

Hysterical Realism in DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* Death Phobia, Hypochondria, and Religious Revival

Dr. Nader Mustafa Helmy

Abstract

The present study aims at proving that the novels of Don DeLillo (1936) belong to the genre of hysterical realism. In *White Noise* (1985) and *Cosmopolis* (2003), DeLillo highlights the repercussions of modernism and postmodernism in the American society, and which eventually lead to diminish the spiritual aspect of religion, and magnify materialistic values represented by scientific, technological and medical advances. Hysterical realism in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* is mainly incarnated in the characters' desperate and absurd attempts to escape their fear of death and to adhere to the mundane life. The study critically tackles the characteristics of hysterical realism, and the common features in the two novels. Two important findings of the study are: DeLillo's severe criticism of the chaotic skeptic world created by embracing postmodern ideals; and DeLillo's implied invitation for the Americans to revive the role of religion in their life, so as to act as a spiritual remedy for the evils of the modernist-postmodern world.

* * * *

HYSTERICAL REALISM IN DON DELILLO'S WHITE NOISE AND COSMOPOLIS: DEATH PHOBIA, HYPOCHONDRIA AND RELIGIOUS REVIVAL

Don DeLillo (1936-) is a prolific American writer and winner of various awards such as the American National Book Award for *White Noise*. The classification of DeLillo's fiction is a matter of controversy among critics. Several critics tend to classify and discuss DeLillo's writing under the title 'postmodernism'. Scott Rettberg, for instance, stresses this point when he contends that "the work of DeLillo is distinctly post-modern" (1). Joseph

Tabbi in *Cognitive Fictions*, and Christopher Douglas in "Don DeLillo" also consider the writings of DeLillo postmodern (Tabbi: 2002; Douglas: 2002). Other critics, however, disagree with this title of postmodernism as they classify the novelist's work as modernist, poststructuralist, or as fitting within "systems theory". For example, Tom LeClair considers DeLillo "a systems theorist" (3), and Frank Lentricchia argues that DeLillo is the "last of the modernists whose subject is the postmodern condition" (14). The reason behind these divisive classifications is that DeLillo's fiction, particularly the novels selected for the present study, merges strategies of modernism, postmodernism, and realism. Accordingly, the framework of DeLillo's fiction seems boundless and indistinct. Notwithstanding these diverse approaches of examining his fiction, the present study is an attempt to provide a different reading of DeLillo's work. The study assumes that DeLillo's fiction belongs to a genre called hysterical realism. *White Noise* (1985) and *Cosmopolis* (2003) are apt examples of how hysterical realism operates in DeLillo's fiction. The study also underscores DeLillo's severe condemnation of the hysterical atmosphere resulting from embracing modernist and postmodern ideals. In addition, it proves that DeLillo implicitly calls for the return of religion to man's life as redemption for the evils caused by modernism and postmodernism.

Although *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* are not usually discussed together, this study sheds light on the common features of these novels. In addition, there is a full discussion of how hysterical realism operates in the two novels through a close analysis of its characteristics. The analysis covers four main points: the reasons behind the protagonists' death phobia and hypochondria; the devices [or auras of authority] employed to escape or mitigate their fears; the willfully self-destructive propensity of the protagonists; and the tragicomic end of the two novels.

The term hysterical realism was coined by James Wood in an essay on Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, titled "The Smallness of the 'Big' Novel: Human, All Too Inhuman", which appeared in the July 17th, 2000 issue of *The New Republic*, and was later reprinted in Wood's 2004 book, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*. Wood uses the term

to refer to a writing style where the author attempts to talk about “a real social phenomenon with funny and strange characters, an odd plot and over elaborate prose. It [hysterical realism] is a form of social commentary meant to both amuse and comment on society” (87). Laura Miller in "The War for the Soul of Literature" points out that the works which fall under hysterical realism are:

full of information, ideas and stylistic riffs; they have eventful plots that transpire on what's often called a "broad social canvas"; they experiment with form and voice; they are overtly smart... The tragicomic is gentle and sympathetic; it forgives its characters for follies and inconsistencies that are simply part of an inevitable human waywardness and unknowability (http://www.salon.com/2004/07/15/peck_wood).

According to DeLillo, man's hysterical reality is an inevitable repercussion of surrendering himself to the incarceration of modernism and/or to the chaotic atmosphere of postmodernism. Modernism presupposes an understanding of human identity and self as unified, coherent and autonomous and that man is a thinking being who is capable of rationally perceiving, knowing and conquering the world. Modernism, then, urges man to embrace the power of the scientific rationality to secure a promising future. Technology and science, the representatives of modernism in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, will eventually confine humans in a very restricted area of thinking. DeLillo- and postmodernists as well- rejects such a deterministic view of historical progress that does not fit well into the complexity and confusion of our age. Postmodernism, on the other hand, undermines modernist values, and instead emphasizes “fragmentations, discontinuities and chaos rather than the order, coherence, and simplicity characterizing the modernist philosophy” (Waugh 66). Postmodernism, moreover, rejects any metanarrative on the ground that “no story can have any more credibility than any other story. All stories are equally valid and equally invalid” (Stenger, “Postmodern Attacks on Science and Reality”: <http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/reality.html>). Furthermore, the postmodern denial of the existence of objective realities has made authors like DeLillo

concerned with the “vacuity of our age” (Rettberg 2). According to DeLillo, the entire absence of objective realities will certainly open the door to the theory of “simulacrum” or the simulated reality. Simulacrum is a term coined by Jean Baudrillard by which he means

a sign in which the referent has been subsumed by the proliferation of copies, that in the signifying process of ‘exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit [that itself becomes] without references or circumference (qtd. in Clippinger 138).

Simulacrum is thus a natural product of postmodernism as it suggests that man lives in an endless process of copying reality- a copy of a copy- since the original or objective reality is always lacking, as Christopher Douglas puts it, “one of the themes in DeLillo’s fiction is the loss of originals”, (106) or what Leonard Wilcox calls “an endless simulacrum, a meaning cut off from all bases” (351). Since the protagonists of *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* frequently suffer a sense of foreboding, they tend to depart themselves from the existing reality, living in a world of their own (simulacrum) as a kind of shelter against what they fear most (mortality). The consequence of this attitude leads to a hysterical atmosphere which permeates most of DeLillo’s novels. Nevertheless, what DeLillo recognizes more than postmodernists is that there must be logic to human existence, a framework that functions as a reference to people when encountering traumatic experiences. In this respect, DeLillo registers a point of considerable weight:

Offering some reasons [for human existence] is a part of the writer's job. I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it can also operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don't experience in our daily lives, in our real lives" (Decurtis: "An Interview with Don DeLillo" 56).

Hence, it is DeLillo’s job to obliterate doubt and confusion from man’s life, and in doing so he destabilizes the postmodern assumption that disorder and chaos are positive qualities. Moreover, DeLillo believes that postmodernism, along with its destructive forces of

obliterating any logical order in human existence, will inexorably lead to hysteria- a condition that makes man feel extremely nervous, excited, and scared without any logical or physical causes. This can be discerned when examining the characters' world in DeLillo's fiction:

The characters in Don DeLillo's novels inhabit a world that is at times cynically hysterical, sometimes loaded with hopes and potential, sometimes with a brooding, stark darkness that is frightening to us because of the fact that it is so present in our everyday lives. DeLillo's characters face angst of the most contemporary varieties (Rettberg 1).

In an interview, DeLillo describes his characters as real people except that they are "dominated by a sense of invisibility, paranoia and dread. In many respects they are like us, except they live with an unsettling awareness of a world we prefer to ignore" (Passaro 79). In a world dominated by overwhelming materialistic conditions such as callous capitalism, invasive media, terrifying technology and deceptive consumerist values, man is liable to hysterical conditions such as death phobia and hypochondria, diseases from which the protagonists of *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* suffer most. The protagonists of these novels "pathetically struggle in a world of indecipherable, de-centered systems. There is no one system that is universally accessible" (Rettberg 1). Man thus urgently needs a spiritual value that could make sense out of his life. Religion, with its redemptive, illuminating and healing powers as well as its abiding values, could be the metanarrative employed to alleviate man's hysterical reality. As long as all other metanarratives such as modernism, postmodernism, communism, and capitalism failed to assimilate into human mind and spirit, religion with its spiritual potential which encompasses all human needs could act as the guide to humans in the maddening world. The absence of such a spiritual guide might convert man's entire life into a big mess. Although DeLillo does not explicitly introduce such a proposal in a straightforward manner, one could discern this submission in the margins of the novels in focus.

I- White Noise

Jack Gladney: Death Phobia

Jack Gladney, the protagonist of *White Noise*, and Eric Packer, the protagonist of *Cosmopolis*, are early depicted in the two novels as those who are dreadfully preoccupied

with their own health. In a world dominated by postmodern hysterical, frantic, outrageous ideals, Jack and Eric, obsessed by their fear of death and sickness, are in a constant search for immortality. Death is accordingly the motif in the two narratives since it shows “the many facets in which ‘modern death’ appears in virtually all areas of our lives: from technology to media, to [consumerism]; it is portrayed as an all-pervasive phenomenon” (Boxall 98). This hysterical atmosphere is what constitutes DeLillo’s delineation of man’s hysterical reality, a reality which disheartens man to find a definition to his life.

White Noise traces the panicky life of Jack Gladney, the professor and the founder of Hitler Studies at Midwestern University and the first person narrator, his wife Babette, and six children from various previous marriages, following an industrial accident that releases toxic insecticide into their neighborhood. Jack is exposed to this toxic insecticide (Nyodene D), and hence his death phobia is reinforced. Along with his wife, Jack endeavors to possess an illegal drug called “Dylar”, which is believed to eliminate death phobia. DeLillo claims that his main inspiration for Jack Gladney’s obsessive fear of death is “Ernest Becker’s 1974 nonfiction work, *The Denial of Death*, in which Becker argues that man’s attempt to deny the fact of his own death is his major impulse” (Passaro 78). Death phobia distracts Jack from attaining a serene and meaningful life. Hence, the novel is concerned with a very common but rarely discussed phobia.

The title of DeLillo’s novel *White Noise*, in fact, furthers the argument in this paper as fear of death has become more or less like ‘white noise’. ‘White noise’ is “media noise, the techno-static of a consumer culture that penetrates our homes and our minds with brand-name items and fragments of TV and radio talk shows” (Tew 33). Heinrich, Jack’s son, accentuates this point when he tells his father that “the real issue is the kind of radiation that surrounds us every day. Your radio, your TV, your microwave oven, your power lines just outside the door, your radar speed-trap on the highway. For years they told us these low doses weren’t dangerous” (174). Babette, too, refers to the same point in her conversation with Jack, “What if death is nothing but sound?’ ‘Electrical noise.’ ‘You hear it forever.

Sound all around. How awful.' 'Uniform, white" (198). In other words, the implications of the title are closely related to the surrounding forces which severely impinge on the Gladney family such as mass media, technology, and false consumerist values. Such forces are deliberately adopted and driven to extremes in the Gladney household to stamp out their fear of death. However, the outcome of their attempts is disenchantment and hysteria:

In *White Noise*, the fear of death and the return of the repressed indicate the failure of consumerist technology to appease these old ghosts. In order to counter the dread produced by a media-saturated consumerist culture and the uncertainties and madness of postmodern life, DeLillo's characters turn to hysteria in the attempt to revive sacredness and communality (Kavadlo 23).

The mood of *White Noise* is thus hysterical. The characteristics of hysterical realism are early incarnated in the novel when Jack and Babette express their mutual desire to die first since each one cannot bear life without the other partner. In fact, both Jack and Babette are trying to mislead each other as both of them are obsessed by their own fear of death to the extent that both are trying to escape it all the time. Jack admits to himself that, in truth, he would choose loneliness over death. It is much more like hallucination about the present which is excruciating. The debate between Jack and Babette over who will die first becomes childish and hence comic, "She claims my death would leave a bigger hole in her life than her death would leave in mine.... She says if her death is capable of leaving a large hole in my life, my death would leave an abyss in hers, a great yawning gulf. I counter with a profound depth or void" (101).

After being exposed to the poisonous "Nyodene D", Jack is informed by his doctor that he is prone to death soon, "I'm tentatively scheduled to die", Jack telling his wife, "It won't happen tomorrow or the next day. But it is in the works" (202). What shocks Jack greater than the likelihood of his own death is his wife's affirmation that she is terrified of the idea that she may die too, "I'm afraid to die...I think about it all of the time... it haunts me Jack, I can't get it off my mind. I know I'm not supposed to experience such a fear so consciously and so steadily" (186-87). Such a confession adds fuel to Jack's anxiety about his own death.

Jack now realizes that it is not only him who is concerned with his mortal fate. As long as there are others who share him the same feeling, his phobia is enhanced and hence justified. However, Jack's response to his wife's fears is humorous, "That's what I can't forgive you for. Tell me you're not the woman I believed you were. I'm hurt, I'm devastated" (197). If Jack is not willing to forgive his wife for her concern with death, he should provide her with the model that can help her transcend such fears. On the contrary, he laments his fortune and hence deepens her agony, "[t]he deepest regret is death. The only thing to face is death. This is all I think about. There's only one issue here, I want to live" (270).

Paradoxically, however, none of the protagonists actually dies. Actual death does occur, but only "at the fringes of the story. The one force which really pervades the characters' lives is the fear of death and the schemes they devise to escape it" (Boxall 88). One of these schemes is ignorance or to accompany people who enjoy unawareness about their mortality. That is why Jack and Babette spend much time with their youngest son, Wilder who "doesn't know he's going to die. He doesn't know death at all. ...How lucky he is. A cloud of unknowing, an omnipotent little person. The child is everything, the adult nothing" (189).

In *White Noise*, DeLillo is adept enough to provide Jack with foils who refute his strategies of escaping death. Orest, one of these foils, is introduced as an opposite figure to Jack as he is the only character in the narrative to be valiant enough to confront death by sitting in a cage, which is full of deadly snakes, for the maximum time in order to beat a new record. When Orest says, "[t]hey want to bite, they bite. At least I go right way" (198), he simply wants to convey to Jack and the reader an important message about mystical matters like death: death is inescapable. Sooner or later everyone will meet this end, so nobody needs to concern himself with the time of such an end. Orest, in fact, does not want to die; rather he is willing to prove to himself and to others that although death lurks everywhere, it should not affect people's willingness to enjoy life. In a moment of enlightenment, Jack reveals to Babette the same recognition about death, "We have these deep terrible lingering fears about ourselves and the people we love. Yet we walk around, talk to people, eat and

drink. We manage to function. The feelings are deep and real. Shouldn't they paralyze us?" (198) This recognition does not, however, give any relief to Jack simply because the outer world is still dense with postmodern and modernist deteriorating ideals which collaborate to undermine the spiritual potential of religion. In this respect, Jesse Kavadlo, aggressively censuring the postmodern world, comments:

Dominated by the forces of late capitalism, postmodern society is characterized by globalization, pervasive consumerist values, a preoccupation with spectacle and images generated by the media, and technological growth. These elements would seem to combine to diminish the influence of religion on the lives of people (15).

Kavadlo further condemns modernity for the same reason: discarding religion from man's doctrine:

Modernity, with its humanist orientation and its preoccupation with the present and the material, has alienated man from the awareness of his own mortality and, more importantly, dissociated death from the religious realm. Man is hence severed from the spiritual consolations offered by religious explanations of death. He ultimately confronts the realities of his death: its inexorable nature and his powerlessness in the face of death, his bodily decay, and his lack of crucial knowledge about life and death (ibid 17).

Since Jack is disadvantaged from an adequate awareness about man's mortality provided by religion, he eventually surrenders to what afflicts him, death phobia. Death, therefore, has three facets: death that is unnoticed; death that is denied; and death that can be transcended. In the fringes of the novel, DeLillo invites those who are obsessed by their own fear of death to transcend death by embracing a spiritual authority as "[t]ranscendence offers one way through which the self can be fulfilled as it seeks to become whole" (Ibid 24). This can be discerned in the following conversation between Jack and Murray, Jack's friend, in which the latter recommends religion as a spiritual remedy to modernist and postmodern evils as well as a substitute for failing metanarratives:

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

Jack: But these gorgeous systems are all so different.

Murray: Pick one you like (286).

Despite this illuminating advice, Jack swiftly retreats to his world of simulacra. Accordingly, DeLillo's characters' deafness to any sensible voice is what leads them to their destruction. Interestingly enough, it is Jack who states this when he says, "All plots tend to move deathward" (18). The plots, Jack refers to, are the metanarratives which offer man no shelter or security, and as a result they ruin his life. An important aspect of hysterical realism is thus the characters' awareness of the destructiveness of their deeds and the lack of knowledge about the root causes of their anguish. In order to foster his point of view, DeLillo presents manifestations of both modernism and postmodernism in 1980's and late 1990's America: science & technology, consumerism, and mass media. In fact, these forces and others are embraced by the protagonists in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* as auras of authority or simulacra in the hope that they will provide them with security as well as protection against their ultimate trepidation, death.

Auras of Authority [Simulacra]

Mythic Figures: Hitler

Daniel Liechty argues that "[t]he theory of Generative Death Anxiety suggests that at the deepest level, human behavior is motivated by the unavoidable need to shield oneself from consciousness of human mortality" (x). Early in the novel Jack Gladney introduces himself to us saying, "I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. I invented Hitler studies in North America in March of 1968" (4). Hence, from the very beginning of the novel Jack adopts the character of Adolf Hitler as a "shield" against death. In fact, there are several reasons for selecting Hitler as a refuge against death. First, Jack cherishes the idea that Hitler is a character that enjoys a powerful aura of authority. Such a belief is the reason behind naming his elder son Heinrich. Heinrich is a German name which Jack believes "it had an authority that might cling to [Heinrich] ... [Jack] thought it was for forceful and impressive and [he] still do[es]. [He] wanted to shield [Heinrich], make

him unafraid" (63). Second, the character of Hitler is still "a mystery to most people" as he is "full of evil, hatred, and [has] capacity for death" (Hunsinger, "Heinrich's Hidden Prophecy" <http://www.wilkes.edu/Include/academics/kirby.canon/TheQuest.pdf>). Third, Jack believes that Hitler gains more powerful authority from the crowds [his supporters and followers] that surround him. Accordingly, Jack clings to the idea that crowds are a way to "keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual" (73). Like Hitler, Jack entrenches himself into crowds all the time. He enjoys the crowds in the supermarket. At work, he surrounds himself with his students who, he believes, share him the same sense of fear. Ironically, in this particular case it is the 'leader' more than the crowd who fears death (Osteen 169). When Jack and his family have to evacuate because of the toxic spill, it is the feeling of being part of a larger group of people which alleviates his fears:

The place was crowded, still quite cold, but the sight of nurses and volunteer workers made us feel the children were safe, and the presence of other stranded souls, young women with infants, old and infirm people, gave us a certain staunchness and will, a selfless bent that was pronounced enough to function as a common identity (129).

Misled by the idea that Hitler will give him protection, Jack becomes totally dependent on Hitler to the extent that he justifies his incompetence in German language on the ground that he and Hitler share a similar disability. In short, Jack maintains his self-deception by creating a virtual reality to escape the real one and to hide behind the mask of powerfulness represented by the figure of Hitler. Murray, acting as the omniscient narrator, comments on Jack's futile attempts to hide behind the "mythic" figure of Hitler, "Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom. ... You're talking about Hitler, I take it. [...] Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you. I understand completely" (287). Murray, the narrator's authentic voice in this situation, sums up Jack's quandary by stressing the vainness of the simulated reality Jack has created for himself. Instead, Jack is advised to abandon his Hitler and to be brave enough to confront his own concerns.

Science and Technology

Being disappointed in Hitler as a shield against death, Jack turns to another aura of authority, science and technology. The modernist view of the potential of science and technology is overtly questioned in *White Noise*. Babette has slept with Willie Mink, a pharmaceutical company manager and the representative of science and technology, as a bargain to obtain the drug “Dylar”. Babette, in fact, acts as a guinea pig to test the validity of the drug to eliminate the symptoms of death phobia. Such an experiment enhances the idea that death phobia is widely spread in the American society, and Jack is not therefore an exception in his exaggerated fears. Having discovered Babette’s infidelity, Jack’s main interest is how he himself obtains this drug. Despite being informed that the drug does not cure or reduce the symptoms of death phobia, Jack becomes more and more obsessed with the idea that a couple of pills could put an end to his concerns. Jack, therefore, puts his trust in science even if it will not actually give him any remedy to his problems. Science becomes “a kind of physic refuge, a bastion of rationality; a realm in which problems can be quantified, measured, renamed, and made to go away” (Rettberg 2). The powerful potential of science, moreover, leads people like Jack to believe that “if something can be measured, it can be explained. If it can be explained, it can be controlled” (ibid). Jack’s determination to obtain Dylar by any means turns out to be a desperate search for the aura of fearlessness that science and technology may provide. Murray gives utterance to this idea when he informs Jack that technology “creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. Technology is lust removed from nature” (285). Murray is right because the enticements of Dylar will eventually prompt Jack to kill Mink in order to obtain the drug. Dylar, the product of science and technology in the novel, has become an impetus for suicidal acts.

Since modernism is in favor of the powerful prospects of science, and the scientist who materializes and converts abstract ideas into tangible realities, Jack consults his colleague Winnie, a brilliant neurochemist, about Dylar. To his surprise, Winnie does not have any

idea about the drug, and consequently Jack's confidence in science and scientists has been shaken. Jack observes, "[t]he greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear" (161). In other words, there is a parallel relationship between the breakthroughs of science and technology and the fear that is resultant from such breakthroughs. In *White Noise*, Dylar is introduced as a collaborative work of the scientist and the technologist to eliminate the symptoms of death phobia; while, in reality, it enhances it. DeLillo consequently underscores the point that advances in science and technology could exaggerate man's concerns with his mortality. Winnie, on the other hand, believes that man needs to fear death, as it gives life a "boundary." She advises Jack not to follow the so-called magical effects of Dylar. Instead, he is advised to take matters as they come. This destiny-based opinion is further supported by Murray who states that if science fails to satisfy man's spiritual needs about life and death, religion may redeem man's spirit by believing in the resurrected souls. Again, DeLillo obviously calls for the revival of the role of religion as redemption for man's inclination to the illusory prospects of science and technology. In this regard, Louise Wilson contends:

Technology has transformed the world and religion needs to find new ways of coping with a brave new world in which everything is inter-connected. For French theorist Paul Virilio, virtual reality means that "orientation is no longer possible. We have lost our points of reference," yet "the inevitable outcome of this technoscientific development is a renewed need for the idea of God" (45).

Consumerism: The Supermarket

Consumerism is a significant characteristic of capitalist societies, being closely associated to modernity. In *White Noise*, consumerism is dealt with as an escapist device adopted by the characters in order to avoid their fear of death. The supermarket, the symbol of consumerism in the novel, is the place where people gather in large groups to buy stuff whether they need it or not, just to cherish the feeling that they are still alive. Jack explains this idea:

I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. . . I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. [...] I traded money for goods. The more money I spent the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums (83).

To shop is therefore to define one's identity. People who are disturbed by their own fears need to be esteemed in order to regain self-confidence. Hence, Jack spends more and more money in order to enjoy self-confidence and that he is still relevant to the world he is afraid to depart, "Here [in the supermarket] we don't die, we shop" (38). Osteen observes that "consuming attaches persons to the things whose reproducibility betokens immortality" (Osteen 171), and hence the consumer becomes a cog in the capitalist machine. Since Jack's fear of death is intensified in time of loneliness, Jack attaches himself to the supermarket so as to fill in the spiritual gap resulting from this feeling. Like Jack's students at the university and the people in the evacuation, the supermarket momentarily gives Jack and Babette a sense of reassurance and security, "in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls – it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being" (20). Paradoxically, however, excessive shopping does not give Jack and Babette a real sense of reassurance as the ecstasy they feel while shopping fades away as soon as they leave the supermarket. Shopping, moreover, diminishes the familial bonds as the Gladneys keep silent in their way home, "We drove home in silence. We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone" (84). Consumerism therefore fails as an aura of authority to give any real relief to Jack's fear of death as Wilson explains:

We will all die, just as the sunset and the shopping experience come to an end. Buying things will not help, for it is a vain attempt to master a system that is already decided by technology and deathly waves. Inevitably, we look to the belief that there is some mystical authority out there that has figured out death and to feel that we are joined with others in our anxiety and mystery (41).

What DeLillo is trying to convey about consumerism is that the more the people endeavor to shop, the more they get attached to the things they buy. The consequence of such attachment is more devotion to life and more denial of death. Murray crystallizes this idea when he informs Jack that Tibetans believe in a transitional state between death and rebirth that recharges the soul. Tibetans see death as the end of attachments to things. People are accordingly advised not to attach themselves to mundane transient objects that will not recompense for the traumatic spiritual gap deepened by capitalist ideals.

Media

DeLillo's questioning of the postmodern emphasis on uncertainty, chaos and the denial of objective realities is incarnated when he tackles the role of mass media in modern societies. All members in the Gladney household depend entirely on the media, particularly the television and the radio, as the authentic source of information to the extent that the television seems to be "the pinnacle of inspiration upon their lives" (LeBesco 92). Whenever they debate over any issue, they resort to what TV says to support their point of view. To represent the significance of TV in the Gladneys' life, DeLillo writes, "If our complaints have a focal point, it would have to be the TV set, where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires" (80-81). By embracing the reality of the media, the Gladneys lose confidence even in their sensations and gradually abandon their own true experiences. Having failed to recognize that the television has the ability to manipulate images, the Gladneys start to live in what Baudrillard calls "media simulacra" which result in creating a new hysterical reality to the people who perceive and believe in it. Therefore, the media, believed to mirror reality, is interpreted by Baudrillard as itself "hyperreality" whose "images, signs and codes, simulate an autonomous realm in everyday life" (qtd. in Linardi 237).

The absence of objective realities in the characters' lives in *White Noise* results in a huge cloud of uncertainty that covers all aspects of life. Postmodernism nurtures the idea that reality is representational and that every one should have his own codes to interpret the surrounding phenomena in his own ways. DeLillo does not entirely reject this idea. He rather

interrogates the excessive practice of this theory that could eventually eradicate all objective realities from man's life. The ultimate consequence of the absence of objective realities and the supremacy of representation is an extremely blurred atmosphere which will ultimately lead to a state of incertitude. An apt example of such incertitude is when Heinrich tells Jack that the radio said it was going to rain tonight, while Jack points out that it is already raining, and that they do not need to believe the radio over their own senses. Although Jack tries his best to convince his son that it is already raining, Heinrich attributes authenticity to what the weather meteorologists say in the radio that it is going to rain. Having failed to convince Heinrich, Jack gives in, "First-rate, I told him. A victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos" (23). By giving the meteorologists an aura of authority and credibility even if the objective reality is quite plain, DeLillo mocks the postmodern inclination to representation and uncertainty over the incontestable realities.

In their endeavor to assimilate into the media reality, the characters in *White Noise* try to respond according to what the media broadcasts. During the evacuation, Steffie, Jack's daughter, adjusts her physical response to the symptoms broadcast on the radio. When the radio says the "airborne toxic event" causes nausea, she pretends she has nausea. Then she complains of sweaty palms when the radio assures that sweaty palms are the real symptoms of the "airborne toxic event." Steffie therefore bestows credibility on the radio even if it gives different, may be opposing realities of the same situation. In a postmodern fashion, the radio symbolically represents the postmodern belief that reality is representational. Hence, one reality may have different representations. To apply this to the above situation, the "airborne toxic event" is the objective reality, whereas the interpretations of its symptoms are its representations. In reality, Steffie does not suffer from any symptoms of the "airborne toxic event", but because she no longer trusts her own sensations she prefers to go after an aura of authority that could interpret reality on behalf of her sensations. Jack, likewise, does not have any real signs that he is going to die. Yet, he consults a doctor in order to justify his death phobia. Although the medical records do not show any signs of near death, the doctor insists that Jack's health is really in danger and he is about to die. Jack and Steffie are

therefore trying to give meaning to the simulated reality rather than the objective one. Herein lies the destructiveness of the postmodern media reality as Kathleen LeBesco points out, “DeLillo explores the potential consequences of such a blind assignment to [media simulacrum] and the consequences it might have of confusing what is real and what is representation, resulting in a hyperreality” (92).

One of the most significant examples of how people, in *White Noise*, pursue the media reality is the plane crash incident. Bee, Jack’s daughter, is shocked when Jack informs her that there is no media in Blacksmith to cover the event and to interview the victims. She responds appallingly, “they went through all that for nothing?” (92). Bee believes that as long as the traumatic experiences of the passengers are not recorded and broadcast, the passengers’ suffering is meaningless. The plane crash is the objective reality that Bee denies and undermines, whereas a recorded TV program about the incident is the simulated (representational) reality that she pursues and appreciates. The priority of representation over the original is therefore humorously satirized in *White Noise*. In the same vein, When Murray and his colleagues discuss disasters, the department chairman comments that those countries where disasters are not broadcast on the media “don’t really count”. The department chairman proceeds:

India remains largely untapped. They have tremendous potential with their famines, monsoons, religious strife, train wrecks, boat sinkings, et cetera. But their disasters tend to go unrecorded....No film footage, no satellite hookup. This is why California is so important (66).

According to the department chairman, the Indians’ suffering is fruitless as long as it is not transformed into media production. Osteen observes, “They can’t understand their own experience without electronic mediation, without the knowledge that they are being observed. Stripped of the universal third person, they are trapped in a first person they no longer recognize” (181).

Since Jack and Babette are haunted by death phobia, they wittingly seek a different reality that could diminish their concerns. The reliance on TV shows and movies is thus

vindicated. For Jack and Babette, TV becomes the “distancing device between them and their own mortality” (Rettberg 7). On TV, Jack and Babette are indulging in the simulated realities provided by action movies in which heroes survive at the end despite all the deadly circumstances they have gone through. However, media with all its powerful potential does not really help Jack to realize the inevitable end of all humans. Instead of enlightening people about the nature of spiritual matters like death, media engenders a sense of hysterical adherence to life.

Self-Destructiveness

When Jack reveals to Murray, early in the novel, that “all plots move deathward”, he anticipates what he is going to do by the end of his quest for eternity. Being disappointed in all the auras of authority [or plots] that could terminate his fear of death, Jack wages a war against the modern/postmodern society by determining to kill Willie Mink whom he believes to be the origin of his suffering. For Jack, Mink represents both modernism, for his reliance on drug technology, and postmodernism, for the confusing and hysterical side effects the Dylar produces. Accordingly, the confrontation between Jack and Mink turns out to be a confrontation between modern/postmodern ideals and the hysterical reality which Jack represents. Urged by Murray's opinion that in the process of killing a new life is gained, “to kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up” (290), and equipped with the fire gun provided by his father-in-law, Jack enters Mr. Mink's untidy motel room with the firm intention to kill him.

Hysterical realism is highly expressed in the confrontation between Jack and Mink as the most violent scene in the novel turns out to be the most hilarious one. Babette told Jack before that one side effect of Dylar is that one could confuse language with reality, i.e. the mistaking of a word for its content. Jack exploits this poststructuralist concept when attacking Mink. It is enough for Jack to tell Mink words like, “hail of bullets” to find him “hitting the floor... showing real terror” (311). Although the scene is humorous, it critically interrogates the poststructuralist separation of the word from its meaning which, according

to DeLillo, leads to the defeat of reality. The postmodern world will result in the characters' incapability to distinguish between "signifier and signified" (Linardi 239). Finally, Jack turns from theory to practice and shoots Mink twice in the stomach, and then puts the gun in Mink's hand to make it like a suicide. Jack's triumph over the modern/postmodern world does not however last long as Mink defends himself by shooting Jack in the wrist. Jack's belief that killing can be "life-affirming" seems fallacious because killing fails too to provide him with any sense of assurance or security. DeLillo, however, "does not condemn Jack, nor does he downplay what has happened" (ibid) as he simply shows us "how far into postmodern ambivalence Jack has descended, so that his crime, which does not even have negative consequences for Jack, illustrates the stage of his postmodernization" (ibid). A distinct feature of hysterical realistic fiction is, therefore, forgiving the characters' ill deeds simply because these characters are presented as victims of the hysterical, cruel circumstances surrounding them. After shooting Mink, Jack regrets his deed and finds that Mink is just another victim of the chaotic society they live in, "I looked at him. Alive. His lap a puddle of blood. With restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person. The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy" (313). Jack therefore comes to view Mink as just another frightened man whose use of Dylar is evidence of the same fragile condition that Jack possesses himself. Jack's recognition is embodied in his decision to save Mink's life by taking him to the nuns for medical attention. Jack's sympathy results from his awareness that the technological secular society has victimized people on a large scale, as Henry Hunsinger points out that Jack's sympathy is due to "the relevance he attained through his confrontation with Willie Mink and the subsequent forgiveness of the man and the oppressive technological society he inhabits" (3).

When Jack arrives in the hospital to save Mink's life, he is shocked to find that even the Catholic German nuns who run the hospital pretend to believe in God as they do not really have any real faith. One of the nuns justifies their pretension saying, "if we don't pretend to

believe these things, the world would collapse” (318). Although the nuns are aware of the skeptical world postmodernism has created, they are trapped into that world themselves, and hence they come to be victimized by that same postmodern chaotic world. To believe that their pretension will save the world, the nuns are deluded as people like Jack have already collapsed due to the absence of adequate spiritual knowledge about matters like death. Religion teaches people how to perceive death as far as how to live their own lives. The absence of religion in the mechanically technological world gets people involved in a desperate search for immortality. DeLillo is quite aware that having real faith is what maintains the world from being collapsed. DeLillo also rebuffs the idea that faith is only restricted to a 'minority' (the nuns) who, on behalf of other people, takes the responsibility of saving the world through their simulated faith. False faith thus makes Jack quite appalled as it should be the only thing not to be simulated. Faith is the only beam of hope remained to Jack and the loss of faith means the loss of hope to recapture a meaningful life.

II. Cosmopolis

Eric Packer: Hypochondria

Eric Packer's universe, like Jack Gladney's, is “a resolutely postmodern media-saturated world of decadent self-referential capitalism, consumerism and failing metanarratives” (Smith 240). In *Cosmopolis*, as in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, DeLillo gives us one day in the life of Eric Packer, a currency trader and a multi-billionaire. The reader accompanies Eric in his journey from his luxurious apartment in Manhattan to the west side of New York in order to have a "haircut". Eric is seated most of the time in his high-tech limousine, from which other characters and events are introduced. Eric's journey is critically seen as “a metaphor for the volatile movements of [finance] capital seeking to exploit evanescent differences in interest rates, currency values and stock prices on the global markets” (Conte 181). *Cosmopolis*' Eric is the embodiment of the late 1990's stock market moguls who lives in the virtual world of figures and images. His job is to gamble on currencies in the stock market. Accordingly, he lives in a world where money

brings more and more money, and where fortunes could be lost in a couple of hours. In an interview with Paul Gediman, DeLillo notices that

April 2000 was the moment when the financial market collapsed, when recession took over from years of enormous growth. That was the end of a world. The twentieth century truly ended then. Culture was boiling with money. Capital markets surged. ... The confluence of capital and technology seemed to accelerate time. We were all living in the future, at least for a while ("A Day in the life of the Present" 7).

The hysteria which overwhelms the stock market in general and the currency rates in particular is what makes DeLillo admit that the events of *Cosmopolis* "occur in an exaggerated reality" (Ibid). As suggested by the title, *Cosmopolis* is set in a hyper-capitalist society. The title of the novel, like that of *White Noise*, helps further the implications of the hysterical atmosphere of the novel as well as the protagonists' sense of hypochondria, as Aaron Chandler suggests, "Don DeLillo depicts New York as a microcosm for neo-liberal globalization and its problems. He conceives the city portrayed in a state of chaos, suffering from collective posttraumatic stress disorder" (248). Eric is therefore introduced as the victim of such unnerving world of finance. Like Jack, Eric is preoccupied with his own health. His mania to protect himself from any minor disease leads him to experience a sense of hypochondria. A person with hypochondria continues thinking he is seriously ill although appropriate medical evaluations and reassurances show that his health is fine, "even minor abnormalities, such as a runny nose, are seen as symptoms of something really serious. Even after tests come back negative, their anxiety continues to be high and their desire for more physical attention grows" ("What is Hypochondria?" www.Medicalnewstoday.com/articles/9983.php). Just as death phobia spoils Jack and Babette's life, hypochondria does the same with Eric but on a larger scale.

Like the stock market, Eric's life is subject to danger in any moment and hence his entire life has become hysterical:

This is where the novel resonates so deeply with our situation today. ... We finally feel

the hysteria that drives the market forces and our helplessness to control it. The individual decisions of people – whether they happen to feel panic or confidence on a day – create mass convulsions. Stocks rise and fall. Hysteria swells and bubbles burst, and it all acts outside our authority (Harris, "Financial Frenzy: Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*"[http://www. curatormagazine. com/alisaharris/financial-frenzy-don-delillos-cosmopolis](http://www.curatormagazine.com/alisaharris/financial-frenzy-don-delillos-cosmopolis)).

Since patients with hypochondria are not aware that “depression and anxiety produce their own physical symptoms that might be mistaken for signs of a serious medical disease” (“What is Hypochondria?”), Eric is early introduced in the novel as an individual who is unable to sleep due to exhaustion and tension, “Sleep failed him more often now, not once or twice a week but four times, five” (5). Eric's insomnia can be interpreted as a consequence of his obsession of surveillance both of his bodily functions as well as of his financial investments to the extent that he is not willing to take a nap lest he may be liable to either physical disorder or financial loss, as Christopher Donovan explains “currency markets never close. And the Nikkei runs all day and night now. All the major exchanges. Seven days a week” (36). Eric's sleeplessness is accordingly a result of the hysterical world he himself contributes to exaggerate its devastating impact on individuals.

Experiencing a feeling of apprehension, Eric, in his limousine, is watched by a nurse and two armed guards. In addition, Eric's bodily functions are monitored on screens which are placed adjacent to the stock market screens. DeLillo, accordingly, draws a parallel relationship between Eric's life and the stock market. Any decline in the stock market will inevitably lead to deterioration of Eric's health. To emphasize this parallelism, the language used to describe the market data on the screens is the same one used to describe a patient's bodily functions in an intensive care unit, “polychrome numbers pulsing” and “the numbers glide horizontally and the bar charts pump up and down” (39).

One aspect of hysterical realistic fiction is crystallized in Eric's persistence on ludicrously searching for unnecessary meanings and interpretations for trivial matters such as “asymmetrical prostate” or ‘sneezing’: “He realized that he always sneezed twice, or so it seemed in retrospect. He waited and it came, rewardingly, the second sneeze. What causes

people to sneeze? A protective reflex of the nasal mucous membranes, to expel invasive materials” (140). Similarly, Eric is trying to find a reason for the rise of the Yen. Eric who gambles on the decline of the Yen rate in the stock market cannot alienate himself from his body or from the stock market. Eric is accordingly experiencing the same hysterical reality John suffers from in *White Noise*.

Although Eric is an embodiment of modern individuals who are not at ease with the harsh capitalist systems, his devices to protect himself from mortality are ridiculous and absurd. Eric delusively assumes he is invulnerable to death due to his safety measures: his bodyguards, the company of doctors and nurses in his journey, and his bank of information supported by his computers. However, he closes the eyes to the unpredictability of death exactly as he ignores the unpredictability of currency rates. Vija Kinski, Eric’s chief of theory, ironically commenting on Eric's silly dream of mortality, tells him, “People will not die. Isn’t this the creed of the new culture? People will be absorbed in streams of information” (85). Kinski, moreover, asserts the submission that man loses control over the financial systems he himself has created. Man accordingly deals with uncontrollable systems that lead to a state of hysteria that permeates people's life:

In the end you’re dealing with a system that’s out of control. Hysteria at high speeds, day to day, minute to minute . . . We create our own frenzy, our own mass convulsions, driven by thinking machines that we have no final authority over” (85).

Kinski’s words undermine the modernist/postmodern chaotic atmosphere of New York, which in turn represents the mood of the entire world. The stock market along with its maniac implications fosters the hysterical ambiance of the modern world, leaving average people in great depression. The protestors’ assault on the headquarters is therefore an assault against the oppressive capitalist systems that favor minorities and victimize the majority. Like Winnie in *White Noise*, Kinski is DeLillo’s voice and Eric’s foil in *Cosmopolis*. One of her illuminating comments is the one relating to the demonstration, “this is a protest against the future. They want to hold off the future. They want to normalize it, keep it from overwhelming the present”

(91). She predicts earlier that something is going to happen soon to “correct the acceleration of time. Bring nature back to normal” (79). In this way, Kinski presupposes Eric’s death, which in turn indicates the vulnerability of the capitalist systems.

Like Jack, Eric needs to be enlightened about the mortal nature of humans. Kinski, jogging Eric's memory of the hopelessness of the powerful men's absurd dream of mortality, says, “Great men historically expected to live forever even as they supervised construction of their massive tombs on the far bank of the river, the west bank, where the sun goes down” (105). Despite Kinski’s admonition, Eric tragically aspires to the future (the decline of Yen) which, he believes, will sustain him with eternity (wealth). Eric’s deafness to the voice of wisdom and his blindness to the ultimate truth of death predetermine his willfully self-destruction. This, in fact, echoes Jack Gladney’s statement that “all plots go deathward”. All the plots Eric hunts for to shield himself against death will eventually lead to a catastrophe. Jack, therefore, sacrifices his present for the sake of the mysterious prospects of the future, as DeLillo comments:

The idea is time. Living in the future . . . Money makes time. It used to be the other way around. Clock time accelerated the rise of capitalism. People stopped thinking about eternity. They began to concentrate on hours, measurable hours, man-hours, using labor more efficiently (79).

Kinski, opposing Eric's futuristic orientation, believes that people like Eric delusively cling to the idea that “the future is always a wholeness, a sameness. [They] are all tall and happy there...This is why the future fails. It always fails. It can never be the cruel happy place we want to make it” (91). Pursuing future makes people alienate themselves from their present reality and embrace delusive future promises. In *Cosmopolis*, fearing death is therefore a product of man’s excessive leaning to the future.

In his first encounter with pain, Eric comes full circle to his mortality, “As his doctor probes his prostate, Eric experiences pain. There was pain, probably just muscles tensing....But it hurt. It was pain. It traveled the circuitry of nerve cells” (47). Pain makes

Eric more conscious about his mortal body as it erodes his sense of invulnerability to death, “The pain was local but seemed to absorb everything around it ... He could think and speak of other things but only within the pain. He was living in the gland, in the scalding fact of his biology” (50). Despite the pain being momentary experience, Eric experiences what Elaine Scarry calls “the unmaking of the world through pain” (30). Pain amply destroys the “created world of thoughts and feelings” (Ibid). Having recognized his mortal body through pain, Eric resorts to the same auras of authorities Jack Gladney embraces in *White Noise* in an attempt to shun his fears.

Auras of Authority [Simulacra]

Consumerism: The Limo

The front and the back covers of the novel show a white limousine. Hence, the limo is of a paramount significance in *Cosmopolis* since it has an emblematic purpose. DeLillo presents the limo as the symbol of lavish and luxurious materialistic realm of the rich, “the limo is simultaneously a bar, a bathroom, a kitchen, a dining room, a security surveillance center, and a doctor’s office” (22). The limo is accordingly regarded as a “site of various modes of consumption” (22). It is also equipped with screens which enable Eric to trade in currencies as well as to monitor his bodily functions. It consequently represents a microcosmic life (a simulated one) where Eric appreciates his limo to the extent that he feels secure inside it.

DeLillo questions the value of the car whether to be a means of transportation or a place where man could define his identity, “The limousine isolates and separates Packer from the average American. It says to the public, *I am rich*” (22). The limo, like the supermarket in *White Noise*, is a place where a person feels he is still alive and consequently his individuality is remarkably distinct. David Gartman contends that consumers in the 1960s and 1970s began to “question the individuality of their goods,” and everyone tried “to find fulfillment through commodities”, which bespoke their individuality (183). Gartman further asserts that this trait “became manifest domestically in automotive consumption”

(Ibid). While these optional consumer objects offer themselves to buyers as ways to define themselves through personal preference, more importantly, they are replaceable with one another. And as one accessory replaces another, each allows their owner to read themselves differently. The process recognizes the shift in consumption in which “the postmodern epoch has engendered an entirely new relationship with material life” (Ibid). Eric’s attachment to his limo is thus an attachment to his identity and to his own life. To be seated in his limo from the very beginning of the story till the very end is a deliberate choice to avoid threats by encapsulating himself (Jack) with the protective realm of his own car. Therefore, the very moment Eric leaves it at the end of the novel to go to his apartment, he faces death when Richard Sheets (who wants to be known as Benno Levin) shoots him. The limo, like the supermarket in *White Noise*, gives Eric a momentary experience of reassurance; once he leaves it, he is liable to real threats.

Technology

The limousine is also a symbol of modern technology. By relying on his limo as a source of power that protects him from death, Eric discards the notion of God who is supposed to be man’s safe haven in the maddening world. Modernism maintains that rationalism is man’s means to obtain “material security” and thus modernism adopts “the extravagant expectation that technology and science would further not only the control of the forces of nature but also the understanding of self and world” (Kaplan 5). However, in an article entitled “In the Ruins of the Future”, DeLillo stresses the deceptiveness of technology:

Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet. The materials and methods we devise make it possible for us to claim our future. We don’t have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment. The miracle is what we ourselves produce (36).

DeLillo satirically condemns the materialistic aspect of modernism which obliterates the spiritual perspectives from humans’ life. Technology makes man believe he is the master

of the universe and that he could hold off all possible threats. A person can have heart or liver transplant; he may obtain artificial eyes, limbs, or whatever, yet he is still mortal. We cannot ward off diseases like cancer; we cannot stop earthquakes, car accidents, etc. Man still needs God. Eric's own god is his limo in which he alienates himself from the outer world. The limo along with its hi-tech equipments compels Eric to falsely believe he is immortal. Paradoxically, however, while the car is used to shorten travel distances, it also shortens man's life since car accidents are considered an important factor for the high rate of deaths all over the world. Hence, DeLillo mocks technology since it provides man with hi-tech amenities, but it also spoils and endangers his life.

DeLillo's severe condemnation of modernism makes several critics consider *Cosmopolis* a postmodern novel on the basis that postmodernism as a movement evolved against the modernist ideals. Postmodernism, which is against any metanarrative that is claimed to encompass all aspects of human life, stands in a hostile position against religion considering it another metanarrative that needs to be interrogated. However, when considering DeLillo's mocking statement "we don't have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment", it is obvious that DeLillo is calling for a return to God and God's religion. If modernism fails to secure happiness to human beings, postmodernism is not a substitute. Erroll Hulsein in his article, "A Christian Response to Postmodernism", writes

The postmodernist denies that there can be such a thing as a metanarrative – a 'big story' which can give an overarching explanation of the world as we know it. Instead, each of us constructs his or her own narrative, or reality, usually depending on our own community of knowledge (<http://www.reformation-today.org/papers/ibc.pdf>).

Eric already uses his knowledge to construct his own reality; however, he fails to attain happiness. DeLillo therefore asserts that there should be a framework or a light that could eliminate the meaninglessness of people's lives. Without such a framework, man will live in an endless process of simulating realities. According to DeLillo, believing in God and divine providence could mitigate agonizing and horrendous experiences. Both Eric and Jack

endeavor to escape their fate whether by denying their mortal nature or by embracing auras of authority, which may act as shields against death. Such futile attempts ironically bring them closer to their fortune. The message is that death is inevitable; the only metanarrative that could cope with it turns out to be the spiritual faith fostered by religion.

Mythic Figures: The Yen

In *Cosmopolis*, Eric relies heavily on the Yen as a source of power. However, Eric's fatal error is that he is trying his best to give an explanation to the unexpected rise of the Yen relying on the flow of information and other conveniences offered by his limo. Joseph Conte argues, "instead of examining for harmonic balance, Eric should have recognized that patterns in currency values would be 'lopsided,' misshapen, irregular, or asymmetrical" (190). For Eric, there should be a theory to "explain the yen" (63); a theory which is "latent in nature itself, a leap of pictorial language that went beyond the standard models of technical analysis and out-predicted even the arcane charting of his own followers in the field" (63). Hypochondriac people's belief that every minor phenomenon needs to be precisely interpreted is the origin of their suffering. Eric does not take things as they come simply because he trusts his aptitude to decipher all codes of life. Eric as a modernist who lives in the chaotic world of postmodernism uses his calculations and equations in order to put a frame or a rule through which he could predict the rate of the Yen;

[Eric] knew the yen could not go any higher. He explained that there were levels it could not reach. The market knew this. There were oscillations and shocks that the market tolerated to a certain point but not beyond. The yen itself knew it could not go higher. But it did go higher, time and again (84).

Eric's visionary faculties cannot help him to correctly expect the rate of the Yen, and hence he is going to lose all his fortune in a couple of hours. The Yen in *Cosmopolis* is a symbol of the harsh capitalist system man has invented and then lost power to control its ferocity. The Yen, like the figure of Hitler in *White Noise*, does not provide Eric with any sense of security. On the contrary, it accelerates Eric's movement towards his self-destruction.

Media

While Jack depends on the images of the television to construct and interpret his reality, Eric depends more on the images of his personal computers. However, what distinguishes *Cosmopolis* is that the images of the computer screens rely more on the language of digits and charts. Reality for Eric turns out to be a “virtual space contained in the computer screens” (20), upon which he observes “flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing” (13), where “the electronic impulses, representing money moving worldwide, possess a life of their own” (Smith 244). The digital world therefore replaces the real world and this in turn opens the door to another type of simulacrum. Appalled by the invasion of this new cyber/hyper reality, DeLillo, in *Cosmopolis*, comments on people’s excessive reliance on the cyber/digital realm of information and technology:

It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zerooneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet’s living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole (24).

Eric is an embodiment of those who blindly trust the media particularly the one which is related to digits. His reliance on the digital world makes him deny the linguistic communication with others. For Eric, language is currently “incapable and utterly inappropriate for expressing the current situation, a situation that is marked by simulation, hyper-reality and ever-increasing speeds of change” (Noble 63). Or as Baudrillard puts it, ‘the cool universe of digitality has absorbed the world of metaphor and metonymy’ (qtd. in Noble 64). It is not surprising then that Eric isolates himself from others by sitting most of the time in his limousine. This, in fact, has its own repercussions on his marital life. He does not often meet his wife. Ironically, he meets her twice accidentally on his journey to have a

hair cut. DeLillo, therefore, draws our attention to a serious social problem resulting from the omnipresence of the media in every household: it ruins the familial communication and intimacy.

Just as the characters in *White Noise* depend on the media to interpret and decode the surrounding reality, so does Eric in *Cosmopolis*. One example is the demonstration which takes place near Eric. Although he can follow it through the window of his limousine, he prefers to watch the event on the screen of his TV because “it makes more sense” (89). Eric therefore prefers the representation of the event to the event itself. Hence, DeLillo mocks the triumph of representation over reality.

Unlike Jack, Eric’s entire life is mainly based on the simulated world of media. In *Cosmopolis*, the motif of death phobia is more omnipresent in the media. The several screens located around the limo’s interior exhibit images and data transmitted in real time from Europe and Asia. The director of the International Monetary Fund is shot and killed while appearing live on the Money Channel, and the owner of Russia’s largest media corporation dies of gunfire. Eric covetously believes that with the killing of the Russian magnate, he may easily take his financier’s place and extend his business to Russia. However, Eric is unaware that these deaths abroad anticipate his death at home as his chief of security alerts him that there is also a credible threat against his own life. This recognition makes Eric more cognizant about what awaits him at the end of his journey, “at the brink of night that spoke to him most surely about some principle of fate he’d always known would come clear in time” (107). Having recognized his inescapable fate, Eric, like Jack, hastens his own destruction.

Self-Destructiveness

Eric’s insistence on wrongly gambling on the yen despite his councils’ advice to retreat indicates his premeditated movement toward his own destruction by losing all his fortune. In order to pursue his death, Eric first appropriates his wife’s fortune by hacking into her bank account, then moves on to rid himself of his security guard by shooting him without any

reason. This willfully self-destructive behavior is hinted at in several occasions in the narrative. Early in the novel Kinski suggests that Eric's death can only occur "because [he] permits it...as a way to re-emphasize the idea we all live under...enforced destruction [so that] new markets [can be] claimed" (92). To acknowledge that his excessive reliance on technology is the main reason for his own destruction, Eric foresees his death by seeing his dead body on one of the screens of his computers, "a vision of an unidentified body that Eric understands to be his own" (20). Technology, represented by the hi-tech monitors, is consequently seen as Eric's fortune and misfortune simultaneously. Even Eric's desire to have a haircut implies his endeavor for his own destruction for the term "haircut" is a slang term meaning "losing enormous sums of money in the stock market" (Crosthwaite 4).

Having realized that he is going to lose his fortune, Eric decides to end his life, since money for Eric is what protects him from death. In this regard, DeLillo underscores a very serious moral issue: does the loss of one's money mean he is vulnerable to death? Does money mislead a person to the extent that he feels death is inaccessible to him? Does the drive to earn a lot of money make people subjugate and exploit others? When Eric says, "the logical extension of a business is murder", he is quite aware of the poetic justice he deserves for his ill deeds. Eric endeavors to amass a fortune by paying no attention to those who are badly influenced by his greedy behavior. Richard Sheets, or Benno Levin, one of Eric's victims in the stock market, avenges himself by killing Eric at the end of the novel. Ironically, however, it is Eric who takes the initiative to shoot himself in his right hand. Accordingly, Eric's willful pursue of his own destruction seems absurd and comic; features which typify hysterical realistic fiction as Emory Elliott suggests, "rather than a symbol or stereotype of the worst of cyber age robber barons, Eric is a comic figure, a spoiled bully who is out of control, self-destructive, and is begging to be punished- a child who needs limits" (23).

Having recognized the impossibility of immortality by clinging to the technological realm of information and digits, Eric surrenders himself to death. Although Eric's deed is

suicidal, it is also moral. In fact, the transition from ignorance to recognition is incarnated in Eric's attempts to put a tragic end to his life. In other words, Eric sees his death a necessity to metaphorically demolish the capitalist system he is a part of, and to reestablish a new equal system instead. The retribution of Eric is important for both the narrative and for the cosmic balance, as Benno Levin suggests:

You [Eric] need to die no matter what [...] You have to die for how you think and act. For your apartment and what you paid for it. For your daily medical checkups. [...] For how much you had and how much you lost, equally. [...] For the limousine that displaces the air that people need to breathe in Bangladesh. [...] The thoughts you have" (203).

Eric's own death signifies the defeat of technology as well as the virtual worlds nurtured by technology. By letting himself easily killed by Benno Levin, Eric disconnects and liberates himself from the maddening world, from the oppressive capitalist system, and from his egoistic self.

Although not discussed together, *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* have many points in common. Both novels belong to hysterical realistic fiction. The events of the novels move in a linear fashion. There are no fragments or discontinuities, and the two narratives have unity and wholeness which are collectively uncharacteristic features of modernist and postmodern texts. The protagonists are obsessed with their mortality. Although Jack and Eric do everything they can manage in order to avoid death, they move faster and closer towards their self-destruction. Both Jack and Eric fail to grasp the destructiveness of modernism and postmodernism. As a result, they are depicted as out-of-control characters who desperately endeavor to ward off death. In decisive situations, they behave hilariously and weirdly simply because they are not equipped to deal with mystical matters like that of death. The ultimate outcome of the characters' imprudence and eccentricity as well as the gravity and destructiveness of the modernistic-postmodern problems is a hysterically realistic atmosphere which pervades DeLillo's fiction.

Although *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* have points in common, they also exhibit differences. While Jack tries to escape death by joining the crowds, Eric feels secure in his

solitariness. While Jack shares his wife in his agony, Eric occasionally sees his wife on the street. While time in *White Noise* extends for one year, time in *Cosmopolis* is compressed as it lasts for a few hours. Most important is that Eric fears death and dies by the end of the story, whereas Jack fears death but does not die. The reason behind such distinct ends is that Eric is a representative of the system that horrifies and objectifies ordinary people like Jack. Hence, the killing of Eric is a deliberate choice by DeLillo to terminate what Eric represents: oppressive capitalism, invincible civilizations, and decadent communities.

In *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, hysterical realism is introduced when the characters are no longer able to distinguish between what is real and what is simulacrum. Even DeLillo's readers cannot distinguish between the oppressors and the oppressed; the powerful and the powerless; and the murderers and the murdered. In a world where uncertainty prevails, man leads a very baffling life which summons all kinds of fear such as death phobia and hypochondria. The protagonists of the two novels, out of fear, exhibit conflicting reactions such as gravity and hilarity. Despairingly, they cling to auras of authority such as science, technology, and media in order to escape their fears. However, DeLillo has proved that such auras cannot mitigate human instinct fears. On the contrary, they have deepened man's predicament. DeLillo's protagonists are, accordingly, deprived from attaining a definition to their identity since they live in a simulated world where access to objective realities is always denied. Although some critics assume that DeLillo does not provide solutions to the issues he raises in his work, this study shows that he frequently underscores the significance of religion as a remedy for the problems raised in the narrative. What DeLillo calls for is not a traditional concept of religion; but a renewed one which could cope with our complicated reality. The absence of religious belief exaggerates the impact of the hysterical reality, which in turn leads to a lack of vision and uncertainty. Because it is the writer's job to see what others cannot, DeLillo is quite alert that the Americans' immoderation in self-protectiveness, their reliance on the simulated realities, and their negligence of the pending threats of abandoning religious belief should be questioned and destabilized.

* * * *

Works Cited

- Boxall, Peter. *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Chandler, Aaron. "An Unsettling, Alternative Self: Benno Levin, Emmanuel Levinas, and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*." In *Critique*, vol. 50, Issue 3, (Spring 2009): 241- 260.
- Clippinger, David. "Only Half Here." *Literature and the Writer*. Ed. Michael J. Meyer. New York: Rodopi, B.V., 2004: 135- 152.
- Conte, Josef. "Writing Amid the Ruins: 9/11 and *Cosmopolis*." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. (Ed.) John N. Duvall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008: 179 - 192.
- Crosthwaite, Paul. "Catastrophe Fiction in the Age of the Global Accident: Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*". *The London Consortium Static*. (July 2008): 13.
- Decurtis, Anthony. "An Outsider in This Society: An Interview with Don DeLillo." *Introducing Don DeLillo*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia. Durham: Duke UP, 1991: 43- 66.
- DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.
- DeLillo, Don. "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September." *Harper's*, (December 2001): 33- 40.
- DeLillo, Don. *Cosmopolis*. London: Picador, 2003.
- Donovan, Christopher. *Postmodern Counternarratives: Irony and Audience in the Novels of Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson, and Tim O'Brien*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Douglas, Christopher. "Don DeLillo." *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*.

- Bertens, Hans & Joseph Natoli (Eds.). Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell, 2002: 104 – 109.
- Elliott, Emory. "Terror, Aesthetics, and the Humanities in the Public Sphere." *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, No. 19. (2008): 7- 23
 - Gartman, David. *Auto Opium: A Social History of American Automobile Design*. London: Routledge, 1994.
 - Gediman, Paul. "A Day in the life of the Present: Don DeLillo on Cosmopolis." *Interview with Don DeLillo*. Borders Web Site. Web. 25 Feb. 2011 <http://www.bordersstores.com/features/feature.jsp?file=delillo>.
 - Harris, Alisa. "Financial Frenzy: Don DeLillo's Cosmopolis". Web. 10 April 2011 <http://www.curatormagazine.com/alisaharris/financial-frenzy-don-delillos-cosmopolis>
 - Hulsein, Erroll. "A Christian Response to Postmodernism." Web. 2 March 2011 <http://www.reformation-today.org/papers/ibc.pdf>
 - Hunsinger, Henry. "Heinrich's Hidden Prophecy: The Quest for Relevance in Don DeLillo's White Noise". Web. 13 March 2011 <http://www.wilkes.edu/Include/academics/kirby%20canon/TheQuest.pdf>.
 - Kaplan, E. Ann Ed. "Introduction". In *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*. New York: Verso, (1988): 1- 9.
 - Kavadlo, Jesse. *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004.
 - LeBesco, Kathleen. "White Noise as Wake-Up Call: Teaching DeLillo as Media Skeptic." *Approaches to Teaching DeLillo's White Noise*. Eds. Tim Engles and John N. Duvall. New York: Modern Language Association of America, (2006): 87- 101.

- LeClair, Tom. *In The Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Liechty, Daniel (Ed.) *Death and Denial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Legacy of Ernest Becker*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002.
- Lentricchia, Frank. "Introduction." *New Essays on White Noise*. Lentricchia, Frank (Ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1991): 1– 14. Series: The American Novel. Ed: Emory Elliott.
- Linardi, Silvia de Menezes. "All the World is a Screen: The Power of Media Simulacra in the Novels of Don DeLillo". *Belo Horizonte*, V. 6, (2003): 233- 243.
- Miller, Laura. "The War for the Soul of Literature". Web. 13 Feb. 2011 http://www.salon.com/2004/07/15/peck_wood/
- Noble, Stuart. "Don DeLillo and Society's Reorientation to Time and Space: An Interpretation of Cosmopolis." In *AS Peers*, Vol. 1. (2008): 61- 74.
- Osteen, Mark. *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- Passaro, Vince. "Dangerous Don DeLillo." *Conversations with Don DeLillo*. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005: 75- 85.
- Rettberg, Scott. "American Simulacra: Don DeLillo's Fiction in Light of Postmodernism." Web. 12 March 2011 <<http://www.cx.unibe.ch/ens/dellilo/whitenoise.index.htm> >
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Smith, Aaron. "Poetic Justice, Symmetry, and the Problem of the Postmodern in Don DeLillo's Cosmopolis." *GRAAT*, 7 January (2010): 238- 252.
- Stenger, Victor J. "Postmodern Attacks on Science and Reality." Web. 12 March 2011. <http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/reality.html>.

- Tabbi, Joseph. "Cognitive Fictions." Series: Electronic Mediations volume 8. Eds. Hayles, Katherine; Poster, Mark & Samuel Weber. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Tew, Philip. "A New Sense of Reality? A New Sense of the Text? Exploring Meta-Realism and the Literary-Critical Field." *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*. Ed. Klaus Stiersdorfer. Berlin: deGruyter, 2003: 29- 49.
- Waugh, Patricia. *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*. New York: Methuen, 1989.
- "What is Hypochondria?" Web. 10 April 2011. www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/9983.php -
- Wilcox, Leonard. "Baudrillard, DeLillo's White Noise, and the End of Heroic Narrative." *Contemporary Literature* 32. 3, (1991): 346 – 365.
- Wilson, Louise. "Cyberwar, God and Television: An Interview with Paul Virilio." *Digital Delirium*. Eds. Arthur and Marie Louise Kroker. Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1997: 41-48.
- Wood, James. *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.

* * * *