BAUDRILLARD, DELILLO'S WHITE NOISE, AND THE END OF HEROIC NARRATIVE

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From Americana, through Great Jones Street, White Noise, and Libra, Don DeLillo's novels have been concerned with the relationship between American identity and the mediascapes. If the two earlier works were preoccupied with the way in which the American dream is manipulated by the media, the later two chart a world that is mediated by and constituted in the technologico-semiotic regime. In White Noise DeLillo's protagonist Jack Gladney confronts a new order in which life is increasingly lived in a world of simulacra, where images and electronic representations replace direct experience. In Libra, Lee Oswald is a product of that order; a figure devoted to media self-fashioning, he constructs his life—and indeed his death—from the proliferation of charismatic images and spectacles of a postmodern society.1

White Noise and Libra particularly, with their interest in electronic mediation and representation, present a view of life in contemporary America that is uncannily similar to that depicted by Jean Baudrillard. They indicate that the transformations of contemporary society that Baudrillard describes in his theoretical writings on information and media have also gripped the mind and shaped the novels of Don DeLillo. For White Noise especially—because it most specifically explores the realm of information and mediascape—Baudrillard's works provide an interesting, valuable, and even crucial perspective. 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. In this world common to both Baudrillard and DeLillo, images, signs, and codes engulf objective

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1For a discussion of Libra and DeLillo's mediascapes, see Lentricchia 10-29.
reality; signs become more real than reality and stand in for the world they erase. Baudrillard’s notion that this radical semiurgy results in the collapse of difference, firm structures, and finalities (the “fixities” by which stable meaning is produced) markedly resembles DeLillo’s vision of an entropic breakdown of basic rituals and concepts in the informational flow of electronic communication. Moreover, for both Baudrillard and DeLillo a media-saturated consciousness threatens the concept of meaning itself. For Baudrillard, “information devours its own contents; it devours communication,” resulting in “a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy” (In the Shadow 97, 100). Similarly for DeLillo, the flow of electronic information obliterates coherent meaning. The very notion of “white noise” that is so central to the novel implies a neutral and reified mediaspeech, but also a surplus of data and an entropic blanket of information glut which flows from a media-saturated society.

But the similarities between Baudrillard and DeLillo do not end here. For both, this increasingly simational and nonreferential world brings about radical changes in the very shape of subjectivity. For Baudrillard an older modernist order—with its dialectic of alienation and inner authenticity—is eclipsed by new forms of experiencing the self. Lured and locked into the “uninterrupted interfaces” of video screen and mediascape, the subject experiences an undifferentiated flux of pure signifiers, an “ecstasy of communication” in which conventional structures of meaning dissolve and the ability to imagine an alternative reality disappears. A new experience of euphoria, an ungrounded “delirium” replaces the anxiety and alienation of an earlier period. Unlike the earlier experience of alienation, which attested to a coherent private sphere, an interiority of self, this new delirium, a vertiginous fascination with the “instantaneity” and “obscene” visibility of media events, attests to the “extermination of interstitial and protective spaces” (“Ecstasy” 127). Indeed the “communicational promiscuity” of the omnipresent and ubiquitous mass media strips society of its secrets, inhibitions, repressions, and depths and leads inexorably to the hollowing out of the self—or better to say, the dispersal of self, the generalized destabilization of the subject in the era of networks and electronic transmission of symbols (“Ecstasy” 130–31).  

Similarly DeLillo sees a new form of subjectivity emerging as the

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2In this formulation of Baudrillard’s position, I am indebted to Crary 285–86 and Kellner, “Baudrillard” 126–27.
modernist order is eclipsed by the postmodern world. Indeed, an older modernist subjectivity is in a state of siege in the information society. Jack Gladney, the narrator of White Noise, is a modernist displaced in a postmodern world. He exhibits a Kierkegaardian “fear and trembling” regarding death and attempts to preserve earlier notions of an authentic and coherent identity by observing the tribalistic rituals of family life. Gladney attempts to “shore up the ruins” of an older order, ironically by chanting advertising slogans as if they were sacred formulas. Yet he often succumbs to the Baudrillardian condition, floating “ecstatically” in a delirium of networks, hyperreal surfaces, and fetishized consumer objects. Gladney’s narrative is interspersed with the entropic chatter and snippets of talk shows that emerge from a television that “migrates” around the Gladney household, moving from room to room, filling the air with jingles and consumer advice (“The T.V. said: ‘And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio’” [61]). His narrative is interpenetrated by brand names and advertising slogans as he chants, “Mastercard, Visa, American Express . . . Ledead, unleaded, superunleaded . . . Dristan Ultra, Dristan Ultra . . . Clorets, Velamints, Freedent” (100, 199, 167, 229). These “eruptions” in the narrative imply the emergence of a new form of subjectivity colonized by the media and decentered by its polyglot discourses and electronic networks. They imply the evacuation of the private spheres of self, in Baudrillardian terms “the end of interiority” (“Ecstasy” 133).

Moreover, for Baudrillard and DeLillo the dissolution of a modernist subjectivity in the mire of contemporary media and technology is integrally connected to another issue: the passing of the great modernist notions of artistic impulse and representation, the demise of notions of a “heroic” search for alternative, creative forms of consciousness, and the idea of art as specially endowed revelation. Such a heroic modernism struggled through extraordinary artistic and intellectual effort to create meaning from the flux and fragments of an atomized contemporary world, to pierce the veil, to reveal underlying truth. But for Baudrillard, the very impulses that gave impetus to this project have dissipated in the contemporary world: “Something has changed, and the Faustian, Promethean, (perhaps Oedipal) period of production and consumption gives way to the ‘proteinic’ era of networks, to the narcissistic and protean era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication” (“Ecstasy” 127). For Baudrillard these heroic Faustian, Promethean, and oedipal impulses to struggle, to illuminate,
and to unveil a (repressed) truth give way to “the smooth operational surface of communication” (“Ecstasy” 127); they have all but dissolved in the pure, empty seriality and the decentering forces of a “proteinic” information society.

Similarly, for DeLillo, such heroic striving for meaning has been radically thrown into question in the contemporary world. For at the core of the modernist version of the heroic is the notion of the constitutive power of the imagination, the idea of an autonomous and authentic subjectivity out of which springs vision and illumination. Such is the modernist “epiphany”: a moment of profound imaginative perception in which fragments are organized and essence revealed, and (on the level of narrative) in which a hermeneutical core of meaning is contained within a constellation of luminescent images. But White Noise suggests such moments of authentic and unfettered subjectivity are being supplanted by a Baudrillardian euphoria or “schizophrenia” which characterizes the experience of the self in the space of the simulacrum. By rendering moments of “heroic” vision and imaginative epiphany as parody and pastiche—as he does in the climactic “showdown” between Gladney and Gray (a.k.a. Willie Mink)—DeLillo implies the exhaustion of late modernist, existentialist notions of heroism. As well, DeLillo’s parody and “terrific comedy” (Lentricchia 1) underscore a crisis of representation relating directly to the collapse of patriarchal authority and to the breakup of the oedipal configurations that underpin the heroic narrative itself.

The passing of a heroic modernist “Faustian and Promethean era” and the emergence of a “proteinic” postmodern order is registered in White Noise through the narrative voice of Jack Gladney. Gladney sifts through the layers of white noise—electronic media, printed information, traffic sounds, computer read-outs—listening for significance, for a grasp of essence in the flux. In modernist fashion, he struggles in an almost Sisyphean way to glean meaning from the surrounding noise of culture and is drawn toward occasions of existential self-fashioning, heroic moments of vision in a commodified world. When he shops with his family he notes that “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” (84). And when he hears his daughter Steffie uttering the words “Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida” in her sleep, his response is “whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence” (155).
Yet Gladney’s modernist impulse toward authentic selfhood and his quest for transcendental meaning seem oddly out of place in the postmodern world. Gladney’s colleague Murray Siskind, a visiting lecturer in “living icons” who lives in a one-room apartment with a television set and stacks of comic books, and who teaches popular culture courses in “Elvis” and “The Cinema of Car Crashes,” insists that looking for a realm of meaning beyond surfaces, networks, and commodities is unnecessary; the information society provides its own sort of epiphanies, and watching television, an experience he describes as “close to mystical,” is one of them. For Murray television proffers the Baudrillardian “ecstasy of communication,” a “peak experience” of postmodern culture. Television, he says, welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. There is light, there is sound. I ask my students, “What more do you want?” Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. “Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.” (51)

For Murray the postmodernist, the euphoric forms of electronic data and informational flow are to be enthusiastically embraced, and Murray takes it upon himself to be Gladney’s tutor in the new semiotic regime. When Murray and Gladney drive into the country to see “The Most Photographed Barn in America,” for example, Murray explains the significance of the tourist attraction within the new order of image and simulacrum. Rather than conjuring up associations with a pioneering past or an authentic rural life, the barn has been subsumed into the process of image replication; it is surrounded by tour buses, roadside signs, venders selling post cards of the barn, people taking pictures of the barn, people photographing other photographers photographing the barn. Observing the tourists, Murray points to the postmodern experience of proliferating images without ground: “they are taking pictures of taking pictures” (13). Murray expounds solemnly on the unfolding of a new order where the distinction between reality and representation, sign and referent, collapses: “Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (12). He explains to the reluctant Gladney the logic of a simulational world where signs triumph over reality, where experience is constructed by and in service of the image, and the ephemeral image takes on its own resplendent, mystical “aura”: “We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can
you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies” (12).³

Yet if Murray savors the flux of images and signs, Gladney is increasingly nonplused by a world without referents, where the responses of an authentic interior self vanish in the undertow of the simulacrum and where media images and spectacles proliferate, terrorize, and fascinate. The “Airborne Toxic Event” (besides registering the postmodern preoccupation with toxic poisoning) depicts a condition where subjective responses are both constructed and validated by radio and television: initially the “toxic event” is reported as a “feathery plume,” which induces curiosity and mild alarm; later it is described as a catastrophic “black billowing cloud,” evoking fear “accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious” (127). Increasingly it becomes impossible to distinguish between the spectacle and the real. Even the natural world—the ultimate ground of the “real”—succumbs to a hyperreal condition of multiple regress without origin. Spectacular sunsets (which Gladney refers to as “postmodern sunsets”) appear after the release of toxins into the atmosphere, but it is never certain whether the sunsets are caused by toxic chemicals or by the residue of microorganisms subsequently discharged by scientists into the atmosphere to “eat” the airborne chemicals. Exposure to the toxic materials released by the “event” causes déjà vu in the Gladney children (déjà vu itself being a “recollection” without origin), but it is unclear whether this is a “real” symptom or a psychosomatic one resulting from suggestion, since they get the symptoms only after they hear them reported on the radio.

Gladney’s encounter with the SIMUVAC (simulated evacuation) underscores most profoundly the simulated or hyperreal world depicted in White Noise. SIMUVAC regularly stages efficient rehearsals for coping with real disasters—volunteers play dead and videotapes are sent for prompt analysis. Yet at the evacuation site during the toxic event, Gladney discovers that the SIMUVAC personnel are using the real event to rehearse and perfect a simulation. The world has been turned inside out; simulation has become the ground of the real: “You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real,” the SIMUVAC man complains to Gladney; “we don’t have our victims laid out where we’d want them if this was an actual simulation. . . . There’s a lot of polishing we still have to do” (139).

Finally the world of White Noise—one based on the abstract circulation of information—follows the logic of the utter commutability

³Here I am indebted to a considerable extent to Lentricchia 7–10.
of signs. Any semiological network can become a hermetic system into which the individual subject can be inserted and which constructs the self. Gladney’s German teacher, for example, tells Jack how after his loss of faith in God he “turned to meteorology for comfort” and soon had created a universe of significance from the weather: “It brought me a sense of peace and security I’d never experienced. Dew, frost, and fog. Snow flurries. The jet stream. . . . I began to come out of my shell, talk to people on the street. ‘Nice day.’ ‘Looks like rain.’ ‘Hot enough for you?’” (55).

Indeed, Gladney finds himself unwittingly drawn into this order in which the subject is assembled in signs. Gladney is chairman of “Hitler studies” (which in itself suggests a grim nostalgic impulse to recuperate the “real” in an age of simulation) but is nevertheless warned by the chancellor of the university about his tendency to make “a feeble presentation of self” (17). Gladney begins to wear heavy-rimmed sunglasses to bolster his credibility and changes his name from Jack Gladney to the more distinguished J. A. K. Gladney. Later, when his wife Babette expresses her irritation at the imposing, mirrored sunglasses and asks Gladney to stop wearing them, he retorts, “I can’t teach Hitler without them” (221). Any notion of an essential identity is all but erased in this realm of free-floating signifiers and simulation. Yet Gladney is unable, like his friend Murray, to submit himself happily to surface and simulacrum; rather he is plagued by a nagging late modernist, existential sense that he is in “bad faith”: “I am the false character that follows the name around” (17).

This crisis of subjectivity that Gladney faces in this hermetic universe of afterimages, ghosts, floating signifiers, and simulacra is compounded by another—he is facing his impending death after exposure to the deadly gas “Nydene D.” during the evacuation. Gladney exhibits a modernist angst about death, ruminating about its significance, visiting graveyards, and talking about it with his friend Murray. Yet Gladney’s existential crisis is obsolete in the new postmodern order. Gladney’s anguished confession, “I want to live,” merely evokes from Murray a flight of free association along the intertextual surfaces of popular culture: “From the Robert Wise film of the same name, with Susan Hayward as Barbara Graham, a convicted murderess. Aggressive jazz score by Johnny Mandel” (283). Moreover, even death is not exempt 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. When Gladney is subjected to a computer scan to obtain
a “data profile” on his condition, he notes that “it is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying” (142). And as Gladney later tells Murray, “there's something artificial about my death. It's shallow, unfulfilling. I don't belong to the earth or sky. They ought to carve an aerosol can on my tombstone” (283).

Thus media and technology transform death into a sign spectacle, and its reality is experienced as the body doubled in technified forms: death by “print-out.”4 But if death, the last vestige of the real, the final border of the self, becomes part of the precession of simulacra, what possibilities exist for meaning, value, for the autonomous self’s endeavor to create meaning against death’s limits and finality? In an order given over to simulation, such heroic impulses can only be rendered as parody and pastiche—the “blank parody” of exhausted or dead forms, the postmodern response to the disappearance of narrative norms that previously figured heroic action.

When Gladney discovers that Babette has contrived to obtain Dylar (a high tech chemical “cure” for the fear of death) by sleeping with the project manager of the group working on the drug’s research and development, he resolves to hunt out the project manager—identified by Babette as “Mr. Gray”—and kill him. Such a confrontation has all the makings of a heroic showdown. Yet from the outset Gladney’s role of hero in the showdown is undermined in a variety of ways. A note of literary parody is struck even before Gladney meets Gray. After his exposure to Nyodene D. during the airborne toxic event, Gladney is diagnosed by the computerized scanner as harboring a fatal “nebulous mass” in his body. His comments on his own predicament constitute an overt parody of the existential hero contemplating radical freedom against the knowledge of the inevitability of

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4The issue of death provides another comparison between Baudrillard and DeLillo. For both, death is the ultimate signified, the single natural event which ultimately cannot be subsumed into simulacra, models, and codes. As Baudrillard conjectures in Symbolic Exchange and Death, “Perhaps only death, the reversibility of death is of a higher order than the code. Only symbolic disorder can breach the code” (Jean Baudrillard 122). And for both Baudrillard and DeLillo the symbolic mediations of contemporary society deprive the individual of an intimate relation with death, with the result that society is haunted by the fear of mortality (Kellner, Jean Baudrillard 104).
death: “How literary, I thought peevishly. Streets thick with the details of impulsive life as the hero ponders the latest phase in his dying” (281).

When Gladney confronts Gray (identified as Willie Mink), the “residential organizational genius” of the Dylar research group, now a shabby, demented recluse, the scene becomes a pastiche of the existentialist epiphany—a “negative” epiphany which involves a lucid recognition of the absurd and contingent nature of reality, a moment of heroic self-fashioning based on the sudden perception that existence is grounded in nothingness and the individual is utterly free. When he goes to the seedy motel where Mink is living, there is a strong sense of the utter provisionality and freedom which characterizes Gladney’s actions: he proceeds by instinct, continually updating his plans. Like Meursault in L’Étranger, who experiences a sensory epiphany—an amplified awareness of the play of sunlight and the sounds of water—just before he commits his act of violence, Gladney experiences an intensity of sensation as he enters Mink’s room: “I stood inside the room, sensing things, noting the room tone, the dense air. Information rushed toward me, rushed slowly, incrementally” (305). Like Roquentin, who has a visionary moment in La Nausée, Gladney experiences with almost hallucinatory intensity the essential pulsating “thus-ness” of reality, and in so doing believes himself to be experiencing an unmediated vision of pure existence: “I knew the precise nature of events. I was moving closer to things in their actual state as I approached a violence, a smashing intensity. Water fell in drops, surfaces gleamed” (305).

Yet these perceptions are related in a dry, toneless fashion appropriate to pastiche, which Fredric Jameson describes as “the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language . . . without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic” (“Consumer Society” 114). Pastiche implies a world where fragmented or heterogeneous linguistic islands supplant centered, heroic narrative positions, a world where the possibility of unique vision and style has been lost. Thus rather than the parodic imitation of a peculiar and unique style, DeLillo’s pastiche involves a play of stylistic mannerisms, from the high modernist heroics of the existential hero to the B-movie heroics of the hard-boiled detective. Even as he approaches the motel, Gladney assumes the voice-over style of the Raymond Chandler hero: “It occurred to me that I did not have to knock. The door would be open” (305). This B-movie quality is furthered by Gladney’s insistence upon inflating the narra-
tive as he dwells repetitively on his sensory apocalypse: “Surfaces gleamed. Water struck the roof in spherical masses, globules, splashing dramas” (307); “The precise nature of events. Things in their actual state” (310). But these observations of an intensified reality rapidly descend into ludicrous banality, and rather than an epiphany of identity, Gladney undergoes a farcical loss of self:

I continued to advance in consciousness. Things glowed, a secret life rising out of them. Water struck the roof in elongated orbs, splashing dramas. I knew for the first time what rain really was. I knew what wet was. I understood the neurochemistry of my brain, the meaning of dreams (the waste material of premonitions). Great stuff everywhere, racing through the room, racing slowly. A richness, a density. I believed everything. I was a Buddhist, a Jain, a Duck River Baptist. (310)

Moreover, just as the secure narrative position required by the heroic transcendental figure is destabilized by pastiche, the revelations of the heroic transcendental ego are ultimately transformed into a postmodern decentering of self, an “ecstatic” Baudrillardian dispersal of consciousness in the world of screens and networks. As Gladney enters Gray’s motel room he observes that “I sensed I was part of a network of structures and channels” (305). As the narrative continues, metaphors of the experience of Dasein through which Being coalesces in an existential moment of recognition startlingly shift to metaphors of the world of networks, information, and white noise: “The intensity of the noise in the room was the same at all frequencies. Sound all around. . . . I knew who I was in the network of meanings” (312). The whole atmosphere, so charged with unusual vitality, now becomes bathed in the eerie glow of television: “auditory scraps, tatters, whirling specks. A heightened reality. A denseness that was also a transparency. Surfaces gleamed” (307).

For Gladney’s confrontation with Mink is an allegorical confrontation with postmodern culture itself. Mink is the personification of a new order; a composite man of undecidable ethnicity, he suggests a world where national and ethnic differences have been eradicated in an increasing internationalization of American popular culture. Mink wears Bermuda shorts with a Budweiser pattern on them; he sprawls on his couch “in the attitude of a stranded air traveler, someone long since defeated by the stale waiting, the airport babble” (307). “I had American sex the first time in Port-O-San, Texas,” Mink announces; “American sex, let me tell you, this is how I learned my English” (308–9). A repository of Lyotardian “linguistic clouds” of splintered
and fractured discourse, Mink repeats phrases, from television weather reports (“And this could represent the leading edge of some warmer air” [313]) to popular geography merged with popular nutrition hints (“This is the point, as opposed to emerging coastlines, continental plates. Or you can eat natural grains, vegetables, eggs, no fish, no fruit” [311]). Mink voices the drone of the mediascapes; more than that he physically resembles a television set. Gladney notes that “his face was odd, concave, forehead and chin jutting” (305–6). Mink is the embodiment of white noise (“His face appeared at the end of the white room, a white buzz” [312]) and of a system in a state of entropic decay: he is exhausted and depleted; he shows “a senile grin” (309). Moreover he is obsessed with his own deterioration, quelling his fear of death by consuming Dylar tablets one after another.

Gladney’s existential epiphany now begins to resemble the “peak experience” typifying the postmodern condition—one similar to Baudrillard’s description of schizophrenia—the ultimate outcome of an “obscenity of communication” in which the self succumbs utterly to “networks of influence.” Baudrillard describes schizophrenia as “the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things . . . the overexposure and transparency of the world which traverses [the schizoid] without obstacle” (“Ecstasy” 133). In this “delirium” of communication, the schizophrenic exists only as a nodal point or “switching center”; his mental and physical boundaries dissolve in the flow of information as he experiences the cognitive equivalent of white noise.

Alarmingly, Gladney’s peak experience rapidly metamorphoses into this Baudrillardian nightmare. Indeed, it becomes similar to Fredric Jameson’s description (elaborating on Baudrillard) of the transformation of the expressive energies of modernism into the fragmentation of emotions in the diffuse and discontinuous schizoid world of postmodernism. For Jameson, this schizophrenic experience is one in which the world takes on a “hallucinogenic intensity” (“Cultural Logic” 73). Gladney’s experience has this hallucinatory quality, yet if it initially resembles the Sartrean visionary moment in its intensity, its sense of depth, of unmediated reality and pure existence is ultimately a chimera. Rather than an epiphany of identity, it constitutes a dissolution of self, a lifeworld reduced, in Jameson’s terms, “to an experience of pure material Signifiers, or in other words of a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (“Cultural Logic” 72). Gladney is temporally suspended as he continues to revise his plans to kill Mink in a toneless, chantlike fashion, perpetually rewriting a present which seems without link to past and future. And as temporal continuities
break down, his experience of the present becomes overwhelmingly vivid: when he shoots Mink he marvels at Mink's blood, sees its color "in terms of dominant wavelength, luminance, purity" (312). Yet in spite of this heightened intensity, the encounter suggests not the existentialist sense that pure existence looms up as artificial words and constructs drop away, but rather the postmodern awareness that words themselves construct reality. The dominant impression of Gladney's account, in fact, is wordiness, a proliferation of words. Words themselves loom up in hyperpresent materiality; when he shoots Mink, not sound so much as words echo around the room: "I fired the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic" (312).

But it is Mink himself who most completely suggests the postmodern "schizophrenic" experience in an instantaneous world of discrete and discontinuous moments in which signifiers fail to add up, to produce the "meaning-effect" of an interlocking syntagmatic series. One of the side effects of the Dylar that Mink ingests to eradicate the fear of death (and coextensively the sense of time) is the sort of literalizing attention to words that results from the isolation of signifiers in pure and unrelated presents and the consequent breakdown of the play of meaning along the temporal manifold of the signifying chain. In their condition as jumbled and isolated signifiers, words are ultimately reduced to mere signals which form a mechanical one-to-one relationship with their referent.5 Thus Gladney, stalking Mink, says "hail of bullets" and Mink runs for cover; when he says "plunging aircraft" Mink folds himself into the recommended crash position.

Gladney ultimately botches his plan to kill Mink and steal the Dylar: Mink devours the Dylar, and Gladney, after wounding Mink, takes him to the hospital. More significantly, the encounter with Mink suggests the untenability of heroic self-fashioning, as Gladney's epiphany collapses into postmodern schizophrenia. Rather than a moment of pure, unfettered subjectivity, Gladney's experience implies the evacuation of the self, as the deep structures of modern experience—as well as modern narrative—succumb to a postmodern crisis of the sign and representation, to "networks of influence," to a discontinuous schizoid world, and to white noise.

But there is yet another way in which White Noise figures the impossibility of heroism and the demise of the heroic narrative.

5Baudrillard similarly notes the collapse of signification into mere "signals" in postmodern society. For a discussion of Baudrillard and the "signal," see Poster 29.
Baudrillard's suggestion that the "proteinic" era of networks has replaced not only Faustian and Promethean but oedipal strivings is relevant here. For DeLillo's postmodern world is one of free-floating and endless simulacra, a meaning cut off from all bases. This is a world in which in Lacanian terms the stability of the nom du père is subject to doubt, indeed where notions of a centered authority are mere residues from an earlier period. Even religious belief is swallowed in the order of the simulacrum. When Gladney drags Mink to a Catholic hospital after the bungled murder attempt, he asks the resident nun about the Church's thinking on heaven, God, angels, and the saving of souls. Her response is "saved? What is saved? This is a dumb head, who would come in here to talk about angels. Show me an angel. Please. I want to see" (317). The nun informs him that church officials have long since ceased to believe in the "devil, the angels, heaven, hell"; they merely pretend to. "Our pretense is a dedication," she says. "Someone must appear to believe" (319).

This world in which the ultimate, transcendent "name of the father" is simulational implies a crisis in the deeply patriarchal structures of late capitalism, a world in which there is a troubling of the phallus, in which masculinity slips from its sure position. Initially this insufficiency of masculine authority is suggested by Gladney's position as head of a family of five children, most of whom are brought from earlier marriages. This postmodern family is no longer organized around the nom du père; rather it is utterly decentered and globally dispersed. Gladney's string of ex-spouses and his collection of children from previous marriages are connected through time and global space by electronic networks. When one of Jack's ex-wives telephones, he comments that "her tiny piping voice bounced down to me from a hollow ball in geosynchronous orbit" (273).

Gladney's attempts to recover patriarchal authority by wearing sunglasses and teaching courses in Hitler notwithstanding, his narrative is hardly authoritative, nor does it carry a sense of mastery. It is a decentered and toneless montage of voices, ranging from outcroppings of media slogans to metaphysical meditations on the meaning of death. But if Gladney's narrative registers the decline of patriarchal authority, the breakup of the order of phallic power is suggested most strongly by the figure of Gray/Mink and the dynamic of Gladney's confrontation with him. Gray seems initially to represent patriarchal privilege and power. He is a scientist, the "project manager" of the research work on Dylar. And he is the man who has usurped Gladney's wife Babette, lured her into bed in a seedy motel room in exchange...
for the drug. Stung by Babette’s confessed adultery, Gladney imagines Gray and his wife in the motel. The figure of Gray initially suggests phallic mastery, a dominance which affirms the masculine gaze and its power of appropriation: “Bedward, plotward. I saw my wife reclining on her side, voluptuously rounded, the eternal waiting nude. I saw her as he did. Dependent, submissive, emotionally captive. I felt his mastery and control. The dominance of his position” (241).

The “bedward, plotward” trajectory suggests the oedipal narrative itself, with Gray representing the corporate father (or “project manager”) who has usurped Gladney’s “motherly” wife (Babette exhibits “an honesty inherent in bulkiness” [7]). This trajectory also implies the need to bring the narrative logic to its fruition by Gladney’s killing Gray and reclaiming his love object. Yet Gray is finally not a figure of centered authority; he is a “composite man,” as Babette informs Gladney, and “Gray” is a convenient name she uses to refer to several scientists with whom she had transactions in the research group. Further, Gladney imagines Gray as “four or more grayish figures,” vague organization men without potency or phallic power, technocrats devoted to eradicating human emotion, especially the fear of death: “selfless, sexless, determined to engineer us out of our fear” (241). Moreover, oedipal logic gives way to the “proteinic” world of information as Gray appears in Gladney’s fantasy as a televised image, a representative and embodiment of a postmodern informational world of networks and circuits: “I sat up late thinking of Mr. Gray. Gray-bodied, staticky, unfinished. The picture wobbled and rolled, the edges of his body flared with random distortion” (241). Finally the “bedward, plotward” trajectory of the oedipal narrative, culminating in the primal scene itself—the moment of consummation between Gray and Babette—is dissipated by the echoes of brand names and a ubiquitous “panasonic” white noise: “[I] heard them in their purling foreplay, the love babble and buzzing flesh. Heard the sloppings and smackings, the swash of wet mouths, bedsprings sinking in. An interval of mumbled adjustments. Then gloom moved in around the gray-sheeted bed, a circle slowly closing. Panasonic” (241).

Similarly Willie Mink (incarnation of the spectral Gray) is associated with the flow of information and with white noise. But as the one-time project manager of the Dylar research group, which is “supported by a multinational giant,” he is also connected with a global economy. The Mink/Gray composite in fact is associated both with informational flow and transnational monopoly, a new world of multinational capitalism whose channels of control are so widespread and
dispersed that no single authoritative father figure is necessary for its operation. Rather than figuring the power of a centered, authoritative, symbolic father, Mink/Gray represents the "flow of desire" of postindustrial society, a society of services and information in which desire tends less and less to be sublimated and organized within the patriarchal oedipalized family. The figure of Mink/Gray is as amorphous and diffused as the relays and networks of the social desiring machine in the desublimated and postoedipal space of late capitalism. Mink/Gray provides no focal point for an oedipal dynamic that might otherwise underpin the sort of heroic confrontation Gladney undertakes. "This is the grayish figure of my torment, the man who took my wife" (308-9), Gladney resolutely tells himself when he sees Mink. Yet Mink is less a usurper than a repository for the rambling, metonymic discourses of a consumer culture, and Gladney, even if he could carry off a heroic encounter, has nothing substantial to fight. The battle on the heroic terrain of oedipal rivalry and phallic power is abortive: if Gladney symbolically castrates Mink, shooting him in the "midsection" and "hipbone" ("his lap a puddle of blood"), he carelessly allows Mink to do the same to him (Mink shoots him in the "wrist"). Finally Gladney's antagonism toward his opponent collapses; he begins to identify with Mink and regard him as a brother in adversity: "I felt I did honor to both of us . . . by merging our fortunes, physically leading him to safety" (315). Both are now figures of the powerless male, and Gladney finds himself, on the way to the hospital, "growing fond" of Mink.

In DeLillo's world, where the nom du père is simulational or dispersed in the networks and channels of a multinational capitalism, the crisis of phallic power also suggests a crisis of representation. Roland Barthes observes that narrative provides an "Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end)" and that it may be true that "every narrative . . . is a staging of the (absent, hidden, or hypostatized) father" (10). But if all narrative has traces or residues of this oedipal dynamic, in DeLillo's postmodern landscape the oedipal configuration lingers as an impossible memory forever closed off to the errant hero. The very basis of the oedipal logic of the heroic narrative is thrown into question, leading to a breakdown in the economy of representation and the collapse of heroic narrative itself.

After the debacle with Mink, Gladney finds himself back where he started—in a world where experience is so technologically mediated.

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6I am indebted here to Dana Polan's discussion of the father figure and transnational capitalism; see Polan 178. For another discussion of the same issue, see Kroker and Kroker 27.
and processed that televised courses are offered on basic bodily functions such as “Eating and Drinking: Basic Parameters.” Gladney is left in the “ambient roar” of white noise in the shopping center, in the realm of the simulacrum where signs are constantly mutating and reorganizing the consumers’ cognitive world: the supermarket shelves having been rearranged, shoppers wander aimlessly, “trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they’d seen the Cream of Wheat” (325).

Thus ends DeLillo’s grimly satiric allegory of the crisis of the sign in the order of the simulacrum, the dissolution of phallic power, and the exhaustion of heroic narratives of late modernity. These processes of postmodern culture, the novel suggests, are finally tied up with the issue of death. For the existential “fear and trembling” in the face of death represents that last vestige of subjectivity, that deep alterity which both threatens and delineates the self. Dylar promises to erase the awareness of death—the last absolute truth in a world of simulation, the last traces of the deep structures of a modernist consciousness. Yet as the lab technician Winnie Richards tells Gladney: “I think it’s a mistake to lose one’s sense of death, even one’s fear of death. Isn’t death the boundary we need? Doesn’t it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit” (228–29). Moreover, Gladney himself concurs that death provides an essential boundary that gives shape and meaning to life; “dying,” he notes, “cures us of our innocence of the future” (15). And he adds: “All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers’ plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children’s games” (26).

Gladney’s comments imply an awareness that life or narrative “plots” presuppose an end (death), and that it is in the light of an ending that narrative (or life) takes on meaning. The passion for meaning that animates readers is the desire for an end; to eradicate a sense of ending in life or narrative is to extinguish meaning. Yet the sense of boundaries and endings that define the self and give life or narrative meaning (or “heroic” possibilities, moments of self-knowledge, moments of vision) are erased in postmodern society. In a sense the processes under way in DeLillo’s contemporary America—the loss of significant existential moments such as angst and the fear of death that register a space of interiority and authenticity—resemble the effects

7For a discussion of the relationship between narrative and death (to which I am indebted here), see Brooks 283–84.
of Dylar. The “delirium” of communication, the arbitrary sign’s rapturous loss of referent, and the flow of desire in late capitalism erode a sense of temporal continuity, history, limits, and endings—death included. As Murray Siskind observes, “here we don’t die, we shop” (38).

In its concern with the importance of plots and narrative, therefore, White Noise suggests that the breakdown of grand narratives (such as the heroic narrative) does not mean a diminished reliance on plotting. Rather the novel implies that we still rely on plots and have recourse to narrative representations of some kind, that narratives still function to construct and criticize our world, that storytelling is ultimately a historical and political act.8

Indeed, DeLillo’s novels engage historical and political issues; they do not exhibit the ahistoricism and pastiched depthlessness often associated with postmodernism. If his works exhibit the postmodern concern with the unstable nature of subjectivity and textuality, with representation and narrative process, his postmodernism retains the legacy of the modernist impulse to explore consciousness and selfhood and to create an imaginative vision that probes and criticizes its subject matter. If DeLillo uses postmodern devices like parody, pastiche, and parodic intertextual echoes, if he exhibits an interest in the play of language in the postmodern text (exhibited especially in a novel like The Names), these devices are deployed with a commitment to interrogate culture in America, to connect the transformations of narrative and subjectivity to cultural and historical processes.9 Thus his depiction of postmodern culture in White Noise is no celebration of the ephemerality of jouissance. His vision of the dissolution of an older modernist subjectivity in a “mediated” world is not one of “nomadic” and flexible selves that find liberation in the play of style and image, selves that find release of primary desire from oppressive structures in a ludic postmodern “schizophrenia.”10 Nor is his parodic treatment

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8Linda Hutcheon argues that much postmodern fiction reflects the view that we are still reliant on narrative representations in our verbal discourses in spite of the demise of grand narratives; see Hutcheon 49. Jean-François Lyotard, of course, argues that “little narratives”—among which are literary texts devoted to a flexible “narrative pragmatics”—operate in the absence of master narratives and are in fact antagonistic to any grand totalizing narrative (20).

9In an article on The Names, Matthew J. Morris similarly argues for a political effectiveness and commitment for DeLillo’s postmodernism, despite its interest in language play (121).

10Here DeLillo differs from Baudrillard. Baudrillard may decry the “obscene delirium of communication,” but as Douglas Kellner points out, his more recent works
of the patriarchal structures that underpin heroic-narrative paradigms yet another “deconstruction” that serves to remind us once again of their artifice and to expose naturalized myth, embedded ideology. Rather his novel connects the postmodern delirious and decentered subjectivity to a decentered capitalism and to the array of technological and representational apparatuses in the contemporary world—to the flood of media which disarticulates the subject and which dissolves the Faustian, Promethean, and oedipal impulses, replacing them with a new ecstasy of ever-shifting bricolage, with intersubjectivity as schizophrenic seriality.

In his depiction of a Baudrillardian landscape, therefore, DeLillo differs from Baudrillard in one important respect. Baudrillard’s position toward the postmodern world is ultimately one of radical skepticism: finally there is nothing outside the play of simulations, no real in which a radical critique of the simulational society might be grounded. DeLillo’s writing, on the other hand, reveals a belief that fictional narrative can provide critical distance from and a critical perspective on the processes it depicts.

Given a world such as that which White Noise depicts, a culture based on the mode of information, there seems little chance of returning unproblematically to a modernist sensibility, with its heroic strivings for imaginative unity and an “unmediated” vision. In fact the novel suggests that to go back would be a form of nostalgia, could in fact lead in the direction of “Hitler studies” and a grim recuperation of a mythic unity and an “authenticity” of blood and soil (“the more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence,” says Murray [258]). Yet the final image of Gladney suggests that DeLillo would wish to retain some aspects of the legacy of modernism (as he has done in his writing) in a postmodern world—such as the ideal of a rational, autonomous subjectivity—and that he is highly critical of a commodified, fast-image culture that threatens to bring about “the end of interiority.” Gladney’s modernist “last stand” is his refusal to submit to the “imaging block,” in which the body is irradiated with the information of “ecstatic communication” and in which his impending death is consigned to a technologico-semiological hyperreality:

speculate that even though the disappearance of the subject “might create dizziness or even panic,” there may nevertheless be “new pleasures and new modes of being awaiting us as we de-subjectify and progressively objectify ourselves” (Jean Baudrillard 175).

11See Kellner, Jean Baudrillard 90.
Dr. Chakravarty wants to talk to me but I am making it a point to stay away. He is eager to see how my death is progressing. . . . He wants to insert me once more in the imaging block, where charged particles collide, high winds blow. But I am afraid of the imaging block. Afraid of its magnetic fields, its computerized nuclear pulse. (325)

A failure at heroism, Gladney shops at the supermarket and contemplates his “fear and trembling” about death, an indication that his subjectivity has yet to be completely swallowed up in the hyperreal. DeLillo’s sympathies surely must be with his protagonist as Gladney holds tight to his fear of death in a society where the fear of death, like other aspects of the deep structures of subjectivity, is being transformed into images, codes, simulations, and charismatic spectacle; standing in the supermarket check-out line, Gladney ominously notes the “tabloids in the racks” and their tales of the “cunts of the famous and the dead” (326).

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