

16 CRITICS DISCUSS

*White Noise* (1985)

Don DeLillo

(1936- )

“I think it is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is almost there. I tried to relate it in *White Noise* to this other sense of transcendence that lies just beyond our touch. This extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions.... In *White Noise* in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes the radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred.... I never set out to write an apocalyptic novel. It’s about death on the individual level. Only Hitler is large enough and terrible enough to absorb and neutralize Jack Gladney’s obsessive fear of dying—a very common fear, but one that’s rarely talked about.... Jack uses Hitler as a protective device; he wants to grasp anything he can.... [*White Noise*] is about fear, death and technology. A comedy, of course.”

Don DeLillo

“Recognition of DeLillo’s importance was slow to come. For years his novels were widely praised by reviewers and a small group of academicians, but they fell short of commercial success. The honors for *White Noise* and *Libra* marked a turning point in his career. He is now universally acclaimed for his acute renderings of American speech and for illustrating American consumer society and its recent cultural history.... DeLillo was late in coming to prominence but is now regarded as a major novelist who is in many ways more inventive than his peers.”

Steven C. Weisenburger

*Cyclopedia of World Authors II*, Vol. 2

(Salem 1989) 419

“Whatever his subject matter—from the subliminal power of the electronic media and advertising, through the pleasures and confusions of the blended nuclear family, to our national obsession with conspiracy and celebrity—DeLillo dives deeply, probing some of the innermost hideaways of the postmodern condition. For many American readers who lived through the 1980s, he plunged especially deep in *White Noise*.... Our forty-two survey respondents to an initial questionnaire about teaching *White Noise* listed the expected...literature survey courses at all undergraduate and graduate levels, and the novel also showed up on syllabi for Introduction to Religious Studies, Postmodernism and Its Discontents, Machine Cultures, Literature and Medicine, The American Gothic, Multicultural Literatures, The History and Development of Communication Theory, Introduction to Ecocriticism, The Family in Fiction and Film, and Methods of Media Criticism....

Many of the encroaching and disturbing American tendencies that he examines with satiric excess in *White Noise*, such as rampant consumerism, information overload, and obedience to the dictates of the mainstream media, have simply become the lived experience of most of our current undergraduates. As one student said in class, ‘The way the media and its demands are seeping further and further into our lives might have seemed like something new and alarming in 1985, but it’s part of my life. It basically *is* my life’.... *White Noise* is poised to become the avatar of postmodern American fiction. If today’s undergraduate students experience its world as already known, having this world so graphically anatomized can help them achieve a more self-aware grasp on their daily lives.”

Tim Engles and John N. Duvall, eds.

*Approaches to Teaching DeLillo’s White Noise*

(Modern Language Association 2006) 1-2

“The durable respect and attention he has earned from readers, critics, and fellow novelists here and abroad, coupled with the general sense that the themes he isolates in his work consistently reflect the

deepest currents in our social and moral life, have persuaded many observers that DeLillo is in fact *the* novelist of our time.... DeLillo is above all a novelist of ideas, in the tradition of high modernists such as James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Andre Gide, William Faulkner, and Malcolm Lowry, all writers with whom he has identified himself.... Although stylistically more accessible than these writers, DeLillo shares with them a persistent anxiety about the waning of a sense of reality among people living in a complex and traumatizing world. Virtually all his novels represent, among other things, desperate searches for authentic verbal, emotional, and spiritual expressivity amid a simulacral environment that is at once numbing and clamorous.... He both describes this theoretical world in his novels and searches for legitimate and plausible ways to transcend it in favor of social and spiritual reality....

DeLillo's dominant theme, sounded throughout his novels and certainly stressed in *White Noise*, is sound. He explores the possibility of breaking through the clamor and hum of empty ambient noise in our daily lives so that meaning and truth can become audible.... DeLillo believes that the truth of our shared vulnerability to death and our accompanying sense of empathy for one another as mortal beings lies 'hidden though immanent' in the welter of sound in the modern world. Given this shared vulnerability, our most important ethical posture in the world is that of listening.... The conversations in *White Noise* are comic in part because they are totally derivative. Characters are able only to echo the cliches and formulations of the therapeutic, consumption-oriented culture (epitomized by the *Oprah Winfrey Show*) that defines them. Themselves constructions of media, these characters produce highly mediated utterance. This utterance is farcical...mechanical or in some way less than fully human....

*White Noise* overflows with scenes of characters being bested or undone or closely tutored by controlling technology, as in the toxic event, Heinrich's biochemical philosophy of life, or Jack's interaction with a bank machine.... He is beginning, as his novel concludes, the process of overcoming white noise—he is starting to shut out the sound of the postmodern world.... *White Noise* can be understood and taught as one of contemporary literature's most powerful and nuanced moral explorations of the varieties of silence that surround Americans. For just as there is debased as well as legitimate noise, so silence can equal (as the ACTUP slogan has it) death.... White noise represents the distracting, numbing, ambient roar postmodern American culture generates to drown out self-generated, shared, and vulnerable discourse. Literature is a privileged locus of meaningful utterance, a kind of counterstatement to white noise."

Margaret Soltan

"Loyalty to Reality: *White Noise*, *Great Jones Street*, and *The Names*"  
*Approaches*, 158-59, 161, 166-67

"*White Noise* still makes me laugh—out loud—even though I've read it at least seven times in twice as many years...but my freshmen and sophomores, bless them, sometimes have a hard time finding anything funny about the book. Some don't recognize that DeLillo is engaging in satire—a mode of humor they tend to find wanting unless it elbows them rather harshly.... Students are reading a satire aimed not so much at them as at the very academics who teach it. We are the Jacks and Babettes to their eye-rolling Gladney brood; they are the postmodern kids who, like Steffie and her half siblings and stepsiblings, have grown up navigating an ionosphere of televisual and digital signifiers that is as real to them as any reality they could name....

In Jack's struggle to repress and but the barest acknowledgment of Hitler's crimes, the same crimes that give the twenty-first century no option but to remember Hitler, lies what I'll call, for want of a better name, Hitler humor, an evolving tradition of undercutting the Fuhrer and his followers. This humor must be contextualized if the full impact of Hitler's legacy on *Whit Noise*'s uniquely postmodernist satire is to be understood. The logic of Jack's exploitation of Hitler, and of his lack of concern with the Holocaust, plays off Hitler humor in a particularly self-conscious way. The tradition of this humor goes back at least to Bertolt Brecht's 1941 play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, in which Brecht recasts Hitler as a petty gangster who establishes a 'cauliflower trust' over Chicago's greengrocers, and Charlie Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator* (1940), a fantasy about a Jewish barber who bears an uncanny resemblance to Adenoid Hynkel, the fascist leader of Tomania, and infuriates Hynkel's regime in order to warn the world.... This brand of humor denies the most visceral signified of the signifier 'Hitler' and the closest thing there is to a referent for this despicable sign: Hitler's murderous cruelty and violence....

Only by conspicuously absencing both the atrocities of the war and the humanist faith in the essential goodness of humankind represented by beauty in art can the wounds themselves be confronted, fully and honestly, as the monumental loss they forever represent.... By enlisting Hitler as the patron devil of *White Noise*, DeLillo makes it possible for us to consider that postmodernism's victory over the sign has much in common with Hitler's triumph over empirical reason, in that both Hitler and postmodernist consumer culture unhook signifiers from their historical contexts and discard that core of material history like so many fruit pits. Hitler managed to prettify mass murder by pitching it as a necessity for the collective good—of gentile Germans. To paraphrase Murray Jay Suskind's advice to Jack on becoming a killer instead of a dier, the Germans fell into line behind a singularly objectifying and mythifying policy: Better them than us....

He exploits Hitler as his personal blank signifier, which he fills up with what Hitler means to him. In this, Jack relates to his mass-murdering meal ticket both as empty signifier and as role model, his mentor in doing violence to the signifier. Hitler manipulated signifiers to eliminate the human referent from the discourse of genocide.... For Jack, Murray, probably Babette, and likely the entire America of *White Noise*, the death of another human being functions as a guarantee that you are not the one dying.... I teach Jack as an every-American whose representative nature DeLillo gets across in everything from his domestic-sitcom surname, Gladney, to the fact that his town of Blacksmith exists only in a region of the United States (apparently the Northeast), not in a specified state. Like most Americans of the 1980s and today, Jack negotiates his identity with the only means the omniscient economy offers him: by engaging with the same consumerist, technologized, sign-saturated environment....

Hope does come to DeLillo's world, in the form of Wilder, Babette's young son by a different marriage and the only character braver than Murray about confronting the Medusa of unhinged signifiers.... It seems far from accidental once we note the conspicuous absence of the Holocaust in this book, that on the day the child begins to cry uncontrollably, Jack catches him staring into the window of Gladney's oven. Wilder's deep and penetrating gaze, accompanied by a wail of grief that he seems to not so much produce as channel, is as close as anyone in the novel gets to the ovens that Jack can never bring himself to mention, let alone peer into with such intense desire to know and understand what no surface can reveal."

Paul Young  
"No One Sees the Camps: Hitler and Humor in *White Noise*"  
*Approaches*, 39-44, 48-49

"*White Noise* is a critique of the deadening effects of materialism and consumerism.... American writers have dramatized the perversion of the American dream of success by materialistic values. *White Noise* succeeds especially well because it is perhaps the most humorous and scathing of these indictments to date.... It demonstrates that the contemporary world can offer us everything we need to survive and perhaps even thrive, but it cannot give us what we need to truly live: spiritual nourishment. Like Kafka's hunger artist, we are starving for something that seems unattainable in our commodified culture.... DeLillo argues that materialistic craving springs from the desire to evade the inevitability of death.... The prospect of old age and death inspires apprehension 'in a society that has deprived itself of religion'....

DeLillo introduces his anti-materialistic theme with the convoy of college students bearing numerous possessions into their dormitories....the closest DeLillo's characters come to the sacred is when they make ritualistic trips to the supermarket, America's secular cathedral. Consuming is their attempt to fill an inner void. They equate an overloaded grocery cart with personal fulfillment. Malls also serve as a mecca for social interaction because genuine interpersonal communication is discouraged in a commodified culture... The infantile Wilder embodies the concept of life as a series of fleeting gratifications....dramatizing the solipsistic nature of the urge to fill the void. Almost always in the novel, spiritual hunger is subordinated to the compulsion of physical gratification...

Throughout *White Noise*, appearance is a primary standard of measurement for personal success. In modern America, DeLillo demonstrates, only the intrinsic self can have value, and it increases in worth (or cash value) according to the number of things it can control. Acquisitive desires have replaced inquisitive instincts. In a materialistic culture, the intrinsic self atrophies at the expense of the extrinsic self....

DeLillo dramatizes throughout *White Noise*...that ‘the propaganda of consumption...addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life and proposes consumption as the cure’.... Despite the euphoria of [his] purchasing orgy, Jack’s unity with his family is only temporary: on returning home, the Gladneys withdrawn to separate rooms as isolated monads....

Murray, ‘a visiting lecturer on living icons,’ serves as a guru of pop culture and an apologist for consumerism. He views television as having a myth-making function as a ‘primal force in the American home’: ‘The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently.’ Revering the world of ‘[w]aves and radiation,’ he finds car crashes significant as expressions of the spirit of American optimism and sneaks into Denise’s room to do an archaeological study of children’s artifacts. More important, he believes that food labels contain psychic data that reveal vital information when decoded... Yet DeLillo undermines this rhapsodic apotheosis of the sings and wonders of the technological age when Murray absurdly argues that Jack should repress his fear of death by being a killer rather than a dier.

In opposition to Murray’s glorification of the material, Winnie Richards implicitly affirms the spiritual when she advises Jack to see death as a necessary boundary to life. For Winnie, the real texture of human existence depends not on one’s accumulation of commodities but on one’s awareness of the precious brevity of life. Winnie tries to convince Jack that he cannot overcome his preoccupation with mortality as long as he continues to identify with the externals of existence. But hers is a solitary voice crying in the wilderness of consumerism.... Almost a major character in the novel, television functions to indoctrinate Jack and Babette’s children to the supposed necessity of luxuries... Jack, never transcending his attachment to worldly goods, envies Wilder...

Given that part I of *White Noise* is entitled ‘Waves and Radiation’ and that television (in its bread-and-circuses function) has become the Delphic oracle of our epistemology, the inhabitants of Blacksmith are understandably crushed that the airborne toxic event is not covered by the national media; their plight is therefore meaningless. Similarly, the Most Photographed Barn in America has importance not because of what it is but because of the many pictures taken of it....

The novel functions in a manner similar to T. S. Eliot’s portrayal of J. Alfred Prufrock, the poster boy for diffidence and uncertainty in the early twentieth century. Along with many other canonical works of American literature, *White Noise* shows how the single-minded pursuit of materialistic success can lead to the loss of inner vitality, making the intangible self a void.... I believe that the closing reference to the tabloids at the checkout counter of the supermarket serves as a synecdoche for *White Noise* itself.”

Ted Billy  
“*White Noise*, Materialism, and the American Literature Survey”  
*Approaches*, 126-34

“DeLillo shows us the loss of depth and apparent groundlessness of postmodern American culture.... It is as if in contemporary American society Huck’s ‘conscience’ is on the brink of total triumph. At a level not seen before in realism, naturalism, or modernism, the perceived social threat to the autonomy of the individual is figured in *White Noise* not just as constraining the self but as something closer to annihilating the self.... In other words, given the postmodern undermining of absolutes and loss of norms, especially the norm of the self-reliant individual, how can any work situated in such a horizon generate a ground from which to offer a critique?

Hemingway’s individualistic heroism is no longer an answer for DeLillo since the world of *White Noise* depicts the contemporary individual living in and subjectively experiencing both self and surrounding world as an indeterminate white noise—an even hum—in which significant epistemological and ethical differences melt into a numbing sameness.... Jack’s experience of family life, of work, and of the American world of shopping malls and fast-food franchises consists of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous signifiers that fail to link up into a coherent sequence. If his life were a story, it would be plotless, random. This discontinuity poses a threat to his identity, since, like the schizophrenic, he increasingly has less sense of self in any older, normative way....

The chemical released by the airborne toxic event, Nyodene D, may lead to his physical death (though even here there is no certainty, since its effects will take thirty years to manifest themselves); but, more important, his sense of identity is dying, for he reports his mind as increasingly fragile, fragmentary, and—like the schizophrenic’s—indistinct.... Jack finds momentary solace in an epic shopping binge that unites him with his family, letting him be, finally, ‘one of them, shopping, at last.’ Tellingly, though, after the shopping binge they drive home ‘in silence’ and go to their ‘respective rooms, wishing to be alone.’... For a brief moment, shopping and his purchases reassure him of the ‘fullness of being’ of his existence, a reassurance he also gets from a trip to the ATM machine...

As his friend Murray says of the supermarket, ‘This place recharges us spiritually,’ as if a person were a bank account. However, it is a short respite before he returns to ‘the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity’... Jack is waking up to a ‘vast loneliness,’ to ‘brain fade,’ to a sort of schizophrenic drifting in a world of information overload, abandoned meanings, and abandoned identities that, like the latest California lifestyle, end up being dumped into the trash compactor with the rest of life’s dreck. Unlike Jake Barnes [*The Sun Also Rises*] but like the clinical schizophrenic, Jack finds nothing heroic in his confrontation with death and remains unable to link up to the disparate bits of his experience into a meaningful whole, a personal identity. Instead he is, as the SIMUVAC worker tells him, merely the sum total of his socially coded data in a world of discontinuous material signifiers where remarks—his, anyone’s—exist ‘in a state of permanent flotation’ and ‘[no] one thing [is] either more or less plausible than any other thing.’ This indeterminate social space is the point at which multiplicity melts into sameness, where more choice, more information, more facts resolve into an even hum of equally plausible, hence meaningless, white noise....

DeLillo’s postmodern take on the American theme of the self struggling in society takes to a new level the problem illustrated in part by Silas Lapham, Huck Finn, and Jake Barnes. DeLillo’s new postmodern iteration of the American assertion of autonomous identity retains a remnant of realism’s and modernism’s inward turn, in the form of a posited basic human desire or need for a stable autonomous identity. Why else does Jack Gladney protest against his culture’s brain fade?... Because the American culture of white noise has flattened previously stable oppositions into a numbing sameness, making it ever more difficult to differentiate one thing and eventually one self from another, the familiar American struggle for autonomy now requires more than merely turning down the sound of culture and gazing inward to one’s heart; it requires an arbitrary moment outside white noise, a cultural polestar, a stable marker, a belief by which self-identity may function. Unlike the world of the realists, naturalists, or even modernists, the world of *White Noise* is one in which contemporary American consumer culture has almost erased that marker....

Since we have lost the grand narratives that once sustained us, the ‘great old beliefs,’ we clearly lack the cultural resources required to go back to an older and more stable society.... *White Noise* maintains a link with our literary past by positing an underlying human need for autonomous identity, to that extent endorsing a limited sort of postmodern humanism. But it goes beyond the answers of the literary past when it complicates this turn by framing this need in its necessarily social fulfillment. In the end the novel suggests not only that our postmodern cultural moment is deadly to the individual but also that we must resist the full sweep of postmodern indeterminacy. We can resist by exploring various social mechanisms of belief as solutions to the brain fade that besets us.”

Theron Britt  
“*White Noise* and the American Novel”  
*Approaches*, 108-15

“*White Noise* is one of the outstanding novels of the postwar period and among the most enjoyable texts I teach each year. Even though it mocks some of my own investments (cultural studies, for instance), I find its satire of contemporary American life genuinely funny and its diagnosis of modern technology brilliant. My students regularly report that the novel deeply affects their views of the world. The central insight of DeLillo’s novel is that, through an ever-expanding commitment to modern rationality, contemporary Western societies have generated increasingly paradoxical relations to the natural world. *White Noise* makes these relations visible in a stunningly comprehensive way by linking the proliferation of technology to the broader assumptions of modern scientific consciousness.

By understanding technologies as constructs that mediate between human beings and the material world, DeLillo brilliantly articulates the links among mass media, machine technology, and modern technological rationality. This approach correctly depicts machine technology as merely one element of sweeping technical ideology—an unspoken celebration of rational progress... While technology seems to offer talismanic protection against death, it simultaneously spawns terrifying new threats.... The resurgence of... irrationality, DeLillo suggests, is inseparable from the dominance of technological rationalism. As individuals increase their reliance of technical systems, they come to view such systems as powerful agents, which they can treat only with something like religious faith. From this perspective, the Enlightenment vision of progressive human emancipation through science begins to look like a collective delusion....

Once students appreciate the problem of technical mediation, they are ready to explore why DeLillo connects it to various features of the postmodern condition: uncertainty about what is real, difficulty locating origins or foundations, the rise of late capitalism and consumer culture, the decline of the nuclear family, philosophical skepticism and cultural relativism, the rise of cultural studies, and an unchecked proliferation of simulations.... Murray's substitution of paramedical rescue for sex suggests that powerful natural instincts have been supplanted by fantasies of technical prowess. And Mink's pathological confusion of real and representational is inseparable from his absolute commitment to technological salvation. It is this commitment that ultimately unveils the novel's Heideggerian existentialism...

As technological rationality extends life, it inadvertently spawns anxiety about machines, uncertainty about the real, a resurgence of irrationality, and a heightened fear of mortality. This final effect—a dread of death—drives the plot of the novel. Overcome with angst, Babette turns to Willie Mink's revolutionary drug, Dylar, which promises to cure her of her angst. Dylar, in other words, embodies the fundamental promise of technological modernity.... Dylar has reduced [Mink] to a nonperson, a 'grayish figure,' 'a composite' of personal memories and mass-mediated ideas. His speech is interlaced with incoherent snippets of television dialogue. He is, in short, the essence of white noise. His behavior is governed by external suggestions and messages, because he can no longer distinguish representation from reality....

On the one hand, Mink seems to be the thoroughly postmodern figure—or perhaps the parodic emblem of a misunderstood postmodernism—someone who can no longer separate words from things. His conflation of real and representational implies a critique of postmodern groundlessness. On the other hand, DeLillo himself seems to rely on various descriptions of the postmodern condition for his portrait of contemporary culture.... Is *White Noise* a postmodern novel or merely a novel about postmodernism?... In short, does DeLillo embrace elements of postmodern thinking, as some critics claim, or does he merely depict these ideas in order to satirize them?"

Timothy Melley  
"Technology, Rationality, Modernity: An Approach to *White Noise*"  
*Approaches*, 73, 80-83

"The burden on *White Noise* to represent the postmodern difference is further complicated by the plethora of ways that postmodernism has been defined and periodized. There are in effect three distinct versions of postmodernism—the philosophical, the cultural, and the aesthetic. While the time frame of the last two can be reconciled to some extent, it does not square with that of philosophical postmodernism.... DeLillo stands to postmodernism as Fitzgerald stands to modernism. James Joyce and Faulkner both are better representatives of an experimental, high-modernist narrative form, but Fitzgerald always embraced modernity as the matter of his fiction—from the products of modernization (the automobile, the telephone, jazz recordings) to the rise of psychoanalysis.

Similarly, one can point to a number of high postmodernists, such as Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, and Kathy Acker, who write with a more ludic style and feature more ontological disruptions in their work than DeLillo does, yet DeLillo always more concretely claims American postmodernity as his subject matter. His treatment of such issues as media culture, advertising, and celebrity shows us an America where conspicuous consumption is no longer a privilege of the wealthy (as in *Gatsby*) but rather has become the social labor of the middle class. The way, then, that *White Noise* relates to the postmodern may be less as an exemplar of postmodernism than as a meditation on postmodernity—what it feels like to live in the age of media saturation....

Jack frequently encounters simulation—a band playing ‘live Muzak,’ an old Moorish movie theater that has been converted to a mosque. Perhaps the two most significant subsequent representations of hyperreality are SIMUVAC and the nuns of Germantown. In each instance, DeLillo creates a parodic purchase on what it feels like to live in the present.... DeLillo exposes the Disney-like condition of American postmodernity. Even religious faith becomes a form of simulation. When Jack’s plan to kill Willie Mink goes wrong and they both end up wounded, Jack drives them to a Catholic hospital. At the hospital he converses with a nun, Sister Hermann Marie. Assuming she is a true believer in church doctrine, he is shocked to learn that the nun’s faith is a simulation. He concludes that her dedication is a pretense, but she explains that it is just the opposite: ‘Our pretense is a dedication. Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that someone believe’...

Through Murray and Willie, one can introduce students to the two major tropes that have been used to name what succeeds modernist alienation: paranoia and schizophrenia. Murray in his will to power and control represents the paranoid; Willie in his total inability to distinguish reality from its linguistic mediation suggests a cultural schizophrenia.... The more schizophrenic identity becomes the norm, the more possibilities for paranoia circulate within culture, a condition exemplified by the mirroring relationship between Murray and Willie, one suggesting that to be the former is to be well on the way to becoming the latter.... *White Noise* [illustrates] a shift from the alienation of early-twentieth-century literature to the sometimes paranoid, sometimes schizophrenic feel of late-twentieth-century American consumer culture, a feel that persists in our postmillennial moment.”

John N. Duvall  
“*White Noise*, Postmodernism, and Postmodernity”  
*Approaches*, 116-17, 119-25

“The major characters and events in *White Noise* seem to be without motive.... Motives in *White Noise* tend to be the stuff of tabloid aspiration and are inevitably trivialized, even when they involve terrorist plots of the kind we have lately become all too familiar with, as in the tabloid item Babette reads to an audience of blind people: ‘Members of an air-crash cult will hijack a jumbo jet and crash it into the White House in an act of blind devotion to their mysterious and reclusive leader, known only as Uncle Bob.’ By contrast, the novel’s central event, the release of the chemical Nyodene D in the ‘airborne toxic event,’ is utterly motiveless.... There’s not a word about the train that derailed, the chemical company that was transporting Nyodene D, or the large-scale socioeconomic forces behind chemical spills and other industrial disasters....

The salient exceptions to the rule are, of course, Babette’s plan to have sex with Willie Mink in exchange for Dylar, which she undertakes in a desperate and doomed attempt to alleviate her fear of death, and then Jack’s plan to kill Mink and take his Dylar. These are plots...and it is clear that the second plot follows causally from the first. But it’s fitting that both plots go so terribly awry, since Dylar itself seems to be a dud. It causes Mink to confuse words with things, thus affording us some speculations on the relation between language and what Heidegger called Being-toward-death (this is one facet of the novel’s affinities with existentialism): it suggests, however comically, that we must be willing to accept the inevitability of death if we are to understand the functions of language. But since the drug does not succeed in counteracting its users’ fear of death, both Babette’s and Jack’s plots to obtain Dylar seem pointless and futile. The revenge plot that drives Jack to kill Mink for having sex with his wife also fizzles, even though—or because?—Jack obsessively repeats versions of his plan to himself some eight times in chapter 39. Interestingly, had the revenge plan worked, it would have confirmed both Murray’s thesis and Jack’s: it would have imposed order on chaos and it would have moved deathward....

The final sentences of *White Noise* faintly echo James Joyce’s immortal short story ‘The Dead,’ though in Joyce the snow is general all over Ireland and here the confusion is general all over the supermarket. As often happens in *White Noise* (think of the joy Jack experiences at the mall or at the ATM), it is extremely hard to determine whether we are to take this ending ‘seriously’ or ‘ironically’ or by means of meta-ironic sentences containing lots of ‘scare quotes.’ Is this a real ending, an invocation of all the living and the dead (as in Joyce) or to the tabloid cults of the famous and the dead? Perhaps, perhaps not. But even if the ending is ‘real,’ one of the problems with *White Noise* is that it offers too many endings.

When Wilder crosses the highway, we can see this minor miracle as a summation of the novel's treatment of death and language, since Wilder cannot speak and is the only character in the novel who does not fear death. When Jack encounters the German nun...we can read the scene as a summation of the novel's concern with simulacra and simulation. The rearrangement of the supermarket shelves likewise seems to tie up one of the novel's narrative threads, the relation between subjectivity and shopping. But other aspects of the novel are left hanging: Jack continues to avoid Dr. Chakravarty of Autumn Harvest Farms, knowing that he has death inside him and that it's 'just a question of whether or not I can outlive it.' And, of course, '[t]he men in the Mylex suits are still in the area, yellow-snouted, gathering their terrible data.' Too many endings—and no sense of closure....

*White Noise* is nearly motiveless. In other words, the novel doesn't conclude conclusively precisely because the motives in the novel are so uncertain or unascertainable, found only in waves, codes, circuits, streams, simulations—and ridiculous, tabloid-quality plots.... The novel affects a studied ambivalence toward plotting, so much so that it is difficult to say whether the novel is plotted. No doubt this ambivalence accounts for some degree of the novel's oft-remarked tonelessness, as well as for our nagging inability to say with any certainty whether DeLillo has written an existentialist critique or a postmodern celebration of consumer capitalism's reification of human desires."

Michael Berube  
"Plot Summary: Motives and Narrative Mechanics in *Underworld* and *White Noise*"  
*Approaches*, 141-43

"Isn't it the archetypal postmodern novel, an exemplary text for tenured radicals who ironize everything and treat the whole world as a giant simulacrum? And isn't its underlying message that the real threat to America is our own technology, mass disaster with a corporate sponsor, a manufacturer of pesticides?... I think we will find that the novel offers us ways of talking about anxieties that have haunted America since the attacks of September 2001.... By the end of the novel, we can gauge the anxiety that the supermarket is expected to assuage in the 'panic...the aimless and haunted mood' that a rearrangement of its shelves induces.... The question is not, 'Why is the American consumer so dumb?,' but, 'What are these people afraid of seeing?'".... DeLillo does not take Blacksmith for America, although many of the characters in *White Noise* do. We constantly hear Jack and Murray go on as if the supermarket, television, and the tabloids constitute the American consciousness, with Nyodene derivative the unintended by-product of our ingenious efforts to replace nature with technology....

Since the author wishes us to see the denial of history, the transformation of what actually happens into an attractive myth, as a key feature of American life, we need to pay close attention to the one public historical figure the novel considers: Adolph Hitler or, rather, the construction Murray calls 'Gladney's Hitler.' Even students whose knowledge of the Third Reich is derived from popular entertainment can quickly see how ahistorical this Hitler is. He's powerful and demonic but never explicitly connected with World War II or the Holocaust. Gladney's Hitler is all Nuremberg and no Stalingrad, with special emphasis on parades, rallies, and uniforms....

Hitler studies in *White Noise* is an anti-Holocaust studies, a memorialization of the killers and their survival in our popular culture and political imagination.... Hitler studies can be mastered by an American professor who neither reads nor speaks German, because some part of Hitler has become American. The cult of the celebrity dead; the sense that life is defined by images and style, by aesthetic rather than political or moral choices; the appreciation of disaster and violence as satisfying spectacles—these have all become as American as, well, cinematic car crashes. Hitler studies as Jack teaches it doesn't lead to quarrels over evidence or passionate debates about the connection between daily life and historic massacres; it leads to the crowd, to nostalgia for a power so absolute that it shields us from death.... *White Noise* does not anticipate September 11, but 'the unreliable menace' it locates at the domestic heart of America suggests that the terrorist attacks were the realization of a nightmare that had lurked in it for decades."

Margaret Scanlan  
"Hijacked Jet Crashes into White House': Teaching *White Noise* after September 11"  
*Approaches*, 28-32, 37



“*White Noise* explores a related set of dangers and problems in a...contemporary setting in which all disasters are either aestheticized, reduced to entertainment, or backgrounded as white noise. Perhaps most emblematically, a cloud of dangerous gas is euphemistically referred to as an airborne toxic event.... We point out to students that ‘white noise’ not only refers to the babble on the radio but also comments wryly on the author’s manner of cultural critique, which is uncensored yet also completely impotent in terms of guiding the policies or moral values of the culture. Critical white noise is a consolation prize for the irrelevant intelligentsia, which has no direct, meaningful say in handling of problems like airborne toxic events....

Heroism often runs through DeLillo narratives, albeit in camouflaged forms. While Gladney resists recognizing the danger of the airborne toxic event as long as possible, his son Heinrich, bizarrely and satirically named after Heinrich Himmler to show Gladney’s (and American culture’s?) strategy of denial through familiarization, is alert to danger.... Students quickly see that DeLillo’s approach is anti-heroic and that Heinrich’s contrapuntal heroism and, later, Gladney’s insane attempt to hunt down Willie Mink clearly underscore the differences between *White Noise* and such inspiring survival narratives as *Schindler’s List*....”

Valerie Wee and John Whalen-Bridge  
“*White Noise* as a Disaster Movie”  
*Approaches*, 207-13

“*White Noise* makes one of its central themes the struggle to overcome...complacency and to find meaning in the...barrage of white noise that is popular consumer culture. How can we see, think, and feel when we have so thoroughly come to rely on the...screens of popular culture to structure (or determine) our experience of the world?... Perhaps Jack’s fear of death comes from the same ingredients that gave rise to his desire to teach Hitler studies.... The cumulative effect of the terminology of popular consumer culture is narcotic, working by the same principles of hegemony deployed by Hitler....

In chapter 15 of *White Noise*, Hitler’s scene is defined as the family drama, the oedipal situation theorized by Freud. DeLillo focuses attention on Hitler by forcing the analogy between him and Elvis Presley with regard to their personal and familial scene, at the same time inviting questions about how each man became such a cultural force, albeit with different aims and results. That Hitler and Elvis have both become a subject for serious academic study in this imaginary world also comments ironically on the mechanisms of control and manipulation that scholarly inquiry exerts...

The theme of *White Noise* evolves into later novels, such as *Libra* (the story of the John F. Kennedy assassination largely from the perspective of Lee Harvey Oswald), *Underworld* (a sweeping novel about American culture in the cold war era), or *The Body Artist* (a novella about a woman artist who uses her body as a canvas, like Kafka’s protagonist in ‘A Hunger Artist’)... Dread functions as a portent normalizing the act as a precognition, a portent of the end of everything, including meaning. In *White Noise*, as in so much of DeLillo’s work (but especially *Libra* and *Underworld*), the future is always anticipated in the present as a type of prophecy, not unlike the self-fulfilling prophecies of the airborne toxic event’s symptomology.”

David Blakesley  
“A Burkeian Reading of *White Noise*”  
*Approaches*, 171, 173-79

“Jack—and, by proxy, DeLillo—resists myths that too obviously minimize ambiguity and streamline complexity for the sake of well-being.... If Jack resists the teleology of tabloid narratives and religious doctrine, he is more susceptible, as are the rest of DeLillo’s characters, to the deeply embedded narratives of television, to its identity- and consciousness-shaping social myths. As Murray points out, television is ‘like a myth being born right there in our living room.’ Its power is illustrated best in the scene when Steffie talks in her sleep, articulating a commodity-driven dreamworld by mumbling ‘*Toyota Celica*.’... Realizing that his daughter’s dreams are the stuff of advertising slogans and product placement, Jack does not simply fail to lament his daughter’s utterance; he in fact experiences it as though it were ‘a moment of transcendence.’ Myths aspire to such transcendence....

The Gladney family...are forced to evacuate their home for nearly two weeks or risk exposure to a menacing toxic cloud. Even before they depart, however, their ideas about disastrous events have been structured by the myth-making apparatus of television. DeLillo is especially good at showing our reliance on conventionalized narratives that at first seem empty of ideological content. He portrays the victims of a potential plane crash lingering in the airport terminal to reenact their horrifying experience through a communal narrative. He describes the uneasiness felt by the family when they see Babette on television—for according to the norms of television, the familiar and the uneventful are not fodder for the medium. Yet reality and narrative rub up against each other during the airborne toxic event....

Less interested in Hitler's coercive international policy, DeLillo focuses instead on his domestic agenda, seeing in its trappings 'a geometric longing, the formal notation of some powerful mass desire' that has its analogs in contemporary American culture.... Fascist tyranny was the most obvious result of Germany's consensual longing, and DeLillo hints throughout his novel at the United States' imperialist aspirations (e.g., most of Jack's former wives are involved in covert operations). But his primary concern is America's dreamlike rush toward consensus (the repeated references to uniforms, whether the black robes of the professoriate, the Mylex suits of the toxic waste workers, or the complex camouflage outfit that Heinrich wears, are telling here)....

I like to discuss how DeLillo's characters experience an endless but rapid cycle of dread and relief encouraged in one form or another by consumer capitalism. 'Terrifying data is now an industry in itself,' Jack proclaims... [His] dread is shown to be assuaged by shopping binges, bids for celebrity, and pornography, all of which in turn produce experiences of depletion and longing.... If the characters in the novel submit to and are even grateful for this system, it is DeLillo's goal to make his readers more aware of their own willing participation in it....

Murray Siskind and the other New York emigres...respond 'as children' to American culture because they cannot extricate themselves from its natural language.... Murray's adjuration that 'TV is a problem only if you've forgotten how to look and listen' prefigures the theoretical sophistry that will eventually have him propose that Jack murder someone.... DeLillo's strongest condemnation of an unreflective approach to one's culture occurs when he writes of Alfonse Stompanato [named after a gangster], the chair of the American Environments Department, that 'When he talked about popular culture, he exercised the closed logic of a religious zealot, one who kills for his beliefs'....

[This] suggests a pitfall to be avoided even as we come to realize our limitations as critics immersed in and shaped by the cultural language we wish to study. I agree with Osteen that 'the most bracing feature of DeLillo's work is that he satirizes postmodern cultural forms not from some privileged position outside the culture, but from within those very forms.' If this strategy has led to radically differing critical interpretations of the novel, it also makes DeLillo's cultural critique more trenchant...by suggesting ways in which aspects of American culture may be appropriated in order to critique its less desirable aspects.... DeLillo's novel enables my students to become readers and interpreters as opposed to unreflective producers and consumers of white noise."

Randall Fuller  
"White Noise and American Cultural Studies"  
*Approaches*, 22-26

"Professors hoping to enlighten students about commodity culture in *White Noise* run the risk of emulating those 'movie-mad, trivia-crazed' faculty members from the American Environments Department at Jack Gladney's College-on-the-Hill, with the 'Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles' and devotion to reading cereal boxes. Silly and self-absorbed though they may be, these academics have one thing right: commodity messages seem to have become the 'natural language of the culture' in postmodern America.... As Murray Siskind reminds him: the Department of Hitler Studies is Jack's successful product line....

Like most of the lists in *White Noise*, this one exemplifies the rhetorical device asyndeton, which refers to an absence of syntactic connections that has become, according to Tony Thwaites, a signal feature of postmodernist writing and (I would add) of postmodern thinking.... There are three related ways of

addressing consumerism in *White Noise*: to treat commodities as a language, to view consumerism as a form of sustenance or religion, and to examine the relations between consumerism and the natural environment... For [some] scholars, consumer capitalism has created a culture of abundance that democratizes society through freedom of choice....

For the most part *White Noise* dramatizes how nature resists being contained and instead returns to us in altered forms that punish us for manipulating it: it bombards us with a myriad of frighteningly intangible waves in radiation; it chills us by reminding us that, in our bodily death, we are merely animals; it graphically illustrates out technological depredations in spookily garish sunsets and brightly colored poisons.... Is Dylar, which she is taking to lose her fear of death, a kind of artificial fabric created to upholster over the mind's unwanted fears? DeLillo is particularly fond of brand names like these—synthetic words for synthetic products—which sound like the names of ancient gods but also bear the wide-eyed promise of the early space age, the future as imagined a half century ago. 'Dacron,' 'Krylon,' 'Dristan,' 'Celica' ...part of every adult's 'brain noise' ...."

Mark Osteen  
"The Natural Language of the Culture":  
Exploring Commodities through *White Noise*"  
*Approaches*, 192-93, 197, 200

"Other ecocritics—by now the majority—are less euphoric about ecocriticism's potential to actualize social change, although for the most part they share the conviction that there is a material world beyond social fabrication. [Some ecocritics do not believe in the existence of a material world?]

Gone is any Thoreauvian delight in a natural world understood to be pristine. The closest the Gladney family come to a contemplation of their nonhuman environment is watching the sunset from a freeway overpass, a sunset that is a comically gross distortion of itself, since sunsets become 'unbelievably beautiful' after the toxic event. This scene stands out as the only moment of contemplation of nature's beauties, and it presents a familiar Romantic literary tradition as already poisoned. The possibility of a relation between a human observer and a pristine environment is negated by the toxic byproducts of modern society.... In other words, *White Noise* acts as a foil in an ecocriticism class, preventing the imposition of an environmental approach to texts to the exclusion of other approaches...

The Gladneys are perhaps not presented, as some ecocritics would have it, as enablers of a wasteful and destructive consumer culture; their relation to this culture is more ironic and self-aware, and more comfortable, than is allowed by a reading that pushes environmental themes to the forefront and ignores other narrative clues.... The idea is that we must return to an essential connection with nature, from which contemporary technology and culture have alienated us, in order to find our lost spirituality. DeLillo denies, in this and other episodes, that spiritual epiphanies can happen only on contact with unmediated nature. In fact, the one time the word *wilderness* is used in *White Noise* is a metaphor for fear, when the narrator describes panic as 'the god of woods and wilderness.' Primal nature is a catalyst for discovery of a precivilized, elemental self is not contained by the world of *White Noise*; the possibility of such discovery is mentioned only once, by Winnie in her example of the grizzly bear, the sight of which 'gives you a renewed sense of yourself...a distinctly threatening view of untamed nature. The characters of *White Noise* get their nature through cable television."

Louisa Mackenzie  
"An Ecocritical Approach to Teaching *White Noise*"  
*Approaches*, 54-55, 60

"*White Noise* is very much a novel about the mass media. The short consumer messages interspersed throughout the text testify to a cultural situation which the images and sounds transmitted by television and radio have been ubiquitous. In *White Noise*, the industrial age has long given way to a new informational order.... DeLillo leaves no doubt that what is beyond retrieval in Iron City is the industrial age its name alludes to. In the hyperreal world of *White Noise*, the absence of the media makes Iron City quite literally a nonplace, just as the absence of media coverage of the evacuation of Blacksmith's citizens makes that event a nonevent. As various critics have pointed out, the proliferation of simulacra produced by the mass media has all but obliterated in DeLillo's fictional world an independently existing social reality.... In the world

depicted in *White Noise*, the greatest danger is that ‘technology may succeed in creating an illusion that it constitutes the only possible manner by which human beings apprehend themselves and their relationship to the world.’....

Among literary scholars there exists a broad...consensus that DeLillo is a paradigmatic postmodern writer. Critics of differing persuasions have (correctly) identified in his work some of the major themes and artistic concerns of literary postmodernism. These include the proliferation of simulacra and an attendant effacement of reference, origin, and context...preoccupation with consumer culture...a nonrepresentational aesthetics...a systemic perspective informed by a contemporary social and cultural theory...and the evocation of a postmodern sublime... Frank Lentricchia discusses DeLillo as the ‘last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation’... Hal Crowther treats him as ‘a satirist’ who ‘tries to outrun reality’...and Margaret Soltan reads him as a clear-cut liberal humanist.... DeLillo scholars less familiar with the author’s nonfictional writings and interviews will be struck by his unequivocal endorsement of liberal humanist beliefs in the inviolable strength and integrity of the individual, the universal applicability of human rights, and the power of literature to transcend the context(s) of its production. These beliefs are in stark contrast to the postmodern agenda DeLillo’s work is most often associated with....”

Philipp Schweighauser  
“*White Noise* and the Web”  
*Approaches*, 94-98

Michael Hollister (2015)