Andrew S. Gross

Signs of Violence: Terrorism, (Post-) Modernism, and the Nostalgia for Disaster

> To Pammy the towers didn't seem permanent. They remained concepts no less transient for all their bulk than some routine distortion of light. (19)
> "I didn't know this was up here," Jack said [standing on the roof garden].
> "It's to give Pammy a look at the World Trade Center whenever she's depressed. That gets her going again." (81)
> "That plane looks like it's going to hit." (84)
>
> Don DeLillo, *Players*

Terrorists of the modem period and cultural critics of the postmodern period tend to agree about the symbolism of violent acts and the potential violence of symbols. By 1857 one of the earliest proponents of terrorism, the anarchist Carlo Pisacane, had already developed a revolutionary theory of the relation between symbol and act in the influential theory of "the propaganda of the deed."[1] The doctrine was echoed by Mikhail Bakunin and other well-known proponents of terrorism such as John Most, who in 1885 had this to say of the concept: "We have said a hundred times or more that when modem revolutionaries carry out actions, what is important is not solely these actions themselves but also the propagandistic effect they are able to achieve" (Laqueur 108). The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's controversial statements after 9/11 echo the nineteenth-century accounts of propaganda by deed: "This terrorist violence is not 'real.' In a way, it is even worse: It is symbolic" ("The Spirit" 141).

Baudrillard's ambiguous formulation is easily - and probably intended to be - misunderstood. At the simplest level he is merely reiterating what is

1 Bruce Hoffman gives an account of the importance of Carlo Pisacane's articulation of "propaganda of the deed" or "propaganda by deed" (as it is sometimes translated) in the development of the theory and practice of terrorism in *Inside Terrorism* (1998). Pisacane argued: "The propaganda of the idea is a chimera [...]. Ideas result from deeds, not the latter from the former, and the people will not be free when they are educated, but educated when they are free" (qtd. in Hoffman 17).

already explicit in the doctrine of propaganda by deed: terrorists do not pick their targets in the same way military strategists do - and for the simple reason that destroying or capturing such targets would not constitute a material victory or significantly change the balance of power. (Psychologists and sociologists use the term "fantasy war" to distinguish terrorist actions from actual military maneuvers [Reich 85]). Rather, terrorists use real violence to achieve symbolic ends: e.g. producing the change in mood or meaning often called a "climate of fear." Baudrillard is also, of course, making the familiar poststructuralist argument about the social construction of historical events. The attack on the towers was pre-scripted in disaster films and, as the epigraph from Don DeLillo's 1977 novel Players shows, predicted in literature. Terrorists tend to select targets of cultural significance because they depend on facilities of cultural production (e.g. media coverage) to achieve their aims. It is not Baudrillard the poststructuralist who has proved controversial so much as Baudrillard the moralist, as his argument seems to place at least some responsibility for the attacks on the victims: "they did it, but we wanted it" ("The Spirit" 134).

Many prominent cultural critics emphasizing the symbolic nature of terrorist violence have made similar points about shared responsibility. Derrida, according to his interviewer Giovanna Borradori, sees terrorism as an "autoimmune crisis occurring within the system that should have predicted it" (150). Habermas sees the attacks as symptoms of the general communication breakdown caused by the inequalities of global capitalism, and he argues that stronger nations bear the responsibility to reopen channels of communication (Borradori 64). Jameson points to a historical "dialectics of disaster," linking the emergence of fundamentalism to the power vacuum produced by the United States' international assault on the political left during the Cold War (302). Few of the critics cited above would go so far as Baudrillard's "we wanted it" – a statement that is probably more rhetorical flourish than actual indictment. None of them would claim that symbolic violence is "unreal": lives are lost and property is destroyed. Nevertheless, the symbolic orientation of their analyses does suggest an uncomfortable proximity to the theoretical proponents of terrorism. The criticism that understands symbolic violence as a linguistic relation be- tween opposite but interdependent terms often resembles the terrorist propaganda that blames victims for their own destruction.

This kind of "strange bedfellow" relationship in no way discredits the post-structuralist arguments outlined above, but it does establish the con- text necessary for understanding the backlash among critics more concerned with the lure of violence than its symbolic structure. There is a marked tendency in some contemporary criticism to place the blame on artists and writers for attacks they did not commit, probably to counter those theories that could be understood as blaming the victims. It is com- mon to take journalists to task for contributing to a "climate of fear" by

publicizing accounts - and especially photographs - of terrorist acts. Novelists have been held similarly accountable for fictional representations of terrorism. Benjamin Kunkel, in a *New York Times Book Review* article dis- cussing several novels dealing with terrorism that appeared in the decade preceding 9/11, has this to say of the relationship between symbol and act: "The terrorist novel feeds off the glow of the violence it condemns - and in effect turns actual terrorists into advance publicists for your book" (16). "Domestic terrorism and the terrorist novel have dreamed of revolution, but there was none to make. For the novel, there never will be. It is a basic fact, if also a basic frustration, that in modem societies literary power and political power long ago parted ways" (ibid.). Although Kunkel's critical perspective is markedly anti-revolutionary, it has "strange bedfellows" of its own. There is a line of critique - stretching back to Lenin - that views terrorists as violent artists, artists as terrorists manqué.

This line of argument is pursued in Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe's *Crimes of Art and Terror* (2003), an attempt (as the book jacket puts it) to "explore the disturbing adjacency of literary creativity to violence and even political terror." Referring to Don DeLillo's *Mao //*, the authors make the following argument:

> The transgressive desire beneath many romantic and modernist literary visions is for a terrifying awakening that would undo the West's economic and cultural order, whose origin was the Industrial Revolution and whose goal is global saturation, the obliteration of difference. It is also the desire, of course, of what we are pleased to call terrorism. (39)

Although Lentricchia and McAuliffe's tone is rather glib (Why "pleased to call terrorism"?), their argument basically recapitulates one made famous by George Steiner in 1971. Romantic artists, shocked by rapid technological change but locked into a rigid social order developing more slowly than technology, exhibit what Steiner calls "nostalgia for disaster":

> The conjunction of extreme economic-technical dynamism with a large measure of enforced social immobility, a conjunction on which a century of liberal, bourgeois civilization was built, made for an explosive mixture. It provoked in the life of art and of intelligence certain specific, ultimately destructive ripostes. These, it seems to me, constitute the meaning of Romanticism. It is from them that will grow the nostalgia for disaster. (24)

Steiner's earlier formulation is less reductive than Lentricchia and McAuliffe's because it anchors itself in intellectual trends rather than in the supposed terrorist aspirations of individual artists. Nevertheless, the theories offer identical genealogies of the nostalgia for disaster, extending from Romanticism through modernism, culminating in what Steiner calls "Post- culture" and Lentricchia calls postmodernism. This is essentially a genealogy of the avant-garde, one stressing the analogies, and sometimes even the

alliances, between political and artistic radicalism (Poggioli 32). Renato Poggioli's influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde* had, by 1962 (trans. 1968), already drawn attention to the artistic and political nexus between provocation, scandal, and terrorism (32). The issue of symbolic violence is deeply bound up with the modem conception of culture as *oppositional*, i.e. antagonistic to what it considers base or material (whether business or politics, materialism or philistinism) but also materially trying to change it. This is the anti-modem impulse at the heart of modernism, a paradoxical commitment to deploying the newest techniques to attain the most anachronistic ideals characteristic of so many twentieth-century revolutionary ideologies.

The issues involved in the relation between symbol and deed are precisely those at stake in debates over the materiality of culture. These debates can be understood as involving two polar positions: the literary critical and the legal/popular. Literary criticism has traditionally separated materiality and culture by making the cultural its own material, distinct from other sorts. As Wimsatt and Beardsley famously argued in what was to become a joint manifesto for the New Criticism, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) and "The Affective Fallacy" (1949), a poem (their paradigm of a cultural artifact) should neither be confused with its origins (authorial intent) nor with its results (reader response) (1388). Representation, in other words, is not causality, a point they illustrate with the claim that poetry does not "communicate" emotion to the reader "like an infection or disease" or "inflict" emotion "mechanically like a bullet or knife wound" or "administer" it "like a poison" (1402).

There is also, however, a modem legal and popular tradition linking symbol to act and emphasizing the everyday materiality of culture - mainly in an attempt to qualify the absoluteness of the First Amendment. Oliver Wendell Holmes' famous argument about "falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic" in the majority decision of *Schenck v. United States* (1919) is the classic formulation of how words can be causal, and in a criminal way. (The analogy was used to argue against the First Amendment right of a socialist to pass out anti-draft leaflets during World War I.) These two extreme positions - words are not violent like poison or a bullet, or words can constitute a "clear and present danger" - define what we might call the material boundaries of culture. We know that culture has its own distinct kind of materiality, that a law, even though written, can be more fatal, for instance, than any bullet, that a novel or a poem can inspire an individual action or help lead a nation to war; but we also know that a novel is not the same thing as war. Modernist and postmodern art is preoccupied with this (its own) intangible materiality. Terrorism - although far from a modem invention - shares this preoccupation, attempting to violently exploit the way matter (including bodies) can be transformed into symbols and symbols can motivate material change.

Novels of terrorism are deeply concerned with the materiality of symbols and the symbolic uses of the material. Alex Houen makes this argument in *Terrorism and Modern Literature* (2002), claiming that novels of terrorism "figure" the relation between representation and violence, and that such figures are themselves subject to "cultural transference": "the figurations are not mere abstractions. Bound up with the very relations of force and discourse that they engage with, they also present their own power of performativity and critique" (18). "Performativity" and "transference" are Houen's terms for describing the materiality of culture. A novel not only represents social tensions but is a symptom of them (transference), and it deploys representational strategies that become facts in the world, as when a fictional target, such as the World Trade Center, becomes an actual one (performativity). While the material emphasis of Houen's arguments is important, I feel his terminology unnecessarily complicates and even obscures some of the representational devices actually deployed by novels. The remainder of this paper will explore the relation of symbol to act, culture to material, in two of the most important novels to deal with terrorism: Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and Don DeLillo's *Players*. Contrary to Lentricchia, Kunkel, and Steiner et al., these novels are not nostalgic for destruction but explore its *seduction*. They do so by deliberately using pornographic and melodramatic conventions, which figure acts of mass violence as "individual" (I will qualify this term later) crimes of passion.

My use of the term melodrama derives from Peter Brooks's definition in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976). According to Brooks, melodrama is a dualistic or Manichaeistic representational strategy that polarizes moral values (good vs. evil, right vs. wrong) in order to make them universally legible (15). Melodrama is both violent and egalitarian: violent because the opposition between good and evil implies an absolute struggle to the finish; egalitarian because the melodramatic hero and villain are equivalent in their common proclivity to violence, which each justifies by blaming the other. Brooks links the emergence of melodrama to the violent rise of democracy in the French Revolution. It is the characteristic literary form of a revolutionary social structure that valorizes, at least in its generic form, the individual (as citizen). Like Steiner and Lentricchia, he invokes the tradition of the avant-garde by comparing the imaginative leap to a "terroristic" one (16). Unlike Lentricchia, Brooks is not interested in portraying the artist as a potential terrorist but in understanding the cultural function of a symbolic form that manifests itself in literature and in life.[2]

2 This is a common use of the term "melodrama." Edmund Wilson, for instance, argued in 1947 that Churchill was successful as a wartime politician and unsuccessful in peace because "he saw politics as a part of something, melodramatic though that was, larger and nobler than the sequence of expedients of the contemporary political

The melodramatic proclivity to polarize good and evil is evident in both terrorist propaganda and in novels - a similarity that in no way makes novelists terrorists. The aim of most terrorist attacks is to provoke an overreaction on the part of the authorities. This discredits the "forces of law and order" (a phrase almost always placed in scare quotes) by compelling them to break the law in order to preserve it. Ordinary citizens who might other- wise stay out of the struggle are forced to take sides between two equally disreputable forces. As Karl Heinzen articulated the strategy in an anarchist journal in 1849: "our enemies will come to our aid" (Laqueur 61). A more literary articulation of this same principle can be found in Conrad's *Secret Agent*. This is the strategy espoused by the most radical anarchist in the novel, a bomb-builder known as the Professor:

> To break up the superstition and worship of legality should be our aim. Nothing would please me more than to see Inspector Heat [a chief police investigator] and his likes take to shooting us down in broad daylight with the approval of the public. Half of our battle would be won then, the disintegration of the old morality would have set in in its very temple. (54-55)

We could substitute the Professor's words for Heinzen's, but this does not make the novel equivalent to terrorist propaganda or a terrorist act. Establishing the difference between fiction and propaganda is the more difficult task; it is hard to make such arguments without having recourse to critical clichés like "representation is not endorsement" or "authorial in- tent." To illustrate the difference between fiction and propaganda it is useful to first explore the link between representation and violence exploited by terrorist acts. Elaine Scarry's important book *The Body in Pain* (1985) provides a crucial analysis of how symbolic systems are materialized through violence. Her examples are torture and war. Torture forces the victim's body, against the victim's will, to become an insignia of a regime's absolute authority and territory. Through pain the victim is forced to experience the "deconstruction" of his or her own voice and the alienation of his or her own agency, and the corresponding "doubling" of the voice of political authority, which then speaks through the victim's suffering or loss of control (13, 19, 35-36). War works analogously although on a much larger scale, substantiating its arbitrary "rules" as facts through the damage done to human bodies (62). Torture and war are related, according to Scarry, in that they both use violence to materialize cultural "ideals" through the making and unmaking of bodies (125). Propaganda could be understood as a formulation of "ideals" that encourages their materialization through violence. The novels I will turn to in this paper not only do not

careerist" (366). In other words, Churchill was at his best, like many wartime leaders, when the world, like a formulaic novel, caught up with his melodramatic imagination.

"intend" to produce violence (a difficult argument to make), they represent bodies in a way that dramatizes, as feeling, the danger of converting bodies into symbols. It is this strategy that I term pornographic.

Karen Halttunen argues that modem pornographic conventions have their roots in eighteenth-century sentimentalism, a mode closely related to melodrama.[3] The "emotional flatness" (54) and the "fatiguing repetitive-ness" (62) Susan Sontag claims are characteristic of much pornography, and especially Sade, can also be found in popular melodramatic forms. The crucial difference between melodrama and pornography is that the latter is transgressive, and in a double sense. Pornography goes beyond a social limit, breaks a taboo, in order to go beyond a representational limit. Linda Williams, in her recent study of pornography, puts it this way: "Thus a certain 'limit of representability' defines the 'normal' love story or melodrama," while pornography by definition 'goes too far'" (5). This transgression, and the guilty pleasure associated with it, is involved in the immersive nature of the pornographic aesthetic, its ability to make viewers or readers *feel* symbols, bringing together the reception of signs with the experience of the body, the conceptual with the corporeal (see Sontag 47). Pornography works, in other words, because the transgression of symbolic and representational conventions is experienced as transference between the symbolic and the physical. It excites *passion* rather than *understanding*. For this reason, Sontag provocatively compares pornography to a form of "psychic absolutism" that she links to religious experience (70). It is in this respect, I would argue, that pornography is ultimately antinomian, struggling against not only cultural conventions (taboos) but also ultimately cultural forms (genres), including the melodramatic forms that engender it.

The novels I turn to next are, in a very real sense, pornographic as well as violent; Conrad's terrorist owns a pornography shop, and DeLillo's main character, bored with his wife and with pornographic TV programs, gets his kicks by sleeping with terrorists. These novels explore but also instrumen-talize violent and pornographic representations, treating bodies as figures but working through them to reach the bodies (feelings) of the readers, thereby implicating us in the violence of terrorism, and encouraging us to respond, in a visceral way, to its seductions and threats. Pornography, in a sense, becomes a counter-figure to melodrama and violence, alerting read- ers to the dangers of converting bodies into symbols through our passionate experience of symbolic bodies. Conrad and DeLillo *arouse* us to the dangers of violence, our own desire becoming the best counterargument to those violent melodramas that speak through damaged bodies.

3 Halttunen: "The spectacle of suffering - which had first emerged from moral philosophy, found its full articulation in sentimental literature and art, then assumed increasingly sadistic forms in popular sensationalism - became the dominant convention of sexual pornography by the early nineteenth century" (317).

I start with Conrad's *The Secret Agent* because it is, while not the first, perhaps the most significant modernist novel dealing with terrorism. It was constantly referred to in the news in the days following 9/11, and in a way it is the most "American" of Conrad's works, as it was first published in serial form in 1906 in the American periodical *Ridgways: A Militant Weekly for God & Country*, before appearing as a novel in Great Britain the following year. In 1920 Conrad republished *The Secret Agent* with an author's note defending the book against charges of "sordid surroundings" and "moral squalor" (228). The note attempts to defend the moral value of his work by distinguishing symbol from deed, writing from terrorism: "I have no doubt [...] that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won't say more convinced than they, but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them had ever done in the whole course of his life" (232). The problem with Conrad's attempt to distinguish writer from revolutionist on the basis of the work ethic - the one is dedicated, the other lazy - is that it contradicts important elements in the plot. The secret agent Verloc is lazy but he is actually a government agent; the Professor, an absolute revolutionist and nihilist who can be read as a counter-figure of the author, sits alone in his room day and night, working without pause on the perfect detonator.[4] The one principle he adheres to without rest or pause is "Exterminate, exterminate! That is the only way of progress" (222). This anarchistic philosophy, uncomfortably reminiscent in tone and wording to Kurz's genocidal imperative in *Heart of Darkness*, is not to be distinguished from art simply on the basis of the work ethic. The author's creation is the vehicle of his characters' nihilism, even if it is not an agent or instrument of destruction.

The novel is full of contradictions like the one between Conrad's afterward and the plot events (and between extermination and progress): in fact, the plot is predicated on a fundamental confusion between law and terrorism. The secret agent referred to in the title is not really a terrorist at all but an agent provocateur ordered by his superiors in what is probably the Russian embassy (Conrad only hints at the national identity) to produce some results. ("We don't want a voice. We want facts - startling facts - damn you" [19]). The embassy hopes an example of domestic terrorism will scare London into signing an international agreement that would make it difficult for terrorists to escape prosecution by crossing international borders. (London's lax immigration policies in the late nineteenth century made it a safe haven for many revolutionaries and terrorists.) In other words, the terrorist act is supposed to create a climate of fear conducive to upholding law and order, not to undermining it. Verloc goes along with the plan in order to keep his job: for all of his anarchist pretensions, his aspira-

4 In the same author's note Conrad compares writing the story to watching a chemical reaction (231). The Professor is a chemist.

tions are staunchly middle class. When he attempts to blow up the prime meridian - a symbolic but non-strategic target - he succeeds in blowing up his mentally impaired brother-in-law Stevie instead.

Conrad is open to charges of "moral squalor" if only for the gruesome details of scraping together Stevie's remains with a shovel. We also get a detailed description of how Winnie Verloc murders her husband after learning of the death of her brother: the novel is obsessed with the impact of violence on the body. It is precisely at the locus of the body that Conrad really distinguishes representation from violence, but through what is at first the surprising detour of pornography. We tend to discuss representations of "sex and violence" in the same breath because we suspect they are more dangerous than "mere" metaphors. The representation of pornography is pornographic in the same way that the representation of violence is violent: the picture of sex is a "turn on," the image of a tom body nauseates or titillates. In both instances representation activates the body, symbol is translated into feeling or act. *The Secret Agent* activates the link between the two terms, representing pornography in order to work through its own relations to violence. This self-reflexivity is built into the plot at a fundamental level: Verloc owns a shop selling lewd pictures and contraceptives, which functions as a cover for his work as agent provocateur. (Interestingly, this self-reflexivity is picked up by Hitchcock in his film version of the novel, called *Sabotage* [1936], in which the Verloc character owns a movie theater rather than a sex shop.)

What is most striking about Verloc's sex shop is its insignificance for his family. Winnie works there apparently without thinking about what she is doing; she might as well be selling ink and stationary (the alibi products in this alibi shop, and of course another link between pornography and writing). In the same afterword that attempts to differentiate terrorism from writing on the basis of the work ethic, Conrad also claims that *The Secret Agent* is really Winnie Verloc's story (231). This might come as a surprise since we hardly get a glimpse of her personality until the very end. In contrast to the main plot of confusion and deceit, Winnie's story is straightforwardly melodramatic. After murdering Verloc - something represented as a spontaneous reaction to the traumatic loss of her brother not as a deliberate act of revenge - she tries to enlist the aid of one of his anarchist acquaintances, promising him everything she can - to live with him out of wedlock - for his help. He, however, merely steals her money and abandons her. She ends up presumably committing suicide on the ferry ride between England and France, this sacrifice on one international border recapitulating the failed attack on the first border: the prime meridian. The plot events collaborate with Winnie Verloc's rather simple psychology, allowing her to maintain her virtue in the midst of all the sex and violence. She kills her husband, but out of loyalty to her brother, and protects her integrity in the form of her body, resisting even Verloc's advances in the end (the novel

suggests that she would not have killed him had he not made sexual advances after murdering Stevie). The novel uses pornography as a distancing mechanism, fencing itself off from the endorsement of violence by fencing Winnie off from the "commission" of sex. The difference between representing violence and enacting it is the difference between selling pornography and "doing it." By claiming the story is Winnie's, Conrad melodramatically places himself on the side of domestic virtue, reducing violence, sex, and international intrigue to peripheral issues, although these seem to be the basic stuff of the novel. Conrad's novel is not melodramatic, but Winnie Verloc's story is.

Turning to the postmodern literature of terrorism in the example of DeLillo's *Players*, what is most striking are the similarities to the Conradian model. The novel is obsessed with the parallel confusions between law and terrorism, writing and violence, ultimately turning to sexuality to work out the complicated issues of who's on whose side. The major difference is that where Conrad's novel at least gestures toward traditional domestic virtues, DeLillo's characters are cynical and transgressive, constantly swapping partners (one of the meanings of "players"), experimenting with sex and gender roles and toys, all because of a basic boredom with everyday life that is captured in boredom with (basic) sex. Lyle, a stock broker obsessed with numbers (not money but its abstraction) who is eventually drawn towards terrorism, thinks of sex with his wife in the following terms: "It is time to 'perform,' he thought. She would have to be 'satisfied.' He would have to 'service' her. They would make efforts to 'interact'" (35). He is equally bored with pornography: "He wondered if he'd become too complex to look at naked bodies, as such, and be stirred" (17). The scene where he watches local access porno videos while his wife Pammy tries to sleep is overdetermined, hinting at the motivations behind his later attraction to terrorism and also prefiguring DeLillo's later response to 9/11, an event which, as I have already indicated, is predicted by the novel. Lyle comments on local access pornography in this way:

> Here, look. We're here, folks. The future has collapsed right in on us. And what does it look like? [...] It looks like this. It looks like waves and waves of static [...]. We're sitting watching in the intimacy and comfort of our bedroom and they've got their loft and their camera and it gets shown because that's the law. As soon as they see a camera they take off their clothes. It used to be people waved. (17)

This dense passage connects the collapse of the future to the desensitizing effects of electronic media, which dulls the viewer's response to pornography for the same reason it dulls the performers' inhibitions: excess, static, information overload. What is at stake here is the loss of the sense of self as a private, discrete individual. The boundaries between the private and the public, the intimate and the banal, are compromised at the

moment that TVs and cameras project the intimacy of one home into the privacy of another, effectively collapsing the distinction between inside and outside. This dissolution of boundaries is something Baudrillard called "the ecstasy of communication" in an essay roughly contemporary with DeLillo's novel. Ecstasy here is used anachronistically and ironically, referring to the old sense of going out of the body, but brought about by the technologized disintegration of personal space into the information net- work. When all sorts of images are accessible on any TV screen, when it is always possible to be photographed by a camera, whether for exhibitionism or surveillance, then there is no real difference between waving and taking off one's clothes: interaction no longer means communication between discreet individuals, but the steady, undifferentiated stream of images.

Twenty-four years later, in the months following 9/11, DeLillo would rework the idea of a collapsing future into an essay called "In the Ruins of the Future." The collapsing future is different from the ruined future, how- ever, in at least one important respect. While the novel is concerned with the disintegration of self into the information network, the essay is concerned with the violent rejection of the network for a more primitive symbolic system, one based on the retributive, binary logic of us vs. them, an eye for an eye. It is this kind of system I label "melodramatic" at the beginning of this paper. The rejection of the network is brought about by the terrorist attacks and the response they elicit:

> Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet. The materials and methods we devise make it possible for us to claim our future. We don't have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment. The miracle is what we ourselves produce, the systems and networks that change the way we live and think.
>
> But whatever great skeins of technology lie ahead, even more complex, con- nective, precise, micro-fractional, the future has yielded, for now, to medieval expedience, to the old slow furies of cutthroat religion.
>
> Kill the enemy and pluck out his heart. (37)

DeLillo is concerned with the relations between two overlapping sym- bolic systems: the technological and the religious, we might also call them the postmodern and the pre-modem. What links these two systems is the melodramatic urge to reduce complexity to dualism. Conrad, as modernist, in a sense occupies the nodal point between the two: dismissive of the old religious pieties, but still concerned with individual virtues. He is well aware of the fact that terrorism collapses social diversity into a dangerous binary logic of provocation and revenge. He would just give social diversity another name: cosmopolitanism rather than information technology (hence the importance of the prime meridian). The most striking similarity between Conrad and DeLillo is not only their common preoccupation with

the collapse of complexity into melodrama, but their representation of this collapse in terms of pornography. Conrad, as I have already mentioned, distances writing from terrorism by distancing his main female character from sex. DeLillo exposes the complicity of writing and terror through sex.

Bored with his marital sex life, Lyle is only interested in sleeping with terrorists. He first pursues Rosemary, his connection to the terrorist gang, out of habit, finding her bland, uncommunicative and unresponsive. She becomes more interesting when he learns of her radical acquaintances. One of these is Marina, who is not conventionally beautiful but who is, in a sense, ennobled by her hate of the system and her desire for revenge: her brother Raphael is in jail for murdering a stock broker who also knew Rosemary - the event that inaugurates the plot. Marina's commitment to destruction is as extreme as the Professor's in Conrad: "We're here to destroy [...] Theory is an effete diversion. Its purpose is to increase the self- esteem of the theorists. The only worthwhile doctrine is calculated madness" (108). Her goal is to blow up the New York Stock Exchange, and she wants Lyle to plant the bomb. She selects this target because she is aware of the importance of the electronic information systems involved in inter- national capital.[5]

Maria's understanding of postmodemity is, however, markedly pre-modem, as she compares stock brokers to religious figures (107). Her goal is to collapse the postmodern into the pre-modem, the information network into the binary logic of revenge. This is why she chooses terrorism, which, as we have already seen through early terrorist literature, Conrad, and DeLillo's own response to 9/11, collapses social diversity into the paired terms of an eye for an eye and us versus them. Marina understands her connection to Lyle as another sort of binary exchange: "Sex: her body for his risk. Not quite a condition, perhaps. Equation would be closer. It was old-fashioned, wasn't it? A little naïve, even" (187). Sex with her is different, even a revelation for Lyle: "Marina nude. Against this standard, everything else was bland streamlining, a collection of centerfolds, assembly line sylphs shedding their bralettes and teddy pants" (188). She centers him in his body, which is otherwise lost in information systems: "At her imperceptible urging he felt himself descend, he felt himself occupy his body" (189).

Nevertheless, Lyle betrays Marina in the end, choosing instead to align himself with the man she identifies as the "effete" theorist: Kinnear. In a sense he chooses postmodernism over pre-modemism, the information system over the binary logic of exchange and revenge. The novel suggests

5 "Rafael wanted to disrupt their system, the idea of worldwide money. It's this system that we believe is their secret power. It all goes floating across that floor. Currents of invisible life. This is the center of their existence. The electronic system" (DeLillo 107).

that in supporting Kinnear instead of Marina, Lyle is also choosing homosexuality over heteronormative sex. Lyle decides Kinnear must be a homosexual on the first occasion of their meeting, when Kinnear holds up a gun to demonstrate its impotence. Lyle's logic here is identical to Marina's: armed conflict is masculine, theorizing effete. However, Marina is wrong in thinking that theorizing is a substitute for action. Lyle grasps early on that information manipulation is the more interesting game in the postmodern age of systems and networks: "[Kinnear's] selective disclosure of in- formation merely confirmed the material existence of the space he'd chosen to occupy, the complex geography, points of confluence and danger. Lyle found these speculations absorbing [...]". Kinnear's "selective disclosure of information" makes him difficult to pin down; Lyle suspects he has been playing both sides against one another as a double agent ("counter- poise," "equilibrium") for 20 years (145). Kinnear admits as much to Lyle: "Things change and maybe it's advanced communications, I don't know, but today there's just one terrorist network and one police apparatus. Thing is, they sometimes overlap" (116). Lyle finds such comments seductive, in part because what Kinnear does with information is similar to what Lyle does with numbers: playing the margins, looking for profits, manipulating the gap between use and exchange value.

A thorough analysis of the novel's complex representations of homosexuality unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this paper. I mention in passing that Lyle's wife Pammy gets involved in a lover's triangle with a gay couple - Ethan and Jack - in a series of plot events that parallels Lyle's deepening involvement with the terrorists. When Pammy has sex with Jack on the beach, their bodies are presented in terms deliberately reminiscent of a fascist aesthetic, so that this moment of heterosexual passion, like Lyle's encounter with Marina, subtly evokes the threat of violence.[6] Indeed, after this encounter, Jack commits suicide by burning himself alive in an act patterned on the protests of Buddhist monks against the war in Vietnam (DeLillo 198). Kinnear's "effete theorizing" is in many ways presented as an alternative to the violence engendered by the traditional masculine and feminine roles in heterosexual eroticism. Even if the novel figures Kinnear's theorizing as "homosexual," however, Lyle never sleeps with and barely even sees Kinnear. Rather, he sleeps with Rosemary, who works as Kinnear's agent, ferrying information from Kinnear to Lyle and money in the other direction, after Kinnear convinces Lyle (without too much effort) to help him escape to Canada. When Lyle hands over escape money to

6 "Jack stood up to undress. She liked seeing him against the sky, defined that way, clear and unencumbered, flesh tones a perfect compensation, a wry layered grade, for that extravagant blue. Trite, she thought. Muscled body against sky. Soft-core fascist image, Ethan [Jack's partner] would say. But what the hell, folks, it's fun to mythologize" (DeLillo 165).

Rosemary near the end of the novel they resume the affair that had been on hold, but this time with a difference: she appears wearing a dildo - a surprise given their conventional and even boring interaction throughout the early parts of the novel. Lyle understands the sex toy as signifying their mutual and collaborative status as "instruments," but this is an unsatisfying interpretation, and probably deliberately so (211). The significance of the dildo is precisely its ambiguity; it represents Kinnear's power and invisibility because he is able to hide himself behind it, to withhold its meaning just as he withholds information. After all, we know nothing about him; Lyle merely surmises, without much evidence, that he is gay, and even the secret service calls him by different names. In and of itself the sex toy is as irrelevant as the novel's other phallic symbol, the gun, but unlike the gun it suggests changing roles and fluid boundaries, the properties of the network Kinnear manipulates or "plays."

If Winnie is the hidden hero of Conrad's text, Kinnear is the covert hero in DeLillo's. He also stands for the writer (or "theorist"), but one whose weapon is information or "intelligence," not some presumed moral distance from the events he is describing. Kinnear is associated with violence but somehow manages to keep himself out of the fray. Perhaps he even represents an alternative to violence, although his relation to terrorism is far from simple or innocent. In DeLillo's novel the role of the writer is more ambiguous than in Conrad's but also less threatening. DeLillo cannot pre- tend to distinguish himself from somebody like Kinnear on the basis of hard work, as Conrad does with the Professor; but then there is no need for disavowal because there is no threat of his doing anything more radical than what writers do anyway: circulating information. The novel dispenses with determined and violent action at the same moment that it dispenses with traditional gender roles and realist models of individuality. This represents the final replacement of melodramatic conventions with pornographic ones. Sontag's suggestion that pornography is an early form of post- humanism is relevant here; emotional depth and character development giving way to ritualized transgressions and the choreography of corporeal positions ("The Pornographic Imagination" 70). It is the information system that renders character - and violence - obsolete in DeLillo's novel; information is itself pornographic. At the end of the novel, Rosemary and Lyle are no longer identifiable by name and barely by gender, and this is presented as a "welcome" relief (DeLillo 212). Sexual ambiguity in an anonymous motel seems preferable to the "deep implications" of sex with Marina, or the fascist eroticism of Pammy and Jack on the beach (188).

The airplane missing the World Trade Center is, in a sense, the most significant non-event of this novel in which destruction is hinted at, even played with as a welcome distraction from "compulsive information-gathering," but in which little is actually destroyed (DeLillo 129). 9/11 has made such deferrals of violence seem antiquated, just as it has rendered

postmodernism obsolete. The "post" to postmodernism seems to be the return of the "real," reality defined as the "end of irony" and a return to the old virtues of patriotism, seriousness, and heroism. Joyce Carol Oates provides an example of how such "virtues" have become a theme in what we might already call post-9/11 literature. In a sense she has always written stories in which people "find themselves" by overcoming or succumbing to violence. However, her recent short story "The Mutants," written from a survivor's perspective, explores the redemption-through-violence theme at a more communal level. The title of the story predicts the forming of a new, more adaptive, "mutant" community based on a common experience of destruction. There is a Nietzschean element to this plot-line: Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger. But Oates's narrative is self-consciously collective, with group identity growing like scar tissue over a common wound. The trauma of 9/11 engenders a new melodramatic vision of society, with an injured but determined "us" united against a dangerous and mysterious "them."

"The Mutants" embraces the melodramatic models that Conrad struggles with and DeLillo finally rejects, and it does so in the name of the victims. In this it offers a corollary to recent criticism blaming artists and art (usually called "discourse" or "Western culture") for the attacks. Recent fiction and criticism has returned to the melodramatic paradigms that modernist and postmodern fiction painfully rejected. In the attempt to sympathize with the victims, to not offer voyeuristic or pornographic accounts of their suffering, it is willing to sacrifice art and artists as irrelevant or even possibly dangerous. Is it possible to write in the name of victims without being seduced by the binary logic of an eye for an eye, us versus them? Victims suffer real trauma, which they need to express, and their expressions need to be heard, read, and seen, and imaginatively and analytically portrayed. Such "bearing witness for the witnesses" is to be distinguished, however, from grounding collective identity in violence, which as René Girard has eloquently pointed out, always involves the sacrifice of a scape-goat. Even a casual glance at terrorist literature reveals that most terrorists believe themselves to be victims; it is this feeling of victimization that justifies (in their own eyes) their violence. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Sontag argues that the only way to get out of the cycle of terrorist violence, the circle of provocations and revenge, is to get beyond feelings of victimization. Derrida and Habermas, in Borradori's book, also emphasize the importance of looking beyond our own suffering in order to grasp the fact that violence happens everywhere. One of the ways literature can distinguish it- self from terrorism is by moving beyond melodramatic structures to point out the complicated interdependencies and relations of modem life. The literature of terrorism, like *The Secret Agent* and *Players*, is the opposite of terrorist literature, the opposite of propaganda.

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