

Language as the Ethical Other: Don DeLillo's Trilogy

Introduction

Ethics is not merely different from thinking, in which case it would eventually be absorbed by thinking's play of differences, it cuts across ontology, it is radically and irreducibly 'otherwise than being or beyond essence'. (Levinas 1985: 8-9)

Ethics has nothing at all to do with people if one understands people as individuals, units of resource, or even inexplicable mysterious but with the *logic of relations*. (large 2005: xv)

No one owns language, but everyone is subsumed within language in the postmodern world presented by DeLillo. (Simmons 684)

Language has played a prominent part in both literature and philosophy ever since Plato and Socrates. The postmodern age is considered the language turn¹ while writers, philosophers, and theorists strain their efforts to construe distinct perspectives as it conveys much more an insolvable and enigmatic message than a transparent and objective means. Don DeLillo, starting his writing in the late 20th century, has been making a shrewd meditation on language, an inevitable issue for writers and thinkers in the postmodern era. However, his works neither lapse into the fun house of language as John Barth maintains nor stick to the idea of life

¹ The language turn is the phrase employed to designate the obsession with language, both in philosophical thinking and literary creation, especially in the postmodern age.

representation insisted by realists. Don DeLillo impresses readers with his remarkable niche by blending his language concern with the observation of postmodern life. First of all, language, not restricted to the written or spoken one, has been explored from different angles such as sensibility, death, and even the images. That is, language has been taken as empirical life perceptions, and with its incomprehensible and irreducible nature, DeLillo uniquely makes a portrayal of an ethical relation with language as the Other. Language thus is merged with the most fundamental life concern—the self’s inevitable confrontation with the nonthematizable and nontotalizable Other.

DeLillo’s espousing language to the ethical Other echoes Levinas’s ethics in which it is in the saying of language that the ethical Other is discerned. DeLillo’s ethically-pivoted language has been marked with Levinas’s notions of sensibility, face, and diachrony, which means to display the character of the ethical Other. Language as sensibility serves as a recognition that life is more ontological than epistemological, more empirical than logical. Language encompasses the immediate expression of the world as well as the word, addressing man once he was born into the world. However, such a relation does not promise a synthesized totality as Hegel’s dialectics would presuppose. Instead, it is a relation characterized by its incomprehensible and even enigmatic nature. In addition, the more the ethical relation perpetuates the incongruity, the stronger their relation maintains. The thesis would go from how language is explored in DeLillo’s trilogy, *The Names* (1982), *White Noise* (1985), and *Mao II* (1991) in terms of Levinas’s ethics. That is, the examination of DeLillo’s language does not aim at a self-reflexive study but provides an observation of how the self, in face of the Other, situates himself.

I. DeLillo’s “Both/And” Writing—Language as the Ethical Other

Don DeLillo's achievement is publicly recognized. In 1985, he won the National Book Award for *White Noise*. In 1989, he got Aer International Fiction Prize for *Libra*, and in 1991, the PEN/Faulkner Award for *Mao II*. In 1999, *Underworld* won him the Jerusalem Prize, William Dean Howells Medal and Riccardo Bacchelli International Award. Having established his literary status as one of the most-discussed writers nowadays, his distinctiveness lies in his renewing fictional devices which achieve both his stylistic writing and marks the ethical observation of postmodernity in terms of language.

Don DeLillo, making his debut with the novel, *Americana* (1971), opens up a distinguished prospect for American literature, in a sense bridging two supposedly polarized literary trends. Don DeLillo starts his writing in a distraught and indeterminate time, an era when the traditional or so-called realistic novel has been severely questioned and marginalized², and writing foregrounds language as their major concern. It construes the impression that language matters more than the meaning and even life is considered the interwoven social discourses rather than the empirical reality. Writing is no longer a representation or revelation about something but *is something itself*.³ The rise of this language-foregrounding literary trend, especially in the 1960s, is accompanied by the slogans such as 'the death of the author' (Roland Barthes) or "the death of literature" (John Barth), "the death of the novel" (Surrealists, Futurists, and avant-gardes).⁴ This declaration indicates the end

² The realistic writing refers to the faith in the transparency of representation which is founded on the "affirmation of the Enlightenment with the impressively self-confident faith in reason and in reason's access to the real" (Brink 1). That is, the writing is related to a thinking that presupposes truth, values and objective reality.

³ The reflexive writing has been tried or experimented in Modern age as Samuel Beckett commented on his mentor, James Joyce: "His writing is not *about* something . . . *it is something itself*." (Klinkowitz 61). It is writing about writing itself.

⁴ According to Milan Kundera, "the death of the novel" has been discussed by the Futurists, the Surrealists, and the avant-gardes. "They saw the novel dropping off the road of progress, yielding to a radically new future and an art bearing no resemblance to what had existed before. The novel was to be buried in the name of historical justice, like poverty, the ruling classes, obsolete cars, or top hats (13)." Yet, much more depressing feeling toward the novel arises from the practically unreadable or

of the traditional writing perspectives and makes a forceful account of language's indeterminacy in meaning-designation. Language is more message than medium, more ambiguous than determinate. The self-reflexive or experimental coming to the fore since 1960s set back the writers who persisted in making the realistic portrait of life. Writers were obliged to give in rather than took charge in writing. In face of the imposing impact of the medium-as-message writing on the traditional realistic writing, Don DeLillo is not ignorant of the collision of the polar literary trends. Neither does he think either of them should replace the other. Significantly, his writing shows his particular efforts to integrate the concerns of the opposite literary camps, taking the strategy of "both/and" instead of "either/or." Obviously, the immediate life situations and discernible dynamic social relationships⁵ are juxtaposed with or constructed upon his meditation and exploration of the writing itself, the interaction with language itself. In other words, his works are remarkable in being rooted in the worldly and realistic observations and exceptionally incorporating the concern of the experimental fictions featuring the thematic suspension, the decentered narration and the wor(l)d-ly contextualization. DeLillo, according to Tom LeClair, "creates consistently enriching reciprocal relations between the transcultural observations of the New Realists and the semiotic skepticism of the metafiction"⁶

meaning-exhausting experimental novels. Writers are annihilating the novel's once-primary function—representation or communication. The self-conscious or self-referential writing is reduced or confined to the writer's experimentation, examination or meditation on the word itself, leaving actual life irrelevant.

⁵ Don DeLillo's insistence on the observation or presentation of something real in the novel is demonstrated in his remark that "[f]iction without a sense of real place . . . is automatically a fiction of estrangement." (Aaron 74). More explicitly, he comments on himself:

I am a journalist at heart; even as a novelist, I'm first of all a journalist. I think all novels should be journalism to start, and if you can ascend from that plateau to some marvelous altitude, terrific . . . It's my idea of myself as a writer—perhaps mistaken—that I enter these worlds as a completely rational person who is simply taking what he senses all around him and using it as material. (Crowther 96)

The actual life is the premier source for novelistic creation. However profound ideas are embedded in the presentation, the real life is what DeLillo starts with and earnestly works on.

⁶ The New Realism is actually a reaction to the America's experimental fiction of the 1970s, whose leading authors include John Barth, Donald Bartheleme, William Gass and so on. The efforts of the

(LeClair 1987: 178). Yet, to have the diverging trends converge is a difficult task, especially when he means to work on the remarkable concern of the postmodern age—language in the postmodern age.

First of all, what underlies his writing is his perspective based on the keen observation of the contemporary life marked not merely by meaning-annihilating language but by discourses-woven reality. His writing concerns various social facets including the impact of technology and science, popular culture and even historical events. Under these topics, he shows how man, struggling amid the loss of truth, values and standards, has great difficulty or anxiety, to be more specific, in handling or anchoring his life. Integrating real life and language concern in his works, DeLillo demonstrates that language, one of the premier human medium for communication or expression, is closely related to life perception. Language has been his serious concern since his seventh novel, *The Names*, as he states that “with this book I tried to find a deeper level of seriousness *The Names* is the book that marks the beginning of a new dedication. I needed the invigoration of unfamiliar languages and new landscapes” (1993c: 284). With the foreign landscapes and different languages, DeLillo initiates the exploration of language by defamiliarizing what is heard, seen, read, and touched around him. Hence, though being conscious of the opaque or self-autonomous nature of language, DeLillo does not take it as the only reality but highlights man’s genuine interaction with language. That is, DeLillo does not rest on the exploration of what possibility the experiment of language might bring. He neither treats language as the self-effacing language (in Jerome Klinkowitz’s terms) nor means to construct a life made up merely of word bricks.

former mainly fall on re-assertion of traditionally-recognized literary function and methods in presenting characters, manners, cultural phenomenon and social situation. However, skepticism about the transparency of the medium, language, remains, though the New Realists reemphasize the possibility to forge certain meaning faithful to life realities in the literary presentation.

Instead, he uniquely blends his language concern into his life observation by interweaving the mediated into the immediate reality and explores what is revealed about the postmodern life.

Accordingly, his interest in language does not lead to the nihilistic reading of life or linguistic funhouse which prevails among such postmodern writers as John Barth and Louis Borges. DeLillo's concern of the premier medium is actually the point of departure for his response to the prominent issue in the postmodern age—the relation with the Other, the ethical configuration in the postmodern age. However, the ethical concern does not aim at salvaging the social values or the guidelines to tell right from wrong since ethics used to be constructed in an age where truth or standards are supposedly predetermined and required. Besides, the ethical relation starts not with the communication with people in life but launches from the moment man comes into contact with the “first language”—the living space. It permeates in every possible life seams. Apparently, as a writer, DeLillo significantly integrates his concern about language with other influential dimensions of the postmodern life—the prevalence of advanced technology and the media which more deflects than reflects the distinction between real and unreal, life and death, individual and the crowd. What is more impressive in DeLillo's ethical meditation lies in the variety of his topics, including America, football, history, urban life, terror, conspiracy, and death, etc. It seems difficult to construe an integrate picture of his fiction but, as DeLillo says, all of his novels contain “an element of unresolvability. . . . I don't know exactly how to summarize my work but I would say it's about danger, modern danger” (Keeseey 4). Douglas Keeseey further contends that “by ‘modern danger’ DeLillo mean not so much the assassination itself, but a loss of faith in our ability to understand it and other events, to what it all means” (4). The loss of certainty and the sense of unresolvability, generally observed in the critique, correspond to the

questioning of language as well as the authorship and the dismantling force of the media or mediation. The critique makes a thorough observation of the life packed with the mediated immediacy and the inevitable obsession with death. Still, DeLillo's works present "the modern danger" well but leave the sense of unresolvability unsolved.

Such a language-oriented observation of the ethical relation in the postmodern age is significant in several ways. First, the ethical analysis, in a sense, serves as a response to the postmodern age in which meaning or reality is deprived of their certainty. Man is forced to think and live both epistemologically and ontologically. That is, they have to figure out the ideas accumulating and transforming in the empirical life experiences. Language bathed in the temperament of the era is closely related to the ethical Other. It corresponds to Emmanuel Levinas's notion of ethics,⁷ neither presupposing any rules or values as guidelines to conduct man's social behavior nor viewing the Other whose difference from the self is something which could be reduced to a counterpart or a conceptual opposite.

Neither modern nor postmodern writing could claim DeLillo's works as the unresolved lacuna vitally persists. Paul Maltby remarks that "to postmodernize DeLillo is to risk losing sight of the metaphysical impulse that animates his work" (73). He takes DeLillo's treatment of such topics as language, death, and terror as the revelation of Romantic Metaphysics, based on the notion that "the 'inner faculties' as an inviolable, sacrosanct space beyond the domain of industrialization and the expanding marketplace," emphasizing that "DeLillo's appeals to the visionary serve to affirm an autonomous realm of experience and to provide a standard by which to judge the spiritually atrophied culture of late capitalism" (83). Obviously, Maltby tries to associate the incomprehensible in DeLillo with the visionary in modernist

⁷ Levinas's notion of the Other and ethics would be elaborated in the following part.

sense as a way to survive the capitalized and technologically-oriented society. However, the individual experience explored in a unique way does not really suggest an individual with so-called inviolable inner faculties or is able to achieve an autonomous realm of experience. The individual, failing to sustain a critical distance, is besieged by the swirling social forces while the images conjured up lend him or her less to the redemptive power than the feeling of fear and terror. That's why Jack in *White Noise* had to mesmerize himself in shopping to regain his sense of self diluted to a meager possibility. Lou F. Caton's observation of the same character, likewise, reveals that the romantic desires for unity, authenticity and the realization of an autonomous self are thwarted by "a technological society where metaphysical truth is replaced by the materialistic codes of media and capitalism" (39). DeLillo's writing is so inspiringly open-ended that strikingly-different critical points collide.

Instead of aiming such moments at certain metaphysical unity or so-called "oneness" as well as the evidence of the autonomous individual experience, Joseph Tabbi conceptualizes the inexplicable phenomena as the postmodern sublime, stressing how technology evokes the sublime—"the mixed dread and ecstasy in the perceiving self-consciousness as it confronts the unrepresentable yet overwhelming and undeniable felt presence of an ineffable outer reality" (Mascaro 507). According to Tabbi, Don DeLillo neither persists in reconfiguring the metaphysical unity nor indulges himself in the linguistically narcissistic or self-referential postmodern fiction. He regards the unknown as the sublime—the multiple and inconceivable experiences construed in the both immediate and mediated reality. Tabbi's notion of the postmodern sublime as the mix of dread and ecstasy is founded on Kant's notion of the sublime and Lyotard's further interpretation. Yet, new aspects are added to Tabbi's sublime as he associates it with the technologically-wrapped world. However, stressing the juxtaposition and simultaneity of terror and ecstasy, Tabbi's

idea of postmodern sublimity only tells part of the truth since DeLillo's representational lacuna indeed makes terror an obsession while the ecstasy which is supposed to be merged with the pain is rarely seen or felt. To put it more precisely, Tabbi's idea originating from Kant's sublimity is heavily loaded with an intended reference to an aesthetic experience. Tracing the very idea back to Kant's configuration, we find something interesting. The sublime, one of the most important ideas in Kant's aesthetic judgment, is meant to bridge the gulf between the realm of the natural experience, as the sensible, and the realm of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible (Kant 1952: 35). However, whereas the beautiful, the other category of Kant's aesthetic judgment, refers to the "imagination in its free play to the *understanding*, to bring out its agreement with the *concepts* of the latter in general" (Kant 1952: 104), the sublime, in contrast, designates the incongruity of our imagination and understanding which denies our access to a general idea. It reveals man's finality and limit. And what comes along at the moments of the sublime is respect and fear which are capable of "producing delight; not pleasure but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror" (Kant 1952: 130-31). Kant is remarkable in his analysis of such human experience, inevitable but incomprehensible, perceivable but inconceivable, which is categorized as an aesthetic experience—the sublime. When the idea is imposed on DeLillo's depiction of the contemporary, what surprises us is that such experience is far from obsolete as characters are constantly distraught in their daily confrontations. What deserves further concern is that Kant's notion of the sublime is actually deflected rather than directly reflected in DeLillo's works. What should be first called into question is the concoction of pleasure and pain taken as a state of tranquility paradoxically imbued with fear or terror. In face of the incomprehensible or the unknowable, DeLillo's characters are indeed packed with much terror and uncertainty in the diverse relations

in life; however, few elements of pleasure and tranquility are observed. The “sublime” reading is insufficient to account for what DeLillo means to embrace in his fiction. In addition, Bernhard Radloff manifests a direct association of language with the sublime by drawing on Roland Barth who asserts that “[l]anguage turns in on itself, and revolves around its own ‘figurations’; the figuration is the intransitive play of language for its own sake” (Radloff 686). Yet, the language sublimity with its turning on itself results in the experience of bliss which features in the loss of the self and makes language a unilateral relation as it seems that the sublime of language is nowhere the self could lay a hand. More precisely speaking, the self is in a sense either excluded from the experience of the linguistic sublimity or turns out to be the transparent medium for language, reversing the traditionally-held relation between man and language.

With the perpetual and abyssal uncertainty besieging life and submerging the self, it is unfit to espouse the experience of the sublime to DeLillo’s writing. DeLillo’s works, despite a perspective of life which insists on something intotalizable or un-recognizable, insists more on the relation with language than language itself. That is, the immediate life actuality does not disappear with the emphasis on the relation with inexplicable language. It is an observation essentially corresponding to the ethical relation with the Other in terms of Emmanuel Levinas. And, DeLillo’s ethical concern has an especially complete manifestation in three of his novels, *The Names*, *White Noise* and *Mao II*, which altogether make up his ethical trilogy in terms of language. The trilogy presents DeLillo’s concoction of the postmodern obsession with language and his thorough meditation of the Other in the postmodern life. Furthermore, DeLillo shrewdly demonstrates how man situates himself in the society of uncertainty and risk.

The postmodern is an era whose ethics has nothing to do with any predicatives

founded upon the universal law or what Kant insists on—Reason. Besides, the multi-valent or heterogeneous society thwarts any possibility for the establishment of the unifying standard or values. The ethics then is focused upon the relation with the indeterminate, uncertain, and even unknown. Everyone is obliged to face the relation with a part of life which is indistinct and ambiguous. It is an ethical relation with no common ground in examining or determining the difference between the self and the absolute Other. The Other matters as the access to or the trace of the Other makes up the complicated ethical configuration in the value-scarce and technologically-packed society. These three novels of DeLillo's face up to the unknown core of the age, the Other, and strike up an enlightening dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas. However, it is risky to think that Levinas's idea concerning the relation with the Other is only employed to attest how DeLillo corresponds to Levinas's theoretical argument. Rather, Levinas's ideas are incorporated to better appreciate how language is concretely presented and ethically designated in DeLillo's ethical trilogy and manifest the nexus of the Other-confrontation in realistic happenings. In addition, the dialogue between Levinasian ethics and DeLillo's ethical trilogy would significantly shed light on the self in face of language as the ethical Other.

II. DeLillo vs. Levinas

Levinas's ethics, founded on man's empirical life experience, the sensible, aims to examine man's inevitable confrontation with the irreducible Other. Such an ethical observation corresponds to DeLillo's ethical trilogy which is pivoted on language which designates the immediate perception of the world as well as the word. Remarkably, DeLillo's language is not restricted to that written or spoken. There are three distinct aspects of language explored in DeLillo. Language is first presented as

the imposing, threatening and even violent Other in *The Names*—the sensible reading of the world. Secondly, death as the corporeal language in *White Noise* manifests an Othered self. It is an Other not merely fearful, imminent but embedded in the self. The third aspect of the ethical relation goes to the reading of image which is intended to explore the possibility of individuality in face of the overwhelming Other. And, it is especially from the self's responsibility for the Other that individuality is discerned. Hence, the ethical relation pivoted on language in DeLillo's trilogy is an examination of how the self, confronted with and even overwhelmed by language as the ethical Other, positions himself in the postmodern age.

A. Language as the Sensible Reading of the Wor(l)d

Language is the medium forging the relation with the Other, with something going beyond the signifying mechanism. Levinas's Other does not refer to the endlessly-deferring signification but a transcendent but empirical existence. The transcendence designates "a movement of traversing (*trans*) and a movement of ascending (*scando*). . . . It signifies a double effort of stepping across an interval by elevation or a change of level" (Levinas 2000a: 163). However, it is different from the transcendental ideas that Kant proposes, which "'are concerned with the unconditional unity of all conditions in general,' and aim as 'the synthetic unity of the variety of empirical knowledge in general'" (Levinas 2000a: 154). That is, Kant's transcendence suggests a conceptual unity that subsumes the heterogeneity of the empirical experiences. In contrast, language, according to Levinas, is marked by the notion of "saying" which is prior to the epistemological or conceptual integration or unity. The saying neither signifies the perpetually deferred meaning-designation nor hinges on the Kantian transcendental ideas. It disconnects itself from the conceptual totalization and confronts the self with "the Infinity of the Other" (Levinas 1979: 80).

That is where and what Levinas refers to as the Other as he claims that “[t]he absolutely other is the Other” (Leivnas 1979: 39). The saying of the language, more significantly, transforms the dominating and authoritative center of man in taking language as a communicative tool. With language, man is confronted with the ethical relation in which he has to reconsider how to situate himself and deal with the unknowable and perpetually ongoing part of language as the world *speaks* before one was born. This is how language makes the relation with the Other in Levinas’s ethical contour. In addition, Levinas contends that

[t]he beginning of language is in the face. In a certain way, it calls you. Your reaction to the face is a response. Not just a response, but responsibility. These two words [*r ponse, responsabilit *] are closely related. Language does not begin with the signs that one gives, with words. Language is above all the fact of being addressed. . . which means the saying much more than the said. (1988: 169-170)

Face is the key concept in Levinasian ethics. Levinas takes the face as the beginning of language and language starts with man’s being called or addressed instead of man-made words or signs. Hence, it is another segment of linguistic understanding that Levinas means to talk about. It is greatly different from or far from what the signifying chain could account for. In the exposure to the face of the Other, the saying makes manifest the self’s vulnerability, passivity and proximity with the Other which result in the decentered self—“the reverting of the ego into a self, the de-posing or de-situating of the ego” (2000b: 50). In sum, the face of the Other refers to the saying which is a kind of linguistic mechanism but transcends the signifying or identifying mechanism. Both in and beyond language, it aims to explore the ethical relation in which the self, vulnerable, passive, and despite-self, is awakened to the state prior to the ego-centeredness.

However, in what sense is man addressed without resorting to words or signs, the commonly-recognized signifying base? What is exactly the saying, the face of the Other in a concrete sense? This is what Levinas leaves ambiguous and requires further exploration or demonstration. Hence, Chapter two would be the discussion of Don DeLillo's *The Names* which focuses his concern on language starting with the empirical reading of the world, the landscape, and the space, as man, thrown into the world, is incessantly addressed and demanded to respond. That is, the first language lies in the sensible—the sounds, sights, smells and even ambience. To put it in another way, language begins with the sensory spatial reading of the world. The space addresses man in an unidentifiable and inevitable manner. In DeLillo, the saying of the Other first comes from the landscape where people step in. The immediate communication occurs when man is demanded and called to respond to their living space. Set in a foreign land, the novel impresses readers by presenting how the characters are obliged to respond to various landscapes as well as different languages, the words. DeLillo not only integrates the spatial reading into the saying but delves into other possibilities underlying the commonly-used languages in daily life. Simply put, DeLillo has two routes to track the saying in languages. One comes from the spatial reading, the immediate contact with the environment; the other derives from the established, commonly-used languages circulating in real life. The similarity between these two aspects is that they function as the trace of the Other, the saying. DeLillo goes from the spatial to the temporal (the ethical diachrony), from the named to the unnamable, exploring the ethically unsolvable Other in language and how man reacts or responds to the call of the Other.

The reading of *The Names* focuses on the issue of language which is ethically structured on the spatial-temporal loop. DeLillo stresses the contact with the world as the saying of language. Besides, what is significant of the spatial reading is the

recognition of the self's relation with the Other in language. The relation corresponding to Levinas's diachrony indicates the incommensurable or incomparable nature of the Other. However, DeLillo suggests a spatial distance implied in the ethical diachrony. From the spatial reading (confrontation with the alien landscapes) through Levinas's notion of diachrony to the sustained spatial distance (proximity), DeLillo makes a spatial-temporal loop in his observation of the Other as language.

B. Death as the Corporeal Language

Death in *White Noise* refers to the corporeal language, corresponding to Levinas's notion of death as the ethical Other. The analysis of the characters' preoccupation and confrontation with death is the focus of Chapter three. In the novelistic writing, DeLillo bases his ethical observation on the daily empirical experience which comprises not merely the sensually immediate but the technologically mediated. DeLillo especially makes manifest that the body *talks* in a way which *embodies* death as the Other. Life and death are not corporally exclusive as commonly held. Paradoxically, life and death are in a relation, both compatible and incompatible, separate and inseparable. According to Gerald Loughlin, "it is the appearing of that mysterious alterity that hides in being, in the body that encompasses your own, that holds you, not with the strength of enfolding arms, but with a tender otherness, an essential alienness to yourself" (71). DeLillo's perspective presupposes the essentiality of the body in the age of uncertainty and indeterminacy. Instead of drawing on any concrete cultural or historical structure, DeLillo foregrounds death as the immediate bodily language itself. It is prior to one's reaction to what is heard, seen or even perceived. It seems that DeLillo's ethical configuration lies in the sensibility which "has to do with a pre-opening up to the world as a vulnerable, traumatizable corporeality, i.e., even before I meet the other I

am prepared to open up to him or her” (Düssel 129). As the characters in the novel were distraught at how to react to some of their unexpected bodily language, the relation with the body “cannot be resolved into “images” or be exposed in a theme” (Düssel 132). The body, instead, makes a premier site for the ethical relation with the Other as it evokes the most mysterious experience—death, a hard empirical fact.

DeLillo’s notion of death has its correspondence in Levinas. Death as the irreducible and fearful Other is an immediate and embedded alterity to the self.

Death is the impossibility of having a project. This approach of death indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other, something bearing alterity not as a provisional determination we can assimilate through enjoyment, but as something whose very existence is made of alterity. My solitude is thus not confirmed by death but broken by it. (Levinas 1989: 43)

Levinas believes that the generally-conceived idea of the separation and incompatibility between life and death neglects death as an unavoidable and imminent otherness. Hence, to Levinas, death “is not annihilation but the question that is necessary for this relationship with infinity, or time, to be produced” (Levinas 2000a: 19). No longer designating the end of one’s life, death makes a daily companion which haunts the self and awakes the self to the fearful alterity or exteriority. Besides, the self is engaged in the relation with the absolute alterity and called upon to take the responsibility for the Other. With the haunting and fearful Other, the self is not merely constantly disquieted but greatly menaced or even terrified. “Death threatens me from beyond. This unknown that frightens, the silence of the infinite space that terrifies, comes from the other, and this alterity, precisely as absolute, strikes me in an evil design” (Levinas 1979: 234). Death as the immediate Other to one’s life is an undeniable actuality instead of the impossible possibility in

Heidegger's terms.

Death is another prominent and corporeal saying of the Other, as one is born with the knowledge of the inexplicable destiny which means to claim one's life and ruthlessly demand him to respond to. Levinas's notion of death is not abstractly forged; the body delineates the threat of death. The body becomes the site of life and death, the "I" and the Other. Its paradoxical nature, as Levinas states, first lies in the fact that "[t]o be a body is on the one hand *to stand*, to be master of oneself, and on the other hand, to stand on the earth, to be in the *other*, and thus to be encumbered by one's body" (1979: 164). Freedom and limitation simultaneously reside in the body. Hence, the body is "its ontological regime, and not an object. The body, where expression can dawn forth and where the egoism of the will becomes discourse and primal opposition at the same time conveys the entry of the I into the calculations of the Other" (Levinas 1979: 230). The "I" and the Other, the freedom and the encumbrance do not construe a balanced relation. The situation is that the "I" and the freedom cannot help but passively take the threat from the Other or the encumbrance. More acutely, the menace of the Other comes from death which is the demise of the corporeal, an inevitable destiny of life. Death turns out to be the Other as the corporeal language. With the emphasis on sensibility in ethics, Levinas thinks that the body always goes before man's consciousness or recognition. Hence, the body, more an underlying message of death than the carrier or the executor of the "I," makes a significant ethical arena in face of the ultimate unfathomable embedded in life.

As death is something that awakens man's sensibility to the otherness of the corporeal language, the ethical relation is established upon the proximity of death. The proximity of death makes an "irredeemable gap: the biological movements lose all dependence in relation to signification, to expression. Death is decomposition; it

is the no-response” (Levinas 2000a: 11). Yet, it does not mean the distance is well kept; on the contrary, the proximity with death not only undermines the integration of self-recognition but indicates "existence is pluralist” (Levinas 1989: 43). The alterity, neither reducible nor subsumable, designates an unbridgeable but proximate relation. Moreover, the proximity with death manifests how the solitude is threatened as death from the very beginning of life has initiated the inclusive ethical relation with the self.

But, in what way does Levinas theorize the ethical relation with death which features its proximity with the self? To explore death as the ethical Other, Levinas tends to “think death on the basis of time rather than time on the basis of death, as Heidegger” (2000a: 106). That is, he neither puts death on the linear measurement nor reduces it to the plane of the present as he claims that “[d]eath is never a present . . . is a unique relationship with the future” (1987b: 71). The relation with death is marked by the perpetual incompatibility with the fact that “[d]eath is never now. When death is here, I am no longer here, not just because I am nothingness, but because I am unable to grasp” (1987b: 72). The relation actually designates a state in which the self feels displaced, disquieted and even “despite the self”. That is, it is aimed at indicating “the turning of the Same toward the Other. . . the impossibility of the identification of I and the Other, the impossible synthesis of I and the Other”(2000a: 111). Confronting death as the Other in life, the self is left passive and unable to take charge in the situation. Hence, time is redefined in terms of the relation with death which is more a daily obsession or confrontation than an ultimate destination. The future no longer accounts for a not-yet-to-come possibility but bears a relation with the present marked by the proximity with the self. The crux of the relation to death reinterprets the idea of death and at the same time provides a way to rethink what time is.

To die, for *Dasein*, is not to reach the final point of one's being but to be close to the end at every moment of one's being. Death is not a moment of one's being. It is not a moment, but a manner of being of which *Dasein* takes charge as soon as it is, such that the expression 'to have to be' also signifies 'to have to die'. It is not in an unfulfilled future that death must be thought; on the contrary, it is on the basis of this to-be, which is also to-death, that time must be thought in an originary way. (2000a: 43)

It is stated that people never undergo the process of being without responding or taking responsibility for death which is neither presentable nor avoidable. More importantly, death designates not one of the possibilities but the manner of being, a non-thematizable or non-totalizing facet of life. Besides, death as a manner of life would highly possibly redefine the notion of time.

Moreover, the perception of the corporeal language is complicated and extended in the technologically-intervened society which awakens man to something more unexpected and more incomprehensible. Emily Martin has observed that “we are seeing not the end of the body, but the end of one kind of body and the beginning of another kind of body” (Shaw 47). With technology revealing another facet of the body, the corporeal language comprises not merely the empirical but the technological. The language of the body is no longer restricted to what could be sensed. Technology seemingly decodes another dialect of the corporeal language for us as the technologically-intervened body is more vividly demonstrated by Atzori and Woolford: “The skin has been boundary for the soul, for the self, and simultaneously a beginning to the world. Once technology stretches and pierces the skin, the skin as a barrier is erased” (Graham 15). Either of these viewpoints designates a fact that the physical body is neither a boundary of the self nor what the senses perceive. With

technology, man's relation with the body is more complicatedly furthered since technology channels us to another facet of the body which people might, otherwise, neglect or miss. That is what Heidegger contends about technology: "The essence of modern technology lies in Enframing. Enframing belongs within the destining of revealing" (1977: 25). Yet, "when we once open ourselves to the *essence* of technology, we find ourselves unexpectedly taken into a freeing claim" (Heidegger 1977: 26). The freeing claim implies man's capability to transcend the temporal and spatial boundaries. Man is equipped with more power to change or dominate things around. Yet, on the other hand, "man is endangered from out of destining. The destining of revealing is as such, in every one of its modes, and therefore necessarily, danger" (Heidegger 1977: 26). The freeing claim is only one side of the coin while anxiety and fear accompany the perpetual enframing which is a process with no end or boundary provisioned. Danger is another message technology brings—an ambivalent ground. Ostensibly, it presents man's success to overcome his *natural* limits but actually the underlying anxiety is always what marks the role of technology in our life. Rhonda Shaw suggests that "technology is a never-neutral cultural instrument and the moral condition in which we currently find ourselves, as Bauman argues convincingly, is fundamentally ambivalent in terms of our relation with others and hence to our relations with the machine" (Shaw 57). The moral base of the technology in the postmodern age is the aspect that DeLillo means to explore in the ethical relation with death. What marks DeLillo's observation of technology consists in the way death is technologically mediated and incarnated in the body. The technological effect, in DeLillo's presentation, mainly focuses on TV, the airborne event, and even the experimental medication. These are all forces challenging man's perception of the supposedly-distinct boundary of life and death and paradoxically evoking man's deeply-rooted fear for death, a perpetual embedded

Other to the self.

As the corporeal language, the body, indicates man's "condition for the 'susceptibility' for the Other" (Dussel 237), a reciprocal relation between the self and the Other is not presupposed. Death as the ethical Other perceived via the body is not merely overwhelming but acutely *othering* the self. That is, as death is embodied, the self is *othered* in the sense that it is no longer possible to talk about the self without knowing life is destined to an experience of death-haunting.

DeLillo's presentation of the ethical relation, no matter from man's reading of the world (language as sensibility) or the empirical perception (death as the corporeal language), evokes a greater concern of the self. That is, if the self is overwhelmed by the Other, then could it still be possible to talk about the self? If not, then how to explain man's living in the world which remains a hard and concrete reality? This might be an urgent concern of the ethical relation under DeLillo's ethical scope. While the irreducible Other is greatly stressed, the self-for-the-Other is not merely displaced but decentered. Is the self lapsed into a nullifying void or a provisional and evanescent nodal point in daily encounters? Or, more sadly speaking, does the ethical relation in the postmodern age ring the toll of death for the self?

C. The Language of Image

In *Mao II*, DeLillo extends his exploration of the ethical relation to the possibility of individuality despite the ethical trend stressing the overwhelming Other. Centering on the language of the image in the age of the media, DeLillo goes from photographs and TV to writing. Image makes an essential part that people respond to in daily life. Interestingly speaking, DeLillo strives to locate individuality in the self's response to or responsibility for the language of the image. Nonetheless, DeLillo's language of the image does not go from the angle of simulation which

might fall back on the over-discussed issue of the blurred distinction between fiction and reality. Rather, with his concern on the possibility of the self, DeLillo's language of the image actually implies the notion of the crowd, which he regards the most imminent threat to the self- *imagination*. That is, the image in *Mao II* is meant for an ethical relation with the crowd as the Other with an encompassing self-dissolving power. Moreover, the novel makes another loop of DeLillo's ethical concern about the image in writing. From the world of words to the empirical reading of the self, DeLillo's ethical observation extends from the Other in the other (the sensible world) as well as the Other eminent in the self⁸(the body) to the exploration of the individuality in the responsibility for image as the Other. In the previous chapters on *The Names* and *White Noise*, DeLillo sketches the overwhelmed, dissolved, and even othered self in face of the Other, corresponding to the indeterminacy and uncertainty in postmodern age. In Chapter four, the analysis of *Mao II*, DeLillo depicts how a writer, usually a distinct individual in society, strives to preserve his individuality in the world of image. That is, no longer resting his concern on the bewildering boundary between human and technology in *White Noise*, DeLillo proceeds to examine if there is still possibility to claim one's individuality amid the (re)production of the images, whose tug of war is triggered by the notion of the crowd implied in image. It is to see if the image would make a malleable and supple space for the self to reassert himself.

The culture of images in *Mao II*, ranging from photography, TV and even the writing, obviously construes man's sense of "reality" as Susan Sontag contends that

⁸ Like Levinas, Gerard Loughlin in "Desiring Bodies" contends that it is the Other in the other that makes up the ethical relation in which the self is obliged to respond to. However, the Other who is an absolute alterity is not restricted to the other since the Other is more often found embedded in the self. The Other makes up a perpetual relation that the self could not evade or get rid of.

“[t]he credence that could no longer be given to realities understood *in the form of* images was now being given to realities understood *to be* images, illusions” (153). While Sontag stresses how realities are forged and re-*presented* in images, DeLillo as mentioned in the ongoing discussion emphasizes how the image as the threatening and thwarting Other at once demands the self’s ethical responsibility and contributes to the self’s individuality. Photography is the very site that the image of the individual could be massively duplicated. It means the prevalence of photography entitles everyone to duplicating *himself*. And it is in the duplication that the ethical Other is discerned as Roland Barthes states ““the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity”” (Barrett 800). The relation with the photograph as the other in Barthes’s terms merely accounts for the idea that the other-in-the-self is seen in severing identity from one’s being. Yet, to DeLillo, the self’s relation with the image is actually founded on the tension between individuality and the crowd. That is, what the image connotes is not merely an-other self who shares identity with the self, though disconnected from the self’s consciousness. The duplicated image also means the existence of a crowd as soon as the image is made public.⁹ Of course, the crowd of the image does not refer to such a simple idea as a group of people. Instead, it involves an intricate self-Other relation, starting from the crowd of the image on photograph to the image of the crowd in life, on TV and even in writing. DeLillo’s notion of image has gone beyond the duplication or deflection of reality. It is not merely an ethical Other but a stimulus for the self’s potentiality and creativity in response to it. It results from the

⁹ According to Hardack, “[t]wo always becomes a foreign crowd, a mass, opposed to the individual American and everything of which there is more than once or that occurs more than once is foreign. . . . Anything photographed rather than inscribed—i.e. anything tainted by a Warholian version of mechanical reproduction—already exists in duplicate” (379). Every image, no matter on photograph or on TV, implies the existence of two which diminishes the possibility of singularity and individuality. Hence, DeLillo pits the idea of image against personal individuality, which becomes the prevalent situation in American society.

recognition that the image is a representation which excludes any neutral perspective since the angle of every image has been taken and processed from the photographer's viewpoints. Thus, to argue for the degree of reality implied in the image seems futile and meaningless. It is a world of spectacle, designating "there is a presence where there is only an absence" (Levesque 84). The spectacle has drastically diminished the possibility to talk about a genuine or neutral reality as Guy Debord contends: "'Spectacle has mixed with reality and has irradiated it'" (Bizzini 110). That is, the images have gone far beyond the representation of reality but has seeped into and bespoken what reality is. Most of all, it become the language which poses a great threat to one's individuality. That is, what is at stake about the image is neither to reconstruct the barely retrievable reality nor to give oneself away in the proliferation or permeation of images in life. Instead, DeLillo broaches a critical point about images in terms of one's experiential confrontation with the irresistible impact of the images, as Richard Hardack interprets that "Don DeLillo stages a battle between the notion of an individual Western identity and that of a 'mass-produced' foreign consciousness, a contest producing equal amounts of xenophobia and paranoia" (Hardack 374). Hence, the tense relation between the individual and the image is conspicuous. Yet, the critique mentioned above rests on the inevitable impact of the image owing to the fact that reality is shaped more in the images than one's empirical sensual perception. Moreover, the (re)production of the image on the one hand makes unattainable the so-called reality and diminishes or dissolves the uniqueness of the self, as Hardack observes that the images involve the notion of crowd besieging man, causing great self anxiety and reminding a perpetual otherness in one's being.

To be part of any such in-crowd is only to increase one's duality under a false guise of universality Everything in this text, from photo to

answering machine to Coca Cola to Mao, is rendered a secondary, hence mass, hence foreign source of anxiety. Anything that can echo, duplicate, or join you to the mass becomes a radically foreign body. (Hardack 383)

DeLillo does stress the ethical relation with the foreign body of the crowd in the duplicated image. However, the idea of the crowd is not restricted to the image of the crowd on photographs or on TV. DeLillo speculates on the idea of the crowd experienced in realistic events as mass wedding and the group in social movements as well as the reading crowd in writers' mind. The image of the crowd appears in life, empirical, mediated and imagined. However, his central concern, starting with his observation of what an ethical Other that the image incorporates, is to examine the possibility of one's individuality or creativity by elaborating on the self's response to the crowd from different angles.

III. Individuality in DeLillo and Levinas

DeLillo's probing into the possibility of individuality in an ethical relation may help shed light on the *gray area* of Levinasian ethics which raises much dispute not merely on the ethical self but on how the self situates himself in the postmodern milieu. Levinasian ethics, stressing the incommensurability and nonindifference of the Other, has an ambiguous part as he contends that the self responds to the Other prior to his consciousness with radical passivity and vulnerability featuring the self. This causes divergent viewpoints on the relation between the self and the Other. Levinasian self, according to William Large, no longer experiences himself "as a self, but as something other. I become other to myself to such an extent that in this experience we can no longer speak of an 'I' or a 'myself'" (Large 2002: 137). Paul Ricoeur further comments that "Levinas fails to do justice to the importance of

self-esteem, and he attributes this failure to the way in which Levinas's 'entire philosophy rests on the initiative of the other in the intersubjective relation'" (Ferreira 451). Nordvedt thus summarizes that "ethics is a paralysis of consciousness created by the intrusion of otherness" (Nordvedt 226). Ricoeur asserts the significance and possibility of the self-esteem by pointing out Levinas's over-emphasis on the other in the ethical configuration. In contrast, M. Jamie Ferreira holds that "[f]or Levinas, ridding the I of its imperialism does not eliminate ipseity, but confirms it: 'total altruism' is said to be compatible with a confirmed self" (Ferreira 452), based on the idea that "I must have a self in order to have something to give" (Ferreira 453). Divergent views cause great confusion concerning the individuality or autonomy of the self. Besides, while the Other acts as an overwhelming force embedded in the self, could the ethical relation merely be the arena of the Other with the self entirely diminished or dissolved? DeLillo in *Mao II* surely tends to explore what individuality the self asserts in responding to the Other.

DeLillo's observation of individuality is shown in the self's responsibility for the images of the photographs, on TV and even the image triggering the writing process. In the self's responding to the image, DeLillo centers on how the self finds a niche to situate and even *create* himself in the ethical responsibility to the Other. The self in DeLillo's ethical mapping is neither dissolved nor silenced. However, his exploration of the individuality of the self might be different from Gammelgaard's analysis that "[t]he self is—as Kierkegaard suggests—but is always becoming. The process of becoming oneself is mediated by the other, and following Hegel, this process accordingly can never be conflict-free" (Gammelgaard 102). Despite the agreement that there is no fixed and static identity of the self and, more coincidentally, there is always an other involved in the process of the self-becoming, both Kierkegaard and Hegel, according to Gammelgaard, imply a synthetic consequence of

the conflicting encounter of the self and the other. This goes against what underlies DeLillo's and Levinas' ethical contour. No common ground could be reached between the Other and the self.

DeLillo's notion of individuality does not mean to reconstruct the illusion of self-autonomy or integrity but intends to map out the actuality of life by responding to the Other in his or her own way in the wake of the unavoidable ethical bond. That is, it is hardly possible to trace the way or the time when the ethical relation is forged. Nevertheless, in *Mao II*, DeLillo goes further than what he does in *The Names* and *White Noise* to detect what different strategies the characters applied in their response to language as the Other. Generally speaking, these responses could be divided into two camps. One presents a different angle to deal with the consuming or submerging crowd implied in the images, and the other paradoxically creates an image to respond to. These two aspects are based on an idea that an image does not merely imply one way of visual interpretation or consumption. An image, like the figural language, always leaves room for the intrusion of different interpretations. That is, a vision might reduce what an image might suggest. But, paradoxically, an image could not fix up what the vision means to grasp. The former situation is the ethical relation in which the self is left vulnerable and passive to what the image presents. The latter is the aftermath of the ethical bond in which the self's responsibility for the Other is imbued with new possibilities which reassure the self's creativity. An image, then, resembles two sides of a coin. Paradoxically speaking, exposing the self to the imposing Other, the image simultaneously salvages himself from certain nihilistic existence or self-dissolution. It is when an individual conjures up images to see himself through certain life *vacancy* in one's solitude. That is, the sense of the self is achieved in forging and responding to an image as the Other. Different images construed in the self's mind would manifest one's individuality.

What is significant, it is the self's individuality with which something new is added to the world. In other words, DeLillo's ethical observation does not end up with the self-dissolution or nullification of the self but tries to demist the gray area of the ethical relation and shed light on the self's individuality and creativity. More remarkable is that DeLillo's ethical loop,¹⁰ though stressing the overwhelming Other as Levinas does, insists on the concern for self-individuality, a force to renew life possibilities.

Conclusion

DeLillo's observation of life in the postmodern age is focused on the exploration of language as the ethical Other. As Lyotard claims that "the incredulity towards grand narratives" features the postmodern condition, criteria and values are highly suspected of their validity or universality. Totalization or homogenization are defied as difference-reducing or other-suppressing, which alerts the thinkers to the nature of language. No longer regarded as a transparent representation of any possible meaning or intention, language is more message than medium. Though theorists mean to figure out what lies behind language or what language actually designates, there is always an incomprehensible but perpetual enigma, which Emmanuel Levinas takes as the ethical Other. More remarkably, the irreducible and incomprehensible part of language called the saying designates an inevitable relation with the self. It corresponds to DeLillo as language has been the serious concern shown in the ethical trilogy. Language as the ethical Other, to DeLillo, is divided into three aspects: language as the ethical reading of the wor(l)d, death as the

¹⁰ The ethical loop is two-folded in DeLillo's novelistic presentation. The first one concerns the relation between the self and language as the Other which goes from the spatial to the temporal and back to the spatial again, while the other concerns the emphasis of the ethical relation which rests on the imposing and haunting Other to the diminished and dissolved self and back to the self with individuality.

corporeal language, and the language of image. The first two parts emphasize language as the ethical Other who is not merely irreducible and incomprehensible but self-overwhelming, self-diminishing and even self-othering. The third part goes to a significant but less-discussed issue of the ethical relation—the possibility of individuality. That is, DeLillo goes further than Levinas in examining the new possibilities of the self in the ethical relation. On the one hand, DeLillo marks his perspective by making a way out of the gray area in Levinas's ethics which raises counter perspectives on the notion of the self, either partially sustained or completely diminished. On the other hand, DeLillo's exploration of individuality makes a significant response to the controversial notions of the provisional, contingent and evanescent subject in the postmodern age. Most of all, individuality in DeLillo is potential in re-molding humanism in the postmodern age as personal creativity, originality and freedom are distinctly presented in the ethical configuration.