

From Words to Images: Postmodern Transformation in *Mao II*

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ABSTRACT

Historically, novels played a significant role in shaping people's lives. However, in the contemporary era, media has largely taken over this role, offering various benefits, while also producing negative influence. This paper focuses on Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, a postmodern novel that critiques the diminishing condition of the novelist in the modern era. It examines the struggles of writers and how art loses its power over media influence. Using Guy Debord's National Conference on *Human Psyche and Literary Narratives*, at St. John's College, Palayamkottai, on 06-03-2026.

theory, the paper analyses the condition of the artist in the contemporary world, and the growing influence of corporate power in the marketing of art. The novel illustrates how images surpass texts in shaping consciousness, and continuous media exposures normalise violence. The paper highlights how people are made to see profit in everything, thereby losing their perception of the lived experience.

Keywords: Art, Spectacle, Commodity, Media, Images.

Introduction

In the contemporary world, media has taken over every important aspect of life, such as entertainment, news, information, and even controlling political narratives. It plays a major role in shaping public consciousness. Events like festivals, celebrations, violence, wars, and protests are all transformed into spectacles. People experience them through TV screens, social media as images. This gives media more power, as it can influence public opinion. Among these, terrorism holds a central position, becoming a global spectacle. It gains popularity and creates fear through media. The repeated images of violence and fearful narratives turn terrorism into widely consumed media events.

DeLillo, a prominent postmodern American writer, examines these kinds of transformations in his novel *Mao II*. The novel explores how traditional literature and novels lose their impact in a media-driven society, while also critically analyzing the normalization of terrorism in the media. The novel introduces Bill Gray as a reclusive novelist in an era marked by the growing dominance of terrorism, which increasingly uses media as a tool to capture public attention. In contrast, the writers who dominated an earlier phase

have disappeared in an image-saturated world. In *Mao II*, terrorism is not primarily about political violence but is rather focused on gaining exposure. Many works discuss media spectacle in *Mao II*, but this paper focuses on the place of art and media in society through the writer and the photographer and how the world treats them in the context of their professions. Through the lens of Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, this paper examines the commodification of art and explores how individuals react and adapt in a culture dominated by media images and the spectacle of representation.

The Rise of Visual Culture and the Decline of the Novelist

Don DeLillo's *Mao II* sheds light on how media culture has surpassed textual culture through the representation of two significant characters. Bill Gray embodies the struggles of the novelists in a world where literary influence is declining, while Brita, a photographer, symbolizes the growing power of media, which has become increasingly difficult to ignore or resist. Brita comes from New York to find Bill Gray because her job is to take photographs of novelists, poets and playwrights who are famous yet forgotten. She even takes challenging pictures of writers in prison or under house arrest. We live in that era, where writing against system is deviance, while media can take photographs of anything. According to her, "The writer's face is the surface of the work" (DeLillo 26). This reveals how people become attached to images rather than to the work or the individual behind them. The images of the person take all the attention which allows an idea to be given a recognizable face and label. As a result, images come to dominate social life, and lived reality becomes secondary. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord examines the modern obsession with images, arguing images are no longer connected to real experience. Because people now consume life mainly through images so we lose the wholeness of lived experience (Debord 2). It shows how people are attached to images, don't care about the work or the person anymore but just want the

images of the person so they can give the idea a face, a label. Everything is about the images now. So the people have started to live in the images, making them more important than reality.

Another notable incident is that of Scott, a man who is taking care of Bill, gifting a pencil sketch of Mao Zedong, the painting done by Andy Warhol. Mao, leader of the Chinese communist party and a revolutionary figure is just turned into a consumption figure. People's definition of art shifts, with the artist's interview and their pictures selling more than their works. It reveals how everything is limited into a spectacle and it becomes all about consumption. Mao who once stood for communist equality becomes a brand, a poster to hang in a bedroom. The actors in the movies also receive God-like treatment. Scott witnesses a scene where an actor just waves his hand and the whole crowd goes screaming and cheering. These two incidents seem paradoxical yet grounded in the same logic, and that is Images. Today's world tries to profit anything from images, the visual culture. Guy Debord writes, "With the Industrial Revolution's manufactural division of labor and mass production for a global market, the commodity finally became fully visible as a power that was colonizing all social life" (Debord 16). Debord explains that in the earlier times, commodity was just an integral system of life. There was no separate base for it. But after the industrial revolution, it has become the central point to the extreme of dominating society. The capitalist system took commodity to another level, making it a powerful source to sustain life. Now the images of people who fought against capitalism make profit for the very system they opposed. The economic industry runs on popular images. Actors profit from the circulation of their own images, revealing how people are conditioned to adopt this culture and unknowingly participate in the logic of the commodity.

Bill has been writing for nearly twenty years without concern for profit and what matters to him is the impact of his work, not its market value. In contrast, Scott embodies the corporate mentality. He

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deliberately maintains Bill's absence from the public eye, turning him into a mysterious figure so that readers will search for him. This strategy increases the economic value of Bill's work. Through Scott, the novel exposes how art becomes inseparable from marketing. Art is no longer simply created for people, but is packaged, circulated, and consumed within a system where those with economic power have greater access to it than ordinary individuals. In the beginning, Art was the expression of creativity and responded to a lived experience. In this modern society, it is mostly reduced to function as a spectacle and economic commodity. DeLillo explains why people have begun to obsess over darker news when he writes, "We only need the reports and predictions and warnings" (DeLillo 72). Earlier, people sought meaning, truth, and knowledge in what they read, living in a harmonious state. However, as technology developed and life became increasingly mechanized, individuals began to seek traumatic news in order to feel connected to reality. The world of representation produces a constant sense of terror, allowing capitalist systems to sustain and extend themselves. In the novel, every character serves the system in some way. Bill contributes through his role as a writer, while Brita survives through media, even though she is uncomfortable with it. The mediator who supports the terrorist movement is unaware that he too operates within the same ideological structure. Karen and Scott represent ordinary people, conflicted between their real emotions and the rules they must follow in order to survive which makes them lonely in a crowded world.

The Writer in the Age of Spectacle

Writers once held a powerful position in shaping public perception and influencing collective thought. Their words built the moral society and valued human experience. However, with the growth of mass media, this power has gradually shifted. Media now shapes opinion more quickly and more widely

than literature and it is often replacing the writer as the central figure. Yet certain works continue to impact public that's why Bill Gray remains popular because his writing still resonates with readers, proving that literature has not entirely lost its power. According to Charlie Everson, the former publisher of Bill Gray, "The State should want to kill all writers. Every government, every group that holds power or aspires to power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere" (DeLillo 97). This highlights the power writers possess and how their works can disrupt entire industries. During an argument with Bill, Charlie mocks the publishing industry by exposing its deceptive practices. He explains how publishers flatter writers, take them to expensive restaurants, and convince them that their work is popular. This performance is not genuine appreciation but a strategy to secure continued production and profit. It exposes how both art and the artist are transformed into commodities that must be constantly promoted and marketed within the industry. Debord explains that the commodity expands into every sphere such as production, consumption, markets, and profit (Debord 15-16). To hold value in society, everything must generate profit, not only art. Charlie also reveals that novelists are busy giving interviews while interviewers are writing novels. Art is no longer simply art; it becomes another way of making money, something to watch rather than experience.

People are now more interested in the artist than in the art itself. They begin to look for something beyond the words. In a world dominated by visual media, it becomes difficult to accept art without images and most importantly, people expect visibility everywhere. In the novel, Bill Gray realises that the real reason Charlie calls him is to organise a press conference connected to a terrorist group. The group from Beirut kidnaps a Swiss poet in order to broadcast their motives to the world because visibility is power. Since writers are famous and harmless public figures, they become easy targets to abduct. For this reason,

many groups choose artists as hostages to serve for their own political purposes. Bill is a mysterious and influential writer; his presence would create greater impact, which is why the group wants him to speak. The terrorist group asks Bill to give a speech at the press conference, promising that they will release the hostage during the live broadcast. In this way, the terrorists gain maximum publicity. It shows that media can be used by anyone whether good or bad as long as it creates attention. The hostage is no longer seen as a person but is transformed into a spectacle itself.

It raises the question of how people have become normalized to witnessing such events only as spectators. This may be because the system itself has constructed a routine structure of life that controls individuals through exposure of media. People are adapted to watching everything through television and social media, which present a simulated version of reality without emotional intensity. These images eventually distance individuals from lived experience, making them more disconnected from real life. According to Guy Debord, "What is presented as true life turns out to be merely a more *truly spectacular life*" (Debord 83). This implies that reality can no longer be separated from representation, because what we believe to be real already carries the idea of spectacle. Bill Gray understands this as a writer and he knows that there is no complete escape from it. When he meets George Haddad, a mediator between the terrorist group and himself, he is told that if he travels to Beirut, the group might release the Swiss poet. As a writer who has hidden from public life, Bill voluntarily decides to intervene not only to help the hostage but also because he is curious about the terrorist group. After not publishing for almost twenty years, he sees this as an opportunity to begin writing again, even at the risk of his own life.

In a conversation between George Haddad and Bill, George warns him that if he meets the terrorist group, they might take him hostage. They could release the Swiss poet for immediate attention, but later

they may kill Bill and circulate photographs of his death to create future publicity. Bill then asks, "Doesn't he think I'm worth more than my photographs?" (DeLillo 164). Everything becomes material for images such as raging wars, violence, even death are reduced to pictures. These images control the fear among the people and often speak louder than human voices. The dominance of such images also distracts us from living in reality. People are caught in a cycle of fear and anger, constantly reacting to the same circulating images rather than resisting it. The heartbreaking part is that Bill dies before he can even meet the terrorist group, as he is fatally wounded in a car accident. On the other hand, Brita, the photographer, is given the opportunity to conduct a detailed interview and take photographs of the group. It symbolises the position of art and media in the contemporary world, where art is fading while media continues to thrive. Brita eventually decides that photographing writers has become meaningless. People no longer care about art or the artist; instead, they are drawn to disastrous images and scenes of fear.

Conclusion

In this postmodern era, living without media is almost impossible. People constantly adapt to whatever technology brings, and this is how human life continues to evolve. By analyzing the two contrasting characters in *Mao II*, this study argues that technology and media are slowly replacing the moments that make us human. As people become satisfied with mere representation, they begin to lose the feel and touch of reality, no longer participating fully in lived experience. Bill's death at the end shows how much art struggles to survive in a world dominated by media. As art tries to continue live, it becomes increasingly difficult in front of the growing media, while Brita easily receives opportunities and recognition. It is not only about images replacing art, but also about how people are constantly influenced by the news of terror and the repeated scenes of war.

In the end, everything becomes a trend. There was a time when novels were valued, but now actors are worshipped, and violence is gradually normalized through repeated media exposure. Bill's life represents a man who chose to live outside this illusionary fame. Even though technology makes everyone seem connected, people still experience a sense of distance. The connection it offers does not carry the real feel of presence; it only remains a representation. True change must happen within the system itself. When an individual decides to step away from circulating trends, they begin to understand the impact and power they hold over us.

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