

## Death as an Overarching Signifier in Don Delillo's *White Noise*

Hassen Sakaama

Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sousse  
University of Sousse, Tunisia

### Abstract

*The American novelist Don Delillo represents one of the most renowned contemporary writers whose fiction works are haunted by an everlasting ontological investigation into the meanings of human life. He was able to register in his fiction works the general moods of his culture, to capture its generic tastes and desires, to wrest profound meanings from insipid everyday experiences and to meditate on human existence as a whole. Delillo endeavored to distill the consciousness of his society and age through the interplay of characters, events, imagery and themes in order to produce many memorable masterpieces among which the most acclaimed are Americana, White Noise and Underworld.*

*Delillo's continuous philosophical and intellectual brooding gravitates around the perplexing theme of death which seems to represent the binding thread that conjoins his numerous novels. Admittedly, many of his novels end with the death of one of his lead characters after having been assailed for a long time by both fears and dangers. Accordingly, death in Don Delillo's fiction is not merely a theme he unwittingly approaches; it is, instead, a sensible quintessential representation of the spirit of the age in which he writes and an aesthetic reflection on what it means to exist in America in the second half of the previous century. Although death is essentially an intimate matter that is interwoven into the texture of our private everyday lives and a personal experience we go through unaccompanied, Delillo was able to transform it into an aesthetic concern by conjoining both its apocalyptic and its ordinary aspects (James 120). He diffused it in his fiction and reflected the ways in which it is interspersed in the fabric of contemporary American culture and consciousness.*

*The aim of this paper is to explore the theme of death in Don Delillo's White Noise through the different ways the characters respond to their existential crises and fears in a society that is extensively dominated by technology, the media and consumption. This paper represents an endeavor to analyze the significance of this leitmotif and the meanings related to it by focusing especially on the major character Jack Gladney in his strenuous journey towards recognition and self-awareness.*

**Keywords:** death, fear, crisis, technology, postmodern subjectivity.

## 1. Introduction:

Delillo's second novel *White Noise* published in 1985 encompasses his dystopian representation of American life and culture in a world dominated by technology, the media and conspicuous consumption. This novel represents Delillo's attempt to portray a vision of life unremittingly haunted by the specter of death which looms indistinct beyond the purview of the characters minds. In this acclaimed work of fiction, Delillo takes his readers beyond certainty and firmness into the undiscovered land of possibility- the possibility of critical thought which endeavors to counteract the gloominess of contemporary existence in a world heading towards its end (Boxall 11). As Delillo testifies in *White Noise*, although the contemporary subject guarded himself adequately from the fear of death by being surrounded by all sorts of technologies, products and gadgets and by immersing himself in domesticity, death remains a pending unresolved mystery at the forefront of human preoccupations as it keeps reminding humans of its presence and of its indubitable coming. Death, as Delillo shows, lurks beneath the layers of domestic life and whatever humans do to distract themselves from it, remains their major anxiety.

In an interview by Maria Moss, Delillo declared that while writing *White Noise*, a sense of death lingered with him until he finished the novel: "I felt a hovering sense of death in the air... it was like a cloud hanging over my right shoulder. Soon as I finished the cloud lifted" (16). Significantly, Delillo opens up in *White Noise* a space of contention between life and death as an existential possibility that is both sought and shunned. This novel, as Tom LeClair avers, depicts "a deepening of the American and human mystery by means of a narrow and relentless focus on a seemingly ultimate subject-death" (14). In this work of fiction, death resonates conspicuously as a transcendental beyond, beyond the characters powers to control and manage and beyond their capabilities to conceptualize and synthesize. Death is, as Mark Osteen avers, "less an event" that randomly takes place in the course of the novel "than a quality in the air" (497). It is a dark and gloomy apprehension that preserves action in process and keeps experience unfulfilled. Indeed, by focusing on this tricky ultimate subject, Delillo intended to reveal that since the human sense of fear is so intense and because it is profoundly experienced, there seems to be nothing left for us but to live in belligerence with ourselves and with the world around (DeCurtis 118). This sense of estrangement, malaise and conflict is brought to the fore through the lead character Jack Gladney in his journey through life.

## 2. Death as an overarching signifier in *White Noise*:

Death is, without doubt, one of the most perplexing issues the subject is continuously haunted by. It is a disturbing possibility that is always in process, silent but not absent, free-floating in the background of our lives, sneaking indistinct, seeping unremarked "beneath the surface of our perceptions" (DeCurtis 119). Death is, for many of the characters of Delillo's novel, the far horizon looming at a safe distance, and it is never lost of sight. It is always present evincing their limits but enheartening them to keep going beyond. Death is, for them, an overarching signifier and an ultimate truth which exists beyond any reasonable doubt. In fact, many of these characters are haunted by its

omnipresence as they always hold it in view in their daily lives. Delillo's *White Noise* is, in fact, about the ubiquity of the fear of death and what it generates in the human soul when the subject becomes unable to curb its impact. Hence, the fear of death reigns supreme over the subject's consciousness and becomes an omnipotent human adversary.

From the outset of the novel, an ominous overtone could be sensed by the reader through Jack Gladney's and Babette's musings about the eventuality of their deaths as they keep asking each other a fundamental question around which much of their existence revolves: "who will die first?" (Delillo 11). This existential wondering about death often pops up unexpectedly in the course of the narrative, sometimes well-embedded in the structure of the text following up the previous threads of thought and contributing to the fulfillment of meaning (Delillo 11, 42, 73, 87, 107), while some other times it appears completely dissociated from what is being said or discussed simply free-floating in the narrative (16, 41). Babette, from her side, affirms that she wants to die first and is appalled by 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 be remedied (Delillo 58).

Jack and Babette would many a time ponder about the nature of death, its essence and the way it approaches and takes control of the human body. Their obsession with death reflects, in a way, Delillo's conception of it as a powerful intrusive element and a very mighty obtrusive force that greatly affects the assumptions, attitudes, desires and motivations of the living. Hence, life and death are represented in *White Noise* not as separate exclusive entities but, instead, as two inextricably connected inclusive stages separated only by a very fine and fragile barrier. Accordingly, as Jack asserts, "the dead have a presence" in life in us and through us and "perhaps we are what they dream" (Delillo 40). Although Jack and Babette openly debate this macabre topic and continuously discuss the imminence of their deaths, each one of them perseveres in dissembling and masking his own extreme fear. 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" (Delillo 113).

Death, as Delillo certifies, is the primal preoccupation which unites every human being as we are all death-bound. We are all doomed to perish alone, each following his own path, fulfilling his own destiny, and suffering his own plight. Jack and Babette are, in effect, aware about this inalienable truth and they seem to be reluctant in preparing themselves for their final one-way peregrination. Hence, as the shadow of death looms indistinctly and its presence is felt intensely in their lives, they have no other option than to keep questioning the essence of death and keep pondering about what happens when a person dies. In this sense, Sarah Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen assert that “there is no knowing death, no experiencing it and then returning to write about it, no intrinsic grounds for authority in the discourse surrounding it” (qtd. in Vågnes 77). Consequently, this absence of satisfactory knowledge makes Jack and Babette catechize about the absence of a world beyond death or an afterlife and brood whether death is nothing but a uniform white noise that continues endlessly:

“What if death is nothing but sound?”

“Electrical noise.”

“You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.”

“Uniform, white.”

“Sometimes it sweeps over me,” she said. “Sometimes it insinuates itself into my mind, little by little. I try to talk to it. Not now, Death” (Delillo 114).

In the absence of metaphysical religious explanations of death due to the inexistence of religious credence and the inability of religious systems to provide the subject with undeniable conclusions, the characters of *White Noise* tend to contemplate death in a variety of alternative ways. Death is, in fact, contemplated as a never-stopping white noise, “just documents changing hands,” (4) “a swan-dive graceful, white-winged and smooth,” (10) “an inert element in the air we breathe,” (11) “a waiting period,” (21) “the end of attachment to things,” (22) and as “a wild ride through the forest” (Delillo 57). Indeed, these different conceptions of death testify that no system of explanation could, in any possible sense, alleviate the postmodern subject’s malaise and provide satisfactory answers to his existential interrogation about life and death in a post-religious world.

Significantly, Jack Gladney’s concern about death develops as the novel progresses into a mortal dread that continuously haunts his conscious as well as unconscious existence. He attempts to subdue his intense fear of death by resorting to different alternatives among which immersion in family as well as academic life, turning to technology, brooding about his existence, and attempting to kill Willie Mink. Another important strategy that Jack adopts to counteract his death fear, as Peter Boxall avers, is through seeking “immersion in the empty time of his narrative as an antidote to his fear of death” (111). Essentially, he encourages himself and others around to “enjoy these aimless days while they can” (Delillo 18) as they will uncompromisingly lead to their ultimate death. Accordingly, Delillo is affirming in this way the unadulterated truth from which there is no escape: “the aim of all life is death” (Boxall 111). Paradoxically, life, in this way, derives its essence, its plot and its significance from the finality of death itself. In this way, as Slethaug contends,

Delillo's aim "here is not only that an existential awareness of death gives life meaning; his point is rather the Freudian one that life inexorably moves toward death" (81).

While his friend Murray Siskind insists on the necessity of organizing one's life in accordance with a clear plot because for him "to plot is to live," Jack Gladney has a completely opposed opinion as he contends that organizing one's private life in accordance with a preset plan would lead to the direct encounter with what one fears most: death. Jack strongly believes that "all plots lead deathward" since, as he affirms, "we edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot" (Delillo 26). What Jack proposes here is that any attempt to escape death further intertwines the self and entangles it in labyrinthine death processes. In this way, to refrain from acting according to a clear plot is an attempt to "slow things down, to wallow in the dense layers of family life" (Boxall 112) and thereby to confound and mislead death through complete immersion in domesticity. However, this apathetic attitude further distances Jack from the essence of life and immerses him in a living death. This attempt to ward off death through plotting not to plot by following a "plotless time" represents Jack Gladney's fatal flaw as it further submerges him in the emptiness of a deathly temporality (Boxall 112). This deathly temporality is epitomized at the end of the novel by the postmodern sunsets which, as Boxall contends, proclaim the end of the world, offer a vision of the present at the point of apocalyptic extinction and depict the present as "an endless continuation, an immaterial, despatialised temporality" (112). Subsequently, the immaterial death in *White Noise* gets finally materialized by the Airborne Toxic Event which is essentially brought about by the aftereffects of technological development and caused by noxious chemical substances like Nyodene Derivative. These lethal substances dispersed in the air of the peaceful town Iron City and transformed its natural sunsets into "ruddled visionary skyscapes, tinged with dread" (Delillo 64). As Boxall asserts, although the deathliness which inhabits the present escapes our grasp and is "difficult to spot" as it "remains unnamable and unlocatable," Delillo succeeded in the best of ways in finding "deathly possibility inhabiting those very technologies that promise to eradicate death, to bring the unknown future under the control of the present" (10).

In *White Noise*, death pervades personal as well as social life and extends its influence to all facets of the characters' existence. Death even infiltrates the Gladney's recreational television watching. In this respect, the family would often gather around the TV screen attracted by mediated death and televised disaster from other parts of the world. Death, in this sense, transforms into pure spectacle and renders the whole family "totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity." As Jack Gladney avows, "every disaster made [them] which for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (28). The televisual medium, in this case, separates the Gladneys from real death and acts as a filter that allows them to experience only its safe mediated form. However, whether it is mediated or real, the shadow of death keeps hovering around the characters and affecting their quotidian experiences.

For Babette, the fear of death is a constant concern which colors her everyday experiences. Although she adamantly tells Jack that she wants to die first so that she may

not suffer from loneliness in his absence, Babette's unparalleled fear of death forces her to resort to a pharmaceutical drug called Dylar as a way to subdue her unassailable fear. She is in the depths of despair to the extent that she offers to have sexual intercourse with the Dylar project manager in order to obtain the magical pills. Dylar, the latest neuro-chemical pharmaceutical drug, is supposed to act on the person's psychological drives through its "controlled dosage" (Delillo 70). Dylar is as Babette asserts:

the benign counterpart of the Nyodene menace. Tumbling from the back of my tongue down into my stomach. The drug core dissolving, releasing benevolent chemicals into my bloodstream, flooding the fear-of-death part of my brain. The pill itself silently self-destructing in a tiny inward burst, a polymer implosion, discreet and precise and considerate (Delillo 79).

Babette, in this way, as Anne Longmuir contends, intends to counteract her deathly apprehension through a sophisticated chemical technology and her attempt "highlights the fact that, despite scientific and technological advances, man is still beset by a fundamental dread: the fear of death" (293). Dylar, in fact, instead of distancing Babette from her fear of impending death by isolating the "fear-of-death part of the brain," further immerses her in her dread by wreaking havoc in her mind and making her "confuse words with the things they referred to" (Delillo 113).

The question that Babette and Jack keep repeating and which keeps reverberating in the different parts of the text reflects the deep anxiety at the heart of the postmodern subject's existence as a whole. As Delillo clearly shows in *White Noise*, the subject in contemporary societies is surrounded by all sorts of threats: noxious "gene-piercing" chemical substances (13), "industrial wastes," (13) "chemical" spills (44), "psychopharmaceutical" drugs (70), and "radiation" (Delillo 65). As in the case of the Gladneys, contemporary subjects feel that their vital spaces are becoming endangered by many of the aftereffects of science and technology and believe that their bodies and subsequently their lives are constantly under threat which results in a ceaseless fear of impending death. What Delillo's *White Noise* proposes is that death encircles contemporary subjects from all sides. As Delillo affirms, in addition to all the hazards that exist outside home which include "toxic spill, Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokestacks, radioactive water from power plants," death dwells also inside of the American homes. In this same respect, Heinrich, Jack's son, asserts that:

The real issue is the kind of radiation that surrounds us every day. Your radio, your TV, your microwave oven, your power lines just outside the door, your radar speed-trap on the highway. For years they told us these low doses weren't dangerous.... Forget spills, fallouts, leakages. It's the things right around you in your own house that'll get you sooner or later (Delillo 100).

In a similar sense, Mark Whitaker et al. propose that the Bhopal catastrophe in India, which was brought about by a chemical leak and which killed more than 2500 people, "raised a frightening question: could it happen here?" (128). *White Noise*, in effect, conveys in a succinct way the intense fear that spread across the US after the Bhopal

tragedy took place. Crucially, Melinda Beck et al. contend that a “cloud of concern wafted through communities all across the nation in the wake of the Bhopal tragedy” because of the shocking dimension of possible risk threatening their lives. Significantly, as Melinda Beck et al. avow, the quantity of noxious chemicals in use in America is staggering:

An estimated 6,000 U. S. facilities make possibly hazardous chemicals. There are approximately 180,000 shipments by truck or rail every day in the United States of everything from nail-polish remover to nuclear weapons. More than 60,000 chemical substances are in use—and federal regulators don't even know how many pose health dangers (130).

A very similar concern about the various potential risks invading contemporary society is clearly portrayed in Delillo's *White Noise*. This state of permanent peril is internalized by all the characters and results in an intense fear of impending death. Significantly, Death in Delillo's novel is technologically induced, scientifically concocted and essentially self-incurred by human beings. It is the result of the toxic spill caused by the derailment of a tanker carrying lethal chemical substances which spread out over the town and jeopardized the lives of the citizens in the peaceful Iron City.

After being exposed to toxic fumes and being contaminated by the toxic substances, Jack and his family became growingly concerned about their personal safety and mostly overwhelmed by an intense fear of death. The lethal substance Nyodene D. seeped unnoticed into Jack's body and “death has entered” (Delillo 55). It penetrated the pores of his skin unremarked and proclaimed Jack as “dying and yet separate from the dying” (55), a death “too deep to be glimpsed” (76) yet very imminent. Jack's imminent death is chemically induced and graphically rendered through the simulated evacuation agent's computer scan. It is rendered graphically, televised and mediated through graphics, data and “computerized dots that registered” his “life and death” (54) making him “tentatively scheduled to die” (75) a death that remains unremittingly in process and continuously “in the works” (Delillo 75).

Jack Gladney's fear of death, in a sense, mirrors Don Delillo's own consideration of death as “something that is *almost* there” always in process inextricably interwoven into the texture of everyday domestic life, always hovering around and always seeping “beneath the surface of our perceptions” (Decurtis 119). In fact, Delillo expresses deep anxiety in relation to some preeminent perils threatening to wipe out human presence altogether. He embeds the fear of death in his fiction as a reaction to the different dangers surrounding the subject in contemporary societies. From the threat of nuclear war, to the spread of toxic substances and fumes, the subject finds himself caught in an inextricable web of rhizomic dangers that defy his presence and threaten to annul his existence.

These continuous threats keep the subject wavering in an intermediate state of crisis between life and death not knowing where exactly to situate himself, among the living or maybe among the dead. Delillo, in this sense, depicts a postmodern world in which the subject hardly finds any certainties to attach himself to as “the borders of reality are so difficult to define” (Slethaug 63). Accordingly, as Stephen Burn contends, “in DeLillo's

postmodern world it is the vacuum left by religion that drives his characters to fill the void with some substitute body of meaning” (181). In this kind of world which is dominated by consumerism, the media and all types of technologies, including chemical technology, life becomes ephemeral and death becomes extensively artificial. In this respect, Jack asserts: “there’s something artificial about my death, it’s shallow, unfulfilling. I don’t belong to the earth or sky. They ought to carve an aerosol can on my tombstone” (Delillo 103).

Ultimately, Jack and his wife Babette seem to unwillingly accept their plunge towards death in complete passivity and helplessness. The kind of death they seem to dread most, is, by no means a natural, God-given plight but, instead, an artificial man-made calamity. In fact Jack Gladney asserts that the death approaching him and his family is “made in the laboratory, defined and measurable” (Delillo 74). Paradoxically, instead of assuaging Jack’s pain and alleviating his death throes, science and chemical technology are leading Jack into his most dreaded demise.

### **3. Jack Gladney's journey from fear to recognition:**

Jack Gladney, as is the case of many contemporary subjects, seems to find great difficulty integrating himself into his immediate social environment, reconciling himself with the world around and subduing his deep existential malaise. In effect, he would wake up many a time awe-struck contemplating the nature of death and the way it approaches human souls: “is this what it’s like, abrupt, peremptory? Shouldn’t death, I thought, be a swan dive, graceful, White-winged and smooth, leaving the surface undisturbed?” (Delillo 12). He would some other times wake up “in the grip of a death sweat. Defenseless against [his] own racking fears. A pause at the center of [his] being” (22). In another instance, Jack would mistake Babette’s father Dickey, who pays an unanticipated call on Babette and Jack in their house in the early morning when they are still asleep, for death or “death’s errand-runner” presaging his “journey out” (89). This experience submerges Jack in an escalating fear of death which grows frantically and unrestrainedly beyond any stable sense: “I was scared to the marrow. I was cold and hot, dry and wet, myself and someone else. The fist clenched in my chest” (89).

Jack endeavors to outwit this constant fear of impending death by working in the department of Hitler studies and through simulating the image of Hitler both visually and viscerally. Hitler, in fact, gave Jack Gladney “something to grow into and develop toward” (Delillo 11). Accordingly, Jack supplements his name with two invented initials (A. K.) and tries to “grow out into Hitler” (11) by gaining more weight, developing “massiveness” and wearing “glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses” (11). His attempt to counteract death by simulating the symbol of atrocious death, is as Delillo asserts in his interview with Decurtis, “a perverse form of protection” (119). Hitler, in fact, caused so much damage to humanity that Jack believes he could exploit such a deathly reputation as a kind of camouflage and “disappear inside the vastness, the monstrosity of Hitler himself” (119) to outmaneuver his fear. His fear is so profound that he considers Hitler “larger than life” as well as “larger than death itself” (Delillo 105). Murray Siskind best expresses Jack’s intentions by stating that:



"It's totally obvious. You wanted to be helped and sheltered. The overwhelming horror would leave no room for your own death. 'Submerge me,' you said. 'Absorb my fear.' On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works. On another level you wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength (Delillo 105).

As Murray Siskind avers, although Jack's fear of death is so intense, hiding in the shadow of Hitler seems to be just an abortive attempt to ward death off. Since "there's no escape from death" (105), as he clearly states, the individual has only to learn how to "repress," to "disguise," to "exclude," and to "bury" his trepidation (105). Thus, in order to "survive in the universe", the subject has to seek refuge in "repression, compromise and disguise" (105). Murray Siskind attempts to appease Jack Gladney's fears of death by suggesting that he should relinquish his ties with material life through adopting the Tibetan way of contemplating death. He, in fact, urges Jack to consider death a gateway towards rebirth and towards a new life: "death is a waiting period, basically. Soon a fresh womb will receive the soul. In the meantime the soul restores to itself some of the divinity lost at birth" (Delillo 18). In this primeval Tibetan way, the restoration of the soul and its preparation for its passage between life and death does not take place through the means of religious rites and metaphysical practices but essentially through yielding to nature's course, accepting death the way it comes and renouncing any "attachment to things" (18). Technology would, according to Murray Siskind, provide Jack with another way to neutralize his fear of impending death: "you could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out ... it's what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies" (104). The continuous development of modern technology, according to Murray, could attenuate and thereby delay the effects of approaching death through its various techniques and systems: "new devices, new techniques every day. Lasers, masers, ultrasound" (Delillo 104). Hence, technology, as Murray contends, saves lives and prolongs them as it "provides new organs for those that wear out" (104). It, ultimately, has the ability to introduce considerable alterations into the essence of death in contemporary societies.

As Murray proposes, technology seems to have a double role. On the one hand, it has the potential to free the subject from death; while, on the other hand, it has the ability to further immerse him in his deathly condition. Technology as Murray contends, "creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand" and "threatens universal extinction on the other" as it is "lust removed from nature" (104). As Gregory Salyer avows, whether technology is "lust removed from nature, meaning removed from experience" or "the sacred expelled from the profane" doesn't seem to make much difference as "all of these ideas are connected and all move toward the same end, which is death" (48). Technology is, as Gladney affirms, a "seeping falsehearted death" (Delillo 13) that further complicates the subject's life and reduces it to a state of limbo from which there seems to be no viable escape. Therefore, technology gets discarded by Jack and is considered as an ineffective way to restrain his dread.

Another option for Jack would be, according to Murray Siskind, to believe in life beyond death, the rebirth of the soul and the resurrection of the dead as he tells Jack:

“Seriously, you can find a great deal of long-range solace in the idea of an afterlife” (Delillo 104). This religious interpretation of death and the belief in the existence of an afterlife gets also repudiated by Jack who considers it a mere “self-delusion” (104) in the absence of deep religious credence. Surprisingly, Murray Siskind, from his side, considers the way out of this vicious circle of death to be through consumer culture and its many supermarkets which seem to provide him with certain transcendental and uplifting meanings and in which “everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material.” The supermarket, as he proposes, takes over the role of religious systems and “recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it’s a gateway or pathway” which is “full of psychic data” (Delillo18). The supermarket furnishes the “transitional state between death and rebirth” (18) with waves, radiation, voices, sounds, codes and “ceremonial phrases” that make up “the layers of unspeakability” which give this experience it’s very definition (18).

None of the different proposals Murray suggests seems possibly able to help Jack to get rid of his persistent and unassailable death fear. Only experiencing a death itself would possibly be able to decimate this fear. In this regard, Murray Siskind informs Jack that people are divided into two broad categories in the way they approach death. They are either “killers” or simply “diers.” He asserts that “most of us are diers. We don’t have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die” (106). Murray encourages Jack to dare and defy death by inflicting it on others and thereby enter in “direct confrontation” with his feebleness: “if he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up” (Delillo 106). While Murray contemplates death in purely theoretical and speculative terms and considers it, like violence, as a “form of rebirth” (106), Jack, as a response to Murray’s advice and blinded by his “male rage,” (107) goes to greater lengths with his questioning and walks on the edge of death. He, in fact, enacts a mock-epic shoot-out with Willie Mink to take revenge for his promiscuous affair with Babette. Through this act of murder, as Boxall contends, Jack Gladney intends not only to inflict pain and death on the male who had a sexual relationship with his wife and thereby to prove “his sexual power,” but also, “like a kind of 1980s Frankenstein, to kill death itself, to pit Eros against Thanatos” (Boxall 127).

However, this encounter with real death is a far cry from providing jack with satisfaction and contentment as it leads only to “disappointment and shock” (Delillo 114). Jack’s closeness to real death and his approach to an indiscernible anchorless liminal space separating the condition of the living and the state of the dead and the trauma it caused resuscitate his feelings and restore his humane attitude: “my humanity soared” (114). Surprisingly, he saves Willie Mink from death by taking him to a hospital in a fit of “epic pity and compassion” (115) and in a moment of recognition and self-awareness. Although death gets reified in Willie Mink, Jack remains unable to subdue it and incapable of gaining control over it at least at the symbolic level.

Ultimately, the death he faced through the shout-out scene is, this time, neither the product of his fertile imagination nor simply a mediated TV representation. The violence

and hazard he went through are shockingly real and the pain caused by the “bullet hole” in his wrist (Delillo 114) is excruciatingly authentic. This unparalleled experience limited Jack’s distance with his most feared end and exposed to him the demarcation line that delimits the boundaries between the two worlds: the world of the living and the most dreaded world of the dead. It also revealed to Jack the difference which exists at the heart of his ceaseless contention with Murray Siskind about their common plight: death. All along the novel, Jack Gladney's intensifying fear of death anesthetized him, numbed him and ultimately deprived him of his ability to experience life in its fullness and in its overwhelming intensity. Only at the end of the novel that Jack becomes able to redeem his senses after getting involved in a shoot-out scene with Willie Mink, the delirious scientist who defiled his wife in return for the Dylar pills. Significantly, he describes this epiphanic experience in the following way: “with the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person. The old quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy” (Delillo 114). This thrilling act of violence takes Jack out of the common and the usual and stimulates him to feel grand and majestic:

Something large and grand and scenic. Is it better to commit evil and attempt to balance it with an exalted act than to live a resolutely neutral life? I know I felt virtuous, I felt blood-stained and stately, dragging the badly wounded man through the dark and empty street (Delillo 114).

Ultimately, Willie Mink’s approach to tangible death, his foretaste of doom and the sight of real blood gushing out of open bullet wounds stimulate Jack to break free from the chains of his detachment and to reconnect with his previous humane self. In this very respect, his confrontation with real death through the redemptive violence he undertook made him experience himself anew, restore and reestablish his sense of self and regain confidence in life as an undisputable possibility and as a never-ending mystery. Death, in this sense, paradoxically, opens up life for Jack on endless undiscovered possibilities yet to come and whispers to him many of its undisclosed mysteries. Jack eventually rediscovers himself anew as a real subject facing real death and reclaims his jeopardized self. Only then would Jack Gladney recall Winnie Richard’s conjecture about death and start believing in it. Significantly, Winnie reflects Don Delillo’s own view of death as an essential element in the life of every human being as it gives life its meaning and grants it its signification. Life, as she contends, would be both meaningless and worthless in the absence of death:

I think it is a mistake to lose once sense of death, even one’s fear of death. Isn’t death the boundary we need? Doesn’t it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit (Delillo 85).

In this way, as Delillo puts it, in his search for redemption, the subject needs to reconcile himself with the fear of death in order to be able to ease life’s tensions and contemplate its secrets. Hence, the subject must make recourse to action, even if it is of an insignificant nature, in order to counterpoise the power of death and to make life prevail. Death should

also be contemplated as the boundary that reanimates the subject whenever he loses interest in life and “unless the inevitability of death is recognized and accepted, life itself is no more than a slow death” (Slethaug 81). Death ultimately gives shape to a precedently shapeless life and establishes pattern in an otherwise chaotic existence.

#### 4. Conclusion:

In *White Noise*, Delillo plays on the dialogic dichotomy between the characters desire for life and their fixated invocation of death in order to tighten the fabric of his prose and give more solidity and richness to the texture of his novel. By juxtaposing the opposed leitmotifs of life and death, Delillo tightens the structure of the text and fills it with a very dense web of rhizomic meanings. Death in *White Noise* is an overarching signifier that binds the elements of the text together and dominates the lives of all the characters. It is a primal preoccupation which paradoxically both instigates the characters actions and restrains them from any significant action. Although each character tries to approach his preoccupation with death in a different way from all the others, they all share this essential dread and keep being haunted and absorbed by it. Only at the end of the novel that Delillo allows his lead character Jack Gladney to take his destiny in his own hands, to face his racking fear, to regain confidence in life as a wide range of possibilities and to accept death as a necessary evil. Ultimately, the fear of death, as Don Delillo certifies all along the novel, is inextricably interwoven into the subject’s existence and cannot be dissociated from it. Therefore, the subject must learn how to accept the fear of death and to coexist with it before experiencing actual death. Death, as Delillo depicts it, infiltrates all facets of human life and keeps being the obscure human enemy. Ultimately, death never dies as it is always in process and endlessly in the works.

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