"Then We Build a System to Deal with It": Waste, the Technological Sublime, and the Abject in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

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Abstract

Over twenty-five years after the publication of Don DeLillo's magnum opus *Underworld* (1997), which depicts the shift from a naïve belief in technological progress at the beginning of the Cold War to disillusionment as it ended, the novel is more topical than ever, faced as we are with the growing recognition of the failure of both technorationality and capitalism to address humanity's depredation and despoilment of the biosphere. This article argues that *Underworld* deploys what David Nye has called the technological sublime to depict the attempt to master recalcitrant nature, only to ironically reveal the impossibility of the endeavor. DeLillo connects waste's 'worthlessness' and its consequent status as abject to the fantasy of mastery mediated by the technological sublime, thereby critiquing the U.S.-American ideology of progress through technological innovation. Seen within its own logic, the technological sublime is a project of liberation, a vision of impending omniscience, a permanent deferral of human limitation. Yet when waste becomes sublime, the progression toward mastery does not proceed smoothly. Although the technological sublime "undermines all notions of limitation, instead presupposing the ability to continually innovate and to transform the world" (Nye 60), *Underworld*'s aestheticization represents it at its limit, when it can no longer regulate the abject threat of waste. Ultimately, I argue that DeLillo asks readers to grapple with abjection by dramatizing the failure of the technological sublime as an aesthetic strategy, which inadvertently reinscribes the boundaries that it seeks to override: the finitude of the embodied human, the abjection that accompanies the awareness of our relative powerlessness, enmeshed amongst the world around and in us.

Keywords: Ecoaesthetics, waste, technological sublime, the abject, contemporary U.S.-American literature, Don DeLillo.

Resumen

Más de veinticinco años después de la magnum opus de Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (1997), que describe el cambio de una ingenua creencia en el progreso tecnológico al principio de la Guerra Fría a la desilusión al término de ésta, la novela está más de actualidad que nunca, enfrentando como estamos el creciente reconocimiento del fracaso tanto de la tecnoracionalidad el capitalismo para abordar la depredación y el expolio de la biosfera por parte de la humanidad. Este artículo sostiene que *Underworld* hace uso de lo que David Nye ha llamado lo sublime tecnológico para describir el intento de dominar la naturaleza recalcitrante para revelar irónicamente la imposibilidad del empeño. DeLillo relaciona la "inutilidad" de los residuos y su consecuente condición de abyecto con la fantasía de dominio mediada por la sublimidad tecnológica, criticando así la ideología estadounidense del

progreso a través de la innovación tecnológica. Visto dentro de su propia lógica, lo sublime tecnológico es un proyecto de liberación, una visión de omnisciencia inminente, un aplazamiento permanente de la limitación humana. Sin embargo, cuando el despilfarro se convierte en sublime, la progresión hacia el dominio no avanza con fluidez. Aunque lo sublime tecnológico "socava todas las nociones de la capacidad de innovar continuamente y de transformar el mundo" (Nye 60), la estetización de *Underworld* lo representa en su límite, cuando ya no puede regular la amenaza abyecta del despilfarro. En última instancia, sostengo que DeLillo pide a los lectores que se enfrenten a la abyección sublime tecnológico como estrategia estética, que reinscribe inadvertidamente las barreras que busca invalidar: la finitud del ser humano encarnado, la abyección que acompaña a la conciencia de nuestra relativa impotencia, enredada en el mundo que nos rodea y en nosotros.

Palabras clave: Ecoestética, residuos, sublime tecnológico, lo abyecto, literatura estadounidense, Don DeLillo

> *Man is never weary of working [nature] up. [...] More and more, with every thought, does his kingdom stretch over things, until the world becomes, at last, only a realized will, – the double of man.*
> – Ralph Waldo Emerson ("Nature" 51)

Technological Mastery and The Threat of Waste

As the epigraph from the U.S.-American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson gestures toward, U.S.-American culture is built on the ideals of the European Enlightenment, "a doctrine," in the words of philosopher Val Plumwood, "about reason, its place at the apex of human life, and the practice of oppositional construction in relation to its 'others', especially the body and nature, which are simultaneously relied upon but disavowed" (18). Threatened by the inhospitality of the natural world, U.S.-Americans have turned to technology time and time again to "work things up": Early colonists taming the 'howling wilderness' of the New World, settlers turning California from a desert into a garden, and a long line of 'improvements' (dams, canals, railroads, highways) all testify to the enduring U.S.-American desire to bring nature under human control. Over twenty-five years after the publication of Don DeLillo's magnum opus *Underworld* (1997), which depicts the shift from a naïve belief in technological progress at the beginning of the Cold War to disillusionment as it ended, it is more topical than ever, faced as we are with the growing recognition of the failure of both technorationality and capitalism to address humanity's depredation and despoilment of the biosphere. When 'anthropogenic mass', or the weight of all human-made materials, outweighs all non-human biomass, as has been the case since 2020 (Elhacham et al.), it can be said without hyperbole that we are living in a version of Emerson's "realized will—the double of man." This miserable accomplishment calls for, to borrow Pramod K. Nayar's phrasing, "a change not only in our consumption of the literary canon, but also a *repurposing* of canonical texts in order to deliver the urgent news of climate change, eco-disaster and the fragility of human-nature relations" (26).

One of the most important U.S.-American Cold War novels, *Underworld*'s expansive narrative reach makes it difficult to summarize. Jumping among the decades between 1950 and 1990, the novel is held loosely together by the doings of quasi-protagonists Nick Shay and Brian Glassic, both of whom work at a waste management company, as it follows the lives of a dozen characters scattered throughout the United States. The wide scope of the novel results in dense and evocative descriptions of daily U.S.-American life, musings on the nature of postmodern existence mediated by consumerism and visual media, and a fascination with waste. This interest in waste does not come out of nowhere. DeLillo has been thinking about waste for decades, as Todd McGowan notes: "In early novels such as *Americana*, *End Zone*, and *The Names*, characters drew attention to the presence of waste; in *White Noise*, waste becomes a threat that must be avoided; and in *Underworld*, waste management becomes the central concern" (123). *Underworld*'s thematization of waste has received extensive critical attention since its publication. Scholars tend to treat waste as a metaphor for the collective unconscious of America during the Cold War (Schaub) or as a component of a postmodern sublime, the "large forces of corporate organization that control the social and economic relations of human beings" (Tabbi 7). Elise Martucci has analyzed how the novel's thematization of waste "raises our environmental consciousness by revealing the dark underworld of consumer culture" (108) and a recent article by Rachele Dini draws on New Materialism and analyzes waste in light of "entanglements of human and non-human actors" and how waste produces 'stories' of its own ("What We Excrete" 166). However, *Underworld*'s depictions of overwhelming encounters with waste, the novel's dramatization of the failure of humanity to master nature, has not been fully explored.

This article argues that *Underworld* deploys what historian David Nye calls the technological sublime to depict the attempt to master waste and reject the abject, only to reveal the fantastic and illusory nature of this endeavor. Although waste is ubiquitous in the novel, Brian Glassic's visit to the Fresh Kills Landfill in New York City (the biggest landfill in the United States until its closure in 2001) and Nick Shay's visit to a recycling plant in Phoenix, Arizona, are uniquely sublime encounters.[1] Both scenes are mentioned by scholars analyzing the novel's "sacralization of waste" (Salmela 52; Kielland-Lund 89; McGowan 136), but one interesting exception is Ruth Helyer's article "'Refuse heaped many stories high': DeLillo, Dirt, and Disorder." Here, she examines *Underworld* through the lens of Julia Kristeva's abjection, arguing that

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[1] Waste is ubiquitous in *Underworld* and, unsurprisingly, much excellent scholarship on waste's function has been published. Cf. in particular Mikko Keskinen ("To What Purpose Is This Waste? From Rubbish to Collectibles in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*," 2000); David H. Evans ("Taking Out the Trash: Don DeLillo's Underworld, Liquid Modernity, and the End of Garbage," 2006); Christine Temko ("Regulation and Refuse Matter in Don DeLillo's Underworld and Eugene Marten's Waste," 2013); Rachele Dini, ("'What We Excrete Comes back to Consume Us': Waste and Reclamation in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*," 2019); and Markku Salmela ("Recycling Fictions in the City: Don DeLillo and the Materiality of Waste," 2019). In this article, I pursue a connection between the technological sublime, its mediation through encounters with waste, and the abject, the dark underside of the technological sublime, a nexus unexplored, to my knowledge, by DeLillo scholars.

the relationship between waste and the abject in the novel reminds us "of the futility of inflicting meaning upon ourselves" in late capitalist society, where "rigid gender categories and societal norms can only create membranes prone to fracture, which in turn leave us feeling vulnerable and exposed" (1004). Her insightful work, however, analyzes neither Fresh Kills nor the fictional Phoenix recycling plant. Helyer's work testifies to the unmissable presence of the abject in *Underworld*, but there is a deeper connection between the technological sublime, its mediation through waste, and the abject that I wish to pursue here.

I will argue that *Underworld*'s representation of waste as sublime is interesting because DeLillo undermines a central conceit of U.S.-American culture, critiquing the U.S.-American ideology of progress through technological innovation which fosters an unsustainable lifestyle anchored by 'cheap' oil, extractivism, and the domination of non-humans. This emerges out of the ontological status of waste, something abject and without intrinsic value.[2] In contrast, the sublime, as defined by Immanuel Kant, is found in 'great', ostensibly valuable, things. DeLillo connects waste's 'worthlessness' and its consequent status as abject to the fantasy of mastery mediated by the technological sublime. Although the technological sublime is traditionally represented as a transcendent experience without end or limitation, *Underworld*'s aestheticization represents the technological sublime at *its* limit, where it fails to regulate and neutralize the threat of waste.

The Technological Sublime and the Abject

Underworld depicts two encounters where a threatening non-human object dwarfs and overwhelms a character, only for the character to be rescued from this unpleasant feeling of weakness and delivered unto a pleasurable feeling of mastery. When one is confronted by waste *en masse*, like at the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, New York City, the refuse from eight million trash cans is just as overwhelming as a tempestuous storm, a volcano eruption, or a hurricane, two 'natural' objects considered sublime by its most famous proponent, Immanuel Kant.[3]

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[2] Depictions of waste in literature—and how waste is a proxy for cultural ascriptions of value—have attracted significant attention in the last two decades: John Scanlan (*On Garbage*, 2005), Sophie Gee (*Making Waste: Leftovers and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*, 2010), Susan Signe Morrison (*The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter*, 2015), Martin O'Brien (*A Crisis of Waste?: Understanding the Rubbish Society*, 2008), William Viney (*Waste: A Philosophy of Things*, 2014), and Rachele Dini (*Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 2016), among others, have made significant contributions to waste studies.

[3] Kant, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, distinguishes two types of sublime objects: the mathematical, which is merely large, and the dynamical, an object that is both large and powerful. Dynamically sublime objects mark a subject's insufficiency and relative powerless vis-á-vis the outside world. Crucially, however, the sublime is confronted at a remove. The threat is present, but it is mediated, weakened, by distance: "The astonishment bordering on terror, the horror and the awesome shudder, which grip the spectator [...] is, in view of the safety in which he knows himself to be, not actual fear" (Kant 152).

However, it is not the object itself that is sublime, according to Kant. Because the Kantian sublime is "not only great, but simply, absolutely great, [...] equal only to itself [...], nothing that can be an object of the senses is [...] to be called sublime" (Kant 134). Kant finds the sublime, consequently, only "in our

It would be odd, however, if a novel about late-twentieth century U.S.-American culture reproduced 'verbatim' the aesthetic conditions of a world that had witnessed neither air travel nor nuclear war. Therefore, to analyze *Underworld*'s sublime encounters, I draw on the work of historian David Nye, whose account of the technological sublime incorporates the astonishing technological development that has occurred since the Industrial Revolution, focusing specifically on the U.S-American context. One central difference between the Kantian and the technological sublime is, as Nye argues, that the technological sublime can occur without recourse to a 'natural' phenomenon at all. In the technological sublime, an individual grapples with man-made objects which gesture toward the "potential omnipotence of humanity" (Nye 285) instead of being overwhelmed by Nature and then rescued by reason. No less of a transindividual phenomenon than Kant's reason, this self-reification has nonetheless superseded reason's empowering function. Similarly, the threat that initiates the Kantian sublime, that is transformed into pleasure at the right distance, is not present in the technological sublime (or so one might think; later, I will show that DeLillo's portrayal of abject waste fulfills this function). I argue that *Underworld* develops and then subverts the technological sublime, representing it at its limit (paradoxically, for the technological sublime denies the existence of limits altogether), where the dark underside of the sublime, the abject, reemerges. In doing so, DeLillo critiques the U.S.-American ideology of progress through technological innovation. *Underworld* is not a monument to human greatness; it does not depict a concupiscent striving toward mastery and domination.

In contrast to Kantian sublime, where time and space are temporarily suspended, the technological sublime "annihilate[s] time and space" (Nye 61).[4] Technologies like the railroad or electricity disrupt formerly unalterable conditions of human existence: distance and Earth's diurnal rhythm. Consequently, the technological sublime forcibly disrupts the continuity of spatial and temporal relations that circumscribe humanity. An object that evokes the technological sublime loosens the cinch of some current limitation, making life easier and better *now*. In sum, the technological sublime "undermines all notions of limitation, instead presupposing the ability to continually innovate and transform the world" (Nye 60). A vision of a future is inscribed on the physical 'body' of the technological object

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ideas [that follow]" from nature (134). Only reason, an idea which rescues the subject from the overwhelming threat of Nature, is truly sublime. Through the subject's relationship to reason, they find a way to transcend the bodily limitations that an encounter with nature reminds them of. The sublime experience is a sudden enlightenment, where objects that make "our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle" (144) prompt us to notice that we can master terror through reason.

[4] One point of connection between the technological sublime and the abject is their distortion of time. Where the technological sublime seeks to annihilate time, "[t]he time of abjection [is]," Kristeva writes, "a time of [...] veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (Kristeva 9). Both the technological sublime and the abject alter the human being's 'normal' relationship with time, albeit in diametrically opposed ways: the technological sublime seeks to eradicate time whereas the abject compresses and thickens two different experiences of time, the eternal and the ephemeral. The link between the technological sublime and the abject will be drawn out in greater detail in the pages to come.

wherein every limitation has been overcome: a world where everything has been ordered and optimized for humans.

This vision is a fantasy, but this is not self-evident. Only by acquiescing to its logic and following the technological sublime to its conclusion can the fantastical nature of the entire system be glimpsed; this is, as I will show in the next section, exactly what *Underworld* does. Indeed, Nye himself ultimately unearths "a contradiction at the heart of the technological sublime" (Nye 285). This contradiction is an ambiguous mix of of omnipotence and impotence, a simultaneous sense of dis- and empowerment. While Nye alludes to this, he does not describe this contradiction in great detail. Yet those versed in psychoanalysis may recognize the fantastical nature of the description of the technological sublime. I would like to suggest that the nature of this contradiction at the core of the technology sublime is best characterized by what Julia Kristeva has termed the abject.

The abject is, Kristeva writes, "*a something added* that expands us, overstrains us" (11; emphasis in the original). In this way, the abject shares something in common with the sublime, albeit in a negative way. Where the sublime's grandeur strains the human capacity to fathom an experience, the abject utilizes a similar liminality to produce uncertainty and discomfort, Kristeva's gesture to an expansion or overstrain.

Kristeva analyzes how the ego constructs identity by creating and policing a boundary between inside (clean) and outside (unclean), a process she calls abjection. Once the subject realizes it cannot be perfectly clean and proper, it rejects and expels what it does not like, purifies itself – or tries to. Kristeva considers body waste (feces, tears, blood) as the paradigmatic icon of abjection since the fluids of the body cannot be permanently evacuated while the subject remains alive. Bodily waste illuminates the unending nature of this process: it is difficult to definitively exclude those unwanted things which arise inside the subject. The abject is "not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine" (Kristeva 1). Like the sublime, it is a mixture of both subject and object, the result of an embodied encounter. What is abject "is radically excluded [...] draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2), where the definitive classification of subject against object threatens to fail. This radical exclusion, however, is neither final nor precise, nor does it convey the pleasure of mastery that marks the sublime. The abject is ambiguous, does not respect the 'clear' delineations of a symbolic system: "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (Kristeva 9). Although the abject endangers the self, in order to remain whole the subject must attempt to contain it outside the self through a series of 'Not-I' limitations: the abject "takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away [...]" (Kristeva 15).

But what is the connection between the burnished, pleasing, and optimistic technological sublime and the abject? The sublime vision is transformative: The threat of violence nears, but, like an aesthetic defense mechanism, the sublime transforms it into a pleasure of mastery when the perceiver has the necessary

distance, at the boundary between indifference and paralysis. Nature is transformed from threat to servant, one who isn't allowed in the house. Were the utopian desire that undergirds the technological sublime—the total domination of non-human nature—ever to come to fruition, there would be no more threat, no outside threatening the inside, no 'not-I,' and no need for a border to demarcate what threatens and what has been mastered. Crucially, there would be no more abject. Ultimately, the technological sublime, because it seeks to permanently overcome human limitation, is a narcissistic experience, a human marveling at its reified will, its own creations.

As we have seen, the sublime is an experience that transforms a threat into the secure knowledge of mastery—it orders non-human objects and stabilizes them, makes them meaningful and, most importantly, subordinate to the rational subject. Waste, however, challenges the stability of the rigid subject/object ontology that undergirds the sublime. This is because waste is abject, as we saw in the discussion of Kristeva above. If, as I will show, there is a contradiction at the heart of the technological sublime, then the analysis that follows will show that the abject *is* this paradox: at the core of the technological sublime lies an encounter with abjection, the uncomfortable reassertion of twinned essential qualities of humanity: the finitude of the individual and the limitations to human existence that arise from the human's enmeshment with non-human nature. *Underworld*'s depiction of abject waste, I argue, challenges the hegemonic dominance of the ideology of progress, mediated through the technological sublime, in U.S.-American culture.

Drawing on the abject to analyze *Underworld*'s depiction of the sublime encounter with waste is useful because waste is itself abject: humans cannot help but produce it, both intimate body waste and the detritus of consumption and consumerism, despite the inevitable (and perhaps necessary) rejection of waste once produced.[5] Indeed, Kristeva argues that waste embodies the abject's threat to a stable ontology: "The danger of filth represents [...] the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed, to the extent that it is a device of discriminations, of differences" (69). Exposing ourselves to waste, which we create and then disavow, reveals the artificial and contingent nature of our value and meaning-making structures.[6] Analyzing the U.S.-American attempt to master waste that *Underworld*

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[5] While Kristeva's famous essay focuses, due to its author's psychoanalytic bent, on bodily waste and the psychological formation of the individual, this article will focus on material waste, the garbage that the novel's U.S.-Americans produce in the course of their daily lives. While it might be possible to argue that there is a meaningful difference between primary bodily waste and secondary waste, I, following William Viney (2014), believe that this distinction dissolves when waste is viewed in terms of 'use.' In this sense, waste is the product of a process of using, one that can describe ingestion, metabolism, and feces production as easily as it can the process of wearing out a pair of shoes.

[6] This conception of waste hearkens back to Mary Douglas' classic analysis of dirt and social system, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). Dirt, the most basic form of pollution, Douglas argues, "is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (36). Pollutants, like garbage, 'belong' outside the boundaries that demarcate a taxonomy. Kristeva does not mention Douglas, but they share an interest in the role of boundary work in system construction and in the 'unwanted' parts of a culture or a subject.

portrays is necessary because it is an instance where the otherwise wildly successful practices of domination that have resulted in the Anthropocene and its attendant crises meet their match. The abject-ness of waste, at least in *Underworld*, triumphs over the technological sublime.

Fresh Kills Landfill: The Promise of Technical Mastery

Can waste be mastered? This is the central question of the novel—and perhaps of the Anthropocene—which *Underworld* self-consciously poses. At Fresh Kills, Brian Glassic asks himself how we can keep waste, "this mass metabolism[,] from overwhelming us" (DeLillo 185). The novel seems to answer Brian's question through the remarks of another character, Jesse Detweiler, a consultant who advises the waste management firm for whom Brian Glassic and Nick Shay work: "Isolate the most toxic waste […] [But] [d]on't hide your garbage facilities. Make an architecture of waste" (DeLillo 286). Detweiler recognizes the existential threat of waste, "[c]onsume or die" (DeLillo 287–88) is his zingy phrase, and he advises protagonist Nick Shay to make waste sublime, a profitable "landscape of nostalgia," complete with "bus tours and postcards" (DeLillo 288). Framing waste management as a tourist venture produces 'treated' waste, safe to gaze at through the tour bus window. Detwiler's vision of waste as sublime, waste mastered by technological progress, would neutralize the effects of abjection and erase the discomfort, danger, and uncertainty that accompany it.

In this section, I will demonstrate how *Underworld* depicts Fresh Kills Landfill as an object of the technological sublime. DeLillo is at pains to describe how the landfill annihilates time and space, as well as fulfilling two paradoxical social functions: dividing humans into groups based on technological expertise and reaffirming a common humanity. However, once *Underworld* establishes the technological sublime as mediated by the landfill, it begins to critique and undermine it by suggesting that the abject lies at the heart of the encounter with the technological sublime.

In a masterstroke of DeLilloan irony, Fresh Kills Landfill is initially portrayed as an escape from the web of human-made and human-oriented things. Driving to Fresh Kills, Brian Glassic is 'stuck' on the freeway, stuck in traffic with nothing to look at besides advertising billboards. All that he sees, he realizes, are "systematically linked in some self-referring relationship that had a kind of neurotic tightness, an inescapability" (DeLillo 183). No matter how long he drives, he is always at the same site, surrounded by "billboards for Hertz and Avis and Chevy Blazer, for Marlboro, Continental and Goodyear" (DeLillo 183). The billboards' inexhaustible reference to products and commodities blots out any trace of the non-human. However, he eventually escapes this "neurotic tightness" and arrives at Fresh Kills, literally at the end of the road, which ends in "gravel and weeds" (DeLillo 183).

Freed from the web of human-made commodities, Brian looks out at Fresh Kills. He initially perceives the "terraced elevation […] reddish brown, flat-topped,

monumental" (DeLillo 183) as an Arizona butte, signaling a picturesque impulse, alerting the reader to a retreat from human artifice and constraint. The word "monumental" also suggests the grandeur of a natural scene. Brian is initially confused because he mistakes the landfill, a highly artificial object, for a picturesque natural scene. This confusion is significant because Fresh Kills is located on Staten Island, one of New York City's five boroughs, an environment dominated by humans more thoroughly than anywhere else in the country.

However, an ironic reversal immediately follows. Brian soon realizes that what he is seeing is "real and [...] man-made" (DeLillo 183–84). Here, DeLillo plays with the reader's expectations. If the brief association of the landfill with an Arizona butte awoke the expectation that Brian is looking out on a beautiful natural vista, symbolically contrasting with the intensely human nature of the freeway, and of New York City, where much of the novel takes place, then the reader's realization, focalized through Brian, that he is looking at a landfill ironically denies this interpretation. What was promised as a picturesque escape from the human is revealed to be, instead, a disguised extension of humanity's dominance over the non-human. If the reader begins to expect the Kantian sublime, through the presence of the word "monumental," for instance, then this expectation is immediately supplanted by the technological sublime: Brian is gazing at an engineering marvel, not at an Arizona butte.

As Brian looks at the landfill, it gradually becomes sublime. The overwhelming sight, the result of New York City's half-century attempt to deal with its waste, annihilates time and space, making it an encounter with the technological sublime. The landfill is described as "science fiction and prehistory, garbage arriving twenty-four hours a day" (DeLillo 184). Science fiction, as Canavan and Link argue, is essentially about "the negative depiction of the dystopias that will arise 'if this goes on'" (Canavan and Link 9). A desire-laden depiction of the future, science fiction is outside time because it is fictional and, were it possible at all, has not yet occurred. Despite this, science fiction reiterates the temporal structures of humanity and limns itself as a continuation, a prophecy of an impending 'now.' Prehistory, in contrast, denotes an epoch that is outside of time, outside of historical narrative. It is impossible for a body in space to move forwards and backwards simultaneously, but the sublimity of the landfill—its consolidation of past and future—inspires the mind to effect a double projection, an escape out of a series of 'nows.'

Whereas science fiction and prehistory represent an attempt to escape from measurable time, to break with the linear succession of 'nows,' "garbage arriving twenty-four hours a day" performs the opposite, attempts to abolish time entirely by creating an interminable, de-differentiated 'now'. The machines in the passage, "bulldozers pushing waves of refuse [...] [b]arges unloading, sweeper boats poking through the kills [...] vehicles with metal rollers compacting the trash, bucket auger digging vents for methane gas, [...] a line of snouted trucks sucking in loose litter" (DeLillo 184), are not beholden to biological demands and thus do not need to divide time into day/night, work/rest, or even produce/consume segments. This is sublime

time, the eternal now, which, as we saw above, has an abject underside. Here, the novel suggests that humanity can master the threat of waste, its unceasing calling-forth of the abject, by countering it with technological innovation, mechanical intermediaries that are able to escape biological rhythms and cycles, the physical traces of time on the human body. This representation of temporal distortion in the landfill is in line with the traditional U.S.-American cultural imaginary of technology, which *Underworld* will later critique.

The description of the landfill also annihilates space. In order to grasp this immense sight, Brian's eyes wander:

> All this ingenuity and labor, this delicate effort to fit maximum waste into diminishing space. The towers of the World Trade Center were visible in the distance and he sensed a poetic balance between that idea and this one. Bridges, tunnels, scows, tugs, graving docks, container ships, all the great works of transport, trade and linkage were directed in the end to this culminating structure. (DeLillo 184)

Though the description links the World Trade Center to capitalism and comments on the connection between capitalism and waste, I want to focus on how the novel links the World Trade Center and the landfill as purveyors of the technological sublime because they both defamiliarize objects.[7] The World Trade Center, a skyscraper, unlocks a new precipice from which to gaze, an untethered, god-like position which distorts the 'natural' relationship between humans and the space they inhabit, creating the illusion of a total, finite, and depthless environment. In the landfill, the three stages of the life cycle of man-made objects (production, consumption, and expulsion) have been combined, telescoped into a totality of discard. The spaces through which objects have travelled are now lost because the objects cease to be historical items. Any disaggregated use- or exchange-value an object may have had, textured by its interaction with space through time, is erased by its deposition in the landfill, a repository for worthless things. 'They' become an 'it' defined by uselessness: the mass noun 'waste'. The everyday objects through which space is read become unrecognizable—the grammar of reality, space and time, has been effaced.

Additionally, the built environment of the technological sublime produces affect by sorting human beings on the basis of expertise, "a split between those who understand and control machines and those who do not" (Nye 60). Brian Glassic recognizes this split—and his position within it—and that contributes to his affect:

> The mountain was here, unconcealed but no one saw it or thought about it, no one knew it existed except the engineers and teamsters and local residents, a unique cultural deposit, fifty million tons by the time they top it off, carved and modeled, and no one talked about it except the men and women who tried to manage it, and he saw himself for the first time as a member of an esoteric order, they were adepts and seers, crafting the future, the city planners, the waste managers, the compost technicians,

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[7] The "poetic balance" links the processes of production and consumption symbolized by the World Trade Center, which generates unusable byproducts which must go somewhere—to the landfill. Rachele Dini notes that "we *need* [this] endpoint because it *allows us* to keep making things, buying things, and selling things" ("Consumerism" 162, emphasis in the original).

> the landscapers who would build hanging gardens here, make a park one day out of every kind of used and lost and eroded object of desire. (DeLillo 185)

The aura of power and control that knowledge bestows is not, however, universal. First, Brian differentiates between the great mass of people who don't know Fresh Kills exists at all and those who do, the "engineers and teamsters and local residents." The excluded increase, are slowly whittled away until only the waste managers remain. This is mirrored by the increasing precision by which the landfill is evoked. It is initially a "mountain," for those who merely see and know it. For those, however, who can speak about it, the members of an "esoteric order," the mountain ceases to be a figure of speech; the image becomes more figurative and the language more technical, "fifty million tons […] curved and modelled." A distinction is made between those who passively observe, the teamsters and local residents, and those who (try to) manage. The nouns "[a]depts and seers" evoke a spiritual power linked to a group of highly educated technocrats, "the city planners, the waste managers, the compost technicians, the landscapers" who are united by their ability to control the Fresh Kills Landfill, constructing it in the present and into the future. Through his apprehension of a sublime, man-made object, Brian identifies himself as a member of a group who can create technological wonders that overwhelm the minds of their fellow humans.

Yet one paradoxical aspect of the technological sublime is that, even though it splits humans into groups, it also unites them by evoking a common humanity. The technological sublime, even as it reiterates hierarchies, creates "a communion, through the machine, of man with man […] a group experience of its own potential greatness" (Nye 62). In *Underworld*, waste is the object through which the essential commonality of humanity is mediated, the recognition and attempted rejection of the abject. Brian feels enlightened when he realizes that banal matter signifies an organizing, evaluating system:

> He looked at all that soaring garbage and knew for the first time what his job was all about. Not engineering or transportation or source reduction. He dealt in human behavior, people's habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes, maybe their passions, certainly their excesses and indulgences, but their kindness too, their generosity, and the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us.
>   The landfill showed smack-on how the waste stream ended, where all the appetites and hankerings, the sodden second thoughts came runneling out, the things you wanted so ardently and then did not. (DeLillo 184–85)

The waste becomes—not a collection of symbols—but a mass of empty vessels, gesturing to the animus which produced, consumed, and discarded them. *Underworld* names the universal, "behavior," and then lists particulars. By stratifying the vast array of micro-longings and actions that tapestry human lives, the novel brings into relief the essence of humanity, the need to consume in order to continue living.

The rhetorical descriptions of the object that prompts the technological sublime also serve to unite humans separated by millennia and continents. The grandeur of Fresh Kills is suggested by evoking an ancient wonder of the world and then dwarfing it: "He imagined that he was watching the construction of the Great

Pyramid at Giza—only this was twenty-five times bigger" (DeLillo 184). Toward the end of the extended description, Brian characterizes the park that will be built on top of the landfill in terms of another ancient wonder, the fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon (DeLillo 185). David Nye notes that nineteenth-century U.S.-American writers often alluded to great architectural and technological achievements of the ancient world to rhetorically position contemporary technological works. Linking august objects such as the Acropolis or the Pyramids of Egypt to canals and railroads connects their creators, which testifies to the durability of human culture in spite of the erosional effects of alterity, time, and space. Even though the cultures that produced these sublime objects have disappeared, through the technological sublime they nonetheless signify the (supposedly) indomitable essence of humanity: the non-human other, nature, has not eradicated the traces of a long-departed human culture.

Brian finds "the sight inspiring," feels "a sting of enlightenment" (DeLillo 184). After a while, however, his pleasure begins to transmute into discomfort. He no longer sees the landfill as a heap of unwanted objects, but as a threat, "a mass metabolism" that needs to be kept from "overwhelming us" (DeLillo 184). The threat of waste becomes more evident when Brian fantasizes about the people who live near Fresh Kills: "When people heard a noise at night, did they think that the heap was coming down around them, sliding towards their homes, an omnivorous movie terror filling their doorways and windows?" (DeLillo 185). Here, waste's abjection emerges, a slippage between inside and outside, between controlled and uncontrollable. The rejected waste escapes the landfill and returns to threaten human homes. Brian's "movie terror" vision of waste flooding homes is *Underworld*'s ironic suggestion that the technological sublime's attempt to reject and control the abjection of waste is only partially successful. DeLillo's choice to represent the technological sublime through waste is effective precisely because waste itself is abject: it is defined as such, an unwanted and reviled Other from the outset. DeLillo dramatizes the transformative potential of the technological sublime at the point where it meets its match. Embedded in the core of the novel's depiction of the technological sublime is a powerful repudiation of this vision of mastery, of human dominance over non-human nature.

The Recycling Plant: The Abject at the Heart of the Technological Sublime

Whereas waste was sent away to the landfill under the strategy of containment during the Cold War, when Brian visited Fresh Kills Landfill, it is reabsorbed into a matrix of commodification and consumption after the fall of the USSR. In fact, it is no longer considered waste at all. Nick Shay's visit to a recycling plant on the edge of Phoenix, Arizona, is a refined encounter with the technological sublime. The threat of abjection disguised by the sublime object, the fundamental constraint of human finitude, has been 'designed' out of the experience. The technological sublime encounter that results from this new waste management strategy—recycling—is registered by a disembodied, seemingly omnipotent observer. However, despite the

best attempt of engineers and architects to sanitize waste and remove its abject quality, even the recycled commodities depicted by the novel are undergirded by abjection. Although the novel initially depicts this experience as pleasant, the sublime encounter is immediately followed by descriptions of Nick's helplessness and anger as he ruminates on his aging body and the insufficiency of memory. This juxtaposition undermines the technological sublime and the ideology of progress on which it is based, drawing attention to the indomitability of waste and to the ultimate failure of the technological sublime, a result of the abjection that is embedded at its core.

The technological sublime is characterized by an individual's experience of the annihilation of time and space. At the recycling plant, the body and its non-ocular sensations are reduced to practically nothing:

> [I]nside the vast recycling shed we stand on a catwalk and watch the operations in progress. The tin, the paper, the plastics, the Styrofoam. […] [F]our hundred tons a day, assembly lines of garbage, sorted, compressed and baled, transformed in the end to square-edged units, products again […]. (DeLillo 809)

This passage suggests a god-like omniscience: on the catwalk, Nick and his granddaughter can survey the recycling plant as a totality, as if they were above or outside it, able to rise above the huge quantities ("four hundred tons a day") and recycling procedures for materials as varied as tin, paper, plastics, and Styrofoam. The novel moves from the evocation of such an experience—the juxtaposition of Fresh Kills and the World Trade Center, as we saw above—to depicting an actual experience of totality. The text completely obliterates any trace of their bodily existence besides visual perception. The other four senses have been minimized. The design of the recycling plant minimizes noxious smells and harsh sounds.[8] Only self-consciously aesthetic sights remain: "brightness streams from skylights down to the floor of the shed, falling on top of the machines with a numinous glow" (DeLillo 809). All that remains to this experience is the (supposedly) immutable sense of sight. DeLillo here removes from the unique body its unique set of spatial and temporal coordinates, all senses except a stable sense of visual perception, creating what could be called a phenomenological experience of the annihilation of time and space.

In this version of the technological sublime, waste is no longer wasted. The fear that confronted Brian at Fresh Kills, the threat of waste overwhelming the boundaries of the landfill and invading people's homes, has been replaced with a vision of eternal consumption. Leonard Wilcox writes that "in this malign reciprocity of power and waste, an excess or remainder no longer seems to mark a limit condition" (124). This dissolution of the limit is the attempted resolution of the abject. Waste is no longer rejected and set 'outside' the bounds of human civilization, since machines have the

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[8] Comparing Nick's sensory experience here with Brian's at Fresh Kills sharpens the distinction. At Fresh Kills, the stench of the garbage is mentioned four times, including a twice-repeated one sentence paragraph: "The wind carried the stink across the kill" (185). The extended description also devotes a line to the efforts of humans to combat this overpowering reek, "tanker trucks spraying perfumed water on the approach roads" (184). Brian's sublime encounter is embodied, whereas Nick's bodily presence seems superfluous.

power to reclaim it, to prepare it for human (re-)consumption. Consumption is a process, always in the present continuous:

> The trucks are arrayed in two columns outside the shed, *bringing* in the unsorted slop, the gut squalor of our lives, and *taking* the baled and bound units out into the world again, the chunky product blocks, pristine, newsprint for newsprint, tin for tin, and we all feel better when we leave. (DeLillo 810; my emphasis)

Here, there is only the singular space, the itinerant instant of consumption. At Fresh Kills, one distinction remained: something was either product or waste, inhabited different spaces and times. In some sense, products 'aged' and became waste. This distinction has been effaced. Things are products, continually regenerated and refurbished, and there is no space outside the production/consumption nexus, no more waste, no need for landfills or containment. Objects are reformed into what they already were: "newsprint for newsprint, tin for tin." Waste has been transformed (back) into commodity as if it had never been wasted at all, signaling the triumph of the technological sublime, the mastery over matter.

Concurrent with the recycling plant's repackaging of objects, the technological sublime attempts to decouple sublimity from abjection. Nick's granddaughter "loves this place" (DeLillo 809), as do the other kids who visit: "[they] love the machines, the bales and hoppers and long conveyors" (DeLillo 810). The children reify humanity when affected by the machines at the recycling plant: The machines are depicted as both outside human control, because they partake in numinosity, but also, because we are their origin, as our subjects. The dissipation of the threat of waste is made explicit when the text contrasts an old landfill to the recycling plant: "the landfill across the road is closed now, jammed to capacity, but gas keeps rising from the great earthen berm, methane, and it produces a wavering across the land and sky that deepens the aura of sacred work" (DeLillo 810). The threat of waste overwhelming is acknowledged by "closed now, jammed to capacity," but the fact that it is closed *now*, supplemented by the recycling plant, transforms the threat into an ambivalent, almost beautiful sheen that reinforces the ideology behind the technological sublime, which aims to eradicate the abject. The wavering alters the landscape, physically distorting the protean components of 'nature,' "land and sky." The gas is transformed from a harmful substance into a harmless substance—or even a beneficial one, since it seems to complement the 'spiritual' work done at the recycling plant. Here, the transition of the technological sublime from the landfill to the recycling plant mirrors the (attempted) permanent expulsion of waste and its abject threat. Waste will no longer exist, since it will be a permanent commodity, recycled and recycled indefinitely; the abject will no longer exist, because there will be nothing outside the human and its artificial network of commodities against which to define the human.

The technological sublime, as we have seen, attempts to shift its primary ignition away from the threat that inspired the Kantian sublime and toward the pleasure of mastery. By doing so, it would efface the abject. At Fresh Kills, it did not completely succeed, but at the recycling plant, the overwhelming vastness of waste does not seem threatening, as if the technological sublime has achieved its aim and

redeemed waste back into the consuming, living body. As Elise Martucci points out, however, "one must pause at this description of recycling's redemptive effects and question whether this 'redemptive quality' is a false sense of achievement" (121).

Indeed, directly following the recycling plant, Nick ruminates on his life:

> I drink aged grappa and listen to jazz. I do the books on the new bookshelves and stand in the living room and look at the carpets and wall hangings and I know the ghosts are walking the halls. But not these halls and not this house. They're all back there [...] and I stand helpless in this desert place looking at the books.
>
> I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a mystery to myself. (DeLillo 810)

There is a sudden outburst of affect, a mixture of desire, anger, and helpless. Whereas at the recycling plant Nick was merely a pair of eyeballs, shorn of his other senses, this passage reengages those senses.

No longer in the sanctifying sphere of the recycling plant, far from its reassuring vision of controlled aging, Nick doesn't value the sensual experiences of listening to jazz, drinking grappa, or touching books. His thoughts turn toward the past, when he felt 'real.' Note that the word 'real' appears three times in three sentences: Nick characterizes himself as "real" twice and he also walked "real streets in the Brooklyn of his youth. He describes this lost sense of realness with language of embodiment: "rippling in the quick of my skin," "dumb-muscled," as if the past possesses the unity that the recycling plant provided the products which passed through it—the plenitude and presence of wholeness. Here, the limitations of an embodied being reassert themselves and fall short of the promise of the technological sublime. Nick has aged; the past is irretrievably in the past. What is this affect if not a burst of anger and fear by an aging man whose life, as Patrick O'Donnell points out, "embodies the history of the subject produced by objects" (119)? What's more, this outburst is directed precisely against the highly controlled experience the recycled products partake in, "a kind of brave aging" (DeLillo 809). Whereas the recycled commodities age in the most superficial sense, reliving their past 'lives' as a useful item over and over again, Nick is divorced from his past, hyper-conscious of the difference between his youthful body and the body he inhabits now. If waste is offered eternal life as recycled commodities, the sublimity of this gift is marred by Nick's realization that this "kind of brave aging" will never be extended to him.

The sublime attempt to definitively master waste by purifying it of abjection has not succeeded. Or, rather, the technological sublime fails by succeeding, reminding Nick that he has limitations which cannot be mastered, and that, indeed, his entanglement in time and space constitutes his very being. What he is feeling is abjection, the sense of "perpetual danger" (Kristeva 15) that the technological sublime is supposed to eradicate. Despite his attempts to escape abjection by working on the containment and consumeristic sacralization of waste, through both personal

means and in his employment at a waste management company, he—and U.S.-American culture at large—cannot ultimately escape the abject. There is a certain poignancy in the fact that even the human's most powerful creations, such as the recycling plant, which the novel portrays as annihilating time and space for the commodities it processes, ultimately serve to reinforce the inescapability of human limitation. The passage illustrates the pernicious and complicated relationship between an individual, the waste they produce, the abject, and the late-twentieth century technological sublime. Weaving these elements together, *Underworld* mediates the U.S.-American wish to remain present and powerful, to wholly liberate oneself from abjection and reincorporate waste by denying its existence altogether. In a culture where failure is seen as moral unworthiness, *Underworld*'s depiction of abject waste and the failure of the technological sublime challenges the hegemonic dominance of the ideology of technological progress and the domination of non-human nature.

Conclusion: The Limit of the Technological Sublime and the Abject Sublime

Seen within its own logic, the technological sublime is a project of liberation, a vision of impending omniscience, a permanent deferral of human limitation. Unacknowledged, the core of this project is the obliteration of abjection, a complete and total mastery of both subject and object. Yet, as we have seen, when waste becomes sublime, the progression toward mastery does not proceed as smoothly as promised.

I have tried to show two things. First, if the waste management apparatus—landfills and recycling plants—that the novel depicts represent the material component of the system built "to deal with it" (DeLillo 288), the technological sublime represents the aesthetic component of U.S.-American culture's response to waste. Both Brian Glassic and Nick Shay experience the annihilation of time and space in response to encounter with monumental waste-management projects. They both, too, are initially enchanted by the vision of omnipotence and mastery that these projects evoke.

However, building off the first argument, I have demonstrated how, by injecting moments of doubt and feelings of anger at the end of the two protagonists' encounters with the technological sublime, *Underworld* unearths the abject which paradoxically lies at the heart of the technological sublime. In response to the landfill, Brian Glassic asks an unsettling question he can't answer: what will people do when the landfill overflows, when the "mass metabolism" escapes the site where it has been contained, out of sight, out of mind (DeLillo 184)? The novel suggests that the answer is to replace the landfill system with recycling, wherein products never become waste. The recycling plant is, then, an example of Jesse Detweiler's "architecture of waste" (DeLillo 286). It envelopes waste within the technological sublime and make it appear pleasing to the eye. In this acted-out fantasy, abjection, waste's dark underside, has (ostensibly) been designed out of the experience. Yet at the end of the novel, Nick

Shay is powerless, frozen between the promise of mastery that lies just out of reach and his embodied, enfeebled experience as an aging human limited by the passage of time and the yawning chasms that separate him from the "real" place of his youth.

The novel's confrontation with waste, a depiction of frustrated mastery that sketches the limits of the supposedly illimitable technological sublime, belongs to a category of experience that could be called the abject sublime. Beholding a sublime technological wonder, a manifest version of Emerson's "double of man" mastering the natural world (Emerson 51), Nick Shay is thrown back onto his corporeality and historicity as he tries to transcend these limitations. He is only human. By portraying Nick in this way, DeLillo asks readers to grapple with this abjection by dramatizing the failure of the technological sublime as an aesthetic strategy, which inadvertently reinscribes the boundaries that it seeks to override: the finitude of the embodied human, the abjection that accompanies the awareness of our relative powerlessness, enmeshed amongst the world around and in us. *Underworld*'s sublime encounters with waste are prescient reminders that humans are neither omniscient nor omnipotent, that individuals, nations, if not the human species, are circumscribed by entities that resist and frustrate our desires, especially the desire to escape entanglement in a relational world that is only partially responsive to our attempts to communicate with it. *Underworld* suggests, but masterfully refrains from moralizing, that we would do better to acknowledge our limitations and our partiality rather than act out "massive fantasies" (DeLillo 421) of dominance or mastery, aided by technology, the "god trick" about which Donna Haraway has written so persuasively (191). This suggestion, mediated by the aesthetic strategy of the abject sublime, is a critique of U.S.-American culture, especially the ideology of progress upon which the technological sublime is predicated.

Indeed, in times like these, times of upheaval, of loss on a planetary scale, times of seemingly unthinking pursuit of technological domination, we should pay attention to the (ultimately) ethical appeal of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. In lieu of a triumphant *tour de force*, *Underworld* subverts the technological sublime and the ideology of progress from which it stems. This subversion recognizes the abjection of waste, a status that can neither be completely excluded nor comprehensively integrated. Just like the complex and uneasy relationship between the human and the non-human, which unfolds in a liminal space akin to the abject, there is no way to permanently banish the essential trait of humanity: fallibility. Acknowledging our fallibility on a collective and individual level is a necessary and important step towards making amends to all those with whom we share this planet.

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