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## **CONSUMERISM AND MEDIA SIMULACRA IN THE POSTMODERNIST FRAMEWORK OF DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE***

Although DeLillo seems unwilling to categorize his novels as either modernist or postmodernist, the author of this research claims that *White Noise* is distinctly postmodernist. The postmodern condition of the characters of *White Noise* is to a great extent molded by television and consumerism, which are perceived as tools of the “culture industry”. The aim of the culture industry is to create individuals whose freedom is reduced to freedom of choice among the offered and imposed roles and lifestyles. Moreover, television blurs the distinction between the simulation and the real. Whereas media simulacra are generally considered an important aspect of the novel, the critics mostly propagate the attitude that consumerism is not a major theme in DeLillo's novels of the eighties. However, the author argues that consumerism shapes experience of DeLillo's characters and is closely related to the mass media. Although the effects of the mass media are predominantly negative, television, supermarkets and shopping malls are modern temples which alleviate the fear of death in the fictional world of DeLillo. Jack Gladney, the narrator and the protagonist of the novel, attempts to become an image of a university professor who constructs his identity through consumerism and adherence to a particular lifestyle. Being a modernist lost in the postmodern era, he matures by accepting his postmodern condition. He creates an authentic moment by refusing to act in the expected way. Jack's conflict with Willie Mink, which is a parody of confrontation, symbolizes the only possible originality in the postmodern age.

*Key words:* Jack Gladney, lifestyle, Baudrillard, television, image.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although the majority of critics see DeLillo as a postmodern writer, DeLillo himself seems unwilling to affiliate his novels to either modernism or postmodernism. He asserts in an interview: "Post-modern seems to mean different things in ...different disciplines. [...] When people say *White Noise* is post-modern, I don't really complain. I don't say it myself. But I don't see *Underworld* as post-modern. Maybe it's the last modernist grasp. I don't know".<sup>2</sup> However, despite DeLillo's reluctance to categorize *White Noise* (1985) as postmodern, the novel has a number of postmodern characteristics, such as its self-reflexive and self-referential nature, as well as the use of parody and irony. As Mirna Radin Sabadoš claims, what we have in this novel is a pastiche of popular genres in the place of a typical plot (Radin Sabadoš 2017: 99). Aleksandra Vukotić in a monograph titled *Don DeLillo i poetika istorije (Don DeLillo and the Poetics of History, 2018)* points to a "striking absence of history" in *White Noise*. Vukotić argues that the very absence of history indicates the importance of history in this novel in terms of finding one's place in the community and forming of an identity (Vukotić 2018: 13). Postmodern condition disturbs the linear nature of history, which as a consequence leads to a sense of loss and disorientation of people. However, as Mark Osteen notices in his influential book *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*, the fact that DeLillo "satirizes postmodern culture" does not mean that he either criticizes or glorifies it. The author attempts to find a position from which he can observe the society that he lives in (Osteen 2001: 3).

The postmodern world of *White Noise* is the world of simulacra and simulation. Jean Baudrillard, a famous sociologist, philosopher, and culture theorist, explains the difference between representation and simulation. For him, whereas representation is grounded in the equivalence between the sign and the real, simulation stands for "the utopia of the principle of equivalence" (Baudrillard 1981: 6). In the world of simulacra it is difficult to determine the difference between the real and the sign, which blurs them and makes them interchangeable and easily confused. Moreover, Baudrillard states that simulation, epitomized by the mass media, becomes even more important than reality – it turns into hyperreality.

## CONSUMERISM AND IMPOSED LIFESTYLES

In an article "All the world is a screen: The power of media simulacra in the novels of Don DeLillo" Silvia De Menezes Linardi classifies DeLillo's novels into a few categories according to the time they were published. As she

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Richard Williams, "Everything Under the Bomb", *The Guardian* (January 10, 1998), <http://reports.guardian.co.uk/papers/19980109-34.html>, 10.4. 2022.

notices, “the seventies novels are closely connected to consumerism”, while the eighties novels indicate the transformation of reality into hyperreality under the influence of mass media (Linardi 2003: 234). Nonetheless, we will attempt to demonstrate that, although the impact of the media on people is undeniable, consumerism remains important aspect of life in the ninth decade of the twentieth century in America.

As Baudrillard argues in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, consumption is not based upon the specific needs of an individual (1999: 92). Baudrillard notices a contrast between interpersonal differences in the past and in the present. As he states, in the past the differences between people were real, essential differences which could not be exchanged. Nowadays, differences are artificial, associated with artificial concepts of wealth, status, power. As Baudrillard explains, the point is that “differentiation is viewed in terms of the code” (1999: 92), which means that the supposed freedom of an individual is the freedom to choose one of the offered models, which results in destroying singularity and individuality.

Radin Sabadoš notices that “the space of the mass media culture is characterized by the possibility of choice of defined and commercialized lifestyles. Belonging to this culture is marked by the conscious and voluntary consent of an individual to construct his/her identity by his/her choice of goods and lifestyle (2017: 23)”. Similarly, Heider Eid defines TV as a cultural form that has “an ideological role in adjusting and mystifying individual into a subordinate position by creating the illusion of freedom” (Eid 2008: 13). Eid claims that in postmodern culture freedom of an individual is counterbalanced with “freedom of choice of commodity” (2008: 13). The fictional world of *White Noise* symbolizes the world of imposed roles and lifestyles<sup>3</sup>. As a consequence, we do not have unique and authentic characters, but characters who are representatives of certain groups and types. For example, parents who gather in front of the College-on-the-Hill are described as a homogenous group of people. The narrator notices that he has been watching the same spectacle for the last twenty one years: “The women crisp and alert, in diet trim, knowing people’s names. Their husbands content to measure out the time, distant but ungrudging, accomplished in parenthood, something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage” (DeLillo 2018: 9). The author suggests that consumerism and conformism cause gradual elimination of interpersonal differences. All the depicted

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<sup>3</sup> Contrary to characters of *White Noise*, who choose among the offered lifestyles, Nick Shay, the narrator and the protagonist of *Underworld* (1999), decides not to act according to the offered roles. Ninčetiović claims that Nick recognizes that “his actions do not arise out of his identity, but out of the roles imposed to him” (Ninčetiović 2020: 61). Nick comes to the conclusion that „the real, authentic moments occur only when an individual refuses to live in accordance with the imposed roles and chooses a different path for himself/herself“ (2020: 55).

parents are similar. As Laura Barret notes in an article **“How the dead speak to the living”: Intertextuality and the postmodern sublime in ‘White Noise’**”, the characters of *White Noise* are reduced to stereotypes, people without identities (Barrett 2001: 101).

Jack Gladney, the protagonist of the novel, believes, at least at the beginning of *White Noise*, that adherence to a particular lifestyle and consumption will bring him happiness. Therefore, he finds it essential to “look” serious and intelligent. At the outset of Jack’s academic career, the chancellor advises him to invent an extra initial in order to make his name more distinct. Moreover, the chancellor recommends Jack to put on weight and attempt to look uglier in order to resemble Hitler. In an era when images are more important than words Jack thinks that he should wear glasses with thick frames and dark lenses in order to fit into the stereotype of a scholar. When Eric Massingale meets Jack in the supermarket, Gladney looks very different than at the university. Massingale tells Jack that without glasses and academic gown he “look[s] so harmless (DeLillo 2018: 41). Without a gown and glasses, the image of a scholar gets blurred, and Jack seems nothing more than “a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (2018: 41). Although Jack promises Massingale he will not take offence, he is insulted. To grow in self-confidence he indulges in shopping. Shopping helps him feel as an integrated member of society, important and valuable. The act of shopping signifies a source of exaltation for the family: “It seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening.” (DeLillo 2018: 15) Nonetheless, this way of building up self-estimation has short-term effects. As Stacey Olster claims, the fullness of being, which Jack and Babette achieve as the result of consumption, does not offer protection to anyone (Olster 2008: 88). After the shopping, the family silently arrives home and every member of it goes to his/her room.

John Duvall recognizes the connection between the world of consumption, epitomized by supermarkets and shopping malls, and television. What is the link between consumption and television? As O’Guinn and Shrum claim, most people are not aware of the influence that television exerts on them. Still, this influence, having in mind the fact that television is one of the prevailing “socialization agents” (O’Guinn, Shrum 1997: 279), is great. Furthermore, people watch other people on television, so they can find out what members of particular social classes do and what they have. Thus, what men and women consume and what they do on television “marks their social status” (1997: 279). As Moses notices, “shopping provides the chief means by which the Gladney family constitutes their existence” (Moses 2001: 78). Deeply insecure, when their identities are called into question (as when Massingale discomposes Jack with his statement that Jack does not

look like a university professor in the supermarket) they act in a way the mass media teaches them. In order to affirm their identity they indulge in consumption so as to affiliate themselves to the social class they belong to.

## TELEVISION

Postmodern culture is saturated with mass media. The impact of the media on society is one of dominant themes in Don DeLillo's fiction. According to Douglas Kellner, the author of *Media Culture*, television has a great role in the process of forming our identities, our values, and view of the world (Kellner 2000: 1). Television is an example of Baudrillard's simulacrum.. Moreover, as Haidar Eid notices, *White Noise* is set in the period when "print-based information was replaced with image-based information" (Eid 2008: 2). According to Eid, this replacement was significant because images "can be absorbed without full consciousness" (2008: 3). Images on television are signifiers which become more important than the actual reality they should represent. Supremacy of simulation over reality leads to confusion, since the line between the simulation and the real becomes vague.

The fictional world of *White Noise* is to a great extent a world of images. As we have already mentioned, Jack Gladney is attempting to create an authentic image of a university professor. He takes care that his style matches his scholarly status (at least when he is at the university). However, although he is the founder of the Hitler studies, his status is fundamentally problematic since he desperately tries to conceal the fact that he does not know German.

Vukotić asserts that the media images in the postmodern world "precede reality and become part of experience" (2018: 141). Therefore, according to this critic, it is difficult for the characters of *White Noise* to make a clear distinction between the reality and the simulacra of television (2018: 126). Television is, in the words of Murray Siskind, "something we know in a dreamlike and preconscious way", (DeLillo 2018: 28) which results in the fact that we are not aware of the effects of television. Furthermore, television complicates the attempt of the characters to find a meaning in the world in which, in Baudrillard's words, "... there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (Baudrillard 1981 : 79).

Although the mass media exerts an influence on adults as well as on children, this influence differs to a certain degree. The adult characters of *White Noise* recognize the negative effects of television. Jack and Babette feel confused in the world full of information. They find it difficult to find a meaning since all the information exist at the same time and they all have the same value. There is no hierarchy in the mass media culture; no guide that will help people cope. The mass media exerts the greatest influence on

children. They spend most of their free time watching television. Contrary to adults, who are able to discern the negative impact of the mass media, children seem to be under such an influence that they cannot make a distinction between television and reality. We can recall the scene in which Jack and Heinrich argue whether it is raining. While Jack claims that it is raining, Heinrich relies on the radio weather forecast, which foresaw that it would rain in the evening. Jack is surprised and attempts to dissuade his son: "Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses" (DeLillo 2018: 16). As Vukotić notices, in postmodern age man is compelled to accept the logic of technology (2018: 170), and this logic is inconsistent with human logic. According to Baudrillard, erasing of differences between an image and reality has serious consequences: "The whole traditional world of causality is in question. ... the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object" (1981: 32).

DeLillo suggests in *White Noise* that the power of the mass media is substantial. As Alfonse Stompanato, a character in the novel, asserts: "For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and the TV set" (2018: 35). Whereas Jack and Babette are afraid of the negative effects of television, Murray Siskind advocates a diametrically opposed position. He believes that people should learn how to watch it, how to make use of its possibilities: "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 there in a living room (2018: 28)".

The identities and beliefs of the characters of *White Noise* are formed in accordance with the world of consumption and lifestyles as broadcasted on television. It disables them to face reality which differs from its simulation on the screen. For example, the Gladney family is used to watching disasters on television. However, they are convinced that disasters happen to others, the poor and uneducated people. Whereas Heinrich attempts to warn his parents of the potential threat of the toxic event, Jack reassures him: "I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods (2018: 53)". This scene suggests how the simulacra of television becomes more real for viewers than actual reality – how it transforms into hyperreality. Under the influence of television, which promotes beliefs that disasters happen only to the poor and the uneducated, Jack is reluctant to face the factual reality. Although the air-raid sirens are on, the family does not show any sign of worry.

Another example of how simulacrum becomes more important than the actual reality occurs during the evacuation of the inhabitants of Blacksmith. The citizens are disappointed because the media did not inform the public about the airborne toxic event. Since the mass media informs

about everything that is important, non-appearance of the event on the news implies that there is no real danger to citizens' health. As John Duvall asserts, in the hyperreal world of *White Noise* "what empties experience of meaning is not the mediation, but the absence of mediation" (Duvall 2003: 174). A similar point is emphasized when Bee tells Jack that people suffered a plane crash. Surprisingly, the media did not report about this event. Bee shortly comments: "They went through all that for nothing? (2018: 45) Obviously, the characters of *White Noise* seek affirmation on television. As Eid notices, "the individual's ultimate goal in *White Noise* is to become a part of the "cultural industry" of the TV, to become an image, to appear on TV" (2008: 14). In the postmodern era, "Celebrity, once achieved by deeds, is now reduced to one's single exposure in the media" (Linardi 2003: 236). Therefore, as Stompanato mentions, "If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is" (2018: 35).

One more scene which exemplifies the supremacy of simulation over reality takes place when the SIMUVAC, an organization which simulates evacuations, uses the toxic event in Blacksmith to rehearse the simulation. A member of this group sees the actual toxic event as an opportunity to improve the simulation. He concludes that the SIMUVAC team has to practice more, since the results are not satisfactory: "we don't have our victims laid out where we'd wanted them if this was an actual simulation... There's a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that's what this exercise is all about" (2018: 64-65). The logic of this member of SIMUVAC staff is the logic of technology, which is inconsistent with human logic. The man claims that the actual man-made disaster is an opportunity to rehearse the simulation, as if the simulation were more important than reality, which is true in an era of simulacra.

The fascination of the Gladney family with television and images becomes evident when they see Babette on the TV screen: "With the sound down low we couldn't hear what she was saying. But no one bothered to adjust the volume. It was the picture that mattered, the face in black and white, animated but also flat, distanced, sealed off, timeless (2018: 50)". Whereas Denise and Steffie find the image of Babette very amusing and look forward to Babette's returning home to share the news of her appearance on television, Wilder cannot make a distinction between the image of Babette and the real Babette. When the image of Babette is gone, his reaction is identical to a typical reaction of toddlers when their parents are not in the eyesight – he starts crying.

Both *Underworld* and *White Noise* deal with the difficulty of living in an era of simulacra. *Underworld* suggests that authentic moments are rare and they occur when we decide not to act according to the offered roles. Moreover, DeLillo implies in *Underworld* that death is an authentic experience which

is not prone to simulation. When we compare *Underworld* to *White Noise* in terms of their relation to authenticity and the possibility of forming an original identity, DeLillo's vision seems bleaker in the latter novel. In the fictional world of *White Noise* even "the experience of dying is mediated by technology" (Wilcox 2003: 103), which leads to gradual anesthetization of people, but does not reduce their fear of dying. As Wilcox notes, there can be no authentic identity in the world where "even death is not exempt from the world of simulation" (2003: 103).

However, as we have already mentioned, DeLillo's intention is not to condemn postmodern condition. As Boxal emphasizes, DeLillo's fiction does not reject anything – it rather "absorbs and articulates an entire culture" (Boxal 2008: 43). If his prose tends to encompass an entire culture, it means that it embraces the mass media culture, as well as the postmodern condition of contemporary man. As Wilcox points out, there is no room for heroism in the postmodern era. The mass media "strips society of its secrets, inhibitions, repressions", which leads to the state of losing one's interiority (2003: 98). Instead of a modernist epiphany, the potential heroes in postmodernism are undergoing "Baudrillardian euphoria or schizophrenia" (2003: 100). An instance of this schizophrenia or negative epiphany occurs when Jack confronts Willie Mink. Their confrontation is given in the form of a parody. It is exactly the use of "parody and irony that gives postmodern discourse originality and authenticity" (Brkić 2019: 24).

We agree with Wilcox that Jack Gladney symbolizes "a modernist displaced in a postmodern era" (2003: 98). However, his encounter with Mink makes an impact on him so as to accept the postmodern condition of the world he inhabits. Apart from the fact that Jack's confrontation with Mink is mockery of a conflict, it also stands for the moment when Jack renounces his role of a jealous husband. At the moment when he must make a decision, Jack becomes aware that whatever choice he makes, he will act according to the offered solutions. Therefore, he decides not to do anything that would be considered appropriate. Jack wounds Mink, but decides to take him to the hospital. Doing so, he rejects the imposed roles and creates an authentic moment in the world of simulacra.

The postmodern world is notorious for its immersion in the mass media. The mass media, apart from its well-known negative effects, has at least one positive influence. The television screen, along with the supermarket and the shopping center, is a postmodern sanctuary. In an era when religion loses its power these new sanctuaries offer people a sort of shield against death. They connect people in a group. Being a member of a group calms and comforts people who are individually unable to face the fear of death.

## CONCLUSION

Technology, including the mass media, is a means by which capitalism manipulates people. The goal of the “capitalist industry” is to eliminate essential differences among men by using a mechanism where “differentiation is viewed in terms of the code” (Baudrillard 1999: 92). As a consequence, differences among men are artificial and refer to the concept of wealth, status, power. The goal of television is to create beliefs and attitudes of viewers that are in accordance with consumerism. Since the television is envisioned as a representation of reality, people watch what other people have and what they do. Therefore, they recognize products that people on television use as mark of their position and identity.

One of the most devastating effects of television is the creation of an individual who fits the system. Whereas every man likes to think that he/she is unique, the reality is diametrically opposed. Since we are continually exposed to the mass media, since it is ubiquitous, we do not realize that the majority of the information we possesses comes from the other people and the media. It is astonishing how little knowledge we gain from direct experience. If the television enables us to transcend the boundaries set by time and place, it makes us more dependable on others in forming attitudes and views of the world.

To sum up, the negative effects of the “capitalist industry”, as envisioned in *White Noise*, are numerous. Still, the mass media, supermarkets and shopping malls are our modern temples. They symbolize places that we gather in and where we attempt to alleviate our fear of death. Jack Gladney, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, is a “modernist displaced in postmodernist era” (Wilcox 2003: 98). His maturation is reflected in his ability to accept his postmodern condition. He succeeds to create an authentic moment in the era of simulacra by rejecting to act in accordance to the offered choices. Moreover, Gladney’s confrontation with Willie Mink, which is a mockery of a conflict, turns out to be a parody, a true source of authenticity and originality in postmodernism.

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## KONZUMERIZAM I MEDIJSKI SIMULAKRUMI U POSTMODERNISTIČKOM OKVIRU DELILOVOG ROMANA *BELI ŠUM*

### S a ž e t a k

Iako DeLilo ne želi da svoje romane okarakteriše kao modernističke ili postmodernističke, autorka ovog rada zastupa stanovište da je *Beli šum* izrazito postmodernistički roman. Postmoderno stanje likova ovog romana je u velikoj meri oblikovano konzumerizmom i medijskim simulakrumima, koji se sagledavaju kao oruđa tzv. kulturne industrije. Cilj kulturne industrije je stvaranje pojedinca čija se sloboda svodi na slobodu izbora nekog od ponuđenih i nametnutih uloga i životnih stilova. Pored toga, televizija zamagluje granicu između stvarnosti i simulacije. Dok su medijski simulakrumi prepoznati od strane kritike kao jedna od glavnih tema u DeLilovim romanima objavljenim tokom devete dekade XX veka, konzumerizam nije generalno smatran predmetom bavljenja tih romana. Međutim, u radu se problematizuje tvrdnja da je i u ovom periodu konzumerizam predstavljao značajnu temu i bio u uskoj vezi sa medijskim simulakrumima. Iako su efekti medija i konzumerizma predstavljeni kao najvećim delom negativni, roman implikuje da televizija, supermarketi i šoping centri predstavljaju moderna svetišta koja ublažavaju strah pojedinca od smrti u DeLilovom fikivnom svetu. Džek Gledni, narator i protagonista *Belog šuma*, bar na početku romana, pokušava da konstruiše sopstveni identitet priklanjanjem konzumerizmu i određenom životnom stilu. Od moderniste izgubljenog u postmodernom dobu on sazreva u pojedinca koji prihvata postmoderno stanje sveta koji ga okružuje. On stvara autentični trenutak tako što odbija da se ponaša u skladu sa nametnutim ulogama. Njegov konflikt sa Vilijem Minkom, koji je zapravo parodija sukoba, predstavlja jedinu moguću originalnost u postmodernoj eri.

*Ključne reči:* Džek Gledni, životni stil, Bodrijar, televizija, slika.