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Una-Sola-Cosa: The Violence of Aesthetics in Mao II and Estrella distante

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UNA-SOLA-COSA:
THE VIOLENCE OF AESTHETICS
IN *MAO II* AND *ESTRELLA DISTANTE*

by

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Written by Erin Cousins
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Cousins, Erin (M.A., Comparative Literature)

Una-sola-cosa: The Violence of Aesthetics in *Mao II* and *Estrella distante*

Thesis directed by Dr. Peter Elmore

This thesis explores the relationship between aesthetics and violence in Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella distante*. Though each text's central characters begin with an attachment to an idealized narrative of modern artistry, I argue that these idealizations are based on a conflation of literal and metaphorical violence. Such a conflation allows these characters to value violence purely for its ability to impact sense perception, forming what I call an *aesthetic* violence. By conflating literal and metaphorical violence into the aesthetic, I argue, each character is able to ignore the asymmetrical power dynamics inherent to their idealized conceptions of artistry and the artist's role in society: specifically, in the modernist drives toward autonomy and social impact.

The idealization of aesthetic violence and modernist tendencies, though, is problematized in each text by the reassertion of literal violence and its physical consequences. DeLillo's Bill Gray and Bolaño's Arturo B. are faced with the realization that the aesthetic violence and the modernist tendencies they romanticize can be appropriated by (and are themselves forms of) dominating power. *Mao II* and *Estrella distante*, as a result, are imbued with ambivalence; they simultaneously carry nostalgia for the modern and a realization of the violence on which its aesthetics are built. As such, they cannot be characterized as wholly modernist elegies or portents of a postmodernist future, but instead occupy a place in between, a moment of transition in which they are able, unlike their characters, to maintain art's critical function.

*This thesis is dedicated to my niece, Hadassah, whom I hope will grow up to be a great reader,
and to my nephew Dominic, who already has.*

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As Roberto Bolaño says in *2666*, "Reading is pleasure and happiness to be alive or sadness to be alive and above all it's knowledge and questions." Thank you all for your help in the pursuit of that knowledge, and in the exploration of those questions.

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INTRODUCTION

"Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man."

--Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Futurist Manifesto

"Surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule, and why it still expects nothing save from violence. The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd."

--André Breton, Second Manifesto of Surrealism

In 1975, 22-year-old Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño, then living in Mexico, co-founded the poetic movement *Infrarealismo* with Mario Santiago Papasquario. The group's third manifesto, penned by Bolaño and titled "Déjenlo todo, nuevamente" / "Leave it all behind, again" was explicit about the young poets' ethical and aesthetic aims: "Nuestra ética es la Revolución, nuestra estética la Vida: una-sola-cosa" / "Our ethic is Revolution, our aesthetic is Life: one and the same thing" ("Déjenlo todo"). The single line fuses not only art and life, following the project of the historical avant-garde, but also ethics and aesthetics, entangled in an ever-present move toward revolution.¹ The Chilean author would later become famous for his prose, but his work still remains tied to his roots in revolutionary poetry; his novel *Los detectives salvajes* / *The Savage Detectives* draws on his experiences with *Infrarealismo*, re-characterizing the movement as *real visceralismo*, and his 1996 novella *Estrella Distante* / *Distant Star* is

¹ For Peter Bürger, the avant-garde aimed to "reintegrate art into the praxis of life" (22). Though I will not follow Bürger's strict separation of the avant-garde and modernism (as aestheticism), I will use his definition of the avant-garde project in articulating the modernist aesthetics used in this study.

woven around a group of young poets whose *ética* and *estética* are entangled with dreams of revolutionary power. Though Bolaño's prose work was largely published late in the 20th century or posthumously in the early 21st, his novels and novellas are in dialogue with aesthetic traditions of the past; his characters, including his oft-used alter ego, Arturo Belano, are drawn to the artistic histories of modernism and the avant-garde.

The work of Bolaño's American contemporary, Don DeLillo, cannot be so easily tied to a specific movement. Though he is most often characterized as a postmodern writer, his 1991 novel *Mao II* is also centered on a certain (perhaps waning) narrative of authorship in the (perhaps ending) modern era. Like Bolaño's *Estrella Distante*, which takes place in the aftermath of the 1973 Chilean military coup, DeLillo's novel exists in the nexus of a cultural shift; his protagonist Bill Gray is, like Bolaño's Arturo B., pulled simultaneously by nostalgia for the artistic traditions of the past and uncertainty about art's role in a rapidly changing future.

Yet as the epigraphs above demonstrate, the artistic traditions of the past—like the history of the modern era—are imbued with violence. Each quote, taken from avant-garde manifestos written in the first half of the twentieth century, so seamlessly integrates literal violence into its aesthetic treatise that it is difficult to tell the difference between reality and metaphor. Is “firing blindly” a purely artistic metaphor or a literal act of terrorism? Can a “violent attack” of poetry have literal consequences? Violence here is utilized for its aesthetic quality, for its visceral ability to bleed through the limits of language and merge categories. As such, it becomes not purely literal or purely metaphorical, but is instead conflated into what I will call an *aesthetic violence*. Aesthetic violence is defined only by its impact on sense perception; its status as literal or metaphorical act becomes irrelevant. In terms of aesthetic

violence, a gunshot is merely the intensification of a poem; its impact is greater, but in neither case are literal consequences taken into account.

This is the problematic that DeLillo and Bolaño take on directly in *Mao II* and *Estrella Distante*: the conflation of literal and metaphorical violence into an aesthetic violence and the ramifications of that conflation for the status of art and artist. The narrative of each text is driven by characters that romanticize the relationship between art and violence as a revolutionary tool against power; their ability to romanticize is predicated on the same conflation into aesthetic violence seen in the Futurist and Surrealist manifestos.

In working to uncover the conflation of violence into the aesthetic in these texts, the project of this study will be to trace each text's disillusion with a modern narrative of artistry, as well as uncover the effect aesthetic violence has on an artist's relation to systems of power in the material world.

Method: Modernism(s) as Creative Impulses

In order to take on this project, some preliminary definitions and methods must be established. Firstly, in linking *Mao II* and *Estrella distante* to modernist aesthetics, I am not seeking to unite them with a singular definition of either modernism or the avant-garde—in fact, such a project would be impossible. Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers speak to the “current, often paradoxical challenges of treating modernism as a coherent concept” in their 2015 text, *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*, which traces modernism's development as concept and practice from its origins to its contemporary status. The differing views they outline on what constitutes “modernism”, as well as the status of sub-categories such as Aestheticism, high-

modernism, the avant-garde, are too numerous to recount here—in fact, as Latham and Rogers explain, the evolution of modernism has led to the existence of modernisms in the plural:

Once foundational concepts like autonomy and difficulty, for instance, are now no longer essential to the branching definitions of modernism, but instead are treated as one of many complex, multifaceted responses to a bewildering variety of historical, literary, cultural, and other forces that created a global twentieth-century modernity. Thus, critics now speak increasingly of ‘modernisms,’ in the plural, forged in vastly different historical circumstances, but nevertheless held together loosely by an interrelated array of creative impulses. (150)

The approach taken in this study will be based on this perception of modernism as existing in the plural.² Investigating the work of Bolaño and DeLillo requires the recognition that he texts themselves were written after “modernism” as a unified concept had already been destabilized in literary criticism, and set during a time when the “essentials” of modernism were in debate.

According to Latham and Rogers, the 1970s and 1980s saw a rise in contestation of the modernist canon and alternative definitions of the tradition:

Such revisionary definitions of modernism were recovered and reframed, largely in the academy in the 1970s and 1980s, as an increasingly vocal collection of critics asked whether modernism was an elitist, hegemonic movement to be discarded (as some postmodernists would claim); a broad-based movement whose minority contributors had been overlooked and must be recuperated (as some scholars would claim); or a combination of the two. (104-105)

This context is important not because either Bolaño or DeLillo was necessarily a champion of this particular modernist revisionism within the academy, but because it would be an analytical mistake to tie either text to a particular vision of modernist aesthetics. Though *Estrella distante* ties its characters more directly to avant-garde revolution, the central character’s interest in an aesthetic autonomy is crucial to the text’s characterization of art’s role in society. While the protagonist of *Mao II* seeks a critical distance through a separation of art and life, he also

² For a full tracing of the evolution of Modernism as concept and practice, see Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers’s *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*.

maintains a desire for social impact not unlike that of the avant-garde. In other words, the characters in each text display an affinity for more than one of the “interrelated array of created impulses” that make up modernism(s) of the past.

Because of this multiplicity of modernisms within the texts, I am choosing to frame the modernist aesthetics of each in just this way—as *creative impulses* or tendencies that show an attachment to certain modernist traditions but do not demarcate *singular* adherence to those traditions.³ Specifically, this thesis will look at the role of two *intermingling* categories of creative impulses: impulses toward shock, novelty, and social impact as exemplified by the avant-garde, and impulses toward autonomy (and through it, critical distance and privilege) as exemplified by high-modernism and aestheticism. As *Mao II* and *Estrella distante* will show, the thread that binds these impulses is not a singular definition of modernism, but a pervasive and inescapable violence with inevitable ties to power.

First Creative Impulse: Avant-garde Impact and Social Praxis

Though I do not wish to adhere to the strict separation of avant-garde and modernism that Peter Bürger articulates in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, his emphasis on the avant-garde’s desire to re-assert art’s social impact is useful in explicating the nature of this second set of impulses as seen in *Mao II* and *Estrella distante*:

Only after art...has altogether detached itself from the praxis of life can the aesthetic develop ‘purely.’ But the other side of autonomy, art’s lack of social impact, also becomes recognizable. The avant-gardiste protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences. (22)

³ The term ‘impulses’ is particularly suited to the needs of this project in that it does not imply success achievement, but rather a drive *toward* a particular end. Though the characters in these texts attempt to craft positions of autonomy and achieve social impact, their journeys are marked by failure and disillusion through that failure.

Bürger sees the avant-garde as a reaction to the social futility of aestheticism; its “intention” is defined as the “destruction” of autonomy in service of social impact (83). This purposive impulse is then traditionally served by two formal impulses: avant-garde shock technique and an ever-present drive for ‘newness’. Shock, according to Bürger, is “aimed for as a stimulus to change one’s conduct of life; it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient’s life praxis” (80). Newness, as “an aesthetic category,” deals “not with development but with a break with tradition...the radical quality of the break with what had prevailed heretofore” (60). The characterization of shock, newness, and the historical avant-garde in general as a “radical break” with the past crystallizes the avant-garde’s status as what Thierry de Duve calls in *Kant After Duchamp* a “project of emancipation”—an attempt to free art and public through the shocking novelty of revolution (428).

For de Duve, this emancipatory project of the avant-garde is based in an “ideology of progress”, an ideology that “meant simply that ambitious art could not be conceived as anything but progressive—socially, politically, or ideologically...it meant that art achieved its utopian ambition through a critical function organically linking the aesthetic domain with the ethical” (427).

For the purposes of this study, this linking of the avant-garde impulse (and art in general) to a progressive ideology has twofold importance. Firstly, the link to this progressive ideology is first romanticized and then corroded in each text; the revolutionary power of art is elevated, but then destabilized by the appropriation of art’s ‘emancipatory’ function. Secondly, the “critical function” of the emancipatory project is revealed to be itself an asymmetrical form of power, making the aesthetic power hierarchies of the artist complicit with asymmetrical power hierarchies (terrorism, despotism) in the ‘ethical’ domain. In each case, the catalyst for these

shifting notions of art's nature is the presence of literal violence, which reasserts itself within the aesthetic of the avant-garde impulse, refusing to be subsumed into metaphor.

Second Creative Impulse: Autonomy, Privilege and Critical Distance

The second set of creative impulses—those best exemplified by high-modernism and aestheticism—can be subsumed under the impulse toward autonomy. The nature of autonomy in *Mao II* and *Estrella distante*, however, shifts according to the artists' aims. For *Mao II's* novelist Bill Gray, I will focus on autonomy as a means of maintaining critical distance in the style Huysen describes in *After the Great Divide*:

...only by fortifying its boundaries, by maintaining its purity and autonomy, and by avoiding any contamination with mass culture and with the signifying systems of everyday life can the art work maintain its adversary distance: adversary to the bourgeois culture of everyday life as well as adversary to mass culture and entertainment which are seen as the primary forms of bourgeois articulation. (53-54)

For the criminal poet Carlos Wieder, in contrast, I will focus on autonomy as a means to a state of exception, a privileged status for artist and for art-in-itself that is more reminiscent of Flaubert's freedom to manipulate humanity:

That is why I love Art. There, at least, everything is freedom, in this world of fictions. There, one is satisfied, does everything, is both a king and his subjects, active and passive, victim and priest. No limits; humanity is for you a puppet with bells you make ring at the end of his sentence like a buffoon with a kick. (qtd. in Bourdieu 26)

In both cases autonomy affords the character that inhabits it a position free from consequences, as has been noted above by Bürger, and this becomes problematic when coupled with the realities of literal violence.

Because autonomy presents these two ends in the texts, however, I will follow the distinction between *strict* and *instrumental* autonomism as posited by Casey Haskins in "Kant

and the Autonomy of Art” in order to better explain the effects of autonomy on Bolaño and DeLillo’s narratives of authorship:

The confusion surrounding the meaning of artistic autonomy has been furthered in recent years by its usage as a slogan for *both* non instrumental and instrumental views of the and of value which distinctively attaches to works of fine art. The non instrumentalist view, which I will refer to as *strict autonomism*...maintains that what a work of art *is*, as an object of value, is to be distinguished from what it does. The other view, which I will call *instrumental autonomism*...emphasizes the work of art’s distinctive capacity, as an object of value, to do something not done, or not done in the same way, by other kinds of objects. (Haskins 43)

The characterization of *instrumental autonomism* can be best applied to *Mao II*’s Bill Gray and his perception of the novelist’s unique function in society, while *strict autonomism* can be best applied to Carlos Wieder’s attempts to elevate his art and his person above the societal rules of others—yet it is important to note that, as with the distinction between autonomist and avant-garde impulses, the categories are sometimes blurred.

In addition to a consideration of autonomy’s dually *strict* and *instrumental* value, the second specification this study will make with regard to autonomy relates to its “essential” status, something Latham and Rogers note above as no longer being a given within modernist discourse. According to Andrew Goldstone, the pendulum has in fact swung in the opposite direction, as “modernist studies itself has become shy of mentioning autonomy except to dismiss it” (3). In *Fictions of Autonomy* Goldstone notes that autonomy has been described in illusory terms, as a product of a modernist imagination—yet Goldstone would argue that, “To think about autonomy *is* to think about literature’s social embeddedness” (3). Rather than dismiss ideas of autonomy as “mere deceptions,” then, he constructs his notion of autonomy from Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Rules of Art*, in which autonomy is a “position to be made” (3). Because this *position* is the work of particular writers in setting out—and institutionalizing—their own, independent standards for literary practice, self-consciously opposing themselves to less

autonomous alternatives,” Goldstone argues that it is in fact a mode of social relations rather than a denial of their existence (3-4).

Like Goldstone, I find Bourdieu’s concept of autonomy as “position to be made” compelling, and I will use both his original conception and Goldstone’s social extension in working through autonomy’s effects in *Mao II* and *Estrella distante*. Unlike Goldstone, I don’t think that the notion of autonomy as a “mode of social relations” is mutually exclusive with what he sees as both Bürger’s and Bourdieu’s notion that it disguises complicity, “a cover story that attempts to disguise art’s complicity with the dominant powers” (8). In fact, I think the two concepts (autonomy as social position and autonomy as disguising complicity) are useful in dialogue, since the willful habitation of autonomy-as-position aligns more aggressively with “complicity” than the natural unfolding of autonomy as essential quality of art. In fact, like Goldstone, Bürger notes that both the concept of autonomy as inherent and the concept of autonomy as imaginary ignore its complicated nature as *both* “real” and socially determined (36). The idea that autonomy is a constructed ideology, in other words, does not have to negate its powerful effects in the real world—especially when coupled with the notion that it is a social “position to be made” and, therefore, a position to be chosen.

In addition to being a chosen, constructed position, I will argue that autonomy, like the first set of creative impulses above, is inextricable from violence. While autonomy as chosen position would seek to conflate literal violence with the metaphorical, taking refuge in the consequence-free power of an aesthetic violence, literal violence (like Bürger’s avant-gardiste protest) instead “reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences” (Bürger 22). The literal consequences of violence assert themselves in the form of empathy (or pain) and the physical body, forcing the artist (and perhaps the reader) to reexamine the creative

impulses they have idealized. Though the characters are drawn to grand narratives of modernist authorship, *Mao II* and *Estrella distante* become stories of disillusion in which those grand narratives become impossible—and perhaps dangerous—to maintain.

Project: Tracing Disillusion through De-conflation

To trace the disillusion of these grand narratives is to trace the de-conflation of aesthetic violence into its metaphorical and literal parts. Chapter One, then, will focus on Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, and his reclusive protagonist Bill Gray's necessary encounter with violence and subsequent journey of disillusion. I will argue that Bill's assertion that the terrorist has supplanted the role of the novelist is based on a conflation of literal and metaphorical violence, one that simultaneously depends on and reinforces his decision to take refuge in a position of autonomous privilege. George Haddad, who takes Bill's original equation and intensifies it, then challenges Bill's narrative of artistry. George's intensification makes literal violence visible within the aesthetic and catalyzes Bill's reevaluation of abstract authorship. In a moment of non-violent literal and metaphorical synthesis, Bill is introduced to the consequences of literal violence in the forms of empathy and bodily pain.

Chapter Two will expand on the pattern of romanticizing and disillusion established in Chapter One by charting the rise and fall of Carlos Wieder and his distant relationship with his fellow poet (and the novel's narrator), Arturo B. Though Wieder and Arturo begin as peers, Arturo's dreams of revolutionary poetry shift with the rise of his contemporary, whose poetry is inspired by his actual acts of murder. Wieder's crimes place literal violence in service of aestheticism in an attempt to elevate himself to a state of exception not unlike the regime he

supports, the Chilean military dictatorship headed by Augusto Pinochet. In the end, neither Wieder nor Arturo are able to the consequences of literal, ubiquitous violence.

In both texts, the disillusion of romantic narratives is partly the consequence of intensification or even a spectacularization of aesthetic violence that makes the literal violence and its consequences difficult to ignore. Coupled with this intensification is the realization that the potential revolutionary power of modernist creative impulses can be appropriated, that the “impact” of avant-garde impulses can be as easily used *in service of power* as it can *against* it. Autonomy, in turn, rather than transcending the power dynamics of violence through the aesthetic, can make an artist complicit through aesthetic violence. The creative impulses of the past, it seems, are insufficient to maintain an artist’s aesthetic or emancipatory project. To be an artist, now, is necessarily to encounter and reckon with literal violence and its consequences.

Yet despite the evidence of ambivalence surrounding narratives of modernist artistry, neither text directly presents an alternative through their protagonists, whose journeys instead point toward an inevitable obsolescence. A final additional project of this study will therefore be to seek out possible alternatives in each text’s margins, looking, as a shift away from grand narrative would suggest, to the more minor characters and minor moments in each text’s narrative fabric. If contemporary artistry cannot be sustained by autonomy and impact of the author, can an active spectator sustain it? If aesthetic violence can be appropriated by power, can resistance appropriate spectacularization? Though neither author answers these questions directly, it is worth exploring if the disillusion of the past can offer possibilities for the future, or if the violence that constitutes modernism’s power is one condition of art that is inherent, that does transcend temporality.

Placed in conversation, DeLillo's *Mao II* and Bolaño's *Estrella distante* point to the ambivalence of a post-modern moment not in the sense of an entirely new set of characteristics or even a new era, but in a revisionist mode best characterized by de Duve as a "product of disenchantment":

We easily see the problem that is our legacy, and we are all aware of it. It is twofold, and it is the product of disenchantment. On the one hand, the political has betrayed the ethical; on the other, the ideological has hijacked the aesthetic. In the political sphere, revolutions have bred the Terror and the Gulag, and their emancipation project can no longer be trusted. In the artistic sphere, the very idea of the avant-garde no longer has much currency; revisionism rules the day. (432)

DeLillo's novel and Bolaño's novella can be read simultaneously as products of disenchantment and products of nostalgia; they operate in the space between "modernist" and "antimodernist" interpretations wherein, de Duve states, the postmodern 'injunction' "makes modernity the terrain of your archeological investigation and commands you to look at it from a vantage point that no longer takes the modern, or 'modernist,' interpretation of the modern era for granted" (80). Within this space, I will argue, each text's acknowledgement that perhaps "the emancipation project is no longer tenable, for having generated disillusionment and degenerated into totalitarianism" becomes its own method of maintaining critical function (433).

CHAPTER ONE

Aesthetic Violence / Violence of Aesthetics in Don DeLillo's *Mao II*

There is a danger, when writing about fiction frequently characterized as “postmodern”, of defining all aspects of that fiction as purely symptomatic of the “postmodern era”. This is certainly a tempting tactic when looking at a text like Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, frequently cited as an exemplary reflection on the commodification, incorporation, and the dangers of mass-consciousness that come with the transition to postmodernity. For Peter Baker, *Mao II* must be viewed “in the context of postmodern work and theory,” which he uses to argue the terrorist's status as “interpreter, and moreover, that this has something to do with our ‘postmodern condition’” (par. 1). Paula Martín Salván, in “The Writer at the Far Margin” notes that the text is frequently characterized as an “antipostmodernist” critique of late capitalism, incompatible with “postmodern aesthetics” (par. 7).

Such attentions to postmodern context are not wrong: DeLillo's text, like its protagonist Bill Gray, is saturated by anxiety about the effects of an unfamiliar future; both are marked by a pervasive fear of *loss* that appears reciprocal to postmodernity's gain. As Martín Salván notes, “DeLillo's development as a writer in the last three decades runs parallel to the debate around the concept of postmodernism” (par. 4). His novel does the same, in many ways echoing the fears of theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, whose visions of postmodernity are defined by that which the postmodern eradicates (the real, the original, the individual) and the replacements that it offers (the image, the simulacra, the mass). DeLillo's individual wanes in the face of the crowd, words are displaced by the hegemony of the image, and each of these “losses” is exemplified in what the protagonist sees as his own displacement: the terrorist's transposition

of the novelist. Yet by focusing on these changes as a symptomatic, temporal shift from one set of criteria to another, one ignores the ideologies underlying the supposed authenticity of that which is “lost”. If *Mao II* is symptomatic of the postmodern condition, I would argue that the postmodern condition it presents is characterized by ambivalence and even modernist revisionism rather than stark antipostmodernism, and that something can be gained by looking at the text through a modernist lens.

Rather than read the text’s anxiety about the usurped novelist as a *symptomatic* of a new postmodern era, then, I will reverse the focus and look at what underlying modernist impulses, what perceptions of art and artist make the following statement by Bill Gray possible:

There’s a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists... Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated...we’re giving way to terror...(41)

What are the invisible aesthetic ideologies that make “Terrorist” a potential successor to the “Novelist” in Bill Gray’s mind? What does it mean to draw a connection between an artistic process and violent, spectacular crime? An investigation into the aesthetic violence of the terrorist / novelist relationship reveals that *Mao II* is not simply the portrayal of the postmodern era’s aggressive eradication of “authentic” artistry, but of Bill Gray’s own disillusion with constructed and power-driven aesthetic position. The fear of loss that pervades DeLillo’s text, then, is the result of an aesthetic, not merely temporal, problematic; the vision of changing artistry the text presents is characterized by ambivalence, not condemnation.

Encoded Dichotomies: Individual vs. Mass

Although the first connection between novelist and terrorist, art and violence is made by Bill Gray in Part One of the text, the prologue that opens *Mao II* frames the novel with a set of

dichotomies that are later mirrored and intensified by Bill, forming the basis for the equation of novelists and terrorists. Because of this, it is important to recognize their place in framing not only the novel, but also Bill Gray's particular narrative of artistry. I argue that Bill Gray's own desire for autonomy is driven by a desire for separation between an "artist" and the "public" that threatens the obsolescence of art's critical distance; the ground for this artist/public dichotomy is first laid in the relationship between "individual" and "mass".

During the mass-wedding ceremony performed by Sun Myung Moon on thousands of worshipping "Moonies", the reader is introduced to the seeming break between the old world and the new era, a break that manifests in the contrast between the individual and the crowd, the sacred and the irreverent. As the Moonies chant in unison, "The chant brings the End Time closer. The chant is the End Time...They chant for world-shattering rapture..." (15). The reader's window into this "thousands, the columned mass" is provided by Karen, follower of Sun Myung Moon and soon-to-be associate of Bill Gray. For Karen and for the Moonies the "sense...that the future is pressing in, collapsing toward them, that they are everywhere surrounded by signs of the fated landscape and human struggle of the Last Days" is liberation, a rebirth through their Master, the "messianic secret" and "Lord of the Second Advent" who will "lead them to the end of human history" (5, 7, 15, 6). For those *outside* the "chanting thousands," a position voiced by Karen's father but also occupied by the reader, the spectacle is uncomfortable, even sublime. Karen's father notes that, "It's hard for the mind to conceive. Thirteen thousand people," and that the singular body, the "undifferentiated mass" of the crowd "makes him uneasy" (5). The act itself, the "time-honored event" of marriage is devalued in his eyes by its multiplicity: "they repeat it, repeat it, repeat it until something new enters the world" (4). For the outsider, the multiplicitous mass may be sublime, but the sacred is reserved for

singularity.

The incomprehensibility and irreverence of the crowd makes the position of the individual outsider more pronounced, even elevated, since the very notion of “selfhood” is wedded to sharp individualism as it is contrasted with the hive-minded mass of Moonies. The Moonies revel in the fact that “They all feel the same, young people from fifty countries, immunized against the language of the self. They’re forgetting who they are under their clothes...” (10). The celebratory tone of the Moonies and Karen, who “feels intact, rayed with well-being” creates an uncanny juxtaposition next to this homogenization of individual (and national) identity; the American paradigm of self-hood is here characterized as a disease from which to be immunized, as “small banes and body woes” (7). The reader is told that Sun Myung Moon “unburdens them of free will and independent thought,” yet is cut off from the relief of the mass, instead bearing the implicit message of loss in DeLillo’s ironic pairing of “unburden” and “free will”. There are value binaries encoded in DeLillo’s characterization of the masses: to be multiple is to be a mindless drone, to be singular is to have a will, a self. Faced with such a binary, DeLillo’s text begins from the position that the individual is an endangered species. DeLillo’s one-line harbinger, “The future belongs to crowds” then becomes an ominous threat to a reader who finds herself cornered into the individual’s suddenly marginal, yet simultaneously elevated position.⁴

⁴ Richard Hardack, in his article “Two’s a Crowd: “Mao II,” Coke II, and the Politics of Terrorism in Don DeLillo” addresses the xenophobic implications of this individual / mass binary: “The American notion of terrorism, at least at the point DeLillo was writing, is then born from an acute fear of collective identity based in a long Western literary tradition of fetishizing the individual” (375). While I will not address collective identity as specifically characterized as foreign / Eastern as Hardack does, his articulation of the fetishizing of the individual is important here. While I will limit my analysis of the dichotomy to individual / mass, the individual is absolutely, as Hardack notes, placed in the more valued position.

Encoded Dichotomies II: Artist vs. Public

This marginal, elevated position is also the position from which Bill Gray makes claims for art's waning power. This threat of obsolescence, based on a sharp value dichotomy between an elevated, endangered individual and unthinking mass, is mirrored in Bill Gray's own relationship with his public. The individual's fear of displacement by the crowd is echoed in Bill's fear of his own readers, who he feels are "moving in, getting closer all the time" (30). Here, the novelist mirrors the prologue's outsider-individual; the adoring public parallels the ominous crowd. What Bill desires above all is to maintain a protective distance, a separation from the mass of "fairly ordinary people" who try to find him, who "just want to look at his face," to tell him "what his books have meant to them and ask the usual questions" (30). Bill's fear of the public, is, like the individual's fear of the mass, based in a fear of absorption, of what Bill calls "incorporation" (41). Yet the values encoded in this adverse relationship between artist and public point to fact that such incorporation is not just a loss of utility, but also a loss of elevated status *above* that mass, an instrumental autonomy in which a privileged position allows art a "distinctive capacity, as an object of value, to do something not done, or not done in the same way, by other kinds of objects" (Haskins 43).

This barrier between novelist and public is first introduced as *physical* distance: Bill's seclusion is absolute, and even the reader must first be introduced to Gray's mediator, Scott Martineau, who acts as "guide to the frontier" for photographer Brita Nilsson as she makes her way to Bill's location. Brita is only brought to Bill's home, a place that is "very hard to find," under cover of darkness, a level of secrecy that Brita considers 'melodramatic' (23). According to Scott, Bill "doesn't go anywhere else, except to hide from the book he's doing"; Bill himself states that he is "afraid to go anywhere" since he's "convinced the serious trackers are moving in

with their mobile phones and zoom lenses” (44). To maintain separation, any aspect of Bill’s life that “isn’t directly centered on work revolves around concealment, seclusion, ways of evasion” (45). Yet Bill admits that his isolation is driven by more than just a need for privacy: fiercely attached to his own “cosmology of pain,” reluctant to “feel the things other people feel,” Bill Gray uses physical distance to maintain an emotional autonomy (45).

In this desire to free himself from social imposition of other people’s feelings seems built on a notion of an artistic freedom that can be traced to the autonomy of early modernism exemplified by Flaubert who, according to Pierre Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art*, “contributed...to the constitution of the literary field as a world apart, subject to its own laws” (48). For Flaubert, Bourdieu says:

Writing abolishes the determinations, constraints and limits which are constitutive of social existence: to exist socially means to occupy a determined position in the social structure and to bear the marks of it...it also means to depend on, to hold to and to be held by, in short, *to belong to* groups and be enclosed in networks of relations which have objectivity, opacity and permanency, and which show themselves in the forms of obligations, debts, duties — in short controls and constraints. (27)

Bill, similarly, does not want to be subject to any sort of belonging, to “bear the marks” of the social world. As such, he attempts to craft a separation between artist and public. According to Bourdieu, such an attempt “to keep one’s distance from all social roles (and the gathering places where the people occupying them commune) requires a refusal to bow to the expectations of the public, to follow them or to lead them” (79). Bill doesn’t just refuse to bow; he actively seeks a divide that frees him from the expectations (i.e. constraints) of shared feeling and social existence.⁵

Peter Baker, in “Terrorist as Interpreter: Mao II in Postmodern Context” articulates such

⁵ In the section below I address the fact that Bill wishes to remain separate from social existence and the public but still *effect* the public and have a social impact. This desire to effect but not be affected, to enact but not feel, is the core power dynamic of a conflated aesthetic violence.

a divide between artist and public as a “gap between the interiorized experience of novel-writing (and reading) and engaged action in the public sphere” (Baker par. 25). He also cites Richard Rorty’s notion of an “unbridgeable gap between what philosophers and other intellectual and cultural workers do, and the real world in which innocent people are imprisoned, tortured, killed or left to starve to death” which allows novelists the privilege of discussing “issues such as ethics and morality, but crucially **without** the responsibility for anybody’s actual well-being” (par. 24). Baker finds Bill Gray to be devastated by the commodification and subsequent devaluing of the novel—and this may be true—but Bill has also admitted a fear of contamination by the feelings and expectations of others. His desire to maintain distance from “commodification” is also a desire to maintain the novel’s ability to act in a separate, autonomous sphere.

The physical distance that Bill seeks to maintain from his readers is actually in service of a separation from culture; it is what Baker, through Rorty, articulates as a space of *privilege* (Baker par. 24). As in the prologue there are hidden, hierarchical values underlying the separation between individual and mass, here incarnated as artist and public. Those who seek Bill are repeatedly described as “ordinary,” yet Bill, as writer, equates his own seclusion with “God’s famous reluctance to appear” (36). While “the image world” of those ordinary people “is corrupt,” Bill’s hideaway is described as “the holy place”, the “epic preservation” of “neatly amassed evidence of driven art” (32). Separate and secluded, art and artist are pseudo-divine, made more sacred by their inaccessibility, since, as Brita notes, “we’re all drawn to the idea of remoteness. A hard-to-reach place is necessarily beautiful, I think. Beautiful and a little sacred maybe” and “a person who becomes inaccessible has a grace and a wholeness the rest of us envy” (36). The sacredness that was prescribed to singularity in the prologue, then, is here attached to distance and separation, implying a gap between artist and public that must be

maintained for art to have value: to be distant, to be separate, is also to be pseudo-Divine—above, enviable, whole. Based on that underlying premise, Bill’s seclusion is the manifestation of a necessary aesthetic separation, a physical attempt to maintain art and artist’s autonomy.

Critics such as Ryan Simmons and Leif Grössinger have argued that this autonomy is impossible or even imaginary. In “What is a terrorist? Contemporary authorship, the Unabomber, and Mao II” Simmons states that Bill is “fooling himself” in assuming a special position for novelists (676). Grössinger, in “Public Image and Self-Representation: Don DeLillo’s Artists and Terrorists in Postmodern Mass Society” similarly argues that terrorists and artists are unsuccessful in creating distance from society. I argue not that this distance / separate position is mistaken or imaginary, but instead, following Goldstone and Bourdieu, that it is *made*, chosen, and forms a particular position with social effects—to say that it is imaginary would be to ignore the hierarchies of power that autonomy-as-position makes manifest. For Bill, the gap between art and public that Baker, Rorty, and Gray support is essential—but it is a construction rather than an inherent separation; his moves toward the autonomy of a separate sphere require increasing effort. To maintain distance, he exists in a “state of constant religious observance” wherein concealment becomes a series of “ritual movements” with no “halfway measures” (45). His autonomy is, as Bourdieu states, a “position to be made” as opposed to a “ready-made position which only has to be taken up” (76). As such, Bill’s “distance” is a perfectly real, albeit crafted, stance, and it comes with real effects—namely, the elevation of the novelist’s position as privileged shaper of culture. Though Bill has not yet recognized his position as constructed, by reinforcing that barrier Gray, like Rorty, places novelist / artist in a superior position, and that elevated position is, I will argue, what allows Gray to make an aesthetic connection between novelist and terrorist, to romanticize the violence of art’s critical function.

The Terrorist Connection: Aesthetic Violence

The connection that the text makes between novelist and terrorist begins with this ideology of necessary distance, coupled with its less visible connotations of privileged autonomy or God-like status. It is Brita who first notes the importance of distance and separation for both parties; as she makes her way to Bill's home she states, "I feel as if I'm being taken to see some terrorist chief at his secret retreat in the mountains" (27). Scott responds, "Tell Bill. He'll love that," hinting that the fear of usurpation Bill will soon articulate is also a fascination, a welcome comparison. Like Bill's version of novelists, terrorists maintain a separation between 'creator' and 'receivers' of their message. As Bill notes, "Every killer has a spokesman" (a mediator like George Haddad, who acts as a Scott Martineau-like spokesman for Abu Rashid), and Brita's initial journey across the artist/public gap to visit Bill at his "secret retreat" is paralleled by her equally secretive journey to visit actual terrorist chief Abu Rashid at the end of the novel.

This initial position of distance / separation, though unexamined by Bill at the beginning of the novel, has implications for the *acts* that both novelists and terrorists carry out. In order to understand what this means for Bill's understanding of art's purpose, and why terrorists are more capable of carrying it out, it is worth revisiting his initial statement:

There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists... Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated... we're giving way to terror...(41)

In this initial passage, we see clearly Bill's image of what a novelist should be: one who "alter[s] the inner life of the culture" and "make[s] raids on human consciousness" from *outside* of that culture, from across the necessary distance between art and public. The necessity of separation for the novelist / artist is intensified by Bill's use of the phrase "make raids"—writers, here, do not influence "inner culture" from within, but cross the barrier between the artist and the public

in a violent “raid”. The language Gray uses characterizes the act of writers, pre-incorporation, as an act of *transgression*—art, itself autonomous, must invade the ordinary public’s consciousness (with or without consent) and alter what is found there.

Bill’s conception of art, then, is formed by two creative impulses: the previously articulated impulse toward instrumental autonomy that makes an artist the privileged shaper of “inner life”, and the impulse toward impact that allows the artist to shape the consciousness of that public. The former, it seems, is essential to the latter—though the impulse toward autonomy may present itself as a desire for an observer’s neutrality, the subsequent impulse to impact that public means that distance is anything but neutral.⁶ It is instead an *adversary* distance as articulated by Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide*:

...only by fortifying its boundaries, by maintaining its purity and autonomy, and by avoiding any contamination with mass culture and with the signifying systems of everyday life can the art work maintain its adversary distance: adversary to the bourgeois culture of everyday life as well as adversary to mass culture and entertainment which are seen as the primary forms of bourgeois articulation. (53-54)

For Bill, similarly, the “secret force that drives the industry is the compulsion to make writers harmless” (47). For a writer to be dangerous, he must be able to transgress the minds of the public. Distance, here, allows art to maintain its critical function—it’s ability, following de Duve, to “function as judge, guardian, guarantor of the achievement of an ethical or political project of emancipation” (429).

It is no wonder then that terrorists, whose acts are violently, intensively transgressive are more capable (for Bill) of carrying on the task of cultural impact. For Bill, the loss of adversary

⁶ According to Bourdieu, Flaubert himself “tried throughout his life to keep himself in that indeterminate position, that *neutral place* where one can soar above groups and their conflicts” (26). In *Mao II* and *Estrella distante*, however, this position above is not neutral—it is itself a position of privilege (either to impact society or to be free from the laws of society).

distance and the loss of artist's autonomy are what make novelists socially impotent—they are no longer capable of maintaining the barrier between art and public and subsequently have lost the power to *transgress* that barrier. Terrorists, on the other hand, are able to maintain that adversary distance and also intensify that original transgressive act through spectacle, ultimately making them more effective.

What Bill fears losing, then, in “giving way to terror”, is not the ability to create, but the ability to invade: he fears the loss of critical function. In placing terrorists in the position that once belonged to novelists, Gray does not differentiate between them but instead marks the two roles as occupying, or to follow Bourdieu, as *making* the same position of instrumentally autonomous power. Yet to equate these positions is also to conflate the forms of violence that they enact, which is only possible by aestheticizing both. If the violence of terror and the violence of art are defined only by their impact on sense perception (and subsequent shaping of consciousness based on that impact), the literal violence of terrorism becomes an extension of the metaphorical violence enacted by the novelist.

Abstraction and Romanticized Violence

This aesthetic conflation is an abstraction of both art and terror; terror is removed from its literal consequences, while the novel is removed from its form and content. Incidentally, Bill's conceptions of artist and terrorist, based on this aesthetic conflation, become romanticized. Bill's ideal novelist is removed from life in order to maintain critical function, to “make raids” and emancipate the minds of the public from corruption of mass culture—yet Bill ignores the power dynamics implied by both this impulse toward autonomy and this impulse toward impact. As de Duve notes, the very concept of art's project of emancipation contains an asymmetrical hierarchy

between emancipator and emancipated:

Emancipation connotes a liberation, but it is more precise than that. The word is used to indicate the premature granting of legal, civic, or political (let's say ethical in general) majority to a minor. This granting means: you have not yet reached adulthood, but I consider you to be mature enough nonetheless to be able to morally anticipate your majority, and as a consequence I grant you autonomy, in other words, the right to free self-determination. (429)

For an emancipator, in this case an artist (novelist), to emancipate, "he could not be anyone but someone who is already in power, otherwise how could he grant autonomy?" (429). Whether the artist inhabits the margins or the center, the avant-garde impulse toward transgressive impact already implies an asymmetrical wielding of power, an active agent and a passive receiver. The desire to alter the inner life of culture, though championed as resistance to the power of mass culture, is itself a form of power over the passive other.

At this initial stage, Bill's conception of terror is romanticized in a similar way—he equates terror, like art, with marginal resistance to power. Yet to a large extent, Bill's ability to equate a novelist's raid on consciousness with a bomb-maker's act of terror is predicated on the fact that gunmen and bomb-makers exist for Bill only as concepts. As Bill's former editor Charlie notes, Bill has "a twisted sense of the writer's place in society" that drives his isolation:

You think the writer belongs at the far margin, doing dangerous things. In Central America, writers carry guns. They have to. And this has always been your idea of the way it ought to be. The state should want to kill all writers. Every government, every group that holds power or aspires to power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere. (97)

Yet this "twisted sense of a writer's place in society" in no way resembles Bill's own position, which is rather *outside* society, looking in. Nor does it resemble anything Bill has ever encountered in real life. Charlie hints at Bill's underlying belief in necessary distance by placing writers "on the margins", but equates that distance with a position of political resistance.

Charlie's writers "have to" carry guns because they are hunted by those in power; Bill Gray, on

the other hand is a white North American, a pre-9/11 New Yorker, for whom “terror” and the dangers of a murderous state are perhaps troubling, but non-domestic problems. Bill even admits to Charlie that he has “done no dangerous things” despite his idea that a writer should be dangerous, and although Charlie equates Bill’s “dangerous writer” with a resistance to power, Bill has already defined a writer by the power to control the public’s consciousness (97). By setting the novelist outside, reinforcing the gap between artist and “ordinary” life, Bill aspires to “raid”, rather than liberate, the consciousness of the public; his aesthetic places the public as victim of transgression while claiming to work in said public’s service, not unlike the terrorists he believes will soon replace him.

According to Charlie (another pre-9/11 New Yorker, largely untouched by actual ramifications of either state or guerrilla terror), Bill has “lived out the vision” of this “dangerous writer” role; in reality Bill has separated himself from daily life, and has largely been free to make associations without taking into account the hierarchies or power dynamics of his aspirations. In choosing distance, he has attempted to craft a position that transcends mass culture; instead, he has isolated himself into abstraction in the manner Nikos Papastergiadis, following Peter Bürger, aligns with the “romantic artist”:

However, the isolation of the romantic artist was contradictory; it was deemed necessary because it protected the fragile purity of genius from being nullified by market forces, whereas it was also taken as evidence of the artist’s unswerving dedication to universal truth and this indomitable stance elevated ‘him’ beyond the fickle and ephemeral desires of the masses. The claim to transcendence, gained through isolation, not only disguised the withdrawal from society but also secured both the autonomy and increased abstraction in art. (Papastergiadis 44)

It is only as Bill begins to leave seclusion and enter the realm of public, ordinary (and often violent) life that the hierarchies and power dynamics of his creative impulses become clear. As he shifts away from the autonomy and isolation of the “romantic artist”, his ability to conflate the

role of metaphorical and literal violence is problematized, leading to the disillusion of his original conception of art and artist.

Assumptions Made Explicit

Until now, the project of this chapter has been twofold: A) To define the modernist impulses that make up Bill's conception of what is "lost" in the displacement of the novelist by the terrorist, and B) To uncover the conflation of metaphorical and literal violence (*aesthetic violence*) on which the novelist/terrorist connection is predicated. The goal of both of these projects has been to understand the underlying ideological values in Bill's personal conception of authorship, a romanticized narrative of artistry that Bill has already begun to mourn.

I have argued, though, that this novel is not simply the illustration of the destruction of modernist authorship in the face of the postmodern era, but a journey of disillusion and ambivalence toward those modernist impulses in the face of literal violence. What remains to be explored, then, is the effect that Bill's changing relationship to the world has on his idea of authorship and his romanticized conception of aesthetic violence.

Though Bill begins the novel vigilant in his need for distance, his shift away from the autonomy of his "holy place" and into the social sphere opens a path for the intrusion of social reality into his narrative of authorship. As stated above, autonomy affords Bill some semblance of abstraction for both his conception of authorship and his conception of terrorism; taken in to the real world, Bill's connection can no longer transcend the realities of literal violence and its consequences.

It is George Haddad, spokesman for Abu Rashid's terrorist sect in Beirut, who takes Bill's largely unexamined values underlying the novelist / terrorist connection and presents them

to Bill in their unmitigated form. Bill's initial thoughts about the connection between terrorists and novelists are repeated in his conversations with George, who takes those thoughts and reflects them back to Bill, taking them to the full expression and removing abstraction by placing them in a degree of real context.

When Bill and George first sit down to "have a dialogue," Bill begins by restating a version of his original novelist/terrorist argument:

For some time now I've had the feeling that novelists and terrorists are playing a zero-sum game...What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous...I think the relationship is intimate and precise insofar as things can be measured. (156)

Once again Bill mirrors the novel's original pattern of displacement in a "precise" usurpation of the old by the new. He agrees with George that, "the more clearly we see terror, the less impact we feel from art," but has not yet examined the assumptions of superiority and violence inherent in his own ideology of "art" as a "dangerous" shaping of sensibility.

George, however, takes Bill's equation and finds a thread of admiration, stating that it must be difficult for Bill when "they kill and maim because you see them, honestly now, as the only possible heroes for our time" (157). Bill's brief "No" is muzzled by George's assertion that Bill is drawn to the terrorist's way of life:

The way they live in the shadows, live willingly with death. The way they hate many of the things you hate. Their discipline and cunning. The coherence of their lives. The way they excite, they excite admiration. In societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act. (157)

Though George's speech seems targeted, intended perhaps to convince Bill to match his own sympathies for the Beirut sect, George is touching on real parallels here between the terrorists and Bill's own original notion of authorship. Where the terrorists live in the shadows, Bill lives in seclusion; the "coherence" of the terrorists' lives, the "admiration" they "excite" is matched

by the “wholeness” of Bill’s inaccessibility, the “envy” which his “beauty” inspires. Most importantly, George’s assertion that “terror is the only meaningful act” echoes Bill’s statement that terrorists are the ones who now impact culture—but George goes further, revealing the violent undertones of what it means to raid the consciousness of the ordinary public:

Who do we take seriously? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. Everything else is absorbed. The artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated. Give him a dollar, put him in a TV commercial. Only the terrorist stands outside. The culture hasn’t figured out how to assimilate him. It’s confusing when they kill the innocent. But this is precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands. (197)

Here, the underlying logic of Bill’s original equation is made explicit. Whereas the artist has lost autonomy, “is absorbed”, the terrorist still “stands outside” ordinary life; whereas the writer has lost the ability to transgress, the terrorist is still able to speak “the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands”; i.e. violent transgression. The dichotomy between individual and mass, translated through Bill to artist and public, becomes terrorist and innocents: “It’s such a simple idea. Terrorize the innocent. The more heartless they are, the better we see their rage” (129-130). The individual, artist, and terrorist occupy the same space in the hierarchical binary of writer and written-upon, of invader of consciousness and invaded party. As George points out to Bill, it is the novelist “above all people, above all writers, who understands this rage, who knows in his soul what the terrorist thinks and feels? Through history it’s the novelist who has felt affinity for the violent man who lives in the dark” (129). One dichotomy, one transgressor displaces the other, but the original logic is the same.

Importantly, each of these displacements assumes that art and artist could only operate under those same conditions of distance and violent transgression across said distance. By asserting that terrorism has displaced art as autonomous, transgressive carrier of meaning, George is making visible the assumption that this is what art and artist should (and must) be.

Until now, Bill has left that assumption unexamined; its articulation (and full expression) by George causes him to reconsider his original stance.

Bill's Disillusion

George seems to believe that Bill is aware of and comfortable with the conflation of his original paradigm, stating that, "It's the novelist who understands the secret life, the rage that underlies all obscurity and neglect. You're half murderers, most of you" (157). The notion of being a "half murderer," like the notion of a novelist's violent raid, depends on a version of violence defined by its aesthetic impact, not its literal consequences. Now, though, Bill seems unable to accept that conflation, as well as his original values of distance and transgression when they are placed in cultural context, calling terrorist groups "totalitarian states," recognizing a connection to dominant power rather than a resistance thereof, all while "hand-wagging and shaking his head" (157). Suddenly, he rejects his original position on the novelist: a privileged party, distant, above, autonomously exercising his control to raid the consciousness of the ordinary masses. Instead, he asserts that the novel is a "democratic shout" of which even "Some nameless drudge" is capable—a position largely at odds with his original refusal to connect with "ordinary" society—and he finds himself "angry, unexpectedly" (158). In his next conversation with George, he rebuts George's assertions that Mao, who wrote on the "poor people, young people" on whom "anything can be written" was a poet, asking instead, "How many dead? [...]What do these men do with the millions they kill?" (161-162). The violence that was underplayed in Bill's original association is now his main focus. George's intensification of Bill's connection seems to cause a disillusion that prompts Bill to reconsider the role of art as well:

When you inflict punishment on someone who is not guilty, when you fill rooms with innocent victims, you begin to empty the world of meaning...He could have told George a writer creates a character as a way to reveal consciousness, increase the flow of meaning...By extending the pitch of consciousness and human possibility...but he'd never considered the matter in quite this way before and George would have said that terrorists do not have power. (200-201)

Bill's reconsideration of art is not a "raid on consciousness" but a "reveal", an "increase" in the "flow of meaning". The language Bill uses now is of extension rather than transgression, of increase rather than alteration.

These shifts in language are mirrored by shifts in Bill's very being. It is after these conversations, after this disillusion and the shifting of Bill's perspective that he is hit by a car, causing the laceration of his liver that will eventually lead to his death. Interestingly, the physical damage of the accident mirrors his shifting perspective and serves to reconnect Bill physically with the "things other people feel":

The pang in his side was deeper and steadier now, right front upper abdomen. He was getting to know it well. Sometimes a pain feels familiar even as it hits you for the first time. Certain conditions seem to speak out of some collective history of pain. You know the experience from others who have had it. Bill felt joined to the past, to some bloodline of intimate and renewable pain. (196)

Bill's original desire to immunize himself against others and to protect his own "cosmology of pain" is replaced by a reversal of his exclusionary stance, an extension of that cosmology to include the pain of others. His seclusion has shifted to an immersion in social life; his transcendent autonomy has shifted to immanent embodiment. Before, Bill's autonomy allowed him to inhabit a position of authorship defined only by its individual agency, its abstract ability to impact from afar in an aesthetically violent raid. Now, he is explicitly connected to the pain of the receiver, the literal consequence of violent action and the connection to not one, but a mass of others through that collective history. Here, the conflation of the literal and the metaphorical seems to work in the reverse. Literal violence is not subsumed into metaphorical violence;

instead, the metaphorical disillusion of the artist/agent is embodied in the literal pain of the receiver.

What does it mean, then, that these moments of extension, connection and aesthetic reconsideration are also Bill's eleventh hour? As Bill travels from New York to London to Athens he is traversing the "monolith I've built", the isolating distance between artist and public, becoming more and more entangled in the political and social life (44). As George notes, Bill has "come along so readily", has willingly left his seclusion and actively compromised his own position of distance and autonomy (169). In death, the transition from individual to mass, artist to public is complete: as soon as Bill dies, a member of the ship's cleaning crew goes "through the man's belongings, leaving the insignificant cash, the good shoes, the things in the bag...but feeling it was not a crime against the dead to take the man's passport and other forms of identification, anything with a name and a number, which he could sell to some militia in Beirut" (217). Once dead, Bill is stripped of his name (he becomes simply 'the man'), and social markers of his individuality and identity are sold to the highest bidder. Ultimately, Bill loses his position as autonomous shaper of public consciousness and becomes one of the many, anonymous and ordinary in death.

In some ways, then, Bill's death is the completion of the dreaded displacement, the "giving way" of novelist through a failure to maintain distance (and a subsequent failure to remain transgressive). Yet this paradigm of distance and transgression is not an inherent condition of artistry, but is instead based on particular impulses (Bill's, of George's, perhaps of DeLillo's) toward autonomy and transgressive impact. If Bill's death is related to the "Death of the Author," as Baker suggests, it is the death of the idealization of a particular form of authorship, one dependent on those creative impulses of autonomy and impact, as well as on the

conflation of literal and metaphorical violence.⁷

Bill's disillusion with the underlying values and power structures of that paradigm is perhaps too late; his death prevents him from actually presenting any other model for art and artist's purpose. Alone, this seeming anticlimax would indeed point to an "antipostmodernist" reading of *Mao II* as a pure elegy for authentic modern artistry. Bill's own shifting position, though, his recognition of the violence and power hierarchies within his original terrorist/artist connection opens up the possibility that the text is instead a product of ambivalence, the manifestation of "internal dissent, self-argument" that Bill Gray claims to require in his own work (159). Like Bill, the text both idealizes and recognizes the inescapable forces of violence and power that wed themselves to the aesthetics of the modern era. Unlike Bill, *Mao II* manages to survive the recognition.

⁷ In "Terrorist as Interpreter" Baker states that "Mao II could even be interpreted as a complex meditation that stages what Roland Barthes has called "the death of the author," this being in some sense the "point" of the novel" (par. 13).

CHAPTER TWO

Aesthetic Violence / Violence of Aesthetics in Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella distante*

Like DeLillo's Bill Gray, Roberto Bolaño's central subject Carlos Wieder conflates literal and metaphorical violence in his perception of art's role in society. Unlike Bill Gray, he actually carries out that literal violence in service of an aesthetic project, culminating in the use of the mutilated bodies of his murder victims as "visual poetry" in a twisted incarnation of avant-garde shock technique (78). In fact, though Wieder claims avant-garde status, practices avant-garde techniques, and is repeatedly aligned with the avant-garde promise of "revolution", he also acts as its executioner, neutralizing its status as anti-institution by linking it to Pinochet's dictatorship.⁸ Throughout Bolaño's novella his central subject, the criminal-poet Carlos Wieder, acts as a stand-in not only for artist but also for art itself; Wieder's shift from potential revolutionary to nightmarish murderer elicits questions about Art's privileged status as well as the ease of its appropriation by those in power. Watching Wieder from a distance, Bolaño's narrator Arturo B. works through the ambivalence of nostalgia for the artistic tradition of the avant-garde and recognition of its failure and inherent dangers. For Wieder, the narrator, and Bolaño's Chile, violence is ubiquitous: art is embedded in and infused by its hegemonic presence. But the ubiquity of violence also means that it is not the sole tool of a resistant,

⁸ As addressed below, the question of whether or not the historical avant-garde or neo-avant-garde actually had (or succeeded in using) revolutionary power is a matter of some debate. Thayer's contention that the neo-avant-garde could not be innovative is here in dialogue with Peter Bürger's position that "the attack of the historical avant-garde movements on art as an institution has failed, and art has not been integrated into the praxis of life; the students in the early 1970's could perhaps be seen as living the transition from one failure to another (Bürger 57). What is clear in Bolaño's text, however, is the fact that the historical avant-garde was *believed* to have power, and that the promise of revolution was palpable.

progressive force—appropriable and inescapable, it can lead an artist into corruption, complicity, or impotence.

The reader and the novella’s narrator, Arturo B., are each introduced to Carlos Wieder “in 1971, or perhaps in 1972, when Salvador Allende was President of Chile” (3).⁹ The narrator’s dismissal of the exact year is notable here, because it points to what *is* important—the story begins before 1973, before the military coup, before Pinochet. Bolaño’s first chapter demarcates the break repeatedly, drawing a bold line between “Chile in the years before 1973” and the years after. “In Chile, at the beginning of the seventies,” the narrator and his companions are young students, bubbling with the promise of revolution:

Most of us there talked a lot, not just about poetry, but politics, travel (little did we know what our travels would be like), painting, architecture, photography, revolution and the armed struggle that would usher in a new life and a new era, so we thought, but which, for most of us, was like a dream, or rather the key that would open the door into a world of dreams, the only dreams worth living for. And even though we were vaguely aware that dreams often turn into nightmares, we didn’t let that bother us. (3)

Both the reader and the narrator know, of course, that the students’ “dream” will soon become the “nightmare”, and that their utopic hopes for the world post-political revolution will soon be dashed, with many of them forced into exile (and others dead). Because this is Chile “in those days”, though, the students still have hopes for revolution, and from the beginning, their hopes, their conversations suture art to violence. Painting, architecture, and photography are nestled in with “the armed struggle”—poetry and politics are equal players in the oncoming “world of dreams” (3).

⁹ Arturo B. is probably Arturo Belano, a character that Roberto Bolaño often uses as an alter ego. Belano is a protagonist in Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives*, a minor character in *Amulet* and is also the narrator of 2666.

Importantly, it is not the coup that turns this entanglement of aesthetics and revolution into a nightmare.¹⁰ Though the students perhaps are less convinced of the “dream” after the coup, narrator Arturo B. continues to idealize violence and to link it with the essence of poetry. This is most visible in his idealization of his poet mentors, whose lives post-coup are defined by violence, yet whose stories depict them as epic heroes and frame violence as the sacrificial tool of a true Chilean poet. As with Bill Gray, though the narrator is eventually disillusioned of his romantic notions of the avant-garde and the revolutionary power of violence, it is important to understand the position from which he begins.

The students’ mentors, Juan Stein and Diego Soto, are first introduced as the leaders of rival poetry workshops—the narrator and his friend Bibiano are adamant followers of Stein and not of Soto, whose “approach differed markedly from that of Stein in ethical as well as aesthetic matters” (12). Still, the two poet leaders are described as “soul mates” and are, for the narrator and his friends, “the two most intelligent people in Concepción” (10, 12). To say that the workshop leaders are held in high esteem by the students is an understatement—according to Stein, Diego Soto is “the best poet of his generation”; according to the workshop students he “was one of the *two* best, the other being Stein himself” (49).

After the coup, Juan Stein disappears, only to resurface in an article “on various ‘Chilean terrorists’ who had crossed into Nicaragua from Costa Rica with the Sandinista troops” (57). The admiration that the narrator and Bibiano have for Stein as a poet translates into an admiration for him as a guerilla fighter; when it is rumored that “he had joined the Frente Farabundo Martí (FMLN)” the narrator and Bibiano agree “that a guerrilla group with a name like that deserved to have Stein on its side” (60). To the poets, Stein is “a fierce and implacable figure” with “the epic

¹⁰ Below, I argue that it is the appropriation of revolutionary artistic power, and not its eradication, that constitutes the students’ nightmare.

proportions of a Hollywood hero”; he’s a man who they believe “would have personally executed those responsible for the death of Roque Dalton”, a revenge they champion despite its never having been carried out (60).¹¹ Stein’s life after the coup is inundated with violence, here presented in a romantic light: “He appeared and disappeared like a ghost wherever there was fighting, wherever desperate, generous, mad, courageous, despicable Latin Americans were destroying, rebuilding and redestroying reality, in a final bid that was doomed to failure” (57). Courage and despicability, desperation and generosity are enmeshed in the poet’s actions, actions that his students never actually see, but circulate with bravado. Stein is said to be “fighting the South Africans in Angola,” acts as “lieutenant to a priest and guerrilla leader,” and “commanded a battalion or a brigade”; he is “rumored to be among the members of the commando unit that assassinated Somoza in Paraguay” and “to have joined a Colombian guerrilla group” (58). It can be assumed from these rumors (if even one of them is true) that Stein has committed murder, yet the narrator’s tone in describing Stein’s actions and the way they are received is celebratory. The poets glorify Stein, not only because he is dangerous, but also because “he lived dangerously” (58). Stein is depicted not only a perpetrator of violence, but also a “survivor” who ultimately dies, sacrificing himself for a revolutionary cause (57, 60).

This element of self-sacrifice is repeated in Soto’s story, though he enters into its violence less directly and after a long period of living happily in Paris, thinking he “had escaped the curse” of Chilean violence (69). His life, post-coup, is relatively calm, complete with “financial stability and time for writing and research” and with “two children, a boy and a girl”

¹¹ Roque Dalton: a poet from El Salvador who was assassinated by members of the ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo / People’s Revolutionary Army), an organization (part of the FMLN) to which he also belonged.

(68). Yet one night, in Perpignan, he is drawn to the railway station's "labyrinthine paths" and encounters some neo-Nazis mid-attack:

Soto, for some reason, perhaps he heard voices, went to look in another room, some way off. There he found three young neo-Nazis and a bundle on the ground. The youths were diligently kicking the bundle. Soto froze on the threshold until he realized that the bundle was moving, when he saw first a hand and then an incredibly dirty arm emerging from the rags. The tramp shouted, Stop hitting me. It was a woman's voice. But no one was listening, except the Chilean writer. Perhaps his eyes filled with tears, tears of self-pity, because something told him he had met his destiny... For him, life had chosen the crime reports. In any case, he dropped his bag and the books at the door and approached the youths. Before the fight began he insulted them in Spanish. The harsh Spanish of southern Chile. The youths stabbed Soto and ran away. (71)

This short passage serves to crystallize the initial nature of violence in Arturo B.'s mind. Soto, here, is *destined* for violence; life *chooses* it for him. He enters into an unfair fight in defense of a stranger, specifically described as a woman to whom no one is listening—no one, of course, but Soto.¹² The tableau is classically tragic, and the details—Soto's tears, the emphasis on the sex of the victim—seem crafted to elevate Soto to a kind of martyrdom.

With both Soto and Stein, violence is further aggrandized when the narrator links it to Chile itself: "Like the story of Chile itself in those years, the story of Juan Stein, who ran our poetry workshop, is larger than life"—his violence, too, has the air of legend (47). Soto's final moments see a reassertion of his Chilean status; he is described, listening to the cries of the homeless woman, as "the Chilean writer"; he enters into the fight after insulting the neo-Nazis with the "harsh Spanish of Southern Chile" (71). For Arturo, then, violence and poetry are not only linked, but are also ennobled, made "larger than life" in their link to the Chilean nation.

¹² The gendered relationship of perpetrator and receiver of violence is common to Bolaño's work. Perhaps the most famous example is the posthumously published *2666*, an entire section of which is made up of police-report descriptions of mutilated female bodies. In this text, at least, Bolaño seems to use the female body as punctuation, adding recognition of the victims' sex to moments in which one-sided violence is supposed to be palpable.

Utopian Dream to Avant-Garde Nightmare

It is this kind of aggrandized revolutionary power that other students apply to Carlos Wieder, whose pre-Pinochet persona as a member of socialist poetry circles is matched with a pre-Pinochet name: Alberto Ruiz-Tagle. La Gorda Posadas insists to the narrator and his friend Bibiano that “Alberto...is going to revolutionize Chilean poetry” (15). Bibiano and the narrator are skeptical, less certain of a revolution in art than they are of art’s place in political revolution: “Chilean poetry, said Bibiano that night, isn’t going to change until we learn how to read Enrique Lihn properly. In other words, not for a long time” (16). Arturo’s narrative cuts through that certainty with the irony of hindsight, stating, “A few days later the army seized power and the government collapsed,” and the sharp break of the political shift reads like a dark punchline to Bibiano’s (perhaps naïve) assertion. The radical political shift will also be, through Wieder, a radical shift in the allegiance of the avant-garde: though he calls his work “art of the future” Wieder, as the favored artist of the dictatorship, deviates sharply from the supposed emancipatory project of the avant-garde (84). To return briefly to de Duve, Wieder’s use of avant-garde technique becomes an appropriation of art’s critical function and “utopian ambition” by placing them in service of the reification, rather than the revolution, of political power (427).

Wieder’s first sky poem, written in Latin above the city of Concepcion, “instantly won him admirers among the nation’s enterprising minds” (31). As his fame grows, Wieder expands into nationalist spectacle, deviating from poems to the “star of our flag, sparkling and solitary over the implacable horizon,” (31). Though “Initially tentative, the invitations to participate in ceremonies and commemorations were soon being issued with greater frequency,” and while “at the height of his fame,” Wieder becomes explicit about his goals: to show the world that the new regime and avant-garde art were not at odds, quite the contrary” (77). The tone of Arturo’s

narrative when describing the alliance between Wieder and the regime is satirical, even sarcastic; those who follow Wieder's art are described as "the nations most enterprising minds" that act with "the self-assurance befitting soldiers and gentlemen who know how to recognize a work of art when they see one, whether or not they understand it" (31). The narrator's descriptions of his work note that it is often incomprehensible; at points it is described as "child's scribble", "large and rather wobbly," contrasting heavily with the public reports of his "truly prodigious abilities" (81, 33, 33). The tone of irony is understandable, given the narrator's perspective as an imprisoned socialist poet vehemently opposed to the dictatorship, but also gives Wieder's art an air of insubstantiality, superficiality. Wieder's avant-garde is not the avant-garde of the narrator and his companions—the poetic bohemian "dream" has become a "nightmare" of empty nationalist rhetoric.

Wieder's first betrayal of the avant-garde, then, is to put it in service of the regime. In doing so, he opens up the possibility that art is not inherently progressive, that there exists a possibility for complicity with state power.¹³ For Gareth Williams, in his article "Sovereignty and melancholic paralysis in Roberto Bolaño," Wieder's "humorous" sky poetry is Bolaño's

¹³ In doing so, Wieder seems to exemplify a crisis of modernism posited by Andrew Hewitt in "Fascist Modernism, Futurism, and 'Post-modernity'" — the realization of a fascist modernism. For Hewitt, the "possibility of at least thinking a fascist modernism was opened up (or reopened, since the idea was, of course, first articulated by the Fascist Modernists themselves) by a crisis of the avant-garde in the 1960s" during which "The critical conflation of political and aesthetic 'progressiveness' was at an end" (Hewitt 39). Though Latham and Rogers place the crisis slightly later, both their conception of a modernist crisis and Hewitt's imply that these moments of crises were not the result of modernism's eradication by new forces, but moments of realization that modernism's "inherent" qualities were not necessarily progressive. They were, in fact, subject to power hierarchies—Latham and Rogers cite accusations of elitism and hegemony; Hewitt refers to the fundamental fascistic potentiality of the avant-garde itself" (43)

avenue for a critique of this tendency in the Chilean neo-avant-garde (*avanzada*) (134).¹⁴

Williams builds on the thought of Willy Thayer, whose focus on the Chilean state of exception posits a failure of the neo-avant-garde to maintain an innovative status:

In Thayer's formulation, the Chilean neo-avant-garde of the 1980's is always already *captured within* the terrain of the national state of exception that was inaugurated in the flames that engulfed La Moneda on September 11, 1973. After those events, he observes, any claim to newness or innovation in the arts in Chile – that is, any avant-garde response to history in which art is viewed as overcoming, superseding or resisting the limits imposed by its historical or institutional conditions – is grounded in a basic misconception of post-coup temporality... (134, emphasis mine)

I agree with Williams that the narrator, and most likely Bolaño as well, does maintain a Thayer-like skepticism of the neo-avant-garde's revolutionary potential—at least after the rise of Wieder and the military coup. Yet the state of exception as Williams articulates it places Wieder in a purely representative role; he is the aesthetic demonstration of the government's state of exception, and his work mirrors their power because he is “captured within” it. As such, Wieder is representative of the failure of the (neo)avant-garde to remain substantial in the face of Pinochet's state of exception, in which, following Thayer, “the only legitimate language was that of the barked commands of the state's military and police elite” (135). While this is true to some degree, I would argue that a closer look at Wieder's most shocking “poetry” also betrays an underlying (and constructed) state of exception for the artist *alone*. Though he does mirror the sovereign power of the regime, there is a more fundamental aspect of Wieder that transcends his relationship to the dictatorship, and that exists even during his time as Alberto Ruiz-Tagle: hierarchical, privileged distance. Wieder consistently places artist and art *above* spectator, *above* ethics, even attempting to equal the state of exception of the regime (which, incidentally, turns

¹⁴ Williams, along with Silvana Mandolessi, specifically attaches Wieder's aerial poetry to Chilean poet Raúl Zurita, whose aerial poem “La Vida Nueva” bears a striking resemblance to Wieder's in both form and content (Williams 133, Mandolessi 75).

out to be his undoing).¹⁵ As with Bill Gray, Wieder's aesthetic position is one of privilege, active through violence, in which the *agent* does not feel the pain of the passive receivers. As in *Mao II*, it is the conflation and de-conflation of literal and metaphorical violence within the avant-garde impulse that uncovers this hierarchical power dynamic.¹⁶

Violence for Art's Sake: Wieder's 'Avant-Garde' Impulse

Where Gray's aesthetic violence sought to "raid consciousness" from afar, Wieder wants to create an *impact*, and embraces even the "drawbacks of the literary avant-garde" and its tendency to "create confusion at the frontiers that separate poetry from theater or, more precisely, from visual and theatrical events" in order to do so (36). As such, Wieder's projects are less concerned with cultivating understanding than with imposition of feeling, and Wieder uses avant-garde shock—with an increasing undertone of violence—in order to achieve that effect. His first aerial poems, he says, are written in Latin "Because Latin makes more of an impression in the sky" and the narrator notes that, "in fact he probably used the word 'impact,' Latin makes more of an impact in the sky" (36). The purposeful shift in terminology from the more neutral or even positive "impression" to the more aggressive "impact" emphasizes the violent undertone to

¹⁵ For the purposes of consistency I will use the term "spectator"; in Wieder's case, since he insists on his work as a form of poetry, it could be "reader". In either case, the spectator / reader is in the position of *receiver* of impact.

¹⁶ In this respect, Wieder plays a role not unlike that of George Haddad in *Mao II*, making the conflation of aesthetic and literal violence visible, tangible—and incidentally catalyzing disillusion in the artists whose hopes for the avant-garde rested on its revolutionary promise. As this paper will go on to argue, though, he also plays a similar role to that of Bill Gray, whose conception of artist as inhabiting a privileged, culture-shaping position allowed him to conflate literal and aesthetic violence in the first place.

Wieder's aesthetic goal, an undertone that becomes more explicit with the development of his oeuvre.¹⁷

Wieder's subsequent aerial poems find their inspiration in his actual crimes, furthering the conflation of literal and aesthetic violence. He writes the names of women he's murdered in the air: "One of the lines alluded obliquely to the Garmendia sisters," whose death also marks the moment in which "the 'New Chilean Poetry' is about to be born" (32, 20). It's hard to say in that line whether the "New Chilean Poetry" refers to the aerial allusions or the actual murders; the blurred line between act and representation mirrors the blurring line between violence and aesthetics. In other poems "Wieder mentioned a Patricia and a Carmen," two other women who disappeared after contact with the poet, and though many mistake them for "the names of his sweethearts or his friends," the narrator notes that "it would have been clear to an informed, attentive reader that the girls were already dead" (32). Wieder is convinced that those who realize he is "conjuring the shades of dead women" are the ones who really understand the meaning of poetry, "assuring them that they knew more about poetry than most people" (33). To know poetry, for Wieder, is to know (and be complicit in) violence.

¹⁷ In the original Spanish, the words used are "se incrustaba" for "makes an impression" and "empotrar" for "impact". As Myrna Solotorevsky notes in *El espesor escritural en novelas de Roberto Bolaño*, the connotation of violence in the latter is applicable: "Cabria, tal vez, encontrar una diferencia connotativa entre 'incrustar' y 'empotrar' – términos que denotativamente pueden ser equivalentes – si se piensa que se incrustan objetos de mayor valor, como joyas, y que es adjudicable a 'empotrar' un sema de violencia" (21, note 33). In addition, the connotation Solotorevsky notes linking "incrustar" to jewels or "objects of higher value" aligns with Wieder's perception of his art as existing in a privileged, higher plain, as this thesis will go on to argue. The narrator's belief that he "probably used the word 'impact'" instead serves to emphasize the discrepancy between Wieder's perception of art and the narrator's, reinforcing the possibility that Wieder's assumption of privilege is something of a delusion.

As if to capitalize on the initial effectiveness of the true crime subject matter, Wieder eventually takes it to the extreme. In the text's most meticulously narrated scene, framed by an assertion of its exact truth, Wieder unveils his horrific photograph exhibition (83). From the beginning, Wieder intends to "surprise his guests," and the shock effect of the "hundreds of photos with which the walls and part of the ceiling had been decorated" is immediate. Tatiana von Beck, the "first person to enter the room" and the "only lady present" emerges from the exhibition "less than a minute after going in" (84, 86). She is "pale and shaken", speechless, tries "to get to the bathroom, unsuccessfully" and ends up "vomiting in the passage" as she flees the apartment. The owner of the flat enters and "almost immediately he came out again, went up to Wieder, seized him by the lapels, and for a moment it looked as if he would hit him" (88). A young cadet "started crying and swearing and had to be dragged out of the room" (88). Even though, "In general...the photos were of poor quality" they "made an extremely vivid impression on all who saw them" (88). After the physical shock of the "poetry", the party is left "dumbstruck," as if a high voltage current had run through the flat" (89). Before the exhibition the group atmosphere is active, celebratory: "The laughter...was contagious" and "Somewhere a trio began to sing, arms around each other...other guests talked about love of the future" (86). Afterward, the guests are rendered passive, docile: they "stared at each other as if strangers; our faces were still recognizable, of course, but different somehow, despicable and expressionless like the faces of sleepwalkers or idiots" (89). Compared to the linguistic spectacle of the Latin words, the allusions to dead women, or the nationalist display of the Chilean star, the aesthetic display of Wieder's literal violence achieves an unsurpassed, deadening impact.

Importantly, while the violence (both literal and metaphorical) is strong, it is completely one-sided. Wieder himself does not share the shock impact of the exhibition. The final tableau of

the scene places Wieder “at the window, showing no sign of fatigue, with a glass of whiskey in his perfectly steady hand, contemplating the dark cityscape,” in sharp contrast to the “group of pale, exhausted men” in his living room (92). In fact, while the literal violence of Wieder’s crimes is effective in creating the shock and surprise Wieder desires, his own characterization of the exhibition is purely aesthetic. He describes it as “visual poetry – experimental, quintessential, art for art’s sake” (78). Though he uses avant-garde technique, it is not in service of a socio-political emancipation or institutional deconstruction—it is in service of pure aestheticism, “art for art’s sake,” reinforcing rather than deconstructing the status of art as autonomous institution (78). The divide between Wieder and his “readers” is emphasized in the *testimonio* presentation style of the scene; though narrated by Arturo B., the passage is drawn from the “self-denunciatory memoir” of Julio César Muñoz Cano. As such, it is presented as uncommonly reliable; though Arturo notes that, “In 1974, hallucinations were not uncommon” he states that, “The following account of the photographic exhibition in the flat is, however, accurate” (83). The emphasis on its “truth” of the *testimonio*¹⁸, coupled with the police-report like tone Bolaño often employs in his work gives the narration a forensic tone, highlighting the exhibitions

¹⁸ The importance of the *testimonio* style to Bolaño’s work has been noted by Eugenio di Stefano in “Reconsidering Aesthetic Autonomy and Interpretation as a Critique of the Latin American Left in Roberto Bolaño’s *Estrella distante*”, who focuses on the *testimonio* of Amalia Maluenda, the maid of two of Wieder’s victims and the sole survivor of his attack on the Garmendia family. Di Stefano asserts that the *testimonio* form and the Chilean neo-avant-garde exemplified by Colectivo Acciones de Arte are “aesthetically and ideologically opposed to one another” but that “both have been underwritten in large part by a broader attempt to destabilize aesthetic autonomy as a means to democratization in the dictatorships and an opposition to neoliberal policies that have flourished in the postdictatorship” (465). Interestingly, di Stefano asserts this framework in order to propose that Bolaño goes directly against it, instead working to reestablish aesthetic autonomy. While I strongly disagree with di Stefano’s ultimate thesis, his notion of *testimonio* serving as an opposition to the neo-avant-garde (at least Wieder’s version) is useful here. The *testimonio* seems to point, in both the case of Amalia Maluenda, toward an objective truth, whereas Wieder appropriates avant-garde techniques for use in the regime, as well as to further his personal elevation.

criminality at the same time that Wieder insists upon its aestheticism. The contrast between the testimonial tone and Wieder's original intention, then, parallels the scene's final tableau in which Wieder's calm is contrasted with the party guests' disarray, and it is in these discrepancies that Wieder's personal 'state of exception' is most visible. Carlos Wieder is repeatedly separated and elevated, distanced from the affect of the spectators and of the text itself—either as artist or as criminal, Wieder is *unable* or *unwilling* to access the feelings of others.

Distant Star: Wieder's 'State of Exception'

The divide between Wieder and his spectators, Wieder and other people is present in the text from the beginning. Initial descriptions of Wieder (as Ruiz-Tagle) are clear in their separation of Wieder from the rest of the student-poets, as the narrator himself notes:

The differences between Ruiz-Tagle and the rest of us were obvious. We spoke a sort of slang or jargon derived in equal parts from Marx and Mandrake the Magician...while Ruiz-Tagle spoke Spanish, the Spanish of certain parts of Chile (mental rather than physical regions) where time seems to have come to a standstill. We lived with our parents (those of us who were from Concepción) or in spartan student boarding houses. Ruiz-Tagle lived on his own, in a flat near the center of town, with four rooms and the curtains permanently drawn. (6)

While the differences that Arturo B. notes seem superficial at first, Wieder's old-world Spanish and physical isolation, the disconnect between he and the writing collective hint at deeper threads of isolation and self-elevation that inform his aesthetic position. Whereas the others learn together, are taught by other poets, Wieder is a self-proclaimed autodidact; whereas the others form a community through discussion, Wieder "talked as if he were living inside of a cloud" (4). He connects only to the Garmendia sisters, who will later be his victims. Though he attends the workshops, Wieder "read[s] his own work with a certain disengagement and distance"; even his

writing is described as “distant and cold” (11). In his first incarnation as Ruiz-Tagle, Wieder is markedly individual, sharply contrasted with the collective group.

As Wieder’s star begins to rise, admirers continue to be struck by “his coldness, by something remote in his gaze. As Pía Valle put it, there seemed to be another pair of eyes behind his eyes” (77). Yet for the Wieder of post-coup Chile, individualized “distance” becomes imbued with language of attempted transcendence. Wieder literally moves heavenward, takes to the sky to write his poems, creating a new form of physical distance between artist and public and emphasizing the solitary, separate nature of Wieder himself.¹⁹ As the narrator states, “Wieder, we knew, did not fly in a squadron. He flew a light plane and he flew alone” (46). From above, Wieder is capable of Flaubert’s aim “of placing oneself in one bound above humanity and having nothing in common with it other than a relation of the eye” (Bourdieu 27). As Bourdieu notes, such an aim is also a claim to transcendent power: “Eternity and ubiquity, these are the divine attributes with which the pure observer endows himself” (27).

Similarly, Carlos Wieder isn’t just separate; he is above his spectators, and his first aerial poems take on themes that emphasize his position in that hierarchy. His first poem consists of the first five versus of Genesis as written in the Latin Vulgate, followed by the word LEARN (29). Williams reads this poetic act as a heralding of the new Chilean state and a representation of the state’s sovereign will:

Wieder’s poem calls attention to the inauguration in Chile of a new divine kingdom – the return of the commanding God of the Old Testament hand in hand with the on-going history of Nazism. In this relation between God and Fascism, between the immortal God of Christianity and the mortal god of sovereignty, command as the essential ground of domination implies *overseeing and surmounting* those down below who are looking up to the skies to decipher the language of sovereign will. The sovereign command that completes Wieder’s poem reveals what it means to live at the receiving end of the new state’s foundation. (137, emphases mine)

¹⁹ The Spanish word for ‘sky’, ‘*cielo*’, is also the Spanish word for ‘heaven’.

As with his earlier use of Thayer and the state of exception, Williams places Wieder in service of the state—yet Bolaño repeatedly alludes to the fact that Wieder seeks more than a partnership with the regime. Though his poetry does imply a “sovereign command”, an “overseeing and surmounting those down below,” I would argue that he is acting in order to establish his *own* sovereignty: Wieder doesn’t aspire to absolute political power (a place already occupied by Pinochet); he is a writer “who aspired to knowledge of the Absolute” (34). The absolute is reflected in his voice—even the narrator admits that, “you could sense a force in the way he talked, the purity and sheen of the absolute, the reflection of a monolithic will” (44). Bolaño never clarifies his own or the characters’ definition of the Absolute as such, allowing the reader to associate Wieder with the divine Absolute of Christian theology—a divine attribute of God—as well as with the Absolute of German Idealism, that “which has an unconditioned existence, not conditioned by, relative to, or dependent upon anything else. Usually deemed to be the whole of things, conceived as unitary, as spiritual, as self-knowing...” (Sprigge 1). While Wieder uses avant-garde technique and aligns himself with the regime, he aspires to something higher, a form of autonomy for himself and for his art that would transcend, rather than reshape, the every day. Though Williams is correct in reading Wieder’s “LEARN” as a “contentless command, a divine/mortal command that does nothing more than guarantee the witness’s exclusion from the true content of the sovereign will,” he underestimates Wieder’s own aspirations: Wieder uses the biblical Latin not just to usher in the regime, but to elevate himself into the position of one who can claim, “Let there be light” (30). Wieder, though aligned superficially with the political world, is “always an absent figure”; he is “imperious, self-assured, his eyes somehow separate from his body, as if they were watching from another planet” (84). His work does attempt—

repeatedly—to “guarantee the witness’s exclusion from the true content of the sovereign will,” but as we see through his photo exhibition, that will is not Pinochet’s, but Wieder’s own.

It is another military officer who best articulates the hierarchy and autonomy that Wieder seeks through this distance: “What you have to understand is that Carlitos Wieder looked down on the world as if he were standing on top of a volcano; he saw you and me and himself from a great height, and, in his eyes, we were all, to be quite frank, pathetic insects” (110). The “we” here includes the military, includes the everyday spectators, includes the regime. Interestingly, the officer uses this distance as a defense for Wieder’s actions at his military tribunal; it is as if Wieder’s position, his autonomous distance, should excuse his ethical transgressions. If we take the officer’s argument to its full extent, Wieder is exempt because he operates in a world of his own, in a personal ‘state of exception’ for art and artist based on his distance from others, or at least from their existence as human beings (rather than pathetic insects).²⁰

This self-imposed state of exception allows Wieder a self-exemption through an “autonomy of esthetics”, a concept that Jean-Michel Rabaté articulates in *Given: 1° Art 2° Crime: Modernity, Murder and Mass Culture*. Following a definition of “esthetics” initially devised by Thomas de Quincey in his series of essays “On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts,” Rabaté states:

The autonomy of esthetics means that the work of art simply turns into its own reality.

²⁰ Put another way, he is exempt because he assumes a position of autonomy again in the style of Flaubert, for whom art is a means of (metaphorical) manipulation: “That is why I love Art. There, at least, everything is freedom...No limits; humanity is for you a puppet with bells you make ring at the end of his sentence like a buffoon with a kick.” (qtd. in Bourdieu 26). For Bourdieu, such autonomy “requires a posture of impassivity, indifference and detachment, if not a cynical casualness...For example, it is Flaubert’s violent anarchistic humour, his sense of transgression and the joke, along with this capacity to hold himself at a distance, which allow him to draw the most beautiful aesthetic effects from the simple description of human suffering” (110).

The main point is less that it is ready to ‘kill’ reality in order to assert its own laws, than that it becomes once and for all self-reflexive, its significance bounded by the deployment of its formal procedures, an active bracketing out of other worldly concerns that acknowledges the legislation of no human or divine tribunal. (3)

Within this “bracketing out of other worldly concerns,” Wieder’s murders, he believes, exist within this realm of self-reflexivity, the literal violence working in service of the aesthetic. It is through this autonomy that literal violence can be put in service of “art for art’s sake”, since Wieder “acknowledges the legislation of no human or divine tribunal”—except, perhaps, that of his Art.

The Denial and Return of Consequence

Wieder, in his own ‘state of exception’, is cut off not only from the feelings of his spectators, but also of his victims (some of whom, like the Garmendia sisters, have played both roles). The physical presence of the dead bodies—the literal consequence of literal violence—is relegated only to photographs in which “The women looked like mannequins, broken, dismembered mannequins in some pictures” (88). The women look like “mannequins,” another photo depicts “a young blonde woman who seemed to be dissolving into the air,” another simply “a severed finger, thrown onto a floor of porous, grey cement” (89). Where Wieder as an individual agent strives toward the wholeness of the Absolute, his victims are made passive, are fragmented, and disappear—most of their bodies, the narrator tells us that most of them “will never be found” (23). Wieder, then, looking down from “a great height,” is able to *enact* violence without feeling it, since the world below is populated by insects, by fragments. This notion of Wieder’s position as both above and whole, in contrast to others’ passive fragmentation, is mirrored in his physical flight above the public: “Seen from the air, as Wieder himself noted

somewhere, a city is like a photo ripped into pieces, which, counter-intuitively, seem to scatter: a fragmentary, shifting mask” (80).

We have already seen that the avant-garde of Carlos Wieder is not the avant-garde of the students’ dreams—his ultimate goals lie not in revolution but in reification of power and, ultimately, his own elevation through autonomy. The disappearance of the bodies, coupled with the metaphorical absence of consequence, reveal that Carlos Wieder’s violence is also not the students’ idealized revolutionary violence; though he inhabits the role of both artist and criminal, is particularly aligned with a certain *type* of criminality. Wieder, believing in his own state of exception, takes on the infamous crimes of the regime—he makes his victims disappear. Silvana Mandolessi points out this connection in her article “El arte segun Wieder: estetica y politica de lo abyecto en ‘Estrella distante’”:

Además, la inclusión de las fotografías de desaparecidos como material principal de la obra reproduce la estrategia utilizada por artistas de izquierda como modo de denuncia de los crímenes perpetrados durante la dictadura. Aunque con un signo opuesto, Carlos Wieder—personaje que ejecuta las desapariciones—es un *poeta*, un poeta, además, que usa similares estrategias a los artistas de vanguardia de signo ideológico claramente contrario. (65)

In addition, the inclusion of the photographs of the ‘disappeared’ as the work’s source material reproduces the strategy used by Leftist artists to denunciate the crimes perpetrated during the dictatorship. Although of an opposing kind, Carlos Wieder—the character who carries out the disappearances—is a *poet*, a poet, furthermore, that uses strategies similar to those of the avant-garde, whose ideologies are clearly the opposite. (65)²¹

Though Wieder uses avant-garde techniques, his ultimate position both as artist and as criminal attempts to equal or exceed the regime.

Yet despite his ‘successful’ appropriations of the avant-garde and his aesthetic mirroring of the regime’s power, all of Wieder’s aspirations—to a privileged aesthetic position, to ethical

²¹ I’ve chosen to use the term “disappeared” here as the English translation for *desaparecidos* in order to try to maintain the connotations of a well-known, named phenomenon.

exemption, to revolutionary “newness”—are ultimately unsustainable. This is true both within the events of the text and meta-textually; where the regime revokes Wieder’s privileged status (thereby revealing it to be given, not inherent), Bolaño undercuts Wieder’s claims to the “new”, both as artist and as criminal. The first failure comes from Wieder’s own hubris; in aspiring to be like the regime and to maintain a similar position of autonomy, Wieder underestimates the role of his spectators in giving him that privileged position. Though he seeks to use violence as “art for art’s sake”, he mimics the violence-without-consequences of the dictatorship, and is, ultimately, dependent on its support. The tide begins to shift even during Wieder’s final aerial poem; although “Some of the officers discussed the aviator-poet’s eccentric performance...most of the conversations had moved on to questions of national (and even international) significance” (82). Wieder, “perhaps unaware that his public had so drastically diminished,” remains “Undaunted, above all, by incoherence”—yet his disinterest in his readers/spectators is what allows him to underestimate his dependence on them. After his visual poetry exhibition, the Military Intelligence agents arrive, enter the exhibition room, and then leave “as quietly as they had arrived, carrying three shoe boxes provided by the owner of the flat, containing the photographs from the exhibition” (92). In a matter of minutes Wieder’s “quintessential, art for art’s sake” poetry is relegated to the mundane materiality of three shoeboxes; the literal and metaphorical size of his act diminished and made to disappear. The Military Intelligence agents advise the guests to forget Wieder’s artistic act, a decision the guests have already made on their own. Even “The surrealists hastened to agree, affirming that, as far as they were concerned, nothing had happened in the flat that night; they were men of the world, after all” (91). “The world” trumps the privileged space of the artist, and despite Wieder’s transcendent aspirations, he and his art are unable to escape the world through a personal state of exception. Unlike the

dictatorship, Wieder is even unable to fully escape physical consequences; as the narrator has already told us, “one body, just one, will appear later in a mass grave, the body of Angelica Garmendia...but only hers, as if to prove that Carlos Wieder is a man and not a god” (23). After this failure²², Wieder’s claims to a privileged position for his art, a position that exempts his actions, are as hollow as his claims to revolution—while his claims may have already been hollow to the narrator, and perhaps the reader, now even Wieder is incapable of supporting the fantasy. After his fall from grace, Wieder himself becomes fragmentary, ripped into rumor and multiple identities, scattered into the “shifting anthology of Chilean literature” (94).

Bolaño’s Ubiquitous Violence

This chapter has primarily focused on Wieder’s conflation of literal and aesthetic violence, made possible through his assumption of a privileged, autonomous position, and used in order to further that elevated position and his Art. Even though Wieder ultimately fails in his goal, he is undoubtedly characterized as a dangerous, almost as a cautionary tale or dark vision of what an unchecked artist can be. Yet despite his status as murderer, Wieder’s dangerous status within the text does *not* lie in the use of literal violence. Although Wieder’s violence mirrors that of the “new regime,” it is frequently implied by Bolaño that Wieder’s kind of violence is nothing

²² The failure of Wieder’s complete autonomy should not be read as evidence of its nonexistence—in characterizing autonomy is a position means that its effects result not because one attains it in its purity but because the artist pursues it at all. For Bourdieu, autonomy as a position can be made, and it can also be lost:

“As for the autonomy...is it not the conditional freedom, limited to its separate universe, which the 'bourgeois' assigns it? Does not the revolt against the 'bourgeois' remain governed by what it contests, as long' as it ignores the principle, truly-, a contrario, of its existence? How can one be sure that it is not still the 'bourgeois' who, in keeping him at a distance, allows the writer to distance himself from him? 123 (28)

new.²³ Instead, violence in *Estrella distante* is ubiquitous; it is infused into the history of Chile, becomes embedded, and sometimes romanticized, in each character's story. It is the very ubiquity of violence that allows it to be aesthetically appropriated – no one can claim it for any single, progressive project, emancipatory of otherwise.

In his violent nature, then, Wieder is no different from the students in the poetry workshops, from their leaders, or from the narrator himself, who do not receive the same demonization that is applied to the central character. Writers, in this text, all inhabit the violent “planet of the monsters” and “literature’s bottomless cesspools,” and to be an artist is to necessarily encounter and enact violence (132).²⁴ Violence itself, then, is not always a negative; in moments, for some literary monsters, it is celebrated, treated with nostalgia, or with longing. The disillusion comes for the artists who realize that the violence of art is not inherently progressive, revolutionary, or even new. It can be appropriated, can become itself a kind of

²³ The testimony of Amalia Maluenda, maid of the Garmendia sisters and sole survivor of his attack on their family, shows that violence also can't be altered by time. When Wieder is charged, Amalia appears to give testimony, and her *testimonio* links Wieder's violence to the violence of colonization and the violence of Chile as a nation. Amalia, who is described as “the Mapuche maid,” has lost most of her Spanish, and “When she spoke in court, every second word was in Mapuche” (110). The emphasis on Amalia's indigenous status is juxtaposed with Wieder's violent crime, the “black night” of which is linked in Amalia's mind with “the music of the Spanish” (111). The music of the Spanish is, for Amalia, nothing but “Rage...sheer, futile rage” – the beginning of the “cyclical, epic poem” of violence in which Wieder's crime is just “one episode in a long history of killing and injustice” (111). The cyclical, epic poem is also “partly her story, the story of the Chilean citizen Amalia Maluenda,” as well as “partly the story of the Chilean nation” (111). Through Amalia's testimony, the story of Chile is characterized as “A story of terror” (111). For Bolaño, then, Chile itself is inextricable from aesthetic violence. Its history is a poem, a story that is doomed to repeat; Wieder's literal and aesthetic violence is just another verse (111).

²⁴ For Flaubert, too, to be an artist was to be a monstrosity, which he equated with a distance from active living: “If you participate actively in life, you don't see it clearly: you suffer from it too much or enjoy it too much. The artist, to my way of thinking, is a monstrosity, something outside nature” (qtd. in Bourdieu 26).

asymmetrical power rather than a resistance of the same. Wieder's violence, we have seen, is such an asymmetrical power: it is enacted from a distance, with a clear hierarchy between agent and receiver, and without the ramifications of consequence either through the materiality of the body or the affect of others' pain.

Wieder's story is the story of a rise and a fall, and certainly a story of disappointed hopes—but the burden of disillusion falls largely on Arturo B., whose dreams for the avant-garde and for revolution are corroded by Wieder's actions. Arturo, as a writer, is also incapable of escaping the ubiquity of violence, and the end of the novella has him oscillating between futility and complicity. It is in this moment, when Arturo's path once again crosses with Carlos Wieder's, that Arturo's disillusion is most visible.

As Arturo B. is “gradually being drawn into the story of Carlos Wieder,” he realizes, as the reader has already, that it is “also the story of something more” (121). The fact that he, too, is a part of this story—the story of Wieder, Chile, terror, and art—comes to him in a dream:

I dreamt I was travelling in a big wooden boat, a galleon perhaps, crossing the Great Ocean. There was a party on the poop deck and I was there, writing a poem, or perhaps writing in my diary, and looking at the sea. Then an old man, on a yacht, not the galleon, or standing on a breakwater, started shouting “Tornado! Tornado!”...at that point the galleon began to sink and all the survivors were cast adrift on the sea. I saw only Carlos Wieder, clinging to a barrel of brandy. I was clinging to a rotten spar. And only then, as the waves pushed us apart, did I understand that Wieder and I had been travelling in the *same boat*; he may have conspired to sink it, but I had done little or nothing to stop it going down. (121-122).

In “Malestar en la literature: escrita y barbarie en Estrella distante y Nocturno de Chile de Roberto Bolaño,” Ignacio López-Vicuña interprets the sinking galleon as the “shipwrecking of the revolutionary ideals of the ‘sixties’ and ‘seventies’” (160). More specifically, I would argue, it is the shipwrecking of the aesthetically violent power of avant-garde art, whose revolutionary ideals are betrayed and sunk by Wieder's appropriation. Though both Wieder and Arturo are

invested in art's aesthetically violent power, Wieder has taken an (antagonistic) position, using art for self-elevation. The narrator, in contrast, is found isolated and inactive, his art and its violence no longer in service of anything: "I was living on my own, had no money and was in pretty poor health. None of my work had been published anywhere for ages, and for a while I hadn't even been writing" (121).

Yet as López-Vicuña notes, Arturo B. is pulled into the cyclical violence and "involved, indirectly, in a criminal act" when he helps a private detective find and kill the aviator-poet (159). For López-Vicuña, this complicity, the moment in which "violence has finally reached him" is a moment of defeat for Arturo B., a final turn away from the Chilean story since "literature offers no shelter or redemption" (159).

It can't be denied that Arturo turns away, to some degree, from literature; as Lopez-Vicuña notes, Arturo has already informed the reader that *Estrella distante* will be his "last communiqué from the planet of the monsters" (132). But I would disagree with Lopez-Vicuña that this retreat from literature is a result of literature's failure to shelter Arturo from violence. Literature, and art in general, have never been a shelter from violence in *Estrella distante*, and the fact that Arturo decides to "go back to writing my poems, such as they are...and make no attempt to be published" implies that it is not even poetry, but poetry's revolutionary project, that has failed. Arturo will still write; what he's giving up is readership, the ability to impact others *through* his poems. The problem, then, is not that literature offers no redemption but that it has failed to remain a progressive, resistant force. For Arturo, art has become corrupt and appropriable—and perhaps it always was.

CONCLUSION:

“Soñábamos con utopía y nos despertamos gritando.”
“We dreamed of utopia and we woke up screaming.”

--Roberto Bolaño, Dejenlo todo; nuevamente

Escape from Grand Narrative: Alternatives in the Margins

Arturo B.'s retreat from literature, like Bill Gray's death, prevents the text from directly presenting of an alternative of authorship through the protagonists—for both Arturo and Bill, it seems, art has failed. Yet as Mark Osteen notes in “Becoming Incorporated: Spectacular Authorship and DeLillo's *Mao II*”, DeLillo's novel does not end with Bill's death (Osteen 673). Bolaño's novella, similarly, does not end with Wieder's fall from grace, which could be the end of his appropriation of the avant-garde. Both *Mao II* and *Estrella distante* continue beyond the end of these central narratives, making possible an investigation into alternative forms of artistry that may or may not share in modernity's decrescendo of power.

For Osteen, it is *Mao II*'s photographer Brita who presents such an alternative, a hope that “authentic authorship and opposition are not dead” (673). The end of the novel finds Brita on assignment to photograph Abu Rashid; while there, she also photographs his son, and the narrative tells us that, “She does this because it seems important” (DeLillo 236). In Brita's act, Osteen sees an authorial gesture, and one that maintains a resistance to power within contemporary (spectacular) society:

More significantly, her skeptical gesture of defiance sketches some hope for oppositional authorship. In fact, her authority is more viable than Gray's precisely because she recognizes her involvement in the society of spectacle and, rather than hiding from it, uses it to her own and perhaps to society's advantage. (673)

For Osteen, it is Brita's use of the image that allows her to maintain opposition within an image-driven society; by participating she is able to maintain some power, “at once retaining creative

control and relinquishing some of it to the audience” (673). This partial relinquishing of power is essential to Brita’s form of authorship and its ability to survive; I would add that it is this recognition of the power of the spectator that sets such a position apart from Bill Gray’s, whose aesthetics are built on the one-way exertion of artist’s authority over the passive masses.

A similar attention to the power of the spectator is visible through Karen, whose winding narrative meanders in and out of Bill’s clear progression. Though Karen begins and ends the text as Bill’s acolyte, his departure leaves her adrift: “Karen’s life had no center with Bill on the lam. She was all drift and spin” (142). Chapters describing her subsequent wanderings through New York City act as intermittent pauses in Bill and George’s conversations. While Bill and George contemplate the role of the author, then, Karen reshapes the role of the spectator while visiting an art gallery:

Karen looked at a food-crusting spoon that was stuck to the burlap. She thought she might like to touch it, just to touch, for the sake of putting a hand to something that is one of a kind. So she reached over and touched it, then checked around to see if anyone looked askance... She held the spoon in her hand, standing totally frozen. She didn’t know when she’d been so scared. A real spoon with impacted food that was also real. She tried to smell the food, careful not to move the spoon too quickly and cause further horrible dislodgment... She decided to follow Omar with the spoon held openly so someone could spot it and she could then return it with a muttered apology, which she envisioned completely, setting the spoon carefully on the desk near the door. But no one said anything and then she was out on the street and it was still in her hand, complete with crusted food, and she was even more frightened than before. She’d left the premises with part of an artwork in her possession. (172-173)

Karen assumes she will cause alarm in removing the spoon from the piece, she assumes she will be punished further for removing it from its sacred space. Her act is an open transgression; it frightens her to carry it out—yet the mundaneness of the actual object, a “real spoon with impacted food” makes the transgression absurd. The spoon is only “one of a kind” because it is “part of an artwork”; once removed, it is only Karen who imbues it with any power:

She took the gentlest possible care of the food-encrusted spoon from the art gallery. She

kept it on a shelf, clearing some of the books so it could sit undisturbed and in open sight but also out in the sun. She was worried about the food. If the food was somehow touched or stubbed by another object or if or if it was softened by warm air, it might crumble off the spoon and this would be a defacement she didn't think she could bear. (178)

Here, art is defined not by the artist that created it, nor by the institution that shelters it, but by the spectator who elevates it. In this, Karen's relationship to art echoes Osteen's assertion that a new authorship acknowledges and allows an active, power-sharing spectator. The fact that these moments alternate Bill's own shifting perceptions of authorship seems pointed. Though DeLillo does not go so far as to present a full alternative to modernist artistic impulses, Bill's disillusion with modernist artistry is infiltrated by Karen's sudden assertion of artistic agency—importantly, it is not a desire for destruction, but for closeness and preservation, that defines her relationship to art. If there is an alternative form of artistry available in DeLillo's text, it may be a form that requires the recognition of a spectator's power, a symbiotic relationship in which artist and spectator share both power and responsibility for art's value. It seems fitting, then, that such alternatives are not directly presented by the protagonist or even the author of the text, but must instead be drawn out by the DeLillo's own spectator, the reader of *Mao II*.

Similarly, Arturo B.'s brief investigation into a literature movement called the "barbaric writers" reveals a form of art that defines itself by the "dehumanization" of texts through their degradation by bodily fluids, the result of which is meant to be a "deeper understanding of the art of writing" (132). Through "physical familiarity" the technique is meant to break "all the barriers imposed by culture, the academy" and therefore "in principle belong to everyone" (133). Yet Bolaño, like DeLillo, falls short of presenting barbaric writing as a real alternative to the emancipatory project of the avant-garde—barbaric writing, too, is tainted by the presence of Carlos Wieder. It is tied, in fact, to "one of Carlos Wieder's ultimate jokes," a "deadly serious"

poem that calls for the abolishment of literature through the participation of “non-literary people,” a “revolution in writing” for which “poetry is written by non-poets and read by non-readers” (134). While this version of artistry is, no doubt, a shift from Wieder’s initial god-like position, the reader, like the narrator, has become wary of “revolution”. The power of the spectator, here, though it echoes *Mao II* in its assertion of agency, seems at best nonsensical, at worst, dangerous—the reader is left, like Arturo B., without a viable artistic path to believe in.

A Negatively Signified Memory of Hope

Despite the seeming pessimism of disillusion and unexplored alternatives, it is not enough to read *Mao II* and *Estrella distante* as postmodern elegies for modern artistry. The texts do not present passive lamentations, but instead active critiques—they do not treat the impulses of modernity with pure reverence; neither do they regard them with pure scorn. While their protagonists (and perhaps alter-egos) idealize narratives of modern authorship, DeLillo and Bolaño are not, in fact, Bill Gray and Arturo B., and a last look at *Mao II* and *Estrella distante* from a meta-textual perspective makes it clear that they do not share in their characters’ ultimate futility.

As Paula Martín Salván notes, Bill Gray can be read not just an alter ego, but also as a “transference mechanism” for the author (9). For Martín Salván, he personifies “DeLillo’s desire to escape,” through which “DeLillo himself becomes the ideally ‘dangerous’ novelist he talks about” (9). I would agree that DeLillo does succeed by writing Bill’s failure. In fact Bolaño, in writing Arturo and Wieder, does the same. Their success, though, is not their maintenance of their protagonists’ modernist ideals, as Martín Salván posits. Their success lies in their ability to critique *despite the failure* of those romanticized ideals. By allowing their protagonists to

experience both the emancipatory promise and the dangerous violence of those modernist impulses, Don DeLillo and Roberto Bolaño accomplish what Bill Gray and Arturo B. do not—they maintain art’s critical function even through the loss of utopian paradigm.

How is such a critical function possible if we take the disillusion within each text seriously? Bill Gray, Carlos Wieder, and Arturo B. are each wedded to narratives of authorship that no longer seem to function; autonomy and avant-garde impact do not lead to utopia, but instead to complicity with or perpetuation of violent, asymmetrical power. Yet *Mao II* and *Estrella distante* are not wedded to these narratives—they present, instead, ambivalence, taking the place of what Thierry de Duve calls “the last partisans of the avant-garde”:

How do the last partisans of the avant-garde concede of a critique that might survive the loss of the project of emancipation and the collapse of utopias? By turning utopian critique into the critique of utopias...By applying critical vigilance not so much to the conditions of the dream but rather to the conditions of its failure. By showing this through art works that manage to negate both the existing social reality and the flight into utopia, works that no longer anticipate but rather state the fact that anticipation was premature. Thus, artistic activity maintains its critical function. (435)

Bolaño’s novella and DeLillo’s novel present precisely this kind of “critique of utopias”—their “critical vigilance” focuses in on both the violence of modernist impulses and the failures of artistry to maintain critical function through those impulses.

Interestingly, though they present the disillusion of the aesthetics of the past, neither *Mao II* nor *Estrella distante* presents an alternative for the future—perhaps wary of the promise of the new, they “no longer anticipate” (435). Bill’s death, Wieder’s death, and Arturo’s retreat from published literature cut each novel short of directly introducing an alternative for socially relevant artistry. Instead, each text occupies a liminal moment in the “forever unending process of ending” that, according to de Duve, constitutes modernity:

The negativity of the avant-garde, for which tradition had to mean betrayal, is explained

by the anticipated retrospection of the verdict thanks to which avant-garde art would, in the end, be incorporated into tradition precisely for having first betrayed it. Similarly, the avant-garde's pursuit of novelty, its dynamic of constant surpassing, is explained by its aiming at a horizon beyond the modern, which the modern then overtakes in turn. So, modernity seems to be constituted by a forever unending process of ending. (77)

Rather than betray the traditions of the past by presenting a novelty of the future, DeLillo and Bolaño critique those traditions from within, a position that de Duve relates to the postmodern condition: "This may be called the postmodern condition, and the art that is lucid about it gives to 'postmodernism' at least the meaning of a negatively signified memory of hope: even scratched out, utopia is not forgotten." (435) *Mao II* and *Estrella distante* hover in the afterimage of modern aesthetics, looking back with a critical eye. The "postmodern condition" of the artist and the text can perhaps be read as this interval of in-between, when the aesthetics of the past are in revision, yet the aesthetics of the future have yet to be solidified, ingrained, and in turn questioned, supplanted, and mourned.²⁵

²⁵ In this, the postmodernism of *Mao II* and *Estrella distante* resembles the definition of postmodernism presented by Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*: "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Thus understood, postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent" (79).

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