Don DeLillo and the Myth of the Author–Recluse

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The subtly entrapping nature of celebrity has been a common theme of Don DeLillo’s work since his third novel, *Great Jones Street* (1973), narrated by a twenty-six-year-old rock star, Bucky Wunderlick, who tires of fame in the middle of a national tour and goes to ground in a seedy New York bedsitter. This theme, however, finds its fullest expression in DeLillo’s 1991 novel *Mao II*, where it is linked to a specific concern which may be closer to home for him—the paradoxical fascination with author–recluses in American celebrity culture. DeLillo, who came to reluctant terms with major league celebrity from the mid-1980s onwards after a long period of respectful reviews and polite notices, has praised reclusive authors for “refusing to become part of the all-incorporating treadmill of consumption and disposal,” in spite of the “automatic mechanism” of the media which tries “to absorb certain such reluctant entities into the weave.” *Mao II* is about what happens when this absorption takes place, and whether or not this wholly devalues the author’s own tactics of silence and renunciation.

The book’s central character is Bill Gray, the celebrated author of two slim novels who has neither published work nor appeared in public for three decades, and who lives an ascetic existence in an unidentified rural hideout, supported by two assistants, Scott Martineau and Karen Janney. The plot begins as this situation is about to change, and is divided roughly into two parts. In the first part, Gray emerges haltingly from his seclusion by agreeing to have his picture taken by a New York photographer, Brita Nilsson; in the second part, Gray embarks on a more emphatic attempt to go public when he becomes involved, partly as a result of contacts made

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through Brita, with the campaign to free a poet and UN worker, Jean-Claude Julien, who is being held hostage in Beirut. In its bare outlines, then, the novel resembles several recent texts in its attempt to both rework and unravel the pervasive cultural myth of the author–recluse, such as W. P. Kinsella’s *Shoeless Joe* (1983), in which an Iowa farmer kidnaps J. D. Salinger and takes him to a Red Sox baseball game; Jay McInerney’s *Brightness Falls* (1992), in which an author’s hugely delayed work-in-progress and efforts at self-promotion have turned him into a cult figure, in his own words “the Boo Radley of American letters”; and even an episode of *Frasier*, in which the eponymous radio shrink and his brother, Niles, pursue a reclusive and rarely published author, T. H. Houghton, around the bars of Seattle, and pounce on a beer mat doodle which they falsely presume to be his. *Mao II*, however, offers a more complex and developed use of this central trope as a way into a number of issues concerning the future of serious writing, authorship and the self in contemporary culture. DeLillo’s characterization of the celebrity author in *Mao II* can be linked to anxieties about the rise of what Fredric Jameson calls “a new depthlessness” in society and culture created by the replacement of the “real” with surface image. Contemporary celebrity, I will argue, provides many examples of this depthlessness, but it also points to a notion of postmodern culture as heterogeneous and multivalent, the product of a complicated negotiation between different media, discourses and audiences. I want to suggest that *Mao II*’s unwillingness to entertain some of these latter possibilities means that ultimately it reproduces a particularly prevalent myth of author–recluses as transcendent figures defined by their separation from the “mass.”

Bill’s initial decision to have his photograph taken allows DeLillo to provide a series of variations on a recurrent theme in his work – the reproduction and circulation of media images as exchangeable commodities. As Gray puts it during his photo session with Brita: “There’s the life and there’s the consumer event…Nothing happens until it’s consumed…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.”

The frequent references to the life and work of Andy Warhol (the novel takes its title

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4 Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), 43–44. Subsequent references to this novel are in parentheses next to the relevant quote in the text.
from Warhol’s line drawing, *Mao II*, held in New York’s Museum of Modern Art) help to develop this theme throughout the novel. The purposely flattened style of Warhol’s silk-screen prints of cult figures such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and Mao himself partly serves to demonstrate, as one critic puts it, “how fame is transformed into a death mask, how a portrait can freeze the mind behind the face.” The artist’s own carefully achieved shallowness as a celebrity and cultural icon underlines this – when Karen tries to summon up a mental image of Warhol, all she can remember is that “he was famous, he was dead, he had a white mask of face and glowing white hair” (62).

Gray’s agreement to sit for Brita is somewhat puzzling because his theory of photography seems to be that, as Jameson argues of Warhol’s work, there is “no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture.” When Brita has left the house with the negatives after the photo session, Bill thinks of himself as used and discarded: “Got what she came for, didn’t she? I’m a picture now, flat as birdshit on a Buick” (54). Brita also points out that, once Bill’s photograph has appeared, he will be expected to resemble it and that people will “absolutely question your right to look different from your picture” (43). These comments about the displacement of the self by its photographic reproduction connect with what DeLillo has claimed as his original inspiration for *Mao II* – a photograph of J. D. Salinger which appeared on the front page of the *New York Post* in 1988, picturing him as he was caught unawares by two journalists while coming out of his local supermarket. DeLillo referred to this “startling picture of an elderly man – he looked frightened and angry…. For the editor to send these two men to New Hampshire was a little like ordering an execution. And when you look at the face of the man being photographed, it’s not a great leap of imagination to think he’s just been shot.”

Susan Sontag has similarly pointed to the inherently aggressive nature of photography, inscribed in its very vocabulary: “loading” a film, “aiming” the camera, “shooting” a picture, and so on:

There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to

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6 Jameson, 8.
photograph someone is a sublimated murder—a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.9

Mao II provides an extended treatment of these metaphors of the photographer as marksman, and the photographic image as an erasure of the self. Gray describes picture-taking as “like a wake,” and of his fans says that there is “barely a glimmer of difference” between “the cameratoters and the gun-wavers” (42, 197).

The suggestive connections made here between celebrity, media reproduction and death can be linked to a certain negative critique of postmodern culture as an endless play of signs detached from any notion of “value.” The emphasis on the death of subjectivity in a culture saturated with images, in particular, relates to attempts by some theorists of postmodernity to explain the loss of a “depth model” of the human personality as the product of a culture dominated by self-referential signs. This critique can be linked to the cultural phenomenon of celebrity in at least two ways. First, the celebrity is often seen (in Karen’s comments about Warhol, for example) as a prefabricated image rather than a “real” person, as in Jameson’s description of the simulacrum—“the identical copy for which no original has ever existed.”10 Second, the perpetual demand in celebrity culture for more and more information about stars tends to undermine the division between “public” and “private” selves on which the depth model partly depends.11 Jean Baudrillard’s theories of the “hyperreal,” although they offer a complication of the depth model rather than a critique of its disappearance, are also relevant here, because they read like an account of the refusal or inability of celebrity culture to recognize such distinctions:

This loss of public space occurs contemporaneously with the loss of private space. The one is no longer a spectacle, the other no longer a secret. Their distinctive opposition, the clear difference of an exterior and an interior…is effaced in a sort of obscenity where the most intimate processes of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media.12

The concerns raised in DeLillo’s novel about the loss of any coherent sense of subjectivity in contemporary culture can also be linked to the

10 Jameson, 18.
earlier work of the Frankfurt School, where the collapse of this distinction between “public” and “private” spheres is viewed as being consistent with two characteristics of capitalism: the limitless search for new markets, and the valorization of a certain form of individualism, in which, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer put it, “the peculiarity of the self is a monopoly commodity determined by society.”

The telephoto lenses of newspaper and magazine photographers – who, according to Scott, have sought out Gray’s house in order to take long-range pictures of the author (30) – are a specific example of this commodification of the “private” self, created in pursuit of an exclusive image which will boost circulation and profits. Mao II also emphasizes the marketing potential of celebrity, linked to the consolidation of literature as part of the culture industry, and this is signalled at the very beginning of the novel as Scott browses around a New York bookstore, checking out the photographs of authors on the wall and stepping over piles of garishly marketed books all seeming to shriek “Buy me” (19). It is further embodied in the likeable but emptily raffish figure of the editor Charlie Everson, who wants to publish Gray’s long-awaited novel and sell it with modern mass-marketing techniques. As Gray puts it, Charlie’s emphasis is on the promotional power of the product rather than the work itself: “The more books they publish, the weaker we become. The secret force that drives the industry is a compulsion to make writers harmless” (47). The built-in obsolescence of celebrity culture, DeLillo suggests, turns authors themselves into alienated, spectral figures, separated from the creative elements of their labour. As he states elsewhere: “The fame-making apparatus confers celebrity on an individual in a conflagration so intense that he or she can’t possibly survive…this is how the larger cultural drama of white-hot consumption and instant waste is performed in individualized terms, with actors playing themselves.”

Steffen Hantke has similarly explained the celebritization of the reclusive author in terms of this invasion of the self by the relentless logic of capital:

Since the power of [the publicity] machinery is geared toward textual and commodity production, just as the author himself, isolation and silence alone are not sufficient means of throwing sand into its gears. Rather, silence and absence open up a space that remains a potentiality, a site that remains, as of yet, uncolonized until it is noticed and taken advantage of. In the absence of prior


claims, postmodern culture will attempt to invade that space by staging the author as celebrity.\footnote{Steffen Hantke, “God Save Us from Bourgeois Adventure: The Figure of the Terrorist in Contemporary American Conspiracy Fiction,” \textit{Studies in the Novel}, \textbf{28}: 2 (Summer 1996), 235.}

Gray’s fate in \textit{Mao II} also suggests that contemporary culture abhors a vacuum, and that the insatiability of publicity allows it to consume even its most uncompromising noncompliants eventually. Bill consents to Brita’s request for a photo session partly because he realizes he is powerless to avoid the media’s unremitting glare, and hopes that this concession will provide him with some kind of breathing space. He needs the pictures “to break down the monolith I’ve built,” the elaborate operation to maintain his privacy which has entailed “a state of constant religious observance” (44).

It is not hard to find real-life examples of this inability of authors to escape the intrusions of the media. James Knowlson provides an interesting parallel in his account of Samuel Beckett’s efforts to deal with the “catastrophe” of his Nobel Prize success in 1969, as dozens of journalists swarmed around the lobby of his Paris hotel and thwarted his attempts to go into hiding. As Knowlson tells it, the author’s French publisher, Jérôme Lindon, flew to Paris and brokered a gentlemen’s agreement with the press that they should be allowed to take pictures for a few minutes, as long as Beckett did not speak:

Three days after the award, then, Beckett made an appearance … smoking a cigar, with his hair cut very short … he sat down, looking ill at ease, said nothing, and puffed away at his cigar. The cameras whirred, and, before the cigar even had time to burn down a single centimetre, he was whisked away and back to his room.\footnote{James Knowlson, \textit{Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett} (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 570–71.}

Beckett acknowledged reluctantly that even reclusive authors cannot prevent both the commercial exploitation of their life and work and the onset of new technologies which encourage the constant proliferation and dissemination of information. Certain American author–recluses have been less conciliatory than Beckett, but no more successful at avoiding media attention. J. D. Salinger, for example, has been fiercely litigious in blocking pirate publications of his uncollected short stories and biographies which have used private letters and manuscript sources, but may prove less effective in his recent efforts to close down certain Salinger web pages, because of the difficulties of policing the vast network of information which makes up the internet. Another prodigiously eremitic
The contention that author–recluses achieve fame primarily as a product of capitalism’s appropriation of previously uncommodified spheres does not, however, answer an important question: why is the interest they arouse so peculiarly different from that inspired by other kinds of celebrities? There is, after all, another reason why Gray finally allows himself to be photographed: he is aware that his disappearance is itself a primary source of his fame. There have been thousands of pages of print devoted to his reclusiveness and unpublished work-in-progress, and feverish rumours circulating that he has committed suicide, changed identity or exiled himself in Canada. In order to explain this, we need to examine celebrity in a more nuanced way – and, specifically, it should be seen as not merely an economic production but as a social phenomenon, part of the plethora of conflicted meanings which attends the multiplication of signs in contemporary culture. As a number of critics have shown, these tensions are encapsulated in recent controversies surrounding copyright law, created by the simultaneous growth of trademark rights to protect celebrities and a more nebulous and less controllable sphere of publicity. These legal wrangles point to a wider social fact – that celebrity is a site of considerable ambivalence and contestation, produced not only by the pursuit of commercial profit but by a complex system of sometimes competing forces.

In the specific context of Hollywood cinema, Richard Dyer has also explored the “intertextuality” of celebrity (by which he means the interchange between “official” celebrity texts such as movies and TV shows and a subsidiary sphere of journalism, publicity and gossip) and explained the audience’s relation to the star as a compulsive search for the “real” – an attempt to distinguish between the authentic and superficial in the star’s personality by playing off the different texts against each other. In doing so, Dyer argues, audiences use celebrity as a way of speculating about the nature of the individual in contemporary culture.


society—specifically, stars “enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production (capitalism), with its particular organisation of life into public and private spheres.”

Joshua Gamson, similarly, has suggested that the attractions of “celebrity tourism” (turning up at film premieres or going on coach tours of Beverly Hills residential areas in the hope of spotting stars, for example) are partly generated by a search for the “excitement of proof”—the desire “to confirm and reconfirm that surfaces have something, in this case someone, beneath them.”

The way in which cultural commentators, including DeLillo, rushed to interpret the Salinger photograph in various ways, describing it as “sad and frightening,” or revealing the author as “a scared little old man, arm thrown up as if to ward off a blow,” provides another example of this search for “depth.” This picture may well have frozen the author as media image as DeLillo suggests, but it also testifies to the existence of what Roland Barthes calls photography’s punctum: its ability to disturb the looker with more than simply its surface appearance, “a kind of subtle beyond—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see.” The Salinger photograph was clearly interesting in part because it seemed to point to the existence of a “real” Salinger existing outside of the media’s representation of him, particularly since it contrasted so sharply with the only other widely circulated photograph of the author—the young, brylcreemed figure on the cover of early editions of The Catcher in the Rye. Despite Gray’s idea of photography as flattening the subject and destroying his or her uniqueness, the pictures of him also seem to have a similar effect on their observers. Although Scott is initially opposed to Bill’s decision to have his photograph taken, he also believes that “a great man’s face shows the beauty of his work,” and when Brita’s negatives arrive through the post at the end of the novel, he thinks she has “established rhythms and themes, catching a signal, tracking some small business in Bill’s face and working to enlarge it or explain it, make it true, make it him” (60–61, 221).

More generally, the tensions involved in the creation and dissemination of celebrity—the way in which its purely commercial imperatives have to

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be continually negotiated and renegotiated in social contexts – means that it works through and comments on its own contradictions, critiquing the tenuousness of its claims to single people out for special attention.\(^\text{23}\) The celebrity thus functions as a *locus* for debate about what constitutes an individual, and specifically an individual worthy of fame, in contemporary culture, clustering around polarities such as depth and surface, authenticity and superficiality, cultural and commercial value. These tensions are even more apparent in the case of celebrity author–recluses, who occupy a peculiar position in celebrity culture as a whole. These figures, specifically, seem to point to the significance, in Walter Benjamin’s terms, of “cult value” over “exhibition value” – the uniqueness and particularity of art and culture over its reproducibility to as wide an audience as possible.\(^\text{24}\) It is partly this which makes them so fascinating to people – the award of the Nobel Prize, for example, seems to confer something akin to movie stardom on authors such as Beckett precisely because of its association with criteria other than straightforward notoriety or marketability.

DeLillo’s novel does raise the possibility that author–recluses might be valued precisely because of their supposed aloofness from celebrity – as Gray puts it, “when a writer doesn’t show his face, he becomes a local symptom of God’s famous reluctance to appear … The image world is corrupt, here is a man who hides his face” (36). But this seems to work through a simple reversal in which Gray’s reclusiveness becomes merely an inverted form of promotion, a move which centres around the figure of Scott. His obsessive and eventually successful attempt to penetrate Gray’s inner sanctum (which even involves finding work as a mail sorter in order to locate the author’s address), and his concern with what Benjamin would describe as the “auratic” origins of Gray’s writing – his meticulous filing and cataloguing of the diaries, letters and manuscripts, and pride in “being part of this epic preservation, the neatly amassed evidence of driven art” (32) – seems to be an effort to get beyond Gray’s image as a writer and reach the “real” artist underneath. Scott believes that Bill should not publish his novel, using his silence to demonstrate that, in a culture of pure simulation, “the withheld work of art is the only eloquence left” (67). But this concern with purity and essence seems to derive ultimately from an anxiety that Gray might diminish his stock of symbolic capital by undermining its rarity value. As Scott puts it: “Bill

\(^\text{23}\) See, for example, P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), x; and Gamson, 196.

Joe Moran gained celebrity by doing nothing. … [he] gets bigger as his distance from the scene deepens” (52). With the help of a monthly check debited directly from Gray’s account, Scott also proves an excellent custodian of the author’s reputation after his disappearance at the end of the novel, releasing some of the pictures but leaving the manuscript where it is, “collecting aura and force, deepening old Bill’s legend, undyingly” (224). Although Scott’s motives are not primarily financial, there is still a sense that the author has been marketed for consumption – as though, as Stuart Ewen puts it in a similar context, “the critique has been turned on its head, packaged, and used against itself… skinned and transmuted into a consumable style.”

So the author–recluse represents here primarily an example of the media’s ability to reverse the terms of celebrity and use the kudos attaching to artistic “integrity” to its own advantage. What is absent is a notion of the author–recluse as a contested ideological site, a pivotal point of contention in debates about the role of authors, the nature of fame and the relationship between cultural authority and exchange value in capitalist societies. As a cultural myth, then, the author–recluse is produced not simply by “the media” but by authors themselves (the fact that it is Scott who is using Bill in this way implicitly exempts the latter from any suggestion of creative self-invention) and their public.

Mao II’s idea of cultural mediation as a one-way process, in which the celebrity author is merely the victim of an all-consuming publicity machine, is reinforced in the second part of the novel when DeLillo explores the relationship between writers, terrorists and crowds. Gray comes out of hiding at the suggestion of Charlie Everson, flying to London to speak at a reading aimed at raising awareness of the Beirut hostage’s plight. The reading, however, is interrupted by a terrorist bomb, part of a botched plan to capture Gray and release Jean-Claude Julien simultaneously. Then, at the suggestion of an intermediary, George Haddad – and apparently tiring of the ways in which his celebrity name has been used to give publicity to both the campaign for the Swiss poet’s release and the terrorists themselves – Gray makes his way to Lebanon to negotiate with Julien’s captors in person. This extraordinary move springs from his frustration at being turned into a cultural commodity in spite of his best efforts at abnegation and denial, and his subsequent conclusion that his failure to be “dangerous” means that his life as a writer has been “a kind of simulation” (97). Gray’s efforts to find a more active social role for the author are thus part of his belief that writers have

become “famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence” – only terrorists can now “alter the inner life of the culture,” he laments, because writers have all been “incorporated” (41).

This comparison between writers and terrorists is, in fact, introduced only to be inverted at the end of the novel. Gray’s plan to bring about the hostage’s release ends in anticlimactic failure – he dies on a ferry on the way to Lebanon from internal injuries sustained during an earlier car accident – but in a way which undercuts this earlier notion of terrorists as unco-opted and instead promotes the writer as the last (albeit diminishing) hope for humanity. The Lebanese terrorists depicted in the novel’s epilogue prove to be addicted to the image world, wearing a portrait of their leader, Abu Rashid, on their T-shirts, looking at videos of themselves taking part in the war, and apparently aiming to kill Bill, photograph the corpse and release the picture to the world’s media whenever it will have most impact. In an age when “news of disaster is the only narrative people need,” (42) terrorists who exploit the narrative and dramatic impact of television bulletins are the power-brokers, while authors like Gray are a hunted, dying breed – indeed, Brita describes herself at the beginning of the novel as undertaking a “species count” of writers (26), and at the end she gives up her project to photograph terrorists instead. But DeLillo’s characterization of the broader social world which Gray fleetingly embraces suggests that the latter’s inability to survive in this world indicates an admirable refusal to compromise. Only “the secluded writer, the arch individualist, living outside the glut of the image world,” it seems, remains untainted by postmodern culture – and only then by retreating from it into silence.

The connection between this section of the novel and the issues I have already raised around celebrity and authorship becomes clearer when one sees that the link made between writers and terrorists pivots around their rival relationship to “crowds.” Mao II, according to DeLillo, is about different sorts of crowds. My book … is asking who is speaking to these people. Is it the writer who traditionally thought he could influence the imagination of his contemporaries or is it rather the totalitarian leader, the military man, the terrorist, those who are twisted by power and who seem capable of imposing their vision on the world, reducing the earth to a place of danger and anger.26

The representation of the terrorist here, and in DeLillo’s novel – which disconnects this figure from any broader geopolitical context and presents

27 Maria Nadotti, “An Interview with Don DeLillo,” Salmagundi, 100 (Fall 1993), 87.
him as simply a violent, anarchic and charismatic individual – thus seems to follow on from a belief that the relationship between writers and their audiences has tragically deteriorated, allowing the terrorist to take the writer’s place in the social sphere.

DeLillo has referred in an interview to the “implicit panic” suggested by all crowds: “There’s something menacing and violent about a mass of people which makes us think of the end of individuality, whether they are gathered around a military leader or a holy man.”28 There are parallels between DeLillo’s comments here and the work of influential turn-of-the-century crowd theorists like Gustave Le Bon, Scipio Sighele and Gabriel Tarde. This group of writings – a culturally conservative attempt to make sense of the rise of mass, democratic, industrialized, urban society – characterized the collective mind as emotional, irrational and possessing a dangerous and growing power. Indeed, the prediction at the end of *Mao II*’s prologue, which describes the mass Moonie wedding of thousands of couples at Yankee Stadium at which Karen is present, that “the future belongs to crowds,” (16) closely parallels Le Bon’s assertion that “the power of the crowd is the only force that nothing menaces ... The age we are about to enter will in truth be the era of crowds.” 29 *Mao II* contains several descriptions of crowds taken from the news events of 1989, when the novel is set, as well as actual images from the Hillsborough tragedy, the Ayatollah Khomeini’s funeral and the Tiananmen Square massacre – all in grainy black-and-white, so that individual faces cannot be picked out and they merge into a homogeneous mass. The novel as a whole seems to homologize quite specific contexts and present all crowds as faceless and faintly menacing – different crowds are described throughout the narrative as “fuelled by credulousness,” “swarming,” “straining and heaving,” “anguished,” “frenzied” and a “twisted vision of a rush to death” (7, 32, 33, 188, 34).

I want to argue that there is a link between these representations of crowds and the mythicization of the celebrity author–recluse which is DeLillo’s central theme. Significantly, P. David Marshall has linked the rise of celebrity as a pervasive phenomenon in this century to these earlier accounts of the crowd as herd-like and susceptible to emotional appeals, and to subsequent efforts by different institutions to deal with the perceived threat from the mass. He argues that celebrity functions as a “rationalization of the irrational,” a means by which the affective is sublimated and controlled in an increasingly organized and bureaucratized

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This persistent belief in the madness of crowds may explain the frequent characterization of followers of celebrities as unreflectively fanatical, a characterization which, according to Joli Jenson, typically takes one of two related forms: the hysterical crowd or the maladjusted, emotionally unstable loner. Both these types of fan appear in *Mao II*—either directly or as imagined by the subject of their devotion, Gray himself. Bill argues that “people” find the reclusive author fascinating but also resent him and mock him and want to dirty him up and watch his 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. The writer who doesn’t show his face is encroaching on holy turf. He’s playing God’s own trick. (36–37)

The fanatical crowd, then, emerges as complicit with the mass media in its infinite production and recycling of images and its subsequent hounding of unwilling celebrities. The sociopathic loner also appears in the novel, at least in displaced form, as Gray lives in constant fear of being attacked, believing that his deep seclusion “made it possible that some lonely young man might see a mission here” (197). This fear seems to be at least partly justified, given that a deranged fan once sent him a severed finger by post.

There is no doubt that such deluded individuals exist (as epitomized by celebrity stalkers and celebrity assassins or would-be assassins like Mark Chapman and John Hinckley, Jr., who feel an absurd sense of kinship with their prey), and they may be partly produced by a manufactured culture of intimacy which presents celebrities as simultaneously extraordinary and familiar. Salinger has also been frequently harassed by monomaniacal fans—one man dressed himself up in fake wounds and lay moaning and writhing outside the author’s house in Cornish in an effort to lure him out, and in 1982 Salinger sued a fan who had both publicly impersonated and constructed an elaborate imaginary friendship with him. In setting up a binary opposition between the “individual” (represented by the figure of the author, or more specifically the white, male American author) and an undifferentiated “crowd,” however,

30 Marshall, 54, 17.
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DeLillo’s novel seems to point to the typicality of these pathological cases, suggesting that they are somehow indicative of the nature of fandom in contemporary culture. The criticism often levelled at Baudrillard’s comments about the “silencing of the masses” in postmodern culture – that they underestimate the active, sense-making role of audiences – can be made more forcefully about DeLillo’s conception of the “crowd,” which seems to stem from a totalizing view of a mediadominated culture which renders people especially mindless and manipulable.33

By reproducing a notion of an automated mass being instilled with “good” or “bad” influence (“who is speaking to these people?”), DeLillo’s novel seems to endorse Gray’s inability to find a role for the author in the broader social world and his retreat again into silence. By most criteria Gray is a failure: he is making endless, painful revisions to a work which he knows to be misconceived, drowning in a “shitpile of hopeless prose,” (122) and keeping his own mental and physical collapse uneasily at bay with depressants, anti-depressants, antibiotics, sedatives and steroid ointments. But there is a double edge to Gray’s creative desiccation, partly because the relationship with his readership is so thoroughly dysfunctional anyway, so that his only available move seems to be towards an aesthetics of silence. But such an aesthetics is compromised by the fact that, as Susan Sontag says, “the artist’s activity is cursed with mediacy”:

As long as art is understood and valued as an “absolute” activity, it will be a separatist, elitist one. Elites presuppose masses. So far as the best art defines itself by essentially priestly aims, it presupposes and confirms the existence of a relatively passive, never fully initiated, voyeuristic laity that is regularly convoked to watch, listen, read, or hear – and then sent away.34

It is not simply that postmodern culture seeks to absorb silence, then, but that silence itself presumes an audience. Gray’s retreat from the world, as Ron Rosenbaum has written of Salinger’s seclusion, becomes inevitably a statement about it – “an eloquent work of art … [which] betokens some special knowledge, some wisdom, the penetration of some unutterable mystery beyond words, beyond speech, expressible only in silence.”35


35 Rosenbaum, 7, 10.
The novel’s conclusion underlines the inevitable consequence of this – the preclusion of any kind of social role for the author – when Gray dies an undignified death in pursuit of such a role. For how can the novelist aim to “increase the flow of meaning, be a reply to power,” (200) as Gray originally hopes, if his work remains unfinished, unpublished and unread? Bill’s unsuccessful foray into the corrupted public sphere thus only reaffirms and vindicates his initial decision to withdraw from it. I do not mean to reduce the novel simplistically to a “message,” or to suggest that it is merely crypto-autobiography, with Bill Gray as DeLillo’s surrogate self. Amidst its many textual uncertainties, though, the novel does construct a certain set of preferred meanings – partly through its indirect interior monologue, which transposes the thoughts of the various characters but also seems to float above them, having a similar style and tone throughout the novel. The most significant of these meanings is the privileging of a particular image of the author–recluse – that of a charismatic *artiste maudit* separated from the rest of society by the seriousness and singularity of his literary mission, the only genuine element in an otherwise ersatz culture.

This is interesting partly because DeLillo’s own career as a public figure has been so much more open and dialogic than this. For an author who professes a Joycean creed of “silence, exile, cunning, and so on,”36 and who did not give an interview or release any biographical information other than his place of residence (New York) until the late seventies, it is surprising how much space he has given recently to discussing his work. Since the late eighties, he has reluctantly undertaken interviews, book signings and other appearances, at least one result of which has been a series of strikingly photogenic photographs to accompany magazine and newspaper articles – whatever DeLillo thinks of the camera as a murderous instrument, it seems to love him. This semi-conversion is clearly in part a product of the growing pressure placed on authors to market their work by conglomerate-owned publishers (DeLillo’s current publisher is Scribner’s, owned by the media giant Viacom), but it may also spring from his awareness that authors perceived as labouring the point of their reclusiveness can become, as Bill Gray does, “trapped in [their] own massive stillness” (45). DeLillo’s approach has been successful in that he has protected his private life without being celebritized as a hermit – although America’s *Entertainment Weekly* did recently rate him seven out of ten on a writer’s “reclusiveness scale,” claiming also that he

“frequently uses his characters to dis the whole celebrity thing.” What DeLillo has successfully avoided, I think, is Gray’s problem of falling back on a silence which becomes merely a romantically alienated persona, the reflex statement of an oppositional aesthetic. In Mao II, however, DeLillo not only critiques but also romanticizes the role of author–recluses in contemporary culture, by pointing to both the unavoidable involvement of such authors in the commodification of culture and the admirably uncompromising nature of their rearguard action – a purer but doomed strategy which DeLillo has himself rejected.