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White Noise

President Bush: I was hoping the Prime Minister would want to come to Graceland . . . This visit here shows that not only am I personally fond of the Prime Minister, but the ties between our peoples are very strong, as well.
Prime Minister Koizumi: There's Elvis song: To Dream Impossible. (Singing Elvis song.) (Laughter.) My dream came true . . . Thank you very much for treating me nice, the Elvis song. (Singing Elvis song.) Thank you.¹

The (postmodern) way we live now

The pilgrimage to Graceland that capped Junichio Koizumi's 2006 visit to the United States testified to more than just a mutual appreciation of rockabilly's favorite son, the outfitting of Air Force One with Elvis DVDs, an all-Elvis public address system, and grilled peanut butter and banana sandwiches notwithstanding. According to the *New York Times*, in fact, the trip to Graceland was "partly a reward" to the Japanese prime minister for supporting the US president on Iraq and, more recently, for reopening Japan's markets to US beef after a ban related to concerns over mad cow disease.² More than just a result of George Bush's desire to "treat" Koizumi "nice," then, the pilgrimage to Graceland proved that those ties between the USA and Japan that Bush found "very strong" were as much political and economic as they were (pop) cultural. This inextricable link between politics, the economy, and culture attests to the way we live now, to borrow the title of an Anthony Trollope novel. Just how that "we" has come to be constituted and whether there remain any grounds for recovering an "I" of individual subjectivity in such a climate are issues at the heart of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). They inform not only the acts of DeLillo's protagonist, a college professor forced to realize that he is just every man in any city, but also the task faced by DeLillo himself, namely, finding a critical position from which to delineate a cultural phenomenon without being wholly absorbed by it.

Unlike Trollope's 1875 work, which was inspired by "the commercial profligacy" of the late nineteenth century,³ DeLillo's 1985 work was inspired by the profligate consumption of the late twentieth century – a time in which the sun's "corolla" is appropriated to denote a Japanese car; "[s]upranational" product names are computer-generated so as to be "universally pronounceable" (WN 233, 155); and Elvis Presley and Adolf Hitler, icons free of their historical contexts, are impressed into academic service in exchange for high tuition payments. These, of course, are some of the very features that Fredric Jameson cites in his characterization of the postmodern age, an era he defines not only with respect to specific traits – a new kind of depthlessness, a weakening of historicity, the commodification of objects and humans alike – but also as the result of two particular historical conditions: the emergence of a globalized economy in which power has shifted from nation-states to huge conglomerates, and the penetration of capital into those enclaves – notably nature and the unconscious – that formerly had resisted economic colonization. "[G]lobal, yet American," as Jameson states, postmodern culture originates as "the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world" but eventuates as a universal "dominant" so that even aesthetic production – of any kind and any place – has now become a form of commodity production.⁴

Central to the maintenance of that universal dominant is the role played by new technology, particularly new electronic media. According to Jameson, in a decentered world of multinational capitalism, which strains the human capacity of people to locate themselves, it is technology that "seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp."⁵ Indeed, as Guy Debord asserts, it is technology, by way of the mass media, that seems to "cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be *seen*," and technology, by way of the media spectacle, that seems to restore a sense of social consolidation to similarly plugged-in viewers.⁶ The operative word being "seems." For the very vehicle that enables us to apprehend the world through visual images ends up replacing the history of that world with a set of consumable images, representations divorced from their referents and subject to the political whims of their manufacturer. As Debord thus recognizes, "The society that brings the spectacle into being does not dominate . . . solely through the exercise of economic hegemony. It also dominates . . . in its capacity as *the society of the spectacle*."⁷ Or, as DeLillo bluntly puts it in *Underworld* (1997), "Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world" (U 530).

Jean Baudrillard, the French sociologist most connected with the triumph of the simulacrum, the copy without an original, to which this loss of the real leads, has described the consequences of such an erasure: "When the real is

no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning.”⁸ And Jack Gladney, the narrator of *White Noise* and a character whose vocabulary is punctuated by references to God and the human soul, is a compendium of nostalgic longings. Yearning for “pre-cancerous times” (WN 275), he chooses to live in Blacksmith, a town “not smack in the path of history and its contaminations” (WN 85), and waxes eloquent over illnesses – croup, grippe, whooping cough – to which a medical facility named Autumn Harvest Farms should rightfully be devoted. Looking for “moral rigor” in an age of moral relativism, he drives to a village “Old Burying Ground,” where headstones adorned with “great strong simple names” testify to individual worth in an age of mass destruction (WN 97). Searching for lost origins in an era filled with imitations ad infinitum, he variously invokes pueblo civilizations, Norse legends, Roman ruins, and protean gods as evidence of the “epic” qualities that still reside in the events that surround him (WN 127, 257, 317).

Not surprisingly, the foundational myth to which Jack most frequently returns in an age of multinational capitalism is that of American nationhood. Hence the event that opens his narration, the annual return of students to the college at which he teaches, is transformed by him into an ode to Manifest Destiny, with station wagons evoking covered wagons on their journey through the west campus, and saddles, sleeping bags, and bows and arrows taking pride of place among the students’ belongings. This ode to nineteenth-century expansion, in turn, evokes an earlier seventeenth-century expansion, since the “College-on-the-Hill” in which students are joined by “the language of economic class” (WN 41) is deliberately framed by DeLillo to recall the theocratic “Citty vpon a Hill” in which spiritual election was a function of its Puritan settlers’ visible economic prosperity.⁹ As such, the spectacle that Jack witnesses each September provides what all rituals that recall a common descent grant: a sense of “communal recognition” (WN 3), reassuring participants that “they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation” (WN 4).

A later spectacle to which people also respond with “a sense of awe that bordered on the religious” (WN 127) occurs in the aftermath of a chemical spill in Blacksmith that the media terms “[t]he airborne toxic event” (WN 117) and provides the most glaring repudiation of Jack’s Americanist longings. Jack compares the panicked flight of cars to “wagon trains converging on the Santa Fe Trail” (WN 159). But the airborne toxic event is just one instance of a repudiation of American myths that has been going on since the book’s beginning. When Jack unexpectedly runs into Tweedy Browner, one of his ex-wives, at an airport arrivals area, he notices a “sense of Protestant disrepair” that her WASP uniform of knee socks and penny loafers cannot disguise, further proof of that patriarchal decline already displayed by the

male Browners once “the line began to pale, producing a series of aesthetes and incompetents” (WN 86). When waiting for their daughter Bee to disembark at a different terminal, he hears of passengers in a near-airplane crash who, no longer cushioned by economic privilege, have come scrambling from their high-priced seats into the tourist section because sitting in first class would mean being the first to strike the ground (WN 92). When Jack, then, later claims immunity from the airborne toxic event, stating that “[s]ociety is set up in such a way that it’s the poor and the uneducated” who suffer disasters and not the middle class and intellectually gifted (WN 114) – a reprise, in effect, of that “Modell of Christian Charity” by which John Winthrop defended class differences as providentially ordained (“some must be rich some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subieccion”) ¹⁰ – he misses the point of all his earlier encounters. He presumes that “[t]hese things don’t happen in places like Blacksmith” but only in places with “mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county” (WN 114, 117) even though the airborne toxic event exposes how porous all borders – territorial, national, and, as Jack’s exposure to Nyodene D. will force him to recognize, epithelial – now are in the postmodern world that he inhabits.

Crowd control

Shorn of all sense of national community, the characters in *White Noise* can only locate themselves collectively within the crowd and by way of those places that facilitate congregation: the evacuation center provides a “common identity” (WN 129), a tourist attraction promotes “collective perception” (WN 12), the supermarket offers “spiritual consensus” (WN 18). Most of these places, significantly, are not portrayed as being peculiarly American in any way – quite the contrary. Stocked with exotic products from twenty countries and staffed by people speaking languages that Jack cannot “identify much less understand” (WN 40), the supermarket resembles a “Persian bazaar or boom town on the Tigris” more than a lowly A & P (WN 169). This is as it should be since the human need to which crowds minister is portrayed as being both transglobal and transhistorical in nature, as DeLillo suggests when Jack, disregarding the acts of mass extermination by which Nazi Germany is usually distinguished, reveals the defining quality of the mass assemblies on which he places “special emphasis” when teaching his Hitler studies students (WN 25):

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, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd. (WN 73)

What distinguishes the crowds in the postmodern world of *White Noise*, however, is the fact that the sense of union they instill no longer depends on physical proximity. The Friday night gatherings with Chinese take-out that join Jack and his wife Babette's children from various marriages into a blended whole also join the resultant Gladney "family" to families all over the country by way of the television shows they watch while eating. The ATM transactions that Jack uses to check his personal holdings link him to people all over the world by way of a "mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city" (WN 46). And linked by technology in this manner, interacting with what DeLillo terms the "system," it is no wonder that Jack feels that his life is "blessed" by the automated teller machine. So much has it "authenticated and confirmed" his "balance" – both financial and emotional – that he can note in passing a "deranged person" who is "escorted from the bank by two armed guards" with nary a pause, having already placed his faith in a deitific system whose very invisibility – which is to say, its *unlocatable* site – has "made it all the more impressive" (WN 46).

And all the more dangerous. For the ATM system is just one of many systems in the novel through which people commune by way of screens – movie, television, computer – that collectively produce a "new and original historical situation," according to Jameson, in which "we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach."¹¹ The "movie-mad, trivia-crazed" instructors who make up the College-on-the-Hill American environments department, men for whom "the natural language of the culture" (WN 9) has replaced Jack's early Americanist "language of economic class," revel in this situation. When these men quiz each other about the historical event that has most defined their generation, they do not invoke the death of a president but the death of a movie star: "Where were you when James Dean died?" (WN 68). The difference between the two is less marked than one might think when the president whose death gives shape to their question, John F. Kennedy, was so photogenic as to resemble a "great box-office actor," as Norman Mailer recognized as early as 1960.¹² Likewise, when these men gauge the past against which their rites of passage into adulthood (such as the brushing of teeth with fingers!) have taken place, they opt for "seminal events" like Woodstock, Altamont, and Monterey (WN 67) – not just rock concerts but rock concerts made into movies. Yet with each screen

transposition (from actuality to movie to television broadcast) and repetition further distancing viewers from reality, reality becomes defined to the degree that it exists within the contours of a photographic frame. Catastrophes in India typically go unrecorded, so they might as well not have happened (WN 66). The near-airplane crash occurs over a city that has no media, so its passengers suffer their terrors “for nothing” (WN 92). And with each screen transposition further aestheticizing reality, reality becomes increasingly drained of meaning to the same degree. Jack, who is petrified of dying, can base his entire professional career on the creation of a Hitler studies program because the genocidal figure around whom he has “evolved an entire system” (WN 12) is one whose “solid” and “dependable” nature stems from the fact that, as the subject of countless media adaptations, “[w]e couldn’t have television without him” (WN 89, 63). He can teach a course in Advanced Nazism because the class meets in a campus cinema and the footage he shows in it – “propaganda films, scenes shot at party congresses, outtakes from mystical epics featuring parades of gymnasts and mountaineers” (WN 25), an homage, in effect, to Leni Riefenstahl – has been edited down by him to form an eighty-minute documentary, what one might call “Hitler Lite.”

The importance of this last detail cannot be underestimated in any reading of DeLillo’s text for, as Susan Sontag has pointed out, the staging of the 1934 National Socialist Party Congress that is the subject of Riefenstahl’s most famous work, *Triumph of the Will*, was partly determined with the making of a documentary film in mind. More than a mere transposition of history into images, then, the “radical transformation of reality” to which Riefenstahl’s film, in Sontag’s view, attests is one in which “the document (the image) not only is the record of reality but is one reason for which the reality has been constructed, and must eventually supersede it.”¹³ In DeLillo’s book, of course, these coming attractions have already arrived: SIMUVAC mounts practice evacuations by using real evacuations as models (WN 139) and Jack Gladney creates the persona of J. A. K. Gladney, thus becoming “the false character that follows the name around” (WN 17). Lost in a funhouse of mirroring and seemingly infinite copies, in which it becomes impossible to distinguish between a true and false déjà vu, Jack can legitimately follow the question of “[w]hich was worse, the real condition or the self-created one” with a second query: “and did it matter?” (WN 126).

Yes, it does, DeLillo might answer, given the political ramifications to which such confusion leads. Nowhere are those consequences better suggested than in the scene in which Jack and a visiting colleague journey to “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA.” Jack the nostalgist is noticeably silent throughout the scene, as befits someone who looks at fifty-year-old photographs and finds proof that his churchgoing forebears were

“skeptical of something in the nature of the box camera” (WN 30). Fellow academic Murray Jay Siskind, however, knows better. Watching other people taking pictures of the barn, he correctly concludes that “[n]o one sees the barn,” because “[o]nce you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (WN 12). And not just the five signs that Jack and Murray count on their way to the tourist attraction or the myriad postcards available to visitors at a booth located on the site. For the cowpaths, rolling fields, and white fences that precede the men’s arrival at the site – the “signs” that *we*, in the most literal sense of the word, “read” – also offer us the promise of a preindustrial and, therefore, authentic past. That DeLillo refuses to describe the barn itself and thus denies that myth of origins is moot. The “we” who, as Murray states, “can’t get outside the aura” (WN 13), and, in the case of the tourists, even “reinforce the aura” by way of their own photographic equipment, extends to all of us who, in “agree[ing] to be part of a collective perception,” acquiesce to “a kind of spiritual surrender” (WN 12).

Except that we don’t, at least no more consciously than the characters in *White Noise* consciously agree to the manner in which they delineate disaster. Unlike the victims of the first mushroom cloud, whose use of the word “*pikadan*” or “flash-boom” showed a lack of words to describe the bomb that was dropped on them at Hiroshima, the people in *White Noise* have an image arsenal at hand that they use to depict the “roiling bloated slug-shaped mass” lit by spotlights and flanked by helicopters that is the toxic cloud threatening them (WN 157) – the imagery of Japanese monster movies, themselves responses to the fears generated by nuclear radiation. Likewise, the passengers in the near-airplane crash have a set of film clips – from *Airport* to *Airplane!* – contained within their brains that they can use to describe themselves plummeting to earth as part of “a silver gleaming death machine” (WN 90), and they can envision their corpses “in some smoking field, strewn about in the grisly attitudes of death” because the experience has already been preprocessed for them as “[f]our miles of prime-time terror” (WN 90, 92). Such cannibalization of the mind by the media can be seen as an inevitable consequence of the process of mechanical reproduction that Walter Benjamin outlined seventy years ago. For the technological processes that liberated art from its basis in ritual and caused a withering of what he termed its religious “aura” ended in an increased exhibition of mass-produced art and the reconstitution of art’s cult values by consumers who “absorb” art while in a state of “distraction.” It was this form of reception that enabled mass-produced art to serve as a kind of “covert control,” which, in Benjamin’s formulation, would eventually lead to fascism.¹⁴

Living in a world of “shifting facts and attitudes” that one day “just started appearing” (WN 171) – a point confirmed by the hilarious data debates in

which the Gladneys engage (“What is it that camels store in their humps?”; “What are the three kinds of rock?”; “How cold is space?” [WN 81, 176, 233]) – the characters in *White Noise* are quite willing to place themselves under the control of others. As Babette recognizes, “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” (WN 171–2). It is a belief in the reassurance that rules provide, in fact, that underlies the pedagogical approach of all those in the book who instruct others, not only to affirm the importance of their subjects but ultimately to establish their own presence. Babette teaches posture to old people who think they can avoid death “by following rules of good grooming” (WN 27). Murray secures Elvis’s “place in legend” by reminding students of the terms of the rock star “contract” that the self-destructive King (of Excess) “fulfilled” to the letter (WN 72). Jack, made “untouchable” by the “aura” that his own teaching generates, exits classrooms like Moses, as the crowds who gather around him part like the Red Sea (WN 74). *Heil Gladney!*

Screens, systems, and souls

Yet the producer of the kind of “distraction” that Benjamin found necessary for fascism to thrive and the main source of authority in DeLillo’s text is not a person, but a thing: television. Always on and hence omnipresent, television provides the one “custom” and “rule” that the Gladneys ritually observe on Friday evenings when they band together in front of the set, worshipfully “silent,” “totally absorbed,” and “attentive to our duty” (WN 64). And not only the Gladneys, since television – in contrast to those tabloids that DeLillo portrays as devotional tracts – does not demand literacy as a prerequisite for congregation. As Jack’s German teacher, Howard Dunlop, whom a television weather report saves from despair after his mother’s death, observes, “Everyone notices the weather” (WN 55). All-knowing, television dispenses data – concerning everything from an artificial flipper attached by Florida surgeons (WN 29) to a stomach consistent with a creature’s leafy diet (WN 95) to a quick and attractive lemon garnish for seafood (WN 178) to a world war fought over salt (WN 226) – that the Gladneys do not dispute, the inane nature of the soundbytes notwithstanding. Anthropomorphized by Jack in the early sections of the book in which he, like any good disciple, just reiterates what the “TV said,”¹⁵ television is steadily disembodied by Jack over the course of the book to the degree that Nyodene D. exposure increases his fears of death. Its transformation into an invisible “voice at the end of the bed” (WN 178) and “voice next door” (WN 239) reaches its deitific apotheosis when Jack refers to it as simply “[t]he voice upstairs” (WN 226, 257).

The commandments issued by this postmodern god are easy to follow, having been reduced to one: “Consume or die,” as DeLillo writes in *Underworld* (U 287). It is consuming, as Mark Osteen points out, that “attaches persons to the things whose reproducibility betokens immortality.”¹⁶ Hence television, conceived in DeLillo’s first novel, *Americana* (1971), as an “electronic form of packaging” in which commercials are interrupted by programs (A 270), is ascribed in *White Noise* the same “sealed off” and “timeless” qualities as the supermarket (WN 38, 51, 104). Hence the triadic listings of products – “Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex” (WN 52), “Krylon, Rust-Oleum, Red Devil” (WN 159), “Clorets, Velamints, Freedent” (WN 229) – that Jack verbally fingers like a set of rosary beads. At the same time, *White Noise* also signals the change that an intervening decade and a half has wrought in DeLillo’s sensibility. In *Americana*, as its title suggests, the advertising impulse to which television ministers is portrayed as a response to the arrival of the first consumer aboard the *Mayflower* (A 271). The opening pages of *Underworld*, set in 1951, affirm the point in attributing to the industry an explicitly Americanist slant: “In a country that’s in a hurry to make the future, the names attached to the products are an enduring reassurance,” names like Johnson & Johnson, Bristol-Myers, and Quaker State serving as “the venerated emblems of the burgeoning economy, easier to identify than the names of battlefields or dead presidents” (U 39). In the period of *White Noise*, by contrast, it is no longer the indigenous “Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it” that serves, in DeLillo’s yoking of religion and retail, as the “sacred formula” that television dispenses, as Murray claims (WN 51), but “Toyota Celica,” a “language not quite of this world” (certainly not the American world) that forms the “ecstatic chant” uttered by Jack’s daughter Steffie while sleeping in the evacuation center (WN 154–5). And Dylar, the product that lends its name to the largest part of DeLillo’s book and the drug alleged, in television argot, to “speed relief” to the fear-of-death part of the human brain (WN 200), is developed by a research group that is funded by a “multinational giant” (WN 299).

That being said, the violence that can erupt “as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment,”¹⁷ what DeLillo terms “funny violence” (A 364), is typically portrayed by DeLillo as a phenomenon specific to America. Television frustrates the poverty-stricken Lee Oswald in *Libra* (1988) because the life of consumer fulfillment it promises is repudiated by the life in small rooms that he and his mother have been forced to live, and the upshot (pun intended) is the purchase of two mail-order firearms. It is thus to Jack’s credit in *White Noise* that he is well aware that the “sense of well-being, the security and contentment” that stuffed supermarket

bags afford his securely middle-class family is “a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less” (WN 20). What he does not realize is that the “fullness of being” – in the most literal sense of the term – that comes from consumption offers no real protection to anyone. Dimitrios Cotsakis, Murray’s rival in the internecine Elvis wars and an “enormous man” of 300 pounds, is “lost without a trace” off Malibu (WN 169). Orest Mercator, a “big” boy training to break the world record for sitting in a cage full of poisonous snakes (WN 181), is bitten within the first four minutes. Jack, a male of “substantial height, big hands, big feet” (WN 17), becomes a victim of toxic waste after only two and a half minutes of exposure; when he frantically searches the trash compactor for Dylar, the one consumer item he thinks might help him – if only psychologically – all he finds are banana skins, tampons, ear swabs, and flip-top rings, evidence of “the dark underside of consumer consciousness” (WN 259).

This discovery, however, is not nearly as unsettling as what Jack is forced to contemplate in the three scenes in which he goes to get himself medically checked after that toxic exposure, scenes that reveal to him the fraudulent nature of all those collective systems in which he has tried to subsume his individual fears. Still equating information with power, he first goes to a SIMUVAC technician at the evacuation center, whom Jack wants “on my side” because “[h]e had access to data” (WN 139). But when he later visits his doctor who, in turn, sends him to Autumn Harvest Farms for further consultation, Jack is told by a technician who reminds him “of the boys at the supermarket” that “[k]nowledge changes every day” and the data are “conflicting” (WN 277, 280). Still presuming a single connection to exist between signs and what they signify, he expects that the bracketed numbers and pulsing stars that appear on screen in response to his medical history will have a one-to-one correlation with a specific medical condition. But he later finds out that those signs transmitted by “the whole system” (WN 141) can mean a high level of potassium or trace amounts of Nyodene D., a “situation” or a “nebulous mass” (WN 138, 280), “nothing” or “a very great deal” (WN 260). And still thinking that he can “neutralize events” by turning them into pictures (WN 140), much like those climatic disasters occurring elsewhere that he watches on television, he undergoes a battery of tests – brain-graphing, scanning, imaging – that turn *him* into a televised picture, only to discover that he has no directorial control over what the screens broadcast. Instead of the “impassive man, someone in line at a hardware store waiting for the girl at the register to ring up his heavy-duty rope” (WN 140), a man safe in the act of consumption, who stars in the teleplay that Jack envisions, the computer displays a picture of someone being consumed from the inside, someone whom death has unquestionably “entered” (WN 141).

Equally unsettling is the fact that the one drug that might help Jack cope with that condition is described as a “drug delivery system” that interacts with the human brain conceived as a “system of intercommunication” (WN 187, 189). Jack, a modernist in postmodernist clothing, responds to this prospect with outrage. Not only does it confirm the brain theories of his son Heinrich, who does not know “what’s you as a person and what’s some neuron that just happens to fire or just happens to misfire” (WN 46), it consigns to the dustbin “a whole tradition of human failings” (WN 200) in which man exists *a priori* to society, history, and language that can be traced at least as far back as Aristotle. “We can see more deeply, more accurately,” says the Autumn Harvest Farms technician when explaining to Jack the advantages that state-of-the-art equipment affords (WN 277). Yet the “more accurate” fact that making Jack’s body “transparent” via imaging block may reveal is that there is no “deep” quality in Jack – or anyone else for that matter – to see (WN 276). This, of course, is exactly what Jack has briefly considered after seeing Babette, another person of girth, “tall and fairly ample” (WN 5), reduced to a two-dimensional, black-and-white facsimile by the cable network that televises her posture class: “If she was not dead, was I?” (WN 104). But it is not until his own “death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak,” complete with a *TV Guide* printout of his body, that Jack can fully appreciate the horror that comes from viewing a person as “the sum total of [his or her] data” (WN 142, 141). Thinking that his talk with the Autumn Farms technician will constitute the “human part” of his examination (WN 276–7), Jack is forced to recognize that there may not be a “human” part of himself available to discuss.

The death to which DeLillo alludes in these scenes, and the kind of extinction with which he is most concerned, is not, then, the death of the body. After all, as Jack’s doctor reminds him, when it comes to the death of the body, “you are all permanent patients, like it or not” (WN 260). Rather, DeLillo’s main concern is with the “second kind of death” to which the burning of the Blacksmith asylum for the insane testifies (WN 240). The “synthetic” quality that Jack ascribes to this form of death literally derives from the odor of acrid matter emanating from the building – perhaps polystyrene, perhaps a dozen other manmade substances, all kin to the “gene-piercing” ones perhaps responsible for Heinrich’s receding hairline (WN 22) and the asbestos and chlorine perhaps to blame for grade school children’s headaches (WN 35). The “unnatural” element that causes the crowds gathered at the site to feel “betrayed” (WN 240), however, stems from the fire’s destruction of an institution founded upon a depth-model of human subjectivity – “How deep a thing was madness” (WN 239) – that they have all their lives internalized as “natural.” The death that, as Jack puts it, “entered

your mouth and nose” is thus a death that can “somehow make a difference to your soul” (WN 240).

Ironically, the man who confronts Jack with a question about the state of his own soul – “Are you heartsick or soulsick?” (WN 305) – is the man in whom DeLillo portrays the utter voiding of modernist subjectivity, as Jack discovers when he enters Willie Mink’s motel room near the end of the book and finds before him the postmodern condition in extremis. “[G]lobal, yet American,” to recall Jameson’s phrasing, Mink is a “composite” of Melanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, and Dutch-Chinese facial features and has an accent indicative of someone who has learned English from watching American television (WN 307, 308). Prostrate before a set “floating in the air” and “pointing down at him” (WN 305), his discourse a stream of unrelated soundbytes, he is also the burning bush through which this electronic god now speaks. If, as Emile Benveniste argues, “[i]t is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in *its* reality,”¹⁸ Mink’s schizophrenia confirms the complete disintegration of the humanist sense of self. It is no wonder, then, that Jack describes the setting of this climactic encounter as a “white room” awash with “[w]hite noise” (WN 312, 310), the intensity of which is “the same at all frequencies” (WN 312). The state of linguistic entropy to which Mink’s meaningless babble attests brings to fruition the notion of death that Jack and Babette have earlier articulated with respect to all the ambient sound that surrounds them, “[u]niform, white,” and “insinuate[ing] itself into [the] mind” (WN 198–9).

The problem is that Jack, still searching for modernist epiphany and underlying truth, does not recognize his own implication in the scene he describes. On the contrary, he thinks that as he “approache[s] a violence, a smashing intensity,” he is “moving closer to things in their actual state” and seeing “things new” (WN 305, 308). What Jack does not see is how much Mink is his own doppelgänger. Mink responds with “somewhat stylized” gestures to the fusillade of words with which Jack assaults him (“Falling plane,” “Plunging aircraft”) because, in the context of the immediate scene, he has been popping Dylar pills like Pez and is in a state of extreme suggestibility (WN 310, 309). Yet Jack’s gestures – which, as narrator, inhere not only in what he does but in how he relates what he does – bespeak a sensibility that is no less media-colonized. Hardly “beyond words,” as he claims (WN 312), he has in fact at his disposal only clichéd words – “cult-related frenzy” (WN 311), “squalid violence,” “shadowy fringes of society” (WN 313) – to describe his B-movie plan to kill Mink, the details of which he repeats seven times in instant replay. A “white man” in a “white room” permeated by “white noise” (WN 310),

Jack can no longer be divorced from Mink. He has disintegrated to the point where he has become identical to Mink, the two conjoined into a “we” with their mutual shooting (WN 314, 315).

Given how much this climactic scene itself replays an earlier literary scene involving amorous rivals – the shooting of Clare Quilty by Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (1955), which also ends with the commingling of doubles into a unified “we” – it necessarily raises questions about the degree of DeLillo’s own complicity in the postmodern phenomenon he delineates. As John N. Duvall asks, “if [DeLillo] insists that the world is wholly mediated, what distinguishes the novel as a medium and the electronic media he criticizes?”¹⁹ To be sure, both partake of perhaps the most culturally pervasive system of all – language – which, when it assumes the form of “state-created terminology” (WN 117), is consistently portrayed by DeLillo as obscuring realities that might disrupt the status quo. “Landing” attached to “crash” quiets passengers in a plummeting airplane (WN 91). “Black billowing cloud” reassures those in the path of a toxic air mass that “they’re” – which is to say, some amorphous authority – “coming to grips with the thing” (WN 113). Yet, as Babette astutely realizes, “We have to use words. We can’t just grunt” (WN 233), a point that is underscored by the portrait of her son Wilder, whose vocabulary, stalled at twenty-five words at the beginning of the book (WN 35–6), is found to decrease steadily as the book continues (WN 264). If, as the neurochemist Winnie Richards observes, an infant’s brain develops in response to stimuli and America still leads the world in stimuli (WN 189), the exemption from mortal fear that Wilder displays comes at the expense of intellectual maturation. Being without language, simply put, means being autistic.

Yet DeLillo differentiates between the way that print and visual media employ language. In *Mao II* (1991), a novel that explicitly considers whether it is only the terrorist that has not yet been entirely absorbed by the media (a possibility that, in the post-9/11 era, the video-obsessed Osama bin Laden would seem to have answered in the negative), Brita Nilsson makes a point of looking at the captions that accompany the photographs of famines, fires, and wars that entrance her: “The words helped her locate the pictures. She needed the captions to fill the space” (M 174). A poet taken hostage by fundamentalists and left with only visual memories to contemplate comes to a similar conclusion: “The only way to be in the world was to write himself there” (M 204).

It is by affirming that act of narrative in the book’s final pages, locating the “awe” that “transcends previous categories of awe” (WN 324) in a sky that is, in his metafictional punning, “under a spell, powerful and storied,” that DeLillo “writes himself” into the world of *White Noise* (WN 325). Yes, the

depiction of nuns practicing simulated faith while living in a town that is said to have no media would seem to confirm postmodernism's infiltration of the world's last remaining enclaves. And, yes, the concluding scene that takes place in the supermarket, where "we" – which is to say, all of us – assemble and await our passage through the terminals, is rife with intimations of an inescapable deadening of our souls (WN 326). But Jack refuses to talk to the doctor who wants to see how his death is "progressing" (WN 325). More to the point, he refuses to be inserted one more time into "the imaging block" (WN 325). It may not be equivalent to the "sneak attacks on the dominant culture" mounted in *Underworld* by those figures in the recovered Sergei Eisenstein film who exist "outside nationality and strict historical context" (U 444, 443). Nor may it constitute as thunderous a "NO!" as that invoked by Herman Melville when describing the "sovereignty in [him]self" with which Nathaniel Hawthorne faced the "visible truth," which is to say, "the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him."²⁰ Still, the fact that Jack does not have the wherewithal should not obscure the fact that he has the will. And it is in granting to Jack even that small amount of volition that we locate DeLillo's own authorial triumph.

Notes

1. Office of the Press Secretary, June 30, 2006.
2. Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Koizumi Joins Bush in Warning North Korea Not to Fire Missile," *New York Times* (June 30, 2006), p. A6.
3. Robert Tracy, "Introduction," in Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now*, ed. Robert Tracy (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), p. xxxix.
4. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 5, 4.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 37–8.
6. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), p. 17.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
8. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 6.
9. For a more extended discussion of DeLillo's use of early American motifs in *White Noise*, see Laura Barrett, "'How the Dead Speak to the Living': Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 25.2 (2001–2), pp. 99–102.
10. John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity" (1630), rpt. in *The Puritans*, 2 vols., vol. 1, ed. Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 195.
11. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 25.

12. Norman Mailer, "Superman Comes to the Supermart," *Esquire* (November 1960), p. 122.
13. Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism" (1975), rpt. in Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Anchor, 1991), p. 83.
14. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), rpt. in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 224, 239-41.
15. See pp. 18, 29, 61, 95, 96.
16. Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 171.
17. Don DeLillo, "Matters of Fact and Fiction," interview with Anthony DeCurtis, *Rolling Stone* (November 17, 1988), p. 120.
18. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (1966), trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 224. I am grateful to Linda Hutcheon for bringing this quotation to my attention in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 168.
19. John N. Duvall, "The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*," *Arizona Quarterly* 50.3 (1994), p. 148 n.3.
20. Herman Melville, letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, [April 16?] 1851, rpt. in *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth, *The Writings of Herman Melville*, 14 vols., vol. 14 (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1993), p. 186.