The Only "Worried Adult" in the Crowd?: Individuality, Terrorism, and Mass Psychology in Don DeLillo's *Mao II*

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[Abstract]

This paper examines the critical tension between individuality and collectivity in Don DeLillo's 1991 novel *Mao II*. While DeLillo sharpens his critique of Western capitalist homogenization and the American mass mind in *Mao II,* the novel fails to provide a meaningful exploration of the shared ideological mechanisms linking the loss of individuality endemic to terrorist ideology and to the conformist tendencies of Western postmodern subjects. Instead, anxiety about the potential obliteration of individuality leads *Mao II* to renounce collectivity altogether, which it depicts as a mere 'crowd' associated exclusively with the non-American and the non-Western. The individuality portrayed in *Mao II* expresses its identity and autonomy at the cost of extreme solitude, rejecting any possibility of connection or solidarity with others. Such a self-enclosed, self-referential concept of individuality, which is explicitly advocated by the protagonist Bill, offers no viable solution to the crisis of Western democracy diagnosed by the novel. This paper argues that the novel's limitations stem from DeLillo's inability to imagine alternative forms of freedom, individuality,

and collectivity.

Key Words: individuality, collectivity, terrorism, Don DeLillo, *Mao II*

1. Introduction

Throughout his career, Don DeLillo has focused on the postmodern condition of contemporary American life. Calling attention to the homogenizing tendencies of consumerist society and the dominance of specious images produced by mass media, DeLillo has often highlighted the loss of individual subjectivity as one of the major problems facing today's world. The specter of the crowd, previously evident in *White Noise* as media and images that eat away at human consciousness, is an extension of his warning about the dissolving individuality of postmodern subjects. In *Mao II*, DeLillo's criticism of the homogenizing forces of Western capitalist society subtly shifts to terrorism. As DeLillo clarifies in an interview that coincided with the publication of *Mao II*, "the death of the individual" underlies both the postmodern mass mind and the psychology of terrorism. "[F]rom the mind of the terrorists to the mind of the mass organization," DeLillo states, "[i]n both cases, it's the death of the individual that has to be accomplished before their aims can be realized" (Passaro). By juxtaposing Middle Eastern terrorism and Western postmodern culture, *Mao II* focuses on the totalitarian restructuring of human mind, which leads to loss of critical subjectivity and a concomitant decline of democracy.

Concerns about the deterioration of critical subjectivity and democratic values have become even more prominent since the 1990s, when DeLillo published *Mao II*, and the subsequent age of terror the novel is said to have anticipated.

Anxieties about "fake news," the proliferation of conspiracy theories like QAnon, the increasing polarization of American political discourse, uncritical acceptance of online misinformation, and, finally, the events of the January 6 Capitol attack —a kind of culmination of the aforementioned trends—are seen by many as manifestations of weakened critical subjectivity that presents an urgent socio-political problem for the contemporary United States. The mindless crowds of cultish religious enthusiasts who occupy Yankee stadium in *Mao II* bear a prophetic and allegorical relationship to the crowds of MAGA followers who attacked another symbol of American democracy in the real world of 2021. Terrorism and American mass consciousness, two phenomena premised on an underlying "death of the individual," in DeLillo's view, are arguably combined in the armed attempt to halt the peaceful transfer of political power, fused into a violent insurrection against the country's democratic constitution.

DeLillo's bitter examination of "the death of the individual," however, fails to offer critical insights into the dangerous tension between individuality and collectivity that the novel locates in New York and Beirut. DeLillo's pointed critique of the American mass mind is undermined by the novel's rapid turn towards the incomprehensible, mindless crowds of the non-American, non-Western world. *Mao II* otherizes the senseless collectivity rather than investigating the psychological mechanisms shared by Middle Eastern terrorists and the mindless crowds of Western consumer capitalism, and thus loses the opportunity for a comprehensive interrogation of the totalitarian tendency in American postmodern subjects. The reinforcement of individuality, which the protagonist Bill seeks and attempts to achieve through his writing, also reveals its own limitations when the supposedly democratic and other-oriented gesture at the novel's center turns out to be a self-enclosed system of self-assurance with no space for the other. The novel's limited conceptualization of

individuality and collectivity, which does not escape the existing political systems, false binaries, and cultural status quo of the West, leads to contradictions in *Mao II*, ultimately rendering it part of the problem it criticizes (You 31). As "a single worried adult" (146) in the crowd, Bill sees through the condition of the selfless mass but cannot get himself out of the frame. *Mao II* falls into the same predicament, presenting an acute diagnosis of the contemporary world's threats to individuality while unself-critically affirming simplistic narratives that would come to dominate political discourse in the post-9/11 United States.

2. Crowds and "the Worried Adult"

The world of *Mao II* is dominated by the homogenizing force of capitalism, which reduces everything into consumable images. You can find the "signs for Mita, Midori, Kirin, Magno, Suntory" (23) everywhere in New York, while Beirut is covered with the advertising placards of Marlboro and Coke II. In this globalized late-capitalist world, places become "remote and unreceptive but at the same time intimately familiar" (120), turning all spaces inside out and making people speak the "synthetic mass language, the esperanto of jet lag" (23). Here nothing is left inaccessible, and geopolitical differences dissolve into a featureless mass filled with images of resemblance. The absorbing power of capitalism not only homogenizes distinct places but also flattens differences between people. Exerting the "total control of the person's response, like a consumer prison" (88), the capitalist world feeds captive individuals with an endless series of images (re)produced by mass media. One of the characters in *Mao II*, Karen, incessantly devours the catastrophic images broadcast on television, merging herself with them and becoming like a

"thin-boundaried" receptacle that absorbs everything around it. Under the assimilating power of capitalism, individual subjects like Karen are more than ready to take "it all in, believe it all" (119) and immerse themselves in the undifferentiated crowd.

Mao II begins with a dramatic demonstration of the nature of faceless crowds, depicting a mass wedding of the Unification Church—DeLillo calls them "the Moonie" believers—conducted at Yankee Stadium. Brides and bridegrooms, each in identical dresses and suits, wait in columns to be married to the matches chosen by their "true father, Master Moon" (6). To an outsider, the sight of thousands of people chanting repetitive words in one voice is deeply disturbing: the "mass of people turned into a sculptured object … a toy with thirteen thousand parts" (7). Searching for Karen among the mass of brides with binoculars from the grandstand, Karen's father thinks "[t]hey all feel the same, young people from fifty countries, immunized against the language of self. They're forgetting who they are" (8). In bewilderment, he tries to fathom the reason why they willingly relinquish their subjectivity to follow Master Moon:

> When the Old God goes, they pray to flies and bottletops. The terrible thing is they follow the man because he gives them what they need. He answers their yearning, unburdens them of free will and independent thought. See how happy they look. (7)

Freed from the traditional constraints imposed on the self, postmodern subjects experience disorientation and anxiety in an era when grand narratives and old faiths have disappeared. Drawing on the vocabulary of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Slavoj Žižek perceives the same predicament observed by Karen's father and explains it as the subject's confrontation with the disintegration of the big Other. In the subject's release from the regulations of the big Other, Žižek explains, the lack of the

internalized symbolic order creates a sense of uncertainty rather than a liberation of the subject. The freedom of the postmodern subject is therefore "not the freedom of someone who can freely choose his destiny, but the anxiety-provoking freedom of someone who is constantly compelled to make decisions without being aware of their consequences" (Žižek 338). Longing for a sense of belonging and meaning, the subject desperately desires something that can replace "the Old God" and yields their freedom and individual identity to "flies and bottletops" or "the principle of easy belief" (7).

The live telecast of the Iranian crowd frantically wailing at Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's funeral epitomizes the subject's shock and horror in the face of the big Other's nonexistence. Karen, watching with terror the "[w]eeping chanting mourners … bloodying their heads and tearing at their hair, choking in the thick dust" (188-9), feels like "she was among them" and "hear[s] them saying, We have lost our father" (189). According to Žižek, the formation of selfless crowds and their longing for subjection is a general condition for individuals in postmodern worlds; but Karen's father regards them as strange, abnormal, or foreign figures to be studied, analyzed, and cured for their "rare disease" (11). For him and other 'normal' Americans, fanatic believers are irrational and dangerous eccentrics who need the help of "psychiatrists and police" (8). Assuming that such figures are the product of an extreme cult and that he is immune to their shared illness, Karen's father feels he must rescue his daughter from such irrational devotion.

Contrary to Karen's father's belief, however, DeLillo finds commonalities between the two crowds divided by the fence. The spectators in the grandstand, who say they do not know how to react to the undifferentiated, incomprehensible mass but continue to photograph them incessantly, are not intrinsically different from the crowd in the ballpark. DeLillo treats the observers as critically as the Moonie

believers, describing how "[t]he crowd-eye hangs brightly above them like the triangle eye on a dollar bill" (10). Addressing them as crowd with a capitalist eye, he points to the benumbed subjects who are so absorbed in the logic of capitalist culture that they have become insensitive to their own inner lack or conflicts. Although the observers reassure themselves that they remain whole and sane by distinguishing themselves from the mindless crowds, their behavior and consciousness reveal the same desire for loss of self. There are "as many people taking pictures as there are brides and grooms. One of them for every one of us," Karen notes, witnessing the people in the grandstand "crowding the rails, standing everywhere to take pictures" (10). Meanwhile, getting "bored" (12) at the distressing sight of the mass wedding too soon, Karen's father gets excited by the idea of "learning everything" about the cult that has captivated his daughter, to which his wife expresses a cynical denunciation by saying "You don't have to enjoy it" (11).

Unlike the two groups of the crowds, Bill Gray, the protagonist of *Mao II*, understands the "irrational way of life that has a powerful inner logic" (45) and keenly recognizes his involvement and complicity in it. The society is full of images ceaselessly produced, copied, and repeated, leading to the increasing homogenization of individuals as they devour the mass-produced images. Believing that it is the "way religion … [or] disease takes over a life" (45), Bill wants to resist the incorporating force of the capitalist image-world by isolating himself from society. As a renowned writer, Bill lives in complete seclusion from the outside world, "working on and off for twenty-three years" (51) on a book which he may never publish. However, his reclusion only contributes to his godlike aura, and he realizes that he too is entrapped by the system. He has been an object of "constant religious observance" (44) by the public, which made him thoroughly aware of the destructive force of the images. Apprehensive of the mass consumption of his upcoming book, he insists, "[t]he more

books they publish, the weaker we [the novelists] become" (47).

As an isolated wise man who alone apprehends the looming threat of the mass and the image, Bill expresses concern for the mindless individuals but also fears them. The lost man in the photograph of refugees Karen finds in Brita's loft provides a perfect analogy for Bill in this sense. In the middle of the massed boys,

> [S]he noticed a single worried adult, one man's head showing at upper right ⋯ all the boys are looking in the general direction of the camera and he is standing diagonally and peering over the heads and across the frame and out of the picture ⋯ He is part of the mass but lost there, stuck there ⋯ And the lost looking man whose mind is not on the food or the camera but on the crowd, how he might escape before they trample him. (146-7)

The lost man is neither one of the boys waving and looking at the camera nor the picture-taker outside of the frame. With perfect understanding of his situation, the man seems worried about the crowded boys and thus peers over them at a distance; yet he has no way to get out of the crowd as well as the frame himself. As a lost man in the consumerist postmodern world, Bill is "suffering like the rest of them" but distinguished from the mass with his deep-seated "doubt" and "loss of faith," which he says he "smell[s]" in bed "[e]very minute of every day" (38). When everybody is looking in one direction, he is the only one who looks "across the frame and out of the picture" (146), contemplating with dread the future the crowd portends.

As a single worried adult in the crowd, Bill fears the violent power of the image, which annihilates the individuality of the original and supersedes it. Through a confessional dialogue with Brita, a photographer working on a project to document writers, Bill reveals his deep apprehension of the reductive representation of capitalist

image production and the crowd's ceaseless consumption and reproduction of it. He regards his picture taking as a "consumer event" (43), which announces the death of his identity, with a suspicion that the images will be voraciously consumed by the crowd and soon replace his original substance with its specious aura. Bill later says he "used to brood about" being "[s]hot by someone" (196). He worries that one's individuality is destroyed once shot, whether by a camera or by a gun.

What Bill fears the most is the possibility that the homogenized individuals living in the sea of mass-produced images could readily turn into a totalitarian crowd that wipes out diversity and individual freedom. The Moonie believers with "all arms high" (16) resemble Nazi supporters and forebodingly reveal the willing subjection of individuals to any authoritative narrative that promises to replace their lost faith. At Yankee Stadium, the Master leads the believers "out past religion and history" (15) while the selfless crowd "chant[s] for one language, one word, for the time when names are lost" (16). Bill says Karen carries "the virus of the future" (119), which insidiously infects people with self-negation and numbness, turning them into unthinking and undifferentiated crowds.

The loss of individuality, found either in the totalitarian subjection of individuals to a religious cult or the homogenization of individuals in the late-capitalist image world, centers upon DeLillo's critique of contemporary America in *Mao II*. As a reviewer in the *Washington Post* suggests, *Mao II* might be "DeLillo's strongest statement … that we are living in the last violet twilight of the individual." The apocalyptic pronouncement that "[t]he future belongs to crowds" (16), which closes the novel's prologue and reappears hauntingly throughout the narrative, denotes the dread of mindless crowds that DeLillo shares with his protagonist. As an esteemed cultural critic of America, DeLillo delivers a warning of a "worried adult" alarmed at the future of democracy brought into crisis by the homogenized, unthinking mass.

3. Othering the Crowds: Adversaries against Western Democracy

The diminishing subjectivity of individuals and the threat of mindless mass—the postmodern problems of the late-capitalist image world DeLillo tackles in many of his works—find a new correlative in *Mao II*. The link between terrorism and the totalitarian crowd DeLillo builds and deliberately reinforces throughout the novel expands his critique of the loss of individual autonomy beyond the American consumerist society and postmodern conditions in the West. Given that the publication of *Mao II* predates 9/11 by ten years, DeLillo's novelistic analysis of the ideological mechanism of terrorists and its association with the psychology of American postmodern subjectivity suggests an unexpected yet insightful approach to terrorism before and after 9/11. However, instead of exploring the domesticity of the problem—the deep-rooted socio-cultural mechanisms producing selfless crowds in the Middle East *as well as* in the United States—*Mao II* takes the opposite tack, othering the crowds and the totalitarian tendency of the undifferentiated, thoughtless collective.

Starting from Yankee Stadium in New York, the stage for the homogenized, uncritical, and calamitous crowds quickly moves to foreign spaces. Focusing on the crowds crushed to death in a British football stadium, the fanatically wailing Iranian crowd at Khomeini's funeral, and the crowd of a million Chinese in identical clothes at Tiananmen Square, the novel connects the totalitarian collectivism threatening individual autonomy and democratic ideas to the non-American and the non-Western. The powerful depiction of the ironic American subjects in the prologue—where the baseball park, a symbol of Americanness and democracy, is filled with two groups of crowds divided by the fence—loses its critical edge against contemporary America,

when the narrative voice has to declare "that our true father is a foreigner and nonwhite" and further Orientalize it by quoting the alien Korean phrase "Pali-pali" (9). In this way, the careful depiction of the Moonies at the ballpark comes to signal a threat of contagion from outside rather than a caution against America's own problems. What ultimately puzzles Karen's father are the "faces that don't look American" (5) filling Yankee Stadium with their meaningless chant.

Considering DeLillo's keen awareness of how images annihilate what they purport to represent, his insensitivity towards the representation of the East in *Mao II* is surprising. The disappearance of the "nuance and shadow, grids of pinpoint singularities" (7) regretted so bitterly in the cultural context of the West seems no longer at stake when it comes to the images from the East. The catastrophic images Karen obsessively watches on TV and Bill deplores for replacing the novel almost always present non-American or non-Western crowds, in which Karen senses "the total vision" (193) that she used to hear in the words of Master Moon. The problem is not only the images broadcast by mass media but also artistic production in which historical personages exist as mere copied images stripped of all context. Looking at Andy Warhol's prints of Mao, Scott thinks the "[w]ork that was unwitting of history" is appealing and liberating and that he had never "realized the deeper meaning of Mao before he saw these pictures" (21). Furthermore, in these images or the people the characters come to meet in the Middle East, we only find fanatical crowds but no individual who recognizes the inner logic that drives people into irrational zeal and worries about the loss of individual identity that could end with totalitarian uniformity. Without "a single worried adult" (146), the world outside is caught up in the irrational and childish impulse of what Žižek describes as the "obscene need for domination and subjection" (360).

When the characters of *Mao II* travel to the Middle East, people who have been

represented only through reproduced images, such as television broadcasts or photographs, finally have their own voice, but it only reaffirms their uncritical, senseless, and homogenized state of mind. When the representative of the terrorist group, Haddad, is introduced, the intellectual middle-aged man is portrayed as wearing "a plastic watch he might have borrowed from a child" (128) and shows a naïve self-contentment during his conversation with Bill. Inviting Bill to meet the terrorist leader Rashid, Haddad wants to legitimize their cause against Bill's claim that they are "perfect little totalitarian states," but he only undermines his own argument with a self-contradictory assertion that they need "total politics, total authority, total being" (158). Similarly, Rashid later meets and states to Brita the doctrine of his terrorist group in a dignified tone; however, when he repeatedly blurts "[t]ell me if you think I'm mad" (234), the authority of his statement is seriously questioned.

In this way, DeLillo's criticism of the homogenization of the Western capitalist world subtly changes its aim. It is now directed toward a totalitarian collectivity firmly associated with the non-American and non-Western. The terrifying images of Moonie believers reappear throughout the text; DeLillo uses similar language (and occasionally the exact same phrases) to represent Chinese Maoists as well as Middle Eastern terrorists, linking them with the fanaticism of Moonies. Haddad and Rashid repeat the language of Master Moon—calling the leader of the terrorist group a "father" (9, 234), the crowd his "children" (9, 233), and their community a "nation" (7, 234)—bolstering their shared fanaticism and irrationality. DeLillo readily extends this association to Chinese Maoists by depicting them "chanting formulas and slogans." They "dressed alike and thought alike" (162) much like the Moonies. In a similar vein, Jeremy Green asserts that the mourners at Khomeini's funeral, broadcast on television, also resemble the Moonies (113).

DeLillo's representation of the terrorists and the East in *Mao II* flattens the complexities and singularities of each historical entity by lumping "the Christian cult, Chinese Communism, and Islamic fundamentalism" in "the rigorously synchronic portrayal" (Scanlan 35). And the rough coalition of the dangerously undifferentiated, mindless collectivity DeLillo creates presents itself in a deliberate geopolitical and cultural asymmetry. In this regard, critics like John A. McClure argue that *Mao II* exemplifies a revised version of the late imperial romance. McClure claims that the novel echoes the latest American rhetoric that figures America as the protector of democracy, which is a mere replacement of "civilization" or "Christianity" in earlier imperial rhetoric, and thus tends to ideologically justify "Western intervention and domination, rather than to interrogate it" (145).

Yet, acknowledging DeLillo's critical attitude towards the Americanized world often found in his other writings, some critics find it more productive to focus on what caused such a problematic delineation of the totalitarian tendency of the contemporary world in this novel.[1] Richard Hardack sees the opposition between Western individuality and Eastern totalitarian collectivity as DeLillo's strategic choice "only to collapse it … [and to] dramatize[s] the speciousness of the dichotomy between the domestic and the foreign, both of which turn out to be products of the same Western imagination" (374-75). Contrary to Hardack's generous reading, but in the same effort to come up with a rational explanation for the accusation of DeLillo's imperialist representation, Margaret Scanlan also argues that "DeLillo seems so intent on reproducing the forces that homogenize the world that he gives up on the possibility of reproducing its heterogeneity" (35) and as a result ends up "erasing the heterogeneity of history, religion, language, and culture" (36).

From the vantage point of the present after more than two decades since 9/11, DeLillo's problematic rendering of the East and terrorism exposes a significant

political implication that would not have been acknowledgeable upon its publication. The limitations we find in *Mao II*—its othering of totalitarianism and its decontextualization of historical differences—provocatively prefigure the political narrative of the post-9/11 United States. In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror,* published two years after 9/11, Jacques Derrida criticizes contemporary attempts to define terrorists as "the Other" whom Westerners cannot understand, observing that those called "terrorists" were often recruited, trained, and armed by the United States and other Western powers (115). Indeed, the West invented the word, technique, and politics of terrorism; the history of "white" terrorism such as the Baader Meinhof gang, the IRA, and the Oklahoma City bomber falsifies the dominant image of terror, wide-spread after 9/11, strongly associated with the Arabs and the Muslim world, erasing the concept's heterogeneity.

Thus, DeLillo's failure to critically relate the totalitarian tendencies in American mass consciousness to terrorism also seems to come from the constraint of American political imagination revealed in public and intellectual discourse concerning terrorism after 9/11. *Mao II*'s self-enclosed consciousness makes it blind to the analogy between the terrorists' totalitarian narrative and its own theorization about them. Contemplating on the ideological effect of terrorists' "one fiction," Bill thinks:

> He could have told George ... When you inflict punishment on someone who is not guilty, when you fill rooms with innocent victims, you begin to empty the world of meaning and erect a separate mental state, the mind consuming what's outside itself, replacing real things with plots and fictions. One fiction taking the world narrowly into itself ... (200)

Bill insightfully condemns terrorists' totalitarian narrativization, which reduces the world to a singular meaning and mental state; yet his profound understanding of the mechanism and effect of totalitarianism's "one fiction" is not reflected in the novel's dichotomizing and reductive representation of terrorism as essentially a mentality of "the Other." Indeed, reading this passage in a post-9/11 world gives an eerie sense that makes us recall the prisoners in Abu-Ghraib, the missing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and the "War on Terror" narrative propagated by the U.S. government.

   Mao II could have been an in-depth exploration of the ideological mechanism of the diminishing subjectivity shared by American postmodern subjects and Middle Eastern terrorists, but engrossed in diagnosis and denunciation of the stated crises—whether the crisis of democracy brought by terrorism or the homogenization of the world by Western consumerism—DeLillo falls into a loop of self-confident critique in which he cannot see himself as part of the problem. As "a single worried adult" (146), his primary goal in *Mao II* is maintaining individual subjectivity and autonomy at all costs against the adversaries of Western democracy; yet, trapped in the given structure of self-enclosed and self-affirming American political imagination, *Mao II* becomes a symptom that foreshadows the solipsistic post-9/11 political discourse in the United States.

4. "Writing Toward" Self: The Self-enclosed Loop of Liberal Individualism

While terrorism and totalitarian collectivity are coupled as forces jeopardizing democratic diversity in *Mao II*, DeLillo suggests another set of ideas in opposition to

them as a last defense of individuality—*the novel* and democracy. Though putting aside the simplistic scheme of the antithetical structure, the artistic embodiment of democratic values in writing and the novel reveals its own dilemmas in the way Bill tries to reach the hostage held by the Lebanese terrorist group through his act of writing. As the non-American and the non-Western are reduced to a mirror on which the problems of the Western world are projected, in Bill's aestheticized gesture to connect to the imprisoned poet, the hostage serves as a mirror for Bill's self-reflection and self-assurance. Rather than creating a meaningful connection to the Other and the outside world, Bill's writing provides him with a self-enclosed system of self-referential individuality, which enables him "to remain outside the zone of infection" (22) and accomplish his individualistic, autonomous, and completely isolated death.

The link between the novel and democracy is decidedly stated by Bill in his heated debate with Haddad, which puts novelists in confrontation with terrorists, competing to have the power to reshape the consciousness of people. Believing that the novel emblematizes free expression of individual thoughts and democratic coexistence of diverse ideas, Bill insists that the novel embodies democratic possibilities in the form of "ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints":

> "Do you know why I believe in the novel? It's a democratic shout. Anybody can write a great novel ⋯ can sit down and find his voice and luck out and do it ⋯ One thing unlike another, one voice unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints. And this is what you want to destroy." (159)

The novel used to have the ability to "shape the way we think and see," but now it is destroyed by terrorists like Haddad and their power to "influence mass consciousness" (157). Bill says he has been noticing "a curious knot [that] binds

novelists and terrorists" who are competing to "alter the inner life of the culture" (41). Yet, in this "zero-sum game" (156), Bill laments, terrorists seem to replace the artists who are "absorbed and processed and incorporated" (157), no longer capable of changing how people see the world and themselves.

Thus, to resist the homogenizing force inducing totalitarian numbness and loss of self, Bill turns to writing again. As democracy is linked to the novel, so too is the notion of individuality epitomized by writing in *Mao II*. Jean-Claude Julien, a Swiss poet held hostage by a Lebanese terrorist group in Beirut whom Bill later participates in a public act to support, longs to write just "ten words" that he believes will make him "come into being once again." Locked in a room as a prisoner, Jean-Claude thinks "[t]he only way to be in the world was to write himself" because "[w]ritten words could tell him who he was" (204). For the hostage as well as Bill, writing is the only way to find and reconfirm their identities. In a conversation with Brita, Bill explains the meaning of writing:

> The language of my books has shaped me as a man. There's a moral force in a sentence when it comes out right. It speaks the writer's will to live. The deeper I become entangled in the process of getting a sentence right in its syllables and rhythms, the more I learn about myself ⋯ the code of being that pushed me on and made me trust the world. (48)

As for the hostage, what constructs Bill as a man is his own language and writing. Through writing, he learns about himself, finds connection to the world, and discovers a moral force and the will to live. Bill confesses he has "always seen myself in sentences" (48); and when he doubts himself, he desperately "find[s] a passage he knows will reassure him. He reads it and he's reassured" (52). When Bill tries to reach the kidnapped poet, it seems natural that he wants "writing about the

hostage to bring him back," which is "to return a meaning that had been lost to the world when they locked him in that room" (200).

Writing in *Mao II* thus acquires political and ethical significance as a space that reveals one's identity and preserves his singularity as an individual. In this regard, many critics have paid special attention to the motif of "writing toward," which Bill introduces as the orientation of his writing and Brita suggests is "what people see in your [Bill's] work" (47). Regarding Bill's journey to get closer to the hostage, the idea acquires even bigger stakes as it indicates a democratic approach and connection to the other that resists terrorism's threat to individuality and diversity. Bill quits his self-confinement to go to London to support the hostage and finally attempts to go to Beirut to replace him, but he dies unexpectedly on the way. Given his failure to reach the hostage, Bill's writing remains his only ethical gesture toward him. Proposing the phrase "'writing towards' the hostage," Peter Boxall suggests reading Bill's writing as "finding those unspoken places where the writer and the hostage might 'converge'" (172). In his view, Bill's death before their actual convergence is not a failure but a moment that offers the possibility of an ethical encounter with the other. Responding to Boxall's reading, Adam Thurschwell also acknowledges that Bill's writing towards the hostage consists in an aesthetic and "imaginative identification with a lost, absent, or dead other," though remaining in doubt as to whether this "purely literary" convergence could be "a political act" (295).

However, what Bill himself reveals about his writing and the meaning of "writing toward" challenges such critics' attempts to endorse its ethical connotation. When Brita asks what "writing toward" means and if it is not "what people see in your[his] work," Bill answers: "I only know what I see. Or what I don't see" (47). Shifting the focus from "people" back to himself, Bill emphasizes that it is about him and his artistic work not the people around him. In this conversation, he reveals that he has

"been trying to write toward … [a] kind of innocence ever since," and that "innocence" indicates an ideal artistic form and the pure pleasure it gives, an experience he enjoyed as a child when he would make up imaginary baseball games. In this self-sufficient creation, he does not need anyone else because he "was the players, the announcer, the crowd, the listening audience and the radio." Bill calls it the "pure game of making up," where "Everything is seamless and transparent … [and] completely spontaneous. It's the lost game of self, without doubt or fear" (46). With his deep apprehension of the distorting force of images, Bill finds satisfaction and reassurance in this self-enclosed and thus perfect game of make believe, even though he is aware that it is a "lost game of self," in which neither doubt nor fear exists because there is nothing but his own consciousness and imagination.

What Bill has been writing toward is not the other or the hostage but himself; he loops in a self-sufficient system designed to reassure himself. Writing is the basis of his individual identity, his own creation, which gives him back the meaning of his existence. Accordingly, in Bill's writing about the hostage or his journey to reach him, there is no space for the hostage as an individual. When Bill attempts to think about the hostage—by trying "to put himself there, in the heat and pain, outside the nuance of civilized anxiety"—what he wants to understand is "what it [is] like to know extremes of isolation" (154). What Bill sees in his journey to Beirut is not danger or the kidnapped poet but only loneliness, as he believes it is "self-enforced loneliness that helps you advance in moral rigor" (160). Even amid a targeted bombing surrounding the efforts to save the kidnapped poet, Bill forgets the existence of the poet and says he "couldn't remember why he wanted to write about the hostage" (198); and after this remark, Bill returns to the purely self-referential play of announcing the imaginary baseball game out loud. The identity of the hostage, which appeared to have some degree of existential importance in earlier moments,

starts to be absorbed into Bill's consciousness as he writes about him. Towards the end of the novel, Bill admits "he realized in the end he wasn't really thinking about the prisoner" (215). Bill's writing is indeed a shout of individuality, which serves as a reaffirmation of Bill's self, reducing Jean-Claude into a mirror for Bill's self-reflection or just "one of Bill's symptoms" (Scanlan 35).

Bill wants to preserve *his* identity and autonomy against the omni-directional attack of images from the outside world. In this regard, it is not pertinent to judge whether his death was a success or failure, as some critics do, using the criterion of its political or ethical meaning. Rather, his acute desire is to escape the homogenization of the consumerist world and its annihilation of one's individuality. Therefore, in his anonymous death, as many critics argue, Bill does achieve a "resistance to cultural usurpation of meaning" (Allen 590) or an "admirable refusal to compromise" (Green 147). Even when we are hesitant to call Bill's obscure death a resistance, the self-determination in its execution is unquestionable. Bill dies in his own scenario with full autonomy without capitulating to the capitalist image-world. As Steffen Hantke writes, whether Bill's death is "[h]eroic or foolish, he has the last word in his own story, playing for integrity and making the game where it can still be won" (237). Hantke remains uncertain whether Bill's self-perception as a stronghold of resistance is accurate or delusive but emphasizes the fact that DeLillo gives Bill such an autonomous, self-determined death.

Thus, the individuality Bill desperately desires succeeds in preserving his own autonomy at the cost of extreme solitude and refusal of any possibility of connection or solidarity with the other. Anxiety about the annihilation of individuality leads *Mao II* into a disapproval and renunciation of all collectivity. The collectivity in *Mao II* is only represented by the "crowd," an undifferentiated mass—not people, those who maintain their individuality while sharing a common spirit. When Karen says

"people" to refer to Chinese, for example, Scott immediately corrects it to "crowds" (70). Similarly, the Chinese protestors calling for democracy in Tiananmen Square and the soldiers there to suppress them are not distinguished from each other; they are only "[o]ne crowd replaced by another" (177), the description of which again recalls the Moonies. In addition to the undifferentiated juxtaposition of Christian cult followers, Chinese political protestors, and repressive national forces, this moment also shows that DeLillo's criticism of the Western contemporary world again makes him decontextualize and reduce the non-Western world into a symptom of the West, while revealing his incapability of imagining any other form of freedom, individuality, and collectivity beyond the extant system of Western democracy.

The self-enclosed, self-referential individuality Bill advocates and performs in *Mao II* can hardly be a solution for the crisis of democracy that concerns Bill, as well as DeLillo. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt argues that "the masses grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in class. The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships" (317). Isolation is an essential element of totalitarianism since loneliness deprives people of human connection, sense of reality, and the ability to act. Solitude can be valuable for creative activities, Arendt writes, but it is "a situation in which I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me" and thus one must return to human companionship (474). An atomized and isolated individuality is at the core of the origin of totalitarianism and deeply associated with both (post)modernization and the development of capitalism, which DeLillo rates as the principal cause of the production of the crowd. Repudiating any contact, communication, or solidarity with the other, the self-sufficient individuality represented in *Mao II* only intensifies the

isolation of the individual and more importantly precludes the possibility of a sound collectivity to counteract the totalitarian homogenization threatening the future of democracy.

5. Conclusion

Individuality and collectivity have also been a central issue in recent debates in political philosophy regarding the crisis of Western democracy. Western democracy grounded on liberal individualism is diagnosed by many thinkers as being in a two-fold predicament: it subsumes people who seem to willingly forsake their civil liberty and political rights, and it runs the risk of becoming an empty signifier vulnerable to appropriation by undemocratic forces. What these thinkers propose as a solution to this dilemma is an alternative collectivity that embraces individual singularity. For instance, indicating the dominance of governmentality that appropriated the place of politics, Giorgio Agamben insists on a "coming community" that shares an "*inessential* commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence" (18-19, emphasis original). Jean-Luc Nancy asserts a concept of "the inoperative community," stating that democracy must disclose plurality and infiniteness, rather than absorb them into a community.

Despite sharing the same concerns about the future of democracy, *Mao II* charts a different response to the predicament of Western democracy, which is *either* surviving as an individual *or* as a community, the latter of which almost always means becoming the undifferentiated, selfless mass. The Moonies represent the idea of community; as Scott puts it, "[t]he point of mass marriage is to show that we have to survive as a community instead of individuals" (89). On the other hand, the

individuality promoted in *Mao II* is an idealized model in a vacuum, stripped of all collective qualities such as nationality, gender, religion, ideology, class, and so on. When Brita introduces a story at the dinner table in Bill's house—which tells of "two tiny human figures moving toward each other from remote provinces, step by step" along the Great Wall of China—at first glance, it seems to suggest a new planetary and ethical encounter between individuals. Nonetheless, Brita soon rejects the political implication of the story, saying "It's not nationality, not politics" (70).[2] Insisting on the purely artistic nature of the encounter between individuals, like Bill does with his writing, Brita advocates an individuality deprived of any collective qualities. Ironically, such empty individuality could be a consequence of capitalist homogenization; far from resisting such processes, it could become the ground for the development of the mindless mass rather than an alternative to totalitarian homogeneity.

The constrained conceptualization of individuality and collectivity makes *Mao II* part of the problem it attempts to criticize. As we can see in Bill's limited position as the "single worried adult" (146) who understands the threat of the crowds but cannot escape their logic, the novel provides a sharp critique of the dilemmas of the Western postmodern world but cannot detach itself from the self-enclosed, self-assured political consciousness of America. In this regard, Žižek's analysis of an anecdote about Western media coverage of the Tiananmen Square protest illuminates the problem of a Western perception unable to think in other terms. Describing an American news reporter "standing in front of a copy of the Statue of Liberty and claiming that this statue says everything about what the protesting students were demanding," Žižek points out that the American media offers another "reinscription" of the Chinese protesters' demand for freedom and equality "within the confines of a given order," when their "longing … had nothing to do with the real USA" (207).

In this sense, Rashid's words to Brita towards the end of the novel—"Don't bring your problems to Beirut" (232)—resonates with the self-enclosed American consciousness of *Mao II*, which finds the self-obsessed problems of its own in the other and the outside world. The loss of individuality, as a prerequisite for terrorism or postmodern homogenization either in Beirut or New York, is to be analyzed, criticized, and lamented—but without reinscribing "your problems" over Beirut.

Notes

1) As a response to 9/11, DeLillo published an essay titled "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September" in December 2001. He writes, "All this changed on September 11. Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists. But the primary target of the men who attacked the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre was not the global economy. It was America that drew their fury ... It was the blunt force of our foreign policy. It was the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind" (33).

2) Gayatri Spivak and Étienne Balibar also present theoretical models of a newly imagined planetarity. Spivak suggests "planetarity" as a way of rethinking our relationship with the planet, which is a precapitalist structure open to other epistemes and alterity. Balibar designates the newly imagined planetarity as "transnationalism," which transcends and reinvents the boundaries of nationality and citizenship. However, what Brita advocates here is distinct from these ethical approaches. While these concepts remain highly conscious of the possible violation of singularity and at the same time exercise great caution in avoiding identity politics, Brita too easily renders identity itself as invalid and empty. Compared to Balibar's transnationalism, Brita's notion is more like a "post-national" stance (which Balibar deliberately distinguishes from transnationalism) claiming the end of the nation-state despite its extant problems.

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국문초록

돈 드릴로의 『마오 II』에 나타난 개인성, 테러리즘, 군중심리

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본 논문은 돈 드릴로의 소설 『마오 II』가 형상화 하는 개인성과 집단성 사이의 긴장 관계를 비판적으로 고찰한다. 이 소설에서 드릴로는 서구자본주의 사회의 동질화와 미국인들의 무비판적 군중화에 대한 날카로운 분석을 제공하며, 개인성의 상실이라는 공통 분모 아래 중동 테러리즘과 서구 포스트모던 주체의 군중화를 가져온 이데올로기적 메커니즘을 탐색한다. 하지만 개인성의 말살에 대한 드릴로의 깊은 우려는 집단성 자체에 대한 부정으로 이어지며 『마오 II』에서 집단성은 비미국적이고 비서구적인 것, 오직 '군중'의 형태로만 존재하는 것으로 묘사된다. 또한 이에 대한 대립항으로 제시되는 개인적 자율성과 정체성의 강화 역시 타자와의 연결 및 연대의 가능성을 배제하는 극단적인 고립을 통해 성취되는 것으로 그려지며 생산적인 대안을 제공하는데 실패하고 만다. 본 논문은 『마오 II』에서 특히 주인공인 빌을 통해 제시되는 자기폐쇄적, 자기반영적 개인성의 개념이 이 소설이 진단하고 있는 서구 민주주의의 위기에 대한 해결책이 될 수 없음에 주목하며, 이러한 한계가 현존하는 서구 정치체제를 넘어선 다른 형태의 자유, 개인성, 집단성을 상상할 수 있는 능력의 부재에서 기인함을 주장한다.

주제어: 개인성, 집단성, 테러리즘, 돈 드릴로, 『마오 II』

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