Chapter 1

Literary Review

If the number of awards were used as the main criteria in measuring literary greatness, Don DeLillo would be a novelist who certainly ranked among the elites. *Mao II* as Douglas Keesey has documented "was justly granted the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award in 1992", just only a year of the novel's publication (Keesey, 1999, p. 24). The critically acclaimed success of *Mao II*, award wise, is arguably DeLillo's continuous accomplishment as his other novel *White Noise* received the American Book Award in 1986 (Keesey, 1999, p. 8). By continuous, I mean to say that both of DeLillo's award-winning novels share the same theme of exploring the concept of simulation. The differences between the two is that the concept of simulation DeLillo examines in *Mao II* is more autobiographical, almost to the point of being his personal agenda, whereas *White Noise* investigates a more general effect of the concept on a middle class white-American family. Such accomplishment is a testimony to the author's increasing skill, propelling DeLillo into the hall of fame as one of the great American voice. In 1999 he was "awarded the Jerusalem Prize, given to a writer whose work expresses the theme of freedom of the individual society; he was the first American author to receive it". [2]

Hence, it is necessary to study the autobiographical aspect surrounding the development of *Mao II* as it is closely tied to the novel's subject. *Mao II* tells the

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[2] DeLillo's autobiography is taken from DeLillo's *Mao II* author's introduction section. *Mao II*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

story of the protagonist Bill Gray, a critically acclaimed yet reclusive author, who is trying to win a battle against "terrorism" in the postmodern context of image-consumption. The mentioning of the word 'terrorists' in the post-millennium context will immediately bring to mind the 9/11 attacked on the World Trade Center. There are many literary criticisms linking *Mao II* with the tragic incident. There are certainly some resemblances between the terrorists who executed the massacre in New York and those portrayed in the novel such as their similar Middle-Eastern background. The similarity certainly ends there as the actual historical incident that influenced DeLillo's to make his stance against terrorism is "Ayatollah Khomeini's [condemnation] of Salman Rushdie to death for blaspheming Islam in his novel *The Satanic Verses*" (Keesey, 1999, p. 8). The Islamic leader also makes an appearance in *Mao II*. The portrayal of Khomeini in the novel is not the only traceable resemblance between fiction and reality as DeLillo himself is also "one of the authors to show support for Rushdie by participating in a reading organized by the Authors' Guild, PEN American center" (Keesey, 1999, p. 24). Predictably, Bill Gray, a character who could be classified as DeLillo's alter-ego, is also scheduled to make a public poetry reading to save a Swiss poet from his imprisonment by a Maoist group in the novel.

DeLillo's participation in the reading is also tied to another important idea in *Mao II*, the concept of the reclusive author. Prior to his reading in support of Rushdie, DeLillo, likes Bill Gray and his contemporary American reclusive literary celebrities such as Thomas Pynchon and J.D. Salinger, strongly opposes to public appearance. The novelist's decision to emerge from his seclusion, as Keesey points out from DeLillo's own article on *Mao II*, is considered to be a grand symbolic gesture of resistance because "writers have felt preempted by terrorism, have felt that

they've lost a certain influence that violence, a particular kind of theatrical violence, has seized from them" (Keesey, 1999, p. 24). From these circumstances, it is rather logical to interpret *Mao II* as DeLillo's literary shout against terrorism or to be more precise, the "simulated image" of the terrorists. The novel is almost DeLillo's call to arm. Unlike other literary works that only ignite ideological passion, *Mao II* receives immediate response from Thomas Pynchon. In an extremely rare public "appearance", the infamous reclusive author provides a personal recommendation for the novel as "[a] vision as bold and a voice as eloquent and morally focused as any in American writing". [3] *Mao II* is certainly a novel that inspires a reclusive author. The autobiographical elements of the novel alone would make interesting historical analyses. However, its rich content and sophisticate presentation format makes it an open text for various reading approaches.

In *Mao II,* Don DeLillo presents the fragile state of the "author" and the endangerment of the "real" in the Western late-capitalist society in contrast with the terrorists' efficiency in influencing the mass mind through image medium. The dominant themes in the novel include the declining status of the "high modernist literariness" in the late-capitalist media saturated popular culture as well as the foregrounding of the "simulation" over the "real". The themes mentioned are immediately visible at the surface structure of the novel through the difference in characters' relationships. Every character in the novel from Bill Gray, Scott Martineau, Brita Nelson or Abu Rashid seems to carry clear and definite representational meanings as the high modernist author, the image media, the simulated author and the terrorist respectively. The system of sign and representation

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[2] Quoted on the back cover of DeLillo's *Mao II.*

that exist in the characters' relationships provides us with the text's structure of representational meanings – a system that constitutes the basic framework of many criticisms. Some critics even elaborate this representation framework by relating it to the field of cultural studies.

Many criticisms have been written on various contents of *Mao II*. They range from straight forward interpretation of the characters' relationships and their representational meanings to the cultural exploration of the idea of the reclusive author. The aim of this literary review is to explore and criticize the nature of these methods and their analyses of *Mao II*. The results of the reviews will be used as supporting evidences for establishing my methodology in hope of reaching better understanding of the novel. To begin with, critic such as Douglas Keesey interprets *Mao II* as a novel of competing binary oppositions in his article "The Future Belongs to the Crowd." Although he did not state his approach openly, it is apparent that Keesey relies mostly on structuralism in his analysis. Large portion of Keesey's argument focuses on drawing the relationship between the characters' and their representational functions. As a result, his article rarely strays from the surface reading and interpretation of *Mao II*.

Keesey's semi-structuralist method views *Mao II* as a novel of contrasting binary oppositions such as writer vs. terrorists, individual vs. the mass, or writing vs. media images. Basing his argument on this premise, the analysis of the novel becomes a matter of slotting the characters into their respective representational positions. The most obvious example is how he immediately assumes that Bill Gray is the representation of individuality, while Karen is the representation of the mass mind. Keesey then ventures to treat Bill Gray as DeLillo's voice box in expressing

the decline of high modernist literariness. Keesey states that in the fictional Bill Gray, DeLillo "has created an alter ego" (Keesey, 1999, p. 203) who would "question the meaning of authorial fame" (ibid.., p. 203). Aside from this historicist observation of the relationship between the author and his character, Keesey also notes that Bill Gray represents the arch of individuality because he "become a reclusive author as a form of protest against the ubiquity of other depersonalizing media, but… begun to wonder if he has really escaped their influence and regain his individual voice" (Keesey, 1999, p. 212). In order to complete the interpretation of the binary opposition of individual vs. the mass to rectify the novel's representational structure, Keesey interprets Karen's role in the novel as a character that "stands for all those hooked on disaster by the media, seduced into believing that the future belongs to the crowd" (Keesey, 1999, p. 211). Karen conforms to the pole of the mass mind because of her experiences with various events that symbolically destroy her status as an individual. According to Keesey, the Moonie mass wedding and the deprogramming experience force upon by her American family are attempts to "assimilate her identity for their own gain" (Keesey, 1999, p. 209). He also interprets Karen's fascination with disaster news as a sign of the "death of the individual" because the consumption of images could "[encourage] suggestible viewers like Karen to give up fighting and surrender to mass worship" (ibid.., p. 211).

After identifying the characters along with their respective binary oppositions, Keesey proceeds to interpret this structural relationship by relating them to the theme of the decline of authorship in the postmodern world. It is useful to note that his interpretation does not follow the structural framework previously mentioned strictly. Instead, it leans toward the New Criticism approach that relies heavily on the

relationship of symbols in the text. Thus, it is safe to say that his overall approach resembles an evaluation of what each character represents in the text's system of meanings. Keesey perceives Bill Gray as a sort of "simulated author", a victim of the overblown media culture. In support of this idea, he sites how Bill Gray's photography session with Brita epitomizes how "his life has indeed been a mere simulation and not that of the authentically dangerous writer he had wanted to make himself" (Keesey, 1999, p. 213). This simulation of Bill Gray represents the loss of individuality and the failure of the author in the struggle against the image culture.

Keesey also sites the role of other characters in the novel as supporting units for the theme of the simulated author. Beside the previously mentioned media-addicted Karen, Keesey interprets the role of Scott Martineau, Bill Gray's assistant, as his subconscious towards the idea of simulation. In Keesey's opinion, Scott "represents Bill's self-doubts" (Keesey, 1999, p. 212) and is also "the symbol of Bill's own fear that his personal retreat…has merely facilitated their transformation of him into an image" (ibid.., p. 212). The working of the New Criticism approach reduces Scott's position in the novel structure to a symbolic unit to be used as supporting evidence to justify Bill Gray's actions in the novel. Consequently, the search for the symbolic supporting evidences becomes the final purpose of the reading. Such rigid reading approach does not stray from the surface meaning of the text. As a matter of fact, it fails to even question the validity of each symbolic unit in the novel's structure. Although problematic, Keesey's article provides a useful reference in dealing with the issue of the simulation and the novel's system of representational meanings.

Continuing with the concept of simulation, Joe Moran, the critic on American Studies, explores the nature of simulacrum presented in *Mao II* by using cultural theory of Fredric Jameson as well as historicism approach to unravel the notion of the reclusive author. In his article, "Don DeLillo and the Myth of the Author-Recluse", Moran suggests that DeLillo's portrayal of Bill Gray illustrates Jameson's idea of "a new depthlessness", in which the surface image replaces the real (Moran, 2000, p. 138). Moran then identifies the theme of the novel as "the reproduction and circulation of media images as exchangeable commodities", a theme that is represented through the photographer Brita taking pictures of Bill Gray (ibid.., p. 138). He then applies Jameson's concept of simulation to interpret Bill Gray's reaction to the aftermath of the photo session with Brita as "[thinking] of himself as used and discarded" (ibid.., p. 138). Moran's interpretation follows Jameson's theory thoroughly. Bill Gray's photograph becomes the erasure of his real self. The existence of the reproduced self then eradicates the need for the real. Applying the simulacrum framework to the analysis, Moran points out that the real Bill Gray is dead, reproduced, and commodified at the exact moment his pictures are taken. The frameworks of image commodification and Bill Gray's character analysis function as the core of his argument in interpreting the cult of celebrity culture; a social phenomenon that Moran presumes DeLillo himself also tries to resist.

Moran draws a relationship between the cultural aspect of the celebrity worshiping cult with the unique nature of the reclusive author portrayed in *Mao II*. His analysis strictly follows the framework of the image commodification. After citing various other cultural theories, Moran sees the intrusion of the media on reclusive celebrity such as Bill Gray as a commodification of the "private" self for

pure financial gain. Moreover, literature also suffers from the market's image commodification process as its very form is transform into the accessorized product for the cult of celebrity culture (Moran, 2000, p. 141). In support of his argument, Moran interprets the character Charlie Everson, a publishing tycoon, as a symbol for the desire of the literary industry to profit from marketing Bill's much sought after novel (ibid.., p. 141). He concludes his observation on the relationship between the cultural aspect of the cult of celebrity and the nature of the reclusive author by analyzing Scott Martineau's obsession in searching and owning the "authentic" image of Bill Gray. Moran postulates that it is in fact the author's reclusive status from fame that raises their profile of authenticity; therefore, Bill Gray's reclusiveness becomes "an inverted form of promotion" (Moran, 2000, p. 145). Moran then interprets Scott's role as Bill Gray's assistant as "an effort to get beyond Gray's image as a writer and reach the real artist underneath" (ibid.., p. 145). His cultural analysis shows how Bill Gray, even in his aloofness, is still saleable as rare and authentic image. The book and the man move congruently with the supply and demand of the industry. In short, Moran's sees Bill Gray's reclusive status in the capitalist market as a marketable cultural myth.

Finally, Moran analyzes how the mythicization of the reclusive author is reproduces and functions within the capitalist cultural framework. He comments that there is "a link between [the] representations of crowds and the mythicization of the celebrity author-recluse" (Moran, 2000, p. 148) visible in *Mao II*. He interprets how the image of the crowd is presented in the novel that the novel as "faceless and faintly menacing" (ibid.., p. 148). The aggression of the crowd contributes to what Moran describes as "subsequent hounding of unwilling celebrities" (ibid.., p. 148). Thus,

Moran's cultural framework inevitably implies that the "silence" on the author's part remains a mythical gesture – the vain dramatization of the avant-garde artist who attempts to verify his importance in the culture of mechanical reproduction that threatens to commodifide such existence in the first place. He also uses historicist approach to interpret Bill Gray at the end of the article. Moran argues that DeLillo is fully aware of the danger of this silence gesture. That is why he decides to occasionally appear in public in order to avoid falling into the same trap as Bill Gray. He indicates how DeLillo's willingness to work with the media is successful as the novelist is able to "[protect] his private life without being celebritized as a hermit" (Moran, 2000, p. 151).

Moran's cultural approach treats *Mao II* as a study case for the danger of the mass media and of remaining reclusive. The line between what is written in the novel and the cultural reality are almost non-existent. The tension between various binary oppositions that illustrates the theme of simulation is used almost as background information for Moran's cultural analysis to emphasize the danger of image reproduction. Despite its non-literariness style, it is noticeable how Moran's reading of the text follows similar pattern as those of Keesey. Both critics read and interpret the text similarly by assuming how the surface representational meanings constitute the novel's fundamental framework. Consequently, the binary oppositions and unit of meanings in the text are rarely questioned. I will now provide the final criticism of *Mao II*, which is Mark Osteen's "Becoming Incorporated: Spectacular Authorship and DeLillo's *Mao II.*" The article is quite distinctive from the other twos as it specifically challenges the representational meanings that the text set up. The analysis of Osteen's article will focus on the critic's concept of "spectacular

authorship", his methodology of reinterpreting the binary oppositions in the surface structure of *Mao II* and their cultural significant.

In contrast to the two previous critics, Osteen sees the pole of 'image' as a new form of spectacular authorship that perfectly suits the postmodern spectacle society. Osteen proposes that DeLillo's decision to present photographs[4] along with written narrative is the author's testimony of "his participation in the culture of images"; a "corporate" gesture that responds well to the simulated culture of the public (Osteen, 1999, p. 92). His analysis of *Mao II's* form of presentation hints at the reinterpretation of the binary oppositions. It is notable to mention that Osteen's idea of the spectacular authorship could be considered as a useful method because it merges the problematic binary oppositions of image and writing together. Osteen uses cultural framework to argue that DeLillo's incorporation of photographs into his novel indicates how both writing and photography are inseparable in the postmodern capitalist context (Osteen, 1999, p. 101). The novel's hybrid form of presentation raises a new possibility of interpretation on the pole of mass vs. individual and image vs. author. The fusion of binary oppositions in the capitalist context then conceives what Osteen calls "spectacular authorship": a new form of "photographic writing" that is "[subjected] to an economy of identity and authority in which the origin of any event or text is overdetermined and its authorship is exploded by the circulation of images; in this economy every message is corporately owned" (Osteen, 1999, p. 110).

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[3] Osteen refers to the photographs that appear at the beginning of each part of the novel, i.e. the picture of the Moonie's mass wedding at the beginning of chapter one "At the Yankee Stadium."

Under Osteen's combination of structural and cultural frameworks, the focus of the reading shifts from identifying the conditions of the victimized author, a position pursued strongly by the previous critics, to the author of the mass.

The binary oppositions and the cultural notions Osteen mentioned are represented in the novel by their respective characters. Again, the methodology of Osteen's criticism consists of identifying which character conforms to his idea of the spectacular author and which does not. I would like to comment on Osteen's analysis of the following characters: Bill Gray, Scott Martineau and Brita Nelson to illustrate his methodology. Osteen begins by assigning the role of the spectacular authorship to Brita. Her reputation as a photographer automatically establishes a symbolic symbiotic relationship with the media culture in capitalist society. Her representational meaning reflects DeLillo's decision to present the novel in hybrid form (Osteen, 1999, p. 101). Here, Osteen's emphasis on the importance of images in the capitalist context shifts the central focus of the analysis to Brita and the success of spectacular authorship in asserting its influence over the media-saturated society. In this scope of analysis, Bill Gray "whose silence and exile only make him more available for appropriation" [5] takes a secondary position to Brita. Osteen reduces Bill Gray to a romantic author who fails to "reauthorize [himself], to wrest control of the story by consenting to or contesting the spectacular authors who dominate the photos" (Osteen, 1999, p. 102).

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[5] Osteen refers to Bill Gray's refusal to make public appearance or publish his new novel.

Beside Brita and Bill Gray, Osteen proceeds to add that Scott, a character who Keesey interprets as reflection of Bill Gray's consciousness, also represents his idea of spectacular authorship. He considers Scott as an author because the character possesses Bill Gray's image. According to Osteen, Scott "no longer needs the 'real' Bill"[6] as the only identification he requires in order to own the legacy of authorship "resides in the books and manuscripts under [his] control" (Osteen, 1999, p. 105). Scott is able to attain the status of spectacular authorship because he owns the image of Bill Gray. The assistance is able to continue writing the myth of the reclusive author rather than actual literary work. Scott's authorship rests on his credibility to produce and prolong the image of Bill Gray. Up to this point, it should be visible what distinguishes Osteen's method, in relation to the two previous criticisms, are his positive outlook toward the simulacrum and his analysis of the novel's form of presentation.

The reviews of all three criticisms show different interpretative approaches to the text. It is undeniable that all of the approaches continue to rely on the interpretation of characters' representational meanings in the text. This is evident in the fact that all of the above criticisms work within the boundary of binary oppositions; whether in trying to describe their relationships or shifting them around to suit the critics' predetermined cultural framework. The characters and their respective binary oppositions are separated from other literary elements such as the obvious distorted tense usage and narrative plain. For these critics, it is actually the

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[6] Osteen refers to Scott's sole ownership of Bill Gray's image rights after the author's death on his boat trip to Beirut near the end of the novel.

cultural framework that provides the meanings to the relationship of the characters, which is supposed to be the novel's units of meanings. Moreover, the problem of representations should be brought up into consideration. The critics' structuralist approach creates on extreme distinction between the binary oppositions. They tend to view the characters as set of representations. When every aspect of the novel is condensed into set of binary oppositions, the ambiguity of the text largely ignored. In other words, what the critics claim as set of binary oppositions that exist in the text are not analyzed in connection with the novel's ambiguous narrative structure.

It is quite surprising to see how the critics failed to analyze *Mao II* narrative because it is the fundamental component of literature. Logically speaking, the characters and their representational meanings should primarily exist within the novel's literary structure; therefore, the absence of any criticism on the narrative undermines the general interpretation of the novel. The critics have stressed on the result of Bill Gray's failure to resist commodification. However, what they interpreted as Bill Gray's failure are based on his death while on the trip to Beirut as well as his short comings when compared to other characters who are more adapted to the media culture. Instead of taking a closer look of *Mao II* unique narrative, they immediately assume that the characters are direct representations of the binary oppositions or cultural units they tried to set up. In other words, the criticisms only offer a surface interpretation of the text. Thus, it is safe to say that the method of the critics, while largely borrowed from the structuralism school of thought, fail to address the very literary structure that holds the binary oppositions together.

The ignorance toward the narrative leads the criticisms to be a sort of quest for the critics' to find a monolithic interpretation of the simulacrum theme. Had the

critics incorporate the idea of narrative criticism into their analysis, the diversity of the novel's narrative structure would not have been totally disregarded. Here, what I mean by the diversity in the narrative is immediately apparent when the stylistic method is used to study DeLillo's deliberate usage of different "tense" for each part. The tense usage is of utmost importance because it constitutes the time and space – the reality of the narrative and the characters. The denial of this spatial time differences is equivalent of disregarding *Mao II* literariness entirely. Consequently, different tense usage for each part signifies different time continuum. It is rather awkward to assume that the characters existing in different spatial times are the same. It is also highly susceptible that the characters (who are supposed to represent the critics' assigned binary oppositions) would carry different functions in different spatial times.

Despite this obvious time shift, the entire novel makes perfect sense when read linearly. The discrepancy between our senses of linear completion is sharply contrasts to the novel's actual presentation. The distorted narrative progression is presented as the norm. The initial response to the distorted sense of time is that it seems to be a justification of the novel's theme of simulation, manifesting a complete postmodern simulated text. However, a closer look at this unconventional narrative structure in relation to the story will reveal how the novel's appearance as a simulated text can be quite deceiving. It is as if the text is trying to undermine the notion of the real as well as that of the high modernist author by asking us to accept its postmodernity through the outward foregrounding of its simulated structure. This simulation extremity of the narrative can be overturned. Moreover, a thorough analysis of the seemingly obvious characters and their representations of the real and

simulated will reveal their co-existing tension rather then emphasizing on a singular pole of meaning as the novel's simulated narrative and form of presentation seem to suggest. This tension in the poles of meanings presents us with an opportunity to tip the scale and overturn the reading of *Mao II* as a salvaging of the real and high modernity instead of a pure postmodern simulated novel. Ironically, the essence of the real can be found in the struggle of the "terrorists" against the simulated mass media. The terrorists' realness hint at the possibility of recovering this supposedly lost value. The thesis will reveal how the novel can be read in favor of the real, while demystifying the monolithic idea of the postmodern simulation at the same time. This is not to glorify the real or placing simulation in an inferior position. Rather, it aims to prove that the novel embodies a surprising level of depth that negates the absolution of either binary opposition. The notion of the author can also be resurrected in the image saturated era, an interpretation that ultimately challenges the novel's postmodern status.