Terrorism and Spectacle in *White Noise* and *Mao II*

On September 11, 2001, the horrific spectacle of two planes crashing into the Twin Towers was broadcast live into the living rooms, businesses, and schools all over the developed world. Everyone who had access to a television turned it on and joined in the unprecedentedly massive global audience, unified in its utter shock, transfixed by the sheer singularity of the event.

The sociopolitical ramifications of 9/11 have been astounding and persistent. At the time of this writing (2013), the Patriot Act is still in effect and the War on Terror is still being waged in the Middle East — despite the fact that Osama bin Laden has been killed. In other words, the consequences of 9/11 have extended beyond the initial action-reaction/crime-punishment parameters. The significance of the event has grown to be more than the sum of the lives and the infrastructure lost; there appears to be an additional symbolic significance lurking beside the real event itself.

What is the source of this symbolic significance? This is a question that the redoubtable postmodern novelist, Don DeLillo has been exploring for decades. Before 9/11, many of his critics had long been discussing DeLillo's commentary on the relationship between terrorism and the media and the resulting effects on art (Leonard Wilcox, “Terrorism and Art”), communication (Arnold Weinstein, “Rendering the Words of a Tribe”), and community (Frank Lentricchia, “Tales of the Electronic Tribe”). They were
beginning to read him as a segue between the modern and the postmodern — from the naturalist works of Zola and Balzac, to the postmodern theories of Baudrillard and Derrida. He was becoming an authority on the societal effects of media and terrorism. It comes as no surprise, then, that after 9/11, critics have turned to DeLillo for answers.

In the article, “Spectacular: Underworld and the Production of Terror,” Stephen Mexal examines DeLillo’s fiction to gain insight on (among other things) the relationship between the televisual image and the terror act, and whether the spectacularized (transformed into a copiously reproduced image) terror act alienates or promotes a sense of community among the public. He comes to the conclusion that although terrorism ostensibly seeks to alienate the victims, the result of spectacularized terror is a restoration of “the communitarian historical consciousness” (319). He argues that to meet “in the market” or “on the Internet” is “still to meet, to be not-isolated” (332), echoing Lentricchia’s notion that “[c]ommunities have to start somewhere, a community’s collective memory needs to have beginnings to recollect,” and that “[t]he era of the shopping mall, the supermarket, the fast-food restaurants, and the ritual family gatherings around the TV” (95) may very well be this new beginning. Ironically, Mexal uses the works of Guy Debord and Baudrillard, who, despite their disagreements, are fervent opponents of the trend toward this ‘new community,’ as theoretical support for the position that DeLillo’s fiction is a positive portrayal of this trend.

It is commendable that critics such as Lentricchia and Mexal manage to extrapolate a positive sense of progressivism from the often-bleak social commentary within DeLillo’s fiction. However, in drawing this conclusion, they misinterpret his irony. Mexal, for instance, misses the irony altogether in this passage from Underworld:
He [Richard Gilkey] made the call and turned on the TV, or vice versa, without the sound, his hand wound in a doubled hanky, and he never felt so easy talking to someone on the phone or face-to-face or man to woman as he felt that day talking to Sue Ann. ... He talked to her on the phone and made eye contact with the TV. This was the waking of the knowledge that he was real. (qtd. in Mexal 331)

He does recognize that the feeling of collectivity Gilkey experiences may be a “false collectivity” and that “it is, after all, one that is predicated on sadism and terror” (331). However, he continues to say that DeLillo “asks the reader to reconsider how we understand real and not-real” along with “collectivity.” He takes the mistaken perspective that the system of terror and its spectacularization is “mutually-contrived” with the intended goal of “overcom[ing] social isolation through the medium of television” rather than, say, perpetuating this isolation. For one thing, it is no coincidence that all of Gilkey’s senses involved in this conversation are either mediated electronically or absent. He does not just look at the TV, he makes “eye contact” with it, which is an impossibility and a wishful anthropomorphization of the medium. He makes the comparison of this mediated conversation with other non-mediated (electronically, that is) ones and notes his ineptitude with the latter and thus the dependency on the former for proficiency in communication. His hands are literally “wound” to compensate for the missing tactile stimuli of face-to-face communication. There is a constant reference to traditional communication in this passage, and an inherent nostalgia for its realness.
Furthermore, when Mexal argues that the spectacularization of terror restores the “communitarian historical consciousness” (319) that is lost in postmodern alienation, he uses Debord as theoretical support:

Once society has lost the community that myth was formerly able to ensure, it must inevitably lose all the reference points of a truly common language until such time as the divided character of an inactive community is superceded by the inauguration of a real historical community (qtd. in Mexal 319)

What Debord is discussing in this passage is the Marxist notion of the self-realization of the proletariat and the subsequent revolution. He was the founder of the Situationist movement, which advocated intersubjectivity to achieve this self-realization and to resituate itself into history. The reason why the proletariat is not situated in history in the first place is capitalist alienation, or the separation of man from his products and from nature. To Marx, man is productivity. Rather than being an abstract spirit apart from nature or a material object wholly defined by nature, he creates his own humanity through his appropriation of nature to fulfill his needs. Marx asserts that capitalism exploits man's labor by breaking this relationship between labor and nature and replacing it with capital. In other words, what gives man his very humanity is objectified and treated as a means of accruing capital rather than as an end in itself. This blatant exploitation is what Marx believes will end in the proletariat realizing the contradictions present in capitalism and resolving them through revolution.

Debord contributes to this theory by discussing a major adaptation of capitalism that Marx could not have foreseen: the spectacle. When Debord says that the spectacle is
“capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images” (34), he means that this force of human alienation and the worldview it nurtures can be transformed electronically into an image and projected through visual media. These images promote the accumulation of capital and create the desire to have “pseudo needs” fulfilled by products that are manufactured by labor that is no longer a direct appropriation of nature to fulfill basic needs. To Debord, when these basic needs are met, the rest of one’s waking hours should not be spent accruing capital, but engaging in creative endeavors and developing one’s own subjective existence. It is only on this level that humans as social beings can genuinely communicate and realize themselves; this is the only way that the revolution of the proletariat can occur. What Debord is certainly not advocating is the resituation of the proletariat in history through the spectacle. In fact, he explicitly warns against making this error:

The spectacle appears at once as a society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. Being isolated — and precisely for that reason — this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation. (3)

The spectacle merely appears to be a means of unification. He asserts that the spectacle does provide a common language and consciousness, but these are illusory and false. The consciousness is isolated from reality and the language is that of “generalized separation.” To Debord, spectacular unity is not a positive side effect, but an imposed unification, a replacement of the Marxist notion of society as inherent within man with one that is abstracted and projected onto man.
In arguing that the spectacularization of terror in fact intensifies postmodern alienation, I will incorporate the theories utilized by Mexal (Debord and Baudrillard) in addition to the work of Marshall McLuhan and Soren Kierkegaard, to analyze two of DeLillo’s pre-9/11 novels: *White Noise* and *Mao II*. In using the logic of McLuhan, I will assert that the spectacularization of terrorism through the medium of television renders the act part of the content of the medium. Therefore, when analyzing the sociopolitical consequences of the spectacularized act of terror “the medium is the message” (remembering, of course, that the real act in itself has its own repercussions for the loved ones of the victims). The question, then, arises as to what the ‘message’ of television is — and my answer is homogenization. As Kierkegaard observed in the nineteenth century, the press creates a public that is an “abstract phantom” which consists of “unreal individuals, who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization — and yet are held together as a whole” (38). Kierkegaard was only complaining about the newspaper circulating throughout Denmark, though. Television, on the other hand, expands this public to a global scale, and everyone under the thumb of its hegemony is “unite[d] [...] but only *in [their] separateness*” (Debord, 29). Consequently, this false unification, which Mexal misguidedely refers to as a restoration of “collectivism,” “a common language,” and “a communitarian consciousness,” I call homogeneity. This common language is nonverbal; it is that of image. It undermines the subjectivity inherent in language. Without subjectivity, the signifier becomes the signified — thus becoming an objective force of its own without the solid grounding of a material referent. Individual interpretation of the real is replaced with passive reception of the hyperreal (Baudrillard’s term), and the notion of a reality that is created by the sum of all individual perceptions (from the inside out) is replaced with
one that is created by the projection of one interpretation (from the outside in). The spectacularization of 9/11, then, is an especially salient example of the latter form of reality, where the media projects its interpretation of the event to the television audience and consequently homogenizes its interpretation of the event. In DeLillo’s awareness of this trend, he conveys his distaste by portraying the effects of spectacularization as regressive rather than progressive.

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*White Noise* is divided into three sections: “Waves and Radiation,” “The Airborne Toxic Event,” and “Dylarama.” The first section introduces the reader to the narrator, Jack Gladney, along with his family and colleagues. Jack is a college professor at the College-on-the-Hill who has pioneered the field of Hitler Studies in America. On campus, he surrounds himself with individuals who study American culture. He befriends one of these professors, Murray Jay Siskind, and spends time on and off campus discussing various aspects of American society. It is through Murray that the majority of the social commentary voices itself in the novel. The other major source of commentary — in this case, more existential than social — is Jack’s son, Heinrich, a precocious teenager from one of Jack’s previous marriages.

In “The Airborne Toxic Event,” a chemical spill releases a noxious cloud of gas and smoke that soon envelops Blacksmith. The professor and his family are forced to flee their home and quarantine themselves with the rest of the victims in a shelter outside of town. Throughout the disaster, the decisions they make, the opinions they hold, and even the symptoms they develop are influenced heavily by the media coverage. However, as one of
the victims laments, the radio is the only medium that covers it, and without television the victims struggle to find meaning in the event.

“Dylarama” focuses on Jack’s wife Babette’s use of the experimental drug Dylar and the affair she has with the project manager in order to obtain it. The purpose of this drug is to eliminate the fear of death, which haunts both Babette and Jack. As a side effect, though, Babette experiences potent memory loss, to the displeasure of her husband and daughter, Denise. Once he finds out about the affair, he begins to obsess over it — not only because of the betrayal and hurt pride, but also because of the lure of the drug. Jack eventually discovers the identity of the project manager and confronts Willie Mink only to discover that he is suffering from massive abuse of his own drug. Jack attempts to murder him, nonetheless, but he botches it, and ends up driving Mink to the hospital, instead.

The postmodern condition that DeLillo frames in *White Noise* is one that is characterized by simulation. The individuals within this condition are essentially separated from reality by the mediating force of simulation. Their knowledge of this phenomenon is fairly explicit, as is evinced by the SIMUVAC (Simulated Evacuation) worker who is helping to orchestrate a real evacuation in order to practice for the simulated one at a later date: “You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real. There’s a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that’s what this exercise is all about” (135). This act of ‘polishing’ the real is important to DeLillo in that it is the prime directive of the media and consequently the expectation of those who consume it. This expectation then leads to an integration of the philosophy of simulation into society to the point where the real is viewed as a raw material, of sorts, something that needs to be ‘polished’ or refined in order to make it presentable, or more specifically, *consumable*. 
The economic notion of the consumption of representations of the real has been noticed by DeLillo scholars in their analyses of his depiction of media response to disasters. One in particular, John Duvall, makes this observation in his analysis of *White Noise*: “As disaster becomes aestheticized, another boundary blurs, that between television news’ representation of violence and violence in film, creating a homogenous imagistic space available for consumption” (133). It is important to note that this desire or tendency to represent the real is not a sort of conspiracy against humanity by the media, but rather a reflection of the values capitalism has instilled in Western society. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord cautions against this very misallocation of responsibility: “The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as [...] a world view transformed into an objective force” (5). The world view that Debord refers to in this passage is, of course, that of capitalism, which gives primacy to exchange value over use value or any other form of intrinsic value. In other words, the motive behind this phenomenon is purely economic, but the effects extend into the realms of the personal and socio-political, nonetheless.

Jack’s friend Murray is highly aware of the economic factors underlying media spectacularization. He urges Jack and his students to “learn to look as children again. Root out content. Find the codes and messages” (55), which echoes the distinction McLuhan makes between form and content. According to Murray, because of the failure to look and listen as children, people have “forgotten how to collect data” (71). He continues to explain that “in the psychic sense a forest fire on TV is on a lower plane than a ten-second spot for
Automatic Dishwasher All. The commercial has deeper waves, deeper emanations. But we have reversed the relative significance of these things” (71).

In DeLillo’s fiction, this reversal of significance with respect to different facets of television carries over to reality. In the case of the SIMUVAC situation, Jack notices the effects of simulation on his community: “There were those who professed not to see the irony in their inaction. They’d taken part in the SIMUVAC exercise but were reluctant to flee now” (251). To them, the simulation is real, but the real event itself is not pertinent enough to deserve a response. They are entering a Baudrillardian world where the real becomes the hyperreal:

The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models — and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (Simulations 3)

Baudrillard goes beyond Debord and argues that the reality that the spectacle formerly mediated no longer exists. What used to be a representation of the real is now the closest one can get to reality. This claim is a bit extreme, to say the least. In all likelihood it is wrong. What may be more accurate is that the representations of reality through visual media in postmodern culture have become so pervasive that they have developed a reality of their own. Reality obviously exists, but attitudes toward it have changed. For example,
when Jack and Murray go to see the most photographed barn in America, Murray discovers
the aura of spectacularization and juxtaposes it to the reality it envelops:

“What was the barn like before it was photographed?” he [Murray] said.
“What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it
similar to other barns? We can’t answer these questions because we’ve read
the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can’t get outside the
aura. We’re part of the aura. We’re here, we’re now.” (20)

Viewed metaphorically, the barn is the real, and the signs and the photography are the
spectacularization of the real. They cannot view the barn critically because they have seen
it in its pre-packaged-with-meaning form. They “can’t get outside the aura.” They are
captured in the moment and the momentum of the spectacle. The people in this audience,
or this aura, are all on an equal plane in that they are unable to see the real. They are in a
community of people who share the same interpretation of the barn: it is the most
photographed barn in America, famous for the sheer fact of its fame. Even Murray, being
conscious of the spectacularization of the barn, understands that he still cannot get outside
of the aura it creates. There is an implication of confinement here, of being trapped in a
web of illusion, where simply being aware of the web is not enough to escape it. Now, one
could ask why it matters that Murray cannot escape it. After all, these people have all come
together to view what would only have been a plain old barn without the spectacle
surrounding it. This is where homogenization enters into the picture. The audience viewing
the barn is an assumedly disparate group of individuals, each with their own opinions and
perspectives. On the one hand, the spectacle of the barn allows this disparate group to find
a common ground and be unified in their identical perception and interpretation of it. The
cost of this unification, though, is the silencing of the very *disparateness* that makes this group interesting. As McLuhan observes in a different context:

> If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness? (61)

The reality of the barn is not created from the sum of the individual perceptions, but created by “a single consciousness” and projected onto the group. Their individual perceptions and opinions are therefore no longer valued; under the guise of transcendence, they are actually being translated into ‘a more suitable form’ for consumption, and by necessity, their diversity is rendered irrelevant.

This mistrust in human subjectivity is evinced in the extended scene with Jack and his son, Heinrich. In the scene, they are arguing over whether or not it is raining. Jack sees the raindrops on the windshield, but Heinrich remains obstinate because the radio says otherwise:

> “It's going to rain tonight.”
> “It's raining now,” I said.
> “The radio said tonight.” (28)

The cause of the argument itself is fairly banal, but it brings out a much deeper and more serious issue, that of human obsolescence:

> “Look at the windshield,” I said. “Is that rain or isn’t it?”
> I'm only telling you what they said.”
“Just because it’s on the radio doesn’t mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses.” (29)

Heinrich views humanity as an outmoded form of technology whose senses are “wrong a lot more often than they are right” (29). This is a fair observation that can be made without any moral intent. However, Heinrich continues to say that it has been “proved in the laboratory” (29). This statement implies a self-inflicted aspect of human obsolescence. It is a sign that the view of human subjectivity as presented by the spectacle is not only being projected onto humanity, but being adopted and proliferated by real individuals.

Eventually, Jack coaxes him into answering the question by positing a scenario where a man is holding a gun to his head. Heinrich answers:

“What truth does he want? Does he want the truth of someone travelling at almost the speed of light in another galaxy? Does he want the truth of someone in orbit around a neutron star? Maybe if these people could see us through a telescope we might look like we were two feet two inches tall and it might be raining yesterday instead of today.” (29-30)

With this response, Heinrich moves from the distrust of individual human senses to the inconsistencies of differing perspectives. He is ridiculing the subjectivity of the human experience and expressing a desire for one objective truth. The genius of these passages lies in the fact that DeLillo is giving this serious social commentary through the guise of a teenager just being disagreeable with his father. This is no soliloquy from the sympathetic protagonist; it is a teenage boy wanting desperately to undermine his father. Nonetheless, his outlook would be unnerving to those who celebrate this subjectivity.
Critics like Mexal adopt the point of view of Heinrich when they express their disdain for human subjectivity: “The real, because of its singularity, its resistance to documentation, is in fact more subject to misrepresentation and distortion […]” (Mexal 326). As if in response to this sentiment, Murray opines, “[t]he family is strongest where objective reality is most likely to be misinterpreted” (85). Nonetheless, Mexal views the simulation of the real as an “insignificant phenomenon” because, “to meet in the market or to meet on the Internet is, under [Baudrillard’s] logic, still to meet, to be not-isolated” (332). The logic to which he is referring is found in Baudrillard’s *Ecstasy of Communication*, which he cites:

> Advertising in its new dimension invades everything as public space... disappears. It realizes, or if one prefers, materializes in all its obscenity [emphasis added]; it monopolizes public life in its exhibition” (*Ecstasy* 129; quoted in: Mexal 332).

What Mexal is ignoring is Baudrillard’s notion of the obscenity of this condition: “Ecstasy is all functions abolished into one dimension, the dimension of communication. All events, all spaces, all memories are abolished in the sole dimension of information: this is obscene” (*Ecstasy* 28). Baudrillard is not writing to promote advertisement through information technology and the apparent community it creates. He seeks to provoke resistance against the trend, although he adopts a fatalist attitude in his presentation.

If technology seeks to expose the weaknesses of human subjectivity, then what is to become of the great arbiter of such experience, language? McLuhan speculates that it, too, will become obsolete:
Electric technology does not need words any more than the digital computer needs numbers. Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatever. Such a state of collective awareness may have been the preverbal condition of men. [...] The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity [emphasis added]. The next logical step would seem to be, not to translate, but to by-pass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness which might be very like the collective unconscious dreamt of by Bergson. (80)

From this perspective, language could be seen as an arbiter of human subjectivity, ergo a hindrance to universal objectivity. If one is a proponent, then, of unification achieved through image communication, it follows that one must be an opponent of verbal language, because that is what allows subjectivity to persist. It begins to appear absurd that DeLillo, a fiction writer, could possibly support the usurpation of language by image. As Duvall notes, it is disturbing; it is the realization of “the tv man’s dream of unmediated mediation” (146), which, in the case of Mink in White Noise, is “revealed as postmodernity’s schizophrenic nightmare” (146). He has lost touch with the subjectivity of language and instead, “experiences the mediation of Jack’s language as pure material signifier — immediate and real” (146).

Although Mao II is narrated by many characters, it essentially revolves around Bill Gray, a reclusive novelist working endlessly on a failed project, and his attempted return into the public sphere. The first step in this return is when the photographer, Brita Nilsson, finds Bill and sets up a photo shoot at his home. Bill reveals to Brita his anxiety toward
being documented in this manner; he asserts that "[a] portrait doesn’t begin to mean anything until the subject is dead" (42). He also discusses with her (and later with George Haddad, the terrorist sympathizer) his theory about the obsolescence of novelists. He feels that they have been replaced as instruments of social commentary and change by terrorists, who succeed in their communication through violent, spectacular images.

In *Mao II*, DeLillo expresses his unease toward the precarious situation of human language through the insecurity of the characters in their own narrations. For example, there are numerous instances where the narrator is searching for words such as, “What is it called, writhing?” (33), “What is the word that sounds like it means calm and assured but actually means you are baffled? They looked nonplussed” (83), or “What is the word, dispersed?” (177). Karen, who watches television with the sound off, has a particular difficulty with language: “Karen tried to think of the word, chadors, […]” (192). For her, the gap of understanding between subjective meaning and signifier becomes a chasm: “Baseball,” she says, using the word to sum up a hundred happy abstractions, themes that flare to life in the crowd shout and diamond symmetry, in the details of a dusty slide” (8-9). Contrary to Mink in *White Noise*, Karen does not experience language as “pure material signifier,” but rather seems to distance herself from language as a mode of communication altogether:

She was watching the world news of the day. On any given day it was mainly the film footage she wanted to see and she didn’t mind watching without sound. It was interesting how you could make up the news as you went along by sticking to picture only. (32)
In this passage, Karen is explicit about her apathy toward sound paired with image communication. She claims that she “make[s] up the news” while she watches, but the question remains as to whether she is actually forming a subjective interpretation in her head or simply receiving what Debord would call the “objective force” (5) of a spectacular projection.

While it may seem intuitive to assume that pairing language with even a spectacularized image would add subjectivity, given the circumstances of Mink in *White Noise*, DeLillo suggests that this pairing distorts language into something more objective. As the title of the novel invokes, “white noise” is what language has become through the medium of television, permeating and mutating the minds of the population like the physical “waves and radiation” that Murray identifies: “The sooner we forget these spills [televised catastrophes], the sooner we can come to grips with the real issue” (164), the real issue being, “the kind of radiation that surrounds us every day. Your radio, your TV, your microwave oven, your power lines just outside the door, your radar speed-trap on the highway “(164). Murray reveals to the reader how television adopts language and converts it to a type of radiation with similar objective properties as the physical radiation from electric devices. With this comparison in mind, it becomes clearer how Mink, as a product of image consumption who has reached his maximum potential, can experience language as “pure material signifier.”

Heinrich, even though he has not reached the point of confusing subjectivity for objectivity, expresses the desire for objectivity and a frustration with language for not providing it: “Is there such a thing as now? ‘Now’ comes and goes as soon as you say it. How can I say it’s raining now if your so-called ‘now’ becomes ‘then’ as soon as I say it?” He
even views time itself as a subjective experience that exists “[o]nly in our verbs” (30). As for Jack, despite the fact that he disagrees with his son in this argument, admits, “Grammar and syntax. The man [Hitler] may have felt himself imprisoned in more ways than one” (38). Both of these individuals view language as an obstruction, whether it is expressing one’s own subjectivity or being able to experience objectivity.

How does this discussion of subjectivity and objectivity in DeLillo’s fiction relate to the spectacularization of 9/11? In the second section of White Noise, “The Airborne Toxic Event,” DeLillo makes an interesting commentary on media response to disaster. Throughout the event, Jack notices how his family experiences the same unmediated mediation as he later discovers with Mink. When they hear on the radio the symptoms they are supposed to develop from exposure to the toxic cloud, his wife and daughters develop those symptoms. One medium that is notably absent from the Airborne Toxic Event, though, is television.

The fact that the event is not televised infuriates many of the victims, because it leaves their suffering bereft of meaning. Even prior to the Toxic Event, Jack learns of this outlook from his daughter, Bee, who expresses her sympathies for the survivors of a plane crash:

“Where’s the media?” she said.

“There is no media in Iron City.”

“They went through all that for nothing?” (96)

From Bee’s perspective, then, the lessons learned, the stories told, the overall subjective experience — is “nothing.” The experience of the plane crash survivors is raw, unpolished reality doomed to insignificance without the spectacularization of the media. Bee is not
equipped to perceive and procure meaning from a real event, and, judging from Jack’s
response to the Toxic Event, neither is he:

“This things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set
up in such a way that it’s the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main
impact of natural and man made disasters[...] I’m a college professor. Did you
ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of
those TV floods?” (114)

In this passage, Jack reveals his TV-conditioned interpretation of disasters. The disasters
that he had previously seen on television were all imbued with the idea that they only
happened to others. As a member of the television audience, he expects to be separated
from real disasters. His schema has been shattered, because it has been formed by the
perception of disasters, not as disasters in themselves, but as a validation of his position
within Western society. The spectacle, in its constant validation of capitalistic values, has as
a side effect distorted Jack’s perception, interpretation, and expectation of reality.

In the absence of television news, Jack begins to notice an interesting change in
behavior among the quarantined victims:

The toxic event had released a spirit of imagination. People spun tales, others
listened spellbound. There was a growing respect for the vivid rumor, the
most chilling tale. We were no closer to believing or disbelieving a given
story than we had been earlier. But there was a greater appreciation now. We
began to marvel at our own ability to manufacture awe. (147)

Without television, the victims are forced to procure their own meaning from the Toxic
Event. As a result, they begin to develop a respect for their own “vivid rumor[s]” and
“chilling tale[s].” It is a “growing respect” because their subjective opinions and perceptions have hitherto been irrelevant. Judging by Jack’s apathy toward the credibility of the individual narratives, what does become irrelevant is the need for one objective truth. Heinrich, the empiricist in the crowd, finds a platform for providing whatever objective information he can in the absence of the media. The difference between his objectivity and that of the media, though, is that his lecture is limited to facts about chemistry. He recognizes his own subjectivity and sticks to facts, which are outside of him and objective in their own right. In other words, objectivity is not problematic in itself; it is when subjectivity is portrayed as objectivity that the issue of homogenization arises. Objectivity is universal, so when the media projects its subjective interpretation of a disaster on television, it renders its subjectivity universal within the audience. The media does not simply provide the facts; it projects an attitude and a response to the facts. It renders its audience unified, or rather homogenized — not by an objective truth, but by a subjective pseudo-truth.

In *Mao II*, Bill Gray interviews the terrorist sympathizer, George Haddad, in order to discover the whereabouts of Abu Rashid in Beirut. The conversation quickly broadens in scope, though, to justifications for terrorism and the need for a strong authority figure in times of chaos:

> In societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act.
> There’s too much everything, more things and messages and meaning than we can use in ten thousand lifetimes. Inertia-hysteria. Is history possible? Is anyone serious? Who do we take seriously? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. Everything else is absorbed and
processed and incorporated. Give him a dollar, put him in a TV commercial. Only the terrorist stands outside. The culture hasn’t figured out how to assimilate him. It’s confusing when they kill the innocent. But this is precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands. The way they determine how we see them. The way they dominate the rush of endless streaming images. (157-58)

It is difficult to disagree with any of the points he makes about Western society. Amidst his litany, though, he is noticeably brief with respect to the actual method of terrorism: the targeting of innocent civilians. The best he can do is admit that it is “confusing.” He understands that terrorists share the same outlook on America as many non-violent social theorists and novelists. The problem, though, is that these other forms of criticism have been “absorbed and processed and incorporated;” they have been evaluated solely for their market potential (commodified), and have been sterilized of their critical efficacy. The terrorists, however, have not been sterilized. They have found the flesh through which to fight their fleshless enemy. Their actions are, of course, immoral, but DeLillo makes the interesting discovery that the enemy of the terrorists may be the same enemy as their victims — the spectacle. Not only are the victims dehumanized by the worldview of their own society, but also by those who seek to change it.

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As Lentricchia correctly observes, there is a message in DeLillo’s fiction. Not only does he critique postmodern America, but he also critiques the act of critiquing itself. Similarly to how Marx and Kierkegaard contend with their predecessor, Hegel, DeLillo questions the notion that one can step outside of one’s own historical context to criticize it.
Jack pretends that he is above the society in which he exists, but it has, nonetheless, permeated his thought process the same as anyone else. In this respect, Lentricchia is not wrong. He is only suggesting that we have patience and give the postmodern condition the necessary time to redefine our sense of community. When he applies this passive acceptance of the spectacle and the false sense of community it creates to DeLillo’s fiction, though, it becomes problematic. Although his intention is to open the minds of his academic audience, he is actually silencing his own critical intuition, and instead advocating the passivity that the spectacle already instills into society.

Yes, DeLillo does not directly tell the reader what to do and think, so it is safe to say that he does not take a militant stance against the spectacle. This does not mean, though, that he is by default advocating passivity. He is, after all, going to great lengths to illustrate how the media projects opinions and interpretations of reality rather than reality itself. He shows the effects of the passive reception of these projections on individuals, who exhibit blatant lapses in judgment and deficits in critical thinking. Even Jack, who falsely views himself as in a position to critique society from the outside, actually forms this worldview from the portrayal of his profession on television. As for Bill in Mao II, he realizes his obsolescence as an instrument of social change, not because he lacks the violent behavior necessary to get public attention, but because the society to whom he writes lacks the critical thinking ability and intellectual respect necessary to glean any meaning from it or even care that his work exists. This social condition is the problem that DeLillo confronts. He illustrates how these deficits are exacerbated by a society defined and mediated by spectacle. Through the situational irony of the discrepancy between Jack’s circumstances and his pretentions about them, and through Bill’s observation of novelists being replaced
by terrorists as instruments of social change, DeLillo exhibits the critical self-reflection that he wishes to see from others in his own society. As a social critic, DeLillo warns against the pretention of being immune to the effects of the societal structure in which one lives. As a novelist, he is aware of the causes and the effects of the diminishing social impact of his medium, at both a personal and social level. If there is a moral here, it is that these traits should not be exceptional; he should not be among some elite group of critical thinkers. Instead, these should be basic tenets of human existence, not to be supplanted by the distractions of televisual spectacle.
References


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