

White Noise: Beyond Baudrillard's Simulacral World

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Introduction

Postmodernism is not only the catch-all term that covers most of the events taking place in Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise*, but also the context through which one can collaborate in creating the text. That is, one's background about the postmodern world, and one's attitude towards it, play an essential role in understanding, interpreting and even co-authoring DeLillo's motifs and messages, not to say the prohibited word "themes". In Roland Barthes's terms, the novel may be described as both a "readerly" and "writerly" text at the same time (1974), in the sense that the reader may either act as a passive consumer while consuming the text/commodity, or actively co-author and co-create it. According to this formulation, one can argue that *White Noise* is not only postmodern, but also realist. In other words, despite its postmodernity, the novel does not adopt an anti-mimetic attitude, but rather questions--aesthetically and ideologically--the postmodern logic behind the rejection of mimesis, or realism, by applying the principle of mimesis to a different "reality" from that of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,¹ a controversial "reality" that is problematized and made a copy of a simulacrum. To repeat, if realism was a representation of reality, modernism was a problematization of representation; and if postmodernism is a problematization of reality itself (Lash), one can argue, then, that *White Noise* is a **realistic (post)modern text**. In terms of the reader's ontological worlds set up by a text, *White Noise* manages this paradoxical realistic problematization precisely by approaching microphenomena through micro-macro approaches-- a concept I will explain later.

I will therefore deal, first, with the Baudrillardian postmodern world of the novel, and then discuss the hegemonous ideology justifying and defending the existence and continuity of this world.

White Noise is the story of Jack Gladney, the chairperson of the Hitler Studies Department, at a college in the America of the eighties, who has a constant fear of death. He and his family live a typical American life. Death controls everything he does, and he therefore tries to get rid of his fear of death by occupying himself with very American habits, i.e. shopping, watching TV, reading tabloid magazines. One day he is exposed to the toxin of the "air-borne toxic event", which implants a time-released death in the form of a "nebulous mass" in his body. All his attempts to confront this situation fail. Therefore, he is left confronting the fear of death, his alienation and estrangement, alone.

By bearing in mind that the events of the novel take place in the 80s--a time during which capital penetrated into all areas of social and cultural experience (Jameson, 1991), and during which image-based information replaced print-based information--one can start drawing a line between consumerism and the role of the media. It was, according to Edward Said, "the Age of Ronald Reagan. And it is in this age as a context and setting that the politics of interpretation and politics of culture are enacted" (1992:248). Moreover, this was a decade during which the American society was placed on the threshold of a qualitatively new era that seemed to be ruled by the "reality" of the simulacrum, a depthless surface/image² (Baudrillard, 1994; Jameson, 1991). Or rather, it was a decade during which the American and the international community were controlled by the ideas of productivity and "free market", i.e. the survival of the fittest.

I will therefore start my analysis of the novel by treating the "new reality" of the simulacrum that seems to be in control of most of the events in *White Noise*.

A World of Simulacra

White Noise is a world of spectacles and images, a TV-saturated, information-based world, a world that seems to be controlled by television which is the main source of news, drama, and knowledge about postmodern culture.

However, by following the narrative interruptions of the TV, it is the commercials and trivial talk shows which seem to control most of the programs. The examination of TV output, then, becomes central to any analysis of the novel, its fictional world, and its characters whose sense of themselves is mediated in significant ways by their interaction with the television set. Even the means through which the Gladney family experiences a sense of familial relationship comes through their contact with the TV. The TV, in *White Noise*, is not only a source of new epistemological experience, but also a new ontological level that doubles the fictional one, and triples the reader's real world. If the reader's ontological world is doubled in the act of reading, and if the fictional world of the novel is doubled in what the TV represents, the relationship between the "TV" and the reader's world is, then, a representation of representation itself-- in which the reader experiences a third level of her/his own ontological world. What all the characters of the novel perceive through TV is, of course, representations and images; their perception, then, is as much directed to representations as it is to reality. Thus these representations come to constitute a great proportion of their perceived reality; that is, their perception of reality comes to be increasingly regulated by means of these representations and images. Their exposure to these cultural forms raises the unavoidable postmodern question about the problematic nature of reality and its relationship to representation. Significantly, the novel comments on the importance of the TV

in the American home through the character, Murray Siskind, a teacher of popular culture:

I've come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring. It's like a myth being born right therein our living room, like something we know in a dream-like and preconscious way. (DeLillo: 51)³

And since it is the major source of information, the TV, again in Murray's words,

offers incredible amounts of psychic data. It opens ancient memories of world birth ... [It] practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness and disgust. (51)

The shift from a modern to a postmodern world is therefore accompanied by a radical change in the mode of representation, bringing with it a change in the relationship of signifier and referent--or rather representation and reality--which is now more problematic because the image has taken the place of the word as signifier: images now resemble referents more than words (Lash, 181). That is to say, the signifier has become a referent and the signified is devalued; this is what Lash calls "the de-differentiation of signifier and referent". Thus, the postmodern cultural forms of social communication generate meanings through "non-discursive visual imagery" which shapes consciousness and behavior. What one has at one's disposal is a culture where image plays a more important role than linguistic discourse. As Jhaly, Kline, and Leiss put it, "iconic representations" have a stronger impact on "affective opinion," and behavior than "verbal discourse"; they can be absorbed without full conscious awareness and without being translatable "into explicit verbal formulations" (1986:244).

In *White Noise*, the daily life of the characters is pervaded with a reality that consists of representations: contrary to one's conventional "realistic" understanding of cultural forms as signifiers which are supposed to represent reality, what these characters have is a problematic comprehension of reality which is transformed and made "flimsy" by its penetration by images. TV seems to have succeeded in pervading their lives, and shaping their behavior and even their expectations of others and of themselves. What the novel does is "reflect" the modeling role that TV has been playing in postmodern American society by providing one with a representation of the preoccupation of the characters with

modeling their lives in accordance with TV images. Jack Gladney, in a significant monologue at the beginning of the novel, explains his relationship to Hitler and how he has become the chair of the Hitler Studies Department in a way that clarifies his self-image:

So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort. The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own ideas, an alternative to the bushy beard ... Babette said she liked the dignity, significance and prestige.

I am the false character that follows the name around.

(17)

Beside self-referentiality and self-consciousness, he is known as J.A.K--a pun on J.F.K--and his wife's expectations of him are based upon this image. Moreover, when his colleague, Massingale, tells him that he looks a "harmless, ageing, indistinct sort of guy" without his glasses, he gets offended; and whenever he is intimidated, he wonders where his gown and glasses are.

Jack Gladney is thus only an image, or even a copy. 1968 was the year when he decided to open the Hitler Studies Department, a time just as the TV began to pre-empt reality. By the 80s, when the events of the novel take place, America was dominated by the TV and its models. The power of the media in the 1980s as represented in *White Noise*, controls even people's "natural" reactions: when the radio announces the symptoms that people may suffer from as a result of the spread of the toxic event, Gladney's daughters experience these symptoms. When the radio announces new symptoms, they start suffering from the new ones. Babette, significantly, asks Gladney to keep the radio turned off so their daughters cannot hear, because they "haven't got beyond *deja vu*". Gladney's response seems to be logical:

"What if the symptoms are real?"

"How could they be real?"

"Why couldn't they be real?"

"They get them only when they're broadcast." She whispered (33).

And even Babette herself starts seeing announced things before they happen. With the dominance of the TV, then, the whole concept of reality is invaded by simulations (Baudrillard, 1994). Baudrillard, who is central to any discussion of

the problematic relationship between reality and simulation, argues that: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal"(1994:1). The simulacrum precedes and pre-empts the "real" it is supposed to simulate since "[the real] is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it any more". And the question is "no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real [itself]" (1994:2). Simulation, thus, subverts the difference between the "real" and the "imaginary". It becomes clear, then, why the status of the real is problematized in *White Noise*. One night the family is surprised by Babette's appearance on TV:

The face on the screen was Babette's. Out of our mouths came a silence as wary and as deep as an animal growl. Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces. What did it mean? What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders? Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Is this her spirit, her secret self?... It was her alright, the face, the hair, the way she blinks in rapid twos and threes. I'd seen her just an hour ago, eating eggs, but her appearance on the screen made me think of her as some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the mists of the dead. If she was not dead, was I? (104)

And the real Babette is not as important as the picture: "[It] was the picture that mattered, the face in black and white, animated but also flat, distanced, sealed off, timeless". Moreover, she is not a human made of flesh and blood, but of "electrons and photons" (104). All the distinctions between the image and the real disappear completely, and the former takes over the latter. Gladney, equating death with television appearance, tries to tell himself that it was "only television--and not some journey out of life or death, not some mysterious separation" (105). However, the most significant reaction is Babette's baby who is completely unaware of the gap between the real and the image. That is why when the image disappears, he simply cries, whereas for the rest of the family the image is a "hyperreal", more real than the real.

Baudrillard's arguments about the simulacrum and the reproducible object world that loses its originality help to explain the privileged status of the image in the fictional world of *White Noise*. In this novel, the notion of the SIMUVAC, in which the real is used to experience the simulacrum parallels Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum: The SIMUVAC is used as a "chance to use the real

event in order to rehearse the simulation" (39). Moreover, the loss of originality and the sense of distance which this loss creates makes people feel "intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television" (65). Very significantly, the whole family gathers in front of the TV and enjoys watching catastrophes:

That night, a Friday we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with the take-out Chinese. There were floods, earth quakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Henrich was not sullen, I was not bored. Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death ... we were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping. (64)

And this enjoyment is explained by Alfonse, Gladney's colleague, as a need "to break up the incessant bombardment of information". Catastrophe is only a simulacrum without originality; we enjoy it as long as it is distant from us; "we know we're not missing anything" (56).

Within this context, what Murray Siskind asks Gladney to do is simply remove the distinction between the signifier and the referent and take the image completely for the "real". When Gladney wonders "whether to feel good or bad about learning that [his] experience [of enjoying disasters on TV] is widely shared," Murray tells him to feel bad. That is, one should feel unique in one's experience and perception as if one is experiencing the real itself. Put differently, the representation must be collapsed into the real; or rather, the signifier must function as a referent as a result of the withering away of the signified. Murray argues that:

This is what comes from the wrong kind of attentiveness. People get brain fade. This is because they've forgotten how to listen and look as children. They've forgotten how to collect data. In the psychic sense a forest fire on TV is on a lower plane than a ten-second spot for Automatic Dishwasher All. The commercial has deeper waves, deeper emanations. But we have reversed the relative significance of these things. This is why people's eyes, ears, brains and nervous systems have grown weary. (67)

That is why he shows interest in Gladney's children and follows them and takes notes: the children, excluding Wilder, are the ones who are most affected by TV; they are completely taken up with whatever they watch. Gladney, for example, watches his daughter watching TV: "She moved her lips attempting to match the words as they were spoken" (84). Even her dreams are haunted by TV commercials. One night Gladney hears her murmuring "Toyota Celica" in her dreams:

The utterance [Toyota] was beautiful and mysterious, gold- shot with looming wonder ... Supernatural names, computer generated, moreover less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence.

I depend on my children for that. (159)

Words, even in dreams, have lost their human dimension. They are "computer generated" utterances that have substituted (wo)man's deep human experience. The unconscious, in other words, is totally colonized, and therefore, (wo)man's sense of alienation is deepened. Thus it becomes clear why Babette has made it a rule to watch TV with the whole family on Friday nights:

She seemed to think that if kids watched television one night a week with parents or step-parents, the effect would be to de- glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome. Domestic sport. Its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power would be gradually reduced. (16)

However, what all of the family members--including Gladney himself--feel is boredom, simply because each one of them has her/his favorite image. Gladney reads deeply in Hitler while watching.

"Hyperreality" is, then, dominant in the text; the distinction between the real and the unreal--for example, on TV and in the SIMUVAC experience--is blurred. Even the unconscious is colonized by images and simulacra. In the SIMUVAC experience, for example, there is no real event, but rather an artificially reproduced one. However, it is not considered unreal, but "realer-than real", a real affected by "a hallucinatory resemblance" with itself. Thus Baudrillard's following words are true of the world depicted in *White Noise*: "everywhere the hyperrealism of simulation is translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself" (1994:23). In the novel, Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal is apparent in the way in which the SIMUVAC, the model, replaces the real event

and where Hitler and J.F.K, the images, replace Gladney, the real human being. Significantly, in the 1980s, as Kellner and Best notice,

TV programmes appeared in the USA which directly simulate the real-life situations ... In this universe, the simulation models become more real than the actual institutions, and not only is it increasingly difficult to distinguish between simulations and reality, but the reality of simulation becomes the criterion of the real itself. (1991:120)

Although Babette, and even Gladney for that matter, seems to reflect on the inadequacy of the TV programmes to reality, she is unable to fight them and free herself from their control over her and her family's life.

The television, then, is one of the major characters in the novel, a character that all members of the family are obliged to interact with, i.e. a family member. The intimate relationship between the TV set and the other characters leads to a radical change in the concept of time and space in the world of the novel. That is to say, the TV world is compared, whether consciously or unconsciously, to the world of the novel in such a way that the boundaries between the two worlds are always blurred: Wilder cries when his mother disappears from the screen. The TV's limitless space becomes an organic part of the domestic space, the world "inside" the TV is the world "outside" it: Steffie repeats like a parrot whatever is said on TV. The empirical world of this American household is mixed, mingled and unified with the different worlds projected by the TV; the "real", "empirical" world is only one of the various, imaginary, unreal worlds of the TV. The TV, thus, refuses to be only watched: in a manner of speaking, it also watches characters as they model their lives according to its models. For instance, the whole violent cinematic scene in which Gladney shoots Mink is witnessed by the TV.

The novel's play with ontological levels creates the impression that the alternative reality offered by the TV saturates the characters' consciousness and unconscious in a way that makes one wonder whether such characters can ever have independent, not to say autonomous, consciousnesses. Moreover, the reader's ontological world, the fiction's ontological world, and the TV's sub-ontological worlds are always compared to one another. That is, in *White Noise*, the world is represented as having been invaded by the representations of TV and therefore questions the ontological world of the reader. The various sub-ontological fictional worlds of television interact with the macro-ontological world of the novel, which is a micro in relation to the reader's macro-world. This dialectical process creates intersections of micro-macro ontological levels and

shows how they interact and mediate each other. That is, the novel's and television's fictional worlds are interconnected in a micro-macro dialectic that reflects the wider micro-macro relation between the reader and the novel itself. Since DeLillo is experimenting with reality, it follows, then, that this reality has different ontological fragmented worlds in which the original one is missing. That is why Gladney--the postmodern subject--has a fragmented world, a world that is not his own, but rather multiple ontological worlds with no *telos*, except death.

Even the world outside Gladney's personal consciousness--university, supermarket, airborne toxic event--is modeled on TV images and programmes. By "mirroring" this TV-based culture, DeLillo does not only reflect (on) TV as a character and a "world" within the novel, but also launches a critique of its "destructive" role in postmodern culture. In this culture, images have become a form of power used to hegemonize and homogenize society by distracting attention and shifting it from any critical revolutionary collective insight and by re-emptying basic reality. In this regard, Michael Rogin comments on the role of spectacles in the America of the 1980s by arguing that "[the] Reagan spectacle points ... neither to the insignificance nor to the autonomy of the sign but rather to its role in producing power"(1994:231). Moreover, he maintains that "spectacle and secrecy define the political peculiarities of the post-modern American empire..." (1994:233). Rogin's point of departure is that Reaganism, in the 1980s, was dominated by Reagan, the actor, and George Bush, the former CIA director--a coalition that did not promote democracy, but rather led to politico-historical amnesia, and to the claim of the end of history.

The reason I am using Rogin's contentions is because they offer a historical and political context to *White Noise*, that is, America in the 1980s. My contention is that the novel does not only ridicule television but also points to its destructive role in order to articulate the existence of an alternative reality in which television can play a progressive role. Television's one-sided representation is a part of the hegemonous ideology, that is, of postmodernism. Hence by launching a critique of television in a postmodern context, *White Noise* calls for the creation of a critical and dialectical alternative. From this perspective, Rogin's argument clarifies a contextual dimension in the understanding of the novel.

According to Rogin, the crimes of the "postmodern American empire" are, ironically, concealed by placing them in plain sight: "Covert operations actually function as spectacle" (229). Rogin then proceeds by arguing that Reagan's and Bush's careers and their presidency are intertwined with two political peculiarities of postmodern America; namely "the domination of public politics by the spectacle and ... the spread of covert operations and a secret foreign policy" (229). Thus, paradoxically, "spectacle and secrecy support each other by a

division of labor, one being public and the other private, one selling or disguising the foreign policy made by the other" (229). Rogin concludes by stating that political spectacle, in what he calls "the postmodern empire", "is a form of power and not simply window dressing that diverts attention from the secret substance of American policy" (1992:230). American postmodern politics is therefore dominated by the confusion of covert action and spectacle; the former derives from the imperatives of the latter, not secrecy. That is, covert actions owe their invisibility not to secrecy but to "political amnesia" since the context of the spectacle is immediately forgotten, not to say buried (234).

In *White Noise*, for example, beside the blatant influence of TV on the characters, one of Gladney's previous wives works with the CIA in Eastern Asia; no more details are given about her secret life. That is, by claiming to represent the America of the 80s, the novel, by implication, does not deny the existence of another side that cannot be represented since it is secretive. However, it is inseparable from what is allowed to be represented. *White Noise*, then, does not only produce characters but also reflects on the context that produces them, a context that is politically concealed. Hence it becomes very significant that Babette suffers from amnesia, and that the whole family confuses political and geographic information with information taken from television (81).

Spectacle has no history; on the contrary, "[it] is the cultural form for amnesia representation, for specular displays are superficial and sensately intensified, short lived and repeatable" (Rogin, 236). The symptoms Denise and Steffie suffer from are forgotten the moment they are told by the TV that they should have different symptoms. The suffering of the inhabitants of Blacksmith, the town where the airborne toxic event takes place, is not reported on TV at all. Instead, it is repressed to the "political unconscious" and replaced by new spectacles that are disconnected from their historical background. As Rogin would put it, all spectacles are covered with a new layer of other spectacles which themselves immediately enter the symbolic realm (236). Further, with the advent of the TV and its spectacles

the whole traditional world of causality...is in question: ... the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between the end and the means. It is in this sense that one can say: TV is watching us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us. (Baudrillard, 1994:30)

Heinrich, Gladney's son, refuses to accept the empirical fact that it is raining because "the radio said it's going to rain tonight" (22). Mink, the mysterious agent who trades pills for sex with Babette, is a TV addict who throws and swallows pills like popcorn while watching and being watched by the TV. One does not know whether he is "inside" the TV, or "outside" it.

One cannot, then, understand the role of television in the world of *White Noise*, the 1980s America, without taking into account the Reaganite regime as a representative of the arms industry and transnational capital. In other words, to understand Gladney's behavior, and the other characters', one needs to relate it to a broader politico-economic phenomenon; namely the division of labour and the circulation of products in a late capitalist society. Within this context, television is not a purely innocent technological medium, but rather a political, economic, and ideological project. That is, all American characters are spectators who consume spectacles either individually, or collectively, and thus their everyday life becomes colonized completely by spectacles as a way of evading the late capitalist division of labour. The private and the public are completely intertwined in the ironic massive consumption of capitalist leisure that encourages false "individual uniqueness". Spectacles, as Rogin puts it, "colonize everyday life ... and thereby turn domestic citizens into imperial subjects" (1994:236). The mass consumption of simulacra operates within the capitalist equation of the subject-object relationship in which the objective world is represented as alternative goods and products that do not only control the subject's behavior but also her/his perception and desires. In *White Noise* Mink plots the lovemaking scene in such a way that it mirrors soap opera sex--"American sex". Gladney himself usually has an erection when Babette wears snow stockings, and when she reads erotic scenes from a tabloid or a novel. The reality of simulation has become the criterion for "the real" itself: ideal sex is the hyperreal sex as portrayed in porno movies, soap operas, and erotic books. The hyperreal is an ideal.

Within this context, Kellner (1998) contrasts the concept of simulation to both "representation" and "dissimulation". He quotes Steven Best's argument against simulation: "Against dissimulation, simulation, too, involves the production of illusory conditions. But where in dissimulation the Real and the True are always hermeneutically recuperable behind a concealing mist or mask, simulation erases these final terms and destroys the very opposition between true/false, reality/illusion. Dissimulation thus allows the reversibility of illusion and truth; in simulation they are too intertwined to be distinguished and are irreversible" (Best as quoted by Kellner, 1998:8). Dissimulation in this regard is a function of the ideologies and misrepresentations that distort reality.

The TV is, then, the cultural apparatus that delivers all information; it is an

essential part of the mass media, an apparatus that constitutes and transmits authoritarian interpretations of reality and reflects the powerful interests of those who own it. What is offered with the simulacrum-based information is what the spectator is supposed to feel and the attitude s/he is to hold. Thus, despite Murray's defence of the TV and its claimed "variations," what is really being screened is not completely "objective" and "free"; rather, there is always a mediator between the event happening and the spectator. For example, contradictory information is given about the airborne toxic event. What one thus sees follows rules and regulations set by those who control the apparatus, by corporations which have interests in promoting some images of reality rather than others. What is completely ignored, by the Baudrillardian Murray, is the political context that is made active and effective by an unconscious ideology, an ideology that the medium disseminates without serious reservations or opposition.

Despite variations in representations, the inhabitants of Blacksmith follow a certain representation favored by the TV. That is, the overall version of reality represented for Blacksmith inhabitants operates according to rules, within certain frameworks, controlled conventions and certain intentions, all of which are determined by, what Gladney calls, "gods of awesome technology". As Said argues in a different context, what is screened, and the way it is portrayed is already formulated in a manner that directs them to an overall version that excludes other versions. (1997:50f)

Ideological Underpinnings

The dominant world-view within, and even without, *White Noise*, then, is a reflection (on) of postmodern ideology. Ideology here--broadly speaking--is concerned with how we, as individuals, comprehend the world in which we live, an understanding that involves the complexities of psychological and social structures. Between these two structures, the realm of communication--involving imagery as a technological process of the mass media--is vitally important. Central to this understanding is Louis Althusser's definition of ideology as the function of "constituting" concrete individuals as "subjects" (1992). Althusser emphasizes the "material existence" of ideology and its embodiment in the structures and institutions of society. Thus the institutions of television and broadcasting are as much an embodiment of ideology as the programme material which is being shown. So the postmodern world which *White Noise* represents, according to this theorization, is filled with individuals who are constituted by the capitalist consumer ideology that is ever-present in the image of mass media. Their sense of themselves and their role in society as ideological constructions are determined by such institutions. That is why Gladney is just an image, a role

pre-determined for him by the strongest institution in an administrative and information-based capitalist society, namely the media.

Walter Benjamin's well-known theorization of mechanical reproduction as a collective experience is not, then, infused with anti-authoritarian progressive politics in *White Noise*. Instead, what seems to be represented is an inevitable relationship of "culture industry" and "one-dimensional" experience that supports the status quo by fostering a position of passive consumerism. The TV, within this context, is leisure that manifests the mechanism of class control. Media, TV, leisure and other forms of the "culture industry" have an ideological role in adjusting and mystifying individuals into a subordinate position by creating the illusion of freedom. That is to say, the inferior position is represented as a form of freedom, namely freedom of choice of commodity. Hence one can understand Steffie's dream of Toyota Celica; the unconscious is invaded with "commodity fetishism". The TV, then, promotes the commodification of everything--even sex. TV-watching is supposed to be an activity that takes place during free time at home when the Gladney family rests, an activity separated from work whose *telos* is the monthly salary. However, the family is still not free at home, the same capitalist relations of production that determine their lives outside home, continue to follow them during their free, creative time. As Adorno and Horkheimer would put it, the TV is a member of the family, advertising for commodities, fetishizing them, and reproducing the class relationship outside the family (1972). As a form of "culture industry" the TV, then, plays a role in structuring "free" time in accordance with the interest of those who own it as an institution. It, moreover, creates uncritical obedience to the existing power: Murray's defence of TV never questions the power of those who own it. It is, for him, just "a medium". And for Heinrich, it will not rain because the radio has not said so even though he can see that it is raining. The TV, as a medium of advertising, never goes beyond the image-commodity to its produced origins, i.e. the workers who produce it. And the question that arises is what kind of creativity is expected from such individuals? Adorno's and Horkheimer's pessimistic point of view is that freedom in late capitalism is an "illusion"; even the "individual" her/himself is an "illusion", and completely co-opted in the "unquestionable" status quo (1972:154). Hence what we have, according to Herbert Marcuse, is a "one dimensional man" whose critical ideas are rationalized and "redefined" by the "rationality" of the given system, i.e. "the administered society" whose aim is the demolition of critical opposition (Marcuse, 1970).

Taken further, Althusser's notion of the "Ideological State Apparatus" confirms what early Critical Theorists theorized: an ISA is the state's means of exercising force over its citizens/subjects, and the means through which ideological dominance is maintained via many institutions, one of which is the TV (1992).

The individual's ultimate goal in *White Noise* is to become a part of the "culture industry" of the TV, to become an image, to appear on TV, and thus accept her/his subjugation freely: when Gladney's daughter Bee responds to people escaping a plane crash, the first question she asks is "Where's the media?" and when she is told that "there is no media from Iron City", she reflects that "they went through all that for nothing?" (92). And when the people of Blacksmith experience the airborne toxic event, a man complains that "there is nothing on network... Not a word, not a picture". He even wonders: "isn't fear news?" (161). People's ideas of themselves and even their roles are determined by the media; their desire, then, is to be accepted and mentioned by this ISA. One's attention is completely shifted to one's role as a consumer of spectacles, rather than a producer. The total subordination to television is, in other words, the product of political and social mobilization in the sense that the "imaginary" is invested with as much influence as the real itself and vice versa. The airborne toxic event, despite its horror and invocation of a nuclear disaster, is mixed with the SIMUVAC to such an extent that people react in the same way to both. Since the real toxic event is confused with an imaginary one, why should they, then, bother telling the difference as long as the reality principle never reaches, directly and forcefully, into their lives? That is, though the reality principle reaches into the lives of the inhabitants of Blacksmith, their reaction is immediately pacified in the course of the simulation of the event that takes place after the event itself. Even though the toxic event takes place, its "reality" is diluted by the SIMUVAC.

The hidden ideological question that arises, then, is whether there is any hope of social change. Or rather, whether there is any form of resistance to the "medium"? In this regard, it is not a coincidence that Babette insists on sitting with her children on Friday night to watch television together; and that Murray's students are against TV. Moreover, Gladney's problematic questions about death mount a figurative critique of TV. Taking the issue of resistance further, the disappearance of the real and its annihilation in representation in the world of the novel, which is seemingly governed by signs, is in apparent conflict with what *White Noise*, as a novel, aims at. That is, the seeming autonomy which signs and images gain and their interaction with each other ostensibly leads to a semiological Baudrillardian world where signs refer to other signs. In such a world, according to Baudrillard,

[this] means simulation in the sense that ... signs will exchange among themselves exclusively, without interacting with the real (and they only exchange themselves among themselves smoothly, they only exchange themselves perfectly *on the condition* that they no longer exchange themselves with the real). (Baudrillard in Poster, 1988:63)

Elvis's life as narrated by Murray refers to Hitler's life narrated by Gladney. And commodity signs--e.g. Toyota Celica--advertised on TV gain significance in relation to other commodity signs. However, *White Noise*, in opposition to this semiological view, as a novel made of signs, refers to and gains significance in relation to an external referent and "ground of value" that exists outside the novel. Put differently, it represents what most Americans do, namely watch TV, consume junk food, read tabloid papers, and buy commodities. Watching TV is, in other words, mirrored in the world of the novel together with elements of resistance represented in the conscious reflection of some characters on the inadequacy of the simulacrum; added to this is the novel's implicit ideological question about the characters' ability to free themselves from the prison house of the sign. One is not just entertained with two worlds, the world of commodity sign and that of the TV, but is rather asked to reflect on the material world that is reflected in the copy--namely *White Noise*. Thus the mere fact that there are elements of resistance represented in the novel implies that the outside world itself is never stable. That is, by critiquing the semiological inflation of the postmodern condition, *White Noise* opens up new horizons in relation to the material reality it is intended to reflect (on). Hence what seems to be a stable world representing elements of power is in fact unstable with alternative elements of resistance.

Baudrillard's--and Murray's--pessimistic views of radical semiurgy and technological reductionism with regard to the role of the TV, its prevention of any critical response and its isolation of individuals in an autonomous world of simulacrum, are ideologically and semiologically contested by *White Noise*. Nevertheless, the novel itself consciously adopts Baudrillard's and Habermas's (1989) views of the invasion of the "private sphere"/the domestic scene by the TV/public sphere. In this regard, Baudrillard maintains that

... the most intimate process of our life becomes the virtual feeding ground of the media ... Inversely, the entire universe comes to unfold arbitrarily on your domestic screen ...: all this explodes the scene formerly preserved by the minimal separation of public and private, the scene that was played out in a restricted space. (Baudrillard as qtd. in Kellner, 1989: 71-2)

The privacy, autonomy, and subjectivity that are defended by the modernist Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" have disappeared. What Gladney, the postmodern subject tries to do, against the flow of Baudrillardian simulacra, is mere contextualization. Hence the conscious presence of other motifs, i.e. of family relations, fear of death, and the

questioning of the depthlessness of the surface/form. Apparently, Gladney does not celebrate the last motif as much as Murray does.

The questions raised by *White Noise* with regard to the function of TV, the simulacrum, and media and society, are, then, related to form and content. Though the inhabitants of Blacksmith, who only obey orders given by the TV, are--significantly--ridiculed, they are still American citizens who spend most of their time watching TV: when they are told by the TV to suffer from *deja vu*, they obey submissively, and when they are asked to start perspiring, they start perspiring. That is to say, TV simulacra simulate them rather than the other way around. The citizens' response, then, is controlled by codes and signs, by advertisements and commercials, by the (super)market and the state, and thus by a hegemonous power that controls the institution of TV and the (super)market, a power that is totally responsible for the toxic cloud event.

The function of television is therefore not only to manipulate but also socialize people and create out of them replicants of replicants in which there is no origin and room for any ideas of radical change. Any libidinal or interpersonal relations are thus "electrified" and reinstated through a twenty-four hour transmission of signs, commercials, adverts, talk shows etc. However, the toxic cloud event leads--supposedly--to a suspicion and undermining of the TV. The fact that Blacksmith citizens' exposure to death in the event is totally ignored by the TV is questioned; their reaction afterwards to the SIMUVAC's simulation of the toxic event is negative--not to say cynical. Is this an indication of their rejection of the superficiality and depthlessness of the simulacrum? A rejection of their own manipulation? A beginning of self-consciousness? Or is it a resistance and rejection of a late capitalist corporation-led regime? Is it, put radically, a legitimation crisis facing the system?⁴ Is it a beginning of a rebellion against the established meaning of knowledge/power formulation in order to establish a new system of meaning through alternative communications? Taken further, is Gladney's violent action against Mr. Grey/the simulacrum, after being exposed to the toxic event, an intervention of radical politics aiming at the production of new systems of meaning and a new society? Or is it an attempt taken by *White Noise* to go beyond postmodernism?

It is this kind of question that one is required to answer in order to contextualize Gladney's social world. That is to say, to understand his fragmented consciousness and make a whole of it, one is invited, by the novel, to go beyond the simulacrum-subject relation and deal with the social and its "absent presence."

ENDNOTES

1- It is noteworthy that even Derrida himself is not against mimesis itself but rather the way its logic is understood, i.e. because it represents itself as "deterministic". He is, then, for mimesis but against "determinism"; accordingly, the signifier and the signified should be coupled through the logic of "alea" (chance) rather than "necessity" (determinism). (Derrida as qtd. in Zavarzadeh and Morton, 1994:90)

2- It is not a historical coincidence that Ronald Reagan was an actor elected as the president of the United States. His reign witnessed the substitution of print by the image/simulacrum which has dominated public politics since then. In the 1980s, military and political events were--and still are--presented to the American public as aloof spectacles. Events like the bombardment of Libya, the invasions of Panama, Grenada, and Iraq (during George Bush's Reaganite presidency), and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon ... etc. were presented like movies on TV screens.

3- All quotations from the novel will henceforth be followed by page number from the 1985 Picador edition.

4- This question is raised by Kellner as well, echoing Habermas's "legitimation crisis" (Kellner, 1989:89). Baudrillard, very negatively, considers this kind of resistance as a "refusal of meaning and refusal of the world" and "a violence done to meaning". Any massive resistance, within this Baudrillardian reactionary interpretation, is a "regeneration of meaning and speech" that may be resisted by the "silent majority", or legitimated by the system and thus co-opted (Baudrillard,

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