

Welcome to the Imploded Future: Don DeLillo's *Mao II* Reconsidered in the Light of September 11

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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. It is just like Beirut, it looks like Beirut.

—Don DeLillo, *Mao II*

I

“The Bush Administration was feeling a nostalgia for the Cold War. This is over now. Many things are over. The narrative ends in the rubble, and it is left to us to create the counter-narrative.”¹ So Don DeLillo asserted in the December issue of *Harper's* in the aftermath of the September 11 attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center. In this essay entitled “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September,” he put a special emphasis on the contemporary writer's mission to weave the alternative counter-narrative to set against “the new tragic narrative”² terrorists had authored and the countervailing Cold War narrative George W. Bush resurrected as an excuse to counterattack “them.”

In the midst of the catastrophic havoc, DeLillo observed “a hundred thousand stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world,”³ which not merely gave us a glimpse of how each individual behaved in

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response to what might be called an epic tragedy but let us ponder upon the very nature of our identity in terms of the apocalyptic calamity. From this perspective he referred to some marginal episodes he gleaned out of the smoky rubble as embryos of the prospective counter-narrative that carried “around their edges the luminous ring of coincidence, fate or premonition”⁴: anonymous men and women running for their lives; people falling from the towers hand in hand; doctors’ appointments that happened to save patients’ lives; the cell phones used to report the hijacking and thwart further attack; last but not least, “[t]wo women on two planes, best of friends, who die together and apart, Tower 1 and Tower 2.”⁵ Breathing the fumes of lower Manhattan, he witnessed the spontaneous display of photographs of missing persons and improvised memorials, which exemplified a great variety of lost countenances and voices faithfully reflecting the multicultural configurations of the victims.

As a novelist with a particular interest in and concern with the spectacular disasters terrorists plot, DeLillo advocated in the same essay writing back against the massive spectacle by desperately imagining the details of the crucial moment each individual had experienced. To the same effect, he persisted in meticulously collecting vestiges of diverse memories, even paying close attention to the debris of scattered objects left behind in the mire of wreckage. Nevertheless, inasmuch as the provisional counter-narrative, including dubious discourses circulating on the Internet, is, as he stated, “shaped in part by rumor, fantasy, and mystical reverberation,” it involves some difficulties in verifying whether it is flavored with “a shadow history of false memories and imagined loss”⁶. As was the case with the Kennedy assassination, “[f]or the next fifty years,” DeLillo predicted, “people who were not in the area when the attacks occurred will claim to have been there. In time, some of them will believe it. Others will claim to have lost friends or relatives, although they did not.”⁷ All these responses taken into account, what is most relevant to him is not so much the verisimilitude of any particular testimony as the “mystical reverberation” of the quintessential American psyche, albeit versatile and amorphous, taken aback by the unexpected buffet.

If the September 11 attack reminds us of the Kennedy assassination, which was featured in *Libra* (1988) as “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century,”⁸ obliquely referring to the Zapruder film, it is chiefly because the airplanes crashing into the twin towers might be seen to have had a similar effect as the bullets triggered at JFK in abruptly

bringing about “an aberration in the heartland of the real.”⁹ Paradoxically enough, this aberrant violence reiteratively broadcast owed itself to what was taking place in secret in the heartland of “simulacrum America.” Viewed in this context, aberrations contingent to the collapse of the World Trade Center entail far more implication and adumbration than first meets the eye. Just as a targeted simulacrum “JFK” lent itself to the creation of the illusionary Camelot myth and the New Frontier, so the “WTC” which had actually dominated the New York skyline¹⁰ for over a quarter of a century undeniably stood as an undermined simulacrum for the hallucinatory “white-hot future”¹¹ which American consumer culture and technology in fact combine to pre-empt. As to what the Babel-like twin towers used to epitomize, DeLillo hit the nail right on the head in his penetrating insight that “[t]he World Trade towers were not only an emblem of advanced technology but a justification, in a sense, for technology’s irresistible will to realize in solid form whatever becomes theoretically allowable.”¹²

As if far-sighted enough to anticipate the demolition of the towers,¹³ DeLillo interpolated the unforgettable scene just in the middle of his voluminous masterpiece *Underworld* (1997) in which the World Trade Center still under construction is juxtaposed with garbage bags left in stacks as a result of the on-going strike in New York.¹⁴ In combination with a distant view of the prominent towers seen from the vast Fresh Kills landfill, this classically DeLilloesque interlude of the surrealistic landscape predicts how the accelerated “white-hot future” claimed by “technology’s irresistible will” ends up in reality. Omnipresent garbage bags, in stark contrast with the hubristic bulk of the towers viewed from any place in the Big Apple, prefigure once again the saturated garbage bags DeLillo reported having witnessed everywhere in the barricaded “third-worldish” territory where the twin pillars used to soar. Given the déjà-vu-like synchronicity that oddly links the future-oriented World Trade Center and wastes originating from the past,¹⁵ it is not far-fetched to infer that what DeLillo actually witnessed on the doomsday was not the ostensibly exploded landmark of the global mercantile transactions but the implosion of the “white-hot future” America invented.

II

Since the beginning of his career, DeLillo has devoted himself to pursuing the potential for an alternative counter-narrative against the

ubiquitous discourses of media and technology through the deconstructive appropriation of their precarious nature. In his view, what is at stake is a highly glossy future they continue promising like oracles, where Americans are supposed to lead a comfortable life for good and all with ever-increasing desire satisfied as in advertisements. As Mark Osteen aptly sums up, “in all his work DeLillo imitates the discourse he aims to deconstruct and thereby generates a dialogue with those cultural forms that both criticizes their consequences and appropriates their advantages.”¹⁶ Whether these deconstructive tactics of mimicry and appropriation prove to be double-edged or not, no doubt *White Noise* (1985) is his monumental achievement to subvert “from within the culture itself”¹⁷ the spectacular postmodern media culture infested with white noise—a heavily loaded metaphor of pervasive media blitz.

Whereas the lengthy episode of “The Airborne Toxic Event” awkwardly embedded in the middle of *White Noise* can be regarded as a (re)appropriated narrative of so-called environmental terrorism, his following bestseller, *Libra*, revolves around the intriguing complicity and rivalry between Lee Harvey Oswald and other plotters scheming to pull strings behind him in pursuit of the terrorist narrative converging in the JFK assassination. Triggered by this notable accomplishment worthy of his reputation, DeLillo’s long-nursed interest in the theme of terrorists having seized control of the world narrative by taking advantage of the society of spectacle finds its best expression in his next masterpiece, *Mao II* (1991), a Pen/Faulkner Award winner published just a decade before the September 11 attack. Grappling with the threatening advent of the new narrative based on the unprecedented system of world terror as opposed to the narrative of the self which novelists endorse, *Mao II* comes into being as an inevitable “sequel” to *Libra*, where the motif of “men in small rooms” manifests itself with the seeming affinity between terrorists and novelists reinforced.

In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo refers to the intricate interrelation between insidious plots concocted by terrorists and the brightly colored future American consumerism unequivocally guarantees everyone else:

I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America. Again we come back to these men in small rooms who can’t get out and who have to organize their desperation and their loneliness. . . . I see this desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored

packages and products and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go.¹⁸

Further evidence supporting this view of Oswald as a paradoxical product of postmodern consumerism can be drawn from a close analysis of his next work, *Mao II*. If this novel deserves reconsideration at present in the wake of the current wave of terrorism, it is not just because it provides us with the exquisite delineation of a novelist placed in a predicament in “a zero-sum game”¹⁹ with terrorists, but because it contains within itself a paradox in future-obsessed American culture, which inspires a novelist/hero to come up with some tentative prescription for disseminating the germ of the counter-narrative rescued from the “ruined future.”

At first glance, the image-saturated media culture of late-twentieth-century America presented in detail in *Mao II* appears to be so prevailing that a voracious barrage of proliferated images seems to have transformed everything into a mere simulacrum, whose ultimate form could be metaphorically sublimated into the holographic “white-hot future.” More relevant, however, is the appalling fact that this is also the very milieu where terrorists and apocalypse-awaiting cultists desperate to hurry time avail themselves of publicity stunts. They make a hasty move toward millennial apocalypse by making use of the society of spectacle and technology which is in their favor to such an extent that the futuristic world narrative is utterly at the mercy of their cause. To borrow Margaret Scanlan’s words, “[t]errorists use the latest information technology to promote medieval theologies and despotism. This technology permeates our lives, naturalizing even guerilla war. . . .”²⁰ Just as the prologue of *Mao II* that ends with the ominous jingle, “The future belongs to crowds,”²¹ depicts as an epitome of the whole book a mass Unification Church wedding at Yankee Stadium, the future finds itself always already preoccupied and on the verge of implosion: “the future is pressing in, collapsing toward them [crowds].”²²

It is those faceless individuals entirely swallowed up in crowds and endlessly multiplied through the manipulation of images that Bill Gray turns his back on. He is the celebrated reclusive novelist DeLillo himself might have become, leading a secluded life in a remote hermitage in upstate New York, where he is struggling to work on his abortive third novel, fleeing every kind of publicity and media appropriation. Despite this pathetic situation, it would be too hasty to conjecture that his

fastidious posture stems only from the plausible apprehension that a novelist might otherwise be co-opted and made harmless by excessive commodification which giant publishing conglomerates facilitate in collusion with the media. As a matter of fact, his decision to recede into sanctuary, "playing God's own trick,"²³ is regressive by its nature, if not degenerative, in that it involves merging into the anonymity of faceless crowds in which reclusive terrorists hide themselves.

Thus his quixotic seclusion cannot be taken at the face value he gives it from the practical standpoint; it can possibly be an ambivalent gesture he makes in an attempt to simulate the anonymity of terrorists who he assumes have taken the place of writers as leading shapers of culture. Indeed, in his analysis of the oppressive predominance terrorists have accomplished by circulating the new narrative of terror, he deplores the irresistible disadvantage writers are forced to endure: "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 the bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated."²⁴ Nevertheless, the measures he has actually taken against their ascendancy over him are retrogressive enough to let him behave like a martyr, who is "merely playing the role of the famous recluse."²⁵ Having erased every single vestige of his individuality, as hooded terrorists do, he is so infatuated with the facelessness he has newly procured that he enjoys toying with it like a child. As a result, ironically enough, his aura as a missing novelist becomes enhanced beyond all measure, owing to the absence of his portraits as well as his never-published work in progress.

It is under these self-indulgent circumstances that Bill Gray, "a local symptom of God's famous reluctance to appear,"²⁶ has finally made up his mind to put an end to his lengthy seclusion that has only augmented mystification. Regardless of his misgivings caused by his exposure being near at hand, he dares to invite Brita Nilsson, a middle-aged camera-woman, into his hideout and agrees to have his photograph taken. Yet what this tentative gesture of revelation implicates is neither so self-evident nor single-minded as it appears; in fact it results from his contradictory impulse to come out of hiding to quit his suffocating way of life and at the same time to seek further seclusion. In consequence, his photo session with Brita, which includes the most sophisticated DeLilloesque conversation in the novel, is characterized by a strange equilibrium of

his two opposing predispositions: actively propagating his images as a singular novelist who champions the self, and passively receding into obscurity as a recluse simulating a terrorist way of conspiracy. This dilemmatic incongruity, as DeLillo himself suggests in an interview, precisely originates from the intriguing fact that the endlessly reproducible “photographic image is a kind of crowd in itself.”²⁷

III

Now that the intrinsic interdependence between mechanically reproducible photographs and the emergence of crowds comes into focus, it becomes evident that it is of no little significance that *Mao II*, whose cover is embellished with Andy Warhol’s famous photo-silkscreen, the *Mao* series, is installed with a variety of para-textual framing devices. As Laura Barrett contends in detail, this novel is “constructed like a photograph, framed by two slim chapters”²⁸—the eye-catching prologue entitled “At Yankee Stadium” and the sequel-like epilogue named “In Beirut”—both narrated exceptionally in the present-tense, describing photogenic wedding ceremonies in striking contrast to each other. On top of that, it is also worth arguing that the text itself is visually demarcated by several blurred photographs of an “undifferentiated mass”²⁹ interpolated between each section, including the images of a rally in Tiananmen Square, a Unification Church mass wedding, the Sheffield soccer stampede, and Iranian mobs mourning against a backdrop of an enormous portrait of the late Imam Khomeini.

Given the undifferentiated visual images of a mass of people photographed deliberately out of focus, it stands to reason that they serve as oblique reminders of the uncanny affinity between mechanically replicated photographs and the ubiquitously proliferated images of crowds who “survive as a community instead of individuals.”³⁰ This observation, however, does not necessarily exclude another interpretation that on a potential basis they are reminiscent of the amorphous yet differentiable visages of myriad future lookers, whose retrospective gaze only the sitter can envision over the photographer’s shoulder. While Bill complains, as if in self-mockery, about the metamorphosis he undergoes during his own photo session with Brita, which ostensibly reduces him to a mere superficial material as “flat as a birdshit on a Buick,”³¹ he is not unconscious of the after-effect of “this mysterious exchange”³² with her—the posthumous implications for posterity his photographs might

“post forward”³³ with a full three-dimensional depth. Comparing this assiduous sitting endowed with ritualistic qualities to his own wake and referring to Brita as a priestess-like mortician who embalms his body, he speculates on the mysterious aura his photographs will reinforce in the not-too-distant future:

Something about the occasion makes me think I’m at my own wake. Sitting for a picture is morbid business. A portrait doesn’t begin to mean anything until the subject is dead. This is the whole point. We’re doing this to create a kind of sentimental past for people in decades to come. It’s their past, their history we’re inventing here. And it’s not how I look now that matters. It’s how I’ll look in twenty-five years as clothing and faces change, as photographs change. The deeper I pass into death, the more powerful my picture becomes.³⁴

As this prophetic statement about his own photographs eloquently indicates, Bill considers the rare occasion of sitting as a virtual announcement of his death that provides him with a fixed point from which he can “remember forward”³⁵ and presage the re-formed future his empowered posthumous portraits are bound to affect. His intuition of “a kind of simulated death”³⁶ of his own becomes all the more pertinent when juxtaposed with Scott’s interpretation of what Bill’s following disappearance is all about: “Scott thought the photograph might make him [Bill] look older. Not older in the picture but older as himself, after the fact of the picture. The picture would be a means of transformation. It would show him how he looked to the world and give him a fixed point from which to depart. Pictures with our likeness make us choose. We travel into or away from our photographs.”³⁷ Even though Scott, who used to be Bill’s fanatic fan and now acts as a self-appointed secretary, suspects that his master intends to “revise the terms of his seclusion” by cornering himself into “the crisis of exposure,”³⁸ he is of two minds in what direction “older” Bill is likely to depart. He is not certain whether Bill means to project his disparate images forward onto future observers or just intends to fade away into undifferentiated oblivion.

Neither is Brita, whose worldwide project of photographing none but writers Bill makes mock of by saying “you’re smart to trap us in your camera before we disappear . . . Put us in a museum and charge admission.”³⁹ In a sense, Brita is a postmodern daughter of August Sander, the renowned German photographer who “hit upon the idea of an epic photographic collection to be called *Man of the Twentieth Century*, a massive,

comprehensive catalogue of people written in the universal language—photography”⁴⁰ and whose photograph captioned *Three farmers on their way to a dance, 1914* furnishes Richard Powers with the title of his distinguished first novel. What Sander embarked on at the turn of the century only to fail at Brita appears to take up on a far limited scale at the end of the same century. Whereas her predecessor was preoccupied with the anachronistic cataloging of representative types of his time, Brita specializes in a cross-sampling of moribund writers, although she has not yet decided if she will present her collection of images of eclipsed writers as conceptual art in some portrait gallery or stash it away in permanent archives. Anyway, at least at the outset of her work in progress, what counts most for her is to make an accurate visual map of a rare “species” categorized as writers, and it is Bill Gray who turns out to be her last and foremost specimen, and the one that brings her whole project to a standstill.

As is true of photographers, Brita cannot fully predict how her art is to capture her sitter and fix him onto the contact sheets, nor can she confidently surmise what effect she has exerted on Bill throughout the photo session, which is in a sense a substitute for deadlocked writing on his part. She has contributed far more to his transformation and metamorphosis than she herself is conscious of; she actually mystifies and demystifies him all at once by manipulating his likeness at her disposal. Despite Bill’s disappearance and demise, reminiscent of his assassination, after her “shooting,” a term that connotes the predatory impulses inherent in photography, his portraits as duplicated phantoms are subject to and open to the close reading, free revision, and deliberate editing later generations might evolve. The twelve sheets of Bill’s portraits now available as simulacra to Scott and Karen are a telling metaphor of these palimpsestic reverberations of polyphonic meaning because of the minute differences discerned in their advertisement-like repetition: “Although in a way, and at a glance, the differences frame to frame were so extraordinarily slight that all twelve sheets might easily be one picture repeated, like mass visual litter that occupies a blink. All the more reason to analyze. Because there really were differences of course. . . .”⁴¹ Suffice it to say here that these seemingly replicated photographic images of Bill subtly differentiated are meant to have much in common with Warhol’s factory-produced multiple pseudo-Maos, which ingeniously differentiate themselves in gradation of colors and shades arbitrarily modulated as if to invoke the democratic deconstruction of the authoritative original.⁴²

IV

It is not until the dissemination of his differentiated visual images is complete that Bill follows his impulse to fade into faceless anonymity, putting Scott off the track and merging into “the surge of noontime crowd.”⁴³ This well-wrought move towards self-effacement is a natural extension of the photo session, no matter how contradictory it may appear to his decision to expose his self-images. Importuned by his old friend, Charles, who is eager to edit his long-awaited novel, Bill half-heartedly gives assent to his request to take part in a media event—reading poems in London to release Jean-Claude Julian, a Swiss poet held hostage in Beirut.⁴⁴ What is more, even after the terrorists’ interruption which results in the canceling of the reading, he does not turn back but precipitately heads east for Athens, Larnaca on Cyprus, and his final destination, Beirut, as if to take a head-on plunge into the headquarters of his opponent, the terrorist chief, Abu Rashid.

During this reckless journey, his desperate struggle as a novelist against terrorists over their “spectacular authorship”⁴⁵ is belatedly under way. Regarding Jean-Claude as a sympathetic fellow writer and his double, Bill makes such a great effort to project his innate desire for writing on the hostage that his consciousness does not merely blend into Jean-Claude’s but virtually permeates the objective narrative that depicts his doleful plight. In consequence, Bill’s narrative gradually undermines and supersedes the omniscient narration that is supposed to portray the young poet held in custody.⁴⁶ In contrast to “a digital mosaic in the processing grid,”⁴⁷ which is what Jean-Claude has been reduced to, what Bill attempts to embody with paper and pencil is the living hostage imagined as his character profusely burdened with bodily agony and sufferings: torture whimsically repeated by the boy in charge of him, with whom, as in cases of the Stockholm syndrome, the detained hostage identifies himself; sporadic sounds of launched rockets perceived through the hood with no eyeholes; prolonged pain inseparable from the slow progress of time. Even though Jean-Claude/Bill cannot help admitting “[a]ll energy, matter and gravity were ahead, the future was everywhere”⁴⁸ in favor of the terrorists, it must be underscored that once in a while Bill’s sentences manage to succeed in giving expression to the poet’s numbed sense and giving voice to his acquiescence: “There was something at stake in these sentences he wrote about the basement room. They held a pause, an anxious space he began to recognize. There’s a danger when

it comes out right, a sense that these words almost did not make it to the page.”⁴⁹ For this reason, for the first time since he left his hideout, he finds himself in dire need of his typewriter, not the word processor which George repeatedly recommends.

Apart from those dangerous sentences he has managed to fix on paper, a series of acrid disputes over the authorship of the future narrative between Bill and George, an intelligent spokesman for the Maoist group who abducted Jean-Claude, bears witness to his integrity and individuality as a writer. In response to George who has a firm belief that “history is passing into the hands of the crowds,”⁵⁰ Bill sets forward a counterargument against the undifferentiated mass mind and monolithic uniformity terrorists enforce on the masses. George evaluates “the unchanged narrative”⁵¹ Mao invented and required people to confirm even after his death: “He [Mao] became the history of China written on the masses. And his words became immortal. Studied, repeated, memorized by an entire nation.”⁵² Refusing this arrogant conceit, Bill criticizes the reiterated narrative scribed alike on innumerable people for incurring a complete demolition of “[o]ne thing unlike another, one voice unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints.”⁵³ Furthermore, in his retrospection after parting with George, he wishes he could have made a more candid retort:

You begin to empty the world of meaning . . . replacing real things with plots and fictions. One fiction taking the world narrowly into itself, the other fiction pushing out toward the social order, trying to unfold into it. He could have told George *a writer creates a character as a way to reveal consciousness, increase the flow of meaning. This is how we reply to power and beat back our fear.* (Italics added)⁵⁴

This is precisely what Bill narrowly puts into practice when he endeavors to fabricate the hostage in his own way as his character during his fatal journey to Beirut—the self-imposed ordeal he submits to. Towards the very end of his life, he does not hesitate to do his best to retrieve hijacked “fiction” and facilitate the centrifugal proliferation of meaning too fertile and versatile to narrow down. Putting himself in Jean-Claude’s shoes, he wishes to contribute himself to what his beloved “fiction” stands for, so that he can get rid of his haunting fear and fight back against the detention of Jean-Claude—“the first tentative rehearsal for mass terror.”⁵⁵ In the last analysis, what he intends to rejuvenate is no other than the living language and lived time as opposed to the monopolized language and accelerated “time forced and distorted”⁵⁶ by terrorists.

V

Nevertheless, nothing is more ironic than the fact that throughout his wandering, Bill as an “author/creator” seems to degenerate step by step into a mere “character”⁵⁷ not so different from wretched Jean-Claude himself or the filthy bum Scott encountered in a gorgeous bookstore in New York. After all, Bill ends up as a nameless corpse on a ferryboat bound for Beirut with his passport stolen, as if he had merged into the anonymous masses. In accordance with his demise, his elaborate last writing about the hostage, scribbled on a memo pad, is most likely to get scattered and be lost in utter oblivion. Thus Bill’s last attempt to create the counter-narrative as a “modernist” writer of high integrity seems not to have borne the fruit he envisioned. On the other hand, the sheets of his portraits, as well as the manuscript of the unfinished novel he is to bequeath to posterity, survive as surrogate materials, “collecting aura and force, deepening old Bill’s legend, undyingly.”⁵⁸ This is at once the last situation Bill anticipated and the very circumstances he apprehended at heart when he initially agreed to have his photographs taken and began to commit himself to the distress Jean-Claude was suffering.

More intriguingly, Bill Gray’s last attempt to invigorate the counter-narrative and his following surrender to the overwhelmingly spectacular future projected by terrorists is roughly paralleled by the way Karen behaves during his disappearance: “Karen’s life had no center with Bill on the lam. She was all drift and spin.”⁵⁹ Karen, an ex-Moonie who looks like “something out of Bill Gray,”⁶⁰ emerges herself as a girl of the image who has an idiosyncratic affinity with the media. Fascinated with watching the TV news without sound, she can not only predict the remarks of announcers but also impersonate their “voices with the trueness that’s startling.”⁶¹ In addition to this “uncanny mimicry”⁶² which is instrumental in making her a mutant “human chameleon, whose empathy is boundless,”⁶³ she is “thin-boundaried”⁶⁴ enough to be pervious to any visual discourse projected upon the future: “She took it all in and believed it all. . . . She carried the virus of the future. Quoting Bill.”⁶⁵ Infected with the dazzling allure of the “white-hot future” abounding in white noise and contaminating in turn whoever contacts her, Karen is totally at home with the non-literary world, where she has a great command of visual languages, thanks to her peculiar ability to acknowledge any “dialect of the eye.”⁶⁶

Of particular relevance here is Joseph Tabbi’s observation regarding

one of the most significant roles Karen and Brita play in putting Bill's private narrative in the right perspective: "[T]hey take the narrative out of Bill's room and into the realm of competing voices, mixed populations, and nonhegemonic, even 'terrorist,' institutions."⁶⁷ These vicarious activities Bill seems to have entrusted the two women with after his disappearance surely correspond to his ethical belief in the democratic multiplicity of voices inherent in the counter-narrative he asserted in the heated debate with George.⁶⁸ Indeed, in their respective ways, Karen and Brita are both willing to lend themselves to democratization of Bill's narrative by taking it into an open field and exposing it to heterogeneous voices, but Tabbi's point would have become all the more lucid, had he paid scrutinizing attention to the noteworthy difference between the two compassionate women.

In the long run, Karen ends up "drifting and spinning" like "visual litter" on the multilateral interface between the grand narrative she cannot completely do away with and the counter-narrative Bill has newly instilled in her, virtually nullifying the intricate line of demarcation drawn between them. No doubt she is enthusiastic about making an entry into the versatile multi-layered microcosms of derelicts in the lean-tos and tents,⁶⁹ longing to appreciate the esoteric poetry of their vernacular "language of soot"⁷⁰ "that sounded like multilingual English"⁷¹ tinged with Bakhtinian heteroglossia. Yet, what she is actually engaged in is enforcing upon them the formulated grand narrative that accelerates the anticipated advent of her "Master," from which she has not yet entirely been deprogrammed.

In contrast to Karen's recurrent apocalyptic mission into which she has drifted away, Brita's arduous final mission in the epilogue, "in Beirut," has more to do with differentiated verbal language than totalizing visual images. First and foremost, Beirut is delineated as an imploded "millennial image mill"⁷² as a result of the long-standing civil war, where local militias have taken to a new form of fighting, firing at portraits of each other's leaders. Filled with the rambling ruins and ravages somewhat reminiscent of the devastated Ground Zero, DeLillo's Beirut is a typically "third-worldish" locus no less plagued than New York⁷³ with the bombardment of rampant visual images, including gaudy red posters for Coke II—a palpable sign of "Cocacolonization."⁷⁴ Yet, this is not the whole story. As David Cowart spells out, "he [DeLillo] characterizes Beirut itself as language, its squalor, suffering, torture, civil war, and endless, violent death all giving tongue to the misery of the

‘nowhere’ people. . . .”⁷⁵ No matter how inextricably Brita is enticed into and entangled in an image-ridden labyrinth of Beirut and no matter how far she makes inroads into the heart of the slums where Abu Rashid’s hideout is located, it is not her camera but her tongue that she makes the best use of in her showdown with him at the end of their photo session.

Her battle of words with the chief of the terrorists, however, is just a prelude to the multiple reverberations of miscellaneous radio voices she hears day and night “calling across the leveled city.”⁷⁶ Interpellating and praying for all the hostages, all the babies, all the refugees and all the dead, these imperishable verbal voices “crowd in toward her, pressing with a mournful force.”⁷⁷ So far as these polyphonic sounds aired throughout the city are concerned, they converge nowhere but in the ruins of Beirut: “Only our language is Beirut.”⁷⁸ Appreciating the practice of these resilient verbal activities in the most demolished area of the imploded city, Brita, who awakes at some sounds at dead of night, “interpellates”⁷⁹ in salutation the bride and groom in the midst of the wedding parade advancing just below her balcony escorted by a battle-tired tank. Whether rudimentary or not, her multilingual blessings towards the couple and their felicitous response endorse DeLillo’s unflinching confidence in the humble everyday narrative he highly evaluated “In the Ruins of the Future”: “But living language is not diminished.”⁸⁰ In opposition to the September 11 attack that was plotted, in Osama bin Laden’s words, to “overshadow all other speeches made everywhere else in the world,”⁸¹ *Mao II* rejuvenates itself as a metafictional counter-narrative that exemplifies the awkward yet surmountable predicament living language confronts at Ground Zero.

NOTES

¹ Don DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September,” *Harper’s*, December 2001, 34.

² Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (New York: Viking, 1991; Penguin Books, 1992), 157. In connection with this new tragic narrative, Bill states as follows: “The darker the news, the grander the narrative.” See DeLillo, *Mao II*, 42.

³ DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future,” 34.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Viking, 1988), 181.

⁹ Anthony DeCurtis, “‘An Outsider in This Society’: An Interview with Don

DeLillo," in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 48.

¹⁰ In *Mao II* Brita complains about the sheer massiveness of the wall-like WTC that looms, occupying too much space and obstructing most of the view from her loft. In response to her remark, Bill points out the dialogical relationship the time-honored twin towers seem to have entered into, naturally assimilating into the landscape. See DeLillo, *Mao II*, 39–40.

¹¹ DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future," 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³ As has already been pointed out, the eerily religious jacket of *Underworld*, on which a large bird-like object is making its way towards the WTC against the stark silhouette of a church, looks as if it is prophetic of the September 11 attack. On DeLillo's commitment to the selection of this monochromic iconography based on a photograph by André Kertész, see Vince Passaro, "Don DeLillo and the World Trade Center Towers." <<http://www.mrbellersneighborhood.com/>>.

¹⁴ See Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 372–6.

¹⁵ Jesse Detwiler, "a garbage guerrilla" in *Underworld*, provides an intuitive insight into the relationship between civilization and waste: "[C]ities rose on garbage, inch by inch, gaining elevation through the decades as buried debris increased. . . . It pushed back. It pushed into every space available. . . . No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense." See DeLillo, *Underworld*, 287.

¹⁶ Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2000), 193.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ DeCurtis, "An Outsider in This Society," 57–8.

¹⁹ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 156.

²⁰ Margaret Scanlan, "Writers among Terrorists: Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and the Rushdie Affair," in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 40.2 (Summer 1994), 244. Reprinted in *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction*, (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001).

²¹ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 16.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 41. His quotation from a 1991 interview sums up much of what DeLillo has to say about the affinity between writers and terrorists: "True terror is a language and a vision. There is a deep narrative structure to terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to." See Vince Passaro, "Dangerous Don DeLillo." *New York Times Magazine*, 19 May 1991, 77.

²⁵ Douglas Keeseey, *Don DeLillo* (New York: Twayne, 1993), 188.

²⁶ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 36.

²⁷ Maria Nadotti, "An Interview with Don DeLillo." Trans. Peggy Boyers. *Salmagundi* 100 (1993): 88.

²⁸ Laura Barrett, "'Here, But Also There': Subjectivity and Postmodern Space in *Mao II*," in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 45.3 (Fall 1999), 799. Her argument about "DeLillo's destabilizing narrative space" by means of "the interrelation of storytelling and photography" is cogent. See *Ibid.*, 805.

²⁹ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

³² *Ibid.*, 43.

³³ There may be no direct intertextuality between Richard Powers's *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* and *Mao II*, but the concept of "posting forward" and "remembering forward," which crops up sporadically in the former, is illuminating enough to throw a new light on our discussion about the latter here. Concerning this, see Powers, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (New York: Beech Tree books, William Morrow, 1985), 209, 210, 257, 259.

³⁴ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 42.

³⁵ Powers, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, 209.

³⁶ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 140.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁰ Powers, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, 39.

⁴¹ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 222.

⁴² In a nutshell, Bill is to Brita's replicated Bills, as Mao is to Warhol's silk-screened Maos, insofar as the slightly differentiated simulacra float free of history, nullifying the original. Since the postmodern aura is achieved by replication, as Barrett underscores, the way what Warhol did with Mao in turn affects the creation of his own aura as simulacra is worth scrutinizing, but it is a little beyond our scope here.

⁴³ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 102.

⁴⁴ This situation parallels the fact that DeLillo himself read in support of Salman Rushdie at the Columns Gallery in New York City, which suggests that *Mao II* was scrupulously intended as a response to the Rushdie Affair. In his interview with Passaro, he maintains that Rushdie is situated as "a hostage." See for more details Ryan Simmons, "What Is a Terrorist? Contemporary Authorship, the Unabomber, and DeLillo's *Mao II*," in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 45.3 (Fall 1999), 677.

⁴⁵ Briefly referring to Jennifer Wicke, Osteen defines this term as follows: "the power to use photographic or televised images to manufacture, as if by magic, spectacular events that profoundly mold public consciousness." See Osteen, *American Magic and Dread*, 193.

⁴⁶ See Les W. Smith, *Confession in the Novel: Bakhtin's Author Revisited* (London: Associated University Press, 1996), 138–9.

⁴⁷ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 112.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁶ DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future," 39.

⁵⁷ For example, Bill asks a group of vets he runs into on Cyprus to make a diagnosis of his own symptoms caused by the car accident, pretending that they are his character's, not his own.

⁵⁸ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 224.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶³ Louis Menand, "Market Report," in *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, eds. Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 2000), 74. Originally published in the *New Yorker*, 24 June 1991, 81–84.

⁶⁴ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 119.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 175.

⁶⁷ Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 202.

⁶⁸ Bill insists to him, evaluating polyphonic voices inherent in his own narrative: "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 total control wrecks the spirit, how my characters deny my efforts to own them completely, how I need internal dissent, self-argument, how the world squashes me the minute I think it's mine." DeLillo, *Mao II*, 159.

⁶⁹ A bag lady's "secret universe of things, unwhisperable, plastic bags inside plastic bags" epitomizes the concealed tight-knit microcosms Karen is attracted to, but after all she cannot help feeling alienated from "some infinite collapsible system of getting through a life." See DeLillo, *Mao II*, 145, 152.

⁷⁰ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 180.

⁷¹ Ibid., 149.

⁷² Ibid., 299.

⁷³ Apart from this, there are some passages throughout the text, where the dreary sights of New York abruptly overlap with the devastated landscape of Beirut. For example, see *Mao II*, 146, 176.

⁷⁴ Scanlan, "Writers among Terrorists," 246.

⁷⁵ David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 113.

⁷⁶ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 239.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Instead of reinforcing the ideological unconscious Althusser elucidates in conjunction with "interpellation," Brita's spontaneous hail from her balcony deconstructs it from within itself. Thus, unlike the thousands of newly-weds depicted "at Yankee Stadium," this couple is not subjected to the hailer in terms of any ideology.

⁸⁰ DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future," 39.

⁸¹ Quotation from "Transcript of Osama bin Laden videotape—December 13, 2001," issued by the U.S. Department of Defense. <<http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/12/13/tape.transcript/>>.