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**POSTMODERN TRANSFORMATIONS OF ART
AND AUTHORSHIP: FROM ART PRODUCTION
TO IMAGE CONSUMPTION**

Keywords: *modernist tradition; Romantic authorship; postmodernism; aura of simulacrum; seriality; image culture; missing writer; commodification*

Abstract: *Postmodernism represents itself a cultural “mutation”, a systemic transformation affecting many aspects of life and art. It is the realm of consumer culture in contrast to what might be called the production culture of modernism. Moreover, it reflects a broad cultural shift, not only from a dominance of production to the dominance of consumption, but also from producing and selling goods to (re)producing and selling images. In this context, and with the major contribution of technology, the reproduction and the image become more powerful than the original and the unique.*

*The present paper focuses precisely on the cultural transition – in the particular fields of art and literature – from modernist authenticity and uniqueness to postmodernist replication and seriality, from the original artwork to its endless, depthless copies within a techno-capitalist environment. This transition is reflected by the duplication-induced decline of artwork’s aura (in Walter Benjamin’s famous definition) and the concomitant rise of a new kind of aura – what American writer Don DeLillo calls “the aura of the simulacrum” which is actually augmented by reproduction and embraced like a new religion by his characters. I use as case studies DeLillo’s novels *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II* (1991) to show how reproduction has become part of contemporary life, how art and artists are packaged and turned into commodities, to explore the transition from art production to image consumption as reflected by the change in the notion of aura — from the aura of high-culture objects to the aura of the simulacrum.*

*DeLillo’s *Mao II* in particular also points to the shift from the Romantic notion of individual authorship to the postmodern dissolvability of the author/artist/writer into multiple representations in the world of mass-reproduced images; thus reclusive writer Bill Gray is reduced to his image, prey to consumption and simulation. Finally, DeLillo gives Brita Nilsson the last word in the novel, as a more viable form of opposition to an image culture. Photography, Brita’s creative medium (and employed by DeLillo as well), allows a critique not from exile but from within the postmodern culture itself.*

Aura is all we are left with.
Don DeLillo, *Interview with Brigitte Desalm*

We don’t need the book. We have the author. [...]
We have the pictures, let’s use them to advantage.

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The book disappears into the image of the writer.
Don DeLillo, *Mao II*

We live in a postmodern, visual age, in a world where the image, the reproduction is often more powerful than the original. “Think about the way people react to unusually exciting, tragic or romantic experiences by saying “This is just like a movie!”” (Staniszevski, *Believing is Seeing* 59). This remark by Mary Anne Staniszevski shows the change in the understanding of art (and in the attitude towards art and authors) in the postmodern age. At the root of this new understanding are certainly the new technologies of photography and cinema; they represent at the same time new forms of art and a new vision.

Postmodernism represents itself a cultural “mutation” (Berger xi), affecting many aspects of life and art. It is the realm of consumer culture in contrast to what might be called the production culture of modernism. And it is generally agreed that the transition from modernity to postmodernity has something to do with the technological revolution since World War II, which largely contributed to the cultural shift, in the West, from an industry and production-oriented society to a postindustrial, reproduction-oriented, consumer society. In this paper, therefore, I will use the term postmodernism as it is defined by Fredric Jameson (the cultural logic of late capitalism, the effacement of the older, high-modernist, frontier between high culture and the so-called mass or commercial culture) and Jean Baudrillard (the culture of simulacra, of copies detached from their original referents).

Inspired by the observation that Walter Benjamin’s famous concept of “aura” takes on intriguing new meanings in the work of American writer Don DeLillo my paper focuses on the cultural transition – in the particular fields of art and literature – from modernist authenticity and uniqueness to postmodernist replication and seriality, from art production to the packaging of art, from the original artwork to its endless, depthless copies within a techno-capitalist environment. As Carolin Duttlinger remarks, this groundbreaking cultural shift is actually alluded to by the concept of aura which describes “an elusive phenomenon from the perspective of its disappearance” (“Imaginary Encounters” 79), a state that had already become obsolete even in Benjamin’s time.

This transition also applies to the author – from the modernist and romantic focus on individual sensibility and originality to the postmodern dissolvability of artists into multiple representations, to their transformation into news stories and merchandise destined for an impersonal market economy. The writer, in particular, is both producer of textual “products” and marketable product himself within the American postmodern culture. “In the West”, DeLillo notes, “every writer is absorbed, turned into breakfast food or canned laughter” (qtd in Cowart 115). I will use as case studies Don DeLillo’s novels *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II* (1991), to show how reproduction has become part of contemporary life, how art turns into commodity, and how the condition of the writer himself has changed: while the modernist fails to redeem the wasteland, the postmodernist fails to matter at all to a world which responds only to the acts of terrorists or to the incessant bombardment of media images and popular culture in general. At the

same time *Mao II*, in particular, attempts to answer Fredric Jameson's question concerning the extent to which postmodern art is capable of not only replicating, but also resisting the cultural logic of postmodernism. The novels also illustrate the nearly opposite ways in which DeLillo and Benjamin use the term "aura" in relation to literary and cultural products.

The 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" by German cultural critic Walter Benjamin (first published in English in 1968, in the book called *Illuminations*) has become a standard reference for any attempts to analyze the interrelation of political, technological and artistic development under capitalism. According to Benjamin, in literary, visual, and cultural studies, "aura" implies uniqueness and authenticity and it is associated with the traditional work of art, whose contemplative experience is progressively eroded with the advent of modern media technology. For Benjamin, reproduction eliminates the "aura" of a work, which derives "from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition" (*Illuminations* 223), from its placement within a historical tradition of individual creativity, one related to the source of art in myth or ritual (223-4). Given the camera's ability to endlessly reproduce images, photography is one of the main forces behind the decline of aura in high-culture objects: "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art." (221). Indeed the decline of the artwork's aura reflects a wider condition of contemporary culture, precisely the turn toward seriality and uniformity which now shapes the experience of reality. The elimination of the quasi religious aura surrounding the work of art implies the loss of any sense of unreachable (divine, mysterious, transcendental) distance. The destruction of "aura" in mechanical reproduction signals the transition from the artwork as cult (for instance, as a religious object) to the artwork as exhibit – in museums, in cinema, and even in bookstores (which increasingly turn into temples where the new *consumer* religion is practiced).

Don DeLillo, on the other hand, remarks in an interview that in the American postmodern culture "the aura is all we are left with. We are living in some kind of aura", he tells Brigitte Desalm, "and reality is disappearing in a curious way. We walk through the street, we see an act of violence, a shooting, and say: Just like the movies. We have become unable to grasp something unmediated" (DeLillo). A perfect instance of the way in which images have supplanted events in contemporary America is "the most photographed barn in America", the scene in DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) which illustrates Jean Baudrillard's argument that original ideas and events have been replaced by simulacra, that "the real" has given way to "the hyperreal".

The barn in DeLillo's novel is a major tourist attraction yet advertised not as the oldest or the most picturesque, but simply as "the most photographed" (*White Noise* 12). Jack Gladney and Murray Siskind, the novel's protagonists, count five signs advertising the barn before reaching the site (or "sight", in fact a packaged perception, not a "thing"). Once there they find forty cars and a tour bus in the parking lot, and groups of people taking pictures: "all the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits" (12). There is also a booth where a man sells postcards and slides of the barn.

Watching the photographers Murray realizes that in fact “no one sees the barn” because once “you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (12). The barn is thus rendered absent as referent. But the news about the loss of the referent, about the dissolving of the object into its representations (the road signs, the photos, the postcards) is delivered in DeLillo’s novel not with nostalgia for a lost world of the real, but with joy (Lentricchia 316): “We are not here to capture an image”, Murray tells Jack, “we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura.” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 12).

Indeed in *White Noise*, the characters’ relation with simulacra is not a simple, clear-cut one. As opposed to Baudrillard’s melancholy vision of the emptying out of meaning (of originals, of stable referents), DeLillo’s characters do not merely resent simulacra, they rather embrace simulacra and find comfort in them as shown, for instance, by Murray’s enthusiastic celebration of television and shopping as contemporary religious rituals. The explanation may be that in a world with few certainties to cling to, people resort to simulacra to define themselves and their sense of reality, to construct an aura for themselves (like, for example, Jack’s “professional aura”). For Jack and his family (whose shopping and TV addictions DeLillo actually satirizes), “reproducibility may have removed the aura of the work of art, but art’s magic function has merely migrated to the marketing of consumer goods” (Duvall 336).

If Baudrillard regards the loss of the referent as the equivalent of a moral fall, for DeLillo’s characters in *White Noise*, the simulacra turn into “a religious experience in a way” (12). Engaged in a kind of “spiritual surrender”, the tourists in the barn scene have agreed to be part of a “collective perception” (12), of a community based on the aura of electronic images. Watching the tourists “taking pictures of taking pictures”, listening to the “incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rustling crank of levers that advanced the film”(13), Murray realizes that they will never actually know what the barn was like before it was photographed: “we’ve read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can’t get outside the aura. We’re part of the aura” (13); and Murray seems “immensely pleased” by this. Therefore, the elements of simulation “that make Baudrillard sad, make Murray glad.” (Duvall 338).

The barn is clearly not an art object, but that is beside the point; in postmodern culture the tourists would probably behave in a similar way in the “presence” of an original work of art. The barn is not a high culture product, but again this is not relevant, as the object (artwork or not) is often already replaced by simulacra. In regard to the topics of product and image, we can see a new concept take shape: the aura of the simulacrum in consumer culture. Critic John Duvall notes the irony of this interesting cultural shift: at the very time when reproduction destroys the religious aura of high culture, the same techniques of reproduction (such as photography and film) establish aura in mass culture.

If the discussion of the “barn scene” in *White Noise* has reflected the dissolvability of the object (high culture or not) into its representations and, ironically, the role of photography in reinforcing its aura, DeLillo’s *Mao II* explores the “dissolvability of the artist” himself (134) into multiple representations and the extent to which the writer

and literature, like many other aspects of cultural production, are exposed as empty signs endowed with meaning only “through linkage to economic and political power” (Clippinger 136). Within the postmodern commodity culture, the author becomes secondary and can disappear either by withdrawing from society or through death – without negatively impacting the “commercial” (hence marketable) image of the writer, the image constructed and maintained by the publishing industry.

Early in the novel we find protagonist Bill Gray living a bunkered existence in his modernist sanctuary in upstate New York, withdrawn from the publishing industry. As critic Leonard Wilcox points out, Gray’s artistic crisis is determined by the clash between his modernist aesthetic assumptions and a “corrupt” image world, a new world of postmodern simulacra and spectacle that he finds himself inhabiting. As the inheritor of romantic and modernist traditions, Gray believes in the power of the word, in the “moral force” of 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, *Mao* 48).

He has sought out seclusion in an attempt to preserve his aesthetic values in the face of a commodified and media-driven world. Gray laments the passing of modernism, of an aesthetic order in which the novel thrived. “Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see”, he says. After Samuel Beckett, the “last modernist”, television and mass media have taken over that function and “the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings” (157). Bill Gray, “born under the old tutelage” (215), finds himself caught in this “new tragic narrative” (157). Indeed in *Mao II* the old literary systems seem dead, writers are blocked, taken hostage, advertised, traded, sold, and killed.

Gray feels that the uniqueness and subversive potential of art and literature is now threatened by commercial values: “The more books they publish, the weaker we become” (47). He published two slim volumes of fiction about thirty years ago¹ when he also had his last session with a photographer (36) and became a literary celebrity; then he disappeared from public view. Ironically, Bill’s self-imposed isolation has only intensified his fame. “Bill is at the height of his fame”, Scott Martineau, his personal assistant explains, precisely “because he hasn’t published in years and years and years. [...] Bill gained celebrity by doing nothing” (52). Critic Leonard Wilcox remarks this “inverted and hyperreal” logic of postmodernism, within which a writer gains fame by not publishing, by refusing to interact with the surrounding culture. Scott, the guardian of Bill’s image, understands this paradox only too well; consequently, he urges Gray not to publish, because publication “would be the end of Bill as a myth, a force” (52). Scott knows that keeping a low profile would stimulate media interest and increase Bill’s status as a celebrity. Bill himself realizes that his isolation has allowed others to manufacture an aura for him larger than he will ever be.

¹ Although DeLillo avoids dates and never mentions the Rushdie affair directly, *Mao II* is set in 1989, the year of the fatwa; the year is also suggested by such events as the Hillsborough Stadium disaster, the Ayatollah Khomeini’s funeral, the Tiananmen massacre, the major Andy Warhol retrospective held in 1989 at the Museum of Modern Art which Scott probably visits in the novel. Most of these public events from that year flit across television screens in *Mao II*.

Before Bill Gray actually appears in the novel, we encounter the “signs” of the writer, his signature, in the form of “two lean novels in their latest trade editions” displayed in the “modern classics” section of a New York bookstore (20). The writer’s commodified image is thus introduced when Scott, who “liked to check the shelves for Bill” (20), enters the bookstore, where the books are displayed provocatively

on step terraces and Lucite wall-shelves, books in pyramids and theme displays. [...] stacked on tables and set in clusters near the cash terminals [...] stacks on the floor five feet high, arranged in artful fanning patterns [...] standing on pedestals and bunched in little gothic snuggeries. (19)

The depiction of the bookstore and of Scott’s relation with the books is erotically charged, foregrounding the books as objects of fetishized consumer desire:

There were rows of handsome covers, prosperous and assured. [...] He was a young man, shrewd in his fervors, who knew there were books he wanted to read and others he absolutely had to own, the ones that gesture in special ways, that have a rareness of daring [...] He stared at the covers of mass-market books, running his fingertips erotically over the raised lettering. Covers were lacquered and gilded. [...] He could hear them shrieking *Buy me*. There were posters for book weeks and book fairs. (19)

These passages, which emphasize the books’ exhibition and their gleaming appearance, also foreshadow an interesting development in the publishing industry within postmodern commodity culture, namely the *event* of the book, the posters, the newspaper interviews, the photos of the authors (which Scott “made a point of checking”), the television programs etc. that announce and promote the book and the author – all of which become more important than the reading of the book, to the point of replacing the book’s actual content. This development was in fact signaled by postmodern critic Jean-Francois Lyotard in his 1988 book, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*:

So, in the next century there will be no more books. It takes too long to read, when success comes from gaining time. What will be called a book will be a printed object whose ‘message’ (its information content) and name and title will first have been broadcast by the media, a film, a newspaper interview, a television program, and a cassette recording. [...] People will think they must ‘have’ it (and therefore buy it) so as not to be taken for idiots or to break (my goodness) the social bond! The book will be distributed at a premium, yielding a financial profit for the publisher and a symbolic one for the reader. (xv)

The television programs, the authors’ photos, the posters, more generally the images, the styles, the (re)presentations (of the book) are thus “not the promotional accessories to the economic product, [rather] they are the products themselves” (Connor qtd in Clippinger 139). This is an illustration of Guy Debord’s concept of the “spectacle” as the chief product of contemporary society; the spectacle of the image, Debord argues, its production, marketing, and consumption, is the defining characteristic of postmodern capitalism. It also reflects the broad cultural shift, in the West, not only from a dominance

of production to the dominance of consumption, but also from producing and selling goods to (re)producing and selling images.

The bookstore scene in *Mao II* is followed by the museum scene where Scott Martineau wants to see “the Warhols”. He contemplates several of the versicolor Mao canvases that Andy Warhol, “the high priest of pop art” (Cowart 122) executed between 1972 and 1974: “images of Chairman Mao. Photocopy Mao, silk-screen Mao, wallpaper Mao, synthetic-polymer Mao.” (DeLillo, *Mao* 21). Still, the transition from books to paintings/photographs seems natural enough granted we follow a young man who can like literary art just as much as graphic art. This transition should be read neither as a simple parallel between types of art, nor as a simple contrast between an old fashioned aesthetic medium (the book) and its postmodern successor (pop art). That is because the experience in the bookstore “gratifies neither aesthetic nor intellectual expectations” (Cowart 122). As we have seen above, even books can be made to fuel consumer desire; in the bookstore scene it is not “bibliophilia” that is emphasized but merchandising:

Hardly a temple consecrated to the unique and holy work of literary art, this is the bookstore of Disneyfied simulacrum. Whatever aura exists here (and it extends even to an erotics of book covers) is co-opted by commercial calculation. (122)

Undermining the distinction between serious art and popular culture, denying depth, “authority”, and uniqueness in the work of art, Warhol became one of the inventors of postmodernism. Scott finds his Mao series “liberating” because it is “unwitting of history”, while the Chairman’s face floats “nearly free of its photographic source” (21). DeLillo similarly states elsewhere that Warhol succeeded in taking an image and “liberating it from history. [...] In the same way that soup is packaged, Warhol packages his Maos, his Marilyn Monroes, and his Elvis Presleys.” (qtd in Osteen 651). Thus Mao, a man who was immersed in war and revolution, seems in the Warhol version to be kind of a saintly figure on a painted surface, like a Byzantine icon. Much in the same way, another Warhol silk screen on canvas called *Gorby I* features the Soviet President’s head set against a background of Byzantine gold (DeLillo, *Mao* 134). If for Walter Benjamin the “aura” of a work is derived from its placement within a historical tradition, Warhol’s Mao series is “unwitting of history” (21). Since the time of the “original” Chinese leader, DeLillo suggests, Mao has long become iconic, detached from historical narrative, dispersed into his endlessly replicated copies, not much different from the Marilyns and Elvises, or from Big Mac and Coke. Warhol and pop art thus demonstrated that

art was no longer possible in terms of a progressive historical narrative. The *narrative* had come to an end. But this [...] liberated artists from [...] having to follow the ‘correct historical line’. It really did mean that anything could be art. (Danto qtd in Osteen 651)

The images Warhol produced in his New York studio called “The Factory” are just as standardized as anything Henry Ford ever dreamed of. In the Mao series (a selection of which appears on DeLillo’s dust jacket), the same image/picture of Mao is

repeated, in assorted hues and variously accessorized; quite similarly, Detroit's products come out in different colors and with different options (Cowart 123). Warhol lent the dignity of art to industrially-produced commodities of American civilization (such as Campbell Soups, Coca Cola or Brillo detergent); at the same time, with the help of standardized production methods, Warhol infused art with "the magic of the perpetually same" (Honnef 88).

Mao is not just the subject of a new art, but he is himself an artist in the new mode. His Little Red Book of Quotations is the ultimate bestseller, exerting a certain fascination on the masses of Chinese people, enjoying a new kind of aura: "The book was the faith that people carried everywhere. They recited from it, brandished it, they displayed it constantly. People undoubtedly made love with the book in their hands." (DeLillo, *Mao* 162). It is the Bible of ultimate conformity, the icon of crowd mentality. "The cult of Mao was the cult of the book", Bill Gray tells George Haddad, the spokesman for the Maoist group in Beirut who abducted the Swiss poet. "It was a call to unity, a summoning of crowds where everyone dressed alike and thought alike." (162). The Chinese people, drawn by the endlessly repeated and recited words and phrases, by a few "simple formulas copied and memorized and passed on" (7), came out of their rooms and became "a book-waving crowd" (162).

We can now understand more clearly the differences between Benjamin's and DeLillo's use of the term "aura". For Benjamin, "aura" is the trace left by the aesthetic, "mythic" value of originality; he is famous for the analysis of the demise of originality in photographic and cinematic reproduction. For DeLillo, and for Warhol, on the other hand, "aura" refers to the enhanced emotional or spiritual messages, or the radiance, of a photographic icon (be it Marilyn, Elvis, Liz, Jackie, Bill, Andy, Mao or "*Gorby*").

At the same time Warhol's art was a comment on contemporary society and culture, particularly consumerism, by using popular images and icons and incorporating and re-defining them in the art world. As Fredric Jameson remarked in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Andy Warhol's work in fact

turns centrally around commodification, and the great billboard images of the Coca-Cola bottle or the Campbell's soup can, which explicitly foreground the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capital, ought to be powerful and critical political statements. (9)

Warhol depicted celebrities as well as common consumer products without idealizing either of them; instead he repeated these images over and over to signify the banality of a technological world dominated by machine-made products. The following humorous and ironic quote from Warhol reflects his critical yet accepting attitude both towards the commercial culture he lives in and towards the artist's "aura", itself regarded as a commodity in consumer capitalism: "Some company recently was interested in buying my 'aura'. I never figured out what they wanted. But they were willing to pay a lot for it." (qtd in Clippinger 140).

In DeLillo's *Mao II*, the disappearance of novelist Bill Gray contributes to the proliferation of the "currency" of his "aura". Indeed everything is marketable in

postmodern commodity culture, including – or especially – the image and aura of the writer. The more time Gray spends in isolation, the bigger he gets “as his distance from the scene deepens” (52) and the more people want “words and pictures. They want images.” (DeLillo, *Great Jones Street* 128).

At the same time Gray is hostage to the fame that his publicity and the “missing writer myth” have generated. Scott’s plan to make Gray a prominent figure in postmodern celebrity culture works so well that Gray finds himself trapped by his own reputation and fame, his life becoming “a kind of simulation” (DeLillo, *Mao* 97). Somewhere else in the novel, Bill distinguishes between “the life and [...] the consumer event”, declaring that

Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or in film. [...] Nothing happens until it’s consumed. Or put it this way. Nature has given way to aura. A man cuts himself shaving and someone is signed up to write the biography of the cut. All the material in every life is channeled into the glow. (43-44)

But the photograph, the image, the movie frame soon becomes oppressive: “from the moment your picture appears you’ll be expected to look just like it. And if you meet people somewhere they will absolutely question your right to look different from your picture” (43).

In allowing journalist Brita Nilsson to photograph him, Bill risks destroying the status of legendary reclusive genius (and, along with it, his own reputation of “dangerous writer”) which he had attained precisely (and ironically) by staying out of the circulation of the simulacra for so long. Bill’s legend, this fixed image that the media has had of Bill for over twenty years will be shattered by the photograph of an old man. This adds to the public’s secret pleasure of mocking a famous figure (and a writer’s intriguing figure for that matter), of watching the writer’s face “distort in shock and fear when the concealed photographer leaps out of the trees [...] In our world we sleep and eat the image and pray to it and wear it too” (37)

And yet Bill feels that he needs these pictures to face the world again, to end the disease-like seclusion, to break down the “monolith” he has built and all the captivity and surveillance that have come with it:

I’m afraid to go anywhere, even the seedy diner in the nearest little crossroads town. I’m convinced the serious trackers are moving in with their mobile phones and zoom lenses. Once you choose this life, you understand what it’s like to exist in a state of constant religious observance. (44)

If there is a tendency in DeLillo’s characters to turn away from the social world, to seek desperate seclusion in cell-like rooms, there is also an equal and accompanying desire to break free from that isolation. Bill, too, wants to be left alone and at the same time to be able to safely get out of his hiding: “Don’t stare at me, don’t ask me to sign copies of my books, don’t point me out on the street, don’t creep up on me with a tape recorder clipped to your belt. Most of all, don’t take my picture” (45). Bill cannot understand how a young, inexperienced man, “wary of the machinery of gloss and

distortion, protective of his work and very shy and slightly self-romanticizing”, would find himself, all these years later, “trapped in his own massive stillness” (45), a media object, prey to news hungry reporters, fans and photographers the moment he leaves his hiding, no longer in control of his own life.

He wants to live a different kind of life, outside secrecy, to be released from celebrity pressures, to enjoy simple things like everybody else, “eating tricolor pasta in trattorias near the park. [...] Live at the center of the cubist city, Sunday papers spread everywhere and glossy bagels on a plate.” (55). Bill, the example of Romantic model of authorship under siege, also longs for the days of childhood when he used to announce ballgames to himself – another kind of creative process, a quest for a fresh, innocent, original vision:

I sat in a room and made up the games [...] I was the players, the announcer, the crowd, the listening audience and the radio. There hasn't been a moment since those days when I've felt nearly so good. [...] I remember the names of all those players, the positions they played, their spots in the battling order. And I've been trying to write toward that kind of innocence ever since. The pure game of making up. (45-46)

Bill's state of dependency, defeat, loss of faith and inertia is interrupted by the arrival of Brita who enlivens and invigorates him, freeing his creative instincts: “I'm all idea today” (42), he tells Brita during the shooting session. It is true that, at the same time, Bill feels threatened by her work, which can both magnify and diminish him:

We are alone in a room involved in this mysterious exchange. What am I giving up to you? And what are you investing me with, or stealing from me? How are you changing me? I can feel the change like some current just under the skin. (43)

One of the things he may worry about is that their exchange will transfer authority from writing to photography (Osteen 654). By accepting to be photographed, Gray enters the world of mass-reproduced images where, according to Scott, “we don't need the book. We have the author [...] We have the pictures, let's use them to advantage. The book disappears into the image of the writer.” (71). On the other hand, Bill knows that he has already been mediated, incorporated, and commodified due to his previous books and to his reclusive image. Brita's pictures of Bill will only create a new object of commodification – a sort of “missing writer returns after twenty years” – or this at least seems to be Scott's wish.

Bill associates the mechanical repetition of Western art and commerce with mass identity and death: “Sitting for a picture is morbid business. A portrait doesn't begin to mean anything until the subject is dead [...] It struck me just last night these pictures are the announcement of my dying” (42-43). That is why, Bill thinks, Brita is smart to trap writers in her camera before they disappear and then “put us in a museum and charge admission” (42).

Mao II, therefore, not only shows how the aura of an artwork has been reproduced but also dramatizes the extent to which the producer of the artwork is

duplicated, marketed, and consumed, thus emptied of signification. In this respect DeLillo modernizes Benjamin's critique by showing how Bill Gray is reduced to his image, prey to consumption and simulation. The writer is subjected to the visual domain of photography and iconography, to the economic sphere of publishing and marketing, and to the political manipulation of terrorism (Clippinger 139).

The publishing world is represented in the novel by Bill Gray's editor Charlie Everson whose committee of academics is first contacted after Jean-Claude Julien, the Swiss poet, is abducted by a terrorist group in Beirut. The mutual interests of the publishing world and terrorism become obvious when Everson explains that

I'm chairman of a high-minded committee on free expression. We're mainly academics and publishing people and we're just getting started and this is the crazy part of the whole business. This group takes a hostage simply because he's there, he's available, and he apparently tells them he's a poet and what is the first thing they do? They contact *us*. They have a fellow in Athens who calls our London office and says, There's a writer chained to a wall in a bare room in Beirut. If you want him back, maybe we can do a deal. (DeLillo, *Mao* 98)

The image of the writer is therefore purchased and manipulated to serve the financial purposes of the publishing world and the political goals of terrorism. The value of the writer is thus no longer conceived in literary terms, but calculated only in terms of economic and political usefulness. The Swiss poet, depicted as a type of merchandise, is also a means to advertise both the terrorist group, otherwise very little known – the hostage is “the only proof they exist” (98) – and Charlie's organization which is “just getting started”.

Jean-Claude is stripped of his humanity, of his personal and literary worth; he is remade not of written words but of electronic bits – “He was a digital mosaic in the processing grid” (112) – which are reassembled by reporters, photographers, cinematographers, TV anchormen. The poet is thus reduced to a marketable image, a media event within the global electronic narrative. This confirms once again Debord's assertion that images have become the chief commodity of contemporary culture.

Bill Gray has something further to offer to the publishing and terrorist organizations: the aura of a famous novelist. As Charlie Everson puts it:

There's an excitement that attaches to your name and it will help us put a mark on this event. [...] I want a missing writer to read the work of another missing writer. I want the famous novelist to address the suffering of the unknown poet. [...] Don't you see how beautifully balanced? (99)

Bill's photographs taken by Brita not only replace the person but also become surrogates for the infinitely deferred product, the novel that Gray has been unable to complete for years and has spent his time revisiting “in a charade that parodies the act of writing” (Clippinger 149). Language having failed him, Gray apparently “seeks affirmation in the new visual medium of the spectacle” (Levesque qtd in Clippinger 149). This explains in part Gray's willingness to be photographed (despite his premonition that

these pictures announce his death) and to enter the game of hostage negotiations which will surely lead to his death. This is reflected by his dialogue with George Haddad, the spokesman for the terrorist group in Beirut, who instructs Bill how to deal with terrorist leader Abu Rashid:

‘He’ll want you to take the other man’s place.’

‘Gain the maximum attention. Then release me at the most advantageous time.’

‘Gain the maximum attention. Then 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.’

‘Doesn’t he think I’m worth more than my photograph?’ (DeLillo, *Mao* 164)

Gray’s concern over his “value” is comical and perhaps naïve both in terms of terrorist politics and given the fact that he must have known by now that his worth has been an image constructed and maintained by the publishing industry.

Unlike Andy Warhol (or Chairman Mao for that matter), Gray is unable to capitalize artistically (or politically) upon his commodification. But in both cases, the aura, the iconicity achieved in life survives undiminished in death. Andy Warhol survives as image fully commodified “on postcards and paper bags, in photomosaics, multiple exposures, dye transfers, Polaroid prints” (135). Gray’s “real”, anonymous death on a ferry to Lebanon – ultimately a consequence, too, of his inability to interpret the visual clues that would have protected him from getting almost killed in Athens – will allow his image to live on in legend; his absence will enable his aura to be undiminished. Moreover, consistent with the above-discussed strategy of enhancing the writer’s aura, with the principle that “the withheld work of art is the only eloquence left” (67), Scott will not publish the manuscript of Bill’s last novel:

The manuscript would sit. He might talk to Charles Everson, just a word concerning the fact that it was finished. The manuscript would sit, and word would get out, and the manuscript would not go anywhere. After a time he might take the photographs to New York and meet with Brita and choose the pictures that would appear. But the manuscript would sit, and word would travel, and the pictures would appear, a small and deft selection, one time only, and word would spread, and the novel would stay right here, collecting aura and force, deepening old Bill’s legend, undyingly. (224)

Here we have an inversion of Benjamin’s thesis about the work of art. Instead of an absence of aura resulted from the mechanical reproduction of the work of art, we have the “withheld work of art” replaced entirely by aura. Moreover, Scott proposes that the absent writer be replaced by his photos and the written word by rumor (McMinn 213). As Scott and Karen examine the contact sheets of Brita’s photographs of Bill they are struck by the fact that “the differences frame to frame were so extraordinarily slight that all twelve sheets might easily be one picture repeated” (DeLillo, *Mao* 222). Brita’s photographs are in fact serried images of a Bill Gray now existing only as simulacrum, as copies without an original, as circulating images detached from cultural and political history: “Bill Gray I, Bill Gray II, Bill Gray III ...” (Coward 126), like Andy Warhol’s Maos.

In postmodern culture, therefore, there is a tendency to reduce all aspects of society, even those regarded as the defining moments of that era, such as art, literature, philosophy to consumable goods and products. While the field of literature has not been usually associated with notions like “business” and “marketing”, it is inevitable that in contemporary culture the novelist is consumed by his own image, the novel becomes a commodity once it is published, just as the artwork must confront its exchange value (Osteen 664).

And yet in all his interviews, DeLillo insists that writers should stand in opposition – to the state, the corporation, the consumerist imperative, the “corrupt” image world (DeLillo, *Mao* 36), to the glamour of terrorism – that they must refuse to be completely co-opted by commerce, to be incorporated into the “ambient noise”. His insistence parallels Jameson’s plea for a serious interrogation of the possibilities of political and critical art in the postmodern period of late capital (*Postmodernism* 9). Consequently, DeLillo says, a writer cannot afford “the luxury of separating himself from the crowd. [...] It is indispensable to be fully involved in contemporary life, to be part of the crowd, the clash of voices.” (qtd in Nadotti 88). In other words the artist should challenge the culture from within. At the same time the artist can explore and exploit the image culture, the new possibilities of art in postmodernism. As we have seen, the postmodern spirit also creates a new mode of experience and new playful possibilities for the imagination.

Unlike Bill Gray, whose fate seems to leave little hope for the author’s genuine re-emergence and reinvention as a vital social figure, Brita Nilsson recognizes her involvement in the society of spectacle which she uses to her own – and perhaps to society’s – advantage. She uses photography to assert her own subversive authority – as when she removes the hood of one of Rashid’s boys and snaps his picture (DeLillo, *Mao* 236), restoring the boy’s original identity and for a moment extracting him from the crowd he had been brainwashed into. Continuing to write and to believe in the novel as “the great secular transcendence” (72), DeLillo also acknowledges the potential of Brita’s art and weapon. Consequently, not only does he give her the final word in the novel, but also he himself incorporates photographs into the text, a gesture that reflects his (reluctant but definite) participation in the society of spectacle. Both Brita and DeLillo, then, work from the inside of the discourse of images to engage in a critical dialogue with it (Osteen 667). Both demonstrate how authors may incorporate spectacle without being incorporated by it, positioning themselves at once within and against image culture.

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