

**Culture, History and Consciousness in DeLillo's *White Noise*:**

**The Aesthetics of Cyberspace**

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Since the memory of past experience contributes to our self-identity, the self is often thought to be an historical construct. And perhaps the most obvious aspect of history is that it is always repeating itself. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin asserts that when one "grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one," one "establishes a conception of the present as 'the time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (263). As the eternal present, this time of the now is a form of no time, which implies that even as an historical construct the self has a timeless dimension. Similarly, in "Tales of the Electronic Tribe," Frank Lentricchia suggests that in America, postmodernism was not invented in the 20th century but came over in the 17th century with the European pilgrims on the Mayflower.

Lentricchia is referring to Don DeLillo's first novel, *Americana* (1971), in which DeLillo cleverly anticipates the current controversies over the notion of postmodernism by saying that television actually arrived in America with the pilgrims in 1620. Television (closely followed by the computer) is the quintessential electronic medium of postmodernism. In watching television, the viewer resembles the Europeans on the Mayflower by dreaming of a new self, a fantasy self under the stimulus of Hollywood and Madison Avenue, just as the pilgrims in the 17th century dreamt of a new self in a new world (Lentricchia 88-89). In Lentricchia's words, "Sitting in front of TV is like a perpetual Atlantic crossing—the desire for and the discovery of America constantly reenacted in our move from first-person consciousness to third: from the self we are, but would like to leave behind, to the self we would become" (88). The new self and the new world built around it do not occupy a geographic so much as an imagined space, or in a virtual sense cyberspace. Cyberspace is closely linked to "the time of the now," which in a sense is beyond space-time altogether. This quasi space is also the site of DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (1985), in which the consciousness of the characters and reader expands beyond historical boundaries. In *White Noise*, as I argue below, DeLillo suggests the possibility of a new self-identity and collective

consciousness based not on fragmentation, which is typically associated with postmodern consciousness, but on a coexistence of opposites.

*White Noise* is the story of Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies, his friend and colleague Murray Jay Siskind, and his wife Babette and their several kids, mostly from earlier marriages. The novel is divided into three parts—"Waves and Radiation," "The Airborne Toxic Event," and "Dylarama"—and in terms of space-time has two dimensions. One is that of ordinary space-time through which the story unfolds: Jack and Murray, the novel's agent of mystery and noise, theorize about American popular culture; the Gladneys attempt to escape the potential disaster of an "airborne toxic event," to which Jack is exposed; Babette, Jack's wife, tries to hide her fear of dying, which leads to her using the drug Dylar and having an affair with her supplier, Willy Mink or Mr. Gray; and finally Jack attempts to kill Mink as an act of revenge. The key dimension of the novel, however, is that of cyberspace or "the time of the now" in which "the environment-as-electronic-medium" (Lentricchia 89) alters the consciousness of the postmodern community in its search for self-identity. In spite of the apparent loss of unity and coherence in the postmodern self (Silverman 126-193), DeLillo's novel suggests how in a virtual community individual and collective self-identity can be seen as whole or integrated.

In *White Noise*, reality and self-identity for the characters hinge on the images of media representation, primarily by television but also by computers. Nothing has meaning or value for the Gladneys or Siskind unless the media conveys it to them as information. This information can be understood either as simulacra, images simulating reality, which as an ordinary referent no longer exists (Baudrillard 170), or as representations of a reality which still exists but is ordinarily inaccessible (Hutcheon 33-61). In DeLillo's novel individual experience counts for less than public information, and through television and other media the collective perception of this information enters (and in a way constitutes) social consciousness. A media image of a daily experience can be said to render this experience "extra-daily" by elevating the consciousness of the experiencer from the individual to the collective. Not only do media images provide the individual with vast stores of information not available through first-hand experience, they also suggest that something exists beyond the space-time limits of information. In certain traditions, such as gnosticism, the ideal has been for the information or knowledge of everything to be grasped instantaneously. This feat is particularly relevant to current issues of artificial intelligence and memory. Computer representations, for instance, can lodge almost unlimited data in artificial memory structures that simulate the multilayered onion of the universe, a feat often attempted in the history of hermeticism through magical alphabets and encrypted texts. To instantaneously cognize an encyclopedic memory structure would be to access the living Logos.

Through the instantaneousness of knowledge, even in a postmodern era skeptical of wholeness, it may be possible to become united with the cosmos at its most fundamental dimension from which space-time emerges. In the history of artificial memory, as Erik Davis points out, “erudite Hermeticism” is “a more elevated Gnostic philosophy that emphasized the ability of humanity to discover within itself the mystical knowledge of god and cosmos” (32). DeLillo portrays the construction of a similar self-identity through the (epistemological) link between consciousness, postmodern culture and information about the universe as aspired to through electronic media. As *White Noise* suggests, awareness expands through the instantaneous knowledge of information, whether this information is simulacral or representational.

In chapter three of *White Noise*, Jack and Murray take a trip from their College-on-the-Hill to visit a barn in the nearby countryside. The barn is ordinary, but also a major tourist attraction known as “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA” (12). Before reaching the site they see several signs pointing the way, and once there they find groups of photographers taking pictures of the barn and a man in a booth selling postcards and slides. In discussing this phenomenon, Murray makes a series of observations typical of the novel’s theoretical dialogue:

No one sees the barn. ... Once you’ve 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. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of *nameless energies*. ... Being here is a kind of *spiritual surrender*. We see only what the others see. ... We’ve agreed to be part of a *collective perception*. This literally colors our vision. A *religious experience* in a way, like all tourism. (12; italics mine)

Murray here describes the “accumulation of nameless energies” of a community engaged in “a kind of spiritual surrender”; this spiritual energy gives rise to a virtual reality, which in the process of rendering absent the barn as a referent nevertheless points to and perhaps even creates another kind of presence: namely, the virtual presence of a community based on the aura of electronic images, and indeed of an entire culture constituted by the “hyperreality” of these images (Baudrillard 166-167).

In the ongoing debate over the impact of virtual reality and cyberspace on the nature of self-identity and community existence, some argue that cyberspace can be projected as a utopian vision, or as William Gibson puts it in *Neuromancer*, a “consensual hallucination” (51). Others argue that we still live in a real physical world with all its political and social pressures and that no alternative utopian world of cyberspace actually exists. In “Cyberspace and the World We Live In,” Kevin Robins asserts that “[v]irtual communities do not exist in a different world” (146). He critiques cyberspace as a utopian space, noting that “[t]he mythology of cyberspace is preferred over its sociology,” and arguing “that it is time to relocate

virtual culture in the real world (the real world that virtual culturalists, seduced by their own metaphors, pronounce dead or dying)” (153). The conflict of discourses on virtual reality and cyberspace converges on the crisis of self-identity in the postmodern condition. While romantic and modernist notions of a coherent and unified self have been challenged by postmodernists, the electronic community of virtual reality attempts to counteract the alienation and fragmentation experienced in the “real” (postmodern) world with what Howard Rheingold calls “shared consciousness” and the experience of “groupmind” (*The Virtual Community* 245, 110).

As Lentricchia points out, Murray’s use of the term “aura” in *White Noise* differs from that of Walter Benjamin by implying a new kind of community based on a “groupmind” or “shared consciousness.” In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin shows how photography, and for that matter all electronic means of aesthetic representation, has resulted in the decline of aura, or the intimacy of community experience traditionally associated with being in the presence of great works of art (222-226). The mechanical reproduction of art makes copies of original works available to the masses, but at the cost of tradition and a shared sense of history. But is everything necessarily lost with the original copy? As Lentricchia writes:

Benjamin’s deadly camera which returns no human gaze may be the mediator of a new kind of community, wherein all distinctive selfhood is extinguished in a new art form whose mass cultural presence glows at postmodernism’s holy place, the site of the most photographed barn. DeLillo’s point, unlike Benjamin’s, is not the nostalgic one that aura is in decline, but that its source has been replaced. The question he poses in all but words is, What strange new form of human collectivity is born in the postmodern moment of aura, and at what price? (92)

From a certain perspective, the price may not be as high as it seems. DeLillo certainly satirizes the excesses of American media and materialism through his mocking enumerations of the images of popular culture, as in the novel’s brilliant opening passage and all the discourses between Gladney and Siskind on television, supermarkets and advertising. The media representation of coded messages, as Murray expresses it, are repeated like chants or mantras: “Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it” (51). “Mastercard, Visa, American Express” (100); and “Toyota Celica” (155), which Steffie, one of Jack’s daughters, even says in her sleep. But these images—while they seemingly cover up, substitute for, interpret or simulate reality—serve also to reveal something hidden. In a sense, the postmodern environment-as-electronic-medium is anticipated by the attempt in Gnosticism “to represent the unmediated presence of the Gnostic mind” (Davis 50) through the complexity of encoded messages. Like the allegories of gnosticism, cyberspace consists of a myriad of phantasmagoric, metamorphic images that can alter one’s

state of mind by “generat[ing] psychedelic perceptions with a minimum of sensory cues” (Davis 40) and ultimately expanding consciousness toward totality.

The opposition therefore between real and unreal community has become blurred. In the simulational culture of our second media age, as Mark Foster writes in “Postmodern Virtualities,” “[t]he mediation has become so intense that the things mediated can no longer even pretend to be unaffected” (84). With fluid realities our identities also become fluid. As Rheingold, who foresees tremendous cultural changes through electronic media, puts it: “We reduce and encode our identities as words on a screen, decode and unpack the identities of others” (61). Yet the disappearance of traditional communities around the world has resulted in a hunger for shared experience, and the dissolution of stable identities and the loss of familiar presuppositions have impelled the individual toward a kind of presuppositionless state of conscious experience—or a virtual phenomenology.

As DeLillo in an interview explains, regarding the shared experience of supermarkets and other aspects of suburban existence, “In *White Noise*, in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred. Is it really there? Well, yes” (DeCurtis 63). When Murray meets the Gladneys shopping in a supermarket, he remarks,

Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. ... It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we want to . ... This is not Tibet. Even Tibet is not Tibet anymore. (37-38)

He later adds, “This place is sealed off, self-contained. It is timeless. Another reason why I think of Tibet” (DeCurtis 38). Although Murray and not the author is speaking here, DeLillo believes that “there is something there that we miss. ... a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision” (DeCurtis 63) Throughout the novel, images are invested with the sense of transcendence, which is associated for DeLillo with the fear of death lurking beneath our perceptions. Death, of course, can be understood figuratively as a kind of transcendence, of going beyond cultural presuppositions and the limitations of space, time and causality. Like virtual reality and artificial memory, it has no place, being outside of sensory experience. Death and transcendence, emptiness and fullness, and the fullness of emptiness—all of these describe the experience of cyberspace. Yet as Robins suggests, virtual reality is not cut off the real world of culture and physical bodies, just as consciousness is not cut off from the phenomenal world (as I discuss later).

Our encounters with cyberspace, a medium through which we can access information almost instantaneously, opens our awareness to the smallest time and distance scales of the physical universe, bordering on an unmanifest realm known in quantum physics by such terms as the Planck Scale, the vacuum state, and the unified field (Hagelin 56-57; Penrose et al., *The Large, the Small and the Human Mind* 3-4). This virtual dimension is described by physicists such as Nick Herbert, John Hagelin, Fritjof Capra, Roger Penrose and others as linked to human consciousness. Penrose asserts that consciousness is not just an epiphenomenon, something that happens as a result of other elements that are functional, and “not just the sum of the parts, but some sort of global capacity which allows us to take into account the whole of a situation at once” (“Interview with Jane Clark” 20). In developing a theory of consciousness, he indicates that “we need to look for large-scale states whose wave functions collapse spontaneously” (Interview with Jane Clark 21); that is, we need to develop a theory that can account for how consciousness seems to oscillate between the unboundedness of large-scale states of awareness on the one hand, and on the other, the boundaries of particular thoughts, between the manifest wave functions of specific data and the perfect orderliness and symmetry of all knowledge—the infinite information of the cosmos.

In *The Large, the Small and the Human Mind*, moreover, Penrose proposes that the physical world, the mental world and the Platonic world (specifically the world of mathematical concepts that describe what is “out there”) are interconnected. “The more we understand about the physical world, and the deeper we probe into the laws of nature, the more it seems as though the physical world almost evaporates and we are left only with mathematics” (3). He goes on to affirm that there is “the common feeling that these mathematical concepts are products of our mentality” (96). Apparently separate on the surface, the physical and mental worlds seem to share a common basis.

Penrose’s perspective resembles that of Eastern cultures, where the self as pure consciousness (Atman) and the absolute (Brahman) are said to be one and the same. From this perspective consciousness is all inclusive. In Shankara’s Advaita or nondual Vedanta, the principles of which underlie Indian aesthetics, the changing visible world is a mere illusion (like Baudrillard’s notion of simulation), and Brahman as the non-dual, never-changing absolute is the one reality. As Eliot Deutsch notes in his short but comprehensive book *Advaita Vedanta*, pure consciousness or “The Self” is “One, it is not different from Brahman. This is the central metareligious or metapsychological affirmation of *Advaita Vedanta*. It means that man is essentially spiritual; that in the most profound dimension of his being he is no longer the ‘individual’ that he ordinarily takes himself to be, but that he is precisely reality itself” (65). In a sense, the view that the self is linked to information about the universe and that the unity of self and information comprises ultimate reality is shared by postmodernists and portrayed (to a certain extent)

in *White Noise*. The title of the novel itself alludes to the noise of the universe, the hum of its “energy waves and incident radiation” described by Murray.

Postmodernists, of course, define the self in terms not of unity—like pure consciousness—but of difference, absence and multiplicity. The subject, as a cultural construct dispersed along a chain of signifiers (Silverman 149-193), becomes a variable image. Jack, who cannot speak German, is the simulacrum of a professor of Hitler Studies who wears dark glasses and a gown at the College-On-the-Hill, but who is unrecognizable to a colleague who sees him in the mall without his mask. “You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 83). So who then is Jack? Does he have a real or only a simulated self? In terms of quantum physics, the global information systems that exist at the basis of artificial intelligence and memory, and that extend over all space and time, also exist at the basis of the human subject. From this perspective, the postmodernist self is also linked to these systems and therefore has access to a global or unified quantum reality through direct experience—in spite of what deconstructionists may in theory claim (Haney 1-50). DeLillo’s novel explores this connection between the postmodernist self and global systems.

Reputedly, the postmodernist self has lost the “deep interior” sought by gnosticism and become saturated by a multiplicity of social voices. As Kenneth Gergen writes in *The Saturated Self*, “[w]ith the spread of postmodern consciousness, we see the demise of personal definition, reason, authority, commitment, trust, the sense of authenticity, sincerity, belief in leadership, depth of feeling, and faith in progress” (228). Through its saturation by a multiplicity of media voices, the postmodernist self goes beyond the finite game of logocentrism and becomes open to “the possibility of an infinitely changing array of rules” through which “the game of human existence finds greatest promise” (Gergen 198). But what is the nature of this promise and how does it relate to postmodernist self-identity?

To answer this question we need to define information in both physical and phenomenal (or mental) terms, since information underlies all technologies responsible for the saturated self. The white noise of DeLillo’s novel is the noise of technology: “CABLE HEALTH, CABLE WEATHER, CABLE NEWS, CABLE NATURE” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 231)—or cable information. As David Chalmers notes, “[t]he most basic sort of information is the bit, which represents a choice between two possibilities: a single bit (0 or 1) selected from a two-state space is said to carry information” (278). Information spaces, he explains, “are *abstract* spaces, and information states are abstract states. They are not part of the concrete physical or phenomenal world. But we can find information in both the physical and the phenomenal world” (280). ([Note 1](#))

Physicists sometimes suggest that information is fundamental to the physical universe, as in the proposed “it from bit” idea (Chalmers 302). The bits of information that constitute the “it” of the universe, however, do not have any

properties or substance, but rather exist in a state of pure informational flux. Even the space-time framework of the universe seems to consist only of “relations among information spaces”; this possibility leads Chalmers to speculate that “[t]he world is simply a world of primitive differences, and of causal and dynamic relations among those differences” (303). The main problem found with this view of information is that it does not seem to account for consciousness, which as a global phenomenal state is not exhausted by the binary spaces of information bits. It is thus suggested that information space has a further intrinsic property, for “If physics is pure information, there will be nothing to distinguish instantiations of the two information spaces”—that is, 1 and 0 (Chalmers 304). There must be something beyond information, which Chalmers identifies as the phenomenal properties of human consciousness: “Perhaps, then, the intrinsic nature required to ground the information states is closely related to the intrinsic nature present in phenomenology. Perhaps one is even constitutive of the other” (304-305). Chalmers recognizes that the claim that information spaces are somehow grounded in phenomenal or protophenomenal properties is a kind of “outrageous” panpsychism, but he also notes that from a scientific perspective “panpsychism is not as unreasonable as commonly supposed” (305).

The relation between information and consciousness is analogous to that between third-person explanations of experience and first-person experience itself. As J. F. Varela and others have argued, third-person explanations, as in cognitive science, and first-person experience, as in phenomenology, are mutually interdependent. Varela notes that “Experience is clearly a personal event, but that does not mean it is *private*, in the sense of some kind of isolated subject that is parachuted down into a pre-given objective world” (340). In the case of *White Noise*, the consciousness of the characters is not only embedded in the physical and social world, but also in the virtual reality of cyberspace. Information from both worlds has the cumulative effect of shifting the individual’s attention from the local to the nonlocal, and from the finite to the infinite. Whereas third-person explanations can describe the local and finite, only phenomenal (first-person) experience has direct access to the non-local and infinite. The tendency to move beyond the subject-object duality—as toward a connectedness between the Platonic, physical and mental worlds described by Penrose, or the experience of pure consciousness described in Eastern cultures—is suggested by DeLillo’s characters and induced by the text in his readers. As Peter Malekin and Ralph Yarrow suggest, literature “emerges out of consciousness and reforms consciousness” (163).

In terms of the relation between information spaces and phenomenal (or mental) properties, it is arguable that the difference that makes the difference in our knowledge about the cosmos is that between ordinary daily consciousness, which is finite and characterized by mental contents such as thoughts, sensations, perceptions, emotions and memories, and pure consciousness, which is infinite and characterized by no mental content whatsoever. The difference here is between the self in historical time and the self in “the time of the now,” which is beyond space-

time and therefore infinite and eternally present. It is the (fantasy) self sought after in a hyperreal world by the pilgrims and by the viewers of television. Through the direct experience of the difference between these two phenomenal states (the historical contents of awareness and the unbounded witnessing faculty of awareness by itself), one has the basis for distinguishing between two spaces of information which in themselves are insubstantial and thus indistinguishable. Some physicists hold that the metaphysics of pure information is here connected to the metaphysics of pure consciousness (Chalmers 276-310). Arguably, this pure phenomenal or protophenomenal state sought after by pilgrims, Gnostics and postmodern viewers of television underlies the difference that makes the difference in the transmission of social voices.

On the one hand, then, the fact that the informational flux of the universe is without properties helps to account for the demise in postmodernism of reason, depth, progress, authority and the like (Gergen 228). On the other hand, it seems that becoming saturated by the multiplicity of voices through the informational flux of electronic media can lead ultimately to a decrease in or even transcendence of conceptual boundaries. If this is the case, then the resulting postmodernist consciousness has definite affinities with Gnostic consciousness in the West and pure consciousness in the East. (Note 2) The issue of hyperreality now appears in a different light. As John Frow observes, “The world of *White Noise* is a world of primary representations which neither precede nor follow the real but are themselves real—although it is true that they always have the appearance both of preceding another reality (as a model to be followed) and of following it (as copy). But this appearance must itself be taken seriously.” He adds that although we can distinguish between realities, between literal and metaphorical language, between “real moments and TV moments,” and between their ironical gaps, “this distinguishing and this irony are insecure” (183). In other words, they are both real insofar as reality is constituted by the observing consciousness. (Note 3) In spite of their differences, then, postmodernism, Vedanta and quantum physics all suggest a vital connection between reality and consciousness.

As a systems novelist who sees the interconnection of everything, DeLillo converts the waste of American popular culture, such as cable nature (as opposed to living systems), into an art form, an “ironic modern sculpture” (LeClair 212). This art form, of which *White Noise* is an example, warns us against the entropy of thermodynamic and informational systems, such as the toxic cloud that threatens the Gladneys and the computers they depend on, e.g. to check their bank balance and their state of health, but over which they have no control. Entropy is also symbolized by the Gladneys’ trash compactor, which makes “a dreadful wrenching sound, full of eerie feeling” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 33). According to the second law of thermodynamics, entropy is as “a sort of gradual but inexorable descent into chaos. Examples of the second law are found everywhere: buildings fall down, people grow old, mountains and shorelines are eroded, natural resources are depleted” (Davies 10). Entropy, of course, leads to death, and ultimately to what

some physicists call “the ‘heat death’ of the universe” (Davis 11). The Gladneys’ fear of death makes them victims to what Tom LeClair refers to as a “self-inflicted double bind” (213). Because they fear death they try to transcend it, but their evasive tactics ironically bring them even closer to death, as when Jack, following Murray’s immoral advice, tries to become a “killer” rather than be a “dier” by murdering Babette’s Dylar supplier, but instead gets shot himself. Jack tries to escape his personal fears through various strategies (see LeClair 207-235). In Part One, “Waves and Radiation,” he takes shelter in the authority and power of Hitler studies, yet by Part Three, “Dylarama,” his tactics lead him back to himself and he longs for disaster: “supreme destruction, a night that swallows existence so completely that I am cured of my own lonely dying” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 273). Throughout the novel, the Gladneys’ fear of death overlaps with their attempt to evade uncertainties.

In trying to understand nature, “the nature and being of real things” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 234), the Gladneys must deal with uncertainty, or the mystery of informational systems that for Siskind is spiritually regenerating. This mystery hinges on the relation between entropy and its opposite, negentropy—symbolically death and life respectively, two apparent opposites that, like information and consciousness, seem to have a common basis. When Murray Jay Siskind says, “Everything is concealed in symbolism. ... it is psychic data” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 37), he hints at a link between mind and matter that I have been discussing here. The concept of mortality and our defenses against it belong to a closed system, a spatial, social and psychological metanarrative which takes the phenomenal world to consist of separate and distinct entities. Systems theory rejects this closure by studying “the abstract organization of phenomena, independent of their substance, type, or spatial or temporal scale of existence. It investigates both the principles common to all complex entities and the models ... used to describe them. ... [and it] focuses on the arrangement of and relation among the parts that connect them into a whole” (Audi 784-785). The Gladneys define living systems and the world in general in terms of closed structures and the logic of either/or, which they hope will protect them against the fear of death and incoherence. “My life,” Babette says, “is either/or” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 53). The attempt to evade uncertainty, as the Gladneys do, is described in Gregory Bateson’s *Mind and Nature*, which as LeClair has pointed out is central to DeLillo’s use of systems theory. As Bateson writes of the phobia experienced in contemporary life, “a breach in the apparent coherence of our mental logical process would seem to be a sort of death” (140). This incoherence stems in part from the apparent contradiction of the logic of both/and—as in the unified logic of both mortality and immortality, information and consciousness. The inability to adapt to the logic of both/and, which is beyond the rational mind and thus seemingly incoherent, compels the Gladneys toward self-destructiveness.

The difference between the logic of either/or and the logic of both/and can thus be understood in terms of the difference between classical Newtonian physics and quantum mechanics. As LeClair puts it:

What the Gladneys refuse to accept and what forms the basis for DeLillo's understanding of systemic fact and value is the loop: the simultaneity of living and dying, the inherent reciprocity of circular causality that makes certainty impossible. Their refusal is rooted in mechanistic science, that extension of common-sense empiricism which defines the world as a collection of entities, a heap of things like the Gladney's compacted trash, rather than a system of energy and information. (226)

Jack's search for "the nature and being of real *things*" (italics mine) already illustrates what LeClair calls his "epistemological error" (226). As quantum physics tells us, and as DeLillo shows through his systems-influenced portrayal of uncertainty, "things" as such do not really exist; everything consists of waves and radiations. As Nick Herbert puts it, "Everything in the world is pure quantumstuff, a physical union of particle and wave" (64). This quantumstuff, being both particle and wave, is not an either/or situation, and is therefore inaccessible to third-person, empirical observation, as indicated by the uncertainty principle. ([Note 4](#)) From the perspective of the finite intellect and third-person computational reports, uncertainty seems to dominate. But once phenomenal awareness reaches the holism of systemic openness, where consciousness and information unite, then the question of certainty becomes irrelevant in the experience of being, which is no longer experienced as a *thing* but as a coexistence of opposites. Yet as Malekin and Yarrow observe, "since the mind as such is subjective, it can never be adequately explored or understood by objective means alone" (96).

Fear of death and uncertainty is thus "natural" only in a finite state of awareness where the intellect is cut off from pure consciousness, experiencing life and death as being separate and strange instead of interconnected and familiar. Murray tries to account for the Gladney's fear of the uncertainties of life and death: "The more we learn, the more it grows. Is this some law of physics? Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain. Death adapts, like a viral agent. Is it a law of nature?" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 150). Although Murray here seems to contradict the principle that connects information and consciousness, it is arguable on the basis on quantum physics and Eastern thought that any knowledge consists of two aspects, the parts and the whole. Although analyzing the parts, the particles or waves, indeed culminates in the uncertainty principle, focusing intuitively on the underlying whole can result in an experience of the "almost holy or sacred" (DeCurtis 63). This experience, however, does not spring from empirical observation within ordinary time and distance scales, but rather depends on an instantaneous cognition within "the time of the now"—as rendered in *White Noise* through the negentropic encounter with the invisible.

In *White Noise* DeLillo alludes to the Tibetan and Egyptian Books of the Dead and also to the Mexican Day of the Dead, and gave this novel the working title, “The American Book of the Dead.” DeLillo portrays our experience of the supermarket, television and other aspects of popular culture as preparing us for the openness of the invisible as symbolized by death. The experience of the supermarket may not directly prepare us for death like the Tibetan Book of the Dead, but it does, as LeClair observes, “offer a communal experience of the invisible, a sense of the mysteriousness that implies that neither life nor death has been settled, closed” (228). Through a systems theory approach to what is natural, DeLillo depicts the interconnectedness of all entities, whether living or inert, on a protophenomenal level. Uncertainty and mystery merely express an initial reaction to an unfamiliar openness to all possibilities. Once accepted, a systems reaction can lead to what Morris Berman calls a “reenchantment of the world” (*passim*).

In *White Noise*, the environment-as-electronic-medium has a reenchanting effect on both characters and readers by raising consciousness from the individual to the collective. That is, the media representation of the experience of an individual or group, as on television, seems to invest the experience with the collective phenomenological properties of the audience, thereby lifting the consciousness of the individual beyond finite historical boundaries toward the infinite ground of pure information and pure consciousness. Any collective attention in *White Noise* on information about experience seems to elevate the consciousness of the experiencer due to the intrinsic link between consciousness and information. The popular slogan that “no publicity is bad publicity” stems from the fact that the difference that makes the difference in the way publicity affects its recipient is due not to the difference between good and bad media, but rather to the difference between media coverage and no coverage at all, between collective attention and the absence of attention. For Andy Warhol, everyone should have the taste of at least fifteen minutes of fame.

Thus, when Jack’s daughter Bee lands safely on a flight plagued by mechanical problems, a flight that nearly crash-landed and caused panic among the passengers, the first question she asks her father who meets her at the airport is, “Where’s the media?” When he says, “There is no media in Iron City,” she replies, “They [the passengers] went through all that for nothing?” (92). Living in a postmodern society, Bee yearns for a global experience provided through the collective perception of media, as do the photographers in the case of the most photographed barn in the world. Anthony Giddens describes this kind of virtual community as a way of “living in the world” in a manner unlike that of previous eras—a manner that nevertheless, as I have argued here, connects with an earlier time:

The transformation of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what “the world” actually is. This is so both on the level of the “phenomenal world” of the individual and the general universe of social activity within

which collective social life is enacted. Although everyone lives a local life, phenomenal worlds for the most part are truly global. (187)

As DeLillo shows, the global nature of subjective experience is expanding exponentially. Shuan Gallagher would define this as an experience of “existential phenomenology”; rather than being purely internal, “consciousness is ‘in-the-world’ in the radical way that someone like Heidegger defines it” (209).

In the postmodern sea of all possibilities where everything seems equally valueless, Murray Jay Siskind is able to make the immoral argument to Jack that “there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers.” For Siskind, who says that he is “talking theory,” the difference that makes the difference between people is whether they “lie down and die” or live on and “gain life-credit” by killing. But Jack questions this theory: “Are you saying that men have tried throughout history to cure themselves of death by killing others?” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 290). In the end Jack seems to adopt Murray’s immoral theory insofar as he tries to kill Babette’s lover, Willy Mink; but the outcome of his elaborate plot is significant. Having wounded Mink, Jack decides to take him to the hospital instead of becoming a killer or a dier, for he realizes that by eliminating his fear of death through the drug Dylar, Mink had undermined his capacity for living. Jack’s elaborate scheme thus backfires into a revelation, confirming the systems theory premise that any closed system, whether in life or fiction, is self-destructive because it impedes openness to a greater wholeness. DeLillo’s inconclusive ending thus illustrates his aversion for closed systems. As he says about his writing in an interview, “I don’t think of language in a theoretical way. I approach it at the street level” (DeCurtis 61). Wisely, he opts for phenomenal experience over theory.

Critics of Jack’s immoral behavior argue that the only way he can escape the hyperreal is by becoming a primitive beast through violence. Being primitive means entering a subculture of violence, a conspiratorial community, but of course Jack already belongs to a global community, that of the electronic tribe (Lentricchia 113). As we have seen, the link between this tribe and “the time of the now” is related to systems theory as well as to phenomenology and the notion of panpsychism, the history of which extends from gnosticism to postmodernism. If, as these insights suggest, information and consciousness are linked, then the difference between life and death is not all what it seems to be. Ultimately, the unbounded, eternal state of pure information and pure consciousness persists even amidst the waves of difference (or death) that constitute the field of appearances. This fusion underpins the novel’s doubleness, as captured by the paradox of the title itself. The meaning of “white noise” includes chaos, music, the whole range of sounds that make up the “panasonic” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 241), the background noise of the supermarket, and the cosmic hum of the universe, which is basically an “aural” experience that integrates data with consciousness.

As portrayed in *White Noise*, the new postmodernist consciousness is not so new after all, but rather forms a constellation, as Benjamin would say, “with a definite earlier one”—one that reemerges in a reenchanting world that includes virtual realities. Whether appreciated through the aesthetics of cyberspace or the power of gnosticism, the “nameless energies” of global consciousness retain their universal allure for the human race. Surprisingly, the environment-as-electronic-medium and the extrinsic force of information in the post-industrial age—television, computers and media images such as the most photographed barn in the world—swing us back full circle toward the intrinsic ground of experience. And if alert enough, we can glimpse that junction point between information and consciousness.

### Notes

1 The link between information and the physical world can be explained by the slogan invented by Bateson: “information is a difference that makes a difference” (qtd in Chalmers 281; italics in the original). For example, in turning a light switch, the only difference that makes a difference is the point at which the light actually switches on or off (Chalmers 281).

2 Postmodernists and gnostics would thus converge on the ground of pure consciousness through their saturation by information. Indeed, as suggested by quantum physics, both information and consciousness have a metaphysical dimension (Chalmers 301-310).

3 As Deutsch observes on the Vedantic notion of the self-validity of knowledge, “All knowledge obtained through perception, inference, and the like is true as far as it goes, but it is only knowledge of Reality [Brahman and Atman] that is ultimately true, for it is never sublated [superseded] by any other knowledge or experience” (86).

4 Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle asserts that “you can’t know where an atom, or electron, or whatever, is located and know how it is moving, at one and the same time. Not only can you not know it, but the very concept of an atom with a definite location and motion is apparently meaningless” (qtd. in Davies 102).

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