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Keeping Death at a Distance: Hyperreality, Consumerism and Media in *White Noise*

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Abstract

This article examines hyperreality and simulation, consumerism, and technology and the mass media in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). Critics have usually discussed these features of postmodern culture separately, and readings that place the fear of death at the novel's centre have treated its culture as a general defence against mortality. The article argues instead that simulation, consumption and media are three interconnected practices resting on a shared promise: a world sealed off from time, in which death happens elsewhere. Methodologically, the study offers a theoretically informed close reading of selected scenes, drawing on Baudrillard, Lyotard, Jameson, Harvey and McLuhan, with attention to narrative voice and irony. The analysis finds that the three practices reinforce one another and that each fails for a reason internal to it: the mediation that keeps death at a distance also turns it into information that returns to the characters as a verdict. The toxic cloud exceeds its simulation, Dylar cannot be bought as a cure, and the screens that place disaster elsewhere later show Jack his own exposure. The article concludes that *White Noise* critiques the consolations of postmodern culture as much as it satirises its surfaces.

1. Introduction

Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, published in January 1985 and winner of that year's National Book Award, follows a year in the life of Jack Gladney, chair of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill, and his blended family in the small town of Blacksmith. The novel moves from domestic comedy in its first part, "Waves and Radiation," through an industrial disaster in the second, "The Airborne Toxic Event," to a darker plot in the third, "Dylarama," concerning an experimental drug designed to suppress the fear of death. Reviewing the novel on its publication, Jayne Anne Phillips (1985) observed that DeLillo was concerned "not so much with characters as with culture."

The culture in question is that of postmodern America: a society of shopping malls and supermarkets, television and radio, credit cards and corporate chemicals. Theorists of postmodernity have described this culture in terms that seem tailor-made for DeLillo's novel. Jean Baudrillard (1981/1994) argued that contemporary societies live in a "hyperreal" in which models and images precede and replace the reality they claim to represent, and that consumption has become a system of signs through which individuals acquire identity and belonging (Baudrillard, 1970/1998). Jean-François Lyotard (1979/1984) described a postmodern condition marked by "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv), and Fredric Jameson (1991) and David Harvey (1989) linked these cultural changes to a new, post-Fordist stage of capitalism.

This article examines three themes through which *White Noise* engages with these ideas: hyperreality and simulation, consumerism, and the influence of technology and the mass media.

Each has been discussed extensively by critics, but usually in isolation. The article's central argument is that the three themes are best understood together. In *White Noise*, simulation, consumption and media are not simply symptoms of postmodernity; they function as strategies by which the characters attempt to keep death at a distance. The Gladneys turn to images, commodities and broadcasts for reassurance, and each source of reassurance proves insufficient when death, in the form of a toxic cloud, a computer printout or a drug that fails, comes close.

The link between culture and mortality in the novel is not new in itself. Bonca (1996) has argued that the fear of death is the novel's true centre and that its culture of noise and commodities works as a defence against that fear, and Brown (2020) has read death as the one concept the system of signs cannot absorb. The present article extends these readings rather than restating them, in three respects. First, Bonca's title borrows Murray's description of "repression, compromise and disguise" as "the natural language of the species" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 37), and his reading accordingly approaches the defence against death as something close to a universal condition. This study specifies how the defence operates in three distinct practices and identifies the promise they share: a world that appears sealed off from time, in which death happens elsewhere and to others. Second, it shows that these practices are interconnected rather than parallel. The barn reappears on the road to the evacuation camp, the supermarket and the television are described in the same words, and the drug that promises to end the fear of death is advertised in a tabloid like any other product. Third, it explains why the defence fails. The failure does not come only from a reality that breaks in from outside; it arises within mediation itself, because the images, goods and machines that hold death at a distance also convert it into information that comes back to the characters as a verdict. This third point, developed most fully in the discussion of media (Section 4.3), is the article's principal contribution.

The argument is pursued across three questions: how the novel represents the relationship between reality and its mediated representations, how it represents consumption as a system of signs, and how media and technologies serve the characters as sources of both reassurance and anxiety. After a review of criticism and theory (Section 2) and an account of the method (Section 3), Section 4 addresses each question in turn and draws the findings together, and Section 5 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Critical Reception of *White Noise*

Criticism of *White Noise* has developed along three main lines. The first, and most influential, reads the novel through Baudrillard's theory of simulation. Wilcox (1991) argues that the novel depicts a world saturated by media in which Jack's search for meaning, and his final violent plot, parody an exhausted heroic narrative. Frow (1990) treats the "most photographed barn" episode as a paradigmatic scene of the simulacrum, and Duvall (1994) argues that television and the supermarket together form a single "marketplace of images" that aestheticises everyday life. These studies establish the novel's close engagement with postmodern theory, though they tend to read the characters' experiences as straightforward illustrations of it.

A second line of criticism focuses on consumption and the family. Ferraro (1991) reads the Gladneys as a family constituted less by inherited bonds than by shared shopping, while Bonca (1996) argues that the fear of death is the novel's true centre and that its culture of noise and commodities works as a defence against that fear. A third line questions purely postmodern readings. Maltby (1996) points to moments of visionary experience, such as Steffie's sleep-talk and the toxic sunsets, that exceed the logic of the simulacrum. Most recently, Brown (2020) has argued that death functions in the novel as the one concept that stands outside the system of signs, "irreducible, certain and universal" (p. 17).

Four further studies frame the novel's treatment of media and belief. LeClair (1987) was the first to read *White Noise* as a "systems novel," in which information, technology and

ecology form feedback loops that exceed any individual's grasp, while Lentricchia (1991) argues that the real subject of the novel is the electronic image as "the active context of contemporary existence in America" (p. 88). Osteen (2000) situates the novel within DeLillo's wider "dialogue with culture," showing how consumer and media culture take over functions once performed by religion, and Conroy (1994) traces how tabloids and television stand in for the authority figures the Gladneys no longer have. These readings establish that mediation in the novel is structural rather than incidental, but they say less about how it bears on the characters' mortality.

This article builds on Bonca's and Brown's attention to death but shifts the focus. Where Brown treats death as a metaphysical limit outside the system of signs, and Bonca treats the culture's noise as a broad form of repression, the present study examines the everyday practices (photographing, shopping, watching) through which the characters try to keep that limit at a distance, and the reasons each practice turns against them. It also reads together the three themes that previous studies have tended to treat separately.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

"Postmodernism" is a notoriously elastic term. Eco (1984) complained that it was applied to "anything the user of the term happens to like" (pp. 65–66), and Hassan (2003), after three decades of writing about it, admitted that "we hardly know what postmodernism was" (p. 3). Following Eagleton (1996, p. vii), this article distinguishes *postmodernity*, a historical condition of late, consumer capitalism, from *postmodernism*, the cultural forms and theories that respond to it. *White Noise* depicts the former and is an example of the latter. Four bodies of theory inform the analysis.

Lyotard: knowledge without legitimation. Lyotard (1979/1984) defines the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv), the grand stories of emancipation and progress that once legitimated knowledge. Without them, knowledge tends to be legitimated by performativity, by what works, rather than by truth (pp. 41–47). In computerised societies, he adds, knowledge is reshaped into quantities of information and produced in order to be sold (pp. 4–5). These ideas illuminate both Jack's academic career and the characters' dependence on bulletins, tabloids and printouts.

Baudrillard: simulation and the consumer society. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard (1981/1994) defines simulation as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (p. 1). In this order, "it is the map that precedes the territory" (p. 1); simulation is not imitation but "substituting the signs of the real for the real" (p. 2). The image passes through four phases, ending as "its own pure simulacrum" (p. 6). Eco's (1986) parallel account of the American taste for the "absolute fake" adds that the hyperreal can be pleasurable as well as disorienting. In his earlier work, Baudrillard (1968/1996) defines consumption as "an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs" (p. 200). Objects matter less for their use than for their *sign-value* (Baudrillard, 1972/1981), and superfluous consumption is functional because it affirms abundance and social existence (Baudrillard, 1970/1998).

Jameson and Harvey: late capitalism. Jameson (1991) describes postmodernism as the "cultural dominant" of multinational capitalism (p. 4) and identifies a "waning of affect" (p. 10) in its culture. Harvey (1989) traces a "sea-change" since around 1972 from Fordist mass production to "flexible accumulation," marked by rapid turnover of products and fashions (pp. vii, 147, 156).

McLuhan and Debord: media. McLuhan's (1964) dictum that "the medium is the message" (p. 7) directs attention to a medium's effect on "the scale or pace or pattern" of human affairs regardless of its content (p. 8). Debord's (1967/1994) definition of the spectacle as "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (p. 12) adds a social dimension.

These theories have been strongly criticised. Eagleton (1996) argues that postmodernism is "often politically oppositional but economically complicit" (p. 132), and Kellner (1989)

warns that Baudrillard's later work dissolves social reality into a totalising play of signs. The present study therefore uses these theories as tools for describing the novel rather than as truths that the novel must confirm.

3. Methodology

The study is qualitative and interpretive. It adopts a theoretically informed close reading of selected passages, attending to diction, imagery, repetition, narrative perspective and irony, and uses the concepts outlined in Section 2.2 as heuristic tools for describing what those passages do. Each reading is also tested against the existing criticism reviewed in Section 2.1, including readings that point in a different direction.

Two methodological principles guide the analysis. First, the study avoids circularity: it does not read the novel through Baudrillard in order to conclude that Baudrillard is right, but asks where his concepts fit the text, where they fit only partially, and where the text resists them. Second, it distinguishes the novel's characters from its author. *White Noise* is narrated in the first person by Jack, whose self-understanding the novel frequently ironises, and much of its theorising is voiced by Jack's colleague Murray Jay Siskind, a character whose ideas are often comic. Their statements are treated as positions within the novel, not as DeLillo's own views.

The corpus is the novel itself, cited from the Penguin edition (DeLillo, 1985/1999). Passages were selected according to one criterion: they are scenes in which mediation is itself a theme. These include the barn episode (chapter 3), the supermarket and shopping scenes (chapters 1, 2, 5, 9 and 17), the television scenes (chapters 11, 14 and 20), the ATM (chapter 10), the airborne toxic event (chapter 21), the Dylar plot (chapters 26–39) and the novel's ending (chapter 40). Because the novel circulates in several editions with different pagination, quotations are cited by chapter, given in full at the first quotation in each titled strand of the analysis and as "chap." thereafter.

The study has two main limitations. It examines a single novel and does not compare *White Noise* with DeLillo's other fiction. Its theoretical framework is also largely Euro-American and contemporary with the novel, which gives it a shared historical horizon but also risks mutual confirmation; the first principle above is intended to guard against this.

4. Analysis

4.1 Hyperreality: Simulating the Real, Deferring Death

The most photographed barn. The novel's best-known engagement with hyperreality occurs when Murray takes Jack to see a tourist attraction known as "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA." Surrounded by people with cameras, Murray declares: "No one sees the barn ... Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 3). The scene corresponds closely to Baudrillard's precession of simulacra. The barn has no significance apart from its representations: it is famous for being photographed and photographed because it is famous. Murray makes the point explicit: "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura" (chap. 3). When he asks "What was the barn like before it was photographed?", he concedes that the question cannot be answered: "We can't get outside the aura" (chap. 3). In Baudrillard's terms, the image now masks the absence of a profound reality; the tourists, as Murray says, are "taking pictures of taking pictures" (chap. 3).

Murray's use of "aura" also reverses Benjamin's (1936/1969) argument that mechanical reproduction destroys the aura of the unique work of art. In Blacksmith, reproduction creates aura. Yet it matters who is speaking. The theory of the barn is Murray's, and the novel frames it with gentle irony: Murray takes notes throughout, and at the end "He seemed immensely pleased by this" (chap. 3). By turning the barn into a lecture, he adds one more layer of interpretation to it. The barn returns during the evacuation, when the Gladneys pass "a sign for the most photographed barn in America" on the way to the emergency camp (chap. 21). The landscape of tourist simulacra and the landscape of real disaster are the same. The barn's aura

promises a world in which every image is preserved; the toxic cloud brings into that world something that cannot be preserved or rehearsed.

The airborne toxic event. Part Two offers the novel's most sustained treatment of reality and its representations. The radio first calls the cloud a "feathery plume," then a "black billowing cloud," and finally "the airborne toxic event," a phrase Heinrich pronounces "syllable by syllable, as if he sensed the threat in state-created terminology" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 21). The residents learn of the danger through a shifting vocabulary controlled by others, an illustration of Lyotard's (1979/1984) argument that, in computerised societies, knowledge cannot be separated from the question of who controls information.

The radio also shapes the residents' bodies. Jack suspects that his daughters heard about "sweaty palms and vomiting" on the radio "before developing these symptoms themselves," and notes that déjà vu "was no longer a working symptom of Nyodene contamination. It had been preempted by coma, convulsions, and miscarriage" (chap. 21). He asks: "Is a symptom a sign or a thing? What is a thing and how do we know it's not another thing?" (chap. 21). Even the body, which ought to be the most reliable evidence of reality, now produces symptoms learned from a broadcast.

The SIMUVAC programme takes the logic further. At the emergency camp, Jack discovers that the state agency for simulated evacuations is using the real event as a training exercise. When he protests that "this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real," the official replies: "We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model," adding that "we don't have our victims laid out where we'd want them if this was an actual simulation" (chap. 21). The real event is judged by the standard of its model and found wanting: here, in Baudrillard's phrase, the map precedes the territory.

Yet this scene also introduces death into the logic of simulation, and death does not behave like an image. A technician tells Jack that his data profile is "generating big numbers" and that "you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that" (chap. 21). Jack reflects that "It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself" (chap. 21). His death has become data on a screen, but mediation makes it more frightening, not less real. Jack's earlier refusal to evacuate shows how images had protected him: "Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods?" (chap. 21). His sense of immunity rested on a televised picture of who suffers disasters, which the cloud ignores.

The simulated self. Hyperreality extends to Jack's identity. Advised by the chancellor to change his name and appearance, he became "J. A. K. Gladney, a tag I wore like a borrowed suit" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 4). He wears an academic gown and dark glasses and hides the fact that he cannot speak German (chap. 8). Murray praises the result in the vocabulary of marketing: "He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler," an achievement "masterful, shrewd and stunningly preemptive" (chap. 3). Jack's persona is a simulacrum of scholarship, legitimated by performance rather than knowledge. Its function becomes clear in Part Three, when Murray suggests that Jack's career was a defence against death: "On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works" (chap. 37). The defence is fragile. When a colleague sees him without his glasses and remarks, "You look so harmless, Jack" (chap. 17), the persona briefly collapses. In each of these scenes, simulation offers protection from death, and in each the protection proves partial.

4.2 Consumerism: Shopping Against Death

Consumption as social ritual. After the Second World War, as Cohen (2003) has shown, the United States developed a "Consumers' Republic" in which mass consumption was promoted as both an economic engine and a civic duty. By the early 1980s this culture had entered the phase Harvey (1989) calls flexible accumulation, marked by consumer credit and the rapid turnover of goods. *White Noise* registers this world from its opening page, where students' parents unload their station wagons of "stereo sets, radios, personal computers" and

"English and Western saddles." Jack concludes that this ritual, "more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 1). The passage is a literary version of Baudrillard's (1970/1998) argument that consumption is a code through which a group recognises itself, and its religious vocabulary suggests that consumption has taken over some of the functions of religion.

The next chapter connects this display of wealth to death. When Jack says that the parents "genuinely believe they're entitled" to their money, Babette replies: "I have trouble imagining death at that income level" (chap. 2). The remark is comic, but it states the novel's central fantasy: that abundance can purchase immunity from mortality.

The supermarket as sanctuary. After a family shopping trip, Jack reflects on their full bags: "it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 5). His language is existential rather than economic. Abundance confirms that the family exists, as Baudrillard's account of functional waste would predict, and supports Ferraro's (1991) reading of the Gladneys as a family held together by consumption. Murray explicitly links the supermarket to death, comparing it to Tibetan rituals of dying: "This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway" (chap. 9). The supermarket, he says, is "sealed off, self-contained ... timeless" (chap. 9), a world without decay, which is precisely its appeal to people who fear death. The novel, however, undercuts Murray's reverence. Old Man Treadwell and his sister are lost for days in the Mid-Village Mall, and Gladys Treadwell later dies "of lingering dread" (chap. 20). The sanctuary of consumption cannot keep out the fear it promises to soothe.

Objects and identity. Characters repeatedly invest objects with the power to confer identity. Murray dresses almost entirely in corduroy, a fabric Jack imagines he associated "with higher learning in some impossibly distant and tree-shaded place" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 3). Denise wears a green visor that seems "to offer wholeness and identity" (chap. 9). The clearest example follows the remark that Jack looks "harmless." "The encounter put me in the mood to shop," he says, and leads his family through the mall: "I shopped for its own sake ... 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" (chap. 17). The money he spends returns "in the form of existential credit," and he concludes: "I was one of them, shopping, at last" (chap. 17). Consumption repairs a threatened identity, and its excess, comically overstated by Jack's narration, reveals how compensatory that repair is.

Brand names and transcendence. At the evacuation camp, Jack hears Steffie murmur "Toyota Celica" in her sleep and recognises "some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 21). Yet the utterance strikes him "with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence" (chap. 21). The scene may show that the sacred has migrated into commodity language, or, as Maltby (1996) argues, that the need for transcendence survives even among brand names. The novel leaves both readings open. What is clear is the context: the scene takes place in a shelter, under a toxic cloud, at the moment when death is closest.

Dylar: buying a cure. The Dylar plot takes the logic of consumption to its limit. Babette, unable to bear her fear of death, answers a tabloid advertisement: "The headline hit home. FEAR OF DEATH, it said" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 26). Dylar is the ultimate commodity, a product promising to remove the fear that other commodities only manage. It fails; Babette herself calls it "Fool's gold" (chap. 27). When Jack confronts its developer, Willie Mink, the words "Falling plane" throw Mink into a panic, and the words "Plunging aircraft" send him into the recommended crash position (chap. 39): a grotesque figure for whom words have replaced things. The final chapter returns to the supermarket, whose shelves "have been rearranged," leaving shoppers "in a fragmented trance" while scanners "decode the binary

secret of every item, infallibly" (chap. 40). The machines read the code; the people cannot. The supermarket no longer offers the orientation or the "fullness of being" it once seemed to promise (chap. 5).

4.3 Technology and Media: Mediating the Fear of Death

Television as environment. Television is the most pervasive presence in the Gladney household. Murray, who has spent two months watching it "into the early hours, listening carefully, taking notes," tells Jack that "TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data" and urges his students to "Root out content. Find the codes and messages" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 11). His conclusion is that "the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring" (chap. 11). Murray's view is close to McLuhan's (1964): what matters about television is its form and its effect on the environment in which people live. His words also echo his description of the supermarket as "sealed off, self-contained" and "timeless" (chap. 9), which supports Duvall's (1994) argument that the two form a single space of images. Like the supermarket, television offers a world apparently untouched by time, and therefore by death. The novel places this enthusiasm within a debate: Murray's own students dismiss television as "just another name for junk mail" (chap. 11).

Watching catastrophe. Babette has made it a household rule that the family watch television together on Friday nights, hoping to "de-glamorize the medium" and reduce its "narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 4). The rule backfires. Watching footage of floods, earthquakes and volcanoes, the family is unusually attentive: "Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (chap. 14). When Jack asks why decent people are "intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television," his colleague Alfonse Stompanato explains that "we're suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information," adding that viewers can enjoy disasters "as long as they happen somewhere else" (chap. 14).

Jameson's (1991) "waning of affect" helps to explain the family's response: images of mass death become entertainment, consumed without grief. Yet the ritual also protects. Watching death happen to others on a screen confirms that it is happening elsewhere, and in Debord's (1967/1994) sense it binds the family through images of other people's suffering. Part Two reverses the arrangement. When the disaster comes to Blacksmith, the viewers become victims and discover that their ordeal barely appears on screen. A man at the evacuation centre, holding up a small television set, protests: "Do they think this is just television?" (chap. 21). For people who have learned to experience disaster through television, an untelevised disaster seems somehow unreal.

Babette on the screen. Part One ends when the family suddenly sees Babette on the local cable channel, teaching her posture class. Jack describes her image as "animated but also flat, distanced, sealed off, timeless. It was but wasn't her" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 20). He begins to think that "Murray might be on to something" and tries to tell himself that it was only television, "not some journey out of life or death" (chap. 20). When the image disappears, the toddler Wilder stays in front of the set, "crying softly" (chap. 20). The medium transforms what it carries, as McLuhan argued, and the televised mother seems to exist beyond time. But Jack's unease, with its language of "life or death," and Wilder's tears register the cost: the image of the mother is experienced as a separation from her.

Tabloids: hope in print. If television dominates Part One and the radio Part Two, the tabloids are the medium of hope. At the evacuation centre Babette reads to blind evacuees a front-page story headed "Life After Death Guaranteed with Bonus Coupons" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 21). Later she reads Jack an item claiming that surgeons "use high-frequency tapes of mouse cries to destroy tumors," and asks, "Do you believe that?" He answers "Yes," and she replies, "So do I" (chap. 31). In Lyotard's (1979/1984) terms, once the grand narratives of religion and science lose their authority, popular culture produces small narratives of miracle

cures and reincarnation that borrow the prestige of science without its methods. The headline joins a religious promise to a commercial offer. It is also in a tabloid that Babette finds the Dylar advertisement (chap. 26), and the novel's final sentences return to the tabloid racks at the checkout:

> Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead. (chap. 40)

The list summarises what consumer media offer the frightened: survival, healing and contact with the dead.

Technology: blessing and threat. At the bank's automated teller machine, Jack finds his balance matches his estimate and feels that "The system had blessed my life" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 10). The next sentences darken the scene: "A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with" (chap. 10). Martins (2005) observes that such everyday encounters with machines build up a sense of an invisible "apparatus of power" (p. 91). The plot extends this ambivalence from the bank to the body: the chemical industry that stocks the supermarket also produces Nyodene D., and medical technology promises diagnosis but delivers dread.

Why the same media reassure and threaten. These scenes could be read as a simple division of the novel's media into comforting ones (the Friday-night disasters, the tabloids, the ATM) and threatening ones (the radio bulletins, the SIMUVAC computer, the imaging block). The novel works more systematically than that. In each case reassurance and anxiety derive from the same property of the medium, so that the qualities which make a technology consoling are the ones that make it frightening. Three such properties recur: distance, invisibility and the conversion of experience into information.

Distance is the clearest. Television comforts because it places death elsewhere: disasters are enjoyable "as long as they happen somewhere else" (chap. 14). But distance is a relation rather than a possession, and it holds only while the viewer remains outside the frame. When the cloud reaches Blacksmith, the same gap that made catastrophe watchable becomes the measure of the residents' abandonment, which is why the lack of coverage unsettles them as much as the chemical does. Babette's broadcast turns this property inward. The screen that keeps catastrophe at a safe remove also removes the mother from her child, and the image that seems "timeless" (chap. 20) is the one in front of which Wilder cries.

Invisibility works in the same double way. The ATM reassures because the system behind it operates unseen, yet Jack registers in the same sentence that this invisibility makes it "all the more disquieting to deal with" (chap. 10). Security of this kind rests on trust rather than knowledge, since the characters cannot inspect what they cannot see, and the deranged man escorted from the bank is a reminder of what happens to those the system does not bless. The airborne toxic event repeats the pattern on a larger scale. The cloud can be seen, but its effects cannot, so the residents take their knowledge of their own bodies from the radio, to the point of developing the symptoms it announces (chap. 21).

The third property, and the one that matters most for the novel's treatment of death, is the conversion of experience into information. Lyotard (1979/1984) argues that in computerised societies knowledge is translated into quantities of information, and that whatever resists such translation is likely to be abandoned (p. 4). In *White Noise* the ATM balance that confirms Jack's estimate and the data profile that generates "big numbers" (chap. 21) are the same operation with opposite results. Information soothes when it confirms what the subject already believes and frightens when it contradicts him, but in neither case does he own it. The knowledge belongs to the system, which delivers a blessing and a prognosis with the same impersonal authority. This is why Jack senses, at the SIMUVAC terminal, "an eerie separation

between your condition and yourself" (chap. 21): his death is at once his own and not his own. McLuhan's (1964) account of media as extensions of the body and nervous system clarifies the point. An extension enlarges the reach of the senses, but it also places part of the self outside the self, where others can read it. By the final chapter Jack avoids his doctor because he is "afraid of the imaging block ... Afraid of what it knows about me" (chap. 40).

Taken together, these properties explain why the same technologies produce security, uncertainty and vulnerability at once. Security comes from mediation's capacity to make death distant, invisible and abstract. Uncertainty follows from the characters' dependence on sources they cannot verify, a dependence that reaches even the symptoms of their own bodies. Vulnerability comes from the fact that mediation stores the self as data, which can return at any moment as a verdict. Comfort and threat are therefore not two uses of technology but two faces of one structure, which is what Murray's formula compresses: technology "creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other" (chap. 37). Jack's story bears out both halves, and often in the same objects.

4.4 Discussion: Three Strategies, One Structure

Read together, the three sets of findings reveal a common pattern. In each domain the characters turn to a form of mediation that promises permanence: the photographs that "maintain" the barn's aura (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 3), the supermarket that is "timeless" (chap. 9), the television image that is "sealed off" from time (chap. 20). In each, the promise is tied, explicitly or implicitly, to death. Murray compares the supermarket to Tibetan rituals of dying, Babette cannot imagine death "at that income level" (chap. 2), and the family's televised disasters are enjoyable only because they happen elsewhere. In each, finally, the promise fails at the moment death draws near: the barn reappears on the road to the evacuation camp, Dylar turns out to be "fool's gold" (chap. 27), and the family's own disaster is barely televised.

These findings both confirm and qualify the existing criticism. They confirm the Baudrillardian readings of Wilcox (1991), Frow (1990) and Duvall (1994): the novel does stage the precession of simulacra, the sign-value of commodities and the self-enclosed space of the screen. They qualify those readings in two ways. First, simulation in *White Noise* is not merely a condition the characters suffer; it is something they actively seek, because it shields them from mortality. This extends Bonca's (1996) argument that the culture of noise is a defence against death in two directions: it shows how the defence operates in three connected practices, and it shows why the defence fails from within, since the mediation that protects the characters also hands their mortality back to them as information. Second, the novel does not grant simulation the totality that Baudrillard claims for it. The toxic cloud, the body that registers "big numbers" (chap. 21) and the fear that Dylar cannot remove all persist through their representations. In this respect the findings align with Maltby's (1996) and Brown's (2020) counter-readings, though they locate the limit of simulation less in moments of visionary transcendence or metaphysical certainty than in the everyday failure of cultural consolation.

The pattern also clarifies the role of Murray. As Sections 4.1 and 4.3 showed, Murray articulates positions close to McLuhan's and Baudrillard's, and critics have often treated him as the novel's theorist. Yet it is Murray who praises the supermarket as preparation for death, who celebrates television as a timeless "primal force" (chap. 11), and who finally tells Jack that people are either "killers" or "diers" (chap. 37). The theorist of postmodern culture is also its most eloquent apologist, and his advice leads Jack toward violence. The novel's irony toward Murray is therefore part of its critique: it shows how easily the analysis of consolation becomes another consolation.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that hyperreality, consumerism, and technology and media form a single structure in *White Noise*. The barn's aura and Jack's academic persona, the supermarket and the shopping trip, the Friday-night disasters and the tabloids all promise a world sealed off from time, in which death happens elsewhere. Each promise fails when death draws near: the

toxic cloud cannot be contained by its simulation, Dylar cannot be bought as a cure, and the screens that kept disaster at a distance end by showing Jack his own exposure.

The study's original contribution lies in two claims. First, it reads three familiar themes as interconnected practices with a shared logic rather than as parallel symptoms of postmodernity, and in doing so gives Bonca's (1996) account of culture as a defence against death a more specific shape. Second, it shows that the defence fails from within. The distance, invisibility and abstraction that make mediation consoling are the same qualities that make it frightening, because they turn mortality into information the characters cannot control.

The novel does not, for all that, present reality as wholly lost in simulation. Watching the strange sunsets that follow the toxic event, the people of Blacksmith admit that "Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread" (DeLillo, 1985/1999, chap. 40). *White Noise* is a critique of the consolations postmodern culture provides as well as a satire of its surfaces. Its humour depends on how much its characters need those consolations, and its seriousness on showing why they cannot be enough.

The study has two limitations. It examines a single novel, and its theoretical framework is largely Euro-American and contemporary with the text, which risks mutual confirmation even with the safeguards described in Section 3. A comparative study of DeLillo's later fiction, such as *Underworld* (1997) and *Zero K* (2016), could test whether the structure identified here persists, and the novel's reception outside the United States, where the brand names and broadcast formats it satirises now circulate globally, would also repay study.

Declaration of AI Assistance

The research questions, thematic choices, theoretical framework, arguments, and interpretations presented in this article are the author's original intellectual contributions. Claude (Anthropic) was used as an editorial and research-support tool to refine the prose, verify quotations from *White Noise*, review citations and source attributions, and identify relevant secondary scholarship. All scholarly decisions and interpretations remained the author's own. The author independently reviewed and verified the manuscript, including all quotations and references, and assumes full responsibility for its originality, accuracy, and academic integrity. Claude is not credited as an author.

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