

A Small Incisive Shock: Modern Forms, Postmodern Politics, and the Role of the Avant-Garde in Underworld.

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"A Small Incisive Shock": Modern Forms, Postmodern Politics, and the Role of the Avant-Garde in Underworld

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

“A Small Incisive Shock”:
Modern Forms, Postmodern Politics, and the Role of The
Avant-garde in *Underworld*

Philip Nel (bio)

On May 13, 1997, Don DeLillo spoke at the New York Public Library's "Stand In for Wei Jingsheng," an event that coincided with the American publication of Wei's letters from prison and that was designed to call attention to human rights in China. The essay he read that day, "The Artist Naked in a Cage," draws parallels between three men in cages: Russian performance artist Oleg Kulik, Franz Kafka's hunger artist, and Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng. Reading a reprint of DeLillo's lecture in *The New Yorker* later that month, I was struck by the analogy because it was at once precise and imprecise. It was imprecise because both Kulik and Kafka's hunger artist chose to live in a cage, but Wei Jingsheng had been jailed against his will.¹ Yet, on the other hand, the analogy between Kulik and Wei is apt, and perhaps performance art *can* act "in opposition to the state," as DeLillo says of Wei ("Artist" 7). Near the end of "The Artist Naked in a Cage," DeLillo argues that "the more nearly total the state, the more vivid the [End Page 724] dissident artist" and concludes, "The deeper they conceal him—the more remote the cell, the smaller the cell, the colder and stonier the walls of the cell—the more vivid and living is the writer" (7). In the strength of this image DeLillo finds a kind of hope in fatalism, a still-living writer opposing the state that is simultaneously killing him. It is a mixed message, but DeLillo's ambiguous juxtaposition tries to accomplish what Wei, locked in a cage, could not: to use art as a way of confronting the public with Wei's incarceration.

I open with this example in order to consider DeLillo's language as a kind of performance art that functions in apparently opposite ways. In the tradition of the avant-garde, it can shock the reader into a new awareness of the material world; however, just as any avant-garde invariably gets absorbed by the culture it strives to critique, so DeLillo's style can at times replicate the structures of power that it wants to oppose. And DeLillo realizes this. His comments on Kulik, for example, indicate an awareness of how fine a line there is between shock and complicity: "It offers a genuine sense of the latitude of free expression

and places a small, incisive shock in the midst of all those SoHo apparel shops and restaurants. But it also suggests the grim idea that the performance artist, liberated from Soviet state control, hair cropped, and dog collar secured, may be carrying his own culture's atavistic wish for order and repression" ("Artist" 6-7). What DeLillo says of the Russian performance artist's impersonation of a dog applies equally well to his own writing: it both offers a "small, incisive shock" and registers the anxieties and repressions of the world in which he lives. The ambiguities in his writing are both provocative and merely representative, actively shocking and passively matter-of-fact. I have begun with DeLillo's essay on Wei in order to introduce *Underworld* as at the nexus of a series of questions concerning the relationship between DeLillo's politics and his aesthetics, between modernism and postmodernism, and between the historical avant-garde and mass culture. In its richly layered language and careful structure, *Underworld* is DeLillo's most "high modernist" novel to date; however, it also draws on avant-garde techniques in a more subtly effective way than his previous work. DeLillo has refined the montage technique that has characterized his writing style, crafting more nuanced and provocative juxtapositions than he has before. This essay argues that *Underworld* complicates traditional distinctions between modern and postmodern [End Page 725] by drawing on both a high modernist aesthetic and those residual elements of the historical avant-garde that characterize certain postmodernisms. In relation to Wei, the essay claims that DeLillo's language aspires to both the status of formalist perfection and performance art, and that this dual allegiance...



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