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‘KLEENEX-VIEW’ AND CULTURAL DEVALUATION:  
MERCHANDISE AS ONTOLOGY IN DON DELILLO’S  
*WHITE NOISE* (1985)

An exciting perspective of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* is the one indicated in the above title. My paper is to focus on three chapters of the novel, with special emphasis on the social concerns the text presents. DeLillo’s interest in externals as an effect provoking problems can be seen as an attempt to write about society following the iconoclastic tradition of the American novel. He creates a multilevel text that explores the consciousness of today’s American Everyman intellectual, his perception of reality and human reactions providing a pathway to the so-called ‘hard-core’ of contemporaria through the dimensions of psychology, philosophy, sociology, culture and language.

In many respects *White Noise* presents a blend of modernist and postmodernist tendencies. A major critic of DeLillo’s texts, Frank Letricchia highlights the postmodernist features of the novel when investigating such notions as the loss of energy and values, the criticism of reason and technological modernization in Habermas’s sense, and last but not least the codes and rituals or ‘entropic dystopia’. However, some other characteristic features of the novel, such as the quest for understanding conceptualizing the deconstructive and chaotic world and the truly satirical voice, condition us to interpret it more readily in terms of modernism. This novel is a science fiction like vision, a distopia of contemporary culture, moreover the philosophical ideas the novel focuses on are of epistemological nature. The narrator, Jack Gladney seems to be aware

of the importance of creating stories ('plotting'), but narratology does not become his predominant concern throughout the novel. The selected section of the book can be taken as a thematic proposal to the novel as well as a complication after the descriptive, introductory narratives of the earlier chapters. Here the suspicion, that 'something has gone wrong' is foreshadowed; a comprehensive analysis of contemporary American society is envisaged, including some causal relations leading up to the state of fear and references to death, such as "A series of frightened children appeared at our door for their Halloween treats (WN 53)" at the end of Chapter 11. These three chapters are situated in the first part of the novel entitled "Waves and Radiation," in Lentricchia's description:

"Waves and Radiation" is all about the white noise, actual and metaphoric, that constitutes the setting of postmodern life, an environment more or less in focus—less rather than more because not a direct object of perception like traditional novelistic and pre-modern environments, the city and the country. And the less in focus the environment, the more our paranoia is enhanced, not clinically but as a general (and reasonable) psychic condition of privileged first world citizens. (Lentricchia: "Tales..." 100.)

The psychic condition of people is expressed in the complex symbolism of the toxic cloud, waves and radiation. The scientific description of the phenomenon called 'radiation fog' helps us understand the wide range of symbolic implications *White Noise* offers the reader: it is an immobile, cloud-like moisture that in clear nights hovers over wintertime valleys while the earth's warmth 'escapes into the upper atmosphere'. The chapters I have chosen for analysis present a world in which people's minds are covered with this 'fog' in everyday terms.

The following chart presents a summary of the negative (entropic, deconstructive and devaluing) tendencies that seem to work behind the text and formulate the fundamental concepts it is built upon.

**SOCIAL (CONTEXTUAL) DIMENSION  
(TEXTUAL) DIMENSION**

↓  
ideological-political powers  
(e.g. media gurus)

↓  
social & psychological pressure =  
conformism & popular myths

↓  
escapes

↓  
\*shopping (die away)

\*watching TV("Merchandise as Ontology")

\*hiding away on campus as a student/ teacher

\*taking drugs, approaching death

**ARTISTIC**

←  
↓  
(‘narrative animal’)

↓  
plotting  
lack of real action

↓  
escapes  
(irresponsibility)

↓  
‘we fict’  
(make up stories  
that hold reality  
together)

↓  
\*everyday tales  
\*literary tales (e.g.  
metanarratives)

The selected chapters include such locations as the school, the supermarket, College-on-the-Hill, the family home (especially the kitchen), the bank and Murray’s place. These intentionally generic locations, together with characters of similarly generic nature, point out an interesting feature of DeLillo’s writing and approach to literature. His ethical preoccupation attacking the American lifestyle is embedded in a text. The main point is to make people recognize: ‘you

live in the same way and let your mind get full of junk data (e.g. the supermarket and the TV) and false dreams; open your eyes and see you live on the surface and are getting alienated from the hardcore of life.' Probably this intention moves the writer away from the traditional novel-concept where the characters and contents are deprived of their everyday nature. Actually DeLillo's writing seems to be the opposite of that trend in fiction. I think that the notion 'we fict' gets overwhelming emphasis in the latter through the preoccupation with philosophical ideas in the form of the novel.

DeLillo's textual reality and its philosophical, social and psychological dimensions are presented directly in the content and characters like Murray or Heinrich. They speak out their views sometimes in an extremely strict and explanatory, 'philosophizing' way, for instance in Murray's talk to Babette in the supermarket (Chapter 9); the dialogue between Jack and Heinrich about 'truth' (Chapter 10) or in the case of Jack's interest in the culture of death (e.g. his Hitler Studies) throughout the book and in the course of these three chapters in the death of culture, inflation and disarray of values. Murray plays a special role, his presence reminded me of the Lucifer figure in a famous Hungarian drama: *The Tragedy of Man* (1861) by Imre Madách. Jack (Ádám) and Babette (Éva) experience different things while Murray (Lucifer) keeps on explaining the evil nature of mankind with irony and sometimes sarcasm, for instance: " 'The more you talk, the sneakier you look, as if you're trying to put something over on us' [says Jack. Murray's reply is:] 'The best talk is seductive' (WN 51)." A panoramic view of their existence is presented here, providing a philosophical perspective that makes them reevaluate themselves and their approach to reality.

Another interesting parallel is also noticeable here: Babette's figure seems to follow the path that other American writers, like Edward Albee, established with female characters such as Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* and some other female characters of the less well-known plays entitled "The American Dream" or "The Sandbox". The social concern and the writer's approach to the society in which he lives show similarities, too, in many stances. The institution of marriage, for instance, is treated as a satire of conformism here, though its 1980s' concept lacks the outsider's superior view and

presents the spouses not as much as social beings, but rather in their psychological nature.

Since morality and fantasy are of primary interest in the novel, comic qualities are especially emphasized. The tone of DeLillo's text is full of different types of humor, especially Black Humor and satire. However, neither one achieves absolute dominance. In his critical view of society he uses satire as a weapon, though he is aware of the fact that since no one is in the position any longer to judge without self-criticism, superiority disappears and the narrator can merely wander around the settings without any certainty to find a hierarchy of values. This feature would move the general tone from satire towards Black Humor; certain elements point in this direction, for instance the nihilistic black games such as Heinrich's chess party with the serial killer and the murder-case itself; the games with death such as Babette's drug-taking habits or Jack's choice of profession as a researcher of Hitler Studies; the stress on social absurdities such as people's disability and unwillingness to realize the impact of the media on them. Using Abádi-Nagy's distinction (*Válság...* 386–97), DeLillo's novel shows comic, 'Black Humorous' qualities in the

- physical sphere (i.e. the strong concern with death and apocalyptic environmental pollution, fear and uncertainty);
- ethical sphere (i.e. the writer's aim to shock and estrange from the absurdities of life lack superior and/or outsider position);
- mental sphere (the superficial qualities become overemphasized with the loss of real values and causality, though the need of a firm center, a hardcore, still lives).

As Robert Scholes claims regarding the symbolic function of snow in Donald Barthelme's *City Life*: "This snow-like fallout of brain damage is not just a reminder of the pollution of our physical atmosphere, it is the crust of phenomenal existence which has covered our mental landscape, cutting us off from the essence of our being, afflicting even the atoms (Scholes 116–7)."

A closer examination of the text reveals the signs of the approaching apocalyptic situation and references to the true nature of the phenomenon. The cloud threatening Blacksmith and its people probably denotes not just surface dangers like the ones caused by problems with a machine, the food, fumes or toxic materials, but it

also refers to “something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things (*WN* 35);” so to speak the firm center of their lives, too. Words like ‘irritation’ or ‘mask’ and events like the teachers’ brain confusion and the investigators’ enlisted uncertainty-factors suggest the suspicion that some really big trouble is to come. The pollution of the environment-, language- and mind theme forms a complex thematic unit here.

After this introductory paragraph we are again with the Gladneys and Murray Siskind at the Supermarket, an archetypal image, a ‘sacrificial temple’ of our age. At this image we have to stop for a moment and see what SUPERMARKET embodies and represents. An analyst of the “Mechanization and Standardization in America” (Müller-Freienfels 272–9) differentiated between European and American lifestyles. He claims that while the Old World culture focuses on the organic, artistic and intellectual aspects, Americans are much more concerned about the magnitude in values, the machine-made world, and technique is not a means only but also a purpose for them. While Europeans are interested in distance, uniqueness and originality, their New World fellows deal mainly with type, similarity and agreement in all dimensions of life (274). This quoted distinction lies at the roots of American pragmatic thinking and behavior and get symbolized in the term ‘Supermarket Culture’. DeLillo stresses the spiritual surrender of the ‘sensus communis’ to these ideas and Supermarket stands for them: “We moved together into the ultra-cool interior (*WN* 35);” the sliding door that keeps energy in and after the last purchase point where “breath mints and nasal inhalers” are sold, people get out of the womb-like (spiritual) ‘incubator’ that prepares them for death, having been consumed by the system in which they are to purchase happiness by the act of shopping, obtaining material goods; finally they are at the parking lot, another typical symbol of their lifestyle.

I think the KITCHEN is another important location of the Gladneys’ life since it is a center of information exchange in the family and between the family and the outside world. The telephone is located here and “a computer-generated voice is asking a marketing survey aimed at determining current levels of consumer desire (48),” implying the strong interdependence of information and consumer

society. The family members hear the news about the toxic cloud from the radio there in the kitchen, too, and decide what to believe and how to react. The dinner table is the place where they talk to the kids and discuss family matters as well, presenting a confusion of the private and the social spheres.

The switch from the kitchen-setting to Murray's home is quick: here we find a room which is 'a container of thought' next to an insane asylum, which is expected to give strange noises... Murray is engaged in his communication theory referred to above.

Both the supermarket and the suburban kitchen scene stand for the notion of conformism. I believe that the original idea of conformism apparently got loaded with negative connotations. Texts like DeLillo's writing criticize manipulation strategies in a satirical voice and focus on standardized man ('massive nothing'); the standardized environment ('suburbia'); or routine activities (senseless and emptied-out social reflexes, e.g. when Babette reads, because the old fellow needs his 'weekly dose of culture myths'). "We moved into the generic food area... (36)" says our narrator-guide and starts his list of language and culture trash: bins, filmy bags, machines, nameless systems, roars and cries, altogether WHITE NOISE in Supermarket-terms stressing the superficial order of all things around them, the chaos and unnaturalness as dehumanizing forces. Here 'merchandise as ontology' is explained through the idea: "Here we don't die, we shop (36)." Then a superficial dialogue follows that leaves us in suspicious again: Baba is discovered to use a drug that has side-effects. From this point we can't help searching for underlying reasons for that and it enables the reader 'to see double': to see the causes and effects together. We learn that all the family members have some kind of escapist redirection activity as a defense against outside forces, for instance Baba taking drugs; the ex-wife at the ashram; Denise and the green visor which offers her "wholeness and identity (7);" Heinrich and the chess party; Jack wearing a black gown on campus; and even Wilder, the defenseless innocent little kid, who cries for hours. These self-defense strategies provide them with a 'Kleenex-view' of the world similarly to the paperback books on the shelves of the supermarket that suggest made-up stories about cult mysteries and heroes. The end of the novel underlines this idea: "The tales of the

supernatural and the extra-terrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead (326).”

The supermarket in Murray’s presentation becomes a temple where sacrificial rituals happen thousands of times every day. The text here gets loaded with philosophical allusions (e.g. the Tibetan spiritual parallel) and conclusions like: “Here we don’t die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think (38).” This place is like an Egyptian pyramid, where we get a still-framed perception in a ‘sealed-off’ and ‘self-contained’ location of death. The notion that these people die as they lived is implied here: they seem to live in complete facelessness and loneliness, being exclusively concerned about everyday banalities. Again, Wilder and another kid, the Asian baby both counterpoint the adults’ guilt with their innocence. In my view, throughout the whole chapter Murray tries to get Jack and Babette to visit him at his place and the spouses are powerless and seem to get under his polite controlling intentions. Jack’s mental uncertainty and gradual loss of direction is underlined by the returning motif of the inability to comprehend people talking strange languages around him, just like at the beginning of this chapter.

Between the Kleenex-view described in the supermarket-section and the Kleenex-view offered by the TV in Chapter 11, the previous chapter forms a thematic link situated mostly in the family home. Chapter 10 starts as if we are given a poster or advertisement about College-on-the-Hill, and then we can look behind and see, what in fact students get for their fourteen thousand dollars: another ‘incubator’, where they (‘in fetal position’!) are hermetically closed up for secret ‘overfinement’ purposes. Overfinement refers here to the extremely specific education that enables them to speak a professional jargon, an incomprehensible language for Jack. Again the Babel-image appears and shows Jack as an estranged observer of the students and their bell-jar covered inbreeding place, a further reference to Sylvia Plath’s notion of *The Bell Jar*. Paradoxically teachers like Jack teach these languages to them. However, he is unable to advance in his German, the meta-language of his own field, i.e. Hitler Studies... On the other hand, they get overfined during their college years in the sense that their mind and interests focus on academic fields and they lose touch



with everyday reality. Jack and Murray spend most of their time on campus, too. Marshall McLuhan, Father of Media Theory and author of such books as *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, himself a myth-maker and mythical figure as well, says in an interview:

- ‘But’, the voice perished, ‘you’ve only lived your whole life on a university campus.’
- ‘Well’, McLuhan responded, ‘if you’ve lived on a university campus, you know a lot about stupidity. You don’t have to go outside the university to understand the human condition.’
- There was laughter.
- ‘You can’t always recognize stupidity at first sight—he continued.— Or immaturity. Very few people go past the mental age of eleven now. It isn’t safe! Why—they would be alienated from the rest of the world.’ (Powe 23)

Campus-life and education often trains people for cultural conformity, though the idea to follow the ‘establishment’ is sometimes rejected by the same intellectuals. According to an influential, though conservative view of the anti-establishment intellectuals in a book entitled *The New American Society* “Opinion-making institutions can present and diffuse ideologies that justify the dominance of bureaucratic elite and can withhold information that conceals incompetence, malfeasance and self-serving (Bensman–Vidich 285).” At another place in the same book conformity and one-dimensionality, a fundamental notion of Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* is ideologically turned out of its original meaning, when discussing the pre-manufactured experience provided by the mass media and intellectuals turning against it: “The failure of consciousness means simply that individuals fail to recognize the amount of freedom that is available if they would choose to use it (279).” The above quoted views serve as counter-examples that refer to Jack’s involvement in the battle of ideologies, makes efforts to see clearly, but he cannot get out of the context of his own life, cannot revolt in a heroic way: he simply goes on searching for possible escapes.

After the two images of social and spiritual incubation, i.e. the Supermarket and the Campus, the themes of consumer society and contamination merge, when Babette argues why she needs her daily

dose of cult mystery and escape: in her simplifying mind there always must be either-or choices, for instance to take or not to take a chewing gum or a cigarette; either she dies first or Jack... Her reactions again remind us of Albee's Martha when she says: "I'm not a criminal,... All I want to do is chew a pathetic little tasteless chunk of gum now and then (WN 42)." Martha behaves similarly in tense situations. I think such seemingly irrelevant questions as the fuss about whether to chew or not to chew gum is given some relevance. Through Babette's reactions one can learn about the psychology of this culture and its impact on the individual. Babette is like a perfectly programmed robot, a product of consumer society being absolutely dependent on her environment, one who has lost her own will-power and is on the way of losing self-control, too: "Look, either I chew gum or I smoke. If you want me to start smoking again, take away my chewing gum and my Mentho-Lyptus (42)." Others always instruct her what to do and what not to do. She reads the warnings on the chewing gum or cigarette packet; she waits for the media to tell her whether there is danger of a toxic cloud or not; Mink gets her to take Dylar and what not... She is a robot in the sense that she mechanically does routine activities, for example "transcribing names and phone numbers from an old book to a new one (45);" shopping, teaching motion-patterns, getting the family to watch TV always at the same time and reading to an elderly man just as she reads bedtime pornographic stories as a substitute for a real sexual relationship with Jack). Her figure seems to be similar to "a race of people with a seven-bit analog consciousness (41)." Facelessness is also emphasized at the end of this chapter: Jack checks his balance (!) at the bank, his account is OK, so the system has "blessed his life (46)," approved his existence. In other words, if others say so, then he exists. A similar ironical identifying relevance is given to the 'automated banking card' at the end of Chapter 37: "REMEMBER. You cannot access your account unless your code is entered properly. Know your code. Reveal your code to no one. Only your code allows you to enter the system (295)."

In the course of shifting the narration from a family scene with Babette to another one with Heinrich, Jack disappears. He is present only as a medium of narration, he transfers and radiates his view to the reader. The episodes with Heinrich reveal epistemological questions.

He is the orator of 'the many truth theory' and a voice of pessimistic relativity (skepticism). He dwells on the border of skepticism and nihilism, since he plays a GAME of chess with a murderer, a game of movements without personal communication. Here the Babel-allusion reaches one of its peaks: the paradox of language and game, or language as a game in a philosophical sense. It is facelessness in another form. A further example of social psychology is given here: a figure similar to the characters in the novels of Truman Capote and Franz Kafka follows a call and kills people without any specific reason. But similarly to Capote's way of investigating the motives of his murderers in the book entitled *In Cold Blood*, Heinrich lets us know the psychological drives behind their deeds claiming that the prisoner has heard 'pressuring voices' coming from the TV.

A movie entitled *Knight Moves* presents murder-instinct in a similar way, too. I think chess, an organized system of rules that are based on causal relations, is the counter-symbol of the seemingly senseless murder-case lacking causality. Probably that is why they chose to play it. Moreover, on Heinrich's side it provides him with a sense of order as opposed to the chaotic nature of the surrounding world. Heinrich's reasoning seems to me a bit too philosophical for a teenager. Nevertheless, it is not the only example in the novel, where children present more wisdom than their parents. Denise gets superior to, or at least morally stronger than Babette in the beginning of the chapter, too. The way adults seem to formulate their perceptions into concepts about the reality that surrounds them seems to be significantly manipulated and many times helplessly confused.

Without noticing it we are introduced to the other supplier of physical data and mass consciousness: the TV. The manipulation strategies mentioned earlier in the supermarket-section work also through mass media, where one cannot get reality but only its screened vision. Referring back to the above chart one can see that among the possible escapes TV, i.e. watching stories happening always to others, believing all and sometimes mixing it up with reality, seems to be the everyday devaluing counterpart of the notion 'we fict'. Today more and more people are aware of the negative, controlling power of the media: still we keep watching and listening to them. DeLillo provides an explanation in the novel: "Media is a

primal force in American home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained and self-referring, similarly to the supermarket image. It's like a myth being born right there in our living room... (WN 51)." For a lot of people TV means too much: actually, sometimes I am amazed how much a lot of people are attached and glued to the 'metaphysical God' in my own surroundings as well. Again taking McLuhan's opinion, which also deals with waves and radiation: "At the speed of light there are no moving parts. At the speed of light you don't have a body. On the telephone, on TV, on the radio, you are discarnate. This is the age of discarnate man. And without a body you can't be human. You can be God or devil, but you can't be human (Powe 24)." Jack gives his own view in the next chapter (Chapter 11) saying:

The boy [Eugene in Australia] is growing up without television, which may make him worth talking to, Murray, as a sort of wild child, a savage plucked from the bush, intelligent and literate but deprived of the deeper codes and messages that mark his species as unique.

And Murray's reply is:

TV is a problem only if you've forgotten how to look and listen. ...Root out content. Find the codes and messages, to use your phrase, Jack. (50)

He adds later on:

You have to open yourself to the data. TV offers incredible numbers of physic data... [The real thing TV provides us is] coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. ...sacred formulas (51).

Jack and Murray represent two close, but not identical views: both recognize the extraordinary importance of myths and codes, easy to notice and understand signs for the *sensus communis*. However, Jack considers the media as a purpose, too. A similar paradox appears here as the one I referred to earlier in the contrast of European and American cultures. The two 'sites of experience,' using Eugene Goodheart's term (26), emphatic carriers and producers of myth, in chapters 9, 10 and 11 are the Supermarket and TV: anyway one can find many other contemporary mythical subjects in the rest of the book, too, such as Elvis, cars, Anglo-conformity, suburbia or the campus.

To understand DeLillo's ideas concerning the role of media, one must know that he is a media-expert himself and seems to be perfectly familiar with the relationship of media, popular culture and literature,

where the keyword is MYTH. In his essay John Vickery quotes Ernst Cassirer when defining myth as:

...a mode of consciousness that symbolically structures the world and a record of the mind's processes projected onto the external world. Its symbolizing activity, therefore, contributes to the human creation of a meaningful and so called objective world. By so objectifying human emotions in image and symbol, myth serves the socially pragmatic function of generating a shared feeling and conviction of social and natural unity. (Vickery 79)

Zsolt Virágos explains in his essay why and how this originally positive, “ideologically attuned myth-making (30)” changes the ‘generation of shared feelings’ into something dangerous. DeLillo applied a similar theme in his *Libra*, where the metanarrative nature of media is in focus, and there is a further example: the ongoing ‘live’ metanarrative process concerning the O. J. Simpson case each day on CNN and in other media in 1995 or the constantly enriching metanarrative coverage of 9.11, the terrorist attack against the World Trade Center in New York and its aftermath.

The quest for a firm center is lost and substituted by beliefs in different myths, like clichés, political religion, technology, myth of the apocalypse and the myth of New World innocence, in Virágos’s terms; such metaphors as John Winthrop’s 350 year old idea of ‘a city-upon-a-hill’, the myth DeLillo directly refers to in the text when mentioning the ‘College-on-the-Hill.’ To some extent, *White Noise* gives the criticism of the monomyth-seeking conformism, the ‘mainframe’ as DeLillo calls it (WN 46), that is presented in popular culture reinforcing ‘core values.’ Iris Murdoch claims that the problem is the “over-willingness to depend upon ‘myth’ (Kermode 123).” The novel also deals with the period of uncertainty, when ‘competitive myths’ appear. Probably the reason why DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and in particular the chapters analyzed here, focus on contemporary Americans’ attachment to popular culture myths is the recognition that:

1. after many classical and avant-garde attempts in arts, people want something that is understandable for everyone (‘sensus communis’), taken to extremities in the novel: they need a kind of ‘Kleenex-view’ provided by the Supermarket Values of TV culture, a defense safety-

net against reality, plus something that presents patterns for them to follow;

2. from the viewpoint of the 'establishment', powerful cliques controlling the masses with the help of media, popular arts serve the present existing system and provide a tranquilizer and artificially generated pleasures ('kitsch') smoothing away aggression of man-in-the-street. Its mechanism is presented especially in the dialogues between Jack and Murray, for example in Chapter 11 when Murray compares the unifying, controlling and estranging power of ads and mass-producers of culture on kids and adults (*WN* 48).

A Hungarian philosopher, Miklós Almqvist gives the deep understanding of this question (14, 97) and I think his ideas could help us realize more of the social background of the text. He also mentions an interesting phenomenon, which has something to do with the title of the novel and its first part, moreover the theme of Chapters 9, 10 and 11, namely that according to media-sociologists, since there are many channels to choose from on TV, yet people get almost the same watching any of them, people watch TV less attentively, while the media becomes the source of background noise, i.e. *WHITE NOISE*. He concludes that it is not an absolutely negative feature of modern life, since arts and media can serve purposes like relaxation as well. Goodheart agrees on this claiming in his essay entitled "Don DeLillo and the Cinematic Kitsch" that cinematic kitsch may even provide us with a necessary mode of relaxation in a life governed by anxieties and fears. The real danger perhaps lies in the tendency of kitsch to overtake everything, to consume all our experiences (126).

I think that the writer calls attention to these dangers, too. His suspicion concerning "the networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies (*WN* 46)," the system altogether and the individual's necessary self-defense described ironically at the end of Chapter 10 (*WN* 46) comes from the idea, that to feel safe and comfortable in present society, one has to give in to the system including identity and independence as well, and become a number (just like in Jack Richardson's drama entitled "Gallows Humour" the despised idea of becoming a 'number-patch'). Jean-Francois Lyotard connects the ownership and control of information with the relationship between state and society, also mentioning noise as a phrase for chaos:

The idea that the state as a 'brain' or 'mind' of society owns knowledge, gets more and more out of date in the same degree, as the counter-idea, which says that society can live and develop only if messages flooding in it are rich in information and can be decoded easily, gets stronger and stronger. The ideology of transparency of information, which walks hand-in-hand with commercialization of knowledge, begins to consider the state as a factor causing obscurity and noise (Lyotard 17, translation mine).

I believe that Jack is aware of this tendency, although his surface actions (what we actually learn from the text) show him to be a perfect agent of conformism (e.g. his job at the college, or his words at the bank). The irony of his voice (e.g. on page 46) and the narrative technique proves the opposite: Chapter 10 ends in the 'perfect harmony of the soul' when he is accepted by the system, i.e. the bank-account balance is confirmed, nevertheless, Chapter 11 starts with the sentences: "I woke up in the grip of a death sweat. Defenseless against my own racking fears (*WN* 47)." The recognition is followed by interior fear and quest for a hardcore, a center. The 'good old' routine actions and reactions in the exterior are here now: "to talk seriously to a child" in the kitchen, "where the levels of data are numerous and deep (48)" (see also in Richardson's drama the symbolic kitchen-scene).

On the way home from Murray's place, they pass along the window of an optical shop and read again brand names. Here the 'Kleenex-view' theme is reinforced, see also Denise's green visor and many other references earlier: the view of things is in question now. Murray says previously that the 'hows' of watching TV and the world are important (see also *WN* 50). Babette has always got trouble with seeing clearly and now her perception of the world becomes even more confused. She forgets all the details of everyday life, moreover, this seems to be a general tendency, since forgetfulness is in the air... 'Brainwash' is an unmentioned word hanging in the air, but references like drugs reinforce its hidden existence. Babette is a pliable subject to be influenced and controlled, the most terrifying thing about her is that though 'either-or life' mentioned earlier can be boring, she claims: "I hope it lasts forever (53)." Her last sentence means the opposite of what we saw at the end of the previous chapter in Jack's behavior: she passively and powerlessly falls into a unconscious state, a vegetation

of mind, where the inputs of the surroundings directly determine the effects on her actions and choices; she totally gives up her identity and personality, getting diffused in 'The Toxic Labyrinth' (referring to Myrna Millar's book title).

One thing the reader of DeLillo's *White Noise* surely wishes to do is to avoid the 'toxic labyrinth', and perhaps to obtain an approach to reality which is radically different from a 'Kleenex view'.

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