DeLillo's *White Noise:* Language as a mirror and catalyst of existential anxiety in a world of simulacra

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Abstract: This paper explores the manner in which language both depicts and shapes the existential dread felt in DeLillo's *White Noise*, a world of simulacra with no other referent but death as a distant memory of reality. Under such conditions, the characters cling to signifiers which are no longer in connection with the signified, they repeat catchwords, slogans and brand names, seemingly believing that the immersion in this abundance will bring the desired oblivion. Instead, this profusion of words and information, allied with the apocalyptic reports of the impending catastrophe, creates fertile ground for insane speculations, finally resulting in all-encompassing schizophrenia.

Key words: language, anxiety, simulacra, media, information, catastrophe

Simulating life in a hyperreal world reminiscent of the past, present and future is a dramatic experience in itself, and yet the sense of impending danger can only intensify it. *White Noise,* DeLillo's eighth novel, which won him the National Book Award in 1985, portrays a postmodern American society characterized by existential uncertainty which grows in the face of potential disaster and simulated evacuations confused with terrifying catastrophe stories. At one point, the unease that most of the dwellers of DeLillo's Blacksmith and Iron City feel throughout the novel is transfigured into feelings of anxiety and fear bordering on insanity. Still, the change in the general atmosphere of the novel may only partly be attributed to the "airborne toxic event", as "the booster" of the anxiety increasingly felt among the characters seems to be the language of the novel itself. This paper will show the manner in which the language (ab)used by the characters and the media mirrors the world of "waves and radiation", as well as explore its ability to intensify, sustain and diminish the anxiety and fear permeating the novel.

At the very beginning of *White Noise*, one is bombarded with a myriad of images describing station wagons, simultaneously providing the setting for the novel, in which people seem to be secondary to their possessions[1]:

> (…) The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationery and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; (…) the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; (…) the junk food still in shopping bags – onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut crème patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints. (3)

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[1] Kavadlo notices that what is missing from Gladney's report are human beings to whom these possessions belong, specifying that "People, more than merely identified or understood by their

One may notice that there is a certain pattern in listing these items; they seem to shift from those typical of every time and place ("sheets, pillows, quilts") to those clearly denoting that the story is taking place at the end of the 20th century ("the stereo sets, radios, personal computers") in the U.S.A. ("Waffelos and Kabooms", "the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic Mints"). The protagonist, Jack Gladney, renders a brief description of a world dominated by products, brand names and commercials, of Jameson's "postindustrial consumer society of the media and the spectacle" (Jameson 113). In such a world objects and constructions "loom" in an almost threatening manner, inspiring religious-like awe. Thus, it is no wonder that here one can even "die of lingering dread" (99) (as in the case of Old Man Treadwell's sister, Gladys[2]) after the traumatic experience of getting lost in a huge shopping mall provoking a blend of "fear and trembling" one would normally feel when faced with the immensity of the universe. Here a shopping mall (or a supermarket) becomes a universe in itself, arguably one of simulacra[3], in which one can easily become panic-stricken because of something as trivial as the rearrangement of items in supermarket shelves.

Airborne industry of fear

In the world of *White Noise,* a sense of mild anxiety is a commonplace, but once there is a life threat in the shape of a toxic cloud, the characters start to fear for their existence and survival, as the sense of immediate danger inspires a mixture of dread and awe that "transcends previous categories of awe" (324). Moreover, DeLillo's characters frequently use the very words "dread", "awe", "magic", "spectacular", "catastrophic", "majestic", "cosmic", "mystical", "epic", "apocalyptic", which brings them even closer to the sense of the sublime, so their apprehension never stops growing.

The television itself seems to inspire such feelings, the characters usually taking everything they hear as the unquestionable truth, this being "the end of scepticism" (27), as Gladney explains. His colleague Murray Siskind describes the experience of watching TV as "humbling" and "close to mystical". Taking notes frantically, he explains,

> Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. *'Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.'* (51)

However, Murray's choice of words ("concealed", "hurtling", "coded", "repetitions") seems to suggest that people are being tricked into remembering jingles and buying products they do not actually need (having majored in communication arts, and with his brief experience in advertising, DeLillo easily recognizes the distinctive quality of the media vernacular and its impact on our (sub)conscious). Thus, DeLillo's characters seem to be passive recipients of whatever television and other media offer. In contrast,

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[2] Strangely enough, Gladys was also the name of Elvis Presley's mother, who is also mentioned in the novel (70-72). Like Old Man Treadwell's sister, Elvis's mother is said to have died of fear (when her son joined the army).
[3] Baudrillard sees the hypermarket as a "polyfunctional nucleus" in which objects and their arrangement serve only as a model of social relations simulated by the consumers (Baudrillard 78).

every once in a while the TV and the radio "say" something ("The radio *said*: "It's the rainbow hologram that gives this credit card a marketing intrigue" (122)), and one cannot but overhear it. This is usually "uttered" completely out of the context, which makes the sentence nonsensical, and yet easy to remember and reproduce at most unexpected times, like when Jack Gladney's daughter Stephie talks in her sleep. She utters two words: "Toyota Celica", the name of an automobile, and Gladney starts to muse on the meaning hidden behind these "supranational names" (155). Prone to analyzing in a manner characteristic of Leopold Bloom, Jack draws a conclusion that they are "part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe" (155). However, after hearing this utterance (which triggers the retrieval of the whole jingle in his mind[4]), Jack starts to feel unease:

> It made me feel something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me a sense of meaning, a presence? (…) Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with splendid transcendence. (155)

It appears that the language of DeLillo's media is nothing like Orwell's Newspeak, nor do the slogans heard on TV resemble the maxims chanted in Huxley's World State. It is not supposed to make people feel happy and unable to conceive of the evils of the world, but rather to get them apprehensive and afraid. At one point Gladney, who does not share Murray's enthusiasm for television, mentions that TV can either "fill [one] with rage" or "scare [one] half to death" (168), maintaining that it is "the TV set where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires" (85). He further notes that "terrifying data is now an industry in itself" and that "different firms compete to see how badly they can scare us" (175).

Indeed, the media seem to create and spread anxiety in a variety of ways, which is best depicted in the scene describing the airborne toxic event. Here, the power of language to catalyze existential dread and fear seems to be exercised in the following ways: by remaining silent: "Is it possible nobody gives substantial coverage to such a thing? Half a minute? Twenty seconds?" (162); by using euphemisms, such as the phrase "feathery plume" (111), elegantly coined to denote the cloud of lethal Nyodene D; by using menacing words and phrases like "black billowing cloud" (113) or "convulsions, coma, miscarriage" (121); as well as by means of repetition:

> The amplified voice said: "Wind change, wind change. (…) Toxic, toxic. Proceed to your vehicle, proceed to your vehicle."
> Denise, who was clutching her mother by the wrist, flung the entire arm down on the mattress. "Why does he have to say everything twice?"(156)

Gladney, who is himself trying to overcome his fear by means of denial ("Nothing is going to happen. (…) These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith" (114)), replies in a laconic manner to his son's questions so as to keep up appearances ("Good." (113, 115)), wondering if his son Heinrich "senses the threat in state-created

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[4] It seems that everyone remembers jingles, not only children; the slogans and catchphrases seem to have become part of the collective unconscious. Sometimes it is unclear if phrases such as "MasterCard, Visa, American Express" (100) or "Leaded, unleaded, super unleaded" (199) are uttered by a human being, by the TV and the radio, or whether they are simply part of everyone's "brain noise".

terminology" (117). Frequently referring to "them", or the ones in position to give names, the Gladney family seem to hope that if a term is "a little more accurate, [it] means that they're coming to grips with the thing" (113). On the other hand, as the toxic event is redefined every time it is given a new name[5], so is the mild unease which grows into apprehension and finally into fear that grows to the point of absurdity – affected by the sinister media language, the Stovers, Gladney's neighbours, keep their car facing the street, out of the garage, with the key in the ignition in case something disastrous happens. Yet, the paradox is that the real catastrophe, or rather what the characters would perceive as their worst nightmare come-true, never comes; according to Baudrillard, catastrophe is actually our hope and a kind of "promise", but it never takes place in the world of simulacra (Baudrillard 55).

The tabloid android experience

Once catalyzed, the anxiety and fear seem to be sustained by "passing rumours back and forth". In effect, rumours are yet another source of anxiety in the novel:

> Three of the live deer at the Kung Fu Palace were dead. The governor was dead, his pilot and co-pilot seriously injured after a crash landing in a shopping mall. (…) The toxic event had released a spirit of imagination. (…) We began to marvel at our own ability to manufacture awe. (153)

It seems that people are both afraid and amazed by these accounts. Catastrophe stories and gloomy predictions abound in DeLillo's culture of tabloids, and people read (and watch) them with relish, feeling complete detachment from other people's misery. In one of the first chapters, the Gladney family are gathered around the TV set silently watching floods, earthquakes and volcano eruptions taking place on the screen in front of them with great interest. Jack Gladney notes: "Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (64). In a world in which it is possible to lecture on Hitler and Elvis with equal enthusiasm and excitement[6], never making a qualitative judgment, but merely reporting, catastrophe gains a particularly soothing quality (as long as it happens somewhere else, as Alfonse Stompanato, the chairman of the American environments department explains (66)). Here is how Jack's son Heinrich experiences his "first burning building" live:

> "It's funny how you can look at it and look at it," Heinrich said. "Just like a fire in a fireplace."
> "Are you saying the two kinds of fire are equally compelling?"
> "I'm just saying you can look and look."
> "'Man has always been fascinated by fire.' Is that what you're saying?" (240)

Apparently, Jack, who seems to be a misfit in the new world order, finds it hard to accept that in the culture of simulacrum there is practically no difference between watching a construction on fire and relaxing by the fireplace. However, this voyeuristic

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[5] According to Frederic Jameson, language constructs and forms our views of reality. Naming reifies and redefines everything. (Jameson's lecture on "Realism and Affect", Belgrade, June 2009).
[6] "[Gladney] is interested only in Nazi aesthetics, [but] has lost sight of the horrors of the Nazi past"(Duvall 3).

impulse to "look and look", or the hunger for the catastrophic and the macabre, could be explained by Murray's theory that seeing someone die, or hearing of someone's death or misfortune, helps one gain life credit, Murray's policy being "better him than me" (169).

Furthermore, Jack Gladney seems to be trying to gain his own life credit by using German language as a protective charm against death in a daunting world of cold simulacrum. Fascinated by German language and names because, in his opinion, they suggest authority and strength, he admits that he named his son Heinrich Gerhardt, "to shield him" and "make him unafraid" (63). Similarly, Murray later notices that Gladney's choice to teach Hitler, a figure "larger than death", points to his need "to be helped and sheltered" himself (287), although the very name Hitler has practically become synonymous with death, Jack's worst fear. Nevertheless, Gladney's inability to learn German, a language he finds elusive and inscrutable, merely increases his angst, as he seems to be the only professor at College-on-the-Hill who does not speak this language: "I was living, in short, on the edge of a landscape of vast shame" (31).

Clueless fumbling in the dark of the simulation

It appears that DeLillo's is a world of no surprises, where "everything was on TV last night" (268)[7]. Moreover, Babette, Gladney's present wife, believes that "what would surprise [her] would be if there were no surprises" (132). Under such conditions, the eerie sense of déjà vu (increasingly felt among the townspeople after the TV announcer has listed it as one of the symptoms of exposure to Nyodene D) becomes symptomatic of the media society, a world in which one is merely "taking pictures of taking pictures" (12), and therefore is unable to tell the difference between reality and simulation:

> But what if she hadn't heard the radio, didn't know what déjà vu was? Which was worse, the real condition or a self-created one, and did it matter? (…) Could a nine-year old girl suffer a miscarriage due to the power of suggestion? Would she have to be pregnant first? Could the power of suggestion be strong enough to work backward in this manner, from miscarriage to pregnancy to menstruation and ovulation? Which comes first, menstruation or ovulation? Are we talking about mere symptoms or deeply entrenched conditions? Is a symptom a sign or a thing? What is a thing and how do we know it's not another thing? (126)

This passage shows a complete breakdown of meaning and logic in the new, "non-referential" world order in which "remarks exist in a permanent floatation" (129). The absence of referents in language seems to mirror the "breakdown of authority" (90) in the new social order, and as it appears, this is the source of deepest anxiety and fear: "What people in exodus fear most immediately is that those in positions of authority will long since have fled, leaving us in charge of our own chaos" (120). However, this concern seems to be completely out of place in a world in which the authorities are using the real disaster as a "chance to rehearse the simulation" (139). Gladney's firm belief in the power of authorities to handle emergency situations ("(…) they are looking

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[7] According to Fiske, television has contributed to a change in our everyday perception, as "our view of the world is increasingly mediated by the vast mental image-bank we each store in our minds." (O'Day 113)

in the thing more or less squarely in the eye. They are on top of the situation." (115)), will finally disintegrate in his "epiphanic" encounter with the German-speaking nuns who reveal to him that their devotion is a mere pretence: "Show me an angel. Please. I want to see" (317).

In a world of a "heightened reality" (307), with a wealth of words, images, facts and factoids, people need some kind of clue that would help them find their way. Unsure about how they should react to particular events, the Gladneys keep watching other people in an attempt to identify the scope of the danger: "Mainly we looked at people in other cars, trying to work out from their faces how frightened we should be" (120). Babette locates the reason for this need in the fact that nowadays people are faced with an abundance of rapidly shifting facts and opinions, which makes people, especially the middle-aged and the elderly, apprehensive and insecure. Advocating the need for her courses in "Posture" and "Eating and Drinking"[8], she infers that "people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way" (171-2).

This inability to handle huge amount of information, which is more often than not completely useless, is well represented through the image of a scavenger. Watching Jack Gladney as he rummages through his garbage[9], feeling "like a household spy" (259) in search for Dylar (a soma-like drug engineered to inhibit the "ancient" fear of death[10]), one cannot but draw a parallel between this and the futile search of DeLillo's characters for meaning, or at least something that would ease the angst they feel largely due to the instability of signs and the language itself:

> (…) I found crayon drawings of a figure with full breasts and male genitals. (…) I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness? I came across a horrible clotted mass of hair, soap, ear swabs, crushed roaches, flip-top rings, sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat, strands of frayed dental floss, fragments of ballpoint refills, toothpicks still displaying bits of impaled food. (…) But no sign anywhere of a shattered amber vial or the remains of those saucer-shaped tablets. (259)

The nauseating amount of these repulsive images resembles the abundance of worthless information and stories that appear in most bizarre combinations. It is not accidental that Jack never finds the magic tablet – it is precisely the absence of clues and pointers that provokes the "nameless fear" in characters.

Fusillade of words, plunging schizophrenia

Surrounded by white noise (the very term "white" could remind one of Melville's sinister "whiteness of the whale"), and unable to isolate and process the important data,

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[8] Babette's courses, deemed as "too obvious and nebulous", do not seem to be out of place in the culture of simulacrum, where people have forgotten how to perform basic tasks. According to Baudrillard, people no longer touch and look at each other, but use the services of various institutes and therapies instead (Baudrillard 13).
[9] The imagery of garbage and waste seems to be exploited to its full potential in DeLillo's seminal novel *Underworld*.
[10] Unlike Huxley's soma, Dylar does not seem to work; rather than inhibiting anxiety and fear of death, it seems to increase them.

people get "brain fade" (67) and start to decompose and question the meaning of everyday words such as "radio", "night", "wet", "talk", etc. in an almost schizophrenic manner[11]. This is especially characteristic of Babette, who suffers the side effects of Dylar throughout the novel: "What is night? It happens seven times a week (…) What is wet?" (301), but also for their children, who have become familiar with the new, "atomized contemporary world" (Wilcox 348).

For Jameson, this schizophrenic breakdown of language "reorients the subject or the speaker to a more literalizing attention towards words" (Jameson, 120), and this is precisely another side-effect of Dylar intake, most obviously manifested in the character of Willie Mink (a.k.a. Mr Gray). It is in the last scenes that the power of language to catalyze one's fear and anxiety is presented at its best. According to Wilcox, words are here reduced to signals forming a "one-to-one relationship with their referent" (Wilcox 357), automatically indicating how one should feel and react:

> I recalled Babette's remarks about the side-effects of the medication. I said, as a test, "Falling plane."
> He looked at me, gripping the arms of the chair, the first signs of panic building in his eyes.
> "Plunging aircraft," I said, pronouncing the words crisply, authoritatively.
> He kicked off his sandals, folded himself over into the recommended crash position, head well forward, hands clasped behind his knees. (309-10)

Exploring the power of language, Gladney even attempts to kill Willie Mink, his wife's lover, with words before actually firing the gun: "I said to him gently, "Hail of bullets." Keeping my hand in my pockets. (…) "Fusillade," I whispered." (311), sadistically enjoying Mink's "brilliant, cringing fear". This side-effect of a drug which "causes the user to confuse words with the things they refer to" (310) seems to reflect a world in which words have the power to induce anxiety to the point of insanity.

Conclusion

In brief, the language of the media society portrayed in *White Noise* both reflects and affects the existential dread and fear of an apocalyptic catastrophe which fails to strike, leaving DeLillo's characters no other choice but to speculate on its possible scope and devastating effects. The dwellers of Blacksmith and Iron City never reach Orwell's "room 101", but it is its proximity and its image created by the media that scares them to death. Thus, they are doomed to sail the streets of Blacksmith, haunted by the black cloud and billowing thoughts of death, surrounded by white noise on all sides, threatening to sink them in the manner of Melville's formidable white whale.

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[11] Jameson describes schizophrenia as "an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence" (Jameson 119).

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