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The Sublime in Don DeLillo's *Mao II*

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ABSTRACT

The world that DeLillo's characters live in is often portrayed with an inherent complexity beyond our comprehension, which ultimately leads to a quality of woe and wonder which is characteristic of the concept of the sublime. The inexpressibility of the events that emerge in DeLillo's fiction has reintroduced into it what Lyotard calls "the unrepresentable in presentation itself" (PC 81), or to put it in Jameson's words, the "postmodern sublime" (38). The sublime, however, appears in DeLillo's fiction in several forms and it is the aim of this study to examine these various forms of sublimity. It is attempted to read DeLillo's *Mao II* in the light of theories of the sublime, drawing on figures like Burke, Kant, Lyotard, Jameson and Žižek. In DeLillo's novel, it is no longer the divine and magnificent in nature that leads to a simultaneous fear and fascination in the viewers, but the power of technology and sublime violence among other things. The sublime in DeLillo takes many different names, ranging from the technological and violent to the hollow and nostalgic, but that does not undermine its essential effect of wonder; it just means that the sublime, like any other phenomenon, has adapted itself to the new conditions of representation. By drawing on the above mentioned theorists, therefore, the present paper attempts to trace the notion of sublimity in DeLillo's *Mao II*, to explore the transformation of the concept of the sublime under the current conditions of postmodernity as depicted in DeLillo's fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Often known as indescribable, incomparable and unrepresentable, the sublime is almost impossible to define. Simply put, though, the sublime is a combinatory feeling of simultaneous fear and fascination, repulsion and attraction, and horror and admiration that is caused in the face of an overwhelming and confounding phenomena. Being confronted by something that eludes description and representation, we are incapable of speech and expression, and "this failure of language is where the sublime begins" (Wawrzinek 11). Don DeLillo is famous for continuing to "write novels that probe American postmodernity" (Duvall 4). The postmodern culture with its intricate web of systems and image-bound consumers is an ever-present theme in DeLillo's novels. DeLillo portrays a condition that is "too complex for our current perceptual apparatus to comprehend" (Knight 37). This incomprehensibility leads to a quality of "woe and wonder" which in Bloom's view is why "we turn to DeLillo" (Bloom 4). Moreover, DeLillo's concern with the advent of the digital age and global terrorism makes inevitable the figuring in his novels of an element of the sublime. In DeLillo's fiction, however, the sublime appears in diverse forms, drawing its quality of awe and wonder from various sources like technology, violence, hollowness and spirituality.

2. TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME

If the traditional sublime was triggered by the magnificent phenomena in nature, the postmodern sublime is born from much darker and more formidable agents, one of which is technology. Joseph Tabbi argues that, "Kant's sublime object, a figure for an infinite greatness and infinite power in nature that cannot be represented, seems to have been replaced in postmodern literature by a technological process" (ix). Tabbi includes DeLillo in his list of writers (Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon and Joseph McElroy), in whose novels "a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology," has led to "a complex pleasure derived from the pain of

representational insufficiency” which in turn “has paradoxically produced one of the most powerful modes of modern writing in America—a technological sublime” (1). Tabbi, however, does not point to the diversity of the concept of the sublime in DeLillo’s fiction which derives its power not just from technology but from a whole other range of sources like violence and even spirituality.

Accordingly, “the awe and reverence once reserved for the Deity and later bestowed upon the visible landscape” during the nineteenth century is now directed toward “technology or, rather, the technological conquest of matter” (Marx 197). As Jameson writes, in a culture where “the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good,” it is the “mesmerizing and fascinating,” yet overwhelming, “technology of contemporary society,” that “seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp” (ix, 37-38).

In DeLillo’s novels we witness what Boxall calls a “mini history” of “technological developments in the post-war” (6). Here, what shocks are “the consequences of human accomplishment unbounded by humility” (Bernstein 24). In *Mao II*, technology plays an important role in creating the sublime. *Mao II* follows the life of a reclusive novelist named Bill Gray who sees himself as the last individual voice in an era of electronic media, communism, terrorism, and a cultural addiction to conformity. For Bill, the technological sublime materializes in “the new culture, the system of world terror” (112). This new system leaves him speechless:

The rush of things, of shuffled sights, the mixed swagger of the avenue, noisy storefronts, jewelry spread across the sidewalk, the deep stream of reflections, heads floating in windows, towers liquefied on taxi doors, bodies shivery and elongate, all of it interesting to Bill in the way it blocked comment, the way it simply rushed at him, massively. [...] Nothing tells you what you're supposed to think of this. (*M* 94)

For him, the fast pace of these new transitions is overwhelming. He finds the technology of voice mail, for instance, “a murderous technology” (Boxall 169), one that “destroys the poetry of nobody home” (*M* 92). The interference of the answering machine is linked, for Bill, both to “the aggression of global technological capitalism, and to that of global terrorism” (Boxall 169). “There’s a lot of violence” in the phrase ‘Accessing your machine,’ Bill tells Brita. “You need a secret code if I’m not mistaken. You enter your code in Brussels and blow up a building in Madrid” (*M* 91). This exposes “a deep underlying connection between technology, violence and capital” that is an ever-present issue in DeLillo’s fiction (Boxall 7).

The rapid pace of technological growth has also led to an explosion of data in our everyday lives, what is most appropriately called an “information sublime,” which, according to Pepperell, can trigger the same awe and excitement that earlier generations felt towards “the extremities of the natural world” (Pepperell 384). “Data banks are the Encyclopaedia of tomorrow,” writes Lyotard, because “they transcend the capacity of each of their users. They are ‘nature’ for postmodern man” (*PC* 51). This is what Lyotard predicted as “the [postmodern] condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies” (*PC* xxiii), toward which we can do nothing except “gaze in wonderment” (*PC* 26).

As Lyotard puts it, “knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major—perhaps *the* major—stake in the worldwide competition for power” (*PC* 5). It may be for this reason that Bill Gray of *Mao II* seeks to recluse from any form of technological and informational mediation. In fact, *Mao II* can be considered “an attempt to explore the meaning of novel writing in the American information society near the end of the twentieth century” (Nagano 23). Not wanting to be influenced by external forces, Bill tries to shut himself from “the flood of media-generated information in order to bring his novels to perfection” (*ibid*). The sublime power of this “larger and indescribable system at work” overpowers him so much that he attempts, however unsuccessfully, not to be a part of it (Bernstein 24). He refuses, more than anything, to be “consumed” by the “image world” (*M* 44, 36), but as the novel progresses, he gradually loses control and succumbs to the sublime volume of information that violates his aesthetic bubble.

3. VIOLENT SUBLIME

The force of technology, however, is not the only source of sublimity in DeLillo's fiction. Nowadays, our daily dose of the sublime is not only secured by information-technologies, but also by an even darker and much more powerful source, that is violence in the sense of catastrophes and man-made disasters. We used to be awed by the formidable oceans, mountains and cataracts, but as a result of our 'immersion' into info-tech multimedia, scenes of violence have become the latest and strongest replacement for the sublime in nature, providing us with that 'terrible joy' and 'delightful horror' that we cannot get enough of. So whether we are simply reading a tragedy, or watching a horror movie, or following news of world-wide disasters, "we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others" (Burke 42). As a consequence of this, [T]here is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; so that whether the misfortune is before our eyes, or whether they are turned back to it in history, it always touches with delight. This is not an unmixed delight, but blended with no small uneasiness. The delight we have in such things, hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel, prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer; and all this antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works us to its own purposes, without our concurrence. (Burke 43) It is, therefore, our natural instinct to feel a guilty pleasure at the sight of some 'uncommon and grievous calamity.' It is of no surprise that Burke is not the only one who finds this human impulse natural. Umberto Eco holds a similar view to Burke's in his readjustment of Friedrich Schiller's "On Tragic Art,"

It is a great general phenomenon of our nature that sad, terrible and even horrible things have an irresistible attraction for us; and that scenes of suffering and terror repel and attract us with equal power. All will cluster around someone who is telling a murder story, we eagerly devour the most adventurous ghost story, and the more it makes our hair stand on end, the greater eagerness. (Eco 288)

In opposition to any moral or ethical ground, the scenes of sublime violence and suffering have become more and more "aestheticized" (Ticinovic 11). In the words of Katya Mandoki: "In due time, the theory of aesthetics will have to account not only for the delight in Kantian beauty and the sublime, but for the phenomena like aesthetic violence and the aestheticization of violence, [and] of aesthetic abuse and intrusion..." (Mandoki 42). It is mainly an unconscious longing for this feeling of the sublime that explains why DeLillo's characters cannot get enough of overwhelming scenes of violence and catastrophe. Aside from their techno-apocalyptic quality, Don DeLillo's novels are noted almost as frequently for their "brilliant terror, manifested as a frisson at the core of contemporary existence" (Bernstein 1). Although terrorism seems to be an ever-present issue in DeLillo's novels, Bernstein argues that,

The terror is not simply the terrorism with which DeLillo is almost obsessively concerned, but also that of a sublime dimension of experience. Again and again DeLillo's characters are faced with the inexplicability of events and the giddy suspicion, terrifying in its eventual impact, that a darker force determines reality. (1)

This notion is exemplified in the many scenes of catastrophe in DeLillo's novels. Catastrophe in this sense includes "destruction in all its varied manifestations—plain murder and assassination, nuclear explosion, toxic pollution, etcetera" (Aaron 69). These are the "key topics that keep erupting" in the thoughts and conversations of DeLillo's characters (ibid).

Accordingly, a longing for disaster is seen in DeLillo's *Mao II*. The need for sublime violence asserts itself once again to awaken the information-numbed characters. They are "ray-gunned by fame and death," by "the repeated news images of car crashes and movie stars" (20). "Famine, fire, riot, war. These were the never-ceasing subjects" (174). The novel foregrounds reports on events that affect a large number of people in violent and tragic situations. We witness upheavals around the world-conflicts in the Middle East, the Tiananmen massacre in China, activities of an Asian religious cult, and a sporting disaster in a soccer stadium in Britain. We, along with the characters, resort to these dark news because "our desperation has led us toward something larger and darker. So we turn to the news, which provides an unremitting mood of catastrophe" (72). Critics have

argued that DeLillo's characters tend to believe that violence "brings back lost materiality and makes embodiment possible" (Nagano 39). Katherine Hayles, for instance, argues that today "only violence [...] can crack the slick surfaces of fetishized commodification and restore the connection and immediacy that embodiment entails" (qtd. in *ibid*).

This search for restoring "connection and immediacy" is best evidenced in the character of Karen. She compulsively watches news of violent and tragic events around the world as a desperate attempt to take back her "vibration" through sublime "annihilation" (*M* 181). The images of sudden eruptions of these news of disaster are communicated in such a powerful manner that they grip the viewer/reader. The scene where Karen watches a sporting disaster at Hillsborough Stadium, Britain, is worth noting. In a state of an "astonishment amounting almost to terror," "horror and sacred awe" (Kant 99), she watches the overcrowding supporters being crushed to death:

She sees the crowd pushed toward the fence and people at the fence pressed together and terribly twisted [...] There are bodies packed solid, filling the screen, and people barely moving at the fence, pressed and forced into one twisted position. ... they are writhing and twisted with open mouths and bloated tongues [...] She sees the fence up close and they stop the film and it is like a religious painting, the scene could be a fresco in a tourist church, it is composed and balanced and filled with people suffering [...] They show the fence from a distance. (33-34)

It is precisely because of this 'distance' that the quality of the sublime is preserved here. Karen experiences the sublime because she is not actively involved in the violent suffering of the people. What is stressed in the description of the crowd, here, is "their physical pain" (Nagano, 34), as exemplified by the following line: "It is an agony of raised and twisted arms and suffering faces" (*M* 33). "The idea of bodily pain," as Burk puts it, "in all the modes and degrees of labor, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of the sublime" (Burke 79). "Pain, and fear," he continues, "act upon the same parts of the body, and in the same manner, though somewhat differing in degree" (119). They are, therefore, "capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror" (123).

In the words of Bill, "we're giving way to terror, to news of terror, to tape recorders and cameras, to radios, to bombs stashed in radios" (*M* 42). In his interview with Maria Nadotti, DeLillo himself comments on such news: "The news is fiction, the news is the new narrative-particularly, the dark news, the tragic news. I think that from this kind of news people find a kind of narrative with a tragic stamp which in another time they found in fiction" (Nadotti 114). In the novel, DeLillo lets Bill comment on the same question: "News of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative" (42). This brings us to the most curious yet interesting conversation between Bill and his assistant Scott Martineau about the connection between novelists and terrorists:

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? Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. (*M* 41)

The novel, therefore, according to Scott and Bill, has lost its edge "to feed our search for meaning," and satisfy our appetite for "the great secular transcendence" (*M* 72). The novelist has lost his power to "influence mass consciousness," for "the more clearly we see terror, the less impact we feel from art." After "Beckett" as "the last writer to shape the way we think and see," we find the sublime only in news of catastrophes, "midair explosions and crumbled buildings" (*M* 157). In this sense, terrorists have become "the only possible heroes for our time" because they have the deadly force to "resist absorption into the inertia of super-saturated cities" (Saltzman 207), and they continue to shock and overwhelm us,

The way they excite, they excite admiration. In societies reduced to blur, and glut, terror is the only meaningful act. [...] Inertia-hysteria. Is history possible? Is anyone serious? Who do we take seriously? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. Everything else is absorbed. The artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and

incorporated [...] Only the terrorist stands outside. The culture hasn't figured out how to assimilate him. It's confusing when they kill the innocent. But this is precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands. (M 157)

So the terrorist stands out because he is not yet 'absorbed'. As much as we hate to admit, the power of such terror, both in its Burkean and terroristic sense of the word, persists in making the sublime possible. Even Brita tends to believe that "what terrorists gain, novelists lose" (M 157).

4. THE RIDICULOUS AND THE SUBLIME

The postmodern sublime differs from the romantic sublime not just in substituting technology and violence for nature as its major sources, but more significantly in its fundamental essence. Casting off transcendence in favor of immanence, the contemporary sublime is characteristically not nearly as uplifting and elevating as the romantic sublime. As overwhelming and baffling as it still may be, this version of the sublime can at times be hollow, inauthentic, and even ridiculous. Postmodern sublime, unlike the romantic sublime, is "neither beautiful nor necessarily invested with a moral imperative; instead, between knowing and feeling, it is at the limits of ethics and aesthetics," seeking "neither closure nor origin" (Frederick 550).

From a poststructuralist/ postmodernist perspective, we live in an age when metanarratives and grand schemes of thought such as religion, politics, or science, can simply no longer account for all aspects of human experience. This is what Lyotard has called an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (PC xxiv). As a consequence of this condition, a substantial element of the Kantian sublime, that is the "emptying of the self" followed by a "self-assertion" (Mooney 47, 48), is missing in the contemporary version of the sublime. The postmodern man's experience with the sublime is neither inflating nor elevating. When DeLillo's characters encounter the postmodern sublime, they are deflated and emptied only to realize that there is nothing empowering to be filled with: the possibility of self-assertion is gone for good.

Not only can the postmodern sublime come off as hollow and empty but it can also turn into its total opposite: the sublime becomes the ridiculous. This is the nature of the postmodern sublime. The "co-existence of multiple differences" is, in fact, a major feature of the postmodern sublime, allowing "the sublime and the grotesque to be situated alongside one another" (Wawrzinek 28). This is what Žižek talks about when he discusses the opposition of the ridiculous and the sublime. As Žižek observes, the distinction between the sublime and the ridiculous is "a matter of degree" (Shaw 142). Therefore, rather than talking of an opposition between the sublime and the ridiculous, Žižek discusses their co-existence and co-implication. In *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, Žižek pursues this idea through a detailed reading of David Lynch's neo *film noir*, *Lost Highway* (1997): We see an enigmatic juxtaposition or coincidence of opposites in Lynch's films-of the protagonists' comical fixation on an ordinary yet sublime object; of an unbearably naive yet deadly serious vision; or the redemptive quality of clichés that makes them paradigmatically post-modern, corresponding to what Žižek here qualifies as the enigma of 'postmodernity.' (Wieczorek x)

The co-existence of the sublime and the ridiculous is characteristically observed in *Mao II*. Take the banality of a sublime event like war, for instance. "The sound of launched rockets [...] the city banded in rhapsodies of light and fire all the way to morning, when men came out of stifling shelters in their underwear to sweep away the rubble and buy bread" (M 111). Here, we see the journey of the sublime to the ridiculous in one single sentence. The sublimity of the 'launched rockets' and 'rhapsodies of light and fire' is undermined by the banality of the image of men in their 'underwear' coming out to buy 'bread'. Here, because of the multiplicity of previous horrific events and fires, the sublime essence of the war is extracted from this scene. Another example of this is the sixty year old driver who "pronounces the second *b* in bomb". The seriousness and significance of the word bomb is undermined by constant repetition "bomb, bomb, bomb," and by "the man's accent [who] made it sound like boom boom boom. This seemed pretty funny to Bill" (M 228, 124). The best example of the ridiculous sublime, however, is Bill's unheroic and obscure death. First, he gets hit by a car quite unpreparedly and unnoticeably,

He saw worry beads dangling from the rearview mirror of a car coming the other way and then the first car hit him. He walked sideways in a burlesque quickstep, arms pumping, and went down hard, striking his left shoulder and the side of his face. He tried to get up almost at once. People came to help him, a small crowd collecting. Already there was a clamor of blowing horns. He got to his knees, feeling stupid, holding up a hand in reassurance. (*M* 167)

This is certainly not the expected fate for a distinguished writer, to get hit by a random car and go down in a ‘burlesque quickstep’. Moreover, Bill ignores the symptoms of his internal injury and instead of going to the doctor, he takes a trip. What Bill generates is a narrative of “false heroism to give meaning to his irrational act,” an act that leads to “his meaningless death” on the bunk of a street in Beirut with a “bruised and unshaved face” wearing “dirty clothes” (Nagano 29).

5. NOSTALGIC SUBLIME

The Sublime in DeLillo, as in most postmodern works, can be ridiculous and inauthentic. But DeLillo’s sublime gropes for something meaningful and transcendent even in those seemingly ridiculous and inauthentic moments. Harold Bloom notes, “DeLillo, who is so easily mistaken for a Post-Modernist End-Gamer, is rather clearly a visionary, a late Emersonian American Romantic” (Bloom 3). The plethora of postmodern features such as signs without meaning, simulations without originality, and information-technologies that have replaced a new center in today’s life, prevails in DeLillo’s fiction. Among all this confusing mess that is the life we’re living, however, DeLillo, like his wandering characters, is still searching for a transcendent meaning beyond what Baudrillard calls the “the hysteria of production and reproduction of the real” (*Simulations* 44). This is why, we are witness, in almost all of DeLillo’s novels, to a nostalgic yearning for that which escapes representation. This yearning reintroduces into DeLillo’s fiction what Lyotard calls the modern “nostalgic” sublime which “continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure” (Lyotard, *PC* 81). For Lyotard, this nostalgic sublime is linked to “the nostalgia of late twentieth century culture which has tended to move away from avant-gardist experimentation, back towards the past” (White 1). Baudrillard explains this movement towards the past as a result of the disappearance of the real: “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (*Simulations* 12).

The ‘nostalgic’ sublime, then, is in search of meaning and mystery. This eagerness for mystery is often mingled with a hidden spirituality in DeLillo’s novels. John McClure, for instance, in ‘DeLillo and Mystery,’ explores these “recurring intimations of spirituality” in DeLillo’s fiction, inviting us to consider “the variety of mystery” in his work (Duvall 8). DeLillo himself comments on the operation of mystery in his works: “My books are open-ended,” DeLillo tells an interviewer, “I would say that mystery in general rather than the occult is something that weaves in and out of my work. I can’t tell you where it came from or where it leads to” (DeCurtis 55). With “pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the spirit,” then, DeLillo continues to probe and offer moments of mystery and spirituality (Duvall 4).

Furthermore, it is argued that DeLillo is more likely to “endorse his characters’ beliefs in transcendent realities than to dismiss them” (Maltby 225). This, however, does not affirm the appearance of a grand transcendent source of spirituality or a higher divinity in his fiction. In DeLillo’s novels, it is the small and seemingly insignificant moments of routine life that provide the searching characters with the solace of a higher level of meaning. This search for ‘the epic in the mundane’ is what Linda Munk has termed the “Trivial Sublime,” a concept that locates the grand sublime in “the seemingly insignificant things of the everyday: in small and near and common objects” (Munk 1). It is in this sense that DeLillo’s sublime finds “overwhelming power in small things human moments, rather than large ideological structures or invisible, unifying power” (Ticinovic 20).

The “persistence of mystery” in DeLillo is evident in *Mao II* (Duvall 4). The search for an “emotional rescue” is especially manifest in the character of Karen (*M* 82). In a world where the need to believe in a higher power seems outdated and unnecessary, Karen is a seeker for spiritual belief and devout believers. “I don’t like not believing,” she says, “I’m not at peace with it. I take

comfort when others believe” (*M* 69). It is this longing for belief that leads Karen to becoming interested in religious cults. Karen, as one of the last believers whose race is going extinct, has a thirst for “what was vast and true,” a yearning for “a shining, an electrochemical sheen,” and a “light from out of nowhere” that may restore “the eerie gleam of who you are” (*M* 78). This is why Karen feels the need to attribute meaning and mystery to everything that surrounds her. A good example of this is the episode of Karen’s watching the footage of a disaster on television. Karen watches the scene of a mass death that unfolds in a stadium. For Karen, the scene evokes an “ancient history of suffering,” linking her to a sublime spiritual energy in the bygone past (Boxall 163). Then, the footage cuts to a freeze frame and in the eyes of Karen, the scene composes itself into a painting. “They stop the film,” she says, “and it is like a religious painting, the scene could be a fresco in a tourist church, it is balanced and composed and filled with people suffering” (*M* 33).

Critics argue that, these moments of visionary and spiritual experience may be regarded as an instance of DeLillo’s endeavor “to affirm the integrity and spiritual energy of the psyche in the face of late capitalism’s disposition to disperse or thin out the self into so many consumer subject positions” (Maltby 224-225). Thus, Karen, more than anybody in the novel, experiences the nostalgic sublime, because for her,

Everything feeds in, everything is coded, there is everything and its hidden meaning [...] She felt she needed her own hidden meanings to get her through the average day [...] She thought her body had become defensive, homesick for lost assurances. It wanted to be a refuge against the way things work, against the force of what is out there. To love and touch, the roundness of these moments was crossed with something wistful now [...] She wanted her body to remain a secret of the past, untouched by complexity and regret. (*M* 90)

Karen, then, like many of DeLillo’s characters, is wistful and ‘homesick for lost assurances.’ She longs to take refuge in a spiritual shelter, even if its source is the commonplace ‘roundness of these moments’ rather than a divine and sacred higher power.

6. CONCLUSION

The sublime in DeLillo’s *Mao II* is a manifold phenomenon. Its diversity is such that it defies representation or categorization. The most significant source of sublimity in DeLillo’s novel is the force of information and technology which has taken the place of divine nature to provoke simultaneous fear and fascination. DeLillo’s characters are constantly bombarded by baffling streams of information and formidable technologies that have overwhelmed man’s power of reason and imagination. Additionally, the presence of an even grimmer yet much more forceful source of sublimity is felt in DeLillo’s fiction and that is violence in the sense of disasters and manufactured catastrophes. As we have shown in this study, sublime catastrophe can awaken awe and terror in the information-crazed and anesthetized senses of characters for whom violence is the last contact with any sense of the real. Moreover, the loss of grand narratives has led the sublime to its opposite pole, the ridiculous. But even in those apparent ridiculous or hollow moments, DeLillo’s characters search for a trace of transcendent meaning. The very consequences of living in an increasingly secular society of the digital age have driven DeLillo’s characters to look for comfort and reassurance in the ‘good old past’, and therefore made room for another mode of sublimity to reappear in DeLillo’s fiction: the nostalgic sublime. The recurring moments of spirituality and transcendence show that DeLillo, like his wandering protagonists, is still searching for those hidden meanings and existential mysteries. But the source of these transcendent moments is not a higher divinity but the characters’ familiar and earthly surrounding world. The variety and diversity of the contemporary sublime under the new conditions of living, as evidenced in DeLillo’s novel, therefore, is incontrovertible. The sublime in DeLillo is a phenomenon that cannot be plainly categorized as either technological, violent, ridiculous, or nostalgic; it is all of those characteristics and more.

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