

**“THE BOUNDARY WE NEED”: DEATH AND THE CHALLENGE TO  
POSTMODERNITY IN DON DELILLO’S *WHITE NOISE***

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**ABSTRACT.** *Don DeLillo’s White Noise is often taught as an exemplar of postmodern literature because of its concern with the postmodern themes of identity and spectacular commodification. There is much in the text, however, to suggest that DeLillo’s central characters are searching for certainties, some of which are related to earlier cultural paradigms. This paper argues that Don DeLillo’s novel explores ways to overcome the persistent displacement of meaning in postmodern texts by establishing death as one concept outside the systems of signs which is irreducible, certain and universal. DeLillo’s characters are in search of a “transcendental signified” (Derrida) able to bring a halt to the potentially infinite postmodern regressions of late twentieth century American culture. Here I argue that in White Noise it is death which provides this exterior metaphysical principle.*

*Keywords:* Don DeLillo, White Noise, Postmodernism, Modernism, Death.

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**“THE BOUNDARY WE NEED”: LA MUERTE Y EL RETO DE LA POSTMODERNIDAD EN *WHITE NOISE*, DE DON DELILLO**

**RESUMEN.** *White Noise*, de Don DeLillo, se enseña a menudo como ejemplo de literatura postmoderna debido a que aborda temas postmodernos como la identidad y la mercantilización del espectáculo. El texto de la novela sugiere en numerosas ocasiones que los personajes principales están buscando certezas, algunas de las cuales están relacionadas con anteriores paradigmas culturales. En este artículo se defiende que esta novela de Don DeLillo explora maneras de sobrellevar el persistente desplazamiento de significados que se localizan en textos postmodernos, y que lo hace considerando a la muerte como concepto que se sale de los sistemas de signos y que es irreductible, cierta y universal. Los personajes de DeLillo van en busca de un “significado trascendental” (Derrida) capaz de detener las regresiones potencialmente infinitas de la cultura estadounidense de finales del siglo XX. Mi postura es que en *White Noise* la muerte es lo que proporciona este principio metafísico externo.

*Palabras clave:* Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, Postmodernismo, Modernismo, muerte.

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Don DeLillo's 1984 novel *White Noise* and its criticism find themselves caught in a dilemma. On the one hand *White Noise* is taught on university English courses as the prime postmodern text, displaying the characteristics of postmodern literature identified by central theorists such as Jean Baudrillard (1994), Fredric Jameson (1991) and Linda Hutcheon (1988). After all, DeLillo represents a world in which culture and the experience of reality are motivated by television and the image, in which identity is decentred, and technology provides an elegant solution to any problem. As a consequence, critics have explored in detail the ways in which the novel can be read as a postmodern novel, a novel about postmodern society, or a critique of postmodern culture and theory, leading Peter Knight, for example, to ask whether DeLillo's writing here is “a symptom, a diagnosis, or an endorsement of the condition of postmodernity” (2008: 27). On the other hand, critics have suggested that DeLillo's central character, college lecturer Jack Gladney, is our guide to postmodernism from the perspective of a nostalgic modernist (see for example Cantor 1991: 58; Lentricchia 1991a: 14; Olster 2008: 79), while his colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, is his “tutor in the new semiotic regime” and “a postmodern savant” (Wilcox 1991: 350; Moses 1991: 68). The tensions between these two positions are illustrated by the novel's postmodern thematics of identity, technology, language and the nature of reality and the way they are contained by the familiar narrative stabilities of perspective and chronology, as well as appeals to earlier modes of representation. Critical perspectives on *White Noise* generally recognise DeLillo as either a postmodern writer or as a writer who challenges

the late-twentieth century postmodern consensus. This contestation is reflected in interpretations of the title: some critics (Lentricchia [1991b], for example) see the white noise experienced by the characters in the novel as the whine of electrical systems of communication, while others (such as Maltby [1996] and Packer [2005]) see it as a spiritual hum representing potentially spiritual, sacred and redemptive experiences.

In this paper I argue that while DeLillo's characters are immersed in postmodern phenomena and are persistently seduced by the appealing surfaces of the spectacular commodity realm and the technology that motivates it, the text itself demonstrates DeLillo's suspicion of literary and cultural theories which propose postmodernity's potentially infinite deferrals and regressions. As such, my argument relocates the novel as a text which explores postmodern themes, while at the same time demonstrating DeLillo's parodic intentions towards postmodern culture by consciously locating textual authority at the moment of death –at the juncture between being and not being, between knowing and the impossibility of knowing. In *White Noise*, DeLillo is parodying the features of postmodernity as well as dramatising the pervasive power of postmodern commodity culture and postmodern discourse in the academy. This is in part because, as Stacey Olster has noted, DeLillo's task is to find "a critical position from which to delineate a cultural phenomenon without being wholly absorbed by it" (2008: 79). The postmodern cultural phenomenon that Olster identifies and DeLillo explores is one in which the certainties of metaphysics –the concepts that guarantee meaning– have been deconstructed by post-structuralist and postmodern thinking. Jacques Derrida observes that the "history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonyms [of central authority]". He goes on to describe how it "could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence [...] (essence, existence, substance, subject), alètheia [truth], transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth" (1988: 109-10). It is the loss of these certainties, amongst them identity, history and scientific progress, that Gladney mourns in *White Noise*. Jean Baudrillard contemplates the nature of the relationship between the sign and the guarantee of meaning when he argues that:

All Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange - God of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum - not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. (1994: 6)

God, then, could be one candidate for the foundational or metaphysical principle able to provide a basis for meaning in a language system because He is external to the system of signs. However, Baudrillard identifies that religious belief and worship are themselves constructed through a system of signs and potentially subject to the same processes of deferral as language. Derrida goes on to demonstrate that once the concepts of authority have been deconstructed (dismantled through their own contradictions), then the systems of meaning to which they had given stability collapse and appear to contribute to the chaos of life rather than the organisation of experience. It is the nostalgic desire for a transcendental signified, a concept able to give authority to all signs in a system of meaning, which motivates DeLillo's characters in pursuit of some sacred or spiritual experience that will no longer be subject to the processes of deferral and referral that shape late twentieth century America in the novel.

The absence of the transcendental signified results in meaning in language being deferred from one signifier to the next without arriving at the solid object of signification the language user craves. Derrida argues that a moment arrived:

when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse [... ] [T]hat is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely. (1988: 110)

The transcendental signified, then, is the language component that will bring a halt to the process of deferral, or “play” as Derrida characterises it, and a material and stable meaning can be arrived at. However, the nature of this authoritative concept cannot be linguistic or it will itself be implicated in this process of play, referral and deferral in language and meaning.

It is my contention that the fear of death inhabits the lives of DeLillo's characters as an example of what Baudrillard would see as a simulation of death. In contrast, for DeLillo, the material fact of death is able to provide an exterior metaphysical principle able to bring to a halt the potentially endless deferrals proposed by postmodern culture. Death then acts as Derrida's transcendental signified precisely because it is not constructed within the discourses of language. Death is, of course, also beyond the characters' narratives and so while we and DeLillo see the futility of the pursuit of a halt to these regressions, Jack Gladney and his wife, Babette, are unable to and are condemned to live in a perpetual postmodern representation of a technologically motivated reality. Paul Maltby argues that “to postmodernize DeLillo is to risk losing sight of the (conspicuously

unpostmodern) metaphysical impulse that animates his work" (1996: 260). While Maltby locates un-postmodern impulses across DeLillo's work in the Romantic sublime, the innocence of childhood and spiritual redemption, I want to pay far greater attention to death as a guarantee of meaning in this text. Indeed, while DeLillo's narrative focuses in a manifest way on spectacular commodification and the culture of the image, and on the influence of multi-national culture and technology, it is death that is a consistent presence in his debates here. DeLillo's working title was *The American Book of the Dead* and he has said that the book is about "death on a personal level" (Moses 1991: 79 and DeLillo quoted in Engels 1999: 769). Death, then, is itself problematised in the text. It does not inhabit the lives of the central characters in a direct way, but is instead experienced through a number of deferrals: as a fear of something that can be managed and medicated technologically. As a consequence, the fear of death becomes another symptom of the postmodern condition, while the material experience of death itself remains a distant but distinct possibility for the establishment of a metaphysical concept.

DeLillo's central character, then, is on an unstated quest to find the transcendental signified that will give meaning to the systems of thought and experience through which he moves. To do this, as both Derrida and Baudrillard have shown us, Jack needs to establish a position outside of postmodern culture so that he is able to get a purchase on it and, to some extent, resist it. However, both Baudrillard and Jameson identify that the realm of the image and its commodity environment provide little opportunity to establish a critical position outside of postmodern culture. Baudrillard cites an "*implosion*" between the poles of cause and effect such that "nothing separates one pole from another anymore", resulting in "an absorption of the radiating mode of causality" (1994: 31, original emphasis). This implosion mimics the flattening of so many aspects of contemporary experience, culture and theory in postmodern thinking: time and space, or the television screen and its surrogate, the image, for example. Jameson reinterprets Baudrillard's "gap" between the poles of cause and effect in an analytical model of "critical distance". For Jameson, postmodernism has abolished, or collapsed, the earlier forms of critical distance with the result that "[w]e are submerged in its henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our new postmodern bodies are [...] incapable of distantiation" (1991: 48-9). Within the logic of the text, DeLillo's characters are condemned, to one extent or another, to occupy these undistantiated cultural spaces. However, DeLillo's position, outside the text, gives him an authorial distance which allows him to generate a parodic interpretation of postmodern culture. As I will demonstrate, DeLillo's scepticism of endless deferrals finds its expression in death as a certainty, with his concerns given voice by a minor character, Winnie Richards, who draws our attention to the tension between

the fear of death and death itself. Before demonstrating the strategies adopted by Jack Gladney to evade the endless processes of postmodern deferral, I want to explore the postmodern features of the novel. These are both thematic and generic. DeLillo borrows from the genres of the family drama, disaster narratives and the detective form, while his dominant postmodern themes are identity, commodification and television.

## I

Jack Gladney is a character in search of an identity. He describes himself as a college lecturer who “invented Hitler Studies in North America in March 1968” (DeLillo 1984: 4). At the time, the college chancellor had advised him that his name and appearance let him down. As a consequence, Jack changes his name to J. A. K. Gladney: a “tag [he] wore like a borrowed suit” (DeLillo 1984: 16). Equally, Jack has a “tendency to make a feeble presentation of self”, particularly his physical self. The solution, he tells us in his first person narrative, along with wearing the medieval academic robes of a departmental chairman, is to “gain weight” because:

[the chancellor] wanted me to “grow out” into Hitler. [...] The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea [...] Babette said she liked the series J. A. K. [...] To her it intimated dignity, significance and prestige.

I am the false character that follows the name around. (DeLillo 1984: 17)

These gestures of self-hood are symptomatic of the decentering effects of post-structuralism and the consequent destabilisation of identity in a postmodern world. Jameson describes this move away from the stable self as “the *decentering* of that formerly centered subject or psyche” (1991: 15, original emphasis). This decentering has the effect of liberating the self from the destructive forces of modernism and modernist anxieties about the distortion of individuality because “the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling” (Jameson 1991: 15, original emphasis). In the case of Jack Gladney, his original conception of self is evacuated by the stereotype of a college don provided by his chancellor (a man who is both large and successful) leaving a vulnerable sense of identity which will later be occupied by stereotypes drawn from popular culture. The conflicted individual, struggling against the chaotic world of commodified forces to construct a stable and coherent sense of who they are, is neatly embodied in the figure of Orest Mercator who wants to break the world record for sitting in a cage with poisonous snakes. Gladney describes

how Mercator is "creating an imperial self out of some tabloid aspiration" (DeLillo 1984: 268). What Jack does not see is that his own imperial self, the distant academic, is equally crafted with dark glasses and the robes of a departmental chairman.

Jack's most complete sense of selfhood comes when he embraces the commodity environment and allows himself to be immersed in shopping. The supermarket and the mall are iconic postmodern spaces in that they exemplify the overwhelming plenitude of the commodity environment, they organise consumption, and they are prime examples of the triumph of the image over material reality. The Mid-Village Mall in *White Noise* is "a ten-storey building arranged around a center court of waterfalls, promenades and gardens" (DeLillo 1984: 83) where the commodity spectacle and the image offer Jack a temporary refuge from the insecurities of postmodern identity. When he catches sight of his own image in the store mirrors, he reflects: "I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed" (DeLillo 1984: 84). An interesting contrast to this fantasy world of consumption is the terrain in which the mall sits. The postmodern landscape of commodification and consumption is imposed like a palimpsest over the archaeological remains of America's past. Residues of the area's industrial past remain inscribed on the landscape in the form of names which capture a modernist past dedicated to production rather than consumption. The local towns are named for the substantial practices of industrial production and the immigrant communities who peopled them. Fredric Jameson describes how the "postmodern is [...] the forcefield in which very different kinds of cultural impulses –what Raymond Williams has usefully termed "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production– must make their way" (1991: 6). The towns of "Farmington", "Coaltown", "Blacksmith", "Watertown", "Bakerstown", "Glassboro" and "Iron City" are all expressions of the area's residual industrial past and provide Jack with a nostalgic focus for earlier certainties, but certainties that are, none the less, lost to the postmodern cycles of renewal and innovation (DeLillo 1984: 12, 58, 85, 97, 222, 275 and 300). Iron City, for example, is "sunk in the confusion [...] of abandonment" (DeLillo 1984: 85). It is the city's main street which displays the most profound features for both nostalgia and the irretrievability of the certainties of earlier times because it is close to "a classic photography of regret" (DeLillo 1984: 89). This isn't just the main street of Iron City, it is the sepia tinged stereotype of the decay of the small town Main Street in the face of the onslaught from suburbanisation and advanced capitalism which the mall represents. Though Jack seems to be drawn to these earlier cultural impulses, the narrative makes it clear that these potential modernist escapes from postmodern indeterminacies provide only nostalgic dead-ends.

DeLillo draws the reader's attention to the power of the commodity image many times in *White Noise*, but the clearest example comes in the supermarket where products are arranged "backed by mirrors that people accidentally punched when reaching for fruit in the upper rows". Here the consumer is first seduced by the "burnished" fruit and then drawn to the reflection of the commodity rather than to its already improved physical reality (1984: 36). Baudrillard extends Derrida's explanation of play in language to a system of images, such as that produced by advanced capitalism, consumerism and advertising. What he discovers "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal", resulting in the "desert of the real" (Baudrillard 1994: 1). In the supermarket, the image dominates the culture of advanced capitalism and exceeds the reality of the physical object. Baudrillard argues that in the postmodern realm, rather than reality motivating the image, reality is preceded by the image – "a precession of simulacra" he calls it (1994: 1). Meaning for the image-sign in this system, then, is not generated by its relation to a material reality, but by "the orbital recurrence of models and [...] the simulated generation of differences" (1994: 12). Because all these image-signs are related in a synchronic plane, endlessly referring to each other, the depth of meaning Jack craves is absent.

Perhaps the most famous and commented-upon example of the irreferentiality of the image in American literature takes place in *White Noise*. Jack takes Murray to a tourist attraction signposted "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA". Of course, Murray is obliged to give a theoretical commentary on those taking and selling images of the barn. "No one sees the barn", he perceptively tells Jack:

Once you have seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn [...] We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura [...] we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. (DeLillo 1984: 12-13)

The barn itself is never described to us, but Murray describes exactly the way in which the tangible reality of the barn itself recedes from its image simulacrum, the photograph, in the realm of potentially infinite reproduction because "[t]hey are taking pictures of taking pictures" (DeLillo 1984: 113). Borrowing from Benjamin, he attributes an aura to the experience of the image of the barn which mimics, but isn't, the unique and religious quality possessed by great works of art. In effect, the image and the process of capturing it take on the spiritual qualities earlier art retained within itself and the experience of its physical presence. Jack and Murray witness a new postmodern sublime that is the equivalent of the earlier Romantic sense of the sublime – in its inexplicability and awe-inspiring qualities – but which is motivated by technologies of reproduction



and consumption (for an extended discussion of the Romantic sublime in the novel, see Maltby 1996: 269-71). As Lentricchia puts it, the real subject of this scene "is the electronic medium of the image as the active context of contemporary existence in America" (1991b: 88). Murray recognises, too, the implosion between the poles of analysis and interpretation described earlier, and the problematic nature of delineating "a cultural phenomenon without being wholly absorbed by it" (Ostler 2008: 79). In many ways, this episode encapsulates Jack's emerging experience of postmodernity in the novel: he can no longer contemplate his own experience of postmodern America precisely because of the signs directing him to it.<sup>1</sup>

Television dominates as the site for both the transmission and the depthlessness of the image in *White Noise*. Jameson describes how television "articulates nothing, but rather implodes, carrying its flattened image surface within itself" (1991: 37). He goes further and, it could be argued, establishes a set of terms which trace quite closely the experiences of DeLillo's characters in *White Noise*. For Jameson, communications technology, with television as its most common manifestation, is one of the fundamental components of what he calls "a postmodern or technological sublime", establishing a relationship between reality and TV similar to that we have seen between the barn and the commodified circulation of its image (1991: 37). It is significant that Gladney family life revolves around television. When Babette unexpectedly appears on the family TV, Gladney describes how the picture is "animated but also flat, distant, sealed off, timeless [...] she was coming into being, endlessly being formed and reformed [...] as the electronic dots swarmed" (DeLillo 1984: 104). Babette here is more real, more authentic for being reproduced on the TV screen. She is actively taking part in the postmodern process of image production as she is constituted and then re-constituted electronically in the form of light. The experience for the family demonstrates that Babette has a more secure presence in the postmodern world if that presence is validated by electronic media. "[I]t is TV that is true", Baudrillard argues. "Truth [...] is no longer the reflexive truth of the mirror, nor the perspectival truth [...] of the gaze" (1994: 29). In other words, the medium meant to reflect reality is now active in shaping it. For many of the characters in *White Noise*, the transformation of reality into the form of the image on television validates and legitimises the image rather than the reality, paradoxically giving the image greater substance.

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1 The barn takes on similar qualities to the Lascaux caves in France, which Baudrillard considers. By creating an exact replica to preserve the original, the custodians of the caves have created a "duplication [which] suffices to render both [the duplicate and its original] artificial". In essence, the real recedes and is replaced by a copy of itself which then stands for both the artificiality of the image and at the same time the new reality of the original (Baudrillard 1994: 9).

The ecological disaster that forms the central part of Jack's narrative produces a poisonous cloud which is also a key trope for postmodernity in the novel. Most significantly, the cloud is a postmodern spectacle which, Jack is told, contains a "whole new generation of toxic waste" (DeLillo 1984: 138). Commentators on the postmodern identify waste as an inevitable by-product of the culture of consumption which then forms the poisonous residue of contemporary living. Ordinarily, these residues are denied and hidden, and so when they escape back into the realm of consumption they create horror and panic. In *White Noise*, however, the cloud of poisonous by-products is also spectacular and has many of the qualities of the technological sublime. Guy Debord, in his influential study of commodity culture, describes the spectacle as "not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (1983: no. 4 no page). Once again we can see the image dominating the social realm, here mediating relationships among citizens whose only social role is to become consumers in an image-saturated society. Debord goes on to relate the social relations between people to the mode of production in society. "The spectacle, grasped in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production [...]", he argues. "In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present *model* of socially dominant life" (1983: no. 6 np, original emphasis). We can see the toxic cloud, then, simultaneously as a spectacular expression of the processes of production that generate the consumer goods occupying the commodity realm, the dangerous residues of industrialisation, and the means of motivating and maintaining consumer desire in the realm of the image. This latter at first seems counter-intuitive because the toxic cloud of industrial residues should be the hidden consequence of consumerism, but Jack becomes immediately aware of the cloud's relationship to the image and to commodity consumption. "In its tremendous size, its dark and bulky menace, [...]" he informs the reader, "the cloud resembled a national promotion for death, a multimillion-dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy print and billboard, TV saturation" (DeLillo 1984: 157-8). The media are not covering the toxic event, but its manifestation is taking on the qualities of light and spectacle that TV generates, as we have already seen with Babette's live appearance. Debord would see the toxic cloud as the "apologetic catalogue" of the totality of the relations of production, consumption and advertising in an advanced capitalist system (1983: no. 65 np).

DeLillo uses the medical consequences of exposure to pollution to explore the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Amongst many examples, the development of the side-effects of exposure to Nyodene D suggested by radio accounts is significant for its exploration of the relationship between media, the

signifier and material reality. First Jack's daughters experience "sweaty palms"; then "nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath"; and finally "*déjà vu*" (DeLillo 1984: 112 and 116, original emphasis). The girls respond to the directions of the media, in a media saturated world, rather than to their own biological states. In a statement that demonstrates his awareness of the transmission and effects of information and knowledge in a postmodern society, Jack asks the reader: "Are we talking about mere symptoms or deeply entrenched conditions? Is a symptom a sign or a thing? What is a thing and how do we know it's not another thing?" (DeLillo 1984: 125-6). These indeterminacies demonstrate Jack's discomfort with his place in the new postmodern order. DeLillo uses him to illustrate the unsettling effects of postmodern regress when, unlike Murray, the subject is insufficiently aware of post-structuralist questioning of the stability of meaning in language. If, as Jack suspects, a thing could be another thing or a symptom could substitute for a cause, then, as Derrida argues, "the domain and play of signification" (1988: 110) could extend infinitely. Jack is aware of the potential irreferentiality of language and his anxiety over the distinction between a signifier, a symptom and the thing to which they are supposed to refer demonstrates the urgency of his quest for metaphysical certainties in each episode of his narrative.

The power of the TV and the mystical quality of the commodity spectacle are illustrated when Jack overhears Steffie mumbling in her sleep. Watching children sleep, like shopping, gives Jack a spiritual lift. The connection between the mystical and the commodified is amplified when Steffie utters, in an "ecstatic chant", the name of a Japanese automobile: "*Toyota Celica*". Jack reflects on the transcendental possibilities of this name. "The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder", he tells us:

It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky [...] She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. (DeLillo 1984: 155, original emphasis)

Jameson, the philosopher of multi-national capital, would recognise how advertising has invaded the consciousness of the child with meaningless terms able to resonate with consumers regardless of language and culture. Millard too recognises that the "subjectivity of the novel's characters is fashioned for them by the imperatives of consumer culture and its media images and narratives" (2000: 124-5). There is a quality to this experience which is paradoxically personal, religious and sublime but, once again, the sublime qualities are motivated by technology to generate a peculiarly postmodern moment. The name Celica provides celestial

possibilities of the sacred and spiritual, in which Maltby identifies “a mystical resonance and potency”, able to transcend the mundane nature of a mere car (1996: 261). The personal and mystical experience of the commodity signifier here is due, in part, to the very nature of language in the postmodern environment. The meaning that Jack craves is subject to a process of referral, a movement from sign to sign, concept to concept, image to image along a chain of signification in which metaphysical stability and linguistic authority is evaded. Jack’s present, Jameson might argue in a reflection of the mystical nature of the experience of the signifier,

suddenly engulfs the subject with undescrivable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material –or better still, the literal– signifier in isolation. This present of the world or material signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect [...] which one could [...] imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity. (Jameson 1991: 27-8)

The euphoric effect of the sign in isolation transports Jack ever more deeply into Baudrillard’s hyperreality, into a realm where the sign exchanges for the advertising image and vice versa in a continuous play of “the simulated generation of differences” (1994: 3). Maltby mistakenly sees Steffie’s commodity incantations as indicative of the “Romantic notion of insight, of the child as gifted with an intuitive perception of truth” (1996: 268). However, there is no indication that Steffie’s unconscious chanting of commodity names is able to anchor meaning for either her or Gladney. Once again, Jack’s euphoria does not lead to the metaphysical certainties that are the subject of his quest.

## II

If language and culture refuse to offer any stable concepts upon which to establish meaning, can the act of representation, literature itself, offer any certainties? *White Noise* starts off as a campus novel, in which post-structuralism has triumphed as the dominant critical discourse at the College-on-the-Hill. The department of American environments has become dedicated to the interrogation of the languages of popular culture and commodity objects, with “full professors [...] who read nothing but cereal boxes” (DeLillo 1984: 10). Jack’s debates with his fourteen year old son, Heinrich, contribute to the unsettling instabilities of post-structuralist discourse by problematising the nature of language, its capacity to represent reality, and the status of knowledge. Heinrich adopts a position which, in DeLillo’s hands, parodies the linguistic uncertainty explored by post-structuralism and the insistent relativism of postmodernism. In an exchange about the weather Heinrich poses the question: “How can I say it’s raining now if your so-called ‘now’

becomes 'then' as soon as you say it?" (DeLillo 1984: 23-4). In exchanges such as this, Heinrich adopts a Baudrillardian stance in which signs that point to reality – here the vocabulary of weather radio reporting –merely substitute for the subjective experience of time, space and language. The campus novel is clearly being used by DeLillo here to demonstrate and explore the paradigmatic dominance of post-structural thought which has been so central in shaping critical approaches to the postmodern culture that his characters negotiate. Heinrich is Jack's son by an earlier marriage and much of the narrative takes the form of a family drama. However, because none of the children living in the Gladney household are the product of the marriage of Jack and Babette, the family drama is not a traditional one. Instead, the family as an idea is disrupted by a series of unconventional kinships, multiple marriages and a complex series of step and half-sibling relationships creating "a fearful symmetry" that parodies the American nuclear family (Ferraro 1991: 16). However, instead of heralding a breakdown of social order, these new and chaotic structures merely propose different ways for the family to remain what Gladney terms "the cradle of the world's misinformation" (DeLillo 1984: 81). The narrative is also driven by a mystery, and Jack –his identity already fragmented between academic, happy consumer and family man– becomes a reluctant detective to solve it. Jack must find out about Dylar, the mysterious drug Babette takes to treat the symptoms of her fear of death, and confront its creator, Mr Gray. DeLillo's narratives have always been characterised by a pronounced self awareness of plot, and the detective component of *White Noise* draws this metafictional device to the surface. Jack frequently acknowledges the relentless drive of the plot that he is involved with towards conventional resolutions. "All plots move in one direction" Jack tells Babette during one of their conversations about their shared fear of death (DeLillo 1984: 199). The detective form moves inexorably towards a violent conclusion and death because, as Packer notes, "sacrificial conclusions are a staple of narrative", and Jack becomes increasingly aware that he must fulfil the destiny of his genre form (2005: 660). By constructing Jack from the conventions of the different genres which shape his narrative, DeLillo is demonstrating that Jack is more than a character subjected to the forces of a new cultural paradigm, he is also a metafictional device contrived to explore the competing forces of residual modernism and expanding postmodernism.

### III

Where then should Jack Gladney look for an escape from the infinite regress and deferrals in the decentered systems of meaning at the end of the twentieth century? Jack's metafictional awareness of his own plot moving him deathward provides a compelling example of the capacity of death to be the

sign which brings to a halt the deferrals of postmodern experience –including that of literary form. However, as we have already seen, Jack and Babette are more concerned with one of the signs for death, fear, than they are with death itself. In *White Noise*, the fear of death becomes a symptom of the late twentieth century, which can be medically controlled and which defers the materiality of the end of life along a chain of signification. As Wilcox observes, “even death is not exempt from the world of simulation: the experience of dying is utterly mediated by technology and eclipsed by a world of symbols. The body becomes simulacrum, and death loses its personal and existential resonances” (1991: 352). But Wilcox is conflating death with the fear of death. When focusing only on the fear of death, we once again find Jack faced with the unstable relationship between “a sign and a thing” when indicated by a symptom. However, the fear of death is what is visible from the characters’ perspectives, while death itself is observable from a perspective external to the text for DeLillo and the reader and, for the first time in the novel, we can see the process of deferral potentially coming to a halt.

Death operates in a number of ways in the novel. Advanced capitalism’s technological mediation between death and its deferred surrogate, fear, is symbolised by the drug Dylar. In contrast, early in the narrative, Jack seeks certainties about death in “THE OLD BURYING GROUND *Blacksmith Village*” (DeLillo 1984: 97, original emphasis). Here, beyond the noise of traffic and factories, beyond the reach of the twentieth century, Jack finds “great strong simple names, suggesting a moral rigor” faintly inscribed on the headstones (DeLillo 1984: 97). Jack interprets this earlier age as signalling a greater immediacy to death able to fulfil his nostalgic desire for certainty and a more stable set of moral beliefs on which to build a system of meaning. He is aware, however, that he is only able to interpret his contemporary encounter with ancient death through the representational codes of “the landscapist’s lament” (DeLillo 1984: 97). Here, Jack’s late twentieth century condition is mediated by the representational codes, the traditions and the generic conventions of American landscape painters (of the Hudson River School, for example) in a similar way to how he will go on to interpret his experiences through the generic codes of the TV detective mystery. Significantly, Jack and Babette do not discuss the corporeal realities of pain or trauma that will lead to death, or the mysteries of an afterlife. Instead, in *White Noise*, late twentieth century society has found ways to simulate death and so technologise its experience, and to medicate against the fear it creates with elegant technical solutions. When, for example, passengers at Iron City airport report their airplane falling four miles after an engine failure, they describe how a voice from the flightdeck leaves a message for the flight-recorder: “It is worse than we ever imaged. They didn’t prepare us

for this at the death simulator in Denver. Our fear is pure, so totally stripped of distractions and pressures as to be a form of transcendental meditation” (DeLillo 1984: 91). While a death simulator has been created, it is only proximity to death that can begin to strip away technological and philosophical mediation. Crucially here, when the flightdeck voice is faced with the reality of death, he is able to see death much more directly as a potentially transcendental experience.

Babette’s attempts to overcome the symptoms of her death anxiety are focused on Dylar. Dylar medicates the patient against the fear of death and hence moves it from the purely personal and emotional into the realm of technological consumption. To guarantee a supply of the drug Babette sells her body to Dylar’s renegade creator, Willie Mink, known through most of the novel as Mr Gray, in a “capitalist transaction” which also provides the motivation for Jack’s narrative of pursuit and vengeance in the last third of the novel (DeLillo 1984: 193). The purpose of the drug is not to tranquilise the patient, but to inhibit the fear of death by interacting with neurotransmitters to isolate “the-fear-of-death part of the brain” (DeLillo 1984: 200). Dylar, as Moses observes, is the ultimate postmodern drug because “it makes no claims to treat causes, only to alleviate symptoms [...]; manipulate the signs, deconstruct the symptoms, and the cause or referent in effect disappears” (1991: 76). Dylar and the fear of death, then, operate in the novel to emphasise the deferrals of meaning from signifier to signifier rather than the relationship of the signifier to material experience, and to illustrate further the extent of the penetration of the commodity realm into America’s emotional life at the end of the twentieth century.

The postmodern thematics of identity and the image-driven culture of television intersect with the issues of death and literary form in the confrontation between Jack and Willie Mink. First Jack takes on another identity, that of the detective who tracks down the evil genius and the violator of his wife. Then, demonstrating a profound awareness of the power of plots and plans (as he has throughout the novel), Jack takes on the role of violent avenger that his narrative predicts for him. Jack’s own prophesy, that plots inevitably direct their participants’ narratives deathwards, seems to be coming true as his narrative draws towards the violent climax that its formula demands.

Jack tracks down Mink to the Roadway Motel in Germantown, an industrial area of Iron City. With a plan to shoot Mink and disguise his crime as a suicide Jack senses a new order that allows him to become more “aware of processes, components, things relating to other things” (DeLillo 1984: 304). This moment represents the point at which Jack’s identity is most fully colonised by the popular discourses of postmodern culture and he relinquishes his nostalgic desire for earlier cultural certainties. When he looks through the motel room

window and sees Mink bathed in the flickering light of the TV Jack feels that he has become “part of a network of structures and channels” which will result in “violence, a smashing intensity” (DeLillo 1984: 305). Mink, even when given his full name and a more developed characterisation, remains a figure constructed from the lexicons of popular culture. When challenged by Jack he responds in what Wilcox terms the “drone of the mediascapes” with TV documentary information about animals fitted with radio transmitters, pet diets and how to convert Celsius to Fahrenheit (1991: 356). Because the room is saturated with the chatter of communication systems, Jack is more aware than ever of the “sublitoral” hum<sup>2</sup> of the late twentieth century. The Dylar Mink has consumed disrupts the relationship between language and the world for him and forces him to conform to the gestures of contemporary culture. Derrida and Baudrillard would recognise the problematical linguistic effect that Dylar causes. When Jack says “Plunging aircraft”, because Mink confuses the sign with its referent, he adopts the crash position. And because he does it “in a somewhat stylised way” we can see that both he and Jack are being actively shaped by the forces of the culture that surround and act on them (DeLillo 1984: 309-10). The televisual nature of the episode is reinforced when, at the point at which he wishes to inflict a fatal gunshot wound on Mink, Jack advances “into the area of flickering light, out of the shadows, seeking to loom” (DeLillo 1984: 311). At this moment, because Jack’s actions are illuminated by the glow of television’s beam and at the same time he conforms to the noir stereotype of the avenging television detective, he becomes totally absorbed into the realms of popular culture. Jack repeats his plan, his generic plot, many times during this narrative sequence. The planned denouement – a “scene of squalid violence and lonely death at the shadowy fringes of society” – conforms to the stereotypes of the TV detective mystery which are now shaping Jack’s narrative (DeLillo 1984: 313). However, the violent steps Jack takes in achieving his plan reveal DeLillo’s suspicion of post-structural regression in systems of language and meaning. Violence and the proximity to death reveal to Jack the possibility of establishing meaning in a much more direct way than Derrida, for example, proposes. When Jack shoots Mink he witnesses a linguistic clarity that has so far evaded him: “I fired the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic. [...] I watched the blood arc from the victim’s midsection. A delicate arc. [...] I saw beyond words. I knew what red was, saw it in terms of dominant wavelength, luminance, purity. Mink’s pain was beautiful, intense” (DeLillo 1984: 312). At first the instabilities of language are evidenced here by the surplus of signifiers for gun. But once

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2 DeLillo uses this coastal analogy earlier in the novel (1984: 168) to describe the constant but indistinct waves of sound which make up the white noise soundscape of late twentieth century America.



Mink's experience of violence becomes visceral, intense and evident to Jack he is able to see beyond the potential regress of language and identify experience as it really is, beyond the structures of representation which, up to this point, both contain and direct his actions. Jack soon experiences the immediacy of pain and the materiality of potential death himself when Mink, in an unscripted disruption to the plan, shoots him. Pain and pity hijack Jack's plot and Jack becomes Mink's rescuer rather than his killer. The role of vengeful husband in Part III of the novel comes into conflict with the serious academic and sentimental father from Parts I and II. As a result, Murray's earlier assertion that life is "a plot, a scheme, a diagram [...] to shape time and space" is shown to be an inadequate explanation of events (DeLillo 1984: 291). Dragging Mink to hospital becomes a "redemptive" act for Jack: he feels "virtuous" and his "humanity soared". By describing how Jack's actions are driven by "an epic pity and compassion", DeLillo once again draws attention to how Jack seeks to understand his actions in the terms of narrative tropes but, as we saw in the Old Burying Ground, he is drawn to a narrative form which predates modernism and postmodernism (DeLillo 1984: 314-5).

Despite Jack's desire to establish an understanding of his own position in relation to competing cultural paradigms, DeLillo has one more example of postmodern indeterminacy for him to face. The hospital is run by nuns who are the last Germans in Germantown. But instead of providing a connection to religious certainties from an earlier age they take a decentred attitude to faith. In a gesture which demonstrates the urgency of Lyotard's question: "Where, after metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?", the nuns renounce the need for faith in favour of dedicating themselves to a pretence of faith (1984: xxiv-v). A deity able to give authority to a system of meaning is, of course, one of the metanarratives held in suspicion by postmodern critics. Baudrillard has shown us how God would be the anterior metaphysical principle able to halt the potentially infinite deferrals of language and give authority to meaning. For Baudrillard, in a postmodern world, God can be simulated, causing the system of meaning to become "weightless" (1994: 6). However, DeLillo demonstrates that even when the sign no longer exchanges for a material reality, individuals find a nostalgic comfort in believing that it does, and the nuns understand this. "As belief shrinks in the world", a nun tells Jack, "people find it more necessary than ever that *someone* believe [...]. Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us" (DeLillo 1984: 319, original emphasis). Similarly, Jack finds the nun's German litanies beautiful and comforting, both central characteristics of religion (DeLillo 1984: 320). The nun's incantations are recognisably religious to Jack but they are without semantic or linguistic meaning to him.

## IV

We can see these nuns as another diagnostic trope for DeLillo's reading of the postmodern condition: they represent the residues of earlier economic and cultural paradigms, while at the same time embracing and exploiting the indeterminacies of the postmodern age. Consequently, Cantor is only partially correct when he describes this as the "perfect postmodern moment: a nun who is a simulacrum of faith" because DeLillo is acutely aware of the nostalgic impulse for the earlier certainties that the nuns represent (1991: 60).

I have argued that while *White Noise* appears to be a text manifestly concerned with the depthless surfaces of postmodern culture, DeLillo's textual treatment of late twentieth century American culture is much more complex than a straightforward binary opposition between modernism and postmodernism. His suspicion of the infinite regress of meaning in sign systems under the conditions of postmodernity is demonstrated most clearly by the distinction between the postmodern symptom of the fear of death and the potential halt to the infinite regress of deferral arrived at with death itself. Jack Gladney's narrative demonstrates the nostalgic need for metaphysical certainties as a response to postmodern estrangement. The culture that Gladney negotiates illustrates Fredric Jameson's analysis of the late twentieth century, where postmodernism is the "forcefield in which very different kinds of cultural impulses [...] must make their way" (1991: 6). However, while Jack is being seduced by postmodern culture, DeLillo's text demonstrates that death, as we have seen, is the only concept able to halt the potentially infinite deferrals of language and textuality. Winnie Richards, a neurochemist who analyses Dylar for Jack, gives voice to DeLillo's concerns and those of the reader, when she asks him: "Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a [...] definition? [...] a border, a limit?" (DeLillo 1984: 228-9). Winnie understands that Jack's and Babette's anxieties are focused on the symptom rather than the cause and that to become immune to the fear of death could radically alter how they live. Maltby argues, like Winnie, that "the non-figurability of death seems like a guarantee of a domain of human experience that can transcend hyperreality" (1996: 269). Death is also the concept which will give meaning to all the signs in the system of language because, of course, it cannot be escaped. In addition, it is external to systems of signs, so while it could guarantee meaning in language, for example, it is simultaneously beyond its grasp.

Winnie is a figure who rarely attracts the attention of critics, but she is central to understanding DeLillo's response to postmodernity. While the novel acknowledges the power of postmodern ideas and the manifestations of postmodern technological cultures, DeLillo also wants to draw attention to the human need for metaphysical

certainty. We can identify Gladney with characters in DeLillo's work who Peter Boxall sees as exemplifying the "trajectory that [...] in DeLillo's oeuvre suggests [...] that the mediation of the culture is not yet total, that there are other histories that can be written and imagined [...] - that there is an ongoing struggle to discover the counternarrative, to angle oneself against the historical current" (2002: 6-7). The novel's persistent concern with death parodies postmodernity's obsession with both endless deferral and the quest for a concept to bring it to a halt. While DeLillo demonstrates that until the point of death we cannot evade the indeterminacies of postmodern culture, he also shows that nothing can transcend death and so the endless deferrals of meaning that we have experienced through the three parts of *White Noise* must come to a halt at the transcendental signified that is death. As Lentricchia points out, death is "nature's final revenge on postmodern culture" (1991b: 103).

The satire is, of course, that the transcendental revelation will come too late for Jack Gladney to understand his own late twentieth century condition. Because this text deals with death in such an insistent way, it can be argued that DeLillo is exploring ways in which to overcome the persistent displacement of meaning in postmodern texts by establishing one concept outside of a system of signs which cannot be subject to deferral or commodification and is irreducible, certain and universal. Or to paraphrase DeLillo himself: those who have abandoned belief can still believe in death.

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