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White Noise: Consumerism or Death

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In this article, I attempt to replace Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise (*1985) in the context of a late-capitalist (post)modern world by discussing its existential understanding of the concept of death. I will, therefore, treat the concept of death as a dominant motif and a metaphor for the alienation of the (post)modern subject in a simulacral world.

White Noise is the story of Jack Gladney, the chairperson of the Hitler Studies Department, at a college in the America of the eighties, who has a constant fear of death. He, his fourth wife, Babette, and their children from previous marriages live a typical American life. Death controls everything he does, and he therefore tries to get rid of his fear of death by occupying himself with very American habits, i.e. shopping, watching TV, reading tabloid magazines, and by debating scientific issues and academic interpretations of culture with his Baudrillardean postmodernist colleague, Murray Siskind. One day he is exposed to the toxin of the "air-borne toxic event", which implants a time-released death in the form of a "nebulous mass" in his body. He learns meanwhile that his wife has been taking tablets to cure her fear of death after responding to an advertisement in a tabloid paper. In return for sexual intercourse with the project manager, she has become a Guinea pig in the development of an inhibitor for the sector of the brain that dreads mortality. After being persuaded by his postmodernist friend that plots defy death, Gladney decides to wreak revenge. He plots, in detective story fashion, to kill the man involved with his wife. The man, called Grey by Babette, has been dismissed from the project. Gladney finds him at a motel in the marginalized Iron City. He shoots him, but is himself shot by Mr. Grey. He finally saves Grey and takes him to a hospital run by German nuns who believe in nothing. Gladney is left confronting the fear of death, his alienation and estrangement, alone. Within the context of the alienation of the (post)modern subject/individual--not to say her/his apparent death--the question of death, as a persistent motif dominating Gladney's life and the world of the novel, becomes more comprehensible. That is to say, alienation and death, within this context are inseparable. Since alienation is the inevitable product of the logic of the capitalist market, it becomes clear, then, why there is a connection between death and (post)modern consumerism. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Murray, in a Baudrillardean poststructuralist fashion, summarizes the (post)modern existential position: "Here we don't die. We shop. But the difference is less marked than you think" (38).

This mechanical approach to life and death cannot but lead to alienation. In fact, Murray's theorization of death recognizes this existential fact:

> In cities no one notices specific dying. Dying is a quality of the air. It's everywhere and nowhere. Men shout as they die, to be noticed, remembered for a second or two ... In a town ... people notice dying better. The dead have faces, automobiles. If you don't know a name, you know a street name, a dog's name ... You know a couple of useless things about a person that become major facts of identification and cosmic placement when he dies suddenly, after a short illness, in his own bed, with a comforter and matching pillows, on a rainy Wednesday afternoon, feverish, a little congested in the sinuses and chest, thinking about his dry cleaning (38-9).

The pessimistic relationship between living in big cities and both alienation and death is the reason why Murray prefers living in towns. However, the specificity of dying in towns as described by Murray is still, ironically, related to what the dier thinks about while dying, e.g. dry cleaning. The loss of the meaning of death, as a signified, in big cities, is what Murray laments; however, the meaning he gives to death in towns does not transcend a trivial activity, i.e. dry cleaning. But for him it still signifies ‘something’, whereas in big cities it signifies ‘nothing’.

The question of death with which all the characters in the novel are concerned leads to more detailed existential sub-questions: What is death? Why does (wo)man have a fear of death? How can one get rid of it? And--more importantly--is death the completion of life despite their apparent antithetical relationship? If ideology is considered to be our understanding of the life we live, it follows, then, that it includes our understanding of death. That is, with one's ideological orientation, one can confront the fear of death. Within this relational context, death and ideology in *White Noise* are interrelated in such a way that one cannot avoid asking the same questions about death as about life, questions that appear and disappear throughout the reading process. Since the novel is presented as Jack Gladney's consciousness and since his consciousness is haunted with the fear of death, it follows, then, that the novel is (about) death--or rather haunted with the fear of death. By the same token, *White Noise* is about the (post)modern American world, a world that is haunted with death. It follows that the question posed for Gladney and thus for the reader outside the text is, as Said would put it, "not *whether* to be but *how* to be" (252).

Althusser's definition of ideology is a good starting point in formulating some of the answers to the questions of ideology and death which are dominant in the (post)modern world of *White Noise*: "it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that men represent to themselves in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there" (1992:56-7). What is, then, represented in ideology is the imaginary relations of 'subjects' to the real relations in which they live. Hence their understanding of their existence and death relies heavily on their representations of the imaginary version of these relations. Within the (post)modern context of the novel the question of whether death itself is real or simulacrum arises. Gladney's ideological quest for

concrete answers with regard to death necessarily leads him to a confrontation with the (post)modern capitalist ideology, with its representations of imaginary versions of real life, and with his being subjectified as 'subject' so as to accept his death 'freely'. His quest starts with observations and responses to the visual version of death, a version--or rather a form--that lacks content: "The emptiness, the sense of cosmic darkness" becomes "MasterCard, Visa, American Express". He thinks that this is horrible because if he dies, "[no] one [will be] there. A hole in space and time" (100-1). His consciousness of death leads him to a deeper level of consciousness and reveals the insignificance of ordinary, routine life by breaking through the conventions and habits of which he is a victim. The implicit question that automatically follows is how to avoid such meaningless death? Or rather how to fill this 'emptiness' and lighten this 'darkness'. To reject them is to reject what follows them, i.e. 'MasterCard', and 'American Express'. Put differently, it is to reject the conditions which have shaped them, and to defy the circumstances in which Gladney, the subject, is denied agency. His attempt to resist the consciousness of death, before and after the toxic cloud event, is, indeed, an attempt to protect the mundane value which he does not have the courage and consciousness to abandon. Consciousness of death requires a confrontation with death through a transformation from an obedient subject to an agent of liberation. That is to say, a consciousness of death is a consciousness of life, albeit with alternative values.

Thus, ‘enjoying' catastrophes on TV becomes the logical response to this fear, or rather a projection. Babette's fear of being alone after Gladney's death and the family's gathering around the TV set to watch catastrophes are explained by Murray as a way of "[keeping] out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone" (73). Thus loneliness/alienation and fear of death become equivalent in a highly advanced capitalist society. Gladney's internal monologue in this regard is very significant:

> The truth is I don't want to die first. Given a choice between loneliness and death it would take me a fraction of a second to decide. But I don't want to be alone either ... Babette's death would leave me scattered talking to chairs and pillows ... Who decides these things? What is out there? Who are you? (102-3)

This is, undoubtedly, a cry going beyond passive responses, a cry for content and meaning in a meaningless formalistic life, an ideological cry for what exists beyond appearance, and a cry for the revelation of the real rather than the imaginary relations of individuals to the objective world. Since death is alienation, it follows that Gladney's questions are about those who create alienation rather than about a metaphysical power that is beyond human understanding, though the questions asked have a metaphysical form.

Obviously, the characters’ preoccupation with death smacks of morbidity. Even before his exposure to the toxic cloud, Gladney cannot divert his attention from the fact of death; it always intrudes itself on his consciousness. His attempt to distract himself from the thought of death by intensifying his pursuit of commodities and academic prestige never works. Neither does the threat of death work as a pretext for meditation upon higher spiritual values. Death,

for him, has never been a personal possibility that he can freely resolve to assume; nor is it a possibility that will give an ultimate meaning to the series of acts which constitute his life.

The dramatic change in Gladney's quest takes place during the airborne toxic event when he comes to understand that death can be man-made:

> This was a death in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way as some seasonal perversity of the earth like flood or tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of man-made event (127).

This (post)modern human-made event makes him discover that he is only "the sum total of [his] data". Immediately, the question of whether death within a technological (post)modern context is made a simulacrum arises. Death has already been subjected to the logic of the precession of simulacra whereby the hyperreal simulacrum pre-empts the real death. Thus it is no coincidence that *White Noise* is preoccupied with death as well as with TV; both are interrelated and inseparable. It is very significant that Babette's appearance on TV implies her death, death that is "rendered graphically" and "televised so to speak" as put by Gladney himself (141-2).

Prior to the toxic cloud event, Gladney's attitude toward death is not as profound as it is after his exposure to the radiation. Previously, his fear of death is grounded in a sense of alienation and the end of his social and biological functions. The significance of the toxic cloud event is that it deepens both his existential fear of death *and alienation* and thus the meaning of all the roles he has been playing, i.e. a chair of Hitler Studies, a father, a husband/lover, and--most importantly--a human being. Death has a unique meaning now; it is a concrete experience of a different order from that of the simulacral death. Gladney is forced to face it alone, here and now. It is for this concrete reason that fear of death heightens and intensifies his self-awareness.

In a self-reflexive internal monologue, Gladney contemplates his expected death, as a result of exposure to the toxic event:

> Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the x-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all. It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced. *An entire awesome technology wrested from the gods*. It makes you feel like a *stranger* in your own dying (141-2). [emphasis added]

Using the second person pronoun is undoubtedly an indication of the schizophrenic symptoms Gladney has started suffering from, and a provocative gesture directed at whoever is reading. After this monologue, Gladney immediately refers to himself with the first person pronoun 'I': "I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses" (142). Whereas the 'you' asks provocative, conscious questions about power and domination, the 'I' is co-opted by the power of the image--or rather persuaded to submit to the authority of those 'gods' from whom the awesome technology has been wrested. This is the beginning of an interplay between the 'I' and the 'you', or rather a refusal to let the reader/interpreter identify with the 'I' since s/he is addressed directly and thus detached from the assimilation of the 'I'. Taken further, the part that is exposed to death/nonexistence is 'you', which is separate from the 'I'. The 'I' does not follow the logical syllogism, whereas the stranger/'you' does. The 'I' still wears the gown and the dark glasses, while the 'you' has to confront the awesome technology and thus experience death. Gladney is therefore caught in a limbo between life, which his ego/'I' does not want to give up, and death, which his projected 'you' has to deal with. The 'you', in other words, belongs to a different ontological level, i.e. death/non-being, whereas the 'I' lives in the juxtaposed ontological level, namely life/being. Behind this interplay between roles lies a dialectical affirmation that life--affiliated with 'I'--is almost impossible with 'you', i.e. a consciousness of death. Significantly, Gladney's life starts developing a meaning *because* he lives in the shadow of death; all of his mundane experiences hereafter are heightened *because* they carry with them a higher consciousness of death as an antithetical personal possibility.

Thus in order to understand the 'you' and its world, that is death, Gladney needs to understand the 'I' and its late capitalist (post)modern world. Within this subject-object dialectic arises the question of the death of the (post)modern subject, a question Gladney needs to engage with in order to confront his concrete death.

Jack Gladney is, then, a subject, whose life is "the sum of [his] data" made of 'figures', 'big numbers', and 'pulsing stars' indicating his history, a history that is determined by "[some] state or federal agency, some insurance company or credit firm..." (140-2). He is aware that his death is now determined by 'SIMUVAC;' in other words, even his death has become a simulacrum in order to detach it from any meaning it may have. He is not only 'subjected' to a superior agency that controls the simulacra in his life, but also in his death. The private sphere is thus eradicated completely by the public sphere. The lovemaking scene between Babette and Mink, for example, is witnessed by the TV. Her description of the event is significant: "I was remote. I was operating outside myself. It was a capitalistic transaction", and all she remembers is a "TV up near the ceiling, aimed down at [them]" (194). It is not they who control the TV, but rather the other way around. The most intimate moment that individuals may have is no longer private; instead it belongs to the public sphere. Gladney's love, death, life, and wife are controlled, dominated and manipulated by the simulacrum, and are subjugated to whatever has control over them. In this regard, Babette summarizes the complex relationship between the toxic cloud event, death, diseases, and the capitalist market

in the following remarkable fashion: "It is all a corporate tie-in, ... The sunscreen, the marketing, the fear, the disease. You can't have one without the other" (264). Moreover, the group responsible for the production of Dyllar, the pills she takes in order to eradicate the fear of death, is "supported by a multinational giant" (299).

In response to Murray's question about death, Gladney remarks that "[death] is what makes [life] incomplete" (284) not the other way around. His fear therefore is a fear of 'tragic death' that does not give a precise meaning to his life, a death that does not complete it. Thus this experience--fear of death--introduces a sense of individuality and self-awareness because he is "alone, distinct, [and] whole" (229). To acknowledge and to be aware of his individuality is to acknowledge his temporality and thus limitedness to a sense of time that he cannot escape, a time that has an end. His fear therefore is a fear of linear time that defines his death, a fear of teleology created and controlled by the late capitalist bourgeois establishment, and a fear of development towards a tragic end. Further, his sense of a conscious personal identity as opposed to that of others who do not expect to die ascribes importance to his individual existence. Hence, as a self-conscious individual, he experiences fear of death as a threat to his personal being; his awareness of the limitedness of his life distinguishes him from others, as Murray notices, but leaves him solitary. It becomes clear, then, why he and Babette are interested in Wilder, Babette's two-year-old son. "He", as Murray puts it, "doesn't know he's going to die. He doesn't know death at all" (289). That is, Wilder neither has a sense of time, nor does he distinguish between life and death. Compared to Wilder who does not know what will happen in the future and thus represents all different possibilities of the future, Gladney is a moving death, a man who knows--like the Cyclops--that he is programmed to die after fifteen years. His death will occur at an appointed time and thus will not make his life a ‘meaningful totality’. Since his death is already determined by the toxic cloud and by gods of ‘awesome technology’ and therefore has nothing to do with his freedom, it cannot give meaning to his life; on the contrary, it can remove all meaning from his life. As Sartre would have put it, the element of futurity that exists in Wilder’s life is removed from Gladney’s life and with it all possibility for the projection of “possibles” (533). Sartre argues convincingly that

> [Death], in so far as it can be revealed to me, is not only the always possible nihilation of my possibles ... It is also the triumph of the point of view of the Other ... The unique characteristic of a dead life is that it is a life of which the Other makes himself the guardian ... To be dead is to be a prey for the living. This means therefore that the one who tries to grasp the meaning of his future death must discover himself as the future prey of others. We have here therefore a case of alienation (540-43).

And that is precisely Gladney’s case--a case of alienation represented in the complex antithetical conflict between his attempt to grasp the meaning of his future death and the triumph of the ‘gods of awesome technology’. However, taken from a different perspective, his knowledge of his imminent death does not necessarily mean the end to his power of decision itself. Since fear of death leads him to self-awareness and to a deeper level of

consciousness, he is then expected to promote that faculty which he has been robbed of, namely the power of decision. He is still free to make a decision that involves a project beyond death, a project projecting toward the future.

The problem, then, goes beyond fear of death, literally and metaphorically, and becomes a fear of loss of individuality and the courage to make authentic decisions. Being aware of death can have value only in so far as it helps Gladney to make such authentic decisions.

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