

Postmodernism in American Fiction: Hyperreality and Simulation & TV in White Noise

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Abstract

Postmodernism emerged as an age of unprecedented development, new approaches and the Cultural Revolution, with changes occurring in many spheres of life. It was born out of Heisenberg's "Uncertainty principle", the chaos of World Wars, and the influences of Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Lacan and Darwin. It challenged openly the standards by which particular forms, texts, and presumptions are projected, imposed, and declared to be in good taste, everlasting, and universal. Research shows that Postmodernism is an important theory in the development of contemporary American fiction. It has challenged traditional forms of narrative, such as linearity, and allowed writers to experiment with structure, genre, and perspective. It continues to influence American novelists, both in terms of style and subject matter and allows them to explore unconventional themes and valorize non-mainstream cultures and identities. It questioned the idea of a single authoritative version of history and reality. It is characterized by chance, minimalism, random technique, parody, and self-exhausting fiction, linked to occurrences, street theatre, anti-rational activities, and harsh revolutions. It provides an important space for voices previously unheard in fiction. It critiques and discusses the influence of digital gadgets, IT technology, consumerism, etc. It is preceded by a sense of change and distinguished by the emergence of a sophisticated central consciousness. It offers diversity as new meanings emerge and people begin to question the existence of a bond that once connected them all. In view of the aforementioned, this paper attempts to trace the instances of post-modernistic simulation and hyper-reality (especially TV as hyperreal) in Don DeLillo's White Noise.

Keywords Postmodernism, reality, consumerism, truth, and simulation

Introduction

Postmodernism is a reaction or response to modernism in the late twentieth century. It opposes Modernism ideals and celebrates fragmentation, provisionality, and incoherence. Postmodernism believes that there is no fixed reality or absolute truth and truth is relative. It rejects Western values and beliefs as only a small part of the human experience and postmodernism as a form of literature focuses on a vision of a contradictory, fragmented, ambiguous, inconclusive, indeterminate, unfinished, broken, and discontinuous world. Post-modern writing features irony, playfulness, and dark humour. Authors in this style voice

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frustration with World War II, the Cold War, and conspiracy theories, and approach serious subjects in a playful and humorous tone. Postmodern narrative elements like pastiche, intertextuality, metafiction, temporal distortion, cyberpunk fiction, magic realism etc. expand possibilities of expression.

In the Postmodernist era, America emerged as a superpower, especially after World War II, and the role of television and media in America gained more significance. American writers of the 1940s and the 1950s contributed to the innovation of naturalist and modernist narrative techniques. These works depicted a chaotic urban setting, disintegration of moral values, absurdity, stoicism, fear of death, despair, radical rebellion, nihilism, sexuality, alcoholism, and vernacularism. Simon Malpas in the introduction to his book *The Postmodern: The New Critical Idiom* says:

What is it like to be postmodern? Contemporary culture moves at an almost incomprehensible speed. The opportunities and lifestyles open to people in Europe and North America seem to multiply exponentially as new ideas, technologies and fashions appear at ever-increasing rates. Space and time shrink almost to nothing as we move around the world at breakneck pace. Civilizations, traditions and forms of social interaction are transformed or even annihilated as borders become more fluid and the conventions, customs and ways of life that once distinguished one place from another turn into matters of choice for an internationalised consumer. The world is now, quite literally, at our fingertips as we choose and purchase lifestyles from wherever we please, eclectically piecing together patchworks of images and signs to produce our identities.... We inhabit a multinational, multimedia, interdependent world marketplace, and have been, to use a contemporary buzzword that will be explored in more detail later in the book, 'globalised'.

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is a typical postmodern text which is heavily filled with Baudrillardian concepts of Hyperreality and simulation. Jean Baudrillard, the French sociologist coined the term "Hyperreality," which describes a situation in which there is a blurring of the lines between reality and simulation, with simulations or representations appearing more real than the reality they are intended to reflect. *White Noise* addresses this blurring of reality and Hyperreality in the postmodern context. In the novel, in fact, television becomes more real than reality itself, and the characters in *White Noise* suffer from problematic comprehension of reality which is conveyed to them by images of supermarkets, malls and hypermarkets. Hyperreality is literally seen as the existence in which the real and fiction are indistinguishable from each other. Frederic Jameson in his essay "Technoculture and Hyperreality" calls postmodernism the "cultural logic of late capitalism" where society is constantly bombarded with advertisements, videos, and product placements. Frederic Jameson in "From Postmodernism and Consumer Society" states:

Many of newer postmodernisms have been fascinated precisely by that whole landscape of advertising and motels, of the Las Vegas strip, of the late show and Grade- B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel. They no longer "quote" such "texts" as Joyce might have done, or Mahler; they incorporate them, to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw.

Even Antony King in his essay titled "Baudrillard's Nihilism and the End of Theory" published in Mike Gane's *Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought: Jean Baudrillard, Volume I*, says:

Hyperreality emerges when culture no longer refers to social reality. Hyperreal culture is not grounded in a reality beyond itself; images float free from any verifying reference, becoming an unanchored “reality”. The signifier and signified become detached, and the signifier effaces the signified. Hyperreality marks the end of representation, because representation becomes reality and, in this, differs profoundly from any previous culture. (Gane 133)

In the postmodern context, simulacra play a significant role in the dissolution of the distinction between reality and simulation which results in Hyperreality. Jean Baudrillard in the essay “From Simulacra and Simulation” writes:

Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of Simulacra. It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms: the Pirates, the Frontiers, the Future world, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation.

Vincent B. Leitch, George Lynn Cross Research Professor and Paul and Sutton write in their book *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* opines:

Simulacra seem to have referents (real phenomena they refer to), but they are merely pretend representations that mark the absence, not the existence, of the objects they purport to represent. Baudrillard blames two distinct but related culprits for this change: contemporary consumer culture and imperialistic Western Science and Philosophy.

In consumer society, natural needs or desires have been buried under, if not totally eliminated desires stimulated by cultural discourses (advertising, media, and the rest), which tell us what we want. We are so pre-coded, so filled from the very start with the images of what we desire, that we process our relation to the world completely through those images. (Leitch, Cross Paul and Sutton 1554)

DeLillo’s *White Noise* explores the postmodern condition of information overload, reverberating with symbols of contemporary American society such as supermarkets, malls, tabloids, advertising, academia, and satire of television and mass media. The novel blurs the lines between the real and the artificial, focusing on the effects of technology, advertising, terrorism, religious cults, sports crowds, political crowds, television, nuclear war, and natural and human-made catastrophes. The novel’s family structure is replaced by a loose aggregate of siblings, step-siblings, and ex-spouses, living in a condition of permanent impermanence. The novel’s protagonist, Jack, sees the family as the “cradle of the world’s misinformation” and Babbette as a protective charm. The novel’s mysterious finale is unexpected, unsettling, and unfinished, leading to the postmodernist conclusion that the book transcends all tropes. Antonio Gramsci’s division between “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals highlights the complexity of postmodernism, where consciousness is unable to discern between reality and a simulation of reality.

In DeLillo’s *White Noise* TV is depicted as a hyperreal entity exhibiting a hyperreal world. Its omnipresence has a profound impact on the characters and the overall society. Television in “*White Noise*” functions as hyperreal by inundating characters with images, sounds, and information, creating sensory saturation and blurring the line between fiction and reality. This leads to a sense of detachment from reality, a false sense of security, a loss of authenticity, and a commodification of death. The novel critiques the impact of mass media on human life, questioning the consequences of living in a culture where simulated experiences

overpower authentic ones and representations become more potent than reality itself. In fact, Murray Siskind, a teacher of popular culture, while referring to the TV says:

I've come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring. It's like a myth being born right there in our living room, like something we know in a dream-like and preconscious way. (DeLillo 51)

And since the TV is the major source of information, again in Murray's words: offers incredible amounts of psychic data. It opens ancient memories of world birth ... [It] practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness and disgust. (DeLillo 51)

In DeLillo's *White Noise*, the daily life of the characters is pervaded with a reality that consists of representations. These characters have a problematic comprehension of reality which is transformed and made "flimsy" by its penetration by images. Television seems to have succeeded in pervading their lives and shaping their behaviour and even their expectations of others and of themselves. Jack Gladney, the protagonist of *White Noise*, is the director of the Hitler Studies Department at an American university in the 1980s. He indulges in American pleasures like shopping, TV watching, and reading tabloid magazines to distract himself from his fear of passing away. He experiences an "airborne toxic event" from poison exposure one day, which results in his body developing a "nebulous mass" that serves as a time-released death. He makes repeated unsuccessful attempts to handle the circumstances. Gladney, in a significant monologue at the beginning of the novel, explains his relationship with Hitler and how he has become the chair of the Hitler Studies Department in a way that clarifies his self-image:

Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort. The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own ideas, an alternative to the bushy beard ... Babette said she liked the dignity, significance and prestige. I am the false character that follows the name around. (DeLillo 17)

Besides, he is known as J.A.K – a pun on J.F.K. – and his wife's expectations of him are based upon this image. Jack Gladney is thus a copy. By the 80s, when the events of the novel take place, America was dominated by TV and its models, and thus the whole concept of reality got invaded by simulations. One night the family is surprised by Babette's appearance on TV

The face on the screen was Babette's ... What did it mean? What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders? Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Is this her spirit, her secret self? It was her alright, the face, the hair, the way she blinks in rapid twos and threes. I'd seen her just an hour ago, eating eggs, but her appearance on the screen made me think of her as some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the mists of the dead ...? (DeLillo 102-103)

And the real Babette is not as important as the picture: "[It] was the picture that mattered, the face in black and white, animated but also flat, distanced, sealed off, timeless". Moreover, she is not a human made of flesh and blood, but of "electrons and photons" (DeLillo 104). All the distinctions between the image and the real disappear completely, and the former takes over the latter. Gladney, equating death with television appearance, tries to tell himself that it was "only television – and not some journey out of life or death, not some mysterious separation" (DeLillo 105). However, the most significant reaction is Babette's baby who is

completely unaware of the gap between the real and the image. That is why when the image disappears, he simply cries, whereas, for the rest of the family, the image is a “hyperreal”, more real than the real.

Baudrillard’s arguments about the simulacrum and the reproducible object world that loses its originality help to explain the privileged status of the image in the fictional world of *White Noise*. In this novel, the notion of the SIMUVAC, in which the real is used to experience the simulacrum parallels Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum: The SIMUVAC is used as a “chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation” (DeLillo 39). Moreover, the loss of originality and the sense of distance that this loss creates makes people feel “intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television” (DeLillo 65). It is worth mentioning that the whole family gathers in front of the TV and enjoys watching catastrophes:

That night, a Friday we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with the take-out Chinese. There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Henrich 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 otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping. (DeLillo 64)

Within this context, what Murray Siskind asks Gladney to do is simply remove the distinction between the signifier and the referent and take the image completely for the “real”. When Gladney wonders “whether to feel good or bad about learning that (his) experience (of enjoying disasters on TV) is widely shared,” Murray tells him to feel bad. That is, one should feel unique in one’s experience and perception as if one is experiencing the real itself. Murray argues that:

This is what comes from the wrong kind of attentiveness. People get brain fade. ... The commercial has deeper waves and deeper emanations. But we have reversed the relative significance of these things. This is why people's eyes, ears, brains and nervous systems have grown weary. (DeLillo 67)

Words, even in dreams, have lost their human dimension. They are “computer generated” utterances that have substituted (wo) man’s deep human experience. The unconscious, in other words, is totally colonized, and therefore, (wo) man’s sense of alienation is deepened. So, it becomes clear why Babette has made it a rule to watch TV with the whole family on Friday nights:

She seemed to think that if kids watched television one night a week with parents or step-parents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, ma it wholesome. Domestic sport. Its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power would be gradually reduced. (DeLillo 16)

The novel features the television as a significant character, influencing the concept of reality, time and space. The TV’s limitless space becomes an organic part of the domestic space, with Steffie repeating what is said on it. The novel’s play with ontological levels creates the impression that the alternative reality offered by the TV saturates the characters’ consciousness and unconscious, questioning their independence. The reader’s ontological world, fiction’s ontological world, and TV’s sub-ontological worlds are compared, creating

intersections of micro-macro-ontological levels. DeLillo's experimentation with reality leads to different ontological fragmented worlds, with Gladney, the postmodern subject, having multiple ontological worlds with no telos except death.

Gladney's world is modelled on TV images and programs, reflecting on TV as a character and world in the novel. DeLillo critiques its destructive role in postmodern culture, where images hegemonize and homogenize society, distracting attention from revolutionary collective insight. In this regard, Michael Rogin comments on the role of spectacles in the America of the 1980s by arguing that "[the] Reagan spectacle points ... neither to the insignificance nor to the autonomy of the sign but rather to its role in producing power" (DeLillo 231). Heinrich, Gladney's son, refuses to accept the empirical fact that it is raining because "the radio said it's going to rain tonight" (DeLillo 22). Mink, the mysterious agent who trades pills for sex with Babette, is a TV addict who throws and swallows pills like popcorn while watching and being watched by the TV. One does not know whether he is "inside" the TV, or "outside" it.

Gladney's behaviour is linked to the division of labour and product circulation in a late capitalist society. Television transforms American characters into spectators, encouraging false individual uniqueness and a capitalist subject-object relationship. The reality of simulation becomes the criterion for "the real," with ideal sex being the hyperreal portrayed in porno movies, soap operas, and erotic books. This reminds me of Norman Denzin who remarks in his essay "Takes on the Postmodern: Baudrillard, Lyotard and Jameson":

In an age of Hyperreality, 'when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning'. There is, Baudrillard argues, a proliferation of myths of origin, and signs of reality. A preoccupation with authenticity, and an 'escalation of the true, of lived experience ... a pain-stricken production of the real and referential'. The hyperreal age works under a strategy of deterrence as if a surfeit of lived experiences could erase any doubt that the real has ceased to exist. (Gane 299-300)

TV is a cultural apparatus that transmits authoritarian interpretations of reality, reflecting the interests of its owners. It offers simulacrum-based information, influencing the spectator's feelings and attitudes. Despite variations, the content is not entirely objective or free, with a mediator between events and spectators. Blacksmith inhabitants follow a TV-favored representation, operating according to rules, frameworks, and controlled conventions determined by "gods of awesome technology". Paul Hegarty in his book, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory*, Chapter 2, "Simulation and the Decay of the Real", states:

TV is no longer content to 'show' reality, and thereby make the real more hyperreal, but now intervenes in events, puncturing the last illusion of a distinction between real and copy. The speed and level of technology mean that the world is one ... (Hegarty 64)

The individual's ultimate goal in *White Noise* is to become a part of the "culture industry" of the TV, to become an image, to appear on TV, and accept her / his subjugation freely: when Gladney's daughter Bee responds to people escaping a plane crash, the first question she asks is "Where's the media?" and upon finding "there is no media from Iron City", she reflects that "they went through all that for nothing?" (DeLillo 92). And when the people of Blacksmith experience the airborne toxic event, a man complains that "there is nothing on network... Not a word, not a picture". He even wonders: "Isn't fear news?" (DeLillo 161). People's ideas of themselves and even their roles are determined by the media. One's attention is completely shifted to one's role as a consumer of spectacles, rather than a producer. The total

subordination to television is, in other words, the product of political and social mobilization in the sense that the “imaginary” is invested with as much influence as the real itself and vice versa. Pramod K Nayer in his *Literary Theory Today* writes:

In an age when natural object is no longer credible ... Simulations and models are pure reproductions.... The “Last Original” actually does not exist: it may be infinitely reproduced. This is the hyperreal. In the hyperreal, then, the image is reality. Our experiences (of reality) are simulated through technology. Examples of this simulated reality abound in home shopping via television, electronic shopping, holographic images etc. Baudrillard describes the situation thus: we will never again in the future be able to separate reality from its statistical, simulative projection in the media, a state of suspense and definitive uncertainty about reality(Nayer 226)

The novel *White Noise* explores the role of TV, simulacrum, and the media’s relationship with society. Gladney’s questions about death critique the novel and the disappearance of the real and its annihilation in representation conflicts constitute the essential part of the novel. Our reading reveals clearly that the characters in *Blacksmith*, who follow TV commands, are heavily controlled by a hegemonic force that regulates their responses through codes, signs, Hyperreal, advertisements, commercials, and the state.

On the whole, *White Noise* is a critique of modern American society that emphasizes the growth of technology, Hyperreality, media, capitalism and popular culture. It also shows not only how humans in the postmodern era are trapped in a world of Hyperreality, advertising, and consumer culture but also portrays postmodernism as a cultural logic of capitalism, creating a virtual world called simulacrum – an environment filled with floating signifiers without signified.

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