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Don DeLillo's White Noise (revised)

Modern Superstitions

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Don DeLillo's *White Noise* speaks to us of a world where insecure human beings drift and collide, looking to grasp some certainty in a sea of useless or unreachable information. A cynical portrayal of this society is delivered to us through the words of Heinrich, Jack's teenager son: "We think we are so great and modern. Moon landings, artificial hearts. But what if you were hurled into a time warp and came face to face with the Ancient Greeks?" (p. 147). Heinrich's comment reminds us that the certainties that we might have accomplished as members of the so-called scientific society are weak and –this is my point- superstitious: "Why not tell them magic?" (p.148). Heinrich's proposition reflects what one of the main themes of the novel: superstition of technology; the sometimes unreflective belief in technology's discourse that we have learned to define as reason. "What good is knowledge if it just sits in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything" (p.148).

The theme is developed with great consistency through the novel. Jack's fluid samples for medical tests are described with ritualistic care -as a sort of modern sacrament- as "a daub of the most solemn waste of all, certain to be looked upon by the technicians on duty with the mingled deference, awe and dread we have come to associate with exotic religions of the world." The workings of technicians and scientists are regarded by Jack

as obscure rites he has no access to, and through the novel the voices of radio, TV ads, and the blinking bracketed numbers with computerized stars that define the fate of people throughout the novel are omnipresent characters that oppress and trigger fear. Voices distort the perception of the humans' senses; the weather forecast, the sirens with alarm voices, the powerful and sad image of a couple of elderly people lost in a mall, disoriented and mute. The weather forecast becoming more 'real' than the mere observation of the sky, "'It's going to rain tonight.' 'It's raining now' I said. 'The radio said tonight'" (p.22). In another instance of this inversion where the reality of the media and the reality of perception become entangled, Jack refers to the imminence of his own death to his friend Murray "It is now official, according to the computer", after interviewing with a gray character, an agent of an organization in charge of simulating disasters and of –by extension or coincidence- attending them, studying them.

The characters themselves are part of this system where knowledge is constantly questioned under the light of certain –very specific- channels of legitimation; the insecure Hitler scholar who doesn't know German seeks to improve his language by secretly hiring a private professor; the wife whose job is to tell people how to eat, walk and sit, to regular people who need reassurance from a legitimate or 'certified' authority, are fully aware of their role as actors in this system of information transmission, "So people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way, at least for the time being." (p.172) and yet are at the same time trapped by it. In *White Noise* the certainties provided by these apparatuses crack and are revealed in their weakness by their inability to preserve the characters from the fear of death. Another passage of the novel describes how a private firm called 'Advanced Disaster Management' has learned the lesson and administers simulacra like masses. Dylar's effects, revealed in their full power in the episode of Jack's attack of Mink, are a disorder of the brain in which words and facts are indistinguishable; the characters are jailed in a world of real simulations with the symptoms of a simulated, stylized –yet fully believed- terror.

DeLillo's *White Noise* draws a portrait of a society –our society- that has not fully resolved profound conflicts between scientific knowledge and religious belief; about an individual whose certainties are shaken by an unintelligible event that reveals primitive fears and family secrets, and he obliges the reader to wonder about the reasons and the programs behind the huge, articulated landscape of discourses, policies, medications, advertisements, products and fear that our lives as modern citizens is composed of.