

Chapter 2

The Postmodern Simulation and the State of the Author

Mao II presents the idea of simulacrum as its dominant theme. Two major postmodern critics, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, provide the general idea to this concept. The arguments of these two critics will provide an overview of the postmodern Western society and how the idea of “simulacrum” affects its shaping. It is useful to note that the statements of these two are succession of one another. Baudrillard’s argument offers a general, often abstract background, on simulacrum. Meanwhile, Jameson’s theory is rather an extension of Baudrillard’s proposal with additional cultural focus. The ideas of the postmodern simulacrum will then be examined to properly define the state of the high-modernist author and the real in *Mao II*.

Baudrillard outlines the concept of simulacra as “generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 2). This state of hyper-reality is “sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference” (Baudrillard, 1999, p.4). Moreover, simulacra is “opposed to representation” as its origin is created from “*the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference” (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 11). In other words, simulacra is neither real nor false. It transcends the fundamental logic of sign because it does not function according to the law of representation; therefore, concealing any reference point to the origin of the

real. Hence, simulation exists in its own time and space, beyond the binary opposition of the real and image. If one were to follow the logic of simulacra to the end, it is even possible to say that what is classified in various areas of culture as simulated experience (tourist attractions for examples) are literally more real than its predecessor.

Aside from presenting the theoretical aspect of the concept, Baudrillard also traces its historical progression in order to render how the postmodern society is trapped in the state of simulation. Baudrillard cites that the emergence of the simulacra, or rather the death of representation, is closely tied to the development of the “capital”. He instigates that the development of capitalism and currency exchange destroys the foundation in the relationship between representation and meaning by replacing the real⁶ with abstract values (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 43). He also stressed that any attempts to recreate the real through material reproductions will only worsen the crisis of mass produce simulacra and further enhances the state of hyper reality that has manifested in every possible aspects of society (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 44).

Based on Baudrillard’s argument, it is safe to say that the concept of simulacra mark the death of the real because it erases the point of reference to the origin of “authenticity”. Logically speaking, simulation is an inevitable cycle that follows the system of mass-produced goods as every identical product distance our perception form its point of original reference. Theoretically speaking, it is in fact the

⁶What Baudrillard is referring to as the real here is essentially the process of barter trade, in which the two parties exchange concrete goods of acceptable values with each other as opposed to representational money transaction.

presence of simulacra that becomes the tool of measurement that confirms the status of what is authentic and real. Simulation is the real because it only refers to itself, gradually distancing us from ever identifying the point of authenticity. A concrete example of this situation would be how an authentic Van Gough's painting carries a heftier price than its mass-produced replica. One cannot wholeheartedly admit that the manufactured piece is not real as it contains the same details as the original. Hence, the original Van Gough's piece carries higher capitalistic value simply because there are other mass-produced simulated replicas to confirm its authenticity. This explains why certain pieces of art are "hunted" by dealers because of their rarity. This capitalist phenomenon is also presented in the novel as Bill Gray's unfinished novel is also "hunted" for its authenticity more so than its actual literariness. The idea of referential point comes across as rather ironic because the abstract idea of authenticity is worth more than the concrete realness. It is as if the real is being authenticated by its own simulacrum. Under this logic, the real becomes an excess commodity if there is no point of reference to distinguish it from its simulated replicas. Up to this point, Baudrillard have illustrates the purely theoretical side of the simulacra; however, it is not fully applicable to the analysis of *Mao II* unless the nature of the relationship between simulacra and the capitalist market is fully clarified.

Fredric Jameson advances Baudrillard's theory of the simulacra by applying it to the historical development of late capitalism. Jameson specifies the social and historical context of the postmodern as the basis for the advancement of the simulacra. It is necessary to point out that the understanding of what Jameson's define as the "postmodern" will provide a clearer contrast on Bill Gray's status as the high

modernist author in *Mao II*. Adam Roberts, a critic of Jameson, summarizes the theorist's definition of the postmodern as "the expression on an aesthetic and textual level of the dynamic of 'late capitalism'" (Roberts, 2000, p. 112). This economic environment, Roberts argues, is immediately distinguishable from the capitalism of the nineteenth century because more emphasis is placed on the service industries and intellectual properties rather than the production of assembly line goods (Roberts, 2000, p. 112). Thus, postmodernism, as Adams conclude from Jameson's perspective, is "not just another word for the description of a particular style," it is also "a periodizing concept" which correlates to "a new type of social life and new economic order – what is often euphemistically called modernization, post-industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism" (Roberts, 2000, p. 122). To put it simply, postmodernism, in Jameson's perspective, is based on the cultural logic of the late capitalism economic context.

Adam Robert's review of Jameson's argument provides a concrete framework on the concept of simulacra, the dominant issue in *Mao II*. What Jameson defines as "consumer society of the media or the spectacle" clarifies the cultural manifestation of the simulacra. Tracing Jameson's argument on the postmodern, it is visible that the late capitalism has develops its economic scheme to the point that it is able to commodifide abstract values into mass marketing products. It is exactly this mass marketing scheme that contributes to the creation of the simulated society. This assumption is founded on the fact the mass media such as television (or as DeLillo tries to present in *Mao II* through Brita Nelson's photography) is able to commodifide the abstract quality of images into a form of consumer goods. The media industry

insists that the real⁷ must be captured through various mediums (camera, voice recorder, telephone answering machine, etc.). These captured images are to be reproduced according to their various formats; therefore, constitutes the process of “image commodification.”

What Baudrillard defined as the state of hyper reality is created at the end of the image commodification process. The paradoxical nature of this event rested on the fact that the reproduced images presented in the mediums are treated as real. A real and tangible example of hyper reality could be illustrated through an image of an obese man watching live satellite broadcast of the Iraq war on television, while a framed photograph of his former thinner self lay broken on the floor. Using the combination of Jameson’s postmodern framework and Baudrillard’s simulacra, it is undeniable that the televised images are real and so is his thinner former self as a photographic evident exists. Still, the sense of realness in this fictive situation remains problematic. The reality of the Iraq war is presented on television in the reality of the obese man. He knows from watching the images on screen that there is a war raging on beyond his living room. Yet, the sense of absurdity still lingers because the manifestation of the images on television is literally more real than the uninteresting reality of an immobile obese man whose life has not been documented on film; therefore, carries no economic value in the late capitalism context. The images radiate a referential quality that signifies the life of their consumers. In fact, it is presence of the images that confirms the reality of their consumers. The illustration of the obese man creates, to put in a blunt term, an “illusion” of reality. It is merely a reality of a consumer watching a television, in which its images signify a rotten

⁷ I am referring to the reality that has been captured on various mediums.

carcass of the real war that is waging elsewhere. Here, Jameson's proposal of postmodernism completes the practical side of Baudrillard's loose theory of the simulacra: the commodified images are themselves simulacra, a tangible set of reality that fuses seamlessly with those of the consumers.' Moreover, the fact that these images are able to reach every level through the web of mass communication inevitably contributes to the creation the simulated society where everything is governed by the logic of simulation.

The analysis of Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra and Jameson's cultural examination confirms how the process of mass commodification confirms the absence of the real. Once the real is commodified it becomes simulated images that carry certain economic and cultural values. These simulated images disrupt the pre-existing binary opposition of the real and images. The process of image commodification turns the real into images, while the images themselves are commodified into concrete saleable products. However, the most prominent quality that the real lost during this transition is its "depth." This is because the depth of the captured reality is reduced to a one-dimensional product once it exits as a commodity, which could be reproduced repeatedly for the purpose of mass marketing. In addition to being commodified as mass product, the real could suffer more in the late capitalism context even when it attempts to preserve its authenticity. Coming back to the Van Gough analogy, the fact that the real painting of the artist worth more than the mass produced replicas hints at the strategy of late capitalism to commodified abstract quality. In this scenario, the real merely signifies a brand of authenticity and could be commodified under the economic logic of late capitalism. The irony continues as the status of the real is reduced to referential point of its replicas. Thus, it is safe to

say that the strategy to the real fails entirely in the context of the postmodern simulated society.

The proposals of these two theorists are applicable to the reading of *Mao II*. It could almost be said that the struggle of Bill Gray to retain his authorship shares a direct relationship with the theories. It is necessary to explore Bill Gray's struggle using cultural perceptions of the theorists. Bill Gray's position in the novel, when placed in Jameson's postmodern late-capitalism context, represents the dying-breed of the high modernist author. His quest within this cultural sphere is to preserve his high modernist status from image commodification - a quest to retain his life from the jaw of death in traditional literary context. This is because simulacrum and mass marketing system degrade the avant-garde status of the high-modernist works to mere commodities. Here it is necessary to turn to Adam Roberts's brief summary for more information of the high modernist concept. According to Roberts, the Modernist authors such as Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, Erza Pound and Bertolt Brecht contributed to variation of different writing styles and prosaic experimentation in all literary fields from fiction to drama (Roberts, 2000, p. 99). Roberts also noted the important characteristics of high-modernist authors as:

[Sharing] fascination with literary experiment, with making a 'new' literature that was deliberately unlike the 'realist' art of Victorian culture. Modernist literature is often startling and challenging; it may, for example, be written in a fractured or peculiar style or it may advocate the overturning of traditional values. (Roberts, 2000, p. 99 - 100)

From Roberts's summary, it is safe to say that in term of cultural notion, what is considered to be high modernist, whether by the standard of the artist or the classification of the critics, is embedded with the status of the avant-garde - a superior form of art that is supposed to defy the social norms.

Despite its social revolutionary ideology, the high modernist authors cannot escape the economic chain of capitalism. The flaw of the high modernist mindset, when placed in the postmodern image saturated world, lies in the fact that the ideology of its works called for social change but in order to complete such task it would have to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the mass market. After all, the authors must spread their works to the mass some how. It is this paradoxical logic that renders the high modernist works impotent. The prestige value of defamiliarizing the normality and mundane repetition of mass consumerism held within all levels of high modernist works are always prone to commodification in the capitalist market. When economic evaluation comes into consideration, what is deemed as high modernist would be nothing more than a form of style created to fit the consumers' demands. Thus, in the historical period where there is no distinction between high and low art, it is inevitable that the high modernist's ideas of shocking the bourgeois and influencing the mass mind merge with popular culture in all levels of artistic productions. If this condition persists, the influential power of art, artist and author such as Bill Gray is undeniably neutralized. DeLillo vividly portrays the impotency of the high modernist author throughout the novel. Bill Gray's published novels as well as his eagerly awaited unfinished piece are treated as collectible merchandises, a position that defeats the reclusive author's intention of writing a "dangerous" literature that would mark the triumphant of high modernist ideology. Meanwhile,

Bill Gray himself is “hunted” by the media and fanatical fans like Scott as if he were some sort of celebrity. It is clear that Bill Gray’s existence is exploited and commodified by the marketing scheme.

The same capitalist logic also adversely affects the high modernist’s literary value. A work of literature is prone to commodification purely because of its publication. A published novel lost its value of authenticity. Once a manuscript enters the printing process there is no difference between the first published novel and the last. The published novel, a “copy” of the original manuscript, is commonly taken as the real text. Its publishing credibility depends on its perfection, a product of countless editing procedure. For a novelist to call a press conference and announce that his new best selling novel is not real because of its alteration from the original manuscript would be a sight of madness. This is because from the readers’ opinion, what the author claims as an authentic version of the marketed copy may not be better than the one he/she owns.

Reading or consuming the text is a subjective activity. Thus, once the novel is published, the author loses control over it. A typo or a distorted grammatical shift can hold infinite interpretation in the readers’ minds. The author’s intention or his original mistake may be forever unnoticed and if worst comes to worst, may be praised as an act of literary genius. In fact, the acts of interpretation and criticism are what contribute to the simulation of the novel for they distance our perception from the authentic intention of the author. The unexpected mass commodification of high modernist literature is portrayed in *Mao II* in the scene that Scott shows the collection of Bill Gray’s literary items to Brita. Stylistically, the scene resembles an assembly line, in which countless items concerning Bill Gray emerge on infinitum:

Scott showed her a room off the kitchen where some of Bill's papers were kept. Seven metal cabinets stood against the walls...He [Scott] narrated matter-of-factly. There were old handwritten manuscripts, printer's typescripts, master galleys. There were reviews of Bill's novels, interviews with former colleagues and acquaintances. There were stacks of magazines and journals containing articles about Bill's work and about his disappearance...his death, his rumored return. Scott read excerpts from some of these pieces. Then they carried their wineglasses out along the hall where there were shelves filled with booklength studies of Bill's work and work about his work.⁸ (DeLillo, 1991, p. 31)

Judging from the manner of the narration, both Scott and Brita could have been in a factory or a warehouse instead of the home of a reclusive author as the numbers of items are unrelenting. Moreover, the fact that they "carried their wineglasses" around implies a sense of casualness. It is as if Scott is taking Brita for a tour of his factory that mass-produced the information on Bill Gray. At the end of the tour, Brita concludes that this giant storage is "the holy place, the inner book, long rows of typewriter bond buried in a cellar in the bleak hills" (32). Her description of Bill Gray's item storage concurs to Scott's semi-factory tour as she realizes this place is not just an architectural structure, it is also a giant novel that captures its reflection – a manifestation of simulation. The sheer numbers of Bill Gray's references inside are the holy-grail and the "inner book" because they held enough referential information

⁸ All quotations from *Mao II* are taken from DeLillo, Don. *Mao II*.

to construct a myth of Bill Gray; enough to produce a simulated image of the author; enough to be the definition of Bill Gray's life in the event of his death. Again, the irony here is that the simulated literary items have the power to be the referential point of Bill Gray's existence.

In this stream of thought, the very existence of the novel in the mass capitalistic culture is a simulation, concealing the existence of the real author and its own authenticity. The only thing that is real in the literary industry is the act of writing. The real emerges at the exact moment the author put pen to paper and start writing, conceiving a piece of work that has not been captured and represented in any shape or form. In order to be an author one has to write for the act of writing is the only proof that the author is alive and is telling his tales. A finished novel is an end product waiting to be commodified. Hence, in order to salvage the real from *Mao II* it is necessary to identify the act of writing - a gesture that will lead us to find the real author who is dangerous enough to escape the simulation process of the novel. Incidentally, an interpretation that seeks to identify writing is in itself, a search for the real.