

**Constructing the Meanings of History, Identity, and  
Reality in Don DeLillo's *Libra* and *Mao II***

Marianne Ingheim Rossi

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Dedicated in loving memory of my grandfather, Poul Keis

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Marianne Ingheim Rossi

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## Introduction

For centuries, philosophers, historians, literary critics, and other scholars have discussed the nature of existence, knowledge, and representation. Today, this discussion is especially interesting to postmodern critics, and it is central to the works of many postmodern novelists, in particular Don DeLillo. At the core of the debate today is the questioning of the traditional distinction between history and literature, fact and fiction, life and art, reality and imagination. Postmodernists, including DeLillo, challenge the Enlightenment ideal of positivist history, the idea that historical truth based on objective facts is “out there” to be discovered. Similarly, they question the Enlightenment ideal of the universal subject, the notion of a universal core of identity. Reality, they claim, is not stable or fixed, but, rather, relative and contextual.

Most postmodernists, including DeLillo, do not deny the *existence* of a physical reality, or the *existence* of history and identity. Rather, they claim that the *meanings* of history, identity, and reality are constructed, in other words, how we make sense of our world, how we come to know our past, and what we mean by identity. Postmodernists argue that we create the order and meaning that we seek. This claim necessarily leads to the relativity of truth and brings ideological, cultural, and historical contexts back into the discussion of existence, knowledge, and representation.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the ways in which the meanings of history, identity, and reality are constructed in DeLillo’s 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> novels, *Libra* and *Mao II*. These novels demonstrate how meaning is created through the use of textuality and narrative, and through manipulation by so-called “Masters” and the mass visual media. I hope to expand the scholarly discussion of DeLillo by focusing on what I have found to be de-emphasized aspects of these two novels, including the metafictional element, and by demonstrating the relevance and limitations of the application of various postmodern theories. By placing DeLillo within the context of postmodernism, I wish to demonstrate the significance of DeLillo to the postmodern debate and the study of postmodern literature.

Most critics place DeLillo within the framework of postmodernism, including one of the leading DeLillo experts, Frank Lentricchia, who has read *Libra* as “postmodern critique”. Other critics, however, such as Jesse Kavadlo, find it misleading to label DeLillo a postmodern exemplar. According to Kavadlo, “Beneath its postmodern and paranoid guise, *Libra* presents characters yearning for a kind of salvation that is more spiritual than political

or even personal” (47). Instead of postmodernism’s “doctrine of disbelief”(10), he finds the longing for faith and moral absolutes in DeLillo’s works. I would argue that while there is a certain longing for “truth” beyond the mediation in DeLillo’s novels, the postmodern tenet that “truth” can never be anything but a construct prevails. It is not that DeLillo finds life meaningless, only that any meaning is constructed, not found.

I would tend to agree with literary critic Christopher Douglas in his definition of DeLillo’s particular postmodernism. He claims that “DeLillo’s status as a ‘postmodern’ writer may surprise, considering the fact that his work can only marginally be considered in terms of a *formal*, literary postmodernism. ...DeLillo can better be considered postmodern in the *thematic* sense” (104, italics in original). In other words, the themes of DeLillo’s novels and his treatment of these themes are postmodern, but his style of writing is, if anything, only marginally so.

DeLillo’s themes relate to the so-called “postmodern condition”, after philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s influential book by that name, including such themes as the role of the mass media, especially television, in the saturation of postmodern culture by visual images; the role of language in constructing reality; the uncertainty of knowledge; and the construction of history and identity. DeLillo’s novels also explore such themes as consumerism, technology, conspiracy and paranoia, especially in the context of the Cold War, and the topical issue of terrorism. As the purpose of this thesis is to explore a particular theme in *Libra* and *Mao II* and not on DeLillo’s style of writing, I find it relevant to place DeLillo within the context of postmodern theory.

Many critics have applied postmodern or poststructuralist theories to DeLillo’s works, in particular the theories espoused by Baudrillard, Jameson, de Man, DeLeuze, Hutcheon, and White. DeLillo’s fiction, however, resists coherence of theory, suggesting the relevance but also the limitations of applying postmodern theory. His fiction does not “fit” into any one theory. It is full of contradictions, and, as such, reflects not only the contradictory time and culture which it depicts, but also the contradictory nature of postmodernism.

I will be focusing on the application of the theories of the postmodern literary critic Linda Hutcheon, the historian Hayden White, and the cultural theorist and postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard, to *Libra* and *Mao II*. This may seem contradictory in that Hutcheon and White reject Baudrillard’s claim that reality has been lost to a “hyperreality” in which the original has been simulated until all that is left is the “simulacrum”. They do not deny the existence of “the real” but merely challenge us to rethink how we come to know

what we believe to be true. They do not deny the existence of meaning but contend that it is created rather than found.

I would argue that both theories are relevant to the study of DeLillo, in particular to *Libra* and *Mao II*, because I find that DeLillo, like Hutcheon and White, questions how we come to know “the real” without denying its existence, while at the same time portraying a reality similar to Baudrillard’s hyperreality with a proliferation of simulations and simulacra. Both theories shed light on the study of what I believe to be a main theme of both novels, namely, the construction of the meanings of history, identity, and reality. Both theories reject central tenets of humanism, as does DeLillo, a point that critics miss who do not apply postmodern theory to DeLillo’s work.

In general, critical interest in *Libra* has focused mainly on the construction of identity – the identity of Lee Harvey Oswald – and the construction of history. Some critics have applied Baudrillard’s theory while others have focused on White. Still others have de-emphasized theory, such as Kavadlo, and, interestingly, Lentricchia, who places *Libra* within the context of postmodernism but without any references to postmodern theory. *Mao II* has not received as much attention as *Libra*, but in general, the attention has focused on the replacement of the novelist by terrorists and the photographic image. Critics have applied theories on photography or media theory. Overall, I have found a tendency among critics to either overemphasize Baudrillard or reject postmodern theory altogether. In addition, I have found that most studies of *Libra* focus *either* on Baudrillard *or* on White, and *Mao II* has quite simply not been studied enough. What I wish to contribute to the scholarly discussion is a study of these two novels that applies *both* Baudrillard on the one hand and Hutcheon and White on the other.

In addition to the theories of Hutcheon, White, and Baudrillard, I will explore the application of narrative theory, referencing literary critics such as Mark Currie, Frank Kermode and others. I will also explore the relevance of media theory, especially referring to media theorist and cultural critic Neil Postman and social theorist Guy Debord. In addition, I will apply theories on photography, in particular those of literary critic and semiotician Roland Barthes, novelist and literary theorist Susan Sontag, and media theorist Marita Sturken.

The main focus of my thesis, however, will be on a close reading of *Libra* and *Mao II*, comparing and contrasting the two novels where relevant, and comparing and contrasting my readings with those of established literary critics. Where relevant, I will also refer to essays written by DeLillo, to interviews with the author, and to other novels by DeLillo, including

*Americana*, *White Noise*, and *Underworld*. Important scholars that I will be referencing include Douglas Keesey, whose book focuses on the power of mediating structures such as film and language in DeLillo's novels; Mark Osteen, whose book explores DeLillo's "dialogue with culture"; and a number of scholars whose articles have appeared in important literary journals and essay collections, including Lentricchia, Christopher M. Mott, and Timothy L. Parrish among others.

My interest in studying these two particular novels was motivated by the commonality of theme and a violent plot, but above all, the metafictional element linking the two novels, an element I have found somewhat overlooked by most critics. *Libra* and *Mao II* both contain writers as characters, in *Libra* a historian and in *Mao II* a novelist. While the writer in *Libra* struggles to finish his historical account of the Kennedy assassination and ultimately fails because he is unable to construct a narrative, the writer in *Mao II* fails to finish and publish his novel and eventually dies because he believes that the novelist can no longer influence society. Through these characters, the novels discuss the purpose of narrative and writing, especially in an image-dominated world in which we not only prefer the image to "the original" but also to other forms of representation, such as writing. DeLillo suggests that the purpose of fiction is to create meaning, to provide narratives that make sense of our world. I will argue in this thesis that central to the understanding of *Libra* and *Mao II*, and therefore strangely underemphasized by many scholars, is the importance DeLillo places on narrative for constructing the meanings of history, identity, and reality.<sup>1</sup>

In *Libra*, DeLillo provides a meta-commentary on the writing of history and literature by demonstrating the importance of narrative in the writing of both. He challenges the traditional distinction between history and literature by emphasizing that both are human constructs.<sup>2</sup> I hope to show that *Libra* is an example of what Hutcheon has called "historiographic metafiction", though hardly any critics have discussed it as such. By comparing *Libra* to *Mao II*, I hope to further emphasize DeLillo's questioning of the distinction between history and literature, between what we call "reality" and what we define as "fiction".

This thesis has been organized into three chapters, the first dealing with how meaning is constructed, the second with who constructs meaning, and the third with the consequences of this constructivist view. Each chapter will be comprised of three sections. The first section

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<sup>1</sup> At the same time, DeLillo questions the role of narrative. As will be discussed in chapter one, DeLillo simultaneously invokes and subverts narrative structuring.

<sup>2</sup> At the same time, DeLillo seems to privilege literature over history, as will be discussed in chapter one.

in each chapter will discuss relevant postmodern theories. The second section will be a close reading and critical discussion of *Libra* with an application of these theories, and the third section will be a close reading and critical discussion of *Mao II* with an application of these theories. Throughout the thesis, I will be defining my use of terms such as postmodernism, narrative, and ideology.

Chapter one will deal with the roles of textuality and narrative in constructing the meanings of history, identity, and reality in *Libra* and *Mao II*. The first section will discuss the contention by Hutcheon and White that our only access to the past is through its textual remains, White's argument that historians and novelists use similar narrative techniques, and Hutcheon's term, "historiographic metafiction". This section will also discuss narrative theory in terms of how texts are put together to form narratives, theories on photography in terms of the role of photography as text, and the idea of the textuality of identity.

The second section will be an application of the theories of Hutcheon and White and a discussion of the roles of textuality and narrative in *Libra*. It will discuss the textuality of identity as exemplified by the manner in which many of the characters construct identities with the help of documents, including Win Everett's creation of a lone gunman. The textuality of history will be demonstrated through the work of the historian Nicholas Branch. This section will also focus on *Libra* as historiographic metafiction, exploiting as well as subverting historical narrative. DeLillo creates a conspiracy narrative about the Kennedy assassination in the form of *Libra* while simultaneously demonstrating the role of random events. Through Branch's failure to write a coherent narrative, DeLillo provides a meta-commentary on the representation of Kennedy's assassination, on the writing of history in general, and on the creation of *Libra* itself. This section will discuss DeLillo's emphasis on the importance of narrative for making sense of historical events, and it will also show the role of narrative in creating one's identity and reality, as exemplified through the character of Oswald. Finally, this section will suggest that, according to DeLillo, the purpose of writing and narrative is not necessarily to provide any final answers but to offer comfort through narrative structuring.

The third section will likewise discuss theories on the roles of textuality and narrative as they apply to *Mao II*. The textuality of identity will be exemplified, among other things, by Brita's photography of the novelist Bill Gray, and the textuality of history will be demonstrated through the use of visual images. *Mao II* to a much greater degree than *Libra* emphasizes visual images as texts, illustrating the shift from a word-centered to an image-centered world. While Everett in *Libra* constructs the character of Oswald mainly with the



help of written texts, Brita constructs a man with photographs. This section will apply theories on photography, including those of Sontag and Barthes. Barthes' famous declaration, the "death of the author", will be discussed in terms of Bill's picture. This section will also focus on the role of narrative in constructing the meanings of history, identity, and reality as used by many author figures in the novel, including Bill, Brita, and the terrorist Abu Rashid. It will especially focus on news of terror as the new world narrative, perhaps even replacing the novel.

While chapter one will endeavor to answer the question of *how* the meanings of history, identity, and reality are constructed in *Libra* and *Mao II*, namely through textuality and narrative, chapter two will consider *who* participates in the process, in other words, who writes the narratives. Chapter two will focus especially on the role of the mass visual media and the ideological frameworks within which narratives are constructed. The first section will discuss the contention by Hutcheon and White that ideological frameworks are always at work in narrativization. It will address the critique of narrative by many postmodernists, including DeLillo, as an instrument of ideology and power. It will also discuss relevant media theory in order to demonstrate the role of the mass visual media, including the theories of Postman and Debord.

The second section will be an application of these theories to *Libra*. It will discuss the role of Cold War ideology in constructing the meanings of history, identity, and reality, as well as the ideological implications of the "lone gunman" theory versus conspiracy theories. This section will also discuss the suggestion that narratives are linked to power in that so-called "Masters", such as the CIA, construct narratives to legitimate their authority and advance their power. It will discuss the portrayal of Oswald as not only a product of ideology and a pawn of the CIA and the FBI, but also as a man shaped by the American media, by what Debord calls the "society of the spectacle". Finally, the section will focus on the role of the mass visual media in constituting the meaning of the Kennedy assassination and in constructing a new sense of reality in which media representations seem to have replaced "real" experience.

The third section will likewise apply theories on ideology and the media to *Mao II*. It will discuss the role of author figures, or "Masters" such as Chairman Mao, in constructing the meanings of history, identity, and reality by writing a culture's narratives, but also how they themselves are products of the "society of the spectacle". This section will focus on the ideological frameworks these author figures operate within, as well as DeLillo's critique of narrative by demonstrating how the pursuit of perfect structures and order can lead to

totalitarian tendencies. This section will also discuss the political role of the writer and Bill's contention that the novelist's ability to use narrative to change the world has been usurped by the terrorist. It will discuss the purpose of narrative and writing in an image-saturated society, and it will conclude with a discussion of the power of the mass visual media to create mass identity and a reality based on exposure.

Chapter three will focus on the consequences of the constructivist view of history, identity, and reality expressed in chapters one and two. In other words, it will open up to a broader discussion of "the real" and the proclaimed "loss of originals". The first section will discuss Baudrillard's contention that we live in a "hyperreality" produced by the media in which "simulacra" have replaced all originals through a process of simulation. It will also discuss Hutcheon and White's rejection of Baudrillard's theories, and Hutcheon's contention that we have never had unmediated access to reality but have always come to know it through our representations of it.

The second section will discuss the extent to which Baudrillard's theories can be applied to *Libra* and how they fall short. It will focus on the portrayal of a world lived inside representations in which images are experienced as more real than directly experienced life, in which Oswald seems to have become a simulacrum existing in a hyperreality created by the media. This section will suggest that while blurring the distinction between "the real" and "the fictional", DeLillo does not reduce people and events to mere representations. He does not deny the existence of Oswald as a human being nor the Kennedy assassination as a real event. Finally, the section will suggest that representations create rather than replace meaning.

The third section will likewise apply Baudrillard's theories to *Mao II*. It will focus on the depiction of a reality in which real people and real events *seem* to have been reduced to visual images, in which Bill seems to have been replaced by his image in the form of Brita's photograph of him. Like Oswald, he seems to have become a simulacrum existing in hyperreality. This section will suggest that though there is a definite privileging of images such as photographs in *Mao II* over "the real" and over other forms of representation, the real has not disappeared. Rather, this is an illusion created in large part by the mass visual media.

# Chapter 1:

## The Roles of Textuality and Narrative in Constructing the Meanings of History, Identity, and Reality

*Libra* and *Mao II* are essentially debates about existence, knowledge, and representation. They ask questions about what is reality and how we can know what really happened in the past. They suggest that while the world is not meaningless, meaning is not “out there” to be discovered. Rather, meaning is created. This chapter will discuss the roles of textuality and narrative, terms that will be defined below, in the meaning-making process. It will apply the theories of Hutcheon and White, relevant narrative theory, and theories on photography to *Libra* and *Mao II* in order to emphasize the theme of the constructed meanings of history, identity, and reality.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1 On Postmodern Theories of Textuality and Narrative

Any discussion involving the term “postmodernism” must begin with a definition of what the author means when using the term. I will be using it here to describe the ideas flourishing among certain 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars in fields as diverse as philosophy, art, architecture, and literature, some of these ideas continuations of modernism, others rejections of it. Postmodernism has been defined in different ways by different scholars. For Lyotard, it has been about the defeat of grand narratives; for Jameson, the triumph of capitalism; and for Baudrillard, the loss of reality. My definition of postmodernism will follow along the lines of Hutcheon. To her, postmodernism challenges Enlightenment (and by extension, modernist) ideals such as rationality and objectivity, positivism, liberal humanism, and universality. It claims that order and coherence are human constructs, that meaning, or “truth”, is created rather than already existing. The point is not that there is no meaning, but that any meaning is constructed.

As human beings, we seem to have a need for meaning and order. Hutcheon points out that postmodernism does not deny this need: it “acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* 41-42). We quite

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<sup>3</sup> By “history” I mean the narrative of the past relating to humanity and human events. By “identity” I mean the essence of a person as a separate entity. By “reality” I mean everything that *is*, in other words, the sense of what exists and what is true.

simply create the order, meaning, or “truth” that we seek. “Truth” is therefore not an objective entity to be discovered, but rather, conditioned by its context. According to Hutcheon, postmodernism contextualizes “truth” by recognizing that truths, in the plural, are socially, ideologically, and historically constructed (18).<sup>4</sup>

This does not necessarily lead to radical constructivism in which reality itself is a construct, or to Baudrillard’s “hyperreality” in which reality has disappeared. Hutcheon’s version of postmodernism does not deny the *existence* of reality, but merely questions how we can make sense of it. Her postmodernism is not ahistorical, as some critics have claimed, but it challenges what we *mean* by history, and her postmodernism does not deny the existence of the subject, as other critics have argued, but it does question the *nature* of the subject. As I will be arguing throughout this thesis, her version of postmodernism, which I find reflected in *Libra* and *Mao II*, suggests that while “the real” does exist, the meanings we assign to it are created.

According to Hutcheon and historians such as Dominick LaCapra and White, the manner in which we assign meaning to a historical event is by interpreting its textual remains. In fact, Hutcheon claims that history does not exist except as text, which is not to “deny that the *past* existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts” (*Poetics* 16, italics in original). This does not mean that the past *is* a text. As the cultural critic Fredric Jameson argues, “history is *not* a text”, but “it is inaccessible to us except in textual form” (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* 35, italics in original). Empirically, the past did exist, but epistemologically, we can only know it through the meanings we give to historical events as we interpret the texts left behind. In *Libra*, Branch must interpret the many documents he has collected regarding the Kennedy assassination. These documents are his only access to the event, his only method for assigning meaning to the event. The Zapruder film, for example, becomes a key text in defining the assassination.<sup>5</sup>

The poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida famously declared that “Il n’y a pas de hors texte”,<sup>6</sup> which by many has been interpreted as meaning that nothing exists outside textuality. I would interpret his statement to mean that there is no position outside of language or text from which to view reality. His statement implies what structuralist linguists

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<sup>4</sup> I will return to the question of context and ideology in chapter two.

<sup>5</sup> The Zapruder film will be discussed further in section two of this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> As quoted in Currie, page 47.

such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Barthes<sup>7</sup> claimed before him, that language plays an important role in how we constitute our sense of reality. Saussure, Barthes, and others challenged the notion that language merely reflects reality, that it is a transparent medium through which a pre-existing reality is represented. Instead, they stressed the constitutive role of language in constructing reality.

Furthermore, as the philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin taught us, language does so in an opaque, biased manner: “Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intention; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others” (294). In other words, language is never neutral or transparent but loaded with cognitive baggage, ideology, contexts, and connotations. As I will argue in chapter two, if there is no position outside of language from which to view our world, then we can never step outside of ideological, cultural, or historical contexts and be neutral in our representations.

Postmodernism argues that the meanings of history, identity, and reality are constituted by texts or language. It rejects positivist history by denying the existence of historical truth based on objective facts “out there” to be found, and it rejects the humanist notion of a universal core of identity, the idea of the subject as a coherent, unitary, autonomous entity with a fixed and stable core. Instead, postmodernism points out the constructed and unstable natures of history, identity, and reality. It argues that just as history is assigned meaning through its textual remains, the meanings of identity and reality are constructed through language.

In *Libra* and *Mao II*, the textuality of identity is explored extensively. In *Libra*, many of the characters construct identities with the help of documents such as credit cards, letters, photographs, and passports, and in *Mao II*, the main character is defined by his photograph. In both novels, there is the sense that identity is unstable, put together by texts, and the product of historical, cultural, and ideological contexts.

The term “textuality” has been defined in various ways, but I will be using it here rather broadly to include not only the written word but also other forms of language. I tend to agree with Hutcheon that historical texts include not only written documents, eye-witness accounts, archives, and so on, but also visual images such as photographs and paintings (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 75). Including visual images in a definition of textuality also reflects the shift in representation that has occurred in the 20th century, brought on by the

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<sup>7</sup> The works of Barthes extend over many fields, including semiology and literary criticism, and contain both structuralist and poststructuralist elements.

mass visual media. As Postman so eloquently noted in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, we have gone from a word-centered culture to an image-centered one in which images, especially television images, rather than writing, is preferred in the representation of reality. I would argue that this shift is reflected in *Libra* and *Mao II* in that *Mao II* to a much greater degree than *Libra* emphasizes visual images as texts. For example, while Everett in *Libra* constructs the lone gunman mainly with the help of written documents, Brita in *Mao II* constructs a man entirely with photographs.

Photography plays a unique role in constructing the meanings of history, identity, and reality. It captures experience on film, and perhaps more than any other form of representation it participates in creating personal and collective memory. Paradoxically, it provides a kind of historical “truth” while exhibiting a sense of immediacy. As Barthes puts it, “the photograph [is] an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*” (*Image-Music-Text* 44, italics in original). In other words, it captures the present moment while simultaneously creating the past. Portrait photography, for example, portrays the image of who you are, but also of who you were. It “evokes both a trace of life and the prospect of death” (Sturken 19). As Bill in *Mao II* seems aware of, photography creates memories that future generations will look at when one is dead, and in this way, it paradoxically signals both death and immortality since the photograph will live on. It signals both history and the present moment.<sup>8</sup>

While written accounts are understood to be the products of interpretation, photographs are thought to provide un-biased proof that an event took place or a person existed. Barthes calls photography “a certificate of presence” (*Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* 87). A photograph signals that that which is portrayed really used to exist, and, as such, is often perceived as more authentic than a written narrative. Barthes claims that while “language is, by nature, fictional”, “the Photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself” (*Camera* 87).

Though it may seem as if photography is a direct slice of life, as if it merely reflects reality, I would argue that a photograph is not a purely objective representation of the real. The supposed objectivity of the camera is countered by the subjectivity of the photographer and the viewer. According to Sontag, “photographs are evidence not only of what’s there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world” (88). The photographer has the power to shape the reality portrayed. S/he chooses what to photograph

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<sup>8</sup> Barthes and the idea of death in photography will be discussed in section three of this chapter, dealing with *Mao II*.

and decides on what story or emotion is to be conveyed. S/he decides what to include within the boundaries of the frame, what details are to be focused on in order to relay the overall intention and thereby control what the viewer is to find important. S/he controls the camera and decides on an angle or point of view.

The viewer also influences the meaning of a photograph, perceiving subjectively that which is portrayed. I would argue that once a photograph has been developed, it becomes the material of the audience. The photographer ultimately cannot control the meaning assigned to the photograph by the viewer, and thus, meaning is not stable. Photography does not merely reflect reality, but rather, like language, its conveyances are influenced by its author and audience, and, as such, are inherently ideological and cultural. Like a writer, the photographer selects, arranges, and tells a story, and like a reader, the viewer retells the story in his or her mind.

I would suggest that the meaning of a photograph is constructed through narrative. According to Sontag, there is a limit to “photographic knowledge of the world” for “Only that which narrates can make us understand” (23). Texts such as photographs need to be formed into narratives in order to create this knowledge. Narrative has come to be seen by many as central to the way human beings make sense of the world. The term “narrative” is not restricted to literary studies but has entered into discourses found in fields ranging from psychoanalysis to the study of history. From a cognitive perspective, we use the process of narrativization to create meaning, to structure and make coherent the chaos of events we experience. The literary critic H. Porter Abbott claims that “we are all narrators” and we are all “recipients of narrative” (xi). The stories that we tell ourselves and each other as well as the stories we are told every day come not only in the form of novels, but, as narratologists Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires suggest, there are many other types of narrative, including films, myths, advertisements, and the news (1).

Critics tend to disagree on what constitutes a narrative. As Abbott points out, some require at least two events, one after the other, for example Barthes and Schlomit Rimmon-Kennan (12). Others, such as Mieke Bal, also insist that the events be causally related (12). Still others call for a narrator, for example Gerald Prince (13). Abbott himself defines narrative rather broadly as “the representation of an event or a series of events” (12). I will be using this broader definition with the only requirement of some kind of action involved. The narrative may be expressed verbally by a narrator or it may be expressed visually in the form of images, be they film or even static images such as photographs, for I would tend to

agree with Abbott that when we look at a picture, we cannot resist creating a narrative in our minds (6).

The role of the viewer in creating the narrative, then, becomes as important as that of the photographer, just as the role of the reader is as important as that of the author. A central critique of narrative theory by poststructuralists has been the assumption that a narrative contains a fixed meaning assigned by the author. Poststructuralist narrative theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the incompleteness of narratives as their meanings change with their readers. Poststructuralist narrative theory focuses on reader-centered narratives. Barthes went so far as to declare “the death of the Author”, rejecting the traditional view of the author as the sole origin of a narrative. Instead, he announced “the birth of the reader”, claiming that the reader is the producer of meaning (*Image* 148). I would put it this way: once a narrative has been written, it becomes the material of its readers and thus becomes the product of interpretations that may differ. I would argue that a narrative comes into being when a story is told through verbal or visual narration, and then re-told inside the mind of the reader or viewer.

Our need for narrative structuring is based on our need for order, and linking events in temporal sequences as well as through cause and effect are two kinds of ordering techniques. According to Abbott, “We are made in such a way that we continually look for the causes of things. The inevitable linearity of story makes narrative a powerful means of gratifying this need” (37). Furthermore, as Kermode has noted, we long for the “sense of an ending”. Since the world does not have beginnings and endings the way, for example, novels do, we use narrative techniques to create the sense of it, or, as Kermode puts it, we use fictions “to make sense of our worlds and our lives. For to make sense of our lives from where we are, as it were, stranded in the middle, we need fictions of beginnings and fictions of ends, fictions which unite beginning and end and endow the interval between them with meaning” (190). Since we long for closure, which fiction often provides, we structure our world through narrative.

This is not to say that a literary narrative necessarily has the classic structure of beginning, middle, and end. It does not necessarily order events in chronological order, and while it moves towards closure, it does not necessarily provide it. A narrative carries the “sense” of, or longing for, an ending, but some literature, especially postmodern literature, often refuses to provide a clear sense of closure. *Mao II*, for example, seems to fade out rather than end. *Mao II* is also an example of a narrative that, while presenting events



chronologically, leaves many gaps and loose ends. In many ways, traditional narrative is being redefined by postmodernism. Derrida and the deconstructionists, for example, endeavored to “deconstruct” narrative linearity (Currie 79). I would argue that while DeLillo does not abandon linear narrative entirely, *Mao II* is an example of a non-continuous linear narrative, containing fragments but emphasizing the structure of narrative within the fragments.

According to many psychoanalysts, we not only use narrative to make sense of our world but also to form identity. As Currie puts it, “the only way to explain who we are is to tell our own story, to select key events which characterize us and organize them according to the formal principles of narrative” (17). The stories we tell to ourselves and to others about who we are take the form of narrative. I would argue that like a literary writer, we use narrative techniques to shape memories into narratives that define our identity. We select which events to remember and which facts about them to include. We exclude certain facts and events, but we also fill in gaps where information is missing by hypothesizing about how events must have happened. We then arrange the facts into a sequence of events in order to create a coherent structure. In short, we interpret our experiences, analyzing causes and effects, and write a story that fits into an overall idea of who we think we are.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens claims, “A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important thought this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*” (54, italics in original). The inability to create narrative seems to lead to an inadequate sense of identity, as portrayed by Oswald in *Libra*. Though he tries to create narrative by writing a diary, he fails because his split personality denies him a stable voice and his dyslexia complicates his ability to use language. Oswald’s inability to form a coherent narrative of his life and his subsequent lack of a sense of identity compels him to join Everett’s assassination plot, a structured narrative with a clear role for him to play. Likewise, Jean-Claude in *Mao II* loses his ability to keep a mental story going due to being held hostage by terrorists, and thus, he gradually loses his sense of identity.

Like personal memory, collective memory is constructed through narrative. This is not to say that narrative is the only tool that historians use. As White points out, other forms of historical representation include the annals and the chronicle, but many historians view narrative as the proper way of writing history (*The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* 4). Traditionally, however, they have not viewed historical narrative as constructed. Instead, since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, many historians have claimed that the study of history is scientific and objective, and that historical narrative is therefore

the accurate representation of the past. As opposed to the literary writer whose narrative is the representation of the imaginable, the work of the historian was considered that of uncovering the “truth” of a past event.

Critics of historiography such as the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss have argued that historical accounts are actually interpretations, that the facts are not “given” to but rather “constituted” by the historian. Lévi-Strauss contends that when confronted with facts, the historian must “choose, sever and carve them up” in order to create a narrative.<sup>9</sup> What this essentially means is that the objective reality that the historian is expected to uncover is actually, according to these critics, a constructed reality. I would argue that this also means that historical narrative contains ideological and cultural frameworks. As Sturken points out, collective memory “is bound up in complex political stakes and meanings” (1).<sup>10</sup>

White takes the argument a step further by maintaining that the work of a historian is similar to that of a literary writer. The aim of both is to provide a verbal image of reality, and the way in which this is achieved is through a process of literary, or fiction-making, techniques (*Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* 122). In fact, White describes the historical text as a “literary artifact” (81). This does not mean, according to White, that there is no knowledge to be gained from the historical record (99). It just means that we can only make sense of the record when the historian employs the same techniques as the literary writer: “It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same” (98). Like the literary writer, the historian must fashion the “facts” in such a manner as to create a narrative, and only then will it make sense. The historian Branch in *Libra* refuses to apply any narrative techniques to the data he has collected, and, therefore, he is unable to make sense of what might have happened when Kennedy was assassinated.

When writing a historical narrative, the historian must first investigate the historical texts, verbal and visual, and decide, as White suggests, what is the “most plausible story that can be told about the events of which they are evidence” (*Content* 27). After deciding what story to tell, the historian must decide which facts to include in order for the plot to be logical. Branch’s main problem in *Libra* is that he refuses to be selective. Since the historical record is “both too full and too sparse”, the historian must exclude certain facts that are not relevant to his or her story, and must also fill in gaps where information is missing in the record by deducing what must have occurred (*Tropics* 51, 60). Just like the reader of fiction,

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<sup>9</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, as quoted in White, *Tropics of Discourse*, page 55.

<sup>10</sup> The ideological aspects of narrative will be further developed in chapter two.

the historian must search for clues in the text and form hypotheses for filling in the gaps in order to make sense of the text.

When the historian has selected which facts to include in his or her narrative, s/he must arrange them in such a manner as to create logical meaning. The order of presentation need not be the chronological order in which the events originally occurred. As narratologist Seymour Chatman explains, referring to narrative in literature, the purpose of the order of presentation “is to emphasize or de-emphasize certain story-events, to interpret some and to leave others to inference, to show or to tell, to comment or to remain silent, to focus on this or that aspect of an event or character” (43). The historian, like the literary writer, decides on an order of presentation for the purpose of creating a plot, in other words, to emphasize causes and effects and to create logical beginnings and endings.

The process of creating a narrative requires interpretation. In fact, interpretation inevitably enters into narrativization. White claims, “the facts do not speak for themselves, but...the historian speaks for them” (*Tropics* 125). As a result, the same historical event can generate multiple interpretations. Some critics would argue that such a view leads to relativism. White would agree, insisting that there cannot be a “nonrelativistic representation of historical reality” (117). As the product of interpretation, history cannot generate a single truth about an event, only possible truths.

The “truth” value of a historical account is further complicated by the fact that we tend to believe that an account is plausible if it is coherent in its structure. As White points out, since we assume that reality is coherent, if an account is *not* coherent, we consider it implausible or inaccurate (*Tropics* 122). If it *is* coherent, then it must be true. A critique of narrative structuring is thus the tendency to connect the dots at all costs, whether the account is anywhere near the “truth” or not. This is a typical critique of conspiracy theories. The longing for narrative structuring can lead people to believe almost anything. In *Mao II*, the Chinese people believe Mao’s version of Chinese history because it takes the form of a supposedly coherent narrative.

Coherence is not only brought about by narrative structuring, but also, according to Lévi-Strauss, by myth<sup>11</sup>. White suggests that there are only a certain number of stories that can be told about a given event, and that these types of stories are limited to the myths of a culture’s literary tradition (*Tropics* 60-61). As we read the historian’s narrative, then, we come to understand not only the “facts” provided, but also what kind of story that is told, the

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<sup>11</sup> See White, *Tropics of Discourse*, page 103.

“archetypal myth, or pregeneric plot structure” which we recognize because it is part of our “cultural endowment” (83, 86). In this way, unfamiliar events become familiar and make sense to us. In *Libra*, for example, the myth of the “lone gunman” is challenged by the myth of the “government conspiracy”, two myths that we are familiar with and which we, therefore, find coherent and plausible.<sup>12</sup> Abbott calls these myths “masterplots”, stories that are told over and over again to such an extent that our values and identities as individuals and cultures become connected to them – I would say even *formed* by them. For this reason, we tend to find credibility in narratives that contain such “masterplots” (42).

White’s claim that the work of a historian is similar to that of a novelist has been met by some criticism. His claim that “history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation” (*Tropics* 122) has been disputed by both historians and literary critics who argue that history and fiction are distinct categories. Hutcheon counters the literary critics who continue to believe that art is transcendent with universal values not rooted in historical realities and, therefore, superior to history (*Poetics* 90, 108). She contends, and I would agree, “that both history and literature are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past” (89). Both are human constructs created by narrative within historical, ideological, and cultural frameworks.

A type of literature that emphasizes the discursive nature of both history and literature is “historiographic metafiction”, the term coined by Hutcheon to describe the postmodern variant of the historical novel, or, rather, subversion of the genre. It is “historiographic” in that it deals with historical events and people. It is “metafiction” in that it is self-reflexive, aware of its own constructing process as well as providing a commentary on the writing of history and fiction in general. As Hutcheon explains, “historiographic metafiction questions the nature and validity of the entire human process of writing – of both history and fiction. Its aim in so doing is to study how we know the past, how we *make* sense of it” (*The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* 22, italics in original).

Currie calls this type of literature “theoretical fiction in the sense that it writes out in fictional form what poststructuralist theorists say about historical narratives” (65). It “raises issues about knowledge of the past and the bearing that narrative has on that knowledge” (65). By reminding us that both literature and history are human constructs, historiographic metafiction challenges us to rethink the ways in which we distinguish between the two

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<sup>12</sup> These two myths will be discussed in chapter two.

categories, and even between what we define as the “imaginary” and what we define as “reality”.

I would argue that *Libra* is an example of historiographic metafiction. It is historiographic in that it deals with a historical event, the Kennedy assassination, and with historical people, including Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby, and FBI agent Guy Banister. It is metafiction in that through the character Branch it provides a commentary on the writing of history and literature in general and on the writing of *Libra* in particular.<sup>13</sup> According to the literary critic Heinz Ickstadt, “*Libra* is not, like the historical novel, a narrative version of an already known and documented history but a fiction which demonstrates that fiction is needed to create meaning from the mass of documents” (303). This is what makes *Libra* historiographic metafiction and not a historical novel. Ickstadt distinguishes between the two, saying, “Is ‘historiographic metafiction’ a contemporary version of the historical novel or the postmodern subversion of that genre? Probably the latter, since the historical novel continues to exist in a quite non-metafictional manner” (299).

*Libra* emphasizes the importance of narrative for making sense of historical events. At the same time, however, it questions historical narrative. As Hutcheon points out, postmodern novels often invoke narrative representation at the same time as they subvert it. For example, narrative closure is often undermined in that there often is a refusal to provide a clear sense of it (*Poetics* 40). In *Mao II*, for example, the story seems to fade out rather than provide a clear ending. In many postmodern novels, there seems to be a simultaneous desire for and suspicion of plot, a desire to unify the scattered events of a story and yet an aversion to over-plotting. Postmodernists reject closed systems of meaning, reject so-called “metanarratives”, and yet I would argue that they must employ narrative in order to provide any kind of meaning. The rejection of metanarratives leads to resistant narratives, for is not the destruction of narrative a narrative in itself?

In postmodern American literature in which paranoia and conspiracy theories have figured heavily, Hutcheon notes this ambiguity:

Many have commented upon this paranoia in the works of contemporary American writers, but few have noted the paradoxical nature of this particularly postmodern fear and loathing: the terror of totalizing plotting is inscribed within texts characterized by nothing if not by over-plotting and overdetermined intertextual self-reference. The text itself becomes the potentially closed, self-referring system. (*Poetics* 133)

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<sup>13</sup> The Author’s Note basically serves the purpose of drawing attention to the constructed nature of the novel. See section two of this chapter.

With *Libra*, DeLillo has written a highly structured, tightly plotted conspiracy narrative. At the same time, he questions the tendency of conspiracy theories to connect the dots at all costs, as exemplified by Branch's reluctance to write a narrative. Furthermore, the novel is full of random occurrences and mysteries, suggesting that historical narrative can never fully explain reality. In *Mao II*, the questioning of narrative is linked to totalitarian regimes. DeLillo suggests that the pursuit of perfect structures and narrative order can lead to totalitarian tendencies. Furthermore, with *Mao II*, DeLillo challenges traditional narratives and their totalizing, closed systems of meaning by opting for a more open narrative containing many gaps and loose ends.

This is an example of the paradoxical nature of postmodernism, which Hutcheon stresses throughout her criticism: "Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (*Poetics* 3). Even though Lyotard's definition of the postmodern may be true, that we live in a time of "incredulity toward meta-narratives" (xxiv), I would argue that we still rely on narrative representation for creating meaning. *Libra* and *Mao II* may reject any grand narratives, but they still invoke the importance of narrative structuring for creating the meanings of history, identity, and reality.

## **1.2 *Libra*: "We script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter."**

With *Libra*, DeLillo has written a tightly knit conspiracy theory that emphasizes the roles of textuality and narrative in constructing the meanings of history, identity, and reality. The novel consists of a double narrative, one involving Oswald's fictional biography and the other involving the assassination plot orchestrated by former CIA agent Win Everett who constructs a "lone gunman" out of texts. These two narratives gradually converge as Oswald becomes the supposed lone gunman in Everett's plot. A third element in *Libra* that seeks to determine how these "two parallel lines" (*Libra* 339) converged is the work of historian Nicholas Branch, a CIA retiree given the daunting task of writing a historical account of the assassination.

DeLillo's conspiracy theory involves former CIA agents who first plotted against Castro as a part of Kennedy's anti-Castro program and who became disillusioned after the Bay of Pigs disaster. Everett devises a plot which is meant to be a "a spectacular miss" (*Libra* 148), an attempt on the life of the president which can be traced to Castro, thus placing Cuba once again at the center of American politics. Part of his scheme involves creating a lone

gunman, someone pro-Castro like Lee Harvey Oswald whose ties with Cuba will lead investigators to believe that Castro orchestrated the plot. Everett decides to “put someone together, build an identity” (78) by forging documents such as credit cards, letters, photographs, passports, driver’s licenses, address books, anything textual that therefore can be traced and appears real. Like a novelist, he constructs a character using mostly written texts. He says, “We do the whole thing with paper... We script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter” (28). The words Everett uses, such as “script”, “put together”, and “build”, underscore the theme of identity as a construct created through textuality. This is not to say that Oswald *is* a text, but rather, I would argue, that he is *made up* of texts.

Once Everett has constructed the lone gunman, he and the other conspirators must find a real person to fit the role: “They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the world” (*Libra* 50). Everett is surprised to find that the Oswald character he has created already exists in the real world, that the fiction he has been devising is “a fiction living prematurely in the world” (179). This character already has his own aliases and forged documents, and he ends up playing the role Everett has designed for him so well because he *is* the role already. As Mott points out, “there is no difference between a scripted Oswald and the ‘real thing’” (139). The “real thing” is also a construct. In fact, I would argue that in DeLillo’s world there is no “real” Oswald as opposed to a “fake” one.<sup>14</sup> Instead of possessing humanism’s stable core of identity, Oswald is portrayed as a postmodern, unstable construct put together by texts.

While most critics recognize DeLillo’s rejection of humanism, some critics make assumptions in their close readings that relate to humanism. For example, when Joseph Kronick writes that there is no way back for Oswald “from the fictional self to the actual self” (113), he is assuming that there is an “actual” as opposed to a “fictional” self. Literary critics Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles criticize Keesey for his assumption that DeLillo’s characters lose their “true” identities due to the media, in other words, that if it were not for various media, they would have access to their “true” identities (13). This objection to Keesey will be discussed further in chapter three, which will focus on my contention that we have never had unmediated access to history, identity, and reality, a contention I believe is reflected in DeLillo’s works.

Further underscoring the unstable, textualized nature of identity in *Libra* is the fact that not only Everett and Oswald but also most of the other conspirators use various aliases

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<sup>14</sup> The “real” will be discussed extensively in chapter three.

and forged documents. All of these characters seem to believe that if they put something in writing, it becomes “real”. As Oswald puts it, “Stamp some numbers and letters. This makes it true” (*Libra* 313). When Oswald decides to start a diary, he does so because he believes it will make his life “real”, it will “validate the experience, as the writing of any history brings persuasion and form to events” (211). In writing his so-called “Historic Diary”, he is anticipating the attention he will receive from future readers. This attention, he believes, will legitimate his existence and provide him with a place in history.<sup>15</sup> Like Everett and the other conspirators, Oswald recognizes the power of written language to transform thoughts or experiences into “truth”, validated as such by readers.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in writing a diary, Oswald will transform his experiences into a narrative, a form we find to be more “realistic” than real, fragmented life.

However, Oswald fails to create a coherent narrative, in part because his dyslexia complicates his ability to use language. He cannot “find order in the field of little symbols....language tricked him with its inconsistencies” (*Libra* 211). He also fails because his split personality denies him a stable voice. One of the aliases he creates, Hidell, becomes a part of his personality after endless simulation, and it is using Hidell’s voice that he writes certain passages in his diary. Furthermore, his incoherent narrative is constantly switching between first, second, and third persons singular, and it lacks a distinction between the subject and the object. As literary critic Glen Thomas puts it, Oswald’s diary “is marked by a split in the narrating subject, so that Oswald himself becomes both subject and object of the entries” (112). For example, the depiction of his suicide attempt is written using Hidell’s voice in the present tense as if it were a scene from a play in which he is the actor. As he watches himself trying to commit suicide, he writes: “*somewhere, a violin plays, as I watch my life whirl away....I think to myself, ‘How easy to die’*” (152, italics in original).

Oswald’s inability to form a coherent narrative of his life leads to his inadequate sense of identity and purpose in life. He longs for “a structure that includes him, a definition clear enough to specify where he belongs” (*Libra* 357). He finds this structure and a clear role to play in Everett’s assassination plot. Parrish contends that Oswald is “a failed writer who becomes a misplaced assassin because he cannot implement his vision of the world effectively through language. He goes from being a writer of a plot he cannot complete to

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<sup>15</sup> Chapter two will discuss extensively Oswald’s need for attention from others, spurred on by the media.

<sup>16</sup> As I will argue later in the section, however, once something is written, the author loses control of it as it becomes the material of the reader.



being an actor in a plot he does not write” (88). Since Oswald cannot write his own historical narrative, he enters Everett’s supposedly well-written plot.

The conspirators have created a “world inside the world” (*Libra* 13), which they think is more structured than “real” life. They believe that their plot is “a better-working version of the larger world...Here the plan was tighter. These were men who believed history was in their care” (127). In other words, they believe they have constructed a plot through which they can control history, a plot that has the structure of a literary narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Everett, however, loses control of the plot, in part because another conspirator takes it in a different direction than what he had intended, and in part because investigators in the aftermath of the event fail to mention any link to Castro. The conspirator T. J. Mackey decides to simplify what he finds to be a too complicated plot by changing its outcome to that of a real assassination rather than a miss. Since he is unsure of Oswald’s shooting ability, he opts for crossfire from several shooters to ensure a hit. Oswald’s role is thereby reduced to that of a simulated lone gunman whose paper trail will lead to Castro. However, the investigators of the assassination do not include a link to Castro in their official version of the event, either because they do not find such a link or because they choose not to include it in the official record. Instead, Oswald is understood to be the lone gunman. Without the link to Castro, Everett’s plot fails entirely.

This failure, I believe, illustrates the poststructuralist critique of the assumption that a narrative contains a fixed meaning assigned by its author. Everett cannot control the manners in which Mackey or the investigators read his narrative because, as I would argue, once a narrative has been written, it becomes the material of its readers and thus becomes the product of interpretations that may differ. This is the case whether the narrative is historical or literary. Even though Everett succeeds in writing a coherent narrative by employing literary techniques of characterization and emplotment, his readers misread his intentions. According to literary critic François Happe, “The writer-conspirator makes history with techniques borrowed from fiction, and he fails because his fiction is too complex for the reader he has chosen: Mackey” (34). Thus, a fiction that was intended to mislead in one way ends up misleading in a way unintended by the author.

Everett has a foreboding that he is losing control of the plot because he thinks that “plots carry their own logic” (*Libra* 221) and “secrets build their own networks” (22). In spite of his intentions, the conspiracy will run its own course. Everett believes that “there is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believe[s] that the idea of death is woven into the

nature of every plot” (221). What he means is that narratives carry the “sense of an ending”, to use Kermode’s phrase, the sense of something ceasing to exist. Death is therefore a logical end to a plot. This is why what was supposed to be a miss becomes a fatal hit. What was supposed to be a simulation of an assassination becomes the real thing.

With *Libra*, DeLillo invokes while simultaneously subverting conspiracy narrative by demonstrating how Everett cannot control his plot, not only due to misreadings but also due to seemingly random occurrences and chance happenings. According to literary critic Skip Willman, “As a totalizing narrative, conspiracy theory constructs a vast network of ‘meaningful’ connections, but DeLillo creates a conspiracy held together by the ‘meaningless’ and the ‘contingent’” (“Traversing the Fantasies of the JFK Assassination: Conspiracy and Contingency in Don DeLillo’s *Libra*” 412). For example, Oswald disappears from the conspirators for a while and then suddenly reappears in the office of Guy Bannister who has been trying to find him. Oswald turns up looking for work in the one place they never expected to discover him. Another chance happening is the fact that Kennedy’s route in Dallas goes right past the book depository where Oswald happens to work. In fact, the motorcade drives right by Oswald’s window.

Some people, however, would interpret these random occurrences as coincidences, which, according to Happe, do not occur by mere chance, as they may seem. He claims that they are actually like conspiracy theories in that they “give form to events” and can lead to superstitions such as the belief in astrology (31). He explains, “once we have noted the coincidence, we can’t help establishing a causal link” (32). I would put it this way: we tend to create narrative out of everything we experience. We want to establish causes and effects. Our longing for order in the midst of chaos and what seem like random events can lead us to create explanations, or narratives, that some people might view as superstition. For example, David Ferrie, one of the conspirators in *Libra*, believes in a strange mix of astrology, religion, hypnotism, ESP, and destiny. These phenomena link events together and create order. As Happe puts it, “Since nothing can be more disquieting than pure randomness, we are ready to inject any kind of order into our world” (31). A critique of conspiracy theories has been this tendency to connect the dots at all costs, whether the account is anywhere near the “truth” or not.

The Kennedy assassination is an event that has generated an astounding amount of conspiracy theories. In many ways, it can be defined as a postmodern event, an occurrence that has defied closure by generating a mass amount of data without a narrative to structure it. The search for the “truth” has left us with a profusion of literature espousing conflicting

versions of what might have happened. According to DeLillo, this event marked the beginning of the postmodern world. In the article “American Blood” in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, he explains: “What has become unraveled since that afternoon in Dallas is...the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared. We seem from that moment to have entered a world of randomness and ambiguity” (22). There has been “a natural disaster in the heartland of the real, the comprehensible, the plausible”, and we have been “forced to question the basic suppositions we make about our world” (22).

Living in this chaos of postmodernity, it has been comforting to some people to believe in conspiracy theories. As DeLillo puts it in an interview, “Believing in conspiracy is almost comforting because, in a sense, a conspiracy is a story we tell each other to ward off the dread of chaotic and random acts. Conspiracy offers coherence” (Goldstein 51).<sup>17</sup> In other words, conspiracy offers the same comforts as any narrative, the comforts of coherence and closure. Faced with apparent acts of randomness, many people have created order with conspiracy theories.

Paranoia and conspiracy narratives have figured heavily in postmodern American literature. I would argue that the particular function of conspiracy theories in postmodernism is that of destabilizing official narratives. In the case of the Kennedy assassination, *Libra* is an example of a conspiracy narrative that functions to destabilize the Warren Report. As counternarratives, conspiracy theories demonstrate the instability of meaning and truth. They show the contextual and ideological nature of meaning and the impossibility of ever “discovering” the “truth”.<sup>18</sup>

While most of the characters in *Libra* seem drawn to conspiracy theories of various kinds – reflective of the paranoid time in which they live, the Cold War era – Branch is anxious not to read too much into the facts or to connect what may simply be random occurrences: “There is no need, he thinks, to invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions” (*Libra* 58). He does find that certain occurrences beg a deeper explanation, for example all of the strange deaths of the conspirators, but “he wants a thing to be what it is. Can’t a man die without the ensuing ritual of a search for patterns and links?”(379). His reluctance to establish links and create a

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<sup>17</sup> It could be argued that believing in the lone gunman theory can be equally comforting. The ideological aspects involved in the discussion of conspiracy theory versus the lone gunman theory will be discussed in chapter two.

<sup>18</sup> At the same time, these counternarratives are themselves narratives that posit their versions of truth. This postmodern dilemma will be discussed later in this section.

narrative is reflective of the critique of totalizing narratives such as conspiracy theories and their tendency to read too much into the facts, to make connections at all costs.

I would argue that Branch's reluctance is rooted in a concern about imposing closure on the assassination story prematurely, for as Kronick rightly points out, "To choose an alternative among the possible plots is ultimately to foreclose history, a necessary act but with melancholy consequences since we can never know if we chose correctly" (123). Branch does not wish to force narrative structuring onto the events until he has "master[ed] the data" (*Libra* 442), in other words, until he has uncovered the "truth" of what happened and can therefore write the "correct" narrative. According to postmodern theory, however, there is no "truth" to be found. Rather, "truth", or meaning, is created, and I would argue that it is created through narrative. Since, as White points out, interpretation inevitably enters into narrativization, the same historical event can generate multiple interpretations, or many possible truths. The Kennedy assassination in particular exemplifies this postmodern view of historical "truth".

Branch will never be able to "master the data". His endeavor to do so is complicated by the fact that he will never have access to all of the data since the Curator censors the documents sent to him, and by the fact that the data never stops pouring in: "It is impossible to stop assembling data. The stuff keeps coming" (*Libra* 59). As a result of the constant influx of new material, Branch feels that "the past is changing as he writes" (301). Indeed, I would argue that history is always changing, forever being rewritten, because we view the past from the present with the information we have to our disposal today. Meaning is not stable or fixed.

Not only does the data keep pouring in, but there is quite simply too much of it for Branch to assimilate it all into a narrative. His problem is illustrative of what Baudrillard calls the "implosion of meaning" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 79), the collapsing of meaning as a result of too much information. As chapter three will discuss in more detail, Baudrillard claims that the proliferation of representations, or "information", in the media obliterates meaning. I would put it this way: when we are bombarded by too much information, we become unable to make relevant connections and create narrative. Branch's failure to create meaning is quite simply due to an excess of information.

His astounding collection includes photographs, eyewitness accounts, baptismal records, report cards, postcards, and tax returns. These texts are his only access to the assassination, because as Hutcheon and White contend, the past is only accessible to us through its textual remains. Like the investigators who write the official version of what

happened based on the texts they encounter, Branch only has documents on which to base his historical account. Everett's plot itself emphasizes the textuality of history in that the history he creates is composed of texts. It is a plot purposely written to leave textual remains for future investigators.

This is not to say that the event *is* a text. I would have to disagree with Kronick who, linking de Man's theory to *Libra*, claims, "the assassination is a text" and "history is a text" (109). I would argue that we cannot *know* about an event except through its texts, which is not the same as equating the event with the text. The fact that we gain knowledge about an event through its texts and representations does not mean that the event did not occur in an empirical reality or that the event has been replaced by its texts and representations. It merely means that these texts and representations influence the *meanings* assigned to the event.

For example, the Zapruder film became a key text in defining the Kennedy assassination. This home movie was first published as still images in *Life* magazine and was not shown to the general public in its entirety until 1975. For years, then, the film was considered to contain the secret truth of who killed the president. When it was shown in its entirety, however, it failed to reveal this truth. As Branch puts it, while the film captures "the powerful moment of death", the rest of it is "surrounding blurs, patches and shadows" (*Libra* 441). According to Sturken, "The image withholds its truth, clouds its evidence, and tells us, finally, nothing. Science cannot fix the meaning of the Zapruder film" (29). The function of the film, then, has been to generate many meanings of the assassination and to spur conspiracy theories of various kinds.

In spite of the various meanings the Zapruder film has generated, one cannot discuss the assassination without referring to the film. In fact, Sturken claims, "In a certain sense, it is not possible to imagine the event in the absence of the Zapruder images. The film has become the event" (29). For many people, the film has become more than a representation of the assassination. It has become the event itself. I would argue that this is because the footage has been repeated endlessly in the mass visual media. As a result, we cannot imagine the event without seeing the images presented in the film. We cannot separate the images from the event. According to literary critic Philip E. Simmons, "the media spectacle surrounding these deaths<sup>19</sup> is itself history; the images themselves *are* the events, and to speak of these killings separately from our experience of watching them on television is in a way, paradoxically, to deny their essential reality" (73, italics in original). I would argue, however, that while these

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<sup>19</sup> The shootings of Kennedy and Oswald, my note.

images have defined the events they represent, they have not replaced the events themselves. While they have created the *meanings* of the events, they cannot deny the existence of the events in an empirical reality.<sup>20</sup>

As Branch discovers, the Zapruder film as well as the rest of the data he has collected cannot reveal the “truth”. The texts contain innumerable contradictions, so-called “facts” that are forever changing depending on who is interpreting them. Even what should be uncontested, such as the color of Oswald’s eyes, seems to be the product of interpretation rather than a stable fact:

Oswald’s eyes are gray, they are blue, they are brown. He is five feet nine, five feet ten, five feet eleven. He is right handed, he is left handed. He drives a car, he does not. He is a crack shot and a dud. Branch has support for all these propositions in eyewitness testimony and commission exhibits. (*Libra* 300)

Everything is potentially true since everything is supported through eyewitness accounts or “evidence”. Yet everything cannot be true.

Even photographs of Oswald seem contradictory. Branch notices that he “looks like different people from one photograph to the next. He is solid, frail, thin-lipped, broad-featured, extroverted, shy and bank-clerkish, all, with the columned neck of a fullback. He is everybody” (*Libra* 300). Even photography cannot reveal the “truth” of who Oswald is. There are in fact many possible Oswalds, and which Oswald you see depends on your perceptions and interpretations. The lack of certainty regarding even basic physical qualities underscores the fact that it is not possible for the historian to “uncover” the “truth”. He or she must decide which of the potential truths seem most plausible to him or her.

Faced with these contradictory “facts”, Branch must choose which seem most credible. Faced with an astounding amount of data, he must select which data to include in his narrative. He refuses, however, to be selective: “There is nothing in the room he can discard as irrelevant or out-of-date. It all matters on one level or another” (*Libra* 378). Branch thinks that he “must study everything. He is in too deep to be selective” (59). As a result, he is unable to assemble the facts into a narrative and, thereby, create meaning. Because he fails to be selective, nothing makes sense. He is left with merely texts, with what he calls “lonely facts” (378), existing outside of narrative.

I would argue that Branch’s struggle to assemble the data offers a meta-commentary on the writing of Kennedy’s assassination, on the writing of history in general, and on the creation of *Libra* itself. Unlike Branch, DeLillo has managed to write a narrative by applying

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<sup>20</sup> Chapter three will discuss Baudrillard’s claim that the image or representation has replaced the real.

certain literary techniques that, according to White, the historian also must apply in order to write a coherent historical account. As White claims, the process of creating a narrative is the same in both historical and fictional representation: selecting, ordering, and narrating events. DeLillo, then, has chosen what story to tell; he has decided which facts to include and which to exclude in order for the plot to be logical; he has filled in gaps where information was missing in the record; and he has ordered the events, not chronologically, but in such a way as to be exciting to the reader as well as to make sense. In short, DeLillo has interpreted the texts and arranged the facts in order to create a narrative.

Branch, however, seems satisfied with his fragments existing outside of narrative, his notes that, like Scott's files in *Mao II*, contain information without connections, closure, or narrative structuring. Branch "takes refuge in his notes. The notes are becoming an end in themselves. Branch has decided it is premature to make a serious effort to turn these notes into coherent history" (301). On some level, DeLillo seems to admire Branch's ability to be satisfied with notes, to refrain from imposing closure on the assassination story. In this way, Branch can be seen as the ideal postmodern writer, subverting narrative.

With *Libra*, DeLillo has written historiographic metafiction that exploits at the same time as it subverts historical narrative. While he emphasizes the role of narrative in constructing the meaning of history – as exemplified by Branch's failure to construct a narrative – he simultaneously questions its ability to completely explain historical events – as exemplified by the occurrence of random events in *Libra*. While he challenges totalizing narratives such as conspiracy theories, he simultaneously writes his own conspiracy narrative. As Parrish rightly puts it, "Although one might say that DeLillo constructs a plot mainly as a means of questioning plots, *Libra* demonstrates that questioning any one plot is the means by which another plot is inevitably created" (86-87). Furthermore, while challenging whether we will ever get to the "truth" of who assassinated Kennedy, DeLillo gives us *his* account of what might have happened. His dilemma is this: while suspicious of narrative structures, he constructs just such a structure, and while disclaiming the ability to say "what really happened", he provides us with *his* version of the event.

However, DeLillo is careful to point out that *Libra* is only his fictional account:

*Libra* is a work of the imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I've made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination. I've altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters.  
(Author's Note in *Libra*)

The Author's Note draws attention to the constructed nature of *Libra*, emphasizing that not only does the novel not claim to be a historical account, but it also does not claim to be fiction that merely reflects reality (as realist art has claimed). Rather, I would argue that *Libra* is *about* history, and it is also about fiction. It is about the discursive nature of both literature and history, supporting Hutcheon's claim.

As a novel, *Libra* does not serve the purpose of providing any final answers. While it deals with historical events, it does not aim to "uncover" historical "truth". Literature has a certain advantage over history in the sense that it does not need to prove anything or explain everything. Its purpose lies elsewhere. Willman asks a very relevant question in regards to *Libra*: "In what way can a work of art operating outside the world of empirical facts and established "reality" help us to understand the JFK assassination?" ("Art After Dealey Plaza: DeLillo's *Libra*" 623). I would argue that with *Libra*, DeLillo suggests that the purpose of literature is to create meaning that exists outside of the empirical. It can offer a kind of "truth" in that it can provide us with perspectives on the human experience. As Oswald's mother says in explanation of her son's actions, "Your honor, I cannot state the truth of this case with simple yes and no. I have to tell a story" (*Libra* 449).

DeLillo's treatment of history in *Libra* has received some criticism, criticism that I would argue reflects a common misunderstanding about the purpose of literature. When the conservative opinion writer for the Washington Post, George Will, proclaimed that *Libra* was "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship" because of its "lunatic conspiracy theory" and its "blaming America for Oswald's act of derangement", his statements revealed not only a political prejudice against DeLillo but also the misunderstanding that literature should be in line with the official historical record. Regarding DeLillo's treatment of history, Will declared that "Novelists using the raw material of history – real people, important events – should be constrained by concern for truthfulness, by respect for the record and a judicious weighing of probabilities".<sup>21</sup> I would argue, however, that the purpose of literature is not to reflect any "truth". In fact, postmodern literature claims that neither literature nor history can provide us with the "truth", and postmodern literature often writes counternarratives to question the official narratives and thereby underscore the instability of "truth".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> As quoted in Ruppensburg and Engles' introduction to *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, page 8.

<sup>22</sup> Being called a "bad citizen" was actually a compliment to DeLillo since he believes that the writer should be "dangerous" and question official narratives. I will explore this view of the novelist in my discussion of *Mao II* in chapter two.



*Libra* seems to privilege literature over history, as suggested by Branch's failure to create meaning out of the texts surrounding the assassination.<sup>23</sup> In an interview, DeLillo says, "fiction rescues history from its confusions" by providing "a hint of order in the midst of all the randomness" (DeCurtis 294). In another interview, he explains that, "fiction offers patterns and symmetry that we don't find in the experience of ordinary living. Stories are consoling" (Connolly 31). In other words, fiction can provide comfort through narrative structuring and closure. *Libra* can provide this comfort in that it has structured an event that otherwise seems to defy structuring and given an ending to an event that otherwise seems to defy endings. History, too, can provide the comfort of narrative structuring if it applies literary techniques, but it cannot provide any final answers, as it claims to do.

Literary techniques are required for turning reality into a narrative. When one of the characters in DeLillo's novel, *Underworld*, says, "everything connects in the end" (465), what he really means is that we *make* everything connect. We simply cannot resist narrative structuring, and as a result, we tend to turn everything into a story, to connect the dots somehow, because that is how we make sense of our world. In short, we create fiction.

### **1.3 *Mao II*: "They were putting him together...bouncing his image off the moon."**

Like *Libra*, *Mao II* emphasizes the roles of textuality and narrative in constructing the meanings of history, identity, and reality. Both novels are about authorship, about "men in small rooms" (*Libra* 41) who use their fictions to orchestrate acts of violence: in *Libra* an American-grown conspiracy and in *Mao II* an Eastern terrorist plot. While *Libra* deals with historical events, *Mao II* is very much about the future, or even the present. It is about new world narratives, new forms of representation, reproduction, and the masses: mass language, mass art, mass production, mass media, mass culture. Both novels contain writers as characters, in *Libra* a historian and in *Mao II* a novelist. Through these characters, the novels discuss the nature of history and literature, and the purpose of narrative and writing. This commentary is the metafictional element linking the two novels.

While both *Libra* and *Mao II* focus on the role of textuality, I would argue that *Mao II* to a much greater degree than *Libra* emphasizes the role of visual images as opposed to the written word. As such, *Mao II* is an illustration of how we have gone from a word-centered to

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<sup>23</sup> DeLillo also criticizes literature, especially its tendency to reduce reality to aesthetics, as will be discussed in chapter three.

an image-centered world, as Postman has pointed out (9). The textuality of identity is underscored by Brita's photography of the novelist Bill Gray. Like Everett in *Libra*, Brita creates the identity of a man through paper, but, while Everett constructs the character of Oswald mainly with the help of written texts, Brita constructs a man with photographs.

These photographs will seem to replace "the original", much like the Zapruder film seems to replace the Kennedy assassination. To his readers, the photograph of Bill will *become* Bill. It will become the reference point for judging who "the real" Bill is, for as Brita puts it, "from the moment your picture appears you'll be expected to look just like it. And if you meet people somewhere, they will absolutely question your right to look different from your picture" (*Mao II* 43). According to Keesey, "the pictures may be appropriated by the mass media to further their obliteration of his unique self" (189). I would argue, however, that in DeLillo's works there is a rejection of the humanist notion of a "unique self". The photograph does not replace Bill's "unique self", but, rather, it is one of the texts that creates the *meaning* of his identity. What I mean is that the photographer and the viewer of the photograph assign meaning to Bill's identity, or rather, meanings in the plural. They shape his *media* identity.<sup>24</sup>

Brita's photographs do not replace Bill, but they also do not merely reflect Bill's identity. In other words, Brita does not simply expose an objective reality but interprets the character of Bill and creates her own version of him. As Bill puts it, "I've become someone's material. Yours, Brita" (*Mao II* 43). Even though she tries to "eliminate technique and personal style" from her work, she is well aware of the fact that she is "doing certain things to get certain effects" (26). She is deciding what story or emotion to convey with her photography, what details to focus on, and what perspective to incorporate. When Bill's assistant, Scott, and his girlfriend, Karen, look at Brita's photographs of Bill, they cannot help but notice the influence of Brita, how she has "enlarged" and "explained" and "made him over" (221). Moreover, since the photographs follow each other in the original order of exposure, they create a narrative in which Brita is the storyteller, shaping the life of her subject. I would argue that like the novelist or historian, the photographer selects, arranges, and tells a story.

While several critics note Brita's role as photographer in shaping Bill's identity, they seem to ignore the role of the viewer.<sup>25</sup> Osteen, for example, rightly notes that photography's

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<sup>24</sup> Chapter three will discuss Baudrillard's theory of the image replacing the original.

<sup>25</sup> Many critics note the role of the mass visual media and the publishing industry, which will be discussed in chapter two.

“mimetic quality is always accompanied by a realization of its artificiality, of the photographer’s authority, of the subject’s performativity, and of the mediated nature of ‘reality’” (194), but what about the role of the audience? When Scott and Karen view Brita’s photographs, they see a particular narrative and version of Bill in her pictures, in other words, they interpret the photographs and thus participate in creating their meanings. They notice that the pictures can be viewed in several ways, for example, they can be seen as “one picture repeated, like mass visual litter” (*Mao II* 222), in other words, like Andy Warhol’s works with their serial repetitions of images. Thus, the context in which a photograph is seen and the audience’s interpretation of the image influences the meaning of the photograph. In fact, I would argue that once a photograph has been developed, the photographer loses control of its meaning and it becomes the material of viewers who may interpret the picture differently. Meaning, or “truth”, is inherently unstable.

If a photograph is not an objective representation of reality, then it must be the creation of something new, and by extension, the death of a so-called “original”. Brita’s photography signals Bill’s figurative death (and foreshadows his literal death later in the novel). She is “shooting” Bill, creating a new identity by taking his picture but also killing the supposed original. As Bill puts it, “these pictures are the announcement of my dying” (*Mao II* 43). Her photography can be seen as symbolic of postmodernism’s “death of the subject”, and in this case, also of the “death of the author”. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes explains the figurative death of the subject in this way: “I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death” (14). In other words, photography turns the subject into an object, and thus, “the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity” (12). Even looking into Brita’s camera lens, Bill sees himself as an object: “Here I am in your lens. Already I see myself differently. Twice over or once removed” (44).<sup>26</sup>

Brita, however, thinks of herself as a restorer of identity, as exemplified by her visit to terrorist leader Abu Rashid. She believes that Rashid has destroyed the identities of his boys because they are hooded and wearing T-shirts bearing Rashid’s picture. This effacement of identity prompts her to remove the hood of one of the boys and photograph him in an attempt to give him his “true” identity back. As literary critic Laura Barrett puts it, “By removing one of the boys’ hoods and snapping his photograph, Brita assumes she is restoring identity and using the camera as a giver of life” (801). I would argue that Brita’s assumption is not

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<sup>26</sup> “Twice over” also alludes to the title of the novel. The significance and irony of the title will be discussed in chapter two.

completely accurate. Rather than giving the boy back his so-called “true” identity, Brita is transforming him into another kind of object, a photograph.

Rashid, on the other hand, believes that he has *given* his boys an identity by allowing them to become the image of himself. As his interpreter explains, “These children need an identity” and “the image of Rashid is their identity” (*Mao II* 233). The T-shirts bearing his picture represent texts that define who these boys are, thus underscoring the textuality of identity.

The identity Rashid creates is a mass identity. As his interpreter puts it, “The boys who work near Abu Rashid have no face or speech. Their features are identical. They are his features” (*Mao II* 234). Mass identity, or the disappearance of the individual in a crowd, is a recurring theme in *Mao II*, exemplified by the many photographs inserted throughout the novel depicting crowds, and by the various settings of the novel abounding with crowds, including the crowds of New York, the homeless people Karen visits, and the mass wedding in which she is a bride. According to DeLillo, “The future belongs to crowds” (16). In *Mao II*, it seems that people are becoming like the repeated image of Warhol’s art, slight variations on basically the same form. Instead of the individual of humanism, we now have the postmodern crowd.

I would argue that Warhol’s mass-produced art in the form of serial repetitions of images, such as Chairman Mao and Marilyn Monroe, is illustrative of the “death of the subject”, and by extension, the “birth” of mass identity. Perhaps this is why Brita finds a “death glamour that ran through Andy’s work” (*Mao II* 134). However, she participates in a similar process, for as literary critic Richard Hardack claims, “Anything photographed... already exists in duplicate. It has joined the impersonal mass, is no longer individual, and is therefore already terrorized and even dead” (379). Like Warhol’s art, photography is the duplication of identity, and, as such, it facilitates what appears to be the death of “the original”. What Brita in effect has done is created a duplicate Bill, who will be mass-produced when his photographs are published. Alluding to Warhol’s “Mao II”, a series of silkscreen prints repeating the image of Mao and from which the title of the novel has been taken, Osteen points out that Brita has created a “Bill II” (210), a copy, or as Baudrillard calls it, a “simulacrum”.<sup>27</sup>

Becoming a commodity through mass production is exactly what Bill fears the most. It is for this reason that he refuses to publish a new book, for as philosopher and cultural

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<sup>27</sup> Chapter three will discuss Baudrillard’s contention that “the real” has been replaced by the simulacrum.

critic Walter Benjamin famously declared, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (221). What Benjamin basically lamented was the loss of authenticity, the loss of the original work of art, when it is reproduced. Because Bill does not wish his next novel to become a mechanical reproduction through publication, he refuses to finish writing his book. Like Branch in *Libra*, Bill refuses to impose closure on the novel, albeit for a different reason.

At first glance, then, it seems rather strange that Bill hires Brita to photograph him for publication. He is a reclusive writer à la J. D. Salinger whose seclusion is an attempt to avoid becoming a commodity in the mass media. This, however, only encourages celebrity-hungry people to worship his image, namely, that of a reclusive author. A plausible explanation for Bill’s hiring Brita is the one Scott gives: “Bill had his picture taken not because he wanted to come out of hiding but because he wanted to hide more deeply, he wanted to revise the terms of his seclusion, he needed the crisis of exposure to give him a powerful reason to intensify his concealment” (*Mao II* 140).

Ironically, through Brita’s photography, Bill becomes the reproduced image that he despises. However, the publication of his image will not decrease but *increase* his “aura”. Barrett claims that “Contrary to Benjamin’s prediction, however, the publication of the long-awaited images that Brita produces will not deflate the aura: they will augment it. In fact, postmodern aura is achieved by replication no less than by invisibility” (792). Whereas the publication of his book would decrease the aura surrounding the novel, perhaps by temporarily removing the anticipation of a new book, the release of the photographs will encourage celebrity-hungry people to worship Bill’s image. The aura of his identity will increase as he becomes an object to worship. Scott, anxious to keep Bill’s aura alive, decides after Bill’s disappearance to publish the photographs but to keep the novel locked up, “collecting aura” (*Mao II* 224).

I would argue that even after Bill dies, his “aura” will live on with his photographs. Paradoxically, while photography symbolizes “the death of the subject”, it simultaneously symbolizes immortality in that Bill’s photographs will live on long after he is dead.<sup>28</sup> As chapter three will discuss in more detail, photography signals Bill’s entrance into what Baudrillard calls “hyperreality”, a copy world in which he will gain a kind of eternal life. In this way, photography is the act of creating history, of creating memories that future generations will look at when one is dead. As Bill tells Brita, “We’re doing this to create a

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<sup>28</sup> Obviously, his novel will also live on after his death.

kind of sentimental past for people in the decades to come. It's their past, their history we're inventing here.... Isn't this why picture-taking is so ceremonial? It's like a wake. And I'm the actor made up for the laying-out" (*Mao II* 42). Photographs are textual remains from which the meanings of history can be constructed, as Hutcheon and White have pointed out.

The textuality of history is further underscored by Brita's photographs of historical events as well as by the reproductions of photographs depicting historical events that DeLillo has inserted throughout the novel, including a crowded Tiananmen Square in Beijing, a mass wedding performed by Reverend Moon, soccer fans being crushed in the Sheffield soccer disaster, a crowd of Iranians in front of a poster of Ayatollah Khomeini, and three boys in a bunker, presumably in Beirut. Paradoxically, these photographs exhibit a sense of immediacy while being historical texts. As Barthes has pointed out, photography is simultaneously "here-now" and "there-then" (*Image* 44), capturing the present moment while creating history.

According to Hutcheon, the many contradictions inherent in photography make it "the perfect postmodern vehicle" (*Politics* 116). I would argue that DeLillo uses photography in *Mao II* to emphasize the contradictory nature of postmodernism as well as to emphasize the image-saturated world we live in. Through the reproduction of images in the novel, he implicates himself in the very process he criticizes, thus suggesting that there is no escape from the proliferation of images. While critical of the mass production of art and history, he reproduces Warhol's "Mao" on the cover of the novel and historical photographs throughout the novel, thus in typical postmodernist fashion invoking that which he wishes to subvert.

By emphasizing our image-saturated culture, DeLillo seems to question the role of writing, and even the role of art itself when it is being mass-produced. What is the purpose of Bill's novel when his image is all that matters? Bill thinks, "The image world is corrupt" (*Mao II* 36). As a man of words, he laments what he sees as the decline of the novel due to the replacement of writing by images. Paradoxically, as chapter two will discuss in more detail, DeLillo claims that the purpose of the novelist is to provide a culture's counternarratives, and at the same time, he questions the novelist's ability to influence a culture saturated by visual images.

While DeLillo questions the role of writing, he simultaneously demonstrates its importance in shaping history, identity, and reality, especially in shaping Bill's identity. For example, like the conspirators in *Libra*, Bill uses written language to construct a "false" identity. "Bill Gray" is an alias he devises for himself, a "false" name stamped on official documents such as his passport and other forms of identification. Ironically, when a crewmember finds Bill's dead body on a ferry, he steals these papers in order to sell Bill's

identity to someone else. Bill's "false" identity will become someone else's alias. Kavadlo claims that "Bill's death allows him to return to himself, to leave "Bill Gray", the false name on the passport, behind" (95), but I would argue that in DeLillo's world, there is no "real" Bill as opposed to a "fictional". Like Oswald in *Libra*, Bill is portrayed as a postmodern, unstable construct put together by texts.

The textuality of Bill's identity is further underscored by what literary critic John Carlos Rowe calls "the archive he has built in place of a home" (25). I would say the archive that Scott has built for him. Like Branch in *Libra*, Scott has collected a mass amount of documents, including Bill's manuscripts, notes, letters, reader mail, and Brita's photographs. This archive has become a way for Scott to control Bill. In a sense, these texts seem to replace the author himself, because even after Bill dies, Scott is shaping Bill's media identity through the publication of Brita's photographs.

I would argue that while language plays an important role for all of us in shaping identity and reality, for a writer such as Bill, it is even more important. He says, "I've always seen myself in sentences. I begin to recognize myself, word by word, as I work through a sentence. The language of my books has shaped me as a man" (*Mao II* 48). In a sense, writing creates the author just as much as the author creates his writing. As literary critic Richard Levesque puts it, a writer is "*simultaneously writing and being written*" (70, italics in original).

Like Bill, the poet Jean-Claude Julien uses writing as a means of creating himself. In fact, without writing, he feels that he ceases to exist. Therefore, when he is kidnapped by terrorists and held hostage in a place where he can no longer write, he feels himself losing identity. At this point, he says that only "Written words could tell him who he was...The only way to be in the world was to write himself there...Let him write ten words and he would come into being once again" (*Mao II* 204). Bill and Jean-Claude, like Oswald and the conspirators in *Libra*, believe that putting something into writing makes it "real". They believe that they can "write" themselves into being.

Bill attempts to rescue Jean-Claude from the terrorists by "writing" him back into existence. He says he is "writing about the hostage to bring him back, to return a meaning that had been lost to the world when they locked him in that room" (*Mao II* 200). Interestingly, he uses similar words to describe why a writer creates a character, namely, to "increase the flow of meaning" (200). It is almost as if in writing about Jean-Claude, Bill is creating a character in a novel, as if Jean-Claude is a product of Bill's imagination. If this is the case, will writing about him make him "real" or a "fiction"?

One could also argue that in writing about Jean-Claude, Bill is writing *himself* into being, recreating himself as Jean-Claude. He tells himself to “Find the places where you converge with him” (*Mao II* 160). When Bill leaves his old life with Scott and Karen and enters the terrorists’ plot, it is as if to change places with Jean-Claude, and with Bill’s death (a semi-suicide), Jean-Claude mysteriously disappears from DeLillo’s novel as well. I would argue that with these metafictional elements, *Mao II* complicates the distinction between reality and fiction, just as *Libra* complicates the distinction between history and fiction, suggesting that what we call “reality”, or “history”, is ultimately a construct, a fiction created through narrative.

Further underscoring the constructed nature of the meanings of history and reality is the terrorists’ use of narrative in creating their versions of “truth”. Like Everett in *Libra*, the terrorists seem to believe that they can control history by putting their fictions into the world. As Rashid’s interpreter puts it, “we make and change history minute by minute.... We do history in the morning and change it after lunch” (*Mao* 235). His words underscore the unstable nature of history as a continuously changing narrative, a narrative that I would argue changes depending on political intents and purposes.<sup>29</sup>

The instability of the meaning of history, the flexibility of “truth”, is further suggested by Haddad’s love for the word processor: “You don’t deal with heavy settled artifacts. You transform freely, fling words back and forth” (*Mao* 164). Like the novelist, the terrorist in *Mao II* constructs histories and realities through texts and narratives, but I would argue that, like the novelist, the terrorist cannot control the meanings *readers* assign to these narratives. Furthermore, as chapter two will discuss extensively, both the novelist and the terrorist are implicated in what Debord calls the “society of the spectacle”, thus complicating the issue of authoring.

Whether Jean-Claude is being authored by Bill or by the terrorists is uncertain, but, like Oswald, he does not seem to be the author of his own life. Held hostage by the terrorists, he finds himself increasingly unable to “*to keep a particular narrative going*”, as Giddens has put it, and thus, he gradually loses his sense of identity (54, italics in original). It is as if he is “stuck” in someone else’s narrative, and though he is unsure whose narrative it is, he does not think the hooded boy who tortures him is “the author of his lonely terror” (*Mao II* 111). As his life in captivity becomes more and more meaningless and random without a “sequence or narrative or one day that leads to another” (109), he loses his sense of time, space, language,

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<sup>29</sup> Chapter two will discuss the politics of narrative.



and ultimately, identity. According to Osteen, “this breakdown of his mental story...leads him to lose control over his identity” (203), illustrating the importance of narrative for constructing the meaning of identity. The loss of narrative leads to new narratives, for, as Osteen points out, “By the end of the novel Jean-Claude, like *Libra*’s Oswald, becomes a character in somebody else’s book” (203).

Like Jean-Claude and Oswald, Bill enters a narrative that he does not seem to write. He enters the terrorists’ plot because he believes that novelists no longer have the power to influence society, to write the narratives that construct the meanings of history, identity, and reality. This role, he claims, has been taken over by terrorists. In other words, the power of the written word has been usurped by visual images that terrorists use to wield their power, and in fact, it is not through writing but through visual images that Jean-Claude gains a new identity. As Osteen puts it, “Jean-Claude is remade not of written words but of electronic bits” (203). The terrorists rewrite him, giving him an identity as “a digital mosaic in the processing grid, lines of ghostly type on microfilm. They were putting him together, storing his data in starfish satellites, bouncing his image off the moon” (*Mao II* 112).<sup>30</sup>

The terrorists seem to understand what Bill does not: in postmodern society, something becomes “real” not through writing but through representation as an image in the mass visual media. They understand that the television image is the new universal language, a language that communicates a reality based on exposure in which to be outside of the media is to cease to exist. As George Haddad, an intermediary between Bill and Abu Rashid, puts it, the terrorists have learned “the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands” (*Mao II* 157). Quite simply, they have learned from the West how to exploit television to serve their ideological or political purposes.

To gain publicity for his cause, Rashid stages a televised news conference – hosted by Bill’s publisher, Charlie, who is anxious to create publicity for Bill’s new novel – to announce the release of Jean-Claude. According to Charlie, “His freedom is tied to the public announcement of his freedom” (*Mao II* 129). In other words, without media coverage, there will be no release. However, the news conference is only a simulation of a release; whether Jean-Claude will actually be freed is questionable. It is also irrelevant since the image of a release is all that matters. Viewers will believe it to be “true” because it is televised, for in the logic of postmodernism, if something is shown on television, then it must be “real”.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The role of the terrorist versus that of the writer will be discussed in chapter two, as will the implications of the supposed failure of writing/ the writer.

<sup>31</sup> The role of the mass visual media in constructing the meanings of reality will be discussed in chapter two.

Moving images, such as television images, seem more “real” than writing or even photography – though I would argue that they are as much a construction of rather than a reflection of reality – in that they provide a continuous record and seem to propel the viewer into a continuous present moment. Unlike writing and photography, the television image, as Sturken points out, “evoke[s] not a fixed history but, in its immediacy and continuity, a kind of history in the making....It is relentlessly in the present, immediate, simultaneous, and continuous” (24). Where written narratives and photographs carry the sense of an ending, of a past that is over, television images suggest a constant present. According to Jameson, this “transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents” leads to a loss of history (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 205).

In one sense we *have* lost history, if by “history” we mean a traditional, linear history. Historical narratives, however, are being redefined by postmodernism and television. *Libra*, for example, is a historical narrative that leaves room for randomness and chance occurrences. *Mao II*, even more than *Libra*, is a narrative that leaves many gaps and loose ends, and it refuses to provide closure. Television, even more than postmodern novels, leads to a redefinition of what “history” means. According to Rashid’s interpreter, “Men live in history as never before” (*Mao II* 235), in other words, history is happening *now*, in the present tense. I would argue that rather than having lost history, we experience history as continuously happening on television.

Television news programs exemplify this “history in the making” in which the past is never over. Television journalists, as opposed to historians, create narratives without endings composed of images rather than written language.<sup>32</sup> In *Mao II*, television news seems to be “the new tragic narrative” (*Mao II* 157), as Bill puts it. It even seems to be replacing the novel, for, according to Bill, “News of disaster is the only narrative people need” (42). We do not need the novel anymore to fulfill our longing for narrative structuring. In an interview, DeLillo puts it this way: “World news is the novel people want to read. It carries the tragic narrative that used to belong to the novel” (Begley 101). I would argue that news of terror, like the novel and like conspiracy narratives, provides us with the structure of narrative. However, while it moves towards closure, it never quite satisfies our longing for the sense of an ending.

Our longing for the narrative of disaster may also be linked to our sense of information overload, of being bombarded by too many images and words to be able to create

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<sup>32</sup> The role of the journalist versus that of the historian will be discussed in chapter two.

meaning of it all. Like Branch in *Libra*, we experience Baudrillard's "implosion of meaning", and as a result, we may find the narrative of terror to be the only outstanding sequence of events, the only narrative able to simplify an otherwise chaotic world. As Haddad puts it, "In societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act. There's too much everything, more things and messages and meanings than we can use in ten thousand lifetimes" (*Mao II* 157).

Karen is fascinated by disaster footage shown on television. As she watches the news, she projects herself into the scenes and merges with the people portrayed. She enters these narratives that are not her own because, like Oswald in *Libra*, her own life is characterized by a sense of aimlessness. She needs other people to tell her who she is. According to Giddens, the media provides coherent narratives that alleviate the anxiety caused by our difficulty in "sustaining the narrative of the self" (199). By projecting herself into the news, Karen achieves the narrative structuring that her own life lacks. She becomes "a character in a global electronic narrative" (Osteen 204).

Though Karen watches the news with the volume turned off and thus does not hear the journalists' narration, the images themselves tell the stories, in collaboration with Karen's interpretative skills. In fact, Karen actively participates in constructing the narratives. She says, "You could make up the news as you went along by sticking to picture only" (*Mao II* 32). Like the reader of a novel, Karen enters into the meaning-making process with the author of the images by interpreting and thus influencing the meaning of the images, for as Barthes has pointed out, the author is not the sole origin of a narrative. I would put it this way: meaning is a collaborative effort, constructed by both readers and authors and influenced by historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. Thus, it is inherently unstable.

Karen's fascination with television news emphasizes the shift from a word-centered to an image-centered society and suggests the replacement of the novel by television news. If *Libra* seems to privilege literature over history, *Mao II* seems to privilege images over any kind of writing. Both writers in the novel, Bill and Jean-Claude, disappear and seem to be replaced by their images, and it is a photographer who completes Bill's unfinished journey to visit Rashid, a photographer who gets the last word in the novel.<sup>33</sup>

While it may seem as if *Mao II* privileges photography over literature, I would argue that DeLillo is merely emphasizing what he sees to be happening to the writer in an image-saturated society and also suggesting a redefinition of literary narrative. With *Mao II*, DeLillo

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<sup>33</sup> The role of the photographer as privileged over that of the novelist or the terrorist will be discussed in chapter two.

has written a narrative that, while presented chronologically, consists of many gaps, is missing causes and effects, seems to fade out rather than provide closure, in short, what Barrett calls “a bare-bones narrative” (805). In fact, she claims that in *Mao II*, DeLillo abandons “a straightforward linear narrative” (805). I would argue that DeLillo does not abandon linear narrative altogether, but rather, writes a non-continuous linear narrative, one that contains order and structure within the fragments. DeLillo challenges traditional narratives and their totalizing, closed systems of meaning, and instead opts for a more open, dare I say, postmodern, narrative, a type of narrative that is more reflective of postmodern society and its emphasis on images than a traditional narrative.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Chapter two will discuss DeLillo’s critique of the totalizing narrative in terms of its totalitarian or fascist tendencies.

## **Chapter 2:**

# **Ideological Frameworks and the Role of the Mass Visual Media in Constructing the Meanings of History, Identity, and Reality**

In *Libra* and *Mao II*, DeLillo uses the theme of authorship to demonstrate the constructed nature of history, identity, and reality. He suggests that through textuality and narrative, author figures shape their versions of “truth”, always within the framework of a particular ideology, for example Cold War ideology. Who are these author figures? Who writes the narratives? As Oswald’s mother in *Libra* so pointedly asks, “Who arranged the life of Lee Harvey Oswald?” (455). While chapter one discussed *how* the meanings of history, identity, and reality are constructed in *Libra* and *Mao II*, chapter two will consider *who* participates in the process. The manipulation by so-called “Masters” such as Chairman Mao or the CIA will be discussed, as well as the role of the mass visual media. The theories of Hutcheon and White will be used to demonstrate how ideological frameworks are always at work in narrativization, for example in the writing of history, and relevant media theories such as those of Postman and Debord will be used to elucidate the role of the media.<sup>35</sup>

### **2.1 On Postmodern Theories of Ideology and the Media**

Postmodern art and theory have brought ideological, cultural, and historical contexts back into the discussion of our representations of history, identity, and reality. Postmodernism denies the existence of historical truth based on objective facts, and it rejects the notion of a universal core of identity. Reality, it contends, is viewed through an ideological lens and cannot be represented as objective truth. Postmodern art, far from being a-political, as some critics have suggested, cannot but *be* political in that it points out the constructed nature of our discourses. Hutcheon contends that postmodernism aims “to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’...are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us” (*Politics 2*).

It is important to note that postmodernism itself is not free from ideology. For example, the view of identity as a construct contains ideological prejudices, as does the humanist view of the universal subject. Postmodernism cannot step outside of ideology to

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<sup>35</sup> Baudrillard’s theories will be discussed in chapter three.

record the way “things really are” as little as can any other theoretical approach. Hutcheon notes that postmodernism “is implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe” (*Poetics* 23). I would go so far as to say that *all* art is in some way political, but that the uniqueness of postmodernism is its awareness of it.

The postmodern view of representation as construction rather than reflection suggests a view of representation as political. In other words, the narratives that we construct in order to understand our selves, our history, and our world are founded on ideology. By “ideology” I refer to an organized set of ideas based on certain assumptions about reality. It has been said that we live in a time free of ideological prejudices, a time of objectivity. I would argue, however, that we can never step outside the bounds of ideology. We may think that ideology implies a false representation of reality, and that by stripping away these prejudices, we can view the facts as they “really are”. However, ideology is at work in everything we experience as reality.

Events do not appear to us in the form of a story. We use narrative techniques such as selecting, ordering, and highlighting facts to create stories and, thereby, make sense of events. It therefore does not seem reasonable to presume that we can know what “really happened” free from our own interpretations and perspectives. As White puts it,

Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see ‘the end’ in every beginning?... And does the world, even the social world, ever really come to us as already narrativized, already ‘speaking itself’...? (*Content* 24-25)

Of course not, but because of our need for narrative structure, we perceive events as already narrativized.

The reason for this is not only the fact that we need narrative structure to make sense of our world, but also to establish a moral authority, i.e. to assign our values and beliefs to events. White contends that we cannot narrativize without moralizing. Whether the narrative is factual or fictional, there always seems to be an “impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine” (*Content* 14).

Currie explains that one of the moralizing features of narrative is that of closure: “endings are ways of projecting values onto events, rendering the remainder of the narrative sequence intelligible in retrospect” (67). Narrative closure provides meaning, especially in a moral sense. Hutcheon puts it this way: “to narrativize the events of the past is already to moralize and to impose closure on a story which did not end and whose constructed end

suggests that there is a moral meaning inherent in those events (rather than in the narrative structuring of the historian)” (*Poetics* 192-193). Reality does not appear to us complete with endings. When we interpret historical events, we provide the endings, thereby projecting our own values onto the events. Branch in *Libra* refuses to moralize or bring premature closure to the Kennedy assassination, and, therefore, fails to write a coherent narrative.

Narrative closure is linked to forgetting, the leaving out of certain facts. As Sturken points out, memories, whether individual or collective, are created not only through remembering but also through forgetting, because we simply cannot remember everything. Forgetting, then, “is a necessary component in the construction of memory” (7). To make sense of historical events, we “forget” in order to force closure on the events. As Sturken puts it, “The desire for narrative closure thus forces upon historical events the limits of narrative form and enables forgetting” (8). While forgetting, then, is a necessary cognitive tool, problems arise when people in power deprive others of their memories for political purposes, when there is “organized forgetting”, as Milan Kundera calls it.<sup>36</sup> Censorship is one method of organizing what is to be remembered. In *Libra*, for example, Branch’s documents are censored by the CIA.

Structuralists and poststructuralists have criticized the use of narrative in representation, claiming that it is an instrument of ideology and power. I would agree that an ideological framework always surrounds a narrative, whether factual or fictional, and that narrative can therefore be used for political purposes. DeLillo is especially critical of narrative in *Mao II*, in which he demonstrates how it can lead to totalitarian or fascist tendencies. As will be discussed in sections two and three of this chapter, so-called “Masters” such as Mao or the CIA use narrative to further their political goals.

The narratives told are most effective if they fit into a particular culture’s dominant ideology, i.e. ideas that seem natural and true, and therefore remain largely unchallenged. A culture’s identity, its values and beliefs, are created through “masterplots”, or myths, stories that are told over and over as a way of representing the culture to itself. These masterplots give credibility to confirmative narratives and discredit contradictory ones (Abbott 42).

I would argue that the writing of history cannot escape ideology, in spite of historiography’s claim to objectivity. When writing in the present about events of the past, perhaps the real question being asked is not so much “what are the facts”, but rather, using White’s words, “How are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of

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<sup>36</sup> “Afterword: A Talk with the Author by Philip Roth” in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 1980, p. 235. As quoted in Sturken, page 7.

explaining them rather than another?" (*Tropics* 134). In other words, how is the narrative to be written? Which facts and *whose* facts are to be included? Put a different way, whose "truth" is to be placed in a position of power or authority over all other "truths"?

Debord claims, "to reflect upon history is also, inextricably, to reflect upon power" (*Society of the Spectacle* 98). The word "power" implies the capacity for control over something or someone. In every society, there are people exerting power over the rest, and these are the people who influence a culture's ideology and are written into its history books. As Karen in *Mao II* notes, history is about one crowd gaining power over another crowd, only to have the power-dynamics reversed at a later date (177). The writing of history reflects this power struggle. According to White, history "is always written for a specific (manifest or latent) purpose" (*Tropics* 56). It is not only history *of*, but also history *for*. Just as the past affects the present, the present affects the story of the past due to politics.

Foucault has written extensively on how power works in modern society. He claims that modern society is like Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon" design for prisons in which one guard can watch over many prisoners while himself remaining unseen. Through controlling systems of power and knowledge, Foucault claims that we are constantly under surveillance.<sup>37</sup> As a character in DeLillo's novel, *Running Dog*, comments, "The camera's everywhere" (150). Since we do not know if and when we are being watched, we monitor our own behavior to make sure it is in line with the accepted norms. We have essentially internalized the controlling system of power relations. To put it a different way, we have become unconscious of the power dynamics and the masterplots, and I would argue that it is our lack of awareness that makes the system so powerful.

History is not the only political discourse. As the literary critic Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out, art cannot escape its ideological context any more than history can. Greenblatt, one of the founders of New Historicism, has argued that a literary work is a product of its historical and cultural context, in other words, the political, economic, and social circumstances surrounding its origin.<sup>38</sup> History and literature are both discourses and, as such, cannot be value-neutral. I would argue that representation, whether factual or fictional, comes into being through power dynamics and politics. What I mean is that representation is a product of as well as a producer of ideology.

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<sup>37</sup> See: Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977.

<sup>38</sup> See for example: Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Greenblatt Reader*. Ed. Michael Payne. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.



Postmodern literature, such as historiographic metafiction, emphasizes the discursive nature of both history and literature and the role of ideology in constructing the meanings of history, identity, and reality. *Libra*, for example, discusses the role of Cold War ideology in the writing of the Kennedy assassination as well as in the shaping of Oswald. *Mao II* illustrates how the concept of terrorism is a construct, a narrative written within a political context and for a political purpose. Both novels demonstrate how any definition or representation of history, identity, or reality is linked to certain assumptions and ideologies. The official U.S. narrative of an event is the narrative that best adheres to certain American values, belief systems, and political pursuits. This is not to say that an event did not take place in reality. I only mean that our interpretations of the event are steeped in ideologies that we cannot escape.

Written narratives such as those presented in literary and historical writing cannot be value-neutral because they employ the medium of language, which, as White notes, is not a transparent, medium, but “contaminated” by ideology (*Tropics* 127). I would argue that not only words but also images have political contexts and intents, and cannot be value-neutral. Since images have in many ways supplanted words as the most powerful representations in our postmodern culture, the mass visual media has to a great extent become the main instrument used for conveying ideologies and exerting power.

The phrase “mass media” is usually defined as a method of public communication used to reach a large audience. It refers to various means for conveying information and entertainment such as newspapers, film, radio, and television. In this chapter, I will focus on the mass visual media, including television and film. Furthermore, I will discuss the role of specific groups of media people, for example journalists. After all, “the media” is really just a tool. In addition, it is important to note that it is the people who control the media, for example, producers and television network owners, who have the ultimate power in that they decide what is actually shown on television. As *Mao II* demonstrates, just as a publisher decides the fate of a writer and his novels, media people decide which events are reported on and in what way they are presented.

Many cultural critics have written about the role of the mass media as a cultural authority of our time, many of them highlighting its negative influence and effects. Postman, for example, focuses on how the media, according to him, no longer serves the purpose of informing but only of entertaining. As a result, we are “amusing ourselves to death”, to use the title of Postman’s book. In other words, we are becoming increasingly lethargic, politically inactive, and easily influenced. We are becoming “narcotized by technological

diversions” (Postman 111). I would tend to agree with Postman that the function of the media today does in fact seem to be purely to entertain, and I would go so far as to say that the *power* of the media lies in its ability to entertain. Through entertainment, the media quite simply makes us unaware of the ideologies it feeds us.

According to Postman, even televised news no longer serves the purpose of informing but of entertaining. It has become “news without context, without consequences, without value, and therefore without essential seriousness; that is to say, news as pure entertainment” (100). As viewers, we are bombarded with little bits of so-called information without any contexts to make the events meaningful. We are shown an endless stream of images, often images replaying the same events. This “information glut” has led to Baudrillard’s “implosion of meaning” and left us lethargic in that it has “made the relationship between information and action both abstract and remote” (Postman 68). We are no longer required to evaluate the information because we are quite simply made unable to by the sheer amount of it. Furthermore, it may be that we are becoming less informed than ever in spite of – or because of – the abundance of information. Postman goes so far as to say that we are being misinformed in that all of the information available creates the illusion that we know something when in reality we know nothing (107).

Television news is an important motif in DeLillo’s novels. For example, Karen in *Mao II* and the Gladneys in *White Noise* are fascinated by disaster footage shown on the news, and for Karen, the news plays an important role in shaping her sense of identity. In *Libra*, Beryl sends newspaper clippings to her friends as a way of corresponding instead of writing personal letters, suggesting that news stories and images from the news are the new form of communication, supplanting personal communication between people. Postman puts it this way: “Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images” (92-93).

If it is true that news stories and images have replaced personal experience, emotion, and communication, perhaps it is a function of living in an entertainment-based society. *Libra* and *Mao II* poignantly dramatize life lived inside this world of representations created by the mass visual media, a world in which it seems that the “real” has been replaced by its representation. In *Libra*, Hollywood is shown to have contributed to creating the sense of “real” life as a movie, as entertainment, and in *Mao II*, television news programs are shown to have contributed to creating the sense of a reality based on exposure in the media.

DeLillo’s contention in interviews and in *Mao II* that television news is the new world narrative, suggests that journalists may have supplanted novelists and historians as the

contemporary author figures par excellence. The professor of communication, Barbie Zelizer, argues that televised journalism reached its current status after the Kennedy assassination. She claims that the assassination “was a turning point in the evolution of American journalistic practice not only because it called for the rapid relay of information during a time of crisis, but also because it legitimated televised journalism as a mediator of national public experience” (4). The public came to rely on television journalists to make sense of this otherwise senseless event, and journalists used methods and technologies previously unavailable to them in order to meet the demand for information. In fact, the public came to view television journalists as the most credible observers of real world events. Thus, television journalists “strengthen[ed] their position as cultural authorities concerning events of the ‘real world’” (Zelizer 2). As cultural authorities, journalists came to play an important role in shaping the collective memory of the assassination, i.e. in determining how the public was to remember the event.

As author figures, it was important for journalists to produce a narrative of the assassination, for, as Zelizer puts it, “It was...in narrative that the media needed to legitimate their claims to the story of Kennedy’s death” (32). In fact, according to Zelizer, “Journalistic authority depends on narrative” (190). In other words, it is not enough for television journalists to produce images. There has to be a story, because it is through narrative that authority and credibility are achieved.

Journalists, however, prefer not to impose narrative closure on events. The lack of closure that characterized the Kennedy assassination therefore suited journalists well. Not only did it generate an astounding number of versions of what happened, including any number of conspiracy theories for journalists to pursue, it provided a backdrop for the growing criticism of historiography. The difference between journalists and historians is not only that journalists cover the events of today while historians chronicle those of yesterday, but also that historians strive for closure while journalists prefer to keep stories alive.<sup>39</sup> The problem historians found with the Kennedy assassination was that they failed to provide the closure they longed for, thus leading critics to question the reliability of historical discourse. According to Zelizer, journalism became the solution to the problems facing historiography (181). Journalists did not strive for narrative closure.

In a sense, television journalists created a new meaning of history. Zelizer contends, “Television interfered with historical progression by not allowing memories to move beyond

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<sup>39</sup> The question is when historians should take over from journalists. At what point does an event become historical?

the images it repeatedly showed. . . . The idea of a history frozen by images worked to the advantage of journalists” (187). By continuously repeating a few key images, televised journalism paradoxically transformed history into a continuous present, which could be reported on endlessly. For example, the repetition of key images such as the Zapruder film and Oswald’s shooting by Jack Ruby kept the assassination narrative continuously in the present.

The power of television to define history, identity, and reality lies in part in the fact that its representations seem natural. They confirm our masterplots, myths, and ideologies. I would argue that what we perceive as natural, we perceive as containing no ideology, but the fact is that television utilizes and furthers specific ideologies. It is both a product of and a producer of ideology, and it is therefore not a neutral instrument.

In fact, television influences the meaning of that which it presents, for as Postman points out, “It is naïve to suppose that something that has been expressed in one form can be expressed in another without significantly changing its meaning, texture or value” (117). In other words, the *form* of representation influences the meaning of that which is represented, and, as such, plays an important role in defining its moral value. Therefore, in using television as the main instrument of representation, we have allowed it to play a key role in constructing our postmodern reality. It does not merely reflect the “real” but has a normative function in defining its meaning.

As a global medium, the power of television is far-reaching. It is the medium of choice for people searching for avenues of influence. It participates in “writing” world narratives and in furthering a culture’s myths and ideologies. One of the Western ideologies it has promoted is that of consumerism. Here, the role of advertisers has been crucial. I would argue that advertisers have been successful in getting consumers to buy their products not only through creating an artificial need, a longing for the products, but, perhaps more importantly, through creating a longing for a certain image, identity, or reality.

Western consumerism goes beyond the mere selling and buying of products. It has to do with the selling and buying of identities and certain ideas or values. According to DeLillo, the identity consumers long for is that of the “third person singular”, as defined in his novel, *Americana*:

In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be. Advertising has discovered this man. It uses him to express the possibilities open to the consumer. To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream. Advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled. (281)

What DeLillo means by the “third person singular” is a potential self-image, the image one *could* have if one bought the particular product being advertised. The longing for the “third person singular” is the longing to be the person in the advertisement on television, and advertisers tell consumers that this dream will be fulfilled if they buy their products.

I would argue that advertisers and the media create the need to become the “third person singular” by luring consumers into believing that only by buying the products will they lose anonymity and the sense of alienation that they carry. According to Debord, we have become alienated from each other because we live in the “society of the spectacle”. By “the spectacle” he does not merely mean “the media” or an instrument or even images (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* 6). He means “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (*Society* 12). In this social realm, visual images shape our collective consciousness, and images become our world of communication. Debord claims that the function of the spectacle in society is “the concrete manufacture of alienation” (23). DeLillo puts it this way: Consumerism “causes unfulfilled desires to rise above the rooftops. It makes people lonely” (“American Blood: A Journey through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK” 27). For capitalist purposes, the spectacle strives to create a lonely crowd of people who can be persuaded into believing that the only way to connect to each other and become the “third person singular” is to consume. The spectacle, then, has to do with power, especially economic power.

The dream of becoming the “third person singular” is also the dream of becoming famous, of watching yourself on television. According to Debord, we have gone “from *being* to *having* to *appearing*” (*Society* 16, my italics). I would tend to agree that there is a longing to be seen that perhaps did not exist to the same extent before the arrival of the television image. As DeLillo puts it in an interview, “there is a deeply self-referential element in our lives that wasn’t there before” (DeCurtis 287). *Libra* dramatizes this self-referential element, this watching-yourself-being-seen, by portraying Oswald as a man whose actions are scripted more than anything else by his longing for fame, a longing to a great extent created by the American media.

## **2.2 *Libra*: “Who arranged the life of Lee Harvey Oswald?”**

In his court testimony, Jack Ruby is to have said, “Somebody will have to piece me together” (Introduction to Part Two of *Libra*). Who is this somebody? Who puts the pieces

together and writes the narratives, the stories that make up a life? Who writes the stories that define a culture, or the stories that become history? All of the characters in *Libra*, except for Branch, are drawn to conspiracies. They believe that history has been secretly manipulated. As one of them puts it, “This is what history consists of. It’s the sum total of all the things they aren’t telling us” (*Libra* 321). Conspiracy implies that we are not in control of our lives, that an outside force or organization is scripting our lives, that “We are characters in plots” (78). If this is true, who is our author?

*Libra* is about a time in American history in which paranoia was widespread, in which suspicion, spies, secret operations, and conspiracy theories flourished, and in which the role of intelligence agencies grew remarkably due to the perceived communist threat. The Cold War era, extending from the late 1940s to the early 1990s, was a time in which Americans viewed the world through the lens of Cold War ideology, i.e. through the lens of the conflict between the United States and the former Soviet Union, or, more precisely, the conflict between the ideologies of capitalism versus communism. The discourse of Cold War ideology became the dominant ideology of American society, affecting its politics and culture. I would argue that in *Libra*, the Cold War is not only the backdrop for the events that unfold, but also plays a key role in shaping the lives of the characters. It forms their beliefs and desires, it motivates their acts of violence, and it is the logic behind their secret world of conspiracy.

Oswald’s perceived role in the conspiracy against President Kennedy is strongly linked to Cold War ideology and certain American myths. As Mott points out, the official U.S. narrative of the assassination as proposed by the Warren Commission, the “lone gunman” theory, is linked to the American myth of the individual, the loner, the lone cowboy of Western movies (134). I would argue that this myth makes the “lone gunman” theory seem credible. As a masterplot of American culture, this myth is found in its literature, and perpetuated in its movies, for example in Hollywood’s creation of the lone cowboy seen in John Wayne movies or the lone rebel in James Dean movies. In *Libra*, Oswald watches John Wayne movies and reads Walt Whitman, the epitome of the self-reliant man of American literature. In the context of the Cold War, this myth was important in that it emphasized the perceived distinction between Americans and Soviets: American freedom and individualism versus the communist collective or crowd.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> In *Mao II*, DeLillo sets up this opposition only to collapse it, as will be discussed in section three of this chapter.

The myth of the American loner contains certain political assumptions about social reality and history. If the individual acts alone, society at large is exempt from responsibility when, for example, acts of violence take place. According to Willman, the “lone gunman” theory “represents an explanation carefully constructed to achieve ideological closure and restore the status quo by reducing the assassination to a ‘random’ historical occurrence” (“Traversing” 407). This type of narrative implies “a smoothly functioning social system subject only to accidental deviations and deformations introduced by external, corrupting forces. By randomizing history in this way, contingency theory rejects the possibility that the social system itself may be responsible for these instabilities” (“Art” 624). Narratives such as the “lone gunman” theory posit a harmonious society that on rare occasions is subject to random acts by individuals living on the margins of society, outsiders like Oswald. The myth of the loner assumes that Oswald was not a product of American society but a deviation from it.

Critics of the Warren Commission countered the “lone gunman” theory with various conspiracy theories, suggesting that there had been a secret plot by a group of powerful people, such as the CIA or the Mafia. Conspiracy theories, as opposed to theories involving a “crazy loner”, posit a “fallen” society, one that is no longer harmonious due to secret operations carried out by groups of people. However, as Willman points out, conspiracy theories, like the “lone gunman” theory, negate the responsibility of the social system by placing “the responsibility for the social antagonism traversing society not to the ‘normal’ operations of the social system, but to the hijacking of this social system by a hidden agency” (“Art” 625). Both types of narratives resolve any contradictions and impose closure to an event, thus upholding the status quo.

The particular attraction to conspiracy theories lies perhaps in the fact that, although they can lead to paranoia, they can also provide some comfort in that, as Willman puts it, they “restore our grip on reality by erecting the fantasy figure of a hidden agent” (“Traversing” 410). Instead of the randomness of the “lone gunman” theory, they provide meaningful connections and patterns, and make clear who are the “bad guys” and who are the “good guys”.<sup>41</sup>

I would argue that history, whether perceived as manipulated or the result of random acts, is constituted through narratives containing certain ideologies or assumptions about

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the “lone gunman” theory versus conspiracy theories, see: Žižek, Slavoj. “The Spectre of Ideology”. *Mapping Ideology*. Verso: London, 1994. Also see: Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso: London, 1989.

reality. These narratives are linked to power, for as White has pointed out, we cannot narrativize without moralizing and placing our “truth” in a position of power over other “truths”. So-called “Masters” invent and distribute narratives that fit into their ideology for the purpose of legitimating their authority and advancing their power. In *Libra*, for example, DeLillo notes, “Castro was inventing a convenient history of the revolution to advance his grab for power, to become the Maximum Leader” (185). This is not to say that events do not happen in a historical reality. What it means is that the official narrative of an event, for example, the Kennedy assassination, is written within a particular ideological framework and with certain political intents.

*Libra* focuses especially on the role of American intelligence agencies as “Masters”. I would argue that the power of these agencies lies in part in the fact that they create fear of “the Other”, a useful technique that every “Master” employs. In the context of the Cold War, the agencies participated in creating a fear of communism and communists. By creating this fear, they constructed a reality in which their authority was necessary to protect society. Their increasing power was thereby justified. As FBI agent Guy Banister puts it, “Spy work, undercover work, we invent a society where it’s always wartime” (*Libra* 64). The society of fear found in *Libra* is similar to the world presented in *Mao II*. The only difference is that the fear of communism has been replaced by the fear of terrorism.

The power of intelligence agencies also lies in the fact that they claim to have intelligence, or knowledge, of a perceived threat to society. An undercover agent in *Libra* describes this so-called secret knowledge in the following way: “A fact is innocent until someone wants it. Then it becomes intelligence” (247). I would argue that a fact is innocent until someone turns it into a narrative. Then it can be used for purposes of advancing power. Facts may appear neutral, but when they are shaped into a narrative, they are no longer free from interpretation or ideology.

According to literary critic Philip E. Simmons, “It is the job of intelligence agencies, of course, to make visible and intelligible that which would otherwise remain hidden” (76). I would argue to the contrary that their role is to create that which must remain hidden, as well as that which they choose to reveal. In *Libra*, former CIA agents carefully construct the conspiracy against Castro (what was supposed to be a missed assassination attempt on President Kennedy), guarding their secret closely and hoping to reveal the ties to Castro at the right moment. As it turns out, they fail to control the plot. This, however, is irrelevant since the power of “Masters” such as the CIA is not contingent upon total control but the *illusion* of control, upon convincing people that they master reality.



By writing his own conspiracy narrative in the form of *Libra*, DeLillo obviously rejects the Warren Commission's "lone gunman" theory and what it implies socially and politically. According to Willman, DeLillo demonstrates "the ways in which Oswald is a necessary product of the American social system, rather than an external element introducing corruption into an otherwise sound social fabric" ("Traversing" 408). Oswald is not only the pawn of the CIA and the FBI, but he is also a product of Cold War ideology and the American media. As Lentricchia puts it, "Lee Harvey Oswald is a contemporary *production*" (441, italics in original).

Lentricchia goes on to say that the question of *who* produces Oswald is linked to "the question of where DeLillo imagines power to lie in contemporary America" (441-442). Many critics, including Lentricchia, conclude that DeLillo imagines power to lie in the media, but according to Mott, "We might look to the media as purveyors of dominant discourses at work in society, but we do not follow the full range of DeLillo's exploration if we stop there" (138). As I will be arguing later in this section, DeLillo certainly emphasizes the role of the media in shaping Oswald, but rather than blaming the media, he portrays a complex society in which various ideologies, myths, and narratives collide and are incorporated in Debord's "society of the spectacle". In this sense, *Libra* itself is political, containing certain belief systems about American society and power.

*Libra*'s Oswald is described as a man living on the edges of society, a product of his time and culture, but also a man particularly "lost" and searching for meaning. He is first drawn to the American Marine Corps, then to the Soviet Union, and, finally, to Cuba, because he believes they can give him the identity he desperately longs for. As Alek from the KGB puts it, "That's what they all want, isn't it, these people who live in corners inside themselves, in blinds and hidey-holes? A second and safer identity. Teach us how to live, they say, as someone else" (*Libra* 166).

Oswald's attraction to Marxism begins with reading Marxist literature as a poor boy growing up in New York City. According to Willman, "Oswald's discovery of Marxism enables him to make sense of his poverty and deprivation as an encounter with class struggle" ("Traversing" 423). The Marxist narrative makes sense of his life of poverty. It provides him with an identity as the victim of capitalism, and Oswald believes it can give him a place in history if he joins the struggle. He becomes somewhat disillusioned, however, when after he gives the Soviets secrets from his time in the Marine Corps, they reject him. He returns to the United States where he proceeds to pass on information about the Russians to the CIA and

the FBI. His disillusionment with the Soviet Union, however, does not cause him to abandon his Marxist project altogether, as indicated by his intentions of moving to Cuba.

Oswald is an outsider in both the Soviet Union and the United States, caught between two systems that he cannot completely embrace because neither system can give him both the individuality he longs for and the connection to a struggle greater than himself that he desires. As Mott puts it, “He is a loner seeking connection in the United States, and he is a ‘comrade’ seeking individuality in the Soviet Union” (137). He is a man of contradictions, as symbolized by the central metaphor of *Libra* and the book’s title: the sign of the Libran, the symbol of which is a pair of scales. According to Ferrie’s astrologist friend, a positive Libran manages to stay balanced, whereas a negative Libran is unsteady and impulsive (*Libra* 315). Oswald, as a Libran, is a man poised on the scales, “ready to be tilted either way” (319).

In the end, I would argue that what seems to steer Oswald’s actions more than Cold War ideology or his attraction to political struggles is his longing for fame, spurred on by the American media. As his friend, George de Mohrenschildt, puts it, “he may be a pure Marxist, the purest of believers. Or he may be an actor in real life” (*Libra* 56). Like many people in the “society of the spectacle”, Oswald longs for a life in the “third person singular”. But where other people strive to become this person by buying consumer products as advertised on television and in magazines, Oswald, who cannot afford these products, strives for celebrity status. He says, “If you can’t buy what they’re selling, you’re a zero in the system” (40). Not wanting to remain a “zero in the system”, Oswald takes action to become famous by joining Everett’s plot. He has discovered that “identity is not a matter of one’s fight in a political struggle, but a question of media exposure” (Buscall 36). It is through publicity that he will gain identity in the form of the “third person singular”.

In many ways, Oswald *is* “an actor in real life” in the sense that his life is a performance staged in anticipation of the attention he will receive from and through the media. His actions are self-conscious dramas in which he watches himself act while imagining the attention his actions will generate from the magazine readers and television viewers who witness the drama. Literary critic William E. Cain suggests that Oswald “believes that his acts will be significant and his life made real only when onlookers legitimate them. What he does will matter only when his dramatic performance is witnessed” (62).

In a sense, Oswald is the main character as well as the narrator of his life: “he experienced what was happening and at the same moment, although slightly apart, recounted it all” (*Libra* 45). As literary critic N.H. Reeve puts it, “All the time Oswald is having his life

he is also planning a future narrative of it” (143). For example, when he passes on secrets to the American intelligence agencies, he sees himself writing about it in a magazine and anticipating the reactions of its readers. When posing for a picture holding the rifle that he will use to shoot General Walker, he imagines the attention he will receive from readers who will see this photograph in *Time* magazine. By becoming the “third person singular” in a magazine or on television, he will leap “into the frame of official memory” (*Libra* 279), and this will legitimate his existence.

I would argue that the mass visual media in the form of magazines, Hollywood movies, and television plays a major role in constructing the Oswald portrayed in *Libra*. As one of the “Masters”, or cultural authorities, of our time, Hollywood participates in shaping our collective consciousness, not only by perpetuating certain American myths such the lone cowboy and the rebel, but also by contributing to creating the sense of life as a movie, of our experiences in “real” life as entertainment and drama. Lentricchia points out that film “is the culturally inevitable form of our self-consciousness, the medium of our ‘constantly watching ourselves’ in future filmic time perform the role of a self-to-be” (446). Film is “a new kind of storytelling about the magical third-person pitched by and to the audience of the first-person, who is none other than the ordinary moviegoer or TV viewer” (446). Put another way, Hollywood movies and television shows have added a self-referential element to our lives in the form of a desire to watch ourselves being seen, the longing for the “third person singular”.

According to literary critic Eugene Goodheart, we live in a “cinematic real” in which “our lives become the lives of cinematic representation” (357). For Oswald, “the real and the cinematic have become indistinguishable” (358). When he sees John Wayne in real life, he is surprised to find that Wayne looks as “real” as on the movie screen, and when he watches a movie in which Frank Sinatra plots to assassinate the president, he feels “connected to the events on the screen. It was like secret instructions” (*Libra* 370). In another movie about a plot to assassinate a dictator in Cuba, he feels that he is “in the middle of his own movie” (370). Like the conspirator, Wayne Elko, who interprets everything in his life as if they are images from his favorite movie, *Seven Samurai*, Oswald views his life as a spectacle constructed by Hollywood.

As Lentricchia points out, “*Libra* dramatizes the experience of everyday life in a ‘world gone inside out’, of life lived totally inside the representations generated in the print and visual media” (444). Put a different way, *Libra* dramatizes postmodern ontology in which the image seems more “real” than the original. For example, when President Kennedy arrives in Dallas, people look to confirm whether he appears as “real” as his photographs, whether

the original is as “real” as the image. They find, “He looked like himself, like photographs” (*Libra* 392). In the logic of postmodernism, since he looks like his photograph, he must be himself.

Being used to the visual media, Americans perhaps do not find this kind of logic strange, but when Oswald’s Russian wife, Marina, who has never encountered television before her arrival in the United States, discovers herself as an image on a television set in a department store, she finds it completely unbelievable: “It was the world gone inside out. There they were gaping back at themselves from the TV screen” (*Libra* 227). The “world gone inside out” is a world in which the media image replaces directly experienced reality. When Beryl sends newspaper clippings to her friends, she does so because she “believed no message she could send a friend was more intimate and telling than a story in the paper about a violent act...Because these are the things that tell us how we live” (261). In a world lived inside representations, the representations become our lives.<sup>42</sup>

As a man living inside the representations created by Hollywood and television, Oswald longs to become the “third person singular”. This longing is fulfilled when, in the climactic scene of *Libra*, he watches himself on television being shot by Jack Ruby: “He could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV” (*Libra* 439). The word “shot” here carries a double meaning: Oswald is shot by Ruby’s gun while he is being shot by the journalist’s camera. As he watches himself on television, he sees that he is in pain. It is as if the television image legitimates his experience, makes it “real” to him: “He was in pain. He knew what it meant to be in pain. All you had to do was see TV” (440). On the other hand, the television image distances Oswald from his pain. It is as if he is detached from his own death. Like Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, he is a “stranger in [his] own dying” (*White Noise* 137).

When Beryl watches reruns of the shooting on the news, she notices this detachment in Oswald’s face:

There was something in Oswald’s face, a glance at the camera before he was shot, that put him here in the audience, among the rest of us...He is commenting on the documentary footage even as it is being shot. Then he himself is shot, and shot, and shot, and the look becomes another kind of knowledge. But he has made us part of his dying. (*Libra* 447)

Right before he dies, Oswald imagines himself in someone else’s house and observes himself being shot on their television. He imagines himself as part of his own audience, just as Beryl

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<sup>42</sup> Chapter three will expand on this idea.

imagines herself as part of his dying. In a sense, she *is* part of his dying in that television has made her a witness to his death.

Oswald's shooting by Jack Ruby, one of the rare live images of its time, was continuously replayed on television news programs. Beryl wonders, "Why do they keep running it, over and over? Will it make Oswald go away forever if they show it a thousand times?" (*Libra* 446). On the contrary, I would argue that the repeated television image will make him live forever. As Kavadlo puts it, "The replays have the paradoxical effect of continuously killing Oswald but keeping his image alive" (59). What the repeated television image does, I would argue, is transform the historical moment into a continuous present, a present in which Oswald will continuously be reborn as his image. This image cannot die, and in this way, "His death becomes a simulacrum of immortality" (Kavadlo 58) in which he will live on in "hyperreality".<sup>43</sup>

Paradoxically, constant reruns keep a story alive while simultaneously creating distance to the event. According to Sontag, "An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs...But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real" (20). Television journalists, anxious to keep the assassination story alive and not impose narrative closure on the event, continuously replayed certain key images, thus paradoxically making the event seem more and more surreal (or hyperreal).

Constant reruns make a spectacle of an event, and for its spectators, repetition causes the reality of the violence to gradually disappear. The mass visual media, therefore, participates in suggesting that violence is a viable path to fame. Keesey suggests that the media's role is two-fold: "By presenting images of consumer fulfillment to people who cannot afford to buy into such spectacular success, the media provoke desire and rage. By making such a sensation out of men who commit violence, the media encourage others to take the same route to fame" (172). Oswald's shooting of Kennedy and his own death at the hands of Ruby are both media events, both captured on film, and both promoting the celebrity status of the men involved. While I do not believe that DeLillo is blaming the media for the ills of society, I do think that he is suggesting that the media participates in creating an unsatisfied need that can lead to violence, a need for consumer products, yes, but even more than that, a need to be seen.

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<sup>43</sup> Baudrillard's concepts of "simulacrum" and "hyperreality" will be discussed in chapter three.

The media rewards Oswald for his violence by giving him the fame he has been longing for. It provides him with a new identity – a life in the “third person singular” – and calls it “Lee Harvey Oswald”, with the middle name, ordinarily never used, now included. By re-naming Oswald, the mass media shows its power to define identity, for the act of naming is linked to power. As Osteen, puts it, “Naming others means mastering them, making them into objects, and wielding over them the power of creation or destruction” (122). The media turns Oswald into an object called “Lee Harvey Oswald”, thus seemingly replacing the “original” Oswald. The “original” even disappears in the mind of Oswald’s mother who begins to call her son by his new media-given name.<sup>44</sup>

Before Oswald is shot by Ruby, he learns of his new name, his new identity, and is pleased to find that he has finally achieved celebrity status. He is no longer “a zero in the system” because “Everybody knew who he was now” (*Libra* 435). Not only has his existence been validated by the fact that he has finally been seen, Oswald now feels that he can write the narrative that will make sense of his life: “he’d found his life’s work. After the crime comes the reconstruction....He will vary the act a hundred ways, speed it up and slow it down, shift emphasis, find shadings, see his whole life change” (*Libra* 434). What Oswald wants to do is write down the story of the assassination, and he is thrilled to find that not only does his life now have a plot; it also has a coherent main character: “His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald” (435).

In the narrative of the Kennedy assassination that the mass visual media constructs, Oswald is presented as a “bad guy”, as is Jack Ruby, while Kennedy is cast in the role of the “good guy”, in the mythical role of dashing, glamorous man who dies too young. Ruby, however, feels “miscast, or cast as someone else, as Oswald” (*Libra* 444). Instead of being the hero, the one people admire for killing Kennedy’s assassin, Ruby feels that his role in the drama is merging with that of Oswald’s, so that he “has stopped being the man who killed the President’s assassin. He is the man who killed the President” (445). Oswald and Ruby are similar in many ways. They are both Librans, both easily influenced by others, and both actors in real life. The only difference is that Ruby thinks the role he has been given to play is the wrong one.

Television journalists, then, came to play a key role in constituting the meaning of the assassination by determining the “good guys” and the “bad guys”, by constructing certain narratives, and by emphasizing certain images, and thus, they served an ideological function.

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<sup>44</sup> As I will discuss in chapter three, however, in DeLillo’s world, there is no “original” as opposed to a construct.

However, even author figures such as television journalists, the CIA, or Win Everett are themselves scripted by ideologies and myths, themselves incorporated in the “society of the spectacle” in which images and narratives collide, are incorporated into each other, and are interpreted differently by various viewers and readers, thus underscoring that no “Master” can completely control the meanings of history, identity, or reality.

### **2.3 *Mao II*: “The world narrative belongs to terrorists.”**

Like *Libra*, *Mao II* examines the issue of who has the power to construct the meanings of history, identity, and reality by writing the narratives of our time and culture. It complicates the issue of authoring by questioning who is actually authoring whom. For example, Scott describes himself as a “nonbeing” before reading Bill’s novels and devoting himself to the author (*Mao II* 57), yet in many ways Scott is controlling Bill’s life. The many author figures in *Mao II* – Bill, Scott, Charlie, Brita, Andy Warhol, Reverend Moon, Chairman Mao, and Abu Rashid – not only participate in creating identities, histories, realities, but they are also themselves products of creation. They are all incorporated in the “society of the spectacle”, of the production and consumption of images. According to Haddad, “Everyone has a script he brings along” (137). Are we then actors in real life, and if so, who writes the script? The writer? The terrorist? The media?

In *Mao II*, there is a profound longing for a “Master”. By “Master”, I mean a person or group of people who exercise control or power over other people, groups of people, or even whole nations. Like the attraction to conspiracy narratives or terrorist plots, the attraction to authority figures lies in the fact that they provide the structure and order that life without them seems to lack. They provide coherent narratives by which to live our lives. If Lyotard’s claim is true and we live in a time of “incredulity towards meta-narratives”, that we have given up “grand narratives” such as that of religion, then perhaps we are left with a void to be filled by a new narrative provided by a new “Master”. As Karen’s father muses, “When the Old God leaves the world, what happens to all the unexpended faith?” (*Mao II* 7). If God is gone, who is the new creator? If religion is gone, who is the new authority?

While everyone longs for a certain sense of order in their lives, some people are more attracted to totalitarian or religious cult leaders than others. Giddens contends that these people find solace in overarching systems of authority because they find freedom to be a burden (196). Reflecting on the attraction of cult members to Reverend Moon, Karen’s father says, “they follow the man because he gives them what they need. He answers their yearning, unburdens them of free will and independent thought” (*Mao II* 7).

Karen is one of the people Giddens alludes to. We first encounter her as a bride in a mass Moonie wedding, and later we find her devoting her life to Bill, whom Scott says “invented her” (*Mao II* 65). Both Bill and Reverend Moon are “Masters” that have shaped her identity. In fact, if many of the characters in *Mao II* are author figures, Karen is a character in search of an author, in search of someone to tell her who she is. Like Oswald in *Libra*, she longs to be a part of something greater than herself, something that will give her an identity, albeit a mass identity.<sup>45</sup>

I would argue that the power of “Masters” like Moon lies in their ability to create this sense of identity and belonging among cult members. Ironically, this is achieved through an effacing of individuality. The members of the Moonie cult are “immunized against the language of self” (*Mao II* 8). Through chanting, they are led into a trance-like state in which all independent thought and language is lost, and a mass identity is created. They become “an undifferentiated mass” (3). Similarly, the terrorist leader, Abu Rashid, creates a group of young people who look, talk, act, and even think alike. As Rashid puts it, “All men one man” (233). Uniformity is the goal of “Masters” because it gives them the control they strive for.

Conformity and control, I would suggest, are achieved through unifying narratives. These narratives are written within certain ideological frameworks with the purpose of furthering the ideology and advancing the power of the “Masters”. Mao’s framework, for example, was that of communism. Within this framework, he wrote his version of Chinese history. As Haddad puts it, “He became the history of China written on the masses” (*Mao II* 161). The success of these narratives lies in their credibility and capacity to fill people’s need for structure. According to Haddad, Mao simply gave his people the stories they wanted to hear, the narratives that provided them with the order they longed for. He says that there is a “narrative every culture needs in order to survive. In China the narrative belonged to Mao” (162).

Unification and control are also achieved through the transformation of a leader into a father figure who will provide complete security for his people. Cult leader Moon’s power thus also lies in the fact that he assumes the role of a father figure, protecting his “children” from outside forces by controlling their minds and voices, their beliefs and opinions. According to Karen, “We are protected by the total power of our true father”, and “All doubt will vanish in the arms of total control” (*Mao II* 179). Likewise, Rashid assumes the role of a father figure by providing his “children” with the identity they so desperately need, namely,

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<sup>45</sup> Oswald’s longing to be a part of something greater, however, is overridden by his longing for fame and celebrity status.



that of being “children of Abu Rashid”. This identity “gives them a vision they will accept and obey” (233). Also totalitarian leaders like Chairman Mao and Ayatollah Khomeini manipulate people into believing that they are the “true fathers”. As Karen watches Khomeini’s funeral on television, she is struck by the crowds of Iranian mourners devastated by the death of their leader, and she identifies with their loss, saying, “We have lost our father” (189).<sup>46</sup> She too has lost her “father” in that both Moon and Bill have disappeared from her life.

The appeal of totalitarian regimes, religious cults, and terrorist groups seems to lie in this collective urge to give oneself over to power, to assume a role in a narrative that one did not write. In *Mao II*, DeLillo offers a critique of narrative, demonstrating how leaders use narrative for purposes of control and how the pursuit of perfect structures and order found in narrative can lead to totalitarian tendencies. As a postmodernist, DeLillo is critical of totalizing narratives, for which reason, I would argue, *Mao II* is written as a more open narrative with many gaps and loose ends.

The critique of narrative is also linked to a statement DeLillo makes in an essay: “Plots reduce the world” (“In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September” 34). The word “plot” signifies both a conspiracy or secret plan to accomplish something, usually harmful, and a storyline in literature. In the first sense of the word “plot”, perhaps DeLillo means that violence takes away not just a life, but also the *meaning* of life. As Bill puts it, “when you fill rooms with innocent victims, you begin to empty the world of meaning...replacing real things with plots and fictions” (*Mao II* 200). What is “real”, the death of a human being, becomes merely part of a narrative, a necessary component of a plot. It is almost as if a plot *replaces* the “real” world, which tends to lack the structure and order of narrative. Like a literary narrative, a conspiracy narrative reduces, even seems to replace, “real” life with a story.<sup>47</sup>

According to Haddad, there is a unique connection between novelists and terrorists or totalitarian leaders. He says, “You could have been a Maoist, Bill....And you would have seen the need for an absolute being” (*Mao II* 163). What he means is that Bill is a sort of “Master” in that, as a novelist, he exerts total control over the characters he creates, the worlds they live in, and the stories they live out. It is true, of course, that the terrorist or totalitarian leader tries to control real people and “real” reality while Bill tries to control fictional people and “fake” stories, but both assume the role of a “Master”. When Bill’s

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<sup>46</sup> While some totalitarian leaders have been revered as father figures, others have been greatly feared.

<sup>47</sup> The seeming replacement of the “real” by representations will be discussed further in chapter three.

daughter calls him “the Mythical Father” (114), it is not only a satirical comment on his lack of presence in her life, but also a comment on his God-like or creator status through his work as a novelist.

Bill, however, disagrees with Haddad, claiming that the novel is “a democratic shout” in that all of the characters have an equal voice and no one has total control, not even the author (*Mao II* 159). He claims that his characters “deny [his] efforts to own them completely” (159). He therefore sees the novel as the antithesis to totalitarianism. If Bill is correct in his claim, then the title of DeLillo’s novel is rather ironic, mentioning as it does a communist leader. Furthermore, the title is ironic in that Bill himself is a kind of “Master” like Mao, for I would argue that, contrary to his claim, as a novelist he *chooses* which voices to include in his narrative and *decides* what they will say.<sup>48</sup>

According to Reeve, “*Mao II* is full of idealized nostalgia for the novel as a kind of model democracy, a form that could bring out the humanity stifled everywhere else. To write a novel, Gray suggests, is not to reproduce the paranoia of plotting, but to protect oneself from it” (148). The manner in which a novel could “protect” against “the paranoia of plotting” seems to me would be through the writing of counternarratives, the purpose of which is to question official narratives. However, as *Libra* suggests, the questioning of a plot is itself constructed as a plot. Narrative techniques are used by both the novelist and the terrorist or totalitarian leader to construct their plots, and since narratives are inherently political, as White has pointed out, both the novelist and the terrorist or totalitarian leader are political in their plotting.

Bill believes that his role as a writer *is* in fact to be political, or “dangerous” as he calls it, to live on the margins of society and challenge authority figures. Novelists, Bill claims, should write in opposition to totalitarian leaders and terrorists, and their lives *should* be threatened: “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” (*Mao II* 97).

As many critics have noted, there is no doubt that the death threats and “fatwa” issued by Khomeini in 1988 on the Iranian novelist Salman Rushdie was a powerful influence on DeLillo and the writing of *Mao II*.<sup>49</sup> In the novel, DeLillo offers his critique of the silencing

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<sup>48</sup> The “II” in the title suggests that originals are being replaced by copies, as will be discussed further in chapter three. New author figures are thus merely copies of old ones. For example, according to Bill, the terrorist group is a kind of totalitarian state in miniature (158), making Rashid a kind of “Mao II”, a miniaturized copy of Mao.

<sup>49</sup> See especially Margaret Scanlan.

of authors by fundamentalist regimes, as well as emphasizes the political role of writers in society. In an interview, he uses words that echo Bill's sentiments:

The writer is the person who stands outside society, independent of affiliation and independent of influence. The writer is the man or woman who automatically takes a stance against his or her government. There are so many temptations for American writers to become part of the system and part of the structure that now, more than ever, we have to resist. American writers ought to stand and live in the margins, and be more dangerous. (Arensberg 45-46)

While sympathetic to DeLillo's view, I would argue that the writer cannot "stand outside society" and be free of all influence. No one can step outside of ideology and criticize from the outside the culture in which one lives. While the novelist writes narratives in order to influence society, s/he is equally influenced by the narratives already written or being written. Even DeLillo is not free of influences or ideologies.

Furthermore, the writer cannot completely control the influence his or her work will have. In fact, Barthes would say that s/he cannot control it at all, for it is the reader who creates the meaning of the novel. I would say that novelists lose control of their narrative as soon as their book is published. It then becomes the material of readers, critics, and others, and thus can generate many meanings.

Likewise, a terrorist cannot completely control the outcome of his plot. Contrary to Rashid's rather arrogant claim to "make and change history minute by minute" (*Mao II* 235), he cannot control the course of history. As *Libra* demonstrates, outcomes are often a function of random occurrences, and, furthermore, terrorists lose control of their plots once images of their acts are televised. As Osteen points out, "Once their acts or images are circulated, they too become others' material" (208-209). They become the material of journalists, photographers, television viewers, and others.

While Rashid is confident in his ability to influence society, Bill laments the loss of the writer's ability to do so. He believes that the political role of the writer has been usurped by terrorists, that writers are being silenced by terrorists, not only literally, as in the case of the poet Jean-Claude, but also figuratively in that novelists no longer have the power to influence people or to change society. He says, "Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory" (*Mao II* 41). He tells Haddad, "Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think

and see, after him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings” (157).<sup>50</sup>

In mentioning Beckett, considered by many the last of the modernist writers, Bill is announcing what Osteen calls “the end of the grand narrative of modernist authority”. However, rather than modernist authority being replaced by the power of the terrorist, Osteen argues that it is being replaced by what Jennifer Wicke calls “spectacular authorship: the power to use photographic or televised images to manufacture, as if by magic, spectacular events that profoundly shape public consciousness” (193). In other words, if it seems that the terrorist captures our attention more than does the writer, it is because terrorist actions are presented as spectacular events in the mass visual media. In Debord’s “society of the spectacle”, it is visual images of spectacular events that shape the collective consciousness. As Levesque puts it, “Gray has misrecognized the terrorist rather than the spectacle as the culprit” (84).

Acts of violence lack power without publicity. Just as the writer needs a publisher in order for his novels to be known and read, the terrorist needs media coverage in order for his actions to be recognized and effective. According to Levesque, “Neither the act of writing nor the act of terrorism in isolation can sufficiently affirm the author’s or the terrorist’s existence for the outside world” (82).

Rashid understands that his political effectiveness lies in publicity. For this reason, he stages a televised news conference to announce the release of his hostage. While he understands how to use the mass visual media to further his political cause, ultimately, as Osteen points out, “control of the public mind...really belongs to the media corporations who authorize the images that terrorists produce” (206). These media corporations decide which stories get told, from whose perspective, and in what manner they are presented. As publishers decide which books to put on the book market, media corporations decide which images and stories to show on television.

By presenting the images that the terrorists produce, the media is complicit in glorifying terrorism. One can wonder, of course, if it is at all possible to report on violence without glorifying it, since representation has the tendency to distance viewers from reality, to desensitize us to horror and reduce the “real” to the aesthetic. This is the very reason for which Brita stops photographing wars and other horrible events: “No matter what I shot, how much horror, reality, misery, ruined bodies, bloody faces, it was all so fucking pretty in the

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<sup>50</sup> The implications of the supposed failure of the writer to influence society will be discussed later in this section.

end” (*Mao II* 24-25). According to Sontag, “Nobody ever discovered ugliness through photographs” (85). In other words, the camera tends to glamorize everything, to reduce to aesthetics that which is horrible.

On the other hand, without representations, without photographs or televised news coverage, we would not *know* of events. Paradoxically, while representations reduce real events, they also make events seem more “real”. In fact, without media coverage, acts of terror not only lose their political effectiveness, but they also do not seem “real” at all. In *Mao II*, as in *Libra*, there is the sense that reality is created through exposure in the media. As Bill puts it, “There’s the life and there’s the consumer event. Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or on film” (*Mao II* 43). In the logic of postmodernism, the representation is the “final reality”, or, as Baudrillard would argue, it has entirely replaced reality. For this reason, the terrorists look to the video images of themselves fighting in order to confirm that the fighting really happened (109-110).<sup>51</sup>

I would argue that the mass visual media, especially television, has created this sense of reality as the image. As a result, true power lies not so much in the extent to which one can control reality as it does in the extent to which one can control images and use them to manipulate perceptions of reality. For this reason, Charlie and Scott seek to control not so much Bill the author as the *image* of Bill the author. This is also the reason why Rashid forces his boys to wear T-shirts bearing his image. Rashid’s interpreter does not say, “Rashid is their identity”. He says, “the *image* of Rashid is their identity” (*Mao II* 233, my italics).

Similarly, Moon’s followers worship the *image* of Moon. In fact, they have consumed his image, for according to Karen’s father, Moon “lives in them like chains of matter that determine who they are” (*Mao II* 6). In a world in which “we sleep and eat the image and pray to it and wear it too” (37), the “real” father seems to have been replaced by the “image-father”.

If political power lies in controlling images, then perhaps the power of terrorism lies in the *threat* of violence, or, put another way, if the image has replaced the “real”, then the act of violence is irrelevant and the image of it is everything. Levesque puts it this way: “in the world of spectacle DeLillo describes, writing and terror are less important than the medias’ creation of spectacles around the *possibility* of writing and/or terror” (83, italics in original). The media’s creation of the *possibility* of Bill writing another book is what facilitates his fame, and the media’s creation of the *possibility* of the terrorist committing another act of

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<sup>51</sup> Chapter three will discuss Baudrillard and the loss of the “real”.

violence is what facilitates the fear of terrorism. It is not the terrorist act itself but the news item that is meaningful and powerful, because the threat creates fear, which in turn changes behavior. This is why Brita, who has changed her travel behavior out of *fear* of a terrorist attack, thinks the terrorists “have us in their power” (*Mao II* 41).

When Bill says, “we’re giving way to terror, to news of terror, to tape recorders and cameras, to radios, to bombs stashed in radios” (*Mao II* 42), he underlines the role of journalists in creating the fear of terrorism, in creating the narrative of terror in the form of news items. For this reason, I must disagree with DeLillo when, in the essay, “In the Ruins of the Future”, written after the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, he says that today “the world narrative belongs to terrorists” (33). I would argue that without media exposure, terrorists lack power. Journalists, photographers, television producers, and others must transform terrorist attacks into media events in order for them to be relevant. This does not mean that the events do not happen in an empirical reality, but that they lack the political power of narrative without publicity.

The mass visual media, then, plays a key role in creating a society of fear. At the same time, it creates a society of entertainment in which viewers seem drawn to news of terror, the new world narrative replacing the novel. It is not the tragedies themselves that we want, but the images of them. Scott puts it this way:

The novel used to feed our search for meaning... But our desperation has led us toward something larger and darker. So we turn to the news, which provides an unremitting mood of catastrophe. This is where we find emotional experience not available elsewhere. We don’t need the novel... We don’t even need catastrophes, necessarily. We only need the reports and predictions and warnings. (*Mao II* 72)

Perhaps it is a function of living in Debord’s “society of the spectacle” in which the spectacular, such as violence, has become entertainment, as Postman has pointed out. Or perhaps the attraction lies in the longing for narrative, a longing that Osteen claims “apocalyptic events fulfill... particularly well” (174).

However, this longing comes at a price: “televised apocalypses wrap social problems into tidy narrative parcels, reducing frightening events to formulaic fables” (Osteen 174). By reducing tragic events to neat narratives and thus pacifying viewers, I would argue that the news serves an ideological function. As Postman has pointed out, we become increasingly lethargic and politically inactive because the news does not require us to evaluate its contents, to react, or to take action. We are simply asked to allow ourselves to be entertained. Unlike most television viewers, Karen seems aware of this function of the media. While watching a

tragic event on the news, she wonders why no one is reacting to the tragedy. She thinks that perhaps it is not “real”, because “It could not be real if others watched” (*Mao II* 191).

Television news is part of a larger system, existing within as well as furthering the dominant ideology of a culture. DeLillo’s novels demonstrate how Western television participates in constructing the meanings of history, identity, and reality within a certain ideology, specifically that of capitalism – as opposed to communism and socialism – and democracy – as opposed to fascism and totalitarianism. Television is the “white noise” of Western culture, creating more or less passive recipients of this ideology.

In *Mao II*, DeLillo shows how every culture or subculture contains certain dominant ideologies within which authority figures operate. For example, when we first encounter Karen, she has been “programmed” by the Moonie cult. In an ironic turn of events, she is subsequently kidnapped by her own parents and “deprogrammed”. She is “forced to listen to rote harangues. Of course, this is what they said the church had been doing to her all along” (*Mao II* 79). DeLillo seems to suggest that the brainwashing of Karen in the Moonie cult is similar to the indoctrination she experiences within her own family. She is “reprogrammed” into the values and beliefs of American society. As literary critic Ryan Simmons puts it, Karen “has been conditioned to think the way she does by narrative forces that are largely outside her” (684). As, to a certain extent, we all are.

The fear of terrorism, spurred on by the mass visual media, fits into the dominant ideology of the West. Debord goes so far as to claim that democratic societies have created the idea of terrorism: “a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism” (*Comments* 24). According to literary critic Peter Baker, “the terms “terrorism” and “terrorist” are markers invoked to build ideological consensus for certain kinds of U.S. domination abroad” (22). In other words, the American government has used the “War on Terror” to further foreign policy goals, and I would argue that it has justified this “war” by placing “terrorism” in opposition to “freedom”. During the Cold War, the government used the same technique by placing “communism” in opposition to “freedom”. Put simply, the fear of communism has been replaced by the fear of terrorism. In the context of power-dynamics, I would suggest that creating this fear of “the Other” is a very useful technique in that a government or other authority can justify its power by constructing a reality in which that power is necessary to protect society.

One of the assumptions behind the American use of the term “terrorist” is that s/he is always a foreigner (Ryan Simmons 690). More specifically, the terrorist is always assumed to be Eastern, like Rashid in *Mao II*. Another assumption is that the terrorist is “hidden within

crowds” (Simmons 690) whereas the American is a loner like Bill, a free individual. However, as Hardack points out, in *Mao II*, “DeLillo sets up an opposition between the Western writer/individual and the Eastern/mass terrorist only to collapse it” (374). DeLillo juxtaposes the Western individual with the Eastern masses only to show how Western capitalism has created a mass identity and uniformity not dissimilar to that of Rashid’s terrorism or Mao’s communism. It has done so, I would argue, through mass production and the mass visual media.

According to the ideology of capitalism and consumerism, individuality comes from buying products. These products are mass-produced and, therefore, identical, and yet they are marketed as if they can give consumers a unique identity. Ironically, Westerners pursue individuality by buying the exact same things. In the pursuit of becoming the “third person singular” shown in advertisements, we become a mass of consumers rather than individuals.

Not only do Westerners consume the same products but also the same images, values, and ideas through the mass visual media. In this way, the media participates in creating a mass identity in which people look, think, and act in similar ways. As literary critic Jeffrey Karnicky puts it, “DeLillo shows that television viewing, and the repetitions that it engenders, does much more than produce unthinking consumers. DeLillo shows how television’s power has become an integral component of the constructing of the self” (352). I would argue that DeLillo demonstrates how the mass production of the myth of American individualism in the American media has created a mass identity disguised as individualism. People are becoming like the repeated images of Warhol’s works, images, incidentally, that he often took from advertisements or the news media. We are becoming the images.

Bill sees himself as the antithesis to both totalitarianism and crowds, and to Warhol and his mass-produced art. As the embodiment of the American myth of the lone individualist, it is therefore ironic that he becomes implicated in the mass culture he despises. Although he chooses not to publish his newest novel, other novels have been published and therefore mass-produced. Thus, the opposition that DeLillo sets up between the individual, or “original”, words of the writer and the “synthetic mass language” of advertising and consumer society is collapsed (*Mao II* 23). Furthermore, with the mass production of his photograph, Bill becomes a kind of “Mao II”, or “Bill II”, a copy of himself, thus underlining the irony of the title of DeLillo’s novel.

Bill’s implication in mass culture underscores the writer’s supposed failure to influence society. Brita finds that writers have become so irrelevant that she stops photographing them: “It stopped making sense....Writers stopped one day. She doesn’t know



how it happened but they came to a quiet end” (*Mao II* 229-230). According to Keesey, “*Mao II* is DeLillo’s protest against the condition of today’s writer, whose work has been either preempted by terrorists or turned into another meaningless but best-selling commodity by the publishing industry and the media’s publicity machine” (11). *Mao II* poses the question of whether art can avoid becoming merely a consumer product, and if not, can the writer still be “dangerous” and challenge authority?<sup>52</sup>

Paradoxically, DeLillo claims that the purpose of the novelist is to provide a culture’s counternarratives while he at the same time questions the novelist’s ability to influence a culture saturated by visual images. The implication of this inability would be that DeLillo himself and *Mao II* are also irrelevant, or, as Scanlan puts it, “if books do not really matter very much, then no view of fiction can matter very much either” (247).

I certainly do not find DeLillo irrelevant, and I would argue that *Mao II* suggests the difficult but *not* impossible position of writers today. What *Mao II* as a whole is trying to say is quite different from Bill’s contention.<sup>53</sup> The novel is suggesting a re-definition of authorship which recognizes the author’s implication in that which s/he criticizes, which recognizes the changeability of meaning, and which recognizes the fact that everyone is incorporated in the “society of the spectacle”.

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<sup>52</sup> It can be argued that the mass production of art allows it to be more accessible to everyone and, therefore, its influence is extended.

<sup>53</sup> Bill is therefore not DeLillo’s mouthpiece, as Ryan Simmons rightly points out, countering Baker who seems to equate Bill’s views with those of DeLillo’s.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Consequences of Constructivism for the Meanings of History, Identity, and Reality**

As chapters one and two have demonstrated, DeLillo's novels emphasize the constructed natures of history, identity, and reality. Chapter one discussed the roles of textuality and narrative, and chapter two considered ideological frameworks and the role of "Masters" such as the mass visual media. Chapter three will focus on the consequences of such a constructivist view. It will open up to a broader discussion of "the real" by juxtaposing the theories of Baudrillard with those of Hutcheon and White. While Baudrillard claims that "the real", or "the original", has been replaced by its representations, Hutcheon and White (and, I will argue, DeLillo) contend that "the real" still exists, but the *meanings* of it are constructed. These meanings, or representations, are neither "out there" to be discovered nor are they "fake", a term which becomes meaningless in the context of constructivism. This chapter will elaborate on this and discuss the extent to which Baudrillard's theories are applicable to *Libra* and *Mao II*.

#### **3.1 On Postmodern Theories of "the Real" and "the Loss of Originals"**

Postmodernism is a debate about reality and knowledge, ontology and epistemology. It is a debate about what is "the real" and how we can access or *know* it. I will be using the term "the real" to mean that which is authentic, original, objectively true, directly experienced without mediation, in short, the raw reality. Rather than having unmediated access to "the real", postmodernists argue that we can only know it through its representations, representations that we construct rather than being "out there" to be found. Postmodernism emphasizes the subjective, mediated experience of reality and the arbitrariness and politics of our representations. To some, this view of the world is liberating, while to others it is alienating. The sociologist David Lyon wonders what we are left with in a world without "solid scientific facts and a purposeful history, bequeathed to us by the European Enlightenment" (2).

Some postmodernists take the argument a step further by proclaiming "the loss of originals", which essentially means the loss of "the real". When Benjamin lamented the loss of authenticity, or "aura" as he called it, in the mechanical reproduction of a work of art

(221), what was at stake was the loss of the original – or real – work of art. Baudrillard claims that, in postmodern society, authenticity has been lost in all domains of life, not just in art. In fact, he says, “the original no longer even exists, since things are conceived from the beginning as a function of their unlimited reproduction” (*Simulacra* 99). There is no longer an original act of authorship.

According to Baudrillard, all originals have been replaced by so-called “simulacra” through a process of simulation. The term “simulacrum”, which has fascinated philosophers for centuries, is usually defined as an image, copy, or representation of a person or thing that has the appearance of the original but not the substance or essence of it. Baudrillard takes the concept to an extreme by arguing that today the simulacrum is not a copy of the real but has altogether replaced it. It has become “hyperreal”, more real than the real.

Where Plato conceived of simulacra as either true or false representations, Baudrillard contends that the simulacrum has undergone a historical progression. Through various stages, the simulacrum has evolved from a “counterfeit”, such as a mirror-image, to today’s pure simulacrum, a representation without a real (“The Orders of Simulacra” 83). Baudrillard claims, “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (*Simulacra* 2). Traditionally, representation implies a sign referring to something real, with “the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear” (3). The copy and the original used to be distinct. Today, however, according to Baudrillard, the image no longer represents the original but has in fact replaced it. In other words, the representation does not refer to anything but itself. We have the sign(ifier) without the signified.

For DeLillo, this seeming loss of “the real” began with the Kennedy assassination. As Branch in *Libra* puts it, what happened was “an aberration in the heartland of the real” (15). As the electronic media began to play a more and more important role in people’s experiences of real-world events, the distinction between the image and “the real” became less and less clear, to the point where the image seemed to replace “the real”. For example, to many people, the Zapruder film became more than a representation of the Kennedy assassination. It became the event itself. As DeLillo puts it in the essay “American Blood”, “The Kennedy assassination was a home movie. It is called the Zapruder film” (24). As I argued in chapter one, I believe that this is a function of the endless repetition of images in the mass visual media, the result of which is that we cannot imagine the event without seeing the images presented in the film. However, contrary to Baudrillard’s claim, I would suggest

that while these images have defined the assassination, they have not replaced it. While they have created the *meanings* of it, they cannot deny its existence in an empirical reality.

While DeLillo does portray a “world gone inside out” in which life seems to be lived inside representations, I would argue that he departs from Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacrum in that, like Hutcheon and White, he does not challenge the *existence* of history, identity, and reality, only how the *meanings* of these are constructed. In other words, he does not question that Kennedy, a real human being, was assassinated in a real, physical world. However, he does question how we come to know or make sense of the event. Likewise, he does not dispute whether Oswald was a real person with an identity (or several identities), but he does demonstrate that our understanding of Oswald’s life is a constructed narrative.

Baudrillard refers to DeLillo’s “world gone inside out” as “hyperreality”, a term used in postmodernism to describe a world in which “the real” and “the fake” are indistinguishable. To Baudrillard, however, it is even more than that. It is a virtual reality in which the simulation is no longer “fake” because no original exists anymore: “Simulation... is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (*Simulacra* 1). Hyperreality is the copy world we live in, which we assume to be the real world, and in a sense it has *become* the real world because the original, according to Baudrillard, no longer exists.

*Libra* and *Mao II* contain similar scenes that illustrate Baudrillard’s hyperreality. In *Libra*, Oswald’s televised death seems to transform him into a simulacrum in the hyperreality that is television, and as such, he gains a kind of immortality as these images are continuously repeated on the screen. Likewise, Bill in *Mao II* seems to be transformed into a simulacrum through Brita’s photography. Paradoxically, his photograph symbolizes his figurative death while simultaneously a kind of eternal life lived in hyperreality because his picture will live on long after he is dead. According to Baudrillard, this image-world in which Oswald and Bill come to exist has replaced “the original”. In fact, this image-world is what we assume to be the “real” world.

As an illustration of the hyperreal, novelist and literary critic Umberto Eco cites Disneyland, which he calls “the Absolute Fake” because it pretends to be “fake” when it is actually “real”. It pretends to be a magical, fictional park when it is actually a commercial city or shopping mall. As Eco puts it, the “Main Street facades are presented to us as toy houses and invite us to enter them, but their interior is always a disguised supermarket, where you buy obsessively, believing that you are still playing” (43). Disneyland emphasizes its

“fakeness” in order to lure consumers into buying products, because the visitor tends to experience spending money there as not part of the “real” world.

I would argue, however, that using the term “fake” is meaningless in the context of postmodern ontology. To say that our representations are constructed is not the same as saying that they are fake, and by the same token, to say that these representations have become hyperreal because they have replaced the real is not the same as saying that they are fake. In fact, in the logic of postmodernism, there *is* no fake as opposed to a real. If Baudrillard’s simulacrum exists without the original, then everything is a simulacrum. Disneyland is therefore neither “fake” nor “real”. It is “hyperreal”.

Similarly, I would argue that in DeLillo’s world there is no “real” Oswald as opposed to a “fake” one. In fact, DeLillo plays havoc with the categories of “fake” and “real” in that his characters are continuously creating fictional identities. “Bill Gray” is Bill’s alias and “Hidell” is Oswald’s alias. Yet these names are no more “fake” than the “originals” because all identities are constructs. Instead of possessing humanism’s stable core of identity, Oswald and Bill are portrayed by DeLillo as postmodern, unstable constructs put together by texts and narratives.

For this reason, Ruppensburg and Engles object to Keesey’s assumption that DeLillo’s characters lose their “real” identities due to the media, an assumption he makes in statements such as the following: “Ruby has lost his identity to the media, who now represent him as another villain in the piece when he had tried to cast himself as the hero” (170). According to Ruppensburg and Engles, “many critics would disagree with Keesey’s assumption that DeLillo depicts these media as getting in the way of some unadulterated access to one’s ‘true’ self and to ‘genuine’ contact with reality” (13).

Other critics make similar assumptions to Keesey’s. Buscall, for example, claims that the “real” Oswald is replaced by “the scripted, fake Oswald – the sign as reality” (35). While Oswald does seem to be transformed into a simulacrum in the form of his image on television, I would suggest that this is not a “fake Oswald” any more than Hidell is, for there is no “real” or “true” Oswald compared to which the simulacrum would be a “fake”. It is a representation, and as such, it is a construct – neither fake nor real. As Ruppensburg and Engles put it, “the critical tendency is to read DeLillo’s work instead as a series of repeated assertions, despairing or not, that while release from controlled, dictated, and mediated experience and conceptions of oneself is desirable, escape into purified, unmediated identities and experience is impossible” (13).

DeLillo's portrayal of his characters as constructs has led to some criticism. Several critics have accused DeLillo of not creating "real" characters, in other words, characters that act and speak like real people. Douglas contends that DeLillo's characters "seem like simulations of characters – that is, simulations of simulations of people. In DeLillo's novels, characters watch themselves act and imagine themselves acting" (105). Some critics claim that DeLillo's characters do not seem genuine because, as Douglas puts it, "their words, thoughts, gestures come to them (as they come to us, DeLillo's oeuvre implies) from the outside, from the social world that offers the content for speech, emotion, and action" (106). In other words, they seem to be constructed by the outside world. This, of course, is exactly DeLillo's point, as Douglas rightly indicates (106). I would argue that through his characterization, DeLillo emphasizes the theme of the constructed nature of identity.

DeLillo's novels seem to suggest that, like his characters, we are all constructs, scripted by historical, cultural, and ideological contexts, and, especially today, by the mass visual media. According to many critics, including Baudrillard, the media has participated in creating an inverted sense of reality, a hyperreality, or "world gone inside out". Goodheart claims that we live in a "cinematic real" in which real life and images have blended together in such a way as to no longer be distinguishable (357-358). So-called "reality TV" puts a spin on this by pretending to be about real people "like you and me", and yet their stories are staged dramas not dissimilar from those presented in the movies or on television soap operas and sitcoms. According to literary critic Philip E. Simmons, the constant flow of images and representations leads to "the idea that there is no escape from representation" (9), and "At this point the world becomes all image... a collection of signs" (19). At this point, we seem to be living our lives inside the world of representations.

According to Debord, "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (*Society* 12). In other words, images have replaced directly experienced reality. For example, television news programs produce images that stand in for real events. These images, as Debord points out, have been "chosen and constructed by someone else", and they "have everywhere become the individual's principal connection to the world formerly observed for himself" (*Comments* 27). I would argue that while we have always used representations to make sense of our world and thus have never had completely unmediated access to reality, we seem now to look to the representations as if they were the reality. For example, instead of going out and experiencing nature for ourselves, now we watch nature programs on television.

Our attraction to representations is nothing new, as Eco points out. Today, however, we are not only entertained by the representation itself, but by the idea that it “has reached its apex and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it” (46). It is as if we prefer the representation to the real, as if we find the copy to be a “better” real than the original, as if we enjoy the sign(ifier) more than the signified. As Ickstadt puts it, “the relation between reality and fantasy has somehow been inverted, [and] the shared image of the real is more real than reality itself” (307). Or it *seems* that way because we *prefer* the image to the real. The representation becomes our reference point for judging reality, as exemplified in *Libra* by people in Dallas looking to the photograph of Kennedy to determine whether the man himself is “real”, or by Brita in *Mao II* telling Bill that once his photograph is published, people will insist that he look like his photograph.

A result of the ceaseless flow of images and representations is what Baudrillard famously calls “an implosion of meaning” (*Simulacra* 79). In part, this loss of meaning is due to a world of referents without originals, and in part, it is due to an excessive amount of such representations, or what we call “information”. As Baudrillard puts it, “We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning” (79). We may think that more information creates more meaning, but in fact the opposite occurs: “many simultaneous meanings...destroy each other” (40). We end up with no meaning at all, no communication whatsoever, a “hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished” (81). In other words, according to Baudrillard, the real is abolished by the “excess” of reality, and meaning is abolished by the excess of meanings.

I would counter Baudrillard by arguing that meaning is not “out there” in the world, but rather, created by us. Though we may find it increasingly difficult to create meaning in a world where we are bombarded by images and information, I would suggest that we have not lost meaning altogether. Branch’s failure in *Libra* to create meaning due to the excess of data he has collected is countered by Karen’s ability in *Mao II* to assimilate the images she sees on television into coherent narratives. Unlike Branch, we must be selective. Then, like Karen, we can create meaning, that is, narrative. I would suggest that DeLillo’s world is not meaningless, but he challenges us to be aware of the fact that we construct meaning, which therefore is inherently unstable and the product of historical, cultural, and ideological contexts.

Many critics find that Baudrillard is too extreme in his argument, including Hutcheon, whose objection to his theory, I would argue, is reflected in DeLillo’s fiction. She asks

whether we have ever had “unmediated access to reality: have we ever known the ‘real’ except through representations? We may see, hear, feel, smell, and touch it, but do we *know* it in the sense that we give meaning to it?” (*Politics* 31, italics in original). “The real” has not been replaced by its representations, but rather, it has always been mediated by them. As I discussed at length in chapter one, White contends that while the historical event “really happened” in an empirical reality, meanings are assigned to it by historians, who fashion the “facts” into narratives.

Critics such as Baudrillard and Jameson seem nostalgic for a pre mass media culture without today’s simulacra, but, as Hutcheon points out, “There is nothing natural about the ‘real’ and there never was – even before the existence of mass media” (*Politics* 31). “The real” has always been and still is cultural, rather than natural, in the sense that it has always been mediated by representations. What is new is perhaps our realization of this. As Hutcheon puts it, “The postmodern, as I have been defining it, is not a degeneration into ‘hyperreality’ but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it” (32). What postmodern novelists, such as DeLillo, do is question how we represent the real and what that means in terms of ideology and power.

What is also new is the nature of our representations in that we have gone from a word-centered to an image-centered world. While it may seem that these images have gained priority over “the real”, I would argue that this does not equate to a “loss of originals”. It just means that we tend to *prefer* the copy to the original, that images *seem* more real to us due to their proliferation in the mass visual media. Rather than having lost history, identity, or reality, we struggle – but continue – to create meaning through representation.

### **3.2 *Libra*: “It was the world gone inside out.”**

*Libra* depicts a world lived inside representations in which the lives of the characters seem defined by the images presented in the media. Oswald’s Russian wife, Marina, finds life in America to be a “world gone inside out” (*Libra* 227) in that these images are perceived to be more “real” than directly experienced life. Oswald’s friend, Bobby Dupard, for example, describes the television footage of segregation rather than his own experiences of it (271), and Oswald looks to the television images of his shooting in order to feel the pain of his own death (440). It is as if the images legitimate Bobby and Oswald’s experiences, make “real” what actually happened to them. In their world, representations seem to replace “the real” and



become, as Cain puts it, “another, maybe primary dimension of reality” (66), or what Bill in *Mao II* calls a “final reality” (43).

Oswald’s longing to exist in the “final reality” that is television, his desire for a life in the “third person singular”, is an acknowledgement of the power of the media to create hyperreal existence. This longing, which is ultimately a longing to become the simulacrum, is fulfilled when a camera captures his death on film. As I have suggested, Oswald’s death scene is a poignant example of Baudrillard’s theory in that, as Oswald dies, he is recreated by television as the pure simulacrum existing in hyperreality. As Buscall puts it, Oswald is “projected into the arena of the simulacrum, where the sign will be forgotten as such, appearing like a ‘plaster cast’ of the reality” (36-37). In other words, “the original” – “Lee Oswald” – is replaced by the simulacrum – “Lee Harvey Oswald”.

Even more than replacing “the original”, Baudrillard claims that the simulacrum exists without it. I would argue, however, that DeLillo does not challenge Oswald’s existence as a real person in a historical reality, and thus, he does not reduce Oswald to a simulacrum. Instead, he suggests that in an image-centered world, “the original” *seems* to have disappeared because the image is all that matters in the public’s mind. As chapter two discussed at length, the simulacrum is all that *seems* “real” in a world dominated by images produced by the mass visual media. Therefore, just as the Zapruder film only appears to replace the Kennedy assassination, Oswald’s image on television only appears to replace the man himself. In “a world gone inside out”, the real world still exists, but we prefer the representations of it.

These representations *construct* the meanings of history, identity, and reality, rather than *replace* “the real”. The Zapruder film helps us make sense of the Kennedy assassination, just as Oswald’s televised shooting, his diary, and other texts help us understand Oswald’s life. The meanings we construct, however, are inherently unstable and based on our interpretations. As Branch discovers, it is impossible to establish who Oswald “really” was. Rather than possessing humanism’s stable, coherent, core of identity, Oswald is a postmodern construct with multiple identities. Branch calls him the “multiple Oswald” (*Libra* 300). In other words, the meaning of Oswald is defined differently by different people, as illustrated by the contradictory “facts” from eyewitness accounts that Branch has collected.

Further complicating the meaning of Oswald is the fact that he creates fictional identities that are indistinguishable from the so-called “original”. For example, when Oswald, using the voice of Hidell, says, “Hidell prepares to make his maker, ha ha” (*Libra* 151), one wonders who is making whom. Who is “the original” and who is “the fake”? According to

literary critic John Johnston, “To assert that “Hidell” is Oswald’s simple ‘fake identity’, as Mackey is inclined to do, assumes of course that there is a ‘real’ Oswald who possesses a coherent, stable identity, transparent to itself, in relation to which ‘Hidell’ would be a fake” (335). However, “Hidell” is no more “fake” than “Oswald” is, for both are constructs.

Likewise, the lone gunman character that Everett has scripted is not a “fake” Oswald. In fact, Everett is surprised to find that the character he has created already exists in the real world. The “scripted Oswald” is indistinguishable from the “real Oswald” because both are scripted. In other words, there is no stable core of identity to which a scripted version would be a fake. Similarly, when the conspirators create fictional identities, these are no more “fake” than the so-called “originals”. The secret world of conspiracies and aliases is not a “fake” world, but “a world inside the world” (*Libra* 47). DeLillo blurs the line between “the fictional” and “the real” with the purpose of suggesting that everything is a fiction, that is, a construct.

DeLillo’s point, I would argue, is that the meanings of history, identity, and reality are created rather than “out there” to be discovered, and therefore, it becomes meaningless to speak of “fake” versus “real” or “original” versus “simulacrum”. As historiographic metafiction, *Libra* mixes assumed “facts” with “fiction”, thus emphasizing the constructed nature of both literature and history, and challenging us to rethink the ways in which we distinguish between the imaginary and the real. *Libra* asks how we can know the “real” Oswald or the “real” assassination story, and it asks the reader to join Branch in “question[ing] everything, including the basic suppositions we make about our world” (*Libra* 300).

A dilemma DeLillo encounters is the question of whether some fictions are more “real” or “true” than others. As Ickstadt puts it, “are all fictions equally true or false? are some more ‘real’ than others?” (300). While DeLillo obviously wants us to think that *his* fiction is more “real” or “true” than, say, the “fiction” of the Warren Report, as a postmodernist, he simultaneously claims that the “truth” will always elude us. This dilemma is somewhat resolved by my contention in chapter one that the purpose of literature is not to provide us with the “truth”. Instead, *Libra* suggests that the purpose of literature is to provide comfort through narrative structuring, to rescue us from the chaos of reality by creating meaning that exists outside the realm of the empirical. Literature and narrative thus hold a kind of privileged position in the hyperreal world that DeLillo describes. This is not to say that the novelist can step outside of the hyperreal, but s/he can create meaning within the culture.

At the same time, there is the sense that DeLillo criticizes literature for its tendency to reduce reality to aesthetics, to replace “real things with plots and fictions”, as Bill puts it in *Mao II*. Similarly, DeLillo criticizes the mass visual media for seeming to replace “real things” with images. On the other hand, Kavaddo claims that “Oswald ceased to be real long before DeLillo or anyone fictionalized him” (60). In other words, before Oswald became a fictional character in DeLillo’s novel, he was a fictional character in real life. I would suggest that this is exactly DeLillo’s point, that we are all fictions to a certain extent, scripted by ideologies, myths, and “Masters” of various kinds.

This is not to say that we are not real human beings existing in a historical reality. In *Libra*, there is a definite tension between the longing for “truth” or meaning beyond the mediation, and the tenet that “truth” can never be anything but a construct, in other words, that we will never have unmediated access to “the real”. As Hutcheon has pointed out, this is not something new brought on by the emergence of the mass visual media, and it does not equate to Baudrillard’s loss of meaning. While DeLillo does portray a world similar to Baudrillard’s hyperreality in which there is a proliferation of simulacra, which many of his characters tend to prefer to their own experiences, DeLillo denies that these representations have replaced “the real” and all meaning has been lost. Instead, he suggests that our texts and narratives help us make sense of our world, our history, and who we are. They create rather than replace meaning.

### **3.3 *Mao II*: “replacing real things with plots and fictions”**

Like *Libra*, *Mao II* is a debate about what constitutes “the real”, and, like *Libra*, it depicts a reality in which “real things” seem to have been replaced by representations. For example, Jean-Claude seems to have been turned into a simulacrum at the hands of terrorists “bouncing his image off the moon” (*Mao II* 112). Whether he is actually dead or alive is irrelevant since “they’d forgotten his body by now” (112). Like the missing children Karen sees pictured on shopping bags and milk cartons (148), he has been reduced to an image separated from the body of the man. He now exists in the hyperreality that is cyberspace.

Bill thinks, “The image world is corrupt” (*Mao II* 36), because it replaces “real things” with representations. He feels that he has been replaced by his image, that he has become a “Bill II”, a copy in the form of his photograph. As discussed in chapter one, inherent in photography is this idea of the copy, or, as Hardack puts it, “to photograph is always already to repeat or duplicate” (383). According to Baudrillard, this copy replaces

“the original”, as exemplified by Bill’s photography session with Brita. Like Oswald, Bill is “shot” by a camera, signaling the death of “the original” and its replacement by the simulacrum circulating eternally in hyperreality.

During the photography session, Bill tells Brita, “I think I’ve grown a second self in this room” (*Mao II* 37). In other words, I would argue that rather than “the original” being replaced by the image, as Baudrillard claims, Bill has been duplicated, or represented, in the form of a photograph. Through the publication of this image, people will come to know something about who Bill is. In other words, the image will create the meaning of the construct “Bill” rather than replace it, for as Hutcheon has pointed out, our only access to “the real” is through our representations of it. The meanings people will assign to Bill’s identity will be their interpretations of him, or, more correctly, their interpretations of Brita’s interpretations of him, and thus will not establish who Bill “really” is but serve to illustrate the unstable nature of the meaning of postmodern identity.

While images do not replace “the real”, they do tend to be preferred to “the real” in an image-dominated world, and they may even become the reference point for judging reality. This is exemplified by Brita’s contention that once Bill’s photograph has been published, people will insist that he look like his photograph (*Mao II* 43). According to Sontag, “It is reality which is scrutinized, and evaluated, for its fidelity to photographs” (87). Karen thinks, “a picture shows the true person” (178). In other words, a person is judged for his “trueness” to his picture.

When Karen thinks that her husband-to-be has a “Sunday-comics look. It is the thing that makes him real to her” (*Mao II* 8), it is an illustration of this inverted sense of reality brought about by the proliferation of images in the media. In this image-dominated world, or “millennial image mill” (229), it seems natural to use a new form of fighting that involves shooting at pictures of each others’ leaders (227), and to charge someone with “assassinating the image of the general” (44). It seems natural because the pictures of the military leaders seem to have supplanted the leaders themselves. According to Keesey, “Rather than refer to reality, the signs have replaced it” (136). Thus, Baudrillard’s simulacrum seems to exist without “the original”, but again, I would argue that it only *appears* this way because we assign more value to the image than to “the real”, because we prefer the representation to “the original”.

Our tendency to prefer the image to “the real” seems to suggest a need to have images confirm reality and our experiences, as exemplified by the terrorists looking to the video images of themselves fighting in order to validate that the fighting really happened (*Mao II*

109-110). The confirmed reality through images is what Bill refers to when he says, “Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or on film” (43). It is almost as if the purpose of “the real” is to become a representation, or as DeLillo puts it in an interview, “Things exist so they can be filmed and played and replayed (Begley 105).

Photographs or television images validate reality because they seem to be direct reflections of it. They seem to draw us closer to “the real”. However, they also affect a distance to reality in that they reduce “the real” to an image. For this reason, Karen’s father is incorrect in thinking that by photographing her, he can reclaim the daughter he has lost and bring the “real” Karen back. As Keeseey puts it, “The father’s picture-taking does not bring him any closer to Karen; it merely hastens her transformation into an image” (184).

DeLillo seems to criticize the tendency of photography – as well as literature – to reduce reality to aesthetics, to replace “real things with plots and fictions” (*Mao II* 200). As I discussed in chapter two, images such as Brita’s horrific photographs of violence and suffering, have “derealized the real by aestheticizing it and distancing the observer from the horror” (Osteen 201). Likewise, her photograph of Bill seems to have reduced him to an aesthetic form. Bill, in turn, has reduced Jean-Claude to mere words on a page. Thus, I would suggest that our representations, be they visual or verbal, create meaning while simultaneously reducing “the real”. They draw us closer to reality because they are our only access to it, but they also affect a distance to it.

While we used to validate reality through written language, today we tend to prefer visual images. According to Sontag, it used to be “that everything in the world exist[ed] in order to end in a book. Today everything exists to end in a photograph” (24). This change in how we represent the world has effected how we perceive it, for as Postman has pointed out, the form of representation influences the meaning of that which is represented (117). Sontag claims that photography has changed “the very idea of reality” because “photographs have become the norm for the way things appear to us” (87). Thus, visual images do not merely reflect the world but have a normative function in defining history, identity, and reality.

As a result of the shift from a word-centered to an image-centered society, *Mao II* questions the novelist’s ability to influence culture. While literature seems to hold a kind of privileged position in *Libra*, I would suggest that in *Mao II* it is photography that holds this position. It is Brita rather than Bill who can create meaning within the chaos of the hyperreal. While she cannot step outside of reality, she can work within the culture to create meaning through images and narratives, the stories she tells with her photographs. In fact, *Mao II*

seems to suggest that, as Osteen puts it, “the camera can be as effective a weapon as the gun” (6). If Bill’s ability to influence society has faded, DeLillo seems to hold out some hope for the future in Brita’s photography.

Rather than having lost meaning, then, I would argue that DeLillo emphasizes the role of representations – verbal or visual – in constructing that meaning. Though he portrays a world similar to Baudrillard’s hyperreality with a proliferation of simulacra, he does not find this world meaningless. In fact, he claims that these representations help us make sense of “the real”, help us create the meanings of history, identity, and reality.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to explore the ways in which the meanings of history, identity, and reality are constructed in *Libra* and *Mao II*. I hope to have demonstrated that while DeLillo does not deny the existence of “the real”, he claims that any meaning assigned to it is created rather than “out there” to be discovered. Meaning is not stable or universal, but rather, constructed through texts and narratives within historical, cultural, and political contexts. This is not something new, brought about by the emergence of the mass visual media. “The real” has always been mediated by representations, representations that do not merely reflect reality but create the meanings of it.

Narrative is one of the important tools human beings use for constructing meaning. In *Libra* and *Mao II*, DeLillo shows how so-called “Masters” and the mass visual media play an important role in shaping society by inventing and distributing these narratives, narratives that are linked to certain myths and created within specific ideological frameworks. These novels seem to suggest that we are constructs scripted by narrative forces outside ourselves. An interesting topic to pursue would therefore be social determinism versus individual power in DeLillo’s fiction, in other words, the extent to which his characters have any power whatsoever to construct their own lives.

Paradoxically, while demonstrating the importance of narrative, DeLillo simultaneously subverts it. In *Libra*, he questions the ideological implications of historical narrative as well as its tendency to connect the dots at all costs and ignore random occurrences. In *Mao II*, he challenges the totalizing tendency of narratives and strives to redefine it by opting for an open narrative with gaps, loose ends, and a lack of closure.

I hope to have expanded the scholarly discussion of *Libra* and *Mao II* by emphasizing narrative, somewhat underemphasized by critics. I also hope to have complicated the discussion of these two novels by juxtaposing the theories of Hutcheon and White with those of Baudrillard, the latter of which I have found to be somewhat overemphasized by critics. By employing these and other postmodern theories, I hope to have shown the relevance but also limitations of the application of these theories to DeLillo’s fiction. While I believe that these theories, as well as theories on narrative, the media, and photography, are important to the study of DeLillo, his fiction does not “fit” into any one theory. In *Libra* and *Mao II*, DeLillo portrays a world similar to Baudrillard’s hyperreality with a proliferation of simulations and simulacra. At the same time, however, like Hutcheon and White, he rejects Baudrillard’s loss of “the real”, or “loss of originals”. Rather than “the real” being replaced

by representations, DeLillo shows that we can only *know* “the real” through our representations of it.

It is true, however, that the nature of our representations has changed as we have gone from a word-centered to an image-centered society. *Mao II* reflects this change in that, much more than *Libra*, it emphasizes the role of visual images in constructing meaning. These novels demonstrate how the mass visual media plays a key role in creating the sense of reality as one based on exposure in the media, in other words, the sense that if something is shown on television, then it must be “real”. It is even as if the image replaces the real event, but, as I have argued, the image only *seems* to have replaced “the real” because we *prefer* it, not because “the real” has disappeared.

The shift from words to images has led DeLillo to question the purpose of writing. I hope to have demonstrated the meta-commentary *Libra* and *Mao II* provide on the nature and purpose of writing in an image-dominated world in which we not only prefer the image to “the original” but also to other forms of representation such as writing. Through characters as writers, the novels discuss the role of the novelist and the historian and demonstrate the importance of narrative in the writing of both literature and history. In *Libra*, DeLillo questions the traditional distinction between history and literature, “fact” versus “fiction”, and seems to privilege literature in that it can provide comfort through narrative structuring as well as provide counternarratives to the official versions of historical events. In *Mao II*, DeLillo also questions the distinction between “fact” and “fiction” by complicating the issue of what is “real” as well as the issue of who is actually authoring whom in the “society of the spectacle” in which author figures are themselves incorporated in the media spectacle. Further studies could address the role of writing and the writer – or more broadly, art and the artist – in DeLillo’s entire body of work.

By focusing on the metafictional link between the two novels, somewhat underemphasized by critics, my goal was to expand the scholarly discussion of *Libra* and *Mao II*. In addition, by including *Mao II* in my study, a novel somewhat overlooked by critics, I hope to have highlighted its merit as well as how it compliments *Libra*. Furthermore, by emphasizing the postmodern aspects of DeLillo’s fiction, I hope to have demonstrated his significance to the postmodern debate and the study of postmodern literature. A possible further study of interest could be a comparison of DeLillo to other postmodern novelists, such as Thomas Pynchon, E. L. Doctorow, Robert Coover, or Paul Auster, with the purpose of discussing DeLillo’s particular brand of postmodernism.



Although he is a writer who has received various awards, including the National Book Award for *White Noise*, I would suggest that DeLillo still has not received the wider readership or scholarly acclaim that he deserves. I wish this study to be one of (hopefully) many to come that draws attention to this unique writer.

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