

"Thoroughly post-modern millennium"

An excerpt from Martin Amis' review of *Mao II*, by Don DeLillo. (*The Independent*, Sept. 8, 1991): 29.

POST-MODERNISM in fiction was never a school or a movement, like symbolism or surrealism, and had none of the revolutionary trappings--executive committees, special handshakes, manifestos cobbled together in cafes by ambitious young drunks. It was, instead, evolutionary: something that a lot of writers everywhere began finding themselves doing at roughly the same time. Even its exponents could see, in post-modernism, the potential for huge boredom. Why all the tricksiness and self-reflection? Why did writers stop telling stories and start going on about how they were telling them? Well, nowadays the world looks pretty post-modern in many of its aspects. It is equally fantastical and wise-up, and image-management vies for pride of place with an uninnocent reality. Postmodernism may not have led anywhere much; but it was no false trail.

Don DeLillo is an exemplary postmodernist. And perhaps he is also pointing somewhere beyond. Whereas his contemporaries have been drawn to the internal, the ludic and the enclosed, DeLillo goes at things the other way. He writes about the new reality--realistically. His fiction is public. His dramatis personae are icons and headliners: politicians, assassins, conspirators, cultists. His society has two classes: those who shape the modern mind, and those whose minds are duly shaped. It is entirely fitting that the hero of DeLillo's longest, best and most recent novel, *Libra*, should be Lee Harvey Oswald: a babbling loner and nobody, a sleepwalking ideologue who, in a single act, achieved iconic immortality, becoming a kind of flux-tube of national paranoia.

As a package, *Mao II* could hardly look more sprucely post-modern and transmedial. The title, which sounds like its own sequel, refers not to the Mao silkscreen on the cover but to the 1973 line drawing--by Warhol, naturally, the great displacer or degrader of images and icons. Each section of the book is preceded by a beautifully hazed photograph: a rally in Peking, a mass Moonie wedding, the tortured crowd on the terraces at Hillsborough, Khomeini's funeral, the cracked streets of Beirut. The documentary feel is appropriate. DeLillo is giving it to us straight: there's never the slightest doubt about what's going on. We move freely, in brightest light. It is the protagonists who grope and stumble. A blurbist might call the cast of characters "unlikely", but they are more or less familiar players in the DeLillo game: a terrorist, a hostage, a terrorist broker or PR man, a reclusive (indeed spectral) American novelist, his

obsessive fan and archivist, a monomaniac photographer, and an only partly deprogrammed disciple of Master Moon.

We are in an intensified millennial present, the Last Days - what the Moonies call "hurry-up time". "When the Old God leaves the world," DeLillo writes, "what happens to all the unexpended faith?" It's not that people will start believing in anything: they will start believing in everything. "When the Old God goes, they pray to flies and bottle-tops." Karen, who first appears as one of the brides in the Mexican-wave, blind-date Moonie wedding at Yankee Stadium, is only the most extreme symptom of an (apparently) general condition. The post-modern world magnifies the self to the point of insupportability; those who can't take it will need to surrender to an idea or--easier still--a personality. The icon of this overlordship is of course the inscrutable Chairman, who tried to replace the thoughts of a billion people with the thoughts of Mao. At the same time Mao heroised the masses, the dark crowds to whom, DeLillo hints, the future "belongs".

Brita is the driven photographer. She used to photograph derelicts, but now she's switched to writers (any writers, all writers). Her lifework is a kind of "species count", a pictorial census of the breed. "I'm not interested in photography," she tells Karen: "I'm interested in writers." And Karen very sensibly asks: "Then why don't you stay home and read?" But we all know that second-hand isn't close enough any more. Or better say third-hand. The event or the person is first-hand. TV is second-hand. Print is third-hand.