

【연구논문】

Death, Noise, and (Un)plotting in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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One of the difficulties of reading DeLillo's *White Noise* is comprehending a constellation of specific terms that DeLillo deploys in exploring post-modern America, in particular noise and death. Even a casual reader might find recurrent images of noise and death in the book. Seemingly without forming any logical relationship, these two images haunt, disrupt, and puncture the text, thereby making the meanings of the text obscure and destabilize. As if a normal sound system is suddenly switched into another system with different wave-lengths and frequencies, some disparate and irrelevant signs and sounds some way manage to interfere and infiltrate. For example, “homemade signs” on “telephone poles” are abruptly introduced (6) while Jack is driving to his house; a woman's voice on a TV set disrupts an intimate conversation in bed between Jack and his wife Babette; a constant flow of noises at a supermarket

pours down and showers shoppers. The interesting point is that these unregulated noises and signs remain outside of the main plot which Jack Gladney's family weaves into textual threads of meaning.

In one sense, the interruption of death in the plotting of a domestic novel, a genre DeLillo describes as fiction "around-the-house-and-in-the-backyard" (Lentricchia 7), appears to bring out similar effects that the noises introduce. "Walking up the hill to school," Jack Gladney, a middle-aged head professor of Hitler Studies at College-on-the-Hill, is suddenly struck with an idea of death: "Who will die first" (15). Or Gladney wakes up "in the grip of a death sweat" at night (11), and then relates the odd number of the clock radio to a death sign: "What does it mean? Is death odd-numbered?" (47). The sudden attack of death fear upon Jack's consciousness like the violent eruption of the toxic event upon a suburban town and other examples (I will specify in length later) show us the extent to which death remains outside of a causal relation in an ordinary space. On the other hand, however, the pressure of death upon a domestic space appears to be the very force and condition that connects each seemingly unrelated episode and elevates Jack's struggle with death fear to a final move, to a confrontation with Mr. Gray, an exemplary dark figure of the consumer society in our age. It is this double-edged aspect of death that makes our understanding of death difficult. Furthermore, the driving force of death does not end with a typical resolution as reader might expect. Jack's final plot to save the Dylar and to shoot Mr. Gray/Mink is undone, and Jack's anxiety and fear about the death he is aspiring to overcome are not relieved and remain disturbingly unresolved.

As we keep in mind the oddity of death and noise and DeLillo's particular way of presenting them, we come to see more clearly that reading *White Noise* from an existential perspective is insufficient. Indeed, as Michael Valdez Moses emphasizes in his critical essay,¹⁾ we might be able to discern existential issues of death in *White Noise*: an existential situation of human being as "Dasein," a Heideggarian critique of modern subject(ity) and technology and the like. Although an existential reading of *White Noise* is plausible, this kind of reading tends to pay less attention to the meta-narrative and meta-fictional aspects of death, which would be more illuminated in relating them to noise and plotting. In this paper, I will suggest reading death in *White Noise* outside of an existential perspective in order to see the complex relationship between three key elements of death, noise and (un)plotting.

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Every human society possesses its own ritual, history, and culture

1) Michael Valdez Moses in his essay of "Lust Removed from Nature" views the issue of death through the critical lens of Heideggarian existentialism and his critique of technology. Thus he identifies Gladney's anguish of death as an existential Angst and emphasizes epistemological and practical flaws in conceiving of nature as the resources humans can dispose of by using technology (70-78). On the other hand Leonard Wilcox, analysing the textual meanings of *White Noise* largely from Baudrillard's postmodern theory of "simulacra," looks at Gladney's' existential quest for transcendental meaning as futile and anachronic, since "the experience of Dasein through which Being coalesces in an existential moment of recognition" could not find its place in the post modern, the world of "networks, information, and white noise." (355).

with which each member in that society celebrates his citizenship and collective selfhood. In the opening scene, we see the time-honored local event of “station wagon day,” which secures and provides “a sense of renewal, of communal recognition” (3) with its attendants. The participants want to see in this annual event a spectacle that enables them to see their idealized images or secured collective selfhood: “The students greet each other with comic cries and gestures of sudden collapse. [. . .] The parents stand sun-dazed near their automobiles, seeing images of themselves in every direction” (3). The participants are eager to acknowledge and greet each other in order to be acknowledged by their peers. The mutual acknowledgements and gazes form a narcotic social space, in which people see their own idealized images rather than actual realities. The scene of the most photographed barn, in this sense, can be seen to illustrate the way in which the post-modern America of simulacra serves to create a self-reflexive social space. As a post-modern saint Murray Jay Siskind says, tourists no longer see the barn itself because once they’ve seen “the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (12). The barn as a referent is obliterated and replaced by the barn as a sign. In this artificially constructed space with signs that we impose upon an object, we see in the object not a (radical) reality but ourselves, our collective identity. As Murry puts it, “We see only what the other sees (and vice versa). . . We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism” (12).

Then we might ask ourselves why we are eager to follow the religious and habitual impulse to share our emotions and experiences

with others, thereby forming our collective identities. What do we gain or lose by participating these collective events such as a station wagon day, a pilgrimage to a tourist spot, and shopping with family members at the supermarket on a regular basis? In order to find DeLillo's response to these questions, we need to rethink textual significance in the figure of Hitler, especially in the context of mass psychology.

According to Serge Moscovici,²⁾ a French social scientist, each individual participating in a massive event, whether it may be religious, political, or entertainment, casts off his previous (individualized) identity and transforms himself into one part of the collective body, whereas the leader(s) of the event sets up himself as a collective head or mind. In terms of Freudian libido economy, each individual in a crowd gives up his own libido to form and collect the massive libido and concentrate it in the collective head. Thus unlike each separate individualized libido, which is contained and demarcated within each person, this massive libido establishes itself as the limitless and absolute. This is why a charismatic leader, an embodiment of the collective libido, is imagined by a crowd as a mesmerizing and absolute power. By identifying with the leader, Moscovici argues, each individual in a crowd finds his/herself elevated, enlarged, and firmly secured, when he/she otherwise might have felt fragile and helpless.

For DeLillo, the dark and disturbing force Hitler possesses is based

2) In regard to the reciprocal relationship between crowd and leader see pages 150-154, *The Age of Crowd*; in regard to critical analysis of crowd from the perspective of Freudian Libido see pages 244-254.

upon the mass psychological mechanism that allows his adherents to be empowered through identifying with the charismatic leader. As Jack explains to Murray in a habitual campus walk, “helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom” (287), because these figures, like Hitler, are “larger than life” and “larger than death” (287). In other words, they want to “be helped and sheltered” or to conceal themselves in these powerful figures. DeLillo understands that the desire to be secure from danger and to be a part of the crowd by following its ritual and habitual deeds is psychologically related to death fear, because death is understood to be the very thing which “make it[life] incomplete” (284) and brings to life a fundamental rupture and the meaningless. In this view, as Paul Cantor argues, “Nazism is the modern substitute for religion, using theatrical techniques to re-create and recapture the power of ancient rituals to give people a sense of participating in something larger than their individual selves and thus overcoming their fear of death” (51).

DeLillo’s explanation of death fear, however, does not stop at the psychological level. Rather, he extends the theme of death to a meta-scientific discourse by interpreting it in terms of entropy and its relation to time. According to entropy theory,³⁾ heat energy contained in an isolated system, as time goes by, tends to level off, finally finishing with a heat death. In other words, a flow of time, which corresponds with the process of reducing the temperature difference in a system, finally stops at a point, when this difference no longer

3) On the relation of entropy to time, see pages 123-130 in “Entropy and the Direction of Time” in *Time’s Arrows* by Richard Morris.

exists, that is, in the state of death. Thus, the only way to avoid the catastrophic crisis of death is to turn an isolated system into an open system, to give up the ill-conceived strategy of sealing off a system from the outside, and to recycle wastes by revamping and restructuring the system. Although it is uncertain to what extent DeLillo wants to think about death in the context of scientific discourse, several passages indicate that certainly DeLillo has substantial knowledge of entropy, and he experiments with his writing to measure the significance of death in diverse ways.

For example, when Murray tells Jack his reason for wanting to leave the big city, he explains it in terms of heat and energy: "I want to be free of cities and sexual entanglements. Heat. This is what cities mean to me. You get off the train and walk out of the station and you are hit with the full blast. The heat of air, traffic and people . . . The eventual heat death of the universe that scientists love to talk about is already well underway and you can feel it happening all around you in any large or medium-sized city. Heat and wetness" (10). The accumulation of heat and energy, which creates catastrophic effects in sealing off a system, is not only found in big cities but also in the famous barn, where "every photograph reinforces the aura" and people gather to manage "an accumulation of nameless energies" (12), and even in a classroom when the students and lecturers come to be part of a crowd.

The classroom scene is more noteworthy than other scenes in the sense that it demonstrates how quickly and easily an ordinary space can convert itself into the space charged with high tensions and energy, while people in an insulated place are transformed into a

crowd. In attending Murray's Elvis class, Jack displays minute and rarely known details of Hitler in response to Murray's energetic utterances of Elvis' life. Both lecturers' theatrical performance and enchanting speeches shape a "magnetic wave of excitation" and "some frenzy in the air," charging the lecture room with high tension, transforming the attendants into a crowd: "People gathered around, students and staff, and in the mid din of half heard remarks and orbiting voices I realized we were now a crowd" (74).

DeLillo's topographic description of space in terms of energy level allows us to drastically rethink a social space in which we come to form a crowd and assume a collective identity. On one hand, DeLillo appears to imply that the social space has been created, modified and managed because it is essential to protect ourselves from the attack of death fear. The existence of social space, in other words, are chosen and affirmed one generation after another, the logic goes, as the best tactic to ward off from the threats, whether psychological or biological, of death. On the other hand, however, DeLillo, by revealing violent and irrational aspects intrinsic to this strategy, warns us of catastrophic effects and downfalls that this space will bring to us, as it starts to homogenize and rigidify itself more than necessary. Sealing off from outside influences that might offset and give a feedback process to a system in question, the system or space quickly turns to the thing that goes blindly in an one-way direction, thereby accumulating the potentiality of being imploded. Furthermore, the moment this system is legitimized and considered as the only possible way of dealing with death and its related issues, people are bound to engage in a zero-sum game, pursuing relentlessly the values

that the system endorses and celebrates. The ideological effects this isolated system produces are well displayed in the scene in which Jack is suddenly galvanized to pursue a wild shopping spree. After hearing, "You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, again, indistinct sort of guy" (83), from his university professor colleague that he encounters at a shopping mall, Jack attempts to compensate for his loss of youth by consuming goods and thereby showing off his social status and power.

I [Jack] traded money for goods. The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit. I felt expansive, inclined to be sweepingly generous, and told the kids to pick out their Christmas gifts here and now. I gestured in what I felt was an expansive manner. (84)

In the temple of consumer culture, Jack as a disciple knows how to expel a death fear. Relying upon the spell and capacity of buying and consuming goods, Jack attempts to recuperate his impaired and seemingly time-bound self. The ill founded belief that he will be immune to death as long as he possesses a power to buy and consume goods grants Jack a sense of security. A desire to create an "imperial self" (268), sealing oneself from death, is fully developed and complicated in combination with the post-modern technology of TV. The digitalized and virtual space TV creates, as we see in televised *Babette*, is a place "distanced, sealed off, and timeless" (104), the place collecting and preserving the aura of our age, putting us under the spell of promising our immortality if only we are

televised once and for all. This is why Orest, Heinrich's friend, trains himself to "sit in a cage full of deadly snakes" (207) for the purpose of being televised. This is why Bee, Jack's daughter with his former wife, feels disappointed to know that a crash landing did not draw any media-attention. With the aid of media images and technology, one attempts to enlarge one's self and overcome death fear, while at the same time drawing upon high attention and energies from others.

The catastrophic effects that DeLillo finds in an isolated system culminate in Jack's deadly confrontation with Mr. Gray, a crooked project manager who gave the drug Dylar to his wife, Babette, in return for sexual favors. DeLillo's implicit concerns and attitudes toward the final resolution are foreshadowed in a dialogue between Jack and Murray in which Murray counsels Jack on how to control his fear of death.

It's a way of controlling death. A way of gaining the ultimate upper hand. Be the killer for a change. Let someone else be the dier. Let them replace you, theoretically, in that role. You can't die if he does. He dies, you live. See how marvelously simple. (291)

Here, we see Murray thinks of death as a zero-sum game, in which a confrontation and struggle of one against another for survival is inevitable and thus becomes a magic bullet for avoiding death. According to Murray, Jack should be a killer in order not to be a dier, a person who is doomed to die. However absurd and irrational this advice may sound, one steeped in consumer culture and media experience of today easily falls a victim to this illusion.

It is this illusion that leads Jack to a final decision, a decisive

confrontation with Mr. Gray/Mink, who supposedly makes him immortal in return for murder. Armed with a series of murder plots, which he adjusts repeatedly in accordance with the problem he faces in dealing with Mr. Gray, Jack assumes that his plotting will bring out the results that he desires from the outset. But, in fact, it is not until he finds himself bleeding after being shot by Mr. Gray that Jack is fully aware of an ironic twist and turn in his plot.

The word collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff. I was disappointed. Hurt, stunned and disappointed. What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I'd carried out my scheme? The pain was searing. Blood covered my forearm, wrist and hand. I staggered back, moaning, watching blood drip from the tips of my fingers. I was troubled and confused. Colored dots appeared at the edge of my field of vision. Familiar little dancing specks. The extra dimensions, the super perceptions, were reduced to visual clutter,, a whirling miscellany, meaningless. (313)

In one sense, Jack's journey to Iron City, equipped with a series of plots against Mr. Gray dramatizes how a plot for survival turns out to be a death-plot, how the pursuit of more power and control over others by making use of plotting and violence turns out to be disastrous. The passage not only illustrates the physical and real aspect of his pain, in contrast to televised images of pain and death, but also marks a catastrophic moment, when every meaning and direction he intends are collapsed and imploded meaninglessly. The point is that "the extra dimensions" or "colored dots" impairing Jack's clear vision, undoing his plot, are not so much something to be gotten riddened of as something to embrace and accept, since it is

the external forces or noise levels that prevent a plot-system from moving deathward, from leading to death-heat.

Throughout *White Noise*, DeLillo wants us to ponder over mysteries, ruins, and traces that signify external forces or noises, where the case is exemplified with Wilder's six hours straight of crying, Steffie's muttering of an automobile's brand name during her sleep, or U.F.O mystery in a tabloid version. Though featured in an allegorical manner, in this view, Jack's speculative and imaginative rendering of a compactor scene deserves our full attention.

The compressed bulk sat there like an ironic sculpture, massive, mocking. I jabbed at it with the butt end of a rake and then spread the material over the concrete floor. I picked through it item by item, mass by shapeless mass, wondering why I felt guilty, a violator of privacy, uncovering intimate and perhaps shameful secrets. [...] There was a long piece of twin that contained a series of knots and loops. It seemed at first a random construction. Looking more closely I thought I detected a complex relationship between the size of the loops, the degree of knots (single or double) and the intervals between knots with loops and freestanding knots. Some kind of occult geometry or symbolic festoon of obsessions. I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness? (258-59)

While feeding a satirical undertone to criticize a consumer society and its sordid realities, DeLillo suggests at the same time a certain alternative to intervening in the contemporary society in a more ecological and less violent way. Out of disorder and entropy symbolized in compacted wastes, Jack Gladney searches their hidden order or structure that in an ordinary system would go unnoticed. As

if he were an archeologist seeking hidden secrets under ruins or rubbles, Jack opens up the compressed contents in a garbage bag. Under searching eyes, seemingly useless items have been converted to mystical signs that might illuminate our deep psychic structure or “dark underside of consumer consciousness.” Having been seen as useless and meaningless in one system, the objects are pictured now as artistic ones, “ironic modern sculpture, massive, squat, mocking.” From the above, we learn that the binary opposition of meaning and non-meaning, and of death and life, is not fixed permanently regardless of a system given, but assigned its value and function in accordance with the system it belongs to. Thus, there is no more absolute noise and disorder than there is an absolute system governing all the domains and spheres. Just as noise is another kind of information in a different way of articulation and organization, so death is another realm of life in the same way. Noise and death are not to be understood as the ones to be cleared away but as the ones that we should learn how to listen to and keep in contact with.

It is DeLillo's belief that keeping contact with death and opening channels to noise are not possible in a pre-determined way, because the very act of programming, plotting, and simulating already blocks the way to a proper understanding of death and noise by insisting to fix a demarcating line of death from life. And it is the very reason why un-plotting should be the way that noise and death are presented in *White Noise*. Insofar as death and noise are to be understood as forces external to an isolated system, whose strategies rely on plotting, programming and simulating, then it will be doing them justice to put them in the outside of a main-plot, a domestic novel.

DeLillo's particular way of dealing with death and noise, in this sense, evokes the sense of uncertainty and mystery among profane and secularized details. It is precisely this mysterious, evasive aspect of life that makes us, like Jack, pause a moment and think about whether Wilder's crossing over a highway is a miracle or just pure luck; whether a sunset cloud and its evoking sense of awe is the result of toxic chemicals or not.

3

So far, I have discussed the way in which the theme of death is cast in *White Noise* and how the theme is related to two other relevant topics - noise and (un)plotting. From the viewpoint of narrative structure, ending of a story offers a sense of closure or completeness, thereby giving the final shape to the story and its meaning. Ending of a story thus typically manifests the teleological impulse of narrative, and in this sense, it is not surprising that DeLillo opts for an unconventional way of closing his story, which allows his readers plenty of room for interpretation and conjecture. In fact, as the story evolves from one episode to another, our expectation of the final resolution that will emerge at the end to settle down all the conjectures and what-ifs is getting lower and lower because many episodes are loosely connected and constantly interrupted with irrelevant information as Annjeanette Wise aptly observes in several points of her essay.

Much of the text episodically floats around without embracing a particular plot line, despite the two major events or series of events he recounts: the toxic event and his wife's pill-taking and infidelity, and the resulting escapade between Jack and the object of infidelity, Willie Mink. This lack of plot leads Frank Lentricchia to describe the novel as an 'antinarrative narrative' because 'Jack Gladney has a fear of causes and effects and a fear of time.' (11)

DeLillo inserts on the part of an evasive and pervasive culture that seeps in through Jack's voice, perhaps in a revised and media-inspired instance of free indirect discourse. For example, the first paragraph of one chapter comprises a long list of instructions such as one would find on the back of an envelope for a bill. [. . .] Likewise, we frequently read snippets overheard from the television, radio, even passersby on the street. (11)

Noises (irrelevant information), interruptions and refusal of giving the final shape to the story all point to the fact that DeLillo on purpose uses meta-fictional elements not simply to be stylistic or experimental in writing but also to remind us that his narrative structure mirrors what he wants to say - death as an event takes place when we limit ourselves to going in only one direction and leaves no room for other paths, which will make us lose contact with the "images, signs, and codes" (347) from somewhere outside our knowledge and epistemological framework.

It is in this sense that DeLillo's critical engagement with the subject of death would be better understood in a broader perspective than is provided by an existential point of view, insofar as the issue of death in the text is connected to the meta-fictional elements of noise and (un)plotting, through which DeLillo appears to criticize our manner of living in postmodern America. Whereas DeLillo discredits

and criticizes a violent way of solving our fear of death, as exemplified in Jack's plot to murder Mr. Gray, he at the same time appears to endorse a variety of efforts to read the mystery in the secularized post modern America. In other words, DeLillo is distinguished from other post-modern writers in his pursuit of mystical and profound uncertainty of life, while still not losing keen interests in a commercialized, televised post-modern world. The point is that his ambiguous attitudes toward the post-modern do not indicate his incompetence of dealing with problems that the post-modern age raises. Rather, his ambiguity⁴⁾ should be understood as proper response to our world and our perception of it. Unlike Derridian deconstructionists, pre-determining the superiority of the artificial over the natural, of the textuality of language over the physicality of body, DeLillo appears to deny any pre-distinctions or schemes in order not to strip our experience of the mystical, to keep a place for awe transcending "previous categories of awe"(324),and finally to listen to the death "speak(ing) to the living" (326).

4) DeLillo appears to intend a certain kind of uncertainty or ambiguity in deciding on the book's title as *White Noise*. As Tom Leclair explains, white noise, in general scientific usage, is "aperiodic sound with frequencies of random amplitude and random interval – a term for chaos." Thus the term signifies in some sense a disorderly or chaotic irruption of sound. But on the other hand, this term also means a systematic ordering. In music, "white noise is simultaneous ordering the 'both/and' nature of systems" (Leclair 230).

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Abstract

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Critics have approached the pervasive images of Death in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* primarily from an existential point of view, emphasizing its links to the alienation and dehumanizing aspects of postmodern life in today's United States. This paper attempts to provide an alternative reading of *White Noise* by configuring the theme of death within the larger frame of science discourses. This paper observes that the disruption of the story line functions like noise from outside of the system. This new way of reading *White Noise* offers another possibility of understanding otherwise seemingly discrete and separate episodes and events from the story into a more coherent whole. What has become evident from this reading is that DeLillo attempts to deconstruct the binary oppositions of death and life as well as of noise and meaning in his own original way, not simply in a puny mimicry of Derridian deconstruction.

Key Words

Death, White Noise, Plotting, Entropy, Mass Psychology, Don DeLillo, *White Noise*