthodox historians. The boundaries between the two are obviously fluid, with two-way traffic and meetings, whether intentional or inadvertent, not infrequent. (Southgate 9)

Describing two sides of history, the scientific and artistic, and how those contribute to the interpretation of the historical consciousness, White states that for a long period of time philosophers had concentrated on the scientific one. However, according to White the "poetic elements" are crucial in the process because "history is a mixture of science and art" (*Metahistory* x). Similarly, Grant Rodwell in his article analyzes MacKinlay Kantor, who was one of the successful American novelists and a Pulitzer Prize winner, and describes the author's point of view on the particular genre and its effect as follows:

> He is enthusiastic about the historical novel being an important genre of literature because an awareness of the past can help the general reader confront the fear and perplexities of the present and future. He feels the historical novel helps the reader to profit from the lessons of the past… (48-49)

Probably the majority of the historicists would reject this idea from a scientific point of view due to the "fictional" character of the material. Nevertheless, the counter arguments of the postmodern world prove that a well-designed historical novel can influence its audience equally and sometimes even on a deeper level due to its philosophic or artistic character as well as its ability to reach a wider audience. Thus, for example, White believed that all histories are essentially just stories and that the techniques and material of both historians and literary writers are similar (Paul 5). Scientific verification of the historical data for sure was an immune detail in this discourse but the notion of storytelling was handled differently. One of the major intellectuals who influenced White was Roland Barthes, a French philosopher of the mid-20$^{th}$ century, who also scrutinized the nature of narration in both history and fiction. White quotes Barthes' observation from his 1967 essay "The Discourse of History":

> Does the narration of the past events, which, in our culture from the time of the Greeks onwards, has generally been subject to the sanction of historical "science," bound to the underlying standard of the "real," and justified by the principles of "rational" exposition – does this form of narration really differ, in some specific trait, in some indubitably distinctive feature, from imaginary narration, as we find it in the epic, the novel, and the drama. (*The Content of the Form* 35)

White follows with the explanation that the main target of the philosopher was to show that the objectivity of scientific history is exaggerated, and that history may equally be represented "in a number of different modes" (35). Moreover, the ideological character of historiography that is mentioned by both of the authors puts a significant question mark on the field of history. Here it is inevitable to mention Michel Foucault, who had influenced the intellectual circles of the same period and who believed that history is a form of power. Thus, for example, Bressler analyzing the perspective of this philosopher on the ideological side of historiography states, "According to Foucault, historians must realize that they are influenced and prejudiced by the episteme(s)[1] in which they live" (220). In other words, the ideological mindset and zeitgeist of a period makes it inevitable for a historian to lose his/her objectivity according to the philosopher.

Hence the common ground between history and literature that was emphasized by Hayden White would lately be explored and promoted by such historians and academicians as Frank Ankersmit, Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow. Their studies of linguistic and narrative constructivism would again stress the fragile borders between the two fields. Kalle Pihlainen in one of his articles summarizing the common ideas of these theorists states, "The focus of these thinkers on the narrative nature of historical writing, as well as on the construction of meaning that takes place in narration, has led many historians to the extreme and erroneous conclusion that this narrative constructivism implies the equal functionality or inventedness of history and literature" (14).

In this respect, it is possible to trace back numerous examples, of the modern as well as postmodern era, that nurture and develop the historical consciousness of its reader. Among them such significant novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852)*, *The Grapes of Wrath (1939), All the King's Men (1946), The Naked and the Dead (1948), Slaughter-*

*house-Five (1969), Beloved (1987)* or numerous others can be counted. In order to realize how a historical and political context of a novel can actually contribute to the establishment of the historical consciousness this article will focus on Don DeLillo's *Underworld (1997)* which obviously appears as one of the utmost examples that sheds the light on the second half of the 20th century. The author's perspective and depiction of the Cold War period from the social, political and cultural aspects provides a distinctive panorama that cannot be found in a scientific history book.

Donald Richard DeLillo is one of the most profound American authors of the present time who prefers to scrutinize American identity, society, politics and culture in his literary works. Sports, media, religion, politics and economics, as well as such controversial topics as terrorism and conspiracy are all among the sphere of interests of this writer. What is obvious from the attitude and works of DeLillo is that one of the major aspects that he values and cares the most about is history. The major turning point in the life of the writer and, as he believes, in American history, was the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. DeLillo, in several interviews, mentions the event and says "The assassination had an enormous impact, it changed everything. And all the turmoil that followed – the riots, the race problems, the violence – I think flowed from that one moment in Dallas. It was an enormous shock to the American system. It was like a bolt from outer space" (Brooks np). The impact of this tragic moment would bring about several works like *Americana (1971)* and *Libra (1988)* but the view of the historical façade, particularly the period of the Cold War, became a part of almost every novel written by the author.

In his well-known essay "The Power of History," published in 1997 by the *New York Times*, Don DeLillo, evaluating the relationship between fiction/novel and history, states that "Fiction is all about reliving things. It is our second chance" (np). In other words, rewriting and rereading specific historical events or periods, according to the author, provide an opportunity to reconsider the past that actually shapes our present and affects our future. "The past is great and deep. It can make a writer expansive, open him to perspectives and emotions that his own narrower environment has failed to elicit" (np) writes the author. This reveals the huge horizon of possibilities for a writer who takes the reader back the way he desires and projects the world in a way he or she visualizes.

Precisely in this way, DeLillo manages to recreate the whole second half of the 20th century in his magnum opus that was published in 1997. The author planned to write just a story of fifty or sixty pages about the historical baseball game of 1951, but it turned out to become the introductory part of a more than an eight hundred-page novel that the author called *Underworld*. This novel became the greatest and the most powerful work of DeLillo in which most of his favorite subjects collide in one story. Besides the nomination for the National Book Award, this best-seller novel was put on the list of the best works of American fiction by *New York Times* in 2006. Although the author himself accepts that the novel is quite challenging, a wide audience appreciated the author's ability and craftsmanship with which he handled the story.

One of the major characteristics of the novel is its nonlinear narrative that consists of numerous entangled stories unfolding in the second half of the 20th century. Structurally the novel is composed of eight parts, two of which are Prologue (*The Triumph of Death*) and Epilogue (*Das Kapital*), but the rest of the chapters clearly determine the timeline: *Part 1 Long Tall Sally: Spring-Summer 1992; Part 2 Elegy for Left Hand Alone: Mid-1980s-Early 1990s; Part 3 The Cloud of Unknowing: Spring 1978; Part 4 Cocksucker Blues: Summer 1974; Part 5 Better Things For Better Living Through Chemistry: Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s; Part 6 Arrangement in Gray and Black: Fall 1951 – Summer 1952.* Besides those the author also allocates three *Manx Martin* diminutive chapters that have only a twenty-four-hour spectrum and get involved in the story on a different level. Thus, from the very titles of the chapters it becomes obvious that the story follows a backward course although it starts in 1951. "The backward movement of what I'm calling the inside narrative (1992 – 1951) suggests a number of self-evident analogues, especially to the activity of memory, and to a kind of psychoanalytic and cultural archaeology" writes Thomas Hill Schaub, who continues "As archaeology, the movement backward is also a movement down, under, and within—each suggestive of an underworld to be revealed" (71). Indeed, the author manages to expose American society from various dimensions and with different perspectives through the precise historical course.

The novel starts with the legendary baseball game between the *Brooklyn Dodgers* and *New York Giants* on October 3, 1951, which

was marked by a historical moment when Bobby Thomson hit a home run and brought victory for the New York Giants. That hit, known as "the shot heard round the world" (*Underworld* 95), became one of the symbolic moments in American history, and according to the author, it also represented the beginning of the Cold War. The reference actually may go far back to the same phrase that was used by Ralph W. Emerson in his *Concord Hymn* (1837) when he wrote about the first shot of the American Revolution, that was also one of the major turning points in the history of the American nation. Similarly, in this case DeLillo describes the atmosphere after the game and shows that something was going to change once and forever, "when Thomson hit the homer, people rushed outside. People wanted to be together. Maybe it was the last time people spontaneously went out of their houses for something. Some wonder, some amazement. Like a footnote to the end of the war" (94). The author implies that it was the last time after World War II that people were free from the paranoid mind that would predominate the Cold War. DeLillo realized a parallel between the moment at the game and the Cold War when he saw the front page of a newspaper that evenly divided the page and promoted two events of the day, one of which was the game and the other was the atomic explosion in Kazakhstan where the USSR was continuing to test its nuclear weaponry. Both shots were heard around the world and both of them represented a vital moment in history. The famous ball is caught by a boy who skips his school to watch the game. Eventually the ball is snatched by his father who sells it for a small amount of money. From this point on, the reader continues tracking the ball through the whole story. Although its possessor remains in dispute, this object travels through the whole Cold War period and becomes an agent for the historical consciousness of the characters and the reader.

> The ball brought no luck, good or bad. It was an object passing through. But it inspired people to tell him things, to entrust family secrets and unbreathable personal tales, emit heartful sobs onto his shoulder. Because they knew he was their what, their medium of release. Their stories would be exalted, absorbed by something larger, the long arching journey of the baseball itself and his own cockeyed march through the decades. (318)

This "medium of release", as the author calls the ball, will cause numerous stories and events to be recollected and retold by the main

characters, thus contributing to the historical background of the novel. Throughout the book more than one hundred fictional and non-fictional characters appear and reappear. Sometimes they meet each other on a crossroads of the story, but all of them travel through time and while doing this they respond to various historical events that unfold during the second half of the 20th century.

Besides the major storyline, which embraces the American society in general, there is a minor narrative about the protagonist of the novel Nick Shay who is in his fifties and works for a waste management company. Nick's journey is a more psychological one since he tries to resolve the conflicts within his troubled past, or, as we may assume, he tries to deal with his own underworld from a microcosmic standpoint. Throughout the novel the reader learns that he was abandoned by his father, gets details about his relationship with his teacher's wife, and finally witnesses his unintentional shooting of a man. Moreover, the affair of his wife with one of his friends also becomes one of the issues that Nick has to cope with. While Nick Shay's story is a regressive one and starts in the 1990s going back to the past and down to his *underworld*, the story of the ball starts in the 1950s and moves forward bringing the reader to the end of the Cold War. Within these kinds of opposite narratives, the story provides a wide sense of history from every perspective. With numerous characters and their own stories, the author manages to encompass the topics of waste management, nuclear proliferation, international relations and popular culture.

The major historical departure point for the author is the game that was mentioned above. Several details recreated by the author provide a historical atmosphere that becomes one of the most valuable characteristics of the novel. As DeLillo writes "When you see a thing like that, a thing that becomes a newsreel, you begin to feel you are a carrier of some solemn scrap of history" (16). In order to understand the social and political atmosphere of the period, it is necessary to review the post-WWII atmosphere that eventually led to the Cold War with all its political and economic confrontations on the global scale.

With the end of World War II in 1945 the whole international arena had to be reorganized since major powerhouses like France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan and Italy were either physically and economically devastated, or demolished and occupied by the victorious side. The world was entering a period of decolonization due to the

power vacuums that emerged, but, on the other hand, a new wave of competition would begin with the emergence of the so-called Third World. Hence, when the powerhouses lost all the colonies they had taken under control during the 19th century, a massive movement towards independence began among those nations. One of the most obvious examples became Africa where tens of states would get their independence during the several decades after the war. Next to the African case, the Indian revolution may also be provided as an example of the decolonization process. Proclaiming their independence in 1948 and finally ridding themselves of the English rule provided India a chance to emerge in the international arena as a liberated nation. Moreover, the countries of Vietnam (known as French Indochina before the war) and Korea were also affected by the absence of domineering powers and would turn into the most problematic regions during the Cold War period.

The emergence of those neutral and young countries created a new stage for the leading powers to compete. However, the first sparkles of the Cold War emerged not in the East but in the West, particularly in the Eastern European corridor for whom the leading powers had completely different plans. There, two major allies of WWII, the Soviet Union and the United States, met each other after Germany was defeated. On the one hand, the Soviet Union tried to get back the Baltic States that they had lost with the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of 1918, while it also firmly exerted authority in Poland, which was always, according to Stalin, a "gate-like" country through which all the enemies attacked Russia. On the other hand, the United States continuously stressed the importance of self-determination and the goals for the post-war world that were clearly stated in the Atlantic Charter of 1941. Obviously one of the major reasons for these two powers to look at the world stage differently were the ideologies they embraced. On the one side there was the capitalistic, democratic United States of America, intimidating to the Soviet Union. While on the other side there was a communistic state with a socialist economy and a dictator at the top of it, which, besides attacking the American "democratic" label because of the situation of African-Americans in the country, and the double standard that was obvious at that point, was against the capitalistic domination around the world. Predominantly the idea of closed market was a complete antithesis to the open market economy of capitalist America, which, from the end of World War II began to promote free markets

and international trade on equal terms for every country. Moreover, the Marxist idea of spreading communism via revolution appeared to be a threatening detail at the time when there were so many available states that emerged after the war. This idea would later be articulated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who called the notion the "domino theory" which meant "that small, weak, neighboring nations would fall to communism like dominoes if they were not supported by the United States" (Norton 743). Consequently, the USSR, according to the American point of view, became an obvious threat, while an American type of society and economy was not even an option for the Soviet Union. Hence, both sides saw each other as a bully of the world.

Another crucial aspect that would nourish and create a paranoid atmosphere was the atomic monopoly of the USA and the arms race between these two powers. While "The Soviets believed the United States was practicing 'atomic diplomacy'—maintaining a nuclear monopoly to scare the Soviets into diplomatic concessions" (Norton 733), Harry S. Truman also believed that by dropping two atomic bombs on Japan he managed to show the world who the leader was. Within this kind of an atmosphere the competition arose and "Virtually from the moment of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings, American strategists grappled with the problem of keeping others from the 'nuclear club,' particularly the Soviet Union" (723). But this kind of a monopolistic power would vanish when "On September 23, 1949, President Truman informed shocked Americans that the Soviets had successfully tested an atomic device" (723). From this day on, the American nation and its government realized that they were not the strongest and the deadliest power in the world but that there was a power, a threat out there overseas that could actually attack them anytime. This psychological pressure would be used by the American government to promote conservatism within the American society. The isolation and paranoia that began to dominate the United States (as well as the USSR) during the early 1950s determined the domestic and international atmosphere through the rest of the 20th century.

Thus, when the reader descends into the *Underworld* this is exactly the same atmosphere s/he meets during the prologue. "To DeLillo, what is compelling about this moment is not merely the game, but how the game seems to be played in isolation from the cultural context that surrounds it" (700) says Timothy Parrish in his article "From Hoover's FBI to Eisenstein's *Unterwelt.*" The author continues:

> Ironically, this cataclysmic event [atomic explosion], which would ensure that the Cold War continued for another forty years, seems relatively insignificant in the context of an epic baseball game. Throughout the novel these two events become intertwined so that DeLillo can explore how nostalgic recollection of the baseball game seems to efface any historical consciousness of the Cold War. (701)

Besides analyzing the scene of the game, Parrish also vividly states that people were unaware of a historical moment at which they existed, which by the way was more crucial than the game that was gaining attention at that moment. To interpret the scene, DeLillo also uses real-life characters so that the scene would look not like a fictitious story but more like a documentary. Among the people watching the game there are such personalities as Frank Sinatra[2], Jackie Gleason[3], Toots Shor[4] and most importantly J. Edgar Hoover. DeLillo uses Hoover on purpose because "he is another mechanism by which DeLillo distances the received memory of that event in order more fully to historicize it" (705). Hoover was the founder of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its director for almost five decades until his death in 1972. A very powerful but on the other hand quite controversial personality, Hoover was known for his sneaky investigations on prominent personalities. Moreover, he was notably paranoid and obsessed with the Cold War communist threat and espionage. In the novel he gets the news about the "red bomb" (*Underworld* 23) just in the middle of the game and DeLillo describes his reaction as follows:

> But the news is hard, it works into him, makes him think of the spies who passed the secrets, the prospect of warheads being sent to communist forces in Korea. He feels them moving ever closer, catching up, overtaking. It works into him, changes him physically as he stands there, drawing the skin tighter across his face, sealing his gaze. (23-24)

The author projects Hoover's immediate calculations and possible combinations that could threaten the state on national and international levels, and his obvious mistrust and fear overwhelms him at the moment. He contemplates the event and at the same time observes people around him and the stadium; while doing this, a pile of papers, some journal pages, come flying to his chest and he realizes that it is a reproduction of the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of*

*Death*. This piece of art is known for its apocalyptic character where Death riding a reddish horse commands its army of skeletons, which spreads through the landscape and destroys everything. The desperation of people who are attacked proves that there is no way to salvation for them or that there is no power that can save them. This completely horrifying image from the sixteenth century creates a dreadful atmosphere for the reader in the 20th century when Hoover analyzes it in details:

> The meatblood colors and massed bodies, this is a census-taking of awful ways to die. He looks at the flaring sky in the deep distance out beyond the headlands on the left-hand page—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 in long coats and fur caps, speaking that old weighted language of theirs, liturgical and grave. What secret history are they writing? (50)

Hoover for the moment isolates himself from the crowd. It seems as if he is the only one who is aware of what is going on while the public is overwhelmed with the game and the surprise victory. The contemplations by the Director of the FBI finally make him ask vital questions, which force the reader to reevaluate the whole power relations during the Cold War. "And what is the connection between Us and Them, how many bundled links do we find in the neural labyrinth? It's not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to deep completion" (51). Throughout the novel DeLillo shows several perspectives on the power issue and how it actually worked during the Cold War period. On the one hand, the author shows how the rivalry caused fear and paranoia, which ruled the society while on the other hand he managed to provide a different point of view according to which this atmosphere actually made the world ironically easier to grasp and understand. Moreover, it helped both powers to remain at the top of the global agenda:

> I think that is power. I think you maintain a force in the world that comes into people's sleep, you are exercising a

> meaningful power. Because I respect power. Now that power is in shatters or tatters and now that those Soviet borders don't even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. 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. (76)

Those are the words of Klara Sax, who once had an affair with Nick Shay, reevaluating the Cold War period while talking to him in a post-Cold War atmosphere during the 1990s. Here, DeLillo looks back and assumes that the accumulative energy of the Cold War was literally the dynamo that nourished both countries with vigor and power to intimidate the world. The existence of the one side provided the chance for the existence of the opposite side; thus through this kind of "cooperation" both powers managed to dominate the world. Michel Foucault in his article "The Subject and the Power" states that in order to understand the essence of power and power relations, it is necessary to analyze the opposing power that plays a role in this kind of a struggle "in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations" (780). Therefore, Foucault implies that power is a kind of struggle in which both sides manifest each other. Likewise, DeLillo projects this type of reciprocal power relations through the conversation between Marvin and Brian:

> You need the leaders of both sides to keep the cold war going. It's the one constant thing. It's honest, it's dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that's when your worst nightmares begin. All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream. You will no longer be the main … Point of reference" (*Underworld* 170)

Moreover, calling the Cold War "your friend" (170), the author also reveals a paradox of the period when society was ruled and determined by fear and threat.

Hence when DeLillo takes the reader to the post-Cold War period, specifically the 1990s, s/he realizes that the absence of that kind

of a rivalry or struggle brought the world to a different level, where people were trying to cope with a feeling of vagueness and insecurity. Mark Taylor in his book *Rewriting the Real* states that "DeLillo recognized that the end of the Cold War marked the beginning of an era of increasing uncertainty, instability, and insecurity in which everything always seems to be drifting toward the edge of chaos." (183). Similarly, the artist Klara Sax analyzes this feeling and states:

> Many things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck. Things have no limits now. Money has no limits. I don't understand money anymore. Money is undone. Violence is undone, violence is easier now, it's uprooted, out of control, it has no measure anymore, it has no level of values. (*Underworld* 76)

Comparing this state of mind to the post-World War II atmosphere, it is necessary to say that although there was a threat in the air during the second half of the 20th century and although the period was marked by the fear of the possible repeating of global war (most probably because there were just twenty years between the first two) the enemy was obvious and the target was clear. While neither side was eager to drag itself into a devastating confrontation again, one of the best historical examples of such escalation of tension, an example of so-called *brinkmanship*, was the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), which also found its place in the novel.

DeLillo manages to recreate this problematic moment in the history of the Cold War through ridicule. Here the author's choice of character is not accidental. It is not just a comedian or a critic, it is Lenny Bruce who was known for his controversial rhetoric and brave criticism. He was the one who broke various taboos and was arrested for that numerous times. "At the height of his popularity, however, Bruce was perhaps the single most scathing dissector of his society in the whole of the entertainment field" writes Elizabeth Rosen in her article (97). When he was finally found dead with a needle in his arm, producer Phil Spector assumed that he was killed not by morphine but by the police (Corliss np). Thus, DeLillo chooses this man to comment on the Cuban Missile Crisis and this particular scene unfolds through several pages. Lenny starts the broadcast on the radio. It is October 24, 1962. Hysterically shouting "We're all gonna die!" (*Underworld*

546), Lenny at some point stages an imaginary scene of the archangel Gabriel meeting with Castro and deciding whose side he would choose in this crisis:

> The archangel Gabriel appears in the sky over Havana. Bodyguard wake up Castro and he tells them, Lemme alone, and they tell him it's the messenger of God, and he gets in a helicopter and goes up there. The angel's wearing a white robe and he's holding a flaming trumpet and Castro's intrigued when he sees that Gabriel's a black man. He thinks, Great, an articulate Negro, we can have a real no-bullshit dialogue. He says to the angel, I don't believe in God but lemme ask you. Whose side are you on in this crisis? (546)

The essence of the event was actually the discovery of the Soviet missiles planted in the backyard of the United States, the island of Cuba. A period of thirteen days was marked by the rapid escalation of tension between the two powers, an event that is actually known as one of the closest moments to a nuclear disaster. The way the leaders of both countries, the American John F. Kennedy and the Soviet Nikita Khrushchev, managed to avoid another war remains one of the major examples within the studies of international relations. From the American point of view, Kennedy, who became one of the most popular presidents in the history of the country, and his team accomplished a colossal task. Lenny also mentions this team with a sarcastic criticism:

> Yes, they saved us. All the Ivy League men in those striped suits and ribbed black socks that go all the way to the knee so when they cross their legs on TV we don't see a patch of spooky white flesh between the socks and the pants cuff. … Russians agree to remove missiles and end construction of missiles in Cuba. Khrushchev is retching in his latkes. He's taking hot baths to relax. Like a plastic pouch of corn coming to a boil. (625)

Although, there were no records in history when Lenny Bruce brought any kind of political criticism or talked about the Cuban Missile Crisis, according to DeLillo he was the one who actually should have made one. "It seemed to me," DeLillo stated, "that here was a guy who should have, but evidently did not deliver [a political commentary] at the time, so I decided to do it for him" (qtd. in Rosen 104).

DeLillo uses humor not just for political critique but also to reveal cultural traits of the American society during the different decades. For instance, describing society, and fashion in particular, of the 1960s, the author proves an exclusive observation that shows how the Cold War actually affected every layer of the society:

> There was an element of Russian chic in the culture these days. Yevtushenko in his black-market jeans. Those Russian hats that sprouted earlier this winter, still going strong in New York and Chicago. Astrakhans. You wake up one morning and every third man earning a salary in a certain range is wearing a lambskin Russian hat. (*Underworld* 533)

The author clearly ridicules an oppositional Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko who wears a pair of jeans (those symbolized Americanization, capitalism or even imperialism during the Cold War period) bought on the black-market, since the Iron Curtain and the policy of the Soviet market would not let the Western products enter the Russian market. Meanwhile, Americans popularize one of the symbols of Russian culture, the Astrakhans hats, which was particularly favored by the Russian leader Leonid Brezhnev and the affiliates of the Politburo[5]. The absurdity of the situation as well as its irony proves actually how the rivalry of these two powers turned into a complex kind of relationship and how both cultures continued to fight and nourish each other.

Besides the mindset of the Cold War the author also mocks American popular culture beyond everything else. In the chapter that encompasses the 1970s, DeLillo has Klara contemplate Mick Jagger, who appeared on the musical scene during the 1960s and remained highly popular through the rest of the 20th century:

> She realized she'd been seeing Mick Jagger's mouth everywhere she went for some time now. Maybe it was the corporate logo of the Western world, the leer and pout that follows you down the street – she liked to watch him dance and devil-strut but found the mouth a separate object, sort of added later for effect. … `I think everything that everybody's eaten in the last ten years has gone into that mouth. (382)

The author apparently criticizes the consumerism and materialism of American society and its popular culture, and while doing this,

he ridicules it. "'You have to interpret the mouth like it's satire,' … And she realized yes, his mouth was completely satirical, it was caricaturish, a form of talking anus from the countercomics of the sixties, and all the jeers and taunts we'd uttered… had come out of the same body opening, more or less" (383). Numerous examples and situations like this developed by the author provide a renewed perspective on the past and history not just from a personal point of view but from the national as well. Damjana Mraovic-O'Hare in her article "The Beautiful, Horrifying Past: Nostalgia and Apocalypse in Don DeLillo's *Underworld,*" analyzes the novel from two different angles, nostalgia and apocalypse, and assumes that re-experiencing the past also provides an opportunity to determine one's identity or, in this case, consciousness:

> Characters in *Underworld* repeatedly try to revitalize the past to make sense of their present. There is also an attempt—nostalgically—to restore the past to gain a stabilized personal and national identity; what enriches the narrative are both aspects of statements about nostalgia, most often delivered by the characters who reminisce about their previous private and historical experiences, which, paradoxically, leaves the characters perplexed about their own positions within the historical context. (214-215)

One of the major concerns of the author is obviously to make sense of the effects of the Cold War on both sides of the coin. He is writing from a post-Cold War perspective, and towards the end of the novel he makes the reader ask questions about the results or effects of this long period of tension, paranoia and threat. DeLillo clearly shows that nuclear proliferation brought to the world problems like waste management or nuclear waste, which turned the world into a garbage can. Besides, he shows the effects of the long-term power struggle and how it influenced the political as well as economic arena afterwards, bringing that feeling of paranoia and uncertainty. Personal stories, social stories, real and fictitious stories, white American stories and African American stories are all provided by the author. There is almost no subject that is not processed by the author in the novel. Stressing the depth of the novel and its extensive spectrum, Adam Begley states, "With its kaleidoscopic perspective on post-World War II America, it might well have been called Underworlds - it is a plural exploration of subterranean history" (479).

However, what is one of the major cornerstones of this magnum opus is the author's invitation, so to speak, to the reader to absorb his or her history. A dialogue between Dr. Lindblad and Nick, that unfolds at some point, openly reveals this intention of the writer, "'You have a history,' she said, 'that you are responsible to.' / 'What do you mean by responsible to?' / 'You're responsible to it. You're answerable. You're required to try to make sense of it. You owe it your complete attention'" (*Underworld* 512). DeLillo undoubtedly points at the significance of the historical consciousness for a human being so he or she would be able to place himself or herself on the line of the historical course, to understand his or her own existence or the essence of the surrounding events that unfold. *Underworld* reflects on problems on various levels that are hidden or sometimes forgotten or even missed at some point and while doing this the author preserves the grace of an artist.

## Notes

[1] A term developed by M. Foucault that stands for a determinative pattern or a principle in a particular historical period.

[2] F. Sinatra (1915-1998) was one of the most popular and influential American singers of the mid-century United States. He was also a successful actor and a producer.

[3] J. Gleason (1916-1987) was an American comedian, writer, actor and composer.

[4] B.T. Shoor (1903-1977) was a proprietor of a well-known saloon and restaurant "Toots Shor's Restaurant" in Manhattan.

[5] Politburo – the chief political and executive committee of a Communist party *(The American Heritage 1401)*.

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