

The Old Modernist Challenge: Navigating the Hypermodern World of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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While many critics believe technology and media create a postmodern world of endless simulacrum, fractured identity, and vanishing boundaries in White Noise, this essay explores the possibility that DeLillo's text in fact reveals the hypermodernist world of Paul Virilio, resisting these apocalyptic consequences of technology. Daniel Joseph Singal's definition of Modernism helps to show how central aims of the Modernist project – that is, to achieve authenticity and reintegrate Victorian dichotomies – are not only possible but also imperative to achieve in White Noise, for the text implicitly suggests that rejecting Modernist principles may result in a national, epistemic crisis. More specifically, the novel points to one particular stream of Modernist culture as the antidote to epistemic failure. This stream, which Singal attributes to John Dewey, inspires the novel's central Modernist characters: Jack and Denise Gladney. Using Modernist ideologies, these two characters successfully find authenticity and meaning in a growingly complex technological world.

The prophetic warnings in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* might explain the perpetual interest modern critics take in revisiting the novel, coincidentally and almost too appropriately published in the year George Orwell used for the title of his own prophetic work. In the worlds of both *1984* and *White Noise*, technology threatens to destabilize not only the individual, but also the foundations of American democracy. With the advent of the internet, these fictional worlds have, in many ways, begun to manifest themselves in the twenty-first century. Data mining companies, for instance, now reflect the technological surveillance of Big Brother. To be sure, this reflection does not exactly match the extreme authoritarianism of an Orwellian dystopia. On the other hand, it seems that *White Noise* has in fact accurately foreshadowed the current state of American society. Most notably, the proliferation of both fake news and authoritative knowledge on the internet has created what Murray Jay Siskind, Jack Gladney's university colleague, calls "a world of hostile facts,"¹ driving some Americans, in an act of self-preservation, to "seal off the world."

For many right-leaning Americans, this self-preservation requires a frightening detachment from reality. In one of his most recent op-eds, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks offers a compelling theory to explain this disturbing phenomenon. He cites the research of Jonathan Rauch,² which explores how "democratic, neotheocratic societies" navigate the modern age of information to

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1. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (Penguin Books, 1985), 82.

2. Jonathan Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge," *National Affairs*, no. 45 (2018).

establish some form of authoritative truth.³ As Brooks puts it, an “epistemic regime” comprised of “academics, clergy members, teachers, journalists, and others” sift through endless information to identify and then disseminate truths that “survive collective scrutiny.” This process, however, has rewarded its participants with money and status while those left out of the process – namely non-college educated citizens – have seen their communities deteriorate in the twenty-first century. According to Brooks,

This precarity has created, in nation after nation, intense populist backlashes against the highly educated folks who have migrated to the cities and accrued significant economic, cultural and political power. ...

In the fervor of this enmity, millions of people have come to detest those who populate the epistemic regime ... Millions not only distrust everything the “fake news” people say, but also the so-called rules they use to say them.

People in this precarious state are going to demand stories that will both explain their distrust back to them and also enclose them within a safe community of believers.

As a result, two American realities have emerged, one in which citizens have fully realized Jack’s fear of “promot[ing] ignorance, prejudice and superstition to protect [themselves] from the world.”⁴

Critics have certainly discussed this kind of self-preservation in *White Noise*. N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge argue that “Rationality in *White Noise* is always on the brink of being overwhelmed” and that as a result, individuals submit themselves to “any kind of apparently authoritative direction.”⁵ Patrick J. Deneen makes a similar argument, suggesting that DeLillo’s novel portrays “the decline of religious belief and the pressing need for its sustenance and reaffirmation.”⁶ Deneen goes on to argue that such a need for authoritative guidance, as well as “rising individualism” and “materialism” in the novel, foreshadow a self-destructive future for American democracy.⁷ Clearly, critics agree that *White Noise* depicts a potentially threatening postmodern world; to what degree of danger that world presents, however, is up for debate.

At one end of the spectrum, Leonard Wilcox claims the novel reveals the death of authenticity and the “obliteration of coherent meaning” in a “world of

3. David Brooks, *The Rotting of the Republican Mind* (The New York Times, 26 November 2020).

4. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 95.

5. N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, “Toxic Events: Postmodernism and DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1994): 304.

6. Patrick J. Deneen, “The American Mystery Deepens: Hearing Tocqueville in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” in *Democracy’s Literature: Politics and Fiction in America* (eds.) Patrick J. Deneen and Joseph Romance (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 209.

7. *Ibid*, 209.

simulacra, where images and electronic representations replace direct experience."⁸ Lidia Yuknavitch agrees; and, while both Wilcox and Yuknavitch describe Jack as a "Modernist,"⁹ they ultimately believe the postmodern world in *White Noise* has long obliterated any traces of Modernist ideals.¹⁰ To be sure, Wilcox admits that DeLillo's "postmodernism retains the legacy of the modernist impulse to explore consciousness and selfhood and to create an imaginative vision that probes and criticizes its subject matter";¹¹ at the same time, however, his argument suggests that such a Modernist impulse is ultimately futile in the world of *White Noise*.

Many critics dispute this futility, however. One such critic is William S. Haney II, who claims that a new, transcendent self-identity is possible in *White Noise*. Rather than succumb to alienation and fragmentation, characters in the novel integrate their consciousness with the collective hyperreality of cyberspace.¹² Susan S. Martins, however, rightly criticizes scholars like Haney, who see utopian potential in the relationships between technology and the characters in the novel. She also criticizes Wilcox for his dystopian reading of technology, arguing that "*White Noise* does not function as a straightforward dystopian tale, but instead negotiates the tenuous relationship between utopia and dystopia" and depicts our "ambivalent" experience with technology.¹³ Lou F. Caton goes as far as to suggest Romantic values and ideals can in fact survive DeLillo's postmodern minefield.¹⁴

While Jack Gladney certainly displays an occasional Romantic sensibility, he is, at heart, a Modernist. And, although critics debate whether Jack's Modernist order can survive in the postmodern world of *White Noise*, most (if not all) critics affirm without question the existence of this "postmodern" world. However, as C. Barry Chabot argues, it is indeed possible that postmodernism as a "period concept" does not yet exist.¹⁵ If true, Chabot's argument leaves room for a new approach to *White Noise*. More specifically, it allows for the possibility that Jack does not in fact live in a postmodern world at all; instead, the novel reflects the

8. Leonard Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative," *Contemporary Literature* 32, no. 3 (1991): 346-347.

9. Ibid, 348; Lidia Yuknavitch, *Allegories of Violence: Tracing the Writing of War in Late Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Routledge, 2001), 63.

10. Yuknavitch, *Allegories of Violence: Tracing the Writing of War in Late Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 2001, 63.

11. Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative," 1991, 362.

12. William S. II. Haney, "Culture, History and Consciousness in DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Aesthetics of Cyberspace." *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 6 (1997): 11-12.

13. Susana S. Martins, "White Noise and Everyday Technologies," *American Studies* 46, no. 1 (2005): 88, 90.

14. Lou F. Caton, *Don DeLillo* (Bloom's Modern Critical Views) (Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 107.

15. C. Barry. Chabot, "The Problem of the Postmodern," *New Literary History* 20, no. 1 (1988): 10.

potentially menacing reality of “hypermodernism.” John Armitage uses this term to describe the worldview of French theorist Paul Virilio,¹⁶ who not only remained “true to the principle of hope with regard to making sense of history,”¹⁷ but also rejected nihilistic, postmodern views of technology and its effects on reality. While remaining cautiously optimistic about the future, Virilio nevertheless acknowledges the precariousness of hypermodernism, predicting to some degree a catastrophic collapse of modernity. *White Noise*, however, suggests that core pillars of the Modernist worldview – including a preoccupation with authenticity and a desire to re-integrate Victorian dichotomies – can still provide meaningful and valuable support for Americans as they navigate Virilio’s current, dangerously hypermodernist landscape.

While the infinite flux of electronic information has certainly expedited the loss of authoritative truth, it has only further broken-down what Modernism has been deconstructing since the early twentieth century; media, therefore, does not exactly create a “postmodern” world in *White Noise* as much as it contributes to the ongoing Modernist project. Critical to this reading of the novel is Daniel Joseph Singal’s approach to articulating the definition of Modernism. He identifies “two predominant ‘streams’ of American Modernist culture,”¹⁸ and argues the first stream begins with William James and the second with John Dewey. He explains how James’s stream of Modernist culture “banished the closed, deterministic universe of nineteenth-century positivism in favor of an ‘open’ universe governed by change and chance where the process of discovery would be continuous” and where human beings were “doomed forever to epistemological uncertainty.”¹⁹ Dewey likewise accepted the “tentative, pragmatic character of knowledge” and rejected the existence of “fixed truths.”²⁰ There is perhaps no better moment in *White Noise* to illustrate this Modernist ideology than when Jack drives his son, Heinrich, to school and asks him whether it is raining. Using relativist logic, Heinrich dodges each of Jack’s attempts to elicit objective truth from his son, claiming “senses are wrong more often than they’re right” and asking, “What good is my truth? My truth means nothing.”²¹ At one point, Heinrich asks his father if he wants “the truth of someone traveling at almost the speed of light in another galaxy”²² – an almost direct allusion to the “new physics” that inspired Modernist thought by suggesting “everything depended on the relative position and motion of the observer and the object being

16. John Armitage, “Paul Virilio: An Introduction,” in *Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond* (ed.) John Armitage (SAGE Publications, 2000), 9.

17. *Ibid.*, 8.

18. Daniel Joseph Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1987): 17.

19. *Ibid.*, 17.

20. *Ibid.*, 17.

21. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 23.

22. *Ibid.*, 23.

observed.”²³ Heinrich’s relativism, therefore, does not reflect the consequences of a postmodern, media-saturated world but rather illustrates the Jamesian impulse to question objectivity.

Of course, Heinrich ultimately refuses to answer Jack’s question, and the conclusion of their conversation further debunks the existence of a “postmodernism” world in *White Noise*. Frustrated by Heinrich’s stubborn evasions, Jack sarcastically quips, “First-rate ... A victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos. Science’s finest hour.”²⁴ While it might be true that Jack’s annoyance stems from his frustrated “romantic desire to join with his son in an appreciation of an intimate and shared physical event,”²⁵ it is also compelling to note the similarities Jack shares with John Dewey, who gave “greater recognition [than James] to the virtues of rationality and science.”²⁶ To be sure, Jack understands that truth is unstable; at one point, while watching Heinrich pontificate at the dinner table, he reflects, “I wanted to tell [Heinrich] that statistical evidence of the kind he was quoting from was by nature inconclusive and misleading. I wanted to say that he would learn to regard all such catastrophic findings with equanimity as he matured, grew out of his confining literalism, developed a spirit of informed and skeptical inquiry, advanced in wisdom and rounded judgment.”²⁷ Jack embodies Deweyan Modernism; he acknowledges uncertainty but nevertheless values an admittedly ephemeral stability – the kind of stability that “epistemic regimes” offer. Jack’s conflict with Heinrich is therefore less of a “Romantic hero” railing against a postmodern world and more of a “Deweyan-Modernist hero” railing against a *Jamesian-Modernist* world.

American society in *White Noise* is not only Modernist, however; it is *successfully* Modernist, mainly because the text implies a nearly complete eradication of Victorian ideals. According to Singal, “combat[ing] the fundamentally dishonest conception of existence that the Victorians had propagated” became the chief aim of twentieth-century Modernist thinkers and writers.²⁸ This enterprise appears to have succeeded in DeLillo’s text; Jack describes Blacksmith as “a town of dry cleaning shops and opticians. Photos of looming Victorian homes decorate the windows of real estate firms. These pictures have not changed in years. The homes are sold or gone or stand in other towns in other states.”²⁹ Elise Martucci reads this description metaphorically and

23. Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” 1987, 12.

24. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 24.

25. Caton, *Don DeLillo*, 2003, 115.

26. Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” 1987, 17.

27. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 167.

28. Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” 1987, 12.

29. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 59.

concludes that Blacksmith is a postmodern town of “empty representations,”³⁰ but this reading seems to ignore the Victorianism at the heart of the passage. It is significant that Blacksmith literally lacks Victorian surroundings. While these homes may have existed at one point, the novel makes it clear that Victorianism no longer offers the protective shelter it may have once provided. The penultimate chapter of the novel further supports this point, as Sister Hermann Marie, the nun who attends Jack’s gunshot wound, turns out to be an “empty representation” herself. She tells Jack, “It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die. This is why we are here. A tiny minority. To embody old things, old beliefs. The devil, the angels, heaven, hell. If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse.”³¹ Like the photographic shells of Victorian homes, the nuns represent the vestige of Victorian ideals; the once stable dichotomies of “heaven and hell” or “angels and devils” have all but vanished, leaving in their wake an almost too successful Modernist world.

Contrary to what some critics argue, however, dichotomies and boundaries do not entirely disappear in *White Noise*, disproving yet again the existence of a postmodern reality and reaffirming a hypermodernist one. That is not to say, however, that boundaries consistently hold up against the forces of technological change. For instance, the text frequently threatens the boundary between the real and the hyperreal: television and radio penetrate Jack’s narration; a Toyota commercial speaks through Steffie as she sleeps;³² and, by the end of the novel, it seems that Willie Mink, the former head of the Dylar project, has completely transcended the boundary between consciousness and hyperreality. As Wilcox argues, “Mink is the embodiment of white noise” as he “voices the drone of the mediascapes.”³³ Undoubtedly, Mink personifies simulacrum; the subject – that is, Mink – almost completely collapses. Wilcox believes this represents “postmodern culture,”³⁴ but Martins, on the other hand, points to the absurdity of Mink’s condition as a sign of parody. As she sees it, believing that human beings can lose critical distance between themselves and hyperreality is just as absurd as Mink literalizing words.³⁵ This particular reading is compelling, especially because Martins persuasively shows how the Gladneys do not lose their ability to distinguish the real from the hyperreal. Television and radio certainly influence the Gladneys’ perception of the “toxic airborne event,” but they use their own phenomenal experiences to ground their perceptions in reality. Martins

30. Elise A. Martucci, *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo* (Routledge, 2007), 78.

31. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 303.

32. *Ibid.*, 148.

33. *Ibid.*, 356.

34. Wilcox, “Baudrillard, DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative,” 1991, 355.

35. Martins, “*White Noise* and Everyday Technologies,” 2005, 107.

concludes: "The difference between the media representation and what the Gladneys can see happening outside their own window is not effaced - it's not as though they have lost their ability to distinguish among the levels of the 'real' they must navigate."³⁶ Likewise, while Virilio admits to the primacy of the "virtual" in shaping hypermodern reality, he nevertheless maintains that both the virtual *and* the phenomenal interact to create the "real."³⁷ Thus, *White Noise* captures the synergistic reality of hypermodernism as well as the Modernist paradox: as Singal describes it, "the goal of perfect integration must always remain unattainable."³⁸ Simulacrum fails to dominate the real; instead, the two interact synergistically without ever completely losing their distinctions.

Another central binary of the text is the dichotomy between life and death, but again, the boundary between the two remains intact by the end of the novel. Nevertheless, Jack and Babette challenge this separation when they discuss their fear of death. Babette asks her husband:

"What if death is nothing but sound?"

"Electrical noise."

"You hear it forever. Sound all around, How awful."

"Uniform, white."³⁹

Here, Babette introduces the titular, fluid metaphor of the novel. Death becomes synonymous with the "electrical noise" of everyday life. And yet, Babette's use of the hypothetical "if" is telling; it reveals her skepticism and foreshadows Dylar's failure to obliterate this dichotomy. Upon entering Willie Mink's motel room, Jack discovers the dehumanizing effect of the drug. Sitting alone and nearly comatose, Mink devours Dylar tablets and parrots the television in his room. As Jack puts it, "White noise was everywhere."⁴⁰ Death surrounds Mink; borders vanish; distinction blurs. Despite this, Mink's revolutionary drug fails to eradicate death and the meaning it offers life. When Jack says "Falling plane," Mink "grips the arms of his chair" and experiences panic; when Jack taunts him further with the phrase "Plunging aircraft," Mink ducks into a fetal position.⁴¹ Dylar has failed; Mink still fears death, which, according to Wilcox, represents the "ending" life needs to "take on meaning."⁴² To be fair, Wilcox never suggests the process of eroding "temporal endings" is successful in

36. Ibid, 106.

37. Dominique Joubert and Christian Carlut, "Paul Virilio," in *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews* (ed.) John Armitage (SAGE Publications, 2001), 125-126.

38. Singal, "Towards a Definition of American Modernism," 1987, 14.

39. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 189.

40. Ibid, 295.

41. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 295.

42. Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative," 1991, 361.

DeLillo's contemporary America. He rather points to the process itself as evidence of the collapsing Modernist world. This is certainly a persuasive argument; nevertheless, the ultimate failure of Dylar is significant. At the very least, it temporarily refutes Babette's metaphor; for even in the midst of the awful, uniform white noise, the distinct sound of death manages to break through the ambient babble of Mink's motel room and preserve the Modernist worldview.

Although it may seem that such preservation is only temporary, the novel offers as many signs of Modernism's stability and success as it does its instability and failures. Critics seem eager to pronounce the death of authenticity in *White Noise*, but there is surely evidence in DeLillo's text to imply otherwise. Of course, a fragmented subject no longer capable of establishing an authentic self would surely signal a fading – if not a completely diminished – Modernist world. Modernists, after all, demand “nothing less than ‘authenticity,’ which requires a blending of the conscious and unconscious strata of the mind so that the self-presented to the world is the ‘true’ self in every respect.”⁴³ While no one in the novel achieves a perfect blending, Murray implicitly suggests that individualism pervades America. He explains to Jack:

I tell my students they're already too old to figure importantly in the making of society. Minute by minute they're beginning to diverge from each other. 'Even as we sit here,' I tell them, 'you are spinning out from the core, becoming less recognizable as a group, less targetable by advertisers and mass-producers of culture. Kids are a true universal. But you're well beyond that, already beginning to drift, to feel estranged from the products you consume. Who are they designed for? What is your place in the marketing scheme? Once you're out of school, it is only a matter of time before you experience the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity.'⁴⁴

Murray is the absurd and oppressive voice of late-capitalism, suggesting that citizens are only useful inasmuch as they conform and contribute to mass consumerism. But the very reason his college students have lost their “usefulness” has to do with their individuality. The way Murray describes it, corporations do not create identities as much as they cater to them, and the diverse identities of young adults and beyond present a challenge to advertisers who struggle to confine this demographic to a coherent “group identity.” The Modernist movement in search of authenticity has succeeded in producing an individualistic society.

Perhaps the problem with authenticity, then, has less to do with fragmented identities and more to do with hyper-individualism as citizens turn to extreme measures to achieve originality in a hyper-individualized world. Jack earns critical acclaim for inventing and eventually overseeing Hitler studies at his

43. Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” 1987, 14.

44. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 50.

university⁴⁵ – an academic field that is both absurd and not a little sinister. Jack appears to have stripped Hitler of his “moral significance” and treats him more as a “commodity on the academic market” than as a genocidal dictator.⁴⁶ What motivates Jack to create this deeply problematic and socially poisonous field of study is his quest for individuality. As Murray eventually points out, “Hitler is larger than Death. You [Jack] thought he would protect you.”⁴⁷ Death in this novel, as Babette makes clear earlier on, is the white noise of electrical messaging that bombards and surrounds citizens like Jack every day. At the cost of society’s moral fabric, Jack uses Hitler to break through this noise of endless information. At one point, Murray tells Jack that he envies his accomplishments: “You’ve established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own ... It has an identity, a sense of achievement.”⁴⁸ This unique identity rings hollow for Jack, however, especially after the chancellor advises him to change his name to J. A. K. Gladney and gain weight to avoid making “a feeble presentation of self.”⁴⁹ The chancellor pushes Jack to the edge of hyper-individualism, which – unsurprisingly – moves Jack further from achieving authenticity. As Jack himself proclaims: “I am the false character that follows the name around.”⁵⁰

But this failure to achieve authenticity does not preclude eventual success; furthermore, Jack’s awareness of his inauthentic persona reveals an impressive ability to self-reflect. In fact, like a true Modernist, Jack does not allow his failures to deter his search for an authentic self. However, it is important to note that a technologized mass culture presents a clear challenge for the Modernist who seeks her true identity and fears the “colonization of the mind by media.”⁵¹ Lou Caton makes an important argument regarding this point:

the world is turning [Jack] into a post-industrial, computer generated individual, someone who is slowly gaining a “non-authentic self” which is socially constructed, essentially valueless, and enveloped by an unstable matrix of material goods. ... Jack Gladney, then, is both “timelessly” searching for unification and arbitrarily fragmented. This double-self [is] a self both materially constructed by a fragmented, commercial community and one authentically trying to construct a unified community.⁵²

45. Ibid, 4.

46. Reeve and Kerridge, “Toxic Events: Postmodernism and DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” 1994, 307.

47. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 274.

48. Ibid, 11.

49. Ibid, 16.

50. Ibid, 17.

51. Hossein Pirnajmuddin and Bahareh Bagherzadeh Samani, “Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*: A Virilian Perspective,” *Text Matters* 9, no. 9 (2019): 361.

52. Caton, *Don DeLillo*, 2003, 109-110.

So while it is true that a fragmented self exists, an active, authentic self also exists, and it certainly emerges at times throughout the novel. For example, as Caton argues, Jack “deeply values his personal relations and family,”⁵³ and he knows this. “Make no mistake,” Jack says, “I take these children seriously.”⁵⁴ This represents another moment when Jack reveals a confident sign of self-knowledge. Jack is aware of what he values; and when he flails as the department chair of Hitler studies, he knows it because he knows himself.

Jack’s final confrontation with Mink, however, reveals the clearest victory for authenticity in the novel. Modernism, in fact, prevents Jack from slipping into a moral abyss, and for this reason, *White Noise* implicitly encourages the Modernist preoccupation with introspection. Prior to Jack’s murderous escapade, he theorizes with Murray, who reminds Jack of “a fund, a pool, a reservoir of potential violence in the male psyche.”⁵⁵ But unlike the Modernist, who tries to “integrate once more the human and the animal, the civilized and the savage, and to heal the sharp divisions that the nineteenth century had established,”⁵⁶ Murray offers Jack a disturbing dichotomy in true Victorian fashion: “Are you a killer or a dier, Jack?”⁵⁷ For Murray, there is only the animalistic “killer” or the civilized “dier.” Jack accepts the binary, and when he commits to the role of killer and rejects his more civilized self, he nearly loses all sense of identity in a moment of extrasensory transcendence. He moves “Nearer to death,”⁵⁸ and describes his experience with detachment:

Things glowed, a secret life rising out of them. Water struck the roof in elongated orbs, splashing drams. I knew for the first time what rain really was. I knew what wet was. I understood the neurochemistry of my brain, the meaning of dreams (the waste material of premonitions). Great stuff everywhere, racing through the room, racing slowly. A richness, a density. I believed everything. I was a Buddhist, a Jain, a Duck River Baptist. My only sadness was Babette, having to kiss a scooped out face.⁵⁹

Jack’s consciousness expands, and he loses all sense of subjectivity. He is no longer an individual with values; instead, he embodies all beliefs at once and nearly obliterates his own humanity by reducing meaning to the chemical reactions taking place in his brain. And yet, almost as a prelude to his moral awakening, his description ends with a hopeful sign that Murray’s Victorian dichotomy has not yet subsumed the authentic Jack Gladney: he remembers Babette. He remembers that he values family, and that value keeps him grounded

53. *Ibid*, 109.

54. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 102.

55. *Ibid*, 279.

56. Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” 1987, 12.

57. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 278.

58. *Ibid*, 295.

59. *Ibid*, 269.

in the real. The pivotal moment, however, strikes when Mink shoots Jack in the wrist:

The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff. I was disappointed. Hurt, stunned and disappointed. ... The extra dimensions, the super perceptions, were reduced to visual clutter, a whirling miscellany, meaninglessness.

I looked at him. Alive. His lap a puddle of blood. 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 human muddles and quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy.⁶⁰

Jack “inwardly collapses”; in other words, he returns to a subjective state of consciousness. What is significant here, though, is the irony of his reaction to this. He calls this kind of reality – a reality grounded in subjective experience – “meaningless” when in fact his earlier state of being dehumanized Mink and minimized all of human thought to mere chemical reactions. In his “meaningless” state, on the other hand, he remembers perhaps the most important human trait: compassion. Significantly here, Jack becomes a human being only after Mink *shoots* him; Jack’s potentially fatal wound forces him to abandon the meaningless Victorian binary and, instead, “integrate once more the human and the animal.” Jack becomes killer and dier simultaneously, achieving a Modernist integration that ultimately leads to Jack’s critical revelation: his authentic self is, at the very least, compassionate.

Regardless of Jack’s final realization, he is still an outdated Modernist – or as Caton argues, an outdated Romantic – lost in a new age. But the Gladney children, who represent the next and perhaps more important generation, have *only* existed in DeLillo’s hypermodernist world, and it is through these characters that the novel offers some guidance in navigating the complexities of the information age. Even Jack acknowledges that his children belong to a generation where “deeper codes and messages” mark their “species as unique.”⁶¹ Of all the Gladney children, Denise seems to offer the most hope for her “species,” and moreover, she embodies Modernist sensibilities. In many ways, the rest of the children function as her foils, for they fail to follow the basic tenets of Modernism. *White Noise* therefore functions as a sort of cautionary tale, using the children to suggest that Modernist ideals might be the key to unlocking a meaningful existence in the age of technology.

Other than his extreme Deweyan Modernist ideology, there are several other problems with Denise’s first foil: Heinrich. Key among these issues include his postmodern nihilism and his lack of interest in developing an authentic self. Much like Jack in his extrasensory state of consciousness, Heinrich rejects

60. Ibid, 298-299.

61. Ibid, 50.

subjectivity and devalues human experience. He tells his father: “Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? ... Isn’t it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex?”⁶² Not only does Heinrich foreshadow his father’s disturbing immorality, he also suggests authenticity is impossible to achieve. He has given up on the Modernist project, and this surrender to an eternally inauthentic self produces the same apathy towards morality that it later produces in Jack. At one point, Heinrich says over the phone, “Animals commit incest all the time. So how unnatural can it be?”⁶³ It is no wonder that Babette fears Heinrich “will end up in a barricaded room, spraying hundreds of rounds of automatic fire across an empty mall before the SWAT teams come for him.”⁶⁴ While Babette is certainly exaggerating, she nevertheless has cause for concern. Through his immature, existential angst, Heinrich loses sight of humanity: he fully accepts the “animal” but totally rejects the “human,” and this runs counter to a more Modernist integration of the two. Heinrich thus reflects the “Virilian idea that barbarism is the integral accident of technology” and the end of modernity and hypermodernism.⁶⁵

Wilder too represents a rejection of Modernism, but he also represents a rejection of hypermodernism, and the text makes it clear that existing in a such a limbo is dangerous – especially in the midst of the current technological revolution. What is most interesting about Wilder is the fact that he cannot watch television, which, as Jack says, “may make him worth talking to ... as a sort of wild child, a savage plucked from the bush.”⁶⁶ And indeed he does become a “wild child” as he fails to develop language: a central motif in the novel, signifying a form of being. By the end of the text, Jack admits Wilder has a problem: “Is it my imagination ... or is he talking less than ever?”⁶⁷ It is true that too much television in *White Noise* can obstruct the formation of an authentic identity; but no television at all seems to have the same effect, explaining in part why Virilio “does not provide a blanket condemnation of modernity.”⁶⁸ As he puts it, the “global dimensions of the twentieth century” entail “the absolute speed and power of the twentieth century’s telecommunications, nuclear energy and so on, and at the same time the absolute catastrophe of this same energy! We’re living with both of these things!”⁶⁹ By artificially preserving Wilder from the damaging effects of media, Jack and Babette simultaneously prevent their son from

62. Ibid, 45.

63. Ibid, 34.

64. Ibid, 22.

65. Pirnajmuddin and Bahareh Bagherzadeh Samani, “Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*: A Virilian Perspective,” 2019, 359.

66. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 50.

67. Ibid, 252.

68. Armitage, “Paul Virilio: An Introduction,” 2000, 7-8.

69. Nicholas Zurbrugg, “Not Words but Visions!” in *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews* (ed.) John Armitage (SAGE Publications, 2001), 155.

experiencing the potential power and reality of his surroundings. But Modernism does not suppress or avoid reality; unlike Wilder, it confronts the world as it is. In the final chapter of the novel, Wilder literally moves counter to the “modernist stream” of the expressway,⁷⁰ which sounds like “a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream.”⁷¹ Caton offers a helpful analysis of this description, believing “the dead are mythically revived, muttering and rippling at the edge of consciousness. Their voices belong to past story-tellers who have refused to be silenced. They represent an imaginary over-soul that resists this culture’s particular ideology.”⁷² The “modernist stream” of the expressway resists DeLillo’s “postmodern” culture, and when Wilder crosses against the flow of that traffic, he nearly dies and cannot hear the warning calls of two elderly women.⁷³ He survives, but there is nothing waiting for him on the other side; it takes the compassion of a driver to save Wilder from his fruitless effort to resist the flow of Modernism. In other words, resisting and rejecting a world of Modernist and technological chaos is a deadly path that leads nowhere.

The Gladney girls, unlike the boys, appear to be more grounded in objective reality. Although Steffie and Denise seem like an inseparable pair, the latter child offers more hope and guidance in *White Noise*; she is the understated hero of the novel. Steffie, on the other hand, succumbs to simulacra. Thomas J. Ferraro nevertheless defends Steffie, calling her “diplomatic” and arguing that she “conducts the caretaking role ... efficiently and intelligently.”⁷⁴ Her participation in the ludicrous SIMUVAC drills,⁷⁵ however, undercuts whatever intelligence Ferraro claims she possesses. During their simulated drills after the toxic airborne event, SIMUVAC reminds its participants, including Steffie, that “We learned a lot during the night of the billowing cloud. But there is no substitute for a planned simulation.”⁷⁶ Both SIMUVAC and Steffie mistake simulation for reality. While it is tempting to forgive Steffie for what seems to be innocent, childish behavior, her subconscious attraction to the hyperreal throughout the novel is foreboding. In addition to her commercialized sleep-talking, she sits in front of the T.V. set and “moves her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken,”⁷⁷ Steffie surrenders her identity to the brainwashing signals of mass media.

But Denise stands apart from her siblings and half-siblings. Like her step-father, she strives for authenticity. At one point, Jack makes note of the green

70. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 307.

71. *Ibid*, 4.

72. Caton, *Don DeLillo*, 2003, 112.

73. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 307.

74. Thomas J. Ferraro, “Whole Families Shopping at Night!” in *New Essays on White Noise (The American Novel)* (ed.) Frank Lentricchia (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 33.

75. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 195.

76. *Ibid*, 196.

77. *Ibid*, 84.

visor Denise has worn “for three weeks now. She would not go out without it, would not even leave her room. ... Something about the visor seemed to speak to her, to offer wholeness and identity.”⁷⁸ Jack assumes that Denise forms an identity through signifiers, but a few chapters later, he notices that “Steffie came in wearing Denise’s green visor. I didn’t know what this meant.”⁷⁹ At the very least, it means he assumed incorrectly. Denise abandons her visor because unlike Jack, her identity does not rely on materialism. She knows that material objects ultimately fail to help her locate authenticity. For Denise, possessions are more about preserving the past and tethering herself to the real and to experience: “She is the kind of child who feels a protective tenderness toward her own belongings. It is part of her strategy in a world of displacements to make every effort to restore and preserve, keep things together for their value as remembering objects, a way of fastening herself to a life.”⁸⁰ Wilder has nothing to restore or preserve; Steffie willingly participates in the world of displacements; and Heinrich fastens himself to nothing. To be sure, Denise occasionally succumbs to the influences of media; she believes she experiences the symptoms of the toxic airborne event only after she learns of these symptoms on the radio. But what separates Denise from the rest of the Gladney children is her refusal to cut ties with history, the real, and experience – each of which significantly contribute to an authentic self.

Furthermore, Denise embraces the Modernist urge to refuse binaries and “restore a sense of order to human experience under the often chaotic conditions of twentieth century existence.”⁸¹ (Singal 8). When Jack first describes Denise, he calls her a “hard-nosed kid. She led a more or less daily protest against those of her mother’s habits that struck her as wasteful or dangerous.”⁸² A deep concern drives Denise to care for her parents compassionately and realistically. Out of all the Gladney children, Denise appears to exhibit the most compassion, refusing her step-father’s lies and demanding to know more about the drug that is negatively affecting her mother. This Modernist impulse to “know ‘reality’ in all its depths and complexity” leads Denise into a significant exchange with her mother.⁸³ Concerned about toxic chemicals, Denise urges her mother to stop chewing gum. Babette expresses her Victorian “either/or” mentality when she responds, “Look, either I chew gum or I smoke.”⁸⁴ Denise responds, “Why not do both?” She may be sarcastic, but she implicitly reveals her capacity to move beyond binaries and simple truths. Unlike her mother who reads tabloids and cult mysteries, Denise reads the *Physician’s Desk Reference* to learn more about the

78. Ibid, 37.

79. Ibid, 63.

80. Ibid, 102.

81. Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” 1987, 8.

82. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 7.

83. Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” 1987, 16.

84. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 42.

side effects that plague Babette.⁸⁵ Moreover, Babette admits that if “Denise is the source of a rumor or theory, it could very well be true.”⁸⁶ Denise is the true promise of Modernism because she successfully applies Modernist ideologies while *growing up* in a hypermodernist world. She understands the transient nature of knowledge, but she nevertheless seeks and redefines complex truths for the sake of her family and her own authentic self.

Regardless of whether America has become a postmodern world, the nation is undoubtedly experiencing its own airborne toxic event. Through smartphones, television, and other countless technological channels, waves and radiation transmit infinite knowledge, spread poisonous uncertainty, and, as we have surprisingly discovered, instill resentment. Epistemic regimes have failed; the right-leaning Babettes of the world have found the information age unbearable. And, as Davis Brooks argues, “For those awash in anxiety and alienation, who feel that everything is spinning out of control, conspiracy theories are extremely effective emotional tools.” This proves true in *White Noise*, as Babette retreats from a world of “hostile facts” and finds solace in conspiracy magazines like the *National Examiner*. It is no wonder that she finds the ad for Dylar in one of these magazines.⁸⁷ The drug is a false promise, and the same is true for the magazine. The “cradles of misinformation” that Babette and so many right-leaning Americans turn to for stability have ironically destabilized and threatened the progress of Modernist thinkers,⁸⁸ and they have perhaps set the stage for the Virilian “integral accident” that will finally obliterate the hypermodernist world. But there is still hope for national cohesion and repair. As Susan Martins explains, “technologies require highly visible cultural work in the public arena to incorporate them into existing structures of meaning, to assess their impact on social relations and definitions of the human, and to assert governmental controls where economic, ethical, or political issues are raised.”⁸⁹ *White Noise* offers the kind of cultural work and guidance that is necessary for Americans to heal and confront division. Characters like Denise and Jack show the power of integration, the power of assessment, and the power of asserting control over the technological chaos that surrounds them. Technology, after all, is not some Orwellian instrument for social destruction in *White Noise*, or at least not entirely. The novel ends with the potential dangers *and* promises of technology looming on the literal horizon, where the awesome “postmodern sunset” reflects either the toxins of Nyodene Derivative or the microorganisms engineered to save humanity.⁹⁰ But, as Jack points out, the ambivalent “spell” of technology is both

85. Ibid, 36-37.

86. Ibid, 52.

87. Ibid, 183.

88. Ibid, 81.

89. Martins, “*White Noise* and Everyday Technologies,” 2005, 87.

90. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 216.

“powerful and storied,”⁹¹ casting a familiar, Modernist shroud of uncertainty. In other words, while technology might pose new threats to society, twenty-first century modernization merely represents the continuation of an old Modernist challenge: to reconcile the divisions of the world.

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91. Ibid, 308, emphasis added.