

30 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

“Gladney’s fellow academics have succeeded in making major disciplines out of the fascinations of their youth—trivia. ‘There are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes,’ observes a newcomer. They have elevated the common media (television, the gossip and wonder sheets, jazz, rock music, soap operas, commercials, cartoons, movies) into the focus of intense study.... In a sense, *White Noise* doesn’t really have a plot. It is about the intrusion of plot into life, a stringing-together of random events into some kind of meaningful schema....

White Noise is philosophy as dialogue, events, people, a brilliant commentary of American life. But a short review can’t begin to show DeLillo’s skill, for the philosophizing doesn’t get in the way of our enjoyment and the humor doesn’t get in the way of the profundity.... (Considering the recent events at Bhopal, India, one might ask, was DeLillo prescient? Or did he fix on the kind of event that is always taking place in one part of the world or another? White noise prevents us from seeing certain horrifying commonplaces of this modern age.).... On the last page of the book, contemplating an eerie scene, Gladney muses, ‘This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living.’ And in time, all these waves seem to become as one. White noise....

White noise is a susurrations, a fusion of signals and messages, a leveling of sounds into one all-sound—its individual components become indistinguishable. White noise is essentially anti-dramatic. No highs, no lows, no emphases, no diminuendos, all utterances made equal. People who have trouble sleeping—perhaps they want to shut out the screams of the world and their minds—put on earphones that emit a monotonous, soothing sound. Auditory entropy. The death of distinction and distinguishability.”

Sol Yurick
Philadelphia Inquirer
(20 January 1985)

“*White Noise* is a meditation on themes of whiteness—the pallor of death, and white noise, the sound, so emblematic of modern life, that is meant to soothe human beings by screening out the other, more irritating noises of their civilization.... Will Jack be able to discover what Babette’s taking? Will he be able to get a supply for himself? Is he really going to die of the whiff of Nyodene Derivative? Will he go through with his plan to kill Willie Mink, the drug company man, to revenge Babette and steal the Dylar pills? This is the armature upon which DeLillo hangs a series of observations, descriptions, jokes, and dialogues, approximately Socratic...

All of Don DeLillo's fictions contain these conspiratorial models of the world. In *Players* two Yuppies get mixed up with urban terrorists. In *Running Dog* a porn ring tries to get its hands on a dirty home movie reputed to have been made *in the bunker*. In *Great Jones Street* a drug syndicate pursues a depressed rock star who unwittingly possesses their stash. Chemical substances and commodities, like the conspiracies, and like the dustheaps in Dickens, embody the moral defects of the society that produces them. In *White Noise* the conspirators try to find a drug that will take away the feat of death from a society that is fixedly preoccupied with producing death....

The distinguished *Washington Post* critic Jonathan Yardley objects to DeLillo's topical agenda: 'Could there be a more predictable catalogue of trendy political themes: radiation, addiction to violence, television as religion, the trivialization of suffering, the vulgarity of America?'.... What accounts for the charm of these serious novels on dread subjects? Perhaps Jack's eloquence is such that we are a little less harrowed by his author's exacting and despairing view of civilization. And he is very funny. Besides, there is the special pleasure afforded by the extraordinary language, the coherence of the imagery, saturated with chemicals and whiteness and themes of poisons and shopping, the nice balance of humor and poignance, solemn nonsense and real questions."

Diane Johnson
The New York Review of Books
(14 March 1985)

"His tack is inquisitive, almost anthropological, as he serves up a variety of American specialties like college football (*End Zone*), leftists and the CIA (*Running Dog*), rock music (*Great Jones Street*), and Wall Street (*Players*).... What sets DeLillo apart from moralists like Heller or Bellow is an understanding of the complicitous bond between individual and institution. His novels actually celebrate the confusion over personal responsibility for public madness. To this end he turns the trick of making Wall Street or the CIA objects of wondrous contemplation, splicing a clipped lyricism with technical detail to produce descriptions of labyrinthine toys, exaggerated sums of private fears. While DeLillo's Americans nurse paranoidias large and small, they're most frightened of themselves. Apprentice schizophrenics living in willful isolation, these characters still maintain a practiced cool...The narcissism is corrosive, potentially terminal; these people worry themselves to death....

The study of Hitler, who appears 'larger than death,' provides an orderly myth; it's as close as Gladney can come to religious faith.... Oldest son Heinrich (perversely named for Himmler?) plays mail chess with a death row convict and serves as in-house sophist. The daughters cleave to the television, dispense crafted naivete at the dinner table, and murmur brand names like Toyota Celica in their sleep. For recreation everyone shops.... Every embrace he and Babette share is followed by a silent refrain: Who will die first?... But ultimately DeLillo sees these human connections as too vital and necessary to be easily dismissed. In counterpoint he's drawn a compassionate picture of a primitive refuge in a modern 'world of hostile fact.' The vulnerability of this refuge to technological assault constitutes the novel's rather thin plot.... The technological prowess evidenced by carcinogens, television, and the fantasy drug Dylar serves a consumptive, and therefore fatal love of self. Its death rattle is heard in TV's electronic din, the book's 'white noise'....

The novel is perceptively targeted—and the writing, as usual, is sharp as cut glass. DeLillo becomes increasingly elliptical with every book, as if he's paring his prose to the style of a scientist's notebook. Paradoxically, the distillation is matched by a more subtle and convincing treatment of his characters' inner lives. This broadened emotional vocabulary charges *White Noise* with a resonance and credibility that makes it difficult to ignore. Critics who have argued his work is too clever and overly intellectual should take notice: DeLillo's dark vision is now hard-earned. It strikes at both head and heart."

Albert Mobilio
Village Voice (30 April 1985)

"Writing of death, Don DeLillo takes one's breath away. A private man issuing a strangely private kind of fiction, he is the closest thing we have to an Atomic Age Melville. That rarest of birds, a novelist on fire with ideas—and an outlaw epistemologist to boot—he uses his fictional excursions as occasions to think aloud in shadowed sentences, speak in modern tongues, plumb mysteries, fathom depths. In book after

cryptic book, DeLillo circles obsessively around the same grand and implacable themes—language, ritual, breakup, death. How, in a centrifugal world of relativity, to steady oneself with absolutes? How, in the end, to get across the untellable?....

White Noise is furnished with all the suburban props of the all-American novel: an amiably rumped middle-age professor, his plump earth-motherly wife, bright children from scattered marriages, a nuclear family in a pleasant postnuclear home. Their story is unlikely, however, to be mistaken for a fifties sit-com. The academic, Jack Gladney, teaches Advanced Nazism at the College-on-the-Hill; the matriarch leads adult education classes in posture; Gladney's three ex-wives all have ties with the intelligence community; and the fourteen-year-old eldest child of the household, Heinrich Gerhardt, has both a receding hairline and a philosophical bent—on his first appearance in the novel, he solemnly proclaims, 'There's no past, present or future outside our own mind. The so-called laws of motion are a big hoax. Even sound can trick the mind'....

It is said that DeLillo is funny, but his is the funniness of peculiarity, not mirth. It is, more precisely, the terrible irony of the lone metaphysician, rising to a keen intensity as he registers the black holes in the world around him. In *White Noise*, as in all his novels, DeLillo absorbs the jargon of myriad disciplines and reprocesses them in a terminal deadpan. His is a hard-edged, unsmiling kind of satire. It is not user friendly.... Just as DeLillo's characters are often not people so much as energies or eccentricities with voices...so his speech is not normal discourse as much as a kind of rhetoric pitched high, a collection of phantom sentences, a chorus of texts without contexts. And his (chanel) house style has the cool metallic sleekness of a hearse....

It is this tonelessness that accounts for the terrible beauty of much of his writing. DeLillo does not put spin on his words; he leaves them hanging—weightless, somber things full of density and gravity. Disconnected, theirs is the kind of bare, brooding blankness that suggests not numbness so much as mystery, a world not empty of meaning, but too full of it, electrically supercharged. The most conspicuous tic in a DeLillo novel, indeed, is to end chapters with a paragraph consisting of nothing but a single sentence.... Grist for a paranoid or a nihilist, the words simply stand there in space, mute, momentous, eerie as the pillars of Stonehenge. DeLillo's other characteristic device is to put together words and rhythms into patterns, sequences, escalating cadences that build a mood and gather momentum and pick up in time a hypnotic and heartstopping intensity. They turn into rifts, disquisitions, revved-up harangues. They move with the even, pounding purposefulness of footfalls down an alleyway.

This dazzle of Promethean language is largely consecrated to a single driving theme: the rising struggle between tribalism and technology. DeLillo's novels worry and worry at humanity's fight with science; DeLillo's characters are caught between the spirits of their ancestors and the gods of their computer world. The courses in 'Eating and Drinking' he satirizes are no idle joke; in Gladney's world, primal instincts are threatened by a conception of progress that would transform men from animals into machines.... Like Pynchon, DeLillo everywhere seeks out networks, circuits, codes, connections; and, like Pynchon, he knows that the man who finds connections everywhere is a paranoid....

His atmospherics stronger than his aphorisms, DeLillo occasionally builds up menace without meaning, is about profundity rather than full of it, becomes—in a word—portentous. The price he pays for his hubristic ambition is an intermittent bout of pretense; manuals for Zen and the art of emotional maintenance, his books mass-produce fortune cookies along with their koans. Perhaps the oddest and most enduring mystery of DeLillo's remarkable novels is that, though preoccupied with plotting, they are themselves ill-plotted; portraits of a mind as searching, driven and ceaselessly vagrant as the voice in a Beckett novel, they have trouble with resolutions.... DeLillo is determined to take on inquiries that cannot be concluded, to make challenges that cannot be met...

Next to DeLillo's large and terrifying talent, most modern fiction seems trifling indeed. A connoisseur of fear, he writes novels that leave a chill in one's bones. At the same time, however, it is always difficult to tell what he is about, beyond fear, emptiness, the dark. He knows his data cold; he addresses the great themes with uncommon courage (and so, at moments, heroic presumption and folly); his skills are astonishing. But where is he going, what can he do, with them?... Imprisoned, it sometimes seems, within

the four walls of his obsessions, he keeps on, in a sense, writing the same book, simply carrying his medicine bag of tricks and them into a different genre, a new language, with every novel: college football or rock-'n'-roll, science fiction or international business or the academy. Thirteen years ago, his second novel *End Zone* sounded many of the same notes of foreboding that toll through *White Noise*...

For all that, however, *White Noise* remains a far greater book than *End Zone*, in large part because it is something more than cold and curious reason; it offsets its existential shivers with a domestic strength that is touching and true. In the midst of the Pandoran currents and forces that pulse through the dark is a family that is vulnerable, warm bodies that turn to each other for shelter. Gladney wards off the power of the unknown by holding onto his adored wife at night; his unquiet mind is grounded, and uplifted, when he gazes upon the simple calm of his offspring—"Watching children sleep makes me feel devout, part of a spiritual system. It is the closest I can come to God." The professor's fears for his children as they move through a world of dangers are reminiscent, perhaps, of John Irving's *Underworld*. But where Irving was coy and ingratiating, DeLillo is serious and moving. It is a shock to learn after reading his book that DeLillo has no children."

Pico Iyer
"A Connoisseur of Fear"
Partisan Review 53 (1986)

"If DeLillo's three years of living and traveling outside the United States contributed to the scope and intricacy of *The Names*, its 'complex systems, endless connections,' this period of absence also resensitized him to the glut and blurt of this country, the waste and noise condensed in *White Noise*, which he began after his return in 1982.... The title of *White Noise* appears, quite appropriately, in *The Names*. The passage describes air travel, one of that novel's symbols of American-made alienation: 'We take no sense impressions with us, no voices, none of the windy blast of aircraft on the tarmac, or the white noise of flight, or the hours waiting'.... In general scientific usage, 'white noise' is a periodic sound with frequencies of random amplitude and random interval—a term for chaos. In music, however, 'white noise' is the sound produced by all audible sound-wave frequencies sounding together—a term for complex, simultaneous ordering that represents the 'both/and' nature of systems (and irony)....

In *White Noise*, the complex multinational world of *The Names* comes to small-town America.... The fear of death, which infects Owen Brademas and the cult in *The Names*, moves to the center of *White Noise*, driving its narrator/protagonist, a composite of Brademas's anxieties and the cult's responses, into the double binds DeLillo knotted in *The Names*. The subjects and techniques of *White Noise* are closer to a synthesis of *Americana* and *End Zone*, however, than to the multinational boundary crossings and Venn diagrams of *The Names*. *White Noise* has *Americana*'s small-town setting, its buzzing details of domestic life, an atmosphere polluted by electronic media, and DeLillo's early vision of America as a consumer nation symbolized by the supermarket....

While writing *White Noise*, DeLillo mocked what he called the 'around-the-house-and-in-the-yard' school of American fiction, a realism about 'marriages and separations and trips to Tanglewood' that gives its readers' reflected lives 'a certain luster, a certain significance'.... While the Gladneys' safety is suddenly destroyed by the chemical spill that forces them to evacuate their home and town, the reader's expectations of the marital changes and vacations recorded in 'around-the-house' realism are deconfirmed.... DeLillo quickly shifts from the event to the characters' response.... Their response is to information—quantified measures of exposure, possible long-range consequences—rather than to entities, the scattered corpses or destroyed buildings of conventional disaster fiction. The disaster of *White Noise* is, ultimately, the new knowledge that seeps into the future from the imploded toxic event....

While the university in *White Noise* is presented as trivialized by the nostalgic study of popular and youth culture, Gladney's children are making his family a center of learning. The irony of this inverted situation is that the professor and his teacher-wife attempt to resist knowledge and regress into nostalgia while their children, despite their fears, move forward and outward into the Age of Information, into awareness of large, complexly related systems. For the parents, this attitude toward knowledge is madness—as, for some readers, is DeLillo's inversion of the college novel, his making the Gladney children fearful prodigies. However, both the rapid shifts and reversals exist within a general verisimilitude,

the grounding for DeLillo's mockery and exaggeration.... The physical action of *White Noise* is constricted and repetitive: Jack Gladney evades literal death by leaving Blacksmith and traveling to nearby Iron City in the novel's first half, and in the second half he returns to Iron City in quest of a drug that would let him evade his fear of death. Much of the intellectual action—Gladney's dialogues and meditations—is equally looping and reductive, marked by circular logic and sophistical argument....

Gladney's sentences are like these lists: short, noun dominated, sometimes fragmentary, with few of the convolutions or Jamesian subordinations that show up in *The Names*. Often lexically and syntactically repetitious, Gladney's strings of declarations effect a primer style, an expression not of ignorance (for Gladney knows the language of the humanities) but of something like shock, a seeming inability to sort into contexts and hierarchies the information he receives and the thinking he does. Gladney's account of his life resembles the narration of a near-disaster that he hears at the Iron City airport, where a man 'wearily' and 'full of gentle resignation' describes the terror of preparing for a crash landing.... This structural and stylistic reductiveness creates a sense of 'implosion,' a word used several times in *White Noise*. The Gladneys' trash compactor is DeLillo's metaphor in the novel for the novel, for the characters' self-reducing double binds and the narrator's compression of the familiar and wasted. Searching for a wonder drug to relieve his fear of death, Gladney pokes through rubbish compacted into a 'compressed bulk [that] sat there like an ironic modern sculpture, massive, squat, mocking....

In its list-like style, discontinuities, and repetition, its jammed sub-genres and intellectual foolishness, *White Noise* is—as one meaning of its title suggests—an 'ironic modern sculpture,' a novelistic heap of waste, the precise opposite of the living system and...the formal negative of its systems-imitating precursor, *The Names*. This reversal is indicated by the design of the title page of *White Noise* and the first page of each part, where a roman numeral is printed in white on a black background.... As a systems novelist, DeLillo recycles American waste into art to warn against entropy, both thermodynamic and informational. *White Noise* has an apocalyptic toxic cloud striking from Pynchon's rocket-pocked heavens, a slow accumulation of garbage heaping up from Gaddis's commercial multimedia...The systems novelists' best works—*Gravity's Rainbow*, *JR*, *The Public Burning*—are, like *Ratner's Star*, the DeLillo novel most similar to them, massive disaster novels....

We are the highest form of life on earth and yet ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die.' This is the disastrous knowledge in the novel, arising from disaster and leading to it. Saturated with awareness of mortality and denials of that awareness, *White Noise* can be read as a dialogue with Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, which is one of the few 'influences' DeLillo will confirm. Becker's book is an identifiable source for a long 'looping Socratic walk' and talk that Gladney has with the philosopher/magus of the book, Murray Jay Siskind. In *White Noise* and elsewhere, DeLillo seems to accept Becker's Existential and Rankian positions that the fear of death is the mainspring of human motivation and that man needs to belong to a system of ideas in which mystery exists....

The Gladneys are victims of a self-inflicted double bind: fearing death and desiring transcendence, they engage in evasive artifices and mastering devices that turn back upon them, bringing them closer to the death they fear, even inspiring a longing for disaster... To demonstrate the self-destructive loops of the Gladneys' sad foolishness, DeLillo employs a continuous ironic reversal, trapping and retrapping his characters in their contradictions. After giving Babette and Jack quit ordinary behavior that they hope will award them a sense of power over their death or protect them from awareness of it, DeLillo has their actions produce dangerous side effects and then the opposite of their intentions. As the Gladneys become increasingly obsessive, DeLillo also includes figures or situations that parody the Gladneys' actions and motives. Finally—and this is the achievement of *White Noise* that particularly needs to be illustrated—DeLillo presses beyond the ironic, extracting from his initially satiric materials a sense of wonderment or mystery.... If DeLillo begins with some of Becker's assumptions about the effects of mortal fear, the developing theme of nature in *White Noise* undermines the epistemological foundations of Becker's positions and offers the systems approach to mortality that Gregory Bateson presents in his summary book, *Mind and Nature*....

From the consumption of supermarket perishables, the Gladney family ascends to the acquiring of durable goods at a giant shopping mall.... The ironic result of possessions occurs later: Jack's fear of dying

is intensified, rather than relieved, by the objects he has collected over the years.... After four marriages each, Babette and Jack believe they have found partners with whom they can feel safe. For Jack, Babette is the opposite of his other wives, who all had ties to the intelligence community and enjoyed plotting.... When the children's knowledge and questions penetrate their parents' closed environment, the kids become a threat—an inescapable threat, because Babette and Jack have sealed them into the nuclear structure. The Gladney children are also the primary channel by which another danger—the electronic media, especially television—enters the parents' safe domesticity.... The effect of televised death is, like consumerism, anesthetizing. A seeming confrontation with reality is actually a means of evading one's own mortality, giving the viewer a false sense of power....

The toxic cloud is first spotted by Heinrich. Though its danger is progressively confirmed by observation, the media, and police warnings, Jack and Babette attempt to deny its threat.... 'Packed with chlorides, benzenes, phenols, hydrocarbons,' the cloud 'resembled a national promotion of death, a multimillion-dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy print and billboard, TV saturation.' An amorphous, drifting, mysteriously killing mass, the 'ATE' is the contemporary complement of Pynchon's pointed, swift, and explosive rockets. Like the rockets, the toxins were engineered to kill and thus give man control over the Earth; instead, they threaten their inventors and nature. DeLillo tips his hat to Pynchon with a radio advertisement that the Gladneys hear during the evacuation: 'It's the rainbow hologram that gives this credit card a marketing intrigue'....

After demonstrating the ironic effects of unpreparedness in section 1, DeLillo increases the irony in section 2 by having Jack observe people who not only are prepared for disaster but seem to welcome it. Taken out of his safe place and moved to the shelter, the professor becomes the student; he is instructed in the facts of disaster and ways of living with or through it.... Jack finds himself filled with dread, needing some comfort, unable to believe in religion, tabloid faith, or the practical delusions Siskind suggests.... In section 3 DeLillo has the Gladneys ironically repeat the process of evacuation, this time with a trip to Iron City. Their flight is once again made unduly dangerous because of the Gladneys' denial and delay. When they reach Iron City, what they think will be an overnight stay turns into a nine-day siege among crowds that give none of the comfort Jack has lectured about. The final ironic indignity of Part II is that the disaster receives no television coverage....

Heinrich informs his family that radiation from electronic devices is more dangerous than airborne toxins—and Jack increasingly believes that his exposure is causing a large nebulous mass (corresponding to the cloud) to grow within.... As Jack's actions become more desperate, they also become simpler, imploded. The novel circles back to its beginnings—to Jack's initial faith in ingesting products and growing in physical size; to entities and force replacing...communication systems.... In his well-attended lectures on the crowd psychology of the Nazis, he does for himself and his students what the Nazis achieved: 'Crowds come to form a shield against their own dying'....

Siskind's influence culminates during his last appearance in the novel when, as he and Jack take a 'looping Socratic walk' around Blacksmith, he points out Jack's failures at both evasion and mastery. He then suggests murder as a form of mastery.... He has been blatantly wrong in several of his analyses, including a conclusion about Babette, and unfair in the judgment of his landlord.... Although Siskind does offer Jack, as well as the reader, penetrating interpretations of the world, especially the meaning of its communications systems, Siskind's advice promotes a profoundly immoral act. Like the Gladneys, he compresses—implodes—the context of his thinking, ignoring the murder victim and Jack's role as husband and father, which would be endangered by his crime.

A peripatetic Socrates, Siskind turns into Mephistopheles, a sneaky-looking, beard-wearing magus who infiltrates Gladney's consciousness, not by promising an advance in knowledge, as Faust's tempter did, but by claiming, 'We know too much'.... Murray Jay Siskind is the tutor in mystery. DeLillo hedges Siskind's influence in several ways—by making him hyperbolic and occasionally wrong in his statements, by giving him an immoral influence—but I believe DeLillo means the reader to take seriously Siskind's analyses of essentially religious experience in secular forms. By immersing himself 'in American magic and dread,' Siskind arrives at conclusions shared by Gregory Bateson....

The irony—perhaps the saving irony—of Jack’s secret plotting is that he is no better a plotter than he has been a protector, no better a master than an evader. His murder plan seems based on the improbabilities of television crime, full of holes despite his constant, step-by-step rehearsal. He drives to Iron City in a stolen car, running red lights along the way.... The crazed Gray-Mink...is an exotic, colored double for Jack to recognize and accept. Like Jack, he has tried to master death by studying it, and to evade consciousness of death by ingesting products and media. Both Mink and Jack also come close to destroying themselves because of their obsessions....

In the inversion of the college novel, [Jack and Babette] are instructed by their children and receive often fragmented information from the communication loops that penetrate their ignorance. The knowledge that Heinrich and others impose on Jack and Babette is often specialized, taken out of its scientific context... This new information frequently requires the Gladneys to deny the obvious, accept the improbable, and believe in the invisible. The ‘waves and radiation’ are beyond the capability of ‘natural’ perception.... What the Gladneys refuse to accept...is the inherent reciprocity of circular causality that makes certainty impossible. Their refusal is rooted in mechanistic science, that extension of common-sense empiricism which defines the world as a collection of entities, a heap of things like the Gladneys’ compacted trash, rather than as a system of energy and information....

Flowing from this pervasive strangeness or mystery might be a sense of hope, or a least the possibility that human existence could be open rather than closed. Jack and Babette have chosen, in a phrase used to describe their family, to ‘seal off’ death and the dead. They choose to believe that death is the end of human identity.... Skepticism of the reductionist, mechanistic kind would be rid of all belief, but DeLillo suggests in *White Noise* that he shares Michael Polanyi’s (as well as Gregory Bateson’s) position that ‘in attributing truth to any methodology we make a nonrational commitment; in effect, we perform an act of faith.... Mechanism believes the world is closed; systems theory assumes it’s open and accepts uncertainty. The German nun tells Jack that she and her small band are keeping faith alive, but in fact contemporary science...is the primary source and reminder of the necessity of faith....

DeLillo has Jack report in the last chapter what can be only termed a minor miracle... Wilder rides his plastic tricycle across six lanes of busy traffic, beating death at odds it would take a computer to calculate. Perhaps Jack’s achievement—a possible new relationship to death—is implied by his drawing no conclusion from Wilder’s feat. He simply reports it as a fact of uncertain cause and effect... Jack’s final words imply that he may be ready to accept the uncertain activity below the surface of our perceptions, activity that may—and only may—mean that the world of the living and the world of the dead are not wholly separate, closed off....

At the end of *White Noise* the American mystery does deepen, as white space follows Jack’s final enigmatic words.... In *White Noise* DeLillo collects the familiar sounds of American culture and universal fear; he then both turns them up, exaggerating their foolishness for ironic effect, and turns them down, finding in the lower frequencies a whisper of possibility, of uncertainty beyond our present range of knowledge. DeLillo’s is the noise of disaster and the noise of mystery.”

Tom LeClair
“Closing the Loop: *White Noise*”
In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel
(U Illinois 1987)

“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

"*White Noise* is obsessed with one of the classical aims of the realist novel: the construction of typicality. What this used to mean was a continuous process of extrapolation from the particular to the general... Social typicality precedes the literary type—which is to say that the type is laid down in the social world; it is prior to and has a different kind of reality from secondary representations of it. First there is life, and then there is art. In *White Noise*, however, it's the other way around: social taxonomies are a function not of historical necessity but of style.... It is thus no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between a generality embedded in life and a generality embedded in representations of life....The complexity and intricacy of the type—whether it is a character, a scene, or a landscape—is made possible by the constant repetition of its features: it is reproduced as a sort of amalgam of television and experience, the two now theoretically inseparable...."

The new mode of typicality has two features: it is constructed in representations which are then lived as real; and it is so detailed that it is not opposed to the particular. The name usually given to it in the genre of postmodernity is the simulacrum.... For Plato, the simulacrum is the copy of a copy. Violating an ethics of imitation, its untruth is defined by its distance from the original and by its exposure of the scandal that an imitation can in its turn function as a reality to be copied (and so on endlessly). The most influential contemporary account of the simulacrum and the chain of simulations is that of Baudrillard.... The central mediating agency in this world is television...This is really how it is, the marketing scheme really does work, for most purposes, in a capitalist society... Murray is a postmodernist. His students, wishing to return to the high modernism of cinema, are post-postmodernist."

John Frow

"The Last Things before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*"
South Atlantic Quarterly 89.2 (Summer 1990)

"With *White Noise*, DeLillo has cracked the university curriculum in American literature, more and more taking over the slot hitherto occupied by a novelist beloved by students and professors in the sixties and seventies, Thomas Pynchon.... The reading of DeLillo's writing is an experience of overwhelming cultural density—these are novels that could not have been written before the mid-1960s...."

Until the publication of *White Noise* in 1985 DeLillo was a pretty obscure object of acclaim, both in and out of the academy. His readings are rare. He attends no conferences, teaches no summer workshops in fiction writing, never shows up on late-night television... So he has done little to promote himself in the approved ways. And the books are hard: All of them expressions of someone who has ideas...and who experiments with literary convention. What is characteristic about DeLillo's books, aside from their contemporary subjects, is their irredeemably heterogeneous texture; they are montages of tones, styles, and voices that have the effect of yoking together terror and wild humor as the essential tone of contemporary America. Terrific comedy is DeLillo's mode...

The question as to why a particular novel 'breaks through' to a mass audience is subject to...much speculation, as in the following: (1) Ours is a country committed to mass education, even at the higher levels, and *White Noise* is a campus novel (of sorts). (2) DeLillo has pretty assiduously stayed away from the domestic novel and the complacent realism regularly featured in the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic*, fiction 'around-the-house-and-in-the-backyard,' as he once put it. In an age of domestic realism, writers who do not comply must expect to pay the price. But in *White Noise*, DeLillo finally writes his domestic novel (of sorts). (3) *White Noise* is DeLillo's eighth novel. To that point he was well known to reviewers and a cadre of readers as a gifted writer who had published seven novels in the space of a decade. By the time of *White Noise*, DeLillo's career has gathered some momentum, is poised at the edge of breakthrough, if only he will write the right sort of novel. (4) The central event of *White Noise* is an ecological disaster. Thus: an ecological novel at the dawn of ecological consciousness. (5) The inevitable anecdotal reports, two of which I can't resist passing on: In a course on contemporary fiction, one of my colleagues tells me that a student said to him, 'This is the first book in the course about me.' Another undergraduate tells me that he did not 'read' *White Noise*; he 'inhaled' it. The speculation I favor is the one about the domestic novel, a sentimental form plied to huge profit by women novelists in America in the nineteenth century (Updike, Carver, and company have learned the mode well), Anne Tyler's work being only its latest commercial avatar....

White Noise garnered more reviews, by far, than any of DeLillo's previous books. Many of the reviewers—in a crucial act of self-fulfilling prophecy—made the point that *White Noise* was his most 'accessible' novel, a relative judgment, of course, which many book-buyers, to Viking's delight, must have taken seriously. And a number of reviewers—some of them the same who claimed the novel's accessibility—made the more-than-related point that *White Noise* is DeLillo's 'warmest' novel. In an age of domestic realism, 'warmth' is the definition of literary accessibility, family-oriented writing the direct route to lucidity. And the point about 'warmth' is made not just by the sentimentalists among DeLillo's reviewers, in the act of welcoming him 'home,' into the mainstream, but—best testimony I know to the cultural power of domestic realism over the past couple of decades—by those who value DeLillo precisely for his against-the-grain style.

The reviewer who praises him for being that 'rarest of birds, a novelist on fire with ideas,' who says that in comparison to 'DeLillo's large and terrifying talent, most modern fiction seems trifling indeed,' this same reviewer will conclude by saying that *White Noise* is a 'far greater book than *End Zone*, in large part because it is something more than cold and curious reason; it offsets its existential shivers with a domestic strength that is touching and true. In the midst of all the Pandoran currents and forces that pulse through the dark is a family that is vulnerable, warm bodies that turn to each other for shelter.' In a similar vein, the reviewer for the self-preeningly radical *Village Voice*, after saying a number of penetrating things about DeLillo's work, telling us in so many words why it resists 'warm' reception, concludes by praising him for finally coming through with 'convincing treatment of his characters' inner lives.' *White Noise*, he says in his last sentence, 'strikes at both head and heart.' The *Village Voice* joins hands with a magazine whose very name touches off—however unjustly—an image of legendary staidness, the *Library Journal*, guide for those who order books for libraries, and whose reviewer concludes that *White Noise* is DeLillo's 'warmest novel, and perhaps his best.' And most revealingly: A longtime admirer, a weekday reviewer for the *New York Times*, characterizes DeLillo's sensibility as 'icily intelligent,' and then, caught up with his metaphor, proceeds to tell us why *White Noise* is so important: 'It is almost as if we were listening to a massive glacier breaking up.' Thus does DeLillo become 'readable,' thus does he reach his 'peak.'

Not everyone saw the novel so reductively, or so positively. Major reviewers in major places—the Sunday *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Newsweek*, *Commonweal*—often made the point, with elegant concision, that DeLillo's focus is never 'character' in isolation, but institutions, culture, the interdependence of the three, and the disturbing invasions of a self that would be autonomous. In *Commonweal*, Thomas DiPietro makes the most disturbing point of all, which if true—I think it is true—would seem surely to deny DeLillo's consistent access to a large audience: 'In DeLillo's truly Swiftian satire, we're never sure what he himself believes or what he thinks of his characters. As in Swift, we're instead forced to rely on ourselves, to measure literary experience against our own sense of reality.'

But there is a complication in taking DeLillo in Swiftian terms, however seductive and telling the comparison. Swift did not tell his readers what he thought and believed because he could assume with confidence that those who could read him well shared his norms of reasonable behavior. DeLillo takes the Swiftian tack, but he cannot assume what Swift could assume, and there is the rub—the difficulty, for a democratic mass culture of diverse persuasions, of making sense out of what he writes. Like Ezra Pound before him, DeLillo needs a readership of the literarily endowed. Pound is extremely difficult, but no one should be shocked by the fact: After all, he wrote modernist poetry. But DeLillo writes the novel, the form which at the roots of its invention looked for a broad, middle-class reception and centrally, in order to gather that audience, has held up to it the mirror of 'warm,' bourgeois, family life.

The dissenters do not care for the Swiftian mode; they have no use for writers 'on fire with ideas'; they do not buy the line that in *White Noise* DeLillo joins head and heart. The reviewer for *Time* complains, 'Discovering malevolence in things and systems rather than in people is a little callow.' It goes without saying that people are ultimately responsible for the 'things and systems' they create. And it also goes without saying—one of the ironic themes of *White Noise*—that people have a hard time recognizing their faces in the mirror of modern technology, no doubt because they never wanted their technological revolutions to get out of control, assume a malevolent, undesirable life of their own, become virtually self-governing, like nature itself.

[Jonathan] Yardley picks up the theme of the *Time* reviewer, what deserves to be called 'happy humanism.' Yardley thinks DeLillo is 'prodigiously gifted,' a 'writer of stupendous talents'—superlatives quickly followed by phrases of bitter disappointment. *White Noise* is 'another of DeLillo's exercises in fiction as political tract'; he's a 'pamphleteer, not a novelist, he's interested in ideas and institutions...but not in people.' His books are 'dazzling' but 'heartless'—'empty' at their 'core': 'Until he has something to say that comes from the heart rather than the evening news, his novels will fall far short of his talents.' And so on. The best response to Yardley that I've seen came in Diane Johnson's *New York Review of Books* piece, where, taking him on directly, she reminds him that without 'a willingness to engage the problems of the world around him we would not have the novels of Dickens, just as, without an acid tone and interest in abstraction, we would not have the novels of Voltaire'....

Among reviewers of *White Noise*, Johnson deserves the last word with this intriguing sentence: 'In all his work he seems less angry or disappointed than some critics of society, as if he had expected less in the first place, or perhaps his marvelous power with words is compensation for him.' Impulses aesthetic and critical have—classically—stood in starkest opposition, but they go together in the modernist idea of literature, perhaps no more seamlessly than in Don DeLillo, last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation."

Frank Lentricchia, ed.
Introduction
New Essays on White Noise
(Cambridge U 1991) 1, 6-7, 12-14

"If the phenomenon of white noise serves as DeLillo's metaphor for the way in which technology covers over an existential perception of finitude (white noise is literally an artificially produced electronic noise invented to cover over the silence which disturbs workers in modern soundproof buildings), it also functions as his trope for finitude itself, something just beyond 'the range of human apprehension,' below our daily level of consciousness, 'sound all around,' 'uniform, white.' Technology, which promises (or threatens) to remove or cover over *Angst*, ultimately reproduces it in a new and vivid form.... For DeLillo, as for Heidegger, the danger of technology is greater on the metaphysical than on the physical level....

The world in which postmodern reality is taken to be the only 'true' one is a product of technology, or of its essence. Of all contemporary novelists, including Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo has most fully dramatized this state of affairs, given it its most detailed, expressive, and philosophically powerful representation. *White Noise* is DeLillo's exploration of an America in which technology has become not merely a pervasive and mortal threat to each of its citizens, but also, and more importantly, a deeply ingrained mode of existing and way of thinking that is the characteristic feature of the republic.... The by-products of 'technology with a human face' (DeLillo's richly suggestive parody of Alexander Dubcek's 'socialism with a human face')—nuclear waste, chemical pollutants, airborne toxic events—are in any event as deadly to communists as to capitalists....

For DeLillo's characters, contemporary American 'reality' has become completely mediated and artificial... Interspersed in DeLillo's novel, woven between passages of narrative and dialogue, we discover a litany of brand names, advertising slogans, the flotsam and jetsam of consumer culture: Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex... They are the 'white noise' of postmodern America that envelops the Gladneys and the inhabitants of Blacksmith. 'a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension'... 'CABLE NATURE' advertises...the underlying promise of postmodern culture: Nature is on tap, on cable, readily available to any American viewer who possesses access to subscriber television. The sequence promises a complete and godlike control of the human 'environment': health, weather, news, nature itself, all are at the disposal of the consumer.... It is precisely by way of technology reducing nature to a postmodern *simulacrum* (a copy with no original), 'CABLE NATURE,' that man assumes sovereignty over a reality that was once understood to transcend man himself.... Having set out to reduce nature to an object and ultimately a construct, man succeeds in reducing human nature to an object or construct, a mere thing....

Battling for state funds to keep their organization alive, the group [SIMUVAC] makes use of the 'airborne toxic event,' a real technological disaster, as a model for their planned simulation. The absurdity

of this bizarre reversal reveals that these organizations [Environmentalists] operate according to the same logic as do those cultural and economic forces they ostensibly oppose. The identity of the right, in the form of big business, and the left, in the form of environmental watch groups, stems from a fundamentally shared conception of nature as an *environment*.... For both, the *environment* is in man's keeping and control, and it is his responsibility to administer it according to a modern scientific understanding of the world.... The problem with theoreticians like Murray is their willingness to recommend theoretical solutions with unpredictable but all too palpable consequences.... [The policies of Environmentalists are burning down the national forests.] DeLillo's reluctance to become identified with any specific political agenda, his refusal to offer a wholesale plan for social transformation, his steady insistence that he does not 'have a program,' should be understood as the prudence of a theoretically sophisticated novelist who recognizes the terrible dangers that theory may pose when it offers to become practice....

The seventeenth century is important for DeLillo... It is the century in which...the 'invention' of television comes over to the New World on the *Mayflower*.... For DeLillo the origins of postmodern American 'identity' lie in that projected ideal of self-hood which the pilgrims, fleeing the constraints of the Old World, bring to the New World. Television, particularly in the form of advertising, produces and then circulates that image of the self that Americans, even before they arrived at Plymouth Rock, had longed to become. One might say that for DeLillo the seventeenth century is the one in which America is invented in the minds of those Europeans who first settled in the New World....

Throughout his work, DeLillo reveals that postmodernism marks a culmination rather than a break with the empiricist scientific tradition inaugurated in the seventeenth century. In so doing, DeLillo challenges a fundamental premise of contemporary postmodern thought: that postmodern thinking overcomes or 'deconstructs' the false belief in absolute scientific objectivity. Like Heidegger, DeLillo suggests that the most basic assumption of postmodern thought—that man can know only that which he constructs—was already the explicit axiomatic basis of the modern scientific project. We would do well to remember that the reigning dogma of contemporary critical thought—that knowledge is the expression of power and that power constitutes knowledge—was the openly acknowledged starting point for those seventeenth-century thinkers such as Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes who laid the philosophical foundation on which the modern scientific project was built....

The greatest threat of technology is its promise of immortality; its most Faustian form in *White Noise* is Dylar. The drug is a failure... In the postmodern world the prospect of immortality must seem oddly out of place. After all, is not postmodern society precisely the one which has become fully demystified and secularized? For DeLillo, however, postmodern reality unexpectedly produces its own set of myths, cults, gods, and immortals. The concluding passage of *White Noise* reveals the quintessential postmodern environment, the supermarket, to be completely saturated with the aura of the sacred.... In dramatic fashion DeLillo illustrates for us what Horkheimer and Adorno termed the dialectic of enlightenment, the paradoxical way in which scientific enlightenment reverts to new forms of mythology.... DeLillo clearly understands that for millions of his followers Elvis is a latter-day saint, and that it is the technological power of the media which effects his canonization, preserves his iconographic image, keeps him alive forever....

The technological media also guarantee an essential psychic and physical distance between viewer and event, while creating the illusion of intimacy and nearness. So immense is this technological power that a character like Jack Gladney who finds himself in the path of the deadly toxic cloud almost involuntarily conceptualizes it as a colossal postmodern representation: 'The cloud resembled a national promotion for death...' The technological media thus alienate the individual from personal death in at least two ways. First, they transform the deaths of all individuals, insofar as they are captured on film or in 'heavy print,' into yet another commodity intended for mass consumption. Second, by imposing an increasingly automatic and involuntary identification with the camera eye, the media fosters the illusion that the witnessing consciousness of the individual television viewer, like the media themselves, is a permanent fixture possessing a transcendental perspective....

By transforming death into a product which is eagerly consumed (the Gladneys never get enough of televised disasters), the media enormously reinforce and heighten the illusion that death happens only to

others. When the toxic spill takes place not far from Jack's home, he initially ignores it, since life-threatening disasters, as the televised news represents them, always happen elsewhere, and principally, if not exclusively, affect the poor, not the bourgeoisie.... Since Angst or fear of death is so vague, so objectless, it becomes possible for the inauthentic self to overcome its anxiety by focusing on a specific, and often trivial cause. Jack suggests to Babette that she is actually worried about her weight.... Dylar is peculiarly suited to a postmodern culture insofar as it makes no claims to treat causes, only to alleviate symptoms. The technocratic and behaviorist approach of Grey Research, the firm in *White Noise* that manufactures Dylar, follows the instrumental reasoning of a purely representational conception of the world; manipulate the signs, deconstruct the symptoms, and the cause or referent in effect disappears.... The society which encourages the production of Dylar is one which tends to understand all human beings on the model of a thing. As Jack would have it, repeating the words of his son Heinrich, a contemporary pure product of postmodern culture, 'We're the sum of our chemical impulses'....

The supermarket is a powerful synecdoche for postmodern society. In it man encounters only that which he constructs or produces. So powerful is the illusion of omnipotence that he comes to understand himself as that which is constituted by those products. They provide his 'fullness of being,' a fullness of being counterposed to the seemingly alienated existence of those 'who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening'.... Substitute the word 'technology' for 'Hitler' and the existential equation becomes clear. The two are interchangeable terms; both offer to conceal the isolated and anxiety-ridden individual from death, and both promise to increase the power and significance of that individual in order that he may conquer death....The modern technological project ultimately refuses to acknowledge any natural limitations on man, chief among which is human mortality.

In so doing, the new science presumes to answer definitively the question of what man's relationship to nature ought to be. No less certain of itself, postmodernism, particularly when it understands itself as the antithesis rather than the culmination of the modern scientific project, confidently and unequivocally banishes from critical discussion the questions of human nature and of nature in general. Rather than entertain a careful and judicious debate over the possible meanings of such terms, postmodern criticism regards the questions themselves as illegitimate. Raising the grim specter of 'universalist' discourse, postmodernism summarily declares 'the end of philosophy'."

Michael Valdez Moses
"Lust Removed from Nature"
New Essays (1991) 63-84

"Many discussions of *White Noise* do not so much as mention Hitler, most touch on the subject only in passing, seldom even noting the oddness of what DeLillo does with Hitler in the novel.... The bland acceptance of DeLillo's treatment of Hitler in academic circles seems to mirror the very phenomenon *White Noise* portrays: a scholarly world so open-minded that it can now accommodate any subject without evidently blinking an eye.... The international makeup of the [Hitler] conference reflects the characteristic cosmopolitanism of the postmodern world, in which the distinctive meaning of Hitler as a national phenomenon—it was after all *National Socialism*—threatens to dissolve. On the face of it, the idea of coming to a random small town in the United States in order to study Hitler seems ridiculous. Only the promise of 'actual Germans' in attendance seems to offer any hope of authenticity....

Given their distinctive habits, [politically correct] academics are in fact the least capable of coming to terms with Hitler and Nazism.... By setting *White Noise* within the academic world, DeLillo may have taken us close to the bloodless heart of postmodernism.... In Jack's comic—because halfhearted, academic, and postmodern—way, he repeats the tragedy of Weimar Germany. DeLillo understands the psychological appeal of totalitarianism. When people lose their traditional bearings in life, especially religious guidance, they are wide open to the power of anyone who appears to have the conviction and self-assurance to lead them and thus restore meaning to their lives. DeLillo has a chilling sense that in the twentieth century only the criminals have the courage of their convictions.... DeLillo grasps the power of the man with a single-minded will in a world of individuals who have lost the ability to will....

DeLillo suggests that the spiritual void that made Hitler's rise to power possible is still with us, perhaps exacerbated by the forces at work in postmodern culture.... Americans are no longer united by a common

religion ('liturgies') or even by political forces ('laws').... Ultimately Gladney traces Hitler's hypnotic erotic power over crowds to the fact that he filled a religious need in them.... Here is DeLillo's concrete evidence of the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny: Even a lecture about Hitler can have something of the effect of an actual speech of Hitler. However troubling they may be, DeLillo is concerned with showing parallels between German fascism and contemporary American culture... Clearly Elvis has come to fill some kind of psychological and spiritual need in the American people, becoming in effect canonized and the object of quasi-religious worship, complete with pilgrimages to Graceland....

In the midst of the postmodern flattening of distinctions, people need to look up to something, and their media celebrities become a debased version of an aristocracy they can worship. The American Elvis cult is a postmodern simulacrum of the German Hitler cult. In the midst of a genuine economic and political crisis, the Germans turned to Hitler for their salvation. Not faced with problems of this magnitude, but still experiencing a spiritual void, Americans turn not to an actual political leader but to a purely artificial image of greatness, the celebrity....

Like all of DeLillo's work, *White Noise* portrays postmodern America. Faced with an ideology of freedom and self-development, and swamped by an overabundance of material resources, DeLillo's Americans are set adrift in a sea of possibilities... Consider the typical postmodern building, with an Egyptian pyramid here, a Roman arch there, and a Renaissance portico somewhere else. This is the flattening out of history: removing the privilege from any particular historical moment and hence equalizing all historical possibilities.... In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie explores the relation between premodern authenticity (religion based on revelation) and postmodern inauthenticity (films about religious revelation)....

Is DeLillo a postmodern writer or is he a pathologist of postmodernism? I have tried to show that DeLillo is a powerful analyst and critic of those aspects of contemporary life that are usually labeled postmodern. His satiric techniques strongly suggest that he is distanced from what he is writing about... Part of DeLillo wanted to say that we have lost touch with everything that was authentic in our world and in our culture. But I sense that part of DeLillo wants to say that nothing has really changed; things have always been this way. We have our television, but the Nazi Germans had their movies, and neither culture stood in an unmediated relation to reality....

DeLillo wavers between criticizing postmodernism and practicing it. Gladney's vision of Attila could be another one of DeLillo's attempts to characterize the postmodern condition, showing how it cuts people off not just from the world of nature but from the authentic human past, as they cannot help assimilating figures out of history to the mediated patterns of their own attenuated existence.... DeLillo himself seems unable to break out of the postmodern circle and offer a convincing alternative to its diminished reality. In short, he can give us a vision of the inauthentic but not, it seems, of the authentic.

DeLillo is sufficiently distanced from postmodern existence to want to be able to criticize it, but sufficiently implicated in it to have a hard time finding an Archimedean point from which to do the criticizing. That is why he disturbs critics...with his unwillingness to take straightforward stands, even against the evil of Hitler. But that is also the reason why DeLillo is one of the representative writers of our age and one of the most illuminating. Even as he shares in the uncertainties and confusions of postmodernism, he helps to place it in historical perspective."

Paul A. Cantor

"Adolph, We Hardly Knew You"

New Essays (1991) 40-42, 46-49, 51-54, 58-61

"For the last hundred years or so, the divorce rate in the United States has risen precipitously in periodic cycles that have triggered public alarm. The publication of *White Noise* in 1985 came in the middle of the most recent of these cycles. From the mid-seventies onward, whether in panic over traditional values or hopeful of antibourgeois alternatives, academic writers have been proclaiming the 'decline of the American family' and predicting its imminent 'dissolution'... DeLillo takes it for granted that bonds of blood and marriage have been trivialized, and that in their trivialization society has lost one of its foundations....

The matters of intercourse and procreation, of lineage and place, that for someone like Faulkner would be the founding, inexorable blood-knowledge of existence itself seem for Jack and the others to be pieces of trivia, the flotsam and jetsam of circumstance. DeLillo has configured the family trees of the children living in the Gladney house to parody the state of the domestic art in contemporary middle America: Heinrich, fourteen, from the marriage of Jack to Janet Savory (who as Mother Devi runs a profitable ashram in Tubb, Montana); Denise, eleven, from the marriage of Babette to Bob Pardee (who raises money for the legal defense fund of the nuclear industry); Steffie, a couple or so years younger than Denise, from the marriage of Jack and Dana Breedlove (who is a CIA courier in the third world); and Wilder, two, from the marriage of Babette to an unnamed 'researcher' in the outback of Australia. Heinrich has a sister living with their mother; Wilder has a brother living with their father; Jack has at least one more daughter (Bee) from his middle wife (Tweedy Browner). We learn no details whatsoever of the circumstances of remarriage or the strategies behind the redistribution of children that went into the making of the Gladney household or its many satellites....

Each adult lives with a third or fourth spouse, a son from a previous marriage, a daughter from a different previous marriage, a stepson from one of the latest spouse's previous marriages, and a stepdaughter from another of that spouse's previous marriages. Every child lives with one progenitor, that parent's current mate, one half-sibling of the opposite sex whose other parent lives elsewhere, and a combination of stepsister and stepbrother who are only half-siblings to one another. *Each* adult lives therefore with five other people whose average relation to him or her is only 20 percent; *every* child lives with five other people whose average relation to him or her is only 15 percent; and *everyone* in the household lives with five other people, *each of whom* is related on average by no more than (the same) 20 percent to *everyone else* in the house. Not a single child whom Babette has borne or whom Jack has fathered, whether in their custody or not, is living with both parents or even a full brother or sister. Above all, the current assemblage has not been together longer than Wilder's two years of age, and in all probability less than that....

The Gladneys are a representative contemporary family: What their contemporaneity consists of is a relatively efficacious, even compelling domesticity under which lies a basis of quicksand, the no-fault-no-shame-divorce.... Consumerism produces what we might call an aura of connectedness among individuals: an illusion of kinship, transiently functional but without either sustaining or restraining power, a stimulant that at the same time renders one unable to feel either the sacredness or the tyranny of the family bond.... Part of what lies at the bottom of Jack's urge to shop is a sense of disappointment in the supposed 'community' of the university.... By shopping with his family he becomes 'one with his family'... The kind of intercourse conducted in the market generates an effect of kinship that pushes beyond mere semblance to genuine warmth and mutual need. All the more tragic, then, that the family is periodically rendered asunder, its members forced to configure alternative households and to build connectedness anew. It is the failure of the Gladneys to marshal their own recognitions of the sacred and the necessary that, in the final analysis, most depresses DeLillo....

Television menaces the home with an omnipresent temptation to substitute the communal experience of the image for the ties that no longer bind.... Killing the capacity for individual response, television unites families in an orgy of sensationalism that leaves its participants, like any powerful narcotic, thirsty (in this case bloodthirsty) for more.... Television can be said to seduce us with a major reconstruction of the nature of reality... Throughout the novel, the children give themselves over wholeheartedly to energizing rituals of familial consumerism.... For them, the unannounced appearance of Babette on TV raises familial consumerism to a higher power. They feel exhilaration in the crossing of the boundary between substance and illusion, between their actual mother and her mediated likeness. They participate in something like a secular Mass: What is circulated as the transcendent is Babette's image, made holy by the power of the medium, a postmodern communion of the commodified illusion....

In making Babette an image the media has robbed her of her inner self, a process that by their rapturous passivity they have approved, supported, exploited.... In the naivete that signifies the advance of postmodernity itself, Wilder has simply taken the image to be Babette.... Wilder, whose youthful innocence is meant to augur the next stage of human experience.... One day the transmission lines will go down and leave us staring before a blank screen, perhaps infantilized, no doubt helpless without our image-fix....

Jack invests his hope...in the maturing of his children into 'post-postmodernist' alienation.... For Bee and Steffie to have attended Disney World together is sufficient, in today's America, for them to know each other as kin.... Wilder nearly gets himself killed by tricycling across the expressway: which is arguably a dramatization of spiritual renewal in a stricter sense, something like reawakening to the miracle of a reproduced life itself....

To say that Jack has a tone resembling Pynchon's is to underscore here both his deprecatory self-irony ('the first marriage worked well enough') and, more importantly, the sarcastic way in which he deflates older forms of rhetoric ('a star-hung night in Barbados') to signify the deflation in the action itself (conceiving and by implication receiving a child so nonchalantly)... [Allen] Ginsberg [is] a spiritual as well as ethnic precursor of Murray Jay Siskind."

Thomas J. Ferraro
"Whole Families Shopping at Night!"
New Essays (1991) 16-18, 26-29, 33-36

"White noise is literally an anaesthetic, paving the imagination for the transportation of sanctioned simulations.... As DeLillo assesses them, the recurring themes in his novels are 'Perhaps a sense of secret patterns in our lives. A sense of ambiguity'.... Patterns attended by ambiguities—art posits the former while respecting the latter."

Arthur M. Saltzman
"The Figure in the Static: *White Noise*"
Modern Fiction Studies 40.4 (Winter 1994)

"*White Noise* is probably the only novel written by a white male American in the last fifteen years to have consistently broken through to reading lists at colleges and universities in the United States. Given the canon quakes of the last decade, this stands by itself as a cultural fact worthy of mention.... It is my sense that *White Noise* has begun to replace *The Crying of Lot 49* as the one book professors use to introduce students to a postmodern sensibility. I have taught the book at two universities.... The novel seems to draw out a certain buried awareness in my students that the most familiar aspects of their lives—shopping malls, television, families, and the languages of these things—harbor deep and resonant mysteries. It affects them, I think, as a sustained defamiliarization of their own lives.... Preposterously funny, immediately accessible, yet deeply sophisticated on a formal and stylistic level, *White Noise* is one of the few novels capable of mastering—perhaps taming—our schizoid confusions about the mass media experience.... It seems to illuminate reigning theories of cultural postmodernism.... [Baudrillard, Jameson, Lyotard—Murray Jay Siskind]

Gradually the incongruities between the novel and the theories of postmodernism began to slip. It no longer seems to me accurate to call the world of *White Noise* a 'mediascape' or a 'mediocracy,' for instance, or to see a smoothly homologous relationship between the 'white noise' of the novel and Baudrillard's concept of simulacra. Something else is operating in the novel that has been escaping our notice.... DeLillo's ideas about language are quite different from those of the postmodern theorists I've mentioned. Beginning with *The Names*, and then in *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Mao II*, and the novella 'Pafko at the Wall,' DeLillo has been exploring the idea that language is something more than a ceaseless flow of signifiers with no resting place; further more, he's been suggesting that the 'white noise' of consumer culture is saying something far more compelling than that our minds have been colonized by the static of late capitalism.... The phenomenon of 'white noise' is not merely the cultural dreck of consumerism, not the demotic language DeLillo's characters use to shut themselves off from their terror that they will die—far from it, in fact. 'White noise' is for DeLillo contemporary man's deepest expression of his death fear, a strange and genuinely awe-inspiring response to the fear of mortality in the postmodern world....

It is this mysterious 'swarming life,' whatever it is, swirling amidst us in the noises we make, that DeLillo seems to be after.... This swerve away from the denotative content of language evolve into something of a conscious strategy for both DeLillo and some of his characters starting with *The Names*. The novel is a breakthrough book insofar as it articulates for the first time a virtually religious sense of awe before the very fact that language exists, as if DeLillo had discovered an extraordinary mystery in the utterly familiar act of human utterance....

The phenomenon of white noise goes far beyond 'neutral and reified mediaspeech' or capitalist appropriation. White noise manifests itself in much subtler ways, in ways that have little to do with consumerism, mass media, or high technology. It isn't merely imposed from without by socioeconomic or communicational systems, but emerges from sources originating within the characters, from the same organismic death fear that we find operating in *The Names*. White noise, therefore, encompasses a wide variety of human utterance, both denotative and not. Examples are everywhere.... What all these phenomena share is a passion for utterance to 'bridge the lonely distances,' to 'establish a structure against the terror of our souls.' It is language as the denial of death, as the evasion of what cannot be evaded. 'Pain, death, reality,' Murray Jay Siskind will say: 'we can't bear these things as they are. We know too much. So we resort to repression, compromise, and disguise. This is how we survive in the universe. This is the natural language of the species'....

What the novel brings together, then, are two kinds of white noise: that which is a product of late capitalism and a simulacral society, and that which has always been 'the natural language of the species'—death evasion—and which now gets expressed in the argot of consumer culture. The result is a vision of contemporary America that bypasses cultural critique in favor of recording awe at what our civilization has wrought. Because for DeLillo, while white noise certainly registers the ways in which Americans evade their death fear, it can also be heard—provided we learn to listen properly—as a moving and quite beautiful expression of that death fear. It becomes nothing less than a stirring revelation of the fear of death, a noise of great (and frankly, unpostmodern) pathos....

Three important passages in the novel reveal that there is wonder and a curious kind of revelation in the recognition that white noise communicates the death-fear. In each one, Jack hears a different kind of white noise, and by a mysterious *entrance* into its sound, he experiences what can only be called an epiphany. It is not the kind of epiphany which changes his character; Jack enters, each time, into a strange relation with the sound which is seemingly timeless, and has no after-effects in the temporal realm. The epiphanic revelations don't help him 'deal' with his death-fear in any tangible way, especially because Jack doesn't know what it is he's experiencing....

The first moment [1] comes during Wilder's seven-hour stint of crying.... In his hysterical terror, Wilder is expressing (however unconsciously) his death fear, and in a primal way is trying to 'bridge the lonely distances'.... The religious language Jack employs evokes his exalted feeling that sharing his death-terror with his son is a primordial human moment.... A second epiphanic moment [2] comes during the Airborne Toxic Event. Jack, having had a computer confirm just minutes earlier that 'death has entered' his body, overhears his daughter Steffie whisper in her sleep the words 'Toyota Celica.' He responds by saying that 'the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence.' Critics so far have been baffled by what seems to them Jack's outsized response to his daughter's words, but if we see Steffie's outburst as an example of the death-fear speaking *through* consumer jargon, then Jack's wondrous awe will strike us, strange as it may seem, as absolutely appropriate.... Something splendid, if not transcendent, is indeed going on.... Jack has touched the quick of his daughter's death-fear here just as he had with Wilder earlier.... The third epiphanic moment...[3] takes place at the end of then novel, after Jack has shot Willie Mink and is being treated by Sister Hermann Marie for a flesh wound to his wrist. Jack has shot Willie in a psychological re-enactment of a Nazi's efforts to conquer his own death fears by killing others....

The strategy of death-evasion—'the natural language of the species'—that characterizes white noise illuminates much of the novel. Jack's immersion in Hitler studies is clearly his attempt to bury himself in a discourse so horrible that his own death-fear is made puny.... Dylar is a kind of pharmaceutical reification of white noise: a pill to evade the death-fear.... The principle behind Jack's narrative voice—which in my view is the novel's greatest aesthetic achievement...is Jack's enormous awe at the most familiar events, an awe that comes from his knowledge that the backdrop for the familiar is the dark mystery of mortality. Murray, however, manages to express only delight, or else mere semiotic interest, in the phenomena around him.... In his most fateful action, Murray carefully guides Jack through a thicket of rationalization into a psychological clearing where it appears that the only thing Jack can do about his death fear is to kill Willie Mink....

Murray...is both the novel's ecstatic seer and its evil presence. He mouths the most brilliant lines in the book, and clearly speaks many of DeLillo's observations about postmodern society. At the same time, he is the most compelling element in the plot's movement 'deathward,' and his clinical objectivity is unearthly. He many as well be from another planet. If every other character is actuated by his or her death fear, Murray's character is precisely defined by his lack of one. He is a man without a self, for in this novel to have no death fear is to have no self. It is not Murray, but Jack, speaking with that disarmingly baffled voice, whose unintended humor gives off the novel's brilliant sheen of tender irony, who is capable of uttering the mysteries of white noise....

DeLillo's attitude toward the world of his novel is generous-spirited; it is not so much that he is uncritical toward a mass consumer society as that he has attempted to complicate the stiff categories of ideological or cultural critique. The novel does not 'celebrate' the white noise of advertising and mass media—of course not. But it realizes that it is in that noise that our terrors and longings can be read."

Cornel Bonca
"Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species"
College Literature 23.2 (June 1996)

"The communication revolution, seen by sociologists like Baudrillard to be the key constitutive feature of our age, has aggrandized the media to the point where signs have displaced their referents, where images of the Real have usurped the authority of the Real, whence the subject is engulfed by simulacra... What [Postmodernist] responses to the truth claims of the visionary moment share is a radically antimetaphysical stance. We see the visionary moment, with all its pretensions to truth and transcendence, exposed as (1) a literary convention, (2) a logocentric illusion, and (3) a hyperreal construct. In short, the metaphysical foundations of traditional conceptions of the visionary moment cannot survive the deconstructive [Atheist] thrust of postmodern thinking.... DeLillo has been widely hailed as an exemplar of postmodernist writing.... But to postmodernize DeLillo is to risk losing sight of the (conspicuously unpostmodern) metaphysical impulse that animates his work. Indeed, the terms in which he identifies visionary experience in his fiction will be seen to align him so closely with a Romantic sensibility that they must radically qualify any reading of him as a postmodern writer....

What we expect from Gladney's daughter, Steffie, is a profound, revelatory utterance. Instead, we are surprised by (what appears to be) a banality: 'Toyota Celica.' Here it looks as if DeLillo is mocking the traditional faith in visionary moments or, more precisely, ironically questioning the very possibility of such moments in a postmodern culture.... 'Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence'.... The tenor of this passage is not parodic... Gladney's words are not to be dismissed as delusional, nor are they to be depreciated as those of 'a modernist displaced in a postmodern world.' The passage is typical of DeLillo's tendency to seek out transcendent moments in our postmodern lives that hint at possibilities for cultural regeneration. Clearly, the principal point of the passage is not that 'Toyota Celica' is the signifier of a commodity (and as such has only illusory significance as a visionary utterance), but that *as a name* it has a mystical resonance and potency: 'It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky,' a name that is felt to be 'part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.' For what is revealed to Gladney in this visionary moment is that names embody a formidable power. And this idea is itself the expansive theme, explored in its metaphysical implications, of *The Names*, the novel that immediately preceded *White Noise*.... DeLillo highlights the paradox that while so much language, in the media society, has degenerated into mere prattle and cliches, brand names not only flourish but convey a magic and mystical significance. Hence they are often chanted like incantations....

Earlier passages in *White Noise* derive their meaning from the same Romantic metaphysics of language as Gladney's 'moment of splendid transcendence.' First, consider Gladney's response to the crying of his baby, Wilder... For DeLillo, language operates on two levels: a practical, denotative level, that is, a mode of language oriented toward business, information, and technology, and a 'deeper,' primal level which is the ground of visionary experience...the 'ancient dirge' that Gladney hears in Wilder's wailing; the 'language not quite of this world' that he hears in Steffie's sleep-talk; the 'psychic data' that Siskind finds beneath white noise. In communications theory, 'white noise' describes a random mix of frequencies over

a wide spectrum that render signals unintelligible.... The Romantic notion of infant insight, of the child as gifted with an intuitive perception of truth, sets DeLillo's writing apart from postmodern trends. For, of all modes of fiction, it is postmodernism that is least hospitable to concepts like insight and intuition....

DeLillo applies the metaphor of a circumambient white noise to suggest, on the one hand, the entropic state of postmodern culture where in general communications are degraded by triviality and irrelevance.... Yet, on the other hand, DeLillo suggests that within that incoherent mix of frequencies there is, as it were, a low wavelength that carries a flow of spiritually charged meaning. This flow of meaning is barely discernible, but, in the novel, it is figured in the recurring phrase 'waves and radiation'—an undercurrent of invisible forces or 'nameless energies' that have regenerative powers....

In another visionary experience, Gladney has mystical insight into the force—a huge, floating cloud of toxic chemicals—that threatens his life.... This 'awed,' 'religious' perception of a powerful force, which seems in its immensity capable of overwhelming the onlooker, is characteristic of that order of experience explored by the Romantics under the name of 'the Sublime'.... The Romantic-metaphysical character of DeLillo's rendering of sublime experience is evident in the pivotal place he gives to the feeling of 'awe.' Not only is the term repeated in Gladney's description of his feelings toward the toxic cloud, but it is used three times, along with the kindred terms 'dread' and 'wonder,' in a later account of that characteristically Romantic experience of the sublime, namely, gazing at a sunset.... DeLillo is more likely to endorse his characters' beliefs in transcendent realities than to dismiss them....

The fact that DeLillo writes so incisively of the textures of postmodern experience, of daily life in the midst of images, commodities, and conspiracies, does not make him a postmodern writer. His Romantic appeals to a primal language of vision, to the child's psyche as a medium of precious insight, to the sublime contravene the anti-metaphysical norms of postmodern theory. Moreover, while there is, to be sure, a significant strain of irony that runs through his fiction, it does not finally undercut his metaphysics.... It is precisely this metaphysical cast of thinking that separates DeLillo from the thoroughgoing postmodernism of, say, Walter Abish or Robert Coover, and that should prompt us to qualify radically our tendency to read him as an exemplary postmodern writer."

Paul Maltby
"The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo"
Contemporary Literature 37.2 (Summer 1996) 258-77

"The novel garnered the best reviews and strongest sales of DeLillo's career to that point. It is not difficult to understand why it became one of the most widely acclaimed fictional works of the 1980s: its mordantly witty anatomy of the postnuclear family; its sly satire of television, advertising, and academia; its letter-perfect portrayal of the sounds and sights of supermarkets, malls, and tabloids all strike chords that reverberate strongly with contemporary Americans.

When *White Noise* was first published in January 1985, reviewers were struck by its timeliness; indeed, appearing only a month after a toxic chemical leak at a Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, killed some 2,500 people, DeLillo's novel—with an 'airborne toxic event' at its center—seemed almost eerily prescient. Although a few reviewers criticized its plot (or alleged plotlessness), found its witticisms too clever, or accused the author of 'trendiness,' these voices were drowned out by a chorus of praise. As they did in his earlier novels, reviewers recognized the validity of DeLillo's insights about the oppressive effects of contemporary cultural institutions and applauded the astonishing linguistic gifts *White Noise* displays in its sparkling dialogue and in Jack Gladney's alternately bemused, frightened, and self-critical narrative voice. Many readers found Gladney more approachable than the alienated protagonists of DeLillo's previous works; many adults—especially, I suspect, academics—would echo Gladney's blend of denunciation of and baffled appreciation for popular culture.

But the novel's most immediately appealing quality is its humor: it's simply a very funny book. I remember reading aloud to friends Jack and Babette's pre-coital conversation about 'entering,' Heinrich's stubborn refusal to accept his senses' evidence of rain, and the uproarious one-upmanship of the American Environments department. Although DeLillo's earlier novels were also humorous, they carried a more sardonic, Swiftian edge that lacerated with a cooler precision. Many readers have found *White Noise's*

humor more palatable because it is leavened by a warmth and compassion less obvious in DeLillo's earlier work. Much of this warm comedy is derived from DeLillo's slightly skewed depiction of the postmodern family, where the once-solid core of mom, dad, and kids has given way to a loose aggregate of siblings, step-siblings, and ex-spouses rotating in various impermanent groupings....

Jack Gladney...has four children: Mary Alice (age 19) and Steffie (9), from his first and second marriages to Dana Breedlove; Heinrich (14), from his marriage to Janet Savory (now known as Mother Devi); and Bee (12), from his marriage to Tweedy Browner. Only Heinrich and Steffie live with Jack. His wife Babette's three children are Denise (age 11), Eugene (8), and Wilder (about 2).... Since Wilder is not Jack's child, this 'family' can have been together no more than two years; moreover, not one child is living with a full sibling.... This condition of permanent impermanence affects all of Blacksith, a place of 'tag sales and yard sales' where 'failed possessions' testify to failed marriages....

There is abundant information around, but nobody seems to know anything. And just as the family members gorge themselves with disposable information and fast food, so are they also inundated by consumer goods, not only when they visit the supermarket and the mall, but also when they are at home watching television, which they seem to do constantly.... Jack's colleague Murray...enthusiastically celebrates television and shopping as contemporary religious rituals...DeLillo dramatizes the omnipresence of TV and consumerism by punctuating the scenes with disembodied electronic voices and lists of brand names. Simultaneously attesting to the novel's highly textured realism and violating it by reminding us of the author's controlling presence, these mysterious, often acerbic insertions are one reason the novel has been called 'postmodern'....

The relatively plotless part 1 presents itself as a hyper-intelligent TV sitcom, complete with brainy children, zany friends, and banal conflicts.... Things turn much darker when, in part 2, the family is forced to flee a toxic leak; the book begins to resemble a disaster thriller, except that DeLillo is less interested in providing graphic descriptions of poisoning than in tracing its subtler, long-term effects, especially on Jack, who is exposed to the toxic substance and hence 'tentatively scheduled to die.' No longer comforted by hunkering in Hitler's penumbra, and bereft of strong ties to religion, community, or family, Jack becomes desperately obsessed with his mortality. The novel seems to veer into a midlife crisis tale.... Jack's less attractive qualities—self-absorption, hypocrisy, rage—emerge, prompting him to devise an implausible plot that itself seems to come from a TV movie. Yet Jack's alternately ludicrous and pathetic confrontation with his nemesis neither solves his problem nor resolves the plot, which does not, after all, 'move deathward.' With this enigmatic, postmodernist conclusion, the novel moves beyond all the formulae it has employed.

Even those who cherish the novel's comedy cannot ignore its deeply ominous undercurrent, for *White Noise* is most of all a profound study of the American way of death: one of DeLillo's working titles was 'The American Book of the Dead.' It gains much of its remarkable resonance from its unflinching depiction of the nameless fear pervading postmodern society. Like Murray Siskind, DeLillo is particularly interested in 'American magic and dread,' and his novel dramatizes how our obsessions with exercise and disease, our millennialist religions, our tabloid stories of resurrection and celebrity worship, and our compulsive consumerism offer charms to counteract the [Atheist's] terror of oblivion.

White Noise is thus also a novel about religion—or, perhaps more accurately, about belief. Like DeLillo's later novel, *Mao II* (1991), it asks, 'When the old God leaves the world, what happens to all the unexpended faith?' DeLillo has long been attracted to books that 'open out onto some larger mystery'; *White Noise* is such a book, one that alludes constantly to what lies just beyond our hearing, to the mysterious, the untellable, the numinous—to what DeLillo calls the 'radiance in dailiness.' The novel defamiliarizes our familiar world by listening to the sounds and listing the products and places—television, supermarkets, and shopping centers...that channel the spiritual yearnings of contemporary Americans....

White Noise thus brings together many of DeLillo's obsessions: the deleterious effects of capitalism, the power of electronic images, the tyrannical authority and dangerous byproducts of science, the unholy alliance of consumerism and violence, and the quest for sacredness in a secularized world. Like all of his fiction, it displays his virtuoso command of language and, particularly, his ventriloquistic capacity to mimic

the argots of various cultural forms. In it he amplifies the noises around us and permits us to hear again how these sounds shape our own voices and beliefs....

[Tom] LeClair places DeLillo in the canon of other American 'systems novelists' (such as Thomas Pynchon), who analyze the effects of institutions on the individual... [John] Duvall makes the radical claim that consumer society, which pretends to foster free choice, actually inhibits it and thereby promotes a 'protofascist' system that recapitulates the abuses of Nazi Germany.... Only what is broadcast by the media seems real.... Murray Siskind [is] the novel's Mephistophelean spokesman for what...DeLillo finds most dangerous.... Unlike [Cornel] Bonca...who reads white noise as symbol for the denial or fear of death, [Arthur] Salzman hears it as a monotonous, narcotizing sound....

Recent criticism has swerved more decidedly toward reading DeLillo in religious or mystical terms. Paul Maltby sees in DeLillo's faith in the redemptive power of language a reaffirmation of the visionary metaphysics of Romantics such as Wordsworth. Against postmodernist readings of DeLillo, Maltby describes a humanist seeker of the sublime; thus, although Maltby again focuses on Steffie's chanting of 'Toyota Celica,' he finds in it not Saltzman's 'synthetic and deadly' consumer drug, but a potential for sublimity within banality that nonetheless exposes the emptiness and superficiality of contemporary culture.

Clearly *White Noise* is rich enough to provoke contradictory responses, and it will continue to intrigue us because it eludes full explanation. Its conclusion is particularly noteworthy in this regard. How should we interpret Wilder's tricycle ride across the interstate? Is he divinely protected or just lucky? What does it imply about Jack's—and DeLillo's—attitude toward those 'postmodern sunsets' to which the residents of Blacksmith flock? And what is the tone of Jack's final description of the supermarket, with its tabloids offering 'Everything that is not food or love'? Is he voicing a dazed acceptance? Issuing a sardonic warning? Declaring a numbed neutrality? The author neither judges, spells out his message, nor provides a tidy conclusion.... *White Noise* inhabits the very heart of postmodern culture to weigh its menaces against its marvels, alerting us to its wonder as well as its waste."

Mark Osteen, ed.

Introduction

White Noise: Text and Criticism

(Viking Penguin/Critical Library 1998) vii-x, xii-xiv

"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

(MLA 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 (2006) 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 *White 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 absenting 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 (2006) 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 withdraw 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 (2006) 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 (2006) 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 (2006) 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 lucid 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 (2006) 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 (2006) 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 (2006) 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 (2006) 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 (2006) 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 professorate, 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 émigrés...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 (2006) 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 (2006) 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 (2006) 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 (2006) 94-98

“It is DeLillo’s *White Noise* that leads students to the most complicated and sophisticated understanding of the pleasures and dangers of electronic media technologies.... Maggie was part of a class that reached the conclusion that innocent Wilder’s successful tricycle ride across the dangerous terrain of mass-produced technology (cars) signaled a softening of DeLillo’s skepticism. Perhaps, they thought, despite our worries about media technology, Wilder’s making it across the expressway unscathed means that we’ll be all right, after all, that we too will survive our experience of media saturation, but only if we’ve learned not to be jaded by the white noise of media.”

Kathleen LeBesco
“*White Noise* as Wake-Up Call: Teaching DeLillo as Media Skeptic”
Approaches (2006) 85, 90

Michael Hollister (2014)