Trauma and the Postmodern Condition inDon DeLillo's *White Noise.*

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Abstract

This article grapples with one of the fundamental ethical debates of postmodern times in one of the most celebrated Don DeLillo's novels: ***(White Noise****). The novel, in fact, discusses the human eternal existential dilemma about the life and death issue as perceived by the prominent thoughts and attitudes of late twentieth century America. In this novel DeLillo explores the general failure of the great metanarratives, religion, science and consumer culture, to account for the needs and preoccupations of the postmodern human societies and the consequent trauma on the human psyche.*

Keywords: American literature, postmodernity, trauma, metanarratives.

Résumé

A travers cet article, nous essayons d'analyser l'expression de l'un des débats les plus fondamentaux de l'éthique postmoderne dans le célèbre roman de ***Don DeLillo : Bruits de Fonds (White Noise).*** *Le roman reprend symboliquement l'eternel dilemme existentiel de la vie et de la mort, tel que perçu par la pensée américaine de fin du vingtième siècle. Par ailleurs, le roman tente de démontrer comment la modernité a engendré une existence tellement complexe, fragmentée et ambigue ; qu'aucun des systèmes de pensées traditionnels n'est capable d'articuler sa réalité, causant ainsi un traumatisme psychique et émotionnel permanent aux habitants du monde moderne.*

Mots clés : Littérature américaine, postmodernité, traumatismes, métanarratives.

ملخص

هدف هذه الدراسة تحليل إحدى أهم النقاشات الأساسية لأدبيات ما بعد الحداثة في الرواية الشهيرة الموسومة ب White_ *Noise للروائي الأمريكي (Don DeLillo) تعالج الرواية بطريقة رمزية أبدية الأزمة الوجودية للحياة والموت كما تتراءى في الفكر المعاصر في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. فمن خلال حكاية جاك غلادني(Jack Gladney) وعائلته ونضالهما من أجل البقاء داخل سديم ما بعد الحداثة. يكتشف Delillo عواقب فشل الأنظمة التقليدية للفكر الإنساني كالدّين والعلم والإيديولوجيا في التعبير عن عقدة التجربة الإنسانية والاستجابة لمتطلباتها. كما تفحص الرواية الإسقاطات الصادمة لنفسية مجتمعات ما بعد الحداثة وتحاول أن تبرهن على الطريقة التى تنتج بها الحداثة الوجود المعقد المجزّأ والغامض بشكل تعجز معه كل أنظمة الفكر التقليدي عن الارتباط بالحقيقة.*

الكلمات المفاتيح : أدب أمريكي، نفسية ما بعد الحداثة، الفكر الانساني.

Introduction:

From the Age of Enlightenment onward, the notion of modernity has been equated with scientific development, social progress and individual emancipation in most of the human societies. However, humanity has become gradually aware of the heavy costs and burdens of modernity for its effects on man and nature turned to be disastrous and much more pernicious than expected. It even seems, now, that there is little humanity can do to reverse the situation because the modern societies themselves have become so much addicted to urban life, industrial economy and modern services to envision any change, despite the subsequent chronic trauma and ecological stress. For many observers, then, modernity has become an evil humanity is condemned to live with, as some sort of incurable disease. In addition to that, the rampant globalization and interdependence in the world's economic activities seem to have complicated little more the situation in introducing new agents of risks making of any local event a worldwide upheaval. Consequently, governments all over the world were compelled to erect more and more complex systems of protection against the possible dangers generated by the modern condition. However and paradoxically, they seem to have created an existence as much dangerous as the threats they were supposed to face. They constructed gigantic and complex systems where the individual was expected to feel secure, a world where everything is measurable and thus under control, leaving nothing to the hazards of nature. Unfortunately, all these strategies for a safer life proved to be vain and unable to prevent unexpected events and uncontrollable situations: disasters, diseases and death are still out there. The only change that occurred is that to the natural threats was added the no less dangerous collateral effects of the human activities. Therefore, not only does the question of survival remain entire for the human kind, but the situation seems to have been worsened by the subversive and unapparent nature of the new threats. In '*Platonic Noise*' Peter Euben depicts very well this paradox in which the postmodern man seems to have succumbed to the spells of his own technological ingenuity to the point of addiction, but at the same growing more and more anxious by his inability to control its effects. He further explains that the trouble with technology, now, is that while it has effectively helped man to overcome many of the obstacles to life, it obviously failed to solve the most important one which is death, and it is the awareness of such a failure that inflated the human fear of death to pathological levels of trauma.(1) In other words, the terrible paradox of the modern world resides, as it seems, in the false promise of science and technological development to make man immortal; a situation that explains the growing feeling of deception as the standard attitude of the Occidental societies towards modernity.

Methodology and issue:

In fact and though, this paper discusses the issue only in an American context, the situation can, nevertheless, be easily extended to the other Occidental societies as well. Actually, the American society was precociously oriented towards the appropriation of the new and the innovative in everything, and therefore it experienced much earlier the social and psychological consequences of

modernity than in the rest of the world. Therefore, I will try, throughout my presentation, to keep alive from beginning to end this delicate relationship between the socio-historical context and the psychic state of mind of the postmodern American society and the fictional world of Don DeLillo' novel White Noise. In so doing and in order to make my stakes clear, I will rely on some works of a number of scholars and philosophers who have engaged into the complex and delicate interaction between the psychic and the social conditions of the postmodern world. I will mainly draw on the ideas of Jacques Lacan and Tom LeClair in their definitions of trauma, Heidegger's existential speculations as well as the postmodern philosophers like Jean François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard to try to explain the relationship between the spiritual emptiness and its subsequent traumatizing effect on the human psyche in the postmodern American society and the rise of the trivial world of Consumerism. The reason of my choice of those thinkers is that not only did they articulate much of the reality of the Occidental cultural reality, but also for they viewed literary and cultural representations as reliable articulation of the social scape and psychic state of the postmodern world.

Literary analysis: From disillusionment to Trauma.

In a very interesting book entitled From Puritanism to Postmodernism, Richard Ruland and Malcom Bradbury have overtly stated that "*On European soil … the modern movement was born, but it appeared unrooted. In the United States, it found what it needed; a 'homemade world' where it could grow in what Carlos William Carlos called 'the American grain' ".* [(2)]In other words, and as the preface of the book seems to suggest, whether modernity, as a notion and life style, appeared first in Europe, it is in America that it found home and grew to be a worldwide reality. This is the reason that made the disillusionment with modernity much more prominent in the American context, and also perhaps the Americans had stronger faith in progress and technology to insulate them from all the dangers of life. Indeed, it did insulate them, but not from the dangers of the modern world; it has insulated them from the reality of the world itself. It rendered their knowledge of the world secondhand and dependent on stereotyped images reproduced repeatedly by mass media and official education. In "**An Ecology of Extended Mind"** Andrew Murphie explains with a scientific precision the effects of the total reliance of the modern mind on tele-technologies, or what he calls '*mnemotechnics'.* His investigations showed that, in substituting the real experience with the world by a set of passive experiences, they have completely separated the mind from the world around it, and as a consequence the cognitive faculties of the human mind have become considerably altered [(3)], and this is, in my opinion the most tragic effect generated by the modernization of the human societies. In this context, DeLillo's novel White Noise[(4)] is not only offering a dramatic version of this kind of existence, but it goes deeper than that; it delves into the profound anxiety and sense of loss this condition has imposed onto the human psyche. Through the Gladneys' story, the book explores the profound causes that transformed the old fear of death into pathological trauma that affects the life and behavior of people in postmodern

America. Early in the novel, we are introduced to characters severed from the reality of a world they could no longer control. There is a scene in the novel where Jack Gladney, a university professor and head of the department of Hitler Studies, and also the main character of the story, is arguing with his son Heinrich about the human capacities to apprehend the reality of the world. Symbolically, the conversation was about the day weather forecast; while the radio was announcing that it would rain the following day, his father noticed that it has already started to rain. Unexpectedly, Heinrich's reaction was to make his father doubting his own senses and capacity of observation on the pretext that the human mind is unable to discriminate between illusion and reality. In fact, the conversation runs on over two pages in which Heinrich tries to convince his father that laboratory experiments proved that the human senses do mistake very often unlike the modern tools, and therefore, the radio forecast is more trustworthy than what they may feel or see. This is a symbolic articulation of man's steady loss of confidence in his own natural faculties. Jack observes sadly at the end of the conversation that this is the era of the "*victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos. Science finest hour*" (24).

What we may deduce from this scene, and throughout the whole book in fact, is that , then, modernity and its technological achievements and modern systems did not only fail to improve anything from the human tragic destiny, but worst it put the world beyond man's capacities of comprehension. In other words, science did not only fail to keep its promise for immortality, but it became itself a source of death and unpredictable dangers. It is the knowledge of such a reality that imposed on the human psyche greater confusions, a sense of loss and a profound loneliness. At the very beginning of the novel, Jack Gladney noticed anxiously that: '*Dying is a quality of the air. It's everywhere and nowhere. Men shout as they die, to be noticed, remembered for a second or two*' (38). This general impression is articulated with further strength through the description of the evacuation of one of the town's schools:

They had to evacuate the grade school on Tuesday. Kids were getting headaches and eye irritations, tasting metal in their mouths. A teacher rolled on the floor and spoke foreign languages. No one knew what was wrong. Investigators said it could be the ventilating system, the paint or varnish, the foam insulation, the electric insulation, the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by microcomputers, the asbestos fireproofing, the adhesive on shipping containers, the fumes from the chlorinated pool, or perhaps something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things. (35)

This is, as it seems, the condition of modern man's existence, surrounded and overwhelmed, as it were, by commodities supposed to make his life better, but he neither understands nor controls. Therefore, he is in need for greater protection than ever before, and starts to wonder whether the world before was safer than the one he created. This nostalgic longing for the past in the western societies is itself, as Euben explains in the same article, a regressive movement and symptomatic of a spiritual anxiety. [(5)] This state of mind is shown in the novel through the effects of a toxic cloud called the

Airborne Toxic Event which, indeed, is an accurate portrayal of the impact of the modern conditions over the human life. At the beginning, when the danger was announced in the mass media, the talk was about a "*feathery plume*" of "*Nyodene Derivate*" (111) and introduced to the population as a benign and a harmless thing (124). Even its annunciation didn't bother too much the Gladneys who were convinced, like all the other characters of the novel that they were under the protection of a modern and powerful system devised to prevent and control any event at any time, as Jack put it:

These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in a way that's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods; people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornados. I am a college professor. 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. (114)

It is gradually that the Gladneys, at the same time of the rest Blacksmith community, started to realize the scale of the event and to doubt the ability of the government's emergency arrangements to face the situation. Then, terror started to grip the population and the lack of official information inflated their anxious state of mind and sense of loss. What we come to understand, actually, from all the seizing scenes in this fictive situation of the *Airborne Toxic Event* is that the modern societies have just started to realize the extent of the fragility of their existence. Symbolically in the novel, Jack's reaction to the experience was, indeed, regressive for his mind was sent back to a remote phase of the human history which made him feeling that he was still sharing with his ancestors the same threats and fears of total annihilation. The situation has even been worsened for, unlike his former ancestors, the nature of the danger is beyond the human capacities of perception. Jack observes with awe that: "*Man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death*" (22). Furthermore, and as the novel advances, we grow gradually aware that this "*dark black breathing thing of smoke*" does not simply reflect the ecological devastating effects of modernity, but more tragically it announces the penetration of death deep into the vital sources of life itself. In depicting the night of the tragic evacuation of the town, Jack offers a vivid picture of the tragedy:

The men in Mylex suits moved with a lunar caution. Each step was the exercise of some anxiety not provided for by instinct. Fire and explosion were not the inherent dangers here. This death would penetrate, seep into genes, show itself in bodies yet unborn. (116)

Attendant with this, a general feeling throughout the novel that there is something ominous in the kind of life generated by modernity, and which seems to challenge any system of protection, is observed. This feeling seems to have been generated by the fact that technology itself seems to be incompetent to confine its own effects. In this context, Euben's analysis of the novel is very pertinent because it portrays cartoonish characters whose minds are crippled by constant fear, and unable to decipher the codes of their

own environment. (6) Their response to the ecological disaster around them is reduced to a set of instinctive primitive reactions, and this explains the reason why at the most critical moment of the event, the population, like the Gladney family, run instinctively to hide in the suburban areas like their ancestors would have run to caves in front of dangers. Actually, the whole tragedy of the postmodern human condition has been worked out in the novel throughout the seizing picture, in chapter 21, of a community terrified by a gigantic cloud flying over their heads "*like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings"* and an amazing scene "*of people trudging across the snowy overpass with children, food, belongings, a tragic army of the dispossessed"* (127). The threat, this time, seems to reach a scale stronger than anything they have experienced before, stronger than the seasonal perversion, floods or tornados; this is a man made sort of death. After the Nyodene D release and at the critical moments of the evacuation, Jack depicts a tragic scene of marching people through blinding snow and into the dark towards improvised camps, keeping their children close to them and carrying what they could, in a striking similarity to ancestral tragedies, *"they",* in his own words *"seemed to be part of some ancient destiny, connected in doom and ruin to a whole history of people trekking across wasted landscapes. There was an epic quality about them that made me wonder for the first time at the scope of our predicament*" (122). Later on, in the camps, swarms of people gathered to listen to speeches and one-to-one talks, recalling remote times and old images of primitive communal rituals to exhort evil out of the community. As it appears in the novel, then, the modern society boils down, in critical moments, to a kind of tribal order and clannish groupings adhering to "*magic and superstition*" (where) " *objective reality is likely to be misinterpreted*" (82). It is clear here that DeLillo meant this scene to be the embodiment of the postmodern civilization just discovering its fragility in front of new impending forces, and now, like in the past, "*wars, famines, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions… floods, tornados, epidemics of strange new diseases*" (131) all along with "*man-made events*" (124) are inexorably threatening to dissolve human existence.

It is through such scenes that the author masterly portrays what is at the origin of the sense of helplessness and loss so characteristic of the modern psyche. Jack's reflection on his own state of mind, and his family's, after the event, illustrates very well the situation:

Shouldn't they paralyze us? How is it that we can survive them … How is it no one sees how deeply afraid we were, last night, this morning? Is it something we all hide from each other by mutual consent? Or do we share the same secret without knowing it? (198)

Jack like all the characters of the novel seems to be obsessed by the eventuality of total dissolution and paralyzed by the idea of being "*defenseless against* (such) *racking fears*" (47). There is an attempt in the novel to show the scale of the sense of terror that inhabits the characters of the novel though the description of Wilder's, Babette's younger child, whole day lasting cry. The child started weeping suddenly and without any obvious reason from morning to late afternoon and stopped as suddenly as it started. At first, Jack describes the

child's weeping as " *rhythmic urgency … inarticulate mournful sound … expressions of Mideastern lament, of an anguish so accessible that rushes to overwhelm whatever caused it …*" (to become) " *a sound of inbred desolation*" (77). Then gradually, the lament transforms into the expression of Jack's own anguish and obliquely that of the whole community. Jack attests that:

The huge lament continued, wave on wave. It was a sound so large and pure I could almost listen to it, try consciously to apprehend it, as one sets up a mental register in a concert or theater. … He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. … I let it wash over me, like rain in sheets. I entered it in a sense. I let it fall and tumble across my face and chest. I began to think he had disappeared inside his wailing noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility (…) I sat there nodding sagely. (79)

In fact, Jack's response to the child's lament confirms the existence of a deep anguish that he tries vainly to grasp though others' traumatic experience with fear and awe. Later in the novel, he seems to share with the passengers of a plane crash their anxious attempt to detach themselves from their terrible experience in order to understand their own terror. They come to listen to the tale of their own experience told by someone else, as though he were speaking on their behalf in order, as the narrator observes, to " *reinhabit their earthbound bodies, … linger with their terror, keep it separate and intact for just a while longer*" (91). In these scenes of the story, the protagonist seems to be aware about his own dread and awe; however he is unable to take hold of its nature and size, thus, impossible to articulate or give form, but the nature and size of which are eluding his capacities of articulation.

We are, here, in a situation beyond the simple crisis for it cannot be framed or expressed; hence, it becomes impossible to be contained at the psychological and social levels. Isn't this the perfect definition of trauma: a crisis that cannot be framed? Jacques Lacan defines trauma as the consequence of a *Real* that can never be completely grasped or lived, like an experience that is not mentally experienced or framed enough to constitute a usable knowledge. Trauma, accordingly, can be defined as a state of mind caused by the feeling that the reality lies beyond reach; a feeling that grows, very often, to a mental confusion and anxiety escaping the control of the rational faculties of the mind. However, and even though traumatic states elude individual cognitive faculties, they nevertheless possess their own symptomatic modes of expression like repetition compulsions, anxiety and constant dread. [(7)]. In the novel, this idea is expressed through a number of scenes in which the characters live moments of uncontrollable emotion compelling them to irrational behavior, even to death, like old Gladys Treadwell who, according to the doctor, died from "*lingering dread*" (99), after being lost in a supermarket for four days and nights. There is also the scene in chapter eleven, where Jack wakes up suddenly in the middle of the night in " *the grip of a death sweat…*", lacking even the force and will to move from his own bed. When he finally did, he started to speculate about his own death

making an irrational relationship between his death and the digital clock numbers (47). Another symptom of the traumatic state of the characters is the unceasing need to watch repeatedly television violent scenes like car crashes or natural catastrophes. We are informed that the Gladney family used to gather every Friday, as a compulsory ritual, to watch television, but not any program. Jack tells us that:

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

Tom LeClair, in his analysis of the novel, interprets the scene as the expression of a mental pathology of individuals trying to objectify their own terror through others' experiences with awes and dreads. (8) It is, perhaps, the only way for them to have an objective sight of something commensurate to their own fears, thinking that in detaching themselves from it they would be able to control it. He further argues that "… *The effect of televised death is, like consumerism, anesthetizing. A seeming confrontation with reality is actually a means of evading one's mortality, giving the viewer false sense of power*". (9) Likewise, terror seems to compel the individual, very often, to selfish attitudes and to a kind of guilty satisfaction to see others dying and to be safe at that moment, a kind of temporary truce, now that death has got its tribute of human lives, as Murray has put it "*better them than me" (294).*

It is only in chapter twenty that Jack dares articulate a little of his anxiety which he shares with the rest of human kind, which is the knowledge that he must die. It is at this moment of the story that he discovers, along with the reader in fact, that at the origin of his incurable sadness and anguish is that terrible awareness of his finite destiny, and that what he envies in children like Wilder, and even in the least of animals, is the ignorance of such a truth. Right from the beginning of the novel, Jack and Babette feel a sort of attraction towards Wielder, almost a need they couldn't explain; the very presence of the child seems to provide them with some sort of pleasure and temporary relief. However, it is Murray, speaking very often on behalf of the author, who articulates for them the reason for this attraction and why they want "*to get close to him, touch him, look at him, breathe in him.*" (289). In fact, what they envy and cherish most in the child is his ignorance of death, which is itself a blessing that exempts him from harm, fear and anguish, and as Murray attests: " *the child is everything, the adult nothing*" (290). Therefore, we grow gradually aware, all along with the protagonists themselves, of the nature of their own tragedy, which is the failure to accommodate or just to repress the crushing knowledge that there is no possible escape from death. In this novel, DeLillo's reliance on Heidegger's existentialism is evident; he, indeed, attempts to set some of Heidegger's interrogations against a

postmodern context. For Heidegger, man has always been obsessed by the idea that living is also approaching inexorably death and has, and as a matter of fact, resorted in the past to religion and in more recent times to science and technology for relief. (10) Nevertheless, and as it appears in the novel, there is no way to get around death; neither religion nor technology seems to provide man with means to face his finite destiny (291). In fact, it is the failure of all these beliefs, convictions and knowledge to save him from his terrible end which inflates his fear of death to a traumatic level.

Visibly, one aspect of DeLillo's novel discusses the dramatic effects of the decline of the traditional spiritual systems in the Occidental societies. Like Jean-François Lyotard, DeLillo grew very early aware that the postmodern world has definitely become impenetrable and de-centered, and without any accessible system through which the individual can give sense to his life. Lyotard has observed that the human experience has become so much complex that the traditional grand narratives, or metanarratives, like religion, ideology or science, (11) and even the three at the same time, are unable to provide man with any operational spiritual system that could help him to give meaning to existence. He declared that: "*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".* (12) Hencefore, severed from any metaphysical belief, and left alone, the postmodern mind feels completely lost within a world growing more and more meaningless. This is masterly worked out in the novel through Jack's desperate and vain appeals to various systems to find a solution to his exposure to the toxic substance, but unable to find any answer. He first relied on science hoping to find a cure or a solution to change from the inevitable death that entered his body. However, and even though technology seems to be able to identify the death agent, it cannot change anything of its lethal effects. Even *Dylar*, this "*wonderful piece of technology (…) a drug-delivery system*" (188), of high precision that releases some sort of experimental "*psychopharmaceutical*" (189) substances to interact with distant parts of the human brain, failed totally to cure Jack from his terrible anguish. Thereafter, he turned to religion for spiritual relief, but religion itself seems so tragically helpless to provide him even with the least of hopes, that of an afterlife perspective. Through Jack's situation, then, DeLillo expresses the helplessness of the postmodern mind and its loneliness to face his anxieties and fears. In Simulations, Jean Baudrillard articulates very well the pathology of the age where the human mind, in losing total control over its environment, abandons himself to a trivial world of artificialities as a vain substitute. (13) There is a scene at the very end of the novel in which Jacks debates with a nun about faith; at first he was shocked to hear that the nun, like all the other nuns, has no faith at all and wouldn't believe in such old human crudities. She confesses to Jack that, in a world of fake and simulacra, pretense itself is a form of faith, and as she says:

Our pretense is a dedication. Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that

someone believe. Wild-eyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are left to believe. Fools, children. Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure that they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely. Hell is when no one believes. ... We are your fools, your madwomen, rising at dawn to pray, lighting candles, asking statues for good health, long life. (319)

Furthermore, the spiritual crisis of the postmodern age is not caused only by the simple loss of faith, but by the impossibility of any belief at all. It is in this sense, that the novel becomes a portrayal of the postmodern spiritual condition. It announces, as Bernard Stiegler would say, that "*belief and fidelity today assume such as convulsive form as to nothing but announce the advent of total incredulity and infidelity".* (14) At last, Jack would resort to the last of all metanarratives, so characteristic of the twentieth century, which is consumerism. Actually, the last century knew the emergence of a belief that one can buy his way out of his fears and solitude in being an active part of the economic system. Babette naively observed that she has "*… troubles to imagine death at that income level*" (6). This belief was propagated and disseminated through mass media and mainly television exhorting people to buy and pile up things and objects of all sorts in a vain attempt to define some sort of identity. It explains, at least partly, why the modern self embraces willingly consumerism and accepts the mass media manipulations. Perhaps, traumatic states of mind generate spiritual hollowness, deep anxiety and a kind of void that the individual tries to fill with pilling up possessions. It is as though having all the necessary, and unnecessary, objects alike, would lead to the augmentation of the self. Jack describes very well this reality through his own condition; in a moment of frustration, he felt a compelling desire and even was excited by the very idea to buy. He went with his family to the supermarket; thereof he was taken by a fever to buy. He explains that his " *family gloried in the event"* and he was "*one of them, shopping, at last*" (83), and found himself shopping recklessly, buying for "*immediate needs and distant contingencies inspecting merchandise* (he) *had no intention of buying, then buying it ..."* and felt that he was growing in *" value and self-regard (...) the more money"* (he) *"spends, the less important it seems",* (and felt) " *bigger than these sums"*(84).

It is in this way that we should understand why consumption is given a strong spiritual undertone in the novel, and shopping a ritual possessing "*some vastness beyond the world*" (72). Commercial slogans burst out repeatedly in the novel – like in the characters' lives- the recitation of advertising slogans, words and phrases seem to be greater than their commercial aspect, and function as social links connecting people together with, in Murray Siskind words, "*a clear vision, without awe or terror*" (82). Consumption, in such a context, takes on the form of an attempt to raise the self above the earthly tragedies and death itself; it is given in the novel a mythological dimension through which the collective unconscious creates new symbols to express itself. This is at least one way to understand Jack's mysterious attitude during his first night in the camp where he and his family were evacuated. While watching

his children sleeping on improvised mattresses, he felt overwhelmed by some sort of yearning approaching religious contemplation " *cosmic in nature* " and full of " *subtle forces*" (155). It is the moment when Jack fancied Steffie's sleep murmurs to be outwardly messages " *familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant*" and which struck him " *with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence*" (155). Surprisingly, we learn very quickly that his daughter was simply repeating some commercial slogans "*Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida …*" (155) several times.

This is not exclusive to Jack alone; all the main characters of the novel seem to live similar experience, when in contact with commercial slogans either at home through television advertisements or outside in the supermarkets. Certainly, it is the author's intention and oblique way to represent the postmodern individual for whom simple products of everyday consumption have become sacred and possessing some "*concealed symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural meaning* (…) (and) *psychic data (…) leaking through the mesh"* (37). A situation that Leonard Wilcox interprets as the expression of what he calls the Braudrillardian *"ecstasy of communication"* in the modern cultures. Wilcox argues that the altered state of the modern mind finds a sort a relief, even an ecstasy, in the "*smooth operational surface of communication*", like a poem in which sounds are more important than the meaning and of which assonance has the power to stimulate the collective psyche. (15) Moreover, the vessel through which all these data are released, television, is viewed as a sacred thing "*sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring (…) like a myth being born right there in our living room"* (its) *"coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants (…) open (…) ancient memories of world birth*" (51), containing "*sacred formulas*" and a wealth "*of information*" (66). In the postmodern communities composed of isolated individuals, consumption, that is shopping, seems to be the only common thing they share together, and malls and marketplaces become the privileged places for social contact. Murray, speaking on behalf of all Blacksmith community, sees in the supermarket a:

A place … awash in noise. The toneless systems, the jangle and skid of carts, the loudspeaker and the coffee-making machines, the cries of the children. And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the of range human apprehension. … Energy, waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. (36-7).

In the novel, the characters, almost instinctively, seek protection and exchange information in emergency moments in the shopping crowd of the malls. Jack argues that " *Crowds (…) form a shield … 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"* (73). This may also explain the presence of masses of people everywhere in the novel; it symbolizes the characters' vain attempt to stave off the inevitable

advancing end. It is, then, significant in the novel that the plagued community of Blacksmith finds itself compelled to seek protection within primitive clannish frameworks. Once more the metanarrative of consumerism, like all the others, falls short, in crucial moments of life and death.

Mark Conroy, in an excellent analysis of the novel, suggests that this regressive reaction may be explained by the fact that despite the huge amount of information available, its size and complexity put it beyond the human brain's processing abilities; its totality cannot constitute denotative meanings or objective knowledge and is therefore practically useless at critical moments(16). Furthermore, this failure to structure one's experience constitutes another inflating factor of trauma and at the same time heightens its symptomatic reactions. Jack describes his irresistible penchant for consumption and pilling up goods as "*part of* (the) *strategy in a world of displacements to make every effort to restore and preserve, keep things together for their values as remembering objects, a way of fastening to life*" (102). Actually, this is not Jack's inclination alone, but it seems to be the case of all the other characters of the novel and is, perhaps, symbolic of a deep and communal pain caused by the absence of any traditional substance on which the individual's emotion and aspiration can rest. For the characters of the novel, the reality has become *"a secret (…) a second life (…) a dream, a spell, a plot, a delirium"* (242). Indeed, too much information has made the reality grow more and more complicated for the human senses; the modern individual feels severed from his faculties to understand the true nature of things and ends by doubting the perceptive capacities of his own senses. As a result, man abandons his destiny to machines, more and more sophisticated with, as Jack confesses, " *a life independent from us*" , and with the ability to predict the appearance of death itself and "*trace its path in the body (…) take cross-section pictures of it, tape its tremors and waves*" (150) . In a way, the reality of the world is apart from the human perception; it is part of a system that grows more and more "*invisible (…) all the more impressive (…) disquieting*" that consists of "*waves (…) rays (…) particles (…) the language of waves and radiation*" that is the language of the basic stuff of nature which imposes itself as the way "*the dead speak to the living*" (326). While inquiring about his condition after having been exposed to the toxic cloud, Jack is at same time amazed and scared by the sophistication of the modern medical devices; they are just like the technology behind them at once threatening and promising. He informed us that:

They attached me on a seesaw device, turned me upside down and let hung for sixty seconds. A printout emerged from a device nearby. They put on a treadmill and told me to run, run. Instruments were strapped to my thighs, electrodes planted on my chest. They inserted me in imaging block, some kind of computerized scanner. Someone sat typing at a console, transmitting a message to the machine that would make my body transparent. I heard magnetic winds, saw flashes on northern light. … They are trying to help, to save me. (276)

Even though Jack is not yet suffering from apparent disease or pain, he seems to trust the logic of the number and the printout of the machine to be informed about his condition. Despite the lifeless

nature of the technological devices and his apparent suspicion about them, he still relies entirely on them to save his life. There is no choice left, no alternative available. So Jack, standing for the postmodern American society, gives himself up to it almost in a religious elation to the source of his own doom.

Conclusion

It is in this sense that DeLillo's novel is as a dramatic indictment to what has become of the modern societies; it is also a sort of elegy to the depressing condition of the modern self crippled, as it were, by a gradual awareness of the failure of its vain attempts to change something of the final destination of its existence. All along the story Jack is haunted by "*the ambient roar (…) vast and terrible depth (…) inexhaustibility (…) the massive darkness (…) whole terrible endless hugeness (…) the whole huge nameless thing of death"* (150). The truth is that the final message of the novel and the meaning of its title, the noise at the background, is, in fact, the sound of the approaching death, invisible but so present in our lives. Thereafter, and in the absence of an operational spirituality, like religion or ideology, the self abandons what is beyond its power of perception and which belongs to the invisible realm of machines and technology. Even the family, normally the last resort for security and relief, seems to have undergone profound changes that altered considerably its traditional roles. The modern recomposed family, like the Gladneys, and as it pertains to Jack, the postmodern version of the *Pater* of the clan, is "*the cradle of the world's misfortunes*" (29). The Gladney family is composed of children from different parents (Bee, Heinrich, Stefie and Denise) and marginally affective parents (Jack and Babette) amalgamated in a sort of survival-unit to face the danger and ambiguity of their situation. However, the attempt is vain since the unit lacks the essential solidarity and mutual affection. Jack confesses that each member of his family is "*selfish in a totally unbounded and natural way* (198), *total ego (…) free from limits"* (276).

Finally, and in my opinion, DeLillo, at least in this novel, has successfully made a relevant diagnosis of the symptoms of postmodernity. Though he does not take any political stand point, he dares to tell, sometimes, in unwavering brutal tones what is wrong not only in his own society but in the modern world in general. DeLillos' characters, in this novel, inhabit a world that is frightening at times because it is so similar to the modern human condition and nowadays state of the world. A world that is growing more and more cynical and fragmented, loaded with a lot of disillusionment and broken potentials and with a stark darkness ahead.

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