

"WHITE NOISE AS A REPRESENTATIVE POSTMODERN AMERICAN FICTION"

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Abstract

Postmodernism is an ideology which conceals its roots, primarily the term is used to designate a type of art but with time became all embracing. Postmodernism as a school of art is still debated, there are three main ways to use term postmodernism; first as a term of period in history that came after modernism, second referring to a particular trend in art and literature, and third as a philosophical attitude. Postmodernism as a philosophical attitude embraces scepticism and questions all certitudes. Postmodern writer celebrates fragmentation of the narratives, without any nostalgia for the past. They don't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence rather its donn'ee is incoherence. Postmodern literature is marked, both stylistically and ideologically on literary conventions of fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, unrealistic and downright macabre plots, games, parody, paranoia, dark humor and authorial self-reference. Postmodern world is permeated by 'simulacra'. Don DeLillo's "breakout book" White Noise reverberates with signs and symbols of contemporary postmodern world. The postmodern condition is manifested as a kind of information overload in White Noise.

Keyword: Postmodern, paranoia, simulacra, capitalism, jagged, scepticism

1. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism is an ideology which conceals its roots, primarily the term is used to designate a type of art but with time became all embracing. Postmodernism as a school of art is still debated, there are three main ways to use the term postmodernism; first as a term of period

in history that came after modernism, second referring to a particular trend in art and literature, and third as a philosophical attitude. Postmodernism is a radicalization of some ideas which are intrinsic to modernism so as such it is continuation of modernism. Or is it break from modernism; some philosophers said it is both. As a philosophical attitude, it embraces the thorough skepticism, postmodernism questions the very existence of human self. Skeptical thoughts were piling up and in 20th century they intensified. Institutions which were hitherto intact were questioned and all certitudes have been interrogated. Postmodern writers celebrate fragmentation of the narratives, no nostalgia for the past as the modernist writer had. Postmodern writer rejects that which Modernist champions. Postmodernism doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather they celebrate it. Postmodernism believes in the view that there is no absolute truth but truth is relative and constructed by the mind as it tries to understand its own personal reality. Postmodern writer creates an "open" work which the reader completes by supplying his own connections by working out alternative meanings, and providing his own interpretations.

Postmodernism sees human experience as unstable, internally contradictory, ambiguous, inconclusive, indeterminate, unfinished, fragmented, discontinuous, "jagged," with no specific reality possible. Therefore, it focuses on a vision of a contradictory, fragmented, ambiguous, indeterminate, unfinished, "jagged" world.

Postmodern authors frustrated due to World War II, the cold war, conspiracy theories, tries to yoke together indirectly irony, playfulness, black humor. They treated serious subjects in a playful and humorous way- John Barth, Joseph Heller, William Gaddis, Kurt Vonnegut, Bruce Jay Friedman etc. Texts bearing such features are

Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, mixes historically inaccurate accounts of Richard Nixon interacting with historical figures and fictional characters such as Uncle Sam and Betty Crocker. Frederic Jameson in his essay "Technoculture and Hyperreality" calls postmodernism as the "cultural logic of late capitalism" according to his logic, society has moved beyond capitalism into the information age, in which we are constantly bombarded with advertisements, videos, and product placements. Jameson says:

This new moment of capitalism can be dated from the post war boom in the United States in the late 1940s and early 50s or, in France, from the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958. The 1960s are in many ways the key transitional period, a period in which the new international order (neo-colonialism, the Green Revolution, computerization and electronic information) is at one and the same time set in place and is swept and shaken by its own internal contradictions and by external resistance.

Postmodern literature is marked, both stylistically and ideologically on literary conventions of fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, unrealistic and downright macabre plots, games, parody, paranoia, dark humor and authorial self-reference. Postmodern literature rejects the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' art forms and literature. Effacement of key boundaries or separations between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture is the feature of postmodern art and literature. Frederic Jameson in his essay "From Postmodernism and Consumer Society" writes,

... many of newer postmodernisms have been fascinated precisely by that whole landscape of advertising and motels, of the Las Vegas strip, of the late show and Grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel. They no longer "quote" such "texts" as a Joyce might have done, or a Mahler; they incorporate them, to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw.

Postmodern world is permeated by 'simulacra'. In postmodern American society we see images from-films, media etc. There is collapse between reality and illusion, one sign leads to another sign which is simulation. The result is the hyperreality. Jean Baudrillard in essay "From Simulacra and Simulation" writes,

Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra. It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms: the Pirates, the Frontiers, the Future world, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation. But what attracts the crowds the most is without a doubt the social microcosm, the religious, miniaturized pleasure of real America, of its constraints and joys.

The cyberpunk fiction of William Gibson, Neal Stephenson using science fiction techniques to address postmodern dilemma, hyperreal information bombardment. Postmodern author believes that there is an ordering system behind the chaos of the world.

Don Richard DeLillo, born Nov. 20 1936 is an American novelist, short story writer, playwright, screenwriter and essayist. His notable works are *White Noise* (1985), *Libra* (1988), *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997) and *Cosmopolis* (2003), publication of *White Noise* brought him recognition and won him the National Book Award for fiction. In a 2005 interview DeLillo declared that, "Writers must oppose systems. It is important to write against power, corporations, the state, and the whole system of consumption and of debilitating entertainments [...] I think writers, by nature must oppose things, oppose whatever power tries to impose on us". DeLillo is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is a difficult novelist who obsessively analyzes the contemporary moment of the American society. Subject matter in his novels are from advertising, rock music, and sports, to mathematics, language, cults, crowds, disasters and the assassination of President Kennedy. His novel *Libra* is an example of what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. According to Christopher Douglas four currents stand out in DeLillo's oeuvre to which he repeatedly returns. First his fascination with popular culture in which DeLillo is himself steeped deeply, second is a loss of a sense of originals, which is the fictional working out of the theoretical discourse associated with Jean Baudrillard.

Third current is a mood of simultaneous 'historylessness' and desire for historical context and lastly DeLillo's sharing a trait of postmodernism with Thomas Pynchon of 'a mood of paranoia and a suspicion of design'. Christopher Douglas says,

In DeLillo's novels characters watch themselves act and imagine themselves acting.... His characters have been saturated by many media; they already know the gestures, looks, fashions, and phrases with which they must make do... DeLillo's texts are often read as resonating with Baudrillard's perspective on the procession of simulacra.

DeLillo's works tease out the 'gnostic' qualities of our contemporary era. *White Noise* has been called as DeLillo's "breakout book", it was first published in January 1985, appearing just only a month after a toxic chemical leak at a Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, catastrophe killing over 2,500 people in one stroke, so its timeliness further raised the author's success. The novel strongly reverberates with signs and symbols of contemporary American society – witty anatomy of the post war family, sights of super markets, malls, tabloids, sounds, advertising, academia and satire of television and mass media. The novel hums with product placements and commercials and reflects how modern man is over powered by the power of consumerism. To DeLillo popular culture is highly compelling – cult figures, pop stars and celebrities frequently appear in his oeuvre. The postmodern condition is manifested as a kind of information overload in *White Noise* as the protagonist – Jack Gladney, a self-critical narrative voice, moves through the world submerged and brimming in marketing imagery and media stimuli.

2. TITLE OF THE NOVEL – WHITE NOISE

'*White Noise*' the phrase is itself a synesthetic paradox. In science '*White Noise*' is a periodic sound with frequencies of random amplitude and random interval signifying chaos. In music, the phrase means sound produced by all audible sound- wave frequencies sounding together, signifying complex, simultaneous ordering. The characters in sound consume sounds as they consume super market products. In the novel DeLillo collects the familiar sounds of American culture and the universal fear. 'White Noise' as a term from

economics identifies it as "when there is no pattern whatsoever contained in the data series, it is said to represent white noise. This is analogous to a series that is completely random" Randomness is integrated into the novel's form as well as its content. DeLillo argued to his editor that "White Noise" title emphasizes our culture's saturation in sound, but encompasses other definitions as well.

3. THE Pervasiveness of Technology.

In *White Noise* technology is shown as the part of the texture of daily life of modern man. Novel reveals the pervasive presence of technology as both menacing and comforting. Human babble of Jack's friends, family and neighbours is mixed with the mechanical voices of modern machines, media sounds, brand names. Media determines our behaviour, but media is saturated, our age appears as a TV collage, the intrusive voice of television mixes into the narrative flow. "Leaded, unleaded, superunleaded" seem to be random but they are part of Jack and the culture he lives in. Siskind says, "Technology is just removed from nature". Steffie mumbles "Toyota Celica" in her sleep which shows how our unconscious mind is determined by what we see. Mr. Gray is a prototypical symbol conducted by media, who has even learnt his English from TV. TV works as a character in the novel intruding at odd moments, entering the conversation, though without purpose, when TV is on during a conversation between Jack and his daughter Bee "The TV said: Now we will put the little feelers on the butterfly". TV has more complex effects: conditioning and comforting, distorting and informing. Jack says it causes, "fears and secret desires".

4. THE TENSION BETWEEN REALITY AND ARTIFICE.

The authentic and the artificial often blur together throughout the novel. *White Noise* is permeated by 'simulacra', the "real" giving way to what Baudrillard calls the "hyperreal". In the novel when Murray and Jack visit the "most photographed barn in America", Murray argues that the barn itself isn't intrinsically significant but the countless tourists who visit the location has given it meaning and value. Frank Lentricchia calls "most photographed barn in America" as one of DeLillo's – and our own – "primal scenes". Christopher Douglas says,

His [DeLillo's] work takes up the signs of our contemporaneity, things which seem to distinguish our time as different from time past : high technology, advertising, terrorism, suspicion of democratic governments and multinational corporations, religious cults, sports crowds, political crowds, tourist crowds, television, natural and human- made catastrophes, nuclear war".

5. DEPICTION OF THE POSTMODERN FAMILY.

In *White Noise* once solid core of mom, dad and kids family structure is replaced by a loose aggregate of siblings, step- siblings, and ex-spouses rotating in various impermanent groupings. All of them are living in a condition of " permanent impermanence", affecting all of Blacksmith, no one child is living with a full sibling, testifying the failed institution of marriage. Gladney has four children: Mary Alice (19 yrs) and Steffie (9) from his first and second marriages to Dana Breedlove; Heinrich (14), from his marriage to Janet Savory and Bee (12) from his marriage to Tweedy Browner. His current wife Babette's three children are Denise (11), Eugene (8) and Wilder (2) from her earlier marriages. After four marriages each, Babette and Jack believe they have found partners on whom they can trust. Jack sees the family as the "{ cradle of the world's misinformation". Babette thinks of the children with different parentage gathered together as a protective charm: " nothing can happen to us as long as there are depend children in the house. The kids are a guarantee of our relative longevity".

6. MALLS AND SUPERMARKETS ALL PERVASIVE IN *WHITE NOISE*.

Baudrillard's concept of consumer society is fused with post- Marxian Baudrillard of " the orders of simulacra" by DeLillo in *White Noise*. Broad range of consumer choices in shopping malls, appearing as the embodiment of individual freedom, is actually a social control over the consumers to benefit the capital. Jack feels a sense of power in the mall, doing shopping when his auratic self as Hitler scholar is threatened, he says: " The more money I spend, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums". Murray interprets supermarket as " this place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway".

7. MIXING OF GENRES.

White Noise imitates a number of different genres, but ultimately fits none of them. Part I of novel presents a hyperintelligent TV sitcom. Part II is much darker, the family is forced to flee a toxic leak – resembling a disaster thriller, but nothing really changes. Then the novel seems to veer into a midlife crisis tale. Again Jack doesn't take up skydiving or learn to box as happens in a midlife crisis tale. The enigmatic ending of the novel, is surprised, unsettled, unfinished, hence postmodernist conclusion, the novel moves beyond all the formulae it has employed. Antonio Gramsci's permeating statement that "[in] the modern world the category of intellectuals... has undergone an unprecedented expansion" and his distinction between " traditional" and " organic" intellectuals are central to any understanding of the role of the intellectual in *White Noise*.

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