

Postmodern Consumerist Condition and Its Effects on People in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the negative effects of consumerism on people in the postmodern condition in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1986). Employing postmodern theories, it will examine the threat of consumerism to humans. It argues that consumerism physically and mentally affects consumers. On the physical level, people living in the consumerist society cannot avoid environmental and toxic hazards. Even simple products, such as chewing gum, can harm them. Moreover, the logic of consumerism can cause people serious mental problems, leading people towards faulty perceptions, a consumerist type of schizophrenia as described by Fredric Jameson and Jacques Lacan. Postmodern schizophrenics lack the ability to see the proper boundaries between meanings, or in other words, between signified and signifier and are deprived of personal identity. After being bombarded with advertised information, consumers relentlessly buy products and feel that the products they buy determine their identity. In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo presents a vivid picture of the postmodern toxic world that provides people with no real certainty, but rather a fear of death and fatal diseases. It is a world where people's minds and behaviors are manipulated by the logic of consumerism.

Key Words: consumerism, postmodern, white noise, Don DeLillo

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the threats that we fear are not as transparent as the nuclear bomb that wiped out the entire cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II. On the contrary, contemporary culture faces a new kind

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of threat, which David B. Morris in “Editor’s Introduction—Environment: The White Noise of Health” (1996) refers to as “white noise”:

The new danger from environmental degradation is less alien than total nuclear war. We live with its damage everyday. We cannot demonize an all-purpose villain—like the bomb—to serve as the target for our protest and frustration. The enemies are everywhere and include us, especially in our social roles as hapless, but far from innocent, consumers. Environment is the unnoticed, inescapable white noise that surrounds and interpenetrates human health. (11-2)

Normally, white noise is a type of noise that is produced by combining sounds of all different ranges of frequencies together. However, in this quotation, David B. Morris defines white noise as the environmental threats derived from consumer culture. According to Morris, we live with these kinds of threat all the time, whether realizing it or not, and the enemies are ourselves, the relentless consumers. Perhaps, those who are affected by man-made disasters are not innocent victims of unforeseen tragedies, but themselves instigators who must be held responsible for their inconsiderate action of joining the endless consumerist cycle.

White Noise, Don DeLillo’s 1985 novel which received the National Book Award, further portrays white noise as the inescapable toxic environment. However, I argue that white noise in this novel refers to environmental threats derived from the postmodern consumerist condition which can be defined in two ways: firstly describing the toxicity of the postmodern consumerist environment from which no one can escape; and secondly referring to the logic of consumerism that penetrates all beings and all places. This kind of white noise exists everywhere and in everything, manipulating people’s minds and behavior. DeLillo’s novel particularly depicts the postmodern consumerist society as being full of toxic threats through the lives of the Gladneys: Jack Gladney, a college professor in the small town of Blacksmith, Babette Gladney who is the mother of the family, and four of their children from previous marriages: Heinrich, Steffie, Denise, and Wilder. The novel is

structured around two major incidents: an airborne toxic event and Jack's discovery of Babette's participation in the trial of a new drug called Dylar.

Interestingly, critics have employed various perspectives when examining *White Noise* and have reached very different conclusions and interpretations. For example, in "American Simulacra: DeLillo's Fiction in Light of Postmodernism" (1999), Scott Rettberg maintains that *White Noise* is distinctly postmodern in that it presents the stories of characters who face life in a post-modern, post-industrial, televisual culture and matches many of the aspects of postmodernity defined by Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. By contrast, in "Dissenters Are Never Superheroes" (2005), Michelle Rene argues that *White Noise* is not entirely postmodern, but instead attempts to unravel issues of humanity such as love, danger, and death around the protagonists. In addition, some critics have chosen to focus on environmental issues in DeLillo's fiction. For example, focusing on ecocriticism, risk theory, and narrative, Ursula K. Heise in "Toxins, Drugs, and Global System: Risk and Narrative in the Contemporary Novel" (2002) chooses to explore a particular type of risk, exposure to chemical substances, and postulates that *White Noise* is a portrayal of a technologically at risk society. Moreover, in *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo* (2007), Elise Martucci uses ecocritical theories, particularly Leo Marx's discussion of the conflict between technology and nature found in traditional American literature, to explore how technology changes perceptions and mediates reality. Nadine Murray in "Don DeLillo & Diane Ackerman: *White Noise & A Natural History of the Senses*" (2007) similarly analyses the theme of environment in *White Noise* and maintains that the novel illustrates our environment as being produced by advanced technology that determines human lives, such as holographic scanners at the supermarket, computers, stereo sets, and radios.

This paper focuses on the effects of consumerism on consumer health and the ways in which the consumers in *White Noise* respond to these new kinds of threats: the unavoidable toxicity in the postmodern consumerist society and the logic of consumerism which manipulates

consumers. It argues that the consumer's ignorant act of turning towards consumerist ecstasy contributes to increasing environmental hazards, which in turn inevitably harm physical and mental health. Furthermore, this paper examines the vicious cycle of consumerism. Firstly, people are enticed into believing that the products they consume determine their identities. As a result, they perpetually buy and surround themselves with many commodities generating suffering from the toxicity of those products. They are thus inextricably enmeshed in this vicious circle. The interesting question raised here is whether this kind of response is really effective and if there isn't any other more appropriate way of coping with the situation.

Consumerism's Effects on Consumer Health

This paper examines consumerism's effect on people's mental and physical health as portrayed in *White Noise*. It defines the new form of postmodern threat referred to as white noise in *White Noise* in two ways: as the toxicity of the postmodern consumerist environment and the logic of consumerism. The first meaning of white noise is the inevitable toxicity that prevails in the postmodern consumerist condition. DeLillo vividly depicts this toxicity as being found in daily products, existing everywhere within society, permeating existence, and being unidentifiable. As a result, people are unable to avoid this kind of threat and are forced to suffer both physically and mentally.

In addition to toxicity, white noise conveys an additional meaning: the logic of consumerism and its mesmerizing power. This logic of consumerism can cause people serious mental problems, leading people towards faulty perceptions, a consumerist type of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia in the clinical sense is a psychotic disorder or group of psychotic disorders marked by severely impaired thinking, emotions and behavior causing a patient to lose touch with reality. Schizophrenia in postmodern theory, however, is different from that in the clinical sense. The characteristics of schizophrenia have been defined by many postmodern critics but can be categorized into two main

aspects. Firstly, Jonah Peretti, by referring to Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992), asserts in "Capitalism and Schizophrenia" (1996) that schizophrenia is marked by the inability to see the proper boundaries between meanings, or in other words, between signified and signifier. For the other characteristic, Mark Currie explains in his essay, "Culture and Schizophrenia" (1998), that according to Jacques Lacan, schizophrenia is defined as a linguistic disorder and is normally seen as disunity within the personality, where different states of mind cannot be unified in the pronoun "I". When the relationship between signified and signifier breaks down, the schizophrenic will be deprived of personal identity. In other words, the personal identity is the effect of a certain temporal union of the past and the future with the present, one in which the process of signification can occur. However, with the breakdown of the signifying chain we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of sentences in the language, and are thereby, deprived of an ability to unite the past, present, and future of our own biographical experiences or psychic lives. Thus, a schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, a series of pure and unrelated present moments. Similarly, in terms of consumerist practices, consumerism and the media brainwash people into believing that their identity is not fixed and can be changed at will by consuming the products, causing them to indulge themselves in the eternal present of consumerist ecstasy. Consumers in the postmodern world therefore possess a disunified identity (p. 96-114).

The inability to see the boundaries between meanings, the first characteristic of schizophrenia, resembles one of Dylar's effects. Dylar, the experimental drug which is introduced to kill fear of the death, functions as a product providing only an illusive promise to desperate consumers such as Babette and Jack Gladney. It should be noted that the side effect of this drug is confusing "words with the things they referred to" (p. 309) or the inability to see the difference between the word and its real meaning. Willie Mink, the project manager of this drug, is himself a clear example illustrating this point. He is a schizophrenic who sits in front of the TV., continually consuming

products in the form of Dylar, and seeing no difference between language and reality. Mink fixes his eyes on the flickering TV. screen emitting no sound. The way Mink unknowingly acts in response to what Jack says is indicative of the way consumers blindly believe what the media tells them. When Jack says, “hail of bullets,” and “fusillade,” Mink acts in a manner as if he were really being shot. “He hit the floor, began crawling toward the bathroom . . . showing real terror. . . . He tried to wriggle behind the bowl, both arms over his head, his legs tight together” (p. 311). Here, Mink believes completely in what others say, ignoring logic and his own senses. In the same way, mindless consumers believe unquestioningly in the media even more so than their own perception. In the depthless society where the real has disappeared, the media as a form of simulation is upheld as the most important perspective. The influence of the media is so powerful that people ignore their own senses, do not consider the original or the real source, and believe everything the media entrusts to them. For instance, Steffie, with this schizophrenic symptom, insists that “we have to boil our water” just because “it said on the radio” (p. 34). In fact, there is no need to boil water at all, but Steffie who likes to watch TV. and listens to the radio is convinced she should follow what the media instructs her to do. We can view these characters as schizophrenics who develop the symptoms that are announced and confirmed by the media. They cannot differentiate the signifier from the signified and therefore turn to the floating meaningless signifiers in the media. Even though the information in the media as the meaningless signifier sounds senseless and signifies nothing, they totally believe it. These characters are just like Willie Mink, who blindly believes what Jack says and becomes obsessed with the flickering TV., a metaphor for meaningless media information.

As for the second characteristic of schizophrenia, consumerism causes a disunified personality. In other words, it deprives people of a real personal identity. The media conditions people so strongly that their identity becomes dependent on the image of the products they buy. Therefore, Jack has to shop in order to fill himself with desirable images. As Jack states:

I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of my self, located a person I forgotten existed. . . . Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors in security rooms. (p. 84)

Jack feels that he himself has no real identity and that he must buy products for the images he wants to wear in order to find his personality. In *White Noise*, the way to gain identity in the postmodern consumerist society is to buy and display products as a representation of one's own image. Nigel Watson states in "Postmodernism and Lifestyles" in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (2005) that:

People actively wish to join in and actively desire the opportunities for self-expression and display which are provided by the choices of the pink shopping malls. . . . We like to identify with the style that best represents the way that we wish to be seen. (p. 37)

This description matches that of Jack Gladney, the father of the Gladney children and a university professor, who attempts to boost his confidence and create his authority by consuming products and altering his appearance. Jack admits, "I am the false character that follows the name around" (p. 17).

Self-Delusion as a Way Out

Although the people in *White Noise*, or at least Jack Gladney, seem to realize that they are surrounded by the imminent death brought upon them by the products they buy, causing suffering both physically and mentally, they try to ignore this fact and turn to the illusive comfort that consumerism provides.

The characters in the novel also turn to consumerism as a way of evading their fear of death and environmental threats. Consumerism manufactures many products offering an illusive promise of comfort and a solution to toxic problems to the desperate consumers trapped in the toxic and consumerist environment. Consumers believe that consumer products can help them in their hopeless situation. The drug Dylar is a clear example of this point. Dylar

represents the ultimate form of consumer product as it is believed to eliminate the fear of death itself. Although it proves ineffective with Babette, Jack wants to take this drug to get rid of his fear and anxiety. Dylar is similar to any other consumer product in the way that it makes an illusive promise to fulfill consumers' needs and relieve them from mental and physical health problems. Even though the promise is illusive and impossible, desperate people are willing to take it as a last refuge they can cling to in the postmodern world where threats are ubiquitous. In the same way, Jack believes that if he thinks Dylar will help him, it will help him no matter how strong or weak Dylar is. Jack tells Denise, his daughter, that "the power of suggestion could be more important than side effects" (p. 251). Although Denise thinks this sounds stupid, Jack says, "I am eager to be humored, to be fooled. . . . This is what happens . . . to desperate people" (p. 251). This conversation indicates that the people are so hopeless that they are eager to be fooled. They are ready to believe anything and indulge themselves in consumerist ecstasy.

Apart from Dylar, tabloids are another form of product that offers an illusive promise in the toxic society. The tabloids contain stories that claim to relieve consumers of their physical and mental suffering. As Jack ponders, "The tabloid future, with its mechanism of a hopeful twist to apocalyptic events, was perhaps not so very remote from our own immediate experience. . . . Out of some persistent sense of large-scale ruin, we kept inventing hope" (p. 146-47). Tabloids here function as a way of turning disastrous events into pleasurable ones and help alleviate people's anxiety in the presence of fatality and uncertainty. Stories in tabloids, such as star gossip and the articles discussing miracle drugs to cure toxic-related diseases, can distract people from their misery. In one tabloid, it is stated that "mouse cries have been measured at forty thousand cycles per second. Surgeons use high-frequency tapes of mouse cries to destroy tumors in the human body" (p. 236). Moreover, in another tabloid, one story points out that there is the Holy Shroud of Turin, which is famed for its sacred curative powers.

Another similar story describes wonder drugs that are produced in the weightless environment of space and can cure anxiety, obesity, and mood swings. Although this kind of story creates a rather false and illusive hope that people can cure themselves when they face inevitable toxic threats, it does successfully offer the hope that postmodern people are desperately searching for.

People not only consume such products as Dylar and the tabloids but also resort to the idea that wealth and commodities can prevent them from facing environmental hazards. Jack, for example, tries to convince himself that the disaster will not happen to the upper middle class, the privileged class with the power to buy and thus to take refuge in consumerist ecstasy. Jack ponders on natural and man-made disasters:

These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas.

Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornadoes. (p. 114)

Jack believes that, as a college professor, his social and financial status can protect him from all kinds of disasters. He tells himself: "I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event" (p. 117). His assumption is that if he has a strong house in a good location and the power to buy products, he will not be affected by environmental hazards.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that consumerism distorts the ideas of death, life, and existence. In a society relatively free from consumerism, such as Tibet, the way to respond to death is different from that in the consumerist society. Tibetans see death as a natural phenomenon that one cannot avoid; thus, they accept death for what it is. For them, life and death are not different in the way that they both are part of human life. "It is the end of attachment to things. This simple truth is hard to fathom. . . . We don't have to cling to life artificially, or to death for that matter" (p. 38). For Tibetans, brand name products are not an important aspect of life. When we

die, we cannot take them with us and are forced to abandon all things, even our own bodies. However, in America, Murray, Jack's friend, says, "Here we don't die, we shop" (p. 38). In the consumerist society people reject death and try to run away from it by turning to consumer products. People cannot easily accept death because death in this kind of society is unnatural. As Jack states, "There's something artificial about my death. It's shallow, unfulfilling. I don't belong to the earth or sky" (p. 283). Jack's death is artificial because he has been exposed to human-made toxic substances. In addition, death in this kind of society is fearful because it is inevitably premature. To illustrate, people can die any minute because of the toxic environment. This reality reflects the fact that death in the consumerist society is not natural but happens to consumers through their own act of relentless buying. Furthermore, consumerism distorts the consumers' ideas of existence. In Tibet, people learn that they can find true happiness by letting go of everything. In contrast, in America, people are brainwashed into believing that their existence and happiness depend on consumer products. Consequently, they think that they can evade death by buying goods. It should also be noted that right after the toxic event at the school and one caused by a leak of a Nyodene D tank, the Gladneys immediately go shopping. The juxtaposition of these toxic scenes and the supermarket scene implies that after being threatened by fatal incidents, Jack's family tries to grope after the sense of fulfillment, security, and replenishment through consumerism. Jack's reflection on his consumerist consumption further elaborates this point:

It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plentitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, 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 that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening. (p. 20)

Whereas some critics, such as B. R. Myers, find this scene nonsensical and attack DeLillo for presenting the American supermarket as “a haven of womblike contentment, a place where people go to satisfy deep emotional needs,” this paper argues that this portrayal of the supermarket where consumers seek comfort shows that people rely on consumerism so much that in order to gain happiness they have to resort to the products which are provided by the supermarket. To Jack, the senses of replenishment, security, and contentment come only from buying; furthermore, he believes that those who neither need nor afford these products cannot achieve this kind of feeling. Ironically, the truth is the exact opposite. Actually, Jack and his family have never derived any sense of security or well-being from consumption. It can be interpreted that those “who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening” (p. 20) are likely to have a better chance of simple contentment. At least, they are neither exposed to hazardous threats that come from consumer products nor lost in what is mistaken as consumerist ecstasy.

The novel ends with a portrayal of postmodern consumers. They choose to revel in the consumer world because consumerism itself and various products it provides give them hope and meaning although they are illusive and empty. Tabloids and holographic scanners are both the products of consumerism, offering illusive hopes for consumers that everything is fine. The scanners are described as a mystic entity that people can always depend on. For desperate consumers attacked by toxic threats, tabloids provide the realm of superstition and other kinds of distractions such as stars’ stories and false advertisements of amazing drugs that can cure all kinds of diseases caused by consumerism. No matter how severe the confusion and the panic are, consumers try to seek comfort in consumerism.

Conclusions

In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo presents a vivid picture of the postmodern toxic world that provides people with no real certainty, but rather a fear of death and fatal diseases. It is a world where people's minds and behaviors are manipulated by the logic of consumerism. Consumerism provides consumer products that can lethally threaten people's lives on the one hand, and offer the illusive promise of escaping from that fatal threat or death fear through the act of consuming products such as Dylar and tabloids on the other. However, ignoring the fact that consumerism is the real cause of the fatal threats and turning to it as a means of seeking comfort is not a wise choice. Although some argue that no one can escape the poisoning postmodern consumerist environment, we can at least change our way of life, neither surrounding ourselves with the threat in the form of consumer products nor supporting the consumerist circle. Through these practices we may have a glimpse of some solution for this depressing society. Each individual act can contribute to either more severe environmental hazards, or the restoration of the environment. Perhaps, one possible answer to the question raised above lies within our awareness that the consumerist threat is continually caused by ourselves: our own ignorance and our irresponsible acts of relentless buying. We can help save the world and our lives if we are fully awakened from the consumerist maze.

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