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# Postwar Media Manifestations and Don DeLillo

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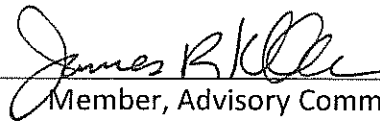

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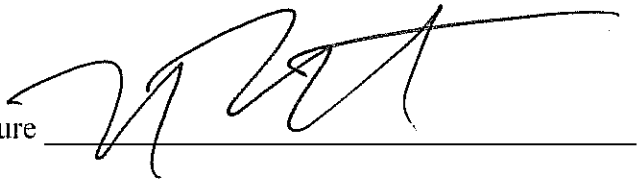
Signature 

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# Introduction:

# The Hyperreal, Hypercommodified American Identity

This study examines the relationship between American media, advertising, and the construction of a postwar American identity. American media manifests itself in several different forms, all of which impact the consciousness of the American people, and the postwar rise to power of the advertising industry helped to mold identity in ways that are often not even recognized. The success of media and advertising hinges on that very fact—that they are able to create a hyperreality which simulates real life without actually being real life. This hyperreality is simulation, a simulation that, in effect, validates real life by copying it. It is a copy that validates the real, but yet also inheres within it, and this balance of validation and inherence is muddled to the point that the copy eventually becomes just as relevant as the real—they are indistinguishable. Media and advertising simulate. They exist in a nonreal realm that holds as much cultural significance as reality in the sense that the simulation also constructs American culture and identity by manipulating Americans' consumption of products like material possessions, news, and art.

One contemporary writer whose fiction is highly concerned with postwar consumer identity is Don DeLillo. His novels explore the American obsession with consumption; he satirizes the hegemonic control that media and advertising holds over

the "consumer culture." As such, his fiction provides a lens through which these manifestations of American media can be examined. The novels that are most relevant to this discussion are *White Noise, Americana,* and *Mao II,* and passages from these works exemplify key concepts of the contemporary media theory discussed in this paper. The creative works of DeLillo, and many of the critical essays written about his fiction, help to establish a tangible application of the theory that drives this study. In addition to DeLillo's work, I also make references to contemporary American popular media as a means to exemplify real world applications of the theory and to ground the philosophical concepts. While I discuss DeLillo's fiction in detail and regularly reference it as a way of illustrating theory, my primary focus is on the media theory itself; I engage with the major theorists of the field in order to carve out a space for my own ideas regarding media's relationship with postmodern America.

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Media's power over the American people is facilitated by constructed simulation. Like Baudrillard's "Disneyland," the advertising world is hyperreal. It is specifically constructed in order to represent a "reality" that does not actually exist. Within this constructed reality, the consumer is pacified (passive-ied). The world is nonthreatening and colorful, stimulating and exciting. The consumer's acquiescence is natural and logical and the images constantly tell us, "Buy more and you will feel better."

The first chapter of this text explores this notion of "feel-good shopping." The idea that buying more somehow makes a person feel better gained strength in the postwar

economic expansion and eventually became an integral part of the consumer consciousness. DeLillo scholar David Kaloustian referred to this concept as the "mantra of consumerism" in his essay, "Media Representations of Disaster in Don DeLillo's *White Noise.*" Kaloustian points out that DeLillo's characters "succumb to a false consciousness by using consumerism in order to mediate [their] desires and validate [their] lives" (17). The characters in DeLillo's fictional town of Blacksmith provide a microcosm of life through which DeLillo can satire the behavior of the rest of America.

I take Kaloustian's *mantra of consumerism* and point out that it is a recurring theme in other works of DeLillo's fiction, as well. His characters often consume in an effort to feel better. Consumption can occur in the form of shopping as it does in *White Noise*, or in more subtle ways like image fetishism in *Mao II* or drug use in *Great Jones Street*. Even less obvious novels like *Libra* and *Falling Man* contain characters who literally *consume* identities. The common thread in each of these novels is that the characters are perpetually searching for ways to feel better by consuming more of whatever happens to be their obsessions.

Chapter One continues to interrogate the formation of the American consumer. Immediately following WWII, the American economy exploded in a frenzy of new purchasing in order to accommodate the rapidly growing number of families. Harvard scholar, Lizbeth Cohen, refers to this period in history as the rise of the "Consumer's Republic" during which the foundation was laid that would soon become the postmodern consumer landscape that DeLillo critiques in his novels. During this formative era, the advertising industry capitalized on the rapid economic expansion and carved out a niche

for itself in the postwar American landscape. These postwar years constituted advertising's rise to power and its construction of a new American identity.

This definitive American consumer identity did not exist before WWII. As Cohen suggests in her book, the role of the consumer was created by the proprietors of capitalism in order to drive and control sales. From the sellers' perspective, it was a perfect set-up—consuming implies that something has been devoured or exhausted and must be immediately replenished or repurchased. If the business world could convince the public of its "consumer" status, then products could be marketed as items in need of "consumption." It is very clever word usage because it gives the individual (the consumer) an illusion of power. A consumer would appear to be at the top of the food chain, making all of his or her own decisions and devouring everything in their path. In reality, this could not be much further from the truth. The consumer is actually more like prey. Businesses dictate the "needs" of the public, telling people what they should buy through subtle advertising. The naïve consumer has very little power in a capitalistic society even though advertising and media would have him think otherwise.

It is no coincidence that this identity began to take hold in conjunction with the mass availability of the television. It is one of two main *hyperreal* spaces that DeLillo recognizes to be important in constructing identity. His fiction often foregrounds the television, as well as the other hyperreal space—the supermarket— as cultural determinants. In many of his novels (especially in *White Noise*), DeLillo's characters interact as much with the television as they do with other humans. To the Gladney family in *White Noise*, the television is one of the two main sites of family bonding. The

other site is the supermarket, where they regularly shop as a family. I argue that this is no coincidence.

The two sites DeLillo chooses as places of family bonding—the television and the supermarket—are the two places most highly concentrated with advertising and brand placement. Both are sources of nonstop stimuli, bombarding the consumer with an overwhelming array of images and advertising. Both use these representations to put the subject at ease and create a comfortable, recognizable environment that encourages consumption. Both are places that are constructed to represent a "real" place that does not actually exist—a hyperreal. Television "life" and supermarket "life" are simulation. Neither are "real" life; they only simulate a conception of real life. They represent a "real" that does not actually exist. As Baudrillard famously observed, simulation is the "generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (1). Television is scripted and produced. Even so-called "reality television" is cut and edited. Likewise, the bright lights and overwhelming stimuli of the supermarket create a fantasyland for the consumer that is highly scripted and depicts a simulated world which does not actually exist in "real" life. There is no "real" place in life that is actually made up of bright primary colors, perfect straight lines, and manipulated lighting. These are elements of a constructed setting--a world that is created artificially--and DeLillo's supermarket and television are perfect examples of this constructed hyperreality. In these hyperreal worlds, familiar images are combined with bright colors, clean lines, and movie star spokespeople. The stimuli work together to disarm the subject: the consumer.

I combine Kaloustian's *mantra of consumerism* with Baudrillard's *hyperreality* in order to explain the power by which advertising disarms consumers. The effect of this

combination is illustrated well in a scene from *White Noise* when the novel's main character, Jack Gladney, goes on a shopping spree at the mall with his family during which he charges everything in sight. In this passage, Gladney is clearly a victim of Kaloustian's "mantra of consumerism"—he buys more to feel better. Within this spending spree passage, DeLillo also interrogates the role that the shopping mall plays in American life. The shopping mall (as well as the previously referenced supermarket) can be viewed as a *hyperreal* space, as defined by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*. Life inside these meccas of consumption is simulated; it is constructed to represent a "real" life that does not actually exist. Examples of Baudrillard's "generation by models," these hyperreal worlds of the shopping mall and the television greatly impact the American family dynamic and the consumer consciousness.

One way that these two vessels of media enter the consumer consciousness is through brand names and the aura surrounding them. In the essay "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo," Paul Maltby notes that "brand names convey a magic and mystical significance" and that, in DeLillo's fiction, "they are often chanted like incantations" (504). The aura of the brand name permeates the consumer mind and creates a numbing effect that desensitizes and disarms. Because of this, people do not question the brand name, thus facilitating the means by which advertising and media can interpret/construct the dreams of American consumers. And, after all, as *Americana* protagonist David Bell asserts, "to consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream" (270).

In Chapter Two, the focus shifts to the American news media as a product designed for public consumption. Postwar media manipulates the newly-created

consumer identity and Americans are eager to embrace the roles that media assigns to them. In his essay, "The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise,*" John N. Duvall argues that the inhabitants of Blacksmith possess what he deems a "masochistic desire to be exploited" (436). They blindly consume whatever the media outlets disseminate to them without ever questioning it. In fact, they reinforce and perpetuate their own victimhood by continually empowering the very institution that exploits them. This "masochistic desire" is probably most obvious in the townspeople's response to the chemical spill, deemed "The Airborne Toxic Event," that occurs in the novel. When the disaster descends upon Blacksmith, the people turn immediately to the media to seek validation of their crisis status. Everyone is gathered at the abandoned Boy Scout camp, which is the evacuation point on the outskirts of town. A man enters the room and begins slowly wading through the crowd. In his hands, he is carrying a small television set above his head. As he walks, he delivers a rousing speech to the people, voicing his frustration with the fact that their disaster was not validated by media coverage:

> There's nothing on network. Not a word, not a picture. On the Glassboro channel we rate fifty-two words by actual count. No film footage, no live report . . . don't those people know what we've been through? Is it possible nobody gives substantial coverage to such a thing? Half a minute, twenty seconds? Are they telling us it was insignificant? Don't they know it's real? (161-62)

The TV man's speech is followed by applause from his audience. All of the refugees are in agreement that they deserve to be recognized by the media for the suffering they have

undergone. The irony here is that the experience is just as real to the victims regardless of whether or not the news reports it, but they still think that somehow without media validation, the experience does not acquire "real" status. Like the TV man, people recognize that the media is supposed to be interested in marketing disaster which is why "the airborne toxic event cannot be a real disaster if the media shows no interest" (Duvall 438). Media interest proves that the disaster is worth noticing. In other words, the people surrender the ability to determine that which is "real" and "important" in their own lives. Instead, it is left up to the media to make those determinations.

In this chapter, I apply Gramsci's discussion of hegemony to the relationship between the news media and the people, a relationship in which media constructs and manages what people consume as "reality." As Gramsci wrote, hegemony is a "reciprocally balanced combination of force and consent" (210). Therefore, media must be *given* the power to control by the people in order to successfully manage that power and maintain the hegemony. One way that this hegemonic power is manifested in American culture can be seen in the concept of media-constructed reality. By retaining the power to validate existence and tragedy through the coverage (or lack thereof) of events, and, in particular, disastrous events, the media can effectually *dictate* what matters in society. If the media covers an event, it matters; if there is no coverage, it does not. Because of this power to construct reality, media is charged not only with the responsibility of managing the constant flood of images that bombard Americans on a daily basis, but also with regulating the ensuing "news pollution" which results from this influx.

My argument here is that media's hegemony is maintained by an act of complicity on the part of the people. On the one hand, media satisfies Gramsci's requirement that, in order for a group to gain governmental power, it must first "exercise intellectual and moral 'leadership'" (210). The most efficient and influential way to propagate this intellectual leadership is by controlling the media. Media control facilitates the dissemination of propaganda (often disguised in the form of advertising). Gramsci's model of hegemonic control is founded on an ability to spread propaganda to the masses. Power is derived more from consent than force, especially in a democracy, and in order to obtain that consent, intellectual control must first be gained by the effective use of propaganda (advertising). In a successful hegemony, "force must not [predominate] excessively over consent" (Gramsci 210). This allows the dominant group to maintain an illusion of freedom that pacifies the masses. The ideological control is masked by the clever advertising propaganda that creates an illusion of free will.

On the other hand, media's hegemony is supported by American complicity and Duvall's notion of the "masochistic desire to be exploited." Media power exists in large part because viewers surrender that power. People ultimately allow media to manipulate their decisions. They turn to magazines and television to be told what to buy. They turn to the news media to be told which stories are important. They turn to the film industry and popular television shows to be told how to behave. People want to be told what to do. They want to be exploited and manipulated.

American media has an incredible amount of power to dictate American culture because the American people willingly surrender the power to think for themselves. This power is so readily surrendered because there is a perceived benefit or return on

investment in exchange for a blind acquiescence to dominant ideology. When people watch a popular television show or look at magazine ads and learn the contemporary fashion guidelines, they are then able to mimic these styles. This, of course, results in acceptance by the dominant social group that reinforces the individual's decision to consume in the first place. A cycle is established whereby the consumer seeks approval, conforms to dominant ideology, and then gains the sought approval. Gramsci says that this "'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group . . . is caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys" (214). People embrace the dominant ideology promulgated by mainstream media because it makes them feel good. They seek acceptance into dominant culture, and media provides an inlet for that acceptance, even if it comes in the form of intellectual exploitation and at the expense of individuality and free thought. Ultimately, in this chapter I contend that the combination of media propaganda and American complicity gives the media ultimate power in constructing/validating reality.

This notion of media validating reality provides a transition into Chapter Three and a discussion of the relevance of the Copy in postmodern America. Images deeply influence the construction of American life and identity, and this influence assumes a role of special significance when it is considered in light of Baudrillard's discussion of simulacra. If a copy is simulacra, and the image is a "copy" of the real, then the image *simulates* the real. This relationship between the real and the copy leads into a discussion that revolves around Walter Benjamin's landmark essay regarding the "work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." Benjamin's claim that that which "withers" from

mechanical reproduction is the "aura of the work of art" (283) is not entirely true in the postmodern world. In fact, it is my personal argument that the postmodern concept of *branding* would suggest that the ability to reproduce mechanically (and digitally) actually *stengthens* a work of art's aura, rather than weakening it.

To Benjamin, the aura of the original is created by its *uniqueness*. He argues that an object's inherent value is derived from its rarity. Benjamin suggests that the more widely reproduced the work is, the weaker its aura. In fact, he goes as far as to argue that an object's uniqueness is actually synonymous with its aura (283). This may be true for high culture art, but in the case of pop art, the opposite is true. In pop art (which is increasingly the art form that influences contemporary culture), the more reproducible an object is, the *greater* its aura. Mechanical and digital reproduction has drastically increased the cultural impact of pop art because it has facilitated an art form that can easily and affordably reach the masses.

This reproducibility with regard to static images can also be applied to the branding of individual identity in the sense that recognizable public figures possess a *brand* that heightens public awareness because it can be manipulated for public consumption. The branding of an image (or person) creates an aura that imbues that image (or person) with the power of cultural relevance. The more reproducible (recognizable) a person becomes, the more relevant that person is to main stream culture.

These concepts of branding and image saturation are major themes of *Mao II*. In the novel, DeLillo uses the art of Andy Warhol to interrogate the commodification of identity. DeLillo and Warhol both realize that the highly influential world of pop art reflects a shift in focus by the American public into thinking of art as a commodity and a

product of consumption. In its role as commodity and product, the work of art is stripped of its intrinsic and aesthetic value and retains its worth only in terms of the economic and exchange value conferred on it. As Warhol's art so aptly symbolizes, in a consumer culture, an object's value is only measured in terms of its ability to be commercially exchanged.

This "exchange value" heavily de-emphasizes the artist and the means of production in favor of the consumer and the means of consumption. Products (and art is included in the postmodern definition of this term) are created to be consumed. If they are not efficient enough or cheap enough or useful enough, they are failures. This trend is a result of the hyper-efficient stipulations placed on products by capitalism. The drive towards obligatory economic efficacy has destroyed the concept of intrinsic value (an object no longer derives value from its very nature), and with it the notion of "*l'art pour l'art*." The commodification of art reduces everything to capitalism's standard of maximum efficiency for maximum profit. Clearly, intrinsic value has no place within this economic structure. When the success of an object is determined by the "free market" economy, the cheapest and most efficiently-produced products will almost always prosper. In other words, that which can be easily copied is that which is valued. Thus, the Copy holds the power in the postmodern economy, and because of this, I argue for a revision of Benjamin's longstanding supposition.

As a whole, this study centers on the relationship between American media and the construction of a postwar consumer identity. In it, I interrogate the process by which Americans have become single-minded consumers of everything from material possessions to news to art, and even to our own identities. It is my argument that this

obsession with consumption is a direct result of hypercommodification and the media-constructed reality that penetrates and manifests itself in postwar American culture. This argument begins in the first chapter as I set up the way that media and advertising constructed postwar consumer identities by segmenting the public and creating buying "needs" that would benefit the individual *and* the group. Chapter Two explores how these identities were exploited as a way of controlling society and cultivating a dependency on the media for information. Once the American people had entered into a complicit bond with the media and surrendered their right to decide for themselves, media assumed a role in society that allowed it to literally validate reality. If media covers a story, it is real, it is important, it is valid. Chapter Three then argues that media's validation is a kind of simulacra that subsumes the real, which leads to my point that the Copy (and its ability to be infinitely reproduced) is the determining factor in constructing cultural relevance in postmodern America. The three chapters are distinct and, in some ways, self-involved in that they explore a specific aspect of the American people's relationship with the media, yet the consistent theme argues that these manifestations of media are the ultimate validators of American identity.

# Chapter One:

## Postwar Advertising, Mass Consumption, and the Construction of the Consumer Identity

"To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream." --David Bell from *Americana*

The consumer is the foundation of American Capitalism. Beginning in the twentieth century and, more specifically, following WWII, a huge push began in favor of the accumulation of "stuff." The more one has, the more important he or she is. This mindset catalyzed the most successful, large-scale capitalistic expansion in history. The willing participants of this surge were (and still are) the American consumers.

The policy of domestic conservation and rationing which occurred in the United States during WWII encouraged the average American to feel more and more that he could play an active role in the future of the country. This, coupled with the victory overseas, led to a surge in patriotism and allowed Americans to see themselves differently than they had before the war. America had become a true world power, and most Americans could argue that they had played a small part in that achievement. This sense of national pride and belief in the power of the individual greatly contributed to the creation of a new kind of identity—both nationally and individually—an identity that postwar citizens were primed to embrace: the American Consumer.

In the wake of this development, the business world achieved a great victory by recognizing, defining, and cultivating this new "consumer identity." The nationalistic

pride that was bubbling in postwar America could easily be harnessed and directed. Add to this the fact that millions of GI's were returning home, starting families, and accumulating the material possessions associated with those new families. The setting was perfect for an unprecedented economic boom. All that people needed was a little encouragement, and that encouragement came from the business world and the newly-developing advertising industry. Advertising began to foster the American consumer identity and mold the consumer consciousness.

This definitive American consumer identity did not exist before WWII, and it is no coincidence that this identity began to take hold in conjunction with the mass availability of the television. The role of the consumer was created by the proprietors of capitalism in order to drive and control sales. It was perfect—consuming implies that something has been devoured or exhausted and must be immediately replenished or repurchased. If the business world could convince the public of its "consumer" status, then products could be marketed as items in need of "consumption." It is very clever word usage because it gives the individual (the consumer) an illusion of power. A consumer would appear to be at the top of the food chain, making all his or her own decisions and devouring everything in the path. In reality, this could not be much further from the truth. The consumer is actually more like prey. Businesses dictate the "needs" of the public, telling people what they should buy through subtle advertising. The naïve consumer has very little power in a capitalistic society even though advertising and media would have him think otherwise.

The false sense of empowerment that advertising constructs can be explained by turning to Antonio Gramsci's discussion of hegemony. According to him, in order for a

group to gain governmental power, it must first "exercise intellectual and moral 'leadership'" (210). The most efficient and influential way to propagate this intellectual leadership is by controlling the media. Media control facilitates the dissemination of propaganda (often disguised in the form of advertising). Gramsci's model of hegemonic control is founded on an ability to spread propaganda to the masses. Power is derived more from consent than force, especially in a democracy, and in order to obtain that consent, intellectual control must first be gained by the effective use of propaganda (advertising). In a successful hegemony, "force must not [predominate] excessively over consent" (Gramsci 210). This allows the dominant group to maintain an illusion of freedom that pacifies the masses. The ideological control is masked by the clever advertising propaganda that creates an illusion of free will.

The American consumer identity is a great example of hegemonic control. By manipulating national pride, a strong economy fueled by consumption was developed. This new economy primarily benefited the state, but yet maintained an illusion of power for the individual that was just convincing enough to continue driving the level of ever-increasing consumption. The consumer economy and the mass consumption mentality create a careful balance "between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups . . . in which the interests of the dominant prevail" (Gramsci 211). The secret to its continued prosperity is that the successes of the fundamental group "[stop] short of narrowly corporate economic interest" (212), effectively veiling the ulterior motive and perpetuating the hegemony.

Clearly, it is in the best interest of capitalism for the consumer to remain oblivious to the fact that he is being exploited by the system. By controlling media, advertising,

and marketing, the powers of capitalism maintain a hegemonic control over the American consumer, all the while feeding the consumer with clever marketing schemes that create an illusion of individual power.

One way media has manipulated the consumer conscious is through the segmentation of the American public into various social groups. By dividing people into groups, marketing companies can specifically target consumers based on products that would traditionally be purchased by those groups. In her book *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America,* Harvard history professor Lizabeth Cohen details the market segmentation process initiated by strategic marketing companies in the second half of the twentieth century. She notes that market segmentation grew out of a need to drive consumption and "ensure continued profits" even in the face of "eventual market saturation" (293). Marketers needed a new strategy in order to keep people buying. Cohen cites Wendell Smith's landmark essay "Product Differentiation and Market Segmentation as Alternative Marketing Strategies" as a main catalyst for the new strategy. Smith argued that "attention to smaller or *fringe* market segments . . . [was] of crucial importance in the aggregate," especially in areas where "*core* markets had already been developed" (Cohen 295). Smith's thesis was that "goods would find their markets of maximum potential as a result of recognition of differences in the requirements of market segments" (295). Thus, marketing strategists eventually determined that the best way to maintain the high level of postwar consumption was to break American consumers into market groups, each of which would have its own set of needs and desires.

Although it certainly sells products, this practice also perpetuates everything from gender stereotypes and racial discrimination to ageism, as people were *told* what they should be interested in based on these social categories. Postwar advertising campaigns basically constructed American identities and reinforced them in order to maximize profits. To ensure that these new identities caught on, it was necessary to "sell" them to the American public. This was done by convincing people that the consumerist mentality was an integral part of American society, that consuming was good for the individual, as well as the group as a whole.

Convincing people that consumerism was good for the individual was easy. The simple message was: the more possessions you have, the better off you are. As the popular 1950's slogan "Keeping up with the Jones's" suggests, one must be in constant consumer competition with one's neighbor. The message was one that always encouraged forward "progress." If one continues buying, then one's social status will continue to rise. The illusion created here is that there is a certain "fullness of life" that results from mass consumption.

## The "Mantra of Consumerism" and DeLillo's *White Noise*

This "fullness of life" granted by consumption is central to the American consumer identity. In the novel *White Noise*, Don DeLillo's main character, Jack Gladney, describes this sentiment well after a shopping excursion with his wife:

> It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the

> weight and size and number , the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls—it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening. (20)

DeLillo critiques the false sense of comfort and accomplishment that comes from mass consumption and the accumulation of "stuff." Gladney feels (at that particular moment, in the wake of post-consumption mania) that he has a stronger sense of well-being and greater social status than the person who exchanges the evening shopping spree for a "lonely walk." This implies that the rampant consumer lives a more fulfilling life than his non-spending counterpart. It also alludes to the fact that people often spend money as a means of combating loneliness. One can never be lonely as long as the cycle of spending is maintained. Repeating in Gladney's mind is a line that becomes a central theme in the novel. David Kaloustian labeled it the "*mantra of consumerism*" (17): Consume more and you will feel better.

The *mantra of consumerism* is a recurring theme in much of DeLillo's fiction. His characters often consume in an effort to feel better. Consumption can occur in the form of shopping as it does in *White Noise*, or in more subtle ways like image fetishism in *Mao II* or drug use in *Great Jones Street*. Even less obvious novels like *Libra* and *Falling Man* contain characters who literally *consume* identities. The common thread in

each of these novels is that the characters are perpetually searching for ways to feel better by consuming more of whatever happens to be their obsessions.

Mass Consumption's "Aura of Connectedness"

In addition to the individual "benefits" of consumption, another great marketing success of consumerism was convincing the American people that buying is also good for the whole. When the economy is bad, the government issues tax cuts because "people will spend more money and stimulate the economy." Spending is the solution. The more money we spend, the better America will be. This is an especially clever way of marketing mass consumption. It is essentially construed as patriotic to spend money and unpatriotic not to spend money. Patriotism is easily manipulated because of the highly negative stigma associated with anyone who is deemed unpatriotic.

In his essay "Whole Families Shopping at Night!" Thomas Ferraro discusses DeLillo's recognition of the "communalizing power of consumer culture." DeLillo's fiction recognizes that consumerism has the ability to create an "aura of connectedness among individuals: an illusion of kinship" (Ferraro 20). Ferraro is correct—*White Noise* makes it quite clear that there is a communal experience about shopping. Jack Gladney's family frequently goes shopping together, whether it is to the mall or the supermarket. In fact the shopping experience is one of the few places that the reader really senses the communal spirit and group identity in the novel.[1] Even the secondary characters like Jack's colleague Murray Jay Siskind share a part of the group identity during the act of consumption. A good example of the way rampant consumption cultivates Ferraro's

[1] The supermarket is a primary site of familial bonding and will later be discussed in more detail.

"aura of connectedness" occurs when Gladney takes his family on a shopping spree at the mall. To begin with, Jack's decision to go shopping (he rarely spends time at the mall) was catalyzed by an exchange with a colleague during which Jack is described as "harmless, aging, and indistinct" (83). This depresses Jack and "puts him in the mood to shop" (83), which satisfies the *mantra of consumerism* that shopping will make him feel better. When he meets his family at the mall they are "excited by [his] desire to buy" (83), and willingly engage in his frenzied shopping experience. When he cannot choose between two shirts, they encourage him to buy them both. When he is hungry, they feed him. His daughters are "scouts" who run ahead and bring items back for him to consume. They are his "guides to endless well-being" (83). Jack's family "glorys in the event" (83). ). At the climax of the spree the entire family participates in the shopping experience like appendages of one entity; the group is unified in all its glory, in an "aura of connectedness," "brightness settle[s] around [them]" (84). The language in this scene suggests a shark-like feeding frenzy. When the water is primed with a few drops of blood, the sharks switch into kill mode. Their eyes roll back into their heads and they consume wildly, biting anything that comes near them. The entire experience is very orgiastic, steadily gaining intensity until it peaks in an orgasm of consumption. Jack's mall outing is similar—the blind, frenzied purchasing culminating with the glory moment, and the quiet introspection that follows during which all of the family members "went to [their] respective rooms, wishing to be alone" (84). Reckless mass consumption is a sexual act and, as such, it is both isolating and communalizing.

Consumption's impact on the group as a whole is also an important part of American consumer culture. The idea that consuming was good for the group was

pushed particularly heavily in post-WWII ad campaigns. Lizabeth Cohen references some of these postwar "patriotic" group identity ads in her book. For example, the May 5, 1947 issue of *Life* magazine included a photo essay of a "typical" American family known as the Hemeke family. The essay was entitled "Family Status Must Improve: It Should Buy More for Itself to Better the Living of Others" (Cohen 112). Thirteen years later, in 1960, *Life* again claimed that "'a health and decency standard for everyone' required that every American family acquire not only a 'pleasant roof over its head' but all kinds of consumer goods to put in it, ranging from a washing machine and a telephone to matching dishes and silverware" (Cohen 113). Advertising played a major role in the push towards mass consumption. As Cohen puts it, "mass consumption in postwar America would not be a personal indulgence, but rather a civic responsibility designed to provide 'full employment and improved living standards for the rest of the nation'" (113).

As seen in the *Life* magazine ads, advertisers were encouraging Americans in their roles as consumers. Another popular consumer magazine of the late 50's and 60's was *Redbook*. In 1957, *Redbook* released a propagandistic film called *In the Suburbs* which essentially told the American people (and other advertisers) that the new hot trend was suburban life. It encouraged people to move out of town into the mass-produced housing of the subdivision. The film also labeled postwar Americans as the "buy-it-now generation," which sent a clear message to the consumers exactly what their roles would be in the postwar economy. They would play a crucial role in America's postwar recovery and their purchases would invigorate the economy and raise them to the higher social statuses depicted by advertising's new consumer identity. The new consumer identity was that of a suburban homeowner outfitted with all the new and "necessary"

appliances. Lizabeth Cohen writes, "Although *In the Suburbs* was an unambiguous marketing tool that simplistically stereotyped suburbanites, the link it identified between mass consumption and suburbanization was broadly recognized in postwar American society, as suburbia became the distinctive landscape of the Consumer's Republic" (195). The suburbs became the new site of economic exchange, and with this new mass-produced landscape also came a newly- redesigned, mass-produced shopping center.

The small local businesses that once thrived downtown were replaced by the regional shopping center which had a wider variety of goods in a more concentrated atmosphere. Also, parking was an issue now that most American families owned cars. People wanted to shop where they lived, so large shopping centers began to pop up in residential areas. Malls and supermarkets emerged as the new form of community marketplace, and this emphasis on the megamall and suburban marketplace has endured for the past 50 years.

## The Postmodern Marketplace

This postmodern marketplace is an important setting for many of Don DeLillo's scenes, especially in the novel *White Noise*. An extremely high value is placed on the supermarket; seven scenes in the novel actually take place in it. It is a site of family communion, cultural exchange, even spiritual renewal, in addition to simply being a place to buy groceries. In the novel, the supermarket is advertised as the cultural mecca of the town. It is a place necessary for existence, and according to Jack's friend and

colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, people must regularly pass through its doors to be renewed.

Siskind holds some radical ideas about the cultural significance of the supermarket. He is a character obsessed with pop culture (he also teaches in the Pop Culture department at the College on the Hill), and he places high value on pop art. To Murray, pop art is as important or even more important than high culture as a means of measuring cultural zeitgeist. He explains the role of the supermarket by comparing it to Tibetan monks:

> "Tibetans believe there is a transitional state between death and rebirth. Death is a waiting period, basically. Soon a fresh womb will receive the soul. In the meantime the soul restores to itself some of the divinity lost at birth . . . That's what I think of whenever I come in here. This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data." (37)

To Murray, and, less overtly, to the other characters in the novel, the supermarket is much more than a place to buy groceries. It is a center of intellectual and ideological exchange; it is the site of family bonding, a place where the whole family can connect with each other interpersonally. The supermarket's role as a communal family gathering place in the novel is emphasized by the fact that almost every time the Gladney's go shopping, they do it as a family. Jack, Babette, and three of their children (Steffie, Denise, and Wilder) shop for groceries together even though the two girls are old enough to stay at home. Curiously Murray, who is basically an adopted family member, is frequently at the supermarket when the family arrives. The family makes decisions

together, discusses crises, even holds hands while at the supermarket. This is particularly interesting because when the family is at home, they are almost always separate. Each family member spends most of his or her time alone in the bedroom. Interfamilial interaction rarely occurs outside of the supermarket when the family is engaged in the act of consumption. Familial shopping trips are one of the two sites of family bonding in the novel.

The other familial bonding site is in front of the television set. These two locations are more similar than it may seem at first. Every Friday night, all six members of the family—Jack, Babette, Heinrich, Steffie, Denise, and Wilder, gather together in the family room and watch television together. It is Babette's "family rule." She rationalizes the practice, assuming that if "kids watched television one night a week with parents or stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it a wholesome domestic sport [and] its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power would be gradually reduced" (16). Thus, according to Babette, watching television together is an opportunity for the family not only to bond (just like at the supermarket), but also an opportunity to challenge the power that television holds on all of them. These Friday night attempts at de-glamorization are usually failures; the power of television appears to grow rather than diminish with each viewing.

It is interesting that the two sites DeLillo chooses as places of family bonding—the television and the supermarket—are the two places most highly concentrated with advertising and brand placement. Both are sources of nonstop stimuli, bombarding the consumer with an overwhelming array of images and advertising. Both use these representations to put the subject at ease and create a comfortable, recognizable

environment that encourages consumption. Both are places which are constructed to represent a "real" place that does not actually exist—a hyperreal. Television "life" and supermarket "life" are simulation. Neither are "real" life; they only simulate a conception of real life. They represent a "real" that does not actually exist. As Baudrillard famously observed, simulation is the "generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (1). Television is scripted and produced. Even so-called "reality television" is cut and edited. Likewise the bright lights and overwhelming stimuli of the supermarket create a fantasyland for the consumer that is highly scripted and depicts a simulated world which does not actually exist in "real" life. There is no "real" place in life that is actually made up of bright primary colors, perfect straight lines, and manipulated lighting. These are elements of a constructed setting--a world that is created artificially--and DeLillo's supermarket and television are perfect examples of this constructed hyperreality. In these hyperreal worlds familiar images are combined with bright colors, clean lines, and movie star spokespeople. The stimuli work together to disarm the subject: the consumer.

It is in the economic interest of both television and shopping centers—the two cultural meccas of postmodern America—to involve the entire family in order to (1) maximize spending by increasing the consumer count, and (2) to colonize the minds of the young in order to desensitize them toward the predatory tactics of consumer marketing. If one grows up watching television or shopping in a supermarket, then that person is much less likely to recognize the subtle messages. Rarely do we question the familiar.

This suggests that Babette's Friday night ritual, as well as the regular family shopping trips, actually encourage the children to embrace the stimuli-saturated consumer world rather than reject it. This is one of DeLillo's main points. In postwar culture, we are always already consumers. It is impossible to get outside of the consumer mentality because every experience is mediated or filtered by the consumer consciousness. Mass consumption is America, and America is mass consumption. As long as television and shopping are America's favorite pastimes, people will continue to be controlled by the media and its constant bombardment of advertising images.

Constructing the Consumer Consciousness

The mediation of the consumer consciousness is a result of the exploitation of the relationship between the business world and the consumer. By complicating the relationship between buyer and seller, advertising firms could necessitate the hiring of a *mediator* between the two. This is exactly what advertising agencies did when they segmented the American public and began creating various consumer types, each needing a specific marketing strategy in order to be convinced to buy more products. As previously discussed, the market segmentation consisted of dividing America into groups based on class, race, gender, and age. Cohen points out that this "splintered purchasing public required manufacturers and retailers to seek more sophisticated guidance" (301) from advertisers and market researchers, which effectively made them indispensable in the new consumer economy. With all of these new marketing groups, the advertising agency ultimately held power over the buyer *and* the seller. An industry was created that

told companies that they needed someone to reach their "target audience" and then turned around and created that very target audience from the sea of consumers.

While *White Noise* does a nice job of depicting the effects of this advertising stronghold on America, DeLillo's first novel, *Americana*, really attempts to explain the process by which advertising infiltrates the consumer consciousness. Written in the late 1960's and published in 1971, *Americana* was a critique of the advertising industry that was conceived during the very era it examines. The novel is heavily concerned with postwar advertising and consumption and the consumer identity that this culture was beginning to construct.

The epigraph to this chapter captures the theme of the novel and addresses DeLillo's main point. According to the protagonist, David Bell, "to consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream" (270). In *Americana*, Bell makes a documentary film that is both a biography and a commentary on postwar American consumerism. In it, various strangers interact with him as they read scripted responses to questions he asks. His film is a critique of the American trend toward mass consumption and the advertising firms (one of which employs his father) that drive this trend. Ironically, as his actors read the script he has written, they become advertisements themselves—advertisements for the argument against advertising. And he becomes the very advertising broker that he seeks to critique. Not surprisingly, Bell realizes that a successful advertising campaign must be well-disguised; it must be cleverly packaged and accessible in order to seduce the American consumer. Control of the consumer mind is economic power, which is why Bell argues that consuming is really more about dreaming than it is about buying. Once the advertiser has convinced the consumer of a given image, then the sale is as good as

made. The secret is to persuade the American people that they possessed these desires all along. Bell precisely explains this secret of advertising. When asked how a successful television commercial affects the viewer, he responds:

> It makes him want to change the way he lives. It moves him from first person consciousness to third person. In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be. Advertising has discovered this man. It uses him to express the possibilities open to the consumer. To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream. Advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled . . . we have exploited the limitation of dreams. It's our greatest achievement. (270-271)

Now, 40 years after DeLillo wrote this book, the claim is still very relevant.[2] Advertising discovered the person everyone *wants* to be, rather than just the people we are. By using DeLillo's term "discovered," I mean to suggest that that ideal person did not previously exist. The advertising industry constructed that identity and then marketed it to the American people. The ideal image is sold to the public. It is itself an item for consumption. Of course, this ideal is different for different people and targeted ads vary accordingly, teaching each individual consumer group how to fill its various consumer roles.

These consumer roles are major contributors to the perpetuation of social stereotypes. At the beginning of the market segmentation movement (and still today in many cases), certain products were marketed according to lines of gender, race, and age.

[2] Although, the gendered language that DeLillo used in his 1971 novel should be updated. Obviously, men and women are both constructed and influenced by the advertising industry.

Men were told to buy cigarettes, beer, and cars, while female-targeted ads were for household products like laundry detergent. Even children were taught by kids' television shows to request certain cereal brands and toys. It was as though purchasing was never a universal task—a given social group never crossed the purchasing boundary into the shopping world of another social group. Obviously, this is false, but the carefully constructed consumer identities would suggest the opposite. According to segmented marketing, X people almost always buy Y products. From the perspective of sales forecasting, this may be a helpful tool, but the negative effect of this kind of marketing strategy is the way that these constructed consumer identities reinforce and perpetuate social stereotypes still to this day. Consumer identities are constructed and marketed so successfully that the American public has internalized the group traits which have been assigned to them. It is as though the socialization is unconscious—it is such a saturated part of everyday life that no one even questions it; in fact, no one even seems to notice.

## The Aura of the Brand Name

Another aspect of what might be called media's colonization of the unconscious is the power of the brand name. Brand names are repeated over and over again in all forms of advertising media to the point that the word itself begins to assume a kind of aura. The name develops a power that transcends the arbitrary Saussurian sign system of signifier and signified. The aura created by a successful branding is no longer bound by the traditional word/image (signifier/signified) relationship of linguistics. The brand encompasses everything that a company represents. Take the Disney brand for example.

What does the word "Disney" actually mean? What is the signified associated with this brand? There is no single signified. The word has no specific meaning or even a universal image associated with it[3]. However, the brand is instantly recognized all over the world. This recognition is a result of the aura associated with the company's successful branding. The brand name transcends meaning. If a company can successfully market a product so that the product name, the word, can transcend routine definition to the point that it *is* itself definition, then it can raise the word above the level of meaning to the point that it becomes completely ingrained in the culture. Constant repetition of the word as a mantra-like chant (recall the "mantra of consumerism") at first strips it of meaning, but, eventually, imbues it with a new significance that is all-meaning. The word is no longer arbitrary. It is the product and the product is it.

DeLillo does a nice job of illustrating this point in his fiction. It is important to him to deconstruct the power of language and the aura of the brand name. As Paul Maltby writes in his essay "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo," "brand names not only flourish but convey a mystical significance. Hence, they are often chanted like incantations" (504). This discussion is particularly relevant in *White Noise*. Throughout the novel, DeLillo breaks the action with a detached third person repetition of brand names. They always come in lists of three and are usually connected to each other in some way. "Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex" (52). "Tegrin, Denorex, Selsun Blue" (289). "Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida" (155). Lists like these appear dozens of times in the novel and never have any specific context introducing or explaining them. DeLillo does this in order to point out the way that advertising has

[3] With the exception of maybe Mickey Mouse, but even then, there is nothing particularly "Disney" about Mickey Mouse.

completely permeated all aspects of our postmodern existence. The brand name has taken over. We repeat the signifiers in our heads and we do not even have to think because we know the products. The mind of the consumer is completely saturated with advertising images and brand names, and there is an underlying current in our culture, a white noise, which constantly repeats these names back to us, forcing us to make sure we never forget them.

This point is probably most clear in the character of Steffie, Jack Gladney's step daughter. There is a particular scene in the novel when Jack is watching his daughter sleep and he hears her say the words: *Toyota Celica*. As almost every critic who has ever written an essay about *White Noise* has noted, this passage is indispensable to the study of DeLillo's exploration of consumer culture. As Jack watches her sleep, he realizes that Steffie utters "two clearly-audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant" (155). As Steffie speaks brand names in her sleep, it becomes clear just how ingrained these words are in our unconscious minds. DeLillo writes that the brand name has a "ritual meaning" as though it were part of a "verbal spell" (155). Gladney explains Steffie's brand name recall as a part of "every child's substatic brain noise" (155). The term "brain noise" implies that it is activity occurring just beyond the realm of conscious thought. It is fleeting, but ever-present. It is dominant enough to be influential, but just subtle enough to disguise itself. This is the most successful kind of advertisement. This is advertising that invades the unconscious and "exploits the limitation of dreams."

How is advertising able to maintain such a strong grip on the American consumer? Part of the reason is its ability to control the unconscious mind. The other

half of the equation is simple, but perhaps even more shocking: Advertising holds power because we, as consumers, *let* it hold power. Hegemony is a "reciprocally balanced combination of force and consent" (Gramsci 210). Media's power over the consumer functions on this exact principle.

# Chapter Two:

# News Media and American Complicity

"In a crisis the true facts are whatever other people say they are." –from *White Noise*

The American media's postwar rise to power was accomplished by strategic marketing and a subliminal kind of advertising which created a consumer identity and then exploited that identity by convincing the public that consumption was an indispensable part of American culture. In this new consumer identity, being American meant spending money. The American Dream was revised to include a dishwasher and a two car garage for every home. Americans became dependent on the accumulation of "stuff" and the acquisition of consumer credit and, in turn, so did the postwar American economy. Once this dependence was established, advertising and media cemented for themselves a permanent place in American culture.

The other key element in postwar media's rise to power is American complicity. Media power exists in large part because viewers surrender that power. People ultimately allow media to manipulate their decisions. They turn to magazines and television to be told what to buy. They turn to the news media to be told what stories are important. They turn to the film industry and popular television shows to be told how to behave. People want to be told what to do. They want to be exploited and manipulated.

American media has an incredible amount of power to dictate American culture because the American people acquiescently surrender the power to think for themselves.

One reason this power is so readily surrendered is because there is a perceived benefit or return on investment in exchange for a blind acquiescence to dominant ideology. When people watch a popular television show or look at magazine ads and learn the contemporary fashion guidelines, they are then able to mimic these styles. This, of course, results in acceptance by the dominant social group which reinforces the individual's decision to consume in the first place. A cycle is established whereby the consumer seeks approval, conforms to dominant ideology, and then gains the sought approval. Gramsci would say that this "'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group . . . is caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys" (214). People embrace the dominant ideology promulgated by mainstream media because it makes them feel good. They seek acceptance into dominant culture, and media provides an inlet for that acceptance, even if it comes in the form of intellectual exploitation and at the expense of individuality and free thought.

In his compelling essay, "The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*," John N. Duvall discusses the American public's "masochistic desire to be exploited" (436), by advertising and mainstream media. As Duvall suggests, the characters in *White Noise* "seek affirmation through television" (436). The inhabitants of Blacksmith turn to the television and, specifically, to the news media to validate their existence. In order for an event to matter, it must be covered by the local news. If the news does not do a story on it, it is as though

it did not happen. By assigning it this ultimate validating power, media/television *creates* that which is valued in real life. As discussed in the previous chapter, media *creates* the real. And the characters in the novel gladly consume this "reality." As Gladney begrudgingly admits, "I am eager to be humored, to be fooled" (251). Like Gladney, the average American consumer has surrendered self-awareness and the power to decide to the Television. The Television will decide for him whether or not something is real/true.

Baudrillardian theory fits very well into DeLillo's critique of television and the mainstream media. In Baudrillard's essay, "The Precession of Simulacra," he discusses a concept which he labels "TV verité." He asserts that "it is TV that is true, it is TV that renders true" (29). This is precisely the argument that DeLillo is making in his fiction. Media validates/determines "real" experiences. A great example of this media validation can be found in *White Noise*. When "The Airborne Toxic Event" disaster descends upon Blacksmith, the townspeople turn immediately to the media to seek validation of their crisis status. Everyone is gathered at the abandoned Boy Scout camp, which is the evacuation point on the outskirts of town. A man enters the room and begins slowly wading through the crowd. In his hands, he is carrying a small television set above his head. As he walks, he delivers a rousing speech to the people, voicing his frustration with the fact that their disaster was not validated by media coverage:

> There's nothing on network. Not a word, not a picture. On the Glassboro channel we rate fifty-two words by actual count. No film footage, no live report . . . don't those people know what we've been through? Is it possible nobody gives substantial coverage to such a thing? Half a minute,

> twenty seconds? Are they telling us it was insignificant? Don't they know it's real? (161-62)

The TV man's speech is followed by applause from his audience. All of the refugees are in agreement that they deserve to be recognized by the media for the suffering they have undergone. The irony here is that the experience is just as real to the victims regardless of whether or not the news reports it, but they still think that somehow without media validation, the experience does not acquire "real" status. Like the TV man, people recognize that the media is supposed to be interested in marketing disaster which is why "the airborne toxic event cannot be a real disaster if the media shows no interest" (Duvall 438). Media interest proves that the disaster is worth noticing.

Reliance on media validation occurs at other places in the novel, as well. When Jack picks up Bee (his daughter from a previous marriage) from the airport, they witness a man retelling the story of the near death experience he just had on his plane flight. A crowd gathers around him as he explains that both engines failed in his plane and, for several minutes, the plane was "a silver gleaming death machine" (91). Both engines eventually recover and the pilot regains control but not before all of the passengers went through the most terrifying experience of their lives. After hearing the story, Bee's only response is, "Where's the media?" (92). She is informed that "there is no media in Iron City," and smugly retorts, "So they went through all that for nothing?" Yet again, without media coverage this horrific experience gains no respect and the very real fear of the passengers is written off as a wasted opportunity.

These examples reflect a bond between media and the individual that is complicitous. Just as in Gramsci's hegemony, half of the reason that the dominant

culture is able to retain power is because the masses willingly surrender it. In this complicitous bond, the media will tell the public what is real and the public will consume it as such. This is the agreement. But inherent in this relationship is a power shift which allows media to essentially control and regulate (mediate!) all that is considered real experience. This power shift, in the words of Baudrillard, results in the blurred "distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between the ends and means" (30). Because culture is predominately dictated by dominant ideology and media controls the means of producing dominant ideology, then it also controls the ends. The line between cause and effect, ends and means, is blurred. Baudrillard continues: "TV is watching us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us" (30). The result of this unchecked control of cultural production on the part of American media is the public's complete dependence on the "analytical conception of the media" (Baudrillard 31). Media informs us, it *feeds* us. We become like addicts for news, a form of news which is necessarily mediated and manufactured for public consumption.

In *White Noise*, the chair of the Department of Pop Cultural Studies, Alfonse Stompanato, claims that "for most people there are only two places in the world: where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is" (66). In other words, every experience that a person has beyond that which occurs in his or her physically tangible world, is filtered by media. In light of Baudrillard's argument, though, this can be taken a step further to make the case that even the physical world is now being subsumed by the mediated one. If the media determines what is real, then the mediated world is as much "real" as the physical one. A

distinction can no longer be made between the medium and its message. The medium is the message. The message is the real. The medium is the real. There is no longer any hierarchical prioritization between the representations of the real which we see on television and the actual which we experience for ourselves. The simulation is as relevant as that which it simulates. Because the simulated is no longer prioritized over the simulation, the simulator holds a powerful role in American society which allows it to dictate reality. As a simulator, media has the power to construct simulations that are as culturally important as the simulated (which is "real life"). Media creates reality.

Simulacra

One of the critics who first established the connection between Baudrillard's *simulacra* and DeLillo's fiction is John Frow. He explores the relationship between actual events in Delillo's fiction and what might be considered simulations of actual events, in which his characters do things that are actually only copies of acts already performed by others. These simulations are a part of the cultural milieu which are never questioned by the participants yet identically reenacted over and over again like photocopies of the original. Frow uses the opening scene of *White Noise* as an example of this cultural simulation. It is move-in day at the university, and Jack Gladney watches as station wagon after station wagon pulls up to the dormitories, all loaded with the requisite college paraphernalia. Gladney describes the scene as though it is identical every year and, in fact, he confesses that he has "witnessed this spectacle every September for twenty-one years" (3). The behavior of students and parents is ritualistic.

Even though they themselves may not have done this before, it is an absolutely ingrained part of American culture which is why this particular move-in is a cultural simulation of not only the move-ins which have come before, but also of the very idea of a collectively understood "move-in ritual." Gladney observes that participating in the simulation makes the subjects feel like "they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation" (4). Frow points out that this communal recognition is "part of a diffuse system of recognitions" which results in the inability "to distinguish meaningfully between a generality embedded in life and a generality embedded in representations of life" (420). It does not matter that this ritual act of move-in day is a cultural simulation. The simulation is as culturally significant as the original. The representation is "lived as real" (Frow 421). This is the Baudrillardian state of hyperreality in which the "real becomes indefinitely reproducible" (Frow 423). This being the case, there can really be no priority assigned to the original or to the copy given that "any original is itself already a copy" (Frow 423).

Returning to the discussion of American media, this idea that the real is "indefinitely reproducible" is particularly relevant. This means that there is effectively just as much cultural relevance to a simulated reality as there is to an actual reality. In fact, there is really no difference (and certainly no prioritization) between the two. Thus, like the long line of station wagons, the media simulates reality over and over again and the simulation is consumed each time as a "new" reality. And, the consumers—the American public—depend on that simulated reality in order to understand how to relate to their world. This dependence continually recycles. People rely on the media to simulate/construct reality each day, to "shape and reshape human identity" (Frow 426).

The relationship is much like an addict who keeps returning to the dealer for more of the very drug that enslaves him.

Americans and News Addiction

Nowhere is this news addiction more prevalent than in the reporting and consumption of disaster stories. The news media has created a culture of fear in our society and preys off of the public's need to be "saved" from that fear. It is basically a self-fulfilling prophecy that has been established and it recycles itself endlessly. For example, media reported in the summer of 2010 that "swine flu" was an epidemic in America. All Americans had to tune into the news every hour of every day in order to (1) save oneself and one's family from this terrible disease, and (2) to satisfy the morbid curiosity inherent in contemporary American life. In exchange for the public's loyalty, news stations reported around the clock about the victims of swine flu and all the many "secret tips" on how to protect oneself. "Wash your hands." "Don't drink after strangers." "Try not to breathe in public places." In actuality, the news reported is almost worthless. There were less than 100 victims in the entire country. Why is this news?! It is news because the media says it is news. It goes back to the complicitous bond. Media will report and the public will consume. DeLillo satirizes this "sheep following the shepherd" mentality in *White Noise*. Jack Gladney echoes the sentiment of most Americans when he nonchalantly comments, "I am eager to be humored, to be fooled" (251). Media gladly fills the role of "humorer" with a self-fulfilling prophecy

that proclaims the existence of a disaster and then manufactures the story in order to prove that it is a disaster. It creates reality and then proves it is real by its own logic.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo satirizes the media's predatory relationship with the American public. He recognizes the media's ability to manipulate people by fear. He uses the voice of the narrator to assert that "in a crisis the true facts are whatever other people say they are" (120). He announces to the reader that "no one's knowledge is less secure than your own" (120). DeLillo is making fun of the way that people immediately turn to the news when a crisis occurs. No one trusts their own judgment, their own knowledge. This, of course, is exactly what the news media wants. It gives them ultimate power to disseminate knowledge and validate human experiences. If media says the public should be afraid, then it should be afraid because the true facts are always what other people say they are.

Media's role during a crisis is also satirized in DeLillo's fiction. Nowhere is this more obvious than during "The Airborne Toxic Event," a poisonous cloud of a fictional toxin known as Nyodene D which hangs ominously over the town of Blacksmith after a train car tank is punctured. All information about the disaster is disseminated by the media—contaminated areas, side effects, precautions, evacuation plans. The only information that the characters know about the toxin is told to them by radio or television. Because of this, the news media is easily able to control the level of terror surrounding the incident. The name of the disaster progresses from the "feathery plume" to the "black billowing cloud" to "The Airborne Toxic Event," and each time the disaster is re-named, more fear and urgency are instilled in the public. The actual contamination itself has not

changed at all, but by using more and more dramatic names, the media escalates public fear, making the people more dependent on the information that it provides.

DeLillo's satire is also apparent in the humorous way that this information is consumed by Jack's and Babette's daughters, Steffie and Denise. Each time the disaster is re-named, there are new symptoms that supposedly indicate one's exposure to the poison. Jack's son, Heinrich, is the first to learn of each new symptom from the radio, and he passes them on to the family. "What does the radio say?" Jack asks his son. "At first they said skin irritation and sweaty palms. But now they say nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath" (111). Almost immediately, Steffie and Denise begin to complain of sweaty palms. Heinrich dryly responds, "There's been a correction. Tell them they ought to be throwing up." Soon after that, the symptoms change again to heart palpitations and a sense of *déjà vu*. Just as before, Denise is a little behind in her assumption of the supposed contamination symptoms. During dinner, she keeps getting up from the table and rushing to the bathroom with her hand over her mouth as though she were about to vomit. When the symptoms change to convulsions, coma, and miscarriage, the two girls are complaining of *déjà vu*. Each time the symptoms change, the girls exhibit the new signs of contamination. Clearly, they are ready to mimic whichever symptoms they are told to by the media. They are malleable subjects, ready to be manipulated by the mediated knowledge promulgated by television and radio. This is a clear critique of the American public's tendency toward blind news consumption.

The rapidly worsening symptoms are also Delillo's humorous jab at the often ridiculous disaster media which has to raise the level of alert constantly in order to keep shocking the American public. If people are not constantly in fear for their lives, they

might lose interest in the news story and change the channel. The symptoms of Nyodene D exposure escalate from slightly discomforting to absolutely horrific in an attempt to keep people interested in the story. This is a side effect of the short attention span of the American public which is characteristic of postmodern society. It is likely a result of the mainstream media's fickle nature which is constantly updating new styles and trends in contemporary culture. Media has basically created a monster in its viewership and is now forced to pacify it with newer, better, and more up-to-date information, as exemplified by the media in Blacksmith. Of course, there is not a single case of any person in the entire novel actually experiencing any of the symptoms supposedly associated with the exposure that the entire town underwent. This is generally the case in real American life, as well, as in the swine flu example when the actual number of infected was an insignificant percentage of the population—certainly not enough to justify round the clock news coverage.

The American public's willingness to participate in this endless cycle of escalating scare tactics recalls the bond of complicity that fuels the culture of consumption. The average American consumer never questions the fact that his fears are being blatantly manipulated by media in order to sell news. As discussed in chapter one, blind consumption is a dream-come-true in the world of consumerism and advertising. The same is true with regard to the news media. It is very easy to sell products to a consumer who asks no questions and always wants to buy more, regardless of quality. Postmodern media has tapped into a market that consumers cannot get enough of—Public Terror. The ability to market terror as an item fit for mass consumption is now a crucial part of mainstream media's approach to news reporting.

One night after the Nyodene D spill, Jack and his abnormally intelligent 14-year old son discuss this concept of terror as consumer product. "Every day on the news there's another toxic spill. Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokestacks, radioactive water from power plants" (174). The terror stories promulgated by the media are continuous. Jack and Heinrich eventually conclude that "terrifying data is now an industry in itself" (175). The same conclusion can be reached in contemporary American culture. If the media can convince the public to be completely information-dependent upon it to "save" them from a crisis, then they are able to prey on the disaster fears and nameless terror that they have instilled in the people. Once the public is hooked, the media can (and must) feed the public its daily dose of terror. Eventually, this leads to a condition I will call *news pollution*.

News Pollution

*News Pollution* is the constant bombardment of news footage, reports, breaking news, deaths, disasters, even weather, that occurs on the aptly-named "newsfeed" of network channels. Every time the television is turned on, there is something that the public "needs to know!" The constant flood of images and information results in a desensitization of the viewer. The daily deaths and crimes become routine; they blend in with the weather updates and are consumed in much the same way, barely even noticed by the American public anymore. Jack Gladney's colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, calls this condition "brain fade." Murray explains his claim, arguing that advertising has

become conflated with news reporting, which has perverted the public's method of consumption for media:

> This is what comes from the wrong kind of attentiveness. People get brain fade. This is because they've forgotten how to listen and look as children. They've forgotten how to collect data. In the psychic sense a forest fire on TV is on a lower plane than a ten-second spot for Automatic Dishwasher All. The commercial has deeper waves, deeper emanations. But we have reversed the relative significance of these things. This is why people's eyes, ears, brains, and nervous systems have grown weary. (67)

The Pop Culture Department Chair from *White Noise*, Alfonse Stompanato, also weighs in on his colleague Murray's concept of brain fade. As Stompanato sees it, "the flow is constant. Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes" (66). Stompanato then extrapolates the brain fade argument as a way of explaining the public's obsession with catastrophes. He argues, "Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information" (66).

Consider Stompanato's catastrophe argument in light of recent global disasters like the Haiti earthquake, flooding in Pakistan, or Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The American public needs about one good disaster a year to break up the brain fade caused by news pollution. It seems like American media provides exactly that. There are horrific tragedies occurring all over the world every day. For example, American mainstream media has paid almost no attention to terrible acts of mass genocide in areas like the Darfur region of Sudan. Furthermore, earthquakes, tsumanis, hurricanes,

volcanic eruptions happen almost every day, yet Americans are only conveniently informed of them every so often. The disaster must be nicely packaged and solvable, which disqualifies Darfur. It also generally has to happen in a country that directly impacts the United States in some way. The media knows that worldwide disaster coverage is an ace up its sleeve and it only wants to play it when it is most effective—when the American public is beginning to suffer from news pollution and brain fade. One massive disaster and the newsfeed is instantly at the forefront of American minds again. It is a very clever form of strategic marketing that operates on a kind of supply and demand principle. When supply of disaster coverage is low, demand for it is very high. Media knows that if the news market is flooded with supply, demand will drop dramatically, and force-feeding disaster consumption might lead to indigestion.

News Pollution also means that media has a constant presence in the lives of Americans. The newsfeed is always on—24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Information flow is constant. It is impossible to get outside of Mediated Knowledge. The mediation of images/information is always already active. Therefore, authentic, unmediated response is impossible. There really is no way to escape the foundation of knowledge that exists and, therefore, that foundation will always affect human response. This is an important theme in all of DeLillo's literature. Media is invasive and permeating. It influences and constructs all of American culture. Through his fiction, DeLillo is "ironically suggesting that whatever authentic response is taking place is nevertheless conditioned and even distorted by media representations" (Kaloustian 13). All information consumed in popular culture is mediated and, as a result, all response to that information is necessarily influenced by that mediation.

The motive for this power grab on the part of mainstream media is (as it always is in free market Capitalism): profit. Of course, any television channel that attracts and holds the attention of millions of viewers is a highly lucrative business due to the cost of advertising space on the network. Ultimately, this is the goal of the news media: keep ratings high so that advertising revenue continues to produce exorbitant profits. The top executives likely care very little about keeping the public informed and very much about keeping their pockets lined with cash. Obviously, there are still commercial breaks during disaster coverage. During the Airborne Toxic Event coverage in *White Noise* there is a humorous moment during which it is pointed out that the radio station cannot spend too much time describing the event because "air time is valuable" (111). Despite the appearance, media outlets are still entirely profit-driven.

The only time in recent history that the news media has lost money in order to provide news coverage for the American people was in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The major media outlets appealed to the American people, claiming to provide nonstop coverage without regard for their own profits as a service to America. What a selfless act of patriotism! Well, not really. What company would actually pay for advertising during this horrific time in American history? No company wanted to be associated with the terrorist attack. No company wanted to "sponsor" this terrible event. Though the big media players may have wanted to convince the public that they were selfless and patriotic, they more than likely simply could not find any financial support during those 48 hours or so.

At any rate, the manufacture and maintenance of disaster media has huge financial potential for those who control it. And, yet again, it all goes back to advertising.

Advertising is the platform on which postmodern media is built. It makes the bond between media and public possible. Media actively cultivates this relationship by creating a hunger for information in the American people and then providing the "food" for consumption that pacifies that hunger. The result is that Americans have entered into a complicitous bond with media in which they have given up their right to decide for themselves in exchange for the perceived benefits derived from the hegemony of media power. Media is everything in American culture because it is allowed to be.

The postwar American public has developed a media fetish. In the last decade alone, over a dozen cable stations have been added that all provide nothing but nonstop news--constant information and images for public consumption. News media has cultivated this fetish by marketing itself as a commodity without which Americans cannot live. It has colonized the unconscious of the American mind and convinced the public that what it has to offer is need-to-know information for the American people, leading them to surrender the power to decide for themselves. Media promulgates the cultural milieu that validates human existence. It determines what is real. By manipulating the public with fear and the threat of terror, media has become an indispensable—in fact, inseparable, part of postwar American culture.

## Chapter Three:

## The Art of the Copy: Mechanical Reproductions and Media Simulations

"The theme [in postmodern American culture] is whatever you want it to be because appearance is all that matters." -from *Americana*

Repeatedly copying an original imbues it with a special power. The very fact that something is worthy of copying dignifies it in a way, suggesting that it is special enough to preserve and recreate. When multiple copies of the item are made, an aura begins to develop around it. The original gains power and influence. It becomes important. As the copies circulate and more people are exposed to the item, it becomes more and more recognizable. The more that people recognize it, the more power it holds. The aura grows.

A good example of the aura created by recognition alone can be seen in American popular culture. The power held by celebrities in this country is unrivaled. Celebrities are popular *because they are popular*. The more recognizable a person is, the greater the aura surrounding him or her. Consider pop culture icons like Paris Hilton or the Kardashian family. None of them have accomplished anything particularly deserving of fame and admiration—even by popular culture's standards. Yet they are instantly recognized everywhere they go. The Kardashians have a popular television show that does little more than depict their day to day routines. They have gained national celebrity

status because they are attractive and because people have come to recognize them. They have basically "branded" themselves, and each time their brand is advertised in popular culture, the aura around it grows. The more popular they are, the more popular they become. This popularity comes as a result of multiplying the brand, of "copying" it. Thus, copying an original is a form of branding it which, in turn, allows the original to be marketed and advertised, and the more recognizable the brand becomes, the stronger is the aura surrounding it.

DeLillo explores this concept in *White Noise.* Jack Gladney agrees to join his eccentric colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, on a day trip to the country outside of Blacksmith. Murray wants to visit a local tourist attraction known as "The Most Photographed Barn in America." When they reach the barn, they discover that there is "a spot set aside for viewing and photographing" (12). Everyone has cameras, and there is even a man in a booth selling photographs of the barn. Each time the barn is photographed, its celebrity increases; its aura grows. It becomes more popular precisely because it is popular and for no other reason. If the barn had not been branded as the most photographed barn in America, it would just be a barn with no special qualities whatsoever. It gets photographed *because it gets photographed*. And each time a copy is made, the original gains strength because the brand is reinforced. Murray points out to Jack that they are not there to "capture an image . . . [but] to maintain one" (12). As he says, "every photograph reinforces the aura." The tourists surrounding them are "taking pictures of taking pictures" (13).

Murray recognizes that the endless copies of the original imbue it with a magical power that allows it to transcend itself. In a way, the original is no longer the original

because it has been changed by the aura of the copy. It is impossible to see the barn as "just a barn" again because it has been forever altered by the aura. Everyone who sees the barn sees it as it is now—the most photographed barn in America—and their consumption of the barn is always already influenced by their knowledge of it. Murray questions, "What did the barn look like before it was photographed? How was it different from other barns?" (13). He responds to himself by pointing out that "we can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures . . . we can't get outside the aura" (13). The original barn is forever influenced by the perception of it. It is famous because it is famous and for no other reason. Like the pop culture celebrities, the brand grows each time the original is copied, and each new copy reinforces the aura surrounding the original.

The infinite reproducibility of the original through the use of the photographic copy recalls Walter Benjamin's classic discussion of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin also describes the aura surrounding a work of art, but he sees it in a different way. To Benjamin, the aura of the original is created by its *uniqueness*. He argues that an object's inherent value is derived from its rarity. In the age of mechanical reproduction "that which withers is . . . the aura of the work of art" (283). Benjamin suggests that the more widely reproduced the work is, the weaker its aura. In fact, he goes as far as to argue that an object's uniqueness is actually synonymous with its aura (283). This may be true for high culture art, but in the case of pop art, the opposite is true. In pop art (which is increasingly the art form that influences contemporary culture), the more reproducible an object is, the *greater* its aura. Mechanical reproduction has drastically increased the cultural impact of pop art because

it has facilitated an art form that can easily and affordably reach the masses. Benjamin, himself, admits that "mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art" (284). The reason for this change is the newfound accessibility of reproduced art. It can reach more people. And, as I previously argued, in postmodern American culture the growth of an object's aura is directly proportionate to its mass accessibility and cultural saturation. The more recognizable an image is, the stronger its place in the cultural collective.

Rather than liberating art from its aura, as Benjamin suggested would happen, the mass reproduction of art has only solidified the aura as a necessary element of cultural success and recognition. In order for something to be considered a cultural success now, it must be widely accessible and regularly consumed. Thus, the opposite of Benjamin's prediction has occurred. The commodification of culture "has worked to preserve the myth of origins and of authenticity" (Frow 422), and has actually only reinforced the role of the aura in the classification of a "work of art."

By Benjamin's suggestions, this result might have been predictable. He argues that "the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function" (284). His argument is that a work of art's "authenticity" is derived from its connection to a ritual performance (as in theater or concert) and that a copy of this performance could never equal the original, thereby establishing authenticity. I take a different perspective on the idea of "ritual art." Ritual implies an event or concept that can be indefinitely reproduced almost identically. In pop art, this ritual characteristic is exactly what reinforces the aura. The ability to recreate extends the accessibility to the masses and ensures its cultural status precisely because (and not in

spite of) its "public presentability" (Benjamin 284). Just like in the case of the "most photographed barn in America," the aura of a work of art is actually strengthened by that work of art's commodification.

In postmodern America the success of a work of art depends on its function as a cultural commodity. The attention span of mass America is growing shorter and shorter; this places a heavy burden on the art (and the artist) to entertain if it wants to maintain relevancy. Art must always seek to match the rapidly changing landscape of the fickle public. Very rarely does postmodern society produce anything that is enduring or respected for more than a few years (and often only a few days). Everything that entertains any level of cultural relevancy is almost immediately forgotten by the American public.

One reason for this is the fact that art is now almost always dependent on technology. Music, film, even literature now, are all at the mercy of technology and run the risk of extinction not on the basis of merit, but instead simply because of a shift in the medium through which art is consumed. For example, the mode of consumption for music has drastically changed over the last 40 years. The art form is still essentially the same—artists create audio art for the listener, but the medium through which that art is transferred is vastly different. Art and artists who do not adapt to the changing modes of consumption lose cultural relevancy, and this loss does not necessarily have anything to do with the merit of the artwork. Thus, commodification of art does have the ability to create an aura around the work of art, but it also makes the art a product of consumption

which almost always means that once "consumed"[4] it will become a relic of the cultural past.

This culture of consumption hinges on the need to always drive the market. Products must constantly be invented, improved, and re-invisioned in order to maintain a high level of consumption, which is what allegedly fuels the economy. Because of this, everything in a consumer culture is a "product" to be consumed. It must be asked then "to what degree is our art just another consumer product?" (Osteen 450). This is a question that DeLillo addresses in several of his novels.

In *Mao II* DeLillo often discusses images and the reproduction of them. Screen printing is an art form that comes up fairly often in the novel. As may be expected, the narrative regularly refers to the master of the silk screen, Andy Warhol. Even the cover of the book is plastered with Warhol's art—it is his famous silk screen that is a repeating series of Mao Zedong faces in different color tones. This image sets the scene for the interrogation of image reproduction that runs throughout the novel.

With his art, Warhol was really attempting to critique postmodern consumerism and what might be called the hyper-commodification of society. His art targeted the obsession with product branding by using repeated images of recognizable brands like Campbell's soup and Brillo pads. He took this concept of branding a step further by representing public figures like Marilyn Monroe and Che Guavara (as well as Mao) as "brands" in and of themselves. These people had reached a level of celebrity status in the culture and had become a kind of brand because they were such recognizable images. They represented ideas or concepts more than they did actual people; Warhol was

[4] "Consumed" in this context refers to the fact that pop culture devours products and shortly thereafter they lose cultural relevancy, as in the case of hit songs or films.

drawing a direct comparison to material products and their ability to invoke "the aura of brand name," as I discussed in chapter one. This critique of hyper-commodification is why Warhol's art so accurately represents DeLillo's fiction. Both men push society to examine the fact that everything is becoming an item of consumption, including art.

DeLillo establishes his connection to Warhol early in *Mao II*. In the first chapter Bill Gray's personal assistant, Scott, visits a museum containing Warhol's art. Scott stands in a room "filled with images of Chairman Mao" including "photocopy Mao, silk-screen Mao, wallpaper Mao, [and] synthetic-polymer Mao" (21). As he stands in front of the representations, Scott realizes that the varying color repetitions of Mao's profile strangely disconnect the copy from the original causing it to "[float] nearly free of its photographic source" (21). The repetition with various colors mimics an advertisement for any regular consumer product. The art is an advertisement for the "Mao brand." Just as discussed in chapter two, branding an item pushes it beyond routine definition, causing it to transcend traditional meaning. A brand is an idea, not a specific product. This is why the Mao copies appear to Scott to be detached from their photographic source. They are no longer just photos of Chairman Mao; instead, they are advertisements for a brand. Warhol is pointing out that everything can be a brand; everything can be commodified, and Delillo references Warhol's art in order to help illustrate the same idea in his fiction.

Brita, the photographer in *Mao II*, also studies the cultural interrogation of Warhol's art. She is at a party and several of his pieces are displayed. People are milling around the art, consuming it "incidentally" (134). As they stood in front of the large windows, all of the party-goers "knew exactly how they appeared to those who were walking or driving by" (134). The art is a commodity that is being consumed in a way

that confers status on the consumer. The irony here is that Warhol's art mocks these patrons in a way. His pieces are highly conscious of their roles in the consumer society. Warhol's art critiques the capitalist tendency towards blind consumption and commodification, yet that is exactly what the people at this party are doing with it. The art is a commodity insofar as its aura can be manipulated to benefit the consumer.

This artistic awareness on the part of Warhol and his art is the basis of postmodern "creation." The work of art knows that it is a product and is aware of the commodifying implications of this product status. In postmodern America, everything that is created can (and presumably will) be commodified. As Peter Boxall has written, all art and artists "are objects of consumption and everything is bound to the cash nexus and the exchange of commodities" (45). DeLillo is acutely aware of this idea, and it is a central theme in almost all of his work. This is why Warhol's art works so well as a representative image for *Mao II*. It is art that is aware of its own status as a commodity, while at the same time critiquing the process that facilitates that consumption. DeLillo recognizes that in postmodern culture "images, styles, and representations are not the promotional accessories to economic products, they are the products themselves" (Osteen 448). Recall that a brand's aura is what defines it. And, in a consumer society, everything is marketable. Art is advertisement and advertisement is art. And all of it is "product" for cultural consumption. What does it mean then that art is commodified product and, if art is a creation of cultural production, what does our art and our treatment of it say about postmodern American culture?

For one, commodification extracts from an object or idea its inherent value. In a consumer culture, an object's value is only measured in terms of its ability to be

commercially exchanged. This "exchange value" heavily de-emphasizes the artist and means of production in favor of the consumer and means of consumption. Products (and art is included in the postmodern definition of this term) are created to be consumed. If they are not efficient enough or cheap enough or useful enough, they are failures. This trend is a result of the hyper-efficient stipulations placed on product by capitalism. The drive towards obligatory economic efficacy has destroyed the concept of intrinsic value (an object no longer derives value from its very nature), and with it the notion of "*l'art pour l'art*." Commodification of art reduces everything to capitalism's standard of maximum efficiency for maximum profit. Clearly, intrinsic value has no place within this economic structure. When the success of an object is determined by the "free market" economy, the cheapest and most efficiently-produced products will almost always prosper. The business model of Wal-Mart is a clear indicator of this tendency. Regardless of the fact that the company produces goods of questionable quality and pushes its manufacturers to outsource labor (sometimes illegally) in order to meet price point expectations, it continues to generate massive revenues while forcing smaller businesses out of the market. Wal-Mart produces goods that would almost always fail an intrinsic value test, but yet succeeds because it excels at the free market's standards of efficiency and price point. In this model, the product's only value is derived from its ability to be exchanged. The more mass-producible a product is, the more exchangeable it is, and thus, the more ~~valuable~~ it is.[5]

[5] I strikethrough "valuable" in order to illustrate the modified definition that pop culture has assigned to it.

Another problem with hyper-commodification[6] is the fact that a product's exchange value is determined very superficially. As previously discussed, the work of the artist is severely underprivileged in the equation. All that is important is how an object can be consumed, be it physically or metaphorically as in the case with the partygoers and Warhol's art in *Mao II*. Because there is no emphasis on intrinsic value, the only factors in measuring an object's worth are cost, utility, and appearance.[7] As DeLillo points out in Americana, "the theme [in postmodern American culture] is whatever you want it to be because appearance is all that matters" (205). Commodification strips all value except for that which is "useful" to increase productivity or "useful" in conferring status on the consumer. The act of creation (particularly in the arts) receives very little recognition in free market capitalism.

This is one of the main reasons that branding has become such a crucial part of postmodern advertising. It is also a bit paradoxical in light of the fact that advertising is a type of art that is "packaged" and accessible to the masses. Advertising is art that creates an illusion of usefulness for the product it represents. In a sense, it is the ultimate incarnation of commodified art. It is created with the explicit purpose of being consumed rapidly and efficiently. It is not supposed to have intrinsic value. It is itself a representation of something else. It is useful (successful) only insofar as it succeeds in making the consumer unaware of its existence in favor of the product that it represents. An ad is a product that is only "real" because it represents another product. Without the original product, there would be no ad. The existence of the ad inheres within the

[6] The prefix "hyper-" in this case means "ultra."

[7] That is to say that it is valued only by its physical characteristics.

product it represents. Therefore, an ad is a kind of simulacrum. It is a copy of a brand which is a copy of an original product. The ad derives a hyperreal existence from that which it represents. Its existence is only illusory because of its complete dependence on the original model. Advertising is simulation. Baudrillard writes that "to simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have" (3). Advertising simulates its own existence. Without a product (or an original) to validate advertising's reality, it is nothing. Thus, there is no such thing as a "real" state of being for advertising, but only a hyperreal state in which advertising simulates real status by copying. It is completely dependent on the ability to copy in order to exist. Advertising is the "art of the copy."

The Photograph and Film Copy Validate the Real

The idea that the "hyperreal" original depends on the copy to exist is a very important theme in DeLillo's fiction. *Mao II*, for example, is a novel obsessed with copies, and in the book DeLillo particularly interrogates the role of the photograph in constructing individual identity. He places great emphasis on the photograph's ability to recreate or validate the original. In *Mao II*, photographs—copies of people—give those people identities by capturing their images and stamping their existence into the record of human history. A major focus of this novel and also of *Americana*, is that an individual's "copy" in some ways undeniably proves or validates the "real" person by tangibly representing that person in a static, unchanging state. As Baudrillard would say "the copy precedes the original."

In *Mao II*, Bill Gray is an old and reclusive writer who desperately hides himself from the public eye. He lives in a secluded house in the woods and has gone to great lengths to ensure that no one knows where to find him. He has not had his photograph taken in many years. Finally, after all these years in hiding, he invites a photographer named Brita to his house in order to re-introduce his image to the world.

Years before, when he first disappeared from public view, many exciting rumors sprang up about him—whether or not he was dead, changed his name, whether he would ever write another word. The rumors generated a great deal of public interest about the reclusive writer. Similar to the previously discussed pop culture icons, this public interest built the aura around Bill Gray. He became more famous because he was more famous. The more he was talked about the more he was talked about. But, just like any product of mass consumption, he was disposable. Once his brand lost its excitement, Gray's aura burned out. As the rumors begin to fade, Bill's image was no longer as coveted as it once was. Fewer and fewer people cared where he was or what he looked like. This equated to an identity crisis for Gray. As the name "Gray" suggests, his own identity became muddled as a result of his fading aura. Having his photograph published will spike public interest again and cause a resurgence of his aura, thus re-establishing his individual identity. The photograph of Bill Gray will give identity to the "real" Bill Gray. It will also provide a "crisis of exposure" that simultaneously metastasizes his aura and also gives him a reason to "intensify his concealment" (140). It allows him to manipulate the image that he is constructing, effectively devising "his own cycle of death and resurgence" (141).

Finally publishing his photograph after all these years serves as Bill's "death notice" (141). It is a living obituary. The photograph announces Bill's disappearance (again). His photograph "would show him how he looked to the world and give him a fixed point from which to depart" (141). He needs an image of himself, a copy of himself, in order to understand who he is. Bill realizes that "the only way to be in the world was to write himself there" (204). "Writing himself there" would mean that a mechanical reproduction of him would exist and show that he is real. The copy engenders the real, bringing Bill back to life by identifying him to himself and to a mass audience.

The effect of "writing" one's own history/present/future is also connected to Mao Zedong in the novel. Bill Gray's assistant, Scott, compares Bill's "cycle of death and resurgence" to that of Mao. As Scott points out, Mao was pronounced dead many times by the press. Each time, though, he "regenerated [his] power by dropping out of sight and then staging messianic returns" (141). These reappearances were covered by the media and Mao manipulated the coverage in order to perpetuate his legendary returns. By maintaining a regular flow of news coverage and photographs in the paper, he was able to continually reaffirm his vitality. For example, Scott remembers a photograph of Mao swimming across the Yangtze River at age seventy-two. As he swims, his "godlike" head rises above the water, announcing with each raised breath that Mao is as strong as ever. It is the photograph that affirms Mao's strength. The photograph can be infinitely copied which allows it to be disseminated to the masses. Without the ability to reproduce Mao's image of vitality, his swim has no point. He swims the Yangtze in order to cultivate his aura of invincibility. Therefore, he needs the copy and its reproducibility to

perpetuate his legend because the reality of the experience can be proven by the copy every time it is viewed. By carefully directing the media's dissemination of these photographs, Mao, too, is "writing" his life. The constructed news promulgated by the Mao copies creates the Mao brand and manipulates his public image, while at the same time ensuring that his mark on history is permanent.

DeLillo is calling attention to the fact that it is Mao's photograph that proves his existence. The photo reveals that he is still alive. A photograph is a static image, a single slice of time that never changes. Because it is a copy of an exact moment in history, it proves the existence of that moment, validating the experience by allowing it to be remembered. It also proves that that exact moment really happened. Just like in the Mao example, the copy makes the original accessible to the masses by allowing it to be experienced over and over again. It facilitates mass production of the original.

Like Mao, Bill is also attempting to manipulate the media in order to validate his own existence. He realizes that he must make a "copy" of himself to prove that he is real. Brita's photograph will provide that copy. Once she releases it to the public, then proof of Bill's existence will reach the masses. More than that, though, the public's consumption of Bill's image will validate his reality to himself. His identity will be public domain again, and he will again have a reason to hide from that identity. As is the case with Mao, mass production of the Bill "copy" proves the existence of (validates) the Bill "real" or, to take it a step further, the copy is the real.

This same concept of the copy validating the real is explored in DeLillo's novel *Americana*. In this book, the focus is on film (documentary) as a means of copying real life. The protagonist, David Bell, often makes reference to the idea that life is only real if

it has been videotaped. Bell narrates, "there were times when I thought all of us at the network existed only on videotape" (23). Later, when a co-worker reminisces about the "old times," he responds, "there are no old times, Wendy. The tapes have been accidentally destroyed" (25). If Bell and his coworkers only exist on videotape, then the loss of those tapes would mean the loss of their identities. Of course, the irony in David Bell's musings is that he and all the rest of the characters in *Americana* really do exist only in the pages of the novel--the tapes or copies, so to speak. At any rate, the theme of this passage is that a videotape provides tangible evidence of the existence of people and moments in time.

Later in the novel, Bell revisits the role of the videotape in validating one's existence. Sitting in a grocery store parking lot, he spots a group of women standing by a station wagon. He lifts his video camera to his eye as if he was shooting film and, immediately, the women begin to smile and wave. Bell hypothesizes about the willingness of the women to perform with such exuberance:

> Maybe they sensed that they were waving at themselves, waving in the hope that someday if evidence is demanded of their passage through time, demanded by their own doubts, a moment might be recalled when they stood in a dazzling plaza in the sun and were registered on the transparent plastic ribbon; and thirty years away, on that day when proof is needed, it could be hoped that their film is being projected on a screen somewhere, and there they stand, verified, in chemical reincarnation, waving at their own old age. (254)

To Bell, appearing on videotape is a way for people to prove they exist. It is also, as he discusses here, a way for people to communicate with the future. Waving to a video camera is the same thing as waving to any future viewers of that videotape, including even, to oneself. As Bell theorizes, the women's happiness resulted from the "anticipation of incontestable evidence" of their own existence." (254). He poses the question: "What better proof (if proof is ever needed) that they have truly been alive?" (254). This leads to a discussion of the potential power held by the camera and whoever controls it. If the camera validates real life and proves existence, then the cameraperson has ultimate power in determining that which is valid. In this particular case, Bell actually leaves the camera turned off, effectively writing these women out of existence. As Bell recognizes, he had "discovered a power" that is granted by the camera to its operator (255).

The "power" that Bell discovered is the same power that is held by all media. Whatever image is captured in the lens of the camera and made available for public consumption is an image that has been made "real" or valid to the public. That moment/image/person is memorialized as having existed at that exact second in time. Thus, the ultimate power to validate real life is in the hands of whoever holds the camera. Bell, who is himself a promulgator of media (albeit estranged from the network for which he once worked), is a character through which DeLillo critiques the media power structure and its ability to determine American "reality." This becomes especially clear in the documentary film he sets out to make in the second half of the novel.

In his documentary, Bell carefully directs his actors in order to construct a specific version of reality. He even writes all of their lines and expects them to be

delivered as he desires. In fact, the film can hardly be considered a documentary considering he carefully directs and edits every moment of the action and dialogue. The "reality" depicted in the documentary is a media-generated one.

In both *Mao II* and *Americana*, DeLillo explores the relationship between a "real" person and a "copy" of that person in the form of a photograph or film recording. Photographs of Bill Gray and Mao Zedong present ways for each man to manipulate his own public image, effectively "mediating" his existence by constructing a copy of himself that he then presents to the public. Because these constructed copies are what define a person's legacy, they are prioritized over the real person—they matter more. In the case of mediated identity, a static, reproducible image holds much more power than a dynamic image that is fluid and ever-changing because a dynamic identity is unprovable insofar as there is never a fixed moment to which one can refer. The reproducibility of a static image is what allows it to accumulate Benjamin's "aura."

This is why, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the pop culture icon thrives on copies of himself or herself. They build the aura. Think of the role the paparazzi plays in this identity construction and aura reinforcement. The more widely-circulated an image, the more power it holds in postmodern culture. Photographs of pop culture icons are among the most highly-coveted pieces of (mass culture) "art." However, this is an art form that is completely disposable post-consumption. The art form depends on the manufacturing of copy after copy in order to maintain relevance.

Similarly, David Bell's documentary film and his ideas regarding the significance of recording people on videotape support the suggestion that the copy in many ways validates real existence. Until one has been copied as a static, unchanging image he or

she has no proof of having existed. The "real" person cannot prove in and of himself that he exists without a copy to verify it. In our postmodern world the copy is all that is important. Substance is irrelevant. There is no inherent value in anything. "Appearance is all that matters."

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