" 'Consume or die. That's the mandate of the culture. And it all ends up in the dump': Consumerism and Waste in the Novels of Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon"

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Thomas Pynchon frequently draws upon the scientific concept of entropy in order to describe his fear that the world is running out of energy. Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics states that within a closed system (such as the universe) all progress tend towards disorder, a state also known as "entropy" (Friedman 84). Entropy is also a measure of the energy in a system that is not convertible into work. The higher the level of entropy, the less energy available, until finally a state of inertia or stagnation is reached. Wittgenstein's assertion that: "The world is all that is the case" (Wittgenstein 5) is echoed throughout Pynchon's first novel *V* as an encoded warning to the characters that their world does indeed represent the kind of closed system in which entropy thrives. The world presented in Pynchon's novels closely reflects Jean Baudrillard's claim that the contemporary world is no more than a simulacrum, replete with the empty signs and signifiers of consumerism, but lacking any depth or significance: "We live in a world in which there is more and more information, and less and less meaning." (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 6). The proliferation of commodities and their empty meanings is widely cited as the reason why the contemporary world has descended into chaos and superficiality. This essay proposes to examine the representation of consumerism in the novels of Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, paying particular attention to its bi-product waste. Waste features widely in the fictional worlds of these authors, representing both the epitome of a superficial culture driven entirely by the demands of the marketplace but also, conversely, a potential source of rebellion to the dominance of consumerism as a signifying system. The central question posed by the essay is whether waste, an intrinsic part of the system of commodity production, is inherently destructive or if it can indeed constitute an unlikely source of transcendence.

An acknowledgement of the central role played by consumerism in American society is not a new development in American literature. As early as 1877, Christopher Newman, hero of Henry James' *The American*, equates his idea of comfort with: "Possessing a number of patented mechanical devices─half of which he should never have occasion to use" (James 86). Novelists such as John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West and Flannery O'Connor, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, testify to the growing strength of consumerism as the dominant American ethos[i]. The fiction written from the mid-1960s onwards, however, demonstrates a significant change in attitudes towards consumerism. One defining characteristic of the more recent fiction is the tendency of the commodity to be subordinated to its image. This progression is noted by Baudrillard who abandoned his original project of extending "the Marxist critique of capitalism to areas beyond the scope of the mode of production"[ii] when he realized that Marx's analysis of commodity production was hopelessly outdated. The reason for this was that capitalism was now predominantly concerned with the production of signs, images and sign systems, rather than with the commodities themselves. While not all theorists agree with Baudrillard's rejection of Marxism─Jameson, for example, regards the contemporary situation as the latest development within capitalism rather than as a radical break from it (Jameson 55)─his equation of the modern world with a giant simulacrum composed of self-referential signs which are not tied to any specific meanings has received widespread support from theorists such as Eagleton, who points to its: "Depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive…" nature (Eagleton vii). One obvious consequence of this profusion of signs is that the signifiers of consumerism─the packaging, brand names and designer labels─increasingly replace the

physical commodity as the object of people's desires. In fact, in the novels discussed in the course of this essay, waste─or, what is left over once the commodities have been emptied of meaning and substance─is often valued more than the consumer goods themselves.

The novels of Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon are firmly situated in the contemporary commodity-filled world. When David Bell, narrator of DeLillo's first novel *Americana*, introduces himself as a: "Child of Godard and Coca-Cola" (DeLillo, *Americana* 269), he neatly summarizes the preoccupations of many of the protagonists who base their identities on the signifiers and representations offered to them by the dominant forces of consumerism and the mass media. Waste, moreover, plays a central role in the lives of DeLillo and Pynchon's characters, with many of them defining themselves less through what they consume than through the waste they generate. David Bell's conviction that it is the external packaging rather than the commodities themselves that constitutes the main core of his being, draws our attention to the intrinsic relationship that exists between consumption and waste: "My pockets full of scraps of paper, index cards, neatly creased sheets, Scotch-taped fragments….what detritus and joy" (DeLillo, *Americana* 269). However, although both DeLillo and Pynchon regard consumerism and the endless packaging it generates as the main entropic force in contemporary society, they differ in their assessment of the role played by waste. DeLillo sees waste only as a negative force, underlying society and propelling it towards its own destruction. Pynchon, on the other hand, sees waste as a potentially liberating and transcending force, disrupting the homogenizing drive of consumerism.

Many of DeLillo's characters introduce themselves to us through their clothes, as through the designer labels they wear are what give them substance. It is significant that when he is told of his mother's impending death, David Bell immediately immerses himself in a detailed examination of his clothing: "I was wearing white Top-Siders, white sweatsocks, a pair of olive chinos, and an old basketball jersey, white with blue trim and lettering, bearing the number nine. While we spoke I studied these articles of clothing intensely (DeLillo, *Americana* 168). Bell's bid to keep unwanted emotion at bay is mirrored by Lyle Wynant in *Players* who checks the contents of his pockets with unhealthy frequency in the belief that if he knows exactly where his possessions are, his own place in the world is assured: "Lyle checked his pockets for change, keys, wallet, cigarettes, pen and memo pad. He did this six or seven times a day….It was a routine that required no conscious planning yet reassured him, and this was supremely important, of the presence of the objects and their locations" (DeLillo, *Players* 26). The point, as James Axton explains in *The Names*, is that objects comfort the characters because they define both their abilities and their limits: "Objects are the limits we desperately need. They show us where we end. They dispel our sadness, temporarily" (DeLillo, *The Names* 133). In a world increasingly characterized by a lack of structure, the physical presence of their possessions thus often constitutes the only way in which DeLillo's characters can define their role or place in society. To possess and consume are thus crucial activities for an integrated and healthy sense of psychological well-being.

This dependence on possessions to insulate oneself from the terrifying chaos of the postmodern world reaches its ultimate manifestation in *White Noise*, in which the Gladney family, as Saltzman puts it: "With the urgency of addicts, accumulate material possessions to defend their sense of presence, to lend them personal density and the illusion of spiritual 'smugness'" (Saltzman 812-3). Jack Gladney describes the relief he feels when his ATM card works, thus validating his status as part of a vast system of consumers: "Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 46). Jack also describes the feeling of security that he and his wife derive from a carload of groceries, again as if to imply that the sheer weight and plenitude of their purchases will protect them: "It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases….in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security

and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls—it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 20).

Jack Gladney's description of shopping as a life-affirming activity is, of course ironic, given that there is some evidence that the commodities that flood the world of *White Noise* are themselves the main source of the phenomenon that gives the novel its title. The "dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 36) which pervades the supermarket scenes throughout the book reminds us that although consumerism might be viewed by many of the characters as constituting a defence against the external turbulence, its overwhelming presence will ultimately destabilize meaning and reduce the world to a stifling system of unconnected signs and symbols. Consumerism, in other words, is the primary source of the increasingly entropic surrounding environment.

There is some evidence that human life has already begun to be subordinated to the world of signs. The students who attend the university at which Jack Gladney teaches are introduced solely through their possessions, a fact that troubles Jack although he is not quite sure why: "Things, boxes. Why do these possessions carry such sorrowful weight? There is a darkness attached to them, a foreboding" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 6). Jack Gladney eventually realizes that is too is in danger of being suffocated by his possessions and during a period of severe anxiety about his impending death begins to divest himself of what he has hoarded over the years: "I threw away picture-frame wire, metal book ends, cork coasters, plastic key tags, dusty bottles of Mercurochrome and Vaseline….I was in a vengeful and near savage state. I bore a personal grudge against these things. Somehow they'd put me in this fix. They'd dragged me down, made escape impossible" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 294). Unfortunately, DeLillo does not appear to be too optimistic about the potential success of this strategy, as the Gladney family are back in the mall by the end of the novel, convinced once more of the recuperative and unifying qualities of contemporary consumerist culture: "This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. And this is where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly coloured goods" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 326).

In spite of the obvious correlation between the white noise generated by the omnipresence of commodities and the general deathward drive of society, many of DeLillo's characters believe that it is only through a wholehearted immersion in consumerism that they can survive in the contemporary world. It is unsurprising that the strongest sense of religious transcendence in *White Noise* is thus located in a brand-name. Overhearing his daughter Steffie chanting the brand-name "Toyota Celica" in her sleep, Jack Gladney strives to read a deeper meaning into the words: "Beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder….How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence?" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 155). In spite of the respectful manner in which her father listens to her chanting, it is improbable that DeLillo's characters will find their salvation in the empty signifiers of consumerism. The irony about the representation of consumerism and waste in DeLillo's fiction is that in spite of its obvious failure to provide the characters with a viable, life-affirming structure, they continue to be regarded with a kind of mystical awe.

One of the main reasons that consumerism fails to deliver as a source of structure for DeLillo's characters is that at its centre is a void, for although many of DeLillo's novels are based on consumerism, the commodities themselves are subordinated to their images and packaging. In other words, the characters do not fill their lives with shopping because they actually wish to eat, drink or otherwise use what they have purchased, but rather because they are buying into the aura that surrounds the brand names and advertising mythology of their

favourite consumer goods. This widespread reduction of the real to its representations results in what Baudrillard calls "hyperreality", a world of self-referential signs, wherein the model or representation becomes more real than reality itself (Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* 11). In *White Noise*, even Hitler becomes reduced to a commodity, the focus of a class taught by Jack Gladney, whose principle focus is the use made of imagery by the Nazi party: "Advanced Nazism….with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 25). Jack's lack of German, moreover, does nothing to threaten his status as an expert in the field of German studies as long as he provides delegates at his conference with appropriately scripted name badges: "Their names lettered in gothic type" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 274).

Because the commodity has been reduced so thoroughly to its image or packaging in the postmodern world of DeLillo's novel, garbage represents the ultimate icon of the consumerist age for it comes full circle from the supermarket to the dump while still retaining the: "Formal structure and even undiminished colours of the presentation of surfaces" (Frow 190). When Jack and Murray meet in the store and compare each other's preferences for different brands, therefore, it is on the packaging rather than on the products inside that they focus: "This is the new austerity….Flavourless packaging. It appeals to me….Most of all I like the packages themselves. You were right, Jack. This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 18-9). This tendency to reduce a product to its external packaging is echoed in *Underworld*, in which Nick and Marion Shay also base their choice of product on its future potential as waste: "Saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought….First we saw the garbage, then we saw the product as food or lightbulbs or dandruff shampoo. How does it measure up as waste, we asked" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 121). So preoccupied with waste is Nick that it begins to intrude on his perception of the world as a whole: "Trouble is, the job follows me. The subject follows me. I went to a new restaurant last week, nice new place, you know, and I find myself looking at scraps of food on people's plates. Leftovers" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 283). Detwiler, one of Nick's colleagues, heralds this focus on waste as the "Mandate of the culture" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 287), and points out that by submitting to this mandate, we are allowing ourselves to be controlled by it: "We let it shape us. We let it control our thinking" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 288). Rather than struggling against this control, however, many of the characters in *Underworld* seem to relish the sense of structure it gives them. Nick and Marion Shay, for example, fulfil the weekly classification and division of their garbage with an enthusiasm and a diligence that speaks loudly of its importance to them: "There is no language I might formulate that could overstate the diligence we brought to these tasks. We did the yard waste. We bundled the newspapers but did not tie them in twine" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 103).

If waste provides the characters of *Underworld* with a means of structuring their lives, its status as the key to their identities also leaves it open to misuse. J. Edgar Hoover, the malevolent presence at the heart of the novel, gains much of the information that swells his beloved dossiers from examining his subjects' waste: "They took the….garbage back for analysis by forensic experts on gambling, handwriting, fragmented paper, crumpled photographs, food stains, bloodstains and every known subclass of scribbled Sicilian" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 558). Nor is Hoover alone in his faith in waste as a source of information. His own domestic garbage is under constant threat from dissident groups wishing to display it and subject it to all manner of indecencies: "They intend to take your garbage on tour….Get lefty sociologists to analyze the garbage item by item. Get hippies to rub it on their naked bodies" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 558). The status of waste as keeper of the secret history of humanity also becomes obvious to Jack Gladney, in *White Noise*, as he sifts through his own household's garbage: "Why did I feel like a household spy? Is garbage so

private? Does it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one's deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioural ruts?" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 259). As Baudrillard predicts, DeLillo's characters thus become reduced to the signs and signifiers of the garbage they generate.

As though to further emphasize its destructive nature, waste is also intrinsically connected by DeLillo to the larger world of weaponry. *Underworld* abounds with examples of the convergence between the atomic bomb, which is one of the central presences of the novel, and common domestic materials. A radio DJ instructs his listeners in the art of making explosives using only domestic ingredients: "You could make your own napalm by mixing one part liquid detergent Joy with two parts benzene or one part gasoline. Shake vigorously" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 603); while a company advertising lawn fertilizer attempts to cash in on this mindset as part of their marketing campaign: "The creative types here in the shop wanted to do a Bomb Your Lawn Campaign. A little twist on the fact that these fertilizer ingredients, plus fuel oil, could produce a rather loud disturbance if ignited" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 528). Domestic waste is cited as the "mystical twin" of modern weaponry because together they constitute an increasingly serious threat to the environment as their bi-products multiply underground. The problem of contaminated waste has become so serious that─with questionable wisdom─nuclear explosions are being used in an effort to destroy it, a measure that results in the: "Fusion of two streams of history, weapons and waste" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 791). In fact, according to some sources in the novel, the threat from the bacteria breeding on human waste has now exceeded that posed by nuclear bombs: "Weapons utilizing pathogenic bacteria could be every bit as destructive as megaton bombs" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 557). Rather than attempting to alleviate this threat by addressing the high levels of waste generation that cause it, however, DeLillo's characters continue to contribute to the problem by surrounding themselves with even more commodities. The Gladney family in *White Noise* persist in their belief that they can insulate themselves from the perils of the external world with their cart-loads of shopping. DeLillo's novels thus present us with a paradox. His characters surround themselves with the signs and signifiers of consumerism in a bid to give themselves a sense of structure and protection in an increasingly chaotic world, all the time knowing that it is precisely these commodities and the endless waste they generate that is at the heart of the entropy that is slowly destroying human life. Although waste and consumerism represent forces that pull the characters towards the "white noise" of death, therefore, they retain a dominant and privileged presence in their lives.

Consumerism also plays a central role in the fictional world of Thomas Pynchon. His novels present a world similar in many ways to that of DeLillo's. Although most, if not all, of Pynchon's characters are susceptible to the forces of consumerism that surround them, one family, the Slothrops of *Gravity's Rainbow* are particularly closely linked to the consumer ethos of America. The family's timber business serves as an appropriate metaphor for the central components of American society, for it converts trees into paper which is then further converted into toilet-paper, banknote stock and newspaper print, or what Tyrone Slothrop calls "the three American truths": "Shit, money, and the Word" (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 28). In fact this statement epitomizes the central concerns of Pynchon's novels which explore consumerism in terms of the power it brings to those who control it ("money"), the waste it generates through both its unusable bi-products and those sections of society against which it discriminates ("shit"), and the transcendent value instilled in commodities by people with very little else to believe in ("the Word"). The central question in many of his novels is whether those who have no power themselves can ever free themselves from the dominant forces of the marketplace and achieve transcendence.

As in the novels of Don DeLillo, one reason the marketplace retains its position as a

powerful force in contemporary society is that Pynchon's characters believe that they need it and its constructions to protect them from an external world which many suspect is nothing but a void. One particularly disturbing incident in *The Crying of Lot 49* involves the main protagonist, Oedipa Maas, who wraps herself up in as many layers of clothes as she can in preparation for her sex-game with Metzger: "(Oedipa) began putting on as much as she could of the clothing she'd brought with her: six pairs of panties in assorted colours, girdle, three pairs of nylons, three brassieres" (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 23). The message inherent in this image is two-fold, as Tanner points out, for Oedipa becomes both a grotesque parody of an insanely eclectic culture which "over-dresses" itself with bits and pieces of fabrics and fabrications taken from anywhere; while simultaneously revealing a poignant vulnerability, for under the absurd, multi-layered "protection", she is oddly defenceless, naked and exposed. Metzger does not fully undress her, but he does seduce her, a fact that proves the superficial nature of the protection offered by commodities (Tanner 58).

In spite of this obvious failure, Pynchon's characters continue to instil commodities with religious significance, much in the same way as Jack Gladney and his wife Babette, in DeLillo's *White Noise*, who speak of "the sense of well-being, the security and contentment" afforded to them by the sight of their car-load of purchases (DeLillo, *White Noise* 20). Oedipa's immediate reaction after receiving the news of her ex-husband's death, for example, is to go shopping (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 6). Pynchon's characters, however, are not as successful as DeLillo's in drawing a sense of structure from the surrounding commodities, and their manipulation by the forces of consumerism is much more overt and more destructive. Tyrone Slothrop, the main protagonist in *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, never really has a chance to define himself, so completely is his identity subordinated to the commodities he consumes. His status as a bi-product of consumerism, rather than an active consumer, is emphasized by the fact that our introduction to him takes the form of a description not of himself, but rather of the layers of rubbish covering his desk: "Slothrop's (desk) is a godawful mess. It hasn't been cleared down to the original wood surface since 1942….Made up of millions of tiny red and brown curls of eraser rubber, pencil shavings, dried tea or coffee stains" (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 18). In spite of being the main protagonist in this weighty novel, therefore, Slothrop never really exists independently of the garbage that defines him.

Pynchon's main interest in *Gravity's Rainbow* is in exploring the increasing entropy defining the world. This novel is similar in many ways to DeLillo's *Underworld*, with the intrinsic connection between consumer waste and the destructive force of the bomb at the heart of the two narratives. Pynchon's interest, however, is in trying to locate some source of hope for the future. As Stark points out, he is particularly interested in three of entropy's bi-products: waste, disassembly and inanimateness (Stark 52). The first of these bi-products, waste, is a consequence of the energy or information which "leaks" out of a system during its lifespan. In the closed environment in which Pynchon's protagonists live, language, for example, has become exhausted or wasted, and thus is unlikely to constitute a source of hope for the characters (much like Steffie's chanting of "Toyota Celica" in *White Noise* is unlikely to constitute a source of spiritual transcendence for her). The problem, according to Saul, in "Entropy", is that words have become overused and have lost their meanings: "Tell a girl: 'I love you'. No trouble with two-thirds of that, it's a closed circuit. Just you and she. But that nasty four-letter word in the middle, *that's* the one you have to look out for. Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit" (Pynchon, "Entropy" 90-1).

The second bi-product of entropy, as suggested by Stark, is that of disassembly or fragmentation, a tendency demonstrated by a large number of Pynchon's protagonists: Stencil, who is unable to impose a rigid and linear form on the clues he has gathered about V,

feels both himself and the object of his quest begin to disintegrate in the face of the increasing disorder: "Stencil that way had left pieces of himself – and V – all over the western world. V by this time was a remarkably scattered concept" (Pynchon, *V* 389); when her quest for structure becomes increasingly improbable due to the high levels of entropy generated by her very efforts, Oedipa also succumbs to a kind of mental fragmentation: "The toothaches got worse, she dreamed of disembodied voices from whose malignance there was no appeal, the soft dusk of mirrors out of which something was about to walk" (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 121); and Slothrop, having escaped from "Their" structures into the chaos of the Zone, disintegrates both mentally and physically towards the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Slothrop….has begun to thin, to scatter" (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 509). These characters thus fulfil the prophecy of the Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics, for they become increasingly disordered until eventually the energy remaining in the system runs so low that they are unable to prevent themselves from disintegrating. In other words, an over-proliferation of information, as Baudrillard argues, does indeed lead to personal collapse.

The third of the bi-products of entropy listed above is that of homogenization. This tendency towards homogenization, which is a result of the increasing presence of entropy in our society, is also related to a broader movement towards death, which many theorists believe is one of the defining characteristics of the modern world. The stasis of the thermometer and the death of all motion noted by Callisto at the end of "Entropy", for example, also heralds his own demise: "The moment of Equilibrium was reached….and the hovering, curious dominant of their separate lives should resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion" (Pynchon, "Entropy" 98)[iii] . The increasing entropy present in the world inhabited by Pynchon's characters thus appears to be steering it in one direction only: towards inertia, stagnation, disintegration, and eventually death.

This conclusion that the high level of entropy present in the modern world can only lead us towards death is not in keeping with Pynchon's well-known dislike for the binary "either/or" dichotomy. It is no surprise, therefore, that the seemingly inevitable death-ward drive of the world inhabited by his characters is also punctuated with an occasional glimmer of optimism, as well the kind of fatalistic humour which also characterizes the fiction of DeLillo. It is fitting that one of the sources of this hope is linguistic. Friedman reminds us that the wording of Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics is crucial, for it states that within a closed system progress **tends** towards disorder. There is, however, no law demanding that the universe must always behave in this way, merely that it tends to (Friedman 84). As a result, there is, as Pearce points out, always a chance of a system not running down─or of a force that counteracts thermodynamic entropy (Pearce 6). The fact that Oedipa's surname means "loophole" in Dutch is one indication that *The Crying of Lot 49* should be regarded not only as an exposition of the process of entropy in American society but also as: "An examination of the loopholes in the metaphor itself" (Siegel 5). Perhaps the most interesting comment on Pynchon's conclusions about the future of the world in the face of ever-increasing entropy comes from Hendin, who insists that Pynchon's symbol for human salvation is not the cross but the proverbial "partridge in the pear tree": "The bird lives off the pears; his droppings fertilize the tree so it can make more pears; the bird makes more droppings". In this instance, nature is revealed to be self-perpetuating: "A Newtonian motion machine powered by crap" (Hendin 42). Rather than regard waste─whether referring to the bi-product of consumerism or the categories of people ignored and marginalized by mainstream society─as a central cause of the entropy and destructive drive of society as suggested by DeLillo, Pynchon appears to retain his faith in its potential to subvert and challenge the dominant narratives and signifiers of commodity production.

Pynchon, as Tanner points out, is a writer with great sympathy for what society designates as "rubbish." (Tanner 20). The landscapes of his novels are filled with dumps and

landfills, and are also populated by many of the categories of people whom society regards as "rubbish" or socially useless: "Bums, homos, drifters, transients, itinerants" (Tanner 20). Many of his novels delve into the underworld populated by such characters, seeking to locate among them an alternative to the stultifying world of consumerism which defines mainstream society. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, when Oedipa Maas manages to slip below the surface of official American society, she discovers a whole world of "excluded middles" she never knew existed (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 125). For the most part, this human waste operates as a source of potential resistance in Pynchon's novels. During her exploration of the underworld, Oedipa discovers an alternative to the official means of communication in the appropriately named W.A.S.T.E. system, used by outcasts and dropouts from mainstream life: "It survived today, in California, serving as a channel of communication for those of unorthodox sexual persuasion" (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 75). Whether or not any of these alternatives could really take on the might of the forces of consumerism is unclear as Oedipa never finds out whether the W.A.S.T.E. system really exists or if it is merely a hoax set up by precisely the same market forces it purports to be undermining: "Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on?" (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 116). However, Pynchon appears to imply that the success of the rebellion is less important than the fact that people are still willing to subvert the systems put in place by the dominant market forces. Just as an obscenity, such as the word "shit", is a symbol of rebellion against prescribed norms of behaviour: "An illocutionary act that violates a taboo of the official culture and in so doing silently acknowledges allegiance with the entire counterculture of the dispossessed" (Ames 196-7) so too does Pynchon suggest that any future hope for an alternative to the official version of reality─now empty and barren─is located in those echelons of society ignored, marginalized and discarded by mainstream society. *The Crying of Lot 49* ends with the image of the auctioneer raising his hands in a manner reminiscent of the performance of sacred rites: "Passerine spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel" (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 127). This suggests that although Pynchon focuses primarily on the obstacles facing his characters as they search for transcendence in the forgotten underworlds of society, he does not rule out the possibility that they will someday be successful.

It is clear that waste thus plays a central role in the novels of Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon. Thematically, waste serves to raise questions about the ongoing obsession with consumerism manifested by contemporary American society. DeLillo's vision is a generally pessimistic assessment of a world increasingly succumbing to the white noise of constant commodity production, where personal values and identities are subordinated to the brand-names and detritus of consumer goods. In Pynchon's novels, waste is also seen to be the main source of the entropy characterizing contemporary society. Pynchon's novels depict a world running out of energy as characters become swamped by the commodities that surround them. Pynchon, however, retains his faith in the potential of waste to subvert consumer society from beneath, suggesting that human waste, including those echelons of society marginalized by dominant discourses, can constitute a source of transcendence and hope for the future.

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[i] See John Dos Passos *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), F. Scott Fitzgerald *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Nathanael West *The Day of the Locust* (1939), Flannery O'Connor *Wise Blood* (1952) for examples.

[ii] See Mark Poster's Introduction to Baudrillard, Jean. *Selected Writings*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, 1.

[iii] For further discussion, see Michael Wood, 22.