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The Shopping Channel: Simulation, Consumption,
and the Author as Cultural Critic in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Université de Montréal
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Ce mémoire intitulé :

The Shopping Channel: Simulation, Consumption,
and the Author as Cultural Critic in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Résumé de synthèse

White Noise de Don DeLillo est une critique de l'amérique post-moderne centrée sur la disparition de la différence entre le réel et la reproduction, l'authentique et la simulation du à l'expansion parasitique d'une réalité médiatisée. DeLillo identifie l'amérique comme étant l'emplacement géographique de l'hyper réalité tel quel fut imaginé par le sociologue français Jean Baudrillard. De plus, il reconnaît la menace que représentent les murmures constants des appareils électroménagers, spécialement la télévision, qui suggèrent constamment que la réalité est un divertissement et qui offrent la possibilité d'atteindre le bonheur perpétuel par la consommation de masse. DeLillo met les événements quotidiens qui forment le mode de vie Américain sous son microscope, et se tient prêt à les disséquer afin d'exposer leur fonctionnement. Les bruits de fonds dans *White Noise*: le chuchotement constant de la télévision, voilà les sujets de ce roman, ainsi que les raisons pour lesquelles il mérite une étude rigoureuse et approfondie.

Mots-clefs : simulation, consommation, post-modernisme, Baudrillard, télévision, identité, amérique, hyper réel, média, peur

Abstract

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is a critique of postmodern America centered on the disappearance of the difference between real and reproduction, due to the parasitic expansion of media-produced reality. Through his disoriented narrator's simultaneous submission to and apprehension of the contemporary world he inhabits, DeLillo identifies America as the geographical location of the hyperreal as it was described by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard. Furthermore, he recognizes the anesthetizing threat of the constant whispering of home appliances – especially television – which suggest that reality is entertainment and offer the possibility of perpetual happiness through mass consumption. The mundane events that make up the average American life are put under DeLillo's microscope, who stands ready, scalpel in hand, to dissect them and to expose their disturbing mechanism. The white noise in *White Noise* - everything that hides just beneath the surface, the constant humming of television - is what this novel is about, and is the reason it demands intense reflection and close intellectual examination.

Key words: simulation, consumption, postmodern, Baudrillard, television, identity, America, hyperreal, media, death

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Dedication

To Karine, whose angelic beauty is matched only by her patience.

Introduction

Using the theory of Jean Baudrillard, this thesis explores how Don DeLillo constructs in *White Noise* a criticism of postmodern America. In *Simulations*, Baudrillard claims that in the postmodern world the distinction between image and the real, between signifier and signified, is no longer valid, as it was in earlier historical periods. Instead postmodern individuals are surrounded by simulacra, which I define here, provisionally, as free-floating reproductions which no longer originate from an authentic source but rather from a series of reproductions. This Baudrillard's model of this new reality, in the culture of the image, is remarkably similar to the one DeLillo depicts in *White Noise*. Indeed, both writers describe a world in which a culture of the image and mediated forms of experience and communication replace traditional human rituals and myths. This new reality offers the possibility for individuals to come together and consume image-objects as a group, such as "the most photographed barn in America," and effectively become a community of the image. The immediate result of becoming part of such a community is that it serves as a palliative against one of the central themes in *White Noise*: the contemporary American's pervasive fear of death.

DeLillo suggests two strategies to confront the postmodern reality of the supremacy of the simulacra. The first is exemplified by Jack Gladney, the novel's narrator, who paradoxically submits to and resists the domination of the image over the "authentic". Baudrillard claims that when the primacy of the simulacra is complete, the individual instinctively seeks refuge by embracing nostalgia. Jack adopts this strategy by attempting to revive American myths of identity and authority promulgated by classic sit-coms and other television programs. Indeed,

he seeks refuge in his role as father-figure, Chair of a college department, and his simulated-self -- J.A.K. Gladney. However, DeLillo systematically shows how Gladney's attempts at maintaining the real through various simulations of authenticity are both ironic and doomed to fail since they rely on the principle of the simulacra which Gladney is trying to counter.

The other strategy in dealing with the hyperreal is shown through Murray Jay Siskind. Though Murray is as much a slave of imagistic representation as Jack is, Murray is quick to realize the potential which such a system offers someone who understands its process. Murray is a sexually cunning, ambitious individual, and through his grasp of the simulacra and his postmodern theorizing he seduces Jack, Babette, and his students in the hopes that he can convince them to enter the culture of image completely where he believes he is master. A gifted interpreter of the hyperreal, Murray uses the Baudrillardian themes which disturb Jack: the primacy of the image, the importance of simulation in society and identity formation, the unifying aura of that which is constantly already reproduced in the hyperreal in order to achieve his goals and his ambitions. However, both strategies fail since the simulated reality and the flexible selves upon which they are based are the result of the hyperreal. In this case, DeLillo argues, the cure cannot stem from the disease. *White Noise* displays how subjectivity disappears in the simulated reality of postmodernity.

Television is the primary tool for mediation in *White Noise*. It not only helps in alleviating the intense sense of dread inherent to postmodernity, but as argued above, it supplies examples of myths and identities which the novel's

characters can adopt to enter the postmodern community of the image. However, television also serves the hyperreal by offering a framed view of the world beyond the small suburban town which the Gladneys inhabit without having to experience it first-hand. This reality at one remove offers protection against the dangers of the world, but also permits them to view nature as a consumable good and a source of entertainment. However, this results in the Gladneys' loss of empathy for the suffering of other human beings, whom they experience as entertainment. Furthermore, it gives mankind the impression that nature is something under their control. These postmodern illusions are destroyed by DeLillo through the events in the middle section of the novel, airborne toxic event and the anxiety generated when it is not covered by the media. The airborne toxic event's effect is two-fold: it not only reaffirms the power position in the man-nature binary, but suggests that in order for the television-watching Gladneys to be "true" victims, they must be represented by mass media.

When television and simulation fail to ease the Gladneys' fear of death, mass consumption presents itself as a worthy alternative. In a manner similar to Baudrillard's theory that consumption is a preconditioned activity which relieves tensions – though this relief is momentary and only possible through consumer objects – DeLillo shows how consumption strengthens his characters' strategies against threats of the real and reasserts myths of authority when they are challenged. DeLillo also touches on the importance of "where" one shops – the cultural institutions of consumption – a theme that is prevalent in Baudrillard. Indeed, in *White Noise* the supermarket and the mall are timeless mystical places

where fears evaporate in the food court, disappear in the frozen-food aisle. Jack feels plenitude and wellness of being which are arguably unequalled when he is surrounded by grocery bags or when he is able to shop with abandon. Yet this personal satisfaction is only temporary. When he comes to believe that his death is imminent, due to his inhaling toxic gases, Jack proceeds to divest himself of all the dead items which clutter his attic. This purging symbolizes the ineffective nature of consumption for personal gratification and alleviation of death: like television and the revival of myths of authenticity, in the postmodern world this strategy to ward off death is ultimately ineffective.

Because of the ironic writer DeLillo is, and because of his other works of cultural commentary, he has been erroneously labeled as a bad citizen. According to Frank Lentricchia, DeLillo is the type of writer "...who conceives his vocation as an act of cultural criticism: who invent in order to intervene: whose work is a kind of anatomy, an effort to represent their culture in their totality; and who desire to move readers to the view that the shape and fate of their culture dictates the shape and fate of the self" ("Intro" 1). Is it any wonder that such a writer offers in *White Noise* a satirical portrayal of everyday American life, or that it has attracted many harsh words because it pulls few punches and makes fewer excuses? Because the line between fiction and non-fiction is so narrow in DeLillo, because he does not deal in "political virginity preserved, [in] "individuals" who are not expressions of – and responses to – specific historical processes" (Lentricchia, Intro 2), a superficial reading of *White Noise* from the right-wing media might conclude that DeLillo's writing is immoral, that he barely

makes a distinction between contemporary America and Hitler's Germany. However, such a reading would not only be wrong, but it would also make DeLillo's case; by reaching such conclusions the critics prove that they are fettered by their own right-winged cultural simulacrum and fallible argument which claim that dissatisfaction is un-American, that social commentary equals national dissention which in turn equals treason. Ultimately, it may be DeLillo's contemporary quality that prevents his classification and that gives him his most powerful weapon. Frank Lentricchia argues that "In the context of American fiction, the reading of DeLillo's writing is an experience of overwhelming cultural density – these are novels that could not have been written before the mid-1960s. In this...lies their political outrage: the unprecedented degree to which they prevent their readers from gliding off into the comfortable sentiment that the real problems of the human race have always been about what they are today" ("intro" 6).

Yet *White Noise* is a novel rich enough to incite contradictory criticism. Moving beyond DeLillo's work as a social commentator on the American hyperreal, a number of critics have identified the author's fascination with one of America's redemptive force: "the radiance of dailiness" and the quotidian. From this point of view, DeLillo pits the narcotizing power of simulations and mass-consumption in a culture of the image against another type of white noise in the shape of the language of a deeper source of human consciousness. This is the "pure" speech below the constant hum and buzz of the postmodern. These diverging opinions show that this novel continues to captivate its readership

because it eludes easy classification and official explanation. The author refuses to supply definitive answers, and prefers to instigate a dialogue with postmodernity through the elements that define the period. “Masking its critique in celebration, *White Noise* inhabits the very heart of postmodern culture to weigh its menaces against its marvels, alerting us to its wonder as well as its waste” (Osteen XIV).

Because Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacra is complex and he has often been criticized for not defining his major terms at great length, my first chapter will concentrate on clarifying the meaning of those concepts most useful to my project. I will then proceed to show, through careful examination of “simuvac” and of “the most photographed barn in America” how for both DeLillo and Baudrillard the postmodern social environment is dominated by the simulacra, by the collapse of human communication, and by the proliferation of free-floating signifiers which result in the uniformity of man and the loss of basic human myths and rituals. Finally, I will demonstrate how both Jack and Murray employ different – but ultimately unsuccessful – methods of managing and profiting from postmodernity’s simulated “reality”.

Continuing my discussion of the simulacra, my second chapter will concentrate primarily on television both as a tool of the image society and as a way of experiencing the “real” world beyond Blacksmith without incurring the risks of such an enterprise. I will show that the results of experiencing nature through the television screen results in mankind’s attitude of dominance towards nature, which it now sees as an object of consumption. Of course, the plethora of

ecological disasters resulting from this attitude – represented in *White Noise* by the airborne toxic event – indicate the folly of this line of thought and shed light on the subtle danger of the technology contemporary Americans unknowingly welcome into their homes. Furthermore, I argue that experiencing the outside world through television leads to a televised perception of the world whereby the individual can only cope with even the most mundane events through media-influenced language. Using a number of scenes as example I will show how the characters in *White Noise* are only able to manage reality through affected media-speak and television logic. This reality leads postmodern individuals to seek the ideal “third-person” of their electronic dreams, but DeLillo shows that the result of all this technology could also be a nightmare: Willy Mink, a shell of a human being who experiences words as pure signifiers, who sits in front of his television perpetually, repeating its broadcasted phrases between rare moments of lucidity.

Finally, my third chapter concentrates on *White Noise*'s critical perception. I will pay particular attention to Bruce Bawer, who reads the novel as a work which does not make moral distinctions, which does not make exception for Hitler's horrors since DeLillo places him next to Elvis and James Dean. I argue that by making this claim Bawer misses the point: by making such use of Hitler DeLillo is showing how the culture of the image promulgated by the academy and the media reduces everything to its simplest expression and therefore renders everything banal. Against this negative reading of *White Noise* I study two critics who read it in surprisingly optimistic terms. First, Thomas J. Ferarro identifies the narcotizing effect of television which infuses the

postmodern audience with a false sense of community through the proliferation of simulation and images. However he identifies in the Gladneys' regular trips to the supermarket the capacity for "authentic" family interaction free from the supremacy of television and simulation. He argues that if the Gladneys were able to display the same familial harmony elsewhere, they could potentially break the anesthetizing power of simulated reality. Moreover, Cornel Bonca also acknowledges the power of the simulacra over the Gladneys' actions and language, but he reads the white noise in *White Noise*, the incessant hum and buzz, the constant whispering of commercial catch phrases, name brands, and jingles as a poetical language which induces momentary communal epiphanies and temporarily suspends the Gladneys' fear of death. Finally, postmodern Americans may be under the spell of free-floating signifiers and easily-accessible consumer good, but the strength of familial ties beyond blood and name and the poetry of the quotidian whisper the possibility of something else at work.

Chapter One:

Killers and Diers: Strategies against Death in the Hyperreal

White Noise is an unapologetic critique of an America where the line between the real and the reproduction, the authentic and the simulated has been blurred by the vertiginous ascendance of technology and the parasitic expansion of media-produced reality. The action in the novel covers a plethora of contemporary occurrences – from trips to the supermarket and toxic chemical spills – and is narrated by Jack Gladney, professor of Hitler studies at a college in Everywhere, Middle America. Through his disoriented narrator's simultaneous submission to and apprehension of the contemporary world he inhabits, Don DeLillo examines America as the geographical location of the hyperreal as it was described by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard a few years prior to the publication of *White Noise* (1985). In his seminal work *Simulations* (1983), Baudrillard posits that medium and message have now blended into a hyperreal, where the distinction between real and imaginary is effaced. It is a world where simulations of the real dominate and are not tied to any origin or source. DeLillo's characters reside in the contemporary United States of the Simulation as envisioned by Baudrillard, where campaign advertisements dictate thought processes and mass media inform speech patterns. Its national anthem is white noise: without highs or lows, distinction or distinguishability. It is a uniform fusion of individuals into a nation of the image.

This novel is about death, both personal and on a massive scale, and about the strategies one adopts in order to sedate that fear when the hyperreal fails him. But it is also about the power that comes with decoding the system, with understanding the message contained within the waves and radiation and using

that system to achieve personal goals. These diametrically opposed descriptions also apply to the residents of *White Noise*'s America, a nation of killers and diers, of simulated New-York émigrés and simulated Hitler scholars – a nation which DeLillo attempts to expose and decipher.

Because Baudrillard has often been criticized for failing to define his major terms, such as the code, and for writing in a hyperbolic style through which he refuses to qualify or delimit his claims, it is necessary to define those concepts useful to the project at hand more clearly (Poster 1). At the heart of Baudrillard's theories is the simulacrum, which Plato defines as "the copy of a copy. Violating an ethics of imitation, its untruth is defined by its distance from the original and by its exposure of the scandal that an imitation can in its turn function as a reality to be copied" (Frow 422). In *Simulation*, Baudrillard devises a theory whereby the distinctions between object and representation, signifier and signified no longer hold true. To replace these relations he observes a world dominated by simulacra which have no ground in reality except for their own being, who no longer refer to an authentic original but to a representation.

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality...the real is produced from minituarised units, from matrices, memory banks and command models – and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance...it is no longer real at all...[it is] the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (*Simulation 2, 3*)

A simulation is not a fiction. It does not simply present an absence as a presence; it does not permit any contrast with reality by effectively absorbing reality within

itself. One cannot think of a “real” world that is somehow bypassed by an “unreal” simulated, mediated image; now there is only a world of self-referential signs, which Baudrillard identifies as the hyperreal. “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” (4). Baudrillard demonstrates his theory of the simulacra and the hyperreal by applying it to various spheres of human activity: medicine, where symptoms can be simulated; the military, where simulators are reformed as though they were “real” homosexual, heart-case or lunatics; and religion, where the proliferation of icons suggests the ultimate inexistence of a “real” God. However, the ideal model of the hyperreal is the perfect fusion of American fantasy and technology known as Disneyland. Using gadgets and quasi-religious icons, infantilized imagery and aural stimulation, Disneyland is an imaginary world meant to strengthen the idea that the rest of the world, the “real” world, is exactly that: “real”. However, according to Baudrillard “[it] is there to conceal the fact it is the “real” country, all of “real” America, which is Disneyland. Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation” (25). The real world, which Baudrillard likens to a perpetual motion picture, requires reservoirs of imaginary – either physical places or media representations – in order to reinforce the idea that the rest of the world is indeed real.

The loss of the real and the proliferation of the hyperreal have an indelible effect on the individual. Indeed, this effect is characterized by a powerful sense of nostalgia – nostalgia for a time in history when the real still preceded the simulation – as well as a frantic attempt to produce the real and restore the referent/referred relation to its natural state. As Baudrillard observes: “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality...there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential...” (12-13). Unfortunately, the mad dash to produce the real at any cost is for Baudrillard further proof that the simulacra now reigns supreme, it is “...a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence” (13).

It is difficult to consider the contemporary America DeLillo depicts in *White Noise* without working within the framework of Jean Baudrillard’s postmodernity. In the novel the characters, led by Jack Gladney, confront or are produced by a social environment dictated by the simulacra, where the primacy of images, electronic signs and simulations replace authentic experience. This social environment is remarkably similar to the one Baudrillard describes in his theoretical writing on media, hyperreality and the simulacra. Indeed, Baudrillard’s contemporary world:

...Is characterized by the collapse of the real and the flow of signifiers emanating from an information society, by a “loss of the real” in a black hole of simulation and the play and the exchange of signs. In this world common to both DeLillo and Baudrillard, images, signs, and codes engulf objective reality; signs become more real than reality and stand in for the world they erase. (Wilcox 196)

Furthermore, Baudrillard's thesis that this mediated reality irremediably results in the uniformity of man and the disappearance of tradition, structures, and "finalities" – all finalities save for its most final expression: death – is echoed in the collapse of human communication and experience before the power of mediated and electronic information in DeLillo's urban and suburban America. In addition, for both authors meaning disappears before "media-saturated consciousness" (Wilcox 197). Indeed, for Baudrillard "information devours its own contents, it devours communication. [This leads to] a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy" (*Shadow* 97,100). The same is true in *White Noise*, where electronic information overthrows conventional communication and meaning. "The very notion of "white noise" that is so central to the novel implies neutral and reified mediaspeech, but also a surplus of data and an entropic blanket of information glut which flows from a media-saturated society" (Wilcox 197). For both Baudrillard and DeLillo, basic human rituals and forms of communication have been replaced by the electronic exchange of free-floating signs in a world governed by simulation and mediated experience.

The world of *White Noise* is populated with Baudrillardian experiences and individuals. The most blatant example of the hyperreal setting of the novel is the existence of a company called SIMUVAC, which stands for simulated evacuation. This organization sets up practice sessions that are supposed to supply instruction in disaster readiness, so that the people of Blacksmith will be ready in the event of a chemical spill or any other catastrophe. Their governing

theory is that “the more we rehearse a disaster, the safer we’ll be from the real thing” (WN 205). However, it is later made clear that SIMUVAC’s interest lies solely on the simulation of evacuation as a profitable venture rather than preventing death or injuries. “SIMUVAC thrives less on saving lives than on increasing people’s fear of the likelihood of a disaster” (Keeseey 143). In fact, during a simulation a spokesperson warns the simulated victims that in the event of actual injury, no one from the company is ready or able to supply help of any kind: “If reality intrudes in the form of a car crash or a victim falling off a stretcher, it is important to remember that we are not here to mend broken bones or put out fires. We are here to simulate” (WN 206). This reversal of real and simulated reaches its grotesque peak when an actual chemical spill forces the people of Blacksmith to evacuate their homes, and SIMUVAC decide to use the spill in order to perfect their simulations. “Plus which we don’t have our victims laid out where we’d want them if this was an actual simulation. In other words we’re forced to take our victims as we find them. There’s a lot of polishing to do. But that’s what this exercise is all about” (139).

In a world where companies like SIMUVAC create cures that are more threatening than the danger they are supposed to fight, Baudrillard’s argument that “the modern individual lies haunted by the fear of death, and readily submits to social authorities...which promise immortality or protection from death” (Keeseey 104) is not only on target, but they also raise more important questions as to the extent of social authorities responsibility for the dangers of everyday life. Indeed, so often in *White Noise* the source of remedy turns out to be the cause of

the danger. For example: “the mylex suits that experts say will protect men from the chemical spill prove to be health hazards in themselves, and the microorganisms created to eat the toxic gas may add even deadlier pollutants to the atmosphere” (Keeseey 144). Not to mention Nyodene D., the chemical ingredient to the airborne toxic event that exiles the Gladneys, a strange chemical whose use and possible side-effects seems as much a mystery to the people of Blacksmith as it is to the authorities who created it and are trying to contain it.

Another example of the importance of the hyperreal and the simulacrum in DeLillo’s fiction appears in the third chapter, when Jack Gladney, who holds the position of chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill, takes his new colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, a professor of popular culture, to visit a tourist attraction known as “the most photographed barn in America”. While the visit may be the subject of the scene, Frank Lentricchia accurately notes: “the real subject is the electronic medium of the image as the active context of contemporary existence in America... [as] the technological expression of an entire environment of the image” (“Tales” 88, 89). This environment is not simply a televised or mediated representation of nature; nor is it a simulated image of a real environment situated outside the mediated representation. In *White Noise* the environment of the image is the real; it is the unifying principle under which contemporary individuals come together as a nation – or, as Gladney would put it, a “crowd”:

The environment of the image is the landscape – it is what (for us) landscape has become, and it can’t be switched off with the flick of a wrist. For this environment-as-electronic-medium radically constitutes contemporary consciousness and therefore (such as it

is) contemporary community – it guarantees that we are a people of, by, and for the image. (“Tales” 89)

The scene begins with the two college professors driving from the city where they live to the tourist attraction. The drive is along a scenic route, which features the typical natural landscape and traditional staples of the American pastoral setting. However, all this nature is described in “flat, undetailed, apparently unemotional declarative” (“Tales” 89). Indeed, the “meadows and apple orchards” (*WN* 12) as well as the “white fences [which] trailed through the rolling fields” (*WN* 12) are noted with complete disinterest, failing to stimulate any response in either the narrator or the reader. The passive narrative tone works to remind the reader that the barn and those taking pictures of it are not there to reinforce nostalgia for a pastoral, pioneering past or to live an authentic rural experience. Rather, the barn has been incorporated in the environment of the image and the process of image reproduction. Along the way Jack and Murray pass six signs that announce “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA” (*WN* 12). When they arrive at the sight they find it surrounded by forty cars and a tour bus, by an army of tourists armed with cameras photographing the barn and other photographers. There is a man selling postcards of the barn, presumably so that people can buy postcards of the barn they are there to photograph.

The narrator’s flaccid tone in this scene is in stark contrast with Murray’s almost ecstatic commentary. This is because Murray the postmodernist understands something that Jack the modernist has not. He realizes that the America of apple orchards and white picket fences (which of course was always already an iconic myth, a simulacrum in its own right, for which we are nostalgic

as the 'real' of the old days, mistakenly) has been replaced by a new America, one that features repetition of images without origin, one where the distinction between reality and representation, sign and referent, no longer exists. "[A] strange new world where the object of perception is perception itself: a packaged perception..." ("Tales" 90) Because the barn is not advertised as the most picturesque or the oldest, because it is not the sight of historical deeds – not where lives were lost or battles fought, but because it is simply the most photographed – Murray's truly Baudrillardian reaction is to claim that "No one sees the barn" (*WN* 12). The barn disappears when it is preceded by road signs announcing the barn. Once the signs appear the tourists forget the object itself to concentrate on the packaged object, the barn as subject for photography. It is no longer a barn; it is an object for consumption, a great unifying object, The Most Photographed Barn in America. "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it is impossible to see the barn" (*WN* 12). This new reality where the referent evaporates and the object disappears in its endless representations, which leaves Gladney impassive – "he seemed immensely pleased by this" (*WN* 13) is his only response – fills Murray with joy rather than nostalgia for the old America.

Not only does Murray recognize the fact that the barn disappears before the explosion of its representations, he identifies the photographers' pilgrimage as a form of communal experience – a religious experience almost. Throughout Murray's commentary Gladney notices the intermitting silence and background noise of "incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rusting cranks of levers that advanced the film" (*WN* 13), which acts as a new kind of "choral

commentary" ("Tales" 90). The religious imagery is significant here since Murray posits that the contemporary individual participates in "a kind of spiritual surrender" (*WN* 12). There is no rebellion; no one else echoes Jack Gladney's sullen indifference before the primacy of the image or its aura because the aura of the image, its purpose, its reason for being, is the contemporary people united.

We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies...We only see what the others see. The thousand who have been here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience (*WN* 12).

By agreeing to become part of a collective perception, by agreeing to take pictures of taking pictures, the contemporary individual is granted a new identity: he is now part of a collective entity created through the history of people who have been there as well as all those who will follow. The tourists surrender is a desired surrender. The barn is to those who photograph what Hitler is to Gladney or what God is to the Christian: an object of contemplation which "serves to legitimize the myth of origin, which creates a sense of purpose, which in turn serves to mitigate the sting of death" (Duvall 445). The aura created by the coming together of generations of photographers permits the contemporary individual to lose himself within the collective, the crowd. It grants protection from the individuating power of postmodernity; one no longer has to face the inevitability of life and death alone – without the shielding capacity of God, history or community. By agreeing to be part of a collective perception, the photographs effectively join the crowd, because "Crowds come together to form a shield against their own dying.

To become a crowd is to keep out death...They were there to be a crowd" (*WN* 73).

Therefore, it would seem that in DeLillo's world Walter Benjamin's claim that "...that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (1169) has been subverted. As John Frow argues, mechanical reproduction does not destroy the religious aura of cultural artifacts. "The commodification of culture has worked to preserve the myth of origins and of authenticity" (422). In this scene, the myth of authenticity that is aura comes into being through mediation, through "the intertextual web of prior representations" (Duvall 444). Consequently it is useless to ask: "What was the barn like before it was photographed?" or "What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns?" (*WN* 13) because the barn is perpetually reproduced in the present through the repetition of the image, and in its perpetual renewal community springs from the technology of representation. "At the limit of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: the hyperreal" (Simulations 142).

In his essay "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative", John Wilcox argues that Jack Gladney is a modernist trapped in a postmodern reality, and that in trapping his modernist narrator in an information society, DeLillo depicts "a new form of subjectivity emerging as the modernist order is eclipsed by the postmodern world" (197). The irony of this is made clear by DeLillo, who has Gladney attempt to calm his crippling fear of death by adopting rites of family and work; rites which he ironically performs by chanting

television commercials like mantras. Despite his discomfort with the postmodern world he lives in, Jack constantly indulges in those activities – unabashed consumerism, marvel and integration of a system of simulation and hyperreality, comfort in being part of “the grid” – which he regards with such uneasiness. “He often succumbs to the Baudrillardian condition, floating “ecstatically” in a delirium of networks, hyperreal surfaces, and fetishized consumer objects” (197). Though often nostalgic, Gladney’s narrative is nonetheless informed by media and technology, by the migrating television which haunts his home and intrudes in the story with sound bites of television advice and commercial suggestion. “The T.V. said: Now we will put little feelers on the butterfly” (*WN* 96). This constant invasion of the television in the narrative represents “the emergence of a new form of subjectivity colonized by the media and decentered by its polyglot discourses and electronic networks” (Wilcox 198), or what Baudrillard identifies as “the end of interiority” (“Ecstasy” 133).

Jack first attempts to conquer his euphoric fear through ancestral rituals of family life. He tries to protect himself from his lonely finality by losing himself in what he believes are protective and stable relationships. Indeed, the Gladney family at first seems the very image of the ideal American family popularized by nostalgic American “realist” novels and early television programs: professional dad, stay at home mom, four children including the token toddler, a house “at the end of a quiet street in what was once a wooded area with deep ravines” (*WN* 4). It is the ideal portrait of the American family – only the white picket fence and golden retriever are missing. Moreover, Jack’s position as chairman at the

College-on the-Hill allows him the opportunity to spend a significant amount of time at home, where his authority figure as patriarch works as a charm against his fear of death. His success as a father is mirrored in his smart, well-behaved children – there is not a juvenile delinquent to be found among the three teenagers sharing a home. They also work as a form of protection: “nothing can happen to us as long as there are dependant children in the house. The kids are a guarantee of our relative longevity” (*WN* 100). For this reason the Gladneys try to keep their children young, especially Wilder “...who speaks very little, thus giving a secret pleasure to his parents” (Leclair 396). His wife is a dedicated spouse and mother whose unreliable memory grants Jack the chance to play the role of the gently patronizing benefactor, which reinforces his supposed authority. The small, safe, and peaceful town they live in is saturated with the anesthetizing aroma of nostalgia. Indeed, the town’s architecture features “houses with turrets and two-story porches where people sit in the shade of ancient maples. There are Greek revival and Gothic churches. There is an insane asylum with an elongated portico, ornamented dormers and a steeply pitched roof topped by a pineapple finial” (*WN* 4), which combine to give the impression that all of man’s history is comprised within the city limits. It is the perfect setting for a man bent on preserving myths of authenticity and origin in order to palliate his fear of death.

Gladney’s strategies to ward off death gradually bring about ironic results. First, his treatment of history reveals Blacksmith to be less a heaven for historical nostalgia than a “supermarket of human possibilities” (Cantor 41) where all history flattens out and becomes a collection of simulations of history, thereby

losing all authenticity. If modernism defined itself in opposition to other historical periods by positioning itself as the end of linear history, "...the privileged moment when traditional myths were shattered and the truth finally emerged once and for all" (41), then postmodernism, coming after this privileged moment, is forced to position itself in "the posthistorical moment" (41). Postmodernity does not move forward towards some ultimate truth, but rather it includes all of history as possible styles and ideas. In reality, what is offered to the postmodern man is a simplified copy of history: Greek revival stands in as a poor imitation of antiquity and the Gothic as a simulation of the Middle-Ages. Everything is seemingly available, but only in its reduced, simulated form.

Moreover, throughout the course of the narrative DeLillo unmasks the Gladney household as a parody of family ritual. There is no security against death in Jack's nuclear family because in the postmodern world family traditions have lost their power to generate authentic, coherent identities. The reality is that this course of action "leads him to ironic traps and eventual absurdities" (Leclair 396). Now in their fourth marriage each, Babette and Jack presumably tell each other everything. Jack sees Babette as a simple woman, one who "lacks the guile for conspiracies of the body" and who is not "a gift-bearer of great things as the world generally reckons them" (*WN* 5). She is supposed to be the opposite of his other wives, many of whom had ties to the intelligence world and all of whom were plotters. To show the depth of their affection for one another, DeLillo has them competing for pleasure by making them argue over which pornography to read, and in sadness by making each one claim that to live without the other

would be insufferable. In reality, Jack states that although Babette may wish to die first, he does not truly feel the same way. Also, though he thinks they share everything, Babette turns out to be as much a plotter as any of his former wives. Indeed, Babette has engaged in an extra-marital affair in order to secure a drug called "Dylar", which is supposed to alleviate one's fear of death. Her desire to procure dylar has lead her to lie, plot, and cheat on her husband. The story of her affair has all the elements of a late-night B-movie: shady corporations, strange drugs, sex in dirty hotels off the interstate with strange men. Jack is obviously taken aback by this situation. He incessantly repeats that "this is not the point of Babette" (*WN* 193). This is because Jack the modernist seeks stability in identity through his relationship with his wife. Babette is the woman who "gathers and tends the children, teaches a course in an adult education program, belongs to a group of volunteers who read to the blind" (*WN* 5). She is an ample woman whose ampleness makes her dependable, stable. Her instability of self prompts his instability of self, and therefore proves that Jack's faith in marriage to supply stability and authenticity is ill-founded.

The same ironic reversal applies to parenthood. As stated above, through erroneous reasoning the Gladneys are under the assumption that they are safe from death as long as children depend on them. Furthermore, Jack's role of father-figure grants him a certain stability of identity in keeping with family traditions. Unfortunately, DeLillo spins Jack's dependence on fatherhood and exposes it as a myth that no longer offers security in contemporary society. Jack and Babette constantly reinforce ignorance and misinformation within the family.

Not only could it be argued that they purposely keep Wilder from learning to speak, but Jack plainly states: “the family is the cradle of the world’s misinformation” (*WN* 81). Ironically, in *White Noise* the children seem better prepared and more willing to face threats than their parents. The most subversive of the Gladney children is without a doubt Heinrich who “...at fourteen, knows science that shows how small are man’s chance for survival” (Leclair 396), but his sisters prove just as able to deal with the fears that paralyze their parents. For example, Steffie volunteers to participate in simulated disasters, and Denise regularly familiarizes herself with the illnesses and sedatives contained in a medical book. In a particular scene, Steffie takes her father’s hand in a supermarket aisle. Jack identifies the hand-holding as a request for paternal protection, and uses this occasion to raise the question of her friendship with her half-sister Denise. “Jack presumes that he is about to engage in an implicit banter: his blessing as a father in exchange for some concessions by Steffie to family peace” (Ferraro 32). In the discussion that ensues, Steffie reverses the positions of power and reveals her suspicions about Babette:

Steffie: “She’s trying to find out the side effect of the stuff that Baba uses.”

Jack: “What does Baba use?”

“Don’t ask me, ask Denise.”

“How do you know she uses anything?”

“Ask Denise.”

“Why don’t I ask Baba?”

“Ask Baba.” (*WN* 36-37)

Though Steffie works diplomatically in order to spare her father’s pride, there is no doubt who leads this exchange – not even for Jack, who comes to realize that the taking of the hand was meant to comfort him, not her. “Steffie was holding

my hand in a way I'd come to realize, over a period of time, was not meant to be gently possessive, as I'd thought at first, but reassuring" (*WN* 39). Again, DeLillo proves that Gladney's strategy is inefficient in contemporary America.

Since familial duties and parenting fail as a defense mechanism against his fears, Jack Gladney turns to professional endeavors to secure an identity as well as surround himself with a crowd to ward off death. Obviously, Jack's position as founder and chairman for Hitler studies offers a great deal of prestige and authority. It also allows him to attach himself to the aura of an historical figure that somehow exists beyond life and death. "Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you" (*WN* 287). In order to fit the part, Jack first alters his identity; Jack Gladney is simply too common a name to figure alongside Hitler. "Jack Gladney would not do, he said, and asked me what other names I might have at my disposal. We finally agreed that I should invent an extra initial and call myself J.A.K. Gladney, a tag I wore like a borrowed suit" (*WN* 16). Of course, this name resonates loudly within the contemporary American psyche. "Babette said she liked the series J.A.K. and did not this it was attention-getting in a cheap sense. To her it intimated dignity, significance and prestige" (17). Not content to immerse himself in the aura of the world's most televised mass murderer, Jack finds occasion to tap into the aura of the world's most televised assassination victim.

After changing his name, Jack completes his metamorphosis by changing his physical appearance. Indeed, Jack's physical self is as commonplace as his name, to a point where his superiors warn about "[his] tendency to make a feeble

presentation of self”, and that he should “grow out” (17) into Hitler. In order to adequately signify his importance as a Hitler scholar, Jack must simulate a more imposing physical self. To accomplish this task he gives himself an image of mystique by wearing heavy-framed glasses with dark lenses to go with his black academic gown as well as one of physical importance by adding weight to his already imposing frame. This physical transformation has the double benefit of intensifying his aura of authority while supplying him with a physical self that echoes Hitler’s presence: impressive, mysterious, authoritarian, larger than life.

Ironically, Jack is critical of individuals who build their identity and sense of community around stylistic poses and affected performances. Jack is at times a very accurate and ironic cultural critic: for example when he identifies those who effectively incorporate the simulacra of their demographic or income tier into their actions and appearance, those “[who trade] upon their culture’s most stable currency, that of the image” (“Tales” 95). The most blatant example of this is the day of the station wagons, the scene which opens the novel. As Jack Gladney narrates the return of students after summer break, which he refers to as a “spectacle” (*WN* 3), his attention is drawn to the parents who accompany them and use this occasion to strengthen their bond as a crowd through rehearsed poses and simulated acts:

The parents stand sun-dazed near their automobiles, seeing images of themselves in every direction. The conscientious suntans. The well-made face and wry looks. They feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition. The women crisp and alert, in diet trim. Knowing people’s names. Their husbands content to measure out the time, distant but ungrudging, accomplished in parenthood, something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage. This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might

do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation (*WN* 3-4)

It is difficult not to note the satiric tone which laces this passage, the “corrosive power of satire” (“Tales” 96). Here Jack reacts similarly to his reception of Murray’s theories during the scene of the most photographed barn in America. He not impressed with individuals coming together and becoming themselves through such superficial artifices, and he is quick to view this display image and style as physical manifestation of the Baudrillardian notion that the simulation exists to hide the fact that there is no reality, that these postmodern Stepford wives and early television sitcom patriarchs of the “strong, silent type” variety lack authentic selfhood, they are “void at the core” (“Tales” 96).

The irony is that the man on the surface so intent on discovering authentic selfhood – and so critical of simulated identities – instinctively trades in his modernist considerations for the comfort of simulacra and simulated identity. Gladney is aware of this ironic reality: “I am the false character that follows the name around” (*WN* 17). Jack Gladney and his professional alter-ego J.A.K. are no more authentic than the individuals who populate the scene of the station wagons. The medieval robe, the dark glasses, the heavy frame, and the three initials: bits and pieces of information provided via media which come together in the form of a collage to stand for an authentic identity. Unfortunately, the man beneath the robe is also “void at the core”. He is the Hitler scholar who does not speak German. Without the mediated veneer to simulate his identity in Technicolor and high-fidelity sound, Jack is normal, common, and mortal.

Jack's position of Chairman at an American college affords him the socio-economical comfort to feel safe within his demographic. Of course, money plays an important role in generating this feeling. Of all the problems that plague the Gladney household, financial concerns are not among them. But money is only part of the equation. When Jack walks to the automated teller machine to check his balance, his reaction is one of approval and individual power confirmed:

Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. (46)

Beyond Jack's financial ease, what has been authenticated and confirmed is that he has succeeded in a social system where to succeed is to be blessed with a supposed form of invulnerability. Jack's reasoning follows the logic of what Frank Lentricchia identifies as "...the media political right, which believes that America is good and that only individuals go astray (the homeless bring it on themselves, as Reagan used to say)" (Intro 4). By choosing a career that comes with its share of social prestige and excelling at it, Jack has secured his position in the American core, the American crowd. His profession grants him existential credit. Media coverage has taught him that deadly situations incurred by nature's wrath or man's ingeniousness gone awry only affect those who are not fortunate enough to be in his professional position. College professors are never victims of floods or toxic spills: only those who keep pick-up trucks on cement blocks in their front yard are at risk. "I'm not just a college professor. I'm head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people

who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are” (WN 117). Because he is blessed with his professional success, the only side-effect of man’s abuse of nature and technology Jack Gladney seems to experience are stunningly beautiful sunsets.

However, DeLillo is quick to illustrate the logical fallacy of this invulnerability-through-professional-success reasoning. First, the novel takes place over the course of a full academic year, which in contemporary society is a clear metaphor for the cycle of life and death; making Jack a college professor brings added attention to this metaphor. Moreover, Jack builds his academic career around a figure which more than any other symbolizes death on a massive scale. The advantages are immediate: through Hitler’s aura he achieves professional success and world-wide academic renown. “Nobody on the faculty of any college or university in this part of the country can so much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction...The college is internationally known as a result of Hitler studies” (11). Paradoxically, Jack grows in significance through his association with Hitler, but he can also counter-act his intense fear of death by disappearing within the shadow of this monstrous figure. However, the move is truly Faustian – the cost of entering into a bargain whereby he can profit from Hitler’s aura seeming dominion over life and death is dearer than Gladney realizes. He figuratively sacrifices his only son when he names him Heinrich, a name ominously reminiscent of Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS and one of Hitler’s right-hand-man, because “[he] felt a gesture was called for” (63). He carries his copy of *Mein Kampf* with him wherever he goes the way a crippled

uses a crutch. The book acts as a form of protective device –from death as well as situations of stress and discomfort – and he is completely dependant of it. Despite being obviously intellectually gifted, he is unable to learn German –the devil’s dirty trick, the fine print Jack omitted to read when he signed his contract. His incapacity to learn German forces him to “live on the edge of a landscape of vast shame” (31). It not only threatens to expose him as a living simulacra within the academic world, but more importantly to Jack it puts him at risk of being cast out of Hitler’s comforting aura, to force him to face death outside of the core.

This association with death and the inauthenticity of Hitler’s aura catches up to Jack when the toxic airborne event occurs near Blacksmith. He instinctively interprets the closing of highways and weather reports of air masses blowing north as mediated confirmation that the system is keeping him safe. “They’re looking the thing more or less squarely in the eye. They’re on top of the situation” (115). His son Heinrich, acting here as the voice of the unmediated reality, counters his father’s dismissive arguments by reminding him that the weather changes, that death is impervious to simulated media-speech. DeLillo soon confirms Heinrich’s suspicions: the Gladney’s are forced to flee the toxic level event, and after Jack exposes himself to Nyodene D authorities confirm that he has invited death within. Though the characters in *White Noise* have a difficulty imagining death “at [a high] income level” (6), DeLillo reminds his reader that disaster strikes without discrimination or favoritism, income or occupation, from the floodplains of California to the heart of Manhattan.

Leonard Wilcox argues that for DeLillo and Baudrillard the incursion of modernist subjectivity by the precession of simulated images leads to the perversion of the modernist notion of epiphany resulting from artistic creation and the disappearance of “heroic” attempts to imagine alternative ways of interpreting reality. He defines this “heroic” search as “modernism’s struggle through extraordinary artistic and intellectual effort to create meaning from the flux and fragments of an atomized contemporary world, to pierce the veil, to reveal underlying truths” (Wilcox 198). However, he goes on to posit that for DeLillo the modernist ideal of heroic search for meaning is complicated by the “smooth operational surface of communication” (“Ecstasy” 127) which defines the contemporary information society. Indeed, this ideal relies on the notion of an authentic subjectivity paired with an unfettered imagination which make moments of true illumination possible. Wilcox identifies this as the modernist epiphany: “a moment of profound imaginative perception in which fragments are organized and essence revealed, [in which] meaning is contained within the constellation of luminescent images” (Wilcox 198). Unfortunately in *White Noise* such moments of epiphany towards the coming together of fragments into grids or cores are not the result of imagination or authentic subjectivity of a schizophrenic Baudrillardian fear resulting from existing within the realm of simulations and the hyperreal. In true modernist fashion Gladney attempts to find meaning by sifting through the white noise of contemporary America – through newspapers, computer-generated data, and of course television – but his efforts are prompted by a paranoid sense of dread and marred by identity simulation in a hyperreal

world. By ironically making brand names of the automobile industry, shopping sprees and automated bank machines the source of Gladney's epiphany, DeLillo signifies the death of modernism in the "empty seriality and decentering forces" (198) of postmodernism.

If Jack Gladney represents the modernist at once lost in and submitted to postmodern world, if he is both critic and active participant, then Murray Jay Siskind is the postmodernist who believes simulacra-laden hyperreality and ecstatic mediated image societies should be embraced. Murray, far from sharing his colleague's unease towards what he identifies as a truly Baudrillardian contemporary America, clearly sees the possibilities the system offers for profit and pleasure. His role could easily be construed as unimportant when compared to his modernist counterpart: "he is comic, a man who sniffs groceries, another of DeLillo's almost Dickensian eccentrics, as Murray's colleagues in the Department of American Environments most certainly are" (Duvall 443). However, Murray is the one who most pointedly defines DeLillo's concern with Baudrillardian themes of hyperreal, simulacra, construction of aura, and describes how these themes function in contemporary society to palliate individuals pervading sense of dread. This does not imply that Murray somehow stands outside of the hyperreal or examines it objectively. As Frank Lentricchia notes, this system of simulation and image not only "shapes the texture of what he sees...he knows how to turn his knowledge into playfulness", but it also leads Murray to mold his physical self into "the third person of his dreams" ("Tales" 101). Indeed, he dresses in corduroy, a fabric "he'd associated with higher learning in some impossibly

distant and tree-shaded place” (*WN* 11). But Murray is more than a character who comments on the system or someone who submits to it; he is, as John Duvall posits, “an agent of action, the character whose goals and desires, more than any other, become occasion to plot. In a novel that is essentially plotless – a fact not surprising given that the narrator believes that all plots lead deathward – we have to turn to Murray to discover the desires that motivate plot” (Duvall 443). Murray not only shows how desires motivate plot, but, more importantly, how a system built on simulacra can be used to further these plots.

Murray’s Mephistophelean tendency is made obvious early on. Having recognized the possibilities of power and the professional aura of Jack’s appropriation of Hitler, Murray openly admits that he wishes to simulate Jack’s career by substituting Hitler for Elvis. “He is now your Hitler, Gladney’s Hitler...I marvel at the effort. It was masterful, shrewd and preemptive. It’s what I want to do with Elvis” (*WN* 11). Whereas Jack’s motivation behind attaching himself with Hitler is in majority motivated by his fear of death, Murray sees the opportunity to tap into a source of academic power within the college and beyond by attaching himself to the country’s most famous rock artist. By complimenting Jack and reinforcing his role of authority (another of his strategies to ward off fear of death), Murray seduces his way into Jack’s confidence. Once this is established he can use his interpretive skills to mentor Jack about the hyperreal as he does during the scene of the most photographed barn in America; a theory Jack is obviously aware of considering the “entire system evolved around [Hitler], a structure with countless substructures and interrelated fields of study, a history

within a history” (11-12), as well as the subject matter comprised in his program: “theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms” (25). Jack’s academic creation incorporates many of Baudrillard’s theories, such as mediated reality, simulacra-laden structures, and appropriation of history into an ever-present present, which gives Murray an opening to further his own ends.

DeLillo grants Murray the opportunity to test his plotting skills when one of his colleagues, Dimitrios Kotsakis, turns out to have prior claim to Elvis as an object of academic study. He prompts Jack into sharing his academic spotlight by participating in a lecture where the two would discuss similarities between Elvis and Hitler. Murray’s tutelage is immediately perceivable in this passage, where Jack’s discussion of crowds attending Hitler’s speech closely resembles Murray’s earlier monologues about the importance of the barn. Crowds formed around Hitler for the same reason they form around the barn: to maintain an aura of authenticity, to ward off death. “Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to ward off death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone...they were there to be a crowd” (73). As a tribute to Murray’s success, Jack only realizes the importance of what he has just transpired after the deed is done. “I had been generous with the power and madness at my disposal, allowing my subject to be associated with an infinitely lesser figure...we all had an aura to maintain, and in sharing mine with a friend I was risking the very things that made me untouchable” (73-74). Furthermore, Murray’s influence appears in Jack’s language, since “the choice of

“aura” to describe his power is Murray’s word and clearly depends on Murray’s previous articulation of the concept while viewing the barn” (Duvall 446).

Jack’s position of power within the college is not the only thing Murray is trying to usurp from Jack. Indeed, John Duvall argues that Murray is also intent on seducing Babette. After all, Murray is identified early on as a “world-weary sexual sophisticate” (445), someone who moved from New York to “...be free of cities and sexual entanglements” (*WN* 10). Before meeting Babette he tells Jack that “[he] likes simple men and complicated women” (11). Though Jack’s rapport with the contemporary society that surrounds him is extremely complex, his manipulation by Murray proves itself to be surprisingly simple. On the other hand, dealings in drug addiction and extra-marital affairs have shown Babette to be much more complicated than Jack believes she is. This is the ideal situation for a man like Murray, a man whose interest in identity simulation and the precession of the image spills into his sexual life. “Murray exhibits a more polymorphous sexuality, choosing as part of his reading matter *American Transvestite*” (Duvall 445). Moreover, although he claims to wish to get away from sexually cunning people, he is one of those sexually cunning people, “who outside the evacuation camp bargains with a prostitute to allow him to perform the Heimlich maneuver on her” (445), and in the supermarket he casually drops hints of sexual interest to Babette right in front of Jack: “I’d ask you to visit my room but it’s too small for two people unless they’re prepared to be intimate” (*WN* 20). Because of this, Duvall deduces that Murray’s seduction is a double one, whereby he seduces Jack with his interpretations of contemporary society,

and Babette with sly smiles and sexual innuendo. Though there is no proof that he is successful in the latter, the textual evidence strengthens the overall argument that Murray is an agent of plot who uses the “realities” of postmodern life to achieve his goals.

Murray’s pattern of seduction through interpretation spreads further than Jack and Babette. Indeed, even his students become targets of his campaign to pass onto others his enthusiastic embrace of the postmodern. Armed with the knowledge that his students feel estranged with television, which they blame for all the ills of society, he attempts to convince them that “looking for a realm of meaning beyond surfaces, networks, and commodities is unnecessary; the information society provides its own sort of epiphanies, and watching television, an experience he describes as “close to mystical”, is one of them” (Wilcox 199). Murray sees television as a gateway to Baudrillard’s “ecstasy of communication”; one of the premier experiences that contemporary society has to offer. The students “are ashamed of their television past” (WN 51), but Murray teaches that television is filled with “sacred formulas...chants...mantras” (51). The medium is a primal force in the household, the ultimate physical manifestation of free-floating referents and simulacra. It offers constant myths and quasi-religious experiences. “It welcomes us into the grid” (51). His enthusiasm is intoxicating, and this seduction strategy is similar to the one he uses on Jack. It presents the same Baudrillardian themes Murray employs to draw himself into Jack confidence in order to draw them into the postmodern flow. “To follow Murray’s celebration of the postmodern, however, grants him his desired mastery over

others...everyone shall enter the postmodern flow – everyone except Murray, who will remain distanced precisely in order to plot, interpret, and control.”(Duvall 448). The primacy of the image, the importance of simulation in society and identity formation, the unifying aura of that which is constantly already reproduced in the hyperreal, these are the theories present in the postmodern which Murray wants those around him to adopt. Murray knows the rules of the hyperreal world better than anyone.

White Noise depicts an America where the distinction between the real and the image is impossible. The ever increasing flow of images, commercials, data, and information no longer reproduces reality, but rather separate themselves from their referent to stand as their own reality. By doing so a self-referential system of signs has been produced, and myths of authenticity have been forfeited. This electronically generated reality – this hyperreality – endangers human identity, leading individuals to construct their selves through sound bites and movie clips which are incapable of placating an intense fear of death and non-existence. Before this reality two distinct attitudes emerge: first, the nostalgic individual seeks refuge in older forms of authenticity, in myths of family and professional success which ultimately fail because the search for authenticity in the postmodern hyperreal is a fruitless endeavor. The other is to use the proliferation of signs and codes to manipulate others to join this community of simulation in order to achieve personal interest. Whichever the case, there is no liberation found in the flexible selves made possible by the dominance of the simulacra, “selves that find release of primary desire from oppressive structures in

a ludic postmodern schizophrenia” (Wilcox 209). In *White Noise* the loss of subjectivity before a dizzying quantity of technological and simulating mechanisms is an unavoidable fact of the postmodern world.

Chapter two:

Dial-A-Rama: Television and Consumerism as Mediated Reality in *White Noise*

DeLillo's postmodern America is defined as a synthesis of Jean Baudrillard's major theories: a land where perpetual mediation through television and rampant consumerism flatten out into a reality caught up in cycles of representation. As shown in the previous chapter, this theory offers to the characters in *White Noise* that which they most ardently seek: easing of their unrelenting fear of death through the creation of a collective culture of the image and by simplifying the process of identity simulation. Television also possesses the power to ward off death by broadcasting the primacy of the image, but it serves the hyperreal in other ways as well. First, television's constant presence and anesthetizing continuous suggestion offers the opportunity to escape reality through entertainment, but also supplies the tools to experience reality and nature second-hand, thereby mitigating any possible threats because the participation in 'reality' is mediated, and therefore vicarious. As one of Murray's colleagues claims: "for most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is" (*WN* 66). Indeed, the power of the medium is unmistakable: it intrudes upon the narration, informs the characters' language and their perception of reality, and influences their actions and personalities – sometimes with dramatic results. While it is dangerously reductive to blame television for all the ills of society, its influence on DeLillo's postmodern America is undeniable. As John Frow argues: "The central mediating agency in this world is television" (425). The characters in *White Noise* rely on mass-media to structure their language, to guide their interpretation of reality and in some case

to mold their personality; therefore a serious study of this novel would be incomplete without a close examination of its treatment of television.

When reality intrudes upon the characters' mediated existence, mass consumption stands ready to offer protection in the form of comfort and reassurance: economic privilege is an insulation from the real. For every fear there is a product, for every apprehension a manufactured object. These items are conveniently stored in shopping malls and grocery stores: places which in *White Noise* possess quasi-mystical properties. However, Baudrillard's work demystifies mass consumption and identifies it as yet another fatal strategy. In *The System of Objects* he posits that consumption's power to alleviate fears is illusory since fulfillment through consumption is a planned motivation disguised as freedom, while *Consumer Society* is an argument against the supposed freedom offered by credit and a broad range of consumer choices which actually hide a new set of chains in the form of social control used to produce the consumers that a market-driven society needs. Through his characters' constant consumer binging and purging, DeLillo shows that attempting to counter fear of death by consuming goods is a doomed endeavor.

The television set is a central figure in the Gladney household. Indeed, television chatter not only pervades as background noise – as white noise through most of the narrative, but it also constitutes much of the white noise woven into everyday contemporary American life which the title alludes to. DeLillo's use of television is such that the medium is as much part of the Gladney family as Babette or Jack. Indeed, the Gladneys take turns sharing the television as it

regularly migrates from one room to another. This attitude resembles the way in which each member of the Gladney family relieves each other in caring for the infant Wilder. Moreover, DeLillo time and again has the television participate in conversations by inserting its comments during dialogues between characters. The examples of this are numerous: "...the TV said: "Let's sit half lotus and think about our spines"..."if it breaks easily into pieces, it is called shale. When wet, it smells like clay"...The TV said: "Until Florida surgeons attached an artificial flipper"...The TV said: "And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio" (18, 28, 29, 61). Like the rest of the family, it has its own personality: when Babette appears on a community channel program, the sound will mysteriously not go up. "Denise crawled up to the set and turned the volume dial. Nothing happened" (105). Moreover, the influence of television is made obvious by the numerous breaks into the narration in the form of advertising slogans and brand names: "The Airport Marriott, the Downtown Travelodge, the Sheraton Inn and Conference Center" (15), "Krylon, Rust-Oleum, Red Devil" (159). DeLillo does not put these lists in quotation marks, nor does he clearly identify their source. As Michael Moses Valdez posits: "It is clear that these incursions cannot be directly credited to Jack Gladney's narrative voice. They are the white noise of postmodern America that envelops the Gladneys and the inhabitants of Blacksmith" (64).

In *Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard discusses objects such as paintings and sculptures that used to serve as pure representations of reality. These objects represented reality without substituting themselves for it. "There used to be,

before, a specific class of allegorical objects: mirrors, images, works of art – simulacra, but transparent and manifest (you didn't confuse the counterfeit with the original)...and pleasure consisted in discovering the "natural" in what was artificial and counterfeit" (143). However, in contemporary society the line between real and simulation is erased and the binary opposition between the two is turned into a single "operational totality" (143). The objects have come to signify reality rather than represent it. These objects are no longer transparent, and since there is no longer a distinction between what is natural and what is counterfeit for the contemporary observer (who has come to rely on images to form the real and determine their social and cultural situation) these objects have become very powerful. Because it eradicates the distinction between reality and Reality Television, between nature and the Nature Channel, television is the predominant "technological expression of an entire environment of the image" ("Tales" 89).

The power of television in *White Noise* can also be attributed to the fact that it is one of the Gladneys' only windows into the world beyond Blacksmith. After all, Blacksmith is a small college town free of the violence, poverty, and pollution which plague large cities. The name of the town "...advertises old-fashioned values and country goodness" (Keeseey 135). It also offers all the comforts normally found in modern upper middle-class suburban areas: shopping malls, supermarkets, and it is the perfect setting for the Gladneys to live out their "Brady Bunch" (135) existence. As Douglas Keeseey observes:

There does not seem to be anything wrong with this picture of perfect happiness, no need to adjust the set. The flaw is hard to

spot because it is everywhere; the problem resides in the very means by which the Gladneys seek their happiness, the very media they trust to bring them fulfillment and distraction. (135)

Living in their hermetically sealed environment, the Gladney's have come to depend on media representations to get a sense of the real world. In a postmodern world where signs and images increase exponentially, the Gladneys' surroundings are dominated by simulacra rather than real events or objects. As Keesey accurately points out: "the town of Blacksmith has no blacksmith, nor does it contain any simple craftsmen whose work brings them in direct contact with the natural world, as a blacksmith does in the making and fitting of horseshoes" (136). The town and its name stand in for a reality which no longer applies; it facilitates the illusion that the people of Blacksmith still actually experience a real contact with the artisanal, pre-machine age of the "authentic" America.

To illustrate the consequences of experiencing nature through television, consider one of the litanies of simulacra which populate the narration. In the third section of the novel, DeLillo inserts the following subliminal enumeration: "CABLE HEALTH, CABLE WEATHER, CABLE NEWS, CABLE NATURE" (231). This example verbalizes the unspoken agreement between postmodern man and postmodern existence that first-hand experience of nature, of the world outside the living room, is no longer necessary because now nature can be accessed by pressing the buttons on the remote control. "The sequence promises a god-like control of the human "environment"; health, weather, news, nature itself, all are at the disposal of the consumer" (Moses 64). Of course, what is

rendered through television is a representation of nature, a simulacrum, but the result is not only that the image of nature comes to replace nature but also that “...man assumes sovereignty over a reality that was once understood to transcend man himself” (65). Nature, which once stood as a force superior to man – as a manifestation of magic, power and dread – has now been processed through television and has been turned into an image produced and consumed by man. Michael Valdez Moses, who reads *White Noise* from a Heideggerian perspective, identifies this televised, technological approach to nature as “Enframing” (65). He defines the concept of enframing as “...the essence of technology, [whereby] nature is “revealed” to be at man’s disposal, and in so doing is transformed into a *thing* which man chooses to consume at his convenience” (65). DeLillo’s postmodern America has completely absorbed the concept of enframing, to such a degree that it would be pointless for the Gladneys to travel out of Blacksmith to visit national parks and natural wonders; the Discovery Channel and the Outdoor Life Network offer simulacra of these very experiences twenty-four hours a day without the viewer need to leave the comfort of the couch or the recliner.

Suddenly nature becomes man’s dominion: it is now man’s responsibility, a product which can be corrected and managed through modern science and technology. When Jack confronts Babette about her addiction to dylar, she offers this explanation of how man should approach a particular problem: “you know how I am. I think everything is correctible. Given the right attitude and the proper effort, a person can change a harmful condition by reducing it to its simplest parts. You can make lists, invent categories, devise charts and graphs” (191-192). Of

course, this conception of the world should be taken as satire on DeLillo's part, but it also accurately expresses the postmodern treatment of nature by man. "There are no natural activities, only technical procedures by which consciousness learns to master its environment" (Moses 68). Babette's theory is the very basis of postmodern man's approach to the world he lives in. This theory is more effectively argued by Murray. When Jack confesses that his exposure to Nyodene D could have deadly results, he suggests that Jack trust the almost supernatural power of technology:

You could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out. This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality...it prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out. New devices, new techniques every day. Give yourself over to it, Jack. Believe in it. They'll insert you in a gleaming tube, irradiate your body with the basic stuff of the universe. Light, energy, dreams. God's own goodness. (*WN* 285)

Through television, nature becomes a consumable product of consumer culture. The result is a new reality where every problem can be fixed, even death.

Of course, DeLillo is quick to point out the flaws in this reductive line of thought. For every technological advancement which makes nature more manageable and immortality appear more possible there is a technological failure which results in an ecological disaster. Chernobyl, Hiroshima, Three Mile Island, and The Airborne Toxic Event are all reminders that "the more vigorously man pursues the ultimate dream of modern technological science – the conquest of the final limit, death – the more rapidly that dream seems to recede and the more imminent seems the historically unprecedented nightmare that technology visits upon man" (Valdez 70-71). Furthermore, DeLillo seems to argue that technology

is more dangerous when it operates under the surface than when its effects are manifest. The airborne toxic event is a deadly threat, but the characters in *White Noise* can see it and immediately identify it as such. The more dangerous form of technology is that which seduces man by creating the illusion of being beneficial when in truth it is a potential source of harm. Jack is aware of technology's dual nature when he posits that his son's receding hairline might be the result of exposure to chemical waste or food conservation agents. "Did his mother consume some kind of gene-piercing substance when she was pregnant? Have I raised him, unwittingly, in the vicinity of a chemical dump site, in the path of air currents that carry industrial wastes capable of producing scalp degeneration?" (22). Technology may govern man's relationship to nature and offer the promise of immortality, but DeLillo asks what dangers reside in seemingly harmless electro-magnetic waves and common household appliances.

When nature is televised and technology becomes the power that alleviates postmodern fear and promises immortality, postmodernity suddenly produces a new religion. The Gladneys do not understand how the microscopic organisms used by authorities will eradicate the airborne toxic event; they are forced to accept it with varying degrees of fear and faith. "The greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear" (*WN* 161). In an exchange between Jack and his son, Heinrich, the skeptic Heinrich argues that the acceptance of the benign nature of many of postmodern life's occurrences is erroneous. "You're so sure that's rain. How do you know it's not sulfuric acid from factories across the river? How do you know it's not fallout from a war in China?" (24). There is

more at play here than the time tested tradition of argument between father and son: it shows that the postmodern individual does not know how the technology he takes for granted works or what dangers it brings with it. Heinrich is interesting because he often seems to be the lone voice of questioning, the only character not willing to accept the image reality so prevalent in *White Noise* at face value. His incapacity to trust technology blindly leads him to acquire knowledge about the thing that threatens him, which helps him establish himself as a source of reliable information during the evacuation camp scene. "My own son was at the center of things, speaking in his new-found voice, his tone of enthusiasm for runaway calamity. He was talking about the airborne toxic event in a technical way, although his voice all but sang with prophetic disclosure" (130). However, Heinrich is here the exception which proves the rule. The skeptic becomes the prophet, speaking the soothing words of technology which calm the crowd surrounding him. Heinrich's knowledge is the new gospel, and the victims of the airborne toxic event are eager to hear his words in order to be reassured. God is dead and has been replaced by the deity Technology, which brings its own set of litanies of empirical law and its promise of immortality from the pulpit of television. But this divinity resembles the vengeful God of the Old Testament, who promises eternal life while constantly threatening to unleash the apocalypse under the guise of a terrible ecological disaster.

Television's stranglehold does not limit itself to nature, but also to the individual's perception and management of the natural. In *White Noise* all experiences, whether dangerous or common-place, are instinctively filtered

through a screen in high definition in order to be perceived as real. Babette, obviously recognizing the power which television holds over the Gladney family, tries to counter-act the medium's influence through mandatory television-watching sessions. "She seemed to think that if kids watched television one night a week with parents or stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome domestic sport. Its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power would be gradually reduced" (*WN* 16). However, attempts at resistance are futile. There is no way to eradicate the mediating effect of television – the narcotizing, anaesthetizing power of the medium – nor is there any real desire to do so. Television offers the tools to interpret and manage a frightening reality through the language and images of mass-media. By using the logic and vocabulary of B-movies and the evening news, the characters of *White Noise* reduce both benign and traumatic events to familiar, non-threatening occurrences.

In *White Noise*, most characters' perception of reality is marred by the seeming omnipotence of television. Even Murray – who arguably distinguishes himself as the novel's most devout postmodern theorist and therefore as the character most aware of television's power over its American viewing audience – unconsciously slips broadcasted typifications into his language. This is made clear when he describes the boarders in his rooming house:

A woman who harbors a terrible secret. A man with a haunted look. A man who never comes out of his room. A woman who stands by the letter box for hours, waiting for something that never seems to arrive. A man with no past. A woman with a past. There is a smell about the place of unhappy lives in the movies that I really respond to. (10)

Murray's list is a collage of cinematic clichés, it resembles the list of characters of a Hollywood thriller or a televised drama series rather than the tenants of a boarding house. What this list suggests is that rather than make an attempt to get to know his fellow boarders, Murray instinctively attributes a familiar, stereotypical television personality to each of them.

The language Jack uses in order to describe and manage reality is just as suffused with televisual clichés as Murray's is. Jack's language is an example of what Fredric Jameson identifies as "pastiche". In *Postmodernism And the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson defines pastiche as "the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech of a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic" (34). Jameson's point is that while parody is conscious and volitional, pastiche is unconsciously imitative. When DeLillo has Jack employ the language of the evening news anchor or the logic of Hollywood scripts, he is not capitalizing on the uniqueness of the contemporary American language in order to make fun of it, but rather that Blacksmith has its own language which mimics the contemporary American language without parody. This language is the language of television, of the image. The only way Jack seems able to perceive the world is through televisual stereotypes. There are examples of this on practically every page of the novel. For instance, when Jack observes a crossing-guard one morning, he instinctively links the experience to a

soup commercial. “A woman in a yellow slicker held up traffic to let some children cross. I pictured her in a soup commercial taking off her oilskin hat as she entered the cheerful kitchen where her husband stood over a pot of smoky lobster bisque, a smallish man with six weeks to live” (22). By making all foreign experiences familiar, Jack insures his control over the proceedings. He uses language “...purely rhetorically, as a weapon in the service of the effort to make the physical world submit to the conceptual” (Reeve/Kerridge 311).

Another example of Jack’s tendency to classify people according to stereotypical televised categories is his discussion with Heinrich about the mass murderer with whom Heinrich plays chess through the post. Throughout the conversation Jack employs the language of an investigative news reporter:

Did he care for his weapons obsessively? Did he have an arsenal stashed in his shabby little room off a six-story concrete car park? [...] Did he fire from a highway overpass, a rented room? [...] Did he write in his diary before he went up to the roof? Did he make tapes of his voice, go to the movies, read books about other mass murderers to refresh his memory? [...] Were the victims total strangers? Was it a grudge killing? Did he get fired from his job? Had he been hearing voices? [...] How did he deal with the media? Give lots of interviews, write letters to the editor of the local paper, try to make a book deal? (44-45)

Part of this line of questioning is voyeuristic: Jack displays the excessive curiosity of a well-trained audience member. However, his affected, media-influenced tone shows how eager he is to identify the killer’s place within the plethora of different television murderer types. Jack is interested in the convict’s motive and *modus operandi* because this will tell him in which category of television assassin Heinrich’s chess partner should be classified. The real killer is complex and therefore frightening; answering a set of stock questions generally used on

broadcast portrayals of mass murderers grants Jack control over the situation. Unfortunately, this way of experiencing the world cannot be turned on and off like a television set. Therefore Jack processes even the most commonplace events through a televisual filter.

Jack's use of definite articles is particularly interesting when considering his use of language to manage reality. For example, whenever Jack ruminates on the topic of Babette's adultery, he decorates the scene with objects such as "the fire retardant carpet" and the "the car rental keys" on "the dresser" (194). This use of the definite article removes any individuality from the objects in question and effectively binds them to a group of similar items seen on television and makes them all alike. Taken as particular details, the carpet and keys remind Jack of a painful incident: his wife's adultery. However, when Jack refers to them as "the car rental keys", they are absorbed into a familiar televisual stereotype. In other words, these specific keys are linked to "the keys" which Jack recognizes from so many sitcoms and TV dramas. They become familiar because they refer back to a mediated reality derived from television and are therefore harmless.

The most alarming consequence of this mediated perception of reality is that those natural occurrences which cannot be reproduced are erroneously considered artificial. This is revealed in a scene in which Jack and Heinrich witness the burning of the insane asylum. The scene begins in customary fashion: Jack and Heinrich employ the mediated language of catch phrases and evening news headlines to transform a potentially threatening event into a familiar image,

an everyday happening, experienced time and again from the safety of the living room couch:

“Most of these fires in old buildings start in the electrical wiring,” Heinrich said. “Faulty wiring. That’s one phrase you can’t hang around for too long without hearing.”
 “Most people don’t burn to death,” I said. “They die of smoke inhalation.”
 “That’s the other phrase,” he said. (239)

So far, nothing seems out of the ordinary. The characters are reacting the same way they always seem to in *White Noise*: mediating the real experience with television lingo to make the event controllable or, in this case, enjoyable. The proceeding takes on airs of a father-son outing; a number of Blacksmith’s residents are inexplicably drawn to the conflagration. “The fathers and sons crowded the sidewalk, pointing at one or another part of the half gutted structure” (240). However, this strategy fails when the real begins to invade the simulated in the shape of strange chemical odor. “An ancient, spacious and terrible drama was being compromised by something unnatural, some small and nasty intrusion...it was as though we had been forced to recognize a second kind of death. One was real, the other synthetic” (240). It could be argued that the intrusion is the synthetic presence of technology in an otherwise “natural” proceeding: the burning of wood and the charring of stone. DeLillo implies that today one can no longer be experienced without the other. Alternatively, the intrusion could be the smell of chemicals since olfactory stimulation cannot be broadcasted. Flames, since they can be televised, constitute Jack’s reality. Smells, since they cannot, are considered synthetic.

This strategy displays its full potential when life-threatening events occur. In times of crisis the characters in *White Noise* rely on narratives and scenarios supplied by television to suspend their growing fear. “Anything extraordinary or unexpected is warded off by the belief that each type of life unfolds according to its own preordained scenario for which television supplies the necessary sequence” (Reeve/Kerridge 311). For example, when the airborne toxic event first appears, Jack feels safe since he resides in Blacksmith. Being a well-trained television viewer, Jack knows that natural disasters never happen in Blacksmith, that nature’s wrath is reserved for specific places: “this is where California comes in” (*WN* 66). Television’s most invaluable contribution to the mediated reality is that it offers sealed-off areas where disasters can happen, areas far away from those watching. Unfortunately, DeLillo does not let his characters off so easy. As the airborne toxic event follows its course towards Blacksmith, Jack sees the poisonous black mass in the form of a ship escaped from a fantasy movie. “The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings” (127). Compared to this nightmare vision, the airborne toxic event appears quite harmless. Ultimately, Jack’s attempts to mediate reality fail and death finds its way to his core. In moments when his thoughts drift to the topic of his death he relies on the cinematic real to palliate his fear of death. “Atilla the Hun died young. Did he feel sorry for himself, succumb to self-pity and depression? I believe he lay in his tent, wrapped in animal skins, as in some internationally financed movie pic, and said brave cruel things to his aides and retainers. No weakening of the spirit...I want

to believe he was not afraid” (99-100). Even Murray succumbs to this strategy when the topic of death is evoked. When Jack tells him “I want to live”, Murray responds: “From the Robert Wise film of the same name, with Susan Hayward as Barbara Graham, a convicted murderess. Aggressive jazz score by Johnny Mandel” (283). What is important here is the habit of analogy, which is continual in this novel. One could say that Jack’s sense of the aesthetic – and his aesthetic gestures, such as this simile or analogy – is generated by such citation, the point of which is to ‘familiarize’ the strange, uncanny, or threatening.

At the conclusion of the second section of the novel, “The Airborne Toxic Event”, DeLillo cements his position on television as a medium which creates the postmodern reality. During the first day of the Gladneys’ forced exile from their home into an evacuation camp, the reader is introduced to “a man carrying a tiny TV set” (435). The man aimlessly wanders around the crowd, holding the television the way homeless men hold empty glasses or cardboard signs offering work for food. However, his speech offers a completely different perspective:

“There’s nothing on network,” he said to us. “Not a word, not a picture. On the Glassboro channel we rate fifty-two words by actual count. No film footage, no live report. Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore? Don’t those people know what we’ve been through? We were scared to death. We still are. We left our homes, we drove through blizzards, we saw the cloud. It was a deadly specter, right there above us. Is it possible nobody gives substantial coverage to such a thing? Half a minute, twenty seconds? Are they telling us it was insignificant? It was piddling? Are they so callous? Are they so bored by spills and contaminations and wastes? Do they think this is just television? “There’s too much television already – why show more?” Don’t they know it’s real?” (435).

Susan Sontag argues that “it is common now for people to insist about their experience of a violent event in which they were caught up [...] that “it seemed like a movie”. This is said in order to explain how real it was” (161). It has been established that the world of *White Noise* is founded on the concept of infinite representation, that it depicts “an environment that softens and absorbs, that receives the impact of dangerous things without recoil or echo” (Silhouette 344). It is interesting to note that what seems to render the evacuation meaningless for the victims is the lack of mediation. Of course, the speech is laden with satire, but beneath his humor DeLillo accurately expresses the depth of the evacuees desire for representation. When the TV man asks “Do they have to be two hundred dead, rare disaster footage, before they come flocking to a given site in their helicopters and network limos? Haven’t we earned the right to despise their idiot questions” (*WN* 436), he is articulating the idea that in *White Noise* only television has the power to legitimize fear. “Those who encountered the airborne toxic event intuitively know that television is not a mediation; it is the immediate. Television, the intertextual grid of electronic images, creates the Real” (Duvall 436).

The other question raised by the TV man’s speech is: what would be the reaction of the television viewing public had the plight of the evacuees been recorded and broadcasted? As John N. Duvall notes: “After concluding his speech, the TV man quite appropriately turns and looks into the face of Jack Gladney because Gladney’s vacant gaze ...implies that the audience for the TV man’s desired broadcast of the evacuees’ story would be, figuratively, the Jack

Gladney family...” (437). The Gladneys’ television habits not only renders television and reality synonymous, but their propensity for transforming violent content into pure entertainment suggests that the TV man’s estimation of two hundred bodies is conservative. Because networks and television channels are constantly competing for the attention of the nation’s Gladneys, it is essential for them cater to their market. Considering the Gladneys’ delight in televised violence, “news” becomes another word for disaster footage and horrible events are measured by their body count. By pointing to this distortion, DeLillo asks how significant the boundary is between television news reports and “lesser” mediums for informative media, for example the outlandish tabloid excerpts peppered throughout the novel.

The dual role of the Gladneys as both victims of a disastrous event and avid viewers of televised calamities draws attention to the issue of the opposing roles television plays for those who are televised and those who watch. If the TV man wishes so fiercely that his ordeal be televised, it is because he knows that mediation makes his experience “real”. This is echoed in an earlier chapter when survivors of a crash landing realize that there are no media in the city to cover their experience. This leads a man to remark: “they went through all that for nothing” (*WN* 92). Since media are supposed to be interested in disaster, the fact that they show no interest in the airborne toxic event makes it difficult for those who experience it to see it as a real disaster, and therefore to see themselves as authentic victims. This makes the task of understanding and mediating their terror very difficult. The TV man’s plea for media attention isn’t based on the

promise of fame and popularity, only that the mediation would authenticate his position as victim, would make him real in the world of formal television representation.

Experiencing reality through the screen transforms the activity into a form of entertainment and fundamentally changes those who enjoy this entertainment. This process not only desensitizes the individual to his fear of death, but also makes him numb to the pain and fear experienced by others when disaster strikes them. Floods, tsunamis and other natural calamities become the premise for captivating television broadcasts. The most blatant example of this occurs in an early chapter of *White Noise*. During one of Babette's mandatory evenings of television and Chinese food, the family is enthralled by a plethora of natural disasters:

There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never been so attentive to our duty, our Friday night assembly. Heinrich was not sullen, I was not bored, Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death...We were silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for something more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping. (64)

The nature of the program the Gladneys are watching during this episode is never clearly stated, but the phrase "documentary clips" suggests that what they are seeing is the televised representation of events which have actually taken place rather than a Hollywood disaster movie. Unfortunately, the Gladneys react to these clips as they would to a blockbuster picture of epic proportions, featuring computer generated images of meteor showers ravaging major American cities

and exploding cardboard houses and buildings. They seem impervious to the fact that these are “real” houses, which “real” people called home, in “real” parts of the world. Therefore it would seem that the sadness, pain, and death – the sum of human misery comprised in these images of nature’s wrath unleashed – does not make it through the television screen. Even Steffie, who usually “[becomes] upset every time something shameful or humiliating seems to happen to someone on the screen” (16), is incapable of feeling compassion or empathy for authentic human tragedy packaged in such an entertaining format. As DeLillo argues: “The message is processed, assimilated and made into something else entirely” (Silhouette 344). The Gladneys may find comfort in experiencing reality second-hand, but through this process they exile themselves from reality they are watching.

As death is aestheticized for the audience’s viewing pleasure, the line between violence and the representation of violence begins to fade away. In his seminar on car crashes, Murray suggests that the key to understanding the message behind these violent representations of human pain and suffering is to “look past the violence” (291), past the referent in the ‘real’ world of human events since in the postmodern world of *White Noise* the importance resides in representation, not content. This leads John Duvall to remark that “though Jack finds this advice strange, that is precisely what he and his children do instinctively when they watch television – they look past the violence and the human suffering of disaster and see only aestheticized forms, enhanced by repetition and technological innovation” (437-438). The repetition of painful images into a

continuous loop numbs the viewer to the pain represented by the images. As the content is slowly removed from the image, what the viewer is left with is a purely aesthetic representation. Eugene Goodheart notes:

We repeatedly witness the assassination of Kennedy, the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima, the disintegration of the Challenger space shuttle in the sky. Repetition wears away the pain. It also perfects the image or our experience of it. By isolating the event and repeating it, its content, its horror evaporates. (“Cinematic” 123)

Today, one feels compelled to add the televised coverage of Desert Storm, which featured cameras attached to bombs which broadcasted “the imminent destruction of targets (and, incidentally, people)...so cleanly and clearly” (Duvall 438), as well as the pulverized concrete and paper drifting like snow in Manhattan on 9/11. DeLillo claims: “We need [these images] to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response” (“Ruins” 35). However, in *White Noise* the image is repeated *ad nauseam*, and the message of human suffering is forfeited before the primacy of the aesthetic representation.

As much as television turns environment into a consumable simulation, it also offers the possibility to transform individuals into the broadcast image they wish to become; what Lentricchia identifies as “the universal third person – the “he” or “she” we dream about from our armchairs in front of the TV” (Tales 88). He suggests that for DeLillo postmodern American identity came over on the *Mayflower*, in the ideal of freedom of identity which the pilgrims brought with them across the Atlantic. “Sitting in front of the TV is like a perpetual Atlantic crossing – the desire for and the discovery of America constantly reenacted in our

move from the first-person consciousness to the third: from the self we are, but would leave behind, to the self we would become" (88). In *White Noise* DeLillo links the invention of television with the invention of postmodern America and the invention of mediated reality: the postmodern condition makes the distinction between real and simulation impossible to maintain and therefore makes the transition from "I" to idealized "he" or "she" possible. Those unsatisfied with the person they have become can tap into the cultural imaginary, mediated and continually reinforced through the genres of television, to reconstruct themselves into the being they wish to be. Through a televised conception of the world, man is freed from all constraints imposed by nature and can not only re-imagine himself at will but also make this constant re-imagination reality.

A number of characters avail themselves of the opportunity to mold their personality without the difficulties inherent to personal development. Television may "continually offer the possibilities of escape from reality, especially from the concreteness of death" (Heller 42), but it can also clarify confusion pertaining to one's identity or help one deal with loss. For example, Jack's German teacher found solace in meteorology after the passing of his mother:

"One day I saw a weather report on TV...It was as though a message was being transmitted from the weather satellite through the [weather man] and then to me in my canvas chair. I turned to meteorology for comfort... [Weather] brought me a sense of peace and security I'd never experienced." (*WN* 55).

Meteorology not only serves a purpose to his life, it also shapes his language. Phrases such as "nice day" and "looks like rain" (55) seep into his vocabulary as the weather offers him an opportunity to come out of his shell, to grow in self-

importance. Similarly, one of Murray's colleagues admits that mimicking a character in a movie provides him with comfort and emotional closing. "I copied Richard Widmark's sadistic laugh and used it for ten years...It got me through some tough emotional periods...It clarified a number of things in my life. Helped me become a person" (214-215). While Arno Heller argues that "the overabundance of modes of action conveyed through the media finally leads to a mental state in which the individual can no longer distinguish between authentic and merely imitated action" (42), it is clear that the characters in *White Noise* have no desire to make this distinction.

Jack takes this concept to another level when he decides to murder his wife's partner in crime, the shamed project director Willie Mink. Using the logic and script of a Hollywood police drama, Gladney devises a plan to murder his enemy, thereby gaining existential credit, restored patriarchal authority, and access to dylar, the drug which is purportedly a cure for fear of death. Ironically, once he is completely given over to his role as hard-boiled enforcer, Gladney experiences an intense moment of supposed visionary clarity whereby he believes he is living a moment of pure unmediated reality: "I was advancing in consciousness. I watched myself take each separate step. With each separate step, I became aware of processes, components, things relating to other things. Water fell to earth in drops. I saw things new" (304). Having totally immersed himself in mediated reality, Gladney spirals uncontrollably into complete self-delusion. "These observations of an intensified reality rapidly descend into ludicrous banality, and rather than an epiphany of identity, Gladney undergoes a

farcical loss of self" (Wilcox 203). Gladney's transcendental revelations are really the ultimate form of postmodern mediation of self.

Jack's adversary, Willie Mink, is the caricatured depiction of postmodern man completely given over to the imagistic flow of mediated reproduction and what Jack would become if he continued down his chosen path. Willie is the embodiment of Fredric Jameson's postmodern schizophrenic. Jameson argues that: "with the breakdown of the signifying chain...the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words a series of pure unrelated presents in time" (*Postmodernism* 27). Willie Mink is a shell of a human being, a body void of subjectivity who mindlessly echoes television's language. It is interesting to note that Mink's utterances have an air of familiarity. Indeed, when Mink says: "The heat from your hand will actually make the gold-leafing stick to the wax paper" (*WN* 308), the reader cannot help but be reminded of television's countless intrusions during the course of the novel to this point. The difference is that the intrusions usually identified as background noise do not emanate from the television set but from Willie Mink himself. "The shock is that the "it said" of television become the "he said" of Mink; Mink *is* the voice of television" (Duvall 449). So the gap between subject and object – between voice and echo, speaker and enunciation – completely collapses. The implications are deadly for Jack, whose illusory moment of mediated self-aggrandizing begins to unravel when he realizes that the object of his anger and the possible source of the alleviation of his fear of death is a fragile wreck of a man.

Mink makes a feeble target for vengeance: because he has no defined self, there is no core or self to eliminate – he is a Baudrillardian simulation in its purest form. One of the side effects of Dylar is a complete submission to suggestion; Mink has lost the ability to distinguish between sign and referent, which is to say, he has lost language and its distancing effects from the world of things and action. Therefore, when Jack says “hail of bullets” (311), Mink responds by mimicking the reactions one would have if he was really being fired upon with a weapon. In this ridiculous exchange, DeLillo brings to life the TV man’s dream of mediated reality. However, this dream is turned into “...postmodernity’s schizophrenic nightmare” (Duvall 449). Mink experiences Jack’s language as immediate and real, the same way the TV man desired to have his ordeal televised in order to give it a sense of reality. As for Dylar, the drug itself is a failed attempt, a would-be substitute for a powerful narcotic which can be found in most contemporary American homes: “In *White Noise*, television itself, that means of forgetting death through aestheticization, is Dylar, an imagistic space of consumption that one accesses by playing dial-a-rama, turning the dial to the channel of one’s choice” (Duvall 450).

Jack’s fantasy crumbles around him when he not only fails to murder Mink but is wounded in the attempt to do so. The pain induced by the bullet which lodges itself in his wrist restores the reality principle. “The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff. I was disappointed. Hurt, stunned and disappointed. What happened to the higher plane of energy in which I’d carried out my scheme?

Blood covered my forearm, wrist and hand” (*WN* 313). This turn of events prompts Jack to help his victim, and in doing so he begins to feel the same elation he felt as he was about to murder Willie. This process of atonement leads Jack to remark: “It hadn’t occurred to me that a man’s attempts to redeem himself might prolong the elation he felt when he committed the crime he now sought to make up for” (315). This decidedly Christian line of reasoning – the repenting sinner making amends by helping the one whom he has injured – coincides with his meeting of the nun in the hospital. As she tends to his wounds, Jack glides into familiar territory by attempting to distance himself from his experience by converting it into a culturally familiar narrative: the nun’s faith in God and heaven. Unfortunately, the nun turns out to be a simulation as she informs Jack that the religious pretend to have faith so that the secular may carry on their faithless lives:

It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die. This is why we are here. A tiny minority. The devil, the angels, heaven, hell. If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse” (318).

For Jack, both the new faith in technology and the old faith in religion are no longer viable. Reality has collapsed his strategies to ward off death through mediation and technology with the speed and force of a bullet.

If Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulations* is instrumental in understanding DeLillo’s postmodernity, his *System of Objects* and *Consumer Society* offer equally interesting perspectives on the issues treated in *White Noise*. In these earlier works, Baudrillard argues that consumption offers to the individual the

illusion of the opportunity for fulfillment and liberation. What consumption offers are conceded freedoms, freedoms which are irremediably linked to and dependent of consumer objects. “[Therefore] “free to be oneself” in fact means: free to project one’s desires onto produced goods. “Free to enjoy life” means: free to regress and be irrational” (“System” 13). The goal of consumer society is not to eradicate tension in a perpetual state of happiness, but rather to momentarily resolve tension through consumption of objects:

The neo-sorcerers of consumption are careful not to liberate people in accordance to some explosive end state of happiness. They only offer the resolution of tensions, that is to say, a freedom *by default*. “Every time a tension differential is created, which leads to frustration and action, we can expect a product to overcome this tension by responding to the aspirations of the group. (13)

Ultimately, Baudrillard contends that the act of buying is neither a lived nor a free form of exchange, but a preconditioned activity which offers temporary relief and the prospect of freedom in the guise of manufactured goods.

The ability of consumer products to relieve tension momentarily is a central preoccupation in *White Noise*. When Jack meets one of his colleagues at the shopping mall, the colleague quickly points out that without his dark glasses and academic robe, Jack “looks so harmless...a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (83). Caught without his simulated persona or a television reality to take refuge in, Jack instinctively relies on his role as a consumer to restore his sense of power and authority:

I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching...I began to grow in self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me. (84)

This is a favored practice in Blacksmith and by extension, America: “When times are bad, people feel compelled to overeat. Blacksmith is full of obese adults and children, baggy-pantsed, short-legged, waddling” (14). Also, because “thrift is un-American” (“Consumer” 51), Jack effectively enters his local and national community by purchasing consumable commodities, whereby he ensures that he is part of a crowd that can shield him from his fear and death. Of course, Jack’s epiphany during his unbridled shopping experience and reconfirmed power and authority are just as inauthentic as his mediated identity of Hitler scholar. In order to impose his paternal authority, Jack dotes on his children by agreeing to their Christmas presents early as the family unit momentarily bonds together in a shopping euphoria: “My family gloried in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last...I was the benefactor, the one who dispenses gifts, bonuses, bribes, *baksheesh*” (83-84). However, once the frenzy of unfettered consumption is over, the family is atomized once again: “We drove home in silence. We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone” (84). For Baudrillard, consumption may be the system under which entire societies are fashioned: “consumers are mutually implicated, despite themselves, in a general system of exchange and in the production of coded values” (“Consumer” 46), but DeLillo suggests here that unity in the name of shopping makes for very weak familial bonds.

During his mad shopping spree, Gladney experiences a strange form of elation whereby he believes that he is completely free to disregard stores and corporations. This capacity fills him with an intoxicating sense of power: “we moved from store to store, rejecting not only items in certain departments, not

only entire departments but whole stores, mammoth corporations that did not strike our fancy for one reason or another” (*WN* 83). However, Baudrillard identifies this consumer empowerment as a form of mystification: “...the liberty and sovereignty of the consumer are nothing more than a mystification. The well-preserved mystique of satisfaction and individual choice, whereby a “free” civilization reaches its pinnacle, is the very ideology of the industrial system” (“Consumer” 39). Consumption is not “a function of “harmonious” social individual satisfaction” (41), and what Jack fails to realize is that no matter how many corporations he rejects, invariably one will present itself which will profit from his purchases.

Credit is a key element in the strategy of countering one’s pervading sense of dread through consumption. During the mall scene, Jack spends with reckless abandon; money is a concept he cannot be bothered with. “The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit” (84). Jack is a college professor, the sole provider of a family of six, with at least two other children from previous marriages. Therefore, it is conceivable that credit has facilitated this shopping binge. Baudrillard sees credit as an instrument of social and wage control through consumption:

Presented under the guise of gratification, of a facilitated access to affluence...credit is in fact the systematic socioeconomic indoctrination of forced economizing and an economic calculus for generations of consumers who, in a like of subsistence, would have otherwise escaped the manipulation of demands and would have been unexploitable as a force of consumption. Credit is a

disciplinary process which extorts savings and regulates demand – just as wage labor was a rational process in the extortion of labor power and in the increase of productivity. (“Consumer” 49)

Credit allows Jack to simultaneously enjoy the auratic power of consumption, experience the safety and comfort of being in the crowd of avid consumers, and dispel the fear induced by his colleague’s observations.

In both Baudrillard’s theoretical writing and DeLillo’s fictional novel, where one shops seems just as important as the act of consuming itself. Baudrillard describes the shopping mall as a place of previously unexperienced luxury, where shoppers are protected from “bad weather” and “seasonal change” (34), where time stands still and all one has to think about is where to spend his money. It is a version of the supermarket, which too is a hermetic, timeless world, oblivious to the passing of the seasons. “Work, leisure, nature, and culture, all previously dispersed, separate, and more or less irreducible activities that produced anxiety and complexity...have finally become mixed, massaged, climate controlled, and domesticated into the simple activity of perpetual shopping” (34). Though he is describing a shopping centre in Europe, Baudrillard could be discussing DeLillo’s Mid-Village Mall or Blacksmith’s grocery store. The supermarket is another Mecca for shoppers: a magical place where everything is ripe and in season, where colors gleam under electric lights. The fully stacked shelves give the impression of permanent plenitude, and racks of tabloids offer “everything that is not food or love” (*WN* 326). In the fantastic world of the super-market, shopping is akin to a mystical experience. Murray expresses this most eloquently: “This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us,

it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data" (37). The supermarket certainly seems to achieve its goal. As Babette and Jack leave, he claims that he finds in his mountain of groceries the representation of his success and position inside the grid. "It seemed to Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases...in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being...it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening" (20).

This momentary sense of elation for the objects that make up Jack's life is countered by DeLillo several chapters later. After learning that he has inhaled toxic chemicals and that his wife has committed adultery, Jack proceeds to divest himself of old objects which clutter his attic. As he sifts through a veritable maze of "old and tired things" (262), Jack realizes these items have lost their initial aura and have reverted back to being inanimate waste. "There was an immensity of things, an overburdening weight, a connection, mortality" (262). In this heap of useless objects, DeLillo shows what happens when the initial thrill of consumption is gone and an item's aura is consumed. This is the result of the momentary freedom and alleviation of dread experienced by the consumer. Mass consumption does not grant perpetual happiness or eternal protection; its only lasting result is a mountain of junk.

Today, DeLillo's reflections on the mediated space of television and the ecstatic abandon offered by the consumer space of the shopping mall and the supermarket have become one because both cultural practices are 'about' the

consumption of images within the larger American imaginary. These two spaces combine in the form of home shopping networks such as QVC, which offer viewers the possibility of consuming objects from the comfort of their recliners. Now, personal aura can be acquired by dialing the number on the screen. Also, thanks to fiber-optics and affordable internet service providers, cyberspace offers a veritable hyperreal, planetary shopping mall. It is no longer necessary to pick-up the receiver; personal gratification is a mouse-click away. This new reality further removes individuals from the natural world which surrounds them. Television offers a window into the “real” world and a high-speed internet connection lets one shop from the comfort of his home. Unfortunately, this further removal of man from the world he inhabits will not correct the issues at play in *White Noise*: experiencing of nature through a filter – the dehumanizing consequence of postmodernity’s television reality – and the alleviation of dread through mass consumption are only heightened by technological advancement. No matter how sophisticated and technologically impressive the methods become, the endeavor remains “a collective desire for... a cultic aura to absorb the fear of dying” (Duvall 451). In *White Noise*, DeLillo shows that television and consumerism fail to fully satisfy this desire; that such an endeavor is ultimately doomed to fail.

Chapter Three

Radiance in Dailiness: Critical Reception and the Poetry of the Quotidian

White Noise is an observation of the American landscape in its totality, of its beauty and its waste. On the surface, the novel ventures into the territory of fiction which Lentricchia describes as “around-the-house-and-in-the-backyard”, though what DeLillo finds there – the primacy of television, the anesthetizing hum and buzz of appliances, the addiction to mass consumption – is treated with unrelenting criticism. In return, he has received his own severe criticism for delivering what Arnold Weinstein qualifies in *Nobody's Home* as “...an anatomy of America the Beautiful in such a way that we discover a world we live in but have never seen, shimmering in its defamiliarized rendition of how the natives work and play” (298). Although DeLillo does not offer a view of his nation marred by political partisanship or blind jingoism – nor does he make excuses or apologies for the unenviable qualities he recognizes in the American way of life – *White Noise* does identify in Contemporary America a fantastic source of mystery and awe beneath the surface, beneath the image. Indeed, under the narcotizing noise of television and mass consumption lies the whisper of beauty and radiance in everyday occurrences: in the language and daily family events, in supermarkets and stunning sunsets.

It is no secret that *White Noise* was Don DeLillo's breakout book. This fact confers upon him commercial success and attention from main-stream media, but also earns him the ire of many literary critics and social commentators. The main source of these critics' complaints seems to be DeLillo's political position. In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo claims that he does not have a political program or agenda: “I don't have a political theory or doctrine that I am

espousing...I don't have a program" (Interview 65). This may be true, but DeLillo's fiction is very political, and *White Noise* is no exception. Indeed, as Frank Lentricchia observes:

DeLillo is [one of those] writers critically engaged with particular American cultural and political matters, writers with terminal bad manners who refuse to limit themselves to celebratory platitudes about truths of the heart, who don't respect...the sharp and deadly distinction between fiction and non-fiction. (Intro 3)

By setting his novel in a quiet, middle-class, predominantly white suburban town and centering the action on the quotidian events which occupy a well-adjusted, contemporary nuclear family, DeLillo gives the impression of writing a domestic novel. However, he quickly shows his hand by using the convention of this popular literary genre to shed light on those aspects of American life which finds troubling. Obviously, DeLillo does not adhere to the political doctrine promulgated by Bill O'Reilly and the Fox News Network: proponents of the "you are either with us or against us" position who value above all else the idea that Americans are right, that America is the greatest nation in the world, that to think otherwise is decidedly un-American. Nor is his fiction aimed at an audience "conditioned by media to avoid anything they can't understand in a minute, [who] have learned to think of ignorance as sturdy common sense" (Zengotita 38). Without a doubt, DeLillo performs his most important civic duty by openly criticizing those aspects of contemporary American life so fervently praised by the media right.

However, many of the critical attacks on *White Noise* tend to confuse DeLillo's social criticism with his personal political agenda or his character's characters' fascinations with his own interests. For example, In "Don DeLillo's America", Bruce Bawer argues that: "DeLillo's offense, to my mind, is that he refuses to make distinctions. To him, as to Gladney, the question of Hitler is simply "not a question of good and evil." Nor, it is clear, do moral distinctions enter into his appraisal of any human act" (253). Bawer may be troubled with the ease with which Hitler is assimilated into western culture, but he makes a rookie mistake in linking Jack's fascination to DeLillo. Paul Cantor, who studies Hitler's role in *White Noise*, accurately points out that though Bawer's attack is misguided, he is on the right track:

Nevertheless, Bawer is right to raise Hitler as an issue in discussing *White Noise*. The bland acceptance of DeLillo's treatment of Hitler in academic circles seems to mirror the very phenomenon *White Noise* portrays: a scholarly world so open-minded that it can now accommodate any subject without evidently blinking an eye. (40)

Overeager to charge DeLillo with fascist tendencies, Bawer fails to recognize a major theme in DeLillo's fiction: *White Noise*, like so much of his fiction, portrays postmodern America. Armed with a national ideology of freedom and a seemingly endless source of material at their disposal, "Americans are set adrift in a sea of possibilities, which, being equally available, become equally valuable, or, what is the same thing, equally valueless" (41). DeLillo shows that Jack's fascination with Hitler is equal to Murray's fascination with Elvis Presley. This is possible since both individuals exist in the culture of the image, a culture which

reduces everything to its imagistic expression and therefore makes everything banal. By charging DeLillo of representing Hitler without considering the moral implications of his actions, Bawer shows how his impulse to accuse and moralize overtakes his critical objective position. He is caught in his own cultural simulacrum of the “judging and shaming” variety.

In this postmodern American environment, Hitler becomes a packaged commodity which Gladney identifies and markets for the academy in a masterfully capitalist move. “When I suggested to the chancellor that we might build a whole department around Hitler’s life and work, he was quick to see the possibilities. It was an immediate and electrifying success” (*WN* 4). The “possibilities” which Gladney and his superior are so quick to recognize are both intellectual but financial: intellectual since it offers an academic environment in which to study and discuss one of the most defining events of the twentieth century, and financial since Hitler’s reign was built on violence and visual stimulation, two staples of the American entertainment industry. Indeed, his department is built around the image of Hitler which has been rendered familiar and harmless through countless media reproduction. “Through the power of the media, representations of Hitler have proliferated and permeated every corner of twentieth-century life...television brings Hitler into our homes and hence domesticates him, assimilating him in the mainstream of modern life” (Cantor 45). Aware of Hitler’s constant media representation, Gladney concentrates on the theatrical, eye-catching aspects of the *Führer*’s reign. Indeed, the only class he

teaches centers on film footage which portrays the Nazis' taste in public demonstration and their sense of style:

Advanced Nazism, three hours a week, restricted to qualified seniors, a course of study designated to cultivate historical perspective, theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms, three credits, written reports. (*WN* 25)

DeLillo brilliantly puts his mastery of irony on display by simultaneously pointing to academia's packaging of the most horrible events of the twentieth century ("three hours a week", "three credits", "written reports"), contemporary America's potentially fascist tendencies ("theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny"), and finally to the simulation-laden hyperreality of postmodernity ("special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms"). Moreover, it highlights the ingenuity of Jack's marketing of Hitler as a highly televisual commercial product to a market addicted to visual stimulation.

DeLillo's satirical treatment of Hitler as a subject of academic study shows that "...contrary to Bawer, DeLillo is distanced from the attitude of his characters toward Hitler" (Cantor 46). In *White Noise* the academic environment is treated in a very sarcastic tone: the College-on-the-Hill features "...full professors...who read nothing but cereal boxes", which is a satiric jab at academic Cultural and Media Studies, as well as intense philosophical debates on one's location at the time of James Dean's death. In this setting, any attempt to seriously consider Hitler's horrors and their influence in contemporary America fail and are transformed into the wholesome sport of trivia, thereby turning Hitler into a familiar and harmless simulacrum. Rather than support National Socialism,

DeLillo sheds light on “the power of the alliance of media and the academy in the postmodern world to trivialize even the most significant of historical phenomena” (47). In the culture of simulation, everything is reduced to the level of ‘The Image’, and therefore Hitler has the same cultural status as James Dean or Toucan Sam. In this cultural environment the fascist ruler and the teen-idol movie star are both reduced to the level of the image, and this is what most disturbs DeLillo.

Ultimately, it is difficult to take seriously a body of criticism which accuses DeLillo of “discovering malevolence in things and systems rather than in people”. To make such claims is to ignore the fact that *White Noise* is first and foremost the account of an American family at a particular moment in American history of material cultural practice. It is true that DeLillo regularly renders this family asunder by forcing them to face their reflections in the mirror of technology and consumerism, but he also recognizes in the radiance of their daily existence the possibility to correct some the ills of American society he so brilliantly exposes.

Although family is a central preoccupation in *White Noise*, untangling the web of blood relations and parent-children relationships it features is a challenging undertaking. None of the children in the Gladney household lives with either both biological parents or one biological sibling, and both adults have been through a combined total of five failed marriages. Furthermore, the task of accounting for each family member’s relation to the others is further complicated by DeLillo’s deliberately banal treatment of marriage and familial reorganization. In “Whole Families Shopping at Night”, Thomas J. Ferraro points to the scene

when the reader is first introduced to Denise's father, Bob Pardee, as an example of DeLillo's way of narrating family history:

Pardee's impromptu visit signifies not so much the amicability of Bob and Babette's divorce as the inconsequential nature of being an ex-husband and a father – and, ipso facto, the triviality of the information that one is an ex-husband or a father. Bob "pops into" the narrative, and the fact of Bob's paternity "flashes by" us. The matters of intercourse and procreation...seem for Jack and the others to be pieces of trivia, the flotsam and jetsam of circumstances. (16)

Moreover, the difficulties which arise from this problematic treatment of familial matters are compounded by Jack's dry, impersonal narrative style. Jack's account of his marriage to Dana Breedlove, his first and fourth wife, and the conception of his daughter Steffie effectively illustrate this point: "The first marriage worked well enough to encourage us to try again as soon as it became mutually convenient. When we did...things proceeded to fall apart. But not before Stephanie Rose was conceived, a star-hung night in Barbados. Dana was there to bribe an official" (*WN* 213). It is difficult not to notice Jack's ironic treatment of the institution of marriage: the fact that a failed marriage was overall pleasant enough to warrant another attempt when both parties find it suitable lends the institution an air of banality. What is even more striking is the way in which Jack "...deflates older forms of rhetoric ("a star-hung night in Barbados") to signify the deflation in the action itself (conceiving and by implication receiving a child so nonchalantly)" (Ferraro 17). This devaluation of marriage as an institution is in keeping with DeLillo's treatment of the disappearance of the mythological America which exists only in the minds of contemporary Republicans to the hands of families which incorporate different individuals from different origins in

a beautiful and effective plurality. For example, despite the casual description of conceiving marriages and children, the Gladneys seem well adjusted to their post-nuclear family reality. Parents, children, step-parents, and half-brothers and sisters interact with impressive degrees of cooperation and conviviality: when Steffie and Denise harangue Babette about her eating-habits or when Babette counsels Jack on what not to say to his son, the reader is not witnessing a magic act or an affected performance. DeLillo's intention is to show the new reality of the nuclear family and the potency of the family ties which are formed through the union of individuals from different backgrounds into an effective unit. Family in *White Noise* is the delicate work of art which results from chaos rather than the ruin of a mythical institution.

Though they have a number of traits in common with the archetypal sitcom family of early television, the Gladneys are a decidedly contemporary family. This is made obvious by their seamless integration into the nuclear family reality. Moreover, Ferraro claims that the Gladneys' contemporary quality shows "...the way the colonization of the home by mass culture achieves this effect of a "close-knit family" without the ties of marriage and blood that, at least theoretically, grounded such families" (20). Echoing Baudrillard, his argument is that in *White Noise* certain consumable goods – specifically television – possess a communalizing power. "What he sees is how [television] produces what we might call an aura of connectedness among individuals: an illusion of kinship, transiently functional but without either sustaining or restraining power, a stimulant that at the same time renders one unable to feel either the sacredness or

the tyranny of the family bond” (21). In other words, television offers a communal experience of endless representation as a stand-in for familial ties.

Television is a central part of the Gladney household. It is no coincidence that Murray, television’s devout theoretician, routinely takes notes when visiting Jack and his family; the Gladneys’ television is not only a migrating entity, but the family members regularly “talk TV trivia to one another” (Ferraro 25). However, television’s eradication of individuality is best expressed when Babette’s class on posture is broadcast on public television. The family displays unrestrained excitement as they watch Babette “endlessly being reformed” (*WN* 104), an enthusiasm for the “Babette of electrons and photons” (104) which none of the Glaneys exhibit for the Babette of flesh and blood. For the Gladney audience versed in simulation, Babette “comes into being” (104) on the screen in a way she never has in real life. Because of this Ferrero suggests:

The screen’s ultimate strategy is to destroy the distinction between flesh and image, re-presenting the image-in-all-its-fleshiness as the thing-in-itself. If the vehicle that generates perception is to replace the object perceived, then television can be said to seduce us with a major reconstruction of the nature of reality itself. (26)

Though Jack expresses some concerns over Babette’s reproduced self, they seem to give themselves over to the experience completely. Jack’s apprehensions reaffirm his position of unease before those aspects of postmodernism he simultaneously criticizes and adopts. However, the children – being completely immersed in the culture of simulacra – experience Babette’s crossing into the realm of pure representation as naturally as any other ritual of familial unity through television. Like the TV man’s lament for media-coverage of the

Airborne Toxic Event because only media-coverage can make his ordeal seem real, Babette acquires a “real” quality for her children when she is put in a mediating frame.

Yet DeLillo quickly pulls the plug on the Gladneys’ jubilant enthusiasm and confirms Jack’s anxiety when the family members realize that the channel on which Babette is being broadcasted is ominously silent. This could be interpreted as a simple technical difficulty, yet the lack of sound “... [yields] a silence that even the children experience as frightening” (27). When the Gladneys notice that something is wrong with this picture, the result is “...the sense that it is their mother who has been lost, their appetite for her image that is under supernatural censure” (28). This reality is shown through the crying Wilder, who embodies postmodernity by confusing his mother with her televisual image. By filling his characters with such misgivings, DeLillo makes the point that what we forfeit by reducing the world to a series of simulation and imagistic representations is our identity, the very thing that makes us human. DeLillo softens the blow a few pages later when the program ends and the girls anxiously await Babette’s return to share their experience with her. “The two girls got excited again and went downstairs to wait for Babette” (*WN* 105). This implies that although the Gladneys are fascinated with hyperreality, it has not completely replaced the thrill of real human contact; the girls are equally excited by the prospect of sharing their experience with the “real” Babette as they were with their experience of the simulated Babette. However, the chapter does not end with Babette’s return but with Wilder crying, his face inches away from the television set. By ending the

chapter this way DeLillo issues a warning that "...our acts of recovery against image narcosis may (one day soon) come too late" (Ferraro 28).

In an interview given to Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo explains that he finds importance in apparently mundane daily events; that there is a sort of magic in everyday occurrences which people take for granted and therefore miss:

I would call it a sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments. In *White Noise*, in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred. Is it really there? Well, yes. You know, I don't believe as Murray Jay Siskind does in *White Noise* that the supermarket is a form of Tibetan lamasery. But there is something there that we tend to miss...So I think that's something that has been in the background of my work: a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision. (Interview 63)

DeLillo identifies the super-market as a site rich in the elusive capacity for the extraordinary. Indeed, Ferraro's reading of *White Noise* suggests that the Gladney family shopping habits are possible signs of "potential renewal" (30). His argument is that there is more at play in the supermarket than the exchange of money for consumable goods; that the quality of family interaction that the Gladneys display there shows the potential for authentic human relations free of simulations or images.

Many of the supermarket scenes in *White Noise* illustrate DeLillo's fascination with the quotidian, which he defines in another novel as "...an extraordinary word that suggests the depth and reach of the commonplace" (*Underworld* 542). Indeed, these scenes are infused with a light-hearted tone, a "sparkling quotidian naturalism...[in which] the comedy is playful and inclusive rather than belittling", which is in stark contrast with Jack's dark, sarcastic

narrative style featured elsewhere. For example, during the frenzied shopping excursion following Jack's encounter with his colleague Massingale, or Jack and Murray's theoretical discussions on killing for existential credit. In *White Noise* Murray equates the supermarket with death and makes countless reference to the object of Jack's greatest fear. "Here we don't die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think" (38). This refers to the supermarket's capacity to make time obsolete: it is sealed-off and timeless – a perpetual spring reminiscent of the Christian after-life. However, in the DeCurtis interview DeLillo mentions a lamasery: a habitation for monks, a place meant for fraternity. The Gladneys are obviously not monks, but the supermarket does offer them an opportunity for "special concentration, an active attention to the business of being a family" (Ferraro 32). In the supermarket, the 1950s fifties sitcom family mythology no longer applies: here fathers shop, and children can reassure and educate their parents. "The key to the magic of this transgression is that it is only a flirtation: Roles are not so much transcended as refigured with the consuming sphere" (Ferraro 22). Because of this temporary suspension of traditional roles the Gladneys are able to resolve problems, raise delicate issues, display affection; they are able to act as a family. Steffie and Jack's conversation on the topic of Babette's possible addiction is one of many examples of this: Babette and Jack's amused approval of Denise's temporary exile to join her friends, Wilder's humorous momentary disappearance and his parents' ensuing search for him, Babette and Jack's foreplay— no pornographic literature necessary – at the

checkout line...all are proofs that Murray is right in claiming that the supermarkets “recharge us spiritually” (*WN* 37).

As the scene closes with Jack and Babette openly flirting with one another, the reader’s impression is that this is a more genuine form of wellness of being than the one Jack experienced through his mountain of consumer goods. This feeling of plenitude leads Jack to remark on the magical quality of his family: “It was these secondary levels of life, these extrasensory flashes and floating nuances of being, these pockets of rapport forming unexpectedly, that made me believe we were a magic act, adults and children together, sharing unaccountable things” (34). This is DeLillo’s radiance in dailiness. The supermarket is not its source; it is merely an environment conducive to its emanation. “If the Gladneys radiate...it is not a matter of hocus-pocus. The kind of intercourse conducted in the market generates an effect of kinship that pushes beyond mere semblance of genuine warmth and mutual need” (Ferraro 35). Unfortunately, the fact that the Gladneys routinely forfeit their power as a family to placate their problems and turn instead for the consolation of mediated, hyperreal solutions is what DeLillo finds most disturbingly typical of American cultural practices of domestic life.

Ferraro’s treatment of *White Noise* is interesting since it both supports and counters the Baudrillardian theories used in this thesis. First, his identification of television as a narcotizing apparatus which infuses individuals with a false sense of community through the proliferation of simulation and images supports my earlier discussions of the link between *Simulations* and *White Noise*. His

suggestion that television destroys the distinction between reality and representation by substituting a perceived object – or, in this case, a person, i.e., Babette – with its televised simulation is in line with earlier claims, even though his argument that the viewer is still capable of recovering from his or her television trance is overly optimistic. Although this argument is supported by the girls' reaction to Babette's television experience, the Gladneys have shown time and again that they are fully immersed in the hyperreal, that their perception of nature and themselves is dependent on the culture of the image. However, he identifies the Gladneys' supermarket experiences as socially motivated in a way that echoes Baudrillard's theory in *Consumer Society*. On the other hand, Ferraro's argument that the supermarket is a centre of familial energy where the Gladney family takes its most harmonious form shifts the focus away from the productive forces which create and motivated the Gladneys as consumers so important to Baudrillard, and reflects DeLillo's comments on the everyday radiance which is brought to the surface there. It also suggests that DeLillo differs from Baudrillard's unflinching pessimism. "Baudrillard's position toward the postmodern world is ultimately one of radical skepticism: finally there is nothing outside the play of simulations, no real in which a radical critique of society might be grounded" (Wilcox 210). However, Ferraro's interpretation of *White Noise* suggests that, for DeLillo, family could potentially counteract the narcotizing power of simulated reality if only it were possible to remove the "magic act" (*WN* 34) the Gladneys perform on their excursions to the supermarket and incorporate it into their family life.

The opposition of DeLillo's identification of the Gladneys' magic in the supermarket with and Baudrillard's pessimistic suggestion that nothing can exist beyond the supremacy of the image is more ferociously argued by Cornel Bonca. In "Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Language of the Species", he posits: "It no longer seems to me accurate to call the world of *White Noise* a "mediascape" or a "mediocracy", for instance, or to see a smoothly homologous relationship between the "white noise" of the novel and Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra" (458). He argues that through his ingenious use of language DeLillo goes beyond the idea of white noise representing the narcotizing siren song of consumer objects or a way for postmodern man to escape his over-powering fear of death and becomes "contemporary man's deepest *expression* of his death fear, a strange and genuinely awe-inspiring response to the fear of mortality in the postmodern world" (458).

The nature of the white noise of postmodern society is central to Bonca's argument. While he admits that this sound is comprised of the media noise of television commercials and brand-names, he claims that it is also formed by the ululations of Jack's infant son and the unconscious utterances of his sleeping daughter. This latter form of language is the natural defense of contemporary individuals against their fear of death: "It is language as denial of death, as the evasion of what cannot be evaded" (Bonca 464). Jack routinely experiences this white noise as a kind of epiphany. In these moments, he does not experience death as something to be avoided but as a "beautiful expression of that death fear"

(466). Jack's fears are not abolished, but he does seem to face them as something natural, moving, and poetic.

To build his argument, Bonca isolates specific scenes where DeLillo displays the "purer" form of white noise. The first is Wilder's seven-hour wailing scene. As the infant's crying wears on, Jack begins to find rhythm in the waves of tears and recognizes something soothing in the child's fit of uninterrupted crying. "The inconsolable crying went on. I let it wash over me, like rain in sheets...I began to think he had disappeared inside this wailing noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some wreckless wonder of intelligibility" (*WN* 78). Bonca argues that Jack's almost-religious experience originates from the fact that in this moment of intense human emotion he and his son share their fear of death. "The language Jack employs evokes his exalted feeling that sharing his death-terror with his son is a primordial human moment" (Bonca 468). It is obvious that the key word in this sentence is "sharing", since it highlights the stark contrast between this momentary escape from fear and Jack's other strategies to ward off death which he experiences as isolated and lonely.

The other important scene Bonca bases his argument on is the one that features Steffie's utterance of the words "Toyota Celica" (*WN* 141). After being exiled from his home, exposed to Nyodene-D, warned that this is a deadly threat, and forced to live in an evacuation camp, Jack finds himself watching his daughter mumble in her sleep when he hears her mutter the name of an automobile. "I watched her face, waited. Ten minutes passed. She uttered two

clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. *Toyota Celica*" (155). The experience "...struck [him] with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence" (155). What Jack experiences here is an ironic epiphany in tandem with his daughter. Bonca reminds his reader that Steffie is a child caught in the midst of a terrible event. As such she is ill-equipped to deal with the death-fear induced by the airborne toxic event, but she intuitively taps into the critic's "pure" white noise for comfort:

Steffie incorporated the terror of the entire day's events, and in sleep communicates her fear the only way she knows: by babbling "Toyota Celica." It is as if she has understood what the hopped-hysteria of mass advertising has really been saying all along (beneath, below or above it all), which is this: You are afraid of dying; let this phrase, this sound-bite, this whirling bit of language so pervasive worldwide that it can serve as common coin in Sri Lanka or Schenectady, Rio de Janeiro or Reykjavik – let it soothe your fears; let your dread dissolve in the chanting of this media mantra. (469-470).

Language works here the same way it does during Wilder's crying scene: it expresses her fear of death in a way that is both cathartic and sad. It is sad because Steffie can only express her fear through a consumable good, but cathartic since through this unconscious poetry Steffie and Jack enjoy a transcendental moment where fear of death is momentarily absolved.

Ultimately, Bonca's essay shifts the reading of *White Noise* from a social critique of consumer society and hyperreality toward a study of how the noise of postmodern society echoes a collective response to the grim reality of the all-consuming fear of death which characterizes contemporary America. However, the difference seems purely semantic: Jack trades his set of mediated and

consumer shackles for linguistic ones. The moments of shared epiphany Jack experiences with his children may be the result of genuine transcendence expressed through natural language, but the outcome is still the same: a momentary but ultimately ineffectual suspension of his fear of death. Moreover, Bonca downplays the pressures exerted by consumer society as well as the proliferation of free-floating signifiers into a nation of the image which hinders the possibility for “natural” experience, two concepts which – as this thesis has tried to demonstrate – are at the heart of both DeLillo and Baudrillard’s considerations. In the end, instinctive social unity through a communal experience of language as a palliative for the death fear so prevalent in the postmodern is a proposition which requires more faith in contemporary man than DeLillo displays in *White Noise*.

In conclusion, though *White Noise* is a clear indictment against the mediated reality of contemporary America – of the dangers we invite into our homes when household appliances become part of the family – DeLillo insists on a panoramic view of the postmodern cultural reality. His criticism may be unapologetic, yet “there remains in his fiction a space for the poetry of mystery, awe, and commitment...a commitment to the possibility, however laid to waste by contemporary forces, of domesticity as the life support we cannot do without” (Lentricchia, Intro 7). Arguably DeLillo’s position lies somewhere between Bonca’s unbridled optimism and the claim that “in all his work he seems less angry or disappointed than some critics of society, as if he had expected less in the first place” (14). Postmodern individuals may be assailed by an environment

that exerts its control over them through mass consumption and the culture of the image, but in the poetry of the quotidian lies the secret to their salvation.

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