

Spring 1-1-2013

A Postmodern Literary Aesthetics of Exploration and Resistance: The Example of Don DeLillo's Mao II

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A POSTMODERN LITERARY AESTHETICS OF EXPLORATION AND RESISTANCE:

THE EXAMPLE OF DON DELILLO'S *MAO II*

by

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B.A., College of Notre Dame of Maryland, 2009

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Comparative Literature

2013

This thesis entitled:
“A Postmodern Literary Aesthetics of Exploration and Resistance:
The Example of Don DeLillo’s Mao II,”
written by Kimberly Myers
has been approved for the Department of Comparative Literature

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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.

ABSTRACT

Myers, Kimberly (MA, Comparative Literature)

A Postmodern Literary Aesthetics of Exploration and Resistance:

The Example of Don DeLillo's *Mao II*

Thesis directed by Professor Eric White

This thesis is concerned with the contemporary problematics associated with the representation of lived experience and navigation of the postmodern world. Specifically, it explores the literary representation of the spatial, temporal, and subjective relationships between the individual and a society increasingly dominated by the proliferation of reproducible images and spectacles. Taking the Benjaminian concept of the destruction of the aura of authenticity in the age of mechanical reproduction and Baudrillard's discussion of the aura's replacement with a series of simulacra as central theoretical underpinnings, the paper defends literature as a privileged and productive site for the thinking through of postmodern experience. In complement with a discussion of numerous theoretical concepts, the thesis uses Don DeLillo's novel, *Mao II* as a practical application of the argument that literature can exert a shaping influence on public consciousness. The text stands as an ideal example of the type of "thinking through" that the paper advocates, both on the level of the plot with the protagonist novelist, and on the level of composition of the text, with DeLillo's authorship of social critique in novel form. The thesis takes a trajectory that begins with an analysis of postmodern space and difficulties of spatial navigation and continues to a discussion of the subjective dislocation of the individual when faced with the prospect of being in the postmodern world. Within the issue of the dislocation of subjectivity and unique identity, it focuses particularly on the differences between modern and postmodern modes of authorship, especially in reference to what Guy Debord has termed the "society of the spectacle." In addition, the discussion of the prevalence of photography in DeLillo's novel seeks to explore the complicity and resistance of that medium's mixed relationship with the problematics outlined above. Ultimately, the paper speculates as to the

productive possibilities DeLillo ascribes to the postmodern artist/author through his commentary within, and structural and narrative approach to, *Mao II*; concluding that literature can only remain a site of privileged “thinking through” of lived experience if it remains aware of its place within the society it critiques and cultivates an aesthetics of resistance from within that society.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1986, Jean-François Lyotard wrote an essay called, “Defining the Postmodern.” In combination with his earlier work, *Postmodern Condition*, this essay represents Lyotard’s foray into defining the period that began in the mid 1960s and continues through the present moment – not, however, through the imposition of a univocal articulation of meaning, rather, through the rejection of the “horizon of universalization” and through the embrace of a “destiny that [moves] toward a more and more complex condition” (1466-67). Although Lyotard was not the first or only thinker to attempt a description of the nature of existence in this era, more than two decades later, the definition of postmodernism remains nearly as elusive as ever when theorized as a totalizing concept. In his work, Lyotard heralds the postmodern deconstruction of the “grand narratives” that largely defined high modernism, and of the commensurability of experience and representation through language (Leitch 1493). Arguably, the fragmentation of definition of what exactly constitutes the postmodern object and postmodernism as a movement and periodizing concept paradoxically helps to create a definition of postmodernism, albeit in broad and heterogeneous strokes. Even as some scholars announce the impending end of the postmodern age, the understanding of the postmodern world and of what coherent meaning can be drawn from spatial and temporal navigation of a world characterized by fragmentation is far from definitive. Paula E. Geyh acknowledges this dislocating lack of certainty when she notes that the intellectual consideration of the term “postmodernism” has become nearly more confusing than the lived experience of the postmodern world (2). She argues that, “As a result, we inhabit, it seems ever more uneasily, the space between our experience of the postmodern world and its meaning [...]. What we have been learning to do, what we are still learning to do, is to span the gap that is this space” (2). Geyh continues by positing literature as the ideal space in which to

represent “our peculiarly postmodern dilemmas,” but beyond representation, to think through the complexities and contradictions of the age (2). Geyh’s assertion of the continued vitality of literary representation may come as a surprise given the inevitable cycle of commodification, replication, and flattening into which the literary work is absorbed within the context of capitalism and globalization. In his analysis of the consumer society of cultural production distinguished by the elimination of individual artistic personality, Frederic Jameson writes:

What we have to retain from all this is rather an aesthetic dilemma: because if the experience and the ideology of the unique self, and experience and ideology which informed the stylistic practice of classical modernism, is over and done with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing.
(1850)

Geyh would presumably respond that postmodern artists and writers are supposed to be working this answer out through their writing and art – identifying opportunities for subversion and critique, even as they are incorporated into the discourse of the determining system of production.

It is my intention to lend support to Geyh’s defense of literature as a “privileged site [...] [and] powerful model” for critically productive exploration of the problematics of postmodernism, as well as to reassert the writer’s agency in shaping consciousness and perception. Specifically, Don DeLillo’s 1991 novel, *Mao II* stands as a text that acknowledges the futile struggle for an individual to exert influence on public awareness through traditional approaches to narrative when narrative is co-opted by the cult of commodity and reproduction, the media’s disruption of coherent historical temporality, and terroristic spectacles calculated to create singular events within a mass of reproduced events and images. While the novel makes

this concession to the world of images, DeLillo suggests the possibility of loosening the grip on modernist models of representation and thereby producing a postmodern “aesthetics of resistance” from within postmodern culture (Wilcox 90). *Mao II*, is fraught with tension cutting across the blurry boundary demarcating the residue of modern subjectivity and the onset of postmodern flattening of temporal and existential specificity. DeLillo explores the spread of this cycle, but also probes the possibility for subversion—complicating the machinery of the capitalist market by depicting language and image both as gears within the mechanical reproduction of culture, and, depending on how they are deployed, as possible impediments to the turning of those gears.

My consideration of DeLillo’s text will seek to explore the prevalence of postmodern themes and questions that have been discussed from numerous theoretical vantage points. Despite inevitable overlap between these issues, the discussion will take a trajectory that begins with an analysis of postmodern space and difficulties of spatial navigation and continues to a discussion of the subjective dislocation of the individual when faced with the prospect of being in the postmodern world. Within the issue of the dislocation of subjectivity and unique identity, I will focus particularly on the differences between modern and postmodern modes of authorship, especially in reference to a the destruction of the aura of authenticity of the singular individual or work, and its replacement by simulacra within what Guy Debord has termed the “society of the spectacle.” In addition, I will discuss the prevalence of photography in the novel, and on that medium’s mixed relationship with the problematics outlined above. Ultimately, I will speculate as to what productive possibilities DeLillo ascribes to the postmodern artist/author through his commentary within, and structural and narrative approach to, *Mao II*.

POSTMODERNISM(S)

Prior to engaging directly with the novel, it seems prudent to briefly sketch some contextualization of the postmodern condition that will be developed further in connection to the plot, characters, and environment of the text. For the preliminary treatment of the concept, I find it useful to follow Geyh's tripartite division of postmodernism. The first meaning of postmodernism is largely theoretical, closely connected to Lyotard's work, and emerges as an observation of the reaction against the "traditional views of knowledge, truth, meaning, interpretation, communication, and so on" that are espoused by modernism (Geyh 3). In critiquing grand narratives of progress, "Postmodernism attempts to turn its back on this understanding of progress as the whole world marching in lockstep toward the same utopian future" (Leitch 1463). While Lyotard does not discuss space directly in "Defining the Postmodern," one of the central conceptual and experiential shifts of emphasis in the uneven transition from modernism to postmodernism can be extrapolated from his comments, and has been taken up by other thinkers: the change from a concentration on time to a concentration on space (Barrett 788). The disassembly of homogenizing forward progression causes a rupture in the linearity of temporality, both creating the opportunity for the "multiplicity of small transformations" that Lyotard identifies, and also creating the risk of a flattening and new type of homogenization through the creation of an "eternal present" that floats in a saturated and disorienting space (Lyotard 1466, Debord 11). Despite the connotation of an abrupt separation from the preceding era, Lyotard emphasizes that, "the 'post-' of postmodernity does not mean a process of coming back or flashing back, feeding back, but of ana-lysing, ana-mnesing, of reflecting" (1468). Drawing on the Greek etymology of the prefix 'ana-' meaning "again" or "back," the suggestion is that the project of postmodernity is not to return to abandoned precepts

of modernism, but to evaluate undulations in emphasis and focus that, in part, carry over from modernism and inform the individual's experience of living in a postmodern world, rather than declaring postmodernity an entirely separate plane of existence (1468).

The second related understanding of postmodernity ("cultural postmodernism") can be attributed in large part to Frederic Jameson's scholarship. According to Jameson, cultural postmodernism reveals itself through the "effacement [...] of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 1847). Clearly, Jameson's ideas take Lyotard's theoretical underpinnings of postmodernism as a basis for his commentary, but the key extension is Jameson's location of its observable "particular style" in the connection between, "the emergence of new formal features in culture [...] [and] the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order—what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism" (1848). In this society of the spectacle, direct experience is converted into representation, distributed through globalized outlets, and thus increases the spatial aesthetic distance associated with the perception of the object, ironically, by making it more easily accessible. Jameson is careful to note that in addition to its particular aesthetic and economic qualities, postmodernism is also a periodizing concept that encapsulates the changes in dominant "political, economic, social, cultural, and aesthetic" orders occurring from the mid 1960s through the present. This emphasis of a historical period establishes the third meaning of postmodernism that is relevant to our preliminary contextualization.

POSTMODERNISM AND THE LITERARY WORK

In connecting the postmodern period to literature, questions arise as to the function of the literary work and the literary intellectual when the perceived “realness” of experience is less and less mappable through the medium of language and narrative. This increasing “unmappability of the real” can be attributed to the proliferation of narratives controlled by the media and politics, narratives that incorporate artistic works for their purposes through reproduction and destruction of authenticity (Geyh 7). Walter Benjamin analyzes the effects of reproducing a once singular work of art, arguing:

It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. [...] To an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility. [...] But as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics. (1056-57)

This age of technological reproducibility is the environment that DeLillo’s *Mao II* navigates, in part by demonstrating the difficulty of physical and temporal navigation through its protagonist, Bill Gray – the novelist at the center of the text. He both illustrates and problematizes various postmodern theories through his efforts to control his materiality and spatial distance from the evolving cultural landscape. In many ways, Bill functions as a microcosmic instance of the destruction of the aura of authenticity of the individual through the reproduction of images and prioritization of simulacra, enabling analysis of the function of intellectual and creative discourse on the larger scale of postmodernism as a whole.

Here, I will offer a brief, non-exhaustive summary of some plot elements in *Mao II*; some of these plot elements (and others) will inevitably be elaborated in the course of my argument. Bill Gray is an aging novelist who finds himself in a society that has become unfamiliar to him. His first two novels were well received by the public. Since their publication, however, he retreated into hiding while working on his third novel. This physical retreat from the postmodern urban space of New York City has relegated Bill to a sort of modernist bunker where he agonizes over the completed, yet unsatisfactory, manuscript of the third novel. In addition to his physical removal from the masses, Bill has retreated from both the publishing world and the stage of public spectacle by withholding his third novel and his photographic presence for over thirty years. His effort to protect the subjectivity of his unique identity has created an aura of intrigue and singularity around him, and his much-anticipated novel, that drives the public to seek him out and render him knowable through photographic documentation and consumption of his written word. Bill lives with his assistant, Scott, who catalogues all of his records and papers; and Karen, a former member of the Unification Church lead by Sun Myung Moon. Although Bill will be of more illustrative significance in this argument, notably, Scott and Karen function as transplants from the postmodern society that Bill has fled, and their inclusion in Bill's close confidence parallels his inability to protect himself from infiltration by the world he attempted to leave behind. After thirty years of photographic absence, Bill decides to allow a photographer, Brita Nelson, access to his fortress for the purpose of taking photographs of him. Brita's particular project is photographing writers, creating a kind of, "planetary record [...] [and] form of knowledge and memory" through a reference work of thousands of photographs (DeLillo 25-26). After his photographic session with Brita, Bill reenters the world, encountering a web of orchestrated spectacle, political maneuvering, and terrorist networks that interfere with his

concept of self as a writer who aims to influence public consciousness. In an effort to reestablish practical agency as an individual, he attempts to travel to Beirut to offer himself in exchange for the release of a French poet held hostage by a terrorist group, but he dies in-transit, stripped of his identifying documents, on a boat crossing from Athens to Beirut.

POSTMODERN SPACE

I have already emphasized the consideration of space as an essential characteristic of postmodern theory, and made the claim that literature is a productive space for exploring theoretical concepts through fictional representation. Various conceptualizations of space are indispensable for analyzing *Mao II*. Typically, space is not the first organizing principle that comes to mind when thinking about literature; chronology of events and their organization in time is often predominate. In “Space, Ideology, and Literary Representation,” W.J.T. Mitchell gives even more assertive force to this tendency:

The first thing to say about the notion of space from a literary point of view is that it does not exist, or should not exist. Literature, as we have been told at least [...] is a temporal art. Space enters into literature only as a dubious fiction, as a phantom in the minds of overimaginative readers, as an invasion from alien and rival art forms like painting, or as a necessary evil in the transmission of verbal art by the spatial, visible traces of writing.

(91)

Despite a desire to separate literature and the visual arts, an acknowledgment of the various literary articulations of space is crucial to recognizing that Bill’s effort to stabilize his temporal and subjective position is directly linked to his spatial movement or lack thereof.

The reader encounters the complexity of negotiating physical postmodern space as a thematic development early in the novel. Scott travels to New York City to meet Brita prior to transporting her to Bill's house to capture his image. They meet in a hotel cocktail lounge in the middle of the city; "Above the bar area there was a clock rotating in an openwork tower. [...] [Scott] thought he could easily sit all afternoon watching the elevators rise and drop [...]. Everything was moving, everything was slowly turning, there was music coming from somewhere" (24). Significantly in this description, everything, including the symbolic marker of temporality (the clock) has been set in motion in space. Scott is initially astounded when he realizes that they are in a revolving bar and "felt as if blocks of time and space had come loose and drifted" (DeLillo 23). This passage, while superficially setting the scene for a plot event, actually subverts the artificial division between literary representation of experience and academic theorizing about experience. The elements of the built urban space are strikingly similar to a hotel that Frederic Jameson references in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" as the epitome of postmodern spatialization. His description of The Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles notes its "giant kinetic sculptures" (elevators and escalators), which imbue the interior space with movement and direct individual bodies' "physical trajectories [...] as virtual narratives or stories" through the space. The Bonaventure even contains, "one of those revolting cocktail lounges, in which you, seated, are again passively rotated about and offered a contemplative spectacle of the city itself, now transformed into its own images by the glass windows through which you view it" (1856). Scott's description of the perpetual motion and activity of the space echoes Jameson's commentary on, "a constant busyness [that] gives the feeling that emptiness is here absolutely packed, that it is an element within which you yourself are immersed, without any of that distance that formerly enabled the perception of perspective or

volume” (1856). This juxtapositioning of the theoretical and the literary, the textual and the visual, is just one way that DeLillo’s novel exemplifies the type of thinking-through of experience that literature can enable. Without the characters’ commentary in the novel, the evolving nature of how individuals transverse and inhabit space could foreseeably go unremarked upon, aside from texts like Jameson’s.

SUBJECTIVE ORIENTATION

The annihilation of perception of perspective or volume that happens on the level of physical space is essentially what Bill Gray attempts to escape in respect to his subjective position in the world. “[P]ostmodern hyperspace [...] has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 1857). Jameson argues that this failure of the subject to adapt to the “mutation in built space itself” is due to the fact that the subject’s processes of perceptual negation “were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism” (1854). This is certainly the case with Bill. Bill is accustomed to a society that allowed for the development of individualizing style and scale; his own recognition and reputation as an author has been predicated on this principle, and his spatial retreat from urbanity constitutes a symbolic rejection of postmodernism. Geyh argues that an effort to reject postmodernism as a whole, “is to endeavor to stand outside one’s age, to remove oneself from its everyday life and its cultural and intellectual currents. To do this seems to me either to sentence oneself to a perpetual misreading and misunderstanding of the contemporary world [...] [o]r else, it is to doom oneself to irrelevance as a thinker” (6). Bill’s fate can be read as the fate of the modernist Author whose

stronghold in singularity is utterly consumed by transitory reproduction of texts and images, and by the leveling of difference.

Charles Baudelaire describes the role of the author as that of *The Painter of Modern Life*. According to Baudelaire, “He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory” (684). The translation and interpretation of daily experience into the eternal truth of human experience is the task that Bill has defined for himself; he has even partially collapsed the separation between his sense of self and his work, saying, “the language of my books has shaped me as a man. There’s a moral force in a sentence when it comes out right. [...] The deeper I become entangled in the process of getting a sentence right in its syllables and rhythms, the more I learn about myself” (DeLillo 48). Bill lives in lamentation of the loss of the moral force and arresting clarity of the novel. In a society where disposable spectacle inundates the news, and both text and image is everywhere, the voice of the novelist is lost to the voice of the crowd. He claims, “Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. [...] After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings. This is the new tragic narrative” (DeLillo 157). Thirty years earlier, Bill too was known for the particularity of his narrative style and insight into the human condition. His early work relied on his ability to connect to the nuanced, yet shared threads of human experience through the creation of his characters.

During Brita’s visit to Bill’s house, Scott reminisces about the jolt with which Bill’s work entered his life:

‘Somebody gave me Bill’s first novel to read and I said, Whoa what’s this? That book was about me somehow. I had to read slowly to keep from jumping out of my skin. I saw myself. It was my book. Something about the way I think and feel. He caught the back-

and-forthness. The way things fit almost anywhere and nothing gets completely forgotten.’ ‘Yes. Sentences with built-in memories.’ (51)

Bill’s first two novels were critically acclaimed and developed the fan-base that was originally amassed around the texts and is now amassed around the absence of a third text and its author. These novels were written in a time when “built-in memories” were a necessity for the construction of meaning because individual and unique artifacts were more precious due to their relatively small range of dispersion. But something has changed in the decades since, and this is represented by Bill’s actual inability to produce a novel of the same type and magnitude. Instead of built-in memories and poignancy of experience, the manuscript for the third novel takes shape in Bill’s mind as, “a neutered near-human, dragging through the house, humpbacked, hydrocephalic, with puckered lips and soft skin, dribbling brain fluid from its mouth” (55). This personification of the novel is devoid of potency and the capacity for the preservation of meaning beyond the cycle of reproduction, commodification, consumption, and disposal. The literal bodily material that would facilitate the storage of such meaning (the brain, the site of memory making and recall) is dissolving and exiting the grotesquely postmodern (and almost posthuman) image that Bill envisions.

The loss of memory is closely connected with the loss of a sense of history in the work of theorists such as Guy Debord. He attributes the “outlawing of history,” and by extension, the death of the novelist as the chronicler of historical memory and reservoir of meaning to, “the manufacture of a present [...] which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future, [that] is achieved by the ceaseless circularity of information” (11). Increasingly, this circularity of information has been driven by the distribution of images as possessable (yet distorted) points of access to meaning; “At the technological level, [...] images chosen and

constructed by someone else have everywhere become the individual's principal connection to the world he formerly observed for himself [...]. The flow of images carries everything before it" (Debord 28) Notably, Bill has withheld his image from the public. Now, his self-imposed seclusion and absence from public view is the major contributing factor to his status as, "a myth, a force. Bill gets bigger as his distance from the scene deepens" (DeLillo 52).

Scott's advice is for Bill to keep the book hidden, to "Use it to define an idea, a principle [...] [t]hat the withheld work of art is the only eloquence left" (67). Both Scott and Bill acknowledge that book falls short of the great early work. Scott even goes as far as to say that they would have to invent new words for "the top heaviness, the lack of discernment, pace and energy" (73). Despite this admission, Bill continues to work on "his hated adversary" and goes through the pantomime of rewriting sentences and refining punctuation without any measureable effect of remedying the novel's lack of depth (55).

And thus, Baudelaire's "painter of modern life" becomes the martyr of postmodern life. Roland Barthes adds to the description of the destruction of personal style and distinction both through his discussion of the shifting context of the act of composition, and through the acknowledgment that the act of composition has always already been one of organizing signifying words to relate to absent referents—language as the simulacra of perception. "His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others [...]. Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely" (1324). Pervading the realms of both language and visual culture, the theme of simulacra—copies of a copy, without relevance to any original—and of the fruitless search for a stable location of aura of authenticity emerges as a primary element of postmodernism as a lived

experience, and as a represented condition in the fictionalized experience of DeLillo's novel.

While Bill believes that he is somehow present in the poignancy of his language, he has already been incorporated into a system of representation.

Although Bill is able to exert some influence over the public's spatial and epistemological proximity, the isolated house is far from an impenetrable fortress between modernity and postmodernity. While Bill originally secluded himself in order to protect a sense of aura and subject position, the seclusion interacts with the pervasive cultural factors of the moment and the combination begins to manifest as simulacra and false, monolithic aura. Benjamin's concept of the aura, while used originally to describe the uniqueness of an original piece of art, can be applied to Bill Gray. Benjamin notes, "the desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things spatially and humanly, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image, or better, in a facsimile, a reproduction" (1055). Bill describes the paranoia he feels that any instant, people will descend on him with cameras drawn during his rare excursions into town, or that telephoto lenses will capture him raw and unprepared through a crack in the curtain. Just as many people do not have the opportunity to view an original piece of iconic artwork and seek exposure to it through reproductions, Bill's inaccessibility has created a clamor for his image.

The intertwined ideological histories characterizing literary and visual modes of representation have had a contentious interaction that continuously repositions readers and viewers in their relationships with not only the represented object (whether comprised of text or image), but also with their spatial and temporal understanding of all of their relationships within a world of experience that is necessarily translated into the fragmentary units of signs. DeLillo's

work contends that successful navigation of a postmodern environment requires the relinquishment of the binary opposition between text and image, as texts become reproducible images, and images become texts that are disassociated from the events they depict.

AURA AND SIMULACRA, TEXT AND IMAGE

Jameson's work coalesces with Benjamin's, identifying the "new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation...in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum" and signals the collapse of the depth models of essence and appearance, the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity, and signifier and signified, which reigned prior to the rupture of postmodernity (*Postmodernism Late Capitalism* 317-18). Jameson attributes the fall of the centered subject, the end of individual artistic style, and "consumers' appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and 'spectacles'" to the pervasive saturation of culture with images and to the replacement of original referent with simulation. Taken together with Jean Baudrillard's *The Precession of Simulacra* and the concept of 'aura' as defined by Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility," these implications derived from Jameson develop a useful theoretical framework from which to analyze various modes of authorship and struggle for manipulation of the aura of authenticity and authority in *Mao II*.

By focusing on three types of reproduced image in the novel—the use of portraiture as political propaganda by figures such as Mao Zedong, Andy Warhol's series of paintings of Chairman Mao, and Brita's portraiture of Bill—it is possible to identify the four phases of the image that Baudrillard identifies as "the liquidation of all referentials...by their artificial resurrection in a system of signs" (1557). These phases include the image as the reflection of a

basic reality, the image as it masks and perverts a basic reality, the image as it masks the absence of a basic reality, and the image that bears no relation to any reality (1560).

My central argument in this section presents the novel's examples of portraiture as political propaganda and of Warhol's portrait series as correlating most directly with the positions espoused by postmodern theories of destruction of the aura of authenticity, replacement of original referents by simulacrum, and the overall flattening of postmodern space. Bill's fate does illustrate the destruction of the aura of the individual, but complicates the understanding of the role of the individual (specifically, the author) through his failed attempts to reestablish his subjectivity within an unfamiliar and long avoided postmodern society. Therefore, Bill serves both as a reemphasis of these processes and of the death of the modern author, but also as a representative of the subversive potential of the individual if they are capable of adapting and using the mechanisms of the visual culture as a means for a new type of location of aura. The political portraiture and pop-art that court the dislocation of the aura of authenticity rooted in one object or one person represent postmodern modes of authorship that manipulate the society of the spectacle rather than hiding from it.

In contrast to Bill's attempts to retreat from the public eye, the political leaders in DeLillo's novel rely on the widespread dispersion of their images in order to accost citizens with daily reminders of their ideological authority. Through the reproduction of large portraits of leaders such as Mao, the aura of the individual is replaced with the representation that evokes the figure's political transcendent power and presence dislocated from their actual spatial presence. Benjamin writes, "By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced" (1054). In the political sense, a mass existence is

advantageous because it lends the impression of a panoptic presence that is constantly inserted into the consciousness of the public and effaces the importance of the physical presence of the leader himself. The portrait, already larger than life, meets the gaze of the citizen in “his or her own situation” and suggests that the leader is capable of spatial maneuvering through every corner of physical territory and public life. The political portraits thus mask the absence of the actual reality of the political figure and become reproducible extensions of the limited individual.

The visual image comes to represent the ideological beliefs of the leader, becoming a symbolic beacon as well as a symbolic target for dissidents, “A pair of local militias are firing at portraits of each other’s leader. These are large photographs pasted to walls or hanging from awning poles [...] and they are shot up and ripped apart, some pictures large enough to swing from a wire strung over the street, and they are shot up and quickly replaced and then ripped apart again” (DeLillo 227). In a social and political sphere where the real target cannot be accessed, the substituted simulacrum is destroyed and then easily replaced by yet another simulacrum. In a discussion with his editor about the viability of the authorial voice, Bill opposes totalitarian authority, favoring the nuance of consciousness that he has always valued in the novel, but George argues, “We need a model that transcends all the bitter history. Something enormous and commanding. A figure of absolute being. This is crucial, Bill. In societies struggling to remake themselves, total politics, total authority, total being” (158). Chairman Mao offers this figure of total being as a flattened, yet reflective, surface from which the multitudes can make sense of their increasingly fragmented subjectivities by casting off their individual auras and defining themselves through the collective identity represented by Maoism. In postmodern space, individual identity is becoming more difficult to locate and recognize in the fast moving, shallow stream of media and cheap reproduction, but this same reproduction gives

birth to the cultural narrative of Mao through the death of the narrative of the individual. In contrast to the former modernist privileging of individual experience, postmodern society seeks that which is universal:

In Mao's China a man walking along with a book in his hand was not seeking pleasure or distraction. He was binding himself to all Chinese. What book? Mao's book. The Little Red Book of Quotations. The book was the faith that people carried everywhere [...]. We memorize works that serve as guides to conducting a struggle. We memorize works that serve as guides to conducting a struggle. In committing a work to memory we make it safe from decay [...]. This is the unchanged narrative every culture needs in order to survive. In China the narrative belonged to Mao. People memorized it and recited it to assert the destiny of their revolution. So the experience of Mao became uncorruptible by outside forces. It became the living memory of hundreds of millions of people (162).

Despite his growing disconnection from his work and the growing struggle to invest his pages with the materiality of meaningful subjective human experience, Bill angrily disagrees: "Even if I could see the need for absolute authority, my work would draw me away. The experience of my own consciousness tells me how autocracy fails...how I need internal dissent, self-argument [...]. The spray of talent, the spray of ideas. One thing unlike another, one voice unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints. And this is what you want to destroy" (159). Bill's humanistic approach is being worn down by the friction with the flat, hard edge of postmodern space. The specificity, or aura of uniqueness of the individual subject is being replaced by texts that are partial in their relation to reality, but total in their reproducibility and generalization. This conflict prefigures Bill's own consumption as he resists the visual culture rather than embracing it for his own ends, as Mao does.

Bill's assistant, Scott, comments on Mao's manipulation of his photographic presence as a means of rebirth or resurgence. "Mao used photographs to announce his return and demonstrate his vitality, to inspire the revolution" (141). Mao's panoptic public portrait separated from his aura as individual is always present, but he also periodically uses photography to counter this relatively static rule with glimpses of his authenticity on a more individual level to provide a new injection of activity and achievement in addition to the overarching ideology. "Mao was pronounced dead many times in the press—dead or too senile or too sick to run a revolution. Scott had recently come across a photograph of Mao taken in the course of his famous nine-mile swim at the age of seventy-two, following a long disappearance. Mao's old pelt head sticking out of the Yangtze, godlike and comic" (141). While the simulated and reproduced portrait largely serves Mao's goal of creating a monolithic force, these other documentary images (hence more active than portraiture) are essential lest his citizens forget that there is the spatial reality of the individual behind the simulacra.

The portraits of Mao are flattened to an even greater level of commodification through Andy Warhol's treatment of them throughout the novel. Warhol comes to represent the ultimate self-aware disconnection of image from reality. The reader's first encounter with the Warhol gallery comes early on in the novel when Scott is in New York City on his way to meet Brita, but it is an encounter that is repeated often throughout the text. In the museum, Scott "went downstairs, where people moved in nervous searching steps around the paintings," as if looking for the meaning of the duplicated images of faces, "car crashes and movie stars," but "Scott had never seen work that was so indifferent to the effect it had on those who came to see it" (20-21). Benjamin comments, "What they [Dada artists] achieved... was a ruthless annihilation of the aura in every object they produced, which they branded as a reproduction through the very means of

production” (1067). While Dadaism somewhat predates Warhol, his pop art constitutes the next step in the continued lineage of aura destruction. “Warhol’s work...illustrates the erasure of singularity and the leveling of experience. His art conflates people and things, so that violence and celebrity are equivalent, Marilyn Monroe and Campbell’s Soup cans both available for consumption, both conveying the same level of complexity and levity” (“Mixed Media” 54). Clearly, this leveling of exchange value is in keeping with Jameson’s recognition of the postmodern collapse of depth models in which surfaces come to dominate depths.

Julian Murphet draws the corollary connection between Warhol and Jameson’s essay, in “Postmodernism and space,” describing “Warhol’s deadened canvasses” as an iteration of the “spatial superficiality” that Jameson recognizes “as an ineluctable property of all culture today” (Murphet 119). According to Murphet’s reading of Jameson, “The absence of depth in the cultural object matches the absence of depth in the consuming subject: both are henceforth fashioned out of recycled bits and pieces from the bottomless image bank with which contemporary society dissimulates itself as transparent, informational, and pure” (119). No matter how anxiously the gallery-goers mill about the exhibit, the canvases are not dependent on their reactions or interpretations because there is no reliance on the perception of essence, existential authenticity, or the signified; all three have been intentionally sacrificed to the subsuming appearance of the image itself. Scott “moved along and stood finally in a room filled with images of Chairman Mao. Photocopy Mao, silk-screen Mao, wallpaper Mao, synthetic-polymer Mao...the Chairman’s face a pansy purple here, floating nearly free of its photographic source” (DeLillo 21). This separation of image from its photographic and corporeal source brings to mind the postmodern replacement of originals with simulacra—copies of copies for which no original exists—and the fourth phase of the image, one that bears no relation to any reality

(Baudrillard 1560). Scott wonders if he “had ever realized the deeper meaning of Mao before he saw these pictures,” perhaps suggesting that though Warhol’s series destroys any semblance of an aura of authenticity, it does so as a commentary on popular and visual culture from within the machinery of that same culture (DeLillo 21). Warhol’s series on Chairman Mao further distances the reproduced piece of art (in this case, portraiture) from the original figure by blatantly manipulating the image to produce works that are consumed by the masses—as are the widespread political portraits of Mao—but that draw attention to the very process of Mao’s conversion from person, to symbolic authority, to disembodied object in popular culture.

Further into DeLillo’s novel, we observe Brita’s experience of the Warhol gallery. As an artist dedicated to a project of documenting the subjective knowledge and memory of the individual author through a “shy” photographic study that is “Like a work-in-progress. Not so permanent and finished” (or flattened), her commentary on Warhol’s pieces is illuminating (27). Walking around the exhibit, “she could detect a maximum statement about the dissolvability of the artist and the exaltation of the public figure, about how it is possible to fuse images...and to steal auras” (134). While Brita’s documentary project seems to be more of an effort to testify to the continued existence of the aura of the individual artist/author than an effort to steal the aura, she nonetheless recognizes the power of the image to replace the perception of the complex fluctuations of subjectivity with a fixed depiction. Significantly, Brita encounters an unexpected emissary from Bill’s secluded world in the gallery. Karen appears, saying, “I’m here to look for Bill” (135). At this point in the novel, Bill has disappeared from his bunkered fortress and has slipped into the world of reproduced image, dominance of the media, and terrorism. He is clearly not physically with Brita at the Warhol show, but symbolically, he has entered the unfamiliar landscape of postmodernity and individual anonymity.

Jameson describes postmodern society as a “vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum” and contends that in light of this collection, “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” (*Late Capitalism* 322). Ultimately, Bill leaves behind only the text of his manuscript and the negatives from his session with Brita. He originally claims that he needs the photographs to help disassemble the monolith he has created of himself and perhaps relieve some of its accompanying pressure on his creative process, but the photographs come to stand in for his spatial presence. According to Benjamin, the aura is largely extinct in the world or art; however, he concedes that portraiture may be its last foothold. “In the cult of the remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time” (1058). While Bill selects Brita as his photographer specifically because of her lack of desire to saturate the media with the images resulting from her quest to document the aura, he nonetheless uses the photographs as a means for a more permanent disappearance. His fixed location becomes a matter of speculation to those closest to him and at the close of the novel, only the reader knows that Bill has died and is now devoid of all of his identifying documents. Scott and Karen are left with his manuscript and photographs. “The manuscript would sit, and word would travel, and the pictures would appear, a small and deft selection, one time only, and word would build and spread, and the novel would stay right here, collecting aura and force, deepening old Bill’s legend, undyingly” (224). The individual artist has died, replaced by simulation. Before Bill disappeared entirely, the photos reflected the basic reality of his physical positioning in his world, as defined by the architectural and symbolic dimensions of the study he is photographed

in. After his disappearance, the photographs mask the absence of the basic reality of Bill's spatial presence, and after his death, they bear no relation to any reality because Bill no longer exists.

Certainly, Bill's ultimate death and subsequent stripping of his identification suggests that as a representative of the modern individual, he is unable to survive within the aura-stealing climate of postmodern space and becomes only an image within a visual culture. While this claim is true, I contend that Bill's character complicates this notion through his efforts to manipulate the placement and perception of his aura; his choice to reenter the realm of outward social interaction (particularly his connection to a subversive terrorist network); and his evolving relationship with writing, language, and image.

The reader might initially ascribe Bill's seclusion as an effort to protect his subjectivity that would be lost through the consumption of his photographic image or the labored over language of his third novel. It does seem that this sentiment is motivating Bill; Scott comments that, "for Bill, the only thing worse than writing is publishing. When the book comes out. When people buy it and read it. He feels totally and horribly exposed. They are taking the book home and turning the pages. They are reading the actual words" (53). However, it is important not to equate Bill's writing with a total articulation of his subjectivity. In addition to physically removing himself from contact with society, Bill has also attempted to implement protections even within his bunkered identity as an author. "Bill Gray" is the name that he goes by both professionally and personally, but Scott finds Bill's birth certificate and discovers that it is a pseudonym. "The date on the document corresponded to Bill's date of birth, which Scott had seen many times on records and forms, and the name of the child was Willard Skansey Jr....Bill was not an autobiographical novelist...nowhere a word of his beginnings or places he has lived or what kind of man his father might have been" (144).

In addition to the connotation of simulacrum associated with Bill's pseudonym, the writing process itself has become a simulacrum of the inspiration and connection with pulse of human subjectivity that Bill once had. The endless files and papers that Scott guards as "the neatly amassed evidence of driven art" are actually copies of copies, with the original now unlocatable and nearly entirely effaced, a shrine of simulacra:

They went to the basement, where Bill's work-in-progress was stored in hard black binders, each marked with a code number and a date for fairly easy retrieval and all set on freestanding shelves against the concrete walls, maybe two hundred thick binders representing drafts, corrected drafts, notes, fragments, recorrections, throwaways, updates, tentative revisions, final revisions. The slit windows high on the walls were shaded with dark material and there were two large dehumidifiers, one at each end of the room (31).

This overwhelming collection has essentially become a tomb for Bill. The death of the artist is a topic that Jameson addresses both in terms of the end of style and of fragmentation of the subject. "The end...of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brushstroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction)" (*Late Capitalism* 319). He elaborates by arguing that models from high modernism such as Picasso, Proust, and T.S. Eliot are no longer functional "since nobody has that kind of unique private world and style to express any longer" in the face of simulation and pastiche of dead styles (Jameson 1850). This deterioration of individual style and corresponding death of the subject/artist is evident in Bill's struggle to complete his third novel in a way that embodies the style and content he envisions. He tortures himself over sentence construction and articulation, never quite happy with the result. Bill begins to doubt his writing, even the usefulness of words:

“He was near the point where he wanted to eliminate things that no longer mattered, things that still mattered, all excess and all necessity, and why not begin with words” (160). His writing serves as the “mark-making thing that contained his life experience,” but Bill finds it increasingly more difficult to successfully articulate those experiences. Jameson writes, “If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity actively to...extend across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but ‘heaps of fragments’” (*Late Capitalism* 323). Though the manuscript for the third novel is essentially complete, it is only fragments of the experiential truth that Bill is attempting to convey. The clarity and style that catapulted his first two novels into distinction has given way to generalized simulation of the envisioned poignant whole. There is a breakdown within the “syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning” (Jameson 323).

Trapped in this sphere that was conceived of as protection, Bill concludes that his strategy of attempting to completely reject the outside world is no longer working; he needs to be photographed, “needs these pictures...To break down the monolith I’ve built” (44). It is not surprising that Scott disagrees with Bill’s choice, as he does not seem to be troubled by the stockpile of simulation. In some ways, Scott becomes a simulated extension of Bill, describing himself as a non-being before becoming Bill’s assistant gave his life perceived meaning. Indeed, Scott has even begun to displace and silence Bill. Bill remarks, “I talk to Scott. But it becomes less necessary all the time. He already knows. He’s at my brainstem like a surgeon with a bright knife” (38). It seems that Bill has decided that entering the image world by becoming Brita’s material offers a means of escape from the even more false aura that he has built through absence. Contradictorily, being photographed both fixes him to a flattened representation but

also allows him to physically reenter the world. An ambiguity of exchange pervades the portrait session between Bill and Brita as well. On the one hand, Brita is seeking to capture who Bill really is, but she is also reducing him to a textual and therefore one-dimensional subjectivity. “Space was closing in the way it did when a session went well...She was trying to place him into context, fit the voice and body to the books. The first thing she’d thought, entering the room, was wait a minute, no, this can’t be him...But Bill was slowly beginning to make sense to her, to look reasonably like his work” (39). Bill recognizes this transformation and ponders, “I’ve become someone’s material. Yours, Brita. There’s the life and there’s the consumer event” (43).

Shortly after the photos are taken, Bill makes his escape in New York City, “moving out onto the sidewalk, where he joined the surge of the noontime crowd” (103). While Bill is ultimately “consumed” by the society he reenters, his choice to do so arguably demonstrates a small amount of agency and the ability to use turn some of the mechanisms of postmodernism against themselves by attempting to direct the positioning of his aura and his subjectivity. His aura as author is fixed to the negative film that eventually returns to his house and unfinished work via Brita, but those photographs also metaphorically unstick him from the page and allow him to lose his old monolithic identity through travel, anonymity, and his changing perspective on the materiality of language.

Bill’s longstanding reliance on the power of language to birth material effects is exemplified through the anger that he feels in connection to the individual author’s declining ability to “influence mass consciousness” in the face of the oversaturation of reproduced image and text. In her article, “*Mao II* and Mixed Media,” Laura Barrett argues that, “Ostensibly in contrast to glossy photographs, weightless television, and the reconstituted voices of answering machines are words, complicated, heavy, fraught. Language initially seems to be a weapon

against dislocation” (55). However, when Bill is no longer able to use language as such a weapon, it instead becomes a weight around his neck because he is attempting to use it without adaptation to the changing conditions. Just after his disappearance, Bill is still relying on his old patterns of language usage, paralleled by his imaginings of the imprisoned poet in Beirut, “The prisoner was full of plans. With time and tools he would learn Arabic and impress his captors and greet them in their language and have basic conversations, once they gave him the tools to teach himself” (DeLillo 108). Eventually, Bill, and his projection of the poet, grow increasingly detached from their grip on language and can “only manage drifting images, half-finished” (110).

Interestingly, when Bill does return to writing, it is not to work on his manuscript, but to continue to write about the poet who is cut off from his homeland, his reflection, his work, and often even visual confirmation of his environment. In the first days of captivity, the poet longs for “paper and something to write with, some way to sustain a thought, place it in the world,” thinking that “Only writing could soak up his loneliness and pain. Written words could tell him who he was” (110, 204). Gradually though, he relinquishes himself to the flattened images that must substitute for his inability to express depth of thought. Bill “smoked and wrote, thinking he might never get it right but feeling something familiar, something fallen into jeopardy, a law of language or nature, and he thought he could trace it line by line, the shattery tension, the thing he’d lost in the sand of his endless novel” (168). Through the release of past anchors of subjectivity, Bill is giving in to being lost. He has found a way to write about himself—the imprisoned modern artist within the disorienting cell of a visual culture moving away from the efficacy of the written word. This surrender to the experience of being lost is analogous to Kathleen Kirby’s description of New World explorers whose accustomed methods of mapping

their environment is rendered useless by the lack of orienting points of reference that would make the environment mappable. She writes, “Even when [...] the explorers knew where they were, operating in the New World prevented them from assuming the position of mastery they possessed in their homelands, where their travels carried them [...] to destinations known in advance across already ordered spaces” (50-51). Bill’s very real sense of being lost, on the spatial and psychological levels is illustrative of the broader postmodern experience of increasing difficulty of orientation in space, time, and individual effect on one’s environment.

There is both subversive merit and unavoidable demise lurking within Bill’s foray into a world of terrorism as an effort to save the imprisoned poet. He dies on the ferry to Beirut, but we know that he likely would have met death even if he took the place of the prisoner; George warns him that the terrorists would “probably kill you ten minutes later. Then photograph your corpse and keep the picture handy for the time when it can be used most effectively” (164). The decision to go to Beirut is a metaphorical mission to rescue his existential particularity in a world of simulation. As such, and with our knowledge of the death of the author of high modernism, we must know that he will not reach his destination; his adaptation has been too slight and too late. Before boarding the ferry, it struck Bill as “odd that he’d been forced to go to three shops before finding a map of Beirut, as if the place no longer qualified, or had consumed all its own depictions” (215). Bill too, has attempted to consume all of his own simulacrum depictions in order to re-establish his aura, but has miscalculated the crushing force that awaits. Boarding the vessel, “He knew he would eventually walk into the headquarters of Abu Rashid and tell them who he was. Bill has never walked into a place and told them who he was” (215). Barrett contends that “*Mao II* challenges the reader to consider words and images as conspirators in the

construction of American culture, often promoting and occasionally resisting the national agenda of production and reproduction, consumption and disposal” (“Mixed Media” 51).

The photo negatives that Bill leaves behind as the only images documenting his existence may still be thought of as simulacra. They do still represent the visual commodification lamented by Jameson and final phase of the image as described by Baudrillard, one that bears no relation to any reality. However, this lack of relation between image and referent is not simply because Bill has physically died and ceases to exist; there is also a disconnection because his efforts at relocating his subjectivity have rendered him a different man than the one that Brita captured on film, even if his mission was not completed. Bill’s overt resistance to the manipulation of visual culture that Mao and Andy Warhol used to their advantage resulted in his extinction, a realization that DeLillo gestures at abstractly through Bill’s shifting opinion of the fragments he’d written about the prisoner. “He thought the pages he’d done showed an element of conflict, the wrong kind of exertion or opposition, a stress in two directions, and he realized in the end he wasn’t really thinking about the prisoner. Who is the boy, he thought” (215). The boy, of course, is the poet’s (and his own) captor. He is the one who directly interacts with the prisoner and relegates him to his disconnection from language and reliance on half-finished images. The captor can be viewed as the cultural and social apparatuses that drive the image saturated postmodern society that Bill is so adrift in.

AN AESTHETICS OF RESISTANCE

By focusing primarily on his own plight as the effaced modernist author, Bill is unable to effectively combat the machinery of the market and is crushed in the mechanisms. DeLillo provides hope for the individual artist who is able to situate him or herself not through a stubborn

reliance on past methods of defining subjectivity, but through an examination of the forces at work in society and by writing them into the open. Andy Warhol's ability to evoke social commentary and inspire Scott to recognize the "deeper meaning" the flattened canvases like those depicting Chairman Mao. Warhol's work is able to survive within postmodern space because it speaks about the commodification of images by becoming a commodity in its own right, but one that is aware of its position as such. Brita recalls that Andy once said to her, "The secret of being me is that I'm only half here" (135). In contrast to Bill's direct assault on the erosion of individuality from the outside that results in his silencing, Warhol's voice issues from inside the gears of the visual culture. Robert Hughes argues that, "[I]n general, his only subject was detachment: the condition of being a spectator, dealing hands-off with the world through the filter of photography" (qtd. in Barrett "Here but Also There" 792). Arguably, DeLillo presents an authorial figure who also deals with the world through the postmodern filter of photography/visual culture, but who is more critically invested in shaping reactionary discourse. This figure is Brita (Osteen 653).

Brita is both invested in memorializing aspects of modernism and in adapting to the changes brought by postmodernism. She straddles the demarcation between these two periods, paralleling the position of the intellectual of the present moment. While Bill makes efforts to reassert himself, Brita is able to actually do so because she recognizes the advantages of the photograph, as well as the inherent limitations. In *The Paradox of Photography*, Pierre Taminiaux places photography at the origin of "modernity, of capitalism and the industrial revolution, of a technical era characterized by the power of the machine. But it is also situated at the end of art, at the very limit of a model of representation" (9). At the same time that Brita's writers project seeks to furnish a type of memory of the singular reality of authors, it

“simultaneously accounts for the gradual disappearance of this memory within social reality. The more that we create sophisticated means of preserving what has been through imagery, the more we are doomed to forget the past as we bury it in its own inner landscape” (Taminiaux 10).

Susan Sontag has likewise identified the photograph as both a “pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (16). Through this dual signification, Brita’s photographs of Bill both protect and distort his subjectivity. Mark Osteen argues convincingly that:

Brita [...] appropriates spectacular images for her critical purposes. Although she participates in the raiding of consciousness by photographic and cinematic images, she also respects her subjects and shares authorial control by turning the session into a dialogue. Unlike Bill, whose silence and exile only make him more available for appropriation, Brita’s work both rests in and resists the cultural evolution that makes writers anachronistic by cunningly acknowledging its complicity in that evolution. While she is certainly shaped by the historical changes that victimize Bill, she also plays a significant role in shaping them: she is in the society of the spectacle, but not entirely of it. Brita represents a privileged authorial position that resembles DeLillo’s own, one we are encouraged to read as the most viable source of creative resistance remaining in the society of the spectacle. (654)

Brita cannot entirely escape the society of the spectacle, but she is able to turn exert some critical control over it through her use of its language and syntax (image and commodity). Her adaptability is further evinced by her abandonment of the writers project; “She does not photograph writers anymore. It stopped making sense. She takes assignments now, does the interesting things, barely watched wars, children running in the dust. Writers stopped one day. She doesn’t know how it happened but they came to a quiet end” (DeLillo 229-230). According

to Guy Debord, the circularity of narrative in the society of spectacle continually returns to the same information and “trivialities” (11). “Meanwhile news of what is genuinely important, of what is actually changing, comes rarely, and then in fits and starts” (11). By closing the novel with Brita in Beirut confronting the terrorists with her camera, DeLillo distinguishes Brita as a source of some of these fits and starts, the source of potential for a postmodern aesthetics of resistance.

Osteen’s criticism of the novel directs particular attention to DeLillo’s own approach to the framing devices in the physical construction of *Mao II* as a demonstration of the awareness of his incorporation into the discourse he critiques. Osteen writes, “DeLillo imitates the discourses he aims to deconstruct and thereby generates a dialogue with those cultural forms that both criticizes their consequences and appropriates their advantages. In short, DeLillo’s critique emerges not from [...] exile but more cunningly from within culture itself” (644). The reader of *Mao II* will notice that Warhol’s Mao series covers the front of the book and that the sections of the novel are set off by photographs: “a rally in Tiananmen Square; a Unification church mass wedding; the Sheffield soccer disaster; a crowd of Iranians in front of an enormous poster of Khomeini; three boys in a bunker, one aiming a camera or gun” (Osteen 645). This confluence of subject of literary discussion/representation and physical construction adds new resonance to Geyh’s original claim that literature is an ideal space to think through the problematics of postmodernism. The space of the text takes up the issues of image v. language, represented and reproduced spectacle v. experienced singularity, and others, both in the textual mode of authorship of DeLillo’s prose, and in his visual mode of authorship through the characterization of the reader’s experience of the tangible space of the novel.

Bill Gray claims that terrorists have become the new shapers of public consciousness because they succeed in being dangerous and arresting in an otherwise increasingly homogenous world, saying, “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 gunman have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated” (DeLillo 41). However, the type of authorship that DeLillo espouses and provides as an example through his composition of *Mao II* is one that answers Jameson’s question of what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing and how they can strive to alter the inner life of the culture (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 1850). DeLillo himself has said that authors must refuse to be “incorporated into the ambient noise. This is why we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation” (Osteen 664). Literature is indeed a privileged site because it has the capacity to work from inside the culture it is a part of in order to critique that culture.

CONCLUSIONS

Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?” takes issue with the type of literary analysis that focuses on the essence (aura) of the individual author. Instead, he suggests a series of more critically productive questions. Since Foucault’s notion of the role of the author seems to perfectly describe the aesthetics of resistance and subversion that DeLillo aspires to, I will quote a passage at length:

Is it not possible to reexamine [...] the privileges of the subject? Clearly, [...] suspicions arise concerning the absolute nature and creative role of the subject. But the subject

should not be entirely abandoned. It should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies. We should suspend the typical questions: how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning; how does it accomplish its design by animating the rules of discourse from within? Rather, we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse: In short, the subject [...] must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse. [...]

No longer the tiresome repetitions:

‘Who is the real author?’

‘Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?’

‘What has he revealed of his most profound self in his language?’

New questions will be heard:

‘What are the modes of existence of this discourse?’

‘Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?’

‘What placements are determined for possible subjects?’

‘Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?’

Behind all these questions we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference:

‘What matter who’s speaking?’ (1489-1490).

Mao II's Bill Gray corresponds to the first list of concerns about the authorial subject. Questions about the authenticity and originality of the author may have been legitimate in a period when

the individuality of style was discernable, but no longer in a period where style is fragmented or universalized through the ability to reproduce and distribute texts indefinitely. Circulation is inevitable; therefore, Foucault suggests that the conditions that enable that circulation become the justifiable object of inquiry, rather than whose fragmented voice is being circulated. Just as Geyh proposes in the argument used to prefigure my own discussion, Foucault also deconstructs the division between literary and theoretical study. For literature to be of critical importance, it must draw attention to the tensions of its age, rather than attempting to exist outside of the context of the postmodern moment. While the work of art in the age of technological reproducibility is denied the “here and now” of singularity, “its unique existence in a particular place,” analysis of the process that enables the reproduction and distribution of the mass existence sheds light on the here and now of the age, thus, bearing “the mark of the history to which the work has been subject,” albeit it through the history of the discourse that effaces distinguishing marks on individual texts and images (Benjamin 1053). DeLillo’s message clearly argues that the only hope for resistance to the society of spectacle and commodity is an awareness of the governing matrices of power within that society; literature becomes the space through which to write that awareness into existence.

In the preceding argument, I have attempted to use Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* as an example of the ability of the literary work to shape the public’s consciousness of their own condition. The postmodern condition has not been without theorizing, but my contention is that theoretical arguments have a more limited circulation and should function complementarily with works of fiction that provide representational application of abstract concepts. Specifically, *Mao II* illuminates the hazardous task of navigating the transition from perceptual strategies conditioned by the remaining ruins of modernity as a period, to the development of new perceptual strategies

needed to locate oneself in a present that is unmappable by the standards of the past. Many of the theoretical questions that I have discussed in this essay have been taken up by other critics of this DeLillo text; however, few single studies have attempted to combine the same number of postmodern themes within the overarching discussion of DeLillo's aesthetics of resistance to the postmodern condition. Most have focused on a single element—photography, for instance. While I have necessarily had to neglect extensive parts of the text in order to prioritize the selection of themes I have enumerated here, the sheer complexity of cultural representation and critique in *Mao II* supports the perception of literature as a vital element in the dialectical sway between our incorporation in the society of spectacle and our awareness of both how we fulfill existing patterns of exchange and trouble the conduits of power through our recognition of that incorporation.

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