Capturing Authority:
Analyzing the Representation of the Authority of the Photographic Image in
*Nadja* and *White Noise*

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the ways in which _Nadja_, by Andre Breton, and _White Noise_, by Don DeLillo, approach and react to the authority of the photographic image. The inclusion of photographs alongside Breton’s written text in his narrative do not function in an expressive manner, but rather, are present in order to invoke the notion that the narrative is a legitimate, autobiographical re-telling of events through the use of the realistic, objective authority that the photographs lend. DeLillo, however, approaches the subject of the authority of the photographic image, specifically in film and media, much more skeptically in the way he represents these entities. DeLillo demonstrates, through his novel, the ways that such a great authority and dependency on the photographic image, via film and the news media, has distanced his characters from the natural world. As a result, characters seem to exist in a state of hyperreality, confusing that which is real with simulacra.
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Introduction

Many have people have studied *White Noise* and *Nadja* within the context of gender roles, madness, paranoia, and avant-garde literary movements, I seek to look at these two texts in a way that they have not been studied before. Although all of these issues have added to my understanding of the texts and they are extremely significant, I focus, here, on the way that new technologies using photographic representation operate within these texts and how they function differently in each text. This is important because it allows the reader to see the ways that the photographic image can be used for its authority in order to bring about certain realities, whether they be directly embedded in the written text, like in *Nadja*, or merely represented in the text by their interactions with the characters.

In looking at two texts, *Nadja*, by Andre Breton, and *White Noise*, by Don DeLillo, I noticed that both texts dealt significantly with the representation of the photographic image. For *Nadja*, it was interesting to me how and why the photographic image was used in conjunction with the written text. I analyze, in this thesis, how the photographic image is used and what function it serves in the construction of Breton’s narrative. I went about this by situating his text within the surrealist, avant-garde tradition at the time it was written as well as analyzing the text directly. In *White Noise*, there seemed to be a great deal of anxiety surrounding the photographic image in the novel. The photographic image, in
film and media, is represented in a manner that shows the displacement of authority from personal, sensory experience to the photographic image in the media. I attempt, in this thesis, to analyze the reasons that DeLillo might represent the photographic image in this way. I approached these questions that I seek to answer in my thesis by first analyzing criticism of the text and the text directly and, then, looking into further theory about anxieties of the reproduction of texts.

Breton seems to embed his written text with photographic images of many of the subjects of his narrative not for expressive purposes or to add dimension to the reader’s understanding of the narrative, but in order to legitimize his text in the eyes of the reader, to combat the aggressive unreadability of his avant-garde style. Using the authority of the photographic image as a realistic, objective mode of representation, Breton’s inclusion of these photographs lend his narrative authenticity, establishing it as a real, autobiographical re-telling of his experiences.

DeLillo, however, maintains a much more skeptical attitude towards the authority that the photographic image carries with it. The representation of the photographic image within the text illustrates the ways in which the characters have become almost completely dependent upon the authority of the photographic image for information; that its authority has subsumed personal, sensory experience and has distanced them from each other and the natural world. In this manner, DeLillo represents the ways in which this displacement of authority has
caused a confusion of what is a simulation and what is real, invoking a sort of hyperreality.
1. Establishing *Nadja* as an Autobiographical Text

In his text, *Nadja*, Andre Breton represents the narrative of his experiences with a woman as real, autobiographical accounts in the sense that they, at one time or another physically took place. In lieu of its very avant-garde style which defies traditional forms of narrative, namely in its unreadability, fragmentation, and defiance of a static reality, Breton still manages to assert his narrative as a true to life, autobiographical re-telling of his experiences with Nadja through the use of the photographic image in conjunction with his written text. The use of the photographic image, a new technology at the time, carried with it notions of objectivity, as it could capture an image just as it appears in real life.\(^1\) With this absolute realism, photographs of objects become verifiable proof of their existence and the photographic image, therefore, carries with it a certain amount of authority. Through the use of the photographs in *Nadja*, the accounts of Breton’s experiences are lent a certain amount of legitimacy and authenticity, functioning to persuade the viewer that the text is, in fact, a real, autobiographical account of Breton’s interactions with Nadja.

The idea central to the narrative that Breton transcribes is that the character of Nadja is real and that the account is autobiographical. He maintains that this text was written automatically without a deliberate order, recounting real experiences as they occurred. Breton writes, in the “Preface,” “I shall limit

\(^1\) While the photographic image is used in an objective, documentary sense, especially in this text, it is important to note that it is still a form of artifice that is very subjective.
myself here to recalling without effort certain things which, apart from any exertions on my part, have occasionally happened to me.”2 Here, the author establishes the notion that he has not deliberately constructed the narrative in any sort of order but the natural order by which they occur to him during his writing process based on his own, real life experience. In doing so, Breton addresses his audience directly, making his intentions for frankness in his recollection of these events known. Similarly, he confronts the reader with the objective nature of his narrative comparing it to something of a scientific process. Breton states that he is concerned, primarily, “with facts which may belong to the order of pure observation.”3 Again, the author represents his narrative as a realistic account of his experiences, leaving the reader to conclude that his encounters with Nadja were real and autobiographical. It is clear, from these accounts, that Breton represents this narrative as a real, authentic re-telling of his own personal experiences with Nadja.

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3 Ibid., 19.
2. Avant-Garde Unreadability of *Nadja*

However, as an avant-garde text, Breton structures his narrative in a very subversive manner as a reaction to the traditional norms of narrative, namely those embodied in the realist novel. In literature, these avant-garde movements sought to find new means of aesthetic expression\(^4\), often subverting traditional narrative. Susan Rubin Suleiman discusses the notion of the avant-garde and a break with traditional modes of narrative when she mentions the aggressive rupture these texts had with literary norms of the past in her article “Aggressions and Counteraggressions” from her book *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*. When discussing the avant-garde movement of a group of Surrealist writers, the Tel Quel, Suleiman writes about the notion of rupture and breaking with traditional narrative of the past as an aggressive way of revolutionizing and creating a new, updated mode of artistic expression in literature. Suleiman writes, “The idea of *rupture*, a radical break with the past, dominated both the aesthetic and the philosophical and political program….”\(^5\)

Seeing the traditional modes of narrative and their respective literary processes as outdated, avant-garde artists, like Breton, sought a more modern mode of literary expression which was more relevant to our contemporary society. Similarly, Suleiman recognizes the fact that the need for radical change in the production of

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\(^4\) Andre Breton discusses his endeavors for a new mode of expression in his articles “Surrealism and Painting” and “What is Surrealism?” and how they fit into the avant-garde movement. However, these articles tend to focus on Breton’s artistic avant-garde style rather than the way he is an avant-garde author in *Nadja*.

literature as well as change in the social and political spheres of the modern world drove avant-garde artists, such as Breton, to create a new means by which to produce literature relevant to modern society. She references this in the “Introduction” when she writes that, “…the hallmark of an avant-garde practice or project…is the attempt to effect radical change and innovation both in the symbolic field (including what has been called the aesthetic realm) and in the social and political field of everyday life.” By seeking new modes of artistic expression in art and literature, avant-garde artists and writers strive to revolutionize the approach to artistic expression and aesthetics as well as grappling with the social and political changes which have come about as a result of advancements in our contemporary society.

Andre Breton, in *Nadja*, embraces this avant-garde mode of literary production in the way that he uses this text to critique and react directly in the face of the literary status quo. One of the ways that he, as well as many other avant-garde authors, use their literary avant-garde texts to radically react to forms of traditional narrative is through the rather aggressive assault these texts have upon a reader accustomed to the norms associated with conventional forms of narrative, namely realism. This difficulty of the reader to read, understand, and interpret these texts is known as the unreadability of body of literature. This unreadability of an avant-garde text completely subverts the conventions of traditional narrative in fiction, introducing a new form of art making which focuses more on aesthetics and other contemporary issues rather than strictly

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6 Ibid., XV.
7 Ibid., 34.
8 Ibid., 34.
nature imitation. Suleiman writes about this radical rupture with traditional modes of narrative and the way that this rupture embraces the notion of unreadability, while often frustrating the reader. She references this idea, referring to the ways that it subverts traditional narrative in defying intelligibility based on the normative standards of the realist novel. Suleiman writes:

…rupture remained chiefly an aesthetic, or else a psychological and erotic, concept. (Nonetheless, for them too it retained its character of contestation and antagonism: the “modern” text was fundamentally opposed to the norms of classical readability, which for fiction meant the norms of the realist novel.9

Suleiman explains how avant-garde authors seek a complete rupture and even subversion of traditional forms of narrative and the norms of the realist novel through creating texts that rejected standards of readability. Suleiman writes about how avant-garde authors attempted to subvert these preconceived notions, generally based on the terms of readability set by the realist novel, by rejecting these values that made a text readable in the traditional manner all together.

According to standards of readability set by the realist novel:

…the chief expectations that generations of readers have internalized concern some fundamental notions in our culture, perhaps in all cultures: the principle of noncontradiction (an event cannot occur and not occur at the same time, a thing cannot exist and not exist at the same time), the notions of temporal succession and causality (events follow each other and are related to each other consequentially), a belief in the solidity of the phenomenal world (a table is a table is a table)…10

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9 Ibid., 34.
10 Ibid., 35.
These classical notions of readability, Suleiman maintains, have been instilled in our society by the traditional form of narrative in the realist novel. In other words, due to the traditional literary representation standards set by the realist novel, readers make sense of a text based on the realist notions of noncontradiction, temporal succession and causality, and the notion of the solidity of the phenomenal world and real, absolute truth. Avant-garde texts break with and aggressively subvert the readability of traditional narrative by embracing contradiction, play, a focus on excess, a nonlinear narrative, fragmentation, and lack of temporal succession while rejecting stable meaning, the notion of absolute truth, and the solidity of the phenomenal world. In rejecting the traditional standards of the realist novel of reading and interpreting texts, avant-garde authors, through their literature, sought to revolutionize and modernize the modes of expression in aesthetics as well as incite change in the social and political world which affected their everyday lives.

Breton most certainly embraced this unreadability in his avant-garde text, Nadja, in the ways he subverted traditional narrative according to the standards of the realist novel. Bethany Ladimer, in her essay on “Madness and the Irrational in the Work of Andre Breton: A Feminist Perspective” talks about the way that Breton subverts traditional narrative through the unreadability of Nadja. She talks about the new mode of literary expression that Breton seeks and the way that it results in a text that rejects temporal succession. Ladimer writes:

11 Ibid., 36
New rhetorical devices are found to represent these new values, which are in revolt against the dominant values of society....Thus we find analogical modes of discourse, constellations and associations which are not linear or “logical,” and a disregard for traditional temporal organization of the narrative.12

In a revolt against society, Breton rejects the dominant values of traditional readability according to the standards set by a realist aesthetic in the way that he makes the text difficult to understand or, as Ladimer says, illogical, to the reader. *Nadja*, Ladimer suggests, seems unintelligible to the mainstream reader because of the ways the narrative defies normative temporal organization and succession. Similarly, Breton subverts traditional narrative in *Nadja* through the rejection of standards of classic, realist readability in the way that he favors fragmentation in his writing of the text. Ladimer writes of the ways he does this through his use of surprising and irrational juxtapositions in the text in order to establish a sense of rupture with traditional modes of literary narrative. She writes, “Cultivating ruptures, Breton combines accumulations of these surrealist juxtapositions, all of which have a ‘gap’ or missing transitional link.”13 Through fragmentation, Breton defies the traditional realist aesthetic of temporal succession as the events lack a logical link or association according to standards of the realist novel. Therein, Breton rejects traditional notions of readability and what he perceives to be outdated modes of literary narrative.


13 Ibid., 181.
3. The Alienation of the Reader in *Nadja*

Through *Nadja*, Breton certainly and radically subverts traditional narrative and readability. However, in doing so he has also estranged the reader as the text is, in essence, difficult to read and therefore, difficult to understand and interpret. Not only did unreadability aggressively subvert traditional narrative, but it also aggressively confronted the reader and their ability as well as their processing of the text in question. Of course, mainstream readers experienced frustration with the unreadability of these texts as it subverted the internalized ways that they interpreted and made sense of the narratives. Suleiman explains this as a sort of unintelligibility that goes hand in hand with the deliberate unreadability of avant-garde texts. She writes about how a text is understood based on the aesthetic norms of the realist novel, stating, “readability is another word for intelligibility: a readable text is one that ‘makes sense.’ It is intelligible because it conforms to certain aesthetic and logical norms that a reader has internalized as a set of expectations.” Hence, an avant-garde text, like Breton’s *Nadja*, often frustrates the reader due to the way it rejects traditional readability, interpretation, and understanding on the reader’s part in rejecting and subverting internalized notions of realist aesthetics. It is also even harder for the reader to give up these internalized realist standards of reading and interpreting a text since it is so similar to the way one makes sense of their everyday, lived experience.

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15 Ibid., 35.
16 Ibid., 35.
Breton, a key figure in the surrealist avant-garde movement, definitely sought to reject traditional standards of readability in his avant-garde novel, *Nadja*. This text embraces the classic avant-garde unreadability in the way that it defies temporal succession and causality as well as absolute truth and favors contradiction, play, a focus on excess, a nonlinear narrative, and fragmentation. However, he, as well, struggled with how to have his works understood to a certain extent by readers despite their frustrations. Ladimer refers to Breton’s alienation of the reader, stating the ways in which his aggressive subversion of traditional standards of readability makes it difficult for the reader to understand the text as a real, autobiographical account. She writes:

> Breton may have begun with the assumption that a verifiable experience would surely guarantee plausibility. The problem is that even the verifiable events in a narrative cannot seem ‘real’ without a complementary system of interpretation ideologically, and hence aesthetically, wide enough to include them.17

While, Ladimer asserts, Breton began under the impression that the reader would understand the text as a believable, autobiographical account is troubled by the unreadability and unintelligibility of the text. Since the text is written in a very unconventional manner at the time, characterized by avant-garde unreadability, it makes it difficult for the reader to understand and interpret. This is primarily because what is understood as real in a text is generally aligned with the realist novel and the way that reader’s align their understanding of the events in a text with how they interpret and understand events in real life. Suleiman writes about

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the ways that subversive, avant-garde texts are often unintelligible to mainstream
readers because they do not align with the reader’s internalized standards of how
to interpret a body of literature, based on their experiences with traditional
narratives modeled after the realist novel. Suleiman writes:

The conventions of realist narrative correspond, in other words, to
what most people (at least in the West) think of as their everyday
experience of the world, which may explain why these conventions
are so easily internalized…and, why they are so difficult, even for
sophisticated readers, to give up. The realist novel invites its
readers to make sense of it in a way that is not essentially different
from the way they try to make sense of the world around them.18

Due to the fact that the conventions of understanding and interpreting texts are
based on the realist novel, and those methods of understanding and interpreting
realist texts are so similar to the ways we interpret our everyday experiences in
life, these standards are often easily internalized and are often difficult for readers
to give up. Therefore, understanding a subversive text that defies traditional
modes of interpretation makes it difficult for a reader to perceive the narrative as a
believable and autobiographical text. Warren F. Motte, JR., references this notion
in his essay, “Metaliterary Games in Nadja.” He speaks Breton’s efforts to coerce
a sympathetic reading of his subversive text, rendering his texts as legitimate,
autobiographical accounts.19 Motte writes, “The order of the represented world in
Nadja defies reason, and thus strains the narratives credibility, as Breton is well

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18 Susan Suleiman, “Aggressions and Counteraggressions,” Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics,
19 Warren F. Motte, Jr., “Metaliterary Games in Nadja” Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in
Modern Literatures 42.3 (1988), 236
Here, Motte points out that the unreadability of *Nadja* makes it difficult for the audience to understand that the text is a real, authentic narrative that is autobiographical. These readers have internalized traditional notions of readability based on the standards of the realist novel and the fact that this subversive text defies temporal succession injures the legitimacy of the narrative in the eyes of readers, as they struggle to understand a text that is so unconventional and unintelligible based on traditional modes of literature. The fact that Breton is trying to establish a credible, realist narrative that is seen by the audience as autobiographical is troubled by the avant-garde unreadability of the text and the way it alienates readers. Breton, therefore, must look to other means of giving his narrative authenticity in order to maintain his style of writing a subversive text. For this authority, he looks to the new technology of photography as a medium that is useful in legitimizing his narrative and the experiences he includes in it.

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20 Ibid., 236
4. Authority and the Photographic Image in *Nadja*

Breton makes these experiences more realistic to the reader in the way that photography is paired with the written text to narrate and give authority to his accounts, lending the text an autobiographical authenticity.\(^{21}\) The artistic medium of photography was a technical advance that allowed for a new sort of art making which directly captured real life. As such, it is often used as authentic means of establishing visual proof of something’s existence, and carries with it a significant amount of authority. Through his use of pairing his written narrative with latent, photographic images, Breton gives authority to his accounts and represents it, to the reader, as a very realistic and autobiographical text. When considering Breton’s motives for intermingling his written narrative with photographic images, Motte comments on the way that Breton, contradictory to his own claims, seems to use these images for a purpose other than adding another dimension of expression to his narrative. Motte writes:

Breton suggests that the abundant photographic illustration of *Nadja* serves to eliminate the need for verbal description, and he cites the attack on description in the first *Manifeste du surrealisme* to buttress his argument. In point of fact, however, verbal description has not been evacuated from the text.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{21}\) Here, I touch on the fact that Breton, in his novel, is somewhat paradoxical. In rejecting the realist novel, he still uses a realistic mode of representation via the photographic image to make his narrative palatable and “real” to the viewer. Motte speaks more about Breton’s contradictions in his essay that I have cited in my references.

\(^{22}\)Ibid., 239.
Here, Motte argues that Breton does *not*, in fact, cut down on the need for verbal description via his extensive inclusion of photographs within the written text. Often times, these photographs do reference a subject in Breton’s written accounts, however, there are still extensive verbal descriptions which are much more expressive, explaining the subject’s significance within the context of the narrative and, many times, explaining much more about the subject than the photograph conveys. As a matter of fact, all of the photographic images direct the reader, in the caption, immediately back to the verbal description of the subject within the written text, as if to give further explanation about the subject. Also, the photographs are by and large minimally expressive, cold, static, and distant, estranging the viewer from making any sort of connection with the subject. The lack of expression in these photographs renders them as little more than artifacts present within the narrative to offer Breton’s experience authenticity and to a certain authority, in the eyes of the reader, which this unreadable, avant-garde text could not provide autonomously.

Primarily, he introduces his text with the image of how his narrative begins, at the Hotel des Grands Hommes, and proceeds to supplant images of the places he mentions and describes throughout his entire journey(Fig. 1).23 He even goes so far as to list the quotations in which he mentions the photographed locales, including his written statement, “My point of departure will by the Hotel des Grands Hommes…” directly beneath the photographed image of this place, referring the reader directly back to the text, reading “(SEE PAGE 23)”.

24 Ibid., 21.
Figure 1

PLATE 1. My point of departure will be the Hôtel des Grands Hommes...

Figure 2
written description of this place on page twenty-three, however, is far more expressive and informative of this place and Breton’s interactions with the Hotel as well as its significance than the photograph is. As a matter of fact, the photograph is rather simplistic in its composition, showing very little action. Even the carriage in front of the building is static, and the Hotel is photographed from afar behind the barrier of the fence, letting the audience view it from a rather displaced point of view, as an outsider. The written text, however, about the Hotel de Grands Hommes, provides the reader with a much more extensive account of the place that is engaging and situates the place within the context of Breton’s narrative. The author writes:

My point of departure will be the Hotel de Grands Hommes, Place du Pantheon, where I lived around 1918, and my first halt the Manoir d’Ango where I was offered the hospitality, when I wished to be undisturbed, of a hut artificially camouflaged by shrubbery, at the edge of a woods; here, while in other respects occupying myself with whatever I liked, I was able to hunt owls as well.  

Breton’s written account of the Hotel provides a much more extensive and expressive description than the photograph, explaining how the place relates to his narrative and the significance it had on his autobiographical experiences. Other places that Breton mentions in his narrative are also photographed and included in a similar manner of static, disconnectedness. Only one page later, a photograph of The Manior d’Ango in Varengeville-sur-Mer is inserted by Breton(Fig. 2).  

25 Ibid., 23.
26 Ibid., 22.
This photograph, as well, is supplemented by the caption beneath it, which directly quotes its significance as Breton instructs in his written narrative, and forthrightly instructs the reader to look back, again, to the text for more description on the place photographed.\footnote{Ibid., 22.} The photograph is extremely static, revealing little more than the architecture of the building, and there is no sign of life or any sort of human interaction with the place in the photograph. Again, Breton’s audience is confronted with a feeling of cold, disconnectedness when viewing a photograph of the place he mentions in his narrative. Again and again, these static pictures of solitary architecture appear in the same manner, often preventing the viewer from feeling any sense of connectedness by excluding human interaction or movement in the picture and also often capturing the place from afar, behind a sort of barrier, like a fence or a street. In addition to this, beneath every photo, Breton quotes his own written accounts of these places and refers the reader directly, by listing the page number it can be found on, back to the written description in the text. This can be observed in his the photographs of the statue of Etienne Dolet in the Place Maubert in Paris\footnote{Ibid., 25.}, the shop front with the words “Bois-Charbons\footnote{Ibid., 29.}, the Porte Saint-Denis\footnote{Ibid., 34.}, the Humanite bookstore\footnote{Ibid., 58.}, the Nouvelle France\footnote{Ibid., 75.}, the café next to the wine seller\footnote{Ibid., 82.}, the fountain\footnote{Ibid., 87.}, and the chateau of Saint-Germain.\footnote{Ibid., 110.} The fact that Breton consistently represents the
places spoken of in his written narrative with photographs lacking in dynamic movement or even establishing some sort of meaningful connection with the viewer shows that he does not mean for these photos to be expressive about these places. He leaves the significance of these places, what they mean, and how they fit to the narrative to be described and recounted primarily in his written text. This is where the reader gets the greatest notion of how these places are meaningful with the context of Breton’s narrative and, also, where they receive a more extensive and expressive description of the places and the events that took place there. These photographs are void of expression, dynamic movement, and interaction with the viewer. All that these architectural photos seem to be representing to the viewer is that they actually exist, functioning as devices that, through their authority that comes from the ability to realistically document an object, lend Breton’s narrative a sense of authenticity and credibility.

The photographic portraits of Breton’s subjects in his narrative are represented in a very comparable manner as well. While some of the portraits find ways to show very little movement, like supplanting two consecutive frames of Robert Desnos taken by Man Ray(Fig. 3)\textsuperscript{36}, the portraits are, on a whole, very cold, static, and do not engage with the viewer. Perhaps the strongest instance of this is the portrait of Paul Eluard(Fig. 4).\textsuperscript{37} The subject is photographed in a very rigid posture and his face is very void of expression. His eyes are coldly piercing to the viewer and allow the viewer to feel very little sort of connectedness with the subject. The portrait is minimally expressive, when compared to the written

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 26.
narrative about Paul Eluard explaining his connection and significance to Breton’s experiences on the following page.\textsuperscript{38} The portrait of Blanche Derval, as well, emanates a similar disconnected, static feeling that makes it hard to engage with the photograph (Fig. 5).\textsuperscript{39} It, like the photograph of Paul Eluard, is also extremely lacking in expression when compared to the written description of the pertinence of subject it captures to Breton’s narrative. The reader is directed back to the textual description of Blanche in the caption below the photograph, like all of the photographic images that appear in the text.\textsuperscript{40} The portraits in the text continue with this characteristic static isolation and estrangement of the viewer from the subject who is represented and can be observed further in the portraits of Madame Sacco\textsuperscript{41} and Professor Claude.\textsuperscript{42} All of these portraits, like the landscape photographs, add very little to the reader’s understanding of Breton’s narrative, and autonomously lack the sort of expression and description that the written text provides. Breton recognizes this, as he consciously points the reader back to the written descriptions of the subjects in the captions beneath every single photograph. Like the landscape photographs, these portraits seem to function as devices which lend a certain authority to Breton’s narrative, which makes it seem realistic and autobiographical.

Most intriguing, though, are the photographs of literary memorabilia. Breton includes, throughout his written narrative, many photographs of written documents pertaining to his accounts of his experiences. The inclusion of

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 137.
photographic evidence of these pieces he references in *Nadja* do not add another dimension of understanding as to their pertinence or meaning within the narrative, nor do they express much about these objects in addition to the descriptions Breton offers in his written text. The first of these metaliterary images which appears supplementary to the text is the Playbill for *The Grip of the Octopus* (Fig. 6). This photograph is merely a duplication of an original piece of text advertising a play that Breton references. Like every other embedded photograph in *Nadja*, the plate is accompanied by a caption referencing the reader, once again, to the written text in which Breton describes the significance of the photo to his experiences. The photograph is very uninteresting and does not engage the viewer, but seems to function purely as evidence that Breton attended this play. In this way, the photograph of the playbill lends Breton’s narrative credibility, making it seem real and autobiographical, through the use of the authority of the photographic image. Additionally, Breton also presents the reader with a photograph of what seems to be a handwritten document pertaining to the Theatre Moderne (Fig. 7). Like the aforementioned photograph of a document, this plate is entirely written text in a disorganized and illegible hand. The image does little to engage the reader or add any sort of angle of expressive representation. Again, it has the description below it that frankly directs the reader, upon its viewing, to return to the place in the written text where the object and its relevance are described more thoroughly. This would suggest that Breton includes the image of this document not for artistic or expressive purposes, but to function in a different way.

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43 Ibid., 35.
44 Ibid., 43.
Figure 6

Plate 9. This film, which has affected me far more than any other...

Figure 7
matter. Through the realistic and arguably objective authority that the photographic technology commands from an audience, Breton lends legitimacy as well as authenticity, to the experiences in his narrative. He includes many other photographs of text within *Nadja* that also represent these objects in a parallel manner, benefiting the narrative in the authenticity it adds to Breton’s allegedly autobiographical accounts. These include another partially handwritten document from the Theatre Moderne\(^4\), a close up of the *Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*\(^46\), and a print of French historical scenes.\(^47\) These metaliterary photographs are quite abrupt and offer the reader a minimal understanding of the subjects, which are greatly lacking when compared with the written text which describes these subjects’ relevance and adds to the understanding and expression of Breton’s narrative. Although these photographed pieces of text are, in fact, written language, they do not add to the reader’s understanding of the objects by their literary meanings. These photographs function in another sense to authenticate Breton’s narrative and experience through the use of the photographic image’s authority in depicting what is real.

In *Nadja*, the photographic image is represented for the realistic authority it carries with it as an objective means of capturing real life. In the face of Breton’s avant-garde style which made the text frustrating and unreadable for mainstream readers, the narrative seemed unintelligible and hurt Breton’s credibility of recounting these experiences as an autobiographical narrative. However, providing the reader with photographic images lent the narrative

\(^{4}\) Ibid., 46.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 88.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 96.
authenticity despite the novel’s inconsistencies, fragmentation, and other literary characteristics of unreadability. The photographic image, as a realistic and objective authority, legitimized Breton’s narrative as an autobiographic retelling of real events.
5. The Photographic Image as a Mediator in *White Noise*

Don DeLillo, however, in his novel *White Noise*, shows the ways that the authority of the photographic image in our modern society, decades after Breton’s *Nadja* was initially written, has had numerous implications on the way that we, as human beings, understand the world around us. *White Noise* represents the way that the photographic image, in its role as a mediating force when used in film and news reels, has distanced human beings from reality and the natural world48. As a mediator, the photographic image, most notably due to its role in cinema, has displaced authority from physical, human experience to images and messages presented by the media. This has also led to the confusion of the real and the model in modern society causing a sort of hyperreality.

Considering the notion that the photographic image is recognized as an authority for the objective documentation of events, verifying the existence of a subject as it has been captured in time, the development of cinema has taken this notion even further. Now, film has been used as an efficient means of documenting events and, using the initial notion of the photographic image and its objective authority, represents one of the main ways that news is mediated to the community. In fact, the characters in DeLillo’s novel are almost entirely dependent on the media, specifically television broadcasts, for their knowledge on many issues concerning the world around them. Their dependency upon images

48 There is a distinct difference between television and the media and film, however, I am only concerned with the representation and use of the photographic image in each of these processes, and how that relates to authority within a text. Contrary to *Nadja*, perhaps the reason that these images do have such an authority which creates a hyperreality is specifically because they are moving images, rather than the static photographs in Breton’s narrative. My focus, however, in this thesis is the use of the photographic image and how it relates to authority within the text.
in the media for information about the natural world has displaced them from their own personal sensory experiences of their surrounding environment. The authority that personal, physical sensory experiences once held is represented, in the novel, as having been nearly completely transferred to the overwhelming authority of the media via the ‘objective’ medium of photography and film. DeLillo represents the dependence of these characters’ upon the media, specifically upon news reels that are recorded and shown on television, in the way that many of the characters rely entirely on these media technologies for information and decision making, instead of on their own, personal sensory experiences. Tim Melley speaks of this human dependence upon technology, specifically media technology, in *White Noise* in his essay, “Technology, Rationality, Modernity: An Approach to *White Noise.*” He discusses technology’s mediating function, as represented in the novel, and how these media technologies have replaced the authority of human sensory experience that had previously taken precedent. Melley writes

DeLillo documents the transfer of authority, decision making, and human agency to technical systems...[he] traces the problem to an increasing dependence on technology, which has not only eroded our capacity to know the world directly but also mystified technology itself.49

In human dependence upon media technologies as an authority for information rather than human experience, Melley argues that decision making and agency

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have been transferred to these media technologies. He maintains that these media technologies have not only displaced humans from the natural world, but that they have also alienated them further from the technologies themselves, creating a further dependency upon these systems. In *White Noise*, Jack’s family depends completely on media technologies, especially the television, as their primary means for collecting information. When discussing a medication that Babette is taking, the family argues about what they know about it and related topics basing their information solely on what they have seen on T.V., even if their information was gleamed from a fictional production like *The Perfect Wave*.

While there are many other means for collecting accurate information about a serious subject, a potentially dangerous and lethal medication that Babette is taking, like medical literature based on physical experiments, they still rely on the authority of the photographic image that the television media offers them. Having seen something on television, they assign a certain authority to what has been recorded as realistic and objective, failing to realize the ways that television could manipulate images to convey artifice, like the movie they are referring to. The characters speak of the television like it is the basis of their lives, inspiring all of their thoughts and desires with the characters, again, blindly associating all that they see with the objective authority of a photographic image based on the notion that it, in film, portrays an objective reality. DeLillo represents their dependence on the television as a media technology in the fact that it inspires all of their most basic human feelings, like fear and desire. DeLillo writes, “If our complaints have a focal point, it would have to be the TV set, where the outer torment lurks, causing

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fears and secret desires.”51 As Jack’s family depends so heavily upon television and the photographic image for all of their information, it replaces their human experiences which would have, previous to the invention of photography and cinema, been inspirations of their fears and desires. Jack’s family is completely dependent upon the photographic image in film, via the television, as an authority for information that it seems to be the pinnacle of inspiration upon their lives.

Similarly, it seems that the real, physical experiences of the characters must be legitimized by the authority the photographic image lends via the media in order to be “real” to the characters. Here, again, the authority of the photographic image and film in the media supersedes personal, physical experience. This is represented in the novel when DeLillo comments on the credentials of Murray against his colleague as an Elvis Presley power base in cultural studies. In the novel, it is mentioned that the reason Murray’s colleague is the top Elvis authority is because he was interviewed on local television. DeLillo writes:

The chairman, Alfonse Stompanato, seemed to feel that one of the other instructors, a three-hundred pound former rock ‘n’ roll bodyguard named Dimitrios Cotsakis had established prior right by having flown to Memphis when the King died, interviewed members of the King’s entourage and family, been interviewed himself on local television as an Interpreter of the Phenomenon.52

In this passage, Murray’s academic credentials and his expertise on Elvis seem to be overlooked when compared with a colleague who, seeming less than qualified

51 Ibid., 85.
52 Ibid., 64-65.
in a scholarly sense as an ex-bodyguard, is favored due to his experience being interviewed on the local news. Here, it can be observed that Cotsakis’ scholarly endeavors have been legitimized by the fact his expertise for Elvis was recorded and broadcast by the mass media, whereas Murray’s knowledge has not received that kind of publicity. In this manner, being on television lends Murray’s colleague a legitimacy and authority on Elvis that Murray does not have, in the eyes of the chairman of the department. Similarly, the authority of the photographic image is manifested in the characters’ dependence upon visual media technologies and the significance they assign to their experiences with this media. When Murray and his colleagues are discussing disasters, the department head comments that those countries where the disasters are not broadcast on the media don’t really count. As far as disaster footage goes, the department chairman comments:

‘India remains largely untapped. They have tremendous potential with their famines, monsoons, religious strife, train wrecks, boat sinkings, et cetera. But their disasters tend to go unrecorded….No film footage, no satellite hookup. This is why California is so important.’

Here, the department head illustrates the notion that unless an experience is mediated on T.V. or on the radio, it loses its importance and its legitimacy. The personal, physical experiences of India and its citizens with all of their disasters are rendered unimportant because their experiences go unrecorded by cameras in order to be mediated in the news to other human beings. California, the

53 Ibid., 66.
department head argues, is so important because, while it, too, has plenty of disasters, its disasters are well documented and mediated to others. In this manner, the photographic image has the authority necessary for lending personal experience legitimacy in that the characters believe an experience must be broadcast and mediated in order to be authentic. Perhaps the strongest example of technology giving personal experience legitimacy is with the plane crash victims. After a terrible plane crash, Bee asks Jack where the media is to cover the crash and interview the victims, and he tells her that there is no media in Iron City. She responds, shocked, saying, “‘They went through all that for nothing?’”54 Bee believes that their traumatic experiences have been wasted, in a way, because they were not legitimized and made real by being broadcast by the media on television. In this case, the lack of authority associated with the photographic image and the way that it, through film, documents and legitimizes this tragedy renders the victims’ experiences meaningless.

54 Ibid., 92.
6. The Photographic Image in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

However, in a modern society, where mechanical reproduction has made these photographic images so prominent and easy to reproduce, it is argued that their actual authenticity as a realistic and objective mode of representation decreases. Walter Benjamin discusses the authenticity of the photographic image as a mode of artistic representation in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin explains the way that the photographic image, in the way that it was designed for reproducibility, debases the authority of the original work of art. He writes:

The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and, of course, not only technical—reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so vis a vis technical reproduction.55

With the advent of photography, an art that relies completely upon reproduction of an original, Benjamin argues that the notion of the authenticity of an original work of art has been lost, since the ‘forgery,’ in essence, has become the final product and work of art rather than the original. With this authenticity, Benjamin also explains that the work looses its authority. Despite this loss of authority, he still outlines the ways in which our modern society privileges film and the photographic image as an authority and a realistic, objective mode of

representation over painting. He references the significance that modern society attaches to film and the photographic image when he writes

Thus, for contemporary man that representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment.\textsuperscript{56}

In other words, the photographic image and film, because they appear to be free from equipment and outside influences, in comparison to painting as an artistic modes of representation, are more valued by modern society because they are perceived as more realistic and objective. As such, he argues, the photographic image and film have become more significant in our contemporary society as a representation of reality, viewing it as having a sort of objective authority rather than viewing it as a piece of art that, Benjamin states, has lost its authenticity and authority in the process of reproduction. DeLillo represents this misconception of the photographic image in the media through film as an objective authority, rather than a subjective mode of artifice, in the way that his characters value information from photographs or television over their personal, physical sensory experiences.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 234.
7. The Photographic Image and Hyperreality in *White Noise*

Photographic images and film, in the media, taking the place of the authority that personal sensory experience once occupied, the mediation between humans and the natural world by these technologies creates an uncertainty about what is actually real compared to what is a simulation, leading to a complete confusion by the characters of the real and the simulacra. Characters seems to have a difficult time discerning what is reality and what is representation, allowing for the notion of the hyperreal, or a reality that feels unreal because it is generated by a model. Jean Baudrillard, in his piece, “The Precession of Simulacra,” explains hyperreality that is caused by reproducible images blurring the line between the original, real object and the model. He writes:

…no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.57

What was previously merely a simulation or a representation of the real, Baudrillard argues, has now made and entirely new reality based not on these signs, or representations. In valuing the authority of a photographic image, whether in the media or film, over their own sensory experiences with each other and the world around them, DeLillo shows the way that the characters have lost

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touch with what is real in this mediation of the natural world. John N. Duvall, in his essay “White Noise, Postmodernism, and Postmodernity” analyzes Baudrillard’s theory on hyperreality and simulation within the context of DeLillo’s novel. Duvall writes, “If the older presumption is that first there is a reality that can be represented or mapped, hyperreality occurs when the model (more often than not a corporate one) produces the physical space one inhabits.”

Again, he reiterates Baudrillard’s notion that simulations are constructing this sort of hyperreality within White Noise as a result of the characters’ dependence upon the media and the photographic image as an authority for information which supplants personal, human experience with the natural world. Perhaps the most compelling example, in DeLillo’s novel, of the notion of hyperreality occurs when Jack and Murray visit the Most Photographed Barn in America. When Jack and Murray arrive to the barn that has been photographed and reproduced more than any other barn in America, Jack observes that there are even people taking photographs of people taking photographs of the barn that is significant because it is the most photographed barn in America. DeLillo blatantly shows how the original, physical barn is being endlessly reproduced in the photographs that have been taken of it and even of the photographs that have been taken of the people taking photographs of the original barn. David Clippinger, in his essay, “Only Half Here,” discusses the notion of Baudrillard’s theory in the simulacra present

in *White Noise* in relation to consumerism, citing an interview with Don DeLillo.

He writes:

> DeLillo touches upon this issue in an interview when he remarks that ‘when the images are identical to each other, consumerism and the mass production of art in their most explicit form take over.’ The work of art becomes susceptible to the force of what Baudrillard refers to as the ‘simulacrum’—a sign in which the referent has been subsumed by the proliferation of copies, that in the signifying process of ‘exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit [that itself becomes] without references or circumference.’

In the case of the Most Photographed Barn in America, the barn acts as the referent, the original and “real” object, which has been completely subsumed by the proliferation of copies, namely all of the photographs which have been taken of the barn as well as copies of the copies, which are the photographs of people taking photographs of the barn. Murray illustrates the way that a new, hyperreality has been created in the process of reproduction and loss of the referential when he comments on the way that the barn cannot be seen as the “real” barn anymore. Murray states, “’No one sees the barn…Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn.’”

Through the character of Murray, DeLillo illustrates the hyperreality that the procession of simulacra, or copies, of the referential, the barn, has created and the way that it has made it impossible to truly see the referential outside of the context of the

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hyperreality all the photographs and signs to the barn have constructed. This has caused the characters to be completely confused as to what is real and what is a simulacra. DeLillo also illustrates this confusion of the characters between the real and the model in the Airborne Toxic event. The officers of SIMUVAC, a simulated evacuation agency that helps the community prepare for such disasters, confuse the real event with that of their usual simulation. Arno Heller speaks about *White Noise* and the way that it represents the confusion of the real and the simulacra in this specific event in his essay, “Simulacrum vs. Death: An American Dilemma in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*.” Heller writes about SIMUVAC and the airborne toxic event, saying:

A particularly ironic incident is Gladney’s encounter with SIMUVAC, a simulated evacuation company that uses the real disaster as a rehearsal of a simulation and apologizes for the lack of perfection: ‘You have to make allowances for the fact,’ one of the organizers says, ‘that everything we see tonight is real…We don’t have our victims laid out where we’d want them if this was an actual simulation…There is a lot of polishing we still have to do’ (136). Even when Gladney is contaminated shortly afterwards with Nyodene-D, the lethal poisonous fallout of the cloud, he remains strangely remote and refuses to take the abstract figures of the text monitor seriously. Even death seems to have become part of the simulacrum…

Here, Heller points out the ways that the officers have confused the real incident, in which the simulations are meant to prepare them for, with the simulations they usually perform in that he is apologizing solely because it’s not a simulation and,

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62 Ibid., 106.
therefore, they are not prepared to handle the real event. Heller also points out the way that the photographic image in the media has displaced him so far from reality that he has a hard time acknowledging the physical threat and reality of the event and its potential danger. Due to the fact that the event has been simulated so much, the characters, including Jack, have lost a sense of what is real, the referent, and what is a model or simulation, confusing the two.
CONCLUSION

Although both texts include the representation of the photographic image quite extensively, it seems that these representations operate in opposite manners. In *Nadja*, Andre Breton seems to embrace the weighty authority that photographic image carries with it as a realistic, objective mode of representation in the way that he includes photographs alongside his written text not for expressive purposes, but to lend his narrative legitimacy as an authentic, autobiographical narrative.

Don DeLillo, however, considering the theories of Walter Benjamin on the photographic image in relation to mechanical reproduction and Jean Baudrillard on the photographic image as a simulacrum, takes on a more skeptical stance on the authority of the photographic image in *White Noise*. In the way that DeLillo represents how the photographic image, in film and the media, distances the characters from the natural world, replacing the authority of personal, sensory experience, he explores the potential consequences of such a blind assignment of authority to the photographic image and the consequence it might have of confusing what is real and what is representation, resulting in a hyperreality.
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