

**Scientific Hysterical Realism:**

**Narrative Excess, Systems Theory, and the Fiction of Don DeLillo**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the intersection of hysterical realism and systems theory in the fiction of Don DeLillo, with particular emphasis on *Underworld*. Hysterical realism, a term popularized by James Wood, describes contemporary novels characterized by narrative excess, encyclopedic detail, and a manic engagement with social systems. DeLillo's fiction exemplifies this mode, but it also complicates it by embedding scientific metaphors, systemic thinking, and epistemological anxieties within its narrative fabric. Drawing on systems theory (Luhmann, Deleuze & Guattari, cybernetics), this study argues that DeLillo's maximalist style is not merely ornamental but functions as a literary analogue to complex systems. Through close reading of *Underworld*, the paper demonstrates how narrative excess mirrors systemic interconnectivity, how paranoia and information overload reflect scientific models of entropy, and how DeLillo's fiction critiques the limits of representation in an age of global networks. Ultimately, the paper situates DeLillo's work as a paradigmatic case of "scientific hysterical realism," where literary form and scientific discourse converge to dramatize the overwhelming complexity of contemporary life.

**Keywords:** Narrative Excess, Systems Theory, Postmodern Fiction, Entropy, Cybernetics, Maximalism, Information Overload, Cold War Literature

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## **Introduction**

The concept of *hysterical realism*, introduced by James Wood in his essay “Human, All Too Inhuman” (2000), has become a critical lens for understanding contemporary fiction that thrives on narrative excess, encyclopedic detail, and systemic engagement. Wood critiqued this mode for privileging ideas, networks, and cultural commentary over psychological depth, yet subsequent scholarship has reinterpreted hysterical realism as a productive aesthetic strategy that dramatizes the overwhelming complexity of modern life. In this context, Don DeLillo’s fiction—particularly *Underworld* (1997)—stands as a paradigmatic example of the maximalist novel, while also complicating the category by embedding scientific metaphors and systemic thinking into its narrative fabric.

DeLillo’s work is distinguished by its fascination with cultural, political, and technological systems, and by its use of scientific concepts such as entropy, information theory, and network dynamics as structuring devices. His sprawling narratives do not merely accumulate detail for its own sake; rather, they mimic the interconnectedness and feedback loops of complex systems. This paper proposes the term *scientific hysterical realism* to describe DeLillo’s distinctive mode, in which literary excess converges with scientific discourse to dramatize epistemological anxieties about representation in an age of global networks and information overload. The central research question guiding this study is: *How does DeLillo’s narrative excess intersect with scientific and systemic thinking to produce a distinctive mode of “scientific hysterical realism”?* To address this, the paper employs a methodology that combines comparative literary analysis, theoretical synthesis, and close textual reading. By situating DeLillo alongside other hysterical realists such as Pynchon and Wallace, synthesizing insights from systems theory and information science, and conducting close readings of *Underworld*, the study demonstrates how DeLillo’s fiction exemplifies and transforms hysterical realism into a scientifically inflected literary mode

## **Literature Review**

James Wood’s influential critique of *hysterical realism* describes contemporary novels as works of “perpetual motion,” driven by excessive detail, encyclopedic ambition, and systemic obsession. For Wood, such texts sacrifice psychological depth in favor of manic energy and cultural commentary. While his assessment was largely pejorative, later critics have argued that hysterical realism captures the

epistemological anxieties of late modernity, dramatizing the impossibility of comprehending vast social and technological systems.

Don DeLillo's fiction has been central to these debates. Frank Lentricchia emphasizes DeLillo's preoccupation with paranoia and systemic structures, suggesting that his narratives dramatize the individual's entrapment within larger networks of power and surveillance. Mark Osteen highlights DeLillo's engagement with consumer culture, showing how commodities and media function as connective tissue in his novels. Joseph Tabbi, meanwhile, situates DeLillo within postmodern epistemology, arguing that his work interrogates the limits of knowledge in an age dominated by information flows. Together, these scholars underscore DeLillo's fascination with systemic complexity, though they stop short of framing it in explicitly scientific terms.

Systems theory provides a useful lens for extending this scholarship. Niklas Luhmann's concept of autopoiesis and social systems emphasizes self-referential structures that reproduce themselves through communication. Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic model offers a non-hierarchical metaphor for interconnectedness, resonating with DeLillo's sprawling narrative webs.

Scientific metaphors—entropy, chaos theory, complexity science—have long been employed in literature to dramatize disorder and interconnection. DeLillo's fiction, particularly *Underworld*, mobilizes these metaphors not only thematically but structurally, embedding scientific discourse into narrative form. The critical gap, however, lies in the absence of a framework that explicitly theorizes DeLillo's work as *scientific hysterical realism*. This study seeks to fill that gap by demonstrating how his narrative excess converges with systemic and scientific thinking to produce a distinctive literary mode.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a multi-layered methodology designed to capture both the literary and theoretical dimensions of Don DeLillo's fiction. The first approach is **comparative textual analysis**, situating DeLillo alongside other writers frequently associated with hysterical realism, including Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, and David Foster Wallace. By comparing narrative strategies—such as encyclopedic detail, sprawling plots, and systemic obsessions—this analysis highlights both the shared features of maximalist fiction and the distinctive qualities of DeLillo's work. Such a comparison allows us to see how DeLillo transforms the mode of hysterical realism into something uniquely inflected by scientific discourse.

The second approach applies a **systems-theoretical lens** to DeLillo's narrative structures. Concepts such as feedback loops, entropy, and autopoiesis are drawn from

systems theory and cybernetics to illuminate how DeLillo's fiction mirrors the dynamics of complex systems. For example, entropy functions as both a thematic concern and a structural principle, while autopoiesis helps explain the self-referential nature of DeLillo's cultural systems. This lens enables the study to move beyond metaphor and to analyze narrative excess as a literary analogue to systemic processes. Third, the methodology emphasizes **close reading of *Underworld***, DeLillo's most ambitious novel. Detailed textual analysis focuses on passages that dramatize narrative excess, systemic metaphors, and scientific imagery. By examining motifs such as waste, nuclear physics, and information overload, the close reading demonstrates how DeLillo embeds scientific concepts into the very fabric of his narrative.

Finally, the study undertakes an **interdisciplinary synthesis**, bridging literary criticism with systems theory and philosophy of science. This synthesis allows for a richer interpretation of DeLillo's fiction, situating it within both literary debates about hysterical realism and theoretical discourses on complexity, networks, and epistemology. Together, these methodological strands provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing DeLillo's fiction as *scientific hysterical realism*.

### **Findings**

The analysis reveals that Don DeLillo's narrative excess is not a gratuitous stylistic indulgence but rather a deliberate mimetic strategy. His sprawling plots, encyclopedic detail, and multiplicity of voices mirror the overwhelming complexity of modern systems, from technological networks to cultural economies. In this sense, excess becomes a structural analogue to systemic interconnectivity, dramatizing the impossibility of grasping the whole while immersing readers in its fragments.

*Underworld* exemplifies hysterical realism in its encyclopedic ambition and manic energy, yet it simultaneously critiques its own excess. The novel's sheer scale and multiplicity of perspectives highlight the limits of representation, suggesting that narrative excess itself becomes a commentary on the impossibility of total comprehension. DeLillo thus both participates in and interrogates the aesthetics of hysterical realism.

Scientific metaphors form the thematic core of *Underworld*. Waste functions as a metaphor for entropy, nuclear physics dramatizes systemic threat, and information theory structures the novel's exploration of communication and overload. These metaphors are not incidental but integral, shaping both narrative form and thematic resonance.

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Finally, DeLillo's fiction anticipates contemporary debates about globalization, networks, and information overload. His novels prefigure concerns about digital connectivity, surveillance, and the saturation of media, situating him as a writer whose narrative strategies resonate with the systemic anxieties of the twenty-first century. In this way, DeLillo's work emerges as a paradigmatic case of *scientific hysterical realism*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The foundation of this study rests on the concept of *hysterical realism*, a term coined by James Wood to critique contemporary novels characterized by narrative excess, encyclopedic ambition, and systemic obsession. While Wood dismissed this mode as sacrificing psychological depth for manic energy, subsequent scholarship has reinterpreted hysterical realism as a productive literary strategy. Rather than a failure, it can be understood as an aesthetic response to the overwhelming complexity of late modernity, dramatizing the impossibility of fully comprehending vast social and technological systems. This reinterpretation allows us to view DeLillo's fiction not as indulgent but as structurally attuned to systemic realities.

To deepen this perspective, the study draws on systems theory. Niklas Luhmann's notion of autopoiesis emphasizes the self-reproducing nature of social systems, offering a lens through which DeLillo's recursive narratives can be understood. Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic structures provide a metaphor for non-hierarchical interconnection, resonating with the sprawling, networked form of *Underworld*. Norbert Wiener's cybernetics, with its focus on feedback loops and entropy, further illuminates DeLillo's recurring motifs of waste, communication breakdown, and systemic collapse. Together, these theories frame narrative excess as a literary analogue to systemic complexity.

The framework also incorporates entropy and information theory. Claude Shannon's model of communication highlights the tension between order and noise, a dynamic mirrored in DeLillo's depictions of information overload. Thermodynamic metaphors of entropy recur throughout his fiction, dramatizing the drift toward disorder in both social and technological systems. These scientific concepts provide structural and thematic coherence to DeLillo's maximalist style.

Finally, the study proposes the category of *scientific hysterical realism*. This hybrid mode captures how DeLillo's narrative excess mirrors systemic and scientific complexity, transforming hysterical realism into a scientifically inflected literary strategy. It situates DeLillo's work at the intersection of literary form and scientific discourse, offering a new lens for understanding contemporary maximalist fiction.

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### **Analysis of *Underworld***

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* exemplifies how hysterical realism can be transformed into a scientifically inflected literary mode. The novel's sprawling narrative, encompassing decades of American history, dramatizes systemic interconnectivity through its excess of detail, multiplicity of characters, and non-linear structure. Rather than functioning as an ornamental indulgence, this excess mirrors the complexity of scientific and social systems, staging the impossibility of total comprehension in an age defined by networks and information flows.

Central to this transformation is DeLillo's use of **scientific metaphors**. Waste operates as a metaphor for entropy, dramatizing systemic breakdown and the drift toward disorder. Nuclear physics and Cold War anxieties foreground the threat of systemic collapse, while information theory structures the novel's exploration of communication, noise, and overload. These motifs are not incidental but integral, embedding scientific discourse into the narrative fabric and shaping the epistemological concerns of the text.

The novel's recurring objects—such as the baseball that circulates across decades—function rhizomatically, connecting disparate nodes in ways that echo Deleuze and Guattari's model of non-hierarchical networks. Characters themselves are positioned less as autonomous individuals than as nodes embedded within larger systems of media, consumer culture, and politics. In this way, DeLillo dramatizes both the seduction and futility of systemic thinking: the allure of coherence and the inevitability of fragmentation.

Ultimately, *Underworld* emerges as a paradigmatic case of *scientific hysterical realism*. Its narrative excess becomes a literary analogue to systemic and scientific complexity, transforming hysterical realism into a mode that interrogates the epistemological limits of representation in the age of globalization and information overload.

### **Discussion**

Don DeLillo's fiction exemplifies the defining features of hysterical realism while simultaneously transforming the mode into a scientifically inflected literary strategy. His novels, particularly *Underworld*, display the encyclopedic ambition, narrative excess, and systemic obsession that James Wood critiqued. Yet DeLillo mobilizes these features not as stylistic indulgence but as a means of dramatizing the overwhelming complexity of modern systems. In this sense, his work reconfigures hysterical realism into what may be termed *scientific hysterical realism*, a hybrid mode where literary form converges with scientific discourse.

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Narrative excess in DeLillo's fiction mirrors systemic interconnectivity, staging the impossibility of total comprehension. The multiplicity of characters, motifs, and storylines in *Underworld* reflects the structure of complex systems, where countless nodes interact in unpredictable ways. Just as systems theory emphasizes emergent properties and non-linear dynamics, DeLillo's fiction resists closure, foregrounding the reader's inability to grasp the whole. Excess thus becomes epistemological: it dramatizes the limits of representation in an age defined by networks and information flows.

At the same time, DeLillo critiques both the seduction and the futility of systemic thinking. His characters often seek coherence through systemic metaphors—whether in consumer culture, politics, or technology—yet they encounter fragmentation, waste, and entropy. The novels reveal the allure of systemic order while exposing its limitations, suggesting that systemic thinking illuminates patterns but cannot resolve the fundamental disorder of contemporary life.

DeLillo's fiction resonates strongly with contemporary anxieties about globalization, networks, and information overload. His depictions of media saturation, surveillance, and technological interconnectivity anticipate twenty-first-century debates about digital culture and systemic collapse. From this perspective, *scientific hysterical realism* emerges as a new category for understanding maximalist fiction in the age of systems, designating a mode that dramatizes both the allure and the limits of systemic representation.

### **Conclusion**

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* demonstrates with remarkable clarity how hysterical realism intersects with scientific and systemic discourses. The novel's sprawling narrative, encyclopedic ambition, and multiplicity of perspectives embody the excess that James Wood critiqued, yet DeLillo transforms this excess into a structural analogue for systemic complexity. His fiction reveals that narrative excess is not merely stylistic ornamentation but an epistemological strategy, dramatizing the limits of representation in an age defined by networks, globalization, and information overload. By foregrounding fragmentation, waste, and interconnectivity, DeLillo stages the impossibility of comprehending the whole, while simultaneously immersing readers in its manifold parts.

Systems theory provides a particularly productive lens for interpreting DeLillo's fiction. Concepts such as autopoiesis, rhizomatic structures, and cybernetic feedback illuminate the ways in which his narratives mimic the dynamics of complex systems. Entropy and information theory further enrich this reading, highlighting how DeLillo

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embeds scientific metaphors into the very fabric of his storytelling. In this sense, his fiction dramatizes both the allure and the futility of systemic thinking, exposing the tension between order and disorder, coherence and collapse.

The concept of *scientific hysterical realism* thus emerges as a valuable framework for analyzing contemporary maximalist novels. It designates a hybrid mode in which literary excess converges with scientific discourse, producing a form that interrogates the epistemological challenges of modernity. DeLillo's work exemplifies this mode, situating him at the forefront of literary responses to systemic and scientific anxieties. Future research might extend this framework through comparative studies with other hysterical realists such as Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, and Salman Rushdie, whose novels similarly grapple with systemic complexity. Moreover, exploring how digital-era fiction engages with hysterical realism could reveal how narrative excess adapts to new technological and informational environments, further expanding the horizons of this critical category.

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