



Research Article

TELVISED CULTURE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the cultural changes that has transformed the life style of American people with the advancement of media. Media culture has shaped the attitude of the multitude in today's world. DeLillo has strongly criticised the people who go behind the image created world. This article tries to focus on the impacts of television and televised culture of the Americans in the novel *White Noise*.

Key words:

Media culture, image created world, simulacrum.

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INTRODUCTION

The culture of a community includes various aspects: spatial, economic, ideological, erotic and political, legal and non-institutionalized trends and movements. It encompasses technology, literature, art, ethnic and religious beliefs and biases that both infuse and connect the higher cognitive functions and emotions of individual minds. Culture can be defined in various ways. In the words of E.B. Tylor, an anthropologist, it is "that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"(17).

In the most general sense, culture can be understood as the accumulated knowledge of customs and traditions of a group of people, which systematically drive and channel collective dispositions of thoughts and behaviour into the future. Cultural pollution derives the pervading mental disorder that disturbs the psychological imbalance of the individuals and the intervention of the media in the individual's choice of living which accentuates their mental agony.

Both culture and literature are inseparable and are interlinked. The culture that is reflected in literature makes the reader understand how to live peacefully, meaningfully and purposefully. Yet the study of man has not been a complete process. Man is more than a social animal as he faces more challenges in his diurnal life living in a digitalized society. Very few are the works that claim the subject related to man's survival and existence in the technologically advanced society.

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DeLillo has a unique place and he stands greater with his brilliant and vivid skill of presenting the environmental degradation due to the technical advancements. His novels highlight the contemporary issues of the American society which concentrates only on enjoying the benefits of the scientific and technological advancements and fails to understand in giving more importance to preserve the values of nature and human beings.

America, the most technologically advanced country in the world after the Second World War, had generated a mood of new confidence and optimism in raising its economy and growth. This seemed to bring lasting peace and national security to it in an increasingly chaotic world. With its effective modernized processes of production and with its plenty of resources, it soon grew as the most prosperous and most developed country in the world. The rapid advancement in scientific and industrial research and their new technological applications had transformed America into a technocratic society which not only led to an alarming devaluation of man but also an unpleasant and horrifying future.

In his essay, "In the Ruins of the Future," DeLillo explains that the reason behind the attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre was Americans' culture which exposes their power, pride, economic growth, policies, their domination of other countries and, particularly because of their force in using technology, America had to face anger from its enemies. DeLillo describes:

... the primary target of the men who attacked the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre was not the global economy. America drew their fury. It was the high gloss of our modernity. It was the thrust of our technology. It was our perceived godlessness. It was the blunt force of our foreign

policy. It was the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind. (33)

DeLillo's *White Noise* is his eighth novel published in 1985. It is widely considered as his first best work that claimed much attention. *White Noise* follows a year in the life of Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies in The-College-on-the-Hill. He has been married five times to four women. He has a brood of children and stepchildren with his current wife, Babette. In due course, Gladney and Babette experience difference of opinions associated with death. Originally, they do not want to die and so take steps to escape from it. *White Noise* explores various themes that emerged during the mid-to-late twentieth century, like rampant consumerism, media saturation, academic intellectualism, underground conspiracies, the disintegration and reintegration of the family, human-made disasters and the potentially regenerative nature of human violence and the tension between reality and artifice.

The mainstream of the novel is regulated around two major problems, the airborne toxic event, and Jack's discovery of his wife's involvement in an experimental study of a new psychopharmaceutical called Dylar. Though Jack is very alert and confident of his position as a professor in Blacksmith, he is exposed to the toxicity mingled with the air. Later when he identifies it he realizes and accepts that he is unable to cure it. However, he wished to avoid the toxicity functioning in his body from killing himself.

DeLillo's *White Noise* is also an analysis on the culture of the people living in an illusionary world i.e. under the influence of the media created world. *White Noise* captures the individuals' collective liking to the media and its created image. The media-permeated environment, which determines the contemporary society, is very well depicted in *White Noise*. This novel not only pictures the socio-cultural trends, which characterize the American lifestyle but also portrays the postmodern social attitude of the people of America through its protagonist, Jack Gladney. Throughout the story of *White Noise*, Jack Gladney connects events, dates, and facts in an attempt to form a comprehensive understanding of this world. Jack Gladney serves as a professor in a college at Blacksmith, a small American town. Jack with his wife Babette and their children lives in Blacksmith, a college town. Throughout the novel various half siblings and spouses drift in and out of Gladney's family. The television subjugates the role of creator and destroyer of 'images' which Gladneys like most. Television is seen to be a part of their family and it has a greater influential role in providing information for people to make comparisons and assumptions of their positions in the changing world.

DeLillo's *White Noise* is a domestic novel which deals with the role of television in changing the culture of people of the present day world. It captures how people's habit of watching television leads to the destruction of their own culture. It analyses the lifestyle of Jack Gladney and his family and explains how they try to fulfill their desires and dreams in their life. In this novel, television is shown to be everything for them and it provides all information that they need to have in their life. They spend most of their time watching television programmes and advertisements which easily trap them.

Television, being a very powerful tool in the hands of man, operates as a source of catastrophic events and disasters, which distort the images of reality. In this novel, through the media,

the characters watch the real scenes of the loss of the lives of many people during the natural calamities like erupting volcanoes, floods, and earthquakes. It is very ironic that these scenes, instead of creating awe and pity or making an appeal for helping these affected people in the minds of these characters, are a source of pastime for them.

These scenes do not really make any impact in their minds. It is in normal practice, irrespective of any culture that people become sympathetic or empathetic when they watch such scenes directly or through television. But in this present chaotic and technocratic modern American society, it is seen through the behavior of these characters of the novel that the culture of showing humaneness is even lost. It has become the order of the day that the American pride does not permit its people to express their feelings or concern internally or externally, and it has become an obsolete custom now-a-days for them to show respect even for man and his life. It is very pathetic that even loss of human lives does not bring any change in their arrogant minds and they do not even sympathize for the affected people. They devour televised realities and that have become their regular task at family dinners. The attitude of the members of Jack's family is reflected in the words of Jack as follows:

That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese. There were floods, earthquakes, mudslides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. ...We were Watching the houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, and more sweeping. (*WN* 29)

Being treated as a member of Jack's family, the television takes up its prominent role in all their discussions. It is the only potential danger to the citizens of the world resulting in boundless life with nature as Jack claims about television that, "where the outer torment lurks, causing fear and secret desires" (*WN* 85). People are not aware that it creates a numbing effect on the audience, predicting a considerable degree of insensitivity. Murray Susskind of *White Noise* admits the destroying role of the television and he calls this effect of insensitivity caused due to the watching of it "brain fade" (*WN* 87). People simply keep watching television just for the sake of doing so and they do not properly understand that they are directly or indirectly forced to watch whatever is shown. They are taken to the dreamy world which they treat as their own living room. Murray, a friend and another character of the novel explains this to Jack when they involve in their discussion on the effects of the television:

Television is just another junk mail... Waves and Radiation. I have come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring. It's like a myth being born right out there in our living room, it is something we know in a dream-like and preconscious way. (*WN* 51)

For some people, watching television seems to make them feel energetic, enthusiastic and also make them get rid of all their tension in life. They find comfort and consolation and also feel secured when they are in the company of television, treating it as their own family member. In this context, it would be appropriate to note how Silverstone, a critic, sees television as: "a member of the family in a metaphorical sense, but also in a

literal sense insofar as it is the focus of emotional or cognitive energy, releasing or containing tension for example, or providing comfort or a sense of security” (39).

White Noise presents how the routine life of Jack’s family is disturbed by the intervention of television and radio speech which aggravate their state of uncertainty leading to great confusion and panic. It also captures how the children are very much affected by the influence of the media. For instance, Jack’s daughter, Steffie’s blabbering of the word, “Toyota Celica” (WN,155) during her sleep very well reflects this. Though his children are seen to be intelligent enough and keep updating their knowledge in all areas of their studies, the media culture damages them easily. Even the family sees the word, ‘Toyota Celica’ as a multinational word and a translinguistic signifier. At times of disaster, Jack’s family recites this word as a rosary of the culture as it comes from the advertisement of television or radio.

Amidst the smooth journey of Jacks’ family, a catastrophe in the name of ‘airborne toxic event’ gets their attention. When this toxic event occurs and the clouds carry the poisonous gas over Blacksmith, Jack’s daughters, Steffie and Denise start sensing the symptoms like ‘sweaty palms’ and ‘nausea’ which later lead to ‘dejavu’ and ‘miscarriage’. These speculative and unreliable sources of information arouse anxiety among them. DeLillo describes:

What if she was developing real symptoms by natural means? Maybe the scientists were right in the first place, with their original announcements, before they revised upward. Which was worse, the real condition or the self-created one, and did it matter? (WN 56)

The Gladneys’ appetite for getting alarms from the media and their constant worry about health fill the remaining pages of the novel. The confusion of authenticity generated by the media falls into inevitable irony: “Could a nine-year old girl suffer a miscarriage due to the power of suggestion? Would she have to be pregnant first?” (WN 56). When living is possible with the culturally advanced customs of technology, it lays no meaning to identify the existence of nature in the postmodern society. Through this novel, DeLillo also analyses the interconnected twist between media and social behavior of its followers in the current scenario.

The materialistic world destroys even people’s habit of visiting banks to deposit and withdraw their money. Now-a-days, people think that going to banks and doing their transactions physically is a time consuming process. They think that the machines do the banking service better and they blindly think that the machines never go wrong just like human beings. DeLillo explains people’s comfort and convenience in using the ATMs and CDMs through the character of Jack who narrates his experience in using them as:

I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card... Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval... the system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. (WN 46)

Jack blindly believes that he finds great relief in using technology and tributes the fact that its suave procedure purges his mind and keeps him from thinking about the underlying processes. It has become the recent culture of the Americans

and the people of other countries to use different plastic currencies namely as mentioned in the novel: “Mastercard, Visa, American Express” (WN 100) and they try to realize all their dreams by consuming all the products as they wish, using these cards. They are least bothered about the difficulties they are supposed to face in their lives, if they do not pay back properly. Their fondness in leading the life of fantasy forces them to use these cards in order to expose their superior identity. In an interview with Nadotti, DeLillo opines about the consumer culture as:

Consume or die...Through products and advertising, people attain impersonal identity.... It’s as if fantasies and dreams could become realized with the help of the entire consumer imagination that surrounds us, a form of self-realization through products. (93)

In this media centered world, the myth about death is explained as a concept that erases an individual’s mortality and transforms these icons into immortality in an art form.

An event that is repeatedly shown in the media generally becomes popular and the lives of personalities which are often shown in it also attain popularity and immortality. It becomes the postmodern paradox of fame, shaking hands with technology, being filmed and getting the names of personalities of the world immortalized. By doing so, the life and death of even the ordinary persons is artificially popularized. Jack’s students believe that “television is the death throes of the human consciousness” (WN 51). Recognizing this, Osteen writes: “televised apocalypses wrap social problems into tidy narrative parcels, reducing frightening events to formulate fables” (174).

The novel *White Noise* concentrates on the belief of the people attaining media popularity. There are people who desire for the pleasure of accomplishing popularity on the T.V screen for a period of seconds and minutes as an egalitarian creed for fame. When asked about it, DeLillo opines that reality is being consumed. He also says that people, who are already under the influence of the television, not only get carried away by the endless repetition of certain videos that keep appearing on TV news and other programmes, but also destroy their own moments of reality and they become the consumers of such artificial moments.

DeLillo firmly believes that what is left in the nature of people is only the improvised moments of violence i.e. it is not the choreographed movie violence but something startlingly real. This gets interwoven in their perception of life and they may not be in a position to know whether the life that they live is real or not.

Accepting technology and recognizing the influence of media are vital to understand the novel *White Noise*. Jack sees his wife being showed on a community cable, while taking classes on postures. Jack understands as if she were dead. At that moment, Babette becomes the Warhol icon. Leonard Wilcox comments on *White Noise* as:

Even death is not exempted from the world of simulation: the experience of dying is utterly mediated by technology and eclipsed by a world of symbols. The body becomes simulacrum, and death loses its personal and existential resonances.... Media and technology transform death into a sign spectacle. (352- 53)

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