

“*White Noise* is preoccupied with consumerism and the values inherent in a consumer society. Discuss”

White Noise was first published in 1985, on the brink of the information age and prior to the world of the internet in which we live today. However, through *White Noise* DeLillo still managed to foresee and call out the capital values of the modern world of technology as they were emerging 30 years ago. He uses his voice as an author to question consumer culture, achieved through his careful mastering of language and clever characterisation. The reader of this postmodern novel is urged to reconsider their role in consumer society and is left questioning whether their own human existence is being thwarted by capitalism and technology. Indeed, it is apt to state that the novel’s main focus and preoccupation is with consumerism and the values inherent in a consumer society. Yet, no solution is offered to the daunting realisation that we are part of the problem, that choice to make a change is left up to the reader. Despite this parting uncertainty, Bonca points out that the wide-ranging explanatory power of the novel and its apparent compassionate tone somehow help in coming to terms with what DeLillo is bringing to our attention, and even serve in “taming our schizoid confusions about the mass media experience” (Bonca 1996). In this essay, I will explore some of the means by which DeLillo reveals the idea that human experience is being compromised by consumerism, and will briefly place the novel’s musings in the context of today’s internet obsession.

The narrative is a truly sensory experience, but one that is not natural or typical. This awakening of the senses in such a familiarly unfamiliar way evokes an eerie sense of unease within the reader. Throughout the novel, there is a bombardment of raucous sound and

technological white noise. Even in the Gladney's' home environment we are not greeted with peaceful refuge and sanctuary, but rather a myriad of mechanical sound. "Whining metal, exploding bottles, plastic smashed flat. Denise listened carefully, making sure the mangling din contained the correct sonic elements which meant the machine was operating properly" (DeLillo 1998, 33-34). As expected from the title of the novel, DeLillo makes extensive use of sound throughout, resulting in the composition of a continuous humming drone and a reminder of the almost Orwellian power of the technology on which we are so dependent. It is interesting to note that *White Noise* was first published in 1985 and that perhaps the "waves and radiation" buzzing through the lives of the characters is indeed a version of Orwell's omniscient Big Brother. We are tied to the electronic commodities in our homes and workplaces, and without them we do not feel whole. Has this fact been ever more relevant than in today's world of smartphones and wearable devices? Not only are we engulfed by waves travelling through the environment, but we personally contribute to the electronic din with a powerful device in our pockets. Indeed, the perils of a late capitalist society and information age that DeLillo is trying to shed light on in *White Noise* have only been amplified as the novel has aged.

The ceaseless noise of the narrative and persistent technological presence is highlighted by the placement of triads throughout the text, "MasterCard, Visa, American Express" (DeLillo 1998, 100), as well as the occasional interjection of the over lording television or radio "voice at the end of the bed" or "voice next door" (178, 239). These capital triplets often occur after a passage of deep thought or one of Jack's many fearful musings on death, and the use of the number three confers a holiness, or mystical power

onto commodities. Jack even says that he feels blessed by the established system of numbers and code.

“In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life.” (DeLillo 1998, 46).

This passage is exemplary of how technology and consumerism come hand in hand to fill the spiritual void in Jack’s life, left by the absence of religion. It is as though consumerism and economic fulfilment are the only remaining aspects of his life in which he can find meaning. His secret code enters him into the world of commodities, it forms part of his character and without it he would not have access to the apparent community of capitalism. There seems to be a sacred power in things, and the credit with which these things can be bought. DeLillo is certainly suggesting that materialism and commercialism have become a new source of meaning for the world (Weekes 2007), with detrimental effects on our human experience.

Despite these attempts to ascribe meaning to the non-human, and even though he is not a typically religious man, Jack is appalled to learn of the true devaluation of religion through Sister Hermann Marie, “You’ve been praying for nothing all these years?...And nothing survives? Death is the end?...I don’t want to hear this. This is terrible” (DeLillo 1998, 319). When a spotlight is shone on it and it is brought to his attention, Jack cannot accept his role as an ignorant obedient consumer. He needs a method of masking the knowledge of his place in society in order to exist contently. Osteen even argues that Jack is himself a commodity, which the students of The College on The Hill are buying (Osteen 2000), which

may explain his vulnerable character outside the walls of the college where he feels as though his brand is not secure. Weekes suggests that the mechanical white noise of the world is both the background noise that is bombarding the world, and the way to avoid that bombardment that people like Jack so need to exist in peace (Weekes 2007). Perhaps those who can sit back and play their part, happy to ignore the lack of true human experience are those who will succeed most in this type of society.

Shopping, along with the drowning out of the noise, is a coping mechanism. Had Jack encountered Sister Hermann Marie in a situation that allowed it, it is probable that he would have gone on another soul searching shopping trip as he did when a colleague called him “a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (DeLillo 1998, 83). With this remark, Jack’s outward persona is shattered and the only way to rebuild it is by trading money for goods. In this wonderfully crafted scene Jack and his family sweep through the mall and awaken their senses with the goods on display. They fully immerse themselves in the world of spending, resulting in Jack once again feeling solidified in his persona. “I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed. Brightness settle around me.” (DeLillo 1998, 84). Their silent drive home is a brief respite from the cacophony of the novel, indicative of their exhaustion after exerting themselves on all that spending, and perhaps showing a fleeting moment in which the family believe that they have come out on top of the spree, above the system. However, later that night the noise of the world is back almost as quickly as the previous quiet moment came and the family is silent as Jack “watched Steffie in front of the TV set. She moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken” (DeLillo 1998, 84).

Indeed, DeLillo seems to be suggesting that the buzzing of consumer society will always silence the individual, no matter how much we buy into it.

In the marketplace of the most recent decade the “more, more, more” attitude may have been dampened by recession and economic hardship, but the underlying values are still visible. The latest and greatest smartphone, tablet or laptop is a coveted prize and only the most stylish brands – often one of two in the case of phones – are acceptable. I would also argue that the focus has switched into a new marketplace, the acquisition of followers and “likes” on social media. Although not of direct monetary value, having an audience of thousands or even millions at the click of a button is a powerful tool in finding self-worth. Who wouldn’t feel the same euphoria as that described by Jack with so huge an audience giving their approval? But the push of a button on a screen is nothing but a simulacrum for human connection and just like Jack wearing his thick framed glasses in the grounds of his university, we can post and edit the version of us that we want the world to see. Is this really what social networking is about? Is human connection not the point, rather than a human to non-human connection to the waves and radiation emitting devices in our hands?

Indeed, character and identity formation are important in the novel, with narratives and stories contributing this. Jack resists plots as he believes that “all plots tend to move deathward” (DeLillo 1998, 26). All of his previous wives attempted to involve him in their secrecy and plotting, and indeed it is revealed that even his own narrative moved towards in murder (regardless of it being a failed attempt). Ultimately, Jack’s biggest fear is death and he knows that his life story will undeniably end in his demise. Wiese explores the role of narratives in the novel by discussing their importance for formation of the characters’

identities and their memories of experience. She argues a different role for the incessant white noise of the novel, saying that it actually communicates to the reader the often unnoticed impact of narratives themselves on our identity formation, and how this can shape our experience, cultural imagination and self-awareness (Wiese 2012). Jack uses the ideal of a pre-packaged lifestyle to provide a means of personal expression, and a possible channel to authentic being in a world in which the natural has been almost completely obliterated (Reeve and Kerridge 1994). The New York émigrés make a passing comment about how “the Californians invented the concept of life-style. This alone warrants their doom” (DeLillo 1998, 66). This sour tone regarding the West Coast of North America is a common idea in DeLillo’s writing. He often uses the idea to illustrate how a further travelling west means more commodification, more consumerism and more loss of true human experience. The émigrés disapprove of “lifestyle”, and probably believe that a truer humanistic culture and valued traditions would be preferable. Jack however, needs to strive for this ready-made, boil-in-the-bag idea of a life or else he cannot function. He shops until he can piece together the parts of his identity and experience, but as Eid points out shopping transcends being the means by which we achieve, and instead becomes the goal (Eid 1999). This ultimately thwarts our experiences and hence the consumer is obliged to conform or else they will be left behind, despite individuality being at stake. To change oneself would need a change in the consumer society itself and so it is easy to become part of the problem. Eid brings to light the fact that it is human beings who are controlling this world, they are stocking the shelves, they are running the cards and in the context of today, they are hitting share and clicking like and affiliate links in profile bios. As such, if it is under the control of humans, it is up to humans to change the devaluing system (Eid 1999).

As well as sound, DeLillo explores the altered sense of vision in the capitalist world, more specifically one's reluctance to trust their own eyes and judgement. This distrust of the senses without prior approval from a knowing figure is most obvious in one of Jack's circular and illogical conversations with his sarcastic son Heinrich. His son claims that "It's going to rain tonight" and despite Jack pointing out that it is currently raining, Heinrich is insistent that "the radio said tonight". Jack asks "just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses". (DeLillo 1998, 22-23). As trained by consumerism, the characters appear to lack their own grounds for judgement and instead use the credentials of the speaker to decide on the validity of what is being said. During the evacuation of Blacksmith, Heinrich finds a stage for himself and acts to the crowd and "people moved in closer, impressed by the boy's knowledge-ability and wit" (DeLillo 1998, 230). He appears to know what he is talking about, and so the evacuees decide to believe him based on his apparent knowledge rather than on the words he is saying. This is a trait that has been engrained in the public from capitalist society; if a product is respected or has attractive branding they will buy it, similarly if a source of information is perceived to be respectful then why shouldn't it be believed? As a result, the meaning found in a disastrous event is not drawn from a concern or understanding of the event itself, but rather a dissociated copy that is intended for mass consumption (Wiese 2012).

In any one of the supermarket scenes in the novel we see this interrelationship of agency and display further explored. In the mecca-like supermarket we see the relationship between humans and non-humans and a clear Marxist "commodity fetishisation" come into play. The items on the shelves hold a seductive power or "psychic data", which is emblazoned on their packaging as brightly coloured advertising, the "veils of mystery and

layers of cultural material” under which the symbolism of the items is hidden (DeLillo 1998, 37). Murray is trying to avoid this seduction by purchasing “flavourless packaging”, he takes the colourful branding away and invests instead in “the last avant-garde” of rejection of commercial brands (DeLillo 1998, 18-19). He is aware however, that his eyes cannot be trusted. Instead he turns to a sense that is less easily manipulated by marketing attempts on the consumer; his nose. “He was picking up items from our cart and smelling them... He picked up our bottle of extra-strength pain reliever and sniffed along the rim of the child-proof cap. He smelled our honey-dew melons, our bottles of club soda and ginger ale” (DeLillo 1998, 18/19).

Our rationality is always on the brink of being overwhelmed in favour of being the ideal consumer (Reeve and Kerridge 1994). As Murray points out “people get brain fade. This is because they’ve forgotten how to listen and look as children. They’ve forgotten how to collect data” (DeLillo 1998, 67). Visible in the echo chamber nature of targeted media on social media such as Facebook, this immediate acceptance of information given a reputable enough source has never been so damaging as today. It is having real political impacts due to the lack of questioning and discourse. Instead the user is fed what they want to see and believe what the trusted computer screen says. This is a chronic form of Murray’s brain fade, and it is a danger that still needs to be brought directly to consumers’ attention, even 30 years after DeLillo first attempted to do so.

After a thorough exploration of the text it is suffice to say that *White Noise* is indeed preoccupied with consumerism, and the values inherent in a consumer society. DeLillo forces the reader to question whether we are truly experiencing life to the fullest in a world

of commodities and waves and radiation, and leaves us questioning whether we as part of the problem are willing to make a change. Despite the novel being written before a recent explosion in technological advancements, I argue that no attempt has been made to rectify the debased values on which DeLillo has shed light on, and that “brain fade” is as big a problem as ever.

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