

CAN THE INTELLECTUAL STILL SPEAK? THE EXAMPLE OF DON DELILLO'S
MAOII

The great danger to avoid is the self-isolating nature of
critical discourse.

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When Roland Barthes wrote and published his «The Death of the Author», he cast doubts upon one of the chief mainstays of Western culture. With the disappearance of the Author –I'd rather understand this death not as disappearance but as fragmentation– the status of the so called universal intellectual (obviously male, white and middle or upper-class) was also indirectly questioned. This –obviously together with other economic, social and political factors– led to the crisis in which part of the intelligentsia is now living and that some are using not only to discredit the individual figure of the intellectual but also to account for a society whose roots seems to be ahistorical or deeply mythical, in which, as in the case of the Holocaust or Italian Fascism, history can be cancelled and rewritten as the revisionists please.

But if the author and the subject are now –even though with a certain difficulty and some resistance– reconstructing themselves in a different way –and I think of the birth of different forms of identity that, with the help of history, Foucault was starting to theorize some time before his death– what is happening to the intellectual? Can some writers still consider themselves to be committed intellectuals? Or perhaps we should ask: does it mean anything now to talk about a writer as a committed intellectual? Must we classify literature as «unproductive», and for this reason declare the death of intellectuals as writers because they do not

fulfill the requirements of a society which is more and more predisposed to the most vulgar, conservative and dangerous technocracy? The concern of this paper is to argue that the intellectual as writer –and I consider the writer as a specific intellectual– is still important, alive and somehow necessary in our contemporary social context. For this reason, in the following section I will introduce the Foucauldian concept of specific intellectual and the Barthesian idea of the writer as intellectual before, in the third part of this paper, relating the idea of the writer as specific intellectual to Don DeLillo's *Mao II*.

In Mao II, DeLillo faces up to most of the contradictions which are present in contemporary society and culture and through the peculiar structure of the book helps us to enter a world mainly ruled by pictures and violence. The society in which the writer-protagonist of the book lives hidden from everybody is dominated by postmodern pastiche, images and spectacle. I find DeLillo's writing interesting not only because it represents a committed criticism of contemporary culture and society but also because this criticism is carried out within a text where the frustrated quest for identity of the American hero merges with the representation of a postmodern world which DeLillo synthesizes in the portraits that Andy Warhol did of Mao Tse-tung, Marilyn Monroe and Gorbachev, icons of a society where images and myth prevail. The hero, in spite of his desperate quest, and in betrayal of the American tradition, is incapable of finding a new identity –let alone his old one– and ends up dying on a boat where nobody knows him while going from Greece to Lebanon. From the West to the East.

DeLillo's main character thus offer us an opportunity to start reflecting on the relation that writing maintains with subjectivity without, at the same time,

losing sight of a committed vision of writing itself. I am not going to go back to the idea of the universal intellectual –although I think that DeLillo from time to time does consider yielding to the temptation; what I want to stress rather is how DeLillo's text manages to reflect the transformation of the idea of the writer as a universal intellectual into the idea of the writer as a specific intellectual.

II

At the beginning of the 1970s Michel Foucault started to develop in a more detailed way his theory of power relations. His interest was framed not only within his own philosophical and intellectual project but, at the same time, reacted to the concerns of a society which was changing quickly. It was the same society that during May 1968 had abruptly woken up and that for a long time believed in the chance of a real transformation of the existing structures without realizing that the international failure of the student movement was leading to the frustration of unfulfilled promises and to the consequent terrorist abjection¹. Gilles Deleuze, in an interview with Foucault on the role of intellectuals, declared that the figure who until then had been considered to be a theorist could not be seen anymore as a

¹ Just to give an example of the political climate of the end of the seventies in Italy I want to quote some phrases from an interview published in the Italian weekly magazine *Panorama* (25-8-1991) on the occasion of the release of Renato Curcio, founder of the Red Brigades. The person who speaks (his name is not mentioned in order to protect him from any possible retaliation) used to be a close associate of General Dalla Chiesa (assassinated together with his wife and the members of his escort by the Mafia) and gives a chilling list of people who were assassinated by the terrorists when Curcio was first put into jail and before the trial: « ... on the 10th [of March 1978] his comrades killed Rosario Bernardi, officer of the anti-terrorist brigade. On the 16th they kidnapped Aldo Moro and killed the five men of his escort. On the 11th of April the prison warder Lorenzo Cotugno was assassinated. On the 20th they killed Marshal Franco Di Cataldo. On the 9th of May they liquidated the President of the Christian Democracy [Aldo Moro]. On the 22nd they massacred the police inspector Antonio Esposito» p. 49, my translation.

subject and as a result of this, the intellectual was not to be seen anymore as the «representative consciousness» of society: «For us the intellectual theorist has ceased to be a subject, a representing and representative consciousness ... there is no longer any representation, there is only action, theory's action, the action of practice in the relationships of networks»².

It was in this context and in relation to his criticism of traditional Western epistemology, that Foucault started to connect more firmly the role that the intellectual and culture play in the frame of the power relations that construct the subject. His can be considered one of the answers to the collapse of classical theorization of, for example, the Sartreian universal intellectual in the post-war period. Foucault rejects this idea because he considers that it is directly related to the idea of the existence of an absolute Truth with its corresponding essentialist and universal subject. In the Foucauldian philosophical project there is no epistemological justification to support the idea of the existence of an intellectual figure who can be considered to be the universal thinking subject. On the contrary, the Foucauldian specific intellectual is not interested in speaking on behalf of other people. Each intellectual works in her or his own field to give the various social groups the tools which will enable them to speak for themselves and according to their different needs. The role of the intellectual has diversified³ together with the

² Gilles Deleuze, «Intellectuals and Power», (Interview Michel Foucault-Gilles Deleuze) in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, Donald F. Bouchard, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 206-7.

³ «This task [...] is also an attempt to locate the intellectual's freedom at the point of his/her limitations –the point at which desire meets with processes of subjectivization, the place where identity forms», Karlis Racevskis, «Michel Foucault, Rameau's Nephew and the Question of Identity», in *The Final Foucault*, Bernauer, James-Rasmussen, David, eds., (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1988), p. 31.

multiple foci in which Foucauldian power relations act within the social network. All intellectuals belong to this chain, that is to say to the power/knowledge relationship, and their role as specific intellectuals is to resist the idea which portrays them as the «consciousness and eloquence» of Western epistemology.

But what about Roland Barthes? How does he situate the intellectual within the cultural scene and with respect to the death of the author? I think that the discourse on intellectuals in the Barthesian text also answers the need to fragment and burst open the inner structures of writing as one possible answer to the logic of Western Epistemology. In many of Barthes's later texts the necessity of staying outside the system and breaking all that ties our culture to the culture of stereotype is evident.

According to Barthes, the universal intellectual is what is left of the heritage of a past time when his word had a prophetic meaning and represented the voice of authority⁴. With the death of the Author, this charismatic, and indeed androcentric, figure disappears. If for Foucault this gave way to the birth of the specific intellectual, for Barthes the disappearance has been definitive, and he declares that the only thing left by the intellectual is his spoor: «Les optimistes disent que l'intellectuel est un `témoin'. Je dirais plutôt qu'il n'est qu'une `trace'»⁵.

I would argue that this affirmation has to be understood as a fragmentation of the idea of the intellectual and not as the confirmation of his death. The «death

⁴ «**H-L**: Il fut un temps où les intellectuels se prenaient, se pensaient comme le `sel de la terre'...

R.B.: Je dirais pour ma part qu'ils sont plutôt le déchet de la société. Le déchet au sens strict, c'est-à-dire ce qui ne sert à rien, à moins qu'on le récupère [...] En un certain sens, les intellectuels ne servent à rien», Roland Barthes, «A quoi sert un intellectuel?», in *Le grain de la voix. Entretiens 1962-1980* (Éditions du Seuil: Paris, 1981), p. 256.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *ibid.*, p. 257.

of the author» describes not a disappearance but the birth of different subjectivities, that manifest themselves, for example, in the questioning and opening of the Canon. Nevertheless I should stress that Barthes's analysis of intellectuals includes his concern with language («Disons simplement que je suis sans doute le trace d'un intérêt historique pour le langage; et aussi la trace de multiples engouements, modes, termes nouveaux»⁶). For this reason it might be interesting to approach the Barthesian intellectual through the criticism of meaning that Barthes developed in his cultural project from the very beginning (and which remained as a firm point of reference till the end of his life). The Barthesian writer, that is to say, acts in a system based on a very clearly specified number of rules that are defined by the mythology of culture. The myth, according to Barthes, is a message which society creates within a specific historical frame and afterwards uses to build up the structures of stereotypes. Multiple languages are used simply to repeat the same Discourse. It could be said that they function like the Foucauldian commentary:

... car le mythe est une parole choisie par l'histoire: il ne saurait surgir de la «nature» des choses. Cette parole est un message. Elle peut donc être bien autre chose qu'orale; elle peut être formée d'écritures ou de représentations: le discours écrit, mais aussi la photographie, le cinéma, le reportage, le sport, les spectacles, la publicité, tout cela peut servir de support à la parole mythique⁷.

Myth does not lie. (It would be very difficult for a picture to lie, just to mention an example which reminds us of the last barthesian text Camera Lucida;

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Roland Barthes, «Le mythe, aujourd'hui» in *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), p. 194.

the person who is looking at that picture knows perfectly well that she is looking at something which exists or has existed somewhere). What we can ask at this point though is how can the myth –which is the language of a specific historical moment⁸– become such a powerful instrument of cultural control? According to Barthes this is because the myth tends to transform itself into nature, that is to say into the essence. Within his framework of power relations Foucault developed the idea of the specific intellectual; so how does Barthes face the task of fighting against the creation of multiple discourses which transform myth from historical product into the essence, that is to say into something that never changes and is always identical to itself? His solution, as we all know, lies in the subversive potential of the literary text. And to understand this we have to refer to the impossibility of the existence of the literary text outside Ideology. Barthes argues that no text can exist outside the limits imposed by the ideological apparatuses. The subversion of the text, in other words, consists in its capacity to flourish within this frame and at the same time to be able to create its own chiaroscuro, to change the perspective we get of the known phenomenological world and present it in a way⁹ which is different, and I give to this adjective all the connotations that are present in both Barthesian and Foucauldian texts.

⁸ «... on peut concevoir des mythes très anciens, il n'y en a pas d'éternels; car c'est l'histoire humaine qui fait passer le réel à l'état de parole, c'est elle et elle seule qui règle la vie et la mort du langage mythique. Lointaine ou non, la mythologie ne peut avoir qu'un fondement historique, car le mythe est une parole choisie par l'histoire: il ne saurait surgir de la `nature' des choses», Roland Barthes, «Le mythe, aujourd'hui», *Mythologies*, p. 194.

⁹ «There are those who want a text (an art, a painting) without a shadow, without "the dominant ideology"; but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text (see the Myth of the Woman without a Shadow). The text needs its shadow: this shadow is *a bit* of ideology, *a bit* of representation, *a bit* of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro» Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 32.

For Barthes as for Foucault then, history assumes an important role in the definition of what it means to be an intellectual. «The writer is always on the blind spot of system, adrift; he is the joker in the pack, a mana, a zero degree, the dummy in the bridge game: necessary to the meaning (the battle), but himself deprived of fixed meaning; his place, his (exchange) value, varies according to the movements of history, the tactical blows of the struggle; he is asked all and/or nothing»¹⁰.

III

Mao II is the story of a famous, much-admired writer who can no longer find a satisfying place in contemporary society; it is for this reason that he decides to hide while he tries to write his last book. The writer feels displaced as an intellectual, and his writing loses the capacity of representing his chiaroscuro in a world which is dominated by terrorism. Each character symbolizes an aspect of a society which apparently has lost all unity but which, paradoxically, is moving in a single direction. The book that Bill Gray is writing is a text which, significantly, he thinks will never be finished:

The language of my books has shaped me as a man. There's a moral force in a sentence when it comes out right. It speaks the writer's will to live. The deeper I become entangled in the process of getting a sentence right in its syllables and rhythms, the more I learn about myself. I've worked the sentences of this book long and hard but not long and hard enough because I no longer see myself in the language¹¹.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹¹

Language does not give back to the writer the image of himself he was used to seeing. Bill has lost control of the grammatical structures and the lexicon («On the stage of the text, no footlights: there is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object»)¹². The situation that Bill is going through can thus be interpreted as the result of the questioning the very idea of authorship. It is for this reason that Bill feels he is not capable of publishing his book; he cannot do it because he feels that it is not his writing anymore. And the work of revision that he carries out day by day is absolutely useless: the text keeps on slipping from his grasp. And so Bill decides to leave his hiding place and agrees to be photographed by Brita, a professional photographer who only takes pictures of writers. He is slowly capitulating to the pressures of the outside world and he tells Brita so in these words: «There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence. Do you ask your writers how they feel about this?» (MIII, 41). In this quotation two ideas that will become the backbone of the novel appear: the relation between terrorists and writers and that between writers and images¹³.

Why after so many years of isolation does Bill Gray decide to publish his photograph and not his book? As we already know, Bill has a conflictive relation with his novel, that is to say with the text he is writing. This text does not recognize

Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1992 [1991]), p.43. From now on I will refer to DeLillo's novel as *MIII*, with the page number.

¹² Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 16.

¹³ See Douglas Keeseey's Don DeLillo (New York: Twayne, 1993). Pp.: 177-193.

him as the «Author» but as somebody that Barthes defined as a «white card» or as the Joker. When Bill feels that he has lost his identity as a writer (and above all as a committed writer) what he desperately needs is another identity. The camera can give him what he needs at this moment, an image which is able to tell him that, in spite of everything, he still exists as Bill Gray, the writer. This is what Barthes writes in Camera Lucida: «Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of `posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image»¹⁴.

For this reason Bill gives up his privacy and agrees to be transformed into an image and, significantly, the person who does it is a woman photographer who left her previous field of research (in the poor outskirts of town) to devote herself to going around the world taking pictures of writers. Through her job the impossibility of writing is transformed into a collection of images of people who write:

It took me a long time to find out what I wanted to photograph. I came to this country it's fifteen years. To this city actually. And I roamed the streets first day, taking pictures of city faces, eyes of city people, slashed men, prostitutes, emergency rooms, forget it, I did this for years [...] But after years of this I began to think it was somehow, strangely—not valid [...] Then you know what you want to do at last [...] I will just keep on photographing writers, every one I can reach, novelists, poets, playwrights [...] This is what I do now. Writers (MII, 24).

If we keep on following Barthesian thought we could even say that the image transforms the referents¹⁵ –which in our case are represented by the portrayed

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage 1993), p. 10.

¹⁵ «And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I should like to call the *Spectrum* of the photograph because this word retains, through its root, a relation to `spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the

writers— into a simulacrum of what they used to mean at another historical moment. In other words I think that the idea that we receive from the picture of the writer can be related to a representation of death, to something that has already disappeared and does not exist anymore: the author is dead and can only come back to us through a photograph, that is to say through an image that has been emptied of any other meaning («He said, `The book is finished but will remain in typescript. Then Brita's photos appear in a prominent place. Timed just right. We don't need the book. We have the author'» MII, 71). Images occupy quite an important place in the narrative of Mao II and in one way or another all the characters relate to them. (In Camera Lucida Roland Barthes stresses the overwhelming presence of images in our society with the following words: «I see photographs everywhere, like everyone else, nowadays: they come from the world to me, without my asking: they are only `images', their mode of appearance is heterogeneous»¹⁶.)

In fact DeLillo's novel establishes a unity among the different parts into which it is divided through the world of images and their tendency to transform every human action into spectacle. In the first part, for example, Bill Gray lives with two young persons who take care of him and look after the house, Scott and Karen. Karen lives obsessed by images and the news is the only thing she watches on television; she watches it without the sound, she simply looks and is not interested in listening. She is not interested in language because it does not mean anything to her, she is only interested in seeing because as Guy Debord writes with his usual

dead» *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 16.

irony «Spectacle has mixed with reality and has irradiated it»¹⁷. Karen's gaze is, obviously, subjective and her personal experience reflects what she absorbs from the totality of the images that reach her. For this reason, while she is watching the news on the student rebellion in China in May 1989, Karen simply notices the enormous portrait of Mao-ZeDong, the same portrait that her friend Scott keeps in his bedroom and which is a reproduction of the famous one done by Andy Warhol:

They show the portrait of Mao up close, a clean new picture, and he has those little mounds of hair that bulge out of his head and the great wart below his mouth that she tries to recall if the wart appears on the version Andy drew with a pencil that she has on the wall in the bedroom at home. Mao Zedong. She likes that name all right. But it is funny how a picture. It is funny how a picture what? She hears a car alarm go off in the street (MII, 177-178).

In the last part of the novel, «In Beirut», the enormous tragedy a whole nation is going through is mediated and described through the images that Brita sees from the window of her car. The language that DeLillo uses is dry and the sentences are short; there are no comments on people or the despair produced by war, just a list of images of people and of the war that merge with the ads: «The streets run with images. They cover walls and clothing— pictures of martyrs, clerics, fighting men, holidays in Tahiti» (MII, 229).

Bill tries to rebel against all this, above all for himself, and for this reason accepts the proposal that his editor Charlie Everson makes to him to talk on behalf of a young poet who has been kidnapped by a maoist group in Beirut; but the press conference that Charlie thinks of organizing in London is, as well, mere spectacle:

¹⁷ Guy Debord *Comentarios sobre la sociedad del espectáculo* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1990), p. 20. My translation.

«I want one missing writer to read the work of another. I want the famous novelist to address the suffering of the unknown poet. I want the English-language writer to read in French and the older man to speak across the night to his young colleague in letters. Don't you see how beautifully balanced?» (MII, 98)

The London meeting fails because a bomb explodes in the place that the British police had chosen for the conference. Nonetheless, it is in London that Bill starts to relate to a mysterious man, George, an intellectual who lives in Athens and who is the contact with the terrorists in Beirut. Bill Gray decides to reject the publicity, runs away from London and fly to Athens to go on acting on his own. In Athens he meets George and it is during a conversation that the two men hold in George's place when all the main elements present in the novel converge; in a few, solid, vigorous pages the intellectual, and through him the terrorists, face up to the writer.

By going away from London and from the press conference that Charlie Everson had organized, Bill tries to rebel against the society which transforms everything into spectacle and himself into the image of a writer; he tries to take back his own destiny and so demonstrate to himself that he still exists as a committed intellectual. Little by little, his quest for his lost identity becomes desperate. From his point of view, the strength of ideas has fallen to the force of violence and if, on the one hand, the author is dead, on the other hand, authoritarianism has won the battle because it has been able to transform itself into something spectacular.

Bill and George represent two sides of contemporary culture. The writer and the terrorist are two mythical figures within our cultural codes who, through the

dynamics of history see their roles and places completely changed in contemporary society. If the writer has lost the power to change or influence the social fabric with his work, then the terrorist has learnt to use the society of spectacle and of images in his favour. Bill's fear and doubts are patent and materialize in the following quotation where we can sense his nostalgia for the writer/intellectual who used to be society's conscience:

«For some time now I've had the feeling that novelists and terrorists are playing a zero-sum game». «Interesting. How so?» «What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous». «And the more clearly we see terror, the less impact we feel from art» (MII, 129-130)

George here uses the verb to see to refer to terror, but terror belongs to the sphere of feelings and we should feel it and not see it. Once more the act of seeing and the gaze are presented as basic elements to understand the balancing game that the two men are playing while the ghosts of unknown hostages –whose pictures can be transformed into a lethal weapon– are fluctuating between them: «Gain the maximum attention. Then probably kill you ten minutes later. Then photograph your corpse and keep the picture handy for the time when it can be used most effectively» (MII, 165). The dialectical confrontation between Bill and George shifts on two completely different levels: while the first talks of contents, the second never stops relating the content to the image. Guy Debord in his Comentarios sobre la sociedad del espectáculo, not only attacks passionately the theorists of the end of history but stresses how the society of images has become

a basic element in undermining the bases of all historical thought, and a dangerous backward step to a mythical conception of human events: «The valuable advantage that spectacle has obtained from situating history outside the law, from sentencing all recent history to clandestinity and helping to forget, in general terms, the historical spirit of society means, in the first place, hiding its own history: the movement of its recent conquest of the world»¹⁸.

The myth as history is patent in the defence that George makes of the terrorist and the use of real violence. Images are the only weapon left to those who, according to George, fight in the name of justice: «But this is precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands. The way they determine how we see them» (MII, 157). Then he goes back to compare the writer's job to the role that terrorists play in contemporary society: «It's the novelist who understands the secret life, the rage that underlies all obscurity and neglect. You're half murderers, most of you» (MII, 158).

Bill's answer reflects the refusal of an absolute Truth and of a figure who can eventually become a kind of God and a creator of Truth, of something that holds the right of life and death over other people. In this context to deny the immutable meaning that myth gives to the figure of the terrorist as defender of truth whatever the cost, means to become aware of the role of history to deny that any image is 'natural' («No. It's pure myth, the terrorist as solitary outlaw. These groups are backed by repressive governments. They're perfect little totalitarian states. They carry the old wild-eyed vision, total destruction and total order») (MII, 158). Facing up to a discourse that tries to transform him into something that he absolutely

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27. My translation.

rejects, obliges Bill to go back to his writing as the only possible answer. Bill's rebellion materializes in the attempt to give back to the hostage an identity that is not the one that images suggest: «He could have told George he was writing about the hostage to bring him back, to return a meaning that had been lost to the world when they locked him in the room» (MII, 200).

The real tragedy described in the novel, then is that the captured poet is used by everyone –nobody is interested in him as a human being. George theorizes on the hostage's position, the terrorists think of him simply as a means to obtain something for their cause and Bill, in his own way, does the same. None of these people talk of the poet as a person; each of them sees him in an absolute way, wether as the price that society has to pay for a cause or as a way of recovering a lost identity. Bill's interest is thus directed not towards the prisoner but towards an idea in danger, the idea of the writer as intellectual and thinking being: «You put a man in a room and lock the door. There's something serenely pure here. Let's destroy the mind that makes words and sentences» (MII, 161).

So the contemporary writer/intellectual is represented by three different points of view: those of the author as deus ex-machina (an idea that, as we will see, still lives on in Mao's works); of the writer who has lost his identity and the meaning of his work; and of the silenced writer about whom nobody worries and of whom, by the end of the novel, nothing will be left but a faded unimportant memory.

Mao Tse-tung's writings are the materialization of the idea of the Author as creator of meaning, a concept that George shares and considers of basic importance for the development of a revolutionary thought: «There are different

ways in which words are sacred [...] Mao said this. And he wrote and he wrote. He became the history of China written on the masses. And his words became immortal. Studied, repeated, memorized by an entire nation». «Incantations. People chanting formulas and slogans» (MII, 161-162).

Here we have the discourse of what is considered true; in this case it is the interpretation that George gives of Mao's discourse which is repeated until it becomes the only valid one, that is to say the Discourse of the Same. For this reason, this discourse becomes a myth and takes for granted an ahistorical and immortal dimension: sacred is how George defines it. What is sacred and mythical has to be accepted as a dogma, it deletes history and lays the theoretical bases of Discourse One: «The Little Red Book of Quotations. The book was the faith that people carried everywhere» (MII, 161).

George is looking for –and defends– the elimination of difference: he wants an ideology in which unity can be encountered and totality analyzed. If we see things from this point of view, from the perspective of any totalitarian discourse (or from the perspective of other so-called democratic discourses¹⁹), we should not be surprised that the only viable project is the terrorist one, that is to say the discourse of the elimination of difference either through assassination by the terrorist or by a State that declares itself democratic: «It's an idea. It's a picture of Lebanon without the Syrians, Palestinians and Israelis, without the Iranian

¹⁹ «In all the places where spectacle reigns the only organized forces are the ones that want the spectacle. For this reason, none of them can be an enemy of what exists, nor can they transgress the *omertà* that involves everything. That disturbing conception, which ruled for two hundred years, according to which a society could be open to criticism and transformable, reformed or revolutionary is over. And this has not been obtained with the appearance of new reasonings but simply because reasonings have become useless. With this result we will measure, more than the social welfare, the terrible strength of the networks of tyranny» Guy Debord, *ibid.*, p. 34. My translation.

volunteers, the religious wars. We need a model that transcends all the bitter history. Something enormous and commanding. A figure of absolute being» (MII, 158, my emphasis).

The resistance which Bill Gray opposes to this authorial figure –who eventually becomes a kind of God in whose name the destiny of a whole people can be changed and assassination and kidnapping justified from a theoretical point of view– is not enough. Bill's cry of protest («Do you know why I believe in the novel? It's a democratic shout. Anybody can write a great novel [...] One thing unlike another, one voice unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints. And this is what you want to destroy») (MII, 159) gets lost in a society dominated by rules which regulate the spectacle and transform everything into an image.

As had already happened in London with Charlie Everson, Bill decides to run away from George's logic and face alone what he will find in Lebanon, but he does not get to Beirut because, as I have already noted, he dies on the ferry. His quest for identity ends up a complete failure. The famous writer who used to live hidden from everybody disappears forever. On the ferry somebody steals all his documents and what is left of him is just a nameless corpse on a boat and a series of pictures. At the end of his life, and without looking for it, Bill Gray is transformed into the thing that he had wanted to avoid: a silent image with a writer's name.

The hostage, the writer silenced by violence, also disappears in the oblivion of the society of spectacle that continuously needs new emotions and new scandals. It is Brita who takes an interest in the man while she is taking pictures of Abu Rashid, boss of the terrorists who had kidnapped him, and the answer she gets

is blood-curdling:

«What happened to the hostage?» [...] He says, «We have no foreign sponsors. Sometimes we do business the old way. You sell this, you trade that. Always there are deals in the works. So with hostages. Like drugs, like weapons, like jewelry, like a Rolex or a BMW. We sold him to the fundamentalists». Brita thinks about this. «And they are keeping him,» she says. «They are doing whatever they are doing» (MII, 235).

The writer, and together with the writer the intellectual, apparently has not survived contemporary culture. The overwhelming message of violence and the annihilation of any feature which might bring us to accept difference and multiplicity seem to be the only thing left. The boys who surround Abu Rashid, for example, keep their faces constantly covered, but they do not do so to protect themselves from being recognised and put into jail but in order to demonstrate that they accept the uniformity that their boss's ideology demands of them: «The interpreter says, 'The boys who work near Abu Rashid have no face or speech. Their features are identical. They are his features. They don't need their own features or voices. They are surrendering these things to something powerful and great'» (MII, 234).

In spite of a progressive sense of defeat that pervades the reader as he or she goes on reading the book, I think that DeLillo's novel can be read as a text with, to use Barthes's words, a literary subversive potential. In Mao II Don DeLillo manages to give life to his own game of lights and shadows and gives the reader a perspective of the various clichés of contemporary society and culture. In our case the writer is the intellectual who acts in a specific context –the text. The intellectual who in the novel is obviously unable to change or influence society and

is silenced by circumstances that are already out of control, on the other hand keeps on talking and writing through the hand of DeLillo himself. His novel, which is such a hard and desperate one, demonstrates that the writer has to write and through his or her writing develops a criticism of meaning –or of the lack of it– not only of the false multiplicity of discourses that has been created by the society of spectacle, but of myth and of the so-called end of history as well. It is in this sense that I understand what Frank Lentricchia writes²⁰ on DeLillo's capacity to shape his own chiaroscuro within the frame of history and of ideology without losing sight of the necessity of questioning the dangerously mythical and ahistorical society that some contemporary critics, theorists and politicians are helping to define.

DeLillo's use of history as a subversive tool with which he manages to represent another reality, questions and presents from a different perspective the official versions and rules that the society of spectacle imposes on the viewer –or the reader in our case– and makes me think both of Barthesian writers capacity to depict their own chiaroscuro within a specific ideology, and the role that the Foucauldian specific intellectuals play within the power/knowledge relation. The capacity that DeLillo shows in Mao II to use and relate to one another concepts such as history, subjectivity and writing, while opening a new and different perspective, synthesizes and lumps together the Barthesian and the Foucauldian ideas of what an intellectual should be:

²⁰ «In [...] their historical rigor, I suspect, lies their political outrage: the unprecedented degree to which they prevent their readers from gliding off into the comfortable sentiment that the real problems of the human race have always been about what they are today» Frank Lentricchia, «Introduction», *New Essays on White Noise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 6.

The role of an intellectual is not to tell others what they have to do [...] The work of an intellectual is not to shape others' political will; it is through the analysis that he carries out in his [sic] own field, to question over and over what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions and on the basis of this reproblematicization (in which he carries out his specific task as an intellectual) to participate in the formation of a political will (in which he has his role as citizen to play)²¹.

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²¹ Michel Foucault, «The Concern for Truth», in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *Michel Foucault. Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 265.