

# Technology, Postmodernism, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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*Intergrams* 3.2(2001):

<http://benz.nchu.edu.tw/~intergrams/intergrams/032/032-lin.htm>

This paper investigates the role of technology in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. In the vein of the dominant mode of critical reception, I first argue that the novel's world is recognizably a postmodern one, in which the technology of reproduction annuls distinctions between the real and the model, the historical and the spectacle, and the subjective and the objective. Reading DeLillo's text in the context of science fiction, I then discuss the novel's representation of the crises of body and identity in an information society. Finally, in the last section, which is more or less a deconstructive reading of the first, I attempt to inscribe a moment of futurity into the mythic repetition of the eternal present in the postmodern era. The "airborne toxic event," I argue, is a metaphor for the writer's apocalyptic vision. The violent rupture it introduces into the status quo is both appalling and promising. It is the Janus-face of the toxic event that prevents DeLillo's apocalypse from being completely assimilated into the postmodern symbolic system. Even in pessimistic works like *White Noise*, we detect a remote promise of hope.

## Technology and Postmodernism

In some ways it is difficult to define the already too familiar term "postmodernism." The term may be linked to formal and thematic reflexivity (Hassan and Hutcheon, though the latter is concerned not only with the poetics but also the politics of postmodernism); an ontological dominant as opposed to the modernist epistemological one (McHale); incredulity toward grand narratives (Lyotard); the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson); a de-differentiation of cultural spheres (Lash); the society of the simulacrum (Baudrillard). {1} It seems that the signifier "postmodernism" has become so free-floating that anyone can appropriate it in accordance with his/her need, but no one has a final say.

Yet it is generally agreed that the change from modernity to postmodernity has something to do with the technological revolution since World War II, which has facilitated the transition in a certain part of the world from an industry- and production-oriented society to a reproduction-oriented information society. To study postmodern culture, therefore, one needs to study the changing modes of, say, personal experience, knowledge and art production, and the principles of social organization in the context of technological innovations. The objective of Jean-Francois Lyotard's pioneering work on postmodernism, for instance, is the changing form of knowledge production in the postindustrial society (xxiii). Another influential theorist is Fredric Jameson, whose interests lie in the rupture of postmodern experiences vis-a-vis modernist ones, and in the

different forms of cultural expression brought about by that rupture. Postmodernism, Jameson claims, is marked by the cultural dominants of a depthless subjectivity, a waning sense of historicity, and an end of unique styles, as opposed to a modernist interior or deep subject who desperately needs an individual voice to separate him/herself from a dehumanizing society (6-31). For Jameson, changes of the cultural dominants in the postmodern era are related to changes of the technological dominant. Therefore, one should read postmodern experiences of euphoria and schizophrenia, as well as the postmodern artistic technique of pastiche, as cultural manifestations or symptoms of an age in which electronic and information technology predominate. To push his hermeneutic model even further, Jameson then argues that postmodern technology, far from being an "ultimately determining" social force by itself, is a "distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism" (37). From culture to technology, and from technology to the mode of production, Jameson's interpretation of postmodernism is probably the most ambitious and controversial in its attempt to see society as consisting of multiple realms, which are not independent of each other, but are interrelated in a "totality," a demonized term most postmodernists would avoid in any way possible.

In the work of the popular priest of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, we see more clearly the correlation between postmodernism and technology. Baudrillard's portrayal characterizes contemporary society as a simulacrum, in which the technology of reproduction replaces that of production as the organizing principle of society. If modernity is the era of machine production of electric and combustion motors, postmodernity is that of information and signs governed by models, codes, and cybernetics. The order of contemporary society thus shifts from a production of commodities to a self-enclosed reproducing system of information, computerization, and media. In such a society, signs become the constituting principle of reality, so much so that people's experience of the real is always already a mediated effect of the simulation models. We can no longer, Baudrillard claims, distinguish between the model and the real, between copy and original. In the postmodern era, the medium is the only message, and image the only reality. Nothing "separates one pole from the other," for in the "collapsing of the two traditional poles into one another," there is "an implosion of meaning" (qtd. in Kellner 84). We are inhabiting a hyperreal world, in which reality is "preceded" by the "black hole" of signs, and territory by the map: "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory-precession of simulacra-it is the map that engenders the territory" (Baudrillard 167).

The world of *White Noise*, as critics point out, is recognizably the postmodern one described by Baudrillard. {2} It is a world in which once autonomous cultural spheres-family, school, and aesthetics-disintegrate into the undifferentiated flux of commodified signs. The three main settings of the novel are home, the supermarket or mall, and the campus. Their differences from each other dissolve when they all become spaces of mass consumption. Much of the dialogue and action takes place in the high temple of consumption, the supermarket. At home, the Gladney family ritualistically consumes commodity-images on TV every Friday night. Even College-on-the-Hill, where the protagonist Jack Gladney teaches, becomes another form of the supermarket. "[T]here are full professors in this place," says Murray Jay Siskind, a professor in the college's department of American Environments, "who read nothing but cereal boxes." Jack's answer to Siskind's statement is not without irony, which expresses an end-of-art view in the postmodern: "It's the only avant-garde we've got" (*WN* 10).

The idea that postmodern culture annuls the distinction between high culture and mass culture is already conveyed in the novel's opening scene, which describes the annual ritual of the students' return to college. Here school is not depicted as an autonomous realm of education, but as a site crammed with lavish commodities: station wagons, tennis rackets, stereo sets, personal computers, hockey and lacrosse sticks, junk food, Dum-Dum pops, and Mystic mints (*WN* 3). Shoved ignominiously between boots, pillows, bicycles, and sleeping bags, as Frank Lentricchia observes, are a few books, the titles of which, unlike the brand names, are not even worth mentioning (95). What is implied in the novel's opening paragraph is that in postmodern America a university is indistinguishable from a supermarket. As opposed to the modernist mode of knowledge, which attempts to preserve a certain distance from society, postmodern knowledge is reduced to a mere object of exchange in the social systems of reproduction and consumption.

In Jack Gladney, innovator as well as chairman of Hitler studies at the college, we see how academic scholarship is pulled by the gravity of the commercializing process and becomes a packaged item on the shelves of the supermarket. The reason that Jack studies Hitler is not his personal interest or commitment to knowledge. He is rather like a consumer who, "strolling up and down the aisles of the vast supermarket of academic possibilities," suddenly stumbles upon a goods labeled Hitler (Cantor 43). Reflecting on the invention of Hitler Studies at College-on-the-Hill, Jack says: "I invented Hitler studies in March of 1968. It was a cold bright day with intermittent winds out of the east. When I suggested to the chancellor that we might build a whole department around Hitler's life and work, he was quick to see the possibilities" (*WN* 4). This flat, dry, and business-like statement is a reflection of a character without much motivation and affect. For he could have picked up any other field on "a cold bright day with intermittent winds out of the east." With the help of the chancellor, apparently a shrewd analyst of the academic marketplace, Jack successfully packages himself as a Hitler expert, even though he does not know German.

To say that a person, and not an ordinary person but, like Hitler, an "incarnation of absolute evil" (Cantor 39), is flattened out as a mere token in the capitalist system of exchange is to suggest that the realm of history also collapses into postmodern simulation models. History becomes a scene of spectacles. This foreclosure of the historical referent results in the availability of free-floating signs to be appropriated for the use of unhistorical pastiche. Siskind's flattering remark to Jack summarizes well such a fading sense of historicity, which Jameson regards as a cultural dominant in postmodernity: "You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own [...]. He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler" (*WN* 11). No longer a horrifying dictator, Hitler now becomes a floating signifier appropriated by Jack to enhance his aura as a scholar. For students, Hitler is a standardized package equivalent to "three hours a week" and "three credits" (*WN* 25). Unanchored to a unique and irreproducible existence in a certain time and place, the image of Hitler flows on the TV screen along with evening news, commercials, and soap operas: "'He was on again last night.' 'He's always on. We couldn't have television without him'" (*WN* 63). Such a leveling of distinction between history and spectacle expedites the random juxtaposition of Hitler and Elvis Presley in which Jack and Siskind engage when they trade riffs within the classroom (*WN* 70-74). The collapse of the real and the historical also brings about the disappearance of ethics. The "[moral] question of good and evil" ultimately becomes irrelevant, for what matters is the exchange value of the sign, not the historical catastrophe to which the sign was once connected (*WN* 63). {3}

Likewise, the American landscape portrayed in *White Noise* is postmodern in that nature in the novel has given way to culture. Woven into narrative action, plot, and dialogue are brand names and advertising slogans that splinter postmodern America as well as the postmodern narrative. In need of a coherent consciousness capable of yoking disparate signs into a unified form, DeLillo's narrative mimics the floating of subjectivity in signs:

The Airport Marriott, the Downtown Travelodge, the Sheraton Inn and Conference Center. (*WN* 15)

Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it. (*WN* 51)

Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex. (*WN* 52)

Mastercard, Visa, American Express. (*WN* 100)

Leaded, unleaded, super unleaded. (*WN* 199)

The realms of Nature and the Unconscious, which in modernism represent resisting forces against civilization, now become civilization's replicated images, so much so that a non-synchronous experience tends to lapse into a homogeneous, empty experience. If dreams once manifested the dreamer's repressed desires forbidden in the conscious state, the postmodern dream in *White Noise* is hardly an occasion through which repressed desires return to destabilize the dreamer. There is no need for repression, for individual desire in DeLillo's novel is hardly incompatible with social desire. Later in the novel, Jack hears his daughter Steffie whisper something "not quite of this world" in her sleep. As he listens more carefully, he hears two words "that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. *Toyota Celica*" (*WN* 154-55). Slogans like "Toyota Celica" and "Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it" overcome the distance between the sacred and the mundane, the ego and the id. Like Siskind who sees coded slogans as "sacred formulas," Jack is struck by "the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence" when hearing Steffie's murmuring (*WN* 51, 155). The discrepancy between the individual and the social, and between the existing and the possible, is annulled. No longer a discontented self, Steffie is a compulsive consumer, even in dreams. Her unconscious is indeed structured as a particular language, the language of commodities.

In fact, in postmodern society, nothing is *less* natural than nature. The radio broadcast of the weather is for Heinrich, Jack's son, much more reliable than spontaneous or natural human experiences (*WN* 22-24). For Howard Dunlop, Jack's German tutor, the "multicolored satellite photo" behind the TV meteorologist, and "weather maps, collected books on weather, [and] attended launchings of weather balloons" constitute essential features of the weather (*WN* 55). In contemporary society, everything seems to be readily available for television viewers, as is succinctly and comically exemplified by the advertisement: "CABLE HEALTH, CABLE WEATHER, CABLE NEWS, CABLE NATURE" (*WN* 231).

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Even the sun is no longer natural. After a chemical leak referred to as "the airborne toxic event," people notice that the sun, probably due to some residue of the toxic cloud, has been transformed into an "unbearably beautiful" sight. It is "like a ship in a burning sea. Another postmodern sunset, rich in romantic imagery" (*WN* 170, 227). The "postmodern sunset" is a composite of the most natural and the most poisonous elements in human culture. Ironically, the

notion of romantic beauty is revealed in DeLillo's text not as bliss from nature but as an effect of industrial pollution. And one could replace "postmodern sunset" with "poisonous sunset," or "airborne toxic event" with "airborne aesthetic event" (Frow 176). If Wordsworth sees nature as a repressed and redeeming Other of technology, DeLillo sees it as a realm whose aesthetic form is nothing but a reflection of technological content. In the face of technologized nature, or naturalized technology, a typical human response is fear, as Winnie Richards, a neurochemist, says: "What can you think about in the face of this kind of beauty? I get scared, I know that" (WN227).

A classic example of the postmodern engulfing of nature by simulation models can be found at the end of the third chapter, in which Jack travels with Siskind to visit a tourist attraction, "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA" (WN 12). The barn is located some twenty-two miles from Blacksmith, the town in which Jack and Siskind live. Along the way they see five signs for the barn on billboards. When they arrive, the parking lot is already crowded with other tourists occupying themselves with taking pictures of the barn. What makes the episode peculiar is that the barn's shape, color, and texture as a sensuous object are completely omitted from DeLillo's description, an omission that makes the barn more like a timeless thing dropped from outer space than a material structure grounded on earth. The materiality of the historical and existential object, which vibrates with the call of a lived context against which the object emerges, dissipates into air. Both the tourist and the reader can no longer experience the barn as a symptom of a particular rural lifestyle involving, say, farmers, cows, and cornfields. Rather, the immediacy of an existential barn is replaced by mediated tourist images: the "postcards and slides-pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot" (WN 13). After looking at the tourists and the tourist barn, Siskind delivers a speech on the nature of what might be called the postmodern experience. Rather than a direct interaction with nature, contemporary experience, Siskind claims, is a form of tourism, in which the tourist willingly surrenders his/her spontaneous gaze to the order of the simulacrum: "Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender" (WN 13). Celebrating such an experience of transcendental homelessness, Siskind continues his lecture on postmodernism:

"What was the barn like before it was photographed? [...]. What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura [...]." He seemed immensely pleased by this. (WN 13)

Siskind's characterization of the tourist experience as a collective surrender to the photographic "aura" reminds us of Walter Benjamin's well-known essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." {4} For Benjamin, mechanical reproduction, in liquidating the sacred aura attached to cultural objects demanding people's ritualistic veneration, can lead to democratic emancipation. The proliferation of reproduced images due to technological revolution, Benjamin predicts, will make possible the birth of a critical subject, who manipulates cultural artifacts instead of being manipulated by them. In *White Noise*, however, DeLillo shows that mechanical reproduction actually helps to create a new ritualistic value. Free-floating signs do not necessarily bring about the hollowing out of spellbinding "meanings" or values. In the case of the barn, the imaging technology produces a kind of technological aura. To surrender to the aura is to be incorporated as a token in the self-enclosed, well-nigh metaphysical system of exchange, which obliterates the boundaries between tourism and religion, self and other, and past

and future: "We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception [...]. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism" (*WN* 12).

Indeed, the lack of distance between the representing subject and representation produces a newer mode of subjectivity. Unlike a romantic and modernist type of alienated or resisting subject, the postmodern individual lacks a critical distance from the ambient technological apparatuses. In *White Noise*, human perception is not so much an expression of individuality as a reproduction of already existing cultural images. The traffic woman "in a yellow slicker" is perceived as the woman in a soup commercial, who takes off "her oilskin hat as she entered the cheerful kitchen where her husband stood over a pot of smoky lobster bisque, a smallish man with six weeks to live" (*WN* 22). The airborne toxic event is experienced as another TV spectacle. Ignoring Babette's suggestion to be "more concerned with the billowing cloud," Jack insists on remaining a television viewer and seeing the life-threatening catastrophe as a mere TV image, as if the toxic chemical were only as real as a channel that could be turned off by the viewer: "Nothing is going to happen. [...] Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith" (*WN* 114). When the toxic cloud does affect Blacksmith, Steffie develops a psychosomatic display of symptoms, such as sweaty palms, vomiting, and déjà vu, in accordance with radio warnings. She is "so open to suggestion that she would develop every symptom as it was announced" (*WN* 126).

Likewise, for SIMUVAC (short for "simulated evacuation") personnel, the airborne toxic event is nothing but a perfect model to rehearse a simulated disaster. "Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?" Jack asks. The personnel answers: "you have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real. There's a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that's what this exercise is all about" (*WN* 139). The copy no longer imitates the original. The postmodern world depicted in *White Noise* "has been turned inside out," in which "simulation has become the ground of the real" (Wilcox 351).

Even personal death can be objectified as a third-person image and hence become "artificial" and "shallow" (*WN* 283). Reading obituaries in chapter twenty, Jack tries to defeat his fear of death by imagining the kind of heroic and spectacular way of dying he sees on film. The following passage reveals not only the crisis of historicity in the postmodern era, but also that of the subjective experience:

I want to believe he [Attila the Hun] lay in his tent, wrapped in animal skins, as in some internationally financed movie epic, and said brave cruel things to his aides and retainers [...]. I want to believe he was not afraid [of death]. [...] This is how it ended for him, with his attendants cutting off their hair and disfiguring their own faces in barbarian tribute, as the camera pulls back out of the tent. (*WN* 99-100)

Postmodern subjectivity is often characterized by a lack of unity, coherence, or depth. Decentered by the shifting networks of communication systems, postmodern subjects are

dispersed or schizoid beings. This objectification of the subjective is underscored most profoundly by the figure of Willie Mink, a scientist who invents Dylar (a drug designed to eliminate the fear of death). Even more than Steffie and Jack, Mink is more a composite of TV codes and messages than an existential human. When we first see him toward the end of the novel, he is watching TV in a motel room saturated with the "network of structures and channels" (*WN* 305). His speech, a pastiche of fragmentary and mutually unrelated slogans and ads, reflects a schizophrenic subject forever floating on the undifferentiated flux of "pure unrelated presents in time" (Jameson 27). Here are some examples:

"To begin your project sweater," he said, "first ask yourself what type sleeve will meet your needs."

"The pet under stress may need a prescription diet," he said. "Death without fear is an everyday thing. You can live with it. I learned English watching American TV. I had American sex the first time in Port-O-San, Texas. Everything they said was true."

"Did you ever wonder why, out of thirty-two-teeth, these four cause so much trouble? I'll be back with the answer in a minute." (*WN* 307-12)

Mink's voice, in John Duvall's words, is "the voice of television." And "there is no core or center to his personality" (145). Physically resembling a TV set ("his face was odd, concave, forehead and chin jutting" [*WN* 305-306]), {5} Mink is a living emblem of postmodern culture and the postmodern subject.

### Technology, Body, and Identity

The postmodern interplay between the subjective and the objective, and the collapse of the former into the latter, can be understood in another sense. The human body, which has traditionally been treated as a natural and stable category, is denaturalized by such technological advancements as organ transplants, genetic engineering, and informatics. Rather than coherent and fixed, the postmodern body seems to be constantly subject to change, invention, and revision. Bruce Sterling, a contemporary author/editor, articulates this (over-) "intimate" relationship between body and technology well: "technology is visceral [...] it is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds" (346).

Notions such as mind, soul, unconscious, and reason, which are grounded on a depth or interiority model, are equally inadequate for understanding the postmodern human. Willie Mink can hardly be understood as a man with an interior mind. He is more like a pure screen, a terminal center where diverse communication networks collide and interact. When the Freudian unconscious is replaced by a technological unconscious, human identity also gravitates toward the black hole of "terminal identity." {6} Baudrillard states: "We are in a system where there is no more soul, no more metaphor of the body—the fable of the unconscious itself has lost its resonance" (qtd. in Bukatman 15).

Such crises of body and identity clearly manifest themselves in science fiction. For instance, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), a film based on Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), shows how human identity is endangered by the figure of replicants or

androids. No longer an unproblematic domain in existence, the human is revealed in both Dick's novel and Scott's film as a reproducible information system. In the film, the replicant is characterized by the director of the Tyrell Corporation which manufactures it/him/her as "more human than human." In the novel, the plot turns an ironic screw when Deckard, the presumably human police bounty hunter, is represented as probably another unwitting replicant. Refuting Deckard's retort that he proves himself a real human because he has passed the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test, the female replicant Miss Luft replies: "Maybe that's a false memory" (89). The replicant-human interactions in the film and the novel may be regarded as an allegory of the boundary dispute in the postmodern era. If the human becomes not only a switching point for multifarious networks, but also the sum total of genetic information which can be randomly selected, modified, and recombined, then how human is human? If humans are defined not by epidermal surfaces, which are technically reproducible, but by information flows and feedback loops, then how do we separate them from computational machines? Is the metal body with a transplanted human head in Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* (1987) a human or a machine?

This postmodern crisis of identity is systematically explored in the cyberpunk school of SF writing. William Gibson's now classic novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), for instance, portrays the protagonist Case as an interface of the human body and the bodiless realm of cyberspace (a terminal matrix of information). For Case, the only "meaningful" thing in life is to jack into the computer, enter cyberspace, and steal data. The "real" world exists in cyberspace. The human body, in contrary, is an undesirable "meat thing," a burdensome "case" that pulls the cyberspace cowboy back from the bliss of hyperreality. His subjectivity is defined not by flesh with its fixed boundaries, but by the borderless flow of information.

Working primarily within the tradition of realist genres, {7} DeLillo nevertheless comes to similar conclusions as Dick and Gibson. Postmodern identity as represented in *White Noise* can no longer be fully grasped by the notions of body and mind, and neither can postmodern space by its physical materiality. Both the world and the body evaporate into dematerialized flows of waves, codes, and dots. Technology penetrates the human body, rendering a unique or authentic being an object of nostalgia rather than historical reality. The postmodern human in DeLillo's text almost becomes, to use Donna Haraway's term, a monstrous "cyborg," who/which exceeds the binary categories of human and machine. "The cyborg," Haraway notes, is a shifting and fluid entity that "flow[s] across boundaries" and that can be randomly "disassembled and reassembled." It is a self that can be translated into "a problem of coding" (163-64).

Saturated with the noises of "toneless systems," "the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines," and "a dull and unlocatable roar" (*WN* 36), the supermarket in *White Noise* is a "high temple" of information flows, "the point where forces converge and data are coded most intensely" (Hayles, "Parataxis" 408). For Siskind, the supermarket is a mysterious space in which everything, due to the giving away of materiality to dematerialized data, operates in an automatic manner: "It's full of psychic data [...]. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here [...]. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability" (*WN* 36-38). {8}



Likewise, the home, traditionally a refuge from dehumanizing industrial modernity, is penetrated by the waves and radiation of microwave, television, and radio. No longer an asylum for an autonomous individual, as in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), or a symbol of tradition, as in E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910), the contemporary domestic sphere depicted in DeLillo's text is an "electrical and magnetic field," the radiation of which will "get you sooner or later" (*WN* 175). Penetration of the private space also functions as the figure of a penetrated, subjective realm, and its objectification into encoded systems of information. This is exhibited most clearly on the night that Babette is teaching her posture class at a local church, and the rest of her family finds that her class is being televised. Seeing how the familiar and materially embodied person becomes defamiliarized and disembodied on TV, the Gladney family responds with mixed feelings of fear, confusion, and excitement. Jack reflects:

Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say good-bye to us from the fluorescent screen? [...]. It was but wasn't her. (*WN* 104)

"It was but wasn't her," for Babette is transformed from a "fairly ample" woman, whose physical presence never fails to provide Jack with a sense of security, into a "two-dimensional facsimile" transmitted through wavebands (*WN* 5). What is so compelling about Babette's screen image, moreover, is that it seems to possess "a form of swarming life" that grips its audience (*WN* 36). Much like the seductive as well as horrifying TV set that protrudes its lips to seduce the protagonist Max Renn in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1982), DeLillo's description of Babette's image is erotically aggressive: "We were being shot through with Babette. Her image was projected on our bodies, swam in us and through us. Babette of electrons and photons [...]" (*WN* 105). Resembling a disembodied phallus, the wavelengths penetrate the feminized body. The juxtaposition of human flesh and wavelengths reveals Jack's anxiety that in a postmodern space, the former tends to dissolve into the latter. Even more than "the thing-in-itself" (Ferraro 26), Babette's phantom is like an intrusive and amorphous creature swimming "in us and through us." The human body is no longer a stable fortress; it has become the fluid form of the T-1000 in James Cameron's *Terminator II* (1991).

The postmodern human depicted in *White Noise* is an encoded signifier. During an interaction with an automatic teller machine, Jack feels relieved that his identity is confirmed by the invisible electronic system: "I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate [...]. The system had blessed my life, I felt its support and approval" (*WN* 46). Like the commodities in the supermarket, the values of which are determined by the holographic scanner "which decode[s] the binary secret of every item," Jack's identity is determined by the transmission of data from one computer station to another (*WN* 326). A person, therefore, becomes an exchangeable item, for anyone who knows Jack's secret code becomes Jack. It is no longer the encoded signifier that refers to a signified, but the signified that is displaced into a series of signifiers. Knowing that the system just confirms his identity, Jack acquires a "deep personal value" (*WN* 46).

When humanity is defined as informational signs, rather than as the coherent and autonomous subjects conceptualized by Enlightenment thinkers, the boundaries of what constitutes a human

need to be reconsidered. After his exposure to Nyodene D. in the airborne toxic event, Jack learns from the SIMUVAC personnel that the level of his exposure is so high that it generates big numbers on the computer:

Gladney, J. A. K. I punch in the name, the substance, the exposure time and then tap into your computer history. Your genetics, your personals, your medicals, your psychologicals, your police-and-hospitals. It comes back pulsing stars [...]. It just means you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that. (*WN* 141)

No longer an existential hero, Jack, like other postmodern humans, leads a post-existential life in which perceptions, experiences, and identity are all mediated by technology. He becomes the "sum total of [his] data," including genetics, personals, medicals, psychologicals, and police-and-hospitals. All in all, Jack is equivalent to the "pulsing stars," the arbitrary symbols on the computer screen that nevertheless represent and replace him. {9}

DeLillo's portrayal of the postmodern subject also can be fruitfully illuminated in the context of the discussion of the "author" issue in contemporary critical discourses. Whether as a creator or a genius, an author is traditionally designated as an autonomous and self-determining individual vis-a-vis the material world in which s/he lives. An author is the source of meaning and authority. Such an equation of author with authority, however, is challenged by poststructuralist theorists. By now we are familiar with Roland Barthes's grand, and probably too hyperbolic thesis of the "death of an author." {10} For Barthes, the author functions like a despot who wards off the circulation of multiple textual meanings by unifying them into a stable, authorial meaning. Through a different path, Michel Foucault emphasizes that it is not sufficient to "repeat the empty affirmation of the author's disappearance." A more positive attitude, Foucault suggests, is to "trace a path through the space thus opened by the disappearance of the author, and to examine the new functions to which this disappearance has given rise" (606). As to the space the author's disappearance opens for us, Foucault, due to his theoretical beliefs, refrains from explicitly naming.

One common thread that links Scott's *Blade Runner*, Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," and DeLillo's *White Noise* is the attempt to map out a post-authorial space. In spite of their different foci and concerns, their individual wills to imagine a future by extrapolating from the present are quite similar. For Haraway, for instance, a "cyborg" is simultaneously a metaphorical kind of language that often appears in SF and an objectively existing entity:

Cyborgs actually exist. About 10 percent of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug-implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skin. A much higher percentage participates in occupations that make them into metaphoric cyborgs, including the computer keyboarder joined in a cybernetic circuit with the screen, the neurosurgeon guided by fiber-optic microscopy during an operation, and the adolescent game player in the local video-game arcade. (Hayles, *Posthuman* 115)

Instead of nostalgically longing for the author, or blindly celebrating his/her demise, Haraway

sees in the hybrid and monstrous being opportunities to critique dualistic and hierarchical forms of thought predominating in Western society: male/female, man/machine, nature/culture, heterosexuality/homosexuality, and purity/impurity. The shifting and self-ironic cyborg represents for Haraway an ideal, i.e., non-repressive, mode of identity that is neither an author of itself nor a copy of an author. Cyborgs do not have a coherent identity, nor do they need one: "They were not men, an author to himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream" (152).

Unlike Haraway, DeLillo treats the proximity of body and technology not as a metaphor of utopia, but primarily as a metaphor for death. His imagination is concerned chiefly with self-alienating effects in a post-authorial culture, rather than with its emancipatory potential. In the SIMUVAC episode discussed earlier, technology is characterized as an intruding medium that alienates Jack from his own body and self. By objectifying death as a set of visible data on the computer screen, modern medical technology produces a self-distancing subject. It "alienate[s] the individual" and reinforces what Heidegger terms "the inauthenticity of existence" (Moses 73). As Jack ponders:

Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all. It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. [...] It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying. (WN 141-42)

To say this, however, is not to suggest that a romanticized past, in which a pre-technological and non-alienating self freely expresses itself, can become a viable alternative. Whether or not such an "authentic" self ever existed, a nostalgic longing for it can often have detrimental effects. Overwhelmed by the fear of death, Jack attempts through a variety of strategies to maintain a stable authorship; all, however, are unsuccessful, some even having lethal consequences. The first strategy is shopping. Although the supermarket is "the high temple" of information, which decodes the consumer as if s/he were a commodity, it is simultaneously a space for the consumer to reaffirm his/her identity. Early in the novel, the Gladney family goes to the supermarket. The shopping spree not only unites the family in a euphoric intensity, but it also momentarily rewards Jack with a sense of fatherly authority he desperately needs. Expenditure of money enlarges his ego. Much like the rich parents at the beginning of the novel, whose luxurious station wagons and "massive insurance coverage" seem to have made them untouchable by death (WN 3, 6), Jack and Babette play tricks with death in shopping:

It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number [...] the giant sizes [...] in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls-it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being [...]. (WN 20)

Jack is a "materialist" in the sense that he is particularly fascinated with the materiality of a thing or a person. Weighty and "giant-sized" commodities are especially gratifying, for they give

him a sense of security and contentment. Babette's ample body appeals to Jack because it makes him feel "sweetly rewarded" to be "bound up with a full-souled woman" (WN 5). Thinking that a massive body will give him "dignity, significance and prestige," Jack decides to gain weight (WN 17). Yet Jack's recourse to material consumption as a way of wielding authority in an increasingly dematerialized society proves to be futile. The moment the Gladney family steps outside the supermarket, the sense of fullness of being evaporates and each resumes his/her alienated life: "We drove home in silence. We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone" (WN84). Once again, Jack becomes a father with no authority.

While commodity consumption is a harmless way of asserting authorship, another strategy Jack employs, namely Hitler scholarship, is certainly not so. Although his invention of Hitler studies at the beginning is arbitrary, Hitler, the despotic author of evil plots, later becomes an embodiment of power and authority indispensable in Jack's life. By identifying with the Evil Father, Jack intends to eliminate his distance from the model of identification and *becomes* himself the Father. In the act of surrendering to Hitler's aura, in other words, Jack simultaneously appropriates the aura. Much like ancient sacrificial rituals that controlled omnipotent and hostile natural deities precisely by surrendering and making sacrifices to them, Jack's relationship with Hitler involves a certain deception and domination. For it is precisely through the act of identifying with or reenacting death that he wants to evade death. {11} As Siskind recognizes: "Some people are larger than life, Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you. [...] The overwhelming horror would leave no room for your own death. 'Submerge me,' you said, 'Absorb my fear'" (WN 287).

Identification, however, does not necessarily produce a "positive" social subject. Bound up with an act of appropriation (the identifying subject wants to become the identified model), identification is often inseparable from violence. Lee Harvey Oswald's identification with the heroic models in films, as DeLillo's 1988 novel, *Libra*, illustrates, leads to his attempted assassination of JFK. Likewise, Jack's identification with Hitler nurtures his "proto-fascist" instincts (Duvall, 128), as underscored by Jack's theory of plots and his plots to kill Mink. At the beginning of the novel, Jack professes that "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot" (WN26). Starting from a beginning and moving toward a narrative closure, a conventional plot is most often the process through which the protagonist resolves his/her problems.

The temporal movement can be transformed into a metaphorical space in which the hero or heroine asserts his/her differences from the surrounding environment in order to fashion a distinct identity. A plot's teleological movement, exemplified by the Hegelian dialectical process, is to annul contradictions so that a more encompassing subject may emerge. The relationship between the plotter and his/her material world, therefore, is ambiguous. On the one hand, the former needs to be separated from the latter so that a stable identity may be generated. On the other hand, the separation cannot be completed because it is the latter that endows the former with an illusory sense of coherence or wholeness. In *Libra*, for instance, Oswald, Win Everett, and Nicholas Branch are all men in small rooms whose identities are no less threatened by than dependent on a presumably chaotic world.

All plots tend to move deathward because an integral self needs a self-liquidating Other to define and complete itself. The Other is made, not born. It is an invented, not empirically existing category. Julia Kristeva's notion of the "abject" is helpful for our understanding of the politics of self-formation. For Kristeva, the abject designates that which is expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, and rendered as Other. A discrete subjectivity is constructed through a boundary-constituting mechanism, which involves both the expulsion of alien things and, above all, the establishment of those things as alien (1-31). The construction of the "non-I," in other words, is part and parcel of the formation of an "I" who recognizes him/herself as different from an abject Other, although it is precisely the latter that constitutes the former. Besides wounds with blood and pus, the sickly, acrid smell of sweat or decay, and all kinds of bodily fluids, abjection also refers to waste and corpses that one thrusts aside to maintain a clean self and a healthy life (3).

This life/death, self/other relationship is theorized by Siskind toward the end of the novel: "To plot is to live [...]. We start our lives in chaos, in babble. As we surge up into the world, we try to devise a shape, a plan. [...] To plot is to affirm life, to seek shape and control" (*WN* 291-92). If we look at plots from the perspective of the plotted Other, then plots are linked to death. However, if we look at them from the perspective of the plotting self, then they are associated with life. This life, Siskind says, is obtained by drawing a borderline between self and other, an act that involves violence: "You cannot die if he does. He dies, you live" (*WN*291).

Jack's encounter with Willie Mink at the end of the novel, which reproduces "a Hitlerian narrative of eradicating the other," illustrates the operation of such proto-fascist violence (Heffernan 179). By plotting Mink's death, Jack hopes to gain an authorial authority. He is both the author and the hero-detective of the murder plot, and Mink, not surprisingly, the villain. Although the killing plot is intended as an exchange-gift for a solid material body, during the process Jack actually remains in a highly dematerialized state analogous to a drug-induced experience. Rather than seeing things as they appear, he sees them as intensities of highs and lows in "[a] heightened reality":

Surfaces gleamed.

Things began to glow. The dumpy chair, the shabby dresser, the rumped bed.

The air was rich with extrasensory material. Nearer to death, nearer to second sight. A smashing intensity.

Things glow, a secret life rising out of them. [...] I knew for the first time what rain really was. I know what wet was. [...] A richness, a density.

I knew what red was, saw it in terms of dominant wavelength, luminance, purity. Mink's pain was beautiful, intense. [...] A richness, a smashing intensity. (*WN* 307-12)

This hallucinatory perception of reality is shattered when Mink shoots Jack in the wrist by accident. The physical pain shocks Jack out of his dream-like state, forcing him to recognize the materiality of his body as well as the surrounding environment: "The world collapsed inward [...]. The rain had stopped. I was shocked at the amount of blood we were leaving behind"

(WN 313-14).

The trajectory of *White Noise* hence "arcs from fetishized embodiment to a dissipation of materiality into information, onward to a recuperation of embodiment through violence" (Hayles, "Parataxis" 411). Jack's plan to establish authority either through commodity consumption or through proto-fascist violence proves to be of no avail. Violence does not compensate for his dissipated body and identity. On the contrary, the shot once again reminds him of his inescapable embodiment, the "meat thing" that pulls him back from a heightened reality. Caught between anxiety about the body's penetration by waves and radiation and the recognition of the danger of nostalgia ("The more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence" [WN 258]), DeLillo is trapped in a double bind. He is neither a Haraway who perceives in monstrous bodies an opportunity for liberation, nor a Jack who resorts to Nazism for salvation. Yet he shares with Jack the anxiety for a disembodied self and with Haraway a suspicion of any nostalgic impulses. This cognitive impasse is a symptom of a historical dilemma in post-authorial culture, which signals the difficulty of answering Foucault's call to "trace a path through the space thus opened by the disappearance of the author."

In this respect, the "airborne toxic event" seems to be more than a catastrophe. Blasting apart the mythic circle constituted by the postmodern sign-system, the toxic event interrupts the continuous flow of a homogeneous, empty time, allowing the intrusion of an altered, i.e., unimaginable, future-time into the eternal recurrence of the present. This radically different temporality, due to its violent ruptures from the realm of the knowable, is both source of hope and object of fear. Like all large-scale disasters, the chemical leak destabilizes a routine life of school, supermarket, and TV. Under the impact of shock, what existed before collapses, giving way to an unthinkable future. While the event is deadly, it also provides a way to intervene with an already deadly lifestyle. As Jack says: "To break the spell [...]. To get away from routine things. Routine things can be deadly" (WN 248). Yet can such a traumatic event be re-assimilated into the cultural exchange system and become another homogeneous signifier? The next section is an attempt to read the toxic event both as a postmodern event and a really "toxic," i.e., unrepresentable, "thing."

## The Toxic Event and the Postmodern Event

When *White Noise* was published in January 1985, reviewers were quick to find striking similarities between the novel's description of a chemical leak and the real leak at a chemical plant in Bhopal, India, which killed thousands of people in December 1984, only a month before the novel's publication. They were struck by the novel's "eerily prescient" knowledge of the global environmental crisis (Osteen, "Introduction" vii). In fact, the novel's environmental consciousness may better be grasped as an instance of the public's increasing concern, after the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island (1979), with the nature of the "natural" world. Such American novels of the 1980s as Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), Paul Theroux's *O-Zone* (1986), T. Coraghessan Boyle's *World's End* (1987), and Richard Russo's *Mohawk* (1986), to name a few, show society's increasing anxiety about a polluted and denaturalized nature (Deitering 196-97). The airborne toxic event, from this point of view, is a cultural metaphor of society's apprehension that our living environment has become or will soon

become a toxic dumpsite.

Like the nuclear disaster of Three Mile Island or Chernobyl, the toxic event also reminds humans of their interdependence with nature. While technological development may be beneficial for humanity in some respects, the detrimental effects it has on the global ecosystem, of which humans are a part, cannot be ignored. If exploitation of nature continues, then the end of nature will finally result in the end of humanity. *White Noise*, in other words, is an ecological novel, which warns humans of their correlation with the global environment.

This warning, moreover, comes as a traumatic intervention with the status quo. A trauma designates the intrusion of an event into the experiencing subject, the overwhelming intensity of which makes it impossible for the subject to react adequately. Although the psychical apparatus cannot fully assimilate the traumatic excitations in accord with the principle of constancy, trauma always returns to the subject in the form of dreams, slips of the tongue, or neurotic symptoms (Laplanche and Pontalis 465-73). In Jacques Lacan's use of the term, the occurrence of trauma signifies the interference of the Real, "the brute, pre-symbolic reality which always returns to its place" (Zizek 162). A traumatic experience is beyond the symbolic systems of language; it is an Other that resists the symbolization which structures our perception of reality.

Indeed, one significant role of language in *White Noise* is to shield the subject from being traumatized by the Real. The name J. A. K. Gladney (obviously a pun on JFK) gives Jack a sense of dignity, security, and authority. The German language gives him something "forceful and impressive." One of his sons is named Heinrich Gerhardt Gladney because he hopes that the German name may confer authority on the name-bearer (*WN* 63). In some cases representations domesticate a "thing" entirely outside representation, reducing its unknowable dimension by incorporating it within the symbolic order (Evans 205). The documentary clips of calamity and death on TV-floods, earthquakes, erupting volcanoes, etc.-make the Gladney family "wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping," as if repetition of death-spectacles will safeguard the spectators from the traumatic encounter with death (*WN* 64). Jack's recourse to Hitler, likewise, is a way of evading existential death by means of a representational death. "Nazism to Gladney," as Joseph Dewey notes, "is one of language's supreme accomplishments" (207). By mastering Hitler's speech, which is often linked with mass death, Jack momentarily distances himself from personal mortality:

Many of those [fascist] crowds were assembled in the name of death. They were there to attend tributes to the dead. Processions, songs, speeches, dialogues with the dead, recitations of the names of the dead. [...] To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. (*WN* 73)

Jack delivers this speech on fascism in Siskind's class. Unexpectedly, the speech further increases Jack's authority as a Hitler expert, and a lot of admiring students and colleagues are mesmerized by his exceptional performance. At this moment, death becomes a manipulatable academic signifier: "Death was strictly a professional matter here. I was comfortable with it, I was on top of it" (*WN* 74). {12}

The Real, however, always returns to disrupt the symbolic. While it is Jack's nature to avoid the thing and to relish shelter in language, the thing will not stop haunting him. Early in the novel, a "heavy-booted and bulky" Mylex-suited man is found dead while investigating the cause of chemical pollution at Steffie's elementary school (*WN* 35, 40). A colleague of Siskind named Cotsakis, who, like Jack and the Mylex man, "was a monolith of thick and wadded flesh," dies while on vacation (*WN* 69). Gladys Treadwell, after four days of losing herself in a local mall, "died of lingering dread" (*WN* 99). These moments never fail to remind Jack of his deep-seated fear of death, one of the few "authentic," i.e., traumatic, things in postmodernity that does not completely collapse into free-floating signifiers. Unlike Siskind who seems to be totally sublimated into the order of the simulacrum, Jack is frequently disturbed by the penetration of "authentic" moments.

There is one such moment when he is shot in the wrist. The bodily pain breaks down his structured perception of reality, forcing him to experience the full force of the bullet. Another example occurs in a "mystically charged" moment toward the end of the novel, in which Wilder, Jack's son, rides his tricycle across the interstate, staying miraculously unharmed (*WN* 322-24). This "mystically charged" experience is typical of DeLillo, who preserves in his work moments of "mystery and wonder," as opposed to the reified time of the secular world (LeClair 86). Still another example involves Heinrich's friend, Orest Mercator's ambition to sit for days in a cage of venomous snakes to break the record. Fascinated with Orest's nonchalance toward death, Jack says: "These are real snakes, Orest. One bit, that's it. [...] They are real. You are real. People get bitten all the time. The venom is deadly" (*WN* 207-8). Jack's dilemma, as revealed in this passage, is that while he finds in the venomous snakes an instance which breaks the spell cast by the "Most Photographed Barn in America" or "Cable nature," he is afraid that the intervention of the Real, much like the call of the Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*, may be too traumatizing to be bearable.

No less venomous is the airborne toxic event, which represents the seductive as well as the lethal dimension of the Real. The toxic leak spills out of the confinement of the simulacrum, asserting its uncompromising thingness. It blasts open the containment of the symbolic order and the continuum of the mundane. Its overwhelming force, therefore, needs to be abreacted by a defense mechanism: "they're coming to grips with the thing. Good" (*WN* 113). One major strategy of mastery or containment works through language. By clothing an alien experience with familiar vocabularies, a person or society seeks to erase the disconcerting unpredictability of the traumatic Real. At first, the toxic leak is described as a "shapeless" smoke like "a heavy black mass." Later it turns into "a towering mass" (*WN* 110-11). Probably because both metaphors still preserve a certain unsettling thingness of the thing, the radio afterwards eliminates the toxic content, cloaking it instead in an aesthetic form. The leak, the radio announces, is like a "feathery plume," although apparently "it's not a plume" (*WN* 111). This natural, even romantic image afterwards gives way to "a black billowing cloud" before being permanently attributed a proper name, "the airborne toxic event" (*WN* 110-17). {13}

The Real is both a desirable and a fearful object. On the one hand, Jack's "endless, never-to-be-satisfied search for authenticity" expresses his will to go beyond the endless circle of "a



wholly pre-packaged world whose limits need never be examined" (Reeve and Kerridge 318). His interest in the poisonous snakes as well as in the boy who grows up without television in Western Australia illustrates this point (*WN* 50). On the other hand, the pre-packaged world is also a safe haven, which protects him from being shocked by "real" snakes instead of snake imagery on the Discovery Channel. Early in the novel, Jack describes himself as a "false character that follows the name around" (*WN* 17). His recognition of the split between the name and the referent shows that he is not yet a completely free-floating subject. Listening to Siskind's ecstatic lecture on the loss of the authentic barn at the beginning of the novel, Jack falls into a long silence (*WN* 12-13). This silence signals a postmodern dilemma: Is it "better" to surrender to the technological aura or to be unsettled by an unknown, probably toxic alterity beyond the aura?

The airborne toxic event in *White Noise* illustrates DeLillo's apocalyptic imagination of an altered temporality. As David Ketterer says, the term "apocalypse" involves not only a catastrophic dimension, but also a redemptive one. "The destruction of an old world," Ketterer states, "is set against the writer's establishment of a new world" (13). This dialectics of the real and the possible is inscribed in the final portrayal of the supermarket at the end of DeLillo's novel:

The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. And this is where we wait together [...] satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the racks. Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead. (*WN* 326)

Critics tend to interpret this ending as an expression of a writer who harbors no hope for a fully postmodernized culture. Everything, even the miraculous and the supernatural, is incorporated within the non-referential systems of symbolic exchange. The "technological media," Michael Moses argues, "ultimately create their own reality, they appear to be free from all natural constraints on their constructions" (72). Similarly, Bradley Butterfield remarks that this ending shows "consumer capitalism perpetuat[ing] its own coordinating activity through the commodification of every hope and need." What these critics fail to notice, however, is that even before the airborne toxic event Jack knows that there exists something that cannot be totally reduced to signs and contained by the "technological media" and "consumer capitalism." Belonging to the realm of the symbolic order, social systems are subject to the returning intervention of the Real, as indicated by the rearrangement of the supermarket shelves and the agitation and confusion this rearrangement causes consumers (*WN* 325). Jack's apparently passive waiting at the register is not so much an expression of his belief in an unchangeable future as a hesitation in the face of imminent or immanent change. The intrusion of the Real is inevitable. The liquidation of the old order is a source of anxiety, but it may also lead to the building of a new world order. It is the Janus-face of the toxic event, its obvious association with ruin and its remote promise of hope, which prevents DeLillo's apocalypse from being reduced to a mere "post-apocalypse." {14}

In conclusion, let us say that society's attitude toward technology has always been deeply ambivalent. While Enlightenment thinkers tended to regard technological innovation as equivalent to humanity's progress, a deep-seated fear that it may lead to a nightmarish dystopia

has always remained. From Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to James Cameron's *Terminator* series (1984; 1991), we see how society's anti-technological sentiments express themselves in cultural production. There are no robots, automations, or androids in *White Noise*. The novel's world is a more familiar one consisting of supermarkets, malls, schools, and homes. Yet the novel's imagination of the present society is no less menacing and horrendous than that in dystopian SF. What is apparent is that technological development seems to be an unstoppable process. How to map out a space in which technology may be used as a liberating force is a question that intellectuals and writers cannot evade. *White Noise*, in this respect, can be considered DeLillo's contemplation of or dialogue with technological culture.

## Notes

1. Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1987); Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989); Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987); Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss et al. (NY: Semiotexte, 1983).
2. See, for instance, John Frow, "The Last Things before the Last"; Leonard Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative"; Paul Cantor, "Adolf, We Hardly Knew You."
3. See also Cantor, "Adolf, We Hardly Knew You."
4. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (NY: Schocken, 1968): 217-52.
5. In the play *The Day Room* (1987), DeLillo actually has one actor play the role of a TV set. Here imaging technology literally becomes a living character, not unlike the erotically aggressive TV in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1982).
6. Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*.
7. DeLillo's only SF work is his 1976 novel, *Ratner's Star*. However, *White Noise's* imagination of technology's impact on human identity and empirical reality is so close to that of SF that it is considered a mixture of postmodern fiction and cyberpunk in an anthology edited by Larry McCaffery, called *Storming the Reality Studio* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991): 63-64. See also Paula Bryant, "Extending the Fabulative Continuum: DeLillo, Mooney, and Federman," *Extrapolation* 30 (1989): 156-165.
8. Siskind, however, often confuses mystery with mystification. In reifying information as if it exists automatically by itself, he ignores the structure of social power that overdetermines the circulation of information. A more fruitful reading of the role of information technology is to situate it into a larger context, rather than isolating, fetishizing, and deifying it.
9. For a reading of *White Noise* in light of Heideggerian existentialism, see Michael Valdez Moses, "Lust Removed from Nature."
10. For a brief introduction of the evolution of the idea of "author" from the Middle Ages to poststructuralism, see Donald E. Pease, "Author," *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank

Lentricchia & Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995): 105-20.

11. For an interesting account of how Odysseus's mimetic identification with nature is a form of deceiving and conquering nature in Homer's *Odyssey*, see Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (NY: Continuum, 1969): 43-80.

12. See also Joseph Dewey's analysis of language as a strategy of containing the "thing" in Dewey, *In a Dark Time*, 208-10.

13. DeLillo's depiction of the "airborne toxic event" reminds us of the first reports of the Hiroshima bombing, which managed to contain the traumatic, i.e., unrepresentable, thing by means of representation. The atomic bomb, according to the *New York Times* reporter Sidney Shalett's account, was likened to "power more than 20,000 tons of TNT," to "an impenetrable cloud of dust and smoke," to "an immense steel tower [...] 'vaporized' by the tremendous explosion," and, finally, to a product of an "imagination-sweeping experiment" (1,2). For Brig. Gen. Thomas F. Farrell, it was an aesthetic image not unlike the "postmodern sunset" in DeLillo's novel: "It was that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately" (qtd. in Wood 5). Sidney Shalett, "New Age Ushered," *New York Times* 7 August 1945: 1+; Lewis Wood, "Steel Tower 'Vaporized' in Trial of Might Bomb," *New York Times* 7 August 1945: 1+. I have to thank Professor Stacey Olster for providing me these precious sources.

14. Teresa Heffernan, "Can the Apocalypse Be Post?"

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