

“THE PROBLEM IS ALL IN THE SPACING.”: TRACING THE GEOGRAPHIC AND
SPATIAL EFFECTS OF “HIGHWAYS” IN DON DELILLO’S *UNDERWORLD*

by

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(Under the Direction of John Wharton Lowe)

ABSTRACT

Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* is an 827-page maximalist systems novel that seeks to encapsulate the tenor of American culture across the span of the cold war. It is a story that follows a panoply of characters from 1950s New York City through to their later lives in the American Midwest during the advent of the internet age in the 1990s. This thesis, by critically placing the novel alongside the development of the United States Interstate Highway system, argues that the novel holds much instructive potential in understanding how contemporary American spatiality and relationality are informed by this massively material infrastructural project. This thesis delineates the novel’s investigation of the confusions of public, private, and corporate power that greatly informed cold war ideology and also inform more individual notions of spatiality. In the final analysis, this thesis sets out a more completely spatialized reckoning of our contemporary cultural moment.

INDEX WORDS: Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, Roads, Highways, Infrastructure,
Infrastructuralism, Spatiality, Postmodern Geography

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DEDICATION

This is to you, Teri Miyagi Smithberg. My partner in crime and decriminalization. The woman who has given up so many nights of peaceful sleep as I noisily stomped around our apartments, in both Decatur and Athens, in search of the right turn of phrase. The switcher-offer of all my thinking lights without whom I never would have been in a place to apply for any master's programs in the first place. Much love.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), as it careens through time and space across the span of the Cold War, emphasizes again and again the importance of the underlying systems and material structures that shape American society. Following a myriad cast of characters separated by vast geographic and temporal distances, the novel necessarily explores, sometimes directly and sometimes seemingly unconsciously, the ways that landed national infrastructures not only facilitate the movement of people and goods but also influence the way people think and act—infrastructures such as the waste management system, media communication networks, and highways. Waste is confronted directly—Nick Shay, the novel's protagonist, is a waste management consultant and sporadic philosopher of garbage—but while American roadways mark the setting for many liminal spaces and moments in the novel, their infrastructural implications don't receive the same direct contemplative eye.

This thesis, by critically placing *Underworld* alongside the development of the United States Interstate Highway system, argues that the novel provides many insights for understanding how contemporary American spatiality and relationality are informed by this massively material infrastructural project. By teasing apart the novel's treatment of roads, as well as automobiles—the mobile technology without which our roadways would not be so ubiquitous nor varicose and which these days are all but synonymous with roads themselves— I set out a more completely spatialized reckoning of our contemporary cultural moment, and, following the lead of DeLillo's

own investigation of waste systems, it is a reckoning which properly considers the impact of these massive material road infrastructures and their concomitant automobile technologies.

Underworld zooms in and out, from dense cityscapes to vast rural vistas, giving the novel on the whole a pulsing and cinematic aesthetic motion. In this thesis, I am intending to focus mostly on those wider vistas, those landscape shots, while most critics have honed in on the urban scenes of New York and Los Angeles, and Phoenix in between. A huge portion of the novel is lost with the critical spotlight heretofore focused on the central cities. Indeed, it is difficult for one chapter or journal article to analyze the geography of both of these distinct areas of the novel, as well as the crucially liminal spaces in between them. I intend, however, that by focusing on a just a few scenes that are key to understanding how the novel constructs its vision of the American road system, the majority of those scenes which will take place in the critically underserved stretches of rural landscape between New York and LA, this thesis can craft a new theory on *Underworld*. Each of these small, conceivably isolated scenes are of course related to the more protuberant scenes and themes of the novel; they cohere through the novel's infrastructural networks of plot, style, and theme—not to mention the fact that simply being bound together materially between the same two covers as every other scene and chapter attributes a relation of meaning.

By focusing on these isolated moments, but showing the ways that they are in communion with the larger structure in the novel, this thesis does literary infrastructuralist work. Material and historical infrastructuralism seek, in part, to show the ways that interactions with infrastructure place us in intriguing relational configurations with the state and other users of that infrastructure. Relatedly, I argue that DeLillo presents the United States road system as a nationally cohering superobject. Formed by an odd crucible of sometimes competing and

sometimes aligned statist, corporate, and democratic forces, our nation's highways condition the natural geographic landscape and the citizen's psychology in ways that match their generative confusion of interests. Focusing on the national cultural perspectives generated by automobility and its concomitant infrastructures, it becomes clear how these technologies reify the crucial cultural tensions of Cold War America: the ascendancy of private/corporate power over public/governmental, the deepening divide between urban and rural outlooks, and questions of economic free will and mobility.

We've all experienced a road trance. You're driving down the highway and your mind gets away from you. All presence—the act of driving, knowledge of where you're heading and where you've been, even the materiality of your car and the highway itself—all dissipates, all seems to dissolve from conscious perception. You snap back, suddenly, a couple of miles closer to home. Highway hypnosis, as it is commonly known, is a phenomenon that has been recognized since the earliest days of mass automobility.

In an article printed by *Literary Digest* in 1921, W. Brown explores the cause of an odd car accident between two veteran chauffeurs—the driver at fault apparently “sat at ease, his hands on the wheel, his gaze straight ahead... nothing to divert his attention” (Williams 223). “The colliding chauffeur had been gazing steadily at the bright streaming roadway flowing smoothly beneath him,” the author artfully explains. “Its monotonous sameness concentrated his mental faculties to the point of inducing momentary self-hypnotism” (ibid). Wondering whether this fender bender and railroad collisions “might not be attributed to [the same] insidious malady,” Brown wonders:

[I]s it possible that the effect of the unwavering stretch of twin rails blending with the even, gray right of way and dissolving under the engineer's searching gaze burned into

his brain a converging, soothing, hypnotizing desire for sleep, peaceful and potent beyond the exercise of his inhibitory will? (ibid)

Brown's conjectures are not too far off from the prevailing consensus around highway hypnosis in the 1970s—when his article was rediscovered and republished in *Accident Analysis and Prevention*—which locate the cause of the phenomenon in “modern superhighways” relative lack of visual stimuli compelling enough to command attentiveness: the “trance-inductive features in the driving situation such as repetitive and monotonous stimulation, bright points of fixation, etc.” (223). And while more recent studies of highway hypnosis have pointed to a relationship between the blandness of road infrastructure and more physiological oculomotoric biases (Cerezuela et al. 1046), larger questions of the perspectival and psychological effects of our automobile-infrastructure apparatuses still remain. What other effects do these vast, fractally repetitive stretches of asphalt have on our conscious and subconscious minds? How do they shape our psycho-geographic maps of America; how do they scaffold our understanding of a unified, continent-spanning nation? How does such a monumentally vast and (varyingly) well-maintained network of infrastructure instill a certain kind of American nationalism? How does the etymologically assured individualism via automobility affect different people's self-identification? How does automobility play a role in our spatialization of the world and in the world? In sum, how does this dominant symbolic landscape/landscape-symbol affect how we see the world, the nation, our communities, and ourselves? How does a body exist in a world of “modern superhighways”?

In order to answer these questions, I turn to Don DeLillo's seminal 1997 novel, *Underworld*. By applying a host of critical perspectives—those of theoretical geographers, scholars of automobility, civil historians, and architectural theorists—this paper constitutes an

attempt to reconcile the perspectival and psychological effects of automobility in America with the technology's highly yet often unnoticed politicized history by analyzing a systems novel that covers the ground of automobility's heyday (the 1950s) through to the turn of the millennium. The tensions that Brown's 1921 article evinces—difficult-to-articulate struggles between the individual will in an overly bland and overbuilt world, between human psychology and modern materiality—ground this thesis's inquiries to a century's long effort. I will shed new light on the potential fallout that occurs when, as Brown puts it, “the being that tries to control this modern Frankenstein monster”—he refers here to the supposedly scientifically-engineered perfection of the automobile and its concomitant infrastructure—“is not machine-made... is not automatic” (Williams 223).

DeLillo's 1997 novel could seem an odd route through which to answer these questions. It might seem that a critic would be better served to examine a true “road novel”—Kerouac's, or Hunter S. Thompson's, or Steinbeck's rollicking journeys that spend most of their time on America's highways. Or still better served yet to add another voice to lively scholarship surrounding Yamashita's pre-apocalyptic *Tropic of Orange*, in which the vehicles abandoned in a standstill on the freeways of Los Angeles become a subversive homeless encampment. Why analyze an 827-page novel with a relatively minimal focus on the interstate? A novel whose driving scenes mostly serve as introductions, transitions, and interregnums?

There are two major reasons why I find that *Underworld* makes a particularly useful lens through which to examine the cultural ramifications of the United States highway system. The first is the synchronicity in which the novel's geographic and temporal reach is analogous to that of the nation's interstate highway project. DeLillo's novel opens with a 60-page prologue that strenuously details the crowd's formation and reaction to the “Shot Heard ‘Round the World”—

the 3-run homer that clinched the 1951 National League pennant for the underdog New York Giants—just five years before the Eisenhower administration's Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. The perspective in this prologue flows democratically from one crowd member to the next—from black Harlem schoolkid Cotter Martin and Madison Avenue advertising manager Charles Wainwright who vie physically for the homerun ball to the front row celebrity conglomerate of Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, and a decidedly celebrity-obsessed Herbert Hoover. DeLillo then explodes the story outward into a sprawling, pluralistic amalgamation of stories, voices, and places from America and around the globe. To get a glimpse of the novel's sustained (and often strange) variety of people and place, consider the epilogue—which starts with an underground nuclear explosion in Kazakhstan and closes with a deceased Catholic nun's spirit become amalgamated into the World Wide Web to find spiritual fulfillment in the relationality between people and information. The novel constantly bounces from polyphonic perspective to perspective, back and forth from the 90s to the 60s to the 70s and the 50s, perspectives and times that are connected to that pennant-winning homerun ball through varying degrees of separation. These exploded spatiotemporal characteristics of *Underworld's* plot allow for insights into the different ways that the American road system is perceived by a cast of American characters of different socio-economic status at different points in time—the ways that the same road system makes such a novel possible.

The other useful aspect of this novel for an infrastructuralist reading is the particular ways that the novel furthers DeLillo's oeuvre-spanning project of “returning the thingness to things,” to use David L. Pike's phrase (97). The most obvious example of this pursuit in the novel at hand is that “thing” of waste, of trash, of garbage. DeLillo does a lot of work to bring this typically taken-for-granted aspect of our modern society to the forefront of the reader's

mind. As noted earlier, Nick Shay, the novel's protagonist among its wide cast of characters, is a waste management consultant for a multinational waste management firm. This allows the reader access to such materially-reorienting insights as: "Civilization did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot... no, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense" (*Underworld* 287). Similarly, then, to the way that DeLillo attempts to bring the infrastructure of waste management out of the background machinations of society and into our perceptive consciousness, I will do the same with DeLillo's portrayal of roads. I bring the road system, which undergirds every possibility of the novel, to the forefront. The material realities of the U.S. highway system truly map the novel, guiding all of the characters through their American journeys, thereby making those characters American.

The recent surge in infrastructuralist literary criticism is crucially informative to such a reading of *Underworld*. Examinations of a writer's and their character's relationships to infrastructure have proven to be quite fruitful in shedding light on a host of questions pertinent to the deconstruction of literature. Public infrastructures serve as useful microcosms into humanity's many levels of relationality: political, nationalistic, public and private, technological. In Michael Rubenstein's vanguard monograph *Public Works*, for example, the author constructs a fuller picture of Irish citizens' relationship to their burgeoning independent nation by looking at the ways that its literature treated its large-scale infrastructural projects. He convincingly argues that Leopold Bloom's flushing of a toilet has deep political and historical implications relating to Ireland's decolonization via autonomous infrastructural construction and is further related to the understood roots of democracy and taxpayerhood in the public works of ancient Greece. Flushing the toilet, like the use of any public work, constitutes "a communion with the state" that

is often relegated into what Christopher Bollas has called the *unthought known*— “something known about, indeed deeply informative of any self’s being and relating, but something which must be experienced and can only meagerly be described” (9). Rubenstein also usefully connects the protonational drive for publicly owned infrastructure as a crucial force in the postcolonial imagination, tying these twentieth-century Irish works to the twentieth-century Caribbean struggle via Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* (1992). By doing critical justice to these concrete objects of history—how they came to be and the effects that they had on people during their development, as well as the effects that they continue to have in their lingering materiality—we inch closer to understanding how nations are formed materially in the modern world, and how people live within such nations. DeLillo’s novel, depicting the United States at the apex of its global militaristic reach, does not concern itself directly with such notions of postcolonial nation-building. However, in its interrogation of the U.S.’s late 20th-century development, it does bring attention, through careful reading, to the ways that taken-for-granted infrastructures such as the road system serve to reify systems of marginalization.

The scholarship surrounding *Underworld* has indeed dipped its toes in the infrastructural turn. Sarah Wasserman offers the most persuasive infrastructural reading to date; she turns her critical eye toward the graffiti that crops up throughout the novel and the billboard apparition that indelibly marks its end—where disparate crowds of New Yorkers stop traffic to see the supposedly miraculous image of the murdered Esmeralda, a parentless and homeless Latina child, that appear on an empty billboard every time the elevated train passes by. Wasserman writes that such apparitions “effectively call our attention to the previously unremarkable... office building. The apparition dismantles the difference between waste and relic, the eternal and the ephemeral, loss and restoration” (1056). More pertinently, though, DeLillo scholarship

has also taken a spatial turn. Herman Heise, for example, uses Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* to read *Underworld* as an encapsulation of late capitalist geographies—focusing especially on how DeLillo depicts the moneyed and inscrutable organization of those hyper-urban areas of the novel: New York City and Los Angeles. In the same year, David Pike's "*Underworld and the Architecture of Urban Space*" reads deeply into the verticality of such spaces. Pike writes that "the great public works of the nineteenth century were primarily concerned with circulation: people... via buses... waste... through vastly ambitious and monumentally conceived... sewage systems" (96), but that the skyscrapers of the 20th century consigned these great public works to a perspectival underworld. These streams of criticism enrich a close reading of the novel's highways, bringing back their "thingness," shaking the highway hypnosis, and making known the "unthought known" of this vast concrete circulatory system.

In order to differentiate this reading from all of those previously mentioned, I focus on those geographically marginal spaces, the spaces *between* urban centers that the novel, in a reverberation of its concern with waste, brings subtly to the forefront. I focus on the ways that roads, as a taxpayer-funded but corporately influenced "public"-project, confuse our notions of public and private while at the same time instilling a hegemonic and marginalizing vision of "one nation." Edward Soja writes:

The generative source for a materialist interpretation of spatiality is the recognition that spatiality is socially produced and, like society itself, exists in both substantial forms (concrete spatialities) and as a set of relations between individuals and groups, an 'embodiment' and medium of social life itself.

As socially produced space, spatiality can be distinguished from the physical space of material nature and the mental space of cognition and representation, each of which is used and incorporated into the social construction of spatiality but cannot be conceptualized as its equivalent. (120)

Underworld creates a space that relies on the concrete spatialities of the American Highway system, while at the same time offering a concretizing narrative for how those concrete spatialities create more amorphous social relations, and how those relations create new imaginative spatialities in turn.

The next chapter, “Richard Henry Gilkey, Automobility, Cinema, Television, and an Individualized Nationalism,” lays the theoretical groundwork for such a newly spatialized infrastructuralist reading by looking at how the automotive perspective and its infrastructures shape the worldview of one of the most strangely indelible characters in the novel. The second chapter applies and expands this critical apparatus to closely read Nick Shay’s early automotive days and the perspectival fragments that surround these—a critically neglected section of the novel. In the conclusion, I apply once more these insights to the novel’s considerations of both pedestrians and the “information superhighway,” the internet, in an effort to show the innateness of such infrastructural systems of relation in the western world, no matter their concrete materiality.

CHAPTER 2

RICHARD HENRY GILKEY, AUTOMOBILITY, MEDIATION, AND AN
INDIVIDUALIZED NATIONALISM

It seems apropos to spend the most energy of an analysis of roads in *Underworld* on the character who is named for their highly evolved form. Richard Henry Gilkey, better known to the public as the Texas Highway Killer, is a serial murderer whose random car-to-car shootings captivate the American news cycle in the novel's "Mid-1980s—Early 1990s" section. While many critics of *Underworld* have thoroughly and insightfully examined the Texas Highway Killer's motivations and thematic implications, these conversations have almost entirely been focused through the lens of media technology (see Green; Hamilton; Parrish). No one has taken a closer look at that other culturally pervasive technology, that infrastructural apparatus which plays center stage in our serial killer's tripartite nom de crime.

An exploration of DeLillo's depiction of the United States Interstate Highway System—with its inextricable connection to the cultural ramifications of automobility, and its long history of stoking the struggles between public and private life as well as those between urban and rural—clarifies the psycho-cultural makeup of this oft-discussed but still not fully understood *character*. I italicize "character" because, for as much as he and his actions are brought up in the critical conversation surrounding *Underworld*, Gilkey is too often discussed as a simple stand-in for DeLillo's other oeuvre-spanning interrogation—the problem of media-motivated violence—and not a more nuanced individual who is affected by *all* of the techno-cultural influences of his era. In fact, I am yet to find a peer-reviewed source that considers Part 2, Chapter 10 of the

novel (*Underworld* pp. 262-272) as the one direct glimpse we are offered into Gilkey's, neither mediated by the television screen nor filtered through the perspective of another character's reactions to those televised images.¹ By understanding the mediating effects of automobile technologies, too, we can better understand those of television.

Mediated Geographies

Before delving into the Gilkey chapter itself, though, it will be necessary to set the foundation for a closer look at those techno-cultural realities which give him his modus operandi and alias: the automobile and the highway. Automobiles and their concomitant infrastructure have left some of the most indelible impacts on the geographic and economic face of the United States, even more so than the textbook case of the transcontinental railroad. However, as Owen Gutfreund makes clear in his incisive history, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl*, the federal highway system did not just serve to further connect the nation's far-flung populations and economies through a system of grade-separated roadways, nor did these visible, tactile protuberances simply result in expanded transportational reach and increasingly individualized access. Nor did the Interstate system did not by simple happenstance contribute to the suburbanization and sprawl of the postwar era. Rather, Gutfreund convincingly tells the story of a century-spanning infrastructural initiative—driven varyingly by public, corporate, and state interests—that began with bicyclists lobbying for smoother riding surfaces (9) and matured into almost 50,000 miles of quality-controlled and uninterrupted pavement that would both geographically influence (200) and be geographically influenced by our burgeoning aviation infrastructural apparatus (211). He shows precisely how, over its twentieth-century-spanning development and construction, this initiative “[laid] the groundwork for the twenty-first-century legacy of ballooning municipal debt burdens, deteriorating city centers, incessant demands for capital improvements, and unstable

municipal tax bases” (1) through a series of lobbying campaigns that were (varyingly) cognizant of the downwind ramifications. These historically submerged effects of Interstate development are crucial for a more refined understanding of a novel like *Underworld*—as geographically expansive and as concerned with revealing “the realness beneath the layers of cosmetic perception” (*Underworld* p. 158) as it is—and its concern with the problematics of the public and the private, of the urban and the rural.²

The mobility of the automobile itself, beyond the problems of geographically uneven development that its fixed infrastructures have engendered, also forces a perspectival shift in its users. Landscapes whirl by, buildings bleed into each other, pedestrians are flattened (hopefully only visually) and stripped of their relative mobility as the machine pulls them into view and then overtakes them in a matter of seconds. Mitchell Schwartz, in *Zoomscapes*, ties these new forms of viewing the world to the cinematic experience.³ The windshield shares the same penetrative, dromoscopic effect⁴ of the projected screen, both of which “plunge us into the visual field” (99). Against this, Schwartz juxtaposes the more lateral, less psychologically infiltrating viewing patterns of the train window and of the stationary painting. He further argues that cinemas—with their darkened rooms and separated seating, all directed at the same screen—are analogous to drivers “negotiating and viewing the same city streets” (98), each from their own individual car. “Both cars and films” Schwarz, writes, “began to craft a society of privatized viewing on a mass scale” (98). This seems to be the same enigma toward which Klara Sax, while watching the Rockettes perform a number to open the premier of an unreleased Einstein film titled *Unterwelt*, achieves an apt revelation: “when a camera in the flies took a live video shot of the dancers that was projected on a back screen she understood, you all did, how a crowd is reconfigured, teased into methodical geometry, into slipknots and serpentines” (*Underworld*

428). How do a multiplicity of individuals *become* a crowd, whether in the context of a cinematic or traffic experience? Does a crowd require a singular view with which all members must be engaged?

Moreover, it is hard not to see automobile traffic in those geometries that Sax evokes: “slipknots and serpentes.” Such questions of crowd and community formation recur again and again throughout DeLillo’s oeuvre.⁵ But here, let me simply offer one illustrative quotation from the opening chapter of *White Noise* (1985), which directly ties the individualized conformity of automobile culture to that grandest binder of “crowds”: nationalism. The narrator, Jack Gladney, observing the “long shining line” of station wagons waiting to offload college students, posits that “this assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation” (*White Noise* 4). Schwartzer’s analogy of automobiles and cinema, when configured with DeLillo’s own voicing of the generative power of automobility in American nationalism, helps us to grasp more fully the novelist’s understanding of the power of perspective in national identity formation. When a technology like the automobile assuages its users with a sense of autonomy and individualism, while at the same time its perspectival materialities and infrastructure guarantee that all those who have the privilege to access it are viewing the same corporately plotted and ideology-reifying vistas, a particularly American nationalism is affirmed.

It is this nationalism, then—one that imperceptibly blends a sense of individualism with a reliance on materialities made possible by the alliance of corporate and state interests—that Gilkey shatters, consciously or subconsciously, disrupting the nationalizing comfort of the automotive *crowd*. However, Gilkey’s acts only engender more wide-ranging, if more abstract,

crowds forming a common perspective. When his actions are inevitably reified into the 24-hour news cycle, the historical ascendancy of which structures the “Mid-1980s—Early 1990s,” the era of the novel in which all references to Gilkey are found, Gilkey’s killings actually do more to reconstruct the sense of common nationality than they do to question the powers that be. On page 209, Richard Henry Gilkey’s words are introduced in the novel for the first time as the “LIVE CALL-IN VOICE OF TEXAS HIGHWAY KILLER” (*Underworld* 215). This particular appropriation is observed by Matt Shay. As he watches the news at his mother’s apartment, he notes that:

When it was running he could not turn away from it. When it wasn’t running he never thought about it. Then he’d get on line at the supermarket back home and there it was again on the monitors they’d installed to keep shoppers occupied at the check-out—nine monitors, ten monitors, all showing the tape. (215)

Matt Shay explicitly notes the line/crowd-forming power of the televising of Gilkey’s killings. Gilkey’s subversive violence, no matter its political intention, is at least in part presented as an image reappropriated by the 24-hour news cycle—as an image that is just as useful to propagate the cycles of narcotic grocery shopping as it is disruptive of the comfortable automobilic perspective. If “*White Noise* intervenes in the cosmopolitan view of individual autonomy and instead looks at this autonomy as a self-delusion of the white middle-aged man,” as Johanna Isaacson argues (48), then *Underworld* intervenes in the *subversive* view of individual violence and instead looks at violence as the self-delusion of the white middle-aged man, a violence easily appropriated by the mediation of television infrastructure.

On the other hand, as opposed to the connection of automobility and the cinema experience, the shift in the dominant mode of high-speed transportation from train to automobile

might just as accurately be likened to the difference between cinema and television viewing patterns. The relegation of the steering wheel to the individual driver and the doing away with unidirectional and predetermined tracks offered the driver a previously unattainable autonomy-in-velocity⁶; the remote control, likewise, begat a new freedom and fragmentation of choice in media consumption. In both cases, the individual suddenly had the freedom to choose what vistas they were engaging with, and when. Of course, in the case of television viewing, that apparent freedom was always overdetermined by what types of images the FCC deemed suitable to air and what types of programs the networks believed provided the most bankable ad space—just like the layout of Interstate roadway was influenced by the tactical needs of the U.S. military and the economic needs mega-corporations.⁷ Furthermore, on a train, like in the cinema, one *is* still in an unbroken spatial relation with their community of viewers—they are separated by a chair, yes, but they are still able to reach over and touch their peers, still able to hear their breathing, to smell their food. Television viewing, on the other hand, is most typically experienced in the walled isolation of the household, as when Matt Shay desperately calls his wife to join in on his obsessive watching of the news footage of the Texas Highway Killer, but she is unresponsive and uninterested (158-160). So too in the car, where one is separated from his or her fellow travelers by a highly advanced apparatus of steel and glass, often explicitly engineered to keep one isolated from every sense of the outside world (apart, of course, from that crucial sense of sight). So, at least in the sense of their structuring of spatial relations between fellow viewers of the world, if not their structuring of the viewing perspective itself, the automobile and the television are closer kin than the automobile and the cinema. This socio-spatial remove, typical of both automobile and television technologies, is central to unpacking both the Texas Highway Killer's submerged impulses (his M.O. effectively shatters this

comfortable isolation for others) and the effects of and widespread fascination with his crimes (viewed, in the novel, always in isolation and doubly mediated through the television screen and the videotape). Gilkey's perspective-subverting actions are ever undermined by their all but complete remediation through the televisual lens.

The Spatial Remove and Auto-Nationalism

It is a spatial remove first and foremost, Edward Soja argues in *Postmodern Geographies*, that is crucial to the development of a uniquely human consciousness. He quotes Martin Buber's "Distance and Relation":

It is the peculiarity of human life that here and here alone a being has arisen from the whole endowed and entitled to detach the whole from himself as a world and to make it opposite to himself. (Qtd. in Soja 132)

Calling on Heidegger and Sartre, Soja expounds on Buber's notion of this initiating "primal setting at a distance" (ibid). To enter into a fully realized relation with the world, the ego needs, paradoxically, to separate itself from that world. It must achieve its own singular vantage, a uniquely situated ego-perception, in order to view the world for what it is, both objectively and subjectively. Soja makes clear, however, that within this distancing move "is also a will to relate, a necessary impulsion to overcome detachment, as the only means by which we can confirm our existence in this world, can overcome meaninglessness and establish identity" (133). In DeLillo's novel, Gilkey has lost his impulsion to overcome detachment as he struggles through a postmodern world whose technologies of automobility and television compound and complicate this developmentally necessary spatial remove. This is precisely what informs his decision to shoot innocent people down in the isolated comfort of their own vehicles from his car, as well as his futile decision to "set the record straight" (*Underworld* 216) on the public's

interpretation of his motives by calling in to an evening news show; his actions stem from a fundamental inability to comprehend his spatially unique and utterly imbricated position in the world. “This existential spatiality” Soja concludes, “gives to being a place, a positioning within the lifeworld... This emplacement is a *passionate* process that links subject and object, Human Being and Nature, the individual and the environment, human geography and human history” (134, emphasis added). We see in Richard Henry Gilkey’s transformation into the Texas Highway Killer the displacement of that passion, the confusion of individual and environment, and the unfortunate outcome of a human history that is willfully negligent of its own effects on human geography.

Gutfreund, Schwartzner, and Soja provide insight, then, into the socio/psycho-spatial America in which Richard Henry Gilkey inescapably lives—one rife with the perspectival and geographic effects of automobility. His chapter seems to take place somewhere in rural Texas, where, apart from the supermarket at which he works, his world is a sparsely populated land of open spaces crossed and dotted by nation-spanning infrastructures. As he drives from his parents’ home, on the way to his friend Bud’s ramshackle house, with the “high school a quarter mile behind [he] still [heard] the big flag snapping and the halyard beating nautically on the pole” (263). The drive itself is marked only by the road itself and the electrical grid: “This was an untraveled road. Travel thirty miles on this road and you may not see another car. You see the power lines extended to the limit of vision, sinking toward the earth as a matter of perspective” (270). Gilkey exists in a tableau that is dominated by the interstitial infrastructures of the Department of Education, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Energy: rural school buildings, backroads, and interminable power lines which always lead to

some more central and well-looked-after location. Soja aptly describes the political economy of those who live in the nodes of postmodern geographies thus:

Indeed, in contemporary societies the authoritative and allocative power of the urban centre is purposefully obscured, or, alternatively, ripped out of context, and given the stretched-out appearance of democratic ubiquity. (234)

This reading of the relational configuration between the geographic center and its nodes reveals that 1) Gilkey's geographical situation is inherently tied to a particularly postmodern divvying up of the nation, a process that is inherently tied to the corporate construction of the interstate highway system and 2) that this postmodern geography creates a complicated positionality from which a violent confusion might be expected.

In this tableau, in this marginally lived environment, Gilkey compares the silence when the wind dies down to "the hush before Judgement" (ibid). Revelatory apocalypse is called upon for meaning when the forces of nature vanish and all that is left is the cartilage of the nation's infrastructure network. Gilkey's built environment, then, is one that is in uneasy tension with the natural world, and it is one that further emphasizes isolation in the marginality of its infrastructure, whose vanishing points always reemphasize the fact that this is a location in-between-nodes.

This depiction represents the experience of a distinctively postmodern infrastructural sublime, which Michele Speitz finds in Romantic literature in her 2021 article in the *European Romantic Review*. Looking at Romantic treatments of bridges and roads, she makes a case for the increasingly built-up secular world encroaching on the territory of the sublime—on the sense of grandeur and awe typically reserved for overwhelming natural vistas and spiritually invigorating religious architecture. In this new permutation of the sublime, massive civil

undertakings become the focal point for making meaning out of that which is too grand, too multi-faceted, and too distant from the experience of a single individual to be comprehended rationally. “The infrastructural sublime,” she shows, “reads unparalleled civil artifacts less as the work of earthen agencies or diverse hands and more as *proud* and *wondrous* products of *one nation, one vision*” (Speitz 45, emphasis added).

DeLillo’s depiction of the Texan landscape, mediated through Gilkey’s perspective, evinces many hallmarks of the traditional sublime: the infinitude of the power lines, the introspection driven by a sense of isolation in the face such hugeness, and the turn to religious association in an attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible. However, Gilkey’s religious association does not seem to be sincere; there is no other mention in the novel of him practicing or even being perversely influenced by any religion, as we sometimes associate with serial killers in the American mythology. Further, when Gilkey returns home at the end of the chapter, the high school’s American flag is still “banging [its] halyard against the pole and it made him weak somehow, the repeated meaning of the noise” (*Underworld* 271). Gilkey’s perception of his local infrastructures does nothing to “install” any sort of unified “national pride” (Speitz 45). Rather, in their own marginality, the infrastructures of Gilkey’s environment only reflect back at him his own oppression-via-marginality/fragmentation, and so they serve to further stoke his own need “to take everything outside, share it with others, become part of the history of others,” by whatever perversely violent means necessary, “because this was the only way to escape, to get out from under the pissant details of who he was” (*Underworld* 266). Those power lines, falling off into the unfathomable distance as they do, “sinking toward the earth as a matter of perspective” (270), come to operate as Newmanian zips.

Jean-François Lyotard reads the bold lines which cut through Barrett Newman's abstract geometries as an instance of postmodern sublimity. He describes them as a painted geography where there is "almost nothing to 'consume'" (241-2) while at the same time presenting, in Newman's own words, a "reassert[ion]... of man's natural desire to be exalted" (*Selected Writings* 173). Take Newman's *Onement III* and its vast, deep red backdrop with a single orange brush stroke cutting through the center and beyond the top and bottom edges of the canvas;⁸ it is difficult not to see in this painting the a two-lane highway gashing, inexorably and with engineered geometry, through an otherwise unbuilt rural landscape—the builtness bleeding into that un(der)developed vista on its blurred edges, so becoming its central and embedded feature. It is all but impossible to assert individualized meaning outside the domineering context of the zip, outside of the domineering context of the national roadways which cut through rural spaces, while the repetitious banging of the American flag saps Gilkey of his energy, reminding him of his overdetermination. If we extend Lyotard and Newman's particularly postmodernist and spatial conceptions of the sublime to DeLillo's serial killer, then we find the novel's central frustration: that America offers so much apparently meaningful materiality, yet so little meaningful infrastructural meaning. Nodes trail off into the coastal distance for the majority of voting and gun-toting Americans, without any means to exorcise the energies of those democratic and violent technologies which have been enshrined in the nation's constitution. When one feels geographically alone, one acts alone against the system, and only to be consumed by the system. This is the ironic curse that DeLillo teases to the forefront in this automobilic reading of his turn of the millennium novel.

Gilkey, indeed, is at his most psychologically vulnerable when he has to engage with the outside world on terms other than his own. While waiting for Bud to finish telling of his own

daily stressors, the Texas Highway Killer yearns for the time when he had a non-customer-facing position, apparently in the supermarket's back office. He was able to perform impersonal, soothingly repetitive tasks like "batching personal checks and redeemed coupons" from the relational isolation of "a glass booth" (266). The only human communication that he had to endure was once removed from truly public interaction: "giving out nickels to the checkout personnel" (266). But Michel Foucault writes that "the space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space" (23). Gilkey cannot handle the multiplicity of life in space—it claws and gnaws at him too intensely—and so, unable to adapt to the changes of history, he wishes only to retreat behind the glass. This spatial positioning, Gilkey behind the corporate glass, is akin to the positionality of the driver, comfortably isolated behind the automobile's windshield.

Still waiting for "the rest" of Bud's complaints, Gilkey continues his musing, reliving those "casual abuses" that he endures at his low-wage supermarket job when, after he "seemingly messed up somehow and was at the counters again" (267). Now, frugal customers call him out for not properly applying coupons or for charging them for a more expensive variety of pear. The agony of these interactions is at least partially the result of Gilkey's own incompetence in comprehending the intricacies of the incomprehensibly vast networks of communication and trade. It is only a sublimely vast network of instantaneous financial communication that would allow for such nationwide couponing programs that make possible such specific absurdities as "sixteen cents off on the tomato paste." And it is only for the fact of the interstate highway system—which allows for agricultural goods to be shipped with enough velocity—that, in a nation about 3,000 miles wide, a customer in an arid ghost town can rightly

complain, “That’s not a red pear that’s an an-jew” (267) and get a couple cents back for the pound. Although, in fact, red d’Anjous are a very commonly sold naturally occurring mutation, that grow from the very same trees as typical d’Anjou pears.

I make this botanical digression for a few reasons. First, it further emphasizes the point that Gilkey’s incompetence in properly ringing up these fruits is inevitable; it is a typically postmodern moment in which semantic paradox reveals that the truth cannot be truly expressed, reveals a linguistically unresolvable (for the characters, at least) contradiction: a red pear can indeed be an Anjou, but a red pear cannot properly *be rung up* as an Anjou. But Gilkey, in his utter incomprehension, cannot even acknowledge the paradox, cannot explicate a challenge to the non-sensical common sense of the customer, nor assert any subjective, individual perspective against the ubiquitous absurdity of postmodern life. Second, the misapprehension of red pears as incommensurate with Anjou pears echoes America’s misapprehension of serial killers as some sort of unnatural outlier, when, in fact, all mutations are a natural occurrence of the genetic and environmental factors that go into making an individual and are natural outgrowths of the original national “organism.” Third, as mentioned above, these ostensible impossibilities are made possible by the velocity of communication and distribution of the Interstate Highway System, by this infrastructural network’s geographic condensing of possibilities and prices of goods available for purchase.

Shane Hamilton, in his history of the political economy of late 20th-century long-haul truckers, writes that “new forms of business enterprise emerged in the postwar period to use *technologies of efficient mass distribution, rather than of mass production, to provide ‘luxuries for the masses’* while slashing labor costs and defying government antitrust provisions” (4, emphasis added). This can be read as a mutation rising out of the history of the highway system

itself as conveyed by Gutfreund: a supposedly public good that was rammed through the public in service of the profit of a few, while still generating debatable public good in the end: mobility, freedom of choice, and new geographic possibilities. Hamilton further explains that “by relying on long-haul trucking to craft a low-price food economy on America’s rural highways” this new economic ordering allowed “broad swaths of the American populace... to demand ‘always low prices’” (5). So, DeLillo’s placement of Gilkey in a liminal pocket of America defined by its transportation and communication infrastructure that leads the gaze always to some more central node, not only has implications for Gilkey’s geographical isolation. This *emplacement*—in the sense of how these infrastructures settle and entrench paradigms of understanding the world—predetermines even those “casual abuses” that seem to cause Gilkey so much psychic strife. With Gilkey’s inability to grapple with postmodern realities, realities underwritten by the new geographical possibilities made plausible by automobility and the U.S roads system, this brief moment of musing is key to understanding Gilkey’s motivations.

Let us recall that Gilkey ascribes his workplace woes to his forced removal from the comfortable, repetitive isolation of work in the supermarket’s glass booth. Gilkey has not completed his “primal setting at a distance.” Soja asserts that “existence, the very presence of being, means having to deal with the friction of distance whether it be on the level of the ‘primal setting’ or in the dull routines of everyday life” (149). Soja further shows that the intensity of this friction is “commensurate” to one’s distance from the primal node. When one exists within the zip, as does Gilkey, the emotive need to “be exalted” equals but cannot negate the friction of distance, and so Gilkey finds his exaltation through negating the comfortable use of those infrastructures which oppress him—though in a manner, which in the 24-hour news-cycle,

negates his message by reinstalling yet another evolution of American nationality—that of fear and communion with the TV screen.

As Shwartzner writes, “dromoscopic perception,” that penetrative perceptive paradigm of automobility, “approaches the built world through possibilities of engagement, tunneling through passages, turning to avoid collisions, always pursuing a distant horizon” (99). Gilkey, due to his incomplete psychological spatialization, detests every facet of this dominant organization of relations, and so seeks to deconstruct it by enacting terror upon its infrastructures. Gilkey’s M.O. penetrates the automotive penetrator. Shwartzner explains the powerful discomfort of such a spatial violation, though under less dramatic circumstances:

“Stuck in traffic, we scrutinize the features of places that passed unnoticed when we zipped by at high speed. And this sort of close viewing can seem somehow voyeuristic, as if we are seeing something we are not meant to see. And of course, stopped in traffic, cars, too, lose their sense of *inviolability*—the expressway can feel uncomfortably like a public forum.” (109, emphasis added)

When a breakdown of the privacy of the individual viewing booth occurs, and drivers are fully confronted with the publicness of its infrastructure—when, due to a decrease in velocity beyond their control, they are forced to acknowledge the friction of spatial relation and infrastructural commonality—spatial discomfort is felt, and America’s odd rendering of what is public and what is private space is illuminated. Gilkey’s killings violently accelerate these realizations, attempting to make them “known.”

Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, argues that our modern historical era was spurred on by “the rise of the social.” By this she refers to a breakdown of that the stark divisions between the public realm, in which government and political action are done, and the

private realm, in which the household resides and the provision for biological needs is taken care of. Arendt argues that these two realms of life, which since the Greeks have organized human affairs, have in the modern era become submerged, and their differences obliterated by, a newly realized “sphere of the social” (69). The social realm arose, according to Arendt, when the provision of biological necessities became a matter for the state. She finds in the fallout of this development a supposedly private realm that has been stripped of all privacy because the state now has access to the inner workings of the household, and a public realm where no free political action can exist because the stifling cycles of biological necessity are now public matters. The U.S. highway system, as we’ve seen, represents an unholy union of the private, public, and social realms with its corporate, state, and personal inbuilt biases and uses. And Gilkey’s reactions to American society might be read in part as a reaction to the lack of real privacy in the modern world—the privacy of the household and of labor that was once at least owned by the lower classes as a pittance for their lack of access to the public realm of government. As Arendt writes, one “non-privative characteristic of privacy is that the four walls of one’s private property offer the only reliable hiding place from the common public world... a life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden” (71).

Gilkey has trouble maintaining the biological necessities of his household as he cares for his aging father, and notes the labyrinthine processes and worries and confusions of government and personal responsibilities of something as simple as sticking to a medication routine: “there was a schedule of medications that Richard and his mother tried to keep track of through the daily twists of half doses and warning labels and depending on this and don’t forget that” (262). We can see more clearly the unthought knowns behind Gilkey’s desire to stay behind the glass at

work, to shatter the glass of other drivers; he is pathologically incapable of adapting to the “rise of the social” and so is doubly removed from others, seeking violently to enact what feels to him like real relations, to close the distance. “Loneliness,” Arendt writes, “is so contradictory to the human condition of plurality that it is simply unbearable for any length of time and needs the company of God... if it is not to annihilate human existence altogether” (76). The motivating force of loneliness comes through most clearly when Gilkey reflects on his on-air calls to Sue Ann, a television reporter based in Atlanta. “He talked to her on the phone and made eye contact with the TV. This was the waking of the knowledge that he was real” (270). In the confusions of public and private realms in the postmodern world, and of near and far, Gilkey feels that he is able to overcome that “primal distance” between subject and object, between two human beings, when triply mediated by phone, television, and vast geographic space. “Being seen and being heard by others,” Arendt explains the subjectivity bolstering effects of public space, “derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (57). Paradoxically, Gilkey is able to feel this sense of public fulfillment while being comfortably removed from the perceived dangers of public space.

Gilkey’s killings ought to be read at least partially as a political (if not entirely conscious) reaction against automobility. He forces regular, everyday people out of the taken-for-granted, comfortable isolation of their automobiles. He shatters the safe glass behind which they enjoy solitude within the rushing crowd of traffic— just like Gilkey himself was forced from behind the comfort of his own supermarket booth. The rest of the Gilkey-perspective chapter is likewise full of these spatio-relational anxieties, resultant of a forced liminality within American networks of relation. The information super-highway, the healthcare system, ideologies of homeownership, telephonics, all make appearances as Gilkey struggles to self-identify within the

zip. When he cannot get through to the television news reporter, with whom he is obsessed, due to the call-in popularity of his story, he describes the switchboard itself as “leery and abrupt and unbelieving” (270).

In these little moments, DeLillo’s prose resonates with the paranoia symptomatic of the confusions of objectivity and subjectivity that follow an incomplete spatial remove. Gilkey tries in vain to make sense of apparently random spatialities as he conspiratorially hypothesizes the benefits of being a right vs. a left-handed highway shooter, and Bud, “in a remark that Richard could not analyze for one shred of content” asserts that left-handed men die early “because they jerk off facing the north pole” (265). “The problem is all in the spacing,” Gilkey observes, as he himself tries to make sense of his decision to shoot his victims with his non-dominant hand. It is the nonsense as well as the multiplicity of spatial relations that structure the plot, the geography, and the perspectives of not only the Texas Highway Killer, but the rest of the cast of *Underworld*. Gilkey ultimately complains of “A forty-mile drive into being transparent” (268). It is the absurdity that occurs when technological velocity promises such connection yet delivers such negation which drives this central, yet critically ignored engine of the novel. In the following sections, I will argue that DeLillo continues to explore, throughout the novel, how the promises of automotive technology ultimately result in identity-negation and a compensatory corpo-nationalism to fill the void.

CHAPTER 3
AN AUTOMOTIVE REREADING OF “BETTER THINGS FOR BETTER LIVING
THROUGH CHEMISTRY”

“The eeriness of the car that keeps on coming after the driver is shot. It approaches briefly then falls back.” (*Underworld* 217)

Again and again, DeLillo illustrates the unsettling, uncanny nature of the automobile. The technology seems to have some volition, some unthinking autonomy in how it affects people and their sense of space. In the previous chapter, I considered the many ways in which Richard Henry Gilkey’s pathology arises out of a psychological need for distance *from* such heterogenous space to compensate for an incomplete “primal setting at a distance”—how for him, the automobile and its infrastructure have become the emblems for other people’s comfort and his own oppression, and so become simultaneously the tool and target of his terrorism. In this chapter, I take the critical lens that I constructed in closely reading the Texas Highway Killer’s isolated perspective, and use it to illuminate Part 5 of *Underworld*, titled “Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry.”

With its subtitle, “Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s,” these 137 pages bounce back and forth between the foundational perspectives of many of the characters whom we have already been introduced to during their lives in the 80s and 90s—Nick and Marian Shay in their pre-Arizona days; Eric Deming, the weapons engineer who worked with Nick’s brother in the desert base; Chuckie Wainwright who was once the uninterested giftee of the legendary baseball and is now an Airforce gunner in Vietnam; and a host of other

characters more or less tangential to the novel's central plot. By reading this section's depictions of automotive life as generative for the rest of the novel, I argue that its overall effect is to provide a multiplicitous snapshot of the embryonic days of Cold War America, a snapshot that highlights the historical foundation of an odd and uniquely American set of relationships between technology and the individual, between corporation and citizen, between man and state, that developed during this mid-century period.

Nick Shay on the Road

Doreen Massey, in *For Space*, argues that space, as opposed to time, is the arena of human relationality:

If time unfolds as change then space unfolds as interaction. In that sense space is the *social* dimension. Not in the sense of exclusively human sociability, but in the sense of engagement within a multiplicity. It is the sphere of the continuous production and reconfiguration of heterogeneity in all its forms—diversity, subordination, conflicting interests. (61)

A bit earlier, quoting Henri Bergson, she writes that if “time prevents everything from being given at once” then “the ‘role of space’ might be characterized as providing the condition for the existence of those relations which generate time” (56).⁹ In “Better Things” and throughout *Underworld* as a whole, then, by carving up, isolating, and reconnecting slices of character's time and space in postmodern combinations that shed light on their inherent *connectedness*, DeLillo seeks to uncover the underlying machinations of a nation's long history. DeLillo reconstructs not the history of a “modernist singular temporality”, but of “postmodern depthlessness... [the] sense of contemporaneous multiple becomings” (Massey 120). As mentioned above, however, this historical perspective is ever mediated by the characters' use of,

and relations to, technology, especially those spatiality-discomposing and uncannily autonomous transportation technologies.

When DeLillo first introduces us to Nick Shay, the novel's protagonist if it has one, it is the spring of 1992. Here he is 40 years removed from the "criminally negligent homicide" (*Underworld* 502) that had him sent to juvenile detention, set him on his life's path away from his hometown of New York City, and still haunts and informs his life. "I was driving a Lexus through a rustling wind" are his first words as he cruises through an unspecified desert in the American Southwest (63). He relishes the fact that the manufacture of his rented vehicle did not involve "a spot of mortal sweat... Just the eerie weave of chromium alloys carried in interlocking arcs... Robots tightening bolts, programmed drudges that do not dream of family dread" (ibid). This appreciation for the supposed non-humanity of mass-produced automobility matches seamlessly with his philosophies about the faceless multi-national corporations, one of which he works for as a waste-management consultant, that came to dominate this era; he waxes:

"Corporations are great and appalling things. They take you and shape you in nearly nothing flat, twist and swivel you. And *they do it without overt persuasion*, they do it with smiles and nods, a collective inflection of the voice. You stand at the head of a corridor and by the time you walk to the far end you have adopted the comprehensive philosophy of the firm." (282, emphasis added)

Here Nick speaks to the decidedly *homogenizing* and frictionless nature of corporate space, a far cry from the descriptions of real space by Soja and Massey. In the desert, Nick muses that his Lexus's antiseptic manufacture makes it "a natural match for the landscape I was crossing. Heat shimmer rising on the empty flats. A bled-white sky with ticky breezes raking dust across the windshield. And the species factually absent from the scene—except for me, of course, and I

was barely there” (63). Here we see distilled the geographic-perspectival impact of the historical convergence of corporatization, automation, and automobility. The “heat shimmer” of the desert on the other side of the air-conditioned windshield can only visually rhyme with the vehicle’s “chromium alloys.” The sky is “bled-white”, drained of any mortal fluid. And of course, this all leads to a comfortable dislocation—“I was barely there.” Later in this same section, Nick muses that “the corporation is supposed to take us outside ourselves. We design these organized bodies to respond to the market, face foursquare into the world” (88). In these passages from Nick’s middle age, we find the imbrications of particular technological, infrastructural, and corporate sublimines. The corporate job and the vehicle, their manufacture and use, are all inventions so looming and so precise as to be difficult to grasp, and in serving as interpreters between the Nick and the likewise incomprehensibly vast free market and national geography, they keep Nick in a comfortably incomplete deindividuation. This, then, is what *Underworld* sees as the end-object of America’s Cold War history. It is a national cohesion scaffolded by frictionless technologies and the multinational corporations that produce them. This powerful confluence makes the effacement of the individual an easy trade-off for the comfort of upward mobility, and a geographic perception that is fully mediated by these factors. These interconnected forces ultimately, in the novel, operate as an infrastructure *of* space, or more accurately, as an infrastructure of spatiality: they structure characters’ perceptions of the entire arena of space, of their nation, of all relationality.

Damjana Mraovic-O’Hare writes that by these later years, Nick has achieved “financial security and a family, and fuses into the middle class while hiding the past homicide. But... he is not substantially changed. He is floating in the historical, not entirely understanding the moments in which he lives” (229). O’Hare’s statement comes in the context of an argument that

posits that Nick is blindered to the machinations of history by his nostalgia. By seeking refuge in memories of the “physical masculinity” (218) of his streetwise New York City adolescence, Nick is able to maintain some sense of personal identity at the price of being unable to “face foursquare” into his own and his nation’s history. Masculinity and nostalgia are indeed subsumed by his corporate identity as he makes facetious “gangster threats” in the office that are “comically effective” (104) and appropriates “the rhetoric of aggrieved minorities to prevent legislation that would hurt our business” (119). Indeed, reliving and imitating marginal histories might help one maintain some tenuous sense of independence in the corporate homogenizer. There is a confounding factor in Nick’s trouble with history beyond his self-preserving need for nostalgia. Perhaps Nick cannot fully grasp the historical for the very fact of his fusion into the corporate middle class, with its technologies and infrastructures of spatial mediation. By keeping him from experiencing space fully as an arena of multiplicity, Nick is blindered toward half of what makes history. In turning to his first-person narrated fragments from the “Better Things” section, then, we can see the incipient stages of these developments *as history*—unshaded by nostalgia—focusing on the effects of the automobile on characters’ senses of public and private, in both the individual/social and politico-economic senses of the words.

Two of Nick’s seven “fragments” find him behind the wheel with his then-girlfriend Amy, as they first aimlessly road trip across the continent, and later cross the Mexican border with the express goal of procuring an abortion. The former fragment is introduced thusly:

“We were together every hour of the day and night for three or four weeks, much of it, most of it in her car, eating and sleeping there, having sex in her car, sleeping and waking up and looking around and it was still dark, or still light, depending, and finally we’d stop driving for one reason or another, logical or not, and life’d slow down enough so things

could happen normally in rooms but only until it was time to go again and she'd rumble up in the 1950 Merc, chassis lowered and driveline slightly souped, and we were headed West again." (548-9)

This single, rolling, breathless sentence encapsulates the rhythm of a road trip as well as the strange way that biological needs and logical reactions to them take a back seat to the prescribed biases of the vehicle and the road. The language in the first half of the sentence recalls that notion in *White Noise* of "the noise and heat of being" as being distilled and amplified in the urban center and the family kitchen, alike (10, 81). In *White Noise* such spaces of "over-closeness" have the effect of shearing belief from truth, of promoting "misinformation" and these processes are tied to the survival instinct of "fragile creatures surrounded by a world of hostile facts" (81). The space of the automobile in this section of *Underworld* is more progenerative than defensive, and there is a sense that instead of facts it is the passages of time are irrelevant in their transnational movement. They wake up to keep moving any time of day or night—meerkattish animals popping up to survey their surroundings, though animals detached from circadian rhythms. The only concrete things, the only stable and reliable things are the vehicle, its modifications, and the cardinal direction in which the couple is headed. Normal rooms where normal things happen, through an odd inversion, become a subordinate space to the interior of the mid-century Mercury.

Concerns of public and private space and property also crop up within the object of the Mercury itself. Nick notes that Amy "didn't want him to know that her father had given her the car" (550). There is some shame that Nick reads in Amy's little secret—a shame in not having "earned" the car; a shame of intergenerational wealth, no matter its relative smallness in scale. Amy's secret of the provenance of her ownership of the car must be read in relation to Nick's

very first time behind the wheel of a vehicle. The supposedly abandoned and hotwired vehicle which constitutes Nick's introduction to automobility years before his road trip, teaches Nick an especially American lesson in the relationality between object and owner. Nick explains that the stolen ride was mostly driven "at night because the brashness [of the theft] had given way to a responsible sense of ownership and they went only limited distances because it seemed safer" (686). Despite its illicit provenance, the object of the vehicle itself demands a sense of respect for the privacy, or privation, of its ownership.

It should also be noted, though, that the revelation of the provenance of Amy's ownership of the "Merc" immediately follows a coolly aestheticized imagination of their road trip and its/their position in the American landscape: "her car was black and hooded-looking and we thought we were phantoms of the road, djinns who could pee unseen in the country dust" (ibid). This tension, between the aestheticized image and the contextualized facts of the matter, the publicity of the former and the secret privacy of the latter, is teased out over the course of *Underworld*. Richard Henry Gilkey has his violent and mediated image covering for "the pissant details of who he was." Klara Sax struggles with this, as well, not only when she attempts to re-aestheticize landscape-levelling warplanes in her landscape art installation, but also as she watches the highly adorned presentation of the fictional Sergei Eisenstein film, *Unterwelt*. DeLillo proposes this lost Eisenstein film as an artistic protest against the Soviet regime, perhaps that most social of statist governments, in the Arendtian sense. Sax struggles with the capitalist aestheticization of a communist auteur's work of the assertion of the private will: "she felt she was in some ambiguous filmscape somewhere between the Soviet model and Hollywood's vaulted heaven of love, sex, crime and individual heroism, of scenery and luxury and gorgeous toilets" (431).

That last in the paradoxical list refers to the decadent restrooms of Radio City Music Hall, in which the film is being screened. Radio City Music Hall, it is apt to be noted, was built as part of an “urban renewal project” funded privately by J.D. Rockefeller (Miller 5). And to further connect to the road trip at hand, somewhere in middle America, Amy complains that Nick “wanted to crowd into the gas station toilet with me... because [he] thought he might miss something” (552). The veil between public and private spaces, in *Underworld*, is shown again and again to be quite sheer, quite vulnerable to penetration, and quite up to individual interpretation. And all of this, in the end, is to say that the aestheticization of the roads in *Underworld* ought to be read within the novel-wide investigation and employment of the aestheticization of history, of international conflict, and of the role of private corporations within that matrix. The novel asks what it means to merge public and private space and how this process blurs the lines between identification, truth, and understanding. It emphasizes the conflicting interests that go into building cultural monuments, transportation infrastructures, and romantic relationships alike. *Underworld* reveals the perspectival power of constructed spaces.

It is also during this road trip that DeLillo offers one of his most particular and incisive depictions of automobility. In a brief paragraph that cuts to the quick of relationality within the four walls of a vehicle on an American highway, he writes:

“She felt the weight of the gaze and looked across at me on the empty road with a mountain of lavender tailings rising above the old sheds that marked a mineworks and it was a look so intimate and reaching, so deep in things we’d done that it became a crazy kind of dare, a form of drag-strip chicken—which one of us would break the lovers’ gaze and look away first to see if the car had wandered into the eastbound lane, with a shiny-eye pickup approaching, half a second from dazzling death.” (553).

This riff, another tightly highly controlled yet breathless and paratactic sentence, again reflects the velocity and momentum of the vehicle on the road trip as well as automobility's promise for an individualistic command of the American landscape. It takes the gaze that recognizes the "over-closeness" and the "noise and heat of being" between the vehicle's bumpers, and conjoins it with that other gaze of the road: that Shwarzerian gaze that consumes the landscape through the windshield, which turns the natural bounty of a nation into challenges of ownership. The lover's challenge—of do you care for me over your own life?—is mirrored by the challenge that the mineworks face to the lavender-bespotted mountains. In one sentence, DeLillo shows the fatality of private romance's struggle to exteriorize and that fatality's reflections in the nation's landscape.

All of this confusion of ownership, of private and public and public and national space, comes to fruition in the road trip's sequel. Two years later, after a time span that goes unnarrated, Nick finds himself in Mexico helping Amy to get an abortion. It is not clear whether this is an outcome of their relationship or not. What is clear is that DeLillo is concerned, in this moment, with how national borders demarcate different spaces, and with how those different spaces contain different notions on what is a private matter and what is to be publicly governed. Nick notes that he had "been told it was better to take a taxi across the border because if you drove your car you became subject to major delays owing to inspections by customs agents on your return the U.S. side, for guns and drugs" (587). Even though the only material thing he and Amy would be recrossing the border with is a negation, a lack, the power of the border as a space of personal violability is deeply felt. And the solution is to cross that space in a semi-public vehicle— a semi-public and roving spatiality— the taxi.

Beyond this, though, the space of the Mexican abortion clinic itself is rendered in a unique, if troubling way. The office, which an American might expect to be housed in a corporately owned facility is in fact just a “fairly sizable house” (587). Here is a privation of what the reader understands as a medical service—what they understand to be a service of biological necessity and so a service to take place in the social realm of not-private but also not-public corporate medicine. Owned and operated by an American expatriate, the abortion clinic/private residence has, Nick notes, “painted sayings and occult symbols, and this was unexpected. Circles, arrows, birds, mucho mystical drivel, and I was trying to absorb it all.” (587). There is a thingness here that emphasizes the constructedness of public and private space, which at the same time emphasizes a kind of cultural appropriation within this medical underworld. What is important, though, is that once more and in a much more complex tableau, the road system has brought us to a crisis of public and private and governmentally overseen spaces. As Doreen Massey, writes: “Arriving in a new place means joining up with, somehow linking into, the collection of interwoven stories of which that place is made... picking up the threads and weaving them into a more or less coherent feeling of being ‘here’, ‘now’.” (119). This is what our narrator, Nick, is trying and failing to do throughout his road trip. He tries and fails, again and again; always stymied by the object of the vehicle, he fails to find real transcendence of relation on the road.

A few years earlier, in the first fragment from this section, when Nick is living in the juvenile detention center following the homicide, he says “all I wanted from the system was method and regularity” (503). He is personally disappointed when the kitchen catches fire in a moment that occurs off of the page. When a group of other adolescents/inmates break out of the facility he describes it as a “tremendous... dereliction, a collapse” (ibid). There is a sense of

awe admixed with a sense of the individual's relation with the collective in the language here, representative of a reversal or deconstructing of the infrastructural sublime—a recognition of the immense power of the *failure* of infrastructure. To use Immanuel Kant's apt definition of the sublime, here: it is the "feeling of the inadequacy of [the] imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole, wherein the imagination reaches its maximum and in striving to surpass it, sinks back into itself, by which, however, a kind of emotional satisfaction is produced" (91). This is, of course, a theme that DeLillo has been developing for his entire career, most distinctly, in "The Airborne Toxic Event" section of 1985's *White Noise* and in the collapse of the twin towers that varyingly haunt the characters in 2007's *Falling Man*. Nick Shay finds much to be desired in the lack of sternness of the infrastructures of *juvenile* detention—"we weren't worth much if the system designed to contain us kept breaking down" (503). After the administration installs a miniature golf course, Nick laments "I was here on a serious charge, a homicide by whatever name... but the people who put me here were trifling with my mind" (ibid). Nick needs a strong, concrete infrastructure against which to shore his identity—his identification with the culture of detention laying the groundwork for his complete submersion into corporate culture later in life.

Here DeLillo offers an insight into how America's other infrastructures, including its road system, instill a certain kind of nationalism. While incarcerated, Nick spends the summers working on roads, "giving myself up to the rote motions of breaking asphalt... hammering hard surfaces on some country road in the julepy haze of a midsummer day" (502) winter shoveling snow and reading books, and this, he says, "was how I built an individual" (ibid). This is the one point in the book where we get a look behind the built to see the build *ing*—the construction and maintenance of the American road system, the construction and maintenance of this national unthought known. And this crucible is quite dissimilar to the waste system's which *is*

foregrounded in the novel. The forces behind the road system aren't hidden behind keycard-locked "electronic gates" and "voiceprint" activated elevators in shimmering bronze corporate towers—"the smart new world of microprocessors" that Nick later fully believes to be the source of American "power" and "connection" (303). No, the road systems that, as Gutfreund shows, made such feats of corporate engineering and secrecy possible, are not themselves powered by microprocessors, but by the incarcerated bodies of the juvenile penal system. Interestingly, too, Nick attributes his growth to the rote and absolutely material, as opposed to digital, geometries of these two tasks—"the linear arrangements of words on a page... the nature and shape of books, the routine of shovel strokes in the deep snow" (ibid). Up the scale to the crowd of the nation, and we can see again how the interstate's carving of the nation into neat, readable spacings conditions a more cohesive national spatial perception. Individual perceptions of the nation are coaxed to align into the "slipknots and serpentines" of Klara Sax's movie theater crowd—who see themselves projected on-screen in "methodical geometry" while the Rockettes perform in "West Point gray" and "bondage collars" (428).

The school-to-prison-pipeline is a distinctly late-20th/early-21st-century phenomenon, the recent scholarship surrounding which has spurred some important conversations that question the culpability of our material architectures and infrastructures in the conditioning of our children, through educational architecture and disciplining, to be suitable and complacent prisoners by way of their already "knowing the rules," so to speak.¹⁰ DeLillo's novel attempts to tackle the same problem from a slightly different angle; it presents the various ways that America's penal, automotive, and corporate systems, among others, all serve to condition the people who live in America into American citizens. In the fragments at hand, relating to Nick Shay's early life, DeLillo explores first how the entangled penal and Christian infrastructures create young (white)

men who are able to forge a sense of individualization *via* submersion into massive material systems, thus churning out ideal candidates for upper-middle corporate managers. In the first chapter, I examined the ways that Richard Henry Gilkey's road-determined geographies conditioned his geographic perception and self-identification as "within-the-zip" and "between nodes"—marginalized, in a word. I also explored how due to an inability to fully relate, spatially, Gilkey finds himself unfit for productive work and relatedly unable to tend to the biological necessities of his household. All of these negative and incomplete conditionings lead him inexorably toward his automotive brand of terrorism. DeLillo, through the characters of Richard Henry Gilkey and Nick Shay, presents the material yet unacknowledged forces acculturating American citizens during the Cold War, especially as they relate to the United States Interstate system.

Atomic Weapons and Automobiles

The other fragment from "Better Living" that directly confronts the impacts of automobility is the story of the Deming family, a searing satire of privative and white-privileged suburbanity. The Demings are connected to the central plot by way of Nick Shay's younger brother Matt; Eric Deming is the brainy and uncouth weapons engineering colleague whom Matt begrudgingly befriends in the extremely consolidated and tight spatial relationality of "The Pocket"—the U.S. military's secret weapons development lab housed in an unspecified American desert in 1974. We get to know an adolescent Eric Deming and his parents in 1957, during the heyday of suburban construction and its progenerating white flight. In the Demings section, themes of aberrant privacy, conditioned by the biases of automotive transportation, take center stage.

The section opens from the perspective of Eric's odd namesake, his mother Erica, as she creates Jell-O entrees unspeakable to the contemporary palette, such as a Jell-O chicken mouse. But even as these corporate-branded recipes offer Erica "the best way to improve her mood"—it is the civil architecture of urban space that clarifies her understanding of her place in the world. "From the kitchen window," DeLillo writes, "she could see the lawn neat and trimmed, low-hedged and approachable. The trees at the edge of the lawn were new, like everything else in the area. All up and down the curving streets there were young trees and small new box shrubs and a sense of openness, a sense of seeing everything there is to see at a single glance, with nothing shrouded or walled or protected from the glare" (514). Erica's sense of comfort in the panoptical nature of suburban city planning is undercut by its own design: the clean edges of lawns, the box shrubs, and the hedges (no matter how low-trimmed) all delineate the inaccessible spaces of private ownership that abut her own. And what she is unable, or unwilling, to see becomes clear in DeLillo's depictions of her husband and son's aberrant, sexually charged infatuations with mass-produced technology. Especially against the fragment that immediately follows—a close depiction of Freedom Summer protestors being beaten and tear-gassed—the Demings' subchapter asks us to consider again the implications of comfortable suburbanity in the unjust state of contemporary America.

As Erica cooks Jell-O concoctions, her husband Rick "was still in the breezeway, running a shammy over the chromework" of the family's Fairlane, which Erica's "swirly blue skirt and buttercup blouse... happened to match the colors of" (516). Rick holds a deep reverence for the car that he compulsively shines, for "beneath the routine family applications was the crouched power of the machine, top down, eating up the landscape" (ibid). And while Rick loves the vehicle for the geography conquering, extra-familial powers that it offers him, when he looks "at

himself in a strip of chrome,” trying to “feel some sense of the power of the automobile,” his visage is reflected back at him “warp-eyed and hydrocephalic” (ibid). This physiological metamorphosis can only be read in conjunction with DeLillo’s depictions of the patients at the Kazakhstani radiation hospital that Nick Shay visits in the book’s epilogue as part of a business trip regarding the disposal of America’s nuclear waste. Nick finds children with heads “slightly oversized, face[s] and forehead[s] marked by tumors, and the spongy caps over the place where [their] eyes should have been” (802). The parallels of physiognomic distortion cannot go unremarked; DeLillo marks the fallout of automobile culture as equal and inherently related to nuclear technologies. Erica, of course, cannot see her husband’s socio-physiognomic transformation at the hands of automobility for what it is; all she can do is notice the palliative effects of automobility’s architecture and language: “one of Erica’s favorite words in the language was breezeway. It spoke of ease and breeze and *being contemporary* and *having something others did not*” (ibid, emphasis added). Erica’s comfortable suburbanity is clearly rooted in a historically emplaced socioeconomic privilege, and the architecture of that suburbia has clearly been constructed in the image of the automobile.

From this privative, automobile-centric vantage, Erica is also unable to recognize her son’s own sexual perversion of object-relations. There is “nothing shrouded or secret” to Erica’s watchful eye, DeLillo writes, “except for young Eric” (514). The adolescent weapons engineer shows his own infatuation with the dromoscopic, as he furtively masturbates around the house in a reused condom, which he appreciates for its “sleek metallic shimmer, like his favorite weapons system, the Honest John” (ibid). DeLillo here emphasizes how war propaganda gets mixed up in the undiscerning, pubescent brain with pornography. Anything that is powerfully seductive becomes the means for sexual pleasure. Relatedly Eric, after some thinking, realizes he finds

erotic pleasure in photographs of Jayne Mansfield's breasts, not for their human sexuality but because they remind him of "the bumper bullets on a Cadillac" (517), which themselves appropriate the language of war, and the made-up-ness of her face out of "a thousand thermoplastic things... in the evolving scan of his eros, it was the masking waxes, liners, glosses and creams that became the soft moist mechanism of his release." Eric's sexual desires are modeled equally on propaganda, advertisement, and his father's own technological perversions. Eric—in his pubescent confusion of sexual-spatial desires, informed by the object-relations of the automobile as they are—and in his secretive and confused familial home life, is a precursor to the Texas Highway Killer. It is only his privileged suburbanity that causes him to kill people in the state-sponsored and bureaucratically mediated manner—becoming a weapons engineer for the U.S. military— as opposed to Richard Henry Gilkey's socio-economic marginalization and serial killing MO. In the Demings fragment, then, we see a thematic infrastructure that connects the Kazakhstani victims of nuclear waste disposal to the midcentury Americans "irradiated" by the promises of automobility and to the most violent and pathological symptom of this historical process, the Texas Highway Killer. The Demings family section continues and amplifies the novel's interrogation of technologically influenced cultural and spatial perspectives in a biting satire of 1950s suburbia. The Demings scene re-emphasizes the constructed nature of automobilic space, and the privilege that it affords some and not others.

The insights of this Deming chapter resonate strongly enough, thematically and plot-wise, with Matt and his girlfriend Janet's camping trip in the military weapons testing preserve, which despite not being in the "Better Things" section, ought to be discussed here. This trip takes place during Matt's tenure in The Pocket, and during a particular period when Matt is struggling with his ethical position as a weapons engineer. In particular, he has been having protracted

conversations with Eric Deming about the irradiating effects of nuclear testing on downwind communities, wherein Matt's genuine concern is juxtaposed against Eric's flippant detachment. Following a marijuana-induced paranoid episode at an engineers' party the night before he leaves to meet Janet, the trip takes on deeper shades of importance: "Matt drove west, deeper into the white parts of the map, where he would try to find a clue to his future" (422). These redacted geographies of secret military bases are reimagined as spaces for journeys of spiritual enlightenment.

Matt thus feels a primal sense of excitement about the trip, but keeps it secret from Janet at least partially because he himself doesn't understand "the stark sort of shudder... knowing he was headed into remote Sonoran waste, where the interplay of terrain and weapons was a kind of neural process remapped in the world, a hollow sort of craving lifted out of the brain stem, or wherever, and painted over with words and sky and diamondback desert" (451). Here Matt visualizes a metapsychological theory of space, a sort of material objective correlative where the right landscape—at the right time for the right mind—can simultaneously confuse the mind and afford it a sense of primal recognition and connection. Just as Erica Demings reads in the suburban landscape a map of her desire for openness that is at odds with the secrets under her own roof, Matt sees in the landscape a harmony between weapons and ecology that belies his internal struggle to quit work in *The Pocket* over concerns of ethical and work-life imbalance. So, it is not just the vast natural desolation of the landscape, but crucially its strata being utterly imbricated with the vast devastating powers of American military weaponry, "the interplay of terrain and weapons" that brings Matt to this edge of sublime understanding. And it is further clear that such a reckoning of human scale against the forces of nature and state is made possible by the individualized perspective of the automobile. As the couple drive the rented jeep they see

“white mountains and flesh mountains and slags of glassy matter that turned out to be mountains” (452); descriptors of the same landscape range from vague to visceral to industrial to certain, the velocity of the zoomscape forcing new types of understanding around every corner. When they make shelter in an old military bunker, Matt seems again to find a sort of harmony and transcendence; “it’s the kind of human junk that deepens the landscape,” he waxes, “how strange and still and beautiful a chunk of concrete can be, lived in fleetingly and then abandoned” (459).

The entire landscape, dotted with military infrastructure as it is, seems to bring Matt the same effect as the Bobby Fischer v. Boris Spassky chess match, which became a synecdoche for the Cold War: “it edged the game out of the private migraine of abnormal introversion and into the mingled thing out there, the everyday melee of competing states and material forces” (457). This section of the road trip in the desert, whether in the space of the vehicle or the bomb shelter, and like the rest of “Better Things,” explores what happens in the translation between the out-there and the in-here, on the individual level, and the public and the private on the societal: what is lost in that pulsing, constant translation and what is gained, its frictions and its confusions, its vantages and its blind-spots. “Ideas used to come from below. Now they’re everywhere above you, connecting things and grids universally” (466); Matt makes meaning out of the spatial and ideological fallout of postmodern infrastructures and postmodern power relations.

All of these analyses are to say that the “Better Things” section of *Underworld* ought to be read as crucial to DeLillo’s investigation of matters of space in the novel, especially as postmodern American space is conditioned by conflicts between private, public, and corporate spheres. It is the fictionalized Lenny Bruce that truly ties all of these fragments together, and it is he who makes up a plurality of these fragments. Bruce’s fragments all center on his stand-up

sets during the Cuban Missile Crisis, that boiling point of the cold war which asked the nation just how far its imperial Caribbean borders really spread. But, while DeLillo uses Bruce's voice for comic relief and as a drama-escalating coda, the author also emphasizes the comedian's ability to riff on the unthought knowns of the American public. A crucial moment comes during Bruce's introduction. It is the end of his very first Crisis set, where he discovers his catchphrase, "*We're all gonna die!*" (506). It is here that he, or the narrator, realizes that:

An hour later, after all the bits, *the scatological asides, the improvised voices*, it was this isolated line that stayed in people's mind when they went to their cars and drove home to Westwood or Brentwood or wherever, or roamed the freeways for half the night because they knew they would wouldn't be able to sleep and *what better place to imagine the flash and burst, where else would they go to rehearse the end of history*, or actually see it—*this was the meaning of the freeways and always had been and they'd always known it at some unsounded level*. (508, emphases mine)

The narrator, via Lenny Bruce—or Lenny Bruce *as* meta-textual avatar for DeLillo (as the "improvised voices" and wish to reverberate in peoples' minds seem to suggest)—understands that it is no longer the moment of communication that makes meaning for the audience. Instead, it is the singular, private, reflective space-time, distanced by time and space and made possible by mega-corporations in conjunction with massive state projects, the space that is provided by the highways, which allows Americans a sense of deeper meaning, a moment of private communion of their material relations with each other and with history. The "Better Things" section of *Underworld* can justifiably be read as an interrogation of the 20th-century struggles and confusions between the public, private, corporate, and psycho-sexual conceptions of space, a

an incisive depiction of the ways that both secret weapons systems and automobile infrastructure have interrelated effects on the American consciousness.

“Better Things” closes with a crowd of pedestrians flowing over the Brooklyn Bridge, people simultaneously finding communal meaning and geographical orientation in the fallout of the Northeast Blackout of 1965. Here, Nick actually worries about the weakness of infrastructure and our utter reliance on it, as opposed to identifying himself against that weakness. “How many thousands, hundreds of thousands trapped in subways or aloft in packed elevators waiting for help. The always seeping suspicion, paralysis, the thing implicit in the push-button city, that it will stop cold” (635). As Nick melds into the crowd, he worries about the ways that technology intervenes in man’s classically understood power of will; even super-human levels of strength mean nothing against the weight of a stuck elevator—the individual will means nothing against the force of national infrastructure, working or not— so he simply melts into the crowd that flows over the bridge, herein finding strength to make it through the night. Throughout the “Better Things” section, DeLillo fictionalizes and narrates real historical occurrences and places them in textual-spatial configurations to show us the multiplicitous and competing forces that make up American space, always emphasizing their infrastructural qualities.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

The modern American novel, informed as it is by America's geography, spatiality, and nationality, should be reread with a consideration for the structuring influence of the country's road systems. Such a consideration's critical potential for unpacking the American writer's (and their fictionalized characters') relationalities is, at this time, relatively untapped. I have shown, through a close critical reading of DeLillo's *Underworld*, the multitudinous ways that the technologies of automobility structure and condition the American perspective. To close, then, it is necessary to take a brief look at those non-automotive spaces which also drive and structure the novel: the pedestrian space of New York City and the digital landscapes which haunt the body of the book and constitute its final pages.

Pedestrians and Avatars; City Blocks and Information Superhighways

Albert Bronzini, in *Underworld*, embodies the pedestrian *par excellence*. Former husband of Klara Sax (and cuckolded by Nick Shay), chess instructor to Matt Shay, and the only character to be born, raised, and remain in New York City, he represents a psychological urbanity unmatched by the rest of the characters in its lack of mediation by the automobile. "Bronzini didn't own a car, didn't drive a car, didn't want one, didn't need one, wouldn't take one if somebody gave it to him. Stop walking, he thought, and you die" (662). For him, roads ought only relate to the automobile as far as they were unfortunately constructed in its image. As he flaneurs around the city in the early 1950s, he comes upon a city block designated a play street, from which cars have been banished. Here, we get the book's most direct and consciously

opinionated stance toward automobiles, as he worries for the future of such safe spaces: “With cars, more cars, with the status hunger, the hot horsepower, the silver smash of chrome, Bronzini saw that the pressure to free the streets of children would make even these designated areas extinct” (ibid). Bronzini recognizes the biases of the automobile and its infrastructures, their tendencies to gobble up public space, visually and physically, as well as their role in the American frenzy for mobility, both geographic and economic. But the space of the city roads, according to Bronzini, is most fruitful when reclaimed by the idealized, unmediated perspectives of childhood play.

Exploring childhood play as an epistemological tool for understanding space is instructive here for unpacking the importance of Bronzini’s observation, especially as Bronzini recognizes the play street as something he wished he could have shown Father Paulus, epistemologist of things as he is, during their stroll through the city (675). Richard Sennett, protégé of Hannah Arendt, writes on urban play spaces and their impact on the socio-spatial development of children, and their related importance as traditionally, and recently undermined, public spaces. Sennet finds deep instructive meaning in architect Robert van Eyk’s post-WWII Amsterdam playground designs, which filled the city’s “emptied spaces” with zones that emphasized subtle “tactile difference” between grassy areas and sand pits, which were both built right up against intersections busy with automobile traffic (232). In such spaces, Sennet writes, children are “provoked... to engage with one another... cooperative activities—looking out for cars, shouting, lots of shouting—becomes a matter of keeping safe” (233). By leaving the borders between these varyingly dangerous spaces “fuzzy,” as opposed to prescriptively cordoned off, Sennet argues, van Eyk invented spaces that forced older children, more conditioned to the spatially informed rules of engagement, to teach their younger peers those

rules through physical modeling. Children learn about the automobile as just another object that must be respected for its material velocity as opposed to all of its ideological biases, as espoused by the later Nick Shay. Bronzini wonders about the rules of the games that happen in such play streets:

“... he was delighted... How children adapt to available surfaces, using curbstones, stoops and manhole covers. How they take the pockmarked world and turn a delicate inversion, making something brainy and rule-bound and smooth, and then spend the rest of their lives trying to repeat the process.” (*Underworld* 664)

Note the human effort to make a cleanly individualized sense of the random historical infrastructural deposits of the material realm, the “pockmarked world.” This is humanity’s relationship to history in its material manifestations; it is a relationship that can only be meaningfully grappled with in true spatial configuration, a configuration that the automobilitic perspective negates. Through the communal and physically discursive epistemology of childhood play such spaces can be meaningfully realized. In its fuzziness, the urban playground’s particular “public realm [is where] people [are forced] to physically mingle rather than verbally interact... [it] was not neutral or indifferent; it drew young and old into the neighborhood” (*ibid*).

This kind of public, physically close *and* multiplicitous space, is altogether different, as we’ve seen, from DeLillo’s automobilitic perspectives, enclosed as they are by the hermetic and corporately designed windshield. Elucidated by Sennet, we can see DeLillo making a case for the epistemological multiplicity of urban spaces dominated by people instead of vehicles, one that is humanistically informed, rather than overwhelmed, by the technological and cultural biases of automobility. In such spaces, “material reality talks back, it constantly corrects projection,

cautions about material truths” (272). As pedestrians, DeLillo seems to argue, we might have a chance to avoid the psychological conditioning of the automotive complex, and might find the ability to teach each other how to live in space. It is also important to note, however, that the vistas of play that we are made privy to are mediated by Bronzini’s own nostalgia. “A *mind relic* of life *not yet* dominated by cars and trucks” (234, emphasis added). Bronzini’s view is optimistic and obsolete.

A similar and in many ways more serious reclamation of public space arrives in the indelible penultimate scenes of the billboard miracle, where an image of the tragically deceased homeless child Esmeralda is visible when the headlights of an elevated train shine on an ad for orange juice. The isolatingly automobiled spaces of the road are transmuted toward communal pedestrianism as “two hundred people wedged onto a traffic island in the bottommost Bronx where the expressway arches down from the terminal market and the train yards stretch toward the narrows, all that old industrial muscle with its fretful desolation” (818). The corporatized and privatized space of both the road and billboard becomes spiritual, while the bureaucratically plain exterior of public transit has been transformed into an individual assertion of space via Moonman’s graffiti. Sister Edgar, the urban nun who had tried to lead Esmeralda toward salvation, finds a secular transcendence in the spatial configuration of the public spectacle. “She feels the words [*the train*] before she sees the object. She feels the words although no one has spoken them. This is how a crowd brings things to single consciousness” (821). Like Sennet, Sister Edgar begins to grasp the power of multiplicity unmediated by privatized technologies.

What do we make, then, of her ultimate transcendence into cyber space—where, on her death, she merges into the internet, “exposed to every connection you can make on the world wide web... in cyberspace, not heaven, and she feels the grip of systems” (825)? In one sense,

we might find closure in Sister Edgar’s “hyperlinked” submersion with J. Edgar Hoover—the democratizing force of the internet and its “settling of difference... all conflict programmed out... a single seraphic word... [that you can] summon in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Arabic... [that you can] locate in a thousand languages and dialects living and dead, and locate literary citations, and follow the word through the tunneled underworld of its ancestral roots... Peace” (826-7). Or, as Doreen Massey writes, “what cyberspace, on some readings, could potentially enable is a kind of disembedding into non-contiguous communities of people-like-us which evade all those challenges thrown up by what material spatiality always presents you with—the accidental, unchosen (different) neighbour” (95). But the tensions on the page belie a postmodernist confusion that undercuts such an easy consolidation. No, this “peace” is not T.S. Eliot’s high modernist “shantih, shantih, shantih” of *The Waste Land*—that other canonical work that deals with detritus and the new ways that crowds form over bridges, death undoing so many— that “Peace which passeth understanding” and constitutes a grand narrative in a single seraphic word (39, 55). This moment of transcendence is undercut by the perspectival biases of the technologies that make it possible. This is, as the text itself makes clear, a “*fantasy* in cyberspace” (*Underworld* 826, emphasis added), this is “cyberspace, *not heaven*” (825, emphasis added). And cyberspace, as Massey must remind us, is an oft-idealized space that is in actuality rooted in server farms, which are typically emplaced in areas of geographically uneven development (96). The rest of *Underworld*, too, gestures toward the essentially complicated material spatiality of the despatializing promise of the internet. It is, of course, Jeff, Nick Shay’s developmentally arrested son, who logs on to the burgeoning world wide web at the close of the book, out of an internet obsession that began with his “obsession” with using digital tools to find meaning in the videos of the Texas Highway Killer—“he enhanced and super-slowed, trying to

find some pixel in the data swarm that might provide a clue to the identity of the shooter” (118). In Jeff’s search for Gilkey’s identity, he himself becomes lost in the parlance of the technology. Nick remembers how, before his introduction to the internet, Jeff used to “used to believe that he could look at a plane in flight and make it explode in midair by simply thinking it” (88). These childhood fantasies speak to a more primal consolidation of space and willpower that belong only to children. “It’s the special skill of an adolescent to imagine the end of the world as an adjunct to his own discontent. But Jeff got older and lost interest and conviction. He lost the paradoxical gift for being separate and alone and yet intimately connected, mind-wired to distant things” (ibid). Growing up, we lose that consolidation of ego with external space. And on the novel’s final page, we see what is lost in a similar perspectival shift from material spatiality to the virtual:

“You can glance out the window for a moment, distracted by the sound of small kids playing a made-up game in a neighbor’s yard... and it’s your voice you hear, essentially, under the glimmerglass sky, and you look at the things in the room, offscreen, unwebbed, the tissued grain of the deskwood alive in the light, the thick lived tenor of things... and you try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world.” (827)

DeLillo is clearly concerned with what happens when real space is dominated by the computer screen, the extra work that needs to be done to recognize materiality when we are consumed by virtuality. The natural world takes on the qualities of the computer screen in the “glimmerglass sky.” Man in cyberspace, while disconnected, is still paradoxically rooted in the rule-making world of childhood games. “Let’s not forget how some things get better” (235), Bronzini tells himself, “a library, a play street, prods his optimism block by block” (238). Bronzini meditates, specifically, on the parallels between the library’s and the play street’s reclamation of an

equitably public space. In this analogy, DeLillo, here, appeals to the spatialized democratization of *information* alongside people and goods. And while Bronzini's ideology might be tinted by a problematic nostalgia that has been ousted by Nick's own masculine corporate nostalgia, he begs the question nonetheless of all that we lose when begin moving not bodies and products, but information at postmodern speeds and with late capitalist, networked organization. What happens when our "primal setting at a distance" is interrupted not only by windscreens of automobiles, but by the similarly perspectively powerful screens of computers? DeLillo, at the very least, seeks to make us aware of spatially fragmenting effects. While on an initial reading DeLillo's sense of positivity for the internet, via Sister Edgar's salvation, might be just as futuristically optimistic as those world's fair corporate agitators for vehicular superhighways of the 1930s, it will be important for literature and cultural critics to stay alert to the ways that this new virtually connective infrastructure is used to mold citizens that are productive for the corporate state.

As I complete this thesis, the fallout of the Palestine, Ohio train derailment is still ongoing. The battle between private citizens and state-subsidized corporations over responsibility for the care of and assertions of primary relationship to the conditions of public air-, water-, and railways is still being sorted out. The public conversation has already acknowledged the prophetic nature of DeLillo's 1985 *White Noise* with its "Airborne Toxic Event" section—in which, almost unbelievably, the hazardous chemicals which seep from a derailed train car catch fire, cause mass evacuations in a small town, and cause a host of uncertain health problems while citizens struggle for control over the media narrative. This tragic event also occurs in a historical moment where a global pandemic has respatialized corporate power—from being emplaced shimmering bronze towers to encroaching on private domestic

spaces through work-from-home initiatives. I would argue, then, that *Underworld* might be the more instructive novel. There is much to learn by unpacking its submerged themes of the necessary acknowledgment of infrastructurally conditioned relations and the confusions and reclamations of public, private, and social space, not to mention grappling with its more protuberant themes of corporate identification and personhood in the making of a nation. We need to ask ourselves, not only why these corporations to pollute our natural spaces, but how that allowance affects both our understanding of what makes a nation—how that allowance intervenes in our senses of public, private, and socio-spatial relations with each other.

As W. Brown wrote in the 1920s, trying to parse the introduction of the automobile to humanity's relation with its environment:

The being that tries to control this modern Frankenstein monster is not machine-made. It is not automatic. It can not prevent its own destruction. It is human. So far it has not been possible to synchronize the human soul with steel and iron and rubber so that our subconscious senses will operate to stop the flight of a sleep-controlled car or the sweep of an unrestrained locomotive. (Williams 224)

Underworld continues this line of questioning automobility's impact, especially as the technology is incongruous with the corporeal and biological realities of its uses. DeLillo uses it as a starting point to question our newest, more slippery digital infrastructures, and makes the case, again and again, for the centrality of space in our construction of relation, ensuring that we don't ignore the intermingling social and material constructedness of this crucial aspect of our humanity. Through Gilkey, he depicts the violent outbursts that follow from postmodernity's confusions of spatial relation. Through Nick Shay, he shows how supposedly well-adjusted men are through that adjustment at the whim of corporate technologies and their biases. *Underworld*

asks us to reckon with how infrastructure makes space matter, and how it tries to lead us to believe that space is negligible. Real public space is crucial to our development as empathetic human beings, and we ought to recognize the ways that our useful technologies seek to undermine this.

NOTES

1. Timothy L. Parrish does, in fact, pull a couple of quotes from this chapter, but both are still solely in service of understanding Gilkey's relationship to his own mediated portrayal in the news.
2. For criticism concerning the public/private divide in the novel and DeLillo's other works, see Wasserman, Zimmerman. For urban vs. rural see Heise, Pike.
3. "'Dromoscopy' combines the Greek words for 'road' and 'field of view'; to [Paul] Virilio, it means the study of the automobile's visual aesthetics of penetration" (*Zoomscape* 98)
4. Schwartzer's book, while primarily concerned with the effects of this new viewing experience on our conceptions of architecture (from "a language of autonomous formal objects to seeing it as an ever-changing, and estranging, cascade of optical experiences" (back cover)) still offers, as I hope to have shown, some insight into the shifts brought on by automobility more generally. However, when I turn to a discussion of public vs. private transportation networks, his architectural insights will come back into play.
5. See Matthew Luter's "Resisting the Devouring Neon" for a discussion of crowds in DeLillo's early work; see Richard Hardack's "Two's a Crowd" for a discussion of the middle period which *Underworld* capstones.
6. Further, as Jay Watson shows through the work of William Faulkner, the time-space compression resulting from the individualized speed of the automobile was reflected in modernity more generally, and caused indelible perspectival shifts in peoples relationship

to time, people paying more attention to shorter spans “five-minute interviews, minute-long telephone conversations, etc.” (332). The advent of postmodern technologies and infrastructures, like the television and the highways, accelerated these shifts, and made their effects felt in the spatial realm as well as the temporal.

7. Gutfreund’s chapter on Smyrna, Tennessee (*Twentieth Century Sprawl* 197-226) offers a vivid portrait the city’s 20th-century evolution from hamlet to “booming industrial settlement” beset by interstates, state highways, spurs and sideroads—“far from accidental... nor... solely attributed to natural features of the region... Smyrna’s remarkable growth can be directly traced to a series of government programs” either in service of the military or automobile manufacturers.
8. View the painting at MoMA’s website: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79921>
9. Massey’s argument that space is the generator of the social realm—and that as the realm of interaction, it also generates the conditions for the perceived passage of time—has implications for Hannah Arendt’s conception of the social. While Arendt acknowledges the (de)-spatializing aspects of the loss of private space to the social, she does not explicitly read the social realm as a particularly spatial arena. And while she argues later in *The Human Condition* that it is “*work*’s” construction of lasting human artifice which gives humankind something against which to measure time and their subjectivity (137), as opposed to “*labor*’s” endless toil for the consumables of biological necessity which keeps man in the timeless cycles of nature, Arendt underemphasizes, relative to Massey the role of social (that is neither public nor private) interaction in generating time and subjectivity. This thesis’s reading of the road system lands somewhere within these distinctions as a “lasting human artifice” that perhaps generates a national sense of time

and subjectivity, and as a public arena where true social interaction is prevented by the privacy of the vehicle's cabin.

10. See Wiley for a rundown of the general school-prison-pipeline, and a close look at the architectural materialities that contribute to the process.

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