ABSTRACT

Link, Peter Charles. “Life After Death Guaranteed with Bonus Coupons”: Seduction, Tyranny, and Mass Culture in Don DeLillo’s Fiction. (Under the direction of John Thompson.)

The purpose of this thesis is to study the viability of individuality in a fast-paced, consumer-driven, late capitalist society in light of Don DeLillo’s White Noise (1984) and Mao II (1991). One way of considering American late capitalism is to treat it as a mass movement with striking similarities to more overtly tyrannical mass movements like Nazism and Mooneyism. DeLillo makes such comparisons in White Noise and Mao II, and his fiction ultimately suggests that an unchecked late capitalist consumer culture is frighteningly capable of not only tyranny, but also of liquidating individuality. A more acute analysis of the methodology employed by mass movements can be made using a Frankfurt School approach. Theodor Adorno’s essay, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” offers a useful framework for studying how mass movements are able to seduce, manipulate, tyrannize, and incorporate individuals. Adorno argues that Nazism depended on knowledge of certain psychological desires to seduce individuals. This essay argues that the American consumer culture uses similar methods to seduce individuals by not only employing psychological weapons, but also by taking advantage of a highly systematized technological apparatus whose development has coincided with the unprecedented rise of the American consumer culture.
“LIFE AFTER DEATH GUARANTEED WITH BONUS COUPONS”:
SEDUCTION, TYRANNY, AND MASS CULTURE
IN DON DELILLO’S FICTION

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Introduction

Don DeLillo

In *White Noise* and *Mao II*, Don DeLillo ponders the question of whether or not individuality is possible in a late capitalist society. Certainly, mass movements like Nazi Fascism or Mooneyism have no room for the individual, and DeLillo fears that an unchecked late capitalist society similarly threatens individuality. In *White Noise*, DeLillo draws a comparison between Nazism and American late capitalism. His central character, Jack Gladney, is professor, department head, and founder of a cutting edge Hitler Studies department at an otherwise unremarkable liberal arts college in the American Midwest. This gives Jack a unique knowledge of Nazi methodology, ideology, and crowd psychology. Jack lives and breathes Hitler; his fascination with Hitler has made him the most accomplished authority on Nazism in the American, and perhaps global, academic community. However, Jack lives in a world where the seductiveness of Nazism comes to be represented by the seemingly innocuous American society around him. Products, in *White Noise*, don’t wait casually on store shelves until needed. Instead, they scream out, they infiltrate, they permeate, and they ultimately seduce individuals. In short, they are no more innocuous than Nazi propaganda because they have the same ability to seduce and rally individuals to an irrational cause. Ultimately, DeLillo
depicts an America governed by elaborate systems of imagery and marketing information, all aimed at organizing individuals into masses so that they might be more efficiently exploited by capitalistic enterprises.

DeLillo’s representation of such systems is particularly intriguing because many of his seemingly comical examples of the American system at work foreshadow the potential danger in the misuse of these systems. Jack Gladney’s experiences with the SIMUVAC man in *White Noise* pit Jack in a witty conversation with a representative of this system who knows more about Jack than even Jack does. Though the tone of the passage suggests comic relief, Jack’s witticisms faintly mask a more serious sense of foreboding. DeLillo is revealing a real concern that such databases of information could be used to exploit individuals. In 1990’s America, telemarketing firms commonly buy such information and organize it into vast reserves of information that they then might use to make virtual composites of their customers. They input phone bills to see to whom and where and when you place calls. They gather credit card bills to see what, where, and how much you buy. These companies commonly use such information in order to better serve their customers. But DeLillo fears that such a system that is left unchecked is capable of using its vast reserves of information to exploit individuals. In a system left to grow unchecked, DeLillo fears that individuals risk having their identities dominated by “the total sum of [their] data” (141).

What makes American late capitalism potentially dangerous is that its development has coincided with the development of technologies which seem
to alienate, to and ultimately marginalize, individuals. Such technology empowers those with access and control over it. In *White Noise*, Jack feels a certain sense of powerlessness when confronted with various representations of this technological apparatus, including common examples such as Automated Teller Machines and less common ones such as SIMUVAC computers. He feels powerless because the technology alienates him from his identity. DeLillo’s real concern, then, is that in a late capitalist society, individuals are at a disadvantage when dealing with corporations who have control over not only information, but also the technology which organizes that information.

Indeed, such technology is designed to serve modern mass movements. In *White Noise*, DeLillo compares late capitalism to Nazi fascism; in *Mao II*, he switches his focus to Mooneyism. As in his earlier comparison between late capitalism and Nazi fascism, both late capitalism and Mooneyism rely on the seductiveness of mass psychology and have as their goal the liquidation of individuality. In *Mao II*, DeLillo focuses on the image-driven American consumer culture, and suggests that the proliferation of such imagery works to marginalize the individual so that he might more easily be seduced by mass culture. The proliferation of powerful, repetitious, and sensationalized imagery in the American marketplace trains individuals to accept and understand such imagery, and ultimately fabricates a mass identity which works constantly to compromise individuality. The characters who survive in *Mao II* are often those who learn to engage mass society; however,
they do so at the expense of their individuality. Stubborn individualists, such as Bill Gray, perish because they are unable or unwilling to let their identities disappear into the imagery of mass movements. In Nazi Germany, individuality was impossible. DeLillo fears that American late capitalism, if left to grow unchecked, might become capable of placing similar restrictions on individuality.

Chapter 1

In Chapter 1, I analyze the psychology of mass movements based on Theodor Adorno’s argument in “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” in which he explains that in order for the transformation of a society into a fascist state to occur, individuals must be willing to cede their individuality to a group mentality and identify with a mass movement. Individuals are willing to do so on such a staggering scale – for example in Nazi Germany – because all individuals have a psychological need to join mass movements, and they often will do so regardless of consequences.

In *White Noise*, I argue that DeLillo compares the Nazi mass movement to American late capitalism. Similarly, for Adorno, late capitalism has the potential to become as totalizing a system as Nazi fascism. DeLillo suggests that both systems are potentially capable of completing the liquidation of individuality by systematically seducing individuals with a generous barrage of repetitious, sensational, and glamorous images.
According to Adorno, individuals have a subconscious desire to join mass movements. In Nazi Germany, it was this psychological need which the fascist state’s propaganda campaign was designed to exploit. By promising inclusion in a sense of identity which was vastly larger than any single individual, Adorno suggests that the fascist state seduces individuals, ultimately convincing them to give up their individuality and yield any claims to their personal sovereignty and individual identity. In Chapter 1, I argue that DeLillo presents a similar situation in *White Noise*. DeLillo offers American late capitalism as a tyrannical system which preys on the individual’s psychological desire to cede control over his identity so that he might instead identify with the more comfortable prospect of a prefabricated identity which fits more easily into the modern consumer culture. Most importantly, the corporate entities which control imagery in a late capitalist society have distinct goals in mind, including profit and corporate efficiency. These goals are not necessarily in the best interest of individuals; that is, although corporate entities offer the comfort of mass culture to individuals, they ultimately have ulterior socioeconomic motives which harm, rather than save, individuals. Though individuality is dangerously compromised in such a society, DeLillo ultimately suggests that knowledgeable individuals might overcome the seductiveness of a consumer culture by learning to decode its imagery. However, such knowledge has its price – those who would live without the glamour of the consumer culture often live as hermits and outcasts on the outer fringe of
American society, and even then, they are often as subject to late capitalist imagery as anyone else.

Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, I resume the argument that late capitalism presents a threat to individuality. In *Mao II*, DeLillo depicts a fiercely image-driven consumer culture which clearly depends on an emerging technology to deliver its messages. Instead of Nazism, DeLillo turns to other disturbing mass movements, such as Mooneyism and Maoism. DeLillo’s characterization of the Moonie mass movement, however, is really a condemnation of the overzealous nature of late capitalism in America. DeLillo believes there is a certain tyranny in the “re-education” methods employed by the Unification Church; he also believes there is a similar tyranny at work in the methods employed by American mainstream society to seduce its citizens. The Moonie mass movement, like Nazism, attempts to accomplish the liquidation of the individual by seducing him or her with sensational imagery and offering inclusion in a particular sense of mass identity. The Unification Church is known to kidnap members, demand their unwavering loyalty, and ultimately require their unconditional submission to Sun Myung Moon’s leadership; in return, they are promised freedom from their individualistic desires, inclusion in a sweeping vision of world domination, and heavenly redemption. Late capitalism makes similar attempts on the sovereignty of the individual by promising satisfaction through inclusion in a vastly powerful and expanding
consumer culture. In doing so, late capitalism employs a highly systemitized technology of “mechanical,” or electronic, reproduction which works constantly to separate an individual from control over his identity.

Though this separation from one’s identity happens on many levels to all individuals, it is most acute for Bill Gray, DeLillo’s strongest individual and author-figure, who refuses to allow his individuality to be compromised by the imagery of the marketplace. His solution, however, is to hide in seclusion and refuse to publish new work. For Bill, publishing is one way that individuals submit to the tyranny of the marketplace, and so he stubbornly resists such forces. Clearly, DeLillo believes that late capitalism marginalizes individuals and authors. But the alternative to the late capitalist consumer culture, for DeLillo, is for Bill to engage another type of tyranny – that which is offered by international terrorists. DeLillo believes that authors – and individuals of any type – are only virile when they are dangerous, or capable of materially affecting the real world. However, in a world dominated by the sensational imagery of the consumer culture, authors lose their ability to communicate meaningfully with the masses. Frustrated by the novel, Bill believes he can “write” by entering the world of global terrorism and trying to affect the world on a level which is similarly dominated by vast and sensationalized images. Bill’s anonymous death, however, on a nondescript ferry in the Mediterranean Sea suggests the absurdity of such a belief. For DeLillo, no matter how ineffectual writers become in an image-driven society, movements which stress large-scale violence and tyranny are not acceptable alternatives. In an
image-driven world that resorts to totalizing systems – be they Nazism, Mooneyism, Maoism, terrorism, or runaway late capitalism – DeLillo’s fear is that there is no space left for individuality.

Critical Approach

This argument draws on the Frankfurt School’s analysis of the interpretation of mass movements and individual psychology, as well as its critique of the psycho-social dynamics of late capitalism. The work I lean on most is Theodore Adorno’s “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda” (1951). In this essay, Adorno offers a framework for evaluating the psychology, motives, and methodology employed by mass movements. His argument revolves mostly around the Nazi mass movement, but his ideas work well as a framework to comment upon its implications for late capitalist America. Adorno theorizes that mass movements specialize in exploiting the individual’s subconscious psychological desire to abandon his individuality and instead allow himself to be consumed by what Adorno calls “leader imagery.” Mass movements, in offering one version or another of leader imagery, seduce individuals into ceding control over their identities to the tyranny offered by those who initiate or control mass movements. Adorno’s theory provides a sufficient framework to analyze late capitalism in terms of several mass movements offered by DeLillo for comparison, including Nazism in *White Noise* and Mooneyism in *Mao II*. 
If the psychology of mass movements can by studied by using Adorno’s essay as a framework, then Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) serves well as a framework for evaluating the technology which makes the propagation of imagery in a late capitalist society possible. Benjamin suggests that the technology which affects art and drives late capitalism has the potential to liquidate the individual by separating the artist from his art. For Benjamin, this is a positive and necessary process, as a piece of art which is separated from traditional authorship will ultimately be less powerful as a tool to exploit the masses. DeLillo, however, believes that such a process, if left unchecked, might signal the death of authorship and the end of literature. Clearly, Benjamin’s conclusions diverge from DeLillo’s sense of the potential danger inherent in any concept of “authenticity”; if there is potential for authenticity in art, then DeLillo relishes it; he believes that it is the author’s place in society to exercise such power, and that the exercise of such power is what makes authorship an expression of individuality. What is most useful in Benjamin’s essay, however, is that it serves as a useful framework for establishing how a work of art is separated from its authorial tradition when it is subjected to the technology of the late capitalist marketplace. In light of Benjamin’s analysis of the function of technology in a late capitalist society, it is reasonable to reevaluate the question of where this leaves the individual. For DeLillo, an individual separated from his art is not an individual at all – he is either dead, impotent, or effectively exiled from his society. DeLillo’s conclusion, then, is that the
same technology which Benjamin believed would liberate individuals is ultimately capable of destroying individuality.
Chapter 1: *White Noise*

*White Noise* as a Comparison Between Fascism and Late Capitalism

In order to provide an analysis of DeLillo’s *White Noise*, I’ll begin by discussing the how the work of Frederic Jameson, Theodor Adorno, and Michel Foucault provide a useful framework for discussing the limitations placed on individuals in a modern consumer culture. Citing Ernest Mandel, Frederic Jameson describes the modern American system as a “Late Capitalist” one: “a purer stage of capitalism than any of the moments that preceded it” (Jameson 64). Jameson is referring to a system run by an overwhelming consumer culture, a vast capitalistic enterprise which constantly invades the space and freedom of the individual in new and creative ways. American late capitalism encroaches on the space of the individual in ways which are seductive, relentless, and yet seem natural as they occur. Such a system thrives on the technology of a mass market, and preys on the individual’s psychological desire to identify with that mass market. In “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” Theodor Adorno offers a theory for why individuals are so willing to abandon their individual freedoms in favor of mass movements offered by totalizing systems. Adorno uses Nazi Germany as his example of a totalizing system, but his theory of fascist propaganda provides a useful framework for exploring how western capitalism functions as an equally totalizing system. In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo uses
Jack Gladney and his Hitler Studies Department to make a similar comparison. While Adorno concludes that Capitalism is capable of completing the “liquidation of the individual,” DeLillo acknowledges that such a conflict exists, yet seems to hold onto the notion that there may still a place for the individual in America. Still, such a notion is problematic, as evidenced by DeLillo’s use of satire; DeLillo’s most individualistic characters – Murray Siskand, for example – are portrayed in ways that make them comical and ridiculous. DeLillo’s use of Gladney to compare Nazi Fascism to American late capitalism certainly points to DeLillo’s concern over the individual’s future in America. Yet, characters such as Murray show that DeLillo believes that a knowledge of the motives and methods of the consumer culture might somehow help individual individuals to see through the complex imagery of the late capitalist consumer culture. Knowledge and power, then, are clearly linked to any understanding of individuality in America – a premise which Michel Foucault would certainly agree with. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault suggests not only that power and knowledge are inseparable, but also that the exercise of such power makes individuality possible (175). For DeLillo, the individual’s access to knowledge and power are key to his survival. Totalizing systems which might block such access, such as Hitler’s Fascism, “tend toward death” according to DeLillo (26). That is, totalizing systems kill the individual by depriving him of access to his own identity. Yet even as DeLillo compares fascism to late capitalism, he offers participation – i.e. the exercise of power/knowledge – in the consumer culture as a way of staving off death by
using this participation as a way of preserving one’s individuality. Murray’s ability to decode and resist the seductiveness of late capitalism, evidenced in part by his use of “supermarket brand” products, suggests that a knowledgeable consumer might still maintain a sense of individuality in a late capitalist society. However, DeLillo’s message is ultimately ambiguous, because even individuals who do manage to gain potentially powerful knowledge seem helpless to materially change the American system.

American late capitalism relies on the propagation of such ideologies as freedom, democracy, and individuality. Such ideologies suggest that an individual has the freedom to think, act, and live independently from outside control, and free from excessive influence or interference. They suggest that systems of government are subject to the will of the individual, and not the other way around. However subject they are to laws and customs, Americans have an almost mythical belief in one’s personal freedom. However, for DeLillo, Americans live in the age of late capitalism, whose systems are never dormant, but always growing, changing, and expanding by developing new and creative ways to seduce the consumer; the system encroaches on the space of the individual; it threatens one’s personal freedom and individuality by persuading the individual to buy into the system. For Jameson, late capitalism breeds systems of standardization in the course of generating profit, control over its citizens, and a stable corporate efficiency. For DeLillo, the power structure in such a system exists as a web of extensive, interconnected systems and institutions which include the likes of government, law
enforcement, academia, medicine, business, and science. These systems work subtly to incorporate the individual by creating for him an identity which serves the interests of corporate institutions.

People in America do not, in general, spend their lives imprisoned under tyrannical regimes, or under the threat of a brutal and unchecked police force. There are no mass executions, relatively few unlawful arrests; moreover, America is generally considered to be a wealthy society. Tyranny, fascism, and totalitarianism often seem irrelevant to American life. What DeLillo suggests in *White Noise* is that what we do have in America is a form of tyranny that exists within our consumer culture. The novel compares violent Fascist regimes with our consumer culture. Nazi Germany relied on the seductiveness of Hitler’s propaganda machine; people taken in by such campaigns flocked by the thousands to an irrational cause. In America, people respond similarly to mass marketing campaigns. Late capitalism relies on a tendency for individuals to use their purchasing power as a means to join mass movements: in America, individuals construct identities based upon what they buy, what they eat, what they wear, what they drive, and where they live. As Adorno suggests, individuals have a psychological need to be a member of a larger group. This psychological need exists equally under each system.

Nazi Germany violently and systematically organized people into ethnic and religious groups. Late capitalism also depends upon, and encourages, the existence of such large, easily identifiable groups. Such a system, then, encourages the growth of institutions that can quickly and effectively
categorize its consumers. Our numerous businesses and financial institutions, closely governed by various cultural and federal institutions, accomplish this quite effectively. Through complex processes involving vast amounts of market research, masses of people are organized into demographic categories, such as “children under the age of seven,” “middle class adults aged 18 to 25,” or “wealthy Americans aged 52 to seventy.” It is these artificial designations to which products are marketed. Corporations create brand names – eerily artificial creations which DeLillo litters his novels with – that create “brand loyalty” within these consumer categories. Successful product marketing, then, involves not only good products and corporate efficiency, but also a society which can be willingly broken down into moldable consumer categories.

One thing which concerns Delillo is the ways that individuals often fail to resist such categorization, but instead allow, encourage, and even relish it. Historically, this phenomenon has been explained with such catch-phrases as “keeping up with the Jones,” but what is most interesting about it is that individual consumers seem to use their buying power intentionally not to benefit directly from the purchase of a particular product, but rather to become members of a particular category of people. That is, by identifying with the product that they buy, people essentially create an identity which is not purely individualistic, but is instead an attempt to identify with a larger group of people. Members of such a society are not only recognized by what they buy; they even recognize themselves by what they buy. DeLillo fears, then, that
identity in America is often inseparable from artificially constructed consumer categories.

In American society, people are not literally herded into consumer categories at gunpoint. Wittingly or otherwise, we submit to such categorization. Americans are not forced into identifying with larger groups or products; we choose to identify with such outside forces. DeLillo is interested in trying to explain why we so easily choose to identify with such forces. Part of the equation is most certainly the responsibility of corporations who wish to profit from the American population in as efficient a manner as possible; they therefore develop complex marketing schemes aimed at specific consumer groups which are designed to literally seduce the individual, to persuade the individual to identify with (and purchase) their product. But if it is to be accepted that Americans submit willingly to such categorization, then corporate profitability cannot be the only motive for the existence of such consumer categories. The other reason for such submission, then, must be explained by something within the individual that can only be satisfied by inclusion in a mass movement.

In “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” Adorno acknowledges the conflict between individuality and a modern mass society:

The straightforward comparison of modern mass formations with biological phenomena can hardly be regarded as valid since the members of contemporary masses are at least prima facie individuals, the children of liberal, competitive and individualistic society, and conditioned to maintain themselves as independent, self-sustaining units; they are continuously admonished to be “rugged” and warned
against surrender…[Freud] tries to find out which psychological forces result in the transformation of individuals into a mass. (121)

Adorno suggests that for the transformation of a society into a fascist state to occur, individuals must be willing cede their individuality to a group mentality and identify with a mass movement. This is not a forced acquiescence or an instinctual “herding” reaction. For Adorno, fascist movements do not begin with the common trappings of fascist regimes – brutal police forces, executions, and almost random violence. Though the cause of mass movements is ultimately sociopolitical or socioeconomic, there is also a psychological component of mass movements that makes them feasible. The individual, in buying into a mass movement – whether it is aimed toward product identity or political propaganda – satisfies a basic libidinal need for “gratification through identification” with that mass movement (Adorno 135). In order to achieve this sense of gratification, the individual willingly, if unwittingly, cedes his individuality to the group mentality: “The fascist community of the people corresponds exactly to Freud’s definition of a group as being ‘a number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego’” (126). For Adorno, mass movements are possible because the individual is willing to forego the personal demands made upon him by his own ego and instead accept as his own the strength and seductiveness of a collective ego. The introduction of a psychological aspect to mass culture is important to an understanding of the seductive workings of consumerism in American society.
Adorno appears to be talking about the seemingly irrational successes of fascist regimes – such as Hitler’s in Nazi Germany – but he makes it clear that he is just as concerned with mass movements in general which might occur in late capitalist societies. When we talk about issues such as consumerism and standardization in America, we are certainly talking about mass movements. The particulars might not be as overt as the terror of Nazi Germany, but the late capitalist system exploits the same psychological need of the individual to be a member of a group. “The narcissistic gain provided by fascist propaganda is obvious. It suggests continuously and sometimes in rather devious ways, that the follower, simply by belonging to the in-group, is better, higher and purer than those who are excluded” (130). At the same time, “the objective aims of fascism are largely irrational in so far as they contradict the material interests of great numbers of those whom they try to embrace” (134). When a consumer buys a product in America, he buys his way into a mass identity, a propaganda not conceptually unlike a fascist propaganda. And he does so even though the overt benefits are minimal. Fascist propaganda is damaging, even fatal, to individuality. Consumerism also works in ways that are contrary to individuality, in that the product it offers often costs money and does little to materially enrich the life of an individual (aside from serving as a rite of passage into a mass movement or identity).

Consumerism and fascism are both manipulators of the individual’s psychological need to be part of a mass consciousness. For Adorno, the individual is thus “exploited by the forces which promote [fascism] for entirely
nonpsychological reasons of self interest” (135). The fascist leader has sociopolitical and socioeconomic motives that are most often not in the best interest of the individual. In late capitalist societies, corporations have distinct capitalistic goals (i.e. profit) that similarly have little to do with the interest of the individual. The psychology of the masses, then, is a tool of not only the fascist leader, but also the late capitalist leader.

One characteristic which seems to concern DeLillo lies in the consumer culture’s chaotic organization. In Nazi Germany, Hitler was the clear leader of the fascist ideology. But in late capitalist societies, such a focal point is more difficult to establish. In America, the president, though often credited as the leader of the system, has no direct control over the marketing images that buy and sell inclusion in the American myth. Even Adorno suggests that “such motivation is systematically controlled and absorbed by social mechanisms which are directed from above,” without ever elaborating on the word “above” (136). While the “top” is fairly simple to locate in most fascist regimes, its equivalent is not so recognizable in late capitalist consumer cultures. In such systems, power is held at many levels simultaneously. Though there are certainly those with considerably more power than others, there is nobody who is the equivalent of Adorno’s omnipotent fascist leader. Instead, such “omnipotence” is spread throughout a complex network of institutions which exist at all levels of society, including the government, its laws and agencies of enforcement, the penal system, all academic institutions, the medical profession, our public and municipal authorities, public and private
corporations, large households, and even – to a certain extent – private individuals. Instead of the ideal of perfection being embodied in a single fascist leader, in late capitalist societies a similar ideal is embodied in the more elusive notion of “the system.”

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault suggests that discipline works in a similar way, in that it cannot be localized in a single individual or institution. Although the penal system is perhaps the most overt representation of the functioning of power relations in a disciplined society, the use of power in disciplining the individual is by no means exclusive to the penal system.

...power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the “privilege,” acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions...power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who “do not have it”; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them...these relations go right down into the depths of society; [they] are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes...they are not univocal; they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations. (Foucault 174)

Foucault refers to not a single source of power, but rather to a more elusive and nearly infinite system of “micropowers” (174). In this sense, power over the individual in a late capitalist society is held not at the place of a single dominant position, but rather at every level, and by every individual. For Foucault, it is this access to power that actually makes the individual; it is this access to power and knowledge that makes individuality possible.
In *White Noise*, DeLillo investigates such power relations in a late capitalist consumer culture, and is ultimately concerned with their effect on the individual. DeLillo uses Jack Gladney, head of the department of Hitler Studies at the small, unremarkable “College-on-the-Hill,” to make a comparison between Nazi fascism and the American consumer culture. Jack exists in a world which is packed with an abundance of cultural icons in the form of advertisements, radio commercials, news reports, silly rituals and traditions, and most conspicuously, products with brand names. DeLillo believes that these cultural icons are not dormant, impotent, or non-threatening. Rather, they are seen to be seductive, dangerous, invasive, and controlling; they subtly encroach on the freedom and the space of the individual. Such icons are powerful due to their seductiveness; they can appear trivial and harmless, but in reality have a deep psychological impact on the individual. Such icons take advantage of the individual’s psychological fear of being alone, of not being a member of his society. Jack and Babette are acutely aware of this fear; one way it manifests itself is through their obsessive fear of death, and their fear of being left alone should the other one die. Moreover, Jack is obsessed with developing a personality which belongs to and is important to his community. This is one way that Jack “staves off death.” He creates and adopts the “J.A.K. Gladney” image in order to belong to the academic world, and in order to create a sense of belonging that is unassailable. DeLillo recognizes the individual’s psychological need to belong to his community, and one way he allows his characters to express that is to have them fabricate
false identities which might work to secure their places in society. Without the assurance of a place in society, Jack Gladney fears that he will be effectively dead. The irony lies in the fact that by assuming a false identity, Jack is ignoring his inner self, whatever that might be; he loses his identity by clinging to a manufactured image which he believes will secure his place in the world.

Jack’s method of staving off death, for DeLillo, is ultimately what causes him to lose control over his identity. Similarly, when Jack embraces the consumer world, he is preoccupied with his membership in society: he makes his purchases in the mall in order to assure his existence, and he confidently withdraws money from an anonymous automated teller machine, hauntingly aware that a faceless machine has the power to acknowledge his electronic place in the elusive network of institutions that makes life in American society possible. The common theme throughout Jack’s encounters with the late capitalist consumer culture is that of belonging. To be alive, for DeLillo, is to be a member of the mass consumer culture. But this message is ambiguous for DeLillo, as membership in a consumer culture also implies a loss of individuality; it implies that one’s free will, and even one’s existence, is controlled from a place outside of the individual. Ultimately, one must – as Murray often can – learn to decode such cultural icons, and learn to live without them (or learn to live amongst them), or at least to respond to them “innocently” (51). Murray is DeLillo’s answer to J.A.K. Gladney; his ability to see through what others cannot penetrate – the most photographed barn in America, for example – and his enthusiasm for products without name brands
is representative of DeLillo’s hope that it might be possible to function in society without being overcome by the powerful consumer culture that the individual exists within. However, DeLillo satirizes Murray to an extent that suggests that DeLillo has little faith in knowledge as a truly useful answer to the late capitalist system. As Foucault suggests, power relations exist at all levels of everyday life; as such, knowledge of such power transactions – such as one’s understanding of the implications of the loaded phrase *Toyota Corolla* – is a prerequisite to resisting the seductiveness of the consumer culture. However, individuals who lack the capital to apply their knowledge, ultimately, for DeLillo, have little real power.

For DeLillo, purchasing power is a passkey into American society. One does not buy a bag of *Waffelos* or a *Toyota Corolla* primarily for nourishment, enjoyment, or one’s transportation needs. These practical considerations surely exist, but they exist secondary to the image that comes packaged with such products. One is seduced by the flashy packaging that surrounds a bag of chips, and one buys a *Toyota Corolla* in order to belong to the group of people who are part of society by virtue of owning a nifty midsize economy car with power windows and dent-resistant side impact paneling. When College-on-the-Hill resumes its semester, station wagons loaded with such societal props are the main attraction:

> This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies and laws, tells the parents they are a collection of like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation. (DeLillo 4)
What DeLillo is acknowledging here is the individual’s psychological need to belong to a group larger than oneself – in this case, a liberal, upper-middle class white professional elite. Herein lies the contradiction between individuality and mass culture. Such identities are hardly individualistic. Instead, they are wrapped up in a psychological desire to belong. But the belonging, in itself, is not the greatest danger of such a system. The danger, rather, lies in the fact that the consumer culture, as a matter of its daily existence, seduces people into believing that they can buy their way into such a society; in fact, DeLillo believes that people can and do buy into such roles, but ultimately, the price they pay is their individuality. The parents who deliver their children to College on the Hill clearly succeed in buying their way into the societal roles which they desire. But for DeLillo, their success is tempered by a feeling that in gaining their status they have ceded their individuality to the power of a manufactured image. Moreover, the thousands of businessmen and executives and advertisers who run such a consumer culture seduce people into believing that buying one’s way into a consumer culture is the only way one might gain access. Advertisers, here, take advantage of the individual’s psychological need to belong, but do so for reasons which are entirely “nonpsychological.” Advertisers have not individuals’ psychological needs in mind, but are rather concerned with their own socioeconomic goals and priorities. Those who create and control the images – such as the prototypical college professor which Jack emulates, and the upper-middle
class professionals which his students’ parents emulate – do not have individuals’ best interests in mind; this makes American late capitalism dangerous for any individual.

Throughout *White Noise*, one’s ability to purchase fiercely marketed images is directly related to one’s psychological need to belong. And, part of the marketing scheme is the illusion that belonging to this cultural advertising scheme is a guaranteed method for staving off death. Murray reminds us that “here we don’t die, we shop” (38). And Jack, feeling disconnected and alone, acts accordingly when he confronts the cultural dumping ground known as the mall:

> I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it...I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgot existed. Brightness settled around me. We crossed from furniture to men’s wear, walking through cosmetics. Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors is security rooms. I traded money for goods. I was bigger than these sums. (84)

Jack is overwhelmed, seduced, by the marketing images that barrage him at the mall. The products he buys have no practical function beyond their ability to make him feel somehow included in the vast cultural system around him. DeLillo represents the mall as a literal palace (“mirrored columns,” etc.) designed intentionally and specifically to seduce the consumer, to make him believe that he can be a part of the life that seems to be a part of these products. The consumer culture offers the illusion that life exists not in
individuality, but rather in constructing an identity based on one's ability to engage the consumer culture, in spending money and buying empty products with powerful images. A front-page tabloid report – seemingly a medium that is far more deliberately incredulous than shopping mall propaganda – reports the same story: “Life After Death Guaranteed with Bonus Coupons” (142).

Power over belonging, life, and, death is held not only in the malls, but also at various other confrontation points. In one of many scenes where Babette and Jack obsess over death, they speculate, “I have trouble imagining death at that [upper-class] income level…Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands” (6). If life depends upon one’s ability to barter for a stable position in society, then Babette fears that her own lifestyle and income make it impossible to compete with the affluent classes of people. Life is purchasing power, and Babette, while comfortable, cannot choose any lifestyle she wishes. The fact that her own family is utterly non-traditional – DeLillo intentionally makes it difficult to track the multiple marriages and various step-children which make up the Gladney family – makes it doubly difficult for Babette to discern her own social role. She therefore looks instead to the promised satisfaction offered by the consumer culture.

Not only do Jack and Babette struggle to buy their way into the scripted roles that American society offers them; also, the roles they do play seem to be controlled from faraway places: Jack speculates that life is a matter of “documents changing hands” (6). The further implication of this passage is that a concept of “life” does not belong to the individual. Instead, Jack alludes to
the constantly changing, growing, invading “system” that holds sway over his and Babette’s lives (46). Jack experiences the same feeling when he approaches one of the newest, most familiar sites in modern American society:

In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all that more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies. (46)

Jack leaves this confrontation point gracious, alive, and in a state of belonging to the system. He knows it to be true because it is what the machine reports. Jack’s identity comes not from any pure sense of individuality, but rather from his sense of being part of a vast financial and ideological system which includes him not on his own terms, but on its own terms. Jack’s survival is tenuous at best. He is at the mercy of a system which he does not believe he has the power to control or affect. Jack is in accord with the system for now, but DeLillo makes it clear that should he find himself not in accord with the system, his life as he knows it can end. Such a threat is evidenced by the “deranged person” who is roughly escorted from the bank. DeLillo intentionally
suggests a hidden danger in Jack's ecstasy, in his discovery that everything is in accord, primarily because Jack does not seem to realize the danger in having his identity tied to such an unpredictable system. The language DeLillo uses shows this conflict: he compares the terribly deranged man who is led from the bank with a system which has the outward appearance of serenity: “The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies.” There is an element of seduction at work here that is clearly deceitful. As with Jack's experience at the mall, his own psychological well-being is not the motive of those who offer consumer products or banking services. This is why his position is tenuous. DeLillo believes that far more than money changes hands at malls and automatic teller machines; identities are formed, traded, and affirmed. As Adorno would point out, the neon faces on the banks and malls in America serve to disguise the socioeconomic and sociopolitical motives of those who own such businesses. Jack takes his money and breathes a sign of relief at having maintained his link to the system. But institutions in American society are both manipulative and exclusionary. Individuals like Jack only profit from the system so long as they are “in accord” with the system. Individuals who do not live in accord with the system – evidenced by the deranged man – are not recognized by the system, and are effectively dead to their society.

An individual's dependence on the system for signs of life and belonging is just as evident in times of crisis. DeLillo suggests that even when life and death are discussed on a more literal level, the nebulous systems of American culture are still in control. This is most apparent when Jack confronts
the “SIMUVAC” representative after having been exposed to the Airborne
Toxic Event:

[The SIMUVAC man] had access to data. I was prepared to be servile
and fawning… (139)

I wondered what he meant when he said he tapped into my history.
Where was it located exactly? Some state or federal agency, some
insurance company or credit firm or medical clearinghouse? What
history was he referring to? (140)

“I didn’t say it. The computer did. The whole system says it. It’s what we
call a massive data-base tally… It just means that you are the sum total
of your data. No man escapes that.” (141)

The data stored in automatic teller machines represents merely a small
fraction of the data that a modern late capitalist society uses to keep track of
its resources. Consumerism works on various levels. Data is collected, stored,
and used similarly at the “mall” level, the “banking” level, and the “crisis
management” level. Such systems of data consume individuality. They
incorporate the individual; they reduce him to the sum total of his data. For
DeLillo, a history of blind engagement with such a system leaves one
dangerously vulnerable to the system. DeLillo portrays Americans, in general,
as unprepared to deal with a late capitalist system designed to organize
individuals into various subsystems of its own. They are unable – or unwilling
– to decode the complex and deliberate imagery which threatens their
individuality by drawing them deeper into the system, by convincing them
(albeit falsely) that their identities lie in the superficial (and even “natural”)
spectacles which the system manufactures for their benefit. People’s general
inability to react to reorganization in the supermarket (at the end of the novel) is a sign that the opportunity for the individual to survive exists, but that people still desire their traditional patterns — the condiments in the condiment aisle and the tabloids in the racks near the checkout line. The community’s fascination with the elaborately sensational sunsets indicates that people will form themselves into groups to watch the spectacle, and not even ask the most important question: Natural? Manmade? Or does it no longer matter. DeLillo is ultimately concerned with the individual’s unwillingness to question, analyze, and understand the system. Consumers, for DeLillo, tragically refuse to see through the glitter of the American market. DeLillo clearly sympathizes with the individual’s plight, his need to satisfy a psychological need by accepting what is put before him; it’s clearly difficult to reveal to oneself that the seductive images attached to products are false images. If these are false images, then consumers are faced with a desire which cannot be fulfilled. To accept false images as true ones, then, is a very human thing to do. While submitting to the imagery of the mass market is clearly dangerous, resisting it entirely is nearly as tragic. Murray is the only character who seems to be able to see through the glitz and glamour of the supermarket. But, Murray is a hermit; he is queer, asocial, and ultimately alone. Yet, Murray doesn’t even seem to see the downside of such knowledge. Because Murray is so obsessed with his quest for knowledge, he has been rendered harmless because as an asocial member of society, he is even less likely to be capable of affecting any change in the late capitalist system. If this is the price of full
knowledge, then DeLillo seems unprepared to disassemble the system. Wholesale acceptance is unacceptable to DeLillo, but so is wholesale rejection.

As such a system takes form, DeLillo’s comparison of it to fascism becomes more viable. “How is Hitler?” Jack’s ex-wife asks. “Fine, solid, dependable.” Jack answers. For DeLillo, Nazi Fascism is a variation of the dynamics offered by American late capitalism. The violence and terror of Nazism is not as prevalent in American society, but for DeLillo, it exists in other, more devious ways, such as in the appeal and marketability of natural and man-made disasters. And in both everyday and crisis situations, individuals are just as subjected in late capitalist societies as people are in fascist societies. DeLillo certainly believes that the terrors of Nazism far surpassed anything that has occurred in America, but the tendencies of both systems to offer uncompromising, comfortable, and seemingly final truths (however impossible such truths may be) makes an unchecked late capitalist society a site of menace which is comparable to Hitler’s Nazi regime. DeLillo is not calling capitalism fascist; rather, he is suggesting that Americans’ willingness to submit to the spectacles offered by the consumer culture ultimately lead toward the end of individuality.

The ability of fascist and capitalist regimes to lead the masses toward death – literal or figurative – is what most concerns DeLillo. The most dangerous aspect of the comparison between late capitalism and fascism lies in both systems’ reliance on mass culture and crowd mentality. “Crowds came
to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out
death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face
dying alone” (73). As part of a lecture about Hitler’s rallies, Jack is alluding to a
psychological component that lures individuals to essentially irrational causes.
The American consumer culture courts crowds just as Nazism did. Both
systems offer false truths that promise to ward off death by fulfilling an innate
psychological need of the individual – the same psychological need discussed
by Freud and Adorno. But these are essentially false truths. They are truths
backed by corrupted motives, such as tyrannical rule in Nazi Germany and
unchecked profit and corporate efficiency in America. Neither system offers
the individual a pure or substantial identity, but rather a hollow, false sense of
gratification that comes, in the case of our consumer culture, with the
satisfaction of having bought a well-thought-of product.

The hollowness of the imagery associated with products in a consumer
culture concerns both DeLillo and Adorno; however, DeLillo clearly parts with
Adorno because he ultimately sympathizes with the very humanistic need for
individuals to belong – something Adorno would never accept. DeLillo’s
concern for the individual is real, yet tempered, in that he sees some value in
the consumer’s ability to pursue fulfillment through purchasing. While Jack’s
misadventures at the mall are tainted by the false imagery that seduces him,
he also leaves with at least a temporary feeling of fulfillment: “I traded money
for goods. I was bigger than these sums…I was the benefactor, the one who
dispenses gifts, bonuses, bribes” (84). There is a sense of irony here, but
there is also a sense of affirmation in Jack’s ability to engage the system. While DeLillo’s comparison of late capitalism to Nazi Fascism is viable, he clearly leaves some space for the individual, even if that space is tainted with consumer imagery. While Jack’s shopping extravaganza is perhaps DeLillo’s most literal example of an individual seduced by capitalist imagery, it is also an example of an individual who exits a consumer event feeling not violated, but fulfilled. Jack feels that he’s reaffirmed his place in society, as a consumer, as an American, as a father. He’s even doled out money to his family, and hence helped them to find similar fulfillment. Certainly, such fulfillment merely entrenches one in the late capitalist system, and in fact is one seductive method which such a system employs as it incorporates individuals. But DeLillo reveals some ambiguity here by portraying individuals who are able to profit – even if in seemingly minor ways – by using the system. Jack and his family help to create their identities by shopping. And Jack even more clearly benefits from such a system by creating his J.A.K Gladney image and using it to further the success of his Hitler Studies department. In *White Noise*, it is here where DeLillo sees some space for the individual to profit in America.

This, also, is where DeLillo parts from Adorno, where DeLillo rejects the idea that the complete liquidation of the individual has occurred in America. For DeLillo, the possibility for individuals to engage the system, and even to profit from it, are an indication that there is at least limited space for individuals to survive in America. However, DeLillo seems to indicate that this space is in danger of disappearing. The airborne toxic event, and the astonishingly
beautiful sunsets it's left in its aftermath, are an indication of the potential for late capitalist imagery to overwhelm individuals. There is a sense of ambiguity in the toxic event’s after-image; though it serves as a source of enjoyment for thousands of people, it also serves as a reminder that individuals are never truly served by a system which relies on such imagery.

DeLillo ends one chapter with this ambiguous phrase: “And the American mystery deepens” (60). For DeLillo, systemization and corporate efficiency cannot exist without the often queer and sometimes sensational conflict between such systems and individuals. That’s the American mystery, and that’s what DeLillo both fears and celebrates.
Chapter 2: Mao II

Mao II

If there is one clear link between White Noise and Mao II, it lies in DeLillo’s concern for the plight of the individual in a late capitalist, consumer-driven, mass society. In White Noise, DeLillo offers a world filled with brand names, flashy images, and weirdly seductive disaster television footage which is designed to prey on the psychological need to belong to a mass culture in order to seduce individuals into purchasing products, images, and ideas. DeLillo suggests that the institutions which support such a system, if left unchecked, are tyrannical, and he sees unsettling similarities between American late capitalism and Nazi fascism. In Mao II, DeLillo does not abandon these ideas, but he focuses more clearly on types of mass movements which should be easier for Americans to relate to in 1990’s America. While sixty-year-old Nazi marches and the threat of genocide can seem remote and irrelevant to many Americans, in showing the tyranny of the “Moonie” mass movement, DeLillo offers a more plausible metaphor for the violence, tyranny, and seductiveness of American capitalism; people involved in “cult” activities may live on the fringes of American society, but American television audiences remain transfixed by such images; the often shown footage of the doomed Branch Davidian religious compound in Waco, Texas is but one recent example. DeLillo uses this fascination to compare such mass
movements to the modern American system. If there is a tyranny, violence, and seductiveness in the Moonie mass movement, then DeLillo suggests that there is an even more sinister and widespread tyranny at work in contemporary American society.

Ironically, the key, for DeLillo, to analyzing mass movements in American society lies not in massive marches or violent government crackdowns, but rather in small, seemingly insignificant, everyday events. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney reinvigorates his sense of identity by simply shopping at the mall. DeLillo characterizes such an ordinary event as a major identity-building event, and as a victory for capitalism as a system of identity at the expense of individualism. In *Mao II*, Scott Martineau browses at a Manhatten bookstore, and in doing so reveals his own vulnerability to the seductiveness of a carefully designed mass market. Though this at first seems to be a rather harmless and ordinary event, DeLillo characterizes it as a political and highly erotic event aimed at seducing and ultimately incorporating the individual by convincing him to buy into the imagery of the dominant mass culture. For DeLillo, this is one way that individuals cede control over their identities to a mass movement. Mass marketing campaigns in late capitalist America are not benign for DeLillo; they are seductive, predatory, and dangerous for individuality. Accordingly, DeLillo uses the dangerous and predatory methods of Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church to draw a comparison between the Moonie mass movement and late capitalism. Similarities between Mooneyism and late capitalism, then, point to the fact that
low-level consumer events in the late capitalist market are closely linked to a larger vision of a vast and enterprising consumer culture. It is through these carefully controlled consumer events that late capitalism threatens individuality.

Another way that the dominant culture creates and seduces individuals in a mass society is through the use of an advanced and highly systematized technology which allows it to more efficiently manipulate the individual psyche. In arguably the most important analysis of the function of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin suggests that a technology which allows the owners of production to “reproduce” works of art fundamentally changes the relationship between an artist and his audience. Benjamin ultimately sees the advent of such technologies to be liberating; he argues that the ability for art to be mass produced will empower the individual by creating art which is accessible to the masses (Benjamin 219-53). DeLillo sees how modern technology changes the relationship between an artist and his audience, but for DeLillo, the result is not empowerment, but death. DeLillo and Benjamin agree that the technology of late capitalism changes the status of an artist and his art, but they ultimately see the effect of such technology on the individual quite differently.

There are at least three major repercussions of the function of art in the context of its “reproducibility.” One is that the work of art, through the process of what Benjamin calls “mechanical reproduction,” is separated from the artist and transformed into a mass marketable commodity. Second is that the
owners of production affect a change in the culture so that there actually is a mass market full of individuals who will consume their commodified works of art. The third point involves the place of the artist in a late capitalist society. It is at this point, essentially, where DeLillo sharply diverges from Benjamin. According to DeLillo, the artist who allows himself to be incorporated by this technology is left empty, ragged, spent, and impotent. By contrast, Benjamin believes that the proliferation of modern technology will free the artist from the influence of the dominant class; yet, DeLillo fears that the late capitalist system has the power to accomplish the commodification of the work of art while incorporating the individual in the process. For DeLillo, the technology of American capitalism will not free the individual from outside influence, but will instead destroy him. In *Mao II*, the result of incorporation, for the author, is a metaphorical death, in that authorship as we know it can no longer be possible. In a society dominated by the seductive imagery of Mooneyism, billboards, television commercials, and sublimely publicized terrorist events, DeLillo believes that traditional authors become ineffectual.

Ultimately, the technology of the mass culture seems to offer an entirely new type of language which relies on a specific kind of imagery – imagery which is based in repetition, sensationalism, and even terror – which is targeted constantly at mass audiences. Not only is a new type of language created by this imagery, but a mass market is created to respond to this language. DeLillo uses Karen Janney and Bill Gray to show the effect of such language and technologies on individuals; ironically, Karen – the partially
reformed Moonie cultist – seems more equipped to deal with the imagery of this new language than Bill; as a fragile individual who has been “re-educated” both by the Unification Church and then again by the apparently wholesome American culture, Karen is representative of the type of individual who has been trained to accept and understand the anti-individualistic imagery and logic of mass culture. The new language which DeLillo suggests is taking hold in late capitalist America, based in repetition, sensationalism, and terror, is capable of systematically marginalizing individualistic thought. According to Bill Gray, “News of disaster is the only narrative people need” (42). Bill’s language is a language which requires some degree of “authenticity” – a characteristic whose loss is clearly tragic in DeLillo’s caricature of modern society. DeLillo fears that a society which does not value authenticity will lose its traditional dependence on the author for spiritual guidance and renewal. In an image-driven society, the importance of the author wanes until he is effectively impotent, hence the “death of the author.” Ultimately, DeLillo fears that staunch individualists like Bill can be incorporated in an unchecked image-driven, late capitalist society, and that the eventual result will be the death of individualism. If entire populations of people can be seduced, and ultimately trained to recognize sensational imagery instead of the individualistic ideas contained in more traditional narratives, then DeLillo believes that the price for that society will be the end of individualism as it has been historically represented by intellectuals and writers.
In American society, the development of the individual can essentially be broken down into hundreds or thousands or millions of identifiable consumer events. To participate in a consumer event is, for an individual, not unlike consummating a relationship of sorts with the dominant mass culture. Products on store shelves don’t appeal to individuals out of fear or greed or anything of the sort; people don’t buy products because they’re forced to; and though greed may be a factor in any consumer event, it is certainly not the primary motivating factor. Rather, there is an essentially psychological need – one which Adorno suggests is a libidinal need – on the part of the consumer that can only be satisfied by taking part in a consumer event. Certainly, there is a practical necessity inherent in many products, but even this is mostly incidental. What really draws people regularly to vast, busy, neon shopping malls across America is something far more seductive than practicality; it’s something which runs deeper than an emotion as simple as greed; Adorno believes that there is a hidden libidinal component that draws people to imagery that they believe will gain them acceptance in a dominant mass culture. The corporate entities which market products to individuals tap into this libidinal energy in order to seduce individuals and wrest control over their identities from them. Essentially, confrontations in the marketplace between
individuals and corporate entities become elaborate power plays where the prize is control over one's identity.

This repressed psychological component is viewable during the exercise of power which occurs during any consumer transaction. Foucault believes that power relationships occur constantly not in the course of grand power plays by powerful politicians or military leaders, but instead at much smaller levels, during any exchange between two individuals, or between an individual and his society. Foucault calls these low-level power plays “micropowers” (Foucault 174). Consumer events, whether they consists of corporations and governments contracting to purchase fleets of trucks, or teenage children spending their allowance in shopping malls, are essentially micropowers.

For DeLillo, real power is exercised at micro levels through consumer events such as the one which involves Scott Martineau shopping in a Manhatten bookstore (more on this event shortly). Identity, according to Foucault, is created through the exercise of power (174). Though Foucault discusses power in terms of any human interaction, DeLillo chooses to discuss power relations which exist between individuals and corporate entities. Clearly, then, consumer events have the power to effectively create individuals by creating and controlling identity-forming events. Individuality forms as the result of the consummation of any number of consumer events – activities which are certainly wrought with ambiguity, because as identity is created it is coincidentally usurped. By looking closely at such consumer events, DeLillo
exposes them not only as identity-forming events, but also as identity-controlling events.

As shown by Adorno’s analysis of the state/individual relationship in both fascist and capitalist societies, consumer events are dominated and carefully controlled by players in a meticulously systematized mass culture. Those who own the means of production invite individuals into mass movements by tapping into a psychological need which compels individuals to cede their individuality to a more collective identity. DeLillo sees the most important of these transactions as occurring during consumer events, where a consumer is seduced by the trappings of the marketplace. In late capitalist America, the marketplace is a place where the consumer is seduced into believing – consciously or unconsciously – that his psychological need to be part of a group mentality can be satisfied simply by purchasing a particular product.

Ironically, many products have little significant value in and of themselves. Rather, these products have attached to them a relentless barrage of images which focuses the individual’s attention not on the actual product being purchased, but on his (albeit unconscious) psychological desire to join himself with a mass movement. These images are the means by which corporate entities – whether commercial or political – tap into the individual’s libidinal need to belong to a group mentality. It is by taking advantage of such psychological desires that those in power maintain and reaffirm their privileged positions within society.
In *Mao II*, Don DeLillo bemoans a late capitalist system which has turned consumer products into political messaging systems and tools to exploit the individual. For DeLillo, owners of corporations have, in the past several decades, wrested control of cultural authority from authors and intellectuals. In doing so, those in positions of power have not only stripped the author-figure of his authorial power, but also stripped the marketplace of its most essential function.

In *Mao II*, stores are not places where goods are traded, but instead have become places where images are traded. To return to an incident I alluded to earlier, an early scene in the novel depicts Scott Martineau browsing at a bookstore in New York City:

He walked among the bookstore shelves, hearing Muzak in the air. There were rows of handsome covers, prosperous and assured. He felt a fine excitement, hefting a new book, fitting hand over sleek spine, seeing lines of type jitter past his thumb as he let the pages fall. He was a young man, shrewd in his fervors, who knew there were books he wanted to read and others he absolutely had to own, the ones that gesture in special ways, that have a rareness or daring, a charge of heat that stains the air around them. He made a point of checking authors’ photos, browsing at the south wall. He examined books stacked on tables and set in clusters near the cash terminals. He saw stacks on the floor five feet high, arranged in artful fanning patterns. There were books standing on pedestals and bunched in little gothic snuggeries. Bookstores made him slightly sick at times. He looked at the gleaming best-sellers. People drifted through the store, appearing caught in some unhappy dazzlement. There were books on step terraces and Lucite wall-shelves, books in pyramids and theme displays. He went downstairs to the paperbacks, where he stared at the covers of mass-market books, running his fingertips erotically over the raised lettering. Covers were lacquered and gilded. Books lay cradled in nine-unit counterpacks like experimental babies. He could hear them shrieking *Buy me*. (19)
On the surface, a consumer event consists of a consumer, in need of a product, who enters a marketplace, seeks out a product, purchases it, and leaves with it tucked away neatly in a brown paper bag. But DeLillo’s consumer event is psychologically and erotically charged. His shopper is “a young man, shrewd in his fervors,” who knows what he wants and what he has to have. The products in this store don’t act like products should act, but instead “gestured in special ways,” as a lover might, with a “daring, a charge of heat that stains the air around them.” DeLillo depicts this New York City bookstore as a fantastic bordello, and the relationship between Scott and the product as an explicitly sexual one. First Scott stared, then “[ran] his fingertips erotically over the raised lettering,” then listened to them shriek: “Buy me.” DeLillo’s version of a consumer event is so erotically charged that any sense of practicality in the product is lost. Instead, the consumer event becomes a place where the individual can be psychologically changed, even remade; in DeLillo’s bookstore, Scott goes to browse at Bill Gray’s books, not because he has any practical need to see them, and certainly not because he wishes to make a purchase, but rather because he has a deeply rooted psychological desire which can only be fulfilled by returning, whenever possible, to such a place. Hidden away at Bill Gray’s wilderness retreat, the New York City retail scene is where Scott goes to reestablish a connection with mass culture.

What occurs here works similarly to the way Adorno says that fascism works on the mind of the individual in a fascist state (Adorno 130-36). The
goals of fascism, so far as the individual is concerned, are largely irrational. While individuals in a fascist state – such as Nazi Germany – do respond to such emotions as fear and greed, fear and greed are inadequate to explain the fanatical religious appeal that Nazism had for millions of otherwise ordinary and rational German citizens. What can explain such devotion is what Adorno calls “gratification through identification” with a dominant mass movement. It’s only by believing that he is “buying into” a mass movement – by purchasing a product image that might act as a passkey into a certain sense of mass identity – that Scott can satisfy a libidinal need to belong. Whether or not he is actually satisfied is less relevant: if he makes his purchase, then he has internalized a prefabricated identity; if he doesn’t make his purchase, then he still has been affected by the barrage of images at the store, and he’ll doubtless return in time to make his deposit. This is the key to the exploitative nature of Adorno’s theory of fascist propaganda. The image – of a leader in a fascist society, or of a useful product in late capitalist America – is oftentimes “untrue”: It is not designed to provide the consumer with truth-value, but rather to tap into a psychological need on the part of the consumer to belong to a mass movement. However, in the case of late capitalist America, the mass movement is not a tangible asset that can be of any real benefit to the individual, but rather an exploitative tool that seduces the individual into ceding his power and identity to a corporate world. In Nazi Germany, this image was focused onto a powerful and charismatic leader who affected “the replacement of individual narcissism by identification with leader images” (135). The
difference in late capitalist America is that this displacement of identification occurs more subtly during the course of an infinite number of consumer events.

Scott’s psychological need to belong to American society by participating in consumer events is hauntingly similar to Karen’s history with the Unification Church. Led by the “leader image” of Sun Myung Moon, the Unification Church – whose faithful are often called Moonies – can be seen as a modern mass movement which has similarities to both Nazi fascism and American late capitalism. Mooneyism was formed under the assumption that Christ failed in His mission to unify God’s chosen people, and that Sun Myung Moon is God’s new chosen one, chosen to lead a new race of chosen people. It is the function of the Unification Church to spread its message and infiltrate the international community so that Sun Myung Moon will be in a position to take over the world when the time comes. The long term goal of Mooneyism is tyranny – not only the complete control over all individuals, but essentially the liquidation of individuality. In the short term, the Unification Church recruits its members by seducing them with seductive images of a unified world. A new member, in exchange for inclusion in a new world order, immediately cedes his or her individuality to the powerful leader image of Sun Myung Moon; from this point forward, the leader meticulously controls the physical, sexual, emotional, religious, and psychological lives of each member. Karen’s experience of being forced, under slave-like conditions, to sell flowers to raise money for the church is not unlike the experiences reported by former
members of the church: under the assumption that they will be included in Moon’s new world order, individuals succumb to the euphoria suggested by the Moonie mass movement, and allow their identities to be incorporated by the church. Adorno suggested that individuals followed Hitler for similar reasons, and clearly, some individuals are even more willing to join a movement that offers not only the liquidation of individuality, but also heavenly redemption as a reward.

But the real danger of Mooneyism is that it expects to arrive at its goal of world domination not through large scale warfare, but by engaging late capitalist society. Critics of Mooneyism claim that the Unification Church, by creating an image of itself as a more traditional Christian organization, has been able to integrate itself into mainstream American culture. The movement has been so successful that it commonly has been able to manufacture media events that feature such eminent guests as former presidents Reagen and Bush. Ultimately, such media events create credibility in the mind of the American public. Such credibility makes other capitalist acquisitions possible, such as Moon’s purchase of Bridgeport, an accredited university in Connecticut. Ingo Michelh, a “re-educated” former member of the Unification Church, fears such occurrences primarily because they seem to go unnoticed by most Americans (Michelh). They go unnoticed, however, because Sun Myung Moon understands American mass culture. To the unconverted, Moon attaches himself to the auras of former presidents and esteemed universities. Yet to the converted, he assumes the image of an omnipotent god-figure. By
coincidentally tapping into late capitalist imagery and tyrannical “leader imagery,” Moon is able to seduce consumers at various levels of American culture. In *Mao II*, Karen is his prototypical target; however, DeLillo means to suggest that all Americans are targets of American capitalism.

Whether Mooneyism is a real threat to American democracy or not, it serves DeLillo as a metaphor for how consumers are seduced by American late capitalism. Mooneyism is an irrational, yet relatively popular, mass movement that happens right under – and often in front of – the eyes of mainstream America. Its imagery – sensationalized, repetitious, and easily reproducible – is very similar to the imagery which American late capitalism employs to seduce its individuals. Karen, therefore, as a result of her history with the Moonies, is relatively defenseless against the imagery of the American marketplace. She unwittingly replaces the powerful leader image of Sun Myung Moon with other popular imagery, such as product advertisements, televised disaster footage, and reports of human stampedes at soccer matches. Images such as these, however terrible they may be, are unreal to Karen because they are *infinitely reproducible*; they are entirely without authenticity, and so fascinate without seeming to offer any real danger. They are fascinating due to their sensational nature, but they are harmless because they are essentially empty images. Such inauthentic images are distanced from any form of authorship, and so they seem impossible of rendering real harm. For DeLillo, the power that such images have is clearly disturbing because they have the power to capture and fascinate, but not to
convey anything meaningful; they seduce by offering passage into mass
culture, but offer nothing tangible in return.

What the technology of mass culture does accomplish is the creation of
an audience which is trained to respond to its sensationalized imagery. The
imagery of Nazism, Mooneyism, terrorism, and late capitalism all train
individuals to cede their individuality to prefabricated mass identities. In each
instance, what the dominant class therefore accomplishes is the creation of a
mass audience who will consume its products and effectively help those in
power to maintain their privileged places in society. The byproduct of a mass
culture, for DeLillo, is the death of individuality. By contrast, DeLillo sees it as
the author’s job to be dangerous, provocative, to be the inventor of ideas and
an opponent of tyranny: “The state should want to kill all writers. Every
government, every group that holds power or aspires to power should feel so
threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere” (97). The author,
for DeLillo, must be a volatile, dangerous figure with the power to change and
enlighten society. But by training individuals to accept empty, yet sensational,
images, late capitalism also strips individuals of their ability to understand
writers. Without an audience, DeLillo feels that authors, in the traditional
sense, are powerless. Bill Gray’s unsuccessful attempt to leave his discreet
hideaway and master mass imagery by engaging the culture of terrorism is
representative of his inability to instill any meaning into an inauthentic, mass-
produced image. His inability to reconcile this conflict results in his anonymous
death on a Mediterranean ferry (more on shortly).
DeLillo’s comparisons between Nazism, Mooneyism, and American late capitalism are most acute when he discusses the issue of “re-education.” Indeed, such a concept is essential to all mass movements if one is to accept that the success of mass movements hinges on their ability to train a modern audience to accept their image-driven language in lieu of a more traditional “authentic” language (such as that which has the traditional written word as its focus, for example, that which is used by Bill Gray). Americans are familiar with (if not fearful of) the programming process which religious cults such as the Unification Church are purported to use to “brainwash” new members to prepare them for membership. Essentially, this programming ritual consists of a period of time during which the individual is separated from everything with ties to tradition – he may be violently taken to a secluded place and, supposedly against his will, severed from news or contact from the outside world. The overall goal is to seduce the individual into ceding his individuality to the potential euphoria or salvation offered by inclusion in the mass movement. To graduate from such a process is to become a virtual slave, losing all trace of individuality and instead identifying with, and living for, the leader imagery of the mass movement (just like joining the Hitler Youth movement meant ceding one’s individuality to the leader imagery of Adolf Hitler). Americans are commonly aware of (and wary of) these brainwashing techniques, as they are often represented this way in popular culture. This brainwashing technique is violent, tyrannical, and directly threatens every American’s most vital aspect – his individuality. But DeLillo sees striking
similarities between Mooneyism and late capitalism, not just in the imagery they use, but also in their methodology. Moonie cults are often accused of employing violent kidnapping and brainwashing techniques; DeLillo accuses the American family of similar crimes by portraying Karen’s re-education as a violent brainwashing technique in its own right. Karen, while still selling flowers for the Moonie cult, is kidnapped by three muscled men, one her “tank top cousin Rick,” whose interest in Karen in the past has amounted more to sexual molestation than any sense of authentic or familial love:

They stuffed her in a car and took her to a motel room, where her father sat in a fire-retardant chair…There was a lot of emotional talk, tabloid-type reassurances about love and mother and home…The two men deprogrammed her eighteen hours a day for eight days. They cited case histories. They repeated key phrases. They played tapes and showed movies on the wall. The shades were drawn all the time and the door stayed locked. (79)

The only difference between Mooneyism and late capitalism for DeLillo, then, lies in which mass movement one cedes his individuality to. DeLillo’s representation of the late capitalist deprogramming ritual is hauntingly similar to the popular representation of the Moonie cult’s deprogramming ritual: both rely on violence, seclusion, separation from tradition, and bombardment with a certain kind of imagery which is aimed at seducing an individual to give up control over his identity in favor of joining one mass movement or another. For DeLillo, late capitalism’s seduction techniques are strikingly similar to the techniques employed by historically dangerous movements such as Nazism and Mooneyism.
However, few Americans are unlucky enough to be placed in a situation where they might be deprogrammed by a religious cult and subsequently reprogrammed by an American family unit. Instead, most Americans are “programmed” through constant exposure to mass culture and by taking part in consumer events. What essentially occurs during a consumer event is that an individual cedes control over his individuality to a more collective sense of identity. If in *White Noise*, DeLillo focuses this tragic loss of control over one’s identity on the family unit and small-town America, in *Mao II* he switches his focus to big cities and the threat of global terrorism, ultimately choosing the author as his prototypical individual. In either case, at stake is an imperiled sense of individuality and an imperiled sense of self. The crucial link between the two novels, and the two contrasting settings, is the technology which brings the seductive images of late capitalism to the consumer in his home, office, or family supermarket. In *White Noise*, the Gladney family ritualistically gathers around the television set on Friday nights and is bombarded with carefully designed consumer images mixed with sensational scenes of disaster. While no financial transaction takes place in this instance, the effect of drawing the individual into mass market is the same; slowly and consistently, individuals are seduced into believing that they are better off belonging to (and capable of buying into) a mass culture. In *Mao II*, Karen Janney is similarly drawn to televised images of riots, plane crashes, and human stampedes – all carefully designed to make her oblivious to anything save the sensationalism of a mass culture. DeLillo believes that this is one of
the most dangerous aspects of an image-driven mass culture— a consumer culture’s imagery not only works to seduce individuals, but it subsequently renders individuals incapable of understanding traditional modes of thought, such as those traditionally controlled by writers and intellectuals. An unchecked consumer culture not only relies on certain types of products and marketing strategies, but also relies on its ability to remake individuals in its own image. While Karen is the most obvious example of an individual seduced, consumed, and remade by the technology of mass culture, most of DeLillo’s other characters are similarly affected.

Bill Gray: Mass Culture as the End of Individuality

Bill Gray, among many things, represents DeLillo’s fear that individuality is threatened in a late capitalist society by the very technology which makes it efficient. The initial effect of such technology is alienation. The technology of the mass market works constantly to alienate the individual from his own thoughts, words, and language. Bill Gray finds a queer sense of alienation by speaking into Brita Nilsson’s electronic answering machine:

Do you know how strange it is for me to sit here talking into a machine? I feel like a TV set left on in an empty room. This is a new kind of loneliness you’re getting me into, Brita…I’m speaking slowly now because there’s no sense of a listener, not even the silences a listener creates, a dozen different kinds, dense and expectant and bored and angry, and I feel a little awkward…The machine makes everything a
message, which narrows the range of discourse and destroys the poetry of nobody home. (91-92)

The passage ends abruptly as the author, having exceeded his allotted length of tape, is cut off by the machine. Though the answering machine seems a rather harmless and objective medium of discourse, it is one way that Bill is separated from his language. Bill not only is forced to bend to the standards set by the machine, but also loses control of his “message” as soon as he hangs up. Bill notes ironically that “people are no longer home or not home. They’re either picking up or not picking up” (92). The significance of this statement is that when a person picks up a phone, the two parties are on even ground, rhetorically speaking. But when Bill speaks into Brita’s answering machine, the owner of the machine gains control over the conversation. Brita can listen and decide if she cares to pick up or not. She can respond at will, or not respond at all. She can “get” the message, or pretend to ignore it. She can engage it “now,” or defer its meaning until a later time or place. And at the end of the exchange, Bill’s language is physically in Brita’s possession. Bill’s awkwardness springs from his hesitancy to leave his language in a place he has so little control over. Bill’s greatest fear proves to be his loss of control over his own language.

Bill’s inability to maintain control over his language becomes synonymous with his difficulty to control his sense of identity. The process by which his work is appropriated by the publishing industry makes it impossible for Bill to publish and still remain individualistic. DeLillo recognizes that a
conflict exists between the authentic, individualistic, artistic expression of an author and the commodified capitalist novel. Once Bill publishes, he loses control over his public identity; his identity becomes locked into a “signature style” which become synonymous with “Bill Gray.” Scott often refers to the “type of novel” which Bill Gray writes. Bill’s publisher, his critics, his readers, and his fans expect Bill to continue to write the same “type” of novels with the same Bill Gray signature style. Any other results will be considered a failure on Bill’s part. By virtue of his past publications, Bill’s style has been commodified; his books have been reformed and forever attached to a glitzy image that is guaranteed to drive sales. From that point on, Bill’s identity is attached to the publicized, commodified version of his work: his signature style. Anytime Bill publishes, more of his identity is commodified, swallowed up by the consumer culture. Ironically, his latest publication is not a novel, but a photo:

“[a morning’s work] is not the only thing you’re losing. Don’t forget, from the moment your picture appears you’ll be expected to look just like it. And if you meet people somewhere, they will absolutely question your right to look different from your picture.”

“I’ve become someone’s material…there’s the life and there’s the consumer event.”

There is a sense of Bill being “captured” by Brita’s eccentric project, and there is a direct comparison between Bill’s struggle over whether or not to publish and his acquiescence to Brita’s request to take and publish his photograph. Bill believes he will have a certain degree of control over his image/photograph. When Scott asks Brita what will happen with the photos,
she tells him, “This is completely up to you...you look at the contacts and decide what you want me to do with them.” Scott answers, “These were the answers we were hoping to get” (26). But if Bill seriously believes he can control this publishing process, he is mistaken. His published photo works similarly to his published work. The photograph, then, becomes a metaphor for the commodifying nature of a signature style: if Bill loses the right to appear in public the way he chooses, it means that control over his identity is held at a place outside of his being. The public image of a writer which is created through the process of publication works to marginalize individualism by absorbing an author’s identity and making it a permanent part of his commodified work.

Another of Bill’s idiosyncrasies that shows his resistance to the technology of the modern publishing process involves his refusal to abandon his old model typewriter in favor of a modern “word processor.” No doubt, the very phrase (word processor) is a haunting reminder of how easily the technology of the mass market wrests control of language away from the author. Bill Gray notoriously uses a massive, grotesque, old model typewriter to compose his novels. The instrument is intensely personal, in a practical and very physical sense. Bill feels closer to the original manuscript copy of his work than he ever could with a modern word processor. He literally, and quite graphically, puts his personal, authentic stamp on his work by intentionally sneezing mixtures of snot and blood onto his unfinished pages (55). This is something that a reproduction cannot duplicate, and something which could
simply not occur with a word processor. To explain Bill’s actions as those of a
tired, frustrated, and dirty old man is insufficient. Rather, his frustration comes
from the knowledge that he is unable to significantly invest his own work with
meaning in such a way that his individuality will survive the editing and
publishing process. On at least three occasions, George Haddad – the
gentleman who serves as Bill’s Mideast terrorist connection – implores Bill to
abandon his aging typewriter in favor of a modern Panasonic word processor:
“Instant corrections…the text is lightweight, malleable. It doesn’t restrict or
inhibit…It’s completely liberating, You don’t deal with heavy settled artifacts.
You transform freely, fling words back and forth” (161,164,170). Freely flung
words traveling effortlessly back and forth, however, is what makes Bill most
afraid. Whatever “revisions” he can effortlessly complete, a publisher can more
easily complete once the manuscript has left Bill’s hands. While a traditional
typewriter does not halt this process, a modern word processor only hastens
and increases the efficiency with which Bill’s work might be appropriated and
changed. Bill’s stubborn refusal to purchase a modern machine is a signal of
his struggle to maintain control over his individual art.

What happens to Bill Gray here is what Walter Benjamin would call a
loss of aura, or an inability for reproduced versions of art to maintain their
uniqueness, their “authenticity” – a phenomenon celebrated by Benjamin yet
clearly mourned by DeLillo. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction,” Benjamin reasons that the modern technology which enables a
work of art to be reproduced on a staggering scale for consumption by the
masses changes – if not destroys – the relationship between the individual and his public by altering the relationship between the “original” piece of art and its potentially infinite reproductions. “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity…Process reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction…Technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of the reach for the original itself” (222). DeLillo and Benjamin agree that modern technology creates a distance between an individual artist and his work. In *Mao II*, the progression from a face-to-face conversation to a “live” telephone conversation to the deferred signification of an answering machine is but one instance of this distancing of the relationship between an author and his audience. Even though the copy of Bill’s voice on the answering tape is never mass-copied and sold, the problematic relationship between the author and his language is the same. The technology of reproduction easily appropriates the original and “[puts] the copy of the original into [a situation] which would be out of reach for the original itself” (222). Though they reach polemically different conclusions, DeLillo and Benjamin both see the destruction of authenticity as the result of the technology of late capitalism.

Benjamin sees art as a political instrument with the ability to “mobilize the masses” (242). He believes the incorporation of art into mass culture to be a positive phenomenon, one capable of combating the elitist and exclusionary nature of art and making it available to the masses. For Benjamin, aura is harmful; only by severing an object of art from its tradition can it be usefully
reproduced for the masses. “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all
that is transmissible from its beginning…the technique of reproduction
detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many
reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique experience” (223).
For Benjamin, then, aura is what makes art into a manipulative tool of the
ruling class by giving it an exclusionary component. But for DeLillo, severing
an object of art from its tradition is to fatally marginalize the traditional position
(and power) of the author. While Benjamin sees the elimination of aura to be
liberating, DeLillo believes that such an occurrence makes literature as we
know it impossible. If one of the goals of literature is to produce material which
is capable of meaningfully critiquing society, then DeLillo believes that a
consumer culture renders the modern novel trivial, insignificant, and lacking in
cultural authority. In a society where authentic objects of art are nonexistent,
authorship – though useful as a marketing tool – is obsolete.

For DeLillo, what makes an object of art unique is that art is the
individualistic expression of an individual artist. The individual-ness of a piece
of art – its historical connection with the artist – is what gives art its aura. By
detaching the artist from his art, and thus creating an artificial distance
between the artist and his art, the machinery of reproduction deceives both the
artist and the public by creating an inauthentic object of art which is incapable
of meaningful commentary, but useful for mass marketing purposes. It is this
fear of inauthenticity – or separation from his art – that causes Bill to resist the
technology of the publishing business. DeLillo’s purpose, then, is to express
the contradictory nature of individuality inherent in any form of modern
publication in a late capitalist society.

For DeLillo, the technology of the publishing industry is not only aimed
at seducing the consumer, but also at incorporating the author by
appropriating his work. This may happen “innocently,” as with the earlier
example of the telephone answering machine, but it also occurs more
blatently, as evidenced by Bill Gray’s struggle with the publishing industry.

One reason this occurs is because technology separates the artist not only
from his work, but also from his audience. Benjamin suggests that an artist
confronted with the technology of mechanical reproduction becomes alienated
to the point where, “[w]ith a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable
emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of
reality, life, voice…aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it
(231). Benjamin revels in the evaporation of aura, but DeLillo depicts such a
loss as tragic and demoralizing:

On his way out of the store he saw a man in a torn jacket come
stumbling in, great-maned and filthy, rimed saliva in his beard, old
bruises across the forehead gone soft and crumbly. People stood
frozen in mid-motion, careful to remain outside the zone of infection.
The man looked for someone to address. It was a large bright room full
of stilled figures, eyes averted. Traffic pounded in the street. One of the
man’s trouser legs was mashed into a battered rubber boot; the other
dragged on the floor in strips. A security guard approached from the
mezzanine and the man lifted his thick hands in a gesture of
explanation.

“I’m here to sign my books,” he said. (20)
The author is DeLillo’s consummate individual, the staunchest defender of a threatened individuality. But as consumers browse the splendor of a Manhatten bookstore, they purchase not the authentic piece of art which they believe they see, but rather the appropriated, reformed copy which has been taken from the artist. The artist, separated from his work – from the essence of who he is – is left then empty and broken. Having been incorporated by the technology of the publishing industry, the author has not only outlived his usefulness; he no longer belongs amongst other members of society. DeLillo’s author-figure is transparent; as a homeless man, he is not a member of society – nobody even takes notice of him until he creates a disturbance. The figure DeLillo offers us in the above passage has no connection with the reproduced works of art on the bookstore shelves; therefore he has no business signing them. Ironically, the author is even less useful than the consumers, who at least have their money to offer. Ultimately, DeLillo’s representation of an incorporated author suggests that individuality in a late capitalist society may not be possible.

Individuality might be impossible not only because of the marginalization of the author, but also because of the reluctance of the consumer to recognize either the author’s individuality or his own individuality. If a consumer is content to resist individuality, then DeLillo believes that individuality in late capitalist America is obsolete. He depicts a group of consumers who, confronted by an individualist, “stood frozen in mid-motion, careful to remain outside the zone of infection…a large bright room full of
stilled figures, eyes averted." These consumers resist the homeless author not because he is dingy or poor, but because they are more content believing in a prefabricated vision of mass culture than in being individuals. Ignoring individualistic impulses is simply easier than resisting the powerful imagery of the consumer culture. For DeLillo, this is the most tragic element of seductive mass movements.

Consumers do not, however, wake up in the morning and decide to join up with the mass culture by purchasing everything from Waffelos to Toyota Corollas to generic romance novels. In order to efficiently market a commodity to a mass market, the individuals who make up that mass market must be trained to accept the appropriated, inauthentic object of art. Benjamin suggests that there exists “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction…The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope…” (225). According to Benjamin, the ways in which human perception is organized changes according to historical circumstances (224). Based upon the individual’s psychological desire to join a mass movement, mass audiences become trained to accept reproductions of art instead of their authentic counterparts. This transformational phenomenon can be seen in both White Noise and Mao II.

In White Noise, DeLillo’s characters are incessantly bombarded with product images until they effectively have no meaning; the imagery associated
with brand names have little to do with the quality of a product and everything to do with assurances that that product will invite one into an environment of gratification. Like *Mao II*’s Manhatten bookstore, the erotically enticing imagery of the marketplace effectively seduces the individual by playing upon his need for companionship and acceptance. This is seen in the supermarket, on the television, on the radio, in storefronts, on product wrapping in the Gladney kitchen, and even in the seemingly randomly placed repetitions of brand names (“*Toyota Corolla*”) that DeLillo inserts into his chapters. The incessantly repeated brand names and endlessly flashing neon signs are terribly similar to the sensationalized spectacles of horror and destruction that captivates the Gladney family when they watch television at night. Over time, by offering spectacularly meaningless images repeatedly to a mass audience, the merchandisers who offer such images carefully train their audience to accept such images. As I discussed earlier, the methodology in late capitalism is disturbingly similar to the methodology in other mass movements, such as Nazism and Mooneyism.

In *Mao II*, the image of disaster has so totally captured its audience, that DeLillo suggests that such spectacular imagery is the only language that a modern mass audience is capable of understanding. Bill tells Brita, as his photographic image is being captured on film, “we’re giving way to terror, to news of terror, to tape recorders and cameras, to radios, to bombs stashed in radios. News of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative” (42). DeLillo’s goal, in *Mao II*, is to suggest
that like Nazism and Mooneyism, the language of American late capitalism renders authorship meaningless by creating, controlling, and repeating sensational and loaded images which are designed to accomplish two distinct goals: to train a mass audience to accept such imagery, and to seduce them into believing that it is the only imagery available to them. By giving way to terror and the news of terror, by accepting such imagery as the primary narrative of our society, DeLillo believes that Americans lose their ability to think and act as individuals. Instead, they learn to think in terms of grand and sensational images, to think and act in terms of crowds following prefabricated images: “the future makes room for the nonachiever, the nonaggressor, the trudger, the nonindividual…crowd on top of crowd, pedaling, trudging, faceless, sort of surviving nicely” (70). The imagery of the late capitalist marketplace, of which “the news of disaster” is a major part, is designed to discourage individuality and encourage the acceptance of a narrative whose goal is to induce compliance with a crazily commodified world in which sensationalism displaces critical thinking and informed democratic change. Individualistic freedom of expression is difficult, troubling, and taxing for people, and DeLillo’s fear is that the consumer culture caters to the idea that “surviving nicely” by acquiescing to the easy and seductive lure of mass movements is a reasonable choice for people to make. It is certainly one of many choices, but one which asks as its price a near complete control over independent thought. It is the technology of late capitalism – not individualistic
authors – who then become the controllers of thought and ideology in a mass society.

DeLillo likens the fantastic language of late capitalism to the sensational (and sometimes real) imagery of terrorism. Bill explains:

“For some time now I’ve had the feeling that novelists and terrorists are playing a zero-sum game...What terrorists gain, 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...And the more clearly we see terror, the less impact we feel from art.” (157)

DeLillo’s use of terror as a metaphor for authorial power in the 1990’s suggests that such a shift is not only dangerous for authors, but for individuality at various levels of society. Clearly, authors – such as DeLillo himself – are fearful that they lose their own power, money, status, and influence in a society dominated by technical, systemitized, and sensationalized imagery. But DeLillo also sees individuality in general threatened by such imagery:

In societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act. There’s too much everything, more things and messages and meanings than we can use in ten thousand lifetimes. Inertia-hysteria. Is history possible? Is anyone serious? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. 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 stands outside. The culture hasn’t figured out how to assimilate him. It’s confusing when they kill the innocent. But this is precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands. The way they determine how we see them. The way they dominate the rush of endless streaming images. (157-58)
Terror, then, is a response to the powerful and incessant imagery of late capitalism. For DeLillo, it has historically been the place of the author to combat tyranny, whether it be the blatant tyranny of fascism or the subtle tyranny of capitalism. But DeLillo believes that the technology of late capitalism has made its systems so powerful that traditional authors have lost their ability to influence those systems. Next to the powerful imagery of the marketplace, authorial power wanes; not only that, but authors are absorbed, incorporated, and assimilated. Dead, they could become martyrs, but alive, ineffectual, and essentially part of the system, they lose the ability to affect or change the system. For DeLillo, only terror is a powerful enough language to be noticed because it is as bright and sensational as the imagery of the marketplace; only terror can match the brilliance, the “blur and glut,” the “inertia-hysteria” which is the result of late capitalist imagery. The author, then, must ultimately find a place somewhere between the tyranny of late capitalism and the tyranny of terrorism.
Conclusion:

There are certain ironies unexplored in this thesis which are worthy of brief consideration here. What I have considered so far is the way in which Don DeLillo depicts individuality in a modern, fast-paced, corporate-controlled consumer culture. Clearly, DeLillo believes that such societies tend to marginalize the individual by seducing him with carefully controlled and highly systemetized technological and social apparatuses. The danger of such systems is that as they prey on individuals, they blend into society almost seamlessly; such systems pass themselves off as normal, innocuous, and even positive components of an otherwise ordinary society. According to DeLillo, a thriving consumer culture is powerful enough to absorb any potential threat to the status quo; in the process, it is even capable of incorporating seemingly incorruptible institutions; even histories can be owned and controlled by the elite class in such a society. DeLillo’s novels explore the ways that late capitalism deals with these institutions. DeLillo deals with Adolf Hitler in ways which make *White Noise* a thoroughly “postmodern” text, by suggesting that late capitalism is capable of absorbing all prior histories and making them serve its own goals. Almost automatically, most Americans describe Nazism as an abhorrent evil unlike any other the world had previously seen. But the way DeLillo casually slips Hitler into his novel institutionalizes him, simultaneously bringing him to the forefront and rendering
him harmless. Paul Cantor notes that by burying the study of Hitler in the pages of a college catalog, DeLillo suggests that the most terrible human tragedy in modern history instantly “loses all its force, soon to become the subject of term papers rather than of public alarm” (45). “Public alarm” is ultimately what DeLillo’s novels are all about. Cantor notes that DeLillo’s unorthodox treatment of Hitler – a treatment which trivializes the brutality of Nazism by depicting its study in both a comical and commercialized way – has received relatively little critical response. One thing that DeLillo means to condemn is what Cantor calls “a scholarly world so open-minded that it can now accommodate any subject without evidently blinking an eye” (40). By absorbing Hitler into academia, academia as an institution of late capitalism has transformed Hitler into a tradable commodity. Clearly we can study Hitler, but DeLillo wonders what it means to study Hitler without fearing him at the same time. What DeLillo sees is a society which might be incapable of learning from histories which have been commodified. On a larger scale, DeLillo sees a consumer culture which tyrannically threatens individuals, and – even as he is sympathetic with its plight – he bemoans a population of people who are unwilling to resist.

DeLillo fears that authors can be marginalized just like Hitler is in Jack Gladney’s history department; their traditional function can be absorbed by the “blur and glut” of an ambitious consumer culture. Whether this actually happens in late capitalist America is clearly a topic worthy of further study. Though DeLillo certainly feels that authors become ineffectual in a consumer-
driven society, many critics clearly feel differently. Frank Lentricchia lists well-known columnist George Will among them. Will condemns DeLillo for using “real” people as characters in his novels – something he does more explicitly in *Libra* than in *White Noise* or *Mao II* – calling DeLillo a “literary vandal” and “bad citizen” (Lentricchia 3). Will clearly views History as the property of late capitalist institutions, not the property of authors; he seems insulted that DeLillo would “steal” such individuals from “official” state histories. In either case, the irony lies in the fact that people – living or dead – can be traded as commodities; whether they are owned by the social elite or by authors is incidental. The fact that Will is so incensed by DeLillo’s “crime” suggests that authors are a threat to conservatism in America, and have not been entirely marginalized by the consumer culture. In *Mao II*, Bill Gray tell us, “I was in Chile last year and I met an editor who’d been sent to prison after his magazine did caricatures of General Pinochet. The charge was assassinating the image of a general” (44). Are authors capable of “assassinating” images in a modern consumer culture, or does the imagery of the consumer culture absorb, and effectively kill, authors? Or restated in more general terms, is there room for individuality in a society driven by late capitalist imagery? In *Mao II*, DeLillo seems to say no: Bill Gray dies needlessly, anonymously, and unsuccessfully on a boat in a remote corner of the world. In *White Noise*, DeLillo is more sympathetic to characters, such as Murray Siskand, who try to maintain a sense of individuality; Murray may learn to see through some of the glit and glamour of the American consumer culture, but he is ultimately
powerless to affect any material change in the system. We must conclude, therefore, that DeLillo depicts late capitalism as a system vast and powerful enough to absorb any potential threat to its well-being.

The power of late capitalism, for DeLillo, seems to lie in its dynamics. My analysis of Adorno suggests that late capitalism lacks the single and easily identifiable leader image that prior mass movements have had as their focal points. Nazism had the singular image of Adolf Hitler; Maoist China had Mao; The Unification church has Sung Myung Moon. But the center of late capitalism is unidentifiable; its power is held and applied at various levels throughout a complex and untraceable network of power relations. For DeLillo, this is what makes late capitalism even more dangerous than other mass movements. Single individuals who serve as leader images – even when they draw their power from greater social forces – make mass movements vulnerable. Nazism relied on the charismatic power that Hitler represented; ultimately, Hitler’s instability caused Nazism to crumble. But late capitalism has no such weakness. It has no scapegoat, and no single center that might be exploited by competing forces. Who, then, are individualists like Murray, or Bill Gray, to target, even if they are able to see through some of the imagery of late capitalism? This might be the greatest question posed by DeLillo’s novels. If there is one problem DeLillo wishes to solve, it is how an individual can fight a system with no discernible center.

Individuals in late capitalist societies seem ultimately unable to transcend the forces of the consumer culture. Even if they can gain the
knowledge they need to see through the imagery of the consumer culture, they
seem to lack the capital to effectively change that culture – Murray Siskand
and Bill Gray are both examples of individuals with knowledge, but who lack
real power because they have no way of capitalizing on their knowledge. In
light of these characters, one frightening proposition lies in DeLillo's
preoccupation with real-world figures such as Sung Mying Moon. Moon could
be DeLillo's representation of a figure who is both an individual and a leader
image, who DeLillo sees as having the potential to transcend American late
capitalism. Moon is dangerous because he has *both* knowledge *and* capital.

As I discussed earlier, Moon understands the American consumer culture; he
engages it by mastering its imagery. Moon also has capital; in addition to vast
financial resources, he owns potentially powerful institutions such as
universities and major newspapers (indeed, he owns the *Washington Times*).

One question DeLillo poses, then, is whether tyrants like Moon could possibly
succeed where authors and intellectuals have failed?

A final irony worthy of consideration lies in DeLillo’s status as a
commercially successful author writing about a commercially successful
author. After several moderately successful novels, DeLillo has produced four
novels – *White Noise, Libra, Mao II*, and *Underworld* – whose success has
made him a bestselling author. His status as a bestselling author
accomplished at least two things: it made him capable of transmitting his
message to millions of people, but meanwhile turned his message into a
marketable commodity. Late capitalism, then, must offer certain freedoms to
individuals – it’s wealth and technology seem to grant authors the previously unheard-of power to reach an incomprehensibly vast audience. But in order to have access to that power, authors must submit to the commodifying forces of capitalistic enterprise. On the inside, DeLillo’s novels provide a harsh and explicit critique of the publishing industry and the consumer culture which promotes it. Yet on the outside his novels are bedecked with catchy, yet ultimately meaningless slogans like: “The writing is dazzling; the images, so radioactive that they glow afterward in our minds” (back cover of Mao II). Not only is such a phrase nearly devoid of critical meaning, but a similar (or even identical) endorsement might be found on countless novels in America. Such phrases on the covers of DeLillo’s texts are a persistent mark of the commodity culture, one which DeLillo is certainly aware of. DeLillo’s novels are certainly what Linda Hutcheon calls a “complicitous critique” of the consumer culture. Hutcheon believes that the commercialization of postmodern art is inescapable, and that this fact – that a critique of late capitalism can only be made from within a society – should not “invalidate the aims and successes of either modernism or postmodernism” (12-13). In American society, it quickly becomes apparent that art which does not allow for such a phenomenon is unreasonable, if not impossible. In the event of its appearance as a commodity, then, one must still ask if DeLillo’s work is his own? How much of it belongs to him? How much to a corporation? How much to his readership? How much to a less discernible notion of “the system”? And ultimately, does DeLillo “own” enough of his novel for him to assume a position
of authority in his society, or for serious authors in general to serve as a serious social force? Even by demanding certain editorial privileges available only to a bestselling author, can DeLillo still resist commodification? There doesn't seem to be a definitive answer to these questions. The fates of DeLillo’s characters suggest individuals in late capitalist societies have little, if any chance of defeating such a powerful and resourceful system. Yet DeLillo, unlike Bill Gray, continues to publish novels which are clearly individualistic aesthetic expressions, yet simultaneously bear the marks of the commodity culture. For Hutcheon, this is a practical necessity, and an unavoidable reality. DeLillo ultimately believes that individualistic expression is possible, to some degree, through the process of writing, and publishing, novels. Clearly, there is a commercial element to this process that potentially threatens DeLillo’s integrity. But for DeLillo to continue to publish novels points to the fact that he ultimately sees writers as a force capable of preserving individuality in a consumer culture increasingly dominated by capitalistic imagery.
Works Cited:


