



Traumatic Hyperreality in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract

Don DeLillo (1936-) is one of the significant postmodern novelists. He deals with almost every significant postmodern concept in literature. His most postmodern novel *White Noise* focuses on meta-concepts of media saturation, hyperreality, dystopia, capitalism, and cultural decline. *White Noise* is a realistic postmodern novel, since it exposes the hyperreality of the American world. This paper states the sharing insights of Baudrillard and Don DeLillo who are preoccupied with hyperreality, simulation, and media-dominated society, it will focus on the media theory itself, with its relationship with postmodern America. The paper is divided into two sections plus a conclusion. Section one presents an overview to the media theory and the concept of hyperreality. Section two will show the impact of technological mediations and the significance of the shopping centers on the rise of consumer culture. Then, the conclusion which sums up the findings of the research.

Key words: (postmodernism, Baudrillard, media theory, hyperreality, simulation, media dominated society).

1.1 Media Theory

Between 1960 and 1970, the fiction begins to find liberated writing way that gives impression to some theorists and authors, who welcomed postmodernism with open arms, that the postmodern novel is one of fun and games. yet, Guy Debord's *The society of Spectacle* (1967) remarks that the world we are living in, is a world of representation in which nothing is real anymore; we are living in media dominated society. Debord warns about onset of a new model of social life that intends to represent itself for manipulation and disguise the meaning of "spectacle" refers to the society's real unreality, by this it is not strange element in our life as Debord asserts (Taylor & Harries: 110-115).

Debord is followed by French socialist, Jean Baudrillard's *simulacra and simulation* (1981) . Baudrillard, who has theorized hyperreality as a key change driving post-modernism, is as many theorists, has spent long time in the last decades debating the ability of technology to change the human beliefs.

Actually, meditation became a basic concept in culture language or communication. Baudrillard remarks that meditation itself and its effects have become excessive and exaggerated, causing disjunction between reality and unreality. (Baudrillard : 167)



1.2 Hyperreality

In postmodernism, hyperreality refers to the awareness of difference between reality and simulation of reality, especially in the media consumer culture of hyperreality. Baudrillard defines hyperreality as "... the generation by models of real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard:166) The famous theorists who have dealt with hyperreality were Jean Baudrillard, Albert Dorgmann ,Daneil J.Boorstin, Neil Postman and Umbero Eco(Wikipedia). Hyperreality is seen as the existence in which the real and fiction are indistinguishable from each other or the unclear distinction between where the reality ends and the simulation of reality begins and vice versa(Ibid).

Baudrillard remarks that hyperreality is not mere blending or confusing the 'real' with the symbol it refers to. He seeks to disentangle the relations among reality, symbols and society, he added that one lives in a world has replaced by a copy world or supposed world. By this we treat with a world that is not actually existed, as he refers. According to his text, reality has been replaced by another signs and symbols.(Baudrillard:79).The traditional society one lives facilitates this traumatic process. The society is an authentic fake as it interests reality in the artificial.To assure this idea, Baudrillard provides the paradigm of the map and the society. The map stands for geography, which represents the real world and determines its organization, while "the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory _ precession of simulation that engenders the territory" (Baudrillard:121). If the empire declines , the map will fade into the landscape, and then there is neither the representation nor the real. Therefore, hyperreality shelters from distinction between reality and authentically the fake.The nearly universal assumption that the world of models of reality is going to leave its physical reality . Models do not stand for reality or assisting its existence, but they change, transform and substitute it, to the extent they become an independent part of the reality.

In his book, Baudrillard presents a set of cultural phenomena to tackle the postmodern confusing of reality with hyperreality, such as television, film and internet. Nowadays many digital media appear like mobiles, phones, tablets, printouts, face book, twitters, viber, whats App and computers. These media manifestations assist to live in supposed world and to substitute it by the real world. In this supposed world, they can express themselves, having new lovers and friends and indulging in a world that may achieve their dreams and fulfill their desires. Their consciousness imitates this hyperreal process of imitation allowing their supposed world and friends to linger in real life.Thus reality is destroyed, while the media and consumer culture reinforces hyperreality in the awareness of society. That what is caused traumatic hyperreality.

1.3 Disneyland World

Baudrillard identifies perfect description to hyperreality. The seminal example he used is Disneyland. This media's power that is facilitated by constructed simulation. Disneyland is an imaginary place that actually reflects



the simulation of the space surrounding it. It is constructed to present a reality that does not exist and to believe that the rest world is real, Los Angeles and the America that surround Disneyland are no longer real, but they belong to the order of simulation and then hyperreality. This process does not present false representation of reality (ideology) but it conceals the fact that the real is no longer real, and then, it saves the reality principle. That is to say , the imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false .

The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false , it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real, whereas the debility, the infantile generation of this imaginary . It ... s want to be an infantile world , in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere , in the “ real” world, and to conceal the fact that the real childishness is everywhere , practically among those adults who go there to act the child in order to faster illusions of their real childishness .(Baudrillard : 174)

Disneyland creates the feeling of childishness inside the adults or letting them to be like children, it creates a real world for imaginary. The world surrounding Disneyland must be a place of hyperreality because it refers that there is a childishness outside its space. As the digital technologies and Disneyland adopt hyperreality, our linger lives must be in a hyperreality also.

2-1 A High Tech America

2-1-1 Television

Through the eighties ,television was the most effective technological mediation in postmodern life; it reflects the life of people, beliefs, thoughts, behaviors, interest, culture and traditions. Television was an essential icon at that time, it was the main source of the information news and arts about the postmodern culture. The Americans see their world and the other worlds through that small set ‘television’ .One can see that there is at least one television in the home if no more. Television, as shown in the novel, contains a nodal point in one-way communication system, it plays a great role in the life of the individual; it is a constant source of information and misinformation , to the degree that it became the new reality of that generation and serves up representations, it across the boundary between the real and the unreal. Actually, television became more real than reality itself, or the representation of the representation itself. The people in *White Noise* believe no one and nothing just what appears on television .Television controlled them, their beliefs, behaviors and even their decisions towards what surrounded them(Giaino:80). Murray Siskkid, a teacher of popular culture, assures that television offers continual consumption of psych data. Murray describes his experience with that living icon saying:

It opens ancient memories of world birth .It welcomes us into the grid , the net work of little buzzing dots



that makeup the picture pattern. There is light , there is sound ...look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the medium particularly overflow with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently.(Dellillo:51)

Murray's description of this experience shows that the shift from modern to postmodern world is done by the change in the model of representation, the word now is substituted by the image effective than the word. That is to say that the hyperreality of television is reality itself. The viewers or the receivers have no role, they just receive the information from television, their dependent source of news. The viewers depend on the visual imagery to form their beliefs and views toward what surrounded them.

Television, as Delillo describes it, is the medium that conveys simulating images for codes that refer to nothing in real life. Thus, the postmodern simulating images shape behaviors and consciousness. In *White Noise*, the characters suffer from problematic comprehension of reality which is conveyed to them by images, because television controlled their daily life.

The Glandneys know the news of the world through television , the family has watched countless earthquakes, disasters and volcanic eruptions on television. When Glandney's daughter knew from the radio the accident of the railway which caused the toxic gas from a tank car, they experienced these signs, but when the radio states new signs and other effective sides, Babette, Jack's wife, told her husband that the girls must not hear these new news, because her daughters "haven't got beyond déjà vu", Jack answered her but " what if the symptoms are real?"

" How could they be real ?"

"Why couldn't they be real?"

"They get them only when they're broadcast". She whispered.(Ibid:33)

At this moment, Babette started to see another accidents, another things before they happen. Now, she behaves, responds , believes and lives simulated reality.

The television and the radio broadcast the news about toxic gas and they motivate the family how to talk about this alarming event. The media reports assure that at the beginning it is "feathery plume", then a " black billowing cloud" and it turned to be an "airborne toxic event" (Ibid:109-17). The most striking thing here is that the family members saw the cloud for themselves, but they still believe what the media conveys. Jack describes it as a " heavy black mass ... more or less shapeless"(Ibid:110), from another side Heinrich argues that it's "like a shapeless growing thing. A dark breathing of smoke. Why do they call it a plume?"(111). The Gladneys do not believe their eyes, they do not convince the reality, they believe what the television and radio convey to them, to the extent that they cannot distinguish between the levels of the real or the hyperreal. They were confused to what is happening in the media and what is happening in their town. Simulation invaded and defeated the reality, it seems more real than reality itself. The characters connect as much with the television



as they do with other humans. Media's hegemony is supported by the American's desire to be exploited and manipulated. They are influenced by the propaganda, they turn to television to be told what to buy , how to behave, to know the most important stories and news, and to learn the contemporary fashion styles to mimic them. The Americans are ready to be exploited by the dominant ideology, they lack the power of decision , and their real desires. They decide , behave and choose according to the dominant social groups that affect their own decisions to consume. That is to say, the Americans have become single minded consumers, they do not buy only the same materials provided by television, they even buy their new identity.

2-2 The SIMUVAC Experience

The distinction between the real and unreal is blurred in the SIMUVAC experience. SIMUVAC is a team of technicians whose job is to rescue the people and evacuate them in disasters. As mentioned before that, the disaster of toxic gas appears only on television, it didn't reach them, thus there is no need for evacuation. But as they believe that what happen on television must happen to

them. There is no real event, it is an artificially produced one. One of the team describes this experience saying, "The more we rehearse disaster, the faster we'll be from the real thing"(205). He explains this process of simulation as the new rescue measure, to prevent future disasters. In order to prevent the horror and worry of the people, the team try to fast their measures, they find the simulating hyperreality is the suitable solution. The technician added saying, "life seems to work that way doesn't it? you take your umbrella to the office seventeen straight days, not a drop of rain. The first day you have it at home, record _ breaking down pour"(205). The team uses the accident of the toxic gas as an opportunity to perfect their simulation, they also uses models and mimic significant content. The simulation has enveloped the whole representation itself instead of absorbing by what it represents. In *White Noise* , Dellilo shows the lack of distinction between representation and reality.

2-3 Super/Hyper Market

After the Second World War the American capitalism is founded by the American consumer. To be more important, you should buy more and have more. This happened, of course, by the power of advertising that fosters the American consumer identity which represents the perfect example of hegemonic influence. In his *White Noise* , Delillo tackles the issue of the consumer culture in the postmodern society. Most of the people all over the world , not only the Americans, buy goods not for their own value , but they shop just because they feel an ecstasy cause by the spectacle of the goods.

The new supermarkets, malls and the hypermarkets defeated the experience of the real. The people now are motivated to shop not for the real need for shopping but for the entertainment of shopping. The bright colors, the beautiful presentation of the good and the meticulous designs are motives for the consumers to shop even if they do not have the real need for these goods or any



intention to buy. What is primary in the experience of shopping is the spectacular arrangement of the goods.

The characters in the novel, shop for the sake of shopping itself. Jack describes his experience of shopping when he was with his family in one of the big malls. "I

shopped for its sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandize I had no intention of buying, then buying it" (White Noise:84). That is to say, that the malls and supermarkets seduce the people by the images and simulacra they present, they seem real more than the reality. Murray notes this fact when he was

in the supermarket saying :

Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But its psychic data, absolutely... All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It's just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakably. (Ibid:39)

It is significant to mention that advertisement plays great role in presenting the goods. They seduce the consumers not to the commodity itself but to its surface, that means again, the reality of the commodity is replaced by hyperreality. Again, the consumers buy not because of their real need for shopping but to full their time or to feel entertainment and expensive to give themselves some happiness. Jack says concerning the shopping, it is " the sense of well-being, the security and the contentment these products brought ... it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being"(20).The sentiment of relax and perfection of life granted by consumption is the foundation of the consumer identity. This idea gained strength in postwar economic expansion to the extent it became an integral part of the consumer consciousness. The characters use consumption, as a form of shopping , to feel comfort as David Kaloustian refers in his essay " Media Representations of Disasters in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*", " [the characters in the novel] succumb to a false consciousness by using consumerism in order to mediate [their] desires and validate [their]lives"(17).the characters do anything, searching for anyway to obsess what they want to consume, especially in the period of the postwar and its forming of a new American face and identity. Businesses, through subtle advertising , invoke the needs of the Americans, telling them what they should buy. The people believe them and believe these advertisements, they have new beliefs about shopping through the media, because the American people are affected by the media's power which is resulted by constructed simulation.

10

Actually, Nil Ozcaglar _Toulouse discusses the matter of shopping as an escape from reality and the daily routine of the postmodern American people, he finds that shopping starts to be as a search for identity and for themselves, in his essay entitled *Living For Ethics : Responsible Consumption in Everyday Life*.



It seems difficult for a responsible consumer to develop and maintain a coherent sense of being in a consuming society. The consuming society has gradually turned out to be a constraint, a moral or an institution imposed upon the consumer. In this societal model, individuals seem to be or feel uniformed. The search for uniqueness and “self” becomes difficult because of the anguish and awkwardness related to the risk of marginality. In the consuming society, consumers express their extended self through their purchases.(Ozcaglar_Toulouse : 423-24).

Supermarket turned to be hypermarket, since it is offer people the chance to live in moments of hyperreal simulation and to escape from the reality of horror of the real death to the sense of the ecstasy and excessive shopping. But this experience of feeling good by shopping much stuffs and materials is false since this comfort is temporal, their bad feeling of loneliness and sadness will not end by mass consumption .

Conclusion

White Noise is a perfect sample of the postmodern world of contemporary America, since this novel presents a work of art that depicts America as fully fledged postmodern culture. Both Baudrillard and DeLillo share common insights concerning Baudrillard’s concept of representation. Reality and unreality turned to be a symbolic representation. Delillo evokes the hyperreal tendencies of a high- tech America to expose the referent world the Americans live in. The contemporary American real life has become artificial because technology has dominated society especially, the television and radio. The two sets turned reality to hyperreality. The characters in the novel, who represent the real Americans, feel alienated, estranged, frustrated and paralyzed in front of the real, and they seek

refuge in the stimulated. Television has its significant role in changing the realities to hyper ones. The people start to believe what television shows to them, and they start to be sad, estranged and alienated from reality. They wish to be alone with their own hyper beliefs towards everything in life. Supermarket is another example of the hyperreality, it moves the consumer from their reality to hyperreal simulation, it gives them the chance to forget their upset feeling and to full their time by indulging themselves in colorful goods. Though the people live short time in this place (world of technology)which is presented by television, Disneyland, face book, supermarket, and hyper malls, they face the dreadful, difficult, and sorrowful world they escape from. By this continuous and huge technology world, we still live in supposed ,imaginary and hyperreal world, for short time, to return back to our complicated reality of wars, horror and death.

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