
Hyper reality, Discursive Power and Resistance in Don Delillo's White Noise

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Abstract: *The exertion of power is interwoven with the concept of the loss of the real in Don DeLillo's White Noise (1985). The present study aims to survey the relations between power and loss of the real in this novel based on Jean Baudrillard's postmodern theories of hyperreality and simulation, and Michel Foucault's theories of power discourses and resistance. As a qualitative, research-based study, this article highlights discourses of power like media, advertising, supermarkets and medical technology to show how reality is concealed and hyperreality takes its place in the novel. According to Foucault, discourses generate power. It is discussed that discourses of power dominate people and they successfully pretend to be the only source of validation. It shall be indicated that the Gladneys are influenced by such exertions of power. However, Jack Gladney resists the power and tries to make other characters aware of the manipulative power of media, advertisements and medical technology which produces a fake drug called Dylar. Besides, Murray resists the persuasive power of advertising of supermarkets by not buying the advertised brands and products which distorts the reality behind consumerism of postmodernism. Therefore, the findings of the study show that there are significant relations between the exertion of power and the loss of the real in White Noise (1985).*

Keywords: *Hyperreality, Simulation, Baudrillard, Power, Resistance, Foucault.*

1. INTRODUCTION

White Noise (1985) is an intriguing postmodern novel written by Don DeLillo. It consists of three sections such as Waves and Radiation, The Airborne Toxic Event, and Dylarama. It deals with the subjects such as media, technology, consumerism, waste and toxic substances, and disintegration of families.

There are numerous postmodern discourses through which power exerts itself in White Noise (1985). Babae's paper (2014) is the only essay studied the "organizations of supermarket and media as new discourses of power" in White Noise based on Foucault's theory of power. But



Foucault's theory of resistance, concomitant with the theory of power, has not been applied on this novel in Babae's paper. Besides, discourses of power such as medical technology and advertising are left untouched in this study. And the consequences of exertion of power on DeLillian characters have not been studied. Here it seems to be a gap. First of all, there are more discourses that have not been referred to. Second, the theory of resistance has not been applied. And finally, the consequences of the exertion of power have not been studied. In order to fill this gap—and as hyperreality has not been surveyed in Wilcox's (1991) Baudrillardian reading of *White Noise*—the present study aims to intermingle Foucault's theories of power and resistance with Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality and simulation to study the resistance of individuals toward imposing power of discourses like media, medical technology, advertising—leading to distortion of the reality and presence of constructed reality in *White Noise* (1985).

Literature Review

Wilcox (1991) in his article called “Baudrillard, DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and the End of the Heroic Narrative” tries to highlight the “informational world” of DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). He applies Baudrillard's concept of “Moebius strip”—the “endless chain of signification”—on this novel. The “flow of signifiers emanating from an information society” and the play and exchange of signs” (p.347) are the points of her consideration in this article. She comes to this conclusion that in the informational world of *White Noise*, images, codes and signs rule (p.348).

Bhardwaj (2016) in “Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: A Postmodern Techno-Scientific Novel” focuses on DeLillo's attempts to reveal the dangerous impacts of the careless use of technology and scientific inventions. It claims that “modern mechanism” has very bad effects on the lives of human beings. This “modern mechanism” is surveyed through the three following issues in *White Noise*: “the television as the source of information and entertainment; the toxic event; and the Dylar drug and its disastrous consequences” (p.103).

“Sketch of Discourse and Power in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*” is a concise article written by Babae and Roselezam (2014). They claimed that they’re going to apply Foucault's theories of discourse and power on DeLillo's *White Noise* to “understand representations and the intersections of discourse” in this novel. Although they propose an interesting idea, they fail to concentrate on those discourses and their role in representations.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study focuses on the theories of two outstanding critics, the postmodernist critic Baudrillard, and the outstanding critic Foucault. Postmodern theories of hyperreality and simulation from Baudrillard and theories of power and discourse from Foucault will be elaborated. As a qualitative and research-based study, the present article shows a compound reading of Baudrillard and Foucault from the point of similarity in which power is exerted through discourses of media, medical technology, advertising and consumerism which leads to the presence of hyperreal world and loss of the real.

The purpose of this study is to trace how power can monitor, manipulate and create



hyperreal moments for characters of *White Noise*. And it tries to indicate how the characters resist the exertion of power through discourses of media, technology, advertising and supermarkets.

3. DISCUSSION

Media Saturation and Hyperreality

Media acts like a "simulation machine." Images, codes and signs are reproduced through media. Media produces hyperreality to homogenize or manipulate its audience (Kellner, 1989, p.68-9). Baudrillard (1988b) states that "TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us" (pp.182-183). Television presents just a "succession of surface images or signifiers" without any specific origins (Sarup, 1988, p.166). Therefore, "Media creates the real," or hyperreal (Duvall, 1985, p.436).

White Noise (1985) depicts a Baudrillardian view toward life in contemporary America. Baudrillard, (1988a) claims that TV becomes "the new reality, more real than reality itself or hyperreality" in postmodern era (p.188). The penetration of media into Gladneys' world is very significant in the novel. Television is predominantly an atmospheric presence in *White Noise*. The voice of television is everywhere and Gladneys cannot get rid of its buzzes.

Media feeds its audience. The people controlled by media are addicted to news mediated for public consumption. Postmodern people are addicted to media news. Media reports and people consume the disastrous news like "floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes" (DeLillo, 1985, p.64) that Gladneys gather around TV to watch or consume them. The simulacrum, the supreme feature of postmodern era, extends to incorporate the individual's "feelings of illnesses." The individuals believe simulacra more real than their direct personal perceptions even about the symptoms of illnesses. After the Toxic Event, Steffie and Denise, feel that they already experienced the present situations called "déjà vu." But Babette mentions that the solution is to keep the radio turned off because they show such symptoms after listening to the radio news:

Babette: Let's keep the radio turned off, so the girls can't hear. They haven't got beyond déjà vu. I want to keep it that way.

Jack: What if the symptoms are real?

Babette: How could they be real?

Jack: Why couldn't they be real?

Babette: They get them only when they are broadcast. (DeLillo, 1985, p.133)

The girls' symptoms are instances of simulation in which the sign or image goes before the origin (Baudrillard, 1988b, p.168). The interesting thing is that Baudrillard (1988b) exactly points to illnesses: "someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and pretend he is ill. Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms." Therefore, "feigning" just "masks reality." But in simulation it is "rather impossible to know what is false and what is true" (Baudrillard, 1988b, pp.167-8). As the symptoms of diseases can be simulated, they reveal hyperreality.



Déjà vu is a "simulacrum" produced in the brain before the real thing occurs. Babette and Jack's conversation is significant about this symptom of an illness:

Babette: This happened before.

Jack: What happened before?

Babette: Eating yogurt, sitting here, talking about déjà vu. (DeLillo, 1985, p.133) DeLillo emphasizes here that Babette has déjà vu of déjà vu.

The postmodern era is characterized by the victory of the image over originality. Wilcox highlights how remarkable postmodern theories of Baudrillard affect *White Noise* (1985):

The informational world Baudrillard delineates bears a striking resemblance to the world of *White Noise*: one characterized by the collapse of the real and the flow of signifiers emanating from an information society, by a 'loss of the real' in a black hole of simulation and the play and exchange of signs. (Wilcox, 1991, p.346)

White Noise (1985) is read as a "fictionalized Baudrillard-for-Beginners" (Coyle, 2007, p.28). Murray, Jack's colleague, is the "mouthpiece for the postmodern theories of Baudrillard" in the novel (Howell, 2013, p.84), and Jack is his student of postmodern thought. Murray's postmodern attitudes are "simplified representations" of Baudrillard's simulation and hyperreality" (Howell, 2013, p.7).

Murray and Jack visit the Barn, a vivid personification of postmodernism, called 'The Most Photographed Barn in America,' and see plenty of signs of the barn and tourists taking pictures. This scene reminds Baudrillard's reference to Borges' tale of territory and map. Baudrillard (1988b) claims that "the territory no longer precedes the map; it is the map that precedes the territory" (p.165). This Barn highlights Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1988b, p.165). Therefore, the photos precede the Barn in the novel as Baudrillard suggests. According to Murray, "no one sees the barn...Once you've seen the signs about the barn; it becomes impossible to see the barn" (DeLillo, 1985, p.12). It is implied that it is no longer possible to know how the actual Barn was, because media representations replace that. Furthermore, the Toxic Event depicts Baudrillard's simulation in the dialogues between Jack and the technician:

Jack: What does SIMUVAC mean?

SIMUVAC technician: Short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they're still battling over funds for.

Jack: But this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real.

SIMUVAC technician: We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model.

Jack: A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation? (DeLillo, 1985, p.138)

Therefore, Baudrillard's 'precession of simulacra' happens in this situation. The SIMUVAC employs the real chemical release as a kind of practice for the simulation of such event. Jack understands that the SIMUVAC personnel uses the real event to practice a simulation. Therefore, hyperreality has the priority over reality.

Discourse of Power and Media

Foucault (1972) claims that discourse has four salient functions: 1) Discourse creates the universe. 2) It produces truth and knowledge. 3) It reveals something about the individuals



speaking it. 4) It produces power (p.50).

Based on these functions, discourse has an essential function in the "social construction of reality." In *White Noise* (1985), discourse is generated by the association between "media, technology, and personal experience" (Babae, 2014, p.30). Jack points to how discourse makes his world as he says: "I read the TV listings, I read the ads in *Ufologist Today*. I want to immerse myself in American magic and dread" (DeLillo, 1985, p.22). Therefore, discourse casts Jack's understanding of the world.

Besides, discourse is the creator of truth. It tries to persuade people to believe its assertions as reality. For instance, DeLillo highlights in the arguing scene between Jack and his son Heinrich that media has the power to generate truth.

And "discourse produces power" (Foucault, 1972, p.50). It gives people social, cultural, and political power. For instance, Jack is the chairman of the Hitler Studies department. This position provides him the power of expressing himself and holding an international conference on Hitler Studies but he cannot speak German. Jack describes this discursive power as: "Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop towards, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort" (DeLillo, 1985, p.19). Therefore, Jack appeals to a kind of Hitlerian discourse—the will to power.

"Discourse" of media "produces power" (Foucault, 1972, p.50). Media has a remarkable amount of power to dominate or dictate people because the people willingly surrender the power to decide for them. The reason is that there is a "perceived benefit" or "return on investment in exchange" for a "blind acquiescence to dominant ideology." After people watch TV commercials and shows or read the advertisements in the magazines, they know the "contemporary fashion guidelines." They try to imitate their styles. It leads to the "dominant social group's acceptance" that strengthens people's decision to "consume." Therefore, a "cycle" is founded through which the consumer looks for "approval," obeys the "dominant ideology," and finally, achieves the "sought approval" (Boltdt, 2011, p.35).

After the disaster of the Toxic Event, the individuals check the media for the validation of their crisis status. It shows the power of media as approving criteria. Therefore, TV controls people.

The characters of this novel tend to be "exploited" via media and advertising. They "seek affirmation through television" (Duvall, 1985, p.436). It is as if television and especially news broadcast by media give validation to their existence. If an event covered by news, it will be approvable.

As Media proved to be the most postmodern reliable source of validation of events through its momentarily news, its broadcast information is really influential on the audience. It turns to be a source of information for the public. The individuals follow the news to inform them of the symptoms of the diseases. For instance, Jack asks his son Heinrich about the new information that media delivers by "What does the radio say?" Heinrich answers, "At first they said skin irritation and sweaty palms. But now they say nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath" (DeLillo, 1985, p.111).

After the daughters, Steffie and Denise, being informed of the symptoms of toxin, they "complain of sweaty palms" as Babette said. But Heinrich humorously warns that "There's been a correction. Tell them they ought to be throwing up," because the symptoms shifted to



"heart palpitations and a sense of déjà vu" (DeLillo, 1985, p.112-16). The girls stop showing the previous symptoms and start showing new ones. It indicates how people are manipulated by what is presented to them via media.

Heinrich mentions that "every day on the news there's another toxic spill" (DeLillo, 1985, p.174). He points to the role of media in announcing the news. Each day different versions of constructed symptoms or fake realities replace the original ones. Therefore, hyperreality emerges and the real is lost. All these news broadcast by media are news of bad events that endanger people's lives. Jack states that "terrifying data is now an industry in itself." Media is an industry. It can monitor the people via frightening them through "News Pollution." It is an expression coined by Boldt (2011) to highlight the "constant bombardment of news footage, reports, breaking news, deaths, and disasters." They are the "newsfeed of network channels." It clearly indicates that "media has a constant presence" in the lives of postmodern people and the "newsfeed is always on—24 hours a day" (pp.45-46).

Baudrillard (1988b) criticizes the role of media in postmodern world as he mentions "TV verité"—"it is TV that is true, it is TV that renders true" (p.179). Even DeLillo (1985) tries to highlight that "media validates/ determines the real experiences" (Boldt, 2011, p.36). After The Airborne Toxic Event, the people who lived in Blacksmith, where the disaster happened, search media, especially TV news to broadcast the disaster to prove their crisis situation: There's nothing on network. Not a word, not a picture. No film footage, no live report... Are they telling us it was insignificant? Don't they know it's real? (DeLillo, 1985, pp.161-162)

They look for even short news about such disaster and their crisis situation they experience. But media was silent about that. It seems that Toxic Event can only be considered as a real disaster if the media covers that. Although the people experience that disaster and they know it was real, they wait to be proved by media. How powerful and penetrative is media!

Seeking support from media is widespread in the novel. Hearing the plane accident, Bee immediately asked his father "Where's the media?" (DeLillo, 1985, p.92) The very first thing that comes to Bee's mind after hearing such disastrous event is media. That is, she tries to make it approvable by media coverage. It shows the validating power of media. It dominates its audience in a way that they check the truth of an event by media.

Resistance to Media, Advertising, Medical Technology and Simulation

Foucault (1978) states that "where there is power there is resistance (p.95). Nealon (2008) and Picket (2005) respectively elaborate on Foucault's resistance as "power implies and produces resistance" (p.104) and "resistance functions as a counter power" (p.50). The "dominant discourse," based on Foucault, "can be interrupted by resistance" and people are "manipulated by discourses" (Guerin et al, 2011, p.133).

Media imposes its power on the audience and distributes false kind of information. Jack's argument with his own son, Heinrich identifies the father's resistance to the manipulative power of media:

Heinrich: It's going to rain tonight.

Jack: It's raining now.

Heinrich: The radio said tonight.



Jack: Look at the windshield. Is that rain or isn't it? Heinrich: I'm only telling you what they said. Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses. Is it raining or isn't it?

Heinrich: I wouldn't want to have to say. (DeLillo, 1985, pp.22-23)

At the end it rains and Heinrich goes to school in the downpour. It shows that media broadcasts false predictions blindly accepted by people.

Jack considers media as a kind of threat to his family. He perceives that the so-called truth or fake reality generated by discourses such as media and technology "threaten our happiness and security. The deeper we delve into the nature of things, the looser our structure may seem to become" (DeLillo, 1985, p.97).

Therefore, he starts resisting them to get relief.

Another instance of resistance to the influence of media can be seen in Murray's mission of watching TV and not letting it to have influences on him. He believes that it depends on the audience be influenced by the manipulative world of media or no. Besides, he resists the TV commercials that persuade people to buy even unnecessary things.

Advertising is defined as a form of discourse. It derives from the "Medieval Latin verb *advertere*, to direct one's attention, or persuade, to a product or service by means of some public announcement" (Danesi, 2015, p.vii). Therefore, advertising is a persuasive way to make consumers buy the goods.

DeLillo (1985) clearly shows that Jack is fascinated by media advertisements:

A woman in a yellow slicker held up traffic to let some children cross. I picture her in a soup commercial taking off her oil skin hat as she entered the cheerful kitchen where her husband stood over a pot of smoky lobster bisque, a smallish man with six weeks to live. (p.22)

Jack's description is derived from the "reader's recognition of the particular soup commercial" parodied by "role reversal." The yellow coat of traffic warden takes the place of the yellow raincoat of the fisherman (Frow, 1990, p.418).

Furthermore, Jack describes Babette's hair as "a fantastical blonde mop, a particular tawny hue that used to be called dirty blond" (DeLillo, 1985, p.5). 'Dirty blond' is a media stereotype color. Jack's special attention to hair color indicates the simulated power of media (Frow, 1990, p. 418).

Jack describes his shopping in malls or supermarkets as:

I shopped with reckless abandon. 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. (DeLillo, 1985, p.84)

Therefore, Jack "willingly engage in his frenzied shopping experience" (Boldt, 2011, p.21). He is so manipulated by advertising industry that believes shopping endows 'wellbeing, security and contentment' and provides its audience with identity. Therefore, advertising suggests that consuming or shopping more leads to feeling better. There is a kind of correlation between these two. "Feel-good shopping" is a fundamental part of the "consumer consciousness" (Boldt, 2011, p.2-3).

TV and consumerism are mutually related to each other in postmodern era. "Multinational corporations have manipulated TV and other mass media to turn the whole world into a



consumer globe" (Ghashmari, 2010, p.182). For instance, TV advertisements heavily influence the consumers or even those who have no intention to buy goods as highlighted in the novel.

The "supermarket is advertised as the cultural Mecca of the town" in the novel (Boldt, 2011, p.23). Like the TV screen, supermarket is the place where the "images" and the "simulacra" show their "triumph over reality" (Ghashmari, 2010, p.181). Consuming goods or merchandise according to their fascinating colors, attractive packaging or new models and sizes attract the attentions of the shoppers, or even those who don't have the intention or the need to buy anything enthusiastically shop mostly the advertised and branded things. Supermarkets generate hyperreal worlds via advertising and presenting different brands for the consumers. Supermarkets create a fantasyland for the consumer like Baudrillard's Disneyland.

Media via advertising imposes its power to persuade American people to consume more and more. Therefore, they play essential role in making the consuming culture. The influential power of TV advertising can clearly be seen on the step-daughter of Jack, Steffie. She said two repeatedly heard words. They were "Toyota Celica," name of an automobile. It was a "simple brand name, an ordinary car" that Steffie, only a little child, murmured in her sleep. She was repeating some "TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida" (DeLillo, 1985, p.155). These commercial words and advertised brand names are deeply penetrated or invaded into her unconscious mind and exploit that.

Media's power over the postmodern American people is exercised via constructed simulation. Media controls the audience by the "constant bombardment of advertising images" (Boldt, 2011, p.27). Advertising world like Baudrillard's Disneyland is hyperreal. It is constructed to show a kind of reality that does not exist.

The world of advertising is "colorful, stimulating and exciting." The advertisements have this message "buy more and you will feel better" (Boldt, 2011, p.2). Therefore, media through advertisements persuades and manipulates people's minds and hearts.

Although Murray accompanies Gladneys in shopping in the supermarket, his resistance to the simulating power of advertising industry is vivid in the novel. According to Foucault (1984), resistance is a kind of "transgression (p.157) or "counter-power" (p.209). What Murray does in the supermarket is significant. He buys things without any brand names or advertised labels. Although brand names as the symbol of consumerism are reiterated in the novel, DeLillo's use of the words 'non-branded, plain white packages, simple labeling, without a plastic window, and white wrapper' indicates Murray's resistance to postmodern advertising industry. Although the advertisements are everywhere he shows his counter-power and buys non-branded things.

The question of "who will die first" (DeLillo, 1985, p.100) is a recurrent theme of *White Noise*. In the third chapter called *Dylarama*, it is revealed that progress of technology in the field of medicine leads to the production of a kind of drug, an experimental treatment for the fear of death. This is technically called *Dylar*. Jack's wife, Babette, takes this drug secretly to get rid of her fear. The following conversation about *Dylar* indicates the penetration power of TV:

What do you know about *Dylar*?



Is that the black girl who's staying with the Stovers? That's Dakar, Steffie said.

Dakar isn't her name, it's where she's from, Denise said. It's a country on the Ivory Coast of Africa.

The capital is Lagos, Babette said. I know that because of a surfer movie I saw once where they travel all over the world.

The Perfect Wave, Heinrich said. I saw it on TV. But what's the girl's name? Steffie said.

Babette said, but the movie wasn't called The Perfect Wave. The perfect wave is what they were looking for.

They go to Hawaii, Denise told Steffie, and wait for these tidal waves to come from Japan. They recalled origamis. (DeLillo, 1985, p.80)

This conversation denotes the experience of "zapping or switching" between TV channels. There are a "chain of floating signifiers" without getting the final meaning. It indicates the "implosion of meaning" happened in media. Most of the conversations and "exchanges of information" of the family members are like TV. That is the 'implosion' of meaning occurs in both of them (Ghashmari, 2010, p.175). It can be concluded that in postmodern world of the novel the family is misinformed.

A world of fantasy like Baudrillard's Disneyland is experienced by Babette as she takes the tablet. In this world, the fake signs of reality take the place of reality. And a constructed world without death is depicted for the drug taker. Jack resists to the spread of Dylar taking.

DeLillo in this novel shows the Foucauldian power of medical technology. It can change death into signs and codes which denotes the 'precession of simulacra.' A simulated kind of death in printed forms of data is presented. The data of death precedes the real death. According to the results of X-ray, Jack is proved to be dead in near future because he is exposed to the chemicals. But he does not feel he is dying. It is as if fake death is preceded and takes the place of death. He resists medical technologies and shows his resistance by not undertaking any medical experiment.

4. CONCLUSION

The present study analyzed DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) through Baudrillard's postmodern theories of simulation and hyperreality, and Foucault's theories of discursive power and resistance. The aim of this study was to show that reality is lost through simulation and hyperreality of postmodernism and constructed reality takes its place. Besides, power is exerted through discourses of media, technology, advertising and supermarket to hide the reality. Simulation and hyperreality hand in hand with power of different discourses fade reality and generate constructed reality. But there is always resistance to such evaporation of reality and exertion of power.

In *White Noise*, television plays an essential role in making a hyperreal world and concealing reality. It penetrates in the lives of its characters like an unwanted guest. Jack is fascinated by the hyperreal world produced by TV. Having influenced by TV commercials and the supermarket's advertisements to buy, he thinks that shopping brings about security and contentment. The advertising provides an ecstasy, or hyperreality, to buy more than what you need. It reminds the hyperreal world of Disneyland.



Media simulates reality and reproduces images. After the 'Toxic Event,' Jack's daughters show the exact symptoms broadcast by media. Besides, The Most Photographed Barn in America presents Baudrillard's 'precession of simulacra' because images of the barn take the place of the barn itself.

Discourse of media possesses power. And this power is exerting on the audience. After the disaster of Toxic Event, people watch TV and news more than before. Media becomes a source of validation. It has the power to manipulate people by what it broadcasts. It has the power to replace the real events with fake ones and feeds people with simulated images and codes. According to Foucault (1978) "where there is power there is resistance" (p.95). Jack resists media and its manipulative power. He believes that kind of reality generated by media threatens their happiness or security because it is just constructed reality. Besides, Murray is the other resisting character to the fascinating power of advertising.

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