FOUND IN THE CROWD:
DELILLO’S COLLECTIVE SUBJECT

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ABSTRACT

Throughout his career, Don DeLillo frequently returns to representations of gathered crowds, yet DeLillo’s crowd scenes are nowhere so conspicuous as in his two midcareer texts, *Mao II* and the novella that immediately follows it, “Pafko at the Wall.” In these texts, DeLillo depicts the experience of the crowd as something traumatic, ecstatic, and just beyond the capacity of language. In so doing, he articulates the threat of the dissolution of the individual subject seated in language, as well as the simultaneous promise of a collective subject forming in its stead. This collective subject eludes signification, recognizing itself instead primarily through acts of repetition, as in chants and images of a leader. Though the influence of media in DeLillo’s texts may serve to contain the dread of the crowd, nevertheless the nature of this collective subject must call into question the particular medium in which DeLillo’s crowds confront the reader—the novel. Using the crowd as his focal point, DeLillo thus examines the position of the contemporary American novelist. In his characters Bill Gray and Russ Hodges, he offers the reader two diametrically opposite understandings of the writer’s relationship to the crowd: in one, the perfectly autonomous individual set apart; in the other, the means through which many voices may be spoken by one. Between these two impossible poles, DeLillo demarcates the space that the novelist must occupy—the nebulous boundary line between the individual and the collective, at once both and neither.
A player hits the ball into the stands. Forty people go after the ball, all trying to grab it … The job of the writer is not to describe the thoughts of an adulterous woman standing at the window watching the rain streak the glass. The writer should understand those forty people trying to get the baseball, understand the other ten or twenty thousand people who leave the stadium when the game is over.

—Don DeLillo
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Introduction

Imagine for a moment the sight of a crowd. Its shape gathers before you, dozens of meters distant, discernible yet somehow alien. Amoebic and many-limbed, a vast bouquet of heads and knees and outstretched hands, this crowd collects bodies like sediment. As if in great intakes of breath it draws others in—more people join now, and soon many more. If only you relax your gaze the boundaries between them start to blur and weaken—or appear to, at least. Like iterations taken from a single template, the members of the crowd begin to look the same. And listen: that buzz of a thousand scattered noises, that mingling of grunts and rustlings, that too begins to change as the crowd gets denser. Chants or handclaps, even the most meaningless of sounds—in repetition, they become something more: a single voice made of many. At once unsettling and fascinating in equal measure, the crowd continues to grow.

This is Don DeLillo’s crowd. Alternately threatening and promising, the phenomenon of the gathered crowd appears time and again in DeLillo’s novels, spanning the breadth of his prolific career in writing fiction. In his first novel *Americana* (1971) the crowd shoulders its way toward Grand Central, a Manhattan deluge in the fading daylight of rush hour; over a decade later it panics amidst the choked streets of a small college town, impelled into exodus by the Airborne Toxic Event in *White Noise* (1985); still later in his career it returns to Manhattan in the violent riots that seize the borough briefly in *Cosmopolis* (2003). Indeed, scenes of crowds appear so frequently in DeLillo’s fictions that his crowd has become so familiar in its features, so recognizable that it has become almost a character in its own right. Across the span of his novels,

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1 The epigraph that leads this thesis is extracted from an interview with Don DeLillo. It may be found in *Conversations with Don DeLillo* (University of Mississippi Press, 2005) 110.
across the smear of decades, DeLillo’s crowd insists.

Nowhere, however, does DeLillo turn his attention more closely upon the character of the crowd and its relationship to the individual observing it than he does in *Mao II* (1991) and the novella that directly follows it, “Pafko at the Wall” (1992). These texts are congested with crowds. In both the novel and novella—the latter of which is later renamed and affixed to *Underworld* as a prologue—these crowds play a pivotal role, afforded more scenes than any other single character in the texts and exercising a measure of agency and power that alarms those characters who observe it from without. Seen on television at Tiananmen Square and Sheffield Stadium, captured in photographs in far-flung refugee camps, and witnessed in person at both Yankee Stadium and the Polo Grounds, these crowds do not simply serve as a backdrop before which the plots of the two texts unfold. They function as the very collective counterweight to the claims of the individual asserted by characters like Bill Gray, the reclusive novelist of *Mao II*.

Yet DeLillo’s admirers and critics alike are all too quick to dismiss the crowd in *Mao II* and the prologue to *Underworld* as so much background noise—or, worse yet, as so much detritus that must be cleared before getting to the real issues at hand. Most often the questions in these texts considered to be real issues—the study of which, apparently, calls for the neglect of the crowd—tend to address either the tenuous position of the coherent, individual subject in the United States of the late twentieth century or DeLillo’s apparent anxiety over the novelist’s diminishing influence in this era. What’s more, DeLillo’s critics invariably keep *Mao II* and “Pafko” separate in their analyses, preserving a distinction between them and pairing the latter

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3 The term “crowd” shall be defined, for the purposes of this paper, as massive gatherings of people, present together at once and assembled according to a common goal or common characteristic.
instead with the tome *Underworld* to which it would be eventually attached. My intention in this thesis is not to dispute the claim that the position of the subject and the anxieties of the novelist feature prominently in these texts. Rather, I will argue that a thorough exploration of DeLillo’s crowd in fact serves to further an understanding of his conceptions of the individual and the novelist—as well as the novelist and the media that surround him—and that considering *Mao II* in conjunction with “Pafko” affords a telling glimpse of the highly ambivalent relationship between crowd and individual.

The trajectory of my thesis shall begin, as it must, with a thorough investigation into the character of the crowds themselves in both texts. Phrased in terms befitting both trauma and ecstasy, the experiences of those characters witnessing the crowd—or acting as part of it—persistently elude the systems of signification by which a person comes to conceive of himself as an individual. Impossible to name, existent beyond the bounds of language, the experience of the crowd thus threatens the dissolution of the individual subject. At the same time, the crowd also promises in its place the formation of a new kind of subjectivity, one separate from the logic of the individual seated in language. Forged in acts of repetition, as in chants or images of a leader, DeLillo’s crowd attains briefly the status of a collective subject.

If this collective subject poses a threat to the individual who encounters it, there exist also means by which the worst of the crowd’s dread and awe may be curtailed. In *Mao II*, these means are the media that capture and convey the crowd to viewers sitting at home. Seen on television or glimpsed in photographs, the crowd is domesticated by frames and anchored by

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4 For examples of the tendency to keep these two texts separate, one might turn to some of the most recent works of scholarship on DeLillo: David Cowart, *The Physics of Language* (University of Georgia Press, 2002); Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); and Randy
captions—rendered less a subject than an object suitable for easy consumption. It is this
defensive mechanism, this process wielded by the wary spectator, that I will examine in the
second section of this thesis.

However DeLillo’s characters may encounter the crowd, of course, his reader encounters
his crowd in a very specific medium—a novel. Given this fact, the final half of this thesis
addresses a vitally important question: what exactly is the novelist’s relationship to the crowd?
How can a writer hope to use a system of signification to represent adequately an experience that
by nature escapes it? Rather than resolve the problem directly, DeLillo instead offers in his texts
two impossible alternatives: Bill Gray, the aspirant to authorial control who seeks to influence
the crowd as an object, and Russ Hodges, the radio broadcaster who fleetingly channels into one
the many voices of the crowd around him. In Bill, we find the failing ideal of the autonomous
individual, of the singular figure set apart from the madding crowd. In Russ, we find the
opposite—the mediator of voices and texts, who for one moment manages to express the
inarticulable experience of the crowd. As we shall eventually see, these two characters come to
constitute the two impossible poles that delimit the position of the novelist in relation to the
crowd that he writes.

Between these two figures, and amid myriad crowd scenes, Don DeLillo seeks to map the
uncertain position of the American novelist in the late twentieth century. Somewhere between
the collective and the purely individual, the novelist exists in the nebulous, uncomfortable
boundary at the limits of the individual subject, flirting at once with dissolution and coalescence.
The writer is both the individual and the crowd, and he is neither.

Laist, *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo’s Novels* (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.,
2010).
The Who in the Holler:  
The Crowd As Collective Subject

In the opening moments of *Mao II*, in the midst of the grand spectacle taking shape on the grass and dirt of Yankee Stadium, it might be easy for the reader to miss two simple questions. As he stares down upon the mass-wedding of the members of the Unification Church, probing the processing crowd through the lenses of his binoculars, distraught father Rodge asks, “Who the hell thought it up? What does it mean?” Addressed to his wife, Rodge’s questions emerge out of his own desperate unease in the presence of the crowd below him. His wife does not answer him, and the subject changes quickly—yet these questions linger. Indeed, they resound throughout the rest of the novel, for in them may be heard the voice of Don DeLillo himself, ventriloquizing his own uneasy fascination with the phenomenon of the crowd. He returns time and time again to the crowd. In each successive representation DeLillo seeks his own answers to variations on Rodge’s questions: exactly how is one to conceive of the crowd’s collective “who,” and what does it mean to say that this collective subjectivity is different from that of the individual? In his extensive exploration, DeLillo borrows concepts best seen in the works of Jacques Lacan and Elias Canetti in order to develop a representation of the crowd that is distinctively his own. DeLillo’s crowd deploys repetition—either aurally, with the chant, or visually, in the image of its leader—in order to bring about the momentary dissolution of the individual subject and to replace it with the new, collective subjectivity of the crowd. Here, in this spontaneous dissolution and reconstitution—both achieved in the same process of repetition—the dread and the promise of the crowd entwine inextricably into one.

Throughout his novel DeLillo associates two fundamental features with the appearance of
the crowd: its emergence out of a process of repetition, and the utter, traumatic strangeness of the thing itself—both experienced from within the crowd and witnessed from without. And in fact, this repetition and the alien character of the crowd it brings about are often intimately linked. For evidence of this one need not look further than the prologue that opens the novel. Faced with the spectacle of a mass-wedding in Yankee Stadium, watching helplessly from the stands as thirteen thousand young grooms and brides march together toward the infield and toward matrimony, Rodge seeks to form an appropriate response to what he sees before him: “There is a strangeness down there that he never thought he’d see in a ballpark. They take a time-honored event and repeat it, repeat it, repeat it until something new enters the world.”

The Moonies filling the playing surface—the members of Master Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church—congeal before him into a swollen collection of humanity, “one body now, an undifferentiated mass, and this makes him uneasy.” Though he may be the father of one of those Moonies processing beneath him, Rodge finds himself relegated to the role of bystander as his daughter becomes a mere constituent atom of this new thing that has entered the world. In its presence, Rodge grapples with his conclusion, “Here is the drama of mechanical routine played out with living figures. It knocks him back in awe, the loss of scale and intimacy, the way love and sex are multiplied out, the numbers and the shaped crowd. This really scares him, a mass of people turned into a sculptured object. It is like a toy with thirteen thousand parts, just tooting along, an innocent and menacing thing.”

Perhaps the clearest source of his fear lies in his utter unfamiliarity with the process being

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enacted before him, a process so alien to his experience that it eludes his every attempt to name it. Early in his encounter with the crowd, Rodge makes a concession: “‘Crowd’ is not the right word. He doesn’t know what to call them.”9 Placed so soon in the scene, this statement carries the bearing of a disclaimer: the word that is to be used to describe the mass of people circled by the stadium’s bleachers, from this point forth, is to be put under erasure by DeLillo’s reader. Whatever name the crowd receives, this signifier operates less as identification than as defensive gesture, a loose-fitting lasso that allows the crowd to remain legible in the text even as it concedes its inadequacy to the task of taming it. This inadequacy is rendered starkly for the reader as Rodge squirms in his seat and “works his glasses across the mass, the crowd, the movement, the membership, the flock, the following,” clearly unable to settle on the right word for what he seeks to frame within the sightlines of his binoculars.10 Rodge flails for footholds, sliding metonymically from one signifier to the next without ever finding satisfaction, still left bereft of the proper instrument to name and organize his experience. This much at least is clear—but why does Rodge find this inadequacy of the signifier so traumatizing?

For an answer to this question, it will be helpful here to make recourse briefly to Jacques Lacan’s formulation of the subject. According to this formulation, the subject is an individuated psychic mechanism seated in language. One knows oneself and recognizes one’s relationship to the wider world only through the complex sets of signifiers that comprise and help structure the symbolic order—the field that at once mediates one’s relations with other subjects and subjects one to the Other, the designation Lacan posits for language and law perceived as a radical alterity. “The subject is born,” Lacan claims, “in so far as the signifier emerges in the field of the

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Other. But, by this very fact, this subject—which was previously nothing if not a subject coming into being—solidifies into a signifier. “\(^{11}\) With one’s entry into the symbolic order, one assumes the position supplied for one within the order—the first-person singular, best legible in English as the signifier \(I\), that makes the subject legible to itself, to others, and to the law. The formation of the subject, then, is coincident with subjection to language; as subjects, Rodge and others are, simultaneously, always signifiers too—and as such they are profoundly dependent upon the reliable operation of signification for a stable sense of self.

The trouble is, with this origin of the subject in language comes also a fundamental exclusion: there remain experiences and desires that one cannot acknowledge, let alone recognize in language, a bothersome remainder that resists assimilation into the symbolic order. Lacan locates this remainder in a category that he terms the real, a place not simply rendered dark by the incapacity of signifiers to represent it but actually produced by this very incapacity. Much like an empty space that does not exist until a clay vase is sculpted around it, the dark matter of the real is fashioned only with the fashioning of the signifier, with the subject’s entry into the symbolic. \(^{12}\) Yet this is an imperfect analogy—for, unlike the emptiness at the heart of the vase, the real is not so easy to pass one’s hand through. Impossible to avoid and impossible to express, the real exists as the hard kernel of our experience, having “presented itself in the form of that which is \textit{unassimilable} in it—in the form of the trauma, determining all that follows, and imposing on it an apparently accidental origin.” \(^{13}\) The trauma of the subject’s encounter with the real lies at least partly in the fact that it hints at a space beyond the signifier, an area of life that

\(^{13}\) Lacan, \textit{Four Fundamental Concepts} 55.
language dares not to reach if only because it cannot. And if there is a limit to the potential of the
signifier, then there is a limit, too, to the sense of oneself as an individual subject derived partly
from the stability of the signifier, I. The encounter with the real disturbs to the extent that it
threatens implicitly the dissolution of the self.

Interestingly, like DeLillo describing the crowd, Lacan connects this trauma of the failing
signifier with a process of repetition. Though the real—like the crowd before Rodge—may be
experienced as utterly alien to a subject who cannot fully grasp it in language, nevertheless it
remains very much a part of the life of that subject. Since the exclusion of the real is coincident
with the subject’s origin, the experience of the real functions as a fundamental part of the
subject’s make-up, the persistent shadow of the shapes one recognizes. As Slavoj Žižek notes
regarding the real, “One cannot attain it, but one also cannot escape it.”14 What results, then, is a
relationship between the subject and the traumatic real that is not unlike the orbit of a star round
a black hole: the repetitive circling around an ominous space that is only detectable by its effects
and its implicit threat of dissolution. Lacan borrows two terms from Aristotle, *tuché* and
*automaton*, in order to describe this process of return, explaining that “the *tuché*...[is] the
encounter with the real. The real is beyond the *automaton*, the return, the coming-back.”15 The
subject must repeat its return to the site that spells its own undoing, and yet this site can only be
recognized indirectly—the encounter, the *tuché*, “is essentially the missed encounter,” for the
very reason that it is so traumatic: it defies the signification that structures subjectivity.16 At once
alien, dreadful, and beyond words, the *tuché* returns in a process of repetition that the individual
subject is incapable of controlling.

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The important thing to note, for the purposes of this thesis, is the startling similarity in terms between Lacan’s return of the real and DeLillo’s representation of the crowd—both of which are characterized by trauma, repetition, and the fundamental failure of the signifier. Yet DeLillo is not the only author to describe the crowd in such a manner: Elias Canetti’s seminal study of crowd dynamics, *Crowds and Power*, opens with a claim that echoes much of what has been noted here already: “There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown,” Canetti declares in his first sentence. “He wants to see what is reaching towards him, and to be able to recognize or at least classify it.”\(^{17}\) Much like DeLillo’s Rodge and Lacan’s subject, the most pressing threat that confronts one is not so much bodily harm or verbal insult, but rather the unclassifiability of the threat itself. Unknown, unnamed, the threat of the touch of others eludes every attempt made by the individual to domesticate it as something familiar, and it is here that the trauma promised by the crowd resides—only in the midst of the crowd does one encounter the excess of touch. And it is here too, in this moment of excess, that the boundaries of the individual subject are dissolved, that “distinctions are thrown off and all feel *equal*. In that density, where there is scarcely any space between, and body presses against body, each man is as near the other as he is to himself.”\(^{18}\) Although Lacan and Canetti worked in different fields of study, examining different objects and employing different terminologies—Lacan being a psychoanalyst, and Canetti being a fiction writer dabbling in anthropology—their assessments nevertheless bear a striking resemblance to one another. This holds true right down to the words they use to designate the trauma encountered by the subject: though translated from ancient Greek roughly as “fate,” *tuché* shares a metonymic intimacy with another word in Lacan’s native


French—*touché*, or “touch.” Lacan’s encounter with the real is thus the unwelcome touch of fate, the encroachment by an invasive and alien other beyond one’s control and capacity to classify. This is not a far cry from the touch explained by Canetti, and both theorists phrase the unease at being “touched” as a feature innate to the subject—a dread that traces its start to the very origins of the individual subject: or, as Canetti writes, “We are dealing here with a human propensity as deep-seated as it is alert and insidious; something which never leaves a man when he has once established the boundaries of his personality.”  

In the *tuché* and the touch of the crowd, these boundaries waver, weakened, the dissolution of the subject lurking imminent in the unspoken darkness.  

Unlike Lacan, however, Canetti also opens the possibility for a subjectivity that exceeds the individual, positing the existence of a collective sense of self shared, if only briefly, by the members of the crowd. For Canetti, the dread of the individual outside of the crowd looking in—the position occupied by Rodge in DeLillo’s prologue—quickly becomes an ecstasy of density once one has joined its mass. Within the crowd, “a head is a head, an arm is an arm, and differences between individual heads and arms are irrelevant… It can never feel too dense. Nothing must stand between its parts or divide them; everything must be the crowd itself.”  

With the dissolution of the individual subject, the prospect that otherwise roils one’s subterranean dread, comes also the possibility of something more positive: the promise of momentary deindividuation—a replacement of the boundaries that define individual subjects, with seams that enable the spontaneous formation of a collective subjectivity. Elias Canetti does not phrase this collective subjectivity in terms of language, instead applying the rest of his work

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18 Canetti, 18. 
19 Canetti, 15.
to an examination of the common behaviors observed in crowds and their relationship to political power. However, he does open the door to a potential exploration of how this collective subjectivity may look—an opportunity that DeLillo seizes in *Mao II*, over a quarter-century later.

Unlike Canetti, DeLillo foregrounds language—much as Lacan does. Indeed, from a certain angle, the experience of the crowd and the return of the real may be perceived as identical. After all, as we have seen thus far, both DeLillo’s crowd and Lacan’s return are couched in terms of their repetition, their resistance to signification, and the unspoken threat these pose for the stable composition the individual subject. Even when viewed from within—from the perspective of Karen, Rodge’s daughter and member of the Moonie mass below him—the crowd undermines the stable, individual subject, doing so by dissolving the boundaries of the signifier: Karen and her fellow brides and grooms “all feel the same, young people from fifty countries, immunized against the language of self. They are forgetting who they are under their clothes, leaving behind all the small banes and body woes… All gone now. They stand and chant, fortified by the blood of numbers.”

21 DeLillo phrases this carefully, tying the annihilation of the individual self to the failure of the signifier that represents it—if the “language of self” that allows the Moonies to conceive themselves as distinct melts away, their very selves melt away with it. This momentary annihilation of the individual subject would seem the conclusive result of a spectacular collision with the hard kernel of the real. But the reader would be remiss to leave the matter there—like Canetti’s crowd, another conception of self bubbles up to take the place of the individual subject. Sounded in the chant led from the infield, and evident in their identical clothing, a collective subject rises from the loam of the collected individuals. In fact, it

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20 Canetti, 29.
is in the process of repetition, the very process that helps disintegrate the individual, that this collective subject takes its recognizable form. Here and elsewhere throughout DeLillo’s novel, the repetition of the chant and of the image of the leader become the aural and visual markers by which the shape of the new, collective subject is defined; through either of these two repetitions—and sometimes through both—the crowd forges floating signifiers of its own, spontaneous challenges to the space set out by the singular I. In the chant and the leader’s image, the crowd constructs a new language within which to position itself as subject.

One might do well to examine the chant first, as it is again within the prologue of Mao II that this aural repetition is examined most closely. Told from within the mass of Moonies, from Karen’s perspective, the chant voiced loudly from the baseball field sounds drastically different from the “repetition and despair” that Rodge hears from his place in the stands.²² In contrast with her father’s impression, Karen and the crowd that encompasses her find future in the repetition:

They feel the power of the human voice, the power of a single word repeated as it moves them deeper into oneness. They chant for world-shattering rapture, for the truth of prophecies and astonishments. They chant for new life, peace eternal, the end of soul-lonely pain… They chant for one language, one word, for the time when names are lost.²³

Though varied in pitch, inflection, accent and any number of different characteristics, the many voices rising forth from the people of many countries mix into one within the boundaries set by a single word. In the same sweeping movement that promises to wipe away individual names, a space is cleared for the newly congealed subjectivity of the crowd. Indeed, the repetition—both oral and aural—achieves a certain ontological dimension: “There is something in the chant, the fact of chanting, the being-one, that transports them with its power. Their voices grow in

²² DeLillo, Mao II 15.
²³ DeLillo, Mao II 16.
intensity. They are carried on the sound, the soar and fall. The chant becomes the boundaries of their world.” In the echo of the voices, the individual member of the crowd hears her voice dramatically changed; spoken as one, orally, her voice returns to her aurally as the voice of many combined. This echo functions much like the reflection that a child might catch of himself in the mirror: just as the child’s reflection condenses his disparate thoughts into the image of a single, coherent body, so too does the chant condense the disparate sounds that comprise the crowd into a single, unified voice. It is thus that the crowd derives its coherent shape and collective subjectivity in the reverberations of the chant.

This relationship between the crowd and the chant is not unique to the mass-wedding in Yankee Stadium—in fact, it arises during several other scenes throughout the novel. Sitting before the television, long after her split from the Unification Church, Karen watches with Brita as the evening news runs footage of Ayatollah Khomeini’s funeral. Around the Ayatollah’s body collect “rivers of humanity… with crowds estimated at three million and everybody dressed in black, all the streets and highways packed with black-clad mourners,” and a disembodied, unidentified voice drones over the succession of images on the TV screen. “Weeping chanting mourners in the millions,” the voice intones—but it does not say this just once, instead repeating it until the phrase, “chanting mourners,” takes on the character of a chant in its own right: “The voice said, Weeping chanting mourners,” “The voice said, Distraught and chanting mourners,” and, again, “The voice said, Wailing chanting mourners.” One might

24 DeLillo, Mao II 15.
25 N.B.: DeLillo’s characters often encounter crowds only after they have been mediated by technology, rather than confronting the crowds directly in person. Keep this in mind, as I will address the influence of media on the crowd in the following section of this thesis.
26 DeLillo, Mao II 188.
27 DeLillo, Mao II 187, 188, 189, 191.
assume this voice to be that of the newscaster conveying the footage, but DeLillo chooses not to make this explicit, leaving the voice unidentified even as it gives shape to the crowd Karen watches on television. Disembodied and unnamed, the voice is distilled to the status of part object, sharing a closer relationship to the crowd of Iranian mourners that it describes than it does to the newscaster stripped clean from the text. Overlaid atop the crowd, the voice stands in as the crowd’s own aural echo—the chanting of millions of mourners condensed into a singular voice that reflects the collective. Here, as at Yankee Stadium, the vast expanse of the crowd finds itself effectively contained within the boundaries set for it by the repetition of a phrase.

Even in a crowd organized less by a common goal than by a common plight, the chant remains one of its prevailing features. With a scene set in Tompkins Square, DeLillo offers a dystopic vision of the dispossessed, the homeless clustered in abandoned bandshells and beneath listing shanties. Unlike the crowds in Yankee Stadium and Iran, the group the reader finds here has not so much gathered as collected like sediment scraped from Manhattan’s surface—“people moving everywhere, a slowly spreading ripple and moan, or not moving, or lying completely still, half forms, beating hearts, faces and names.” In these lines one might read a sad application of Canetti’s claim that in crowds “differences between individual heads and arms are irrelevant,” a collection of the ruined bodies of Tompkins Square rather than a hopeful deindividuation in density. And yet the repetition of the chant offers the promise of a collective subjectivity even in this seemingly hopeless space. Tucked into the impressionistic narrative told from Karen’s perspective is a striking image: “People come out of houses, gather in dusty squares and go together, streams of people calling out a word or name, marching to some central

28 DeLillo, Mao II 150.
29 Canetti, 29.
place where they join many others, chanting.” Though it is left unclear in the text whether this image is actually witnessed by Karen or simply devised by her imagination, the emergence of the impoverished from the sooty background comes as if summoned by the act of chanting. They converge upon an empty space, coalescing behind the repetition of a single word. Shortly afterward, the scene in Tompkins Square is elaborated, stretched to suit the scale of the Iranian mourners and almost certainly now exaggerated in the midst of Karen’s awe. Again,

There are people gathering in clusters everywhere, coming out of mud houses and tin-roof shanties and sprawling camps and meeting in some dusty square to march together to a central point, calling out a name, collecting many others on the way, some are running, some in bloodstained shirts, and they reach a vast open space that they fill with their pressed bodies, a word or name, calling out a name under the chalk sky, millions, chanting.

Described in terms befitting a gas, this crowd spreads to fill the boundaries before it, deriving from the chant collectively what they have been deprived of as individuals: a name and a space that is entirely theirs.

All of this, though, calls attention to one telling aspect shared by all of these scenes: the crowd may indeed be structured in the boundaries of the single word or name chanted, but it never seems to matter much exactly what that word is. In Tompkins Square, the reader is never privileged with the name called out by the emerging masses; in Iran, the words being chanted by the millions of mourners go unspoken; and even at Yankee Stadium, though the chanted word is once spoken, it is in Korean and left peripheral to the scene, functioning almost as an algebraic coefficient, more a place holder than a word with a signified meaning. What one finds in these scenes, then, is that it is “the fact of chanting,” as Karen puts it, more than the signified meaning of the words or names actually chanted, that supports and structures the collective subjectivity of

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the crowd.\textsuperscript{32} The chant serves as the empty vehicle, the floating signifier—the skeleton forged from repetition and relatively indifferent to specific signification. It is the act of repetition, rather than the repeated signifier, that marks the new space for the collective subject.

Beyond sound, a second pattern is also discernible in DeLillo’s representations of crowds—this formation of a collective subjectivity in repetition occurs not only aurally but visually as well. In multiple scenes throughout the novel, the crowd depicted develops beneath the looming image of a single, central figure. At the funeral in Iran this figure is most clearly the Ayatollah, “the black turban, the white beard, the familiar deep-set eyes” of his portrait suffusing the scene—“great photographs of Khomeini hung from building walls,” as well as “photographs of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini fixed to the metal surface” of a cargo container atop his gravesite.\textsuperscript{33} In the shadow of his multiple portraits mourners seethe and gather, crowding the Ayatollah’s body, which is first portrayed as “lying in a glass case on a high platform above crowds that stretched for miles.”\textsuperscript{34} Inert and framed in glass, the leader’s body becomes another portrait in its own right, the first of many replications that exert a certain gravitational pull keeping the crowd’s shape defined. In Tiananmen Square—footage of which is seen by the reader just shortly before the Ayatollah’s funeral—one descries a very similar setting. The tape rolls as Karen watches the television in silence from bed, news reports playing witness as a crowd of Chinese Communist officials and soldiers conduct a crackdown upon another crowd of protesters. Above and all about the struggle tower portraits of the deceased Mao Zedong, delimiting the frame of the two crowds at different depths. Karen first “sees in the deep distance

\textsuperscript{31} DeLillo, \textit{Mao II} 180-1.
\textsuperscript{32} DeLillo, \textit{Mao II} 15.
\textsuperscript{33} DeLillo, \textit{Mao II} 192, 188.
\textsuperscript{34} DeLillo, \textit{Mao II} 188.
a portrait of Mao Zedong,” but soon “they show the portrait of Mao up close, a clean new picture,” close enough to see “those little mounds of hair that bulge out his head and the great wart below his mouth.”

Between these two images the crowd develops as if between boundaries, sculpted still more in the middle distance by yet another Mao: “The portrait of Mao in the daylit square with paint spattered on his head.” In both Iran and Tiananmen Square, as well as in other scenes of the crowd, the looming figure of the leader gets multiplied in copies and scattered across the multitude represented.

It is in this last image, the paint-spattered visage of Mao, that DeLillo offers a clue to the nature of the relationship between the leader’s image and the crowds that it seems so often to suffuse. The seemingly haphazard application of color to Mao’s portrait alludes subtly to the collection of silk screens that lends its name to the title of this novel—Andy Warhol’s own *Mao II*. This allusion leads the reader back to the point in the text when Warhol’s series receives explicit mention. In a museum in New York, waiting for a meeting, Scott stood before a silk screen called *Crowd*. The image was irregular, deep streaks marking the canvas, and it seemed to him that the crowd itself, the vast mesh of people, was being riven by some fleeting media catastrophe. He moved along and stood finally in a room filled with images of Chairman Mao. Photocopy Mao, silk-screen Mao, wallpaper Mao, synthetic-polymer Mao. A series of silk screens was installed over a broader surface of wallpaper serigraphs, the Chairman’s face a pansy purple here, floating nearly free of its photographic source. Work that was unwitting of history appealed to Scott. He found it liberating.

Mao, the historical figure who serves as the portraits’ object, has been wrenched clean from the serigraphs, pried free and discarded for his irrelevance to Warhol’s project. The physical Mao, long since deceased, has been replaced by the seemingly endless reproduction of his image,

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36 DeLillo, *Mao II* 177.
scattered across diverse surfaces and spattered with anachronism. Here, it is vitally important to note the context in which DeLillo introduces this depthless image—positioned in his text immediately following a depiction of another work of Warhol’s, *Crowd*. Set opposite one another, across a set of intimately paired sentences, the “vast mesh of people”—condensed into the singular signifier “crowd”—faces the multiplicity of Maos staring back, much as it would its own reflection in the mirror. Connected by proximity within DeLillo’s text and by Warhol’s distinctive penchant for repetition, the representation of the crowd and the replicated images of the leader are tied visually—and inextricably—to one another. It is in this connection between the two that the reader may begin to understand the role of the leader’s image in the coalescence of the crowd—much like the echo of the chant, the repeated image of the leader serves as a kind of reflection of the crowd, an instrument that allows its members to more easily conceive the shape of their collective subjectivity.

Though leaders like Master Moon and, later, Abu Rashid command a certain level of control over their followers, it is clear that the relationship between the leader and the crowd is far from one of unilateral power. Rather, the leader serves the purposes of the gathered crowd to the same extent as they serve his. In the same process of repetition by which the individual subjects wear down their distinctions and forge a new, collective subject, the individual at their head—the leader—also gets worn down, effectively effaced of his physical being and reconstructed as pure image, as a slate on which to inscribe the reflection of the new, collective subject. At one point in the text, Brita recalls Warhol having remarked, “The secret of being me

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is that I’m only half here”—indeed the same claim makes for an apt description of the assorted leaders throughout the novel. Master Moon may preside over the infield of Yankee Stadium, but, deprived of dialogue or meaningful action within the scene, he acts as little more than an idol to be faced and worshipped; the Ayatollah possesses no breath left with which to deliver commands, an inert body capable of nothing more than occupying space; and Mao himself, the historical Mao, has been replaced entirely in Tiananmen Square by the proliferation of his image in looming portraits. Teetering on the median between presence and absence, the leaders in the novel serve as little more than placeholders, their images as useful to the crowd as the actual men themselves. Much like the chant of the unnamed word, it is apparent that the repetition of the leader’s image is far more important to the formation of a collective subjectivity than the individual subject that it represents. The image, like the chant, serves as a makeshift reflection, an empty vehicle by which the members of the crowd manage to recognize themselves as part of a collective.

Perhaps nowhere is this rendered more explicitly than in the crowd’s tendency to dress alike, often even clothing themselves in the very image of the leader. Among the Moonies the bridegrooms may be dressed “in identical blue suits, the brides in lace-and-satin gowns,” and the Iranian mourners may all be “black-clad,” but crowds like the Maoists in Tiananmen Square take this shared likeness one step further. They so thoroughly empty the image of their leader Mao

41 Of course, the tendency to dress alike is one shared by sports fans, as well. We shall see later in this thesis, in my analysis of “Pafko at the Wall,” that DeLillo’s interest in the crowd also extends to the potential for sports fans to form a collective subject.
42 DeLillo, *Mao II* 4, 188.
that they manage quite literally to step inside it, wearing clothing that starkly resembles his. “A group of old men come on stiffly in Mao suits,” entering the frame of the news footage, and shortly thereafter the footage returns: “They show high officials in Mao suits.” 43 By a process of repetition these officials resurrect their long-dead leader, not as a living figure of power but as a space worn wide enough for the whole group of officials to inhabit—Mao is now merely the subject sanded down to fit the crowd.

Taken together, these two instruments of repetition commonly represented by DeLillo—the chant and the leader’s image—achieve the same ends: the disintegration of the individual subject and the formation of a new, collective subject in its stead. In the process of repetition the crowd undermines the stability of the signifier that would otherwise establish the position and the boundaries of the individual subject in language; and in the process of repetition, too, the crowd crafts for itself a new language of its own, a new position in which it may recognize its own shape and form as collective subject. Herein resides the dread and the promise of the crowd, the trauma of Lacan’s real and the ecstasy of Canetti’s density, the annihilation of the individual and germination of the collective—here, in repetition.

43 DeLillo, Mao II 176, 177.
Closed and Captioned:
The Crowd and the Framing Lens

In precisely the same scene that DeLillo introduces the terms that will come to define his formulation of the spontaneous, collective subjectivity of the crowd, he also introduces the means by which the worst of its awe and alarm is effectively subdued in *Mao II*—indeed, he manages to introduce both in the span of a single, brief sentence. As Rodge scans the grooms and brides in Yankee Stadium, groping for words in the presence of this thing that eludes signification, he does thus: “He works his glasses across the mass, the crowd, the movement, the membership, the flock, the following.” Rodge does not gape at the procession directly; he does so, rather, through the medium of his binoculars. Between the unsettling sight of the crowd and himself, Rodge imposes the protective barrier of a set of lenses. In doing so he affords himself a measure of control over the situation that he would not have otherwise. He can bring the crowd into, and out of, focus as he sees fit by simply adjusting a few knobs that he holds easily in his hands, and every time that he stares at the crowd before him through this instrument it will be neatly bordered by black—the outer edges of the lenses that demarcate just what is featured and what is excluded from his view. In fact, through his lenses Rodge’s view will not look altogether different from the one that might have been transmitted to him on his television screen at home, had there been a film crew present to record the mass-wedding on the playing field. As rudimentary as it may seem, Rodge’s pair of binoculars constitute a medium, a technological instrument intervening between Rodge and the event he perceives before him, repackaging it and serving it in a fashion more palatable for him to consume. No wonder, then, that he can’t seem to

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put them down—as DeLillo makes clear, “Rodge stays fixed to his binoculars.”

As attached as Rodge may be to his set of lenses, his reliance upon them is but a hint of the role that media will come to play in DeLillo’s text. To get an even better idea one need delve deeper into the very same prologue. All around Rodge in the stands, his fellow spectators struggle to digest the scene before them as well, and so they respond in similar fashion. As the crowd beneath them converges on the infield, many of the onlookers “are taking pictures, standing in the aisles and crowding the rails, whole families snapping anxiously, trying to shape a response or organize a memory, trying to neutralize the event, drain it of eeriness and power.”

This is the first mention of a camera in the text. As such, it is fitting that the cameras used by the families function both as a means of domesticating the threateningly alien presence of the crowd, and as a weapon to be wielded defensively by the individuals in the stands. With a camera in hand its handler possesses an instrument, much like Rodge’s binoculars, capable of setting defined limits upon a collective body that otherwise seems capable of expanding its numbers indefinitely. Yet, like any weapon, the camera’s capabilities extend beyond the realm of the defensive—in snapping photos, the uneasy onlookers not only protect themselves from the trauma of an unmediated encounter with the crowd, they also engulf the experience of those present with myriad reproductions of its likeness. Once the photographs are developed, the thing itself multiplies in glossy siblings, stripped at least partly of its uniqueness and transfigured into digestible products ready for consumption. The traumatic encounter becomes instead one of multiple fascinating relics of a distanced moment.

Nowhere in the novel is the relationship between camera and crowd better articulated

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45 DeLillo, Mao II 4.
46 DeLillo, Mao II 6.
than around the dinner table at the novelist Bill Gray’s house, shortly after Brita finishes taking photographs of Bill for his portrait. Bill’s assistant Scott enters the conversation haphazardly, answering Brita’s mention of the Great Wall by describing for those around the table what he thinks of whenever he thinks of China: “Crowds,” he tells them, “crowd after crowd in the long lens of the camera so they seem even closer together than they really are, totally jampacked… Totally calm in the long lens, crowd on top of crowd, pedaling, trudging, faceless, sort of surviving nicely.”  Following one another, or packed one on top of the other, the crowds captured by the camera shrink, condensed by the very fact of being fitted to the limits of the lens’s purview. It is telling that Scott refers not simply to the camera alone but also to its long-focus lens. In fact, Scott repeats this specific phrase—*in the long lens*—here and elsewhere in the novel, calling particular attention to the double-edged effect of the camera on the crowd that it mediates for the spectator. Because the long-focus lens compresses the spectator’s perception of depth in the scene it frames, it compresses also the distance perceived between the objects in that frame—in other words, the long lens renders even denser the crowd caught on camera. At the same time, the long lens increases the possible distance separating the crowd from its viewer behind the camera, diminishing the trauma of the encounter: with distance, the crowd is made a mere image, the sprawl and the potential encroachment of its threat to the individual subject effectively kept in check. When mediated in this way, the crowd’s closeness is a density produced on the individual spectator’s terms. The camera stands as the protective barrier between the individual and the crowd, ensuring that the former will not be subsumed into the folds of the latter. What’s more, Scott later elaborates, “This isn’t a story about seeing the planet

47 DeLillo, *Mao II* 70.
new. It’s about seeing people new. We see them from space, where gender and features don’t matter, where names don’t matter. We’ve learned to see ourselves as if from space, as if from satellite cameras, all the time, all the time.”48 In the long lens, the uncanny nature of the crowd is diminished. Intimately witnessed, the crowd signals the imminent potential for the dissolution of the individual subject watching; yet the mediation of the long lens of the camera is enough to render the crowd implicitly fantastical, wholly set apart from the rest of life that goes unbounded by a frame.

With this in mind, it must be noted that every crowd scene that follows the Moonies’ mass-wedding comes to the reader mediated by the television screen. When Scott sees the Chinese Christian cult walking into a river to conduct a public ritual, the scene of his witness is led with the inoculating phrase, “The night before on TV…”49 And indeed, DeLillo’s narrator does not let us forget that the puzzling, potentially disturbing events unfolding onscreen have been transmitted to Scott only by way of the intermediary wielding of the video camera. As Scott watches the religious group wade by twos and threes into the rushing river, the camera asserts the persistent reminder of its presence—a conspicuous kind of imperfection in the camerawork that insists on receiving as much attention as the crowd it conveys. Even as the cult members get swept downstream, a tragic loss of life in the deluge, the narrator nevertheless diverts the reader’s attention to note that “the footage was shaky and had a quality of delirium, an abnormal subjectivity, the kind of offhand amateur fleetness that was hard to trust.”50 And this scene is but one of several depicted in the novel that must share their stage with the very instrument that serves to convey them. The Maoists in Tiananmen Square, discussed earlier in this thesis, are

48 DeLillo, *Mao II* 89.
49 DeLillo, *Mao II* 143.
watched by Karen alone, lying awake at night “in Brita’s bed with the little TV in hand and the loft all dark and sitting near the ceiling in the glow.”\textsuperscript{51} Only shortly thereafter, Brita and Karen share the room, watching the masses of mourners at the Ayatollah’s funeral “together on the sofa with the TV juxtaposed against the conversation.”\textsuperscript{52}

In each of these scenes, two counterweights confront whatever trauma the collective subject is capable of inflicting on its individual witnesses. First, the reader is never allowed to forget the long lens that the mediated footage installs between the viewer and the crowd; and second, the threat of individual dissolution, which is posed explicitly to present spectators like Rodge, is all but completely diluted by the banal circumstances in which the crowd is often otherwise encountered. The crowd—at once a figure of profound promise and threat to the individual—is thus reduced to little more than its own image, subordinated to the position of one media catastrophe among many that play nightly. Scattered across the many television sets of DeLillo’s novel, the collective subject risks complete domestication by a news media which has caught it in its camera and since turned it into spectacle, an exotic beast tamed and exhibited for viewers in their own homes across the country.

Two crowd scenes in particular demonstrate this domestication most clearly: Karen’s silent viewing of the Sheffield soccer riot, and her fascination with several of the photographs that litter Brita’s apartment. Footage of the Sheffield riot runs fairly early in the novel, as Karen settles into bed beside a half-sleeping Scott. On the television screen before her, a mass of men and boys swarms into view, “a crowd, thousands, filling the screen” without any further

\textsuperscript{50} DeLillo, \textit{Mao II} 143.  
\textsuperscript{51} DeLillo, \textit{Mao II} 176.  
\textsuperscript{52} DeLillo, \textit{Mao II} 186.
indication of purpose or cause. Diction befitting a tidal surge, “bodies pressed and heaving, like bodies in a sea swell,” the crowd on screen begins to exhibit a density great enough to fragment the coherent bodies of its constituent members and rearrange them in scattershot order. The crowd takes on the shape so celebrated by Canetti as the indication of deindividuation—bodies packed solid so no space remains between them. The crowd before Karen now emerges into a collection not of individuals but of heads and arms and faces, a many-limbed collective subject assembled separate from the logic of the individual.

There is a problem, though—the logic determining the shape of the collective at Sheffield is not that of the crowd itself. With the television on silent, no chant ekes free from the TV to be heard by Karen, and indeed even if the volume were blasting in full one would expect not to hear a chant anyway, for there is no repeated image governing the cohesion of the crowd either. This crowd is not an assemblage of its own accord but rather the clustering of a mass restricted from without. Deprived of the instruments of repetition—the chant and the leader—this crowd has been culled together instead by the very object that stands always in the foreground of the footage we see: the fence. “The camera is just outside the fence shooting through the heavy-gauge steel wire… She sees the crowd pushed toward the fence and people at the fence pressed together and terribly twisted. It is an agony of raised and twisted arms and suffering faces.” The effect of the fence is similar to the effect of the camera’s long lens, imposing upon the assembled crowd a density external to its own logic. The mesh of fence, through which the gaze of the individual spectator must pass in order to view the crowd, stands as an instrument of the

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53 DeLillo, Mao II 32.
54 DeLillo, Mao II 32.
individual deployed in opposition to the crowd—a means to render those within it less recognizable than those individuals in front, to protect the individuals outside from the encroaching creep of the malignant crowd, and, perhaps most importantly, to domesticate the crowd, to render it harmless to all but its own constituent members. In all these respects the fence quite visibly enacts the relationship that mass media shares with crowds elsewhere in the novel. The crowd caught in the fence, trapped and sculpted into its shape by the borders defined for it from without: this is the physical demonstration of the work done much more subtly by the long lens.

And if in Sheffield the work of the medium is thrust into view by an incidental object, so too are the viewers themselves positioned in frame. Normally seated safely on the other side of the television screen—and presumably still sitting, watching in comfort, as Karen is—the viewers of the mediated crowd must yet confront versions of themselves in the footage itself: these versions are performed by the indifferent watchers standing just outside the fence. Repeatedly, the narrator calls the reader’s attention to the “men standing off to the side somewhere, watching sort of half interested” even as the rioters choke and trample in the density of their violence. 56 These unidentified men, “calmly watching” from the safe side of the fence as if the scene of mass panic before them “could be a fresco in a tourist church… composed and balanced and filled with people suffering”—these men, by doing so, commit the very same act being committed by the television viewer watching them in turn.57 Both sets of witnesses—the watchers beyond the fence, and the viewers before the television screen—observe with

55 DeLillo, Mao II 33. Here, perhaps, we also see a troubling inversion of the ecstasy of density found in Canetti’s assessment of the crowd, Crowds and Power 29. Rather than ecstasy, the Sheffield crowd discovers agony.
56 DeLillo, Mao II 33.
detachment the events unfolding before them. Freed by the distance achieved by the long lens intervening between the crowd and them, the television spectators feel only dim glimmers of the threat that Rodge must confront in full. There remains little residue of the crowd’s immanent threat to individual subjectivity, just the faint hint of unease that has since been transmuted to fascination behind the safety of mediation. And indeed, in the Sheffield footage at least, the viewer at home even gets the pleasure of seeing his own role acted for him on screen—that of the curious, disinterested onlooker.

This relationship, between the primacy of the medium and the freedom of passivity it allows the viewer receiving the images, reinforces itself in the pattern of the diction used by DeLillo’s narrator. Repeated throughout the brief scene is the phrase, “They show,” each of the phrase’s iterations being used to open a new revelation about the unfolding riot onscreen. In repeating these two words DeLillo refuses to allow his reader to slouch into the easy belief that the details presented to Karen are anything but mediated. What she sees before her has been pre-packaged for her consumption—this is not the crowd itself but the image of the crowd, its edges blunted and its danger to the viewer diminished by distance. In the process of being shown, the crowd is veiled twice, first by the fence in frame and then by the cloak of pixels that allow it expression onscreen.\(^5\) It is only then, following this process of double-veiling, that the text responds with the phrase, “She sees.” The two phrases, “they show” and “she sees” repeated in interval, comprise a kind of call and response routine, whereby the nondescript “they” that mediates the image both precedes and summarily shapes the crowd that “she sees.” It is between

\(^5^7\) DeLillo, *Mao II* 33.

\(^5^8\) Marshall McLuhan, ever the inimitable aphorist, refers to the image conveyed on television as “the mosaic mesh.” Thus two sets of mesh, the chain-link fence onscreen and the pixels of the screen itself,
these two nodes of the interval that all the violence and despair of the rioters circulate; thus the influence of the mediating camera, and Karen’s collusion in readily consuming the image, shape the outer boundaries of the remainder that is conveyed of the crowd’s experience.

In the second scene detailing media’s domestication of the crowd, the outer boundaries of the crowd’s image are brought into even sharper focus. Again, Karen serves as primary witness to the mediated crowd—perusing Brita’s apartment she finds magazines scattered across tabletops and books of photographs stacked neatly in shelves. Among this scattering is a single image that especially catches her eye: “She looked at a photograph of refugees in a camp, the whole picture out to the edges nothing but boys crowded together, most of them waving urgently, pale palms showing, all looking in the same direction, bareheaded boys, black faces, palms that catch the glare, and you know there are thousands more outside the edges of the picture…”59 As at Sheffield the crowd splits the atom of the individual and arranges itself by even smaller component parts—the palms of hands, the bare heads of boys, and the frantic faces turned toward the camera. Something beyond the control of the crowd is at work in this photograph, though, less explicit than at Sheffield but just as important: the defensive exclusion enacted by the photograph’s frame. Within the boundaries established by the photograph, the otherwise amorphous shape of the crowd of boys—expansive, indefinite, and threatening—has been tidied into an object of Euclidean neatness, framed for the viewing pleasure of an audience. “Nowhere in the picture is there a glimpse of ground or sky or horizon, it is only heads and hands,” and in this manner the picture Karen sees here recalls Scott’s experience, earlier in the

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59 DeLillo, Mao II 146.
novel, standing before Warhol’s *Crowd*. In both images the crowd in the fore fills to the edges of the frame, and in both the frame pushes back, exacting its own retribution against the crowd’s encroachments by conclusively defining its shape. Just like the Moonies in the lenses of Rodge’s binoculars, the crowd caught in the photograph is made manageable by the space installed just outside of it, the black or blank space that excludes the thousands of clamoring others.

It is unfair, perhaps, to claim these framing edges to be simply blank spaces; for though this may be true in the case of Rodge’s binoculars, Karen often finds further reassurances lining the frames of Brita’s photographs: the captions. Still combing the loft,

Some nights she came into the loft and went straight to the pictures. Delirious crowds swirling beneath enormous photographs of holy men. She might study the same picture seven times in seven nights, children falling from a burning tenement, and read the caption every time... The words helped her locate the pictures. She needed the captions to fill the space. The pictures could overwhelm her without the little lines of type.

Here, two languages struggle against one another: the language of the crowd, the empty signifier of the leader’s image beneath which the crowd collects like pooled water; and the language of the individual, the writing that lines the frame and translates the crowd into something better legible for the viewer. Pendulating her look from the caption to the picture and back again, Karen’s compulsion to resort to the words at the photo’s edge reflects, even more than a desire to know, a need for comfort. For Karen, the captions serve the vital role of *anchorage*, to borrow a term from Barthes, acting as a means “to counter the terror of uncertain signs” in the images presented by the photographs. Barthes elaborates, “With respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text has thus a repressive value and we can see that it is at this level that the

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60 DeLillo, *Mao II* 147.  
morality and ideology of a society are above all invested.” By resorting to the text at the edge, Karen seeks the intervention of this bastion of familiar signification—if incapable of entirely assimilating the uncertainty of the crowd, these words nevertheless interrupt and subdue the effect that it has on the viewer. An instrument in the service of repression and direction, the caption serves to quarantine the shock of that which it hems in—not unlike the relation of the Lacanian symbolic order to the real with which it grapples. Indeed, this notion of quarantine is only corroborated by the manner the narrator of the novel describes these captions in spatial terms: helping to locate, filling space, the captions function not so much to illuminate the viewer as to bind the object being viewed, buttressing the frame that controls and excludes. In this capacity, the caption serves to sponge dry the last residue of the nameless awe and dread still posed by the crowd to a single viewer after it passes through the long lens.

The effectiveness of this boundary—the solidity of the comforting frame and its reinforcement in the caption’s translation—stands as an evident rebuttal to the leveling possibilities of the crowd raised by Canetti. In his study of crowds, Canetti claims that the conspicuous destruction often associated with the actions of crowds represents “simply an attack on all boundaries.” According to Canetti, in the crowd’s crossing of boundaries by pure force of destruction, individual witnesses discover to their alarm that “what separated them has now been destroyed and nothing stands between them and the crowd.” It is a closing of the distance that usually stands between individuals and, thus simultaneously, between the crowd and the individual. Ostensibly this threat remains ever present, as “the crowd always wants to grow. There are no natural boundaries to its growth. Where such boundaries have been artificially

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63 Barthes, *Image – Music – Text* 40
64 Canetti, 20.
created… an eruption of the crowd is always possible.” Canetti emphasizes this impulse to
grow—and the predilection for destroying boundaries in doing so—as one of the foremost
attributes of the present crowd, and he assumes the felling of artificial limits as all but inevitable
in its growth and expansion. Yet absent from Canetti’s explanation is the intervention of media
in the relationship between crowd and individual witness. The physical barricade standing
between the two may often fall, but the frame of the photograph, or the television screen, that
conveys the moment still remains the one boundary that the crowd is incapable of breaking.
Within the four walls established by the frame, the crowd can storm nearly every limit that
checks its growth, knocking down barricades or even invading baseball stadiums, and still it
cannot escape the bounds set for its image. It is this fact that Karen stays mindful of—checking
the caption, stealing glances at the frame—in those moments she feels most overwhelmed by the
crowd she sees depicted; it is this fact that promises the preservation of the boundaries that
constitute her sense of self as individual subject.

A second effect arises from DeLillo’s emphasis on the frame surrounding the crowd’s
image: the thorough disjuncture of the individual not simply from the crowd but also from the
camera that mediates it. While the ideal spectator of the image—whether projected onto screen,
transmitted through the television, or captured in the photograph—identifies with the vantage
point of the camera, such that the camera serves as a surrogate eye for the duration of the
footage, the frame interferes with this identification. As Kaja Silverman notes, “At the moment
that the frame becomes apparent, the viewer realizes that he or she is only seeing a pre-given

65 Canetti, 20.
66 Canetti, 29.
spectacle, and the *jouissance* of the original relation to the image is lost." The persistent reminders of the frame that contains the image ensure that the later spectators—alternately Karen and Brita and Scott—do not obtain even an illusory experience of being present before the crowd. Unlike Rodge, theirs is not a firsthand witnessing, and the frame of the television robs them of the temporary misapprehension afforded the viewer able to identify with the camera. What results is an extension of the distance already instituted by the long lens and a proportional reduction in the scale of the crowd captured in its view. The crowd is not only stripped of its subjectivity but its image, viewed from the distance instantiated by the frame, is looked upon consciously as nothing more than an object, a spectacle that has been glossed and packaged in manageable boxes for ready consumption. And what’s more, by denying the spectator the illusion of presence, the frame also ensures that the spectator remains self-aware of his status as the consumer of the spectacle, alone at home, rather than flirting with the idea he might ever be a member of the crowd or even a direct witness to the event. Every crowd scene viewed on television, then, overwhelms the dread of encroachment by the crowd with its very opposite—the reassurance that the spectator recalls his limits and definition as an individual subject.

With the crowd’s image thus reduced in physical scale and relative importance, it becomes less a dreadful threat than a curiosity to be gawked at—and not just one but one of many. Staring at the crowd on television, Karen enjoys the freedom of changing the channel: midway through watching the crowd in Tiananmen Square, Karen flips elsewhere, “She changes channels and a million Chinese come on in the daylit square. She is hoping to catch more shots of jogging troops.” With minimal effort—the changing of a channel in solitude—she summons

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different footage of the massing crowd; the image of the collective has been so harnessed to her whim that she even feels comfortable expressing her preference for one camera angle over another. Spread across channels, the crowd manifests itself to the viewer as so many varieties, much like commodities on store shelves. If Karen tires of one variety of crowd footage, she flips to the next: it is her individual will that determines the nature of the crowd depicted. Karen demonstrates the same privilege—that of the individual selecting from among many crowds—as she peruses Brita’s loft for photographs. Books of photographs, pictures on tables, “famine, fire, riot, war,” each image but a component of a vast assortment: the crowd, whose collective subjectivity marks a condensation of many into one, falls victim to the opposite process when mediated—it proliferates into a seemingly infinite multiplicity.69

No longer a subject in its own right, the crowd as received through media withers to the condition of object—many objects, in fact—and this transition marks a dramatic shift in the balance of the relationship shared by individual and crowd from the one we see in the first chapter. Herein lies the tension that drives DeLillo’s novel: a tension between the alarming implications of the present crowd and the domesticating influence of the media that captures and conveys it to the viewer. A tension, in other words, between the crowd as collective subject and the instruments that make it a multiplicate object. These two conceptions—crowd as subject and as object—would seem to be mutually exclusive, two sides of an antinomy that begs resolution.

69 DeLillo, Mao II 174.
A Single Man:  
The Crowd and the Author

The crowd as the fulfillment of a spontaneous, collective subjectivity, and the crowd as the object domesticated by the long lens of the camera, mediated into something manageable for the individual spectator: this explicit contradiction calls attention to the paradox of the crowd’s power in DeLillo’s fiction. Alternately a threat to the individual subject and a spectacle to entertain him, DeLillo’s crowd eludes a simple reading. It is neither entirely a subject nor entirely an object, and the manner in which the crowd confronts its viewer goes a long way in determining its character, as well as its perceived role in society. Tied up in this question is another, more implicit one: if indeed the status of the crowd—as subject or object—is at least partly determined by the manner in which it is encountered, what is the implication of the fact that DeLillo’s crowd is written? Or, put another way, what is the novelist’s relationship to the crowd he seeks to represent?

For there is another contradiction at work here, operating even more subtly than the vacillating conceptions of crowd as subject and object. This contradiction concerns DeLillo himself, his role as the writer of the crowd, and it is thrown into its starkest contrast when one considers other statements he makes during this particular period in his career. In the interviews delivered by DeLillo in the months following the publication of Mao II, conversation after conversation inspire in him articulations of the crowd’s experience similar to those offered in the novel. Yet, in this context, the complexities confronting the novelist who seeks to represent the crowd become more apparent. The compulsion to join the gathering crowd, DeLillo muses, is the need “to abandon one’s self, to escape the weight of being and to exist within a collective
chorus—to lose not only one’s own identity but one’s own language.”70 A selfhood conjured in language, and the simultaneous loss of both individual self and signification in the moment one enters the folds of the present crowd—these ideas resound like echoes from the text of Mao II. But lurking in this formulation of collective subjectivity lies an implicit contradiction, a troublesome question that becomes more apparent when weighed against a statement that DeLillo makes in another interview that same year: “Before everything, there’s language,” DeLillo claims. “Before history and politics, there’s language. And it’s language, the sheer pleasure of making it and bending it and seeing it form on the page and hearing it whistle in my head—this is the thing that makes my work go.”71 Here lies the contradiction, one so obvious that it almost goes missed: DeLillo is a fiction writer seeking to represent for his reader a collective subjectivity founded in oral repetition and in the repetition of a single, unifying image. He must use the same written words, adhere at least partly to the same symbolic order, that the crowd so spontaneously and briefly rejects in its moment of deindividuation. Any novelist seeking to represent effectively the collective subject confronts the task of writing a fundamentally inarticulable experience.

This is a quandary that seems to confront not only DeLillo, as the writer of Mao II’s many crowds, but also the writer he writes: his protagonist, the long-suffering novelist Bill Gray. For it is with Bill that DeLillo seems to construct something of a substitute for himself. The reclusive author, self-sequestered in his house outside of New York City and bowed by the weight of his unfinished novel, the figure of Bill cleaves closely to the mythos that had collected

about DeLillo’s own writing life by this point in his career. What’s more, DeLillo invites his reader to hear in Bill’s voice echoes of his own—especially when, while speaking with Brita, Bill reflects, “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.” Bill and his creator share a relationship with language that precedes and comes to shape selfhood, and both are self-aware enough of bearing this idea that they share it readily with their interlocutors. The novelist and the novelist who writes him cut remarkably similar figures. Indeed, they appear so similar at first glance that the reader could easily mistake the one for being the reflection of the other, Bill being the clean instrument through which DeLillo voices his unalloyed opinions on the relationship between the writer and the crowd.

Bill certainly ruminates often on a topic that concerns DeLillo’s career directly: the tenuous position occupied by the contemporary novelist in a millennial America sated to surfeit by media catastrophes and grand, collective spectacles. In spite of this, though, one must not mistake shared concern for shared opinion; the difference between DeLillo and his character becomes apparent in closer analysis. Even as he ventures forth slowly from his self-imposed seclusion, Bill still remains wary of wider society; he imagines himself separate, an artist laboring apart from the bustle of the mass. In the opinion of his assistant Scott, “Bill doesn’t understand how people need to blend in, lose themselves in something larger.” And this estimation is corroborated by the fact that Bill conceives of his work, his hours spent eyeing down the typewriter, as a solitary struggle—a declaration, at least partly, that “maybe I don’t want to feel the things other people feel. I have my own cosmology of pain. Leave me alone with

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73 DeLillo, *Mao II* 89.
it.” His is a task that requires distance, or so he asserts, and it is this same distance that enables Bill to escape the repetition that otherwise would wear down the words and sentences through which he recognizes himself as an individual subject. As an author Bill locks himself into dialectical struggle with the mass made homogenous by branding slogans and images, clinging tightly to a sense of his own radical individuality only through a prolonged rejection of the mass, and its concentrated, present form—the crowd. As long as he writes, Bill believes, he cannot join the crowd.

Bill is neither the first nor the only figure to assert opposition as the proper stance to assume in relation to the crowd: he shares this belief with two seemingly disparate figures, the modernist artist and the modern terrorist—inherit ing from the former a position that he abdicates to the latter. Assuming the pose struck by the idealized modernist writer, Bill seeks to define his role in relation to society “through agonistic conflict, forging identity through resistance.” He conceives of his position as one of antithesis to a society rooted in the repetition of images—a repetition that Bill decries as a deadening influence. “In our world,” Bill claims, “we sleep and eat the image and pray to it and wear it too.” Bill’s diction presages the crowds that the reader has yet to encounter at this point in the novel, the chanting mourners praying to the image of the dead Ayatollah and the officials in Tiananmen Square wearing Mao suits in the image of their own long-dead leader. The image, as we have seen in DeLillo’s novel, serves an ambivalent role in relation to the crowd, acting alternately as the empty signifier that structures through repetition

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74 DeLillo, *Mao II* 45.
75 Stephen Reicher, in his article, “The Psychology of Crowd Dynamics,” sums the way the crowd’s pathologizers often view its connection to the greater homogenized mass using the following formulation: “If the mass was a potential threat to ‘society,’ then the crowd was that potential made actual” (185).
the collective subject and as the framed object that contains its dread and awe for the individual spectator. Yet for Bill, no such ambivalence exists. Bill dismisses out of hand the possibility of a collective subject, a crowd capable of spontaneous agency; it is, rather, an object to be poked and prodded by the novelist whose books once possessed “the power to shape and influence.”

By clinging to this notion he unknowingly aligns himself with the very elements of contemporary society with which he feels an intense rivalry—the fetishistic workings of capital and the sensationalist news media. The position he fashions for himself as novelist is little more than that of an elaborate propagandist, dredging up the ideas of early crowd psychologists and theorists of mass media in order to rationalize what he perceives to be his own fading relevance. Indeed, Bill voices sentiments not unlike those written by Gustave Le Bon a century prior, who pathologized the crowd even as he sought to understand it: “In the collective mind,” Le Bon wrote, “the intellectual aptitudes of the individuals, and in consequence their individuality, are weakened… In crowds it is stupidity and not mother-wit that is accumulated.” For Le Bon rational intelligence—and thus capacity for action—was the exclusive domain of the unary subject: any endeavor undertaken by a crowd must therefore be evidence of a single individual manipulating it from a position of detachment. According to Le Bon, “All depends on the nature of the suggestion to which the crowd is exposed.” Out of this belief—which was shared by many in Le Bon’s era—grew an entire practice integral to the operation of capitalism in the

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78 DeLillo, *Mao II* 41.
79 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Penguin Books, 1977): 29. First published in 1895, Le Bon’s study is generally considered the founding work in the field of crowd psychology. In the years since its original publication, its influence has been as widely felt as its claims have been widely rejected. Reicher offers a concise summation of Le Bon’s weaknesses: “His perspective matched the concerns of the age in their entirety: Fear and fascination in equal measure; denigration of the collective intellect, harnessing of collective energy” (186).
twentieth century: public relations. Espoused in the nascent science of crowd psychology and soon extrapolated to understandings of mass society as a whole, the theory of the crowd’s susceptibility to direct influence helped to develop the very glut of adspeak and news media that Bill resists. Yet Bill does not reject this theory; rather, he implicitly accepts its terms, neglecting the subversive potential of the crowd itself by mourning the loss of the novelist’s capacity to influence it. The relationship between the novelist and the crowd—and the mass society for which it stands in microcosm—is perceived by Bill as purely unidirectional: the crowd serving only as the object of influence for those capable of standing outside.

To hear Bill tell it, the loss of the novelist’s influence can be attributed partly to the rise of the terrorist—the usurper of the novelist’s position apart. “What terrorists gain,” Bill claims, “novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous.”

By enacting the violence that the novelist merely writes about, the terrorist finds a way to step outside the constant stream of media narratives that swallows even the writer, interrupting and manipulating the machinations of late capitalism in a way that the novelist no longer can. The terrorist delivers the explosive spectacle that the news media so longs for, but he does so in a way inexplicable by its norms. The terrorist liaison George Haddad, of course, is inclined to agree. He elaborates, “Everything else is absorbed. The artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated. Give him a dollar, put him in a TV commercial. Only the terrorist can stand outside. The culture hasn’t figured out how to

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80 Le Bon, 33.
81 For more on the rise of the practice of public relations and its relationship to Le Bon’s theory of the individual’s capacity to directly influence the crowd and the mass, see Bernays, 47-61.
82 DeLillo, Mao II 157.
assimilate him.” What George misses in this formulation is the fact that, in asserting the radical individuality of the ascendant outlaw, he in fact reinscribes the very ideology that the outlaw ostensibly defies. The ascendance of capitalism brought with it the quintessentially bourgeois assertion of the coherent individual—the undivided, singular figure that marked the foundational atom of society. According to George, the grave threat to which the terrorist stands in opposition is not so much the expansion of capitalism and the deluge of news media, it is instead the homogeneity he fears it promises. It is not the politics of resistance that motivate George; it is the possibility of preserving a safe space for the individual, free from those elements that would dissolve its boundaries and subsume it in a brutal sameness.

And when George turns his attention to Mao later in the novel, espousing to Bill the virtues of a Maoist state that mobilizes the full force of the masses, he never quite loses sight of Mao himself as the authorial sculptor behind them all. At first glance, the great “summoning of crowds where everyone dressed alike and thought alike” that George describes as the ideal of Maoist China may strike the reader as reminiscent of the crowds described elsewhere in the novel—particularly of the scene that unfolds in Tiananmen Square, which Karen watches only pages later. But between these two depictions of Chinese crowds—the one described by George and the one depicted later by DeLillo’s narrator—there stands a stark difference. In the footage of Tiananmen Square, Mao is absent. He is reconstructed through a collective act of repetition undertaken by the crowd of officials seen in the square, repeated in the hanging portraits and in the suits the officials wear—the image of Mao serves merely as an instrument for effecting the crowd’s coalescence. Contrary to this, in the ideal envisioned and described by George, the

83 DeLillo, Mao II 157.
84 DeLillo, Mao II 162.
historical Mao is instead all but omnipresent. “In China the narrative belonged to Mao,” George declares. It is “Mao’s book” that binds the masses and “Mao’s China” that defines their geopolitical status. And even the inspiring phrase, “Our god is none other than the masses of the Chinese people,” must be subtly disclaimed with the two words which lead it: “Mao said.” In George’s telling, Mao remains detached from his crowds, never joining them—and it is to his work that their formation may be directly attributed. Thus, like Bill’s ideal novelist and the ideal terrorist that the two of them discuss, George’s Mao asserts the primacy of the individual over the crowd that he sculpts and puts to work as his object—a vision that presents a marked contrast to the collective subject seen earlier in this thesis.

The trouble is, this ideal of the ascendant individual depends on the ability of the individual—whether the novelist, the terrorist, or the revolutionary leader—to maintain distance from the system he resists or seeks to sculpt. And although much of the scholarly analysis of the novel rightly denies that Bill serves as a clean analog for DeLillo, most critics still implicitly preserve the framework of Bill’s ideas as DeLillo’s own. Following Bill, they assume that in DeLillo’s meditation on the status of the novelist in late-twentieth-century America, the success or failure of this writer depends unerringly on his capacity to assert his detachment. All that’s left, it seems, is to debate whether the novelist can or cannot escape the media-saturated realm of the mass, and to measure his relative success against that of the violent terrorist. The unspoken understanding that founds the whole critical debate, though, goes untouched: only the undivided, individual subject is capable of artistic and political subversion. Thus it is taken for granted that

85 DeLillo, *Mao II* 162.
86 DeLillo, *Mao II* 162.
87 For brief arguments why the novelist has not been incorporated, see Schuster 132 and Osteen 213. For an argument why the novelist has been incorporated, see Keesey 177.
the proper orientation of the novelist toward the crowd is one of outright opposition. In the critical discussion surrounding Bill as novelist, remarkably, DeLillo’s prolonged and repeated depictions of crowds go all but unmentioned—and in those rare occasions that they do receive attention, they are taken to be but dumb and dangerous monstrosities, held under the sway of the market or the terrorist-turned-totalitarian. These readings of the novel afford little credit to the subversive potential of the crowd—and reflect little thought devoted to exactly why individuals like Bill tend to pathologize the crowd in the first place.

We have seen, in the first section of this thesis, the root causes of the individual’s defensive stance toward the crowd. What remains to be addressed, here, is not the success or failure of the novelist’s adoption of that stance—as many of DeLillo’s critics have argued—but rather the more fundamental question of whether this is even the proper stance for the novelist to adopt. In order to address this issue, one must avoid the crucial mistake made by many of these critics—confusing Bill, the individual as author, for the novels that he writes. Bill’s argument—and the argument of the critics who agree with him—hinges on the assumption that the writer might achieve aspirations of true authorship, the failure of the one to escape incorporation necessarily spelling the failure of the other. Instead, the failure of the author marks the failure of the construct of the individual radically set apart, at the same time opening a new possibility for a writer freed to represent outside the delineated bounds of the individual subject.

First, something of utmost importance, a fact that generally goes unmentioned in the scholarship surrounding Mao II: for all of Bill’s talk about the practice of the novelist in the contemporary context, he never actually completes his novel. Bill languishes in the throes of a

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88 For further discussion on the distinction to be drawn between the writer and the construct of the author, see Barthes, “The Death of the Author” Image-Music-Text (1977) 142-48.
novel long in-progress, but the reader never sees him finish it; rather, the closest he comes in the
text to completing a work of fiction is in a memory he expresses only to Brita. Sitting before her
as she shoots his portrait, Bill explains why he cherishes his boyhood memories of narrating fake
baseball games: “I remember the names of all those players, the positions they played, their spots
in the batting order… And I’ve been trying to write toward that kind of innocence ever since.
The pure game of making up. You sit there suspended in a perfect clarity of invention.”
Described as pure and perfect, Bill’s “game of making up” was an act of creation and control,
carried out in the autonomous, solitary space of his own bedroom; in other words, it was the
work of the ideal author. Juxtaposed against the struggles that Bill suffers in his writing now, this
memory has the trappings of Edenic myth—a gossamer vision of what came before his descent
into a fallen state. Bill’s memory affords him a narrative that explains the present sense of his
own incapacity to complete his novel: by offering himself a story of the loss of his mastery over
the act of authorial creation, he assures himself that such entirely autonomous creation was once
possible or remains possible elsewhere. In this way, somewhat paradoxically, Bill’s memory
stands at once as a paean to the ideal of the author, the autonomously creative individual, and as
an explanation of his own present incapacity to fulfill the terms of that ideal authorship.

Bill’s house brims with evidence of this incapacity. Stalking the halls and following him
everywhere is the misbegotten half-figure Bill’s book assumes in his imagination: “a naked
humped creature with filed-down genitals, only worse, because its head bulges at the top and

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89 DeLillo, Mao II 46.
90 Bill’s memory of youth serves a purpose not unlike that seen in the Lacanian formulation of fantasy: an
explanation, as Žižek notes, for “the loss of something which the subject never possessed in the first
place” (The Plague of Fantasies 15). Bill fulfills the terms of his symbolic castration by aspiring to a
potential authorship, which, though impossible, nonetheless makes his current writing appear lacking.
there’s a gargoylish tongue jutting at a corner of the mouth and truly terrible feet.”\textsuperscript{91} As horrifying as this vision of his unfinished novel may be, the real thing is not altogether less intimidating. A blob-like expanse filling out to every wall the spaces of his home with reminders of what is never finished, “the entire house filled with pages, pages spilling into the shed that abutted the back of the house, a whole basement containing pages.”\textsuperscript{92} And these pages remain, even after his death far from home on his way to Beirut, outliving in their incompleteness even the man who claims authorship over them. The work over which Bill anguishes throughout the text never receives an audience. Uncompleted and intransitive, neither a creation nor a message ever communicated, Bill’s novel reaches no one—indeed, all one can say is, simply, \textit{Bill writes}.

Though he never finishes his novel, though he never achieves his aims of authorial control over the writing he seeks to complete, Bill does manage to create one thing: the construct of his own identity as author. The world beyond the limits of his self-imposed sequestration clamors for news of Bill Gray—his publisher hounds him for rights to his next book, his photographs promise to be snapped up by obsessed fans and a media intrigued by his seclusion, his very name is enough to command attention to the cause of freeing a hostage. It is not Bill’s novels, specifically, that attracts this accumulated interest—it is instead Bill as author, the celebrity of the individual behind the book, the towering figure on which all the many meanings of his writing condense into a single truth. If this idealization of Bill rings false when paired with the actual character, the insecure figure whose writing seems to dominate him rather than the other way around, perhaps that is because it is. Bill Gray, the radical individual at the heart of every publisher’s dream marketing campaign—this ideal is a construct, a fantasy of the

\textsuperscript{91} DeLillo, \textit{Mao II} 92.
\textsuperscript{92} DeLillo, \textit{Mao II} 224.
individual set apart from the mass, much like George’s terrorist. And perhaps this is demonstrated nowhere more clearly than in Scott’s shock at discovering that Bill Gray is not in fact the novelist’s name. Finding Bill’s birth registration in the depths of Bill’s study, Scott examines it, staring closely to see that “the name of the child was Willard Skansey Jr.” It is this name, the signifier for the solitary author, that gets claimed by the workings of capital and incorporated into the media buzz. The name accrues the aura, the individual it signifies becomes the image of authorship, readied for consumption on a massive scale. The writing itself, however, remains apart, unfinished and ostensibly forever unseen; and the writer himself dies nameless, stripped of his passport in a compartment on a ferry to Beirut.

In the final moments of Bill’s life the confines he sets for himself within the space of the signifier, the pen name that defines his authorship and the “written words [that] could tell him who he was,” erode and ultimately dissolve. What does remain instead is a smattering of other voices, a series of odd phrases heard once and forgotten and now dredged free from some place inside him. They flit through his head without semblance of order—a line heard spoken by a taxi driver long ago, “I was born under the old tutelage the earlier the better”; a line of phrases rent from any successive logic, “Kennedy was Idlewild, time was money, the farmer was in the dell”; a repetition of the favorite clichés of his father and mother. Stripped of his name on the ferry, of the signification that bulwarks the shape by which he recognizes himself as individual subject, Bill is rendered thin-boundaried, a simple vessel for the expression of the voices of others. In this way, he becomes an instrument of mediation himself, digesting and transmuting their voices into something made newly familiar—Bill in his dying becomes the screen through which their

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93 DeLillo, *Mao II* 144.
94 DeLillo, *Mao II* 204.
It is telling, then, that the penultimate sentence to pass through his thoughts before death is a repetition of a line whose origin and even intended meaning he doesn’t exactly know: “Measure your head before ordering.” The reader will recall his thoughts of this line earlier in the novel, its first mention in a random reminiscence as he flags down a taxi in Boston. Then, before expressing the sentence explicitly, Bill describes it as a “line [that] was not one voice but several”—an apt description not only for the line itself but for the state of unsettled subjectivity into which Bill drifts by the time he dies on his ferry. Bill himself possesses not one voice but several. Indeed, as soon as the fantasy of authorship is relinquished with the signifier that denotes it, his name—both of which reinforce the boundaries of Bill as individual subject—he becomes something that appears not unlike the crowd from which he had once sought to keep himself detached. In repetitions he corrals the many voices of those around him into single, distinguishable phrases. The spotty order and seeming randomness of their expression betrays the inconsequence of their signifieds—what matters instead is that Bill momentarily serves as their vessel, the channel through which the voices of others may be organized briefly into something recognizable. For a few brief, spontaneous moments, the line and distance between individual and crowd so precious to Bill and George is finally erased. In those moments, Bill is a crowd.

The Sho(u)t Heard ’Round the World: The Crowd and the Broadcaster

If Bill fails his impossible ideal of authorship, if in depicting this failure DeLillo renounces the possibility of a perfectly autonomous individual, where then can the reader search for an alternative position for the novelist to occupy? In order to find this alternative, one must search beyond the back cover of *Mao II*, to the novella-length story that DeLillo published merely a year after it. It is in “Pafko at the Wall,” a story first published in *Harper’s* and later attached as prologue to the novel *Underworld*, that one may find the character that stands as the diametrical opposite of Bill’s authorial ideal: the radio broadcaster Russ Hodges. In Russ, the reader discovers another impossible ideal, a mediator of texts who manages to give voice to the crowd’s experience.

In many ways, “Pafko” shares more in common with its immediate predecessor than with the larger novel for which it would eventually be renamed, and to which it would be affixed—DeLillo’s Cold War tome, *Underworld*. The novella itself is a fictionalized account of one of the most famous moments in the history of baseball, the dramatic ninth-inning victory of the New York Giants over the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1951. The game, the final contest of a best-of-three playoff, capped the Giants improbable rally to close the season and decided which of the two teams would reach the World Series. In the years intervening between the midcentury game and the contemporary moment from which DeLillo retells it, the game accrued an ample amount of mythology, each real figure involved incorporated into a folklore considered uniquely American. There was Hodges of course, the play-by-play broadcaster who delivered the famous call over

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the radio to hundreds of thousands of anxious fans citywide; there was Ralph Branca, the hapless Dodger pitcher who surrendered the winning run; and there was Bobby Thomson, the Giant batter who hit his pitch, driving it into the stands on the homerun for which the game is best remembered: “The Shot Heard ’Round the World.” All three of these figures are represented in the text, to varying degrees, and to their ranks DeLillo adds others—other historical attendees whose presence at the game often goes rarely mentioned, like Frank Sinatra and J. Edgar Hoover, as well as a few characters entirely of DeLillo’s own invention.

In addition to all of these, there is another figure in attendance that features prominently in DeLillo’s version of the game, a holdover from *Mao II* that remains planted center-stage in the prologue that follows it: the crowd. DeLillo’s rendering of the game is comprehensive, subsuming in the span of his narrator’s restless gaze the great expanse of humanity involved, focusing with equal intensity on the vendors in the aisles and the fans in the seats as on the batter at the plate. While histories of the game record the exploits of the players, DeLillo instead expends his attention primarily on the crowd watching them from the stands—and in doing so he produces descriptions that bear clear similarities to those offered in the prologue’s immediate predecessor.

Once again, the crowd present to watch the baseball game at the Polo Grounds defines its own shape as subject through a process of aural repetition. The clearest feature of the crowd packing the stands is the sound that it produces—indeed, the combined din is paired with nearly every mention made of the fans. Its “deep buzz,” its “hollow clamor,” its “soft roar,” the soul of the crowd expressed in a single, “moaned vowel”—these sounds, taken together, constitute not

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98 Originally titled “Pafko at the Wall,” DeLillo’s story was published in the October 1992 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*. Later, the story was renamed, “The Triumph of Death,” in order to serve as the
just the barometer of its mood but the very foundation of its subjectivity.\textsuperscript{99} The crowd is rendered as synonymous with the sound it creates, a fact perhaps clearest when one pays attention to the grammar employed by the narrator: as Hoover stares across the stadium, what he finds is “the crowd, the constant noise, the breath and hum, a basso rumble building now and then.”\textsuperscript{100} In a sentence free from predicate, the crowd does not act upon anything but rather finds its subject matched with a series of appositives, each listed sound representing a new name for this thing that Hoover finds before him. In effect, the crowd is thus a sedimentation of all the individual banalities that comprise it—the ways in which “a man will scratch his wrist or shape a line of swearwords”\textsuperscript{101}—and their simultaneous aggregation into something profound and unsettling. Like Rodge in the opening of \textit{Mao II}, Hoover gropes for signifiers to delimit the crowd, and like him he flails, again resorting to a series of synonyms in a metonymic slide that fails to reach a satisfying conclusion. All that Hoover can manage are different words for the same sound of this unnameable thing.

Hoover’s reaction is not the only manner in which the noise of the crowd beckons back to DeLillo’s earlier novel. Recalling the crowd clustered behind the fence at Sheffield—the riot heaving “like bodies in a sea swell”\textsuperscript{102}—the fans at the Polo Grounds sound remarkably oceanic in their own right. As Cotter tentatively approaches the gate to the stadium, he slides closer to the last remnants of “the pregame babble and swirl,” and once the game begins in earnest Sinatra eyes with suspicion “all these people lapping at their seat backs,” which threaten to diminish his

\textsuperscript{100} DeLillo, \textit{Underworld} 19.  
\textsuperscript{101} DeLillo, \textit{Underworld} 19.  
\textsuperscript{102} DeLillo, \textit{Mao II} 32.
“ritual distances.” Whatever other differences might exist between the two crowds—the one crammed behind the fence at Sheffield and the other at the Polo Grounds attending to sport and celebrity—both share a common characteristic: their likeness to the sea. Phrased as waves at the shore and as eddying water, these crowds appear fluid and undivided in their movements, swelling in sound against the distance instituted between the individual and them. And this likeness is not altogether unusual—in fact, it comes up often enough in literature that Canetti devotes a section to this common metaphor in his own study of crowds. The commonality between crowd and sea, Canetti writes, is that “the sea has no interior frontiers and is not divided into people and territories. It has one language, which is the same everywhere.” What’s more, “The sea has a voice, which is very changeable and almost always audible. It is a voice which sounds like a thousand voices, and much has been attributed to it: patience, panic, pain, and anger.” In gesturing toward the sea in a prologue otherwise concerned with baseball—played in a stadium locked inland, no less—DeLillo thus lays the groundwork for once again advancing the notion of a new language capable of conceiving the collective self. By accumulating the voices of many into one, like water droplets massing into waves, the crowd becomes the vessel for a new subjectivity, one found alarming by individuals like Hoover and Sinatra who prefer to consider themselves separate.

But even these accumulated sounds represent merely the loam for the potential, collective subject, which is not fully mobilized until it achieves definition in effective repetition. As the narrator observes, “The lapping of applause… dies down quickly and is never enough. They are waiting to be carried on the sound of rally chant and rhythmic handclap, the set forms and

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104 Canetti, *Crowds and Power* 81.
repetitions. This is the power they keep in reserve for the right time.”\textsuperscript{106} It is on the crest of this repetition that the crowd asserts its weight most acutely, entering the game with a “repeated three-beat [that] has the force of some abject faith.”\textsuperscript{107} Note well that this repetition still needs no specific word or phrase, so specific signifier to achieve its intended purpose.\textsuperscript{108} It is a self-expression free from signification, “a chambered voice rolling through the hollows in the underbelly of the stadium” that exists unencumbered by the function of anything but announcing its presence and unifying that multitude that combines to speak it.\textsuperscript{109} It is a single, inclusive voice, threaded together by the voices of many and condensed by the rhythm that abolishes the spaces between them—a density made audible, an echo that serves the formation of a new self.\textsuperscript{110}

And along with the voice in repetition, the collective subject asserts its presence visually as well. Here, unlike in* Mao II*, the empty signifier that structures the crowd is not the image of the absent leader; it is, rather, the repetition of a sight slightly more abstract: the lobbing of wastepaper onto the players on field. Early in the game, several fans lining the outfield wall begin “tossing paper over the edge,” scattering onto the field the refuse once “matted at the

\textsuperscript{105} Canetti, *Crowds and Power* 80.
\textsuperscript{106} DeLillo, *Underworld* 19.
\textsuperscript{107} DeLillo, *Underworld* 36.
\textsuperscript{108} Here it might be useful to make reference to Kristeva’s conception of poetic language: “We have this rhythm; this repetitive sonority, this thrusting tooth pushing upwards before being capped with the crown of language; this struggle between word and force gushing with the pain and relief of a desperate delirium” (28). Within this framework, the language of the crowd might be considered the repetitive sonority uncapped by the crown-word that contains it in the individuated ego of the speaker. This is rhythm and repetition loosed from the dialectical restraints of\textsuperscript{109} DeLillo, *Underworld* 24.
\textsuperscript{110} This self, perhaps, is precisely what Laist observes when—considering the matter from a standpoint of collective intentionality—he observes that the crowd of *Underworld*’s prologue constitutes “a kind of meta-person, made up of the similarly directed attention of its constituent members” (124).
bottoms of deep pockets.”

Around the Dodger center fielder Andy Pafko these scraps of personal trash drift down like so many snowflakes, powdering both player and playing field. Though at first this action is carried out by a small group of people in a section of the stadium, and though it may seem merely the meaningless indiscretion of a few, this sight inspires others to do the same and soon the downpour of paper scraps becomes the visual vessel of the crowd’s selfhood. And indeed DeLillo’s narrator explains this progression quite explicitly: “If the early paper waves were slightly hostile and mocking, and the middle waves a form of fan commonality, then this last demonstration has a softness, a selfness.”

Each member of the crowd reaches into his own pockets, pulling out the crumpled remains of letters from lovers and old friends, torn photographs of family, and leftovers of meals eaten just minutes prior—all this refuse the accumulated relics of lives lived outside the limits of the crowd. In the very same motion, the tossing of pocket trash into the air, the members of the crowd both rid themselves of the mundane proofs of their own individual subjectivity and join the visual repetition that shapes the larger crowd.

As in Mao II, DeLillo’s crowd again asserts itself as a subject through repetition, recognizing itself in the echoes of its own rhythmic chant and in the sight of its collective casting-off—but this emergence of the crowd into collective subject is not the only similarity between Mao II and the novella published just a year afterward. In fact, the resemblance of the

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111 Delillo, Underworld 16.
112 Delillo, Underworld 45.
113 Delillo emphasizes the idea that the life of the crowd threatens the death of the individual in a flourish of coincidence. A man who is “tearing pages out of his copy of Life” drops them upon the fans in the first tier below him (38); one of these pages is a print of Breugel’s The Triumph of Death, and the fan upon which it falls is J. Edgar Hoover. The consummate individual in the text, Hoover views the print with a mixture of alarm and ecstasy—a reaction that Wilcox associates with an encounter with the real (121).
two texts is striking. Both open with a brief line invoking a shared American heritage—in *Mao II*, “Here they come, marching into American sunlight”; in the prologue to *Underworld*, “He speaks in your voice, American, and there’s a shine in his eye that’s halfway hopeful”\(^{114}\) (*Mao II* 3, *Underworld* 11). In both, the first scene depicts an alarming massing of the crowd, a swelling encroachment upon, and invasion into, a location denoted clearly as unmeant for it—in the Yankee Stadium of *Mao II*, the processing grooms and brides appear incongruous on the baseball diamond, and outside the Polo Grounds of *Underworld*, the teenaged gate-crashers must breach the stadium’s security in order to enter. What’s more, in both the respective narrators make clear the position of the reader in relation to the crowd with the repeated use of the phrase, “Here comes”—the individual reader thrust into the central space, threatened by the encroachment of a crowd thus posited as invading from elsewhere, as distinctly *other*. And in both, it would seem, the threat of the crowd is made good: Part One of *Mao II* ends with Bill abandoning his writing, leaving his handler Scott behind as “he joined the surge of the noontime crowd”; the first section of the prologue to *Underworld* ends with the gate-crasher Cotter drifting in among those inside the baseball stadium, “then you lose him in the crowd.”\(^{115}\) By the end of the opening to both, the opposition between individual and crowd diminishes, the former effectively subsumed within the folds of the latter. The similarities between texts are so prevalent that at first glance they might even lead one to worry that DeLillo has picked up Bill’s habit of perpetual rewriting.

> It is on more thorough inspection, however, that the close resemblance between them brings into stark contrast those subtle details of difference that may have been missed otherwise.

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The act that serves to form the crowd is the same that signals the dissolution of the individual. In other words, out of *Life* comes the prospect of *Death*.


Though the similarity between texts in the manner they portray the crowd serves to reinforce DeLillo’s crowd as collective subject, the similarity between the narratives serves a different purpose: the destabilization of the individual subject outside the crowd. Those details of difference between narratives hinge on the inclusion of you—an introduction of the second person which summons the reader into the text, a first step in a greater project of eroding the third-person narrative voice. In both the opening line and the concluding line of the first section of each novel, the principle difference that stands between them is DeLillo’s use of the second person. In the prologue to *Underworld*, it is your voice in which the gate-crasher speaks and your gaze that loses sight of him as he joins the crowd. By bringing the addressee explicitly into the text, demarcating the space of the figure spoken to with a pronoun, the narrator positions the text less as a monologue than as a conversation. The narrator demonstrates an awareness of the role the reader is to play in the development of the narrative—a manifest cession of the commanding heights tacitly afforded an omniscient, singular third-person narrator. The third-person narrator cannot claim to possess the godlike solitude of the individual author, the creator and purveyor of all that is presented; instead, the stature of the reader is elevated to that of a participant in the shaping of the narrative—included as a character in the text with whom the narrator expresses explicit familiarity. Though much of the rest of the game is told by a third-person narrator, it is in these crucial echoes with *Mao II*, and the instabilities they point out, that the monolith of the third person begins to get chipped at, representing flashpoints for a much larger process of destabilizing the narrative voice.

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116 The cooption of the “third person singular” by advertising and consumer culture in the United States has long been topic of interest for DeLillo. In his first novel *Americana*, he writes, “In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be. Advertising has discovered this man… Advertising
These invocations of you are not the only interjections of the second person into the story. Besides a smattering of the pronoun across the pages of the rest of the prologue, the addressee is summoned into the text in an implicit way, as well. Frequently, when shifting the attention of the narrative from one character to another, the narrator suggests that the reader look. “Look at Durocher on the dugout steps,” the narrator says, “the manager of the Giants, hard-rock Leo.”

But it is not simply Leo Durocher who is introduced in such a fashion. Jackie Robinson and the teenaged Cotter, the famous foursome of Gleason, Shor, Sinatra, and Hoover, even unnamed spectators like the ushers and the man speaking to himself in the aisle, among others—all of them, at some point, are brought into the text as the object of the narrator’s command, “Look.”

These characters are not the only ones brought into the text when the narrator issues this command—the second person, the figure to whom the command is addressed, enters the text in the command’s every iteration as a presence implied, a spectator of the game sitting right beside the narrator.

In addition, in centering this relationship shared by narrator and reader, the command to look also calls to attention the somewhat paradoxical position of not only the narrator but the writer himself as he produces this prologue: the position of a director, rather than a creator. By repeating Look, DeLillo self-reflexively acknowledges precisely the function of the narrator in the text to begin with: the direction of the reader’s attention, the privilege of emphasizing certain events and characters and excluding others—the frame that maintains what the reader can and cannot see. What typically goes unspoken in novels is thus brought to the surface: the third
person becomes a character in its own right, traceable not by any particular name but by the evidence of its shaping the recognizable boundaries of the narrative. Much like the frame that delimits the footage on television or the photographs in magazines—seen in the second section of this thesis—the narrator’s shaping influence is brought fully into the reader’s view by the repetition of this command to look. Yet, at the same time that it makes transparent the narrator’s typical privilege, the repetition of *Look* also paradoxically betrays a relative lack of control over the characters at whom that attention is directed, particularly when compared with fantasies of the ideal author’s autonomous, creative capacity (Bill’s, for example—seen in the previous section). For while the narrator can command the addressee to look, the very command—again like the television frame—implies a certain measure of distance: the narrator becomes but one of the spectators looking on, a vessel for the direction of the reader’s attention rather than the creator of all the reader sees.  

Thus in the repetition of the command *Look*, three seemingly disparate effects are achieved at once: the narrator makes space in the text for an intended addressee, the narrator acknowledges the influence he exercises over the addressee’s gaze, and the narrator admits his limited control over those characters and events at which he directs that gaze.  

In other words, the narrator assumes the role of the mediator rather than the author—a figure less the creator and master of the work than the simple instrument by which that writing is conveyed to an intended addressee. Like the camera, and unlike the author Bill aspires to be, the narrator here would seem to make no claims for pure invention. He is instead a translator,  

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119 Coupled with this, the frequency with which DeLillo describes the actions of players on the field in the present progressive, stripped of helping verbs, adds to this impression. Phrased in this tense, the verbs associated with the characters simply become modifiers, adjectives that suggest that the characters predate, and remain unchanged by, the gaze of the narrator.
massaging the preexisting sources for the narrative into something recognizable to the reader he addresses. This distinction between the roles of author and mediator becomes quite clear in light of another similarity shared by *Mao II* and the prologue of *Underworld*. A moment of wistfulness seizes both the novelist Bill and Russ, the play-by-play radio broadcaster announcing the Dodger game—both find themselves dredging nostalgia from thoughts of their respective youth. Bill fondly recalls, “When I was a kid I used to announce ballgames to myself. I sat in a room and made up the games and described the play-by-play out loud. I was the players, the announcer, the crowd, the listening audience and the radio.”\(^{120}\) As we have seen earlier in this thesis, this memory represents for Bill the proof that he once possessed the capacity for authorial creation and has since lost it—the “pure game of making up,” the “perfect clarity of invention” that characterizes the ideal from which he has fallen.\(^{121}\) First glance reveals something similar at work in the memory that seizes Russ unexpectedly. He thinks back to the days at the start of his career spent turning statistics into stories at a Charlotte radio station:

> Somebody hands you a piece of paper filled with letters and numbers and you have to make a ball game out of it. You create the weather, flesh out the players, you make them sweat and grouse and hitch up their pants, and it is remarkable, thinks Russ, how much earthly disturbance, how much summer and dust the mind can manage to order up from a single Latin letter lying flat.\(^{122}\)

Like Bill, Russ cherishes the memory of his time spent giving life to a baseball game almost entirely in his own head, and like Bill, Russ recognizes in this memory a sense of himself as the inventor of a narrative—even as an author of sorts. In fact, even verbs that populate this recollection—*make, create, and order*—seem to reflect a nostalgia for authorship that cleaves closely to Bill’s own. Yet the echo is imprecise, as many of the other similarities between the

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\(^{120}\) DeLillo, *Mao II* 45-6.

\(^{121}\) DeLillo, *Mao II* 46.
two texts are. Much the same way as in *Mao II*, when DeLillo invites his reader to hear in Bill some of his own concerns, in *Underworld* the invitation is to read in Russ a little bit of Bill. And, again much as in *Mao II*, the invitation serves to mislead—or, put another way, the general similarities call attention to the particular differences.

Besides the explicit address of *you* in Russ’s account—complicating the already complicated expression of a private memory in the third person—there is another principal difference between the two similar recollections. This difference rests in the fact that, unlike Bill as a boy, Russ serves more as the mediator of texts than as the ideal author of his own creation, in spite of the intimations of Russ’s diction to the contrary. The baseball game of Bill’s memory is a world crafted in the entirely autonomous space of solitude: his ballgame is his creation alone, precluding the presence of any other influence, either as source or as addressee. On the other hand, Russ enjoys no such detachment. In the profession to which he harkens back, he is handed from “somebody” a piece of paper filled with the statistics and the condensed descriptions of box scores. It is from these texts that Russ cobbles together a narrative discernible to those listening to him; out of the dry, written records of the game, he shapes its story—a story at once like and unlike the assembled materials that serve as its source. And even those flourishes he adds as his own, those details he sprinkles to draw the listener’s interest, do not come from a place of pure originality. Rather, they too are culled from any of a number of other texts affording him source material. For example, Russ resumes, “When he was doing ghost games he liked to take the action into the stands, inventing a kid chasing a foul ball, a carrot-topped boy with a cowlick (shameless, ain’t I) who retrieves the ball and holds it aloft, this five-ounce sphere of cork,

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122 DeLillo, *Underworld* 25
rubber yarn, horsehide and spiral stitching, a souvenir baseball.” ¹²³ The invention Russ remarks upon here bears little likeness to the “perfect clarity of invention” remembered by Bill. The “perfect clarity of invention,” the Edenic ideal supposed by Bill, is here rendered merely as the alloy of popular culture cliché. Russ’s act of narratorial creation resembles a bricolage of found texts—“the Latin letter lying flat,” the numbers it lies next to on the page, and the familiar characters offered up in popular culture. Russ thus strikes a figure closer to Bill as he is in death than in boyhood, corralling into one coherent expression the many texts perpetuated elsewhere in repetition.

Though his medium may be different from that with which both Bill and DeLillo himself work, broadcasting in radio rather than writing fiction on a page, it is clear that DeLillo’s Russ nonetheless grapples with a certain intertextuality typically associated with literature. Delineated by Mikhail Bakhtin and recapitulated by Julia Kristeva, the concept of intertextuality they propose has it that writing is “a permutation of texts,” meaning that “in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.” ¹²⁴ The narrative proffered by Russ to his listeners is shot through, even woven, with the texts that have preceded him—the record of the game, the tropes repeated on TV, any of a countless many other possibilities—to such a degree that they compose the very shifting structure of what he ultimately tells his listeners. By calling attention to this, DeLillo necessarily implicates himself as well. After all, DeLillo also “invents” a kid chasing a ball hit into the stands—Cotter, the erstwhile gate-crasher who recovers a souvenir ball of his own, the homerun ball hit by Bobby Thomson. By writing Cotter, DeLillo mobilizes the same clichés that animate Russ’s account

¹²³ DeLillo, Underworld 26.
while introducing entirely new expectations and tensions that come with making the cowlicked boy instead an African-American teenager from Harlem—Cotter is thus set implicitly in dialogue not only with the boy Russ dreams up, but also with all the other texts that the figure of Cotter might summon for the reader. And this is the case for all of the characters that populate the prologue, particularly for those who—like J. Edgar Hoover and Frank Sinatra—correlate with historical figures who have already collected about themselves considerable mythologies prior to the publication of Underworld. Each of these characters conducts a polylogue, in every action spoken with—and speaking to—all the expectations raised by the specter of his implied history. Each character, then, is much like the crowd in this sense: each character is in fact many that assume the recognizable shape of one.

No character demonstrates this polylogue more clearly than Russ himself. In his role as radio broadcaster, of course, he serves as the mediator of texts—both in his earlier profession translating box scores into stories and in his present one translating the ballgame seen into a narrative to be heard. Yet even this mediator of texts represents a collection of texts in his own right. A historical figure like Hoover, Sinatra, or any one of the players on the field, Russ perhaps bears the greatest brunt of his history, since his famous call of the game’s ninth inning was recorded—his very words preserved in the decades intervening between the game and its retelling in Underworld. DeLillo does not change them here, transcribing here word for word the narration actually broadcast by the historical Russ. Fictional and historical Russes develop a dialogue with one another—the one speaking in the space away from the microphone, “fleshed out” by DeLillo off the records, and the other spoken in whatever the reader knows of Russ

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Hodges unrelated to reading Underworld. But most importantly, both fictional and historical Russes speak together during the final, dramatic events for which the game is famous. From the moment that Bobby Thomson steps into the batter’s box against Ralph Branca in the bottom of the ninth inning, the lines that Russ speaks are a perfect repetition of the historical radio broadcast. The broadcast of the at-bat itself is but a minute and a half long, but DeLillo dilates the space between Russ’s sentences to the span of ten pages—a space that is both structured and given velocity by Russ’s play-by-play. Upon seeing the homerun ball clear the outfield wall, Russ finds that “his voice has a power he’d thought long gone—it may lift the top of his head like a cartoon rocket. He says, ‘The Giants win the pennant.’” And rather than simply describing for the reader the fact that Russ repeats himself, DeLillo affords his character the space in the text to do so explicitly. The fictional Russ matches each of the four times that the historical Russ repeats the sentence on tape, with DeLillo each repetition writing, “He says, ‘The Giants win the pennant.’” Note, here, that the repetition includes not only the sentence as stated, but also the lead-in, “He says”—in this way the act of saying matters as much as the actual content of what is said. Again like the crowd in the stands, the coalescence of selfhood—the chorus of both fictional Russ and historical Russ speaking together as one—is effected in the act of repetition, in the sentence that in the climax of the game becomes a kind of chant.

Of course, the analog between Russ and the crowd is not perfect—the chant Russ repeats is entirely discernible in signification whereas that voiced by DeLillo’s crowd is not—but nevertheless the broadcaster and the crowd share another conspicuous similarity: the shared exercise of a capacious voice. Immediately in the prologue, the narrator challenges the

125 DeLillo, Underworld 42.
126 DeLillo, Underworld 42, 43.
assumption of the voice as distinctive of individuated selfhood. Stating, “He speaks in your voice, American,” hollowing the voice to make space for more than one and including both beneath the umbrella of a collective identity, the line that opens the prologue opens with it the opportunity for the voice to speak a collective experience. In light of this opening, it is crucial to note that every subsequent use of the word voice in the prologue comes in connection with either the crowd as collective subject or Russ speaking of them and on their behalf. As we have seen earlier, the rhythm of the crowd noise rises like a “chambered voice” from the underbelly of the stadium, but it is also Russ who owns a load-bearing voice—introduced as “the voice of the Giants,” he must “save the voice,” his producer tells him, because it is his “pulsing voice on the radio” that functions as the node of connection for fans citywide. Both inclusive vessel and thread that seams, Russ’s voice serves the same purpose as that of the crowd. And when, finally, Thomson hits the homer and Russ commences the repetition that effects his coalescence, one must recall that which immediately precedes it:

Russ feels the crowd around him, a shudder passing through the stands, and then he is shouting into the mike and there is a surge of color and motion, a crash that occurs upward, stadium-wide, hands and faces and shirts, bands of rippling men and he is straight shouting, his voice has a power he’d thought long gone—it may lift the top of his head like a cartoon rocket.

The crowd in the stands condenses into that many-limbed collection of reassembled part-objects and sound that one finds so commonly in DeLillo’s texts: the collective subject that has defined its shape. What is uncommon, however—at least in comparison with Mao II—is that Russ, the individual so long set apart, joins this crowd. And in joining Russ discovers his voice anew: the ecstasy of the fans in the stands, the voice of the broadcaster mediating it, and his repetition that

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127 DeLillo, Underworld 11.
128 DeLillo, Underworld 15, 27, 32.
directly follows, taken together, diminish the distance that separates crowd from ostensibly detached individual. In the same moment that the collected noise of the crowd condenses into a single voice, Russ’s own voice expands to include the power felt in the surrounding crowd. Caught off-guard in the telling of his narrative, Russ in this brief, spontaneous moment becomes joined at the voice with the swelling crowd: he finds himself responsible for, and helpless not to give, expression to the crowd’s experience.

If Bill’s boyhood memory represents the ideal of the detached, individual author giving life to a world entirely of his own creation and with it influencing the mass as object, then Russ’s ecstatic call of the ballgame represents precisely the opposite: the mediator of multiple texts, one among the crowd and even a crowd himself. In his final moments on air, in the midst of the noise all about him, Russ reaches a state loosed from signification. Out of the repetition of his phrase, recently concluded, Russ “raises a pure shout, wordless, a holler from the old days… The thing comes jumping right out of him, a jubilation, it might be heyyy-ho or it might be oh-boyyyyy shouted backwards or it might be something else entirely—hard to tell when they don’t use words.”¹³⁰ A shout raised from some primordial depth to meet the explosive sound filling the air about him, a thing unclassifiable by words and so alien to his sense of self as individual that the shout is never even phrased as his.¹³¹ This is the individual subject in disintegration, unbounded by the signifier and momentarily woven into the greater collective subject—and the whole process happens on air. Russ manages that which would seem impossible: the expression of the inarticulable experience of the crowd.

¹²⁹ DeLillo, *Underworld* 42.
¹³⁰ DeLillo, *Underworld* 43.
Conclusion

These two ideals of the novelist thus contrasted—that of Russ as the voice of the crowd and that of Bill as an autonomous author—can be found encapsulated in the flourish of a single, ambiguous phrase in *Mao II*. At one point, in the midst of a heated argument with George, Bill aphorizes in defense of his vocation. Defending the value of the novel in the face of claims made about its inefficacy, defending it against George and the homogenized state for which George advocates, and defending it even against his own building insecurities, Bill answers: “Do you know why I believe in the novel? It’s a democratic shout.”

It is a stirring rejoinder, an assertion that carries the gloried air of a last stand and effectively ends the day’s dispute between them—but the statement’s rhetorical power does little to diminish its ambiguity. For all the eloquence of Bill’s avowal, it remains an open question just what the phrase “democratic shout” precisely means. It is here, within the space of this ambiguity, that DeLillo posits the place of the contemporary American novelist.

Bill, for one, proceeds immediately to attempt to explain himself. He clarifies: “Anybody can write a great novel, one great novel, almost any amateur off the street. I believe this, George… The spray of talent, the spray of ideas. One thing unlike another, one voice unlike the next.”

Bill’s idea of the novel is a celebration of the individual—the platform for the expression of that which separates one from the rest. Against the encroaching threat of the crowd, he elevates the written words of the novel as so many means for the fortification of the individual subject in signification. In the distance afforded by uniqueness Bill seeks salvation; in

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131 Like the Moonie crowd in *Mao II*, which is described as “leaving behind all the banes and body woes,” Russ “[shouts] himself out of his sore throat, out of every malady and pathology and complaint” (*Mao II* 8, *Underworld* 43).

this salvation Bill seeks return to that purely creative, autonomous act that he recalls but can no longer recognize in his writing. For Bill, the novel marks the promise of the individual’s redemptive detachment—the position apart that makes an author out of the individual and an object of influence out of the crowd.

Russ, on the other hand, represents the enactment of a very different kind of “democratic shout.” His is the single voice made vast to include the multitude, or the many sounds made singular in a voice forged from repetition—or, what’s more, the fact that in the emergence of the collective subject any distinction between these two voices is rendered insignificant. Drawn into relation with Bill and DeLillo as crafters of narrative, Russ himself is a composite, a subject so traversed by texts that even solitude would make him no less of a crowd. But, of course, Russ is not solitary—he is surrounded by the crowd of fans for whom he speaks and who speak through him in the climactic moment that he expresses their ecstasy. His is a shout that reaches beyond signification and into the alarming and alien encounter that points toward his own dissolution as individual subject; his is a shout that, unlike Bill’s, brings him closer to the crowd, even makes him one among its coalesced many.

Somewhere between these two conceptions of the “democratic shout” is triangulated the position of the contemporary American novelist, a position in which DeLillo is necessarily implicated. Bill’s and Russ’s conceptions of the shout—the former the shouts of autonomous persons and the latter the collective shout of the people—mark the two impossible poles delimiting the space allotted the novelist. Or, to describe it more accurately, they represent diametrical opposites—for though these two positions may be distant from each other, they circle

DeLillo, Mao II 159.
one another, their orbit dictated by the crowd that stands at the center. Bill’s ideal author seeks perfect autonomy, measuring its extent by the extent of his distance from the crowd—an impossible pursuit because the very idealization of the author as radical individual counterintuitively encourages his incorporation. Russ’s inclusive voice manages to blur the boundaries between crowd and individual by escaping signification in an utterly alien utterance—an impossible pursuit for DeLillo, as well, as long as he must write using signification to describe it. It is thus the nebulous middle distance that the novelist must occupy in relation to the crowd—neither entirely detached as Bill wishes nor enfolded as Russ finds himself briefly.

The task of the novelist, then, is to reside on the frontier line of the subject’s outer boundaries, straddling that hazy space between individual and collective and always recognizing one by the menace it poses to the other—either of dissolution, to the individual, or of objectification, to the crowd. It is a delicate dance that the novelist must perform: a gesture beyond the limits of the individual, still couched in the web of signification that supports it. Throughout it all, DeLillo’s collective subject recurs, that ambivalent promise within and against which the novelist comes to be defined.
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