

American Simulacra:

Don DeLillo's Fiction in Light of Postmodernism

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The characters in Don DeLillo's novels inhabit a world that is at times cynically hysterical, sometimes loaded with hopes and potential, sometimes with a brooding, stark darkness that is frightening to us because of the fact that it is so present in our everyday lives. DeLillo's characters face angst of the most contemporary varieties. Although Don DeLillo is not a conventional realist or naturalist in any sense of the word, I would not rush to say that DeLillo is a postmodernist author. He is not trying, structurally, technically, or otherwise, to jump into any such camp. He is certainly innovative, but he is content to work in forms and genres that are long-established. Yet the work of DeLillo is distinctly post-modern, in that it presents the stories of characters who face life in a post-modern, post-industrial, televisual culture.



If we compared John Barth, Donald Bartheleme, and John Hawkes with DeLillo, we might come away feeling that in no way is DeLillo postmodern; yet when we compare DeLillo's America, especially in *White Noise*, to aspects of postmodernity noted by Lyotard and Baudrillard, I think we will find DeLillo an apt diagnostician of the symptoms of post-modernism. DeLillo is also an interesting figure in light of the ethical debate of postmodernism. Although he does not take a political stance with regard to our culture, he does look us square in the eye, and tells us what he sees in an unwavering, brutal, tone. There is an awareness of our time in the work of DeLillo, but it is not a comforting one. DeLillo's characters pathetically struggle in a world of indecipherable, de-centered systems. There is no one system that is universally accessible. In DeLillo's America, to paraphrase Yeats; things have fallen apart, the center could not hold, and mere anarchy has been loosed upon the world.

I. The Breakdown of the Metanarratives: Lives Caught in the Systems

What enormous weight. What complex programs. And there's no one to explain it to us (*Running Dog* 93).

Jean-Francois Lyotard notes that we live in a time when metanarratives; grand schemes of thought such as Christianity, Marxism, or Science, can simply no longer account for, and apply to, all aspects of human experience, "the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (Lyotard 37). In other words, there is no retreat to any kind of transcendental knowledge. Science, religion, etc. can't explain away the complexities of human experience. The underlying truth of all things is that the underlying truth of all things is a red herring. Giving up our hand-holds of metaphysical belief, we face the simple fact that the world does not make sense in any simple way, according to any single system.

Lyotard does not think that the breakdown of the metanarratives is a bad thing, but rather a widening of

possibilities. He suggests that we play "language games" subject only to the local rules of self-legitimation. Lyotard is the advocate of a kind of intellectual free agency from all-encompassing systems, which, in their exclusivity, are "terroristic" (63). Lyotard would have us shun consensus-oriented thought, and accept a paralogy that like telematics, "will result in new tensions in the system, and these will lead to an improvement in its performativity" (64).

DeLillo sees more of the loss, more of the cultural vacuity in our age, when there is no objective truth, no metaphysical court of appeals for humanity.

While I think DeLillo and Lyotard would agree that the age of the metanarratives has ended, DeLillo sees more of the loss, more of the cultural vacuity in our age, when there is no objective truth, no metaphysical court of appeals for humanity. What DeLillo recognizes, perhaps more than Lyotard, is that there is something very human in the belief that there must be an underlying logic to human events, that there must be a reason for everything that occurs, and that it must fit into some grand, if imperceivable, plan. In a world in which rational patterns are hard to find, DeLillo has said that offering some reasons is a part the writer's job: "I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it also can operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don't experience in our daily lives, in our real lives" (Decurtis 56). The world of a novel, then, has an advantage over the "real" world -- in the novel, real order can be achieved. The novelist can provide patterns that contemporary life cannot

provide.

DeLillo is obsessed with systems. He recognizes that individuals have a symbiotic/parasitic love/hate relationship with systems. Systems are loops that people get caught up in, but systems, be they belief systems, institutional, mystical, work, or personal systems, are things that people cling to in times of trouble, because if something is part of a system, it has a reason -- it is within human control. In *White Noise*, we see the retreat to systems, and to metanarratives, over and over again. Jack Gladney, chair of the Hitler Studies department at College-on-the-Hill, tries to find solace for his existential angst in a whole series of narratives, each of which might have been potential metanarratives. Consumerism, science, and religion all seem to offer potentialities which, when exposed to the brutal light of reality, are insufficient. Gladney and his friend Murray Suskind, a professor of popular culture, are in the position of appreciating the ironies of contemporary existence while simultaneously being subject to them.

One could say that if there has been a metanarrative of the Twentieth Century, it has been that of consumerism. There is a belief, propagated and disseminated by television advertising, that you can buy your way out of any personal trauma. In buying things at the mall, you may define an identity, an idea of who you are. Jack Gladney talks about shopping at the mall: "I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. . . . I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed" (84). Although shopping may offer a kind of existential relief for Gladney, a sense of control over his destiny and his identity, Jack soon finds that his social and economic standing are of little importance in the grand scheme of things: "I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are" (117). The accidental toxic cloud, the natural disaster, the arbitrary act of violence, are the great levellers. The metanarrative of consumerism falls short when it matters, in crucial moments of life and death. Jack Gladney cannot buy his way out of his exposure to the toxic cloud.

In dealing with his exposure, Jack must abandon himself to another metanarrative, that of science. Science becomes in many ways a kind of physis refuge, a bastion of rationality; a realm in which problems can be

quantified, measured, renamed, and made to go away. As network executive cum film-maker David Bell notes in DeLillo's first novel, *Americana*: "America, then as later, was a sanitarium for every kind of statistic. . . . Numbers were important because whatever fears we might have had concerning the shattering of our minds were largely dispelled by the satisfaction of knowing precisely how we were being driven mad, at what decibel rating, what mach-ratio, what force of aerodynamic drag" (159). If something can be measured, it can be explained. If it can be explained, it can be controlled. When the radio reports upgrade the gas leak from "feathery plume" to "black billowing cloud," Jack Gladney tells his son that it's good, because, "It means they're looking the thing more or less squarely in the eye. They're on top of the situation" (105). Although the authorities weren't apparently preventing the disaster from occurring, they were developing a jargon, an empirical method in which Jack could take comfort.

The third section of the novel "Dylarama," centers around the drug Dylar, which Jack's wife has secretly been taking to counteract her fear of death. Facing the very real possibility of imminent death, Jack becomes obsessed with drug, even though Babette said that it didn't work, that she still dreaded death. Jack feels that he needs to get his hands on the pills, even to going to the point of searching through the trash compactor. Even though the drug doesn't cure anything or stop anyone from dying, Gladney is fascinated by the idea that a little white pill could contain the end to his fear. Here Gladney is reaching for the code of the system, but he is denied access to the metanarrative of science; Jack believes that there must be a solution to his problem that science can provide, but he can't find the pill.

After learning through advanced technological imaging techniques that he has a large growth in his guts and that he will positively die, Gladney is shut out of scientific metanarrative and needs to search for another. Murray, as a purely cynical therapeutic method, suggests religion:

"Millions of people have believed for thousands of years. Throw in with them. Belief in a second birth, a second life, is practically universal. This must mean something."

"But these gorgeous systems are all so different."

"Pick one you like" (286).

It doesn't particularly matter which religious system Gladney chooses, Murray's reasoning follows, as long as it provides the necessary relief.

The last narrative Jack appeals to is a kind of Nietzschean, or perhaps Hitlerian, will to power. He decides that he will attempt to overcome death by causing the death of another. Throughout the novel, Gladney had appealed to his professional life, to Hitler studies, to overcome his fear of death. The idea behind this is that a tyranny so large, a horror so unfathomable, could overpower something as small as any individual's fear of death. However, after Jack actually does attempt to enact his will to power, and shoots another man, he finds: "I was disappointed. Hurt, stunned, disappointed. What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I'd carried out my scheme?" (313). Yet another narrative has failed Jack Gladney, and he must face death with no psychic relief. In the end, even a nun cannot offer him any assurance that death is not the end.

In *White Noise*, we clearly see that the metanarratives fail. Jack Gladney, in his appeals to various systems, finds that none of them are the true grand narrative. In this respect, DeLillo demonstrates the reality of the contemporary period and is in concordance with Lyotard. However, for Lyotard, the dissensus of the individual narratives is not necessarily a bad, but rather a creative process. In *White Noise*, the effect of all the systems being autonomous and not tied into one grand meta-system is disorienting, discomfoting, and disastrous. When all the systems are equal, when all the narratives bear the same weight, and none has recourse to any kind of metaphysical reality; individual subjects are left to fend for themselves amid the frightening, dangerous babble of the narratives. DeLillo's America may be a postmodern one, but DeLillo is

no fan of the consequences of postmodernist culture.

II. American Simulacra

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland (Baudrillard 25).

But as a boy, and even later, quite a bit later, I believed all of it, the institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words. Better living through chemistry. The Sears, Roebuck catalog. Aunt Jemima. All of the impulses of the media were fed into the circuitry of my dreams. One thinks of echoes. One thinks of an image made in the image and likeness of images (DeLillo, *Americana* 130).

Jean Baudrillard notes that: "the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced" (146). In DeLillo's thriller *Running Dog*, most of the plot centers around a pornographic film shot in Hitler's bunker during the last days of his life. The anticipation that swirls around this object is undercut when the film is finally found, and it is discovered that the film is not pornographic, but rather a home movie that Eva Braun had shot to amuse the children. Hitler does make a cameo appearance:

He's a relatively small man with narrow shoulders and wide hips. It's now evident that his pantomime, intended as Chaplinesque, of course, is being enlarged and distorted by involuntary movements -- trembling arm, nodding head, a stagger in his gait (233).

The irony here is thick. The film shows Hitler imitating Charlie Chaplin imitating Hitler in *The Great Dictator*.

People with an idea of Hitler watch a film of Hitler that is not Hitler but Hitler pretending to be someone pretending to be Hitler.

The simulacrum is layered. People with an idea of Hitler watch a film of Hitler that is not Hitler but Hitler pretending to be someone pretending to be Hitler. The incongruity of this Hitler with the idea of Hitler blurs the lines to the point where one watching could not say which Hitler is the more real.

One of the recurrent themes in DeLillo's fiction is that the substance of our society is in fact not substantial, but composed of images of things, of ideas of things, and of false things: "DeLillo's most astute commentators are in general agreement that the America of *White Noise* is a fully postmodern one. For DeLillo's characters, contemporary American 'reality' has become completely mediated and artificial; theirs is a culture of comprehensive and seemingly total representation" (Moses 64). In DeLillo's view, our relation to simulacra is not a simple one. We do not merely disdainfully live in a

world of false things; we embrace the simulacra and thrive on them. Simulacra are a part, perhaps the predominant element, of our life-world.

In *White Noise*, simulation is not just a fact of contemporary existence, it is a comfort. In a world where there is very little metaphysical belief to cling to, the simulacra become something that people can define themselves, and their sense of reality, against. The simulacra, the television images, the radio reports, the medical imaging devices: are considered more real than the immediate personal perceptions of the characters. When "the airborne toxic event" has begun, Jack's wife Babette urges him to turn the radio off:

"So the girls can't hear. They haven't gotten beyond the *deja vu*. I want to keep it that way."

"What if the symptoms are real?"

"How could they be real?"

"Why couldn't they be real?"

"They only get them only when they're broadcast," (133).

This is not just simple hypochondria: the girls, in fact the whole Gladney family, rely on the broadcasts for their well-being. The radio broadcasts, more than their own sensations, effect how they think and feel. In the same way that his daughters don't get sick until they hear it, Jack doesn't believe, or know, or feel that he's dying until his data, a simulacra of himself, is run through a computer. The resulting simulacrum of the calculations is his imminent death.



In *Mao II*, the main character of the novel, Bill Gray, is a famous reclusive author, reminiscent of J.D. Salinger or Thomas Pynchon, who has lived in seclusion with two caretakers for over twenty years, while working on his unfinished novel. When he allows Brita, a well-known photographer, into his home to take pictures of him, Scott, his assistant, is upset:

"We love Bill, that's all."

"And you hate me leaving here with all that film."

"It's just a feeling of there's something wrong. We have a life here that's carefully balanced. There's a lot of planning and thinking behind the way Bill lives and now there's a crack all of a sudden. What's it called, a fissure" (57).

In Bill Gray's tightly controlled household, he and his caretakers have been able to live outside of the loop. The reason that Bill Gray has become such a legend, such an enigma, is that he has been out of the circulation of the simulacra for so long that his image has attained a degree of fixedness. Bill Gray, the person, the writer, has become Bill Gray, the simulacra, the legendary reclusive genius. In allowing Brita to photograph him: "Bill runs a terrible risk . . . Her pictures may reveal that his life has indeed been a mere simulation and not that of the authentically dangerous writer he had wanted to make himself, and the pictures may be appropriated by the mass media to further their obliteration of his unique self" (Keesy 189). The fixed image that the media has of Bill, and the one that serves his reputation well, will be destroyed and replaced by the photograph of an old man. Bill will be a media object, and lose the idea of himself he has successfully inhabited for twenty-three years.

Baudrillard says that our world of simulation, "is infinitely more dangerous . . . since it always suggests, over and above its object, that law and order themselves might really not hinge on more than a simulation" (38). I would suggest that in DeLillo's view of our society law and order are in fact little more than a simulation. The popular consciousness has become so inundated with images that it is no longer possible to determine what is and what is not real. Commenting on the violence in his work, DeLillo said: "I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America" (Decurtis 57). The images of Madison Avenue have so pierced the popular consciousness that if an individual's life does not fit the ideal according to television, he may opt for the opposite, also provided via television, and choose to commit random and senseless acts of violence.

III. Postmodern Ethics?

"How is Hitler?"

"Fine, solid, dependable" (*White Noise* 89).

"All of us secretly favor this destruction, even conservationists . . . We feel a private thrill, admit it, at the sight of beauty in flames. We wish to blast the fine old things to oblivion and replace them with tasteless identical structures. Boxes of cancer cells. Neat gray chambers for meditation and the reading of advertisements" (*Americana* 118).

When *Libra* was published in 1986, because of its topic (Lee Harvey Oswald), it spent a brief time in the national spotlight. Conservative columnist George Will branded DeLillo "a bad citizen" for writing a novel that humanized a national villain (Lentricchia 3). DeLillo's crime was that he demonstrated that Lee Harvey Oswald was as much a creation of American society as was John Fitzgerald Kennedy. *Libra* is not a safe book: "The disturbing strength of *Libra* -- DeLillo gives no quarter on this -- is its refusal to offer its readers a comfortable place outside of Oswald" (Lentricchia 204). In *Libra*, we are forced to confront Oswald as a person. We are forced to see, also, that there is something of ourselves, what we might call our "national character," in Oswald.

Although Will's point can be taken relatively lightly, and we can counter that it is the job of the novelist to make us see what we would not otherwise choose to see, it does evoke a deeper issue in DeLillo's fiction. Reading DeLillo is not a comfortable experience. He focuses on the darker parts of our social experience, and he does not flinch. The problem with DeLillo is that although he exposes some of the more hideous aspects of contemporary (especially American) experience, he doesn't offer any solutions. In some ways, DeLillo is very cold. He can show us the problem, he can make it appear brutal or hysterical, but he can't offer us any balm for our wounds: "DeLillo is sufficiently distanced from postmodern existence to want to be able to criticize it, but sufficiently implicated in it to have a hard time finding an Archimedean point from which to do the criticizing" (Cantor 61).

While Paul Ricoeur can posit a utopia, an arena for critique outside of ideology while operating from within it, DeLillo can't afford himself this luxury. He is firmly entrenched in the loop of our experience, and has little to offer but a deadpan cynicism to takes the edge off of the horror of contemporary existence-- only in a sardonic, dissatisfying way.

What we may instinctually think is evil is not presented in DeLillo's fiction any differently from what we encounter everyday. Not only can Oswald be seen as a potentially likable human being, but Hitler can become an academic subject. Jack Gladney is able to build his whole career on "Hitler Studies." It is not so much the subject, as the way that it is treated, which is frightening. Hitler becomes something like a figure of English Literature, and is approached in the same, flat, academic way. Gladney teaches a course: "Advanced Nazism, three hours a week, restricted to qualified seniors, a course of study designed to cultivate historical perspective, theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny" (*White Noise* 25). In the class itself, Gladney imagines that he whips his students into the same kind of fervor as did Hitler with his faithful at the rallies. This is not a class on the Holocaust; this is a class on the continuing mass appeal of fascism.

Cantor notes: "In *White Noise*, Hitler does not seem to evoke the moral indignation and even metaphysical horror that have become our standard cultural response to the Fuhrer. In fact, the whole idea of Hitler studies becomes quickly comic in DeLillo's portrayal, especially when he links it to the study of another twentieth-century giant, Elvis Presley" (40). Gladney and Murray Suskind at one point give a team lecture on Hitler and Elvis, wherein they draw parallels between the two figures; this becomes a sort of fiddlers duel, each trying to outdo the other with the largess of their figures' achievements. This is a comical, uproarious scene until we realize exactly what we are laughing at: Elvis, the American tragedy/joke, and Hitler, the world's nightmare. In *White Noise*, they are both at the level of simulacra, and taken with same level of seriousness as the packaging of generic peanuts.

While this flatness is a disturbing thing about DeLillo, I don't think that he is guilty of anything other than providing a Xerox copy of the attitudes of the contemporary society from which he emerges. Our response to things that terrify us is to flatten them, to make them seem less horrible, to make them seem comic. The

comedy of Hitler in *White Noise* is the same as the rounds of jokes which circulate after any terrible act; the "Dahmer's Restaurant" jokes, the "Roast Lamb of God" Koresh jokes. If we can laugh at something, we need not be afraid of it. DeLillo may appear numb to the horror of contemporary existence. But his numbness is the same as his that of his readership.

In the same way that Gladney flattens Hitler by academicizing him, he and his family attempt to control their fear of death by watching natural disasters on television. Television becomes the distancing device between them and their own mortality: "The effect of televised death is, like consumerism, anesthetizing. A seeming confrontation with reality is actually a means of evading one's own mortality, giving the viewer a false sense of power" (LeClair 217). The effect of television, perhaps, is that we have become comfortable dealing with issues of our existence only when we are distanced enough from them that we can deal with them in an abstract way.

"The state should want to kill all writers. Every government, every group that holds power or aspires to power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere" - *Mao II*

It is interesting to note that the criticism that is most often levelled at DeLillo, that he is a "heartless writer" who doesn't take a moral or political position, but for one of pure negativity, is the same criticism that Habermas would level at Foucault: that while he can deny objectivity, deny accepted truth, and describe what is wrong with a system, he does not ever move to the next step, and point to a solution, or even an idea of what would be ethically acceptable. Foucault's response is this: "It's true that my attitude isn't a result of the form of critique that claims to be a methodical examination in order to reject all possible solutions except for the valid one. It is more on the order of 'problematization' -- which is to say the development of a domain of acts, practices and thoughts that seem to me to pose problems for politics" (Rabinow 384). I would posit that this is also DeLillo's project. In *Mao II*, Bill Gray's old editor Charlie describes Bill's "twisted sense of a writer's place in society" which may, in fact, be DeLillo's own: "The state should want to kill all writers. Every government, every group that holds power or aspires to power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere" (*Mao II* 96). The writer, in this view, is the whistle-blower of society: by nature a threat to the establishment. Here is the rub: does a writer who is oppositional, who problematizes the established order, have to also propose

a solution?

I am inclined to say that it is enough for a writer to demonstrate a dystopia, without offering a utopia to replace it. We might ask, "In all this ugliness, all this chaos, where does DeLillo stand?" but we do not need to do so. Foucault describes the "specific intellectual," the individual who is concerned with only one part of a (r)evolutionary project; in both Foucault and DeLillo's case, with a critique of systems. Yes, they are in the loop, they do not have the archimedean point to stand from, but it is not necessarily their job to provide a solution or a utopia. Perhaps it is enough to merely notice and identify the problems society might otherwise avoid, as Michael Valdez Moses has argued:

However challenging and disturbing this anarchist writing may be for the perceptive reader, DeLillo's reluctance to become identified with any specific political agenda, his refusal to offer a wholesale plan for social transformation, his steady insistence that he does not 'have a program,' should be understood as the prudence of a theoretically sophisticated novelist who recognizes the terrible dangers that theory may pose when it offers to become practice (Moses 84).

DeLillo is a satirist. His concern is with showing us that there is something wrong; not with telling us what should be done to make it right.

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