ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Reality or Hyperreality? The Erasure of Meaning and Authenticity in Postmodern Society through the Lenses of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Maria Ghita Adam

January 2025

'How serious can it be if it happens all the time?' (DeLillo 201)

White Noise, by Don DeLillo, explores an immediately recognisable and familiar postmodern world. However, through the distance that his narrative allows, the dehumanising effects of consumer culture are put into evidence: technology irredeemably exceeds human comprehension, commodities become central to experience, and representations of reality substitute actual reality. The self consequently becomes a discursive construction that can only impersonate rather than embody, pastiche substitutes authenticity, and meaning disseminates in a matrix of floating signifiers without signifieds. In accordance with Baudrillard's theories on hyperreality and simulacra, Lyotard's abolition of metanarratives and Jameson's postmodern sublime, *White Noise* de-structures the conventional notion of reality in favour of a discursively and technologically constructed one due to which the human mind loses touch with itself.

White Noise presents an acute awareness of the pervasive influence of technology in contemporary society. Radios and television have become an integral part of everyday life: the nucleus of information that provides the 'codes and messages' (60) constituting experience to the point of being 'woven into the basic state of things' (41). However, this hold of media upon society is 'not so much [because it] tell[s] people what to think, but rather what to think about' (Baya 163). That is, it delineates the boundaries of discourse, providing the themes upon which conversation and action are performed –materialised in Steffie 'matching the words as they were spoken' (100) from the TV set–, and thereby constituting the axis around which individual and collective thought and experience are constructed. This is epitomised in 'The Airborne Toxic Event' section: the accident that caused the spill of the toxic chemical Nayodene D. is initially heard 'on the radio' (128), which subsequently establishes the narrative of the event, from its causes to its possible implications. This is 1 evident in the very definition that is given to the phenomenon: the media's euphemistic description of the toxic cloud as 'feathery plume' (130) prevails over the reality of the 'dark

black breathing thing of smoke' (129) that Heinrich observes. That is, only until the new media denomination of 'black billowing cloud' (132) is established. Far from a seemingly inoffensive distinction, it establishes different degrees of danger, which subsequently determines the reality perceived by the individual. Media's authority in discourse is thus made apparent, for its presumed reliability holds a 'position of power over common people like Jack' (Babaee et al. 31). However, it is not merely a matter of discourse. The information provided by the media becomes a substitute for authentic experience to the extent that one and another become indissociable, which is evidenced in Steffie's and Denise's reaction to the event, who experience every symptom speculated from the radio, from 'skin irritation and sweaty palms' (130) to 'nausea, vomiting and shortness of breath' to 'heart palpitations and a sense of *déjà vu*' (136). Despite the obvious hypochondriac component, as 'they get them only when they're broadcast' (155), they reify a confusion between reality and the information provided by the media that has become a major issue in the postmodern experience.

Baudrillard has associated this condition with the concept of *simulacrum*, which is 'the generation by models of a real without origin of reality' (1). The accumulation of these simulacra constructs what he terms 'hyperreality': the 'synthesis of *combinatory models* in a hyperspace without atmosphere' (italics mine). This hyperreal dimension generated by the media is no longer necessarily connected to the immediate experience of reality, but exists independently in a state of *constant re-articulation* of signifiers that are no longer directly associated with a specific signified. In this light, the growing reliance of experience on the authority of the media progressively displaces the self's perception of reality onto its hyperreal simulacra. The self begins to act according to this hyperreal mediatic framework, instead of responding naturally to its surroundings, evident in Jack refusing to believe that a toxic spill is threatening his life, as his position as a 'college professor' (133) distances him

discursively from the (hyper)reality of the 'poor and uneducated who suffer[…] natural and man-made disasters'. Conversely, experience is deprived of organic meaning, as it ought to exist first within mediatic discourse in order to attain "reality". This is the case of the toxic spill evacuation and the almost-plane-crash, where their victims feel that 'they went through all that for nothing' (110), as it was not being digitally retransmitted, and hence neither their 'real[ity]' (189) was validated. Paradoxically, this very retransmission banalises experience; by inscribing it within a wider matrix of similar events, their importance is diminished, since '[h]ow serious can it be if it happens all the time?' (201). Such systematic homogenisation is the product of 'a media saturated consciousness' (Wilcox 347) that "threatens the concept of meaning itself" by neutralising experience and reshaping it in the form of leisure for the spectator, allowing him to 'relax and enjoy these disasters' (34). This banalisation is the result of the separation between signifier –the broadcasted image of disaster—and signified –the actual impact of the disaster—epitomising an "implosion of meaning in the media" (Baudrillard 78) that numbs the self and detaches it from its notion of reality. In turn, 'the medium becomes the message' (McLuhan qtd. in Ghashmari, 174), acquiring its own redundant, self-referencing meaning that only seeks self-preservation, and where unprecedented disasters are made one with adverts. DeLillo even replicates this homogenisation in the novel itself, where media advertisement is paired with critical moments, such as the radio randomly announcing 'optional megabyte hard disk[s]' (131) during the toxic spill. These ads are even ingrained within the characters' consciousnesses, randomly thought or uttered –'[a] jingle for[…] Ray-Ban Wayfarer began running through my head' (46)— and continuously interrupting the narrative, thus representing a symbolical implosion of meaning within the novel itself, whilst also reifying the 'lea[k] through the mesh' (123) through which hyperreality mixes with reality.

However, this disconnection between reality and hyperreality is not restricted to the

mediatic dimension. Once the malleability of discourses of reality begins to dominate postmodern experience, the notion of identity also suffers a split between signifier and signified. Identity becomes performative, its reality 'dissolv[ing] in this dissemination of language games' (Lyotard 30) whose authority is based solely in an endless 'linguistic practice and communicational interaction' (31) that maintains their hold over reality. This is what Lyotard terms 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (27), as 'discourse is endlessly interpenetrated by others' (Reeve 305) to the point that meaning is manipulated and/or neutralised. For instance, Jack's impersonation of Hitler in order to escape from his 'feeble presentation of self' (19) is a personal interpellation of Hitler's historical discourse, embedding him in Jack's own discourse of self-discovery to the point that the 'question of good and evil' (75) around this figure is erased. Through his appropriation of Hitler's capacity to 'put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer' (74) by means of his own 'academic gown and dark glasses' (37) and his fake initials 'J. A. K' (19), he attempts to 'grow in significance and strength' (331), yet he never attains genuine confidence, as he displaces his notion of identity onto the accomplishment of a perfect performance. This he never fully achieves, symbolised in his incapacity to pronounce German, made akin to the 'bending of the natural law' (64). For this reason, he remains the 'false character that follows the name around' (19), a self-perception that evidences the prioritisation of hyperreality –performativity—over reality. It is precisely his concerns regarding his own authenticity that frustrates his status as the 'hero' (322) of his own life, thus embodying the 'exhaustion of late modernist, existential notions of heroism' (Wilcox 349) in a postmodern context where authenticity becomes one more hyperreal metanarrative. The individual becomes a depthless pastiche of possible presentations of self, which is particularly evident at the moment of Jack's epiphany, when he realises 'who [he] was in the network of meanings' (358). Despite his conviction of '[seeing] beyond words' (359), his realisation is ironically verbose: he is

simultaneously a ‘Buddhist, a Jain, a Duck River Baptist’ (357), objects are perceived on multiple discursive dimensions —'the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic’ (359)—and even his initial catharsis is immediately reversed by an alternative ‘redemptive’ (361) catharsis, thus continuously frustrating the accomplishment of a coherent narrative. Ultimately, his conviction that ‘the more people you kill, the more [life-]credit you store up’ (334) is an illusory attempt to commodify death in order to obliterate its reality, which is not much different from the SIMUVAC notion –short for Simulated Evacuations program— that ‘the more we rehearse disaster, the safer we’ll be from the real thing’ (236). Hence, his plot is one more simulation that only demonstrates the death of ‘authenticity’ and the inescapability of hyperreality.

Such discursive uncertainty contrasts with the apparent rationality of technological hyperreality. Since human thought has come to be seen as mere ‘brain chemistry’ (54), and identity as ‘the sum of our chemical impulses’, not only are ‘our senses[…] wrong a lot more often than they’re right’ (26), but even our feelings, opinions and desires –alongside the moral framework they compose— become a mere ‘tangle of neurons’ (230) that only complicate reality, as one never knows if they are real or ‘just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain’ (54). In contrast, the computer offers quantifiable answers, identity becomes the ‘sum total of your data’ (165) and one’s future can be interpreted from mere ‘bracketed numbers with pulsating stars’ (163) that synthesise one’s ‘history’. It is interesting to note here the computer’s assimilation of Jack’s fake initials –‘J. A. K.’ (165)—as his genuine name, which points towards a shift in the notion of identity from essence to surface. Hence, reality is engulfed by hyperreality, which is reified in Babette mysteriously appearing on TV: the ‘Babette of electrons and photons’ (125) literally ‘coming into being’ in exchange of Babette’s physical presence. The ‘excitement’ of the children responds to the TV’s validation of existence, but more important is the association of her digital image with her ‘spirit’ (123),

contained within the ‘distanced, sealed off, timeless’ dimension of hyperreality, which introduces the notion of the ‘Sublime’. This type of entity, referred to as the ‘without-form’ (Lyotard qtd. in Behrooz,et al. 184) and ‘without-limit’, and originally associated with Nature or Divinity (Jameson 77), is perceived here in the ‘dull and unlocatable roar’ (43) of the technological frequencies that speak in their own ‘language of waves and radiation’ (375), which remain incomprehensible for the human mind. This white noise responds to Jameson’s ‘postmodern sublime’ (80), yet it doesn’t merely refer to the technological advancements of postmodern society, but the ‘even deeper[…] world system of present-day multinational capitalism’ (79), which finds its physical reification in the supermarket, a place where ‘objects no longer have a specific reality[…]: what is primary is their serial, circular, spectacular arrangement’ (Baudrillard 77). It is thus the closest approximation to a physical entrance in the hyperreal ‘system’ (55) that ‘authenticate[s] and confirm[s]’ life, which is granted only on the basis of access to one’s ‘banking card’ (338). Here, reality is discourse, identity is performance, spirituality is consumerism and life is a type of death, as brands like *‘Toyota Celica’* (180) acquire the spiritual undertones of ‘an ancient power in the sky’, the adverts for ‘miracle vitamins’ (375) and ‘cures for cancer’ become the postmodern ‘tales of the supernatural’, possessions determine one’s ‘cosmic placement’ (45), and ‘shopp[ing] with reckless abandon’ (99) provides an escape from the self with its promise of perpetual renewal, which is only another type of death, as it doesn’t ‘even giv[e] the event of death a chance’ (Baudrillard 2). The hyperreality of consumer culture and technology has thus become the centre of existence, the ‘never-ending neon’ (265) that contains ‘[a]ll the letters[…], all the voices and sounds’ (44) of contemporary culture, and on whose stability life depends, as ‘everything was fine[…] as long as the supermarket did not slip’ (197).

Therefore, DeLillo’s contemporary world is subtly yet pervasively dystopic, with uncanny undertows that seep through the surface of banality and conventionality of today’s

postmodern experience. The progressive absorption of reality by technology, the media, and consumer culture not only disconnects the self from its environment, but neutralises meaning and makes authenticity redundant. Hence, it renders humanity powerless, and more importantly, blind to the deathly implications behind the seemingly convenient and pleasant world of hyperreality.

Works Cited

Babaee, Ruzbeh, et al. “Sketch of Discourse and Power in Don DeLillo’s White Noise.” *International Journal of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, pp. 30–33.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Baya, Adina. “‘Relax and Enjoy These Disasters’: News Media Consumption and Family Life in Don DeLillo’s White Noise.” *Neohelicon (Budapest)*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2014, pp. 159–174.

Behrooz, Niloufar, and Hossein Pirnajmuddin. “The Ridiculous Sublime in Don DeLillo’s White Noise and Cosmopolis.” *Gema Online Journal of Language Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2016, pp. 183-197.

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*, Picador, 2022.

Ghashmari, Ahmad. “Living in a simulacrum: how TV and the supermarket redefines reality in Don Delillo’s White Noise.” *452° F*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2010, pp. 171-185.

Jameson, Fredric. “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, *New Left Review,* no. 146, 1984, pp. 55-92.

Lyotard, Jean-François. “The Postmodern Condition.” *The Postmodern Turn*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 27-38.

Reeve, N. H., and Richard Kerndge. “Toxic Events: Postmodernism and DeLillo’s White Noise.” *Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. XXIII, no. 4, 1994, pp. 303–323.

Wilcox, Leonard. “Baudrillard, DeLillo’s ‘White Noise,’ and the End of Heroic Narrative.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1991, pp. 346–365.