

# The Consumer Society of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* from the Viewpoint of Jean Baudrillard

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## Abstract

The present paper tries to analyze Don DeLillo's *White Noise* based on Baudrillard's notion of the consumer society. To do this, the researcher recourses to Baudrillard's book *The Consumer Society: Its Myth and Structure* to discuss the major tenants of today's consumer society. Although consumption is vital for human beings to continue their lives, Baudrillard is concerned about the excessive consumption which is now turning into a disease in the contemporary world. Giant corporations create false needs in the consumers and advertising agencies are in fact the best tools to further promote the sales of consuming objects. This study indicates how Baudrillard's philosophical ideas are manifested literally by Don DeLillo as he depicts an imaginary urban society affected by excessive consumption and advertisement. In this postmodern society, people are haunted by fear of death and decay. So, as a defense mechanism, they resort to consumption as a strategy to cope with their fear of death to give meaning to their daily life. Here, the focus is on exposing certain characteristics of consumer society along with an eye on the role of advertisement to foster irrepressible desire to consume as a means of gaining satisfaction while it only leads to ambivalent feelings in the consumers.

**Key Words:** Don DeLillo; Jean Baudrillard; Advertisement; Consumer Society.

## 1. Introduction

With its publication in 1985, *White Noise* won Don DeLillo the U.S. National Book Award for fiction. In this novel, DeLillo examines the contemporary American life in his own special way. He exposes the American's fascination with consumption and buying so one can see that they are no longer the owner of objects but are slave to them due to the prevalence of consumer culture and the pressures of advertisements. He warns against dangerous nature of TV and department stores and how they are now the only forces that can gather families together. The emergence of consumer culture depends heavily on the department stores. These two, advertisements and department stores, shape American's views and notions of the world around them. They now experience life through the images and objects of consumption or as Baudrillard puts it "we are here at the control of a micro-satellite, in orbit, living no longer as an actor or dramaturge but as a terminal of multiple networks. Television is still the more direct pre-configuration of this" (128).

As postmodern novels, Don DeLillo's novels prove themselves to be resistant to criticism and its meaning-seeking strategies. DoCarmo mentions Thomas di Pietro observation as he says "in DeLillo's truly Swifitean satire, we're never sure what he himself believes or what he thinks of his characters", while Eugene Goodheart believes that DeLillo's perspective on our late capitalist environs "says' in effect that [he] will express, bring to the surface the horror and terror we repress in order to . . . ? It is not clear how this sentence should be completed." (150). As an example of postmodern literature, *White Noise* surveys the destructive effects of technology, consumerism and simulation of reality on American families. All of these issues create anxiety and distress for postmodern characters. They live in constant fear of death and decay and the only way to overcome their fears is consumption of chemical drugs like Dylar. Here, consumption is a way to escape the simulated reality of a postmodern society.

As the protagonist of the novel, Jack Gladney is a huge fan of supermarkets and shopping malls which shows that shopping and consuming turn into the new religion in postmodern America. Shopping malls turn into sanctuaries and individuals consider them as arenas to show their financial powers and to get relaxed after a rough day at work. Even in an academic setting, what determines the value of an individual is not his education or academic achievements but the brand of his suit or sunglasses. They strictly adhere to this slogan that “I buy, therefore, I am”. According to Wiese, many critics have seen *White Noise* as exemplifying the analyses of the present sociocultural condition offered by Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and Jean-François Lyotard, so casting it as a “postmodern prototype” (3).

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Objectification of the Subject

One of the difficulties which Jack encounters is the idea of the subject. In fact, he is constantly dealing with the issue of identity in the novel. He makes lots of attempts so as to feel that he has a stable identity. At times, Jack propagates Hitler’s ideologies, but finally he considers consumerism and an impulse to consume as an essential tool in constituting his identity. In one very real sense, Jack construes consumerism as hindering death, but he more or less forgets the fact that consumption inevitably results in death through waste of the material. In fact, abundance is definitely one of the most striking features in describing consumer societies such as the one DeLillo portrays in the novel. Clearly, *White Noise* depicts large stores, with the rapid growth of canned and flamboyant garments, give characters a lot of quasi beautiful looks and feelings engineered for certain purposes. Baudrillard states that “the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects. Their daily dealings are now not so much with their fellow men, but rather-- on a rising statistical curve -- with the reception and manipulation of goods and messages” (26). In abundance, there is more than a sum of products; evidence of excess, a magical negation, and a finite scarcity in the form of a circle represented in the novel. The abundance of which the most elementary but most fertile form exists are the objects organized as collections or lists of objects intermingled with the identity of the objects listed in the stores. This is demonstrated by Murray where:

Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material... Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It’s just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served. This is not Tibet. Even Tibet is not Tibet anymore. (38)

Almost all stores offer a range of different objects that are necessary and relevant to each other and fit in with each other. The fundamental function of such advertisements and consumerism is its functionality for impeding fear of death as well as giving Jack and other a sense of identity and belongingness. In this relation Baudrillard believes that “few objects today are offered *alone*, without a context of objects which ‘speaks’ them. And this changes the consumer’s relation to the object: he no longer relates to a particular object in its specific utility, but to a set of objects in its total signification” (28). For DeLillo, there are only a few objects available for sale alone, and the characters are faced with a body of objects that give them meaning for life. Indeed, it is the advertisement of such objects which bounds the characters to produce a sense of belongingness and identity in the society. Jack and others do not refer to the object for its particular benefit but to a set of objects with their general implications. For instance, Jack describes supermarkets as if “there is a transitional state between death and rebirth, a period in which the soul restores to itself some of the divinity lost at birth.” This is what I think of whenever I come in here. This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, and it’s a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It’s full of psychic data.”(37) The latest ones, advertisements, manufacturing firms, and brands play an essential role in providing a coherent and collective view of these devices, and consider them as an almost inseparable whole or a chain that is not interconnected by simple objects, but a string of entities which imply certain meanings as these objects give each other more complex sentences and create

more complex motives for the consumer. Objects are organized in such a way as to open guides, directing purchasing incentives toward a network of objects. Jack is the epitome of such a discourse as he says:

I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. I sent clerks into their fabric books and pattern books to search for elusive designs. 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. Brightness settled around me.(84)

Jack lives in a place where consumption has taken on all aspects of his life. He fails to achieve identity through consumerism because the materials are produced to be finally destroyed; this can be observed as cultural death as the characters, especially Jack, are unable to overcome the fear of death via a consuming discourse. Moreover, Baudrillard states that "we are at the point where consumption is laying hold of the whole of life, where all activities are sequenced in the same combinatorial mode, where the course of satisfaction is outlined in advance, hour by hour, where the 'environment' is total -- fully air-conditioned, organized, culturalized" (30). The point here is that all activities are logically linked together in the same way. The path of satisfaction is pre-determined and pre-planned, and the environment is also perfect in all respects and is well-suited and culturally found. In the archeology of consumption, this generalization of life, goods, objects, services, behaviors, and social relationships is a stage illustration completed and consumed in an evolutionary process that begins with frequent advertisements as well as from articulated networks. DeLillo states that the quality of everything has declined except for the supermarkets which were still spurious and this is the chief reason for Jack and others to emulate such flamboyance and take it for granted as the supplementary element of their identity: "some of the houses in town were showing signs of neglect. The park benches needed repair, the broken streets needed resurfacing. Signs of the times. But the supermarket did not change, except for the better" (76).

Objects go through and are subject to the complete conditionalities of actions and time and a network of systematic environments that future cities are an example of such a view. As it is depicted in the novel, abundance in Jack's society is closely related to the loneliness. The question of science of fighting against the desperation and will of wealth at the national and international levels as well as the undermining the inherent ethical principle of objects, their usefulness to life, and maintaining a social base or because of a fashionable pursuit are raised. In short, lavishness has always been considered a kind of insanity and instinctive defect that jeopardizes identity and survival. It can be claimed that the concept of utility (a simplistic definition of consumption) is necessary to be considered according to a much more general social logic. The logic in which the notion of waste is not only isn't irrelevant, but also has a positive function; that is, both individual and social functions. Therefore, waste (including huge advertising costs, fashion clothing, military equipment and the switching of tools and industrial equipment), which is widely seen in the novel challenges scarcity and contradictorily implies abundance. What is produced in the form of lists in the novels is not based on useful value or useful life, but rather on its destruction. So, Jack is not successful in gaining a permanent feeling of meaningfulness; on the contrary, he paradoxically gets alienated. That is, becomes a slave of the objects around him and lives with the illusion of individuality. Thus, the system of production is only at the expense of this constant destruction and demolition of objects that can survive. Thus, the purpose of advertising is not to increase the use value of objects, but to eliminate that value. But we must distinguish between individual and collective divisions, on the one hand, as symbolic acts in the form of money, customs, celebrations and forms of socialization. In the latter case, consumption with waste becomes a daily assignment and a compulsory and often unconscious entity and a kind of partnership with indifference in the requirements of the economic order. The consumer society needs its objects for survival of meaning and identity. So, it is only in destruction that there are too many objects and they denote wealth by their destruction and this is why Jack fails to possess a sense of identity by consumption. Parker draws on Frank Lentricchia's notion of DeLillo's novels as "the essential tone of contemporary America" to claim that DeLillo's novels are generally received as acts of socio-cultural criticism

designed to highlight how the constitution and direction of culture simultaneously "dictates the shape and fate of the self". (10)

## 2.2 Financial unrealism

DeLillo's *White Noise* can be observed as being in conflict with financial unrealism. Such unrealism is imposed on the characters via advertisements of the objects through which the characters make attempts to confront the fear of death. The basic point in the conceptualization of this approach is the idea of hyper-reality by Baudrillard which is the relationship and the connection between the reality and its alternate, which is made by man and by means of a consumption discourse. In fact, in the novel Jack finds some kind of genealogy about the real things around him. In this genealogy, when it comes to the real acute stage, where in many impressions everything ceases to be true, it is separated from reality. In this regard, the advertisements in the capitalist discourse which stimulates Jack and others to purchase are to be evaluated as a set of falsified desires for satisfying fabricated and unreal needs. This is obvious where Jack explains his reason for buying:

I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. I sent clerks into their fabric books and pattern books to search for elusive designs. 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. (37-38)

DeLillo's novel describes a world in which it is not possible to recognize the true from the false and the real from its artificial anthropology. This is because of the separation of codes and signs from their realities and conjectures. False needs in form of codes can survive independently of the facts and rely on each other and reproduce without requiring the real thing. As in the novel, coders simulate the reality, and in stages, they overcome reality, and with the presence of all, and in spite of their reality, they narrow the arena to the real and it is difficult for Jack to distinguish the real from the simulated. Thus, this is the hyper reality that is present and ongoing, not the real in its absolute sense. This goes on until the characters are not capable of distinguishing the real from the unreal especially when SIMUVAC takes dominance over the real state of the characters' lives. Therefore, there appears a set of constant dialectic relationships in the novel; between the real and the simulated; life and death; subject and object, etc.

The world that Don DeLillo has created in *White Noise* is presenting a society which has been developed with the help of codes and ideologies, developed especially via media technology. In fact, the main source of the creation of reality is the media and the domination of advertisements which impulse false and unreal desires in the Capitalist society. So, hyper-reality is not only observed on the page and the network, but it affects all life, whether it is economy, politics, society. In such cases, the boundary between the real and the hyper reality is gone, and reality is built according to the signs; the codes that are made in Capitalistic discourses, in education, industry, advertisements, the consumer's goods, polls, and so on. Thus, such unrealism is not necessarily economic but confusing the language of representation.

## 2.3. Cyberterrorism

Controlling the vision of the subjects has always been a fundamental factor in their interpellation. Such a hailing is one of the impulses which advances the ideology of consumption and more or less is conducted through media like TV. Don DeLillo manipulates the term media to analyze consumption in the consumer society of *White Noise*. In the media, everything falls within the framework of the consumption pattern. The media bring together a variety of signs with conflicting messages in form of advertisements, news, entertainment, documentaries, reports, films, political debates, and so on. The massive trend of these consecutive messages has a general impact on the characters such as Jack and his wife. Based on such codes and messages, the first purpose of a Capitalist system is to regulate the roles of the subjects in the society, and that is how Jack is interpellated to be the purchaser of goods so as to feel identified in the society.

With regard to the emotional and quasi practical benefits of a consumer discourse, other discourses will be set aside for it. Disturbing situations and unexpected events, which are quickly

and abundantly delivered to the audience, are transmitted to commodity discourse. Disappointments are neutralized through codification. The historical incident is equated with a false controversy. In the novel Murray states that "TV is a problem only if you've forgotten how to look and listen," Murray said. "My students and I discuss this all the time. They're beginning to feel they ought to turn against the medium, exactly as an earlier generation turned against their parents and their country" (22). Therefore, the message of the TV is not to send images but new methods of communication and understanding that boosts capitalistic ideology. Here, we are witnessing a readout system, which is important in that, the internal cohesion of this system of reading, and the truth of the world or its history will no longer be posed. In this situation, it can be stated that the media impose a message on the audience, and that is why they can be construed as a cyberterrorist discourse. When Jack's family sees Babette on the TV, their first reaction is a mixture of fear and worry. Such a primary negative reaction which the media impose on them propagates fear in the family and thus becomes a source of terror.

With these explanations, it can be stated that the characters of the novel are dealing with media and its signs, but the meaning and message they receive from the media is not the meaning and message of those signs. Here, the meaning dies, and they become a consumer of the signs they enjoy. The bombardment of false news brings the characters to a wide range of diverse issues and problems of vital importance to which they are alien to or unimportant to them. At times, this makes them unable to differentiate what is real or not. In such a society everyone is watching and hearing about TV shows. But only a few of them may be important to them, and their serious attention may only draw on some of the messages and not all those signs. Consequently, sometimes the characters see all the various messages and machine gun in the form of a commercial messages for its visual pleasure without being able to understand its intended message. Concerning such a claim Murray points out that:

Television is just another name for junk mail. But I tell them I can't accept that. I tell them. I've been sitting in this room for more than two months, watching TV into the early hours, listening carefully, taking notes. A great and humbling experience, let me tell you. Close to mystical.(22)

Technology and media are two significant elements in DeLillo's works, and this can be seen in *Cosmopolis* as well. For DeLillo, here, media become the continuum of human senses, and this is why Jack believes that "senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. Don't you know about all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems? There's no past, present or future outside our own mind" (9). Television, for example, stretches human vision; that is, what the characters saw before on the TV and with the help of their eyes, with the presence of television, has a quantitative and qualitative expansion in favor of the Capital ideology. In fact, the characters will grow more extensively and communicate more effectively through the media, but it must be asked to what extent such an expansion is based on reality. DeLillo, because of his different definition of man, not only does not regard media as an agent of the existential development of modern mankind, but rather to its destructive and counter constructive form, which give a new identity to Jack and other characters as a person who is no longer in the real world and does not fulfill the requirements he really needs. In fact, media, instead of providing the possibility of more contact and observation of the outside world, brings man to falsified worlds and leaves the characters with ideologies for more consumption. In this new world, the meanings and realities are in decline. In explaining the death of meaning and the independent life of signs, one can add that when the characters take on their mood and the principle of consumption becomes relevant, consumption should be realized as a vital and at all cost.

The characters are faced with the problem of time; that is, it is not possible to digest many, varied, sometimes complex and conflicting events, and the proper understanding of their meanings over a short period of time. The result will be lagging behind meanings, releasing them, and confusing the appearance of signs. An example for this type of separation of the signifier from its sign is Jack who observes an advertisement at first with reflection, meaningfulness and understanding, but when it comes to understanding the meanings of the object, it gradually increases the desire for consumption. Thus, what media do is nothing but manipulating the

audience, and DeLillo sees them as a force on the part of Capitalist authorities. Baudrillard points out that

What marks out the consumer society is not, in fact, the much deplored absence of ceremonies -- the radio game is a ceremony just as much as the mass or primitive sacrifice -- but the fact that ceremonial communion is no longer achieved by way of bread and wine, which can be seen as flesh and blood, but through the mass media (which are not just the messages, but the whole broadcasting set-up, the network, the station, the receivers and, of course, the programme-makers and public). In other words, communion is no longer achieved through a symbolic medium, but through a technical one: this is what makes it communication. (104).

#### **2.4. False Problems for False Needs**

A question rises regarding the aforementioned evaluation of the capitalist regime in DeLillo's novel which is concerning the value of materials characters buy under the pressure of advertisements. It is observed that Jack and his family are not able to fully satisfy their needs, especially when they fail to confront the fear of death. This fact depicts their means of facing the fright of dying, i.e., purchasing does not contribute to relieving the panic; on the contrary, in some cases exacerbates the catastrophe. This is because of the fact that there exists no essential value in the objects which are propagated by the consumer ideology. Characters, in this sense, are objects that cling to illusory values which lie in the advertised materials, and this is what makes them ambivalent. So they fail to possess a unified identity. In this estimate, such ambivalence causes a disruption in consumer discourse and finally nullifies it as a true mechanism against the fear of death. In one very real sense, it denotes "a sense of both fulfilment and non-fulfilment, or gain and loss, in relation to the object of desire. The discrepancy between what consumer culture promises with respect to the object and what the object can actually deliver robs the consumer of ambivalence toward the object. Moreover, this lack of ambivalence leads the consumer into an unhealthy relationship with the object" (Smith 9). In light of DeLillo's novel, the notion of need, in a way or other refers to motive, desire, and wish, and is also referred to as the mental force that motivates and overwhelms the particular behavior of the characters to satisfy a specific passion. Accordingly, false needs emerge when the advertising market system, such as showcases, conveys this mentality to Jack and others that the goods are a complementary supplement of their identity, but they will find out that the propagated commodities are not able to fulfill to deliver a transcendent illusory feeling. Baudrillard (1975) points out that "It is this proscribed ambivalence that reemerges in the ambiguity of Nature and in man's own moral contradiction" (*The Mirror of Production* 58). These objects in their full sense are defined alongside each other and are not to be recognized in vacuum or without other objects' company. Almost all stores, household electrical appliances, cosmetics, etc. in DeLillo's *White Noise* offer a range of various objects that are of necessary and quasi supplementary nature. That is, they interpellated the characters but become a source of dissatisfaction as a result of anxiety they cause. Therefore, they are compatible with each other and provide a range of elegant and consummating materials for the subjects (in the sense that the characters are objectified by advertising regime). Moreover, the characters as consumers do not refer to the object for its particular benefit, but to a set of objects with their general implications. Thus, the capitalist system instigates false problems in the subjects so as to impulse social solidarity among these subjects. In this regard, the advertising regime aims at homogenizing the subjects' social affairs on the basis of enticing false needs and evades fulfilling their true and real needs which are essential for ensuring their survival. In this sense, false needs are a distorted form of real needs. Baudrillard (1996) believes that "advertising is not simply an adjunct to the system of objects; it cannot be detached therefrom, nor can be restricted to its proper function (there is no such a thing as advertising strictly confined to the supplying of information) (*The System of Objects* 164). Hence, existing regimes, including advertising regimes, apply mechanisms to produce and reproduce such contexts in the society. Baudrillard (1995) states that "a sort of inverse simulation in the masses, in each one of us, corresponds to this simulation of meaning and of communication in which this system encloses us.

To this tautology of the system the masses respond with ambivalence, to deterrence they respond with disaffection or with an always enigmatic belief" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 65). As depicted in the novel, mass media, and advertising systems rely on the methods of associating meanings and signs to manipulate the subjects through normalization of false problems and needs. Accordingly, Baudrillard "argues that the logic of the sign restricts the subject's ambivalence in relation to objects" (Smith 9).

### 3. Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to assess Don DeLillo's *White Noise* in light of Baudrillard's consumer society so as to depict how the characters of the novel are entangled by consumerism and its imminent fatal effects. Accordingly, there was an attempt to illustrate in what ways Jack and others were the slaves of advertisements which propagated consumerism. These subjects are interpellated to follow advertisements and the Capitalist discourse as a defense against fear of death. In Jack's consumer society, the role of supermarkets and showcases is the formulation of consumption and propagating consumerism and its ideology. In this way, the paper's interpretation can be linked to cultural reformulation. Such a discursive reformulation creates the consumer society that responds to the fictitious and enduring needs of the human being in form of permanent cycles. This is achieved mainly through mass media such as TV programs which is construed as cyberterrorism in this research. In fact, it is a media technology that allows the characters to infinitely emulate and produce, consume and waste. Thus such an observation of consumerism is interconnected with the characters' false needs; therefore; it was mentioned that media in the consumer society have a particular focus as they impose ideology of the dominant Capitalist authority by instigating false needs and then creating false solutions for such needs.

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