



**Graffiti: Writing the Backstreet Story across Urban Space in  
Don DeLillo's Underworld (1997)**

غرافيتي: كتابة قصة حياة الشارع الخلفي عبر الفضاء الحضري في رواية العالم السفلي  
(1997) لـ دون دليلو

**Mordjana Haddad, University of Annaba, Algeria.  
haddad.mordjana@gmail.com**

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**Abstract :**

In Don DeLillo's Underworld (1997), the representation of urban space plays an important role in explaining certain realities about New York City. First, this space is saturated with the lights of the advertisements that vehicle what is known as the consumer culture. Second, beneath the shining space lies the Bronx, a marginalized underworld. Seemingly, this neighborhood is abandoned by the city. Nevertheless, Ismael Muñoz and his friends try to draw the city's attention to the condition of their neighborhood through their graffiti art. Interestingly, this art travels across space on the surface of trains. So this article's objective is threefold: first, it discusses how the public space becomes a site for the expression of the consumer culture. Second, it shows the marginalization and the urban decay of spaces like the Bronx, as a direct outcome of the capitalist system. Finally, it discusses the role of Graffiti in communicating the lamentable condition of the neighborhood outside its boundaries.  
**Keywords:** The Bronx, Consumer Culture, Graffiti art, Underworld- urban space.

**ملخص :**

في رواية العالم السفلي للكاتب الأمريكي دون دليلو يلعب تمثيل الفضاء الحضري دوراً هاماً في رسم صورة لمدينة نيويورك في النصف الثاني من القرن العشرين، حيث يظهر هذا الفضاء في صورتين: الصورة الأولى مشبعة بأنوار ألواح الإعلانات التي تروج لما يُعرف بثقافة المستهلك. أما الصورة الأخرى للأسف تمثل حي البرونكس المظلم والمهمش. إذ يبدو هذا الحي معزولاً ومهجوراً، لكن إسماعيل مونيوز وأصدقاؤه تمردوا على هذا الوضع وحاولوا لفت انتباه المسؤولين إلى حالة حيهم من خلال فن الغرافيتي. ومن المثير للاهتمام فإن هذا الفن ينتقل عبر الفضاء على واجهة القطارات ليصل إلى المدينة بأكملها، شاغلا حيز الفضاء العام بجانب أضواء الاعلانات. سنتاقش هذه الدراسة كيف أصبح الفضاء العام موقعاً للتعبير عن ثقافة المستهلك، كما ستركز على أسباب التهميش والتدهور البيئي لأحياء مثل البرونكس، والذي جاء كنتيجة مباشرة لتطور النظام الرأسمالي. وأخيراً، سيناقتش هذا المقال دور كتابات الغرافيتي في إيصال الحالة المؤسفة للبرونكس خارج حدوده و كيفية استغلالها للفضاء العام كما تفعل الثقافة الاستهلاكية.  
**الكلمات المفتاحية:** حي البرونكس، ثقافة المستهلك، فن الغرافيتي، رواية العالم السفلي، الفضاء الحضري.

**Introduction :**

In the magnum opus *Underworld* (1997), Don DeLillo sheds light on the overspread of the consumer culture and depicts one of its tools through the extensive use of commercials and posters in the streets and public spaces. These advertisements have become, as described by Baudrillard (1970), a common language that controls and manipulates their reader's mind in the surrounding space. He thinks of them as mutations to the ecology of human species (p.26).

The writer also criticizes the shining urban space by lifting to the surface the dim underworld. Whereby, he highlights the sad condition of the Bronx, one of New York's oldest neighborhoods, which suffers from urban decay because of economic and technological development. For instance, after the WWII, Robert Moses' project of Expressway crossing over the Bronx— that was supposed to facilitate transport and communication between the city and suburbia—had literally and spatially led to the marginalization and deterioration of this neighborhood. Such marginalization, however, has different effects on the inhabitants of this urban space. While some characters such as Nick Shay, Matt Shay, and Klara Sax leave the area, some others like Mr. Bronzini and the two nuns prefer to stay in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, none of those characters try to communicate the situation of the Bronx outside its geographical boundaries. Contrary to them, Ismael Muñoz, a graffitist, decides to break the separating boundaries between the Bronx and New York City. Through their art, Ismael and his friends try to bring the Bronx' voice through the city's space. By drawing on the surface of the subways that cross the neighborhood's borders, they tell their story to the city. Cleverly, those painters utilize the public space as do advertisements, the same strategy of the consumer culture. By means of this, Ismael Muñoz also known as Moonman 157, is aware of the role and importance of the urban space in communicating his community's story.

In addition, his message successfully reaches the entire world and becomes a part of the international scene, as the narrator says,

Once a man stood on the platform and took a picture of one of Moonman's top-to-bottoms, a foreigner by the look of him, and Ismael sidled to the open door so he could be in the picture too, unknown to the man. The man was photographing the piece and the writer both, completely unknown to himself, from someplace like Sweden he looked (DeLillo, 1997, p.434, emphasis added).

Though Moonman's art becomes internationally famous, he refuses to reveal his identity: "But, see, this was the way his mind was reasoning at this particular time. Stay totally low and out of sight. Do not get your name or face in the papers.... People from galleries were all over the Bronx looking for Moonman .... and the whole Voodoo crew" (DeLillo, 1997, p.436).

Actually, Moonman 157's objective is not fame but drawing the public attention to the underworld communities that mainstream America neglects. The narrator says: "[t]he whole point of Moonman's tag was how the letters and numbers told a story of backstreet life" (DeLillo, 1997, p.434). In doing so, Moonman 157 and his crew reclaim space from the system, create their own world and restore their connection to the world through Graffiti, which is perfectly a spatial art that circulates through the city and represents all that is spatial (remote and close).

Above all, his story about the Bronx displays hope as the following passage suggests:

His letters and numbers told a story of tenement life, good and bad but mostly good. The verticals in the letter N could be drug dealers guarding a long diagonal stash of glassine product or they could be schoolgirls on a playground slide or a couple of sandlot ballplayers with a bat angled between them (DeLillo, 1997, p.440).

From what is mentioned previously, the writer manages to make of the city a space filled with meaning and human experiences that occur there (Martrucci, 2017, p.84).

So this article first discusses advertising, as a language and a policy of the consumer culture, which invades the public space and takes control of the modern society. Second, it shows the reasons behind the neglect of the Bronx and how Graffiti successfully communicates this marginalization. Interestingly, Graffiti works the same way the capitalist system does by occupying and appropriating the public space, however, in its form of undecipherable letters, Graffiti defies the signified system, writes back, and claims the Bronx' right to the city.

### **The Consumer Society and Urban Space:**

From the very outset of *Underworld*, Don DeLillo associates the image of the city with advertisements, he writes: "This metropolis of steel and concrete and flaky paint and cropped grass and enormous Chesterfield packs aslant on the scoreboards, a couple of cigarettes jutting from each" (DeLillo, 1997, p.11). He also demonstrates the impact of those advertisements on the consumer. For instance, in the following scene, Russ Hodges "is thinking base hit all the way but glances routinely at the clubhouse sign in straightway center to see if the first E in Chesterfield lights up" (DeLillo, 1997, p.34). Hereby, the advertising billboards are a routine in the everyday life of the character; he pays attention to the sign and knows that something is wrong with it. Clearly, advertising has become an indispensable part of an overspreading culture, related to the postmodern urban space, or, the culture of the consumer society. The importance of this detail is reinforced when the narrator directly implies the reader, "so light up a Chesterfield and stay right here" (DeLillo, 1997, p.32). In the two examples, the package of cigarettes dominates the space, and interestingly, the lights of the advertisement are related to the act of consumption "light up" a cigarette. It can be said that consumption goes a step further; it is no longer about consuming the object per se but about consuming the advertisement itself. Baudrillard (1968) explains that advertising is not merely related to consumption, but it itself becomes an object to be consumable as a cultural object (p.164).

In another passage, Don DeLillo illustrates well the influence of advertising on society, he writes:

Paper is coming down around the group, being slick pages from a magazine, completely unremarkable in the uproar of the moment. Frank snatches a full-page ad for something called pasteurized process cheese food, a Borden's product.... The pages keep falling. Baby food, instant coffee, encyclopedias and cars, waffle irons and shampoos and blended whiskeys .... It is all part of the same thing. Rubens and Titian and Playtex and Motorola. And here's a picture of Sinatra himself sitting in a nightclub.... Johnson & Johnson and Quaker State and RCA Victor and Burlington Mills and Bristol-Myers and General Motors. These are the venerated emblems of the burgeoning economy, easier to identify than the names of battlefields or dead presidents (DeLillo, 1997, p.39, emphasis added).

In this extract, the Americans obviously belong to the same thing/ system, which is the culture of consumerism. The array of many products and brands link the public all together to the extent that consumerism takes over the place of history (names of battlefields and presidents). In other words, commodification and consumption become integral to the everyday life space as Baudrillard (2002) puts forward: "Advertising in its new dimension invades everything, as public space (the street, monument, market, and scene) disappears. It realizes, or, if one prefers, it materializes in all its obscenity; it monopolizes public life in its exhibition" (p.149, parentheses in original). In the novel, the advertisements are not only a part of the politics of the consumer society, but they are also a celebration and a tool of late capitalism. This clearly appears when a character in a commercial company tells Dwayne that:

They're doing research, Dwayne, on what they call retinal discharge. They secretly photograph women in supermarkets. They have sensitive cameras hidden on the shelves that record excitations of the inner eye, motions of the eye far more subtle and telling than a simple blink, and it seems that women go completely crazy eyeballwise when they see certain colors, packages and designs...Once we get the consumer by the eyeballs, we have complete mastery of the marketing process."(DeLillo, 1997, p531,emphasis added).

After that, Dwayne Wainwright summarizes the whole process by saying: "[t]here is only one truth. Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world"(DeLillo, 1997,p.531) Therefore, advertising becomes an important vehicle for late capitalism.

In this sense, the media becomes so powerful and an obedient servant of capitalism. They penetrate and control the mind of the public, for instance, while driving down Manhattan Brian Glassic observes:

He drove into the spewing smoke of acres of burning truck tires and the planes descended and the transit cranes stood in rows at the marine terminal and he saw billboards for Hertz and Avis and Chevy Blazer, for Marlboro, Continental and Goodyear, and he realized that all the things around him, the planes taking off and landing, the streaking cars, the tires on the cars, the cigarettes that the drivers of the cars were dousing in their ashtrays--all these were on the billboards around him, systematically linked in some self-referring relationship that had a kind of neurotic tightness, an inescapability, as if the billboards were generating reality (DeLillo, 1997,p.183).

In this scene, Brian is surrounded only but objects, brands, and indices of the capitalist system. Signs and ads become a defining part of the modern urban landscape. Not only do they define the daily life of people but also generate reality. They present what Baudrillard calls simulation and simulacrum. Consumption reaches a point of completely grasping the whole daily life or; as a character says "[c]onsume and die. That's the mandate of culture" (DeLillo, 1997,p.287).

In the novel, a sign without ads is unimaginable, even intolerable, the narrator says:

The next evening the sign is blank. What a hole it makes in space. People come and don't know what to say or think, where to look or what to believe. The sign is a white sheet with two lonely words, Space Available, followed by a phone number in tasteful type (DeLillo, 1997, p.824,emphasis in original).

In the epilogue, whose title is inspired by Marx' *Das Kapital*, DeLillo depicts advertising as a new religion for the crowds. He writes: "[i]t is the juice that commands the eye.... They stare stupidly at the juice.... women holding babies up to the sign, to the flowing juice, let it bathe them in baptismal balsam and oil" (DeLillo, 1997, p.820). Though this scene is associated with Esmeralda's murder, it is mainly about the impact generated by Maid Minute orange juice billboard. Hereby, advertising arises as a new religion or belief – the idea of religion is reinforced by the presence of Sister Edgar. The scene is so ironic, because the crowd gathers, on the Bronx Expressway, to witness the magical appearance of Esmeralda on a billboard after her death. Instead of going up to heaven, the innocent girl ends up in a capitalist space. I think that this moment is a triumph of the death, a metaphor for capitalism. More precisely, this moment is a completion to the prologue, entitled "The Triumph of Death", and to the first scene of the billboard of cigarettes that over dominates the stadium and to the thrown cut papers over space from the magazine.

The capitalist space is seemingly saturated with the language of the rich who put a price on everything. Whereas the poor like the residents of the Bronx cannot have a place in that space, as Baudrillard (2002) suggests, "[t]he space is so saturated, the pressure so great from all who want to make themselves heard" (p.154). It seems impossible for the silenced Bronx to make its voice heard in the city. After the rape and the horrible murder of Esmeralda, CNN covers the story which appears just for three seconds on TV. Symbolically, the suffering of a whole population is reduced to three seconds. Despite the fact that Don DeLillo shows that media and public space are used to serve capitalism, he equally gives voice to the neighborhood through the use of another artistic medium, Graffiti. Ultimately, he puts the Bronx as a model of criticism that underlines the contradictions of the modern time: poverty, uneven geographical distribution, and urban degradation. In this vein, Baudrillard explains that:

The urban city is.... a space where indifference, the segregation of urban ghettos, and the downgrading of districts, races and certain age groups are on the increase. In short, it is the cut-up space of distinctive signs. Multiple codes assign a determinate space-time to every act and instant of everyday life. The racial ghettos on the outskirts or in the city centre are only the limit expression of this urban configuration: an immense centre for marshalling and enclosure where the system reproduces itself not only economically and spatially, cover but also in depth by the ramifications of signs and codes, by the symbolic destruction of social relations.

There is a horizontal and vertical expansion of the city in the image of the economic system itself. Political economy, however, has a third dimension where all sociality is invested, covered and dismantled by signs. Neither architecture nor urbanism can do anything about this, since they themselves result from this new turn taken by the general economy of the system: they are its operational semiology. (Baudrillard, 1976, pp76-77).

Baudrillard thinks the city from a spatial angle and a semiological perspective. He observes that the economic development brings with it spatial changes. For instance, it can be said that the economic development leads to a map of misery where the city is cut down into spaces. Each space is a code and presents signs that can be used to criticize the economy. Based on Baudrillard's point of view, I can say

that the Bronx, as a space, displays the limit expression of urban configuration and economic growth. In the novel, due to economic factors, the Bronx becomes a dark underworld full of problems such as: poverty, urban degradation, drugs, and homelessness.

### **The Urban Decay of the Bronx:**

Underworld's plot stretches from the 1950s to the 1990s. This allows the reader to witness the gradual urban dilapidation of the Bronx. This decay is due to two main factors: first, the economic growth—which has led to urban sprawl towards suburbia— and then to what I call bad urban planning. Jon C. Teaford (1993) explains that by the early 1960s the American city was something quite different from what it had been in 1945. Suburbia was gradually becoming the predominant element of metropolitan America, and the central city was declining. Year after year commerce and population escaped the urban core and the decaying neighborhoods. Even the newcomers were some poor immigrants who tried to seize an opportunity in the declining premises. Thus, the metropolis remained a mixture of success and failure, of problems and promises, a discombobulating dilemma for the American nation (p.98).

Also, the Bronx falls in the victim to urban planning. Despite the fact that urban planners are supposed to ameliorate the urban project and make of the city an inhabitable space for all people, they made their plans depending on economic and industrial input instead of a social and spatial resource. In the 1950s, to facilitate the flow of automobiles, New York laid out the Cross-Bronx Expressway. While this urban project facilitated transport and urban practices, it strongly enhanced the marginalization of the neighborhoods. Marshall Berman, himself was from the Bronx, thought that with the completion of the construction of Robert Moses' Cross-Bronx Expressway, the "real ruin" of the Bronx began; the fundamental outcome of his modernization project was suburbanization of the metropolitan center and abandonment of the inner city (Dear, 2000, p.97). Hence, the lamentable-becoming state of this neighborhood is merely a failure of the conceived space, the abstract mental space introduced by Robert Moses. In the novel, Don DeLillo describes the Expressway as follows:

An hour later she was in her veil and habit, sitting in the passenger seat of a black van that was headed south out of the school district and down past the monster concrete expressway into the lost streets, a squander of burnt-out buildings and unclaimed souls. Grace Fahey was at the wheel, a young nun in secular dress (DeLillo, 1997, p.238, emphasis added).

The writer describes the expressway as a monster because it literally destroys the neighborhood. The expressway is built up the Bronx and the fact that it is up and the Bronx is down, as the title of the novel suggests, confirms the projection of the spatial inferiority of the Bronx.

Besides, due to the outward migration to suburbia, thousands of taxpayers left the central-city to suburbia, leaving behind just fewer people. Consequently, thousands of buildings stood empty and abandoned by their owners, and the South Bronx offered the classic example of abandonment and decline. From 1970 to 1975, it lost an estimated 20 percent of its population, and 20.000 to 30.000 housing units were being abandoned each year (Teaford, 1993, p.142). In 1972, The Newsweek columnist Stewart Alsop observed that the South Bronx "is visibly dying, as though

of some loathsome, lethal disease” (Alsop as cited in. Teaford, 1993, p.143). Fortune claimed that New York’s derelict neighborhood “may be the closest men have yet come to creating hell on earth” (As cited in. Teaford, 1993, p.143). Heise (2011) adds that perhaps no other American urban area was so laid to waste by the postwar period’s uneven development as the Bronx (p.239). Consequently, the Bronx became the locus of homelessness, crime, drug addiction, and the physical deterioration of public architectures.

In short, due to economic and industrial reasons, places like the Bronx transformed the city into what Manuel Castells calls the Network Society. Those who have no role to play in the new metropolis, sometimes become a burden and troublesome areas. They are made virtually invisible and become demonized as the enemy within. They are seen as carriers of poverty, decay, disease, drugs, crime, and violence (Castells, as cited in. Soja, 2000, p.151).

In fact, the subtle image of the Bronx in *Underworld* is the environmental degradation, and this is what would mostly attract the reader’s attention. The reader gradually discovers the transformation of the Bronx from a warm living body into a cold almost deserted place. Learning about this transformation comes in a retrospective way because Don DeLillo backwardly arranges the events from the 1990s to the 1950s. First, in part 3, set in the 1980s and 1990s, the reader encounters the neighborhood after the metamorphosis, and then he meets it before the change in part six, set in the 1950s.

In part 3, the Bronx turns into a repellent space, for instance, Mr. Bronzini lives “[i]n a sad building with an entrance way marked by specimens of urban spoor—spray paint, piss, saliva, dapples of dark stuff that was probably blood” (DeLillo, 1997, p.211). This description demonstrates a very unpleasant disgusting physical condition. The building is dirty and lacks human living conditions. Over the years, Mr. Bronzini has witnessed the urban decay of his neighborhood, the departure of old neighbors and the coming of strangers that he describes “inert, and “body-dead” (DeLillo, 1997, p.230). This ex-science teacher does not and cannot leave the place; he is too attached to it. Despite the hard conditions of life in the Bronx, he never thinks about moving to the outer world.

Moreover, the reader can see, through the eyes of two nuns, the pitiful situation of the Bronx buildings. These two sisters do charity all the time to help the vulnerable community living in the Bronx:

The two women looked across a landscape of vacant lots filled with years of stratified deposits—the age of house garbage, the age of construction debris and vandalized car bodies, the age of moldering mobster parts (DeLillo, 1997, p.238). The nuns sat in the van and looked. At the far end was a lone standing structure, a derelict tenement with an exposed wall where another building had once abutted” (DeLillo, 1997, p.239). The nuns also encounter “babies without immune systems . . . and babies born addicted— she [Edgar] saw them all the time, three-pound newborns with crack habits who resembled something out of peasant folklore (DeLillo, 1997, p.246).

With each charity tour, the narrator presents horrible descriptions of the urban decline. The narrator says:

The nuns got out of the van and approached the building. Squatters occupied a number of floors. Edgar didn’t need to see them to know who they

were. They were a society of indigents subsisting without heat, lights or water. They were nuclear families with toys and pets, junkies who roamed at night in dead men's Reeboks (DeLillo, 1997, p.242).

There are even dehumanized stories like the one about a man who feeds on rats:

An endless source of stories, the size of the rats, the attitude of unfearing, how they ate the bodies of those who died in the tunnels, how they were eaten in turn by the rat man who lived in level six under Grand Central, he killed and cooked and ate a rat a week--track rabbits, they were called (DeLillo, 1997, p.440).

From the tours of the nuns in the Bronx, the reader finds out that those inhabitants live a miserable life, and they do not have the least of the humanistic condition. They are surrounded by drug addicts, homeless children, and dirt. They are seemingly powerless and live the same bad condition. They seem trapped in the place; they can be compared to the people stuck in the purgatory. Jerry, one of the Bronx inhabitants, tells Nick that,

He wanted to recite the destinies of a hundred linked souls, the street swarm that roared in his head. The dead, the married, the moved-to-jersey, the kid with five sisters who became a safecracker, the handball ace who's a chiropractor, the stuck-up blond in the fifth grade who married a Puerto Rican prizefighter (DeLillo, 1997, p.620, emphasis added).

According to this character, the souls of the citizens of the Bronx are linked and they have the same destiny. Then Nick thinks that they are "trapped souls trying to emerge" (DeLillo, 1997, p.621). In the novel, one feels that the Bronx is a separate space and does not belong to New York City. Astonishingly, all along the novel, there is no mentioning of any effort taken by the city institutions to help or change the situation of the Bronx people. The city is seemingly amnesiac about the status of this neighborhood. However, in the middle of the cloud of forgetfulness and isolation hanging over the Bronx, ascends a character that tries to break up the boundaries separating the Bronx from the rest of the city. This character reaches the whole city and becomes worldwide known through his art, yet, he stays faithful to his home, the Bronx.

The graffiti artist Moonman 157, a rebellious figure, has well understood the importance of space – particularly the public space saturated with consumer culture— in communicating his neighborhood condition. Interestingly, he takes advantage of the consumer culture policy which invades the whole city and imitates its strategy by writing on the subways and walls so that the whole society read his message. In other words, he appropriates the public space as do advertising agencies. Through Moonman 157 and Graffiti, Don DeLillo wants to say that, "[t]he neighborhood is still a living thing" (DeLillo, 1997, p.202).

#### **Graffiti: Writing the Backstreet Story across Urban Space:**

In the previous section, the Bronx seems powerless and voiceless in the face of New York City and whose trapped citizens cannot ascend to the surface. Seemingly, no one heard about their status or stories. In reading the novel, one finds out that it is Moonman 157's cause and Graffiti task to make the neighborhood's voice heard. The marginalized Moonman 157 and his crew which –"[c]onsists of hopefuls, of course" (DeLillo, 1997, p.437) —develop a strategy of survival, to defy the imposed reality, and to remind the society of their existence.



Moonman 157 is a graffiti artist who paints on trains and walls. Effectively, this makes his art travel in the social space, obliges, and controls the eyes of the citizens of the city. Successfully, the messages written on trains and subways cross the boundaries of the neighborhood to reach the whole city. Impressively, Graffiti is an art that is tightly related to urban space simply because it does not represent space, it is space itself. This art conforms to Frederic Jameson (1990) words about postmodern art which is “an art represented in motion/ not of motion” (p.46). In this case, Graffiti art conforms to the postmodernist artistic techniques. Yet, it is not about entertainment or leisure as the pop culture propagates. In the novel, it becomes a tool to express the angst of the underworld residents and a way of resistance and denouncement. Simply, it plays the role of the narrator of the Bronx’ story across the city space. It is worth noting that of particular interest, Moonman 157 uses space to express the anger of his community. This makes of space so important to explain certain contradictions of the city. Nevertheless, the use of space causes risks to the painters because their art is considered illegal and an act of vandalism. For this reason, they work at night:

They worked through the night without unnecessary talk. They handed him the spray cans. They shook the cans before handing them over and the clicking sound of the aerosol ball was basically the only noise in the yard except for the spray itself, the hissy wash of paint folding over the old iron flanks of the train (DeLillo, 1997,p.439).

Working at night is so symbolic as Bryan Palmer argues, in *Cultures of Darkness*, that “night” as a heuristic for “[c]ultures of transgression, marginality, and alternative” which emerge in contrast to or rebellion against “capitalism’s daytime power” (Palmer as cited in. Pike, 2007, p.40). So, Graffiti is a rebellious art that stands against the capitalist injustice. LSD OM, a famous graffiti writer, explains:

My first impression of why other people were writing because I felt people were angry upset that they didn’t have a voice in the world .... Writing as a way of saying: Don’t make decision without consulting us. Look at this wall and all these lives here. You may not see these people standing on the platform of the train, but all of these names you see are people with lives and meaning (As cited in. Gatsman,&Caleb 2010, p.23).

POWER, another famous L.A graffiti artist and the runner of “Can Control” Graffiti magazine confirms this idea in an interview when he says: “The graffiti often seems like the city fighting back against the urban sprawl—the true voice of the population speaking up, reclaiming the city” (Gatsman, 2007, no page number).

Miller confirms this point of view after he conducted a research on New York City’s graffiti writing culture during the 1970s and 1980s. He deduces that graffiti is an ‘intrinsically rebellious’ public art that addresses ‘race’ and class tensions. He thinks that one of the ways graffiti writers resist the impositions of a consumer society is shaping alphabet to redefine their own identities and their environment. Furthermore, Miller contends that by placing their art in public space, this makes it “free” to all people, Graffiti defies a system that puts a price tag on everything (Kramer, 2010, pp.239- 240).

In fact, Miller’s explanation summarizes the politics of Graffiti: it is an art of resistance which defies the capitalist system. In bombing the trains, Joe Austin(2001) thinks that writers created a new mass media, and in that media, they

“wrote back” to the city (p.4). Ismael Muñoz and his friends respond to the consumer culture as Jean Baudrillard observes in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) that graffiti is “[a] new type of intervention in the city, no longer as a site of economic and political power, but as a space-time of the terrorist power of the media, signs and the dominant culture” (p.76).

This is exactly what Moonman 157 and his friends do. Before becoming a graffiti artist, while Ismael Muñoz has been walking in the streets of Manhattan and the Bronx, he has observed art on platforms and walls. Then, he contemplates, “You have to tag the trains. The trains come roaring down the rat alleys all alike and then you hit a train and it is yours, seen everywhere in the system, and you get inside people’s heads and vandalize their eyeballs” (DeLillo, 1997, p.435 emphasis added). Ironically, Moonman 157’s ideology resembles the words of Wainwright, “[o]nce we get the consumer by the eyeballs, we have complete mastery of the marketing process.” (DeLillo, 1997, p.531 emphasis added). However, at this moment, he gets aware of the importance of Graffiti as an art of space.

Despite the fact that Graffiti occupies public space, its message is totally different from the language of advertising. First, the message does not express commercial purposes; it carries the life of the socially excluded Moonman and his friends. This message is defined by Baudrillard (1976) as follows: “[I] exist, I am so and so, I live on such and such street, I am alive here and now” (p.78). It can be said that Graffiti is an art which bears within it the life story of a certain space. This space is generally socially excluded as the case of the Bronx.

Second, according to Baudrillard (1976) when Graffiti artists go for anonymity, they do not fight for their identity; they turn indeterminacy against the system itself. Their writing defies the code of signifier/signified. It is known that with the emergence of Poststructuralism and Deconstruction, meaning becomes indeterminate and uncertain, and the language becomes auto-referential. Hereby, Graffiti defies the code of auto-referentiality logic of advertisements in its space. Baudrillard explains through a real example from his observation of Graffiti in New York streets in the 1970s:

SUPERBE SPIX COLA.... means nothing. It is not even a proper name, but a symbolic matriculation number whose function is to derail the common system of designations. Those terms blasted their way out, however, so as to burst into reality like a scream, an interjection, an anti-discourse, as the waste of all syntactic, poetic, political development. Invincible due to their own poverty, they resist every interpretation and every connotation, no longer denoting anyone or anything. In this way with neither connotation nor denotation, they escape the principle of signification and, as empty signifiers, erupt into the sphere of the full signs of the city, dissolving it on contact (p.78, emphasis in original).

In Baudrillard’s terms, the emptiness of the signifiers what characterizes Graffiti strength and makes of it particular, because it has led to a sort of a revolution—not at the level of political signified, but at the level of the signifier. Graffiti results in a revolution in the sign system. It has caused insurrection and eruption in the urban landscape as the site of the reproduction of the code (1976, p.82).

So, not only do the graffiti artists tag subways and walls to react against media they also address their message to the politicians and the government to remind them that they exist. As Timothy L. Parish observes, by “[s]pray-paint scrawling, the fact of

their urban ethnic existence all over the city” (Parish as cited in Schuster, 2008, p.136). Schuster argues that those artists defy a “system” that includes city politicians who try through chemical solvents to erase their art from the trains (p.136). The following passages illustrate the city’s reaction to graffiti, “There was a big push out of City Hall to wipe out graffiti once and for all, to cork these ghetto crews [...] He did not fear arrest” (DeLillo, 1997, p.435). The narrator adds, “[f]orget orange juice, man. This was the new graffiti killer, some weirdshit chemical from the CIA” (DeLillo, 1997, p.438). Despite the different trials the city takes to cork the ghetto crews, it fails to stop the graffitiists.

The City Hall is supposed to protect Moonman 157 and his friends especially that they are all kids. This institution and others, according to Baudrillard (2002), are founded to guarantee the individual the right to space –decent life, which has become a scarce commodity, nonetheless, they emphasize quite the opposite: “[t]here is no right to space until there no longer is space for everyone, and until space and silence are the privilege of some at the expense of others” (p.59, emphases in original). In this respect, decent space becomes a privilege given to a certain social class over another. Ironically, in the 1980s, the mayor of New York who was supposed to solve problems related to the city like crime, violence, drugs, unemployment, abandoned children, poverty, and urban decay; instead, he waged “war on Graffiti” as described by Austin (2001, p.4). Here I argue that when the city describes Graffiti as an act of Vandalism, it is absolutely the opposite. It is the city that commits a rampant Vandalism towards spaces like the Bronx.

Actually, Moonman 157’s art cannot be described as something savage. He is very organized in his work. He knows numbers of trains and what ways they take. He thinks:

But you have to stand on a platform and see it coming or you can't know the feeling a writer gets, how the number 5 train comes roaring down the rat alleys and slams out of the tunnel, going whop-pop onto the high tracks, and suddenly there it is, Moonman riding the sky in the heart of the Bronx, over the whole burnt and rusted country, and this is the art of the backstreets talking, all the way from Bird, and you can't not see us anymore, you can't not know who we are, we got total notoriety now, Momzo Tops and Rimester and me, we're getting fame, we ain'tashame, and the train go rattling over the garbagy streets and past the dead-eye windows of all those empty tenements that have people living there even if you don't see them, but you have to see our tags and cartoon figures and bright and rhyming poems, this is the art that can't stand still, it climbs across your eyeballs night and day, the flickery jumping art of the slums and dumpsters, flashing those colors in your face--like I'm your movie, motherfucker (DeLillo, 1997, p.440).

In this scene, Moonman is aware of the situation of his neighborhood and I can say that he is an artist who is conscious about the role of his art and the message he is delivering across space. In this passage, the writer emphasizes again on the deterioration of the Bronx by implying the reader through the use of “you”. He invites him to see and sense the urban deterioration of the Bronx using words such as “burnt, rusted, garbagy, empty tenements, slums, and dumpsters”, yet; the narrator concomitantly invites the reader to feel, as well, the achievement of Moonman 157 and his crew. What they do is artistic “tags, cartoon figures and bright and rhyming poems”; their art is simply like a movie.

Interestingly, Moonman 157's movements are calculated and well planned. He does what the authorities cannot; he is the caretaker of his neighborhood. He helps the nuns by giving them money to fill in the friary with food and financing the grocery. He appears as a businessman and the nuns are part of his crew, they "represented his North Bronx operation" (DeLillo, 1997, p.241), and give him lists with locations of abandoned cars. Then, he sends his crew to bring the intact parts of those vehicles. After that "the car hulks came here to the lots for inspection and price setting by Ismael and were then delivered to a scrap-metal operation in remotest Brooklyn .... The money he paid the nuns for their locational work went to the friary for groceries" (DeLillo, 1997, p.241).

In another scene, while he is smoking a cigar—an image of a businessman—the nuns come to take money for their car spot. He answers "I don't pay you today, okay? I got some things I'm doing that I need the capital .... I'm making plans I get some heat and electric in here. Plus pirate cable for the Knicks" (DeLillo, 1997, p.241). Not only does he appear like a businessman but also can be compared to a mayor because he thinks about the wellbeing of the neighborhood. He is always so interested in helping his people that he is ready to change the situation of his neighborhood by bringing heat and electricity. Thanks to the efforts of Moonman 157, the Bronx is not totally isolated from the outside. By pirating the cable, the Bronx search for leisure like watching basketball, an important commodity of modern times.

It can be said that Moonman, as a neighborhood inhabitant, tries hard to change the situation of his community, and as an artist, he deliberately writes the story of the Bronx through the letters of Graffiti. Remarkably, the Bronx illustrate Baudrillard example of primitive societies that share everything, which he calls the symbolic exchange. For Baudrillard (1970), poverty involves not the quantity of goods a group possesses, but the nature of its human relationship. There is no accumulation or monopolization of raw materials, technologies, or products that would serve to interfere with free, exchange and lead to scarcity. What there is, and what is the source of their wealth, is symbolic exchange. Wealth is based not on goods but on the human exchange (p.12).

### **Conclusion:**

In the general framework of the representation of New York City in *Underworld*, Don DeLillo includes different parts to show the nature of the city with its bright and dark sides. On the one hand, the bright face is shown in the lights of advertising billboards which invade the modern urban space. On the other hand, the dark side is reflected in the description of the Bronx. This neighborhood is socially and economically excluded because of economic and urban planning factors.

In the novel, the writer draws the reader's attention to the physical and moral degradation of the Bronx. In his representation, this place seems impossible for living and appears as an inner foreign city. To highlight the human presence in the neighborhood, he uses Graffiti as a messenger travelling across space to communicate the lamentable condition of the Bronx and to remind the authorities about the neighborhood's existence. Apparently, Graffiti imitates the consumer politics of advertising by appropriating the public space. However, while advertising communicates the life of objects, Graffiti communicates the life of human beings. It writes back to the city's institutions telling them in an undecipherable language the

story of the backstreet life. It reaches the whole city and by doing this it transforms it into a much-like Bronx.

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