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## **The Disappearance of the Real**

Mass Media in Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Cormac McCarthy

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## Introduction: The Collective Allegory of Postmodernism

What is real? Russ Hodges, the radio speaker who gives a running commentary on the legendary baseball match between the Dodgers and the Giants held at Brooklyn's Polo Grounds and narrated in the prologue of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, has his own personal answer to this question: "The thing that happens in the sun."<sup>1</sup> He used to work in Charlotte, North Carolina, "creating" big league games that were already played, giving his listeners the illusion that they were acted in the same moment in which he was narrating them. His business was representations; representations made out of words. He recalls: "somebody hands you a piece of paper filled with letters and numbers and you have to make a ball game out of it."<sup>2</sup> He also recalls that his only desire at the time was to work at the Polo Grounds in New York, doing *real* baseball. However, when he is finally there, under the New York sun, he discovers that what his voice is narrating does not hold together the different dimensions developing in front of his eyes; and by the end of the show he is dazzled, like a drunkard who mimes a ball game, in the empty stadium. What he thought it was real, corresponded perfectly to the unreal he used to represent.

The twentieth century has been strongly affected by a desire similar to that of Russ Hodges for the real thing. Surrounded by images that keep multiplying, people still live in a constant urge for the real. They look for it in newspapers and magazines, in television, radio and on the internet, and the more they watch, the more their distance from reality seems to increase. American society, estranged by a real performed as spectacle in the media, finds only uncertainties in its quest for knowledge. Its condition is still a

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<sup>1</sup>Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

postmodern one, with all the positive and negative implications that such a statement has. In this respect, little has changed since television and mass media industry in general, began to shape society, and spectacles and images became the main instrument with which reality is experienced. Yet, this wild process, by which a multiform visual language dominated American culture, has offered in the years, from Kennedy's assassination to 9/11, several "epiphanic" moments. When, for example, on September 11, 2001, millions of Americans watched live on television the downfall of the Twin Towers, the spectacle created an uncanny feeling of virtuality. Was it *really* happening or was it just another Hollywood production?

As Slavoj Žižek suggests<sup>3</sup>, what we saw on television that day was not the harsh intrusion of reality in our realm of images, but the exact contrary: the image of the two towers collapsing entered and altered our reality. The point is that our reality was already shaped by images and 9/11 simply revealed it to us. Quoting Alan Badiou and his *Le Siècle*, Žižek argues that the attack at the WTC represented the conclusion, the *climax*, of this "passion for the real" which characterized twentieth century. From this point of view it is possible to trace continuity in the development of mass media from the early stage of their diffusion to the new millennium. This "first act" of mass media history is over and the rush of new digital technologies opened a new age for communication.

Certainly the medium par excellence that defines America, from the post-war era to the present, is television. It has penetrated American homes and minds for decades, selling the only possible world, the only real one; causing what Cecelia Tichi calls an "ontological

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<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the desert of the real: five essays on September 11 and related dates* (London, New York: Verso, 2002), 11

change,”<sup>4</sup>becoming the very certification of human experience. Still television was perceived as a dangerous medium since its birth. In the film *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), CBS journalist Edward R. Murrow, who struggles against Senator McCarthy’s 1950s anti-communism crusade, in a moment of American history in which broadcast journalism and television in general, although still in their infancy, became a fundamental tool for shaping the ideas of an entire nation, gives a speech in which he imagines what historians will find in the recorded traces of 50’s television; he argues that they will only see “evidence of decadence, escapism, and insulation from the realities of the world in which we live.” Television is, for Murrow, an instrument wrongly used, one that distracts, deludes, amuses, and insulates people. It is a powerful instrument, which can even “illuminate and inspire,” but can do so “only to the extent that humans are determined to use it towards those ends. Otherwise, it is merely wires and lights in a box.”

What Murrow said in 1953 remains as valid as ever. Even if his prophecy was true, those hypothetical historians envisioned by him, grope without reference in the virtual world created by the uncontrolled technology of mass media. That world defies analysis; it exists uniquely in a dimension of icons and simulacra, which like modern idols, establish an epistemic realm of representations. As David Foster Wallace notices in “E unibus pluram: television and U.S. fiction”<sup>5</sup>, television literally means “seeing far”; and thus it trains the watcher not only to feel really present at any televised event, such as the Olympics or New York under a terrorist attack, but also to relate to everyday life as something distant and exotic, as if it is shown on a TV screen. Wallace’s ideas of “seeing far” and of distance, evoke the words that Guy Debord uses as incipit in *The Society of the*

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<sup>4</sup> Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic hearth: creating an American television culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 130

<sup>5</sup> David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” *A Supposedly Fun Thing That I’ll Never Do Again*. Boston: Little, 1997. 21-82

*Spectacle*: “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that was once directly lived has distanced itself into a representation.”<sup>6</sup>Paraphrasing the same words with which Marx begins the first section of the *Capital*, Debord signals a crucial shift in the postmodern development of capitalism: the commodity has become spectacle, image, and mere representation. Of extreme importance is the term Debord uses to point out this process: the real “s’est éloigné”, distanced itself, it went away; a concept that a medium such as television embodies perfectly.

*The Society of the Spectacle* was published in 1967, when mass media were still in an archaic phase of their development, in comparison to the present. In such a phase Debord has sensed the malignant charm of representations, and prophesied the immaterial reality of today. Using as a starting point the first section of Marx’s *Capital*, the one in which the fetish side of the commodity is analyzed, Debord builds his two hundred and twenty one theses, conveying a crucial message, that is the spectacle is the last stage of the transformation of the commodity, which has no more value in itself, but only as an abstraction: “The Spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see – commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity;”<sup>7</sup>It is not something related uniquely to the world of mass media, but to the entire capitalist society: “The Spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image;”<sup>8</sup>It makes the real become image and only the images can be real:

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<sup>6</sup>“Toute la vie des sociétés dans lesquelles règnent les conditions modernes de production s’annonce comme une immense accumulation de spectacles. Tout ce qui était directement vécu s’est éloigné dans une représentation.” The translation is mine.

<sup>7</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 29.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

“...reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real;”<sup>9</sup>It establishes a monopoly of the truth, a unique unbreakable order of things: “The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: ‘Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear’.”<sup>10</sup>

Debord distinguishes two forms of spectacles: a concentrated spectacle, which is related to totalitarian societies, and a diffused spectacle, typical of western democracies; however, in his *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*, he envisions a unique integrated spectacle, which unifies both the forms theorized before. Whereas the concentrated spectacle could not control peripheral societies and the diffused spectacle could not control society in all of its expressions, the integrated one pervades all of reality, without possibility of escape. When the *Commentaries* were written, in 1988, the Berlin wall had not yet fallen, but Debord confirmed his capacity of prophesising on this further development of the spectacle, which interests the contemporary world. It is thus in this way that the theories enunciated in *The Society of the Spectacle* are fulfilled. Spectacle is a term that better than others gives significance to the way in which mass media transforms reality; it transcends technology in order to underline the human role in this process. Instead of considering mass media as autonomous forces, Debord looks at them as strictly embedded in the society which produces them. Such an approach should be of help in finding paths to resist the overwhelming power of the media, but also Debord is not immune from a sort of impotence that affects critics of mass media.

One of the characteristics of mass media’s critique is that it has, paradoxically, helped them to flourish. Critique seems to have functioned as those prohibitions that inflame curiosity and interest for the thing they try to prevent. The more critics build theories,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 15.



systems of thought that attempt to understand, classify and dominate the technologies of mass media, the more these technologies multiply their power, acquiring consent, and proving their necessity.

In *Understanding Media* Marshall McLuhan writes: “not even the most lucid understanding of the peculiar force of a medium can head off the ordinary ‘closure’ of the senses that causes us to conform to the pattern of experience presented.”<sup>11</sup> The closure of the senses is a sort of dream-like state of mind to which many visual media (television above all) force our brain. Being used to their languages since childhood one is compelled to structure one’s thoughts in terms of passive spectatorship. One is not the creative interpreter of a certain message, but submissive spectator of a medium. That the force of a medium is something not easy to counteract is made clear by the fact that the relationship with a medium (television for an example) is always unequal: the power to control the medium is limited to certain types of operations that one can perform in order to obtain a limited result. But the medium can operate without control from the moment in which it starts to function.

If a statement like McLuhan’s is true, this dissertation, which tries to help its readers have a “lucid understanding of the peculiar force of a medium”, is useless. If nothing can be done in order to resist critically that force, then there is nothing left to do but to give up and accept living in a technological age where thought is always more controlled by the technological means that govern people’s lives.<sup>12</sup> The humanistic tradition that shaped human creative thinking has no more reasons to exist, because people need only to be cold executors of actions imposed by technology. McLuhan’s statement is true, but still there is a strong necessity to react to any force that closes our senses and our understanding of

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<sup>11</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 329.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964).

reality. In order to do this, in order to resist the force of technology, one can find a way of escaping that force and looking at it from a critical perspective thanks to literature and writing.

Literature responded to the advent of cinema and television, often critically, often with an aura of cool detachment that might give a different, more thoughtful, perspective on reality. Apart from the great artistic quality that many visual products can reach, if one considers the medium used, there is a crucial difference to underline: the possibility to control that medium. Cinema and television present moving images and sounds that most of the time pass rapidly in front of one's eyes, and through one's ears, without giving the opportunity to reflect and interpret those images. A book, instead, gives space to a various range of actions that can be performed by its reader in order to gain control over the form and content of the medium. The reader is always engaged in a never-ending interpretative process by which he or she becomes the main actor of the communicative act he or she is involved in with the writer. In "The Movies and Reality" (1926), Virginia Woolf deplored 1920s cinema, in which travesties of great novels, simplified to a ridiculous degree, were the norm:

The eye says: "Here is Anna Karenina." A voluptuous lady in black velvet wearing pearls comes before us. But the brain says: "That is no more Anna Karenina than it is Queen Victoria." For the brain knows Anna almost entirely by the inside of her mind—her charm, her passion, her despair. All the emphasis is laid by the cinema upon her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Movies and Reality," 1926; rpt. in *Authors of Film*, ed. Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington, 1972), 86.

But that same brain to which Woolf gives so much power can be easily “titillated”, and “settles down to watch things happening without bestirring itself to think.”<sup>14</sup> However something different happens when one finds himself in a reversed situation: reading a book where the act of watching a movie or a TV-show is described. In this case, and as examples one could use various passages from Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, passages that will be later analysed in this thesis, the author never induces the reader into passive receptivity; a rambling narrative like *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for example, forces the reader to reconsider his status as spectator, to critically look at the environment created by the media. It works as a sort of filter for all those images that overwhelm him in everyday life.

The postmodern authors on whom this thesis is concentrated, seem to be strongly aware of their role as writers who can challenge the power of the media. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 1966, *The New York Times Magazine* published an article by Thomas Pynchon titled “A Journey into the Mind of Watts”, a journalistic account of life into the black neighbourhood of Los Angeles, after the famous riots which happened the year before, in summer 1965. This text, though, goes beyond the mere facts and presents the reader with a deep inquiry on post-war American society at large. More than reflecting on the events that have led to a disrupted community, Pynchon analyzes the structure which sustains that same community, looking at a racial problem from an unusual perspective, revealing elements that only a writer with his postmodern sensibility could have underlined; elements which become crucial in the light of his novels.

In describing the different perspectives that African Americans and whites have on everyday life, he points out that white culture “is concerned with various forms of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 89.

systematized folly,”<sup>15</sup> that it can afford to ignore the basic realities with which black culture has to deal, such as violence and death, and that it is psychologically distanced from Watts, even if the neighbourhood lies near them. Pynchon is thus creating a scheme of the facts that helps looking at them from a deeper point of view: what was happening in Los Angeles, according to the author of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, was not a clash of racial identities, but rather a conflict between two perspectives on reality; and the whites reality was strongly shaped by mass media. Commenting on the airplanes approaching L.A. International Airport, over the heads of Watts’s population he writes:

From here, much of the white culture that surrounds Watts – and in a curious way, besieges it – looks like those jets: a little unreal, a little less than substantial. For Los Angeles, more than any other city, belongs to the mass media. What is known around the nation as the L.A. Scene exists chiefly as images on a screen or TV tube, as four-color magazine photos, as old radio jokes, as new songs that survive only a matter of weeks.<sup>16</sup>

The white America described in this passage is the mainstream America of the sixties; the America grown with, and nourished by, mass media and spectacles. The reality this America lives does not exist, if not on the tube; it is the real distanced into a representation, and only the contrast with another reality which subverts its claims, gives the opportunity to reveal its falsity. It is a reality which sustains and it is sustained by the economy depending on the “systematized folly”, an economy of “large corporations where Niceguymanship is the standing order,”<sup>17</sup> which makes clear that the “unreal” world would not be possible, if not through the development of capitalism. Wealth is the basis for illusion. Yet, also the African-American community is not immune to the unreal: their use

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Pynchon, “A Journey into the Mind of Watts,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 12, 1966, 35

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

of alcohol is a form of escape, just of lower degree to that of the white kid who “digs hallucination simply because he is conditioned to believe so much in escape, escape as an integral part of life, because the White L.A. Scene makes accessible to him so many different forms of it.”<sup>18</sup> Their tendency toward mythmaking corresponds to a lesser degree of drifting away from reality, whereas the riot of August 1965 becomes a sort of ballet or jazz song. Watts community creates its own forms of representation that, even if in contrast with the unreal of the whites, are always a mode of distancing realities into spectacles. Pynchon concludes his article with an image: at the “Renaissance of the Arts” festival, held at Markham Junior High in Watts, one of the works in exhibition was an “old, busted, hollow TV set with a rabbit-ears antenna on top,”<sup>19</sup> and a human skull inside the screen. Entitled “The Late, Late, Late Show”, the piece lets Pynchon focus on what is probably the main tool by which these conflicting realities relate to each other: the TV set; it represents the spectacle that moulds postmodern societies, the altar of illusions to which both communities Pynchon analyzes in this case, prey in order to become real.

“A Journey into the Mind of Watts” is thus a crucial text that sheds light on the way a postmodern writer such as Pynchon confronts the world of mass media. More than a reflection on the technology in itself, Pynchon offers an analysis of the epistemological revolution sparked by that technology. While in his novels he never expresses judgments on mass media, leaving an air of ambiguity on his attitude towards them, in the *Journey*, he clearly takes position, but delimitating the perimeter of what interests him: the disappearance of the real into spectacle. It becomes thus possible to configure an analysis of American postmodern literature and its deployment of mass media, both as a resource and a conflicting entity, using “A Journey into the Mind of Watts” as a starting point.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 84.

What has just been said about Pynchon can be repeated with regards to many other postmodern authors. But what does it mean to use the term “postmodernism”? The concept of *postmodern* has been so widely applied in every field that it has lost (if it ever had) any aspect of accuracy and scientific value. It is a dangerous term because using it one has the illusion of understanding a determinate work of art or a social condition, but, since it is an illusion, that same term does not give a comprehensive understanding of the complexities which can characterize one’s object of analysis. The term *postmodernism* is in the title of this dissertation because all the books that are studied in it are commonly acknowledged as postmodernists and the kind of postmodernism the dissertation refers to is a literary one. In literary studies this term was first used by Ihab Hassan in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, a book of the late 60s which mainly focuses on authors that we would now define modernists<sup>20</sup>. Twenty years later Terry Eagleton gave a definition of the term that recognizes “the typical postmodernist artefact” as “playful, self-ironizing” and that sees in it a reaction “to the austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity.”<sup>21</sup> There is in many critics a strong stress on the recreational and ironic aspects of postmodern literature in contrast to the more austere modernism. This is a simplification. It is crucial to stress that the so-called postmodern literature developed during the second half of the twentieth century, a moment in which technology and in particular new visual and recording mass media began to acquire a dominant role in people’s life. In the 60s, when a part of the European intellectual debate was concerned with the death of the novel as cultural form, the language of cinema and television seemed to offer a very strong alternative to the more plain

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<sup>20</sup> Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 7.

structure of the novel. It was thus unavoidable for the new novelists to confront these languages, to discover through them new forms of narration that would have opened a path toward a correct understanding of the forces of mass media. David Harvey is right in arguing that “‘postmodernism’ represents a kind of reaction to, or departure from, ‘modernism’,”<sup>22</sup> but this statement should be clarified by saying that postmodernism is a reaction to modernity, departing from modernism. Postmodern American literature, indeed, reacted to the new narrative styles created and promoted by television and other mass media, using them in their work that was already shaped with techniques that were mainly developed by modernism. The modernist sensibility is present under the form of a critique of the use of those same mass media that influenced them. Writers like Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy, who is usually considered distant from these themes, show themselves to have been always conscious, in their novels, of mass media and the technologies behind them, and they represented the dualism between word and image as a conflict between individuals and a system that tries to devour them in its logic. Their characters always find themselves in a position in which they experience what was McLuhan’s interpretation of Poe’s Maelstrom and try to resist the vortex by understanding it.

In *America in the Movies* Michael Wood, quoting Kafka, uses a parable to describe popular culture at work. In this parable, leopards enter a temple to drink what is in the sacrificial pitchers. The action is always repeated, it can be calculated in advance and it becomes part of a ceremony. Woods interprets the leopards as all those preoccupations and problems that penetrate the realm of fiction, the temple:

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 39

We can't do anything about the leopards breaking in, and still less can we do anything, it seems, about the actual existence of leopards in the world outside the temple. But while they are in the temple, we can surround them with a consoling or attenuating interpretation of their activity. They still drink the pitches dry, and they are still, no doubt, dangerous. But they are no longer wild and meaningless; no longer stray, vicious animals haunting the borders of our mind. They are part of the ceremony. All this makes the movies sound like the instrument of social prevention that many writers have seen them: a means of keeping the discontented masses quiet, the new opium of the people.<sup>23</sup>

Mass media tend to hide any kind of element that would cause a rupture in their world. Anything that would have the power of revealing the trick behind the illusion needs to be kept silent. This was true in the United States of the 50's and 60's. Hollywood was a fabric of dreams that would keep the nation content. But more than opium we should call it as Wood does: placebo, something that gives us the impression that everything is just going good. Kafka's leopards can also be seen as glimpses of reality that penetrate the illusory world of images, as Debord would add: "In the world that *really* has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood."<sup>24</sup> In this way that same reality becomes part of the illusion, of the ceremony, of the show. We are no more able to differentiate the two components. The protagonists of novels like *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Blood Meridian* and *Underworld* find themselves in a situation in which they can still recognize the leopards entering the temple. And it is thanks to this recognition that they all begin a journey into the understanding of the maelstrom.

Most of Pynchon, DeLillo, and McCarthy criticism places them solely within a literary framework. The result is that, often enough, their work seems to lose its radicalism in

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Wood, *America in the movies* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 21.

<sup>24</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 14.



analyses focused on dividing their novels into lots and themes; these approaches prevent the reader from perceiving the complete and multifaceted plan which gathers together information and suggestions from different fields. In particular, what is never fully underlined is a general kinetic effect created by their art, through which history and fiction, reality and spectacle, are edited into paradoxical montages. The continuous mixture of various elements, the subterranean connections between them, and the temporal fragmentation of the discourse, seem to follow a common path in these three writers: everything is veiled by the power of images and their rhetoric. Pynchon's engagement with cinema, DeLillo's awareness of mass media and their technological dimension, McCarthy's constant confrontation with the structure of spectacles, build a unique attitude in twentieth century American literary landscape. The transformations that affected and continue to affect postmodern society shape their narratives and influence their motifs, invoking a new approach to literary analysis. Thus postmodern fiction is not simply an object upon which one focuses his critical gaze, but rather a tool with which to explore the inherent fictionality of contemporary society. Postmodern literature grasps reality through language, history through its intricate plots, creating an environment of pure speculations, demonstrating a particular capacity to explore the distance traced by representations and spectacles.

With regards to DeLillo, as Peter Boxall suggests in his introduction to *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*<sup>25</sup>, his work can be read beyond the postmodern debate which engaged his critics in the recent years. Certainly DeLillo's novels offer always the possibility for a critical thought which resist the postmodern, but they do so criticizing it from the inside. DeLillo is able to live, tell and express the postmodern age, looking at it

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

from a critical distance, which only writing and the possibility of language, allow him to have. For this reason, defining such a writer as “postmodern”, reduces the complexity of his work and hides its main features. The same thing can be said of McCarthy, who, indeed, David Holloway, defines a “late modernist”<sup>26</sup>, underling correctly his direct link with a Faulknerian tradition; but such definition risks to miss many other elements of his narratives, which contain references to a primitive society of the spectacle. Pynchon’s relationship with postmodernism, instead, is clearer. Together with William Gaddis and Donald Barthelme, indeed, he is probably the one that better has given identity to it as a literary genre; writing masterpieces like *The Crying of Lot 49*, that develop as linguistic vortexes and labyrinthic fictions, he almost set the standard of the postmodern story. However, going beyond the label of postmodernism, there is one main feature that links McCarthy to DeLillo and Pynchon: these three authors create novels in which it is possible to trace the mode of allegory.

In order to clarify this idea it is essential to reflect on the connection between allegory and postmodernism. Marshall McLuhan saw literature as an instrument which allows deep understanding of cultural phenomena that characterized his age (radio, television and mass media in general); an investigative tool that operates as mediator between culture, technology and science. This approach was probably inspired by I.A. Richards’s “practical criticism”<sup>27</sup> and it is still valid because, thanks to it, one can recognize certain literary structures in the way mass media products are organized. But American postmodern literature goes beyond this theoretical scheme in reinforcing a determinate characteristic of American literature: its analogical/allegorical function. Postmodern writers present a

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<sup>26</sup> David Holloway, *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Elena Lamberti, Marshall McLuhan (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2000), 21.

collective allegory by which they investigate American society and its relationship with media.

To use the term allegory means to face a large number of theoretical approaches that have been developed through the centuries, since the Latin rhetoricians. The idea hidden behind its etymology is well known: “allos” is the Greek word for “other”, “another”, “different”, and “agoreuein” stands for “to speak openly, publicly, in the assembly.” Thus for the ancients, as Deborah L. Madsen has noticed, “Allegory speaks 'other' (*allos*) through rhetorical substitution.”<sup>28</sup> This simple, superficial, and almost primitive, concept of allegory would be sufficient in order to understand the function of a text which operates as an allegory: a novel, a work of art, a concert or a video game, can offer the reader multiple elements of interpretation that go beyond their literary meaning. But after Walter Benjamin, Paul de Man, and other critics, who have worked with the notion of allegory, it is important to be precise about what this concept can offer to this dissertation.

In 1980, Craig Owens, whose essay “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism” can be considered as an unavoidable starting point for any reflection on the critical use of allegory in contemporary literature, said: “To impute an allegorical motive to contemporary art is to venture into proscribed territory.”<sup>29</sup> Notwithstanding several critical contributions manifested in the last decade, in particular those of Madsen, it seems that the term, and the eventual ambiguity of its usage, still scares scholars of literature. Yet allegory offers suggestive views to the analysis of postmodern literature and postmodernity in general. Owens gives a detailed account of the way in which the concept

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<sup>28</sup> Deborah L. Madsen. *The Postmodern Allegories of Thomas Pynchon* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991),

<sup>29</sup> Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October*, Vol. 13 (Summer, 1980), pp. 58-80

of allegory developed during the centuries and underlines certain features that appear crucial in any of its application in critical theory.

Allegory, according to Owens, has a strong “capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear.”<sup>30</sup> This characteristic is the one that Benjamin has widely pointed out in his work on the German tragic drama and it is an historical feature, in the sense that it has accompanied allegory throughout its development in history, as the only link between a present and a past which, otherwise, would risk oblivion; allegory is many things at the same time: “an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure.”<sup>31</sup> It corresponds to the doubling of a text, being structured in a way by which one text is read through another, even if their relationship may be fragmentary. “Conceived in this way,” Owen writes, “allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its final meaning.”<sup>32</sup> Thus a first link between allegory and postmodern literature can be made, given the process through which authors like Pynchon and DeLillo use other texts, taken from various forms of mass culture, and reformulate them in new terms, generating texts through the reproduction of other texts. Paraphrasing Owens, the manipulations to which these writers subject the texts, whether they are images, movies or radio shows, empty them “of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning.”<sup>33</sup> If one thinks of Nick Shay’s lost past in DeLillo’s *Underworld*, where memory always functions toward a recovery of the protagonist’s lost world of his Italian ethnicity, or of McCarthy’s cowboys and wanderers, who constantly try to recreate with their melancholic gaze a pastoral dimension that has already set at the dawn of postmodernity, it is possible to add,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 68

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 69

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

as Owens does, that it is exactly this melancholy that Walter Benjamin identified with the allegorical mood.<sup>34</sup>

The analysis developed by Benjamin in *The Origins of the German Tragic Drama* was probably the first important defense of allegory as a contemporary critical tool. At the core of his thesis is the idea that allegory is not a technique, but an expression, a temporal expression of the transitory nature of the world. For Benjamin all allegories are allegories of the past: they are like ruins, symbols that tell us more and other than what they were created for. Madsen suggests: “according to Benjamin, allegory is a mode of experience, registering the recognition of truth's absence.”<sup>35</sup> It is the disappearance of something, the oblivion, that creates allegory, which is the expression of the desire for what is absent.

The Bible is often mentioned, by scholars who have worked on allegory, as a paradigmatic text in this respect. Maureen Quilligan uses it as the typical example of what she calls a *pretext*: “a narrative that is assumed to articulate the sacred through its language and to reveal the way divine authority is made known in the material world”<sup>36</sup> The Bible is the allegory of a covenant with humanity, it uses the language of revelation, it describes archetypal figures; the same Old Testament can be read allegorically as a prefiguration of the new. The biblical text possesses the most important characteristic of an allegoric work, which is perfectly explained by Owens' statement: “allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another.”<sup>37</sup> The doubling of a text, the existence of a pretext are interpretative

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<sup>34</sup> Benjamin says: “If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind the dead, but eternally secure, then it is expressed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. He places it within it, and stands behind it; not in a psychological but in an ontological sense.”

<sup>35</sup> Deborah L. Madsen, *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>36</sup> Quoted by Madsen, 19

<sup>37</sup> Craig Owens, *Ibid.*, 68

tools which work perfectly with classical examples of allegories, but what happens with modern or even postmodern allegories? Where to find the pretexts and their doubles?

Theorizing postmodern allegories, Madsen proposes a precise difference between them and more conventional allegories; according to her the difference lies in a change of attitude toward the pretext: in conventional allegories the pretext is an authoritative text, a culturally important book, which gives its commentary the possibility to share the same authority, and “more than this, the narrative signs acquire ontology when they are perceived as signs of the divine. Given this fixed ontological centre, traditional allegory is an epistemological form, concerned with the way in which knowledge of the sacred can be made present in a narrative that 'speaks of the Other'.”<sup>38</sup> Postmodernist allegories, instead, have to face the absence of a “fixed ontology”, and this absence problematizes the relation between the narrative and the pretext. Without an authoritative text to comment on, the allegory becomes commentary on the absence of such a text, commentary on the desire, the quest for a “fixed ontology”; as Benjamin would have said, allegory is a perception, an attitude, the expression for something that seems lost.

But what is exactly this *something*? Using the term “fixed ontology”, Madsen suggests that a text like the Bible in traditional allegory goes beyond its religiosity and creates an epistemological structure which sustains an entire system of beliefs. Postmodernity is often related to the disappearance of such a system of beliefs; therefore, it is necessary to understand *how* this disappearance takes place. In *The Allegorical Impulse* Owens analyzes a work by Cindy Sherman called “Untitled Studies for Film Stills” (1980); in her photographs the artist imitates and parodies film stills in order to reflect not only on their mimetic quality, but also on their function in relation to the constitution of the self.

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<sup>38</sup> Deborah L. Madsen, *Ibid.*, 23

Sherman's works are self-portraits through which she represents different stereotypes of women. She creates images of women, “specular models of femininity projected by the media to encourage imitation, identification...tropes, figures.”<sup>39</sup> Reflecting on the allegorical power of Sherman's stills, Owens suggests that their function is also that of revealing mass media as “a false mirror which promotes such alienating identifications.”<sup>40</sup> From an historical perspective mass media penetrated the world as people were used to experience it and modified it at its roots, creating new perceptions of reality. This epoch-making shift took place in the midst of the twentieth century, when the arrival of new media technologies caused that gradual distancing from the real which, according to Debord, characterized the “society of the spectacle”. The real has been killed by TV, as Baudrillard would later theorize in his *The Perfect Crime*: what disappears with postmodernity is the possibility of the real, the capacity of projecting oneself into a world that would be directly experienced. That real is substituted with imitations, images, representations, *simulacra*, to use a Baudrillard's term. But these images and imitations, while “killing the real”, also serve as signals of its disappearance. In Benjamin's vision, mass media, with their fragmentary, impermanent, dispersed soul, can be seen as the new ruins of history, an allegory of the disappearance of the real.

Like Sherman, and many years before her, American writers, such as Pynchon and DeLillo, sensed this dangerous, but at the same time useful, ability of mass media: the allegorical power of signaling a shift in perception the perception of reality. In most of their novels it is possible to trace various references to the rhetoric of the media and to the way it influences society. These writers are still now labeled as postmodern, but the notion

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<sup>39</sup> Craig Owens, *Ibid.*, 77

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

itself lacks a clear meaning. The aim of this dissertation is that of looking at the concept of American literary postmodernism from a different perspective, that is an historical and, at the same time, social and cultural perspective; the authors are analyzed starting from their belonging to that generation of Americans who saw the advent of television in a very formative moment of their lives: Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Cormac McCarthy were all born in the 1930s, and grew up without television; but in the early and mid 1950s, they experienced the materialization of the TV set in most of American homes; this event is certainly not secondary in the definition of their role as intellectuals, writers, and social critics. The use they would make of allegory was not at all coincidental. As Craig Owens has demonstrated, the hostility toward allegory expressed by many modernists was just superficial: “Allegory can no longer be condemned as something merely appended to the work of art, for it is revealed as a structural possibility inherent in every work. In modernism, however, the allegory remains *in potentia* and is actualized only in the activity of reading, which suggests that the allegorical impulse that characterizes postmodernism is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading.”<sup>41</sup> This preoccupation is specularly represented, by postmodern writers with the relationship which their characters have with mass media and the images that constantly force (like Sherman's movie stills) a redefinition of the self: mass media become a fragmented pretext which postmodern characters attempt to read. The “society of the spectacle” itself is not immune from allegory: “allegory may well be that mode which promises to resolve the contradictions which confront modern society...The Western, the gangster saga, science fiction - these are the allegories of the twentieth century. They are also genres most intimately associated with film; that film should be the primary vehicle for modern allegory may be attributed

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 74.



not only to its unquestioned status as the most popular of contemporary art forms, but also to its mode of representation. Film composes narratives out of a succession of concrete images, which makes it particularly suited to allegory's essential pictogrammatism.”<sup>42</sup> Film, and television too; commercials are strongly structured through a pictogrammatic, fragmented narrative which contains many of the characteristics of allegory. When Pynchon and DeLillo, as writers, confronted this multifaceted world of the media they encountered what is, mainly, an allegorical world.

Allegory is a constant element of the American literary tradition; a characteristic that is possible to trace since the origins: the Bible, the allegorical text par excellence, can be considered as a founding book for the American character. During the Colonial period it was one of the few books read widely (also through its commentaries), and it the nineteenth century masters like Hawthorne and Melville used allegory as the instrument to narrate America. Still in the modernist era, a writer like Faulkner would easily admit that the Bible was probably his favorite reading. A Madsen has said: “There is in American literature a long and significant tradition of allegorical writing.”<sup>43</sup> The postmodern use of allegory develops into this tradition. This analysis of Pynchon's, DeLillo's and McCarthy's works aims to demonstrate that theirs are mainly novels configured as allegories of the relationship between spectators and mass media and as such they present, as Owens' Sherman, “specular models projected by the media to encourage imitation, identification.”<sup>44</sup> In these terms their novels are transformed into essential tools to understand mass media and their role in contemporary society.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Deborah L. Madsen, *Allegory in America: From Puritanism to Postmodernism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), 15

<sup>44</sup> Craig Owens, *Ibid.*, 76

The following chapters concentrate on different issues regarding the relationship between mass media and American literature and the way this literature narrates the relationship between American society and mass media. The second chapter is an analysis of the role of mass media in American postmodern literature. The analysis is developed through the comparison of essays been written either on the subject or on the uses that certain authors (DeLillo and Pynchon in particular) make of mass media in their novels. David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: television and U.S. fiction" is the most important that has been written on the subject and with "Fiction of image" (or "image-fiction") Wallace introduces a crucial term in the debate, with which he tries to rename the literature that has always been called postmodern. Together with Eugene Goodheart in "Speculations on Don DeLillo and the Cinematic Real," Wallace stresses the function of television in representing our desires. This idea is similar to what Slavoj Žižek argues in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, where he says that desire is the main engine of happiness and to Karal Ann Marling's *As Seen on Tv*, where she talks about the fact that the main function of television in the 50's and 60's was to sell happiness. Following Wallace's argumentation it is possible to introduce the various analyses that have been made on the use and the role of cinema and television in Pynchon, DeLillo and McCarthy. Their works emphasize the narrative aspects of mass media. When Jacques Ellul talks about the "fruition of a long technical experience"<sup>45</sup> as one of the key elements that shaped the flowering of technology in the nineteenth century, one can be tempted to apply this scheme to a technological mean such as television. What are the technological roots of television? Television is rooted in narrative techniques that belong to the novel, to the Greek tragedy, to the Shakespearian Theatre. Television is a medium that proposes

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<sup>45</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Ibid.*, 91

narratives, tales under the form of information or entertainment. But since it is a different and powerful medium it has the faculty of shaping one's ideas, one's perception of reality and one's decisions. Wallace says that television hegemony is resistant to the critique of what he calls the fiction of image because television itself has co-opted those distinctive narrative forms that characterize postmodern literature. Here stands a conflict in which media and literature oppose each other, using the same narrative forms.

The third chapter focuses on DeLillo and Pynchon novels and analyzes the role of the allegories of mass media in their work. Bill Gray, the writer protagonist of DeLillo's *Mao II* says to Brita, the photographer who came to make a series of portraits of him: "In our world we sleep and eat the image and pray to it and wear it too."<sup>46</sup> No statement better introduces the role of spectacles and images in contemporary society and the way postmodern writers perceive it. Bill continues by saying that the role of writers is that of "encroaching a holy turf." Writers have to invade the field of images to comprehend it and defend the mass from it. *Mao II* offers a different perspective to approach *Underworld*, the work that chronologically follows it. *Mao II* anticipates many of the themes and characters presented in *Underworld*, and the two novels share several similarities. The first of them is a stadium as the set of the prologue. Probably it is the same stadium, because, as Karen says to Kim while they are getting married in front of Master Moon, it is the stadium "where the Yankees play". The introduction of this architectural element in DeLillo's works invites a reflection over its function as a place built and structured for spectacles. Stadiums represent a primitive form of spectacle that has been conserved almost unchanged since its origins until now. In *Mao II* DeLillo also explains the significance of the baseball game in *Underworld* and the function that baseball can have in a novel. At a

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<sup>46</sup> Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1992), 47

certain point the writer Bill Gray tells that when he was baby he used to imagine a baseball game and in his mind he used to play all the voices participating in it: the players, the journalists, the spectators.

This is exactly what DeLillo will do in the prologue (“The Triumph of Death”) of *Underworld*. The writer then uses the style and form of spectacle in his work and at the same time spectacle is something that can be envisioned only in the writer’s mind. Spectacle is indeed a narrative form with a structure not at all different from that of a novel and this is why the writer can have a deep understanding of its structures so to be in a position of defence against the illusion it creates. The allegory presented by DeLillo is that of the mass society under the power of the media and, at the same time, in conflict with it. In Pynchon, instead, the allegory refers directly to television and cinema. The difference lies in the fact that while in DeLillo there are no characters that can be interpreted as symbols of mass media, in Pynchon mass media are always represented by the concrete presence of a character. Peirce Inverarity in *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, is a character that represents the economic and cultural power of mass media. A mysterious presence throughout novel, he seems to be behind a weird web where everything that Oedipa Maas experiences is correlated. The language he uses is the language of spectacle, mediated through television. In the second chapter of the novel, in which Oedipa meets Paul Metzger (a lawyer that should help her execute Peirce’s will), we get to know many things about Inverarity, among these the most clear is the he owns several enterprises which are advertised on television (and he also owns television). Inverarity becomes in this way the symbol of a media power that can direct people lives (this is exactly what he does with Oedipa) and control their desires. Television is also an uncanny presence in *The*

*Crying of Lot 49*. Apart from the beginning, where it appears as a green eye that looks over Oedipa, it is quoted as a dangerous technological mean that possesses people's dreams.

In the fourth chapter, entitled "Old fans who've always been at the movies," attention will be focused on the protagonists of the novels. They always are in a passive position of spectators. Whether they look for a sense or a final meaning (it is the case of Oedipa Maas), or they are impotent observers of perturbative signs that surround them (Gladney and his family in *White Noise*, Nick Shay in *Underworld*) or they try to escape from an overwhelming force that tries to possess them (the kid in *Blood Meridian*), they are all symbols, allegories of a public that constantly receives messages from the media. Since DeLillo novels are characterized by a representation of the media as an ethereal force that permeates our life, a non-concrete entity that is impossible to identify, they are full of concrete representation of spectators. One of the most emblematic is the figure of Karen in *Mao II*. She is always watching TV and when she does not watch it she is usually concentrated in discussions about signs and messages that she encounters in her life. The TV she watches is a mute one. She is only concentrated on images.

At the core of *Mao II* lies the concept of crowd, and indeed images of a crowd are what Karen observes when we first re-encounter her in the novel after the prologue. Crowds as symbols of hypnotized masses that move toward something that they can't control. Crowds watching a soccer match. In the same way, and here return the various correspondences between *Mao II* and *Underworld*, "The Triumph of Death", *Underworld*'s prologue, is all focused on a mass that goes to watch a baseball match. The references to the status of spectator in DeLillo are manifold. The most interesting ones are those in which the characters not only symbolize that status, but also reflect upon it. An often quoted passage from *White Noise* is when Jack and Murray visit "the most photographed

barn in America”. At a certain point, while they are looking at the barn, Murray understands his role as spectator: that of maintaining the power of the image through the desire for it. “We’re not here to capture an image. We’re here to maintain one. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies.”<sup>47</sup> In *Underworld* the presence of the image is less concrete and what we have is an overwhelming feeling of control. Many chapters end with people watching television and cinema, and whether real (a documentary on the Rolling Stones) or false (an hypothetical *Unterwelt* by Eizenstein), mass media are an important aspect of the novel.

The fifth chapter, entitled “The Rhetoric of Spectacle in Cormac McCarthy,” is uniquely focused on the southern writer. McCarthy, indeed, needs to be analyzed from a different perspective: his status as a postmodern writer has never been acknowledged, and the differences between his narrative and those of Pynchon and DeLillo are too evident for a direct comparison. However, it is possible to use the same approach of the preceding chapters to underline various similarities with the other two authors. Also McCarthy speaks through allegory, and he constantly presents a conflict between the individual and a society that overwhelms him. The original perspective of the chapter will be that of dedicating most of it to a social/political analysis of *Blood Meridian* that seems, among all the books studied in the thesis, the most far from the reality of mass media. The novel is set in a moment of American history in which the nation was maturing an idea of violent expansion that needs a strong propaganda effort to carry it out. Judge Holden represents that effort, but three things need to be understood about his figure. The first is that he does not act for any public purpose, but only for his own interest. In this sense he can be viewed as the embodiment of the individualistic spirit of the United States. Second, his rhetoric is

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<sup>47</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984), 12

not directly political, but almost abstract: he talks about various things, in various modes, without any particular intent. Doing so he resembles the abstraction of television and the discontinuity of its message, but the most important thing to underline is that Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* dominates his followers, enchants them and convinces them of the rightness of their actions. These actions become a crucial part of the process by which United States became what they are now; through this allegory of the past, which becomes an allegory of the present (having been written at the end of twentieth century), the discourse can be focused on the function of spectacle in forming the mass society.

Even without direct references to our contemporary technological era, an allegorical interpretation of *Blood Meridian* takes us to the present. What we have in McCarthy is a rhetorical system that controls people minds in order to use them for its own purposes. This system is well represented by Judge Holden, who, since his first appearance, is disguised as spectacle. Throughout the novel he will use his rhetoric, his own narrative structure to “distract, delude, amuse and insulate” his followers, creating desires that they will never be able to fulfil. *Blood Meridian*, moreover, presents a different perspective on the status of spectator: that of the bildungsroman. The kid, following Judge Holden and his “tribe”, experiences life through images and narrations. He almost never participates in any of the violent acts perpetuated by the company he follows, he just observes them, desires them. And every time he is looking at a fight or a slaughter, the scene he observes is configured by McCarthy as a show, a spectacle. The last chapter of the novel, indeed, in which Judge Holden and the kid meet again after many years, is used as a reflection on life as a spectacle, a dance that devours people, as the Judge seemingly does with the kid in the end.

The thesis offers a comprehensive reflection on mass media and American postmodernism. Comparing the different ways in which the authors depict the role of mass

media in our society, organizing them in a unique stream, it is possible to underline that, although with different narrative modes and probably with different purposes, Pynchon, DeLillo, and McCarthy developed a similar critique of mass media, which forces a redefinition of their work. The term postmodernism is no more sufficient in labelling this kind of literature. Pynchon, McCarthy and DeLillo's books are an act of resistance against the power of media and from this act of resistance we can start to redefine our relationship with mass media and the way we use it in our everyday life. This act of resistance can begin from the necessity of giving critical tools to the public. In order to understand media, people need to know how media work; they need to understand the structure, the language and the narrative modes that characterize them. The key word is education. But not an education to know how technology works, but an education that will not let technology dominate us.

The argument of this dissertation has been chosen for two reasons: the first is the necessity to come to terms with the unavoidable presence of media technologies inside the works of postmodern American writers. Many studies have been written on the subject, but mainly considering each author in isolation, and never proposing a careful inquiry of the function of mass media in the "postmodern novel" itself. One of the questions this thesis tries to answer is whether the presence of mass media in authors like DeLillo and Pynchon is just one of the aspects of the world they narrate or is a crucial feature of their postmodernism.

The second reason is that of reflecting on the term postmodernism. Behind this label literary critics could include various aspects of contemporary literature from William Gaddis to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, from Robert Coover to Salman Rushdie; this tendency does not clarify the way literature has developed in the second half of the twentieth



century. This project, thus, invites a re-thinking and a re-formulation of the concept of postmodernism, starting from the American literary experience of a generation of writers (born in the 1930s) who are commonly considered the founders of postmodernism in America. Underlining the role that mass media technologies play in their writing, one can point out that the so-called postmodernism emerged in the United States partly as a reaction to Debord's "society of the spectacle." Through the work of these writers, this dissertation tries to go behind the curtain of mass media spectacles, in order to analyze them and recognize the technological structures by which they are moulded. American postmodern literature of the second half of twentieth century is used as a lens through which look at a society under the pressure of media. The works of Pynchon, DeLillo, and McCarthy, important representatives of that literature, can be as kaleidoscopes that give a new perspective on the relationship between people and mass media, and offer a clear understanding and critique of it.



## Chapter II

### Mass Media and Postmodern Writers: Pynchon and DeLillo

Alec Electron was the character with which the DuMont Corporation promoted the invention of television in 1943<sup>48</sup>. He was a Fred Astaire-like fellow who promised to explain a simple question: *what* is television. To answer this question, Alec Electron had to tell what happens to him and his other friend electrons when light hits them. They jump, “with joy, and jump right off!” controlled by a squad of other electrons who direct them. This squad of electrons acts as a Cathode Ray beam which also sends out two types of messages: the moment in which the squad start to scan the surface for electrons (synchronizing signal) and the number of electrons which have to jump. These messages are sent to the television transmitter and pumped out as radio waves intercepted by antennas and sent to receiving sets. In the receiving set there are “Grid Sergeants”, who seem to inhabit the Cathode Ray Tube “commercially developed by DuMont” (as the advertisement reminds) and maneuver the electrons to scan the fluorescent screen in perfect coordination with the electron beam in the camera tube. “That’s how we put a picture in your television,” concludes Alec Electron.

This simple explanation functioned for the American public as a short, humorous digest of at least one hundred years of scientific research in the field of data transmission. Television is, indeed, an invention that developed through the contribution and effort of

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<sup>48</sup> Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 10. Tichi’s book remains the best ever written on television in U.S. Culture until now. Many pictures are published in the book and, among them, also the Alec Electron’s advertisement.

many individuals, from different countries over many decades, who felt the urge to create a system of communication that would work beyond the limits of space. The first crucial steps toward instant data transmission were taken by scientists in the nineteenth century with the inventions of devices designed to transmit information such as the telegraph, copy-telegraph, telephone, but it was at the dawn of the twentieth century, with the intuition that cathode rays would serve as transmitters and receivers of distant images, that television began to seem always more possible. In the history of this medium and of the technologies that inform it, a preeminent role is occupied by James Clerk Maxwell has theorized a unified model of electromagnetism, and laying the foundation for future work in such fields as general relativity and quantum mechanics.

Thanks to this Scottish scientist, the themes of information and communication become crucial in Thomas Pynchon's work. When Oedipa Maas, the protagonist of Pynchon's first novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, visits a governmental industry called "Yoyodyne", she encounters Stanley Koteks, one of the Yoyodyne workers who introduces her to the idea of Maxwell's Demon: while the Second Law of Thermodynamics postulates that in an isolated system, entropy (or the amount of disorder in the system) never decreases, Maxwell imagines a demon who "could sit in a box among air molecules that were moving at all different random speeds, and sort out the fast molecules from the slow ones...violating the Second Law of Thermodynamics, getting something for nothing, causing perpetual motion,"<sup>49</sup> and decreasing the entropy. Oedipa Mass's quest in *The Crying of Lot 49*, is a fight against entropy, a perpetual research of order in a chaotic system, and Pynchon "uses Maxwell's notion of the Demon as a metaphor for Oedipa's

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Lippincott, 1965), 68.

experiences.”<sup>50</sup> Since the opening of the novel, Oedipa has to sort things out, in order to understand the reasons of Pierce Inverarity, a dead entrepreneur, who left her the task of executing his estate. She has to sort, to separate, to create order in a mass of signs, symbols and images that overwhelm her. She is a Maxwell Demon who doesn't work with air molecules, as in the scientist example, but with information.

The metaphor Pynchon uses is better developed through another character in the novel, John Nefastis, who has invented a machine that behaves as a Maxwell's Demon: “entropy is a figure of speech...” he says, “a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow.”<sup>51</sup> An important thing to point out is that, while Nefastis talk, the TV set is on (it occurs often in *The Crying of Lot 49*) and the box he created, the machine that works as Maxwell's Demon, it is very similar to television. In order to make it function, Oedipa Mass has to stare at an image, a picture of Maxwell, concentrating on it and try to sort things out. Actually, the explanation Alec Electron gives in the DuMont advertisement implies a Demon who controls and sorts the flowing mass of electrons that have to create an image. It is not a case then if Pynchon structures the scene, in which Oedipa understand the function of the Maxwell's Demon, comparing this scientific notion with the technological invention of television. The flow of information in a mass media age is a fundamental characteristic of that age, and the more the information, the more the disorder, the entropy to which the spectator has to respond. *The Crying of Lot 49* is considered as one of the most notable examples of postmodern fiction, and scholars who deal with such a genre have some difficulties in defining its characteristics. It is certain, though, that this novel, as many others who are defined postmodern, embodies the

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<sup>50</sup> Mangel, Ann. “Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information: The Crying of Lot 49” in Levine and Loverenz (eds.) *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 88.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 85

traumatic shift experienced by Americans, in the middle of twentieth century, with the transformation imposed by mass media toward a mass cultural life, a life in which the flow of information, news, spectacles and images reshaped their conception of reality.

As David Foster Wallace suggests, “The seminal novels of Pynchon and DeLillo revolve metaphorically off the concept of interference: the more connections, the more chaos, and the harder it is to cull any meaning from the seas of the signed.”<sup>52</sup> The world of connections and information, of network and data, which is its full development nowadays, and which was beginning to show its complexity when *The Crying of Lot 49* was written, embraced American society in its web, substituting a reality of direct experiences with a distant one, that cannot be experienced, but only observed.

In his widely quoted essay “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace recognizes certain elements which characterize the writers of his generation. The main one is the omnipresence of television in their lives. Television became for these writers a very useful instrument would help them observe, describe and study the American character. It has become a mirror that reflects what people want to see, their desires. And being desire, “fictionally speaking...the sugar in human food,”<sup>53</sup> fiction writers use television as a substitute of their own ogling, watching, and staring activity that is necessary to their job.

In stressing the importance of television for the generation of writers which he belongs to (those born in the 1960's), Wallace is tracing a crucial separating line in the history of twentieth-century American literature. A line that divides two generations of writers by the relationship they had with television. Foster Wallace is among those writers that have been born with television and that are used to its presence in their homes, while other writers,

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<sup>52</sup> David Foster Wallace. “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993), 21

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

those born in the 30's, the generation of Pynchon, DeLillo, Philip Roth, Updike, McCarthy and Gaddis, saw the TV-set materialize in their home, as a new mysterious, technological object. Their generation confronted TV as something exotic, a novelty or a curiosity, and finally an object that would debauch the American character. They could experience the development of the TV environment in the United States, a process that goes from the exotic to the commonplace, a naturalization by which the TV phenomenon becomes assimilated to the point that people see it as a part of the natural order of things. The advent of a television age represented for these authors the entrance in a completely new cultural dimension that was just beginning to reshape the way in which America envisioned itself. They were aware of this change and their work reflects it. To put it in Wallace's words, "they were sentient citizens of a community that was exchanging an old idea of itself as a nation of do-ers and be-ers for a new vision of the U.S.A. as an atomized mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers."<sup>54</sup> From this point of view, postmodernism was deeply informed by television and other mass media, with the result that many of its expressions can be read as articulate reflections on the issues of appearance and representation that could have only been raised by the visual ambiguity in which the new medium was taking America. The real life, distanced from the spectacle, was beginning to imitate it, as disparate texts show. Postmodern fiction exploits the lexicon and the forms of television, legitimating the televisual as the primary, "natural", structure of experience. Cecelia Tichi in *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* reads many novels by DeLillo, Donald Barthelme, Raymond Carver, and others in these terms.<sup>55</sup> Jack Gladney, in DeLillo's *White Noise*, checks on his sleeping children and feels as if "he'd wondered in

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>55</sup> Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth*, 36-37

a TV moment;”<sup>56</sup> a part in Carver’s *Cathedral*, becomes “like one those game shows;”<sup>57</sup> stories in which TV programs become an integral part of the structure of story-telling, and in which the narrative depends on the structure of television, like Barthelme’s *And Now Let’s Hear It for The Ed Sullivan Show*. The “society of the spectacle” governs fiction and even if writers act as critics of this society, they nonetheless exploit its technologies, being aware that those technologies shape the contemporary “environment”. Television and other media in which the disappeared real reappears, fragmented and ruined, and the only places where it can be perceived, ordered, and understood.

Traces of media influence in the American character can already be found in novels that precede the rise of literary postmodernism in the United States or that can be considered as early postmodernism. At the end of *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) by Norman Mailer, for example, a Major of the U.S. Troops, Dalleson, has what he thinks is a genial idea in order to “jazz up the map-reading class”: to use a Betty Grable full-size color photograph in a bathing suit, with coordinates and a grid system. “The instructor could point to different parts of her and say, 'Give me the coordinates.' Goddam, what an idea! The Major chuckled out of sheer pleasure. It would make those troopers wake up and pay some attention in map class.” he thinks, and it is as if he acts with a typical postmodern mood, understanding that the coordinates of a postmodern world are dictated by mass media and Pop-cultural references became tools to relate to the other, orientating points that can be recognized by a mass media influenced character. Pop- cultural references are, of course, a constant element in Pynchon and DeLillo's work. One can almost don't understand novels such as *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Americana*, without a certain knowledge

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<sup>56</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 244

<sup>57</sup> Raymond Carver, “Cathedral” in Cecelia Tichi, 197



of characters from movies, radio and TV-shows. “One of the most recognizable things about this century's postmodern fiction was the movement's strategic deployment of pop-cultural references – brand names, celebrities, television programs – in even its loftiest high-art projects”, Wallace says,<sup>58</sup> and one cannot but agree with this statement; the function of these references is very much different from that of the modernists that would use products of an early mass culture with theoretical scopes, and it is not a simply abstract formula with which to create irony, but it is, fundamentally, a way to return to the real, in a world that is always more, in Debordian terms, a representation. Showing the individual's estrangement towards televisual products (think of DeLillo's *White Noise* and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*) and the overwhelming power of corporate media (think of DeLillo's *Americana*), puts the reader in a critical perspective from which he can look at his own everyday life, full of images and visual experiences, like in a mirror, or in an allegory.

There has always been in the history of fiction the use of rhetoric techniques that became typical of television and mass media in general. Almost provocatively Wallace says that “the stream-of-consciousness guys who fathered modernism were, on a very high level, constructing the same sort of illusions about privacy-puncturing and espial on the forbidden that television has found so fecund.”<sup>59</sup> Television is informed by a technology of the tale which is basically constructed through the use of various narrative techniques that are traceable to the origins of literature, and cinema is not free from the same technology. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* clearly referred to archetypical tales and characters that are still narrated in contemporary novels, movies and TV-shows. A book like *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers* by Chris Vogler, who's

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<sup>58</sup> David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram”, 9

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

deeply influenced by Campbell's work, is widely used by screenwriters throughout the world, who are taught to use certain typologies of characters and certain events in their plot in order to glue the spectators to the screen. From a structuralist point of view everything is analyzable under the form of tale: a picture, a ballet, a novel, a movie, and a commercial on TV; different narrative forms always communicated with each other, and one should not be surprised in finding this communication among mass media and literature.

Still it is evident that something surprisingly new happened with the literature produced in the United States after World War Two: the influence of popular mass culture on literature was not anymore merely technical. In Wallace's words: "About the time television first gasped and sucked air, mass popular U.S. Culture became high-art viable as a collection of symbols and myth. The episcopate of this pop-reference movement were the post-Nabokovian black humorists, the metafictionists and assorted franc- and latinophiles only later comprised by 'postmodern'."<sup>60</sup> Among the writers Wallace recognizes as more representative of this movement, certainly the name of Pynchon and of his *The Crying of Lot 49* is the best to embody all the themes and issues which are raised by the entrance of mass culture and pop images in the realm of literature; he even embodies those problems that are developed by authors who will follow the path opened by him. In this respect, Wallace identifies a further change in postmodern literature, something that he calls a "later wave", and of which DeLillo is the "true prophet". This later wave is characterized by a different approach: while for Pynchon, Gaddis or Barth television images were "valid objects of literary allusion", for DeLillo and others television and metawatching are themselves the subjects. But the division Wallace operates is inaccurate. *The Crying of Lot 49* is already a novel that reflects on the power of the image, on the act of watching, and on

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 10

television as a protagonist of contemporary American culture. It does so not only through the Maxwell figure who permeates the plot with all its references to the world of information exchange, but also through determinate episodes, like the one in which Oedipa and Metzger spend a night watching a movie where Metzger (as a child) was the protagonist; a scene that will be discussed in the second chapter. Wallace recognizes in DeLillo “the true prophet of this shift in U.S. Fiction,”<sup>61</sup> and, quoting the famous “barn-scene” in *White Noise*, when Jack, the protagonist of the novel, and his friend Murray, go to see the “most photographed barn in America”, underlines an essential characteristic of the first generation of postmodern American writers: the silence of their characters as a reaction to spectacles. That silence signals three things: 1) the impossibility of the characters to change the “imagined” reality surrounding them; 2) the resistance of Spectacle to any form of critique and protest; 3) (and this is Wallace's point of view) “the very disease from which he, Murray, barn-watchers, and readers all suffer.”<sup>62</sup> But silence, in a medium, the novel, which functions uniquely through words, also focuses readers' attention on the act of *watching*. Thus, one can say that the protagonist's silence in DeLillo, as in Pynchon and McCarthy (*Blood Meridian* is a perfect example), functions as a sort of allegory of spectator's impotence towards the technologies of spectacle. In this element that lays the deep critique these “postmodernists” move to the world of images and mass media. Their voice is structured through the silence of their protagonists and it is not a critique of technology itself, or of the media using it, but of the devaluation of the human role in the information process.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 12.

The shift these writers caused has to be understood historically as sort of natural development of modernist techniques in an age, as Wallace would say, “deformed by electric signal.” Naming it postmodern literature does not clarify the crucial role important cultural changes had in the definition of this *new* literature. Formally DeLillo, Pynchon, McCarthy, but also Gaddis and Barth, are all modernist, but they all distance themselves from the modernist attitude of looking for epiphanic, ontological truths. They are modernists who live in an age of spectacle, modernists who re-discover the profound allegorical sense of it all, modernists who have to deal with the disappearance of the real, and the re-shaping of their lives in tele-visual terms. The Age of Spectacle they live in does not affect their style so much as it affects their *Weltanschauung*. It transforms their role as writers, making them at the same time prophets and oracles of the Society of Spectacle that was about to born.

In *Electronic Hearth* Tichi discusses the ontological shift lived by America with the introduction of television in their lives. Commenting on Wallace's ideas she gets to this important statement: “To speak of the evolution of television from the exotic to the commonplace is to refer to the process of its sociocultural naturalization, the process by which a phenomenon, initially conspicuous and dislocative in its very newness, becomes overtime sufficiently assimilated that people experience it as a part of the natural order of things.”<sup>63</sup> Tichi often relies on literary experiences to describe the ambiguity by which television, little by little, become something “normal” and, at the same time, a completely uncanny presence; the example she gives are mainly taken from writers who come from that generation of the thirties: Carver, Barthelme, and Don DeLillo. Tichi's examples clarify how a group of writers experienced a slow cultural process (from the novelty to the

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<sup>63</sup> Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth*, 11

naturalization of the TV-set) almost in the same way, and how it influenced their art. This influence is essential in order to understand, historically, their role as writers and the main social function of their novels, going beyond the reducing label of postmodern.

It is not possible to propose such a reading of their work limiting the analysis only to television. The influence comes from the different faces of an overwhelming mass media culture, and cinema is not secondary. In 1948 Claude-Edmond Magny already recognized in the cinema the only great influence on American novelists of that period.<sup>64</sup> If the American writers born in the 1930s have worked on the influence of mass media in the post World War II America, and their novels reflect but also interact with, criticize, narrate, and allegorize that America, in order to better understand their position in the history of literature it is necessary to make another differentiation. A distinction opposed to the one made by Foster Wallace; it is necessary to underline the differences between these early postmodernists and the modernist writers who precedes them. Donald F. Larsson compared *U.S.A.* by John Dos Passos with *Gravity's Rainbow* and he mainly discovered “different purposes in using cinematic techniques.”<sup>65</sup> In the case of Dos Passos it is possible, according to Larsson, to trace clear influences of Sergei Eisenstein's cinematographic techniques on his writing: the juxtapositions of separate units in the novel, for example, remind the dialectic montage theorized by the Russian director. This was probably a period, the 20's, when the two forms of art could communicate with each other through a stimulating, but also innocent dialog, experimenting modes of narration that would help develop their modernist sensibility. But with *Gravity's Rainbow* things change: cinema became also, and probably mainly, an ideological machine, a medium that

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<sup>64</sup> Claude-Edmond Magny. *The Age of the American Novel: The Film Aesthetic of Fiction between the Two Wars* (New York: Ungar, 1972)

<sup>65</sup> Donald F. Larsson, “The Camera Eye: 'Cinematic' Narration in *U.S.A.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*,” in *Ideas of Order in Literature and Film*, ed. Peter Ruppert (Tallahassee: Florida State U. Press, 1980), 96

can easily influence people's perceptions and ideas, working on their dreams. Larsson points out, indeed, that “most of Pynchon references to film have negative connotations,”<sup>66</sup> being always linked to ideas of control and political power; the medium has developed a dark side, by which its narrative power can shape a person's imaginary and desires.

*Gravity's Rainbow* is Pynchon's book that best incarnates this idea of mass culture influencing contemporary society. Two years after the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Bertram Lippman, in his acute analysis of the book, writes: “This book is the final coming together of the movies and the novel.”<sup>67</sup> With Pynchon's book for the first time we have a novel that is built through an imagery that is not uniquely literary, or at least it cannot be solely linked to “high” culture. The inspiration in the writing of *Gravity's Rainbow* comes clearly out of popular and mass culture references: comics, movies, TV-shows, limericks, magazines, everything is mixed with Latin, biblical elements, poets like Rilke; the resulting *pastiche* is surely a postmodern one, but its postmodernism lies more in its contents than in its mode of expression. It is the eminence of the Society of Spectacle in this novel which gives it a postmodern touch, intended as something that comes after and develops differently from modernism. Thomas Pynchon had already tried something similar in *The Crying of Lot 49*, but in the 1965 book the attention was more concentrated on the scientific, technological aspects of the world on information, whereas in *Gravity's Rainbow* the entropy of information is transformed in the explosion of popular culture in its various forms.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49* cinema is a crucial element of the plot; as Lippman has noticed, talking about the shortest of Pynchon's novels: “As in *Gravity's*

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 103

<sup>67</sup> Bertram Lippman. “The Reader of Movies: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*,” *University of Denver Quarterly* 12 (1977): 17.

*Rainbow* the references to the movies are profuse, furthermore, the *making* of movies is part of the narrative, just as it is in the bigger book.<sup>68</sup> David Marriott stresses that, at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon addresses the reader by referring to him not as a *reader*, but as a viewer, a spectator<sup>69</sup>: “Old fans who've always been at the movies (haven't we?).”<sup>70</sup> This must be one of the few times in the history of American literature that a writer recognizes his readers not as people who can easily interact with him through textual references, but rather with visual, cinematographic ones. Readers have changed; the society in which the writer operates is now different, having experienced years of Hollywood movies and TV series, and consequently the writer and his art have changed, accumulating and incorporating the new tools, new modes and techniques, that would be easily understood by the new public. A book like *Gravity's Rainbow* is no more only a book to be read, but also a book to be watched. Many are the elements which contribute to this definition: the idea of a film catching in a projector when Gottfried's memories are revealed; “the screen is a dim page spread before us;”<sup>71</sup> the character of Bianca, who is conceived on a film set; Tyrone Slothrop, who often considers himself in relation to movie stars. The reader cannot fully immerse himself in the world of the novel without a deep knowledge of the visual references present in the book. One cannot correctly visualize a sentence like “no Cary Grant larking in and out slipping elephant medicine in the punchbowls,”<sup>72</sup> if he has never seen the 1939 movie *Gunga Din* in which Cary Grant performs that action.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 39-40

<sup>69</sup> David Marriott, “Moviegoing,” *Pynchon Notes* 16 (1985): 46-77

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 760

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 760

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 14

Pynchon's cinematic references are not easy. The cinematographic competence he requires from his reader is not that of the casual moviegoer. It is true what Charles Clerc said about Francois Truffaut's remark: "I don't want to make films for people who don't read;" it can be rephrased, in the case of Pynchon, with: "I don't want to write novels for people who don't know film."<sup>73</sup> However it is also possible to read in his use of cinematic references, the fact that Pynchon sees, as a way to resist the Society of the Spectacle, a deep knowledge of its structures, of the way media works; knowing how a movie is made, the language that it uses, it is a way to know the engine of the machine that shapes your identity. He requires these cinematic competences from his readers, because only in this way they can be "saved". They need to know the language of movies and indeed he often writes in the form of screenplay or adaptation. There is a scene, for example, when Pointsman, one of the main characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, imagines winning the Nobel Prize, and he does so completely in cinematographic terms: "Here's a medium shot, himself backlit, alone at the high window in the Grand Hotel, whisky glass tipped at the bright subarctic sky."<sup>74</sup>

As Sherrill E. Grace demonstrates a book like *Gravity's Rainbow* can be read as entire, enormous reference to Fritz Lang's silent films.<sup>75</sup> Paralleling the style, structure, and themes of the text and the techniques and themes used by Fritz Lang, Grace substantiates his claim that film analogy in *Gravity's Rainbow* contributes to the novel's overall warning about a paranoid belief in signs, plots and conditioning techniques which shape people's lives. Exploring the links between *Gravity's Rainbow* and Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler*, *Metropolis*, and *Frau im Mond*, Grace's essay illustrates a number of the distinctive

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Clerc, "Film in *Gravity's Rainbow*," in *Approaches to "Gravity's Rainbow"*, ed. Charles Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983), 135.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Pynchon. *Gravity's Rainbow*, 142

<sup>75</sup> Sherrill E. Grace, "Fritz Lang and the "paracinematic lives" of *Gravity's Rainbow*", *Modern Fiction Studies* 29 (Winter 1983), 655-670.



Langian qualities that Pynchon has imitated and exploited in his novel. Lang's movies involve the struggle of opposed groups in society: a threatened, manipulated We and an exploitative, ruthless, power-hungry They; the world of these movies is populated by plotting and counterplotting spies, detectives, financiers, doctors, inventors, and mad, evil scientists; Lang was fascinated by pseudo-scientific and technological discoveries of his day and was often prophetic about their uses and abuses; the rocket trip to the moon in *Frau im Mond* is an obvious example of this interest, one that Pynchon draws upon in his portrayal of the mysterious rocket of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Moreover most of Lang's films illustrate his concern with the social, political, and economic climate of the time, as well as his sense of individual men and women struggling against the overwhelming, impersonal forces of business cartels, multinational corporations, political intrigue, and intricate, remote power games.

Pynchon fills his text with various casual references to Lang's movies and to the Neubabelsburg where he worked; many cities in the novel are referred to as the "Metropolis." Also in the opening dream/nightmare sequence of the novel Pynchon seems to draw upon *Metropolis*. In Pirate Prentice's opening dream, a rocket has struck, and crowds of hushed and faceless "evacuees are taken in lots, by elevator-a moving wood scaffold open on all sides, hoisted by old tarry ropes and cast-iron pulleys,"<sup>76</sup> down into darkened rooms beneath the city. This elevator corresponds closely with the vehicle used to carry the defeated workers of *Metropolis* to their underground toil. According to Grace the peculiar style and structure of Lang's films have much in common with the style and structure of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and this fundamental similarity, in turn, reflects the

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<sup>76</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 2

comparable intentions of both artists. Pynchon's style is a cinematographic one in the sense that his most acclaimed novel is built and structured as movie, an overwhelming montage of the twentieth century history of cinema. This montage develops through the book revealing the substance by which contemporary life is made: cinematic dreams and not direct experiences permit the understanding of reality.

Grace, moreover, proposes a seducing image, underlining that until his death in 1976 Fritz Lang lived in Hollywood and, during his last years, enjoyed talking about film at California universities. Thus he often attended, and spoke at, the frequent retrospective screenings of his films, and one wonders if the audience for the 1969 screening at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art included Pynchon. He was living in southern California and working on *Gravity's Rainbow* at that time.

While with Pynchon the importance of cinema in contemporary society is always suggested, but never clearly expressed by the author, DeLillo has been less cryptic about it. This is the way one of the characters of his novel *The Names* talks: "Film is more than twentieth-century art. It's another part of the twentieth-century mind. It's the world seen from inside [...]. If a thing can be filmed, film is implied in the thing itself. This is where we are. The twentieth century is on film. It's the filmed century. You have to ask yourself if there is anything more important than the fact that we're constantly on film, constantly watching ourselves."<sup>77</sup> The same author in an interview, asked to register his influences, said that "the movies of Jean-Luc Godard had a more immediate effect on my early work than anything I'd ever read."<sup>78</sup> Heinz Ickstadt has talked accurately about the role of

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<sup>77</sup> DeLillo, Don. *The Names*, 200

<sup>78</sup> Tom LeClair's interview in Thomas DePietro, ed., *Conversations with Don DeLillo* (University Press of Mississippi, 2005)

images in DeLillo's works,<sup>79</sup> differentiating the arguments of each novel: *Americana* is about Image as a new religion; *Libra*, on the power of televised events, *Mao II* about the writer's role in "challenging" mass culture; *White Noise* on the way people react to the entropic flow of information which overwhelms them (in this respect the novel is similar to *The Crying of Lot 49*). He concludes his survey by saying, referring to *White Noise*: "It would seem plausible, therefore, to read DeLillo's novel as an allegorization of Baudrillard's theory,"<sup>80</sup> but at the same time he rejects this reading because the novel, according to him, "represents a world turned into Sign and Image, primarily and imaginatively, as a normal world of lived experience in which we are, as we have always been, strangers and yet also, strangely, feel at home."<sup>81</sup> In some way both things are true. It is impossible to negate the fact the DeLillo, even more the Pynchon, represents that world of images that intellectuals like Baudrillard or Debord would theorize as a reality made of simulacra and spectacles. But the allegory is not in the link between, for example, DeLillo and Baudrillard, but in the author's expression that reacts to the disappearance of something and therefore creates allegories. In the case of DeLillo the novels are not allegory of a determinate theory, but narrate the allegory of mass media as the ruins of reality.

Heinz Ickstadt points out that all the themes developed by DeLillo in his entire career convey into what is probably his masterpiece: *Underworld*, a huge novel which, being built through the interconnection of various moments in private and public lives of Americans during half a century, is a work that tends to reflect, historically and allegorically, on the way mass culture shaped the American Way of Life. In *Underworld* movies gain a crucial

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<sup>79</sup> Heinz Ickstadt, "The Narrative World of Don DeLillo," in *Faces of Fiction: Essays on American Literature and Culture from the Jacksonian Period to Postmodernity*, ed. Susanne Rohr and Sabine Sielke (Heidelberg: Winter, 2001), 375-391.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 381

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 381

importance: *Cocksucker Blues*, Robert Frank's documentary on the Rolling Stones, the *Zapruder* film, but most of all the invented movie ascribed to Sergei Eisenstein, *Unterwelt*. While, according to Larsson, Eisenstein is used to differentiate two different approaches to cinema in modernism and postmodernism, paradoxically, with DeLillo (undoubtedly what we could call a postmodern writer par excellence) we have a rediscovery of the Russian genius. Catherine Morley has underlined some elements in DeLillo's novel as re-uses of the techniques invented by Eisenstein: "the textual dynamics of the Prologue [...], the montage technique, the scenic splicing and 'jump cuts' that form the textual landscape of the novel."<sup>82</sup> It is interesting to see how these characteristics that were used by Larsson to distinguish two purposes in the using of cinematic techniques, return also in a postmodern novel. What is then the role of Sergei Eisenstein in a novel like *Underworld*? Catherine Morley suggests that "In the assemblage of a text that pivots upon the moment of the Cold War's inception, DeLillo veers towards the large-scale vision of Eisenstein: a moral epic tracing the shape of national myths and history, through the lens of an individual focal point, over a vast geographical and temporal space."<sup>83</sup> Eisenstein is thus inspiration for the entire structure of his novel. A structure that helps to re-order history for better interacting with it, to better react to the way we have experienced it through images. As the same writer said: "I think fiction rescues history from its confusions."<sup>84</sup> Here lies a crucial difference between DeLillo and Pynchon. While Pynchon, through the concept of entropy, depicts a society that is overwhelmed by the flow of information and that it is impotent in facing it, DeLillo believes that in the same entropic world, art, fiction and writers can have this particular capacity of controlling the power of images. His characters are often

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<sup>82</sup> Catherine Morley, "Don DeLillo's Transatlantic Dialogue with Sergei Eisenstein," *Journal of American Studies* 40 (2006): 20.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>84</sup> Quoted by Ickstadt on page 386

defeated: David Bell, in *Americana*, loses his job and seems to disappear in the landscape he tried to narrate with his camera; Jack Gladney and his family, in *White Noise*, end up menaced by a deathly cloud of poisoned gas; Nick Shay, at the end of *Underworld*, seems entirely impotent in reacting to the computer screen. But their debacle is never complete and the work of the writer can overcome the power of the media he has narrated. In the final part of her essay, Catherine Morley seems to be surprised by the fact that the DeLillo uses the same means he criticizes and, in order to resolve the contradiction, she concludes that in DeLillo there is an opposition between video and cinema. And yet, there is something missing in making this distinction. Also cinema can be dangerous as the video: *Americana*, for example, is full of passages in which the illusory quality of cinema defies any attempt of knowing the real. The point is that one has to understand that the techniques that mold mass media are narrative techniques that were taken from literature. The same Eisenstein wrote a famous essay in which he found in Dickens and Balzac his antecedents. A writer like DeLillo, but also Pynchon, cannot be read merely as a critique of mass media, but in terms of narration of a cultural process. These writers describe a world in which they live and experience the same things of their characters, they narrate it from the point of view of the writer, they present it in an allegorical sense, but they also are always ambiguous about their ideas about it. Their effort is to understand, to sort things out. As DeLillo said, “I like to describe things, to understand things – simple everyday things especially, the things most people overlook or take for granted.”<sup>85</sup>

Among the authors studied in this book, DeLillo is the one who more clearly expressed his views on the role of the writer in the Society of Spectacle. Thanks to the many interviews he gave, but also to a revealing article he published on *The New York*

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted by Ickstadt on page 383

*Times Magazine*: “The Power of History”. This work is almost an essential preface to *Underworld*, a preface like one that Henry James would have written. It speaks to the nature of his own art, and also to his way of comprehending the society for which he writes. In this article, DeLillo mainly narrates the way in which the idea for *Underworld* came to his mind. He recounts the moment in which one morning he read about the anniversary of a famous baseball game of 1951, and he tells about the way he made research about the event. But what is most important is the way mass media and world of image is described in the article; not directly, but through suggestions hidden in the text. For example at the beginning he says that “the newspaper with its crowded pages and unfolding global reach permits us to be ruthless in our forgetting,”<sup>86</sup> or, few lines later, he describes common everyday life experiences connected to images: “Maybe it is the evanescent spectacle of contemporary life that makes the novel so nervous. Things flash and die. A face appears, a movie actor's, say, and it seems to be everywhere, suddenly; or it is an entire movie that's everywhere, with enormous feature stories about special effects and global marketing and tie-in merchandise.”<sup>87</sup> Almost at the end of the article, in a long paragraph, he examines the feeling one can have watching a videotaped event and concludes: “It is another set of images for you to want and need and get sick of and need nonetheless, and it separates you from the reality that beats ever more softly in the diminishing world outside the tape.”<sup>88</sup> “The Power of History,” thus, describes the way in which DeLillo relates to the Society of Spectacle, the way in which he thinks the writer, with his work, can overcome the power of the media. And he says that he can do it mainly through the power of its weapon: language. “Language,” he says, “lives in everything it

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<sup>86</sup> Don DeLillo, “The Power of History,” *New York Times Magazine*, 7 Sept. 1997: 60-63. Available on line at <http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html>

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

touches and can be an agent of redemption, the thing that delivers us, paradoxically, from history's flat, thin, tight and relentless designs, its arrangement of stark pages, and that allows us to find an unconstraining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate."<sup>89</sup>

Heinz Ickstadt notices that, in the case of DeLillo, fiction runs counter to the dominant obsessions of our contemporary world, through naming those obsessions.<sup>90</sup> It is, thus, only fiction, that can save the world from the disappearance of the real. It is only language that can become a counterforce that re-orders things, giving people the critical tools to experience them.

Pynchon is not only interested in movies, but also in the way the entire world of mass media (the society of spectacle) creates an external, virtual reality where things happen as if in a spectacle. Franz Pokler, who Marriott defines "the most conspicuous example of a moviegoer to be found in *Gravity's Rainbow*,"<sup>91</sup> easily confuses the world of cinema with that of history: "when I heard General Eisenhower on the radio announcing the invasion of Normandy, I thought it was really Clark Gable, have you ever noticed? The voices are identical."<sup>92</sup> His confusion can be considered the typical effect of mass media influence in a world shaped by images, visions. It is this ambiguous reality, where the border between spectacle and direct experience are blurred, the one Pynchon and DeLillo talk about. In Pynchon the passage from cinema to the wider idea of spectacle and mass media is very clear because he uses often cinematic metaphors like the word *theater*.<sup>93</sup> Radio is a medium through which many experiences are lived in *Underworld* as well. The baseball game that opens the book was experienced by Nick Shay on the radio, and, Rosie Martin, a

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Heinz Ickstadt, "The Narrative World of Don DeLillo," 386

<sup>91</sup> David Marriott. "Moviegoing," *Pynchon Notes* 16 (1985): 58

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Pynchon. *Gravity's Rainbow*, 577

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Charles Clerc, "Film in *Gravity's Rainbow*," in *Approaches to "Gravity's Rainbow"*, ed. Charles Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983), 136-37.

secondary character in the novel, is in the South during a 1964 civil rights march to which she doesn't participate, but of which she hears a chronicle on the radio. When an author uses mass media as a source for metaphors, allegories and images, he points out that this medium functions as the main engine of culture, creating and shaping modern man's sensibility and imagery. In doing so he thus underlines that unique power of a medium of changing people's perceptions towards reality. It is not a case that film and other media are used in Pynchon and DeLillo's stories mainly for "propaganda purposes, behavioral conditioning, and spying."<sup>94</sup> As Charles Clerc underlines, at a certain point in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon refers to movies as "reminders of impotence and abstraction,"<sup>95</sup> similarly in *The Crying of Love 49*, television is defined as a "filthy machine" that enters people's dreams.<sup>96</sup> What Pynchon and DeLillo do with their novels, whether it is their intention or not, is narrating contemporary society, focusing their attention on the technological shift that characterizes it: the passage to a world of representations and *simulacra*. In this respect, talking about *Gravity's Rainbow*, Scott Simmons says that it can be read "as a probing into the desires and fears which created Western Civilization [...] it is only superficially surprising that such a novel is studded with references, both explicit and buried, to Hollywood genre films of the 30's and early 40's and to German expressionist cinema of the 20's. The America genre film is perhaps our most accurate reflection of popular desires and fears."<sup>97</sup>

It is difficult to decide whether Pynchon and DeLillo, ultimately take a positive or negative vision of mass media and this is not the aim of this book. What this thesis mainly aims to demonstrate is that the overwhelming presence of mass media in the works of the

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 567.

<sup>96</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 73

<sup>97</sup> Scott Simmon, "Beyond the Theater of War: *Gravity's Rainbow* as Film," in *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Richard Pearce (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981), 123



early postmodernists (the generation of the thirties) calls for a redefinition of literary American postmodernism as a “reaction” to the new technologies of mass culture that developed after World War II. Pynchon and DeLillo often present mass media (in particular television and cinema) as overwhelming tools which influence negatively people's lives, amplifying the eternal conflict between illusion and reality. But at the same time, as Charles Clerc said about Pynchon, “a curious paradox emerges: perhaps illusion is necessary at times in the face of life's too frequent awfulness...we need our illusions, we need magic-we cannot survive without them because our own pitiable beings are too inadequate to be self-supportive. Beyond the necessity for escape and entertainment, we seek fulfillment, even the identity of other lives, in film.”<sup>98</sup> Movies, TV, and mass media in general answer a human desire. As David Foster Wallace says: “Television from the surface on down, is about desire,”<sup>99</sup> and ultimately what the American postmodern writers found and narrate of all the mass media is their continuous tendency of building desire, and through desire building the expectations, the needs and the dreams of the Americans. Eugene Goodheart, in *Some Speculations on Don DeLillo and the Cinematic Real* often returns to this idea of desire as the engine moving mass media.<sup>100</sup> Being media representation always a representation of the desire to be something (even the desire of death if we think about the repetition of the Zapruder film in *Libra* and *Underworld*), the postmodern allegory offered by novels like *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Underworld*, is that of the desire, the urge for the real which characterized the twentieth century. This urge has conveyed into the development of a “society of the spectacle,” where mass media

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<sup>98</sup> Charles Clerc, “Film in *Gravity's Rainbow*,” 111

<sup>99</sup> Wallace, David Foster. “E Unibus Pluram,” 1

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Eugene Goodheart, “Some Speculations on DeLillo and the Cinematic Real” in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 119 and 121

nourished people's desire and, at the same time, presented themselves as the ruins of the real.

This survey of the way in which critics and intellectuals like Wallace saw and interpreted the relationship between mass media and American early postmodern writers, has been made in order to define the perimeter in which this thesis is being built. The centrality of mass media in postmodernism has been widely discussed and analyzed; many scholars have written acute analysis of novels like *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Americana* or *White Noise*, in terms of the role movies and other media play in them. What this thesis examines in the following chapters are: first, the impulse that guided postmodern writers to employ the "society of the spectacle" as an object within their work; and, second, how their literature has to be comprehended in this respect.

### Chapter III

“A thing that becomes a newsreel”

#### Spectacles, Mass Media, and the Power of Images in Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo

When at the outset of *The Crying of Lot 49* Oedipa Maas discovers herself executrix of the Peirce Inverarity estate, she is “stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube.”<sup>101</sup> She is apparently a modern housewife who lives in the suburbs; she has just attended a Tupperware party; and she is surrounded by voices, images, sounds, and people coming from the world of mass communication. It is a passage in the novel that easily passes unobserved, like many others that deal with mass media. The way Thomas Pynchon inserts the element of television in the opening paragraph of his second novel reveals the function that mass media technologies have in American society of the 1950s/60s: they are elements of a discourse so perfectly integrated that it is almost impossible to notice them. Pynchon’s entropic, encyclopedic language includes everything, and its principal effect is the depiction of an indistinguishable reality, where every element is part of a devouring whole which does not permit distinctions. Pynchon does not help the reader to underline these elements, his writing being like a river that carries away everything that finds on its way.

The television in Oedipa's living room becomes part of the furniture and, even if it “behaves” as a living presence watching the novel's protagonist, Pynchon uses it as a piece of a larger puzzle, without signposting its importance. Yet television returns often during the unfolding of Oedipa's story. The same day in which she receives the letter from the law

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<sup>101</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 1

firm of Los Angeles, informing her of having being named executor of Inverarity's estate, she will be in front of the television watching *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*; when later she is seduced by the co-executor Metzger, television plays a crucial role in making her fall into his arms. That “greenish dead eye” is thus a leitmotiv in the plot. It returns and returns again whenever Oedipa is confronted with riddles and challenges. But the role that this eye has in the story and, more in general, in other postmodern stories of the last century, is still unclear. Is it just watching? Is it a controlling eye? An influential one? This chapter tries to answer these questions.

To understand the presence of mass media and spectacles in *The Crying of Lot 49* one has to look at the other protagonist of the novel, the man who, through his absence, is the engine which makes the plot develop: Pierce Inverarity. Analogically his absence parallels the “ambiguous” presence of television within the novel. As the TV-set becomes a piece of furniture, an element of the discourse, Inverarity is an indistinguishable ghost who permeates Oedipa's path toward knowledge. From the first time his character appears, he reveals a multiform identity, clearly borrowed from the world of spectacle. Oedipa recalls a telephone call she had received from him a year before the story starts, and in this conversation Pierce is characterized as follows:

a voice beginning in heavy Slavic tones as second secretary of the Transylvanian Consulate, looking for an escaped bat; modulated to comic-Negro, then on into hostile Pachuco dialect, full of chingas and maricones; then a Gestapo officer asking her in shrieks did she have relatives in Germany and finally his Lamont Cranston voice<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, 2-3

If what a character says stands for what a character is, then Pierce Inverarity does not exist as a person, but as a collage of figures that live uniquely in the imaginary realm of mass spectacle. The Slavic voice seems taken from a movie with Bela Lugosi; the “comic-Negro” and the “Pachuco dialect” are stereotyped versions of ethnicity that always abounded in television, cinema, radio, and other forms of popular culture; the Gestapo officer is an unavoidable presence in any World War II film, and Lamont Cranston is the protagonist of one of the most popular “texts” in prewar America: *The Shadow*. All these elements contribute to a characterization of Pierce Inverarity that goes beyond any physical trait; more than what he looks like and appears, Pierce is what he performs as he himself is a spectacle. *The Shadow*, for example, is represented through different media (radio, comics, and television) and it perfectly symbolizes the ambiguous and disguised nature of Pierce Inverarity. Lamont Cranston is indeed one of the alter egos of *The Shadow*, a fictional vigilante, an icon of pop culture, that in this serialized drama has the power of clouding men’s minds and has the ability to become completely invisible; all traits that can be easily attributed to Pierce Inverarity, and thus Pynchon presents us with an allegorical character who embodies the ambiguous nature of mass media, relating himself to a famous character of the media, which he tries to imitate.

But in the first chapter of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas and Pierce Inverarity are not the only characters to be related, in one way or another, with mass media. Two other figures share a common sensibility towards spectacle. Being part of the industry, Wendell “Mucho” Maas, Oedipa's husband, has developed a feeling of uneasiness toward his job. He works as a disc jockey for a local radio station, and when he comes back home he is full of complaints: “I don't believe in any of it, Oed,”<sup>103</sup> he often says to his wife, and he is

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

constantly preoccupied with the ambiguity created by the contrast between his public figure and his private one, being the former an artificial creation of the censorship his boss imposes on him. It is interesting how Pynchon compares, telling the story of Mucho, the two jobs he had, suggesting that there is only a little difference between being a salesman, and a voice on the radio influencing people's mind. Pynchon parallels these two experiences in a way that Wendell Maas seems to have never changed jobs. The writer first talks of the way in which Wendell used to earn his living, that is selling used cars, and how also for that job he needed to conform, to create a public figure, almost interpreting it: for example he used to have a haircut like Jack Lemmon's; then Pynchon compares this experience to that of working as a disc jockey, whereas what he is selling are not cars, but identities, and a way to shape his listeners' identities. In both situations what is relevant is a sort of exchange of values within spectacles. The consumer society is built with representations, and through these representations it sells not only objects and images, but also objectified and imagined identities. Another character that experiences a conflict with mass media images is Roseman, Oedipa's lawyer-friend, whom she visits in order to get advice on how to execute Inverarity's will. Pynchon informs that Roseman had "spent a sleepless night, brooding over the Perry Mason television program the evening before, which his wife was fond of but toward which Roseman cherished a fierce ambivalence, wanting at once to be a successful trial lawyer like Perry Mason and, since this was impossible, to destroy Perry Mason by undermining him."<sup>104</sup> In Roseman's case we have the typical example of the conflict which usually emerges between the representation of something and the impossibility to conform to that representation. Roseman is even

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

working to sue the TV show, having been working for years on *The Profession v. Perry Mason, A Not-so-hypothetical Indictment*.

Looking at *The Crying of Lot 49*'s first chapter, one can underline, notwithstanding Pynchon's reticence in clarifying his intentions, some crucial references to what Guy Debord would call the "Society of the Spectacle." The America Pynchon narrates is a country where people are constantly forced to confront themselves with representations, building their identities through these representations and often envisioning themselves as part of a spectacle. Pynchon's perspective signals the ontological shift that interested America with the advent of television, and through the dialogue enacted by Oedipa and Pierce, he creates an allegory of the constant quest for understanding in the age of mass media.

Pierce Inverarity haunts Oedipa and, through her, all America. Hidden and ambiguous, he does not exist with a clear individuality, but as collection of images and representations. Oedipa's quest soon becomes that of inquiring about the real entity of Peirce and she discovers this in a crucial scene of the second chapter, when she meets the lawyer Metzger, her co-executor. Pynchon soon clarifies that the dimension this character occupies is that of the movies, more than a real one. When Oedipa sees him for the first time, with his being so handsome, she thinks he might be an actor: "she looked around him for reflectors, microphones, camera cabling."<sup>105</sup> And, as the scene develops, Metzger turns out to have been a real actor. He thus seduces her, but more than what he does, what is important in the scene is the way he does it, and Peirce Inverarity's role in it, in spite of his absence, is not secondary. Metzger seduces Oedipa Mass through a television set: Oedipa turns on the television while Metzger is in her room. But, by coincidence, what is being aired on TV is

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 17

*Cashiered*, an old movie starring Baby Igor, the child movie star who was Metzger himself when he was a child. If, as Oedipa supposes, “he bribed the engineer at the local station to run this,”<sup>106</sup> he then probably found a way to interrupt the movie now and then with advertisings that were all about businesses formerly owned by Pierce Inverarity. “Now and then a commercial would come in, each time Metzger would say, ‘Inverarity’s,’ or ‘Big block of shares,’ and later settled for nodding and smiling.”<sup>107</sup>

The real Metzger in the room starts a pantomime of the Metzger in the movie, imitating, repeating, many of the gestures and words that Baby Igor says in the movie. He introduces Oedipa to a new spectacular dimension where everything is doubled by a representation and where he is configured as a double of Inverarity. Metzger knows many things of Oedipa through Inverarity, who once told him one thing about her that is revealed at the end of the scene: that “you wouldn’t be easy.”<sup>108</sup> Metzger knows that Oedipa and Pierce have been together in Mexico, and all he does seems to be enacted following indications of Inverarity. He presents Oedipa with a depiction of how life becomes always a representation of itself. “A lawyer in a courtroom, in front of any jury, becomes an actor, right? Raymond Burr is an actor, impersonating a lawyer, who in front of a jury becomes an actor. Me, I’m a former actor who became a lawyer. They’ve done the pilot film of a TV series, in fact, based loosely on my career, starring my friend Manny Di Presso, a one-time lawyer who quit his firm to become an actor. Who in this pilot plays me, an actor become a lawyer reverting periodically to being an actor. The film is in an air-conditioned vault at one Hollywood studios, light can’t fatigue it, it can be repeated endlessly.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 22



The seduction game Metzger enacts starts at the moment he asks Oedipa to bet on how *Cashiered* is going to end. He has made her drink a lot, he is a beautiful man and Oedipa, now bewitched by the story she is watching, needs information about the plot. Metzger is ready to give them to her, but for a price: for any of her questions he answers, she has to take off a piece of her clothing. One can think of this scene as an allegory of how television works: spectators are drunk, the commercials present a world of consumption and production that belong to some power external to them, and the machine always tries to get their attention to the plot, to what is happening, in order to seduce them. There is nothing Oedipa can do but follow Metzger's rules. The spectacle is a temptation transformed into a necessity: seduced by the dance of doubles the lawyer performs for her, the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49* is attracted by her own desire for knowledge, which is at the same time nourished by the TV screen. She urges for the fictional real produces by Metzger, and asks for more stories to entertain her, because that is what her desires are focused on. When she finally falls into his arms, it is certainly not because of his looks, but because of his techniques of seduction that copy the way in which mass media function. From this moment on the TV set in Oedipa's room at Echo Courts, the motel where she meets Metzger, is always used as a tool to interact with others: Oedipa picks up its antenna in order to defend herself from other attempts to seduce her,<sup>110</sup> and it is the place where Metzger leaves his message to Oedipa once he decides to leave her.<sup>111</sup> All the relationship between Pierce and Oedipa revolves around that TV-set, which is thus configured as a crucial element in the plot. Oedipa is a spectator, and Pierce uses, through the figure of Metzger, the power of mass media to entrap her.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 121

In most of Pynchon's novels there is always someone behind a technology of communication. Whether is just an "old friend" like Inverarity or a mad and mysterious figure like Captain Blicero in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the spectacle is created, maintained and "directed" by a human being. Pynchon seems to remind the reader that is a world where "everything is connected" men can try to oppose the power of the spectacle by unmasking those who sustain it. Don DeLillo, instead, depicts a reality where the spectacle is an autonomous force, an invisible entity that permeates people's experiences and lives. If there is someone behind this spectacle, he is not a single person, but a collective spectator who, through his desire, longs for the representation; as Murray says in *White Noise*: "we're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one."<sup>112</sup> Among DeLillo's novels *Underworld*, is probably the one that best expresses all the themes that have been developing through the years in his narrative. Set in a very long time range, from the post-war era to the end of the twentieth century, the book offers a wide perspective on American history, connecting real characters like J. Edgar Hoover and Lenny Bruce to fictional ones, all living their lives as if they were part of a mysterious web of connections. Spectacles, mass media, movies, and images are not secondary in the development of the story and, sometimes they are not represented directly, but through allegories of the spectacle of the way the real disappears. An example of such an allegory is "The Triumph of Death," *Underworld's* prologue, in which is narrated a legendary baseball game. In 1951, the Polo Grounds in New York was the theatre for a historical play-off game between the Dodgers and the Giants, and DeLillo narrates this event with complete mastery, imagining different characters present at the game and telling, through a

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<sup>112</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 12.

cinematographic montage technique, the different experiences they live. What DeLillo stresses of all these characters at the stadium is their status of spectators and their function in maintaining images and representations.

The crowd at the Polo Grounds is a society made of and for spectacles. Russ Hodges compares the moment he is beholding now to the Dempsey-Willard match he saw when he was a little boy, and he realizes that these kind of moments are historical only because they become newsreel;<sup>113</sup> J. Edgar Hoover feels “some libidinous thing in the world,” which is in a way possessed by those who work in the show business, and that is why he tries to stay always with them.<sup>114</sup> Cotter links Bill Waterson, the guy who sits near him at the stadium, to “small-town life in the movies;”<sup>115</sup> People gather around Jackie Gleason asking him to repeat lines from his TV show;<sup>116</sup> and at a certain point in the prologue, through Hodges, it becomes clear that what is going on is the awaiting for a revelation and there is only one thing that can be the vehicle of this revelation: Hodges's voice on the radio.

“This is radio, buddy. Can't close down. Think of what's out there. They are hugging their little portables.”  
“You're not making me feel any better.”  
“They are goddamn crouched over the wireless. You're like Murrow from London.”  
“Thank you, Al.”  
“Save the voice.”  
“I am trying mightily.”  
“This game is everywhere. Dow Jones tickers are rapping out the score with the stock averages. Every bar in town, I guarantee. They're smuggling radios into boardrooms. At Schrafft's I hear they are breaking into the Muzak to give the score.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, 15-16

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 20

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 27

People seem all to play part in an ancient ritual. During the seventh-inning stretch Waterson explains to Cotter that they are respecting a long-standing tradition the essence of which is the connection, the legacy between different generations; and in this religious moment the only priests are Hodges, his voice, and the radio. The revelation everybody is waiting for is not clear, but it will surely provide a shift of some sort. As DeLillo writes: “The game doesn't change the way you sleep or wash your face or chew your food. It changes nothing but your life.”<sup>118</sup> In other words, it changes everything at a fundamental level.

While the spectacle is going on Hodges has to describe things as any radio commentator would do, but often the “real baseball” he tries to describe disappears behind any attempt of catching it. And in the end his job becomes not so different from the one he used to do in Charlotte, when he had to make up imaginary baseball matches. “The crowd begin to lose its coherence”<sup>119</sup> notices the journalist, and later DeLillo says that “Russ wants to believe they are still assembled in some recognizable manner;”<sup>120</sup> whatever he says in his microphone, it seems to lack coherence and connection with the world outside. If one has to think of a central character in the choral virtuosity of “The Triumph of Death”, then Hodges is the only candidate for such a role, a surrogate artist. DeLillo concentrates on him the last section of the prologue. The match is over, everybody is going back home and Russ is interviewing players; he is “trying to describe the scene in the clubhouse and he knows he is making no sense and the players who climb up on the trunk to talk to him are making no sense and they are all talking in unnatural voices, failed

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 32

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 36

voices, creaturely night screams.”<sup>121</sup> It is as if they all existed in that spectacular moment and now they are all just ghosts of that moment. Mass media create the spectacle and everything which is outside of it is no more real. Leaving the stadium, Hodges's eyes, are captured by a drunk who runs the bases of the empty field. He repeats the pantomime of the spectacle and of the mass media's creation of it. DeLillo writes: “All the fragments of the afternoon collect around his airborne form.”<sup>122</sup> Another ghost of that same spectacle. It is in that image that Russ mirrors himself and the spectacle he just created. The revelation everybody was waiting for it is just passed, “falling indelibly into the past,”<sup>123</sup> making Russ aware of the disappearance of the real. “The event is the real that has become consistent”<sup>124</sup>, writes John Marks in his deleuzian analysis of DeLillo, reflecting on the ball game at the Polo Grounds; the baseball match is transformed through Russ’s eyes in a spectacle that is the only possibility for its reification. The event cannot exist if not as spectacle, and thus as a representation which nullifies its concreteness.

Talking about the 1951 play-off between Dodgers and Giants at the Polo Grounds, the newsreel footage of the event, and Russ Hodges's voice, DeLillo sees it as a moment in contrast with time-collapsing technologies of the contemporary world (he mentions the microwave, the VCR remote and the telephone redial button), something “beautifully isolated in time – not subject to the frantic, debasing repetition which has exhausted a contemporary event before it's been even rounded into coherence.”<sup>125</sup> Still, what he narrates in *Underworld*, is not the isolation in time of the event, but the ambiguity with which mass media relate to such an event: their impossibility of narrating it, and their

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 58

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 60

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> John Marks, “Underworld: The People are Missing,” in Buchanan, Marks (eds.), *Deleuze and Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000)

<sup>125</sup> Don DeLillo, “The Power of History,” *The New York Times Book Review*, September 7, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html>

unique capacity of *creating* it. Hodges's account of the game's final moments is a sort of primitive experience of the exhaustion of a contemporary event. And the drunk who plays baseball alone in an empty field at the end of *Underworld's* prologue, signals the bewilderment that a culture of spectacles can cause, in the same way in which Oedipa is puzzled by the media power of Pierce Inverarity.

A recurring phrase in *Underworld* is “everything is connected.” All the stories in the novel, though set in different periods of the twentieth century, are related. In the same way different experiences, feelings, and visions communicate throughout the novel. The spectacular event narrated in the prologue, and its media conjugation, is a sort of paradigm related to other spectacles which take place in other years: the Zapruder film or Esmeralda's apparition. Media technologies mold these spectacles, they give them sense and structure, and it is through them that the spectacles mature an overwhelming power to change people's life. In the “Power of History,” DeLillo writes, talking about video-tapes and their capacity to transform the watcher: “It is another set of images for you to want and need and get sick of and need nonetheless, and it separates you from the reality that beats ever more softly in the diminishing world outside the tape.”<sup>126</sup> The drunk who plays baseball alone is someone who “wants and needs” a repetition of that same spectacle he has been watching until then. And it is behind this ambiguous desire of the spectators that is hidden that power of the spectacle to nullify reality.

The passages which best explicate DeLillo's words in “The Power of History” are those, in *Underworld*, that deal with the Texas Highway Killer. The Texas Highway Killer is Richard Henry Gilkey, an assassin, who, like all the other figures in *Underworld*, disappears and reappears throughout the novel. His tenth crime is recorded by a child with

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

a video camera traveling with her parents on the highway at the time of the murder, and thus, shown on TV. The broadcasting of the homicide is the occasion for DeLillo to reflect, in a novel where images are often transforming and revolutionary means, on the process by which they influence and shape the human mind. In the construction of the scene the writer narrates, two different elements need to be underlined. There is, first of all, a sort of primordial innocence breathing between the lines. It is the innocence of the kid who has the camera in her hands and who is unaware of the final death/revelation she is about to witness; it is the innocence of the spectator, who has already witnessed that revelation several times, but who is unaware of the way those images are transforming him.

The last sentences of the chapter in which the broadcasting of the killing is narrated read: “The more you watch the tape, the deader and colder and more relentless it becomes. The tape sucks the air right out of your chest but you watch it every time.”<sup>127</sup> It is an ambiguous innocence: the child is in some way conscious of the dangerous and mysterious powers possessed by the technology she is holding in her hands, but she seems used by that technology and by the promises of reality it contains. Like her, the TV-watcher is concerned with the possibilities of the real the medium can donate. And this is indeed the second important element of the passage: a strong desire for the real, which like a ghost inhabits the pages. “There's something about the nature of the tape,” DeLillo writes, “...you think this is more real, truer-to-life than anything around you...the tape has a searing realness.”<sup>128</sup> Reality is the final crucial desire around which develops the entire scene, and, also in this case, the process is ambiguous: because on one side there is a media technology which promises to fulfill the spectators' desires for reality, and, on the other, reality gets always more distant in its representation: “The things around you have a rehearsed and

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<sup>127</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, 160

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 157

layered and cosmetic look. The tape is surreal, or maybe underreal is the way you want to put it. It is what lies at the scraped bottom of all the layers you have added.”<sup>129</sup> This contrast between the “surrounding reality” and the “represented reality” is at the core of how mass media functions in the contemporary world. The case is here that a writer transforms this contrast, repeating it into his novel, in different moments of the twentieth-century history, into an essential feature of this century's shift toward not only that Society of Spectacle theorized by Debord, but also toward a disappearance of the real with which literature has to come to terms.

Catherine Morley has written that characters like the Texas Highway Killer in *Underworld*, or Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra*, “are subject to the illusions nurtured and sustained by the media culture they inhabit, losing their subjectivity to become hyper-manipulated characters.”<sup>130</sup> If this is the case, then the boundaries among spectator, representation, video-maker, and medium are very thin. They all share the same innocence, the same desires for reality, and the same subjugation to a power they cannot control. In two very revealing moments of the novel, Don DeLillo shows these links through communication technologies and their capacity to convey common needs and desires. The episode narrated in these two moments is the same: during the umpteenth television show about the recorded killing, Richard Henry Gilkey makes a live phone call to the show and talks with Sue Ann Corcoran, the anchorwoman. The way DeLillo narrates this phone call is first through the eyes of Matt Shay, Nick's brother, and then through the perspective of Gilkey. When Matt finds himself, casually, in front of a TV where they are showing again the tape of the killing, he recognizes the necessity of looking at it. That scene seems to

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>130</sup> Catherine Morley, “Don DeLillo’s Transatlantic Dialogue with Sergei Eisenstein,” *Journal of American Studies* (2006), 40:1:17-34



haunt him: “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 then 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.”<sup>131</sup> The video is an uncontrolled, autonomous force; when Matt approaches the TV, the screen is already on. He seats on the footstool near it, as if he is approaching an altar, a place of devotion, waiting, like all spectators, for a revelation. The revelatory moment when Matt watches the scene is always the same: the recognition of witnessing something absolutely real, and thus the need of confronting another human being who would confirm the revelation. “Matt could not look at the tape without wanting to call out to Janet. Hurry up, Janet, here it comes...it wasn't enough. It was never enough.”<sup>132</sup> When the same episode is narrated from the serial killer point of view, it changes the perspective, but not the essence of the episode: the need to witness something real and, at the same time, to be part of it:

He made the call and turned on the TV, or vice versa, without the sound his hand wound in a doubled hanky, and he never felt so easy talking to someone on the phone or face-to-face or man to woman as he felt that day talking to Sue Ann. He watched her over there and talked to her over here. He saw her lips move silent in one part of the room while her words felt soft and warm on the coils of his secret ear. 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.<sup>133</sup>

DeLillo puts this passage in contrast with what happens before and after the telephone call, that is, the gray, dull, melancholic everyday life of the Texas Highway Killer. As the

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<sup>131</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, 215

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 217

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 270

son of a dad who has “infirmities still waiting for a name,”<sup>134</sup> he has to take care of him, together with his mom, constantly. And, apart from homicide, his only other diversion is paying visit to Bud Willing, a person he barely knows and of whom he secretly loves the wife. The life around him is a fake version of the *real* life of the videotape which he inhabits through technological repetition every day. It is this virtual life he desires and dreams of. “She had so much radiance she could make him real,”<sup>135</sup> DeLillo underlines, as if it is only the image that comes from the TV screen to legitimate reality. Sue Ann Corcoran, the anchorwoman who presents the show, embodies this televisual power and becomes an essential element of the process of communal desire created by the spectator, the spectacle and its protagonists. She has green eyes, green like the eye of the TV tube staring at Oedipa Maas at the beginning of *The Crying of Lot 49*; she mesmerizes Matt Shay through those eyes and while the medium broadcasts a *naked* news-clip narrating a homicide and the *naked* voice of the killer she is the only live body that links the reality of the spectacle to the spectator. She is not an entity separated from the spectator, whether he is Matt Shay or Richard Gilkey, because by the latter she is evoked as someone who also becomes object of observation through the medium, having given an interview about her life and her choices in another TV-show. She participates of the spectacle like every spectator does, but the roles and the positions of the game or often intertwined. The Texas Highway Killer is himself spectator and spectacle while Matt, who seems to be only a victim of image repetition, desires strongly to be part of that spectacle.

As many, like Mark Osteen and Catherine Morley, have already noted, media technologies seem to be the only elements of the narration to validate the characters'

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 262

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 270

existence in DeLillo. This reflection and insistence on the disappearance of the real, of its blurring with representations is at the root of his oeuvre. *Americana*, DeLillo's first novel, offers a different perspective on the argument through a protagonist, David Bell, who works in television, and who strongly believes in the power of the media to capture reality, and who tries to experience life representing it.

As a youngster, David Bell has spent much of his adolescence watching TV commercials filed by his father. In the basement of their house the man has taught David and his two sisters, Mary and Jane, how to watch a commercial, and the key teaching of this “lessons” was that a commercial has not aesthetic values: “It doesn't matter how funny or pretty a commercial is, he used to say; if it doesn't move the merchandise off the shelves, it's not doing the job; it has to move the merch.”<sup>136</sup> David is thus educated to a sort of critical spectatorship, knowing the hidden structures of media communication. Debord's idea of “spectacle” implied the idea of a capital that becomes image and of merchandise which is reduced or, better, elevated to representation. David understands this crucial characteristic of the society of the spectacle for which he works, but notwithstanding his critical perspective, he cannot escape the pervasive power of media. He is so influenced by the news of wars and disasters on TV, with their counting of deaths, that he cannot enter into a room without counting the people inside that room;<sup>137</sup> he pictures himself and his colleagues as “electronic signals” moving “through time and space with the stutter and shadowed insanity of a TV commercial;”<sup>138</sup> he confesses to have been, often during his life, “stirred by the power of the image.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Don DeLillo, *Americana*, 85

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

The moments in which these feelings, of belonging to a world of overwhelming representations, become particularly strong, are those when David listens (always casually) to a radio show hosted by one Warren Beasley, a friend of his who clearly embodies mass media's power. Beasley's show is called "Death is just around the corner" and it consists of monologues of the same Beasley who pontificates about almost everything. These monologues function as a reversed perspective of the Society of Spectacle, an overturning of the point of view: if in other parts of the novel mass media are a hidden force that appears only through the Bell's almost paranoid analysis, when Beasley talks mass media explode into his theatrical monologues. Beasley presents a world turned upside down where paradoxical events serve to underline the absurdity of the spectacle. Beasley recreated the ever flowing mass of information that overwhelms people in their daily consumption of media. News, events, private anecdotes and public stories are repeated endlessly, sarcastically, by the disc jockey who provokes his listeners presenting them with a grotesque version of their same experiences. By the end of the novel he suggests that: "Drugs are scheduled to supplant the media. A dull gloomy bliss will replace the burning fear of your nights and early mornings. You can look forward to experiencing a drug-induced liberation from anxiety, grief and happiness."<sup>140</sup> Beasley, with his words, works on destroying masks, whether they are masks of spectacles or of spectators, and he reveals naked faces that long for fictions and representations. In his monologues he opens the curtain on what Žižek calls "the desert of the real," operating as a revolutionary force within the spectacle: he sheds light on the technology of the media, transforming it into an allegory of the disappearance of the real. But his revolutionary act is not sufficient in

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 367

defending people from the overwhelming power of the media; he tries constantly to break the masks, but these always rebuild and recreate themselves through the immortal desires that guide the people's urge for the real.

DeLillo seems to be always aware of the impossibility of turning against mass media. His characters, in the end, are often abandoned into a state of surrender to the spectacle: they cannot do anything but obeying its rules, submitting their identities to an external will that directs their desires. In *White Noise*, DeLillo's eighth novel, Beasley's prophecy becomes true: a drug really can supplant the mass media capacity of inducing oblivion to the extent of liberating one from the fear of death. The spectacle develops always more complex forms of entertaining that all move towards the annihilation of any direct experience. It defines an environment where fear is maintained and at the same time forgotten, and it is in this environment that human beings are abandoned to their destiny of oblivion. The spectacle answers people's desires in a way that makes it impossible for them to renounce its seducing qualities: once you are in the spectacle you cannot escape from it.

*White Noise* is built through a linear plot that follows the vicissitudes of a college professor, Jack Gladney, and the people around him, his family and his colleagues. The novel narrates "everyday life," shedding light on what would appear as its most insignificant details and transforming the perceived reality into a theatre of signs and revelations. Behind the superficial mask of the contemporary world order, in a supermarket's shelves, in the cereal box, and in other common commodities are hidden various truths regarding existence and the disappearance of the real.

The world is perceived as spectacle in the novel. In the opening passage, where Jack describes the arrival of new students at the college and enumerates all the commodities

they bring with them in their station wagons, the narrator informs the reader that he has “witnessed this spectacle every September for twenty-one years;”<sup>141</sup> a simple breakfast in a cafeteria is labeled as “spectacular”, and when Jack and his wife, Babette, “explore” the supermarket, almost on a daily basis, they seem to be part of a spectacle, beholding commodities and participating to a ceremony in which “everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material,”<sup>142</sup> as Murray, Jack’s friend and colleague, comments. The novel’s characters inhabit a dimension of ever flowing mass of information, like a menacing black cloud that promises fear and revelation; they are constantly challenged by its power and often defeated by the inevitability of its confusing effects.

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<sup>141</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 3

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

Mass media play a crucial role in shaping this dimension. TV and Radio are always present through the development of the novel and with their voices accompany every moment of Jack's family life. They define an environment in the home and construct a frame of references for all the members in the family. The TV set intervenes in the novel as a real character, communicating through sudden and abstract sentences that seem to claim authority and philosophical deepness. "The TV said," Jack often tells the reader, quoting out-of-context phrases that estrange him from the real: "Until Florida surgeons attached an artificial flipper,"<sup>143</sup> "If it breaks easily into pieces, it is called shale. When wet, it smells like clay;"<sup>144</sup> "And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio."<sup>145</sup> Whatever the TV says, it does not have any direct link or reference with what happens when it "intervenes," like a mad relative to whom nobody pays attention. Yet, even if these voices don't seem to have a performative function in the story, they enlarge the perspective of the reader: their de-contextualization in the novel, paradoxically contextualizes the life of the characters for those who watch their actions; they amplify the fictional world to the extent that it reaches the contemporaneity of the reader, transforming the distant experiences of a college professor into the tale of a everyman living the age of mass media.

In one of his several conversations with Murray, Jack learns from his colleague that "TV is a problem only if you've forgotten how to look and listen."<sup>146</sup> Referring to his discussions with his students, Murray says that he can't accept the way they challenge television; according to him the TV set cannot be seen as an enemy one has to turn against, but as a new instrument that contains innumerable valid data to analyze and reflect upon.

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 28

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 34

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 50

Television, the ambiguous object that with almost a vein of surrealism comments on Jack's family life, is from Murray's perspective the essence of that life:

“Waves and radiation,” he said. “I’ve come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring. It’s like a myth being born right there in our living room, like something we know in a dream-like and preconscious way. I’m very enthused, Jack.”<sup>147</sup>

Thus, notwithstanding all the forms of resistance that the various characters enact against the power of television, the medium continues to provide a constant flow of images and spectacle that influence their relationship with reality. Jack and Babette try their best to be together with their children when the television is on; they participate expressing opinions, proposing shows to watch and do not let Wilder, the smallest of their children, to grow up with television. Yet, television is always there, as an object that no one can avoid. It is the cathartic element offered to society in the small town of Blacksmith. “If our complaints have a focal point,” Jack says, “it would have to be the TV set, where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires.”<sup>148</sup> It represents the only mean through which people confront reality and it is the only force that lets them to be involved into the definition of their character. Murray looks at Jack's kids with deep interest, taking notes while they watch television, convinced that children possess a form of innocence that permits a correct understanding of mass culture. When he is with them in their room, he “looks happy to be there. He sat in the middle of the floor taking notes, his toggle coat and touring cap next to him on the rug. The room around him was rich in codes and

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 51

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 85



messages;”<sup>149</sup> Murray tries to penetrate the spectacle, he wants to understand the dynamics that operate through it, but still he is aware that little can be done in order to resist the force of spectacle and, like the others, he surrenders to the status of spectator that mass media give him.

During one of Murray’s sessions with Jack’s kids, the face of Babette, their mother, suddenly appears on the screen. It is just causality: Babette teaches posture classes and one of her lessons is broadcasted by a local TV station. Jack, Murray, and the kids do not hear what she says, they only concentrate on the image on the screen, and the TV set transforms Babette into her double, into a sort of allegory: “I’d seen her just an hour ago, eating eggs, but her appearance on the screen made me think of her as some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the mists of the dead.”<sup>150</sup> Jack goes beyond Murray’s fascination with the moment and the kid’s excitement for seeing their mother on TV; to him mass media seem to create “some journey out of life or death,” or a “mysterious separation.”<sup>151</sup> Among all the characters watching Babette on TV, the only one in which Jack can recognize himself is Wilder, who touches his mom on the screen, and who cries when the program ends. This is a moment in *White Noise*, in which the force sustaining the spectacle is revealed to the characters as something that they cannot communicate with; they can only stare to its power, they cannot rebel against it: they can only conform to it. Jack has difficulties in believing in the real, if it has not been represented on television before. When a toxic cloud menaces Blacksmith, Jack is not afraid because he never saw on TV someone escaping a tragedy: “These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas,” he says, “it’s the poor and the uneducated who

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<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 103

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 104

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 105

suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters [...] I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods?"<sup>152</sup> The only reality possible is the one the TV narrates; everything that is out of the spectacle is not real. When one night Jack is out for a walk, the first thing that catches his attention is "the glow of blue eyed TVs" he sees from the windows. This is the America Jack lives in, and this is the America DeLillo decides to depict in *White Noise*: a country where all the experiences rising from the economic and social system which characterize it, are accumulated in the form of spectacle.

A central event in *White Noise* is an accident of the highway near Blacksmith, where a tank car is broken and a mysterious toxic black cloud rises from it and menaces all the communities in the area. The toxic substance is called Nyodene Derivative and the risks it poses to human beings are several. The happens in the second section of the novel, which is indeed titled "The Airborne Toxic Event," and in which are narrated the facts following the toxic event, the evacuation to which Jack and his family are forced and their taking refuge in a camp with other inhabitants. The toxic event is a surprise for everyone in Jack's family and the first thing they try to do is to understand it, to build a frame of reference that would help them to cope with the menace. Yet, notwithstanding their binocular and maps, the only thing Jack and his son Heinrich have, in order to build an idea of the event, is the radio. It is uniquely through that medium that they can have a perspective on the toxic cloud. The way the radio names the event is itself revealing of what they are dealing with. At first on the radio the accident is called "a feathery plume," then it becomes "a black billowing cloud," and finally "the airborne toxic event," the different stages of this naming

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* , 114

represent a gradual approach to the real, a slow acknowledgment of the event's gravity, which only mass media make possible.

There is a particularity in the event: in a novel where almost everything is framed by the presence of the TV set, "the airborne toxic event" is narrated uniquely by the radio. Television is absent from the picture in this case and one can argue that this absence reveals other meanings of the toxic cloud. The airborne toxic event can speak of other: it can be an allegory of the way mass media, and in particular television, operate in everyday life. A series of elements needs to be underlined in this respect: all the symptoms that the contact with the cloud can cause change gradually, according to the radio account, but they all convey toward a unique important symptom, the feeling of *déjà vu*. This idea of repetition is not extraneous to mass media: everything is repeated daily on television and radio. Through the structure of the program schedule, spectators get a constant feeling of *déjà vu* induced by the spectacle; the cloud itself is often perceived as spectacle: "The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings [...] it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event, like the vivid scene in the switching yard."<sup>153</sup> Everyone is fascinated by it, seduced by its danger and awed by its force. All feelings that many characters in the novel already felt toward television and mass media in general; but the most important element attributable to the cloud is the final effect it has once it is dispersed: like television and other media, it changes the way the real is perceived. Weeks after the problem of the airborne toxic event, a crucial change characterizes Blacksmith. The sunsets are different and longer: "Ever since the airborne toxic event, the sunsets had become almost unbearably beautiful [...] broad towering visionary skylscapes, tinged with

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 127

dread.”<sup>154</sup> They are called the “new sunsets” or “postmodern sunsets” by Jack, and people stop everywhere to look at them.

The cloud has changed the way people experience everyday life, they now relate to it as if it’s mere spectacle, and the spectacle is the only thing that gives meaning to life: “Everything in our field of vision seemed to exist in order to gather the light of this event.”<sup>155</sup> In *White Noise* mass media behave exactly in the same way the airborne toxic event does. They are perceived as a danger and people constantly try to take refuge from them; but no matter how hard they try, their effects on the real are unavoidable. They change reality and the way people look at it and infuse desires and fears, which like death, haunt the characters for the rest of their life. Like the spectacle that opens *Underworld*, they don’t change “the way you sleep or wash your face.” They change “nothing but your life.”

The final scene narrated in the section titled “The Airborne Toxic Event,” gives a further interesting perspective on the allegory hidden behind the image of the menacing black cloud. One of the refugees at the camp realizes that TV is indeed absent in the event. He wanders throughout the camp with a tiny TV set in his hands, making a speech about the isolation in which the toxic cloud confined them. He feels disappointed because his fears, the tragedy they are living, are not represented, and thus the reality of the event is in doubt:

“There’s nothing on the network,” he said to us. “Not a word, not a picture. On the Glassboro channel we rate fifty-two words by actual count. No film footage, no live report. Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore? Don’t those people know what we’ve been through? We were scared to death. We still are. We left our

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<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 170

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 227

homes, we drove through blizzards, we saw the cloud. It was a deadly specter, right there above us. Is it possible nobody gives substantial coverage to such a thing? Half a minute, twenty seconds? Are they telling us it was insignificant, it was piddling? Are they so callous? Are they so bored by spills and contaminations and wastes? Do they think this is just television? 'There's too much television already-why show more?' Don't they know it's real?<sup>156</sup>

More than sounding as an accusation to the world of mass media, the questions signal the uncertainty of the event they are experiencing. How is it possible that such a scary tragedy is not shown on TV? If it was real it should have been on the news. The speech the man gives does not really propose a definitive answer. He can think that journalists don't come there because the situation is too dangerous, but it is still not clear. The truth is that one of the characteristics of the airborne toxic event is exactly its surrealism of a non-televised moment in a world which is constantly experienced through televised events. In this respect the airborne toxic event seems isolated in time and space: a dream, a moment of pause in the novel, where the characters have the occasion of reflecting on the "society of the spectacle" through its absence. Often, when Jack tries to look externally at something that he is doing, he feels like living what he calls a "TV moment." The airborne toxic event is one of those TV moments amplified, and this is the reason why the characters cannot watch themselves on TV: because they *are* the spectacle. The border between the real and the representation has collapsed. The spectacle has grown to such an extent that it absorbed even the spectators.

Spectacle permeates the life of many characters in American postmodern literature and this is a characteristic that Pynchon and DeLillo certainly share. When Capt. Geoffrey "Pirate" Prentice, the character with whom *Gravity's Rainbow* opens, travels in the subway

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 161-162

through the city of London during World War II, the impressions he gets from what is happening around him are all conjugated in the mode of spectacle: “The Evacuation still proceeds, but it's all theatre”<sup>157</sup> or, a little forward, “He is afraid of the way the glass will fall – soon – it will be a spectacle.”<sup>158</sup> This is the beginning of the novel, but Pynchon seems already to suggest that the reality surrounding his characters is not perceived clearly. Something *big* is going to happen, the falling of a rocket or the explosion of a crystal palace, but, whatever it will be, “it will be a spectacle.” They want it to be spectacle, they long for its theatricality and, thus, the world around them becomes a great representation.

In *The Time-Image* Gilles Deleuze suggests that the formal innovation of much immediate postwar art was a way of reacting to the moral, political and existential questions posed by Second World War. From this perspective the setting chosen by Pynchon for his novel acquires a crucial relevance. War as an “event” tends to reveal the inadequacies of conventional realism. Moments of conflict are inextricably linked with an immense network of effects, long-term causes and consequences, experiences of horror and liberation in civilian populations, complex feelings of shame, fear and dislocation. The event itself is a *spectacle* of interconnections; in the destroyed, fragmented, multidimensional landscape of the fictional London created by Pynchon, all becomes necessary, the falling of a V-2 rocket as well as the senseless peregrination of Tyron Slothrop through the city. The setting forces a reconfiguration of the narrative, in order to penetrate the space of reality, hidden behind the spectacle. Pynchon thus develops a scheme of the events narrated that uses spectacles both as allegories and fictional constructions of meaning. The fall of the crystal palace that in the first page of the novel may be caused by the attack of a V-2 rocket can be read as the crashing of those structures

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<sup>157</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 3

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

that defined the Western world order before the end of the war. The war, that in Pynchon seems to be just an incidental effect of a cultural transformation already taking place, is relevant to the novel not as a geopolitical conflict, but as a complex of interrelated forces which transform and redefine pre-existent structures. When the war ends the people remain just spectators of “the detritus of an order, a European and bourgeois order they don’t yet know is destroyed forever.”<sup>159</sup>

Spectacles are an essential feature in Pynchon's narratives. One can think, for example, of the abundance of songs, evoked through lyrics, throughout many of his novels. These songs have different functions, but they always convey a spectacular idea of what they narrate. It seems evident that they refer to the world of musical, and they transform every lived experience into a pantomime, a representation. Through them Pynchon’s characters envision themselves as part of a spectacle; there is something in the way the characters move through London in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: they stare at the spectacle of a city that opens in front of their eyes as a dream of interconnected events; and, at the same time, they seem to be always observed. The spectacle presents an ambiguous identity in Pynchon, where the boundaries between representation and spectators are very weak.

One of the most beautifully written sections of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is that in which, through an intricate puzzle of events, Pynchon narrates the vicissitudes of Katje Borgesius. This young Dutch woman spent part of the war playing a secret orgiastic sexual game with Captain Blicero, a German lieutenant, who uses her and a boy, Gottfried, to satisfy his desires. This section is enclosed into a frame, that of an ambiguous movie that is being shot when the chapter begins and that is projected when it ends. The movie simply shows Katje walking into a house. The first impression a reader gets is that of someone spying a

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 560

woman: a camera follows Katje and, it implies, as the same Pynchon suggests, the existence of a secret cameraman. Why is he following her? The answer to this question and the solution to the suspense created will arrive some pages later, after Pynchon's digressions into Katje's past, Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, and a Dutch colonist of the seventeenth century. But it is not really an answer, just a further hint to the nature of Katje's movie. At the end of the chapter, indeed, Pynchon informs us that the movie is shown to an octopus named Grigori; the octopus has an important narrative function in the novel, as it will later be used as a bait for Slothrop, but here seems to go beyond his role in the plot, and brings an allegorical dimension to the story. The octopus is indeed being nourished by that movie. He eats images:

Webley Silvernail comes to carry the projector back down the chilly scuffed-wood corridors again to the ARF wing, in to the inner room where octopus Grigori oozes sullenly in his tank. In other rooms the dogs whine, bark shrilly in pain, whimper for a stimulus that does not, will never come.<sup>160</sup>

The way the reel and the projector are brought to him recalls the way someone would bring food to his pet. The presence of the barking dogs, waiting for "a stimulus," reinforces this impression. But instead of food, the animals, like men, need images. In ambiguous and secret rooms where the fate of the war is decided, people create and sustain images. Just a few lines before the description of the octopus's feeding, Pynchon tells the story of the creation of a fake propaganda movie, and in the same chapter he reflects on the necessity of spectacles in war, because they function "as diversion from the real movements of the War."<sup>161</sup> What is suggested in these pages is that hidden forces, like secret cameras, control

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<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 107



people's movements, but at the same time, people need these forces, as animals need nourishment, in order to make their steps in a fragile and temporary world, as that of Europe during World War II. In this sense, Katje and her movie scene are not only a frame for the chapter, but an allegorical frame for the war and the variegated experiences which characterize it. As this section in the book is filtered through that movie scene, life during the war is filtered through spectacle: everything becomes a representation and people's lives become reactions to that representation.

In the middle of the ravaged postwar German Zone, about halfway through *Gravity's Rainbow*, one encounters a mysterious and sinister German movie director, Gerhardt von Göll, who is described as "once an intimate and still the equal of Lang, Pabst, and Lubitsch." Von Göll has a particular idea of the real, similar to that of Russ Hodges in *Underworld*. He believes that many characters who dwell in the Zone are really those he has portrayed in a movie he shot before the end of the war in England, and that they live "real, paracinematic lives", thanks to his film that "has somehow brought them into being." He is convinced that his mission is "to sow in the Zone seeds of reality." Gerhardt von Göll is an important key to the source of many films allusions and to the overall significance of film in the novel. He has completely lost sight of the distinction between the real world and the movie theater, between real and reel. Not only does he suspect, along with others in the novel, that it is all "elaborate theatre"; he actively promotes the idea in the belief that "his images, somehow, have been chosen for incarnation." This is a crucial issue that Pynchon poses in his text: if von Göll's vision is true, if movies are more real than life, what are the possible consequences of such cinematic conditioning? Critics have answered this question following two main paths. On one side there are those who believe that cinema is an active, positive force in the novel that helps to resist the overwhelming power of a secret system

controlling people's lives; while others argue that Pynchon considers films to be false texts, that to be deceived by the film "frame-up" is to be fatally duped. Both theories, in some way, miss a crucial aspect of Pynchon's narrative: its capacity to immerse the reader in a world of puzzles, quests, and symbolic environments that reformulate any constructed form of knowledge, engaging images and representations into a new perspective of thought.

The function of film in *Gravity's Rainbow* is ambiguous. The various allusions to the world of cinema, to well-known characters taken from masterpieces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*King Kong*, *Metropolis*, *Dr. Mabuse*), and to the role of the director, give the novel a particular tone: together with the constant reflection on technology and its use, cinema is an element of Pynchon's work that structures its main frames. Being cinema (and its derivatives) the most important cultural invention of the last century, what Pynchon does through it is exactly to comment on twentieth century's technological revolution. In *Gravity's Rainbow* is impossible to see contemporary society if not through the lens of expanding and shifting innovations in the field of information technology. Many of the references to movies are used to emphasize both the negative influence of film and their social message. For example when in Germany Slothrop meets Franz Pökler, waiting in the ruins of Zwölfkinder for his lost child, the narrator pauses to explain Pökler's passivity and failure. Pökler has idolized the actor Rudolf Klein-Rogge, who played the mad inventor Rotwag in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, and attempts to emulate him:

Pökler's idea of "the lion" came to have a human face attached to it, a movie face natürlich, that of the actor Rudolf Klein-Rogge, whom Pökler idolized, and wanted to be like.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 422

Pökler used to dream about a “metropolis”, a “Corporate City-state where technology was the source of power, the engineer worked closely with the administrator, the masses labored unseen far underground, and ultimate power lay with a single leader at the top”, who had of course the face of Klein-Rogge. But Pökler will later realize that he has merely been a pawn in the hands of *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s master inventor, Major Weissman-/Blicero. The film/text/life-as-theater equations of *Gravity’s Rainbow* draw our attention to the manipulative power of these semiotic systems, at the same time dramatizing contemporary confusion between life and representations. The “paracinematic lives” of *Gravity’s Rainbow* function as warnings.

Pynchon and DeLillo immerse their characters in a world of representations and spectacles. Mass Media permeate their lives, becoming the sole tool they have in order to experience reality. But the distance created between the real thing and the representation corrodes the possibility of knowledge. A common fate links the characters and stories so far analyzed: they are lost forever in the icy border which goes through revelation and ignorance. They walk the blind path of illusions nourished by spectacles, whether they are in a movie theatre, unaware of the rocket that is going to fall on them or in front of a computer screen, travelling through their identity into the depths of the World Wide Web.

DeLillo and Pynchon construct stories in which hidden, mysterious forces drive the relentless movement of people in history; these forces are imperceptible, yet they surprise men with sudden appearances, combinations of events, chains of images, icons that suggest possible correlations, verifiable links to the truth. But they are veiled by spectacles and pantomimes: all that is relevant in the novels’ plots is mediated, distanced in a representation, allegorized. Through the understanding of these allegories the reader is

involved in the protagonists' journey towards knowledge, but if the journey fails, as it seems to always happen, the reader continues to have a different perspective, a more powerful one, with which he can cross the border of revelation.

There is something that both authors make clear: whether consciously or not, behind the same forces which drive them, there are men, guided by an ambiguous impulse for communication and comprehension that becomes unavoidably of domination. Although differences are strong between Pynchon and DeLillo, whereas in the former men seem to be in complete control of their representations, while in the latter they are subjugated by their autonomous power, both convey an idea of mass media with which people can deliberately operate; and this is a crucial element of their discourse. Mass media, and the spectacles diffused through them, are indeed the product of human creativity and intellect. They are configured both as containers and producers of messages; they are made of desires and expectations, and crafted as machines which have to duplicate needs. The TV set, for example, or the radio, both in DeLillo and Pynchon, are living objects, autonomous entities that not only recreate events, but that also persist in the characters' memories and dreams, stimulate them, and call for their entanglement.

Examining the postmodern novels described in this thesis, one can look at the development of mass media through the twentieth century from a different perspective: not that of consumers and users of always more precise and effective technologies of communication, and not that of scholars who look at mass media from different fields, but that of the inner experience related to the usage of technology. A secret mirror is built by Pynchon and DeLillo; it does not only reflect the society it narrates, but it also opens a door into the variegated dimension of the spectacle. Whatever happens in the narratives of these two authors, it is construed through a constant dialogue of representations, through a

web of interconnections which move autonomously into the consciousness of characters and readers. Spectacle is the mode in which societies characterized by modern conditions of production conjugate their needs and structure. It pervades any aspect of contemporaneity, multiplying itself into models and icons, computer screens and TV news; spectacle is the unique structure of modern societies, and if not understood correctly it can only dominate those societies, constantly estranging people from the real. Pynchon and DeLillo's novels help to comprehend the spectacle. They cannot provide a "solution" to the problem of "the society of the spectacle," but they contribute to the debate with a critical representation of that society.



## Chapter IV

### “Old fans who’ve always been at the movies” Spectators in Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo

“Twentieth-century Western culture is pictured in the Orpheus cinema on the last page of *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” said David Marriott, commenting on the function of film in Pynchon’s works<sup>163</sup>. The final scene of *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be seen as a powerful allegory of the submission to spectacles which characterized the twentieth century. The protagonists of the passage are spectators, “old fans who’ve always been at the movies,” as the narrator suggests; they are represented in a moment of pure ecstatic desire, they long for the show to begin, but they don’t know that they are going to pay the ticket for that show with death. A V2 rocket is about to strike them all, and their only comfort is to keep believing in the spectacle, singing a melody.

Marriott points out that they are “happy to succumb to the mind-numbness” of cinema. More precisely they can be considered spectators in the twentieth century, hollow men who sacrifice their identities for those that the spectacle imposes on them<sup>164</sup>. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a novel that since the beginning proposes itself as a film. Its final section is made up of a series of brief titled “scenarios” which resemble a movie shooting-script in which the scenes get shorter as the climax approaches. When, during the penultimate scene, the narrative flow is interrupted, what happens is that the story is disjointed and disrupted by the word CATCH,<sup>165</sup> which clearly refers to a film catching in a projector. Thus, being a novel that reflects on the role of cinema as text, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is strongly concerned with the perspective of the reader/spectator, offering detailed descriptions of the way

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<sup>163</sup> David Marriott, “Moviegoing,” *Pynchon Notes* 16 (1985), 23

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 28

cinema shapes people's lives. One of Pynchon's favorite themes is the influence of cinema on everyday lives: *Gravity's Rainbow* is populated with characters whose lives are shaped by film, including Bianca, who is conceived on a film set during the filming of *Alpdrucken*, but also Gottfried, who lives his final moments on film. In the novel, the characters have exchanged their own identities for more attractive self-images. They sneer like James Cagney, have hairstyles like Bing Crosby or Rita Hayworth and speak with accents like Bela Lugosi or Cary Grant, while wearing hats like Greta Garbo and Sidney Greenstreet. While imagining they are being filmed, they wander around a landscape of film sets, spanning from German expressionism to Cecil B. de Mille. Tyrone Slothrop, the protagonist of the novel, who assumes a constant stream of identities, most often considers himself in relation to movie stars. He acts toward Katje like "the Cagney of the French Riviera,"<sup>166</sup> fancies himself as Errol Flynn and plays a song sung by Dick Powell. He is not alone; in fact, he perfectly complements a cast of characters wearing George Raft suits, Caligari gloves, and Sidney Greenstreet Panamas. Movie stars always serve as models for behavior in Pynchon. He narrates Americans who are cinema-goers and do not discriminate between the spectacular version of life to be found in the movies and the real world outside the cinema. Cinema is always a place of refuge in *Gravity's Rainbow* for all those for whom life has become too painful during the war. However the refuge is only an illusion, as the end of the novel shows: death, pain and sorrow, and ultimately the real, are always near, although the spectacle remains a form of oblivion that guarantees the disappearance of reality.

The moviegoers' and spectators' circumstances are always precarious: their way of living life as if it were a movie is ultimately susceptible to the unhappy vagaries of the

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<sup>166</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 222



random element on this side of the projection screen. Even in the cinema, the rocket will find them. Like Pynchon, Don DeLillo also has a strong interest in the figure of the spectator. Many of his characters spend their time mesmerized in front of a TV screen or in a movie theatre, and, as in Pynchon, DeLillo's spectators suffer from the ambiguity of their status, living the contradiction of existing, at the same time, in a form of submission to the overwhelming power of the media, but, also, consistently desiring to maintain it.

In the famous barn scene of DeLillo's *White Noise*, Murray depicts, describes and analyzes this process enacted by the spectacle and its spectators. When he and Jack decide to visit "the most photographed barn in America," what strikes them more than anything else are the five signs they encounter before reaching the site. On arriving, Murray comments that "once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn."<sup>167</sup> All the signs, which in this case represent the ideal of a barn, cause the disappearance of it. The medium embraces the object it represents to the extent of devouring it. This object is distanced into the representation and, finally, disappears. In saying "No one sees the barn,"<sup>168</sup> Murray is theorizing the disappearance of the real into its representation. This is the first step of the process, which would never be complete without the function carried out by the spectators in formally substantiating this disappearance. Murray continues: "We're not here to capture an image, we are here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura."<sup>169</sup> Only the spectator can let the spectacle survive. He nourishes it through his desire, expressed in the necessity of creating representations that would reinforce an illusory perspective on the real. The more the spectator pursues the real, the more it disappears, and it is through this dynamic that the spectacle is maintained.

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<sup>167</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 12

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

In the same way, Murray suggests, the spectator operates a sort of “spiritual surrender”: “We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception [...] A religious experience in a way, like all tourism.”<sup>170</sup> The spirituality, the religiosity behind the process is crucial. Without *faith* in the spectacle, its effects would never be realized. Therefore the spectacle is increased through the spectators who, seduced by its power, ignite the engine that maintain it.

A powerful example of Murray’s theory can be found in another DeLillo novel: *Underworld*. As it has already been pointed out, this book includes several episodes in which the disappearance of the real is perceived through spectacular events, and its focus remains continuously on the role of the spectator in relation to these events. The passage in which Esmeralda’s miracle is narrated serves as a good example in this respect. Esmeralda is a twelve-year-old homeless child who lives on begging in the most desolate and ruined part of the Bronx. She is a mysterious figure throughout the novel because she defies all attempts by two nuns to help her. The nuns, Edgar and Gracie, move around the neighborhood trying their best to help those people living in the area. However, anytime, they see Esmeralda, the little girl runs away, emerging as a fast and temporary godly apparition in that bleakness, and remaining as such throughout the novel. She is, later, raped and killed, without ever meeting the two nuns. Yet, a relevant event follows Esmeralda’s death. In particular, she reappears as a religious icon. Her reappearance occurs in the form of an optical effect produced by a billboard ad and near by lights coming from passing trains, which give the impression of a miraculous appearance of Esmeralda’s face. People gather to look at this spectacle and witness the “miracle.” In the account of the

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<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

scene, DeLillo brings together all the elements that characterize the development of a mass media event.

The spectacle would not be possible without the intervention of people spectators who give relevance to the image they are looking at. Spectators want, even, *desire* the miracle, and it is exactly this desire that makes it happen. With the perspective of Sister Edgar, who throughout the novel resists the seductions of mass media, DeLillo signals that the force of the spectacle is a creation of the spectator, a projection of his necessity for entertainment and comfort. When news of the miracle starts to spread, Sister Edgar decides she wants to see. Notwithstanding the various reasons given by Sister Gracie in order to convince her not to go, Edgar feels the necessity to believe in the spectacle. She does not care if it is “the worst kind of tabloid superstition,”<sup>171</sup> or if “pictures lie.”<sup>172</sup> She needs to see Esmeralda again.

DeLillo constructs the passage through many details, regarding the way the crowd is formed. At the beginning, it all happens through word of mouth, stories that go from block to block, “moving through churches and superettes,”<sup>173</sup>. Then, people start to flock to this traffic island where the expressway meets the train yards. Cars are parked everywhere and keep multiplying with an increasing collective desire for miracles. The spectacle takes its form through the spectators. Again, it is only the people, gathering to see such an event, that make it possible. Thus, in such a scene, the spectators become the essential element to be underlined. They are the ones who want to see, creating a spectacle in a place that would seem completely inappropriate for one.

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<sup>171</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, 819

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 820

Two aspects related to the “miracle” need to be underlined, including not only the place where it is performed, but, also, the interpretation sister Gracie gives of it. The fact that the apparition is shown on an ad is not secondary. Mainly, it evokes the Debordian idea of the commodity behind the spectacle. The spectacle cannot exist without the commodity. In fact, when the advertisement is taken off the billboard, the spectacle ends. The first time she ever sees the advertisement, Sister Edgar characterizes it as the “lavishment of effort and technique,”<sup>174</sup> what she considers to be, the equivalent of medieval church architecture. It is as if the ad itself had the potentiality of conveying other meanings, more precisely, of producing allegories. When Sister Gracie tries to dissuade her from going to attend the spectacle, she calls it the “the nightly news [...] the local news at eleven with all the grotesque items neatly spaced to keep you watching the whole half hour.”<sup>175</sup> She perceives the illusion behind the event; in other words, she has the critical distance necessary to recognize, within it, the seeds of a media show:

“It's how the news becomes so powerful it doesn't need TV or newspapers. It exists in people's perceptions. It's something they invent, strong enough to seem real. It's the news without the media.”<sup>176</sup>

In addition, such a comment would be perfect in describing “the airborne toxic event” in *White Noise*, in which the absence of television seems to suggest the idea that media power comes from within people.<sup>177</sup> Once again, the event exists uniquely in people’s perceptions. It is not the presence of mass media to characterize it, but only the will of the spectators.

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<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 821

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 819

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Cf. Chapter III

To resist the spectacle, one should resist one's desire. This is the reason why Sister Edgar fails to withstand media power. She longs for Esmeralda's face, which, for her represents, the last spiritual hope in the decaying world surrounding her. That is she becomes, as DeLillo writes, "her virgin twin who is also her daughter,"<sup>178</sup> and, if she wants to see her again, she must believe in the spectacle. When the miracle is finally over and the ad removed, Sister Edgar is left with nothing but the image in her mind. In some way, she perceives the illusoriness of her faith in this spectacle. Yet, at the same time, she understands that it is the only thing that brings her joy, while taking her back to the reality of her experience. Aware of the epiphany she feels thanks to Esmeralda's spectacle, she dies a few days after the miracle ends. In the fragmented and ruined world in which she lives, the only moment of truth offered to her lies within the distanced representation of spectacle.

With the Esmeralda's episode, DeLillo offers the reader a powerful allegory of the spectator's function and situates it in the dynamics of the mass media dimension. If, in his narrative, the spectacle is often an ethereal entity that accompanies the stories in being hidden between the lines of the text, he also makes it clear that images, icons, and representations are developed through allegory. Namely, this process occurs in people's minds, existing primarily as projections of their own desires. From this perspective, spectators find themselves in an ambivalent position, being at the same time the makers and the victims of the power that overwhelms them. It is probably in this ambiguity that lays the complexity of an objective critical analysis of mass media. One can penetrate the spectacle and build a strong resistance to its power, only through a correct understanding of its duplicity.

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<sup>178</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, 821

Through his descriptions of the flocks of people gathering around the billboard on the expressway in the hope of beholding Esmeralda's miracle, DeLillo points out, as he puts it, "this is how a crowd brings things to single consciousness."<sup>179</sup> As a matter of fact, both in DeLillo and in Pynchon, spectators seem to be just that, part of a "single consciousness." Their perceptions are always likely to be unified into a common point of view, as if the different characters participate, all in expressing an unique sensibility. They, thus, become The Spectator, an entity that pervades DeLillo's stories, in opposition to the spectacle. Eugene Goodheart notices that DeLillo's characters "seem disembodied, at times indistinguishable from one another." They seem to inhabit their world sharing an awe for the forces that control them. They feel confused by the weak boundaries separating the real from its representation and become united by the blur of their identities. This disembodiment is strongly related to DeLillo's cinematic imagination. Like figures from film, his fictional characters are subject to transformations, being completely malleable. More specifically, they are in constant search of an identity and are ever ready to change themselves whenever it is convenient. Mass media stimulates these shifts of identity by both proposing a variety of roles to interpret, but, also, selling models of behavior and projecting desires into commodities. Screens, such as, movie screens, TV screens, or, even billboard signs, like the one, where Esmeralda's miraculous appearance occurs, all seem to evoke the lightness and instability of human perceptions. Personalities, in DeLillo's fictional world, seem to manifest themselves with the same simplicity, in which the T.V. spectator would flip the channels on a remote control.

The spectacle presented by mass media aims to represent the totality of human lives, and, thus, all existence is perceived as representations. The real and the spectacle are

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 820

indistinguishable; they mingle together into a realm of fictional experience where individual identity fizzles into a unique “single consciousness.” An eloquent meditation in DeLillo’s *Americana* reads:

In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be. Advertising has discovered this man. It uses him to express the possibilities open to the consumer. To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream. Advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled.<sup>180</sup>

This relationship between spectacle and spectator is exemplified perfectly in this statement. The commodity, which becomes spectacle according to Debord, nourishes the spectator’s desire. In a capitalist society, a society defined, at least in part, by the spectacle, representations are continually being sold. However, these representations cannot be bought, but only dreamt, and, thus, are exclusively watched. In this process, the spectators become one, sacrificed by the spectacle into a single entity, which can be considered a unique individuality in which all the forms of resistance are lost.

Towards the end of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, under the effect of LSD, Wendell “Mucho” Maas discovers that in the society of the spectacle there exists only one identity, a collective one. Furthermore, this collective identity, which is found, is the result of an accumulation of personalities transformed by mass media into a unique Spectator. Quoting the famous Beatles’ song *She loves you*, he arrives at the conclusion, as Pynchon writes:

[...] yeah well, you know, she does, she’s any number of people, all over the world, back through time, different colors, sizes, ages, shapes, distances from death, but she loves. And that ‘you’ is everybody. And herself.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Don DeLillo, *Americana*, 123

<sup>181</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 117

When Oedipa goes to visit him at the radio station, his boss, Caesar Funch, tells her that Wendell is losing his identity. He is, as is described in text, “less himself and more generic. He enters a staff meeting and the room is suddenly full of people [...] He’s a walking assembly of man.”<sup>182</sup> Wendell, himself, agrees on this idea. In his opinion, everybody is a roomful of people. It is relevant that this “epiphany” occurs to Wendell, as he is a disc jockey and works with one of the most important mediums of communication in the diffusion of mass culture. He is aware of the potentiality of this medium, as vehicle of commerce and capitalism. In all its expressions, even in an innocuous popular love song, Wendell understands that this medium, transforms individuals into masses of spectators who become a unique controllable entity.

A similar idea is conveyed in the allegorical scene that opens DeLillo’s *Underworld*. In this passage, Cotter Martin, a boy who enters the Polo Grounds without paying the ticket, is presented, while jumping over the bars of the turnstiles at the entrance of the stadium. In opening his novel, DeLillo introduces him, in the following way: “He speaks in your voice, American, and there’s a shine in his eye that’s halfway hopeful.”<sup>183</sup> He, thus, forces the reader to recognize himself in the character, as part of “an assembling crowd.”<sup>184</sup> He builds the scene in a crescendo in which the individual is lost forever in the mass, becoming part of an unique Spectator. Once he has entered the stadium, Cotter has to run from guards and cops until as DeLillo writes, “[they] lose him in the crowd.”<sup>185</sup> The narration of the ball game starts, only after this prologue to the “official” prologue. It seems the writer, in opening the novel to the reader in such a way, communicates the

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 115

<sup>183</sup> DeLillo, Don. *Underworld*, 11

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 14



necessity to lose one's self in the mass in order to experience an event, like this one. At this point in the novel, of course, the consequence of disappearing into a crowd are not yet clear. Yet, the importance of the circumstances in which the boy finds himself are not immediately developed. However, they are continuously investigated by DeLillo throughout his work, particularly in what happens to the spectators.

In *White Noise*, Vernon Dickey, Jack's father-in-law, asks, "Were people this dumb before television?"<sup>186</sup> Yet, through the course of the novel, in terms of a possible response to this question, no answer seems to be suggested or, even, insinuated. Vernon, in posing such an inquiry, seeks Jack's authority. As a professor, Vernon believes Jack to be educated enough to be able to respond to him, in giving an answer. It seems important that this question arises unexpectedly during the course of narration. Jack reflects on Vernon's character. He sees Vernon in terms of being a worrying father for Babette, characterized by a pragmatic approach to life, which is in sharp contrast with Jack's meditative one. In *White Noise*, Vernon is one of the few characters who do not just passively watch. He still belongs to a world that can be shaped by human action and enjoys spending time, as DeLillo describes him, "[with] garbagemen, telephone repairmen, the mail carrier, the afternoon newsboy. Someone to talk about techniques and procedures."<sup>187</sup> Even when participating in Jack and Babette's contemplative tours at the supermarket, he does not merely stare at commodities, and, as DeLillo writes, "he lik[es] to mingle with shopping mall crowds."<sup>188</sup> He not only wants to take part in dream commodities, but wants to participate in late postmodern capitalism by socializing. Thus, there already seems to be an answer, regarding this question that Vernon asks Jack, regarding the effects of television in

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<sup>186</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 249

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-249

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 249

cotemporary society. Mainly, Vernon is part of a past that cannot fit into the present, a present characterized primarily by its “society of the spectacle.” Notably, rather than spend his time as a watcher, he feels determined to do things. His drive towards active involvement in life is the one characteristic, more than others, which destabilizes Jack and Babette’s everyday life. “Old Man Treadwell” is another character, who is similar to Vernon, but, ironically, is blind. Rather non-incidentally, his blindness entirely limits his exposure to the spectacle, which comes to him only through the intervention of Babette, who reads him magazines. After disappearing with his sister Gladys for several days, Old Man Treadwell is later found, lost and confused, in a shopping mall. Figures, such as Vernon and Treadwell, underline, in a certain way, the status of spectators in relation to other characters. When one encounters them in the novel, one notices their uncanny power of “frightening” Jack and the others, ideally taking them away from their environment, safety and TV screens.

It is figures like Vernon Dickey that permit one to recognize the perimeters of Jack’s world. Jack inhabits a reality in which all he sees can be defined uniquely in terms of spectacles. Most of his rare actions are failures. For example, during the airborne toxic event, when he stops by for gas, Jack becomes contaminated by a cloud of noxious gas. Furthermore, his final attempt to kill Willie Mink can be considered both ridiculous and clumsy. Jack is basically a spectator and, through his point of view, everyone around him is similarly transformed into a spectator. His voice seems to encompass the perceptions of the other characters, and, when one reads Jack’s words, it is, as if, one is hearing the voice of a unique Spectator. Jack’s voice is collective; it develops through the accumulation of other voices, while striving for its own identity in the act of continually inquiring into the experiences of others.

Many characters in *White Noise* play a part in Jack's voice, as they identify themselves through mass media. When Murray attempts to give account for himself and his life, DeLillo describes him, saying : "I'm only a visiting lecturer. I theorize, I take walks, I admire the trees and houses. I have my students, my rented room, my TV set."<sup>189</sup> Television, for Murray, seems to serve as a climax in the description of his existence. In other words, his entire world seems to be focalized into and filtered through it. This TV set is a means of both recognition and revelation. Howard Dunlop, Jack's German teacher, was saved by television after the death of his mother, as DeLillo writes:

I was inconsolable, withdrew completely into myself. Then one day by chance I saw a weather report on TV. A dynamic young man with a glowing pointer stood before a multicolored satellite photo, predicting the weather for the next five days. I sat there mesmerized by his self-assurance and skill. It was as though a message was being transmitted from the weather satellite through that young man and then to me in my canvas chair. I turned to meteorology for comfort.<sup>190</sup>

Jack often finds his children enchanted by the TV screen, trying to imitate the medium, like when Steffie, in front of the tube, "moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken."<sup>191</sup> Yet, again, the spectacle seems to provide both identity and personality.

Much like the many characters, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, living their lives in an attempt to imitate movie stars, *White Noise* seems to offer figures who similarly rely on images for points of reference. For instance, Grappa, one of Jack's colleagues, says that the greatest

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 293

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 55

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 84

influence in his life was Richard Widmark in Henry Hathaway's *Kiss of Death*, as DeLillo writes:

“It resolved a number of conflicts. I copied Richard Widmark’s sadistic laugh and used it for ten years. It got me through some tough emotional periods [...] it clarified a number of things in my life. Helped me become a person.”<sup>192</sup>

Even when Jack meets Willie Mink, the corrupt project manager who gave the drug Dylar to Babette, the man is pictured in front of a soundless television, muttering phrases from old television shows and commercials. He confesses to having learned English through watching American TV. *White Noise* is a novel where spectators hold a critical role in defining the world in which the other characters live. In the reality of this fictional world, spectatorship offers the only possibility for survival, as the pursuit of self is constantly equated with a total conformity to images promoted by the mass media, which holds the only authoritative claim on identity.

If characters in *White Noise* can only exist as spectators, there seems to be no way out from the spectacle. They constantly envision themselves as watchers, and, throughout the novel, everything they experience is filtered through the prism of what is to be considered as spectacle. To this effect, DeLillo describes Alphonse Stompanato, another professor at the College-on-the-Hill, saying, “For most people there are only two places in the world where they live and their TV set.”<sup>193</sup> It seems appropriate that this statement, on the part of Stompanato, comes in the novel in response to Jack’s question concerning people’s intrigue for catastrophe on television. Jack spent a Friday evening with his family in front of a television set, watching floods, earthquakes, mud slides and erupting volcanoes.

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 214 - 215

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 66

During this scene, Jack is described noticing how, as DeLillo writes, “every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping.”<sup>194</sup> In terms of an explanation for this phenomenon, Alphonse describes how he believes the age of mass media has caused the flow of information to become so incessant that it brought about “brain fade”. Thus, for Stompanato, catastrophic events serve to bring spectators’ attention into focus. People desire tragedy because it serves, for them, as a way to return to the real, but, simultaneously, to get trained for the fiction of contemporary existence. Every representation has its force in this essential ambiguity. A spectacle is the mixture of two opposing forces that balance each other out. On the one hand, there exists the urge for the real and the necessity of witnessing something true, while on the other, there is the necessity, through the production of images, to distance the real to the extent that it disappears. These two forces guide the characters/spectators in *White Noise*, in modulating the way in which life is experienced.

The power of these forces is so strong that the characters are always spectators, even when they are not in front of a medium. Through their eyes, everything becomes fiction. On the night an insane asylum in Blacksmith burns down, Jack and his son Heinrich go to watch the fire. They are not the only ones on the scene. Other fathers and sons, seeking “fellowship at such events,”<sup>195</sup> flock there and, simply, stare. They make comments, watching the destruction of the building by fire, as if for one night only, they are able to substitute the TV screen for the event. They have a moment of suspense when a mad woman in nightgown walks across the lawn, who is as DeLillo describes her, “so lost to dreams and furies that the fire around her head seemed almost incidental.”<sup>196</sup> This

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<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 64

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 239

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 239

apparition of the mad woman becomes both “powerful and real” for them. No one is able to say a word, and everyone stares as if unable to intervene, much like witnessing an event through a television screen. The society of the spectacle transforms every event into a representation, and, as a consequence, all aspects of what is generally associated with what one would consider to be reality are perceived as fiction. Ironically, then, when something reveals its so-called *reality*, the characters show no more interest in it. For DeLillo’s characters, when it is not a spectacle, it is no longer real. For example, at the scene of the building fire, when the air begins to be penetrated by a “smell of acrid matter,” coming from the burning building, the mood of the spectators begins to change, and they gradually start going away. As DeLillo describes Jack saying, “Whatever caused the odor, I sensed that it made people feel betrayed. An ancient, spacious and terrible drama was being compromised by something unnatural, some small and nasty intrusion.”<sup>197</sup> A smell given off from the flames of a building on fire, what might generally be considered to be both real and natural, is experienced, through the perceptions of Jack and others, to be something astonishingly “unnatural.” When to their mind’s eye the spectacle becomes something, which is not real anymore, those who behold the spectacle refuse it. One has no sense of smell when experiencing a spectacle through a film or TV screen. Thus, as the event is experienced in the reality of the everyday world, rather than being passively presented to an audience through projected images on an electronic screen, the spectators feel “betrayed,” as if he or she was made to believe something untrue. This allegorical moment in *White Noise* reminds the reader that nothing can be perceived and understood in the society of the spectacle, if not through an ideal screen or via a form of fiction. From the moment in which a “real” element is introduced in fiction, the spectacle is no longer to be

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<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 240

considered a real spectacle because it is not distanced into a representation and, therefore, cannot be trusted.

At the end of *White Noise*, DeLillo represents his characters as spectators in two specular scenes that evoke the one that closes *Gravity's Rainbow*. In the first of these scenes, even if they are not in a movie theatre, DeLillo's characters are sitting in their cars or on webbed beach chairs, waiting for some kind of revelation. The spectacle, this time, is one of the sunsets created by the airborne toxic event,<sup>198</sup> but in this case the scene gains even more significance: Jack, Babette, and their son Wilder, go to look at the sunset, is an overpass where the child risked his life some days earlier. Transforming that place, cathartically, into a place of spectacle, Jack and his family distance the real into a representation, creating a "TV moment" that helps them to take control of their perceptions. When Jack comments the scene, his words would be appropriate for the entire novel and for the role spectators had in it:

We don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don't know what we are watching or what it means, we don't know whether it is permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which uncertainty will eventually be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness, soon to pass.<sup>199</sup>

The spectators' feeling towards the spectacle is ambiguous. They do not know how to relate to it, yet they sense that it exerts a strong power on them and, notwithstanding the danger, they remain mesmerized, captured by its magic.

The second scene DeLillo uses at the end of *White Noise* is set at the supermarket where Jack usually goes. Buying things at the supermarket, throughout the novel,

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<sup>198</sup> Cf. Chapter III

<sup>199</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 324-325

represented a surrogate of watching. The commodity is the spectacle, as Debord suggests, and thus the supermarket becomes an accumulation of spectacles, where the characters participate in a media ritual. However in *White Noise*'s last scene the supermarket has changed. The shelves have been rearranged and the shoppers walk in panic and agitation through the aisles: they do not know where to go and what they are buying and for what reason; they have difficulties in recognizing the products by the labels. But they still watch, they still reiterate that ritual that maintains the society of the spectacle. As Jack says, "in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly."<sup>200</sup> There is always a secret infallible force behind the spectacle, it controls it and guides it; and people, spectators, cannot do anything but wait and look at the tabloids in the racks, where the spectacle is perpetuated and maintained.

These last images with which DeLillo closes *White Noise* are a paradigmatic representation of the forms of spectacle which characterized the novel. Notwithstanding several attempts, throughout the narration, of resisting mass media power, in the end the characters surrender. This is the way life is experienced in twentieth century America, a relentless accumulation of images and representations, "waves and radiation," that shape people's identities and perceptions. Mass media create spectators who cannot but *watch* reality, without ever acting upon it. When during the "airborne toxic event" all the people are gathered in a camp, and they are not yet sure of what is happening around them, they are overwhelmed by unverified information that comes from different sources. Together with death the toxic cloud carried stories in the air, and as Jack points out:

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<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 326



The people [...] were fearful that the stories might be true but at the same time impressed by the dramatic character of things. The toxic event had released a spirit of imagination. People spun tales, others listened spellbound. There was a growing respect for the vivid rumor, the most chilling tale. We were no closer to believing or disbelieving a given story than we had been earlier. But there was a greater appreciation now. We began to marvel at our ability to manufacture awe.<sup>201</sup>

Spectators discover through the toxic cloud - allegory of mass media - that its secret power, its fearful entertaining function, is created by them. The cloud would not be possible if not through people's imagination and desires.

The awe, as Jack says, is manufactured by the spectator himself and thus the loss of identity, which follows the spectacle is itself part of the spectator's desire that maintains mass media. Seduced by Metzger in her motel room, Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* is a clear example of this desire that brings to a loss of identity. She desires the spectacle, even if she knows that she will have to pay with her own personality the seduction. During the game Metzger invents to force her to get naked, Oedipa "went into the bathroom, tried to find her image in the mirror and couldn't. She had a moment of nearly pure terror."<sup>202</sup> The effect mass media has on her is the typical effect it has on spectators; it confuses her and, at the same time, makes it impossible for her to rely on herself and on her identity for support and resistance. As a matter of fact it is probably the loss of identity that makes her fall into Metzger arms.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the strongest example of a spectator is certainly Franz Pökler, whose story occupies an entire uninterrupted middle section of the novel. Pökler is a

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 153

<sup>202</sup> Thomas Pynchon. *The Crying of Lot 49*, 29

“fanatical movie hound”<sup>203</sup> and his experiences with movies reflect a dreamlike, surreal state. He watches movies “nodding in and out of sleep” and his wife Leni wonders how he can “connect together the fragments;”<sup>204</sup> he distributes handbills advertising a “film fantasy” only to discover that the theater scheduled to show it is torn down. As Charles Clerc notices, “fantasy indeed compounds fantasy and leads to a surreal condition; he is as deceived as the people who will come to see the fantasy and find nothing there-only the reality of fantasy.”<sup>205</sup> Pökler’s professional pursuits are strongly influenced by films, as he envisions himself in the roles played by his favorite actor Rudolf Klein-Rogge. The truth of his life, though, contrasts with his cinematic fantasies. He “swims his seas of fantasy, deathwish, rocket-mysticism,”<sup>206</sup> shaped by his teacher Laszlo Jamf, he is left by his wife and loses his beloved child.

Once under the control of Major Weissman Blicero, Pökler is visited by his daughter for two weeks each year. But he cannot be sure of her identity, as who comes to visit him seem to be each time a different child. Pynchon writes:

A daughter a year, each one about a year older, each time taking up nearly from scratch. The only continuity has been her name [...] and Pökler’s love-love something like the persistence of vision, for They have used to create for him the moving image of a daughter, flashing him only this summertime frames of her, leaving it to him to build the illusion of a single child...what would the time scale matter, a 24<sup>th</sup> of a second or a year?<sup>207</sup>

As a moviegoer Pökler sees her “daughter” in stilled frames; only the cinematic movement can give him the illusion of seeing her. Only his love, his desire, can give him the

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<sup>203</sup> Thomas Pynchon. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 577

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 159

<sup>205</sup> Charles Clerc, “Film in Gravity’s Rainbow,” in Clerc, Charles (ed.) *Approaches to “Gravity’s Rainbow.”* Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1983, 125

<sup>206</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 154

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 422

“persistence of vision” needed in order to have the child back. Pökler acts as a spectator because it is the only thing that can give him strength to believe in life. Only through the illusions of a spectator he can still believe in the reality of his life.

Also Tyrone Slothrop, as Pökler, is deeply immersed in the illusory world of movies, but differently from Pökler, he is more “an external byproduct of film.”<sup>208</sup> Clerc recognizes in Slothrop a tendency to use movies as a form of escape. Haunted by different destructive forces, which are at work about him, he assumes multiple forms; his chameleonic nature is molded by cinema: “he is a thinking, walking, sleeping conglomeration of many movie beings.”<sup>209</sup> Slothrop has been brainwashed by all the movies he has ever seen. He constantly refers himself to movie stars; he can assume different voices depending upon the situation, from Cary Grant to Groucho Marx. In some way he associates the other characters he meets throughout the novel with filmic types, ranging from Shirley Temple to Rudolph Valentino; he also fantasizes about working at Hollywood and being a movie star himself.

All these cinematic references related to a central character as Slothrop, accentuate his weakness for fantasizing and his lack of individual identity. As the protagonist of a novel he certainly is a particular one: all the stories about him are inconclusive and in the end the reader does not know what happens to him. Whether by an external force like *The Firm* or by his inner uncertainties, he is denied an identity, and the movies have strongly contributed to his loss of being. Slothrop’s adventures can be thus read as allegory of the effect the Spectacle has on the Spectator. Like Oedipa Maas, who can’t “find her image in the mirror,” or DeLillo’s characters in *White Noise*, overwhelmed by “waves and

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<sup>208</sup> Clerc, Charles. “Film in Gravity’s Rainbow,” 129

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 130

radiation,” he loses his identity, becoming an agglomerate of other identities, a unique Spectator who is lost forever in the society of the spectacle.

Behind this loss of identity, though, there is always the desire for representations, a desire that constantly characterizes spectators. In *Underworld* DeLillo uses a powerful image to convey this idea of urge for fictions that drives people. In a funny, grotesque, and tragic depiction of life in the ghetto, the writer introduces the element of television as a surrogate reality that transforms the perception one can have of the world; and only spectators can keep alive the spectacle. During one of their visits to Ismael Muñoz, the boss of a local gang who helps them “feed the hungry,” Sister Gracie and Sister Edgar, find him in a “lively mood [...] because he has managed to rig a system in the building that produces enough power to run a TV set.”<sup>210</sup> On a stationary bike a little kid named Juano pedals and his action gives energy to a generator which is linked to a television, connected through a wheezing drive belt to the bicycle. With a “go, man, fasta, fasta,” Ismael’s crew urges Juano to pedal, while the stock market channel speaks the language of buying and selling and they keep desiring more things to see, like cartoons or movies, “something with visuals better” than the discoid head of a white collar guy who talks about big board composite.

Once again is Sister Edgar’s perspective that reveals the hidden meaning of such a scene. While the other nun, Gracie, is delighted and attracted by the screen like the others, Sister Edgar understands that the intrusion of the TV set is going to transform the ghetto:

One of the stern mercies of the Wall, a place unlinked to the usual services, is that TV has not been available. Now here it is, suddenly. You touch a button and all the things concealed from you for centuries come flying into the remotest room. It’s an epidemic of seeing. No conceivable

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<sup>210</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, 812

recess goes unscanned. In the uterus, under the ocean, to the lost halls of the human brain. And if you can see it, you can catch it. There's a pathogenic element in a passing glance.<sup>211</sup>

It is not a case that Ismael, inspired by the TV set, has already new plans: he wants “to go on-line real soon,” or “build a military.” The language of the spectacle, which is directly connected with the world of capitalism, invokes new realities and dreams; the idea of an “epidemic of seeing,” by which if you see something, you can catch it, since that something becomes real, well encompasses the urge for the real characterizing the twentieth century. Spectators crave for the spectacle and they are the only ones who can maintain it, nourishing it with their desires.

The allegory DeLillo presents is explicative of the process that lies behind mass media power, and it is repeated often throughout *Underworld*. Also in the prologue, the crowd at the Polo Grounds is depicted as a powerful mass that can “change the structure of the game,” that can “make something happen,”<sup>212</sup> and they are the force that pushes Russ Hodges' account of the ball game. The spectacle, maintained by the spectators, is the ultimate development of capitalist society. The commodity has become abstract and symbolic and it operates through an abstract language like the one spoken on the TV at Ismael's headquarters. People want that spectacle, they are those who make it work, pedaling, nourishing it with their desire.

Yet the role of spectators in the society of the spectacle is ambiguous. Debord calls the spectator the “contemptible individual”<sup>213</sup>, recognizing in him the most corrupted element in the process of disappearing of the real caused by the spectacle. DeLillo and Pynchon are aware of this condition of their characters/spectators, but at the same time, they offer them

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<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 812

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

<sup>213</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 138

a space of resistance, that is not a possibility of redemption, but rather a way to critically relate with the spectacle, the possibility of distancing themselves from the representation. At the core of this possibility lies the interpretative power of the spectator. When Oedipa Maas is about to start her journey through the deepest secret of Inverarity's estate, Pynchon with a prolepsis informs the reader that:

As things developed, she was to have all manner of revelations. Hardly about Pierce Inverarity, or herself; but about what remained yet had somehow, before this, stayed away. There had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix.<sup>214</sup>

In this passage Oedipa is represented with almost prophetic traits (she can receive revelations), as someone who can understand things, even if the task of executing Inverarity's estate would seem impossible for simple housewife like her.

The revelatory nature of the things she can discover implies a different approach in "reading" them and the "allegorical" becomes the mode in which the events have to be perceived. Like Peirce's stamp collection, made of "allegorical faces that never were ignoring her,"<sup>215</sup> the reality in *The Crying of Lot 49* hides a possibility of truth that only Oedipa's sensibility can catch. That something that "remained yet had somehow, before this, stayed away," evokes Benjamin's idea of allegory of recovering a past that would be otherwise disappearing and in some way Pynchon suggests that only an allegorical reading can offer Oedipa a space of resistance against the forces of the spectacle which overwhelm her.

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<sup>214</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 10

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

Oedipa Maas can understand that the movie is out of focus, she can recognize the absence of something, of a correct understanding of reality, and she can perceive revelations from the mysterious things that happen during her quest. With her, many other characters in the novels of Pynchon and DeLillo live their lives as spectators, depicted with a strong potential to critically resist mass media. In the ambiguity of their position, between the critical capacity of confronting the spectacle, and their subjugation to the desires nourished by the media, lies the tragedy of their existence. They allegorically represent billions of spectators that daily experience the reality distanced into a representation. They can recognize the perils of these images and representations, they are afraid of their loss of identity, but at the same time seduced by their own desires, by the promises of the commodity, and by the dreams of the society of the spectacle.





## Chapter V

### “You’re here for the dance” The Rhetoric of Spectacle in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*

Pynchon and DeLillo seem to offer an unparalleled description of the way in which information technologies and mass media, in general, have shaped modes of perceiving reality in the postmodern age. Their novels present characters and situations which are deeply related to the society of the spectacle, including: moviegoers, ex-actors, TV sets with “greenish dead eyes,” employees of the corporate media, professors of pop culture, and people who stare daily at the tube. In any number of ways, television, radio, movies, the “spectacle” in general, becomes the main protagonist of their work. It would, thus, be almost impossible to ignore all these elements in an analysis of their narrative. One cannot study Pynchon and DeLillo without being aware of their profound link with what is to be considered the society of the spectacle they narrate.

Despite many marked differences between the two authors’ works, it is important to underline that both Pynchon and DeLillo often use allegories to reflect on the world of mass media. However, neither of them directly “allegorizes” critical theories, such as those developed by Baudrillard or Debord. These theories are rather helpful tools offering a way to analyze and define the world of the spectacle described by these authors. Specifically, Pynchon and DeLillo’s use of allegory must be considered part of a slow, deep, ontological shift profoundly linked to American society in the second half of the twentieth century. This shift was caused by the diffusion of television on a large scale, the strong development of the Hollywood industry, but, also, by the birth of mass culture. The use of allegory in Pynchon and DeLillo’s work is always deeply bound to this aforementioned ontological shift. Yet, in addition, these allegories are intensely related to both the

contemporary tendency to distance reality in the act of representation and, jointly, to the epistemic transformations imposed by the spectacle on spectators.

As it has been previously pointed out, Pynchon and DeLillo can both be considered part of a generation of writers who share the common sensibility and awareness concerning the world of mass media. To only name a few, other authors, such as, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and Philip Roth, depict a similar America to the one that interests Pynchon and DeLillo. Their representations of America put emphasis on mass culture, pop music, game shows, and televised historical events. In many of their novels, it is possible to trace direct references to communication technologies and what they depict to be a postmodern age shaped most directly by images and representations. Yet, more than the mere presence of mass media in their novels, it seems that the common characteristic linking Pynchon and DeLillo to other postmodern writers is their use of allegory to convey a certain analysis of the relationship between spectators, and the notion of spectacle in contemporary society, structured through its use of both icons and simulacra.

Stressing the presence of allegory in the postmodern novels of this generation of American authors opens interesting new paths in the study of U.S. literary postmodernism. Allegory, indeed, offers a reconsideration of the way postmodernism developed in literature through the second half of the twentieth century, and it is in this respect that Cormac McCarthy becomes a crucial example. In addition, being born in 1933, McCarthy can be chronologically situated within this same generation of writers; yet, on a thematic level, this author contrasts in many ways from authors, such as Pynchon and DeLillo. His ten novels, two plays, and his screenplay are characterized by their heavy attention given to questions relating specifically to the role of the individual in a modern society shown to threaten the establishment of identity and personal autonomy. Traditionally, his work as a

whole is divided in two main groups of novels. These two groups are distinguishable not only in terms of geographical setting, but, also, by their different thematic concerns. His first four novels, *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Suttree* are characterized as being “Appalachian”. These works are all preoccupied with an identifiable nostalgia for a receding paradise organically associated with lived youth and innocence. In contrast, works, such as, *Blood Meridian* and the *Border Trilogy* are identified as “southwestern”, having a deep rooting in a cultural nostalgia for a vanished pioneer lifestyle once galvanized by an individualism deeply linked to a kind cowboy ethos. This division of McCarthy’s canon does not contemplate his last two novels, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, which seem to open a new course in his career. It is, thus, a matter of discussion whether or not the label of postmodernism can be applied to McCarthy. Stylistically his narrative seems to be closer to the modernist sensibility of Faulkner. Yet, at the same time, critics, such as David Holloway suggest, McCarthy’s work is also characterized by its variety of themes and its tendency to play with different genres and narration, elements associable, as Holloway writes: “[with] the late capitalist moment in which it is produced.”<sup>216</sup>

Underlining the link between McCarthy’s novels and their historical moment of production, Holloway attributes to *Blood Meridian* and to its author what he calls a “historicizing tag”, particularly in terms of being what he considers “late modernism”. McCarthy’s language, according to Holloway, “seizes on the postmodern so as to use it against itself, and negate it dialectically from within.” For instance, the lack of any stable or transcendent ideological position is evident in McCarthy. Whereas his narrative keeps questioning its own artistic assumption, McCarthy always stresses the persistence and

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<sup>216</sup> David Holloway, *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 46

resistance of human emotions against the “commodification” of the world. Yet, McCarthy’s fiction shows signs of a soft brand of humanism. In his fiction, even if the author suggests the possibility of a certain order to the universe, he does specify humanity’s relation or relevance to it. Human life is limited to being a world of dreams, illusions and representations. Man seems constantly to be at a loss to grasp a proper understanding of the universe that surrounds him. When giving this representation of humanity historical consideration, it becomes deeply poignant, especially when taken in relation to novels like *Blood Meridian* (where the protagonists live in pantomime to the processes of U.S. development towards a form of imperialism) or *The Crossing* (where the events are situated chronologically in a progressive passage towards the postmodern era, symbolically represented by the explosion of the atomic bomb). McCarthy writes historical novels. His perspective when writing them seems to be that of an author who experiences postmodernism, while always maintaining a purely modernist heart. He reflects on his country, the United States of America, as a society of the spectacle in Debordian terms, a place where capitalism has reached a stage of development that is solely spectacle.

It is in this respect that there are many similarities between McCarthy, Pynchon and DeLillo. The three authors share a common perspective on their society. They look at society in dichotomous terms, yet in their work the individual is commonly held in sharp contrast to a system that tries in various ways to overwhelm him or her. The We/They opposition, which is recognizable both in Pynchon and DeLillo, is also developed in McCarthy through picaresque narratives that situate the protagonists in relation to his or her efforts to show resistance to social, political, and economic forces that threaten the individual with the danger of annihilation. Capitalist society devours its victims by many means. In Pynchon, this occurs through its entropic world of technology, while, in DeLillo,

the capitalist society menaces the individual through the multiplication of images and representations. Yet, in regards to McCarthy's works, it seems this happens rather through the relentless advance of a rationalism of the commodity. The postmodern society represented, in the fiction of the these three authors, develops without any restraint, and its development occurs at the expense of those who can see what is left behind in the process. Similarly to what is found in both DeLillo and Pynchon's novels, McCarthy continually depicts the way direct experience is distanced in the act of representation. At many points in his work, his characters are caught in situations where the disappearance of the real transforms their experience into a postmodern pantomime of a form of human existence that has lost all link to the real.

In the closing section of *The Crossing*, part two of the Border Trilogy, McCarthy's awareness of postmodern existence seems to come to the foreground, particularly in the author's tendency to transfigure contemporary problems into a forever unobtainable distant pastoral past. In the last scene of the novel, after having crossed the border between Texas and Mexico many times for many different reasons, relating to his troubled existence, McCarthy represents his hero Billy Parham, alone, somewhere at the border between the two countries, witnessing a strange dawn:

He woke in the white light of the desert noon and sat up in the ranksmelling blankets [...] The road was a pale grey in the light and the light was drawing away along the edges of the world. Small birds had wakened in the roadside desert bracken and begun to chitter and to flit about and out on the blacktops bands of tarantulas that had been crossing the road in the dark like landcrabs stood frozen at their articulations, arch as marionettes, testing with their measured octave tread the sudden jointed shadows of themselves beneath them.

He looked out down the road and he looked toward the fading light. Darkening shapes of cloud all along the northern rim [...] he looked again at the road which lay as before yet more dark and darkening still where it ran on the east and where there was no sun and there was dawn and when he looked again

toward the north the light was drawing away faster and that noon in which he'd woke was now become an alien dusk and now an alien dark.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 425

According to James Campbell<sup>218</sup>, the location and the time of this strange event witnessed by Billy correspond perfectly with those of the nuclear explosion at Trinity Site, which occurred on July 16, 1945. Moreover, McCarthy's description of the flash of light and the reactions of the animal-life seem to be drawn from the published accounts of witnesses of that explosion. Thus, Billy's experience of this artificial dawn is probably also an encounter with the explosion of an atomic bomb. In this way, McCarthy seems to close the novel on the dawn of postmodernity.

In the novel, Billy is characterized as being a cowboy. He lives in deep contact with nature, and his existence is structured by its cyclic rhythms. On witnessing the event, Billy loses all points of reference. The appearance of the false sun seems to disrupt any possibility of his former life. After the false sun disappears and darkness returns, McCarthy describes him, in the following way: "[he] sat in the road. He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and bowed his head and held his face in his hands wept."<sup>219</sup> In this description, he appears lost, overwhelmed by his past and by the uncertainties that have accumulated in his life. The real does not correspond to what he thought it was. At the beginning of the novel, McCarthy writes that Billy could "ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence."<sup>220</sup> From his horse, the author describes him as having the ability to name "features of the landscape and birds and animals in both spanish and english."<sup>221</sup> The world seems to open from under his eyes, as he exerts, what appears to be, full control over it. These descriptions, at the beginning of the novel, hold striking contrast with those found

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<sup>218</sup> James Campbell, "Seeking Evidence of the Hand of God in the World': Transforming Destruction in *The Crossing*." Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual International Conference on the Emerging Literature of the Southwest Culture (El Paso: U of Texas, 1996), 15

<sup>219</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Ibid.*, 426

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

at its end. Billy's world becomes disintegrates into an accumulation of illusions and unrecognizable appearances.

In addition, McCarthy gives a strong spectacular characterization to the atomic explosion at the end of *The Crossing*. Billy can only behave as a spectator while he confronts the strange dawn. Like a motion picture, he rapidly looks at the event unfolding in front of his eyes. McCarthy even compares the tarantulas to marionettes, as if some sort theatrical pantomime was happening in front of Billy. There is something profoundly allegorical in this image, which goes beyond the idea that Billy is simply witnessing an atomic explosion. Hidden behind the surface of the event, there seems to be this power of the spectacle to transform individual perceptions of the real. In this, the use of allegory reveals itself to be another essential similarity linking McCarthy, Pynchon and DeLillo. As is the case with both Pynchon and DeLillo, McCarthy seems possessed by the same postmodern allegorical impulse, elucidated by Craig Owens.

As Georg Guillemín has underlined, talking about *Blood Meridian*, “no approach other than the allegorical one will unite the novel's protagonists, plot action, and nature aesthetic in one homogeneous interpretation.”<sup>222</sup> Allegory is certainly a crucial element in McCarthy's work. Its use is dense with parabolic images, opening his fiction to a wide variety of interpretations. As a storyteller, he often focuses on elements of discourse that gain significance uniquely through their use as part of allegory. Guillemín defines these elements, which abound in McCarthy's novels, in terms of what he calls “emblems.” When approaching McCarthy's texts in realistic terms, their arbitrariness usually confuses the critic. His rhetoric and iconography are strongly parabolic, and, in uniquely concentrating

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<sup>222</sup> Georg Guillemín, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (College Station: Texas A & M UP, 2004), 73



on his works as allegorical compositions, one can unify the variegated elements which partake in the development of the plot.

This allegorical characteristic of McCarthy's work could, perhaps, open new paths in rethinking and reconfiguring his position in the American literary canon of the twentieth century. In particular, in comparing him with authors who share a common awareness of the issues involved in postmodernity one could be tempted into looking at his narrative in terms of its deeply connection with what, up until now, has be defined as the contemporary society of the spectacle, a society, which Pynchon and DeLillo seem to, perhaps, depict in clearer terms. The comparison can be certainly based on similar trends that are traceable in the three authors in their use of allegory, in their part in the same literary generation, but most of all in the omnipresence of the spectacle in McCarthy, especially in his southwestern novels. This use of spectacle is not only in allegorical terms, but as an instrument of power serving the expansion of capitalism and overwhelming the individual with the impossibility of experiencing the real. In addition, McCarthy, like Pynchon and DeLillo introduces the element of ambiguity that lies in the relationship between spectacle and spectator, wherein the spectacle is both a disrupting force and the expression of the spectator's desire. The spectacle in McCarthy, narrated in all its primitiveness, can thus be read as a force embedded in human character from its very beginning; his spectacle becomes a necessity which shapes human beings as those who experience the world mainly through mirrors, visions, projections of their identities, which distance themselves from reality.

As one of McCarthy's most important novels, the aim of this chapter is that of paralleling an analysis of *Blood Meridian*, with the prior analysis made on Pynchon, DeLillo and their link to the society of the spectacle. The necessity of focusing on only one

novel is originated by the fact that this critical endeavor has to be operated cautiously in order to maximize its potential. *Blood Meridian* is probably his novel that best lends itself to such an analysis, mainly because of its allegorical trait and the presence of a character like Judge Holden. He seems to embody all the features of a rhetoric of the spectacle that, for example, have been already pointed out in this thesis regarding Pierce Inverarity in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. Given these premises, *Blood Meridian* can be read in its totality as an allegory of the relationship between a spectator and a spectacle. This allegory, even if belonging to a distant past, deals with contemporary questions concerning the function of mass media in modern society and the disappearance of the real in the second half of the twentieth century.

*Blood Meridian* is a novel of loss and disappearance, a gradual descent into the absence of the real that overwhelms progress and modernity. As what seems to be a postmodern bildungsroman with traces of the gothic and grotesque imagery, it introduces the dialectic opposition between two protagonists. These include a kid, as an allegory of spectatorship, who experiences the impossibility of grasping reality in a tragic world always more distanced into a pantomime, but also Judge Holden, who serves as an allegory of spectacle, and becomes an almost mythological figure, controlling and promoting this distancing into representation. The book narrates the adventures of a troop of scalphunters led by John Joel Glanton, a mercenary who works for Mexican state governors against the Apaches; the nameless protagonist, the kid, stumbles into this company of scalphunters. He participates for two years in various slaughters until this gang of mercenaries is defeated by the Yuma on the Colorado River. However, more than the events, what gives significance to the story narrated by McCarthy is the presence of Judge Holden in Glanton's band. Holden represents a new vision of the world that will progressively shape America. It can

be considered a vision of violence, power, and war, all of which inhabit the progress and the future of the country. As the dark side of manifest destiny, Judge Holden guides Glanton's company with his rhetoric and power of knowledge. He understands his potential to use the spectacle for his own ends; through it, he commands his followers, by subjugating them to the force of representation. With such an antagonist, the journey of the kid thus becomes a journey that aims to establish a resistance to the control of the spectacle and the power of its seduction. In particular, towards the end of the novel, for the kid it is made clear that the only form of salvation in a world of tragedy and violence is to avoid the judge and his words. The kid has to escape this figure of power and control, but, ultimately, his attempted flight from the judge becomes impossible, because the spectacle permeates reality through and through, thus, following the kid wherever he goes.

The first time McCarthy names the protagonist he calls him "the child," inviting the reader to picture him in his rags and in the environment in which he grew up. Specifically, this environment is described as a solitary farm in the dark woods of Tennessee. "See the child,"<sup>223</sup> McCarthy writes at the beginning of the novel, and this introductory section bears many similarities with the way in which DeLillo opens *Underworld*. Just as McCarthy, DeLillo introduces a character in a way that invites the reader to "see" him and, in this way, recognize him in all his individuality. In addition, McCarthy, like DeLillo, follows his character, through a climax, until his entrance into history. The only difference is that Cotter Martin, DeLillo's character described in the prologue to *Underworld*, is entering history through a famous baseball game. In contrast, McCarthy's kid enters history, as the author writes, "divested of all that he has been,"<sup>224</sup> riding on a mule "in the

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<sup>223</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian; or, The Evening Redness in the West* (London: Picador, 1990), 3

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

spring of the year eighteen and forty-nine,”<sup>225</sup> in what was once called the republic of Fredonia. Both authors depict a similar movement of the individual who is initiated to the world and the real through. In particular, this occurs in *Blood Meridian* in the kid’s close encounter with death after having been shot in the back. The impact of this episode for the kid, in McCarthy’s novel, is comparable to that of the crucial scene described by DeLillo in which Cotter jumps over the ticket fence at Polo Stadium. Both authors situate these moments of initiation just before their characters witness a spectacle, specifically, in Cotter’s experience with the baseball game and, for the kid, in the events surrounding the religious revival in Nacogdoches. Thus, from its very opening, *Blood Meridian* offers a similar perspective to the ones already analyzed in the works of both DeLillo and Pynchon. The protagonist of the novel can be interpreted as a figure who allegorically introduces themes and motifs which permeate the story in a way that they go beyond the narrated events.

Writing about children and television, Cecelia Tichi reflects on the ambiguity of the function of the child in relation to the spectacle.<sup>226</sup> In particular, she suggests that the child who watches TV is always seen as precocious and sophisticated, while, at the same time, considered to be a hostage of violence in a sort of virtual wilderness. He or she becomes a kind of surrogate for the conflicts of adults who try to adapt themselves to the spectacle. Ultimately, “the TV child,” she writes, “is a character in an ongoing American allegory.”<sup>227</sup>

Like all allegories, the characters personify abstract qualities, and the action and settings represent the relationships among this abstractions. The children are the Innocents on a pilgrimage, the

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<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>226</sup> Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth*, 191.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

parents the Guardians who must at times seek guidance from educators and social scientists, the Experts, who can advise them on how to mediate between the Innocents and television. Television in this allegory is a metamorphic character, sometimes the Illuminator, at other times the Corruptor.<sup>228</sup>

The kid in *Blood Meridian* can be seen as the perfect embodiment of such an allegory. His namelessness seems to adequately represent the “abstract quality,” associable with this “every-kid” who becomes the victim of spectacles and mass media in contemporary society. In addition, he confronts a figure - the Judge – who corresponds perfectly with this role given to TV in Tichi’s allegory, as Holden becomes, for the kid, both a kind of illuminator and corruptor. In terms of setting, the prevalence of the wilderness, in *Blood Meridian*, appears to serve in the representation of the violent, “spectacular” environment, which overwhelms young people in front of a TV screen.

In terms of this allegory, a series of elements contribute, in *Blood Meridian*, to its structure. The novel is particularly atypical in its relation to the bildungsroman. There is no concrete development in the kid’s journey other than what seems to be a growing awareness of the impossibility of confronting the *real*. In relation to what would be considered a protagonist of a novel of personal growth and development, the kid shows himself to be more of a watcher than a man of action. While violently participating in all the slaughters initiated by Glanton’s company, he, nevertheless, continually remains in the role of a witness. His violence can be considered almost indirect, being mediated through the narrated spectacle. As his experiences, in the narration, mostly surface as a form of spectatorship, the kid’s development, in terms of a character in the story, is most essentially determined by the introduction of various spectacles. An allegorical reading attributes a special significance to this particular narrative structure in the McCarthy’s

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<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

novel. At the level of allegory, the specific form of the bildungsroman, indeed, becomes meaningful, as the sole lesson learned by the kid shows itself to be the unavoidable disappearance of the real.

In large part through his omnipresence in all of the main events in the novel, Judge Holden, in terms of his relation to kid, comes to be the principal narrative element through which this young protagonist experiences the world. As an antagonist, the judge builds the dimension of spectacle in front of the kid and the other mercenaries. He creates an epistemological frame that encompasses reality and, like a TV screen, becomes the sole way through which Glanton's company can interact with the world. In this respect, the judge also acquires the abstract qualities of allegory that are underlined by Tichi. His ambiguous rhetoric of spectacle evokes that of the mass media in the twentieth century, as it is used in order to establish a form of political and social dominion that would allow the Judge control his followers.

Yet, in addition to the form of bildungsroman, there is another narrative characteristic that is preponderant in the shaping of motifs in *Blood Meridian*. Specifically, McCarthy often organizes the text as a fable, reinforcing its allegorical traits. At different points in the story, for example, characters are defined as a "loutish knight[s] beriddled by a troll,"<sup>229</sup> "like fairybook beasts,"<sup>230</sup> or changelings. Many references to the dimension of fable seem to characterize the novel's structure and development. If McCarthy describes the American southwest of the middle of nineteenth century as part of a fable, then, it becomes clear that the historicity of narrated events is transposed in a different interpretative realm. McCarthy's interest in history seems to be directed towards the significance of the narrated historical moment rather than towards single historical

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<sup>229</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 105

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

episodes. For the United States, the middle of the nineteenth century not only represents the wake of the Mexican wars, but, also, establishes itself as a symbolic moment, in which the nation was beginning to shape itself as a model of geographic expansion and political dominion for an entire continent. Reshaped under the form of the fable and the bildungsroman, a moment of change and transformation is reinvented, becoming the allegory of a present confronting the cultural shifts of postmodernity.

From the very beginning of his peregrinations through the West, the kid shows a self-awareness of his status, continually experiencing reality as a spectator. After having survived a Comanche attack, the kid, together with another man named Sproule, witness a mirage, while wandering through ruins and decadence. This appears to both of them as an immense lake, mountains and a distant city. They, then, decide to fall asleep there. However, when they wake up, there is “no city and no trees and no lake only a barren dusty plain.”<sup>231</sup> Sproule questions the kid about the disappearance of the lake, and the boy answers: “People see what they want to see.”<sup>232</sup> In this passage, the kid seems to show his understanding of the power of desire hidden behind any spectacle, including the necessity of the spectator to recognize himself in his or her own desires.

The kid’s arrest by Mexican soldiers for playing a part in Captain White’s expedition against the Mexicans also serves as a fundamental experience for the kid. This event is also lived as a spectacle but seems more ambiguous than the others. Mainly, this ambiguity relates to the dual role he plays in the scene as a simultaneous spectator and spectacle. Once he is arrested, he is brought out in front of the population of a small town in a sort of parade passing through “a traveling medicine show, a primitive circus,”<sup>233</sup> with “music like

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<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

a fanfare growing the louder.”<sup>234</sup> In becoming a prisoner, the kid is thus transformed into a spectacle, as both a symbol and representation of the strength of the soldiers who captured him.

During the following days, this pantomime continues, as the kid is transferred, with other members of White’s expedition, to Chihuahua City. Before entering the city, their fictionality is underlined in the way the sergeant guiding them, ties their wrists in the manner of prisoners, wrists that would have been otherwise left free, in preparing them for the spectacle. Yet, in parading through the streets of the city, they not only become spectacle, but, at the same time, also reveal themselves to be watchers or, more precisely, spectators of the humanity, inhabiting that land. It is as if the game, which is enacted by this event, permits a total redefinition and exchange of roles in the relationship between spectacle and spectators. The kid and the other prisoners proceed in their movement in an almost in a cinematographic way, simultaneously, looking at the spectators and being perceived as spectacle, as McCarthy describes it:

They passed old alms-seekers by the church door with their seamy palms outheld and maimed beggars sad-eyed in rags and children asleep in the shadows with flies walking their dreamless faces [...] dark coppers [...] scribes [...] naked dogs that seemed composed of bone entirely [...] small orphans<sup>235</sup>

While entering the city, in a way that recreates a sort of spatial and temporal suspension belonging to filmic narration, McCarthy enumerates a list of things the kid and the others watch. Similar to within a panoramic view, this desperate world of the spectators unfolds itself in front the kid’s eyes, developing into a doubled spectacle that underlines the role of watching inside of the novel. These enumerations are indeed a crucial characteristic of

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<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.



*Blood Meridian*. In them, Guillemin, while quoting Owens, recognizes another distinctive sign of its allegorical nature: “Film composes narratives out of a succession of concrete images, which makes it particularly suited to allegory’s essential pictogrammatism.”<sup>236</sup> However, the most significant moments in which the kid appears clearly as spectator are those in which he directly confronts Judge Holden. It is only through the judge that the allegory shows itself complete; it is his overwhelming presence in the novel which transforms the reality around him into a huge illusionary representation.

The judge’s first appearance in the novel occurs during a particular kind of spectacle, namely, a religious revival, which, during the nineteenth century, was considered to be one of the main forms of entertainment. Many historians have pointed out these revivals represented a sort of anticipation of communication techniques used in the twentieth century mass media culture. Although, in appearance, they could be considered to be a rather primitive form of spectacle, these religious revivals, within a society on the cusp of capitalist development, already encompassed all the characteristics of modern mass media. The revival is held by a Reverend Green, whose name evokes the color of the TV set in Oedipa Maas’ living room in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Sue Ann Corcoran’s eyes in DeLillo’s *Underworld*, and as a spectacle it offers all that the public could desire, including: the inevitability and beauty of sin and a possibility of redemption.

A revival is a “show” in which one recounts real life experiences, where the life of an individual is used to serve as an example. These revivals, at the same time, have a strong cathartic function. Reverend Green is telling this kind of story, when the kid enters “the ratty canvas tent”<sup>237</sup> where the revival is being held. The Reverend’s sermon concerns person who, from his understanding of the world, has fallen victim to the devil. He tries to

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<sup>236</sup> In Guillemin, 77.

<sup>237</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 5.

make this individual aware of his condition of sinner. Gathered under the tent, the crowd is be-witched by the spectacle. Then, something unexpected happens; Judge Holden makes his entrance into the tent:

An enormous man dressed in an oilcloth slicker had entered the tent and removed his hat. He was bald as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them. He was close on to seven feet in height and he stood smoking a cigar even in this nomadic house of God...<sup>238</sup>

His violent entry disrupts the sermon while, at the same time, revealing the true nature of the spectacle, in other words, its inherent falseness. Ironically, even in the process of unveiling the illusory nature of truth produced in the spectacle, it seems any revelation of truth is misleading, constantly substituting itself for another lie. In many ways, this scene, in the novel, seems to depict Debord's ideas concerning the nature of truth in a society of the spectacle, as he writes, "truth is moment of falsehood."<sup>239</sup> Particularly, the apparition of Judge Holden is in itself spectacular. It is a spectacle entering another spectacle. The crowd becomes silent, as their attention is completely absorbed by the violent arrival of this mesmerizing character on the scene. The judge, at this point, initiates his own spectacle, telling a story that serves to transform Reverend Green into an evil person. The Reverend is claimed to be an "imposter", and accused of "hold[ing] no papers of divinity from any institution recognized or improvised."<sup>240</sup> The judge even alleges that he is wanted by the law in a number of different states on a variety of charges, including the rape of an eleven year-old girl and "having [had] congress with a goat."<sup>241</sup> The story the Judge fabricates for the audience is a spectacle, in many ways much like the one of Reverend Green. Judge

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>239</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 14.

<sup>240</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 7.

Holden uses a similar rhetoric and many of the same techniques. From the fury that is unleashed by the crowd on the Reverend following his speech, one could assume the Judge produces a spectacle that holds a greater power over the public.

In some way, the judge seems to introduce an element of reality into the tent/spectacle. He reveals to the public the inherent falsity of the show. He does this, as if he wants to make the public aware of their critical capacity for differentiating truth from falsehood. Yet, instead, he seems to only complicate their perceptions of the real. After the tent collapses like a “huge and wounded medusa”<sup>242</sup> and the judge is at the bar giving out whiskeys, someone asks him how he had obtained so much information on the Reverend. He, then, rather innocently replies that he has never heard of him:

Judge, how did you come to have the goods on that no-account?  
Goods? Said the judge.  
When was you in Forth Smith?  
Forth Smith?  
Where did you know him to know all that stuff on him?  
You mean the Reverend Green?  
Yessir. I reckon you was in Fort Smith fore ye come out here.  
I was never in Fort Smith in my life. Doubt that he was.  
They looked from one to the other.  
Well where was it you run up on him?  
I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of  
him.  
He raised his glass and drank.<sup>243</sup>

Thus, the Judge also acknowledges the spuriousness of his own spectacle. His spectacle, therefore, seems to be no different from any other. Its real aim is not to serve “justice,” but, rather, it is to reveal the falsehood through which people experience the real, as it is distanced into representation. Judge Holden is a man of the spectacle. Knowing its power and rhetoric, he uses his knowledge to control, but also “to insulate and amuse.”<sup>244</sup> Unlike

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>244</sup> I am using Edward R. Murrow’s words, already quoted in the introduction.

the violent reaction of the crowd to the spectacle in the tent, the response to Holden's truth shows to be neither that of rage nor anger, but rather that of irony. After the judge announces that he has never truly heard of Reverend Green, those at the bar remain silent, but after a while someone starts to laugh. The ironic nature of what the judge has just instilled in his audience is understood. Everything is false and there are uniquely representations of the reality with which life is experienced and decisions are taken.

The tent scene corresponds to the first scene in which the kid encounters Judge Holden. Before being with him in Glanton's band of scalphunters, the kid only sees him one other time, when their eyes meet, while watching the hotel fire for which he himself is responsible. The tent scene is a perfect introduction to the evil character of the judge. His main power is a rhetorical one. His rhetoric power transforms everything he talks of into a spectacle. During their journey, when, Glanton's band has a dispute with some Mexican soldiers over the use of some pistols, Judge Holden uses his rhetoric in order to resolve it. Talking with the sergeant commanding the soldiers, he makes a formal introduction of his comrades. When presenting Jackson, an Africa-American in the company, he seems to turn the man into a living spectacle:

He sketched for the sergeant a problematic career of the man before them, his hands drafting with a marvelous dexterity the shapes of what varied paths conspired here in the ultimate authority of the extant – as he told them – like strings drawn together through the eye of a ring. He adduced for their consideration references to the children of Ham, the lost tribes of Israelites, certain passages from the Greek poets, anthropological speculations as to the propagation of the races in their dispersion and isolation through the agency of geological cataclysm and an assessment of racial traits with respect to climatic geographical influences.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

In this passage, through Judge Holden's powers of rhetoric, the African-American is transformed from a mere man into living spectacle of history. This offers the judge the opportunity of distracting the sergeant's attention from the dispute over the pistols, as his knowledge of the world and of the real holds an almost hypnotizing power over him. The Judge constructs an image, a representation of something "real," which stands before them. In doing so, he demonstrates the way in which representation shows itself to be the sole possibility for experiencing things. When Jackson inquires about what was said about him to the sergeant, McCarthy describes Judge Holden, saying: "It is not necessary that the principals here be in possession of the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding,"<sup>246</sup> while the Judge adds to this: "words are things." Through this statement, the Judge stresses that only representation has the power to convey truth.

To better understand the role of Judge Holden as an embodiment of a culture of the spectacle primitively planting its roots in the America of the nineteenth century, one can look at another very important passage in *Blood Meridian*. In this passage, the judge operates as a director in a game of representations and interpretations, which engages the entire band of scalphunters. At a certain point in the novel, the company is joined by a family of itinerant jugglers seeking passage to Janos. They are clearly related to the realm of spectacle, being dressed "in fools costumes with stars and halfmoons embroidered on."<sup>247</sup> Although Glanton seems to accept it as something inevitable, their presence is unwelcomed. One night, as the band is camping on a windy plateau, he asks the father of the family if they can tell their fortune. The juggler begins a ritual through which, using cards and the oracular power of wife, they foresee the future of the company. The structure

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<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

of the ritual, in the novel, is given in the following way. The juggler takes the woman away from the fire around which the others are sitting, and her eyes are bound. He, then, asks each member of the company to choose a card. Following this, the woman, in a sort of trance, begins to talk about their future in the form of images.

Even if Glanton is the one asking the jugglers to foretell the future, it is the judge who, for two reasons, is able to very quickly take control of the ritual. The first reason for this is because his fellow mercenaries want an explanation of the woman's visions. Secondly he is the one who instructs the juggler as to whom will become the subject of their predictions. However, it needs to be underlined that there exists no fortune telling at all. The woman, with her eyes bound, can sense the person who picks a card, but she never says anything regarding their future. If she does attempt to say something, for some mysterious reason, she is then stopped by someone in the company. When, at last, the judge orders the juggler to read Glanton's future, the card the boss picks disappears, and the woman finally seems to foresee the tragic future of the band. "Like a great ponderous djinn," McCarthy writes that it is the judge, who intervenes, "step[ing] through the fire and the flames deliver[ing] him up as if he were in some way native to their element,"<sup>248</sup> and, later, putting his arms around Glanton, as if wanting to protect him.

In this passage, with the game of shadows that are enacted, McCarthy seems to narrate a kind of pantomime, stressing the element of fire and its light. As strange figures, the characters move in the ritual, almost playing the roles represented on the cards. In this small spectacle recreated by the jugglers, Judge Holden plays the part of a director, controlling the game. McCarthy describes him sitting "upwind from the fire naked to the

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<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

waist [...] like some great pale deity.”<sup>249</sup> He smiles at the ritual, whereas the others are mesmerized by the jugglers’ oracular powers. After the ritual ends, the author comments on what has been narrated, describing the way in which the family of “bufones” returns to “their strange chattels.”<sup>250</sup> He reflects on their role in writing that it is as if they move “both in card and in substance under consignment to some third and other destiny;”<sup>251</sup> by signaling the dichotomy card/substance, which can also be interpreted as representation/reality, McCarthy evokes the essence of this ritual. Life is represented through cards, and this representation overwhelms it. It becomes as if life is already determined by the spectacle. The “third and other destiny” is very similar to the judge, because as a character he controls the life of those around him, guiding them and, ultimately, destroying them.

From this perspective, the judge resembles the allegories of spectacle that have been analyzed in the narratives of Pynchon and DeLillo in the preceding chapters. Like Inverarity in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Blicero in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and the mass media described in *White Noise*, he is an obscure and mysterious force that operates in history by controlling the destinies of those, ending up in his path. In the novel, he is alternately defined as deity, icon, and juggler, while slowly building an aura of knowledge and truth around him. In doing so, for any understanding of the real, he forces his fellow mercenaries to be both reliant on him and on his spectacular rhetoric.

The tenth chapter of *Blood Meridian* centers mainly on an account of Tobin, one of the members of the gang, concerning the first time Glanton’s company runs into the Judge. It gives a lot information about the Judge’s character. When Judge Holden encounters the

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<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

scalphunters, he is sitting alone in the desert and the band is lost, hungry and having no more gunpowder. Indians are on their trail, and they are on the point of death. Yet, the judge magically guides them, fabricating powder out of nitre and brimstone and, ultimately, allowing them to fend off and kill all the “savages.” On this occasion, the judge shows his knowledge of the secrets of technology and the necessary rhetoric for dominating people. While guiding the band, he is described by Tobin, in giving the following address: “It was like a sermon but it was no such sermon as any man of us had ever heard before.”<sup>252</sup> The aim of his speech is to convince his followers that the earth, as McCarthy writes, “contained all good things within her.”<sup>253</sup> When he finally attracts the Indians toward Glanton and his gang, he acts out a fake scenario, a spectacle that, as Tobin recalls it, “would have brought tears to [one’s] eyes.”<sup>254</sup> He waves a white linen shirt in the view of the Indians and, while speaking in Spanish, he convinces them that the rest of the company is dead and he, the only one alive. This scene offers a strong example of the way in which the judge operates throughout the story, creating spectacles in order to manipulate people. The function of spectacles in McCarthy’s novel thus evokes that of the mass media in the narration of both Pynchon and DeLillo. Also, one could add that most of the characters in the novel behave as watchers, who are influenced by Judge Holden’s spectacles. Therefore, in McCarthy’s work, the allegory seems complete. In other words, spectacle and spectators are depicted by the author in a nineteenth century pantomime, emphasizing the presence of violence in the history of American society, while, at the same time, clarifying the particular role of the spectacle in the building of capitalist society. Judge Holden nourishes the desire for violence in his followers. Their violent desire seems

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<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.



dependent on his type of character, which gives them both inspiration and guidance. Like mass media's effects on the twentieth century, Judge Holden provokes an ontological shift within the story. Specifically, he marks the lives of people around him in using deceptive parables and forms of representation, which claim an interpretative stance on their position towards the real. Holden's followers picture themselves in a deterministic world where all the destinies are already written according to the spectacle. They find themselves in a position, which is not different, for example, from the one of Slothrop and other characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*: puppets in the hand of a mysterious force that drives them through history.

In this landscape that seems profoundly organized by the dynamics of spectacle (footnote: it seems the landscape communicates with the scalphunters through, appearances, shadows, and nature's language), Judge Holden becomes a kind of powerful priest who introduces a new dimension to the human experience of reality. Particularly, the Judge indoctrinates his followers into a world whose experience is shaped by the power of representation. He has a leather ledger book, in which he takes note of various things encountered throughout his journey. He represents everything with perfect drawings that astonish those around him. Yet, often, in drawing these perfect sketches, he destroys the objects represented, in a process in which the real is annihilated, as it is distanced in the act of representation. When asked about the function of this notebook and the reason for his sketches, he replies that his intention is "to expunge them from the memory of man,"<sup>255</sup> while adding:

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<sup>255</sup> *ibid.*, 140.

What is to be deviated to jot from the book wherein it's writ.  
How could it? It would be a false book and a false book is no  
book at all.<sup>256</sup>

The Judge constructs a discourse on reality in which representation substitutes itself for the real, as image replaces substance, and possession of everything is determined by the endless repetition of spectacles and rituals throughout history. To explain his vision of the world to the company, he uses stories and parables, dealing with the same questions of representation and reality that his listeners watch “in the manner of a recital.”<sup>257</sup>

In one of the stories that he tells, there is a harness maker who transforms himself into an Indian, who, then, begs for money, claiming his profession to be insufficient for making a living. This harness maker, dressed up as an Indian, encounters a young man who discovers him to be a “white man,” and, thus, accuses him of duplicity. The young man, then, unsuccessfully attempts to lead the harness maker into both religiosity and brotherhood, as the latter kills the former without reason, despite the convincing nature of the young man’s words. Following all this, the harness maker proceeds in inventing another story and spectacle in which he convinces the young man’s family that they had been robbed and the young man killed. The way Judge Holden tells the story fascinates his listeners, as it inspires various interpretations. The judge, however, guides their attention to what he calls “a rider to the tale.” The young traveler had a bride who bore a child in her womb. The judge, then, focuses on the way in which this child grows up. Notably, as he points out, this child, while never really knowing anything of his father’s existence, holds this mysterious paternal figure as a sort of icon or model through the course of his life. McCarthy, then, describes the Judge in concluding in the following way: “The world

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<sup>256</sup> *ibid.*, 141.

<sup>257</sup> *ibid.*, 143.

which he inherits bears him false witness.”<sup>258</sup> In his conclusion, it seems as if the judge wants to underline that deception is the essence of human experience in a world defined by its spectacles, pantomimes, and representations.

The environment in which Judge Holden tells his stories is an American landscape alive with history and past. The places that Glanton’s company explores becomes full on inspiration for the Judge, as he interprets objects encountered along his path in terms of allegories, containing messages destined for their experience of the present. “The tools, the art, the building,” as McCarthy describes him saying, “these things stand in judgment on the latter races [...] All progressions from a higher to a lower order are marked by ruins and mystery and a residue of nameless age.”<sup>259</sup> There seems to be traces of Walter Benjamin’s influence in Judge Holden’s particular vision of the world. In his interpretation of ruins as the allegory of a disappearing past, certain aspects of Benjamin’s theoretical ideas find a certain type of distorted parallel in the Judge’s awareness of and approach to allegory, in terms of an instrument of progress and truth. In his perception of the secrecy of the world and its relation to the real, the Judge seems to operate outside of history, using the rhetoric of spectacle to control human destiny.

Judge Holden deletes traces of the encountered past and, ultimately, devouring everything found on its path, by simultaneously subtracting it from the real and inscribing it in the pages his notebook. He endeavors to transform existence into representation, in the hopes of reducing the plurality of life into being symbols and messages of which he can manipulate and use for his own ends. When they camp at the Hueco tanks, they discover “rocks covered with ancient paintings [...] of man and animals and of the chase.”<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> *ibid.*, 145.

<sup>259</sup> *ibid.*, 146.

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*, 173.

Moving confidently among these paintings, the judge is then described manipulatively tracing certain of these images:

When he had done and while there yet was light he returned to a certain stone ledge and sat a while and studied again the work there. Then he rose and with a piece of broken chert he scrapped away one of the designs, leaving no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been. Then he put up his book and returned to the camp.<sup>261</sup>

As soon as he copies the images, the judge needs them to disappear. The imposition of his presence in the realm of fiction serves as the only way in which the Judge can obtain full control of the real; he needs to annul any trace of living presence in order to conduct their transformation into representation. He can thus use these representations for his own ends, constructing parables through them through which to shape his followers' vision of the world.

The world narrated by McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* is often organized as spectacle and pantomime. When the Yuma finally defeat Glanton's gang on Colorado river, they are depicted as "some painted troupe of mimefolk,"<sup>262</sup> as they look at the skulls of their enemies as "prefiguration of their own ends."<sup>263</sup> It is almost as if they, themselves, can perceive the allegorical nature of this representation. This same Judge Holden instructs the rest of the company that the world is, as he metaphorically describes it, "[a] hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream [...], an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow;"<sup>264</sup> in a similarly spectacular way, the judge acts freely and with ease, governing destinies through his rhetoric. The final chapter of the novel is entirely dedicated to a comprehensive depiction of Judge Holden. At this point in the novel, McCarthy gives thorough attention to

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<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

this character in describing his relation to the kid, but, also, focuses on the dichotomy spectacle/spectator. McCarthy's emphasis on this dichotomy seems particularly apparent in a pantomimic situation that develops almost in a dreamlike sequence, wherein the kid and the judge confront each other.

Chronologically, the chapter narrates an event that occurs many years following the defeat of the scalphunters. The kid is no more a kid, but a mature man who goes through life gradually losing the impulse for violence, which drove him in his youth. During the course of his life, he tries to resist and escape from the judge. Yet, when finally meeting him again in a bar in Fort Griffin, Texas, he perceives the unavoidability of their encounter. The essential element of this encounter is that it develops while a spectacle is going on. This is a particularly strange spectacle that serves the judge, who defines it as ritual, but, also, as an allegory of his *Weltanschauung*. The strangeness of this spectacle is produced by its division in different fragments, the paradoxes it contains, but, in addition, the symbols it seems to use. Everything that the judge says on this occasion sounds like a commentary on this spectacle. In addition, it seems to simultaneously function as a perfect conclusive reflection on a major theme developed throughout the book, namely, the act of distancing the real through its representation.

When the kid enters the bar, a show is being performed by a little girl playing a barrel organ and a dancing bear in a crinoline. While the two are on the stage, an old man in a tyrolean costume moves among the tables collecting money from the spectators. The judge is among them, and, in the way the author depicts him, he is revealed to be situated at the heart of America, as the McCarthy writes:

every kind of man, herder and bullwhacker and drover and freighter and miner and hunter and soldier and pedlar and gambler and drifter and drunkard and thief and he was among

the dregs of the earth in beggary a thousand years and he was among the scapegrace scions of eastern dynasties<sup>265</sup>

Yet, simultaneously, he looks different from the others, as if at the head of this imaginary mixture of cultural in the American West. He is enrooted in this mix of culture, yet, at the same time distanced from it. Mainly, he becomes a figure that seems to encompass all the different elements, contributing to the shaping of the American continent.

Although in appearance more simplistic, the spectacle of the little girl and her bear does not distinguishes itself from prior spectacles. Underlining its representative potential, McCarthy writes: “the shadow of the act [or the spectacle] which the candlelight constructed upon the wall might have gone begging for referents in any daylight world.”<sup>266</sup> Yet, one of the spectators decides to interrupt the spectacle abruptly by shooting the bear. In the panic, following the shot, when McCarthy describes a woman going on to the stage, saying “It’s all over, it’s all over,” the judge approaches the kid, inviting him to reflect on what they have just seen: “Do you believe it’s all over, son?” he asks.

This question becomes the point of departure, but also the arrival, of an ongoing reflection which molds the novel throughout its development. As soon as the judge begins to speak, another spectacle begins, as the woman announces the commencement of a dance. The beginning of this other spectacle gives the judge a point reference for the explanation that he offers to the kid. “You’re here for the dance,”<sup>267</sup> McCarthy describes him saying to the kid. In this statement the judge seems to suggest that there is a spectacle that fulfills human destiny for everyone. According to the Judge, one must accept the spectacle and be part of it; whoever tries to resist it, by refusing to dance, succumbs to living the impossibility of existence outside of the spectacle:

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<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

This is an orchestration for an event. For a dance in fact. The participants will be appraised of their roles at the proper time [...] the dance is the thing that contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is no necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well<sup>268</sup>

A dance is waiting for the kid, a spectacle prepared for him and his destiny. He cannot subtract himself from it. If he does, that same spectacle will overwhelm him. When, deciding not to participate in it, as he leaves the judge, this latter follows him. In what appears to be a mortal embrace, the kid is killed by the judge, finally annihilating the spectator by grabbing him with his arms.

The last paragraph of *Blood Meridian* is entirely dedicated to the dance and the judge's domination it. McCarthy repeats constantly that "he never sleeps," and that "he will never die,"<sup>269</sup> thus stressing the symbolic value of the judge in his eternal timelessness. Everything seems to evolve around him and his spectacular presence. He is the only one to survive the events narrated concerning Glanton's gang. His force is that of representation that substitutes itself the real, transforming it into a pantomime. The spectacle, through judge Holden, becomes a strong element of control and submission. In Debordian terms, it functions as an accumulation of images distancing the real from the realm of direct experience.

In "'A false book is no book at all': the ideology of representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy," Holloway starts from the premise that "art necessarily tells us something about the historical moment in which it is produced,"<sup>270</sup> in order to stress that McCarthy's work gains particular significance especially when one investigates his novels

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<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 328-329.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>270</sup> David Holloway, "'A false book is no book at all': the ideology of representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy," in *Myth, legend, dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy* edited by Rick Wallach, 185-200. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 186

from an historical perspective. When Holloway analyzes the figure of Judge Holden, he comes to the conclusion that his ability in working with representations is clearly the symptom of the judge's acquired political power over the material world. It is through his mastery of the act of representation that he can exert control over all those who stand in his path. Following Holloway's views, one may question the historical meaning of such assumptions on Judge Holden.

*Blood Meridian* was written in 1985, in the same period in which two other essential novels of the American "postmodern canon" were published: DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Carpenter's Gothic* by William Gaddis. These two works similarly include many direct references to world of mass media and to the society of the spectacle in general. Yet McCarthy's novel, partakes in a similar way to the postmodern culture, serving as the inspiration for both DeLillo and Gaddis. The American capitalist society of the 1980's perfectly embodies Debord's prophecies concerning the spectacle's way of distancing lived experience through the act of representation. In particular, the accumulation of images and icons has gained a strong political relevance, by which social and economic control become directly linked with the control of mass media. Similarly to what is suggested by Holloway regarding Judge Holden: "a capacity for representation [...] gives political power over the world;"<sup>271</sup> Thus, even if chronologically and geographically distant from the ones investigated by other postmodern authors, the America McCarthy narrates, bears a similar preoccupations with issues relating to the rise of mass media and the ontological shift caused by them. In this analysis, it has been shown that an allegorical reading of McCarthy's fiction can serve as an important way of connecting it with questions pertaining to an historical reconstruction of literary postmodernism in the United States.

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<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.





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