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The Dystopian Impulse and Media Consumption: Redefining Utopia Via the Narrative Economics of the New Media Age

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The Dystopian Impulse and Media Consumption: Redefining Utopia Via the Narrative Economics of the New Media Age

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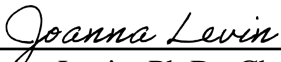
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May 2021

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Via the Narrative Economics of the New Media Age

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ABSTRACT

The Dystopian Impulse and Media Consumption: Redefining Utopia Via the Narrative

Economics of the New Media Age

by Turki A. Alghamdi

This thesis explores the boundaries between the concepts of utopia and dystopia by analyzing how recent texts view the pillars of dystopian literature. Specifically, it investigates the discrepancy between the stance of Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* and Don DeLillo in *White Noise* in situating the visions of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley within the context of the new media age. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* Neil Postman draws a dichotomy between the prophecies of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. He claims that Orwell's vision of the future which he presents in *1984*, an existence marked by authoritarian government control exercised through restricted access to information, has proven to be invalid in the age of new media. Postman also claims that a more accurate vision of the future was provided by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*. In this thesis I argue that *White Noise*, in fact, favors the Orwellian perspective. As opposed to *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, *White Noise* does not perceive the limitations of the form, or the innate human appetite for amusement for that matter, to be causes for the omnipresent tragic outcome of media consumption that we witness today, rather, it distinguishes them as tools utilized for creating and directing this outcome. Although there are major differences between the causes of compliance constituting authoritarianism in *1984* and in *Brave New World* (external and internal) and the ways in which authoritarianism is executed (through deprivation or overabundance), there are still undeniable traces of the existence of a

general base/superstructure power dynamic that is heightened through mass media technology and that manifests itself through the content of the newer forms. This analysis of the power of the newer form in maintaining the status quo illuminates the psychological conditioning exercised through them. This reveals the dynamics of our current consumerist utopia and, thereby, raises infinite questions on the conceptual essence of both utopia and dystopia and the nature of their borders.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ABSTRACT.....	IV
1 THE DYSTOPIAN IMPULSE	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Utopia and Dystopia	2
1.3 Utopian Fears	4
1.4 The Triumph of Dystopia.....	5
2 MASS MEDIA AND THE DYSTOPIAN LEGACY	7
2.1 The Enlightenment and New Media Age.....	7
2.2 Neil Postman.....	7
2.3 Don DeLillo	9
2.4 Huxley and Orwell	10
3 THE QUESTION OF INFLUENCE.....	11
3.1 Postman and DeLillo.....	11
3.2 The Internal Effect in Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show business.....	12
3.3 Similarities and Discrepancies	15
4 KNOWLEDGE, HYPERREALITY, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DEPENDANCE	20
4.1 <i>White Noise</i>	20
4.2 Post-War Economy, Politics, and Culture	21
4.3 The New Orwellian Age	24
4.4 Technology as Thought Police.....	28
5 PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONING.....	34
6 CONCLUSION	43
7 WORKS CITED.....	47

1 The Dystopian Impulse

1.1 Introduction

Don DeLillo undertook fiction in various forms as his published works include novels, short stories, plays, and film scripts. The wide array of topics discussed in his works, along with a scintillating writing style, qualified him to be the first recipient of the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction and a finalist in the Pulitzer Prize for fiction twice. One of DeLillo's most notable books is *White Noise*, a novel with a strong dystopian impulse that was published in 1985 and that rapidly turned DeLillo from a cult writer to a widely acknowledged one and a winner of the National Book Award for fiction (Charles). DeLillo's ironic tone and astounding choice of narrative structure introduced him to a new world of inspiration that endowed him with a significantly larger fanbase. In *White Noise*, DeLillo depicts the life of a college professor and his family who are evacuated from their home as imminent danger approaches in the form of a cloud of toxic chemicals. Books interwoven with dystopian elements are important as they create a platform for discourse that critiques the status quo by stimulating and mirroring our suppressed fears. In this thesis we explore the different viewpoints through which *White Noise* and recent texts perceive the accuracy of the prophetic visions of the pillars of dystopian literature, namely, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984*. Specifically, we discuss how DeLillo's *White Noise* and Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* by Neil Postman situate these dystopias in the context of the New Media Age. This analysis investigates DeLillo's position on issues pertinent to mass media consumption and consumer ideology. Most

importantly, we examine the conceptual boundaries of dystopia as inferred from the epistemological foundation through which *White Noise* frames its depiction of reality.

1.2 Utopia and Dystopia

The concept of dystopia, however, can only be understood within its relationship with its optimistic counterpart, utopia. Utopia as a concept and a literary genre has its roots in an array of disciplines including philosophy, politics, economics, and sociology. Ever since the publication of *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More in 1516, although the first documentation of the concept appeared earlier in Plato's *Republic*, the multidisciplinary and controversial nature of utopia has been a sharply polarizing one among scholars from both STEM and humanities fields. As a result, there is currently no shortage of discussions, theoretical or otherwise, about every aspect even remotely related to the issue. These materials, which range from abstract theorizations of human nature and moving all the way to tangible attempts of application, have not only impacted societies, cultures, and the history of humanity as we know it, but have also been of extreme significance as tools of assessing collective and individual patterns of human intellectual engagement and behavioral tendencies, specially, when we take into account the infinite aporias of utopia.

In literary studies, many scholars argue that the natural outcome of the course of development of utopia as a genre of speculative fiction is the immensely more popular counter genre of dystopia. Dystopian literature has a relatively long history that some scholars date back to 1924 with the publication of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* or even earlier to 1909 with the publication of "The Machine Stops" by E. M. Forster. The origin of the genre can be traced back to ancient cultures as dystopian impulses are conveyed in writings attributed to authors and philosophers of

the classic period. In *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, M. Keith Booker elaborates:

Of course, dystopian literature has clear antecedents that are quite ancient. There is, for example, already a strong dystopian element in Aristophanes's satirical response to the utopianism of Plato in ancient Greece. By the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries writers like Jonathan Swift were writing works that were centrally informed by dystopian energies. (5)

However, although these literary genres, as defined by modern day scholars and critics, can undergo such periodization, the conceptual essence of either genre cannot. Simply, because such fundamentally time-related arrangements inevitably reveal one of the irresolvable disjunctions of utopia, namely, its exclusive temporality. By their nature, attempts of periodizing the concepts provoke a multitude of questions that deal with issues such as the relative nature of a distinct utopian temporality and the temporal perspective exclusively through which utopias could stand a chance of survival. Traditional narrative knowledge, as it precedes the English department, postmodern relativism, and modern science, is a great source from which to draw examples that illustrate this issue. In the story of Adam and Eve, for instance, the Garden of Eden and its ideal abundance, which Robert C. Elliott analogizes to More's *Utopia*, can seem as a utopia only to the point of "the fall" as what follows can only be described as a dystopia in the sense of Booker's definition: "dystopian literature is not so much a specific genre as a particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit"(3). Addressing this problematic part of utopian temporality, Fredric Jameson confirms "the break that simultaneously secures the radical difference of the new Utopian society makes it impossible to imagine" (*Archaeologies*, 86). Another issue is that the dystopia of Adam and Eve, living on earth prior to the domination of the human species, greatly simulates

modern day utopias as depicted in literature and film. These contradictions internal to the concept of utopia do not only shed light on the innate temporal relativity of the concept, but also highlight its precondition for the exclusivity of a synchronic approach of history and temporality dismissing, thereby, approaches of diachronicity. More importantly, what this demonstrates is that due to the reciprocal relationship between the two concepts evident by the very manifestation of dystopian undercurrents in many utopian texts or by what Jameson calls "a Utopian wish fulfillment wrapped in dystopian wolf's clothing" (Postmodernism, 258), dystopian impulses do not succeed the formation of utopian ones, rather, the two concepts act in conjunction. As opposed to the sequential perspective of the genre, which cannot be divorced from its relation to the concept, as observed in Booker's definition, this approach to the power dynamic that governs and maintains the two concepts is a prerequisite for any sound critique of texts that fall under either genre.

1.3 Utopian Fears

From a theoretical perspective, and in the same spirit in which Jerome De Busleyden comments in his correspondence with Sir Thomas More that *Utopia* is "an object of fear to many" (More 222), I suggest that utopian aporias, its totalizing principle and specific temporality, are fertile ground for anxiety. With such aporias come the accompanying fears induced by uncertainty, these utopian fears are detailed as follows. First, the fear of perfection and that utopia may actually be a nightmare once achieved which suggests that, through the realizability of their totalizing principle, utopian dreams are built on the same basis on which dystopias are established. Similarly, Robert C. Elliott suggests in *The Shape of Utopia* that "[u]topia is a bad word today not because we despair of achieving it, but because we fear it" (89). Second, the fear of the loss of identity or what Fredric Jameson terms "the anxiety of utopia" associated with this totalizing principle which he defines as "the fear of losing that familiar world in which all our vices and virtues are rooted

(very much including the very longing for Utopia itself) in exchange for a world in which all these things and experiences -- positive as well as negative -- will have been obliterated" (Archaeologies 97). Third, the fear of the nature of the founder of utopia. This fear stems from attempts of reconciling the contradictions pertaining to this mysterious entity as it is depicted in many utopias either as a vanishing mediator as in *Utopia*, a powerless god as in *Walden Two*, or an authoritarian figure such as Rousseau's lawgiver in *The Social Contract* and tutor in *Emile*. These fears resulting from the internal disjunctions of utopia push us toward its negative, critical, and cynical counterpart that not only extrapolates them but is on many levels motivated by them: "[i]ndeed, much of the force of the anti-Utopia as a genre derives from this essentially narrative fear, in which the name of Big Brother or Zamyatin's Benefactor can only itself be figured as an absence or an actantial fiction which has real and baleful results" (86). In this sense dystopia acquires its reactionary function not necessarily because it naturally follows utopia in chronological order as a genre as this is disproven by the force of subconscious fear which essentially unifies both genres, but because dystopia allows for further exploration of existential fears.

1.4 The Triumph of Dystopia

Although the antecedents of dystopian literature are quite ancient, dystopian literature became recognizable as a counter genre in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, even though the recognized emergence of dystopia is mainly as a reaction to utopia, dystopia grew to be the more dominant genre, "[i]n the course of the twentieth century, dystopian energies—epitomized by the great dystopian fictions like *We*, *Brave New World*, and *1984*—have become far more prominent in both literature and cultural criticism than have utopian ones"(Booker 7). When observed from a new historicist lens, this overthrow of utopia by dystopia is influenced by the sum of political

events, philosophical approaches to economy and human nature, and cultural shifts that took place prior to the twentieth century, amplified by the use of science as a language of authority.

2 Mass Media and the Dystopian Legacy

2.1 The Enlightenment and New Media Age

The emergence of scientific and technological advancements over the course of the enlightenment resulted in an overflow of a utopian and dystopian impulse in fiction. "Indeed the rise of science as a discourse of authority in the enlightenment directly inspired both an explosion in utopian thought and a corresponding wave of dystopian reactions"(Booker 5). However, as the beginning of that revolutionary development posed a threat to the domination of human abilities, as opposed to those of the machine, which indicated significant limitations on the extent to which humans can control their environment, there was a strong shift away from technological utopias to dystopias. In recent years, the ongoing developments in the authoritative, self-legitimizing scientific discourse which are inseparable from the accompanying advancements of technology resulted in the creation of the pervasive, technologically advanced mass media. Similar to the age of enlightenment, the current media age has not only resulted in the creation of the discipline of media studies and opened the door for infinite realms of theories that pertain to media, but also revived the explosion of dystopian energy in a way that allowed it to look back at its main pillars with critical eyes.

2.2 Neil Postman

An intriguing text that was produced amid this whirlpool of emerging technologies and omnipresent mass media and that situated older dystopias in relation to the context of the new

media age is *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* by Neil Postman. Postman was a media theorist and a cultural critic. He worked as a professor in New York University whose forgotten Bronx campus was commonly known as “the College on the Hill.” Prior to occupying the position of chairman of the Department of Culture and Communication, Postman founded the first Media Ecology program. In this book, Postman claims that George Orwell's conception of the future that he presents in *1984* as an existence marked by authoritarian government control exercised through restricted access to information has proven to be invalid in the age of new media and that a more accurate vision of the future was provided by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*. As he explains in the forward of the book:

Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think. What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. (Postman)

In accordance with Huxley's criticism of civil libertarians and freedom fighters who were attentive to challenging propaganda as to eliminate the threat of tyranny –“they failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions”), --Postman argues that our addiction to entertainment places us in a never-ending cycle of media consumption that results in various negative attitudes and behaviors commonly associated with postmodern culture. These behaviors, he argues, include the unconscious adoption of a consumerist ideology that is reflected in the value we assign to symbols of representation and the indifference we exhibit to serious issues portrayed in the news as they are being delivered merely as another form of

entertainment. However, the book mainly studies the effect of visual media on public discourse and argues that, due to their nature, the different forms of visual media substitute image for information, likeability for rationality and are thereby responsible for the decay of intellectual public discourse. As Postman does not deny mass media the appreciation they are due for their positive impact, I believe that everyone can agree, to a certain extent, with the findings of this book pertaining to the witnessed negative effect of mass media. However, his presumption in attributing these results to an addiction to amusement, which he associates with Huxley's vision in *Brave New World*, is highly arguable.

2.3 Don DeLillo

Another text that reflects on these older visions and that was also published during the same period is Don DeLillo's most notable novel *White Noise*. In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo discusses different issues and raises many questions that pertain to human mortality, vacuous consumerism, the blinding effect of scientific and technological authority in shaping public opinions and the collective unconscious, the dynamics formed by economic and social capital, and the impact of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital on the behavior of individuals. More importantly, the text provides an idiosyncratic view of Baudrillard's theories on hyperreality and offers insights into the effect of this phenomenon on our existence as currently observed. The novel was well-received among audiences as well as critics. In the introduction to *New Essays on White Noise* Frank Lentricchia maintains that "*White Noise* garnered more reviews, by far, than any of DeLillo's previous books." (12) Similarly, in *Approaches to Teaching DeLillo's White Noise*, Tim Engles and John N. Duvall consider this work to be one of the most discussed pieces of postmodern fiction due to its accessible writing style and idiosyncratic approach to different issues associated with contemporary American culture.

2.4 Huxley and Orwell

In the following chapters, however, we look at the dichotomy Postman suggests in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* between the Orwellian and the Huxleyan perspective, his invalidation of the prior and confirmation of the fulfillment of the latter, in relation to our modern time by juxtaposing the book with *White Noise*. We also use the connections between the two texts as basis to argue that *White Noise*, in fact, favors the Orwellian perspective. Our aim is to answer the questions of how *White Noise* situates the visions of prominent pillars in the dystopian legacy in the context of the New Media Age and how it deals with various economic, political, ideological, social, and cultural elements engulfed within a hyperreal existence. We arrive at the answers to these questions by exploring DeLillo's deconstruction of the nature of technologically advanced mediums and the way in which they function as to locate the distinct position of a subjectivity challenged by self-exonerating technologies that erode the fine line between a utopian and a dystopian existence to maintain the current social order.

3 The Question of Influence

3.1 Postman and DeLillo

As critics of social reality and observers of cultural change, Postman and DeLillo are contemporaneous authors who are greatly intrigued by similar issues that they tackle in their works. Since both authors witnessed major technological shifts, mainly the rise of TV as the dominant form of mass media, technology, its role in producing mass media, and cultural issues that stemmed from that progress became some of the main topics around which many of their works revolve. Although non-fiction was the form of choice for Postman and fiction for DeLillo, the issue for both authors remains the same, that is, how dystopian trends situate the causality of change on the social and cultural level in the Age of New Media. In this chapter we investigate the views the authors present in their works. Then, we juxtapose the two texts as to highlight the identical issues with which they deal. I believe the juxtaposition of two contemporaneous thinkers with overlapping interests and opposing views allows for an adequate analysis that reveals an important aspect of intellectual discourse pertinent to media and the dystopian impulse. Specially, Neil Postman's keynote address at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1984, titled "Amusing Ourselves to Death," from which his book originated, ignited a wide public debate on the grave consequences of mass media consumption and the fulfillment of the Huxleyan or Orwellian prophecy. This juxtaposition also allows us to clarify DeLillo's stance on the causality of mass media consumption, the point at which the views of the authors disunite. It shows how

White Noise interacts with Postman's argument in ways that assert its belief in the Orwellian vision.

3.2 The Internal Effect in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show business*

In accordance with its presupposition of the validity of the Huxleyan perspective, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* argues that the negative effects of mass media, its limitless consumption and reduction of intellectual discourse, as caused by an endless innate appetite for entertainment, are the results of an internal influence of the intrinsic hedonistic nature of humans rather than a symptom of continuous external control devoted to creating distractions through technology. Moreover, as evident by the decline of totalitarian communist regimes and triumph of democratic capitalist ones, any attribution of such phenomenon to external interferences, although the infrequent occurrence of such interferences is possible, does not accurately reflect the reality of our current time. Postman, therefore, contends that by satisfying this innate appetite for entertainment and hedonistic search of enjoyment, TV is analogous to *Soma*. Simultaneously, he warns against understanding the effect of media consumption as the outcome of complex plotting. In the keynote address at the Frankfurt Book Fair, Postman says:

Television in America, it would appear is the *soma* of Huxley's *Brave New World*. But let me hasten to say that America's immersion in Television is not to be taken as an attempt by a malevolent government or an avaricious corporate state to employ the age-old trick of distracting the masses with circuses. (15)

The tradition of favoring the internal influence in relation to mass media was adopted and reshaped by many philosophers and media theorists, most notably by Niklas Luhmann. In *The Reality of the*

Mass Media, Luhmann introduces the issue objectively as he acknowledges a side that, like Postman, asserts the effect of the internal influence by the unlikelihood of external interference, and a suspicious other that believes the opposite, "On the one hand, improbability has become an institution. It is expected. It operates as an opportunity for attentiveness. On the other hand, suspicions arise of concealed goings-on, of political machinations in the broadest sense" (39). However, although he acknowledges that "this peculiar form of production fits particularly well with the notion of an external influence. This was demonstrated very well by the successful military censorship of reports about the Gulf War" (8), Luhmann's argument is that these issues are influenced internally, not necessarily by the individual, but by the system of operation of mass media and not by insidious external forces. Such exonerating perspectives that accredit more significance to the influence of the internal have been extended and are still applied to recent events. For example, in 2017 The Guardian published an article titled "My Dad Predicted Trump in 1985 – it's Not Orwell, he Warned, it's Brave New World" in which Andrew Postman contends that the election of Trump is the outcome of a trivialized society that, as affected by its consumption of visual media, favors the appeal of TV entertainers over the intellectual capabilities of political candidates, thereby, much like his father Neil Postman, making a case for the internal influence.

However, Neil Postman's validation of Huxley's vision by theorizing an overwhelming internal addiction to amusement is not a totally original one. The same concept in its most general sense is an ancient one and can be traced back to Plato's *Gorgias* in the allegory of the pastry chef and the doctor where, by exploiting the ostensible cheerfulness of his occupation, the former induces the condemnation of the pain-inflicting, well-intentioned latter by the unenlightened masses. However, Plato addresses the pleasure-driven prejudices of the masses and attributes their

poor ability in making judgments to the lack of education and the effect of demagoguery and, ironically, both issues are closely relevant in the case on which Andrew Postman's applies his father's theory. For this reason, Postman's arguments provoke the following questions: is it accurate to simply attribute modern issues pertaining to mass media consumption to an innate addiction to entertainment when people have always been inclined towards that which gratifies their desires? Why should we opt for the obvious when we are dealing with developing issues in light of socioeconomic shifts, cultural changes, and scientific developments that produced modern technologies? Would it not be more accurate to investigate the effect of such events in constructing our current reality and deduce the accuracy of either Huxley or Orwell subsequently?

However, Postman's views and adoption of the Huxleyan perspective look exclusively at the effect of scientific progress on cultural behavior or how technology affects cultural change. This overlooks the sequence of historical events in every way except in their relation to the progress of science and the impact of such progress on specific elements of social life. It seems that Postman ignores the social effect of a postmodern culture that, as Jameson claims, is in agreement with what he calls the end of ideology: "'[i]deology' in this sense meant Marxism, and its 'end' went hand in hand with the end of Utopia" (Postmodernism 111). Postman's view does not take into consideration variables such as the rise of values of materialism and monetary success to dominate the hierarchy of the moral system and the way this reconfiguration of the moral compass resulted in the adoption of science as a self-legitimizing discourse of authority. Guilty of committing the same oversight is Andrew Postman whose application of the prophecy of the election of Trump puts more emphasis on Trump's status as an entertainer and undermines his fundamental role as a billionaire and a multinational company owner who is a product of such socioeconomic shifts and who, as a decision maker, participated in reinforcing the social structure

that led to his election. Postman, the son, reduces Trump to an entertainer and doesn't note that his power, for some, as an entertainer and demagogue, hinged on his purported wealth and role as an uber-capitalist. Not to mention the ways in which he asserted his position in the socio-economic structure through the racial and sexual politics of the extreme right wing. Therefore, I believe it is worthwhile to evaluate if the occurrence of such social, cultural, and economic shifts has resulted in a number of changes in the sociopolitical scene that could outweigh the effect of the byproduct of scientific progress, that is, the addiction to entertainment that technology makes possible.

3.3 Similarities and Discrepancies

Now we explore the identical topics with which Postman and DeLillo work and the points on which both authors agree and disagree. The issues at which the thoughts of the two authors diverge are used in *White Noise* to highlight DeLillo's unique position on the issue of situating the causes and effects of media consumption. However, in this chapter we only view them to highlight the identity of the topics with which the two authors deal.

Of course, a disagreement on the causality of media addiction does not entail a negation of its visible effects. In *White Noise*, we find various instances that align well with many of Postman's findings, especially, those related to his main argument. That is, the effect of the way visual media function (through the substitution of image for thought) in the reduction of the level of intellectuality in public discourse. This thought is best exemplified in the novel when Babette, Jack, and Murray talk about Eugene; Jack says: "The boy is growing up without television," I said, "which may make him worth talking to, Murray" (50). At the same time, *White Noise* depicts many issues in a way that does not align very well with Postman's thoughts, and some of the views DeLillo introduces in the novel are in direct opposition of Postman's.

One of these thoughts is the significance of the content portrayed on TV. When Jack asks Murray about what his students say about TV, Murray answers:

Television is just another name for junk mail. But I tell them I can't accept that. I tell them I've been sitting in this room for more than two months, watching TV into the early hours, listening carefully, taking notes. A great and humbling experience, let me tell you. Close to mystical. (50-51)

This statement seems to directly answer to Postman's assertion in his keynote address at the Frankfurt Book Fair where he says:

Every culture can absorb a fair amount of junk, and, in any case, we do not judge a culture by its junk but by how it conducts its serious public business. What is happening in America is that television is transforming all serious public business into junk. (15)

Postman illustrates this thought in the book by theorizing that since everything portrayed on TV is aimed at capturing and maintaining the attention of viewers, important topics like the ones shown on the news, a segment accompanied by music and presented by handsome broadcasters, are not taken with seriousness at all. They are merely presented as another form of entertainment and are perceived as such by the viewers. DeLillo addresses the same topic and presents a counterargument by depicting his characters intrigued by disasters rather than indifferent to them, as Jack says: "[w]e were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (64). As opposed to Postman's view which suggests that the entertaining nature of the news undermines the seriousness of the issues it portrays and thus resulting in their neglect, DeLillo shows characters that are, if anything, too consumed by the serious issues on the news.

This is best portrayed in a conversation between Jack and Alfonse, where Jack asks "[w]hy is it, Alfonse, that decent, well-meaning and responsible people find themselves intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television?" (65), to which Alfonse answers

"The flow is constant," Alfonse said. "Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes. Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else. This is where California comes in. Mud slides, brush fires, coastal erosion, earthquakes, mass killings, et cetera. (66)

Also, here DeLillo questions Postman's association of the restricted access to information with an external influence and exclusion of the possibility of the external influence being exercised through the very overflow of information. On one hand, Postman says "[e]verything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the walls begin to close around us" (113). On the other hand, DeLillo provokes the questions: does a limited dissemination of information, which could be due to restricted airtime or other reasons, entail an external influence and, by the same logic, does having an overflow of information eliminate the chances of such external control? How are we so sure that external influence does not take place by an overflow of information through self-exonerating media? This effect is evident in various analyses such as Jameson's which contends "the problems of the motives of the individual subject can be elided by attention to the other type of mediation involved, namely, technology and the machine itself" (Postmodernism 59). The idiosyncrasy of new media is not merely the unprecedented vastness of its reach, but its ability to quickly dissolve any suspicions of manipulation at effect by undermining its own credibility, as Luhmann clarifies:

The mass media seem simultaneously to nurture and to undermine their own credibility. They 'deconstruct' themselves, since they reproduce the constant contradiction of their constative and their performative textual components with their own operations. (39)

Interestingly, one of the side effects warned against by the scientists who invented the advanced medical technology of "Dylar," the drug to which Babette desperately resorts so as to extinguish her paralyzing fear of death and abandonment, is the inability to distinguish between constative and performative utterances: "I could not distinguish words from things, so that if someone said 'speeding bullet', I would fall to the floor and take cover" (DeLillo 193). However, this warning only makes Babette more insistent to the point of accepting the "capitalist transaction" with Mr. Gray. Ironically, even Postman acknowledges a similar self-legitimizing effect associated with media that is easily overlooked, "[w]hat is peculiar about such interpositions of media is that their role in directing what we will see or know is so rarely noticed" (10).

Through these discrepancies in the authors' points of view as well as DeLillo's depiction of characters with no agency who reside in "an America where no one is responsible or in control; all are receptors, receivers of stimuli, consumers" (Phillips), unable to overcome the challenge to originality in a time of mass indoctrination of ideology and construction of reality I deduce that, as opposed to Postman's, DeLillo's work favors the notion of external influence that agrees with the Orwellian perspective and undermines the exonerating views of *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* as focusing on the symptom, our desire for entertainment, and mistaking it for the cause.

DeLillo's opposing view rejects the theory of an internal influence that can be remediated, "it seems that DeLillo has conjured an even bleaker scenario than Huxley. In his world, there's no point trying to fight back, or question, or even try to ease your pain because to do so is to go against the inevitable" (Jordison). Therefore, *White Noise* conveys an inclination towards recognizing the accuracy of the Orwellian perspective of external control in envisioning our current time. In the next chapter, we illustrate the modern modification DeLillo proposes to the Orwellian perspective by referring to other corresponding points we find in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* and *White Noise* as to highlight DeLillo's emphasis on consumerism and hyperreality to answer the question of causality with a more comprehensive view of socioeconomic factors.

4 Knowledge, Hyperreality, and psychological dependance

4.1 *White Noise*

What we have discussed in the previous chapter enables us to clearly see the connection between the two texts in the similar topics with which they deal. At the same time, pointing out the stark difference between Postman and DeLillo's views on these topics gives us a saturated image of this connection as manifested through their different perspectives. This not only shows the value in the juxtaposition of these scintillating texts which reveals a significant part of the discourse pertaining to the dystopian impulse in fiction, but also lays the basis for elaborating on the counter arguments and opposing perspective we find in *White Noise*. In this chapter we analyze how *White Noise* conveys its counterargument by building on the axiom of the communication theorist Marshal McLuhan "The Medium is the Message" as a way of responding to Postman's invocation of the phrase in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* by titling its first chapter "The Medium is the Metaphor." What we mentioned in the previous chapter will also help us elaborate on DeLillo's modernization of the Orwellian perspective of external interference which, by means of DeLillo's emphasis on consumerism and the hyperreal, provides a comprehensive view of the role of socioeconomic factors that led to the disadvantages of media consumption that Postman lists.

Having only pointed out the lack of an objective and comprehensive view of historic events and cultural shifts that led to the postulation of the Huxleyan perspective in explaining media consumption in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, it is

important to first draw attention to how *White Noise* fills this gap by capturing various cultural and economic shifts and engulfing theoretical stances that rely on readings of recent events as this will assist us in understanding the other issues this chapter tackles.

4.2 Post-War Economy, Politics, and Culture

In the second chapter of this essay, we discussed the repercussions of the rise of the use of science as the language of authority in the Age of Enlightenment as well as the progression of advanced technologies in the New Media Age which caused the massive influx of dystopian impulses in literature. Here, we expand on that thought by analyzing how *White Noise*, through its emphasis on consumer culture, envelops the concurrent historical and cultural shift in its message, thereby, providing an objective and thorough lens through which to arrive at the accuracy of the Orwellian vision and external influence and theorizing the cause behind media consumption. Mainly, the novel utilizes commodification of goods and services to achieve this effect and to dissect consumer ideology and dismantle its multiple functionalities.

As it was published during the Cold War period, the novel is clearly marked by many of the characteristics of Cold War literature evident in its depiction of rising fears over the threat of communism and nuclear holocaust. Although at first sight the toxic plume and the "generic food and drink, nonbrand items in plain white packages with simple labeling" (18) make the novel seem exclusive to that period, it is not. When inspected closely, the recurrent fixation throughout the novel on largescale commodification appears indicative of various dimensions of overlapping periods of social, cultural, and economic transitions. The novel conveys this repeatedly, for instance, through its detailed description of products, their brand names and packaging. The elasticity of products and the special attention given to brand names and packaging is employed to

put emphasis on the emerging form through which they are advertised. On the issue of emergent forms, Jameson acknowledges the correlative relationship between form and culture as he contends,

It would seem essential to distinguish the emergent forms of a new commercial culture -- beginning with advertisements and spreading on to formal packaging of all kinds, from products to buildings, and not excluding artistic commodities such as television shows (the "logo") and best-sellers and films -- from the older kinds of folk and genuinely "popular" culture which flourished when the older social classes of a peasantry and an urban artisanat still existed and which, from the mid-nineteenth century on, has gradually been colonized and extinguished by commodification and the market system. (Postmodernism 52)

Similarly, by accentuating commodification, DeLillo's fixation on products, brands, and packaging captures this socioeconomic shift which started from the mid-nineteenth century with the industrial society and the establishment of the market system and its gradual amplification which led to consumerism and commodity fetishism. In "Tales of the Electronic Tribe," Frank Lentricchia expands on the significance of brand names to Jack's unconscious and how that reflects the reality of a consumer society.

Constantly shadowing Jack's arty self-consciousness is an unconscious epistemology of consumption. Jack tends to "see" commodities, and with their right names attached. He notes a "camouflage jacket with Velcro closures"; "a family of five [getting] out of a Datsun Maxima"; he tells that his "newspaper is delivered by a middle-aged Iranian driving a Nissan Sentra"; somebody is wearing a "Gore-Tex jacket"; he feels a "chill pass through the Hong Kong polyester" of his pajamas. In each of these instances – funny to

us but not to Jack – Jack is the object of DeLillo's wit, the postmodern anatomist postmodernized, and so become the automaton of consumer society (105)

Thus, this fixation emphasizes the new commercial culture in which the effect of the emergent form, mainly the TV and its form-guided content (shows, films, commercials), is the driving force that shapes the culture of vacuous consumerism that produces the character of Jack Gladney.

At the same time, given that post-industrial society and its concurrent cultural shift were not completely original, Jameson argues,

Postmodernism is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order (the rumor about which, under the name of "postindustrial society," ran through the media a few years ago), but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself. No wonder, then, that shreds of its older avatars -- of realism, even, fully as much as of modernism -- live on, to be rewrapped in the luxurious trappings of their putative successor. (Postmodernism 6)

DeLillo captures these changes in the economic base and superstructure. Particularly, he undermines the effect of the transition from an industrial economy based on manufacturing to a postindustrial economy based on services on the individual as even under this "systemic modification of capitalism" the impact of commodification is still indisputable. Therefore, we find Jack in different instances comforting himself by paying for services in the same manner he comforts himself by paying for manufactured products. In a conversation with Heinrich at the beginning of the second chapter and after noticing "The Airborne Toxic event," Jack asserts: "[w]ell it won't come this way" (108). Heinrich asks him to explain why it will not come their way, to which he answers: "[i]t just won't" (108). When Heinrich asks him the

same question a second time his level of anxiety is elevated, and he adds to his previous answer, “I just know. It’s perfectly calm and still today. And when there is wind at this time of year, it blows that way, not this way” (109). After this anxiety-producing quarrel, the thanatophobic Jack says “[t]hen I went down to the Kitchen to pay some bills” (112). For this, it is reasonable to say that this fixation deals with intrinsic elements of postindustrial societies as well and, thereby, captures the accompanying cultural shift as it steps into the realm of the postmodern.

Therefore, although at first sight DeLillo's focus on products can be simply interpreted within the general frame of a critique of consumer culture and a reflection of Cold War anticommunist sentiments, such descriptions of products and depiction of consumer behavior are some of the ways in which DeLillo utilizes the elasticity of the commodification of goods and services to represent and comprehensively capture the various economic, cultural, and political, dimensions of the post-war period to cover the elements that led to the New Media Age and the infinite media consumption.

4.3 The New Orwellian Age

We have discussed the ways in which DeLillo's vision challenges Postman's views on the issues he presents in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* and agrees with the element of external influence Orwell portrays in *1984*. Now we explore how *White Noise* factors in the economic, political, and cultural aspects of the post-war period it captures in modernizing the Orwellian vision.

We have also discussed how DeLillo's work undermines the effect of the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy on the individual as to point out the ongoing

effect of commodification and the market system that paved the way for the current "media addiction." This stance also functions in a way that erodes the fundamental difference between the form of control Orwell hypothesized in the industrial period and the form of control DeLillo portrays in the postindustrial period as even after the occurrence of this "systemic modification of capitalism," the indistinguishable effect on the still powerless individual proves the existence of the same mechanism.

At the same time, by combining the essential element of external interference with the focus on consumerism, DeLillo captures the shift in the political/economic power structure caused by the rise of open markets, highlights the changes to both base and superstructure, and points out to differences between the industrial and post-industrial economies to suggest that, after this transition, a modern reconfiguration of the power dynamic has occurred, however, it is the same mechanism emerging under a new guise.

The economic shift from manufacturing to services dramatically raised the value of knowledge and information. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard starts by suggesting a relationship between knowledge and power, specifically, "knowledge in the form of informational commodity indispensable to productive power" (5). This relationship along with the reopening of the world market which led to the growth of multinational enterprises has had a significant impact on the traditional position of the state as it transformed it from a director of investments that reaps their benefits to a mere consumer. Therefore, as "[t]ransformations in the nature of knowledge, then, could well have repercussions on the existing public powers"(6), Lyotard highlights the rising power of multinational corporations:

Already in the last few decades, economic powers have reached the point of imperiling the stability of the State through new forms of the circulation of capital that go by the generic name of multinational corporations. These new forms of circulation imply that investment decisions have, at least in part, passed beyond the control of the nation-states. (5)

Moreover, considering the role of technology in reinforcing, stabilizing, and sustaining this emerging shift in the power dynamic from political government to multinational corporations, Lyotard argues:

Functions of regulation, and therefore of reproduction, are being and will be further withdrawn from administrators and entrusted to machines. Increasingly, the central question is becoming who will have access to the information these machines must have in storage to guarantee that the right decisions are made. Access to data is, and will continue to be, the prerogative of experts of all stripes. The ruling class is and will continue to be the class of decision makers. Even now it is no longer composed of the traditional political class, but of a composite layer of corporate leaders, high-level administrators, and the heads of the major professional, labor, political, and religious organizations. (14)

Having established that DeLillo's erosion of the impact of the transition from Orwell's industrial society to his own postindustrial society on the continually powerless characters depicted in *1984* and *White Noise* emphasizes the persistence of the same controlling mechanism in both societies, DeLillo's representation of this transformation in the power dynamic in *White Noise* whose characters are directed by consumer ideology and guided by the technologies surrounding them as opposed to those of *1984* who are controlled and guided by the power of the political leader

suggests a parallel governmental structure that DeLillo offers as a modern modification of the Orwellian vision.

Measured against TV advertising manipulation of the image of the third person, the economic goals of which are pretty clear, and clearly susceptible to class analyses from the left – it is obvious who the big beneficiaries of such manipulation are – the environment of the image in question in *White Noise* appears far less concretely in focus. Less apprehensible, less empirically encounterable – therefore more insidious in its effect (Lentricchia 89)

Similarly, as the totalizing economic principle created by capitalism due to the control of the modern parallel structure is contrasted with Hitler, the authoritarian figure of the past, Lentricchia poses the question,

Would we prefer that Jack give up the supermarket, the mall, his family, the nights gathered around the TV, for another, chilling guarantor of community, who lurks in the background of *White Noise*, as in the background of a number of modernist literary monuments - the specter of the totalitarian, the gigantic charismatic figure who triggers our desire to give in, to merge our frightened selves in his frightening authority? Hitler, another kind of epic hero, voice of national solidarity, is the other object of Jack's awe (112)

John N. Duvall explains this contrast in "The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as an Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*," as he argues that DeLillo's depiction of Hitler Studies is an association of German fascism to American proto-fascism as an indictment of a late capitalist America that produced a totalizing cultural economic system executed

through the market place and that merges the political, the social, and the aesthetic into the simulacrum. Underscoring the totalizing principle of modern-day consumer society as contrasted with a historical totalitarian figure who resembles Orwell's Big Brother reaffirms the association with external control and DeLillo's modernization of the form of authoritarianism offered in *1984*.

4.4 Technology as Thought Police

DeLillo depicts the connection between the totalizing cultural economic system that resulted in the emergence of the parallel governmental structure and the pervasive technologies that enforce it through the simulacrum in the way the reality of his characters is exaggeratedly structured through technology. This is evident in the prevalence of consumer ideology throughout the novel in a way that hinders and interrupts any meaningful thoughts that Jack could have.

Just how far down and in media culture has penetrated is illustrated by the novel's formally most astonishing moment – an effort to represent the irruption of the unconscious – variations on which are played throughout...a break in the text never reflected upon because Jack never hears it. It is, of course, Jack who speaks the line because *White Noise* is a first – person novel, and it could therefore be no one else. Jack in these moments is possessed, a mere medium who speaks:

Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex

MasterCard, Visa, American Express

Leaded, Unleaded, Super unleaded (Lentricchia 89)

Jack's media guided existence also makes him reincarnate the commercials he watches on TV in everyday life. This is especially true when Jack's ego is threatened and his sense of power is compromised.

A woman in a yellow slicker held up traffic to let some children cross. I pictured her in a soup commercial taking off her oilskin hat as she entered the cheerful kitchen where her husband stood over a pot of smoky lobster bisque, a smallish man with six weeks to live.
(22)

Similarly, Jack assesses his power by the objects with which he surrounds himself and attempts to obtain more power each time he goes shopping. While at the mall with his family, Jack runs into Massingale in the hardware store. Massingale, who teaches computer science, comments in astonishment that this is the first time he has seen Jack outside the college. After thoroughly examining Jack's physical appearance and making facial expressions that conveyed his disdain, Massingale says: "[y]ou look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83). As soon as Jack realizes that the power he possesses as the "chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill" vanishes after leaving the workplace, he comments: "The encounter put me in the mood to shop" (83) and goes on a shopping frenzy.

In many instances the reach of the control of media surpasses the purposes of mere advertisements and goes as far as altering characters' perception and feelings. During Jack and Heinrich's argument about the plume, Babette walks in and joins the conversation.

She said a neighbor had told her the spill from the tank car was thirty-five thousand gallons. People were being told to stay out of the area. A feathery plume hung over the

site. She also said the girls were complaining of sweaty palms. "There's been a correction," Heinrich told her. "Tell them they ought to be throwing up." (112)

Similarly, when Jack and Heinrich are driving in the rain, the following conversation takes place,

"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. (22-23)

Here, Heinrich relies heavily on the legitimacy of science, technology, and laboratories in supporting his argument. Lentricchia addresses this issue and highlights the centrality of science in *White Noise* as it results in the catastrophic turning point of the novel, "The Airborne Toxic Event"-- the evasive name not of a natural but of a human effect whose peculiarity is that it is the unintended consequence of the desire of the technologically sophisticated to insulate themselves from the enduring cockroach"(103). It is evident, thereby, how DeLillo suggests that the same authority of science that significantly raised the dystopian impulse after the Age of Enlightenment gave the culture industry the power to construct reality in the New Media Age in a way that hinders the production of original thoughts. DeLillo acknowledges, thereby, the continuous effect of the historical rise of a self-legitimizing authority which can only produce and reinforce a totalitarianism.

We could look at the issue from a more specific viewpoint, namely, the effect of media in creating this constructed reality. Luhmann addresses this issue from an intriguing perspective that explains a doubling of reality that mass media creates as an effect of functional differentiation of modern society. This issue, he argues, stems inherently from the position of mass media as an observing system which forces it to differentiate between self-reference and other references, constructing thereby a second observed reality. Luhmann describes this effect on the observed second level as "whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media. This is true not only of our knowledge of society and history but also of our knowledge of nature" (1). However, *White Noise* emphasizes that this modern functional differentiation is still produced, nonetheless, by the use of science as the language of authority and maintained by emerging technologies. It posits that the inaccuracy of such explanations lies within their contradictory premise that acknowledges the wide range for possible

external interferences and presupposes simulated functional differentiation of "modern" society through media as the continuing effect of "recursively stabilized functional mechanisms, which remain stable even when their genesis and their mode of functioning have been revealed"(1), while undermining its own proposition by comparing the nature of the simulated, forced to differentiate between self-reference and other references, to that of the real such as the older social class structure, negating thereby the ongoing effect of modern issues which led to the rupture resulting in the creation of this modern society.

Therefore, I believe looking at the issue from a broader view by conducting an analysis of the functional pattern of such mechanisms is more beneficial. Heinrich's argument evokes Jack's sarcastic response "[a] victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos. Science's finest hour" (24). I believe this incident, in its relation to science, physical reality, and the effect of technology, solicits an analysis of scientific knowledge and the dynamics of its legitimation in relation to the construction of reality that goes along the lines of Lyotard's.

Since "reality" is what provides the evidence used as proof in scientific argumentation, and also provides prescriptions and promises of a juridical, ethical, and political nature with results, one can master all of these games by mastering "reality." That is precisely what technology can do. By reinforcing technology, one "reinforces" reality, and one's chances of being just and right increase accordingly. Reciprocally, technology is reinforced all the more effectively if one has access to scientific knowledge and decision-making authority. (47)

Overall, as we explored the economic, political, and cultural aspects of the post-war period which *White Noise* considers in modifying the Orwellian perspective, we established that DeLillo undermines the radicality of the transition from the industrial to the postindustrial

society on the individual by depicting characters as being as helpless as those of *1984* in order to emphasize the persistence of the same mechanism of control in both societies. At the same time, DeLillo's depiction of characters devoured by vacuous consumerism, rather than ultranationalism, whose reality is constructed by TV, rather than Orwell's four ministries, and whose thoughts are regulated through technological consumerism, rather than thought police, suggests a shift in the power dynamic. DeLillo underscores the role of science as a language of authority and its reciprocal relation to technology in reinforcing this shift by constructing the reality of his character by TV and radio. Therefore, we find that *White Noise* agrees with many of Lyotard's views as his theories, which emphasize the historical economic and political aspects the novel represents, suitably capture the effect of the transformation in the shape of knowledge in postindustrial society that allowed for this reconfiguration of the power dynamic which DeLillo identifies to take place.

5 Psychological Conditioning

To answer the question of how precisely the novel explains the enforcement of such control through media as to ultimately answer the main question of how the issue is caused by external conditioning rather than merely being the effect of an innate addiction to entertainment is to go back to tracing the clues we find in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* and diligently read between the lines. By doing so, we find another one of the main corresponding points in *White Noise* that stem from Marshall McLuhan's writings. The first chapter of Postman's book "The Medium is the Metaphor" intentionally evokes Marshall McLuhan's well-known axiom "The Medium is the Message" which encapsulates media ecology theory. McLuhan was a philosopher and a media theorist by whom Postman was highly influenced as he says, "I have remained steadfast to his teaching that the clearest way to see through a culture is to attend to its tools for conversation" (8). What McLuhan's aphorism means is that, since culture is a combination of communications of different modes, the form through which it is conveyed dictates its content and allows for distinctive modes of discourse by channeling thought in specific ways. Postman presents his slightly varying proposition as he believes the phrase could result in confusions as a message denotes a constative statement whereas forms of media "are rather like metaphors, working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality" (9). Considering that *White Noise* closely deals with the subject of Media, along with the various corresponding points we list in the third chapter of this thesis, we find that the novel presents its own variation of the axiom as a reply to Postman's amendment to answer the question of how media enforces the control of the parallel governmental structure the novel suggests, that

exploits the endless appetite for entertainment by means of maintaining continuous media consumption so as to stabilize the shift in the power dynamic.

DeLillo conveys this variation through the character of Murray who crosses his legs "primly" and says "I've come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home" (51). I believe, since it closely resembles McLuhan's axiom and Postman's modification of it, this phrase calls for special attention. Specially, when we consider the effect of alliteration and consonance in the phrase: "primly" echoes the first word in the phrase in the position of variation ("primal force"). Among many definitions, *The New Oxford American Dictionary* defines "primal" as "[r]elating to or denoting the needs, fears, or behavior that are postulated (especially in Freudian theory) to form the origins of emotional life" ("Primal"). Completing Murray's same sentence, we find more adaptations of Freudianism: "[s]ealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring. It's like a myth being born right there in our living room, like something we know in a dreamlike and preconscious way" (51). The dictionary definition of "preconscious" in psychoanalysis is "of or associated with a part of the mind below the level of immediate conscious awareness, from which memories and emotions that have not been repressed can be recalled" ("preconscious"). Therefore, as there is sufficient reason that calls for a close reading of the modified part as to understand what is meant by it, it is reasonable to assume a specific invocation of Freudian theory.

However, the word "primal" occurs so often in the writings of Sigmund Freud. Similarly, this definition covers its general sense as deduced from the majority of his work. Since Freud's work engulfs many theories that he produced over the course of his career, it is hard to locate the specific sense DeLillo invokes through the word "primal" without considering the entire phrase. The word "force" helps us narrow down our search and arrive at the theory of primal repression which Freud introduces in *Repression* and refers to as the cornerstone of psychoanalysis. Similarly,

as a key term in the theory of repression and an integral part of the conscious system, the word "preconscious" confirms the accuracy of this association. Freud explains the mechanism through which repression occurs,

A mental act commonly goes through two phases, between which is interposed a kind of a testing process (censorship). In the first phase a mental act is unconscious and belongs to the system Ucs; if upon the scrutiny of the censorship it is rejected it is not allowed to pass into the second phase; it is then said to be "repressed" and must remain unconscious. If, however, it passes this scrutiny, it enters upon the second phase and thenceforth belongs to the second system which we will call the Cs. (122-23)

The development of repression however requires two "forces." First, some already repressed material that function as a constraining force must be present. Freud attributes this first force the term "primal repression." Primal repression refers to a process in which a certain unconscious idea originates the first moment of repression and constitutes a nucleus which functions as a magnet that attracts other ideas that, in accordance with the censorship of the primal oppression, are then marked for repression as well. Second, as the sole existence of such unconscious pole of attraction is not sufficient and since repression demands a persistence in force as to preserve the resistance of censorship, an external repressive force is required to preserve and feed such process. Therefore, the general process of repression is the effect of the combination of two forces.

Freud's repression theory deals with repression in its relation to anxiety hysteria, pathological fears, and phobias. DeLillo alludes to this theory through Murray's lecture on TV to the thanatophobic and powerless protagonist who aimlessly enjoys the deadly catastrophic scenes that TV presents. Considering these contextual elements, it is only adequate to analyze the

representation of the effect of repression on Jack's pathological fear of death and how it is portrayed in the novel in relation to technology.

Freud argues that emotions and instincts themselves are not a part of either the conscious or the unconscious and thereby are not susceptible to repression, however, if an association of an ideational representative with an emotion or instinct is formed then that idea can go through the transition from the unconscious to the conscious if it passes the scrutiny of the censorship. Therefore, we cannot analyze an instinctual emotion such as fear, fear of death in this context, without considering the ideational representations with which it is associated.

It is clear that DeLillo suggests that technology constitutes this ideational representation associated with instincts. Our discussion on the construction of reality by technology necessitates such conclusion and the examples we listed in that part reaffirm this claim. "As DeLillo explains it (again to the Paris Review): 'As technology advances in complexity and scope, fear becomes more primitive.' Here, our primal instincts don't help us overcome technological oppression; instead, they are subject to technology. They also leave us ever more in thrall to the consumer world" (Jordison). In Jack's case, specifically, the impact of watching disasters on TV and the excitement such scenes stir within him is what elicits such association. By showing people who are powerless in the face of nature, TV forms the association between a lack of power with death and fear. The idea of power then is designated as an ideational representative that is positioned as a polar opposite of fear, specifically, the fear of death. Subsequently, TV represents the force that sustains the repression of ideational representative of fear while simultaneously giving the implication of the possibility of avoiding death through the accumulation of power, "I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department," Gladney tells Heinrich, "I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the

county, where the fish hatcheries are" (DeLillo 117). Therefore, as it is an extension of his fear of death, Jack's obsession with projecting a powerful image functions as a defense mechanism.

The System Cs now protects itself by an anti-cathexis of its surrounding associations against the activation of the substitutive idea, just as previously that system secured itself by cathexis of the substitutive idea against the emergence of the repressed idea (Freud, 132)

Some of the incidents that deal with Jack's fear that we have already looked at such as the encounter with Massingale and the ego threatening conversations with Heinrich about the rain and the plume are already sufficient to deduce that Jack's fear is associated with his sense of power and is triggered by anything that might compromise his authority. At the same time, his admiration of his academic robe, avoidance of the German scholars, and attempts of projecting a more powerful image by wearing dark glasses on campus and changing his name from Jack to J.A.K confirm such association.

The ego behaves as if the danger of an outbreak of anxiety threatened it not from the direction of an instinct but from the direction of perception: this enables the ego to react against this external danger with the attempts at flight consisting of the avoidances characteristics of a phobia. In this process repression succeeds in one particular: the discharge of anxiety may be to some extent dammed up, but only at a heavy sacrifice of personal freedom. (Freud, 132-33)

Understanding the sacrifices of personal freedom necessary for Jack's successful repression of such fear clarifies the mechanism through which TV functions. We have mentioned many power threatening incidents in the novel which end up with Jack visualizing

TV commercials or engaging in some form of consumer behavior as a way of consolidating his position. Similarly, in one of the “who will die first” conversations, Jack says in reply to Babette’s wish to die first “[i]t’s not that she doesn’t cherish life; it’s being left alone that frightens her. The emptiness, the sense of cosmic darkness. Master card, Visa, American Express. I tell her I want to die first” (DeLillo 99). What is worth pointing out in this quote is that immediately after thinking of those names Jack represses the immense fear of uttering his self-sacrifice and is able to elude his pathological fear of death and tell Babette that he wants to die first! However, the association is most transparent when the first real life-threatening event occurs and Jack and his family drive out of their home and arrive at the camp. In the barracks, Jack describes his state as “bearing the death impression of the Nyodene cloud, I was ready to search anywhere for signs and hints, intimations of odd comfort.” (154). While watching the sleeping children who “were like figures in an ad for the Rosicrucians”, Steffie uttered the words “Toyota Celica”. Jack describes the powerful influence of these words,

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 TV 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 (155)

Such intense display of the effect of commercials, products, and consumer behavior in comforting Jack's phobia proves that TV, as a force that should sustain repression, establishes the anti-cathexis necessary for achieving successful repression by associating consumerism with power. "These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters" (114). In Jack's case, identity-shaping consumerism is the heavy sacrifice to personal freedom he must endure, "Each of these moments--at the supermarket, at the mall, hearing Steffie talk in her sleep--is delivered with mordantly styled humor because it's almost impossible for Jack to speak any other way: he's doomed with critical knowledge of his life's deep support system." (Lentricchia 112)

Thus, what we infer from observing this dynamic through a psychoanalytic lens is that DeLillo proposes an element of fear induction and amplification of insecurities that mass media utilizes and a comforting escape that it offers to create the combined forces of attraction and repulsion required to arouse and subdue the repressed material it creates. Wielding such power leads to absolute control as the effect of the process repeatedly allows the viewers' ego one course of action only, namely, sacrifice of freedom. Thus, DeLillo suggests that desire gratification is an intrinsic mode of functionality through which media facilitates the exploitation of humans' "infinite appetite for entertainment" on a mass scale and guarantee the continuity of consumption by maintaining and securing repressed material in the unconscious of its viewers who are totally aware of the effect but unable to identify or escape it.

How strange it is. We have these deep terrible lingering fears about ourselves and the people we love. Yet we walk around, talk to people, eat and drink. We manage to function. The feelings are deep and real. Shouldn't they paralyze us? How is it we can survive them,

at least for a little while? We drive a car, we teach a class. How is it no one sees how deeply afraid we were, last night, this morning? Is it something we all hide from each other, by mutual consent? Or do we share the same secret without knowing it? Wear the same disguise? (198)

It is important to remember, however, that although technology constructs another reality (a hyperreality) as a way of exercising control, the association of power with consumer behavior is not completely a technological construct. This is an image of reality marked by commodification that technology preserves by means of the self-referral of the parallel structure to the status quo it dominates:

[U]nlike TV, which is an element in the contemporary landscape, the environment of the image is the landscape – it is what (for us) "landscape" has become and it can't be switched off with the flick of a wrist. For this environment-as-electronic-medium radically constitutes contemporary consciousness and therefore (such as it is) contemporary community. (Lentricchia 89)

As we have explained that media enforces the ideological tyranny of the emerging parallel structure, it is clear how this association, as derived from the reality of a more powerful economic class that expresses its power through the sign value of the objects with which it surrounds itself, inconspicuously reinforces the legitimacy of such structure and consolidates its position. Therefore, the goal is not necessarily to gain more profit or to psychopathically indulge in controlling people's minds. I can only assume that the goal is to hinder any attempts of creating a new social order in which this power could be compromised. Thinking of a better alternative to capitalism or trying to enhance our version of it as to reach its most just form is already not an

easy task, and as long as people are amusing themselves "away" from death a change in the status quo is unimaginable.

6 Conclusion

Finally, arriving at utopia is a near impossible mission not only because of the infinite aporias of utopia that we mentioned, but also because of the challenging task of reconciling such concept with a problematic human nature. The relationship between utopian and dystopian elements is highly complex and increasingly affected by historical changes and emerging technologies. Following the lead of Plato's *Republic*, the pillars of dystopian literature, Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, whose prophecies we analyze in this thesis are critiques of social reality and efforts aimed at exploring the fine line that renders the distinction between utopia and dystopia.

Our juxtaposition of *White Noise* and *Amusing Ourselves to Death* clarifies how contemporaneous works reflect on the prophecies of Orwell and Huxley and situate them within the context of our New Media Age. Through our analysis of *White Noise*, we find that the novel takes into account the various political, cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions of historical events to assert its belief in the fulfillment of the Orwellian vision and posits that we still live in the world of Big Brother. This perspective is becoming increasingly relevant as it manifests itself gradually in our reality, specially, through the fast-paced progress achieved in mass technologies which has led to the normalization of obligatory data collection and the unprecedented threats to user privacy that ensue. DeLillo, however, shows that this vision, due to many variables, is in need of modernization. Therefore, he presents a contemporary alternative to the government dictatorship Orwell hypothesized by means of the highest moral value in the Age of New Media,

namely, commodification. Thereby, his work contends that commodification, instead of patriotism, has become the totalizing principle of our reality.

But most importantly, by underscoring this totalizing principle which is the point at which the opposing concepts of utopia and dystopia meet, DeLillo materializes a combination of all the previously mentioned utopian fears into his critique of the social reality of the New Media Age to contend that we are, in fact, living in a consumerist utopia. With respect to the fear of the nature of the founder of utopia, DeLillo returns to Rousseau, who provided the strongest formulation of the antinomy of the issue,

He thus stages a mystery of personification which has survived on into current ideological stereotypes of totalitarianism, in which a fear of the emergence of the Dictator accompanies any such image of a new beginning or an absolute break. (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 86)

Therefore, *White Noise* provides a diachronic temporal reading of the progress of historical socioeconomic shifts that led to the dictatorship of a parallel government consisting of corporate leaders, high-level administrators, and heads of major organizations.

The reality of this consumerist utopia has its roots in Postman's argument, namely, our appetite for entertainment. However, although the addiction to entertainment is a self-evident symptom, it is not the cause behind our current subjugation. *White Noise* suggests that attributing media addiction to such desire is not a sufficient level of analysis and argues, instead, that this very appetite is undergoing intentional exploitation through manipulation on the level of the unconscious.

It is only our technologically maintained astonishment and psychological compliance that distract and prevent us from perceiving our reality as an Orwellian dystopia. Had Winston in 1984 been equally mesmerized and enthused by ultranationalism as Jack and media consumers by consumerism he would have not been able to critically assess the status quo and, consequently, attempt to rebel against it. Thus, the unattractive utopian reality our mass media constructs by becoming a hyperactive source of mass psychological conditioning provided through happy commercials that simultaneously heighten instinctual fears and offset them as to distract and subdue the increasingly powerless viewers to a point where the effect of this process is visible on the degraded public discourse reaffirms the legitimacy of the utopian fear of perfection and that utopia can be a nightmare once realized. Then, Jameson's "anxiety of utopia" or the fear of the loss of identity naturally follows as a functional property of mass media exemplified by Jack's projection of power that leads him to change his name. Consumers, then, are conditioned to sacrifice their freedom for their ego to remain intact, thereby, allowing their identity to be shaped and molded by the doctrines of consumer ideology, or as Murray asserts "it is only a matter of time before you experience the vast loneliness of consumers who have lost their group identity" (DeLillo 50).

The widely commended accessibility of *White Noise* made it DeLillo's most popular work of fiction. At the same time, its eccentric approach to the magnificent themes it portrays participates to its augmented value. The relevant tools the novel employs to deliver its idiosyncratic perspective on mass media, hyperreality, and vacuous consumerism make its multifaceted critique of the social reality of the New Media Age alarmingly accurate. However, DeLillo's subversion of the long debated fine line between utopia and dystopia leaves one question without an answer, namely, does the triumph of the dystopian element merely reflect an escape from the uncertainties

of utopian fears, or do we intentionally resort to dystopia only to be embedded further within such latent existential terrors?

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