

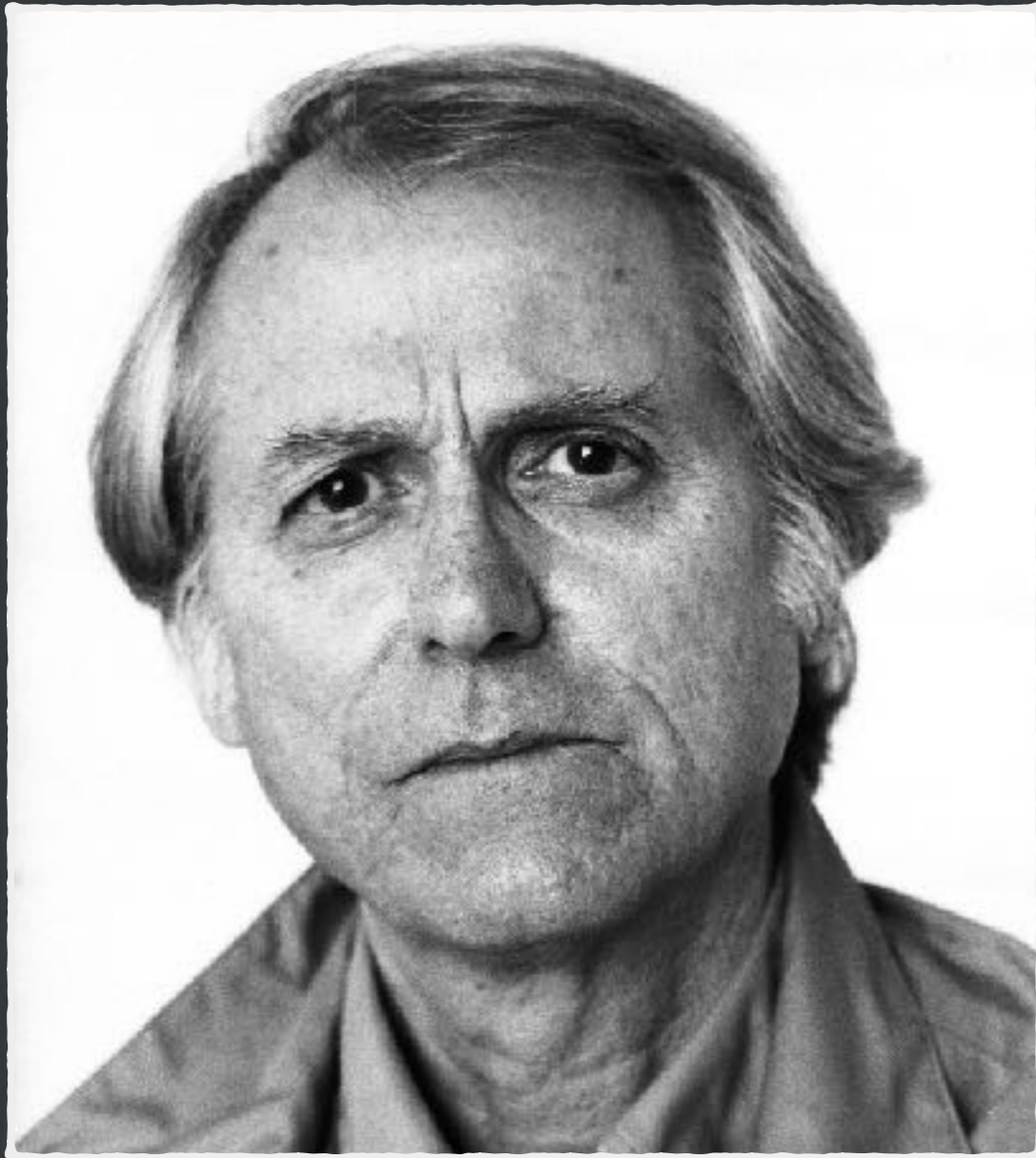
DON DELILLO



White Noise

Lecture 8 - MA 1
Civ/Lit

Don DeLillo



- Don DeLillo is one of the most important Postmodern American writers. He is seen as representing the turn to postmodernism in American literature.
- Given Don DeLillo's undeniable significance to contemporary American Fiction, he has become one of the most significant contemporary American novelists, standing in the first rank with Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and John Updike
- DeLillo's novels ring with the clamour of the marketplace. Americana, End Zone (1972), Great Jones Street (1973), **Mao II** (1991), **White Noise** (1985), and **Underworld** are all novels fashioned from the ready materials of the culture. They are made out of advertising slogans and rock lyrics, snippets of film and television, to the same extent that they draw on literary and philosophical traditions.

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) is a supermarket satire and a critique of an American consumer society ruled by Multinational Capitalism, social saturation of advertising, mass media, and telecommunication. Writing with real irony and dark humor, DeLillo presents a provocative account of an America that embodies the postmodern condition.

White Noise has quickly become one of the most frequently taught postwar novels. In this novel, DeLillo presents a society that reproduces the logic of consumer capitalism. A society where, to use Marxist terms, exchange value and sign exchange value replaces use value. Therefore, a society built around 'an economy of artificial value'. These features shape the universe of *White Noise*, making up the background hum or 'white noise', like the supermarkets, the highways, the television commercials and quiz shows, the radio voice-overs and other random sounds that intersperse the text.



White Noise Plot

- The plot covers an academic year in the life of College professor Jack Gladney, his wife Babette, and their four children from different marriages. Jack is the headmaster of a department he created himself: The Hitler Studies Department. Although he does not speak German, Jack believes creating this field will give him an air of authority and importance.
- After an Airborne toxic event, the family evacuates to a nearby camp and wait for the toxic cloud to pass. Jack's exposure to the toxic chemical Nyodene-D fuels his obsessive fear of death and leads him to different ways of escapism and self-gratification. The Market becomes the new spiritual nest where material acquisition diverts the characters's attention from the fact that death is absolute.
- Jack and one of the children discover that Babette is taking an unknown drug. As it turns out, it is an illegal and experimental drug designed to help individuals overcome fear of death. The discovery of information about this drug lead Jack to confront his wife about it which leads her to disclose details about the person behind the experiment that she has been unfaithful because of this drug.
- After Jack's friend Murray tells him that to avoid fear of death it is better to cause death, he sets to look for the man behind Dylar, and eventually attempts to kill him, only to save him later on.

The plot of the novel is divided into three main parts

Waves and Radiations

There is no clear plot sequence as the story drifts between random events and conversations Jack and his family have. But it does introduce the reader to the subtle, yet looming presence of sounds and radiations: the Tv voice ongoing all the time, commercials, machine sounds, the supermarket buzz, etc. These sounds come to constitute the white noise of life that Jack will face in the two other parts.

Airborne Toxic Event

A train wreck in Blacksmith releases a toxic cloud of smoke into the atmosphere and the residents of the city are obliged to evacuate to a boycott camp.

Because of the toxic substance, Jack learns that he has been exposed to the toxic chemical Nyodene-D, a lethal chemical that lasts in the body for 30 years. This makes Jack obsessed with the idea of death.

Dylar

In the last part of the novel, Jack learns that his wife Babette has been taking an experimental and illegal drug called Dylar which is designed to control obsessive fear of death.

Events get more complicated because of this drug, and Jack almost kills the man behind the experiment Dylar.

Distractions:



Existential Void

White Noise

Consumerism

TV/screens

Hyperreality

Communities

Fear of death



**Absence of faith
and belief in God**

**Substitutes
of God**



**TV/Tech
Capitalism**

(Master Card/Visa/AmExpress)



Fear of Death

- Fear of death is a central and driving force in the novel. the existential anxiety manifested by the characters is explored as early as the beginning of the novel.
- At times, driving, and at others paralysing, the fear becomes an omnipotent antagonist to the characters, one that constantly threatens the peace of their daily lives.
- To begin with, Jack and Babette often have deep conversations about death and much of their existence revolves around the question **"who will die first?"** . Hearing of other people dying only intensifies their crisis.
- This existential wondering pops up unexpectedly at various points in the narrative.
- Babette, from her side, affirms that she wants to die first and is appalled y the eventuality of Jack's death "unexpectedly, sneakily, slipping away in the night" and ponders about **"The emptiness, the sense of cosmic darkness"** and the misery she would experience in his absence. Jack, from the other side, contends that Babette's absence would leave **"a hole in space and time"** and create a **"profound depth or void"** that cannot e remedied (Delillo 58).
- The Gladney's fear of death is so intense that it seems to take control of both their bodies and souls. In fact, they describe this overwhelming dread in the following way:

“I do want to die first,” she said, “but that doesn’t mean I’m not afraid. I’m terribly afraid. I’m afraid all the time.”

“I’ve been afraid for more than half my life.”

“What do you want me to say? Your fear is older and wiser than mine?”

“I wake up sweating. I break out in killer sweats.”

“I chew gum because my throat constricts.”

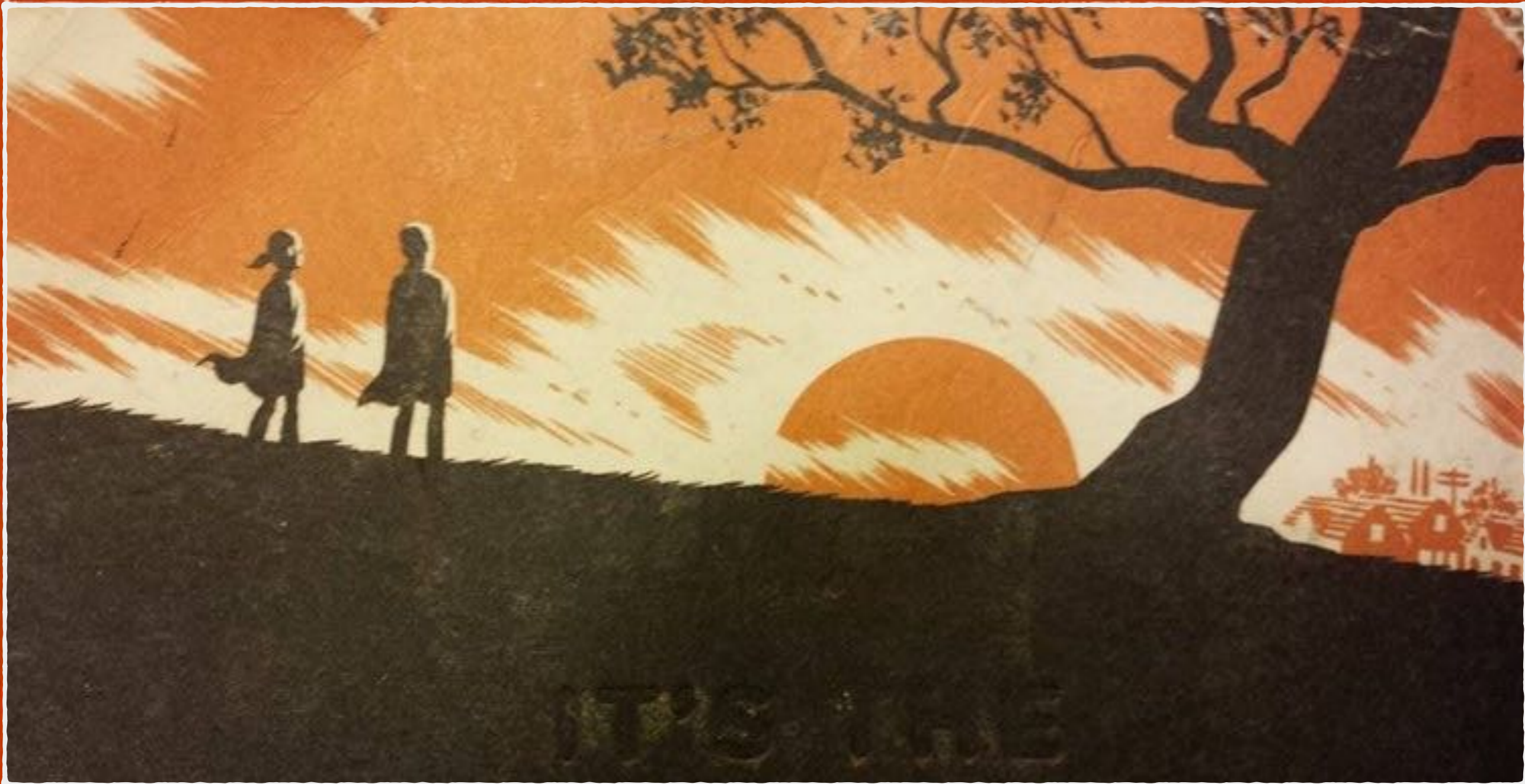
“I have no body. I’m only a mind or a self, alone in a vast space.”

“I seize up,” she said.

“I’m too weak to move. I lack all sense of resolve, determination”

(*White Noise* - Delillo).

- after the Airborne Toxic event, Jack learns that he has been exposed to a toxic chemical. This fuels his fear of death and he describes himself as “a man with death inside him.” This fear causes him panic episodes at night.
- At first he keeps visiting the hospital out of fear, then he denies death all together.
- Even the department he has created is a manifestation of his anxiety and sense of helplessness in front of death. The Hitler Studies is an attempt to wear the mask of an immortal metaphor of power, that is, Hitler himself.
- Despite the persona Jack adapts, with the other intellectuals and scholars, even his family, they remain shallow and scared of reaching a deep understanding of life, since there is death in life. Ignorance keeps them away from this truth about life and death, so they remain on the surface all the time. He even wishes that his days would be aimless so as to not face death: **“May the days be aimless...Do not advance the action according to a plan”**
- This fear pushes him to extremes, as he eventually attempts a murder following his friend’s piece of advice **“become a killer instead of a dier.”**
- Babette taking the drug “Dylar” despite her awareness of the side effects, and despite her having to cheat on her husband are another embodiment of her paralysing fear.



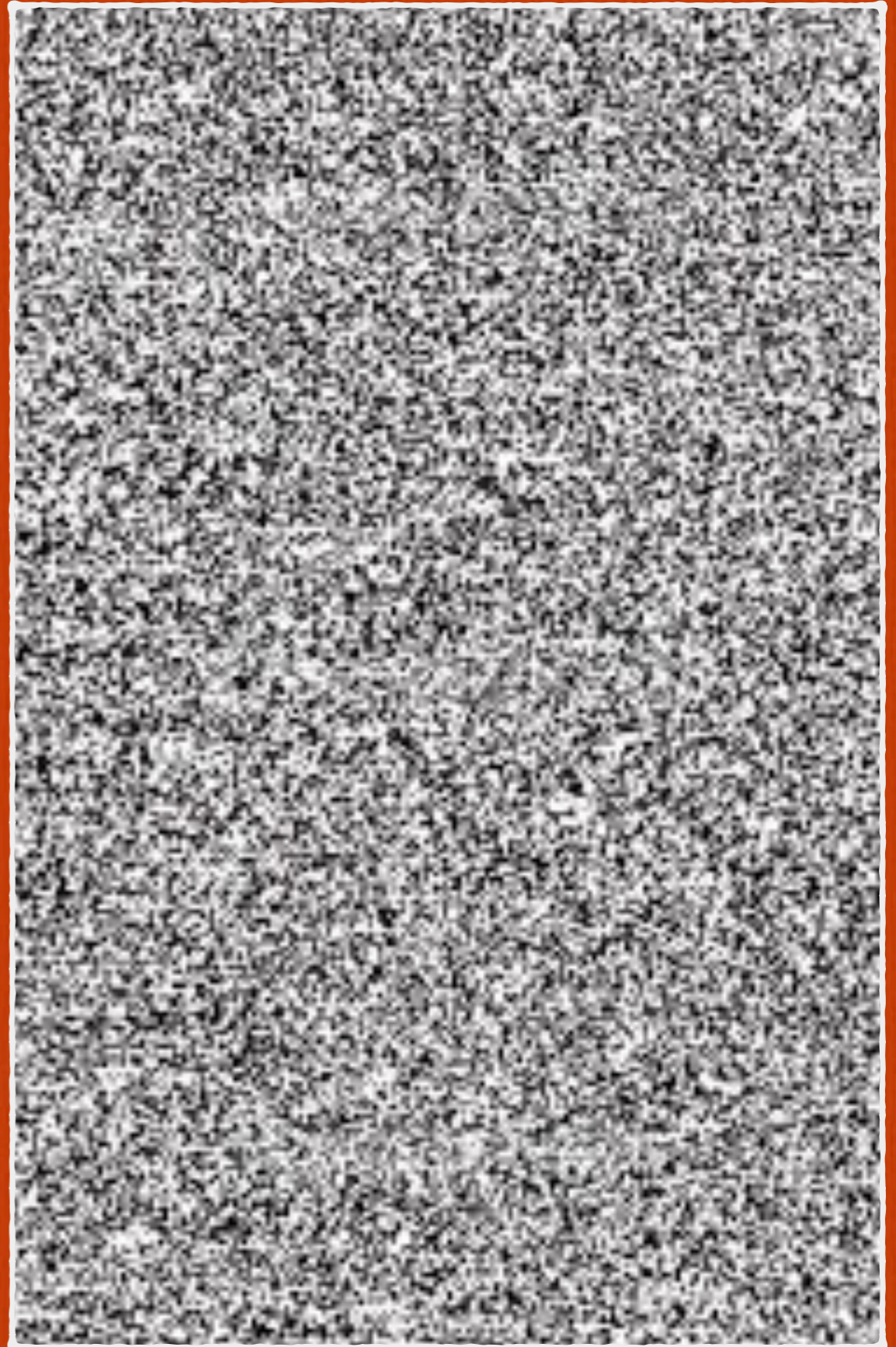
Distractions from Fear of Death

Fear of death makes the characters bombard themselves with distractions in the form of buying, watching endless cycles of TV shows and commercials, buzz of life, or, the white noise of life, in order to forget about their inevitable death as human beings. They are subject to these distractions both as individuals and communities.

White Noise

The Characters' awareness of death is the constant white noise that fills the void of the living world.

White noise is both the comforting background sound of life, at the same time an undertow of death.



□ Scientifically, white noise is :

“the simultaneous combination of equally intense but random sound wave frequencies”

- In the context of the novel, it is the background noise that constantly bombard us and a way to soothe existential fears. There is constant background sound throughout the novel: human buzz, hum, low-level rumble that humans routinely make in enclosed spaces, sirens, loudspeakers, kitchen appliances, radio and TV transmissions, domestic utensils, etc.
- In a way, all those sounds become soothing and comforting, masking louder inner voices of the characters. since silence reminds them of death, constant and random sounds reminds them that they are not alone and that they are living.
- Yet, death is the real background noise the they wish they did not notice, and the one they are trying to avoid through other louder noises.

“White noise machines create soothing, useful sounds to mask the abrasive, disruptive noises produced by other machines”

- Therefore, white noise is both: - **the never stopping noise one is trying to escape**
- **the escape from preoccupation with death.**

- The title has another dimension. Since technically white noise is random, the title also refers to any random event that has the potential to cause a permanent alteration in behaviour, and instead results in a temporary change distracting or masking real issues.**
- A great deal of the background white noise is commercial, mainly through advertising and media, where there are constant references to the marketplace, products names, televised fragments, data unconsciously intercepted and internalized.**

Consumerism

“Consume or die”



I shop

therefore

I am



“Here we don’t die, we shop.”

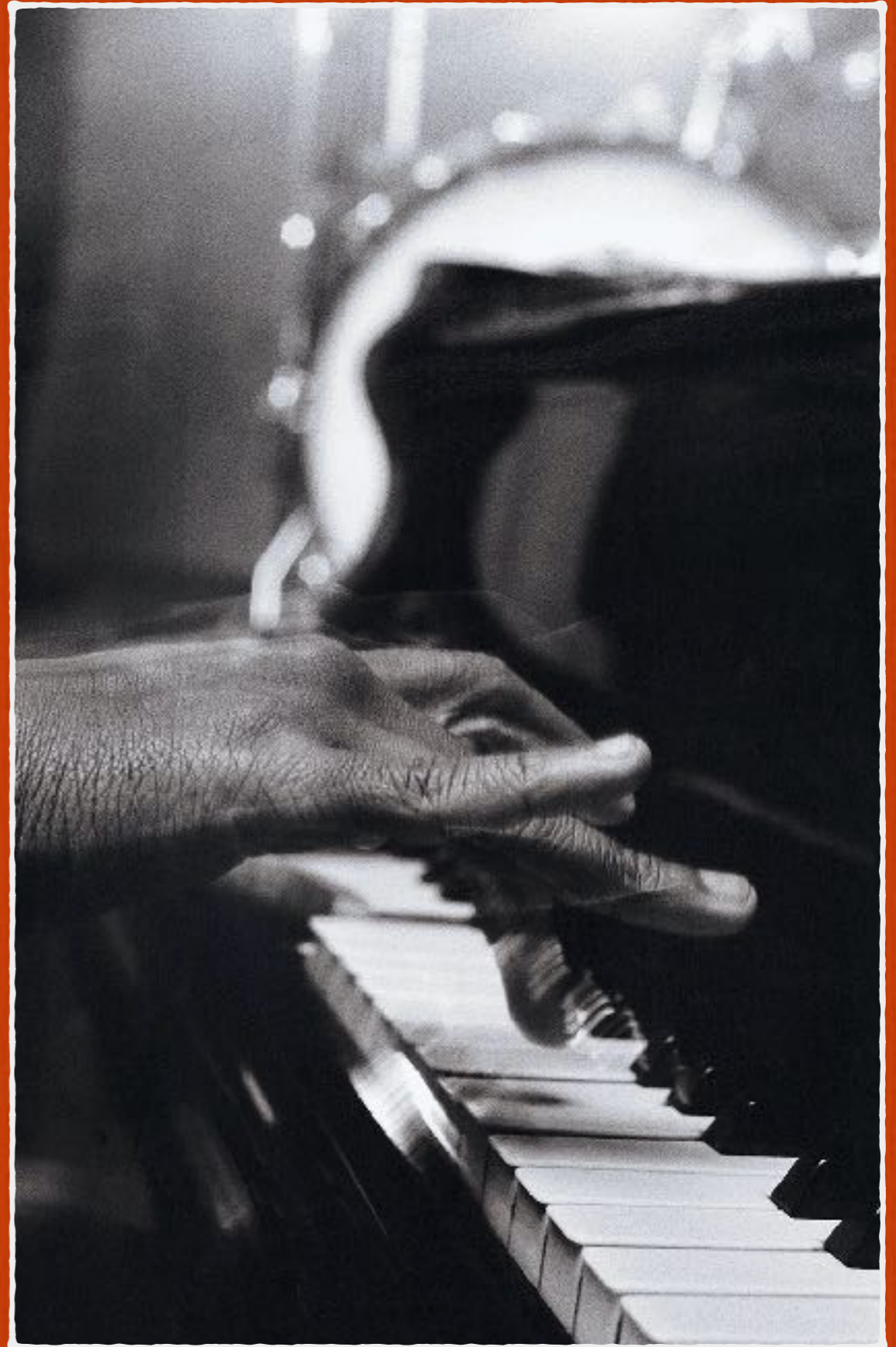
–White Noise–

- in the face of an existential void, economic and material fulfilment replaces existential needs and lends meaning to the characters.
- Consuming attaches people to things whose reproducibility betokens immortality. In other words, shopping gives impression that material existence will continue beyond time.
- Variety of products and different labels on the products are part of the illusion of immortality and reproducibility.
- The Gladneys spend most of their time in the markets or watching TV where **“commercials [are] interrupted by programs.”** It is practically impossible to escape from advertising even when they are watching news and documentaries. This makes consumerism and commercialism the new sources of meaning.
- In times of existential doubt, Jack goes to the market and spends money thoughtlessly because **“these sums came back...in the form of existential credit”**
- Jack’s long journey in the mall becomes a quest to restore his sense of identity and control over his surroundings.

- If the supermarket is a substitute of death, then it represents life with all its entangled community and consumerism.**
- Yet since, life and death cannot be separated, the supermarket represents the individual's journey towards death. How?**
- At the end of the novel, there is a scene in the supermarket where customers are done with their shopping, fill their carts with various products, but by the end they make their way towards the checkout counter where they have to pay. And this is metaphoric of the end of life where all need to account for their deed, and where all wait together regardless of age, gender, or race.**

Crowd Control and Fear of Death

“To become a crowd is to keep out death”



“Death. Many of those crowds were assembled in the name of death. They were there to attend tributes to the dead. Processions, songs, speeches, dialogues with the dead, recitations of the names of the dead... Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual”

–White Noise

- Most of the time, the characters in the novel can only locate themselves collectively within a crowd. That is why there are different acts of communion: eating takeouts as a family, shopping in groups (family or friends), watching TV as a family. intellectual debates between different groups of professors, etc.**
- The evacuation centres where the city's residents evacuate to become a symbol for common identity. The different tourist attractions provide a collective perception where people experience things as a crowd rather than as individuals. And the supermarket offers spiritual agreement and harmony between the different shoppers.**
- This collectivity offers a sense of consolation and comfort against an imminent death.**
- The sense of union does not necessarily depend on physical proximity.**
- The gladness are also joined to families all over the country by way of TV shows they watch all at the same time. and also through ATM transactions where there is communion with unknown individuals through screens.**

Screens and Hyperreality

Screens are necessary in the creation of
hyperreality



- There are many instances in the novel where reality is replaced by Simulacra. (Refer to Baudrillard's Simulacra and Simulation)**
- SIMUVAC: After the Airborne Toxic event the authorities started conducting simulated evacuations to train people in case of emergency. In other words, the simulated evacuation precedes the actual emergency (the map example).**
- Because of Media, people experience reality through signs and a simulated image without having access to reality itself. After the Radio informs listeners about the symptoms of Nyodene-D, Gladney's daughters start feeling the symptoms even without getting exposed to the chemical.**
- Jack's created persona is a simulation, and the name J.A.K. Gladney, and he becomes a false character that follows the name he created for himself.**
- This simulation distances the characters from reality creating a hyperreality.**

- **Screens:** TV screens, computers, ATM screens, etc. with each screen transposition and repetition further distancing viewers from reality, and reality becomes defined to the degree that it exists within the contours of frames and screens. (TV and radio broadcasts)
- Jameson: **“We are condemned to seek history by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains out of reach”**
- This distancing itself is a way to ward off the fear of death. A simulated reality grants characters more control over their surroundings.

Omnipotent TV

- In the novel, the TV is omnipresent, its voice is everywhere.
- The characters are wired to the TV all the time, “totally absorbed, silent, and worshipping.”
- The TV becomes like an all-knowing entity that dispenses data (concerning everything), and everybody just repeats and reiterates what the TV says. The TV thinks for the characters, and becomes the only source of info (There is no way to verify what it’s saying).
- The TV’s omnipresent voice (“The voice from above”), becomes the voice of truth and, therefore, the voice of God. The orders of this new God are “Consume or Die”



Faith and Belief

- **The novel represents a nation with shaken faith and beliefs, and a nation where no one is in control. Religion lost its resonance and the concept of an omnipotent God is absent.**
- **This absence of belief in one controlling divine power pushes the characters towards an existential crisis, causing an acute fear of death.**
- **Because of this absence, characters are willing to place themselves under the control of others, or to take control themselves.**
- **Babette works as a guide for elderly people to show them how to move and do things the right way.**
- **“People need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way”**
- **In the absence of Faith, Capitalism takes over to fill the void and “Mastercard - Visa - American Express” become the new holy trinity for the characters.**

- Although Jack is not a believer, he is crushed when, at the end of the novel, he learns that the nuns at the hospital are not believers.**
- This shows Gladney's desire to believe in something. The nun tells him that "as belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that someone believe... those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us"**

“It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die. This is why we are here. A tiny minority. To embody old things, old beliefs...If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse”

-White Noise-

Questions for reflection

- What happens to humanity in the absence of faith?**
- What is the relationship between Capitalism (economic systems), and the absence of faith?**