

# The All-Pervasive Influence of the Media and the Collapse of Meaning in Don Delillo's *White Noise*

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to investigate Don Delillo's *White Noise* (1986) from the perspective of Baudrillard's theory of *hyperreality* and *simulation*, and that of the role of the media in contemporary media-dominated societies. In this regard, the above-mentioned theories will be first fully discussed, and then applied to Delillo's selected work to observe how a whole culture might be assimilated into a *hyperreal* world, and what ramifications it can have on people's lives without their knowing it. Ultimately, a conclusion will be drawn which might be of great help to readers of the fiction. It is hoped that this study would appeal to those interested in ascertaining the influence of *hyperreality* and the mainstream media on our daily lives, while most of us are not conscious of their dire, cumulative effects.

**Keywords:** *hyperreality*, *simulation*, the media, meaning, representation

## INTRODUCTION

Acknowledged as one of the foremost intellectual figures, Jean Baudrillard and his theories are of paramount importance in the postmodern age. He has exerted considerable influence over different domains. His critiques of Marx and Michel Foucault are known to present philosophers, but the ones

which concern this study are his most controversial and influential theories, named *simulation*, *hyperreality*, and the all- pervasive influence of the media.

### **Simulation and Hyperreality**

Baudrillard's most influential and controversial book has in recent years been *Simulacra and Simulation* (1983) in which he claims reality has given way to its representations. It has, according to him, been superseded by signs and images. What we experience in today's world is a *simulation* of reality. To grasp the meaning of *hyperreality*, we have to first deal with *simulation*, as it is through *simulation* that we come to the term *hyperreality*. Hence, it is worthwhile to define the word *simulation*. According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *simulation* is "the activity of producing conditions which are similar to real ones, especially to test something, or the conditions that are produced". It, therefore, aims at rendering something in order to be regarded as real or original, while it is not so. Baudrillard identifies three kinds of *simulation*; the first kind is an obvious copy of reality which is easily distinguishable, the second one is so impeccable that it is impossible to distinguish between the real, and its copy, but the third and the last one has no relationship to any reality: it generates a reality of its own, an independent world; a world of its own. As Baudrillard argues, there are four stages of reproduction:

- it is the reflection of a profound reality,
- it masks and denatures a profound reality,
- it masks the absence of a profound reality,
- it has no relation to any reality whatsoever.

The first stage is a good copy; the sign is of "the sacramental order". The second one is a perversion of reality, "an evil appearance, of the order of maleficence". In the third stage, the image pretends to be a good copy, but it masks the absence of reality, "it is of the order of sorcery". In the fourth

stage, the image bears no relation to any reality; it is “pure simulacrum” (p.6). Lane (2000) makes a clear definition of *hyperreality* created as the result of simulation:

With first - and second-order simulation, the real still exists, and we measure the success of simulation against the real. Baudrillard’s worry with third- order simulation is that the model generates what he calls hyperreality-that is, a world without a real origin. So with third order simulation we no longer even have the real as part of the equation. Eventually, Baudrillard thinks that hyperreality will be the dominant way of experiencing and understanding the world.(pp. 86-7)

Dissimulation, thought Baudrillard, is not the same as *simulation*. To dissimulate is to “pretend not to have what one has”. To simulate, however, is to “feign to have what one doesn’t have”. The first one indicates “a presence”, while the second one suggests “an absence”. Take as an example someone who remains in bed and feigns an illness, and the one who “simulates” it, producing some of the symptoms pertaining to that particular illness. In the former case, the reality remains “intact”. In the latter one, however, the difference between “the true and the false”, the real and the imaginary” is threatened (p. 4). How then can we know if the person sneezing, for example, has really a cold or not? To put it simply, regarding the one feigning an illness with no clear symptoms, we are able to realize that the person has some other reasons for faking it. Nevertheless, concerning the one simulating an illness and producing real symptoms, we are not then to say for certain whether s/he is ill. In this situation, the distinction between real and false is not easily distinguished. “It is this condition which Baudrillard insists is that of the modern world. It is not that everything has become purely fictional, or without real effects, since the point about a *simulation* is that it is both real and unreal” (Payne & Barbera, 2010, p. 57).

## ***The Implosion of Meaning in Contemporary Cultures***

Baudrillard (1983) states that “[w]e live in a universe where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning” (p. 95). Baudrillard writes of the function of the media in contemporary media-saturated societies. Media, according to him, creates not “socialization”, rather its opposite. It implodes “the social in the masses”. Moreover, all significations of meaning “are absorbed in the only dominant form of the medium”. The medium, Baudrillard concludes, is “the message”, signifying not only “the end of the message, but also the end of the medium” (p.100). Information does not create communication, says Baudrillard, rather it “exhausts itself in the act of staging communication”, and in the “staging of meaning”, leading to a process of “*simulation*”. Whether it is “the loss of communication”, that creates the increasing *simulacrum* or it is the *simulation* that precedes, is not a matter of importance. What is of immense significance is that it is a “circular process-that of *simulation*, that of the *hyperreal*. The *hyperreality* of communication and meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished” (p. 97). As a consequence of the unrelenting flow of information and messages through media, the differentiation between objects and their representation is becoming more and more blurred. We are in contemporary societies facing not information referring to a particular meaning, rather the sort of data devoid of meaning of any kind. Media thus does not provide us with absolute truth, with what actually should be conceived of as meaningful data. Information conveyed through it need be contemplated on critically.

## **DISCUSSION**

Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* concerns the life of Jack Gladney “the chairman of the Department of Hitler Studies at the college on-the-hill” (p. 5), along with his family living in Blacksmith where they are not “smack in the path of history and its

contaminations” (p. 82). Divided into three sections: Waves and Radiation, The Airborne Toxic Event, and Dylarama, it is deemed a reflection on American contemporary life. The term *white noise* refers to the noise coming from a radio or television, which is turned on but not tuned to any program. It, however, has another sense here, “referring to the babble of different messages”, as Nicol (2008) writes, “transmitted constantly in our media-driven culture” (p. 192).

Media play a prominent role in American contemporary culture as delineated throughout the book, “a primal force” as suggested by Murray Siskind, a professor of popular culture in the “American home” (p. 49). The inexorable messages and information transmitted via television performs a considerable function in current life. People are inundated with numerous amounts of psychic data, “look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid”, says Murray, “in the bright packaging, in 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” (p. 49).

Just as the airborne toxins cause those who are exposed to them to become ill, so the cacophony of the information and messages offered by various mediums aggravate the health of people. People are expected to turn against the medium according to students of Murray just as their earlier generation turned against their parents and country. Murray, as an “apologist for postmodernism” (Nicol, 2008, p.192), however, holds a different perspective. He believes people are supposed to learn how to look at the content of what they are being exposed to, “TV is a problem only if you’ve forgotten how to look and listen...I tell them they have to learn to look as children again. Root out content. Find the codes and messages...” (p. 49). Television is considered “junk mail” by students, to Murray but it is “like a myth being born right there in our living room, like something we know in a dreamlike and preconscious way...you have to open yourself to the data” (p. 49).

“Information,” says Baudrillard (1983) “devours its own content. It devours communication and the social...in a sort

of nebulous state dedicated not to a surplus of innovation, but on the contrary, to total entropy” (p. 97). In the novel as well, the flow of information dissolves meaning. Jack’s family is inundated with unrelenting information flowing through the media, some of which may not be reliable. Nevertheless, it seems they have grown accustomed to believing in the validity of the information. The conversation between Steffie (Jack’s daughter), and Babette (Jack’s wife) is worth considering:

“We have to boil our water,” Steffie said.

“Why?”

“It said on the radio.”

“They’re always saying boil your water,” Babette said.

“It’s the new thing, like turn your wheel in the direction of the skid”(p. 34).

The above-mentioned example illustrates the excessive amount of messages and information in the postmodern era; people’s lives are being swamped with a plethora of messages most of which are not fixed and trustworthy. The distinction between reality and its representation in the postmodern age, Baudrillard maintains, is blurred. We are no longer able to differentiate between a real and a copy; we are bombarded by images and signs. Consequently, it is utterly impossible to distinguish between which is real, and which is not.

Two episodes can be regarded as conditions conforming to Baudrillard’s concept of *hyperreality*, with the role of systems of representations in which the real is no longer what it was, but simulated, being superseded by its representations. The first one is when Jack and Murray drive to visit a tourist attraction known as “the Most Photographed Barn in America” (p. 12). Before reaching the site, they encounter five signs reading the above-mentioned phrase, with forty cars and a tour bus, with people holding cameras and a man selling postcards and slides-pictures taken from the barn. Having watched the photographers, Murray maintains, “no one sees the barn...once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn...every photograph

reinforces the aura” (p. 12). Being like a “spiritual surrender” (p. 12), they thus see what others see, what others have seen in the past and will see in the future, being part of “a collective perception” (p. 12). The photographers “are taking pictures of taking pictures” (p. 13). The visitors to the barn are heavily influenced by the “aura” surrounding the barn. There is no way out for them. Since they have read the signs, seen the photographers they are incapable of getting outside the ‘aura’. They have become “part of the aura” (p. 13). What it means is that “the signs”, as explained by Nicol (2008) “condition the viewers’ response to the barn so that looking at it is a matter of witnessing the spectacle surrounding it rather than noticing anything significant about the barn itself” (p. 192).

The second one is when people are expected to evacuate their home for fear of coming into contact with the toxic spillage. This evacuation ordained by an organization named SIMUVAC, “short for simulated evacuation” (p. 131). Jack says to one of its employees “this evacuation is not simulated. It’s real” (p. 131). The employee being aware of this, nonetheless, thinks they could “use it as a model” (p. 131), considering a real event as an opportunity to “rehearse the simulation” (p. 131), to get ready for a possible future simulation. Asked of the way it is going, the employee informs Jack of the fact that

The insertion curve isn’t as smooth as we would like. There’s a probability excess. Plus which we don’t have our victims laid out where we’d want them if this was an actual simulation. In other words we’re forced to take our victims as we find them. We didn’t get a jump on computer traffic. Suddenly it just spilled out, three dimensionally, all over the landscape. You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real. There is a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that’s what this exercise is all about. (p. 131)

Using a real event as a “model”, people are therefore unable to tell the difference between a real phenomenon

and a simulated one. The borderline between them is blurred, making us baffled and confused. These two episodes illustrate Baudrillard's claim that in today's world the real has given way to its representations, that how systems of the contemporary culture produce *simulations* of reality so that the differentiation between the real and its representation is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish. What we actually experience, Baudrillard believes, is not reality but *simulation* of reality. The examples discussed above make it clear that "Baudrillard's argument isn't simply about lamenting the loss of something present and stable (real)", as Nicol (2008) notes, "but how our experience of reality is actually produced by *simulation*" (p.193).

Even language no longer bears any relation to reality. In the course of the book, there are references to numerous products both real and made up. When Jack, reflecting on his wife Babette, the paragraphs ends with the words "MasterCard", "Visa", "American Express", demonstrating how the words refer to no reality on one hand, and suggesting they can take on a "deeper, more mysterious, meaning in the lives of postmodern subjects" (Nicol, 2008, p. 194). While asleep Steffie utters two audible words, "*Toyota Celica*". After a long moment Jack comes to realize this was the name of an automobile:

The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet- carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice, *Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressido*,, Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. (p. 147)

"When the real is no longer what it was", says Baudrillard, "nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (p. 6). Jack can be considered a "compendium of nostalgic longings" (Duvall,

2008, p. 81). By choosing to live in Blacksmith where they “don’t feel threatened and aggrieved in quite the same way other towns do”, and by looking for “lost origins” in an age filled with “intimations and ad infinitum” to evoke pueblo civilizations as evidence of epic features that are still existent in the events surrounding him (Duvall, 2008, p. 81).

The medium, Baudrillard (1983) maintains, is capable of making an event, no matter what its contents are, either “conformist or subversive” (p.100). Throughout the fiction, we clearly observe how constructions of media, signs and images conveyed through television and marketing create real events instead of representing them. The exposure to the chemical waste ensuing the airborne toxic event, for example, is said to cause “a sense of déjà vu”. This symptom experienced by Steffie is exactly that which people were warned of on the radio before they really suffered from them. “This happened once before”, Steffie says, “just like this. The man in the yellow suit and gas mask. The big wreck sitting in the snow. It was totally and exactly like this. We were all here in the car. Rain made little holes in the snow. Everything” (p. 118).

Death is the only thing for which there is no *simulation*. No organization is capable of producing a substitute. It is an obsession with Jack and especially his wife Babette who begins to take a recondite medication called Dylar to relieve her fear of death. The medication, however, effects no change. No method is devised by society to make death more palatable to its people. Even religion has lost its power to do so. The couple’s mind is thus haunted by their fear for which there is no way out.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed, Delillo in the above-examined work, attempts to make the readers conscious of the dominant function of the media in contemporary American society; how information and messages transmitted through media exert influence on people’s lives and how people are in danger of being caught in a *hyperreal* world. Today, we are bombarded by a myriad

of messages most of which bear no resemblance to reality .instead of representing real objects, signs stand in for them. What we experience today is a *simulation* of reality. After reading the fiction, readers will be acquainted with the way information devoid of meaning, are injected into postmodern subjects that is a salient characteristic of the contemporary culture; being overloaded with a surplus of information and messages. Media plays a crucial role in today's world as a whole. It does not mean that all the function it performs is damaging, but we are expected to remain vigilant about its negative, dire impacts as well. The kind of ideology it represents has a great influence in shaping people's perspectives and ways of thinking. Both of these effects thus should be seriously considered.

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