Inside the Zapruder Museum

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of what W. J. T. Mitchell in *Picture Theory* (1994) calls 'ekphrastic fascination' for the documentary image in two novels by Don DeLillo, *Libra* (1988) and *Underworld* (1997). Abraham Zapruder's 8 mm recording of the Kennedy assassination is a contested symbol of contemporary visuality: it invites description but simultaneously seems to deny it, as the spectator struggles to come to terms with what she sees. The film figures differently in DeLillo's two novels. In *Libra*, FBI researcher Nicholas Branch attempts to analyze it, image by image, in order to perform a historical reconstruction of the event of the assassination. In *Underworld*, it is projected before a small audience at an underground art event in New York City in the mid-seventies. The 'ekphrastic object' presents itself in the first novel as image-object, in the second as visual event.

According to Mitchell, 'ekphrastic fascination' depends on an interplay between 'hope' and 'fear': a hope that words can help us describe and understand, and a fear that they cannot. In DeLillo's novels, this ekphrastic ambiguity enables the author to address the complex questions raised by the reinscription and reenactment of the footage of trauma. With its depictions of how Zapruder's film is analyzed and watched, *Libra* and *Underworld* raise what Mieke Bal recently referred to in the *Journal of Visual Culture* (2.1.2003: 5-32) as the central questions of visuality: 'What happens when people look, and what emerges from that act?'

Introduction

> Zaprudered into surreal dimensions of purest speculation, ghost-narratives have
> emerged and taken on shadowy but determined lives of their own.
> William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*

The episode only takes up between three and four of the more than eight hundred pages of *Underworld*, yet a reader will never put away the book without remembering it: on one of the 'rooftop summer' evenings in New York City in 1974, painter and artist Klara Sax follows film connoisseur Miles Lightman to the apartment of a video artist he knows, where a 'beady-eyed' crowd has gathered, on the floor, on folding chairs, on a sofa – amidst hundreds of television sets (DeLillo, 1998: 487). From all the screens flicker the images of an amateur film that lasts less than half a minute, but yet never seems to end. The 'rare and strange' event is, of course, a screening of a videotaped bootleg copy of the 8 mm footage Abraham Zapruder recorded of John F. Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963 (488).

When Don DeLillo returns to Zapruder's film in *Underworld*, almost a decade after the publication of *Libra*, his novel about Lee Harvey Oswald's way into history, it is to describe an event where the footage is re-appropriated into art. Why has DeLillo invested so much of his creative powers in writing about the events that surround Kennedy's death? Partly, it must be because the novelist sees the assassination and its various representations as 'prisms,' through which we can see how profoundly contemporary technologies of mediation have come to shape our cultural memories and imaginations. Widely considered both a beginning and an ending of epochs and periods, Kennedy's death is a moment in which histories are thought to converge or even collapse, or a moment in which, in the words of Jorie Graham in the poem 'Fission,' the very idea of history is felt to be 'outmaneuvered' (Graham, 1991). When Fredric Jameson referred to the sixties as 'the moment of a paradigm shift,' he placed its beginning with the assassination (Jameson, 1991: 355). In a similar gesture of epochal grandour, Thomas Charmichael claims that the event was in fact the inaugural moment of no less than postmodernism itself, 'the first postmodern historical event' (Charmichael, 1993: 207). In the words of Hayden White, the assassination:

has been dissolved as an object of a respectably scientific knowledge ... any attempt to provide an objective account of the event, either by breaking it up into a mass of its details or by setting it within its context, must conjure with two circumstances: one is that the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite; and the other is that the context of any singular event is infinitely extensive or at least is not objectively determinable' (White, 1999: 71). Indeed, Kennedy's death almost seems to have been destined to invoke the Lyotardian breakdown of the metanarratives of modernity.

Speaking of the assassination in an interview, DeLillo suggested that Kennedy's death 'invented' him as a writer (DeCurtis, 1991: 47). Working on *Libra*, he had come to realize that all his previous eight novels 'seemed to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination' (48). Several critics have echoed DeLillo's remarks. 'Almost all of DeLillo's writing has been in some sense about the assassination,' claims N. H. Reeve (Reeve, 1999: 147). Walter Benjamin's aphoristic theses on the philosophy of history are often alluded to in critical essays on DeLillo's writing. According to Benjamin, 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably' (Benjamin, 1968: 255). As DeLillo himself would be the first to point out, many of the narratives of the assassination can be said to 'collect around the dark center' of Zapruder's footage, where they threaten to be lost in the void Benjamin describes in his theses. It is tempting to suggest that DeLillo would have invented the film if it did not already exist. If the writer is drawn to what Mieke Bal has called 'the question of visuality' – 'what happens when people look, and what emerges from that act' – then it is obvious that Zapruder's film belongs perfectly in his novelistic universe (Bal, 2003: 9). According to Marita Sturken, 'it is not possible to imagine the event [of the assassination] in the absence of the Zapruder images' (Sturken, 1997: 29). The film is arguably the most notorious of a group of immediately iconogenerative images that also includes more recent examples such as the footage the Naudet brothers filmed in Manhattan on September 11, 2001, or the photographs from Abu Ghraib. Needless to say, such images are surrounded by all the controversy and paradox of contemporary visual culture. Through its various metamorphoses, they continue to raise familiar as well

as new questions concerning the impact of the mass-produced image in contemporary visual culture.

In *Libra*, Zapruder's footage becomes emblematic for the epistemological crisis of the ongoing forensic image analysis of assassination investigations; with *Underworld*, DeLillo wishes to take us elsewhere. Visiting the Manhattan loft, Klara witnesses how the 'Zapruder film' ceases to be the 'Zapruder film' before her very eyes, and becomes something new. But what exactly? As art event, the projection of Zapruder's images enables Klara to enter a meditation on what are arguably some of the central preoccupations of *Underworld*: death, visuality, and memory. The film is, in Klara's spontaneous words, 'powerfully open' (DeLillo, 1997: 495). This immediate response, as well as her afterthoughts about the images, that the film carries 'a kind of inner life,' might inspire us to think of Zapruder's footage from the perspective of narrative theory: as a 'fabula,' or a 'narreme,' a group of images around which multiple (and often contradictory) stories are constructed, by ever new spectators. As a writer, DeLillo is drawn to these stories, to the moments when they take shape – to what happens when we, like Klara, think that images show a 'crude living likeness of the mind's own technology' (496).

Certainly, the projection in *Underworld* illustrates neatly how problematic it has become to talk about 'visual objects' in essentialist terms. Zapruder's film is what I would like to call a 'travelling image' – it cannot stop moving across what Bill Nichols refers to as 'blurred boundaries,' ever becoming something other than what it was (Nichols, 1994). Along the way, epistemes as well as aesthetics shift, turning what Roland Barthes once called the 'ontological desire' of the cultural historian or the iconologist quickly into ontological frustration (Barthes, 1981: 3). Tackling Zapruder's frames as a 'medium-specific' phenomenon does not present a satisfying solution to these problems, because it only allows us to address a very limited range of the many discursive transformations of a Zapruder fabula. In the words of W.J.T. Mitchell, 'the Zapruder film is a perfect case of an image – or rather a whole image-sequence – 'wanting' a narrative and discursive frame, in the multiple senses of wanting – i.e., needing, demanding, and lacking' (Grønstad and Vågnes, 2006: n.p). Not only has the film taken on a life of its own, it has

taken on many lives, in a diversity of 'habitats,' to stick with Mitchell's metaphors (Mitchell, 2005).

What Zapruder's images want in *Libra*, then, is not what they want in *Underworld*. To the retired senior analyst of the CIA, Nicholas Branch, hired to write a secret history of the assassination, the film is more than anything 'a major emblem of uncertainty and chaos,' with its 'blurs, patches and shadows' (DeLillo, 1988: 441). Not only does it resist the kind of interpretation that Branch attempts, it has come to do so to the degree that it symbolizes that very resistance. Branch 'has abandoned his life to understanding that moment in Dallas, the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century,' but he is 'stuck' (181). For Klara Sax, however, the strange, 'secret' history of the film exists somewhere in the periphery of the event of actually watching it: 'She knew she'd hear from Miles at dinner about the secret manipulation of history, or attempts at such, or how the experts could not seem to produce a clear print of the movie, or whatever' (DeLillo, 1997: 495). She is alert to other aspects of watching Zapruder's footage than is Branch years later. She is not involved in a search of the uncontradictory mimetic trace of an event, of undisputable indexicality. Where Branch thinks of the Zapruder film as a series of frames that forms a larger whole, Sax is caught up in and almost exhilirated by all the movements of *projection*, of seeing a film coming to life 'steeped in being what it was, in being film' (495). She comes to think that her watching raises a number of questions that concern everything from the ontology of the recorded image, to the place of death in our imagination – in short, that it fills her with everything she 'thinks to wonder.'

How should we read such a moment critically? DeLillo's preoccupation with how technology continues to inform our self-identity is so strong that it can be regarded the defining characteristic of his fiction.[1] Arguably, visual media are of particular interest in this respect; reading DeLillo thus implies an ongoing dialogue with a range of cultural theories. Because the critical acclaim for and early canonization of DeLillo's 'postmodern satire,' *White Noise*, (1985) coincided with the heyday of the predominant theoretical

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[1] This is hardly an original observation. Both LeClair (1987) and Keesey (1993) makes the point in their book-length studies. Keesey's main focus is on 'DeLillo's treatment of the media and mediating structures' (vii).

currents in cultural studies in the late eighties and early nineties, much of what was written about DeLillo's fiction in the eighties and nineties considers it a confirmation of the cultural diagnostics of Jean Baudrillard, and in part, of Fredric Jameson.[2] DeLillo's recent work, however, demands new perspectives that enable us to address contemporary visuality literally with fresh eyes.

The Baudrillardian apocalyptic is more than familiar to most DeLillo scholars. A wealth of essays repeatedly point to characters from his novels that are lost deep in the desert of simulacra.[3] Our time, according to Baudrillard, is one in which we are witnessing 'the end of perspectival and panoptic space'; this has to result in an 'implosion of meaning' (Baudrillard, 1994: 30-31). The imaginary 'used to have a lively, dialectical, full, dramatic relation,' but today this relation is 'an inverse, negative relation: it results from the loss of specificity of one and of the other' (47). Admittedly, novels such as *Americana* (1971), *Players* (1977), and *White Noise* lend themselves to Baudrillard's theories in a variety of ways, populated as they are with characters that lose sight of their sense of reality in an image-culture that threatens to consume them. In more recent years, however, an increasing number of readings have suggested that DeLillo's fiction outgrows or resists the various labels that have been assigned to it.[4] The interaction of some of his characters with various technologies of mediation has reflected an ambivalence that makes the tired gesture of yet again introducing 'the precession of simulacra,' a grand narrative in its own right, unadventurous and plainly less satisfactory. The question presents itself: Could it be that simulation potentially offers a particular kind of self-reflection, that it doesn't inevitably rob us of our capacity to think productively of the present or the past? The answer is, of course, yes. Surely, there is something going on when Lauren Hartke sits down before the screen to look at the images recorded by a web camera in Kotka, Finland, and when the unnamed protagonist of 'Baader-Meinhof' visits a Gerhard Richter exhibition at the MOMA in Manhattan, that sits uneasily with

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[2] The translations of Baudrillard (1983, 1988, 1994) into English are influential here.

[3] Keesey (1993) draws heavily on Baudrillard. Goodheart (1991) contends with reference to an episode in *Players* that '[t]he real and the cinematic have become indistinguishable,' but in his reading he does not distinguish between different modes and technologies of visuality: photography, cinema and television all have a similar 'anaesthetizing' effect.

[4] According to Nel (1999), the recent fiction 'challenges the validity of the modern-postmodern binarism.'

Baudrillardian 'indifference' and insistent nihilism.[5] The conflicting emotions of belonging and isolation, exhiliration and exhaustion all coexist in these visual events, where characters are grief-stricken and haunted by memories that are only hinted at. Hartke as well as the woman at the MOMA are no less than hyper-sensitive to the sheer physicality of the media they encounter, to their strangeness, their familiarity – to their tendency in one moment to offer consolation, in the next utter emptiness.

More than anything, these episodes remind us that it is increasingly through 'remediation,' or the 'representation of one medium in another,' that we gain access to the world today (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 45). The past becomes available to us as we engage with what Alison Landsberg strikingly has called 'prosthetic memory' (Landsberg, 2004). Such a memory is technology-produced, and 'emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or a museum' (2). According to Landsberg, there is a 'slippage' in Jameson's as well as Baudrillard's thinking about 'the authentic' and 'the real,' since both categories are and have always been a limit case, an ideal state ... Perhaps there is an important difference between 'experiencing the real' and 'having a real experience.' In other words, Baudrillard and Jameson may be conflating 'the authentic' and 'the experiential' (33).

In fact, *Underworld* takes us to some experiential sites where visual events are no less than epiphanic to its characters. There are several 'visionary moments,' to borrow Paul Maltby's words, where characters experience 'that flash of insight or sudden revelation which critically raises the level of spiritual or self-awareness' (Maltby, 1996: 258).[6] Klara's visit to the Zapruder installation is in fact such a moment, and to think of it as a testimony of a widely felt *iconophobia* would therefore be to rob it of the ambiguity that defines it, to turn it into a 'jeremiad' which it most decidedly is not, and to perform an all too familiar 'iconoclastic' criticism. (Jay 1993; Mitchell 1986, 1994, 2005)

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[5] Lauren Hartke is the protagonist of *The Body Artist* (2001); the descriptions of Richter paintings occur in a short story, 'Baader-Meinhof,' (2002).
[6] 'To postmodernize DeLillo is to risk losing sight of the (conspicuously unpostmodern) metaphysical impulse that animates his work,' (Maltby, 1996: 260).

Instead, I wish to propose a different avenue for the further exploration of this visual event in *Underworld*. If we accept the definition of the concept 'ekphrasis' as 'the verbal representation of visual representation' (Heffernan, 1993: 3), the Zapruder projection is characterized by what I would like to call its 'ekphrastic tension' – a tension which, I will shortly argue, has always informed the often contradictory understanding of the remediation of Zapruder's film. A Greek word and an ancient term, the etymology of ekphrasis suggests why it has become a 'multiple' and contested concept. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 15) It has inspired both the crossing over and the reinforcement of boundaries (aesthetic as well as institutional), and indeed appears a perfect site for interdisciplinary exploration as well as struggle. According to Grant F. Scott, '[e]verywhere in ekphrastic studies we encounter the language of subterfuge, of conspiracy; there is something taboo about moving across media, even as there is something profoundly liberating' (Scott, 1994: xiii).

The 'speaking' (*phrazo*) 'out' (*ek*) of ekphrasis is traditionally thought to vividly evoke sculptures and paintings in words, but seldom objects outside the realm of whatever passes as 'art,' even after the 'end of art.' (Danto, 1997) Furthermore, the ekphrastic remains relatively unexplored in studies of novelistic narrative.[7] I would argue, however, that an ekphrastic moment in contemporary fiction in fact can be productively reconceptualized as 'an evocation of absent images' (Bal, 1999: 118) from a range of different media, and that we as readers need to acknowledge that the contemporary novel may thrive in the imaginary that Baudrillard declared dead.

A brief look at the history of Zapruder's film implies that a reading of the episode in *Underworld* as ekphrastic moment makes perfect sense. When Sax and Lightman wander into what is referred to as a 'Zapruder museum,' it is 1974, and the film has yet to be projected publicly (DeLillo, 1997: 495). The avalanche of documentation that will bury Branch and his history has yet to seriously accumulate. This is of some significance for our understanding of the multi-screening, and for how it is depicted; it defines its ekphrastic tension. In 1997, when *Underworld* was published, as today, Zapruder's film

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[7] Webb (1999) suggests that the predominant focus on poetry is partly accidental, and that the delimitation of the ekphrastic object as art work is a modern phenomenon. Among those that explore ekphrasis in novelistic narratives are Yacobi (1995:599-650) and notably Bal (2004: 341-388).

was familiar to most of DeLillo's readers, its images an essential extra-narrative component of the reading experience. It is readily (and illegally) available as a quick download on the internet, and has become a regular in the television programs that span and survey a century. Forever linked metonymically with presidential death, Zapruder's name has come automatically to invoke the epistemological crisis that ultimately surrounds his film after years of scrutiny; at the same time, however, it defines the event as cultural memory.

For Zapruder's footage has eventually come to be considered increasingly for its aesthetic as much as for its evidentiary status. The art happening in *Underworld* takes place at a point in time when such a process is in its early beginnings. The moment is undoubtedly carefully chosen by DeLillo. In the years that have passed since the publication of *Underworld*, several events have marked a change in the film's cultural status. It has been released in DVD format, digitally enhanced, promoted as 'a collector's item for all Americans,' complete with special features – an artefact that lays a curious claim to uniqueness by eagerly infusing the traumatic with the nostalgic, presenting itself as the privileged commodity with which the public remembers.[8] Whatever happened, the DVD says, this is the best document we have: buy it and see for yourself. Another kind of remembering entirely is entailed by a video game that allows players to aim for the presidential motorcade from Oswald's book depository window, and pull the trigger on a joystick.[9] Although the game allows us to see through Oswald's imaginary viewfinder rather than that of Zapruder, its graphic clearly depends – in its composition and perspectivity – on the images of the film. To complete an impression of a compulsive pressure to re-visualize (and re-shoot) produced by the film, a web camera is placed in Oswald's window, making available to a world of web surfers the images of a mostly uneventful Dealey Plaza, with its traffic and occasional assassination buff, twenty-four hours a day. These are only three of numerous examples that exemplify the fact that the

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[8] *Image of an Assassination* (MPI Home Video, 1998). For thoughtprovoking reflections on the significance of 'uniqueness' and implications for constructions of founding trauma, see LaCapra (2001).
[9] *JFK Reloaded* (Traffic, 2004) was available at http://www.jfkreloaded.net but removed in August 2005; it can be located as abandonware. If your shooting concurs with the findings of the Report of the Warren Commission, your score peaks; the makers of the game claim they want to support the official version.

film has spurred a distinct visual culture, one that has more or less to do with the event of the assassination itself.

'Zapruder remediation' can thus be said to present itself as an ever-expanding locus for exploration for a novelist like DeLillo. Although the iconic power of Zapruder's film has always depended on its multiple existence, on its many formats and yet seemingly single pull, it is an ekphrastic tension that has informed such a pull, and has given the fascination shape. Indeed, one could argue plausibly that the film's images were known exactly because of an evocation in their absence *en masse* – they were remembered and described collectively, but *seen* less frequently. For years, the images were known only as stills, and remembered as would be a series of photographs: individual frames were quickly published in *Life*, whose Richard Stolley bought the negative film from Zapruder in negotiations the morning after Kennedy died.[10] (Wrone, 2003). The November 29, 1963 issue of the magazine, in which several frames were presented before *Life* vaulted the film for years, makes an interesting contrast to DeLillo's fictional presentation of the screening in Manhattan. The frames were accompanied by a dramatic narrative:

> 'Oh, no!, Oh, no!', Mrs. Kennedy cries (*top row of pictures*) as she sees the blood flowing from the President's head. But the convoy keeps going, past the onlookers and photographers who stand frozen or fall to the ground as they hear the shots. As the President lies dying, Jackie scrambles out of her seat and crawls onto the trunk of the car in a pathetic search for help. As she crouches on hands and knees, the President's head presses against her, staining her skirt and stockings with blood. ('Jackie', 1963)

Looking at the pages of the magazine years later, one is struck by how the narrative threatens to talk the pictures to death. Whereas the ekphrastic tension of the novel depends on being 'purely figurative,' as its projection 'cannot literally come into view'

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[10] Stolley later described how Zapruder would be plagued by guilt because of the weighty decisions concerning rights and distribution that he was pressured to make in a rush: 'During our negotiations, Zapruder said again and again how worried he was about possible exploitation of his 26 seconds of film. He told me about a dream he'd had the night before: He was walking through Times Square and came upon a barker urging tourists to step inside a sleazy theater to watch the President die on the big screen. The scene was so vivid it made Zapruder heartsick. Later, while testifying before the Warren Commission, which was investigating the assassination, he wept as the film was shown. 'The thing would come every night,' he said of the dream. 'I wake up and see this'.'' (Stolley, 1998: 43).

(Mitchell, 1994: 158), in *Life*, the narrative overcompensates the lack of ability of the images to explain themselves, or to describe themselves, verbally. Insisting on a copyrighted cultural authority, it is the very voice of *Life* that interprets these images in a less than subtle way for us – as we see them and think about them, about what they show us. The combination of the graphic and the descriptive secured a tremendous cultural impact of the photo special. Even if *Life* did not include the frames that show Kennedy's headshot, readers would think in the years that followed that they had actually done so, neatly illustrating Siegfried Kracauer's musings in the wake of mass photography. Kracauer suggested that the reconstruction of memory in an age of extensive image-reproduction depends on recollection through 'the oral tradition,' not merely the 'image alone' (Kracauer, 1995: 48).

Although captured on 8 mm film, the assassination was thus broadly thought of as profoundly photographic. Indeed it was, from the very beginning, a 'travelling image.' However, the film's rapidly growing mythical status depended on a thirst for further disclosure, on a demand that everything about it that remained hidden would be seen: its unpublished frames, its unseen motion of light and shadow – in short, its projection, all the pieces of the puzzle that selections and verbal descriptions sought to add to, or replace. The Zapruder fabula needed, demanded, and lacked new narrative and discursive frames. *Life* did not give in to this considerable pressure, claiming the images would only open a wound that was beginning to grow. Only private screenings of bad copies, in events more or less like that in *Underworld*, took place occasionally in the decade that followed the assassination, until in the spring of 1975 Geraldo Rivera brought the film to the medium which had been Kennedy's *opus moderandi*, television, when he broadcast a copy on ABC's *Good Night, America*, and followed the screening with a late night television talk.

It should be clear, then, that from its early years and long before more extreme manifestations in recent times, the story of the Zapruder footage is one of frictions, between what is seen and remains unseen, between images still and moving – between visual and verbal description. Its present status and ownership reflects as much: when the American government bought the film two years after the publication of *Underworld*, it

became the most expensive photographic artefact in the world.[11] [16] Indeed, the Zapruder family's lawyer adopted the rhetoric of ekphrasis as art historical genre when he in the negotiations described vividly the semiotic properties of the film, compared its frames to famous works of art, and argued that the film's price should be located 'not only in its rarity but also in formal attributes such as color and composition' (Panzer, 1999).

How could DeLillo not write about such a film, such a phenomenon of visual culture? It is hardly unexpected that the fictional screening in DeLillo's novel has 'an edge of special intensity' (DeLillo, 1997: 488). Taking place a little less than a year before Rivera's very real broadcast, it bears the weight of events which at that moment were yet to come. The ekphrastic tension that informs the cultural reception of the Zapruder film is used to full effect in DeLillo's text. As an extranarrative component, such a reception informs the deployment of the ekphrastic, in a genuinely literary play with the 'descriptive moment.' The audience itself struggles with finding words in response to what they see. Miles Lightman spontaneously displays a reverent sense of the sublime as he exclaims, 'It's outside language' (496). To W.J.T. Mitchell, a distinctly 'ekphrastic fascination' is characterized by moments of 'indifference,' 'hope,' and 'fear' that language can fall short of what the eyes see (Mitchell, 1994: 152). The art event is vibrant with all these emotions, but seemingly never with only one of them. '[W]ary of their own anticipation,' those who attend feel 'lucky,' but they also know 'a kind of floating fear' of the images they are about to finally see, and only vaguely know, from memories of reproductions, from conversations (487, 488). Then the film:

> The footage started rolling in one room but not the others and it was filled with
> slurs and jostles, it was totally jostled footage, a home movie shot with a Super 8,
> and the limousine came down the street, muddied by sunglint, and the head
> dipped out of the frame and reappeared and then the force of the shot that killed
> him, unexpectedly, the headshot, and people in the room went ohh, and then the
> next ohh, and five seconds later the room at the back went ohh, the same release

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[11] It was bought from Zapruder's family, who had bought it back from *Life* after Zapruder's death in 1970. The Zapruders asked for $30 million, the government offered one. An arbitration panel was established when the lawyers failed to agree. ('Arbitrators' 1999)

of breath every time, like blurts of disbelief, and a woman seated on the floor spun away and covered her face because it was completely new, you see, suppressed all these years, this was the famous headshot and they had to contend with the impact – aside from the fact that this was the President being shot, past the outer limits of this fact they had to contend with the impact that any high-velocity bullet of a certain lethal engineering will make on any human head, and the sheering of tissue and braincase was a terrible revelation (488-9).

The gaze shifts to screen, to audience, and back again, in a dazzling multiperspectival passage. Indeed, the very visceral and visual *event* itself stands out as the ekphrastic object, not merely the images flashing on the many screens that fill the apartment.(Bal, 2003; Seel 2005) The focalization shifts from projection to spectatorship; looking at others looking is a vital part of the experience. But not only looking, also listening: the audible response suggests that Zapruder's film, even when it is Zaprudered into something else, has the capacity to take on the power of *memento mori*. Furthermore, the excerpt – like the other few pages devoted to the event in the novel – never spills entirely over into the descriptive, in the way that *Life*'s narrative does. It revels in its distinctly ekphrastic tension.

'Like a clock of life on which the seconds race, the page number hangs over the characters in a novel,' Benjamin once wrote: 'Where is the reader who has not once lifted to it a fleeting, fearful glance?' (Benjamin, 1996: 467). If we think of this passage in Genettian terms, of its *duration* and of its *speed*, then the description of the projection of Zapruder's twenty-six seconds of film approaches the hypothetical degree zero: it is over before we have even thought to look to the top of the page, whether out of indifference, hope, or fear.[12] What is striking in DeLillo's text is the absence of that extended pause to allow a description of Zapruder's footage in any detail. The aesthetics of the ongoing loop suggests that the film ever begins again, before there is time to let it sink in, let alone describe it; many of Klara's thoughts about the images present themselves after viewing. And if we, with Mitchell, think of description as 'the moment in narration when the

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[12] Its slowness 'absolute,' Genette (1980: 93, 94) places the 'descriptive pause' as one of two binary polarities and 'extreme' narrative movements, the other being ellipsis.

technology of memory threatens to collapse into the materiality of its means,' then a full description of the footage constantly threatens to foreground the absence of what is evoked: it threatens to make the reader aware of the absence of the film's images (Mitchell, 1994: 194). Instead, however, this ekphrastic tension allows the passage to linger in the moment of projection: to make us wait for waiting's sake, for something we will literally not see.

The event arguably sites its own re-appropriation as only an art event could do it, and is typical of the avant-garde scene in mid-seventies New York; it seems thus to invite perspectives from a tradition of thinking and a wealth of writing about avant-garde art. Philip Nel's reading of DeLillo's language in *Underworld* as 'a kind of performance art that functions in apparently opposite ways' represents such a strategy, as Nel adopts Eisensteinan terminology ('montage,' 'juxtaposition,') and plausibly suggests that DeLillo 'draws on avant-garde techniques' in his writing, and thereby 'interrupts' (Nel, 1999: 725, 727). Similarly, Mark Osteen applies Eisenstein in his reading of several episodes in *Underworld*, and considers it montage-as-'counterhistory' (Osteen, 2000). Both Nel and Osteen present close readings of the descriptions of the projection of Eisenstein's film, and pay little attention to the Zapruder event.

In a novel that boasts the most memorable Eisenstein moment in fiction, and an invented one at that, a cross-disciplinary take on terminology with borrowed concepts from film and art indisputably seems to present itself. The Zapruder projection confronts its audience with a play with the familiar (television sets, the well-worn furniture of an apartment) and the unfamiliar (what is projected, and how), perhaps hinting at Shklovskyan defamiliarization. Indeed, a number of avantgarde theories of art could enhance our understanding of what kind of an event this is. Again with Benjamin, one could say that the event aims at something like the Brechtian 'interruption' of Epic theater, a *verfremdung* that removes the visual reenactment of Kennedy's death from the cathartic, and invites a new kind of gaze.[13] By way of Kaja Silverman, one could say that

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[13] (Benjamin, 1969: 147-154). Much has been made, and for a very good reason, of the way the assassination has persisted to be narrativized into tragedy in the decades that have followed the event. See, particularly, McEvilley, (1986: 68-75). William Manchester's evocation of the Lancelot allegory upon Kennedy's death projected it forever into the realm of myth; the event has persisted to be

the event, taking place in a home temporarily transformed into an art gallery, depends on 'the paradoxical closeness at the heart of Brechtian distanciation': A joint is passed around instead of the cigar, and the TV wall, a version of the 'fourth wall' Brecht calls for the abolition of, presents the audience to what Silverman proposes we call a 'hyperbolization' (Silverman, 1996: 86-88). It is on this wall, in the hands of an artist, that Zapruder's images constantly cross, and thus have become what W.J.T. Mitchell calls *meta-pictures*, or pictures about pictures; such pictures, according to Mitchell, present themselves, indeed, as travelling images: they are 'notoriously migratory,' and 'resist fixed cultural status' (Mitchell, 1994: 57).[14]

However, a literary description of an event of the New York avant-garde scene of the mid-seventies can also be addressed from the perspectives of an aesthetics that seemed prominent at the time, and I'm not thinking of Eisensteinian montage here. In 1980, Craig Owens presented his take on Benjaminian allegory in a two-part essay in *October*, and suggested that the contemporary art he saw and had seen in recent years was characterized by an appropriation of imagery that it made sense to think of as 'allegorical.' The artist as allegorist, according to Owens, 'does not invent images but confiscates them' (Owens, 1992: 54). Allegory, he pointed out, has always 'functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed' (53). In a more recent return to the allegorical, David Joselit claims that Owens marked a shift 'from an art of essence to an art of appropriation rooted in allegorical extensions of the mass media' (Joselit, 2003). In the United States, 'postmodernist art was seen in terms of an allegorical textuality,' Hal Foster writes about the period (Foster, 1996: 90).

How can these conceptualizations of allegorical art help us see more clearly the ekphrastic tension of DeLillo's description of the art event in Manhattan, 1974? Indeed,

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exploited by the mass media, who developed the dubious genre of the 'assassination anniversary special.' See Zelitzer (1992). Arguably, it was the presence of entertainment news media that urged local authorities, against the wishes of Kennedy's family, to transform Dealey Plaza into a site that today resembles an assassination theme park, complete with tours, exhibitions, and replica for tourists. All these re-enactments revolve around a conception of a theming of the cathartic (see, in particular, the web site of The Sixth Floor Book Depository Museum at Dealey Plaza, http://www.jfk.org/Home.htm).
[14] 'Meta-pictures,' Mitchell (2005: 45) claims, are 'multistable,' they point to a 'co-existence of contrary or simply different readings in the single image'.

the re-appropriation of the screening is all about its own play with textuality. The film runs continuously, at 'normal speed on some sets, slow motion on others,' thus making its re-appropriation of Zapruder's images hyper-visible, and drawing attention to it, in typically postmodern fashion (DeLillo, 1997: 495). The distinct theatricality of the event is that of the mixed media performance, which according to Andy Lavender is defined by its 'intrinsic plurality effect in representation' (Lavender, 2002: 187). In such events, Lavender suggests, 'different things are happening in different ways at once' (187). The visitors to the apartment find themselves to be both actors and audience, as they look at the screens and steal glimpses at each other's responses. They all have to relate to what the Zapruder loop *wants* – what it needs, demands, lacks – and the wall of television sets presents itself as the central locus for this textual play, as it turns out to be 'a kind of game board of diagonals and verticals and so on, interlocking tarots of elemental fate, or synchronous footage running in an X pattern' (DeLillo, 1997: 495). Unlike the linear frame-by-frame presentation that seems to invite the microscopic gaze and the forensic search, the TV wall synecdochically insists with its moving lines that it is 'the representation of one medium in another' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 45). Significantly, the wall is simultaneously a comment on its own mode of visualization, as well as on the moment of death that it keeps projecting. The result is a double-edged 'aesthetics of transition' (Thorburn and Jenkins, 10). To Sax, watching the film is an exercise not in the Branchian semiotics of *Libra*, where signs mediate truth or fail to do so, but rather in something quite different: the installation opens up the twin problematics of death and redescription through its brief play with moving signs.

The gearing of the screens invites pattern recognition, as an 'X' teases out several calligraphic denotations, of which the alphabetical/mathematical ('the x in the equation') serve only as a beginning. The 'X' shares a ripping or tearing quality with the 'Z.' A flashing 'X' of geared screens thus becomes an emblem of fusion and diffusion, as two lines meet and separate midpoint, and reflect back on the two kinds of crossing we are confronted with: that of the passing from one form into another, medium to medium, life to death. We are reminded that death 'is always only represented,' that 'there is no knowing death, no experiencing it and then returning to write about it, no intrinsic grounds for authority in the discourse surrounding it' (Goodwin and Bronfen, 1993: 4).

In other words, there is no authority in the shifting discourses Zapruder's film seems to want; it remains 'powerfully open.' This 'revelation' also implies that the event of the assassination indeed always has been 'enacted with a sense of what will be its own representation' (Charmichael, 1993: 207). Far from having experienced the real event of the assassination, of course, or indeed any definitive documentation of it, Klara Sax has nevertheless very much had a 'real experience' in her confrontation with staged simulation (Landsberg, 1994: 33). Indeed, she feels alive, as she is sensing her own mortality in a new way.

Arguably, it is precisely by posing as self-reflexive simulacrum in a work of fiction that the Zapruder installation recuperates the film's capacity to make those present feel that they have to 'contend with the impact that any high-velocity bullet of a certain lethal engineering will make on any human head, and the sheering of tissue and braincase' – 'a terrible revelation' for Klara (DeLillo, 1997: 488-9). I would argue that is precisely the surfaces of so many television screens – of which 'the cold light,' according to Baudrillard, 'no longer carries any imaginary' – that allow for Sax's 'revelation' (Baudrillard, 1994: 51). For that is what the screening presents to its audience: a 'revelation,' itself a metaphor that suggests that we have only begun to understand the shifting ways in which seeing effects and affects insight. (Levin, 1997; Jay, 1993)

It is by describing the allegorical artist at work, I would finally like to suggest, that DeLillo here poses as the ekphrastic artist. Furthermore, he re-formulates the aesthetics of allegorical textuality novelistically as an 'aesthetics of ekphrastic tension' – for ultimately the allegorical re-appropriation of Zapruder's images into words is, of course, impossible. The novelist can not move beoynd the restrictions of the medium, but can make a reader feel as if such a thing is in fact happening. When Zapruder's film is projected in *Underworld*, the presence/absence problematic of remediation/simulation is thus given double force, as the ekphrastic tension revolves around a fulfillment that is impossible – that of transforming the visual into the verbal – but that nevertheless results in a productive kind of illusionism that is revelatory.

Of course, this summer night in 1974 resonates well within the larger framework of *Underworld*. When a *Life* reproduction of Brueghel's painting floats from the upper stands of Yankee Stadium and into the hands of J. Edgar Hoover, or when Nick Shay's involuntary memories of having shot a childhood friend by accident are so strikingly visual, or when the videotapes of the road shootings of 'the Texas Highway Killer' light up the living rooms: In all these instances, I would argue, Zapruder's film hints at its presence, its very own 'triumph of death' ever haunting the collective unconscious. Indeed, it can seem as if all these other events are collecting around the dark center of *Underworld* – the screening that Klara and Miles visit. It is truly the sign of ekphrastic art when we ultimately might come to remember the film's images – its unassuming exposition of smiling and waving, pomp and parade, its sudden climax of a dying body's spastic gestures and outburst of bloodspray, its frames crowded with bystanders local and visiting, looking and turning away – in short, its silent procession of tragic and irreversible events, its very own 'triumph of death' – for having read about it, not seen it. And then, Zapruder's film becomes not only DeLillo's invention, but also ours. And that evocation of the absent image is always available to us, through the eminently portable technology of the book.

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