

# Panic, Death, and Simulation in the Consumerist World of DeLillo's *White Noise*

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## **Abstract**

This article examines American novelist Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) through the lens of postmodernist issues about anxiety, panic, death, consumerism, technology excess, the modern family, and image building. The publication of this work propelled DeLillo to the forefront of the American literary community concerned with social issues. Its realistic portrayal of American life led to widespread acclaim. Using key concepts from postmodern thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, this article delves into the aforementioned postmodern themes. Jack Gladney, his family, and his acquaintances all inhabit a world dominated by marketing and advertising. The characters are thrust into a commercialised and simulated culture that serves only to instil fear, panic, and a desire to keep up with the current of images in their minds. Attempts are made in this document to identify any viable alternatives to the exorbitant level of technological advancement in contemporary American culture.

**Keywords:** Death, Technology, Simulation, Panic, DeLillo, Postmodernity.

## **Introduction**

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is an outstanding portrayal of twentieth century merchandised, commodified, media-saturated, and technologically advanced American culture. Reading the novel allows the reader to receive a comprehensive picture of late twentieth century American society that is characterised by a dominant market culture and images depicted in media. Contemporary culture promises bliss and comfort with an immediate solution to almost any problem, or a product that would instantly provide relief and happiness to the user. This article is an attempt to understand the psyche of postmodern individuals living in a heavily mechanised world, who struggle to find an identity of their own. It aims to evaluate the risks of a media and technology-saturated life that is dictated by what is depicted in popular media. The simulation world created in the novel reduces the

characters to mere copies of images they see on television; the so-called images that are themselves copies of the real. The postmodern person is panic-stricken by an endless fear of death, and thus challenges all the glory of Capitalist American culture. The lust for wealth and goods, globalisation, rapid technological innovation, and consumerism dominate the modern world. Happiness is compromised when feelings, love, and human companionship are severely restricted. As literature is intertwined with society and culture, representations of technology and consumerist culture create new genres. They illuminate not just the plight of the postmodern individual, but also how much technology affects them. Compared to companionship and dialogue with our loved ones, today's society is more concerned with consumption.

DeLillo's works revolve around the relationship between a writer and his contemporary culture that is dominated by consumerism, hyperreality, boredom, loss of individualism, and global terrorism. The avant-garde techniques used by DeLillo to resist the commodification of culture can be found throughout his fiction. With a provocative juxtaposition of avant-gardist techniques and his writing style, he follows in the avant-garde tradition of shocking readers into a new level of awareness and a fluid relationship between his politics and his aesthetics, as well as between modernism and postmodernism. To date, he has received numerous accolades for his outstanding and exceptional contributions to the literary world. *White Noise* (1985), *Libra* (1988), *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997), *Cosmopolis* (2003), and *Point Omega* (2010) are among the sixteen novels he has published to date that have played a significant role in establishing him as a cult writer. Five major plays, including *The Engineer of Moonlight* (1979) and *The Day Room* (1986), *Valparaiso* (1999), *Love Lies Bleeding* (2006), and *World for Snow* (2007), have been written by him as well as a collection of short stories, *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories*. In addition to these, he has a long list of notable articles and essays that have appeared in publications across the country and around the world. DeLillo's works aim to represent contemporary culture by presenting familiar topics in new ways that are both provocative and complex. He thinks that in the American context, where capitalism and consumerism run rampant, artists must use their art as a weapon in the fight against the prevailing social, economic, and political systems.

The power of literature to affect positive social change is timeless. It exerts a tremendous influence on the masses, allowing them to see the truth

in an otherwise simulated world. The purpose of this paper is to make people aware of the negative aspects of their culture and way of life. Literature, therefore, can play a crucial role in bringing about social change, as the two are inseparable. Almost all of DeLillo's novels follow the same theme. A staunch critic of American capitalism, media saturation, and consumerism, he examines the fallacies of American society. Commodities and worldly delights have become commonplace for the postmodern man. His appeal is universal. As a postmodern subject, he is tangled up in the world of images he is bombarded with. Though free to make decisions, the decisions themselves are symbols of power and dominance.

### **Panic and Death**

Fear of facing death and dying underlines the central theme in the novel. The central characters in the novel Jack Gladney and his wife, Babette, continue to struggle with an unending fear of dying. "Who will die first?"<sup>1</sup> is a question that appears several times in the novel emphasising the importance of death as the final destiny of humanity. The postmodern man with all the glamour that the American society provides continues to run away from his ultimate destiny by engaging himself in myriads of tasks. On one hand, while Jack continues to suppress his fear of death from his wife, Babette continues to harbour this fear to the extent of taking medicine, Dylar, that promises to cure the fear of death.

In order to escape death, Jack and Babette continue to reframe their identity that might help them to prolong their life. Jack wears the Garb of Hitler; he is the Professor of Hitler Studies at his college, but in reality he has never read about Hitler, with all his knowledge of the historical figure coming from the images that he receives on television and media. He has also put an extra initial in his name to appear like a learned professor. He confesses that he wears this name as "a tag that I would like a borrowed suit."<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, he wears a pair of glasses with "thick black heavy

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<sup>1</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 19.

frames and dark lenses” which has even started affecting his eyesight badly.<sup>3</sup> His fear to face his actual personality pushes him to continue with this garbed identity. For him, the dangerous figure of Hitler becomes a protective shelter to ward off death. For Gladney, bearing the tyrannical figure of Hitler enables him to achieve certain power and privilege that he would not have gathered being the real Jack Gladney. He simply signifies the dilemma of the postmodern individual threatened by the uncertainty of life despite having all the essentials and comforts that life can offer. In one of the documentaries of Hitler that he shows to his students in college on the hill, he realises the inevitable nature of death and that being a part of the crowd can be the only way to avoid death:

Many of those crowds were assembled in the name of the death. They were there to attend tributes to the dead. Processions, songs, speeches, dialogues with the dead, recitation in the name of the dead. They were there to see pyres and flaming wheels, thousands of flags dipped in salute, thousands of uniformed mourners. There were ranks and squadrons, elaborate backdrops, blood banners and black dress uniforms. Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd.<sup>4</sup>

The dead warmonger and Nazi Adolf Hitler is transformed by the media into a demigod with incomparable power, through the production of documentaries about his life and reruns of World War II heroics on television. As Jean Baudrillard notes in *Simulacra and Simulations*:

Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real; murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the Real. All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course . . . Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or

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<sup>3</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 87.

circumference.<sup>5</sup>

Media such as television and radio have paved the way for a hyperreal world that appeals to people more than their mundane but real day-to-day routines. The persona of Jack Gladney illustrates the ability of media to reduce the signified to a mere image or representation. Human beings been thrown together into the world of meaningless images. Gladney is captivated by Hitler because of the all-encompassing authority and authority-wielding nature of Hitler's connection to death. Gladney has worked hard to maintain the reputation he has built since 1965 when the centre for Hitler Studies was first established. He even confesses, "I am a false character that follows the name around."<sup>6</sup>

His wife Babette, on the other hand, suffers from compulsive thoughts about death. She declares: "I'm afraid to die . . . I think about it all the time."<sup>7</sup> She goes to the extent of looking for various solutions to overcome this fear and eventually comes across an advertisement selling the drug Dylar, which can eliminate the fear of death in the brain. She is extremely fascinated by the advertisement and volunteers to participate in the drug's trial. The futility of such scientific experiments and advertisements that hunt for customers is exposed in the sheer failure of the drug and how it severely affects the memory of Babette. Enchanted by the very idea of medicine curing her fear of death, she is further compelled to give in to the sexual desires of the project manager Willie Mink. The idea of such a drug showcases the extreme modifications in contemporary American society. Jack adds, "We are talking about death . . . In a very real sense, it doesn't matter what is in those tablets. It could be sugar, it could be spice. I am eager to be humoured, to be fooled . . . This is what happens . . . to desperate people."<sup>8</sup> The above statement highlights consumer saturated society in which people are happy to give to the fake temptations of the consumerist culture. As Baudrillard writes in *Simulacra and Simulations*:

When the simulation wins a new kind of autonomy, the territory disappears behind the map: "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it." Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 170.

<sup>6</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 225.

<sup>8</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 288-289.

shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself.<sup>9</sup>

Like Jack, Babette also tries to restructure her identity frequently, changing her lifestyle which is her way of avoiding death. She claims: "We seem to believe it is possible to ward off death by following rules of good grooming."<sup>10</sup> She subsequently starts buying new products like yogurt and wheat germ to improve her health, and also tries to teach the benefits of eating healthy to other people to avoid the very compulsive fear of death.

The most crucial instance in which death manifests itself in the novel is the Airborne Toxic Event. The accidental spilling of the toxic chemical, "Nyodene Derivative or Nyodene D"<sup>11</sup> heightens the trauma of death in people. Death can be seen hovering all around. It symbolises the inevitable truth that humans cannot escape death. The white cloud of the chemical in the air, the evacuation process, and the symptoms that the characters seem to suffer from all signal death.

### Consumerism

Capitalist culture around the globe is dominated by the commodification of goods. Ours is a world where there is less time for real human experience and instead more time dedicated to complete reliance on buying and selling product, and then consuming media about that very same process. People have stopped living or experiencing the real, and instead largely have experiences based on how they are affected by an advertisement, by a popular celebrity, by the songs and movies that they see, or by the products that are displayed in malls and supermarkets.

Jack and Babette have internalised fear of death that remains deeply rooted in their minds. They are situated in a consumer culture. The supermarket in particular plays a very crucial role in the lives of the Gladneys. For every problem, going to the supermarket and buying things seem to be the solution. The endless products that the supermarket offer promise comfort, power, and happiness to contemporary consumers. Baudrillard, in *The Consumer Society*, expresses this very concern: "the fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance constituted by the

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<sup>9</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 129.

multiplication of objects and material goods.”<sup>12</sup> The market creates a hyperreal world which guarantees fulfillment and satisfaction by offering products that can provide solutions to almost all the needs of its consumers. As Jack explains:

Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight the size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of wellbeing, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls— it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening.<sup>13</sup>

Emilse B. Hidalgo argues commodification has affected the entirety of society and reconstructs the real world based on market images. She adds:

It has to do with the construction of a mega market where everything is for sale according to the customer’s needs, and with the construction of the identity of the consumer, who may assume a passive role as the mindless or unconscious “target” of advertising or, who may assume an active role as a discerning consumer aware of his “needs.”<sup>14</sup>

The opening of the novel offers complete pictures of a highly consumerist society where the students arrive at the college on the hill in station wagons. The students carry numerous commodities, and they seem to gather all those commodities in the hope to find familiarity in the new place. They are so much attached to the products that they cannot remain separated from them, though they are ironically separated from their families and loved ones:

As cars slowed to a crawl and stopped, students sprang out and raced to the rear doors to begin removing the objects inside; the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows 42 and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints. . . . The parents sun-dazed near their automobiles, seeing

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Emilse B. Hidalgo, ‘The Iconic and the Symbolic: The Consumer Society in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Andy Warhol’s *Serigraphies*’, *Invenio*, vol. 12 (2004), p. 21.

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images of themselves in every direction ... The husbands content to measure out the time, distant but ungrudging, accomplished in parenthood, something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage. The assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation.<sup>15</sup>

Such is the elaborated description of the commodities that is given by DeLillo in the opening pages of the novel. Caton points out the nature of contemporary commodified American culture as:

DeLillo's vision of cars as a stream of machines slowly weaving through a pastoral landscape implies that these students are products of an assembly-line culture ... DeLillo refuses to give these students emotional and personal details; instead they are defined by the things that surround them ... The student becomes another commodity built from commodities ... the product of an empty consumerism ... reified by the marketplace ethics of station wagons and stereos.<sup>16</sup>

The commodities define the students in a culture that is saturated with mass consumption. It is these commodities that represent their economic and social status. The novel highlights the growing colonisation of life by commodities, expressed in the "catalogue-like inventories."<sup>17</sup> Bauman defines a consumer society as:

a society of excess and profligacy and so of redundancy and prodigal waste. The more fluid their life settings, the more objects of potential consumption are needed by the actors to ensure their actions against the pranks of fate.<sup>18</sup>

The consumer culture explicitly manifests itself in the novel through repeated noises of the advertising that will continue to dominate the consciousness of the individuals. This becomes evident as Jack's daughters Steffie utters the names of various brands as she sleeps:

Steffie turned slightly, then muttered something in her sleep ... She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

Toyota Celica.

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an

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<sup>15</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Lou F. Caton, *Romanticism and the Postmodern Novel: Three Scenes from Don DeLillo's White Noise* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 1997), pp. 38-48.

<sup>17</sup> David B. Morris, *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity Press, 2000), p. 87.

automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TELEVISION voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence.<sup>19</sup>

The increasing popularity of digital mass media and the images that it fosters in the psyche of the people is highlighted by the fact that the television remains on always in the background whether or not somebody is watching. Murray Siskind expresses the importance of watching television by saying:

[W]elcome us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. There is light, there is sound. I ask my students "What more do you want?" Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.<sup>20</sup>

Watching television discourages the viewers from looking for meaning, as they are distracted. They find satisfaction in the unreal world that is being portrayed on the television screen. It is something that Murray refers to as: "brain fade."<sup>21</sup> The Gladneys have made it a habit to sit in front of the television every Friday night. They feel fascinated by the disaster scenes and catastrophe that is being transmitted. "Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping."<sup>22</sup> This is how they feel happy and safe, sitting at home and far from the disaster site.

### Simulation

The novel abounds in instances of simulation wherein the distinction between the real and the unreal blurs. The unreal or the presented becomes a part of the real in the psyche of the people. Similar is the event of an airborne toxic spill. One of the SIMUVAC experts declares:

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<sup>19</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 180-181.

<sup>20</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 61.

<sup>21</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise* p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 64.

We learned a lot during the night of the billowing cloud. But there is no substitute for a planned evacuation. If reality intrudes in the form of a car crash or a victim falling off a stretcher, it is important to remember that we are not here to mend broken bones or put out real fires. We are here to simulate.<sup>23</sup>

For them, the repeated simulations of a natural disaster render them incapable of understanding the seriousness of the real one. As one of the technicians says, "The more we rehearse disaster, the further it will be from the real thing."<sup>24</sup>

Another example is the very crucial visit to "The Most Photographed Barn of America."<sup>25</sup> Everybody seems to enjoy the beauty of the barn through the images that they capture in their cameras, tripods, telephoto lenses, and filter kits rather than enjoying the beauty of the real barn as perceived by their senses. People are happy to visit the barn but ignore the real, preferring the unreal images. Murray reflects:

"No one sees the barn," he said finally. ...

We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies. ...

"They are taking pictures of taking pictures," he said.

He did not speak for a while. We listened to the incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rustling crank of levers that advanced the film.

"What was the barn like before it was photographed?" he said. "What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. Were here, we're now."<sup>26</sup>

The very name of the barn as being "The Most Photographed Barn in America" hides the real nature and appearance of it. The one that remains now is only an image of the real. This is evident enough of how technology has superseded nature and is manipulated by the same.

for all intents and purposes, there is no longer a barn where the barn sits but only The Most Photographed Barn in America – an object the collective perception, and thus, epistemologically speaking, the existence of which depends solely on the snapshots and postcards that circulate its image. It is difficult not to imagine DeLillo sneaking

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<sup>23</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 206.

<sup>24</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 236.

<sup>25</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 14-15.

peeks at Jean Baudrillard's theories of the simulacrum while writing this scene. [...] What it means to say that no one sees the barn is that, to the perception of its visitors, there is no longer a historical material barn there at all. The precession of simulacra has outstripped it.<sup>27</sup>

Another instance of simulation is evident in Jack's conversation with his son, Heinrich:

"It's going to rain tonight."

"It's raining now," I said.

"The radio said tonight. ...

"Look at the windshield," I said. "Is that rain or isn't it?"

"I'm only telling you what they said."

"Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses."

"Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. Don't you know about all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems? 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. Just because you don't hear a sound doesn't mean it's not out there. Dogs can hear it. Other animals. And I'm sure there are sounds even dogs can't hear. But they exist in the air, in waves. Maybe they never stop. High, high, high pitched. Coming from somewhere."<sup>28</sup>

The above lines emphasise the importance of images fostered by the media in the psyche of Heinrich and almost everyone in contemporary American society. Their understanding of reality comes from the media, supermarkets, books, and television. Heinrich advocates the media over trusting his senses or any real experience.

Another similar event is when Jack and Heinrich take pleasure in watching an asylum that catches fire and people burn into ashes as if it is a mere television spectacle. Their capacity to perceive things through the senses seems to have been eclipsed by excess domination of technology:

the novel's most chilling joke on the simulacrum ... Jack and Heinrich experience the fire not as a tragic event ... but as a male bonding ritual. Watching the firefighters and victims dash about before the blaze awakens feelings of appreciation in them ... But when an acrid smell hits the nostrils of the appreciative crowd, they feel betrayed. Clearly it is the material reality of the fire that betrays them ... The crowd came not to watch a fire with material effects, functions and consequences, or to help the injured, or to protest the poor safety

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Young, 'No One Sees the Camps: Hitler and Humor in *White Noise*', *Approaches to Teaching World Literature*, vol. 85 (2004), p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 25-26.

record of the hospital, but to watch it as they watch TELEVISION.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Postmodern American culture is characterised by immense commodification, capitalism, media, and technological advancements. The development of any society undoubtedly depends upon its progress in science, technology, globalisation, and commercialism. In contemporary times, the advancements in society promise comfort and happiness to human beings. Simultaneously media, television, and radio advertisements release unending series of images that affect the mindsets of humans. A postmodern individual's unconscious mind is affected by an endless display of such images that he sees on television, media, mobile advertisements, and other virtual shows. Consumerist culture essentially uses media as a means of increasing its sales. We are informed of several products available in the market regardless of their requirement. DeLillo emerges as a staunch critic of an immense commodified culture where individuals perceive images to be real. He showcases a culture in which products, commodities, and television rule the lives of people rather than self-reliance. DeLillo warns that contemporary Americans have lost their identity in the name of development. *White Noise* is a fantastic representation of the pitfalls of such development that pushes individuals into an unreal world where they lose their capacity to think good for themselves despite all the bliss that scientific advancements promise. Fear, panic, and death haunt people in their unconscious minds. The idea of death is all pervasive throughout the text of the novel. Death is feared, feared to the extent that the characters seek shelter by buying products, changing lifestyles, watching the news, and listening to radio channels. Humanity can be our only hope for redemption. If we don't learn the importance of respect, love, friendship, and the sharing of feelings, happiness in the hyperreal world will only be a fantasy. In the end, money, technological advances, commodities, or media representations cannot provide a sense of fulfilment. A keen sense and appreciation of the real can be the sole support for a balanced and natural existence.

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<sup>29</sup> Young, 'No One Sees the Camps: Hitler and Humor in *White Noise*', p. 39.