



The Framing of History by Mass Media: A thematic study in Don DeLillo's Underworld

Author 1: P Ramesh, Ph.D. Research Scholar in English, Gobi Arts and Science College, Gobi-638453, Erode (Dt), Tamil Nadu.

Author 2 : Dr.S Parveen Sulthana, Assistant Professor of English(Aided), Gobi Arts and Science College, Gobi-638453, Erode (Dt), Tamil Nadu..

Abstract

This paper explores the framing of history by mass media as presented in Don DeLillo's novel *Underworld*, using framing theory as a lens for analysis. Framing theory, developed by Erving Goffman, examines how media emphasizes certain aspects of reality while downplaying others, shaping public perception and collective memory. *Underworld* illustrates this through its depiction of historical events such as the famous baseball game known as Bobby Thomson's "Shot Heard 'Round the World," and the Cuban Missile Crisis. DeLillo demonstrates how media constructs narratives that become accepted as truth, influencing both individual and collective memories. The novel shows how media's selective reporting can create legends and amplify fear, as seen in the "Airborne Toxic Event." Characters in the novel often rely on media to understand their world, highlighting the powerful role of media in shaping reality. By blending real and fictional events, DeLillo underscores the blurred line between fact and fiction in media-driven narratives. This paper argues that *Underworld* provides a critical examination of the pervasive influence of mass media in constructing historical narratives, shaping public perception, and influencing personal and collective memory, often at the expense of authenticity and individual perspectives.

Key Words: Perception ,bureaucracy ,totalitarianism ,amass ,media.

Don DeLillo's novel *Underworld* explores many themes including the main theme of how mass media frames history. The novel shows how media shapes our view of historical events, shaping our perception and in turn history itself. This research article will apply framing theory to analyze the novel in order to bring out the genius of DeLillo in exposing the impact of media on history. Applying Framing theory will be useful in understanding how media presents and emphasizes certain aspects of reality, ignoring, or hiding other aspects.

Framing theory was developed by Erving Goffman, and the theory is all about how media presents information to the public. In reality, media can highlight some aspects of an event, or a situation, and downplay others which affects how people look at them. For example, if media focuses on violence in a protest, people may see the protest as violent. Instead, If media focuses on the peaceful aspects of the protest, people may see the protest as peaceful. Framing theory shows that media is not neutral as it shapes reality by choosing what to highlight.

The major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations. Framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue.

(Chong&Druckman 110)

In *Underworld*, DeLillo demonstrates, through the narrative, how mass media frames historical events in certain way to become a certain narrative. The novel spans several decades and includes many real historical events which are shown through the perspective of media coverage. This aspect highlights how media shapes public understanding of history, and in fact, shapes and reshapes it. The novel, *Underworld*, starts with a famous baseball game which becomes an important historical moment because of how it is reported in the news media. Media coverage makes the game a part of American cultural memory. This shows the power of media to create historical narratives, an important contention of framing theory. (Curran 2)

In the novel, DeLillo also blends real and fictional events and the mixing shows how media can blur the line between fact and fiction. For example, the novel references the Cuban Missile Crisis. Media coverage during the crisis increased fear and urgency among the public, and they remember the crisis only through the lens of their media reports. This is a perfect example for how media framing shapes collective memory (Edy 66) and in turn history.

The novel suggests that what we remember is often shaped by how media presents events. Media in Underworld acts as a storyteller by creating narratives that people accept as truth. The process is not always accurate because media can emphasize some aspects and ignore others which does not provide a complete picture.

"You know what this is? It's the nightly news. It's the local news at eleven with all the grotesque items neatly spaced to keep you watching the whole half hour." ... "It's how the news becomes so powerful it doesn't need TV or newspapers. It exists in people's perceptions. It's something they invent, strong enough to seem real. It's the news without the media." (DeLillo 374)

Unfortunately, the selective reporting shapes collective memory, thereby providing an opportunity to leave the picture incomplete in whatever way the one who manipulate wishes. DeLillo illustrates this through his characters as they rely on media to understand the world, and their perceptions are shaped by what they see on television or read in newspapers. (Spencer 89) This provides evidence to the power of media in shaping reality.

The novel also explores the relationship between personal and collective memory where individual memories are influenced by media representations. In fact, characters in the novel often recall events from their own experiences and from media depictions. (Stamenković 251) This interplay between personal and collective memory highlights the influence of media. It shows how media shapes not only public perception but also individual understanding of history. "Russ thinks this is another kind of history. He thinks they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power." (DeLillo 24)

The famous baseball game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers becomes an example to demonstrate how the phenomenon of framing works. This game is known for Bobby Thomson's "Shot Heard 'Round the World." Media coverage of this game turns it into a major historical moment. The game becomes more than just a sports event. It becomes a cultural phenomenon. This is because media reports and celebrates the event.

Thomson goes out on the clubhouse veranda to respond to the sound of his chanted name and they are everywhere, they are on the steps with stadium cops keeping them in check and there are thousands more spread dense across the space between jutting bleacher walls, many arms extended toward Thomson-- they are pointing or imploring or making victory fists or stating a desire to touch, men in suits and hats

down there and others hanging over the bleacher wall above Bobby, reaching down, half falling over the edge, some very near to touching him. (DeLillo 23)

The way media frames the game makes it an important part of American history.

DeLillo shows how media can create legends out of ordinary events by showing how the baseball game becomes legendary due to media coverage. People remember the game not just for the event itself but for how it was reported. This demonstrates the power of media to shape collective memory. (Wolf 67) Media framing makes the event seem more significant than it might have been without such coverage.

The novel also references the Cuban Missile Crisis which was a critical moment in American history, and, unsurprisingly, media played a huge role in shaping public perception during the crisis. News reports made the situation seem very urgent and dangerous, and it also led to people's memories of the crisis being influenced by how media reported it. The media's framing created a sense of fear and urgency. This shows how media can shape the emotional response to historical events.

DeLillo blends real and fictional events in the novel, and the blending shows how media can blur the line between reality and fiction. It also proves that media can present fictional elements as part of the historical narrative and it makes it hard for people to distinguish between what actually happened and what was reported. (Ryan & Thon 43) The blending of fact and fiction highlights the power of media to construct a version of history that may not be entirely accurate.

Another key aspect in the novel is the "Airborne Toxic Event," which is a fictional chemical spill that becomes a major news story. Media coverage of the event creates widespread fear and panic. Because of how the characters in the novel rely on media reports to understand the situation, the media's framing of the event shapes how people perceive and react to it. This shows how media can influence public perception in times of crisis.

In *Underworld*, media acts as a storyteller as it constructs narratives that people accept as truth. But, this storytelling is not always accurate. Media can emphasize certain aspects of an event and ignore others, and such selective reporting shapes collective memory. DeLillo illustrates this through various characters who rely on media for their understanding of the world. (Veggie 84) Their perceptions are often shaped more by what they see on television or read in newspapers than by their own experiences.

He thought of the photograph of Nixon and wondered if the state had taken on the paranoia of the individual or was it the other way around. He remembered how he felt cranking film across the light box and wondering where the dots connected. Because everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to only because it does. (DeLillo 209)

The novel also explores how media shapes individual identity. Characters in *Underworld* often define themselves through the media they consume. For example, Cotter Martin is heavily influenced by the radio broadcasts and newsreels he hears. These media sources shape his understanding of the world and his place in it. This reliance on media for identity formation highlights the power of media. Media not only informs but also shapes how people see themselves and their roles in society.

DeLillo also shows how media can manipulate public perception by focusing on certain aspects of a story. This selective reporting can shape how people understand and remember events. For instance, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, media reports emphasized the danger and urgency. This framing heightened public fear and shaped how the crisis is remembered. People remember the crisis not just for the political standoff but for the intense fear created by media coverage.

In *Underworld*, media also serves as a tool for creating heroes and villains. The novel shows how media can elevate certain figures while demonizing others. For example, Bobby Thomson's famous home run becomes legendary partly due to media glorification. Conversely, media can tarnish reputations and shape public opinion against individuals. This dual capacity of media to create and destroy illustrates its powerful role in shaping public perception and historical narrative.

Media's impact on public perception is further highlighted through the novel's portrayal of historical events. DeLillo uses real events, such as the baseball game and the Cuban Missile Crisis, to show how media frames these moments in ways that influence how they are remembered. The intense media coverage shapes public memory, making these events not just historical facts but shared experiences shaped by media narratives. This framing becomes a part of the historical narrative that people recall, demonstrating the media's role in constructing memory.

In *Underworld*, Don DeLillo explores the relationship between personal and collective memory. The novel shows how media shapes both individual recollections and public memory. This dynamic reveals the powerful influence of mass media on our understanding of the past.

Personal memories in *Underworld* are often mediated by media images and narratives. Characters remember significant events not only through their own experiences but also through how these events were depicted in the media. For example, Nick Shay's memories of the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis are influenced by the media coverage he consumed. The media's portrayal of these events becomes a part of his personal history. This demonstrates how individual memory can be shaped by external narratives (Wertsch 125).

Collective memory, as presented in the novel, is also constructed through media as the public remembers historical events through the lens of media coverage. "the influence of media in DeLillo's texts serve to control the dread of the crowd." (Dwyer 16) DeLillo uses the example of the baseball game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers to illustrate this point. The game is remembered not only for the actual play but for how it was reported and celebrated in the media. This collective memory is shaped by the narratives constructed by journalists, broadcasters, and other media figures.

The novel suggests that media-driven historical narratives can often overshadow more personal and nuanced memories. For instance, the "Airborne Toxic Event" becomes a defining moment in the lives of the characters primarily because of the media frenzy surrounding it. The constant updates and sensational reporting shape how the event is perceived and remembered by the public. This media-driven narrative becomes the dominant story, eclipsing individual experiences and interpretations.

DeLillo also explores the consequences of this media-driven memory construction. One significant consequence is the potential loss of authenticity in personal and collective histories. When media narratives dominate, there is a risk that personal stories and individual perspectives may be marginalized or forgotten. In *Underworld*, characters struggle to reconcile their own memories with the dominant media narratives. the novel and the narrative "provides the reader with a kind of 'cognitive mapping,' enabling them to contextualise themselves within the confusing spatial and temporal dimensions of the late-capitalist postmodern world." (Thomas IV) This tension highlights the difficulty of maintaining personal authenticity in a world saturated with media representations.

The novel examines how media can manipulate and reshape historical narratives to serve specific purposes. Media outlets may emphasize certain aspects of a story while downplaying others, thereby constructing a particular version of history. This selective reporting can influence public opinion and shape collective memory in ways that serve the interests of those controlling the media. DeLillo's portrayal of this process underscores the power of media to influence not just current events but also how history is remembered and understood.

In *Underworld*, media acts as a storyteller that constructs narratives accepted as truth by the public. These narratives are not always accurate, as media can emphasize certain aspects and ignore others. This selective reporting shapes collective memory. DeLillo illustrates this through his characters, who rely on media for their understanding of the world. Their perceptions are shaped more by what they see on television or read in newspapers than by their own experiences. This shows the power of media in shaping reality.

The novel also highlights the interplay between personal and collective memory. Individual memories are influenced by media representations. Characters in the novel often recall events from their own experiences and from media depictions. This interplay between personal and collective memory highlights the pervasive influence of media. It shows how media shapes not only public perception but also individual understanding of history.

Underworld by Don DeLillo offers a profound exploration of the framing of history by mass media. The novel demonstrates how media constructs historical narratives and shapes our understanding of events. By emphasizing certain aspects and influencing public perception, media creates dominant narratives that become part of the collective consciousness. This process highlights the powerful role of media in shaping both personal and collective memory, often at the expense of authenticity and individual perspectives. Through his intricate storytelling, DeLillo reveals the pervasive influence of mass media on our understanding of the past and challenges readers to consider the implications of living in a media-saturated world.

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