



The Death of Individuality: “Herd Mentality” and Kantian Infantilism in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*

La Mort de l'Individualité: La « mentalité de troupeau » et l'infantilisme Kantien dans *Bruit de Fond* de Don De Lillo

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Abstract: Since the Enlightenment, philosophers warned against the self-effacing effects of conformity that reduce the individual to a sheepish pawn, herded by self-proclaimed figures of authority. This article explores the loss of identity linked to such dependence on the crowd, as illustrated in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*. It explains the potential reasons behind embracing the “herd mentality” and demonstrates the many strategies people adopt to seek the acceptance of the groups they affiliate with. From constructing a persona that dissimulates one’s inadequacies to the replication of other’s behavior, it follows characters who sacrifice their uniqueness for the comfort of collectivism. Finally, the article shows how easily the crowd-dependent individual surrenders his own judgement and reverts to an infantile reliance on others.

Keywords: American Literature; Postmodernism; Don DeLillo; Individuality; Kant.

Résumé: Depuis le siècle des Lumières, les philosophes ont mis en garde contre les effets du conformisme qui efface l'individu et le réduit à un pion, dirigé par des figures d'autorité autoproclamées. Cet article explore la perte d'identité liée à une telle dépendance à la foule, telle qu'illustrée dans le roman « *Bruit de Fond* » de Don De Lillo. Il explique les raisons potentielles de l'adhésion à la « mentalité de troupeau » et démontre les nombreuses stratégies adoptées pour se faire accepter des groupes auxquels on s'affilie. De la construction d'une fausse identité qui dissimule les faiblesses, à l'imitation du comportement d'autrui, l'article suit des personnages qui sacrifient leur singularité au profit du confort du collectivisme. Enfin, l'article montre

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avec quelle facilité l'individu dépendant de la foule renonce à son propre jugement et retourne à une confiance infantile en autrui.

Mots-clefs: Littérature Américaine; Postmodernisme; Don De Lillo; Individualité; Immanuel Kant.

1. Introduction: The question of individuality, as one’s ability to exude and affirm uniqueness in a society ruled by conformity, has been a recurrent theme in both philosophy and literature. It is seen by some, such the American transcendentalists, as a necessity while at the same time acknowledging its difficulty. Human beings, after all, are social creatures and adopting a “herd mentality” was, in the primitive sense, a matter of survival. Being an individual, as opposed to a group, was synonymous with death since straying from the tribe meant being confronted with starvation, wild animals and the equally life-sapping psychological effects of isolation. The unity of the tribe, to avoid separation, depended heavily on homogeneity, leading to the birth of the clone-like masses with their common rituals and indoctrinated principles known as society. While the primary need for such conformity lessened with time (since isolation-induced death is more symbolic than physical in modern societies), the attitudes of people remained primitive in their overattachment to crowds and their submissiveness to authority. German philosopher Emmanuel Kant noticed this tendency that he coined “Unmündigkeit”, roughly translated as immaturity, in his 1784 essay “What is Enlightenment?”. The word refers to a state of self-inflicted infantilism whereby Man, instead of nurturing individual judgement, prefers to confer his decision-making ability to any figure of power or authority. It is akin to a child’s dependency on adult guidance. For Kant, the key to Enlightenment lies in outgrowing this trait. He writes; “*Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another*”¹. Kant continues his exploration, lamenting his contemporaries’ quick forfeiting of individuality out of “Laziness and cowardice”.

Individuality begins with the detachment from group-think, to borrow Irving Janis's expression. Yet, it goes beyond mere understanding of the world. To be an individual is to translate one's thoughts into an identity that is independent of the self-effacing demands of group identification. In other words, it is to behave outwardly with the maturity of independent thinking gained inwardly. Ralph Waldo Emerson sees it as a form of self-reliance and explains that "the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."² The use of "great man" here suggests that non-conformity is out of the common, implying that the general attitude of the masses is to abandon their uniqueness to blend in with the crowd. Adopting what Friedrich Nietzsche called "Herd morality" signals the death of individuality, and it is this attitude that this article attempts to explore using Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*. The characters of the novel, with a few exceptions, locate themselves only in groups and adopt opinions that are validated by others. They are often willing to abandon their dignity, as will be seen later, and be submissive to anyone who would provide them with a sense of assurance. The protagonist, Jack Gladney, in particular will be the focus of this study, painting him as the personification of conformity and servitude to higher authority. Alienated and consumed by the fear of death, he first abandons all hope for authentic identity by creating a persona that helps him navigate the world and hide his insecurities. Second, his belief in the redeeming powers of the crowd renders him, like most people around him, over reliant on groups. Finally, with a child-like naiveté that made him embrace others' suggestions as truths, he placed the reigns of his life in the hands of doctors, television and his deceiving colleague Murray Siskind who sent him in a futile adventure that nearly cost him his life. Using a few references to philosophers such as Nietzsche and Kant, this article will attempt to explain the general tendency of people to conform and obey as illustrated in the work of Don DeLillo.

2. Identities and personas as public performance pieces: It is safe to say that we live in a world of appearances in which the images projected to the world are worth more than the content of one's character.

Television, with its aestheticized representation subverted our perception of reality, and the fast-paced, clone-producing culture of efficiency limited us to a unidimensional opinion of how certain roles should be filled, thus submitting people to rigid codes of behavior, expression and appearance. It is then logical that the conformist would be seen as fitting his role properly providing him with the social acceptance necessary for his survival. Non-conformity, on the other hand, is generally translated as anomaly, casting the individual away from the realm of acceptability, making him aware of his "thrownness" in the Heideggerian sense. Unable to function properly without a sense of belongingness, the individual replaces his unique personality with a fabricated persona that meets the public's expectations. In *White Noise*, this is the exact process that the protagonist adopts to counter his alienation.

Jack Gladney is a professor and the head of department of Hitler studies. He achieved a remarkable acclaim in the field he had created to the point where "Nobody on the faculty of any college or university in this part of the country can so much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in [his] direction, literally or metaphorically"³. As a family man, Jack lives with his wife, the seemingly well-grounded Babette with her scheme-free lifestyle and her comforting presence, and four children from different marriages. On the surface, Jack's life appears to be well-balanced and enviable (some characters, notably Murray Siskind covet Jack's position both academically and domestically), typical of a successful middle-class professor. Yet, his composed façade hides a deep discomfort. Jack's alienation stems from the incompatibility between his modernist thoughts based on solid Truth and the search for meaning, and his postmodern reality of relativity and moral regression. In essence, he is; "a modernist in postmodern clothing"⁴. Throughout the novel, Jack constantly seeks spiritual interpretation of events and sees the most mundane happenings, such as a child murmuring in their sleep, as a potential message from a higher plane. Of course, his expectations are all ultimately deflated because; "In all modes of fiction, it is postmodern that is least hospitable to concepts like insight

and intuition”⁵. This encounter with the emptiness of Being cultivates within him a neurosis that would be a major theme in the novel; the fear of death. As seen earlier, public acceptance rejects all forms of uniqueness, and Jack, with his nostalgic search for transcendence and his pathologic fear of nothingness (death is, as seen by T.Z Lavine, the epitome of nothingness), is the antithesis of normality. The result is then, inevitably, the fashioning of a mask, a fabricated image akin to today’s enhanced social media identities tailored to gain public admiration.

It is important to note that, in addition to his alienation and despite his success, Jack Gladney is also deeply self-conscious. While teaching a specialty heavily reliant on German, Gladney struggles with the language, taking lessons secretly and finding it excruciatingly difficult to replicate the sounds. Though he created the department, he realizes that his fame is not fully linked to his skills but to the allure of the Hitler figure to which he latched on. As a father, he presents none of the guidance and authority that his role traditionally dictates and finds himself receiving knowledge from his children rather than delivering it. Finally, as a husband, he drew all his comfort from Babette who seemed uncorrupted by the conspiratory tendencies of his ex-wives, only to discover that she had been having an affair with a mysterious man. Jack, already suffering from a crisis of masculinity through his lack of authority and physical strength, finds himself not only betrayed but unable to avenge his pride even after obtaining a pistol and embarking on a vengeful journey. As a whole, and even before his wife’s infidelity, Jack had been feeling insignificant, an imposter in a world he barely understood; “...he is a charlatan, in brief, and unfortunate enough to realize it”⁶. And it is from this painful realization that the J.A.K persona was born.

Unable to naturally mold his character to meet the demands of his multilayered life, Jack opted to take a shortcut and create a counterfeit self that emulates the traits he lacked. Using the gravitas that the symbol of Hitler carried, he created an image that would project the same “importance” and authority. Following the suggestion of the university chancellor, he changed his name from the “harmless” Jack to the more

commanding J.A.K. He started gaining weight to appear physically imposing and to match, though only superficially, the grandeur of his subject that he needed to "grow into". He walked around campus with a black gown that imitated the style of ancient scholars and started wearing thick dark glasses that only worsened his faulty vision and made him see "colored dots" at the edge of his eyes. Jack was aware of the fakeness of his aura. When discussing his need for Hitler with his daughter Denise, he explains;

"So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort. The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea, an alternative to the bushy beard that my wife of the period didn't want me to grow. Babette said she liked the series J. A. K. and didn't think it was attention-getting in a cheap sense. To her it intimated dignity, significance and prestige.

*I am the false character that follows the name around."*⁷

From this passage, his feeling of being a "false character" is made transparent. He is well aware that he became no more than a mimic of his desired self and it sinks him further into his alienation. Conroy explains; "The protagonist's self-awareness is precisely what makes his fakery especially painful"⁸. Yet, Jack was unable to detach himself from the image he created. The comfort it provided was apparent when he was informed of his exposure to Nyodine D, a toxin released from a derailed train. His fear of death made him long for the air of composure that his disguise provided; "I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses."⁹. At the same time, People's perception of him had already been fixed on his persona while his authentic self, appeared to them as unnatural. The best example of this reversal of reality happens when one of his colleagues, Massingale, sees him in the supermarket. Jack, surrounded by his family, had only his "bare" self to present to the world. His colleague noticed the stark difference between J.A.K the imposing professor and Jack the innocuous middle-aged man with the

shopping bags. However, it is not the change that was more notable but the “smallness” and unimportance he projected. Massingale proceeds to utter a sentence that shattered Jack’s already fragile self-worth. He says; “You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy.”¹⁰. This remark sent Jack on a reckless shopping spree to replace his lost worth with commodities and possessions, all in the hope of recharging his “life credit” and soothing his deflated ego.

The fragile self-worth that forces individuality to be buried under a façade of conformity is mostly dictated by group-think. The J.A.K persona was created by the opinion of others, either through self-consciousness or direct suggestion. It is also the judgement of others that destroyed that image and forced Jack to seek another form of disguise, this time through excessive consumerism. At that point; “Jack replaces his inauthentic Hitler aura with the equally inauthentic aura of shopping, which he experiences, however, as authentic”¹¹. In both cases, individuality was overlooked, an explored option unattainable in a world of appearances. More than bowing to the expectations of the crowd, Jack, like most characters in *White Noise*, can only locate himself in the crowd. Throughout the novel, we see people unable to face the self-reliance essential for personal independence. Instead, they adopt a herd-like attachment to groups and a complete servitude to self-proclaimed shepherds.

3. **“Herd Mentality” and the overreliance on groups:** The constant noise of the crowd drowns the voice of authenticity. Being absorbed in and by groups is to inevitably replicate their behavior and adopt their thoughts since it is, as Emerson explained, in solitude that one nurtures intellectual independence. To constantly rely on the proximity of others is to condemn oneself to an eternal Kantian “self-imposed immaturity”. Essayist Maria Nadotti noted the risk taken by always affiliating with groups saying; “There is something menacing and violent about a mass of people which makes us think of the end of individuality, whether they are gathered around a military leader or around a holy man”¹². One might argue that certain groups can confer a sense of courage or values impossible to assert by an isolated individual. However, the common attitudes of crowds seem to indicate mostly the opposite. For Paul

Cantor, for instance, group mentality is rooted in myths and misinformation (an idea confirmed in *White Noise*). He argues; "One can have community, but only if it rooted in error; if one wants truth and rationality, one will have to pay for it in the form of wide spread anomie and rootlessness"¹³. Philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, who advocated the self-affirming individualistic power the *Übermensch*, share this opinion affirming that crowds only reinforce mediocrity by focusing on maintaining the errors of the past and rejecting authentic ideas that appear as a threat to the homogeneity of the group. Ashley Woodward explains; "Nietzsche sees "herd morality" as producing a social mediocrity in which individuals only offer values that are affirmed by the majority, and are not inspired to create their own values"¹⁴. It is then unanimous among many thinkers that the crowd is essentially the enemy of the individual. Nonetheless, many people remain, as illustrated by the characters of *White Noise*, slaves to the comfort and belongingness found in the crowd.

Jack Gladney, as explained earlier, suffers from an acute fear of death that paralyzes him. This dread of the "ultimate nothingness" of Being cannot be fully cured, only numbed. He sees in the crowd, a refuge from his anxiety. While lecturing about the groups of Germans who flocked to visit Hitler's villa and comparing them to the more "familiar" crowds one can see in ordinary life, he clarified his idea to his students saying; "to become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone."¹⁵. What Jack did not realize is that to die as an individual is to live as one, and that his attitude of life-denying avoidance of self-affirmation caused him to sacrifice his authenticity for a false sense of security.

In search of a sense of community, Jack and his wife Babette rely heavily on the comfort of their family. The Gladney's, however, are far from being a typical filial structure. There is a separation symbolized by their different blood, their hidden secrets (Babette's Dylar use, Heinrich's chess games with a death-row convict) and the difficulty to establish meaningful connections. Also, Jack and Babette strive to keep

their children in a perpetual state of dependence to prolong the status quo. As Conroy notes; “The family is retained, but now its purpose is not to change children into adults (the traditional function of the family) but rather to insure that adults remain children (the consumer paradigm)”¹⁶. This tendency can be seen in their younger (and only mutual) child, Wilder, who remains throughout the novel in the limbo of infancy. Jack notices his son’s inhibited growth when walking around the supermarket and makes an interesting remark; “It occurred to me that he was too old and too big to be sitting in supermarket carts. I also wondered why his vocabulary seemed to be stalled at twenty-five words”¹⁷. There is no evidence if Jack’s participation in the creation this process of imposed dependency is conscious, but he certainly made no efforts to amend it. The reliance on groups in this postmodern family is not solely elf-inflicted but also nurtured from an early age, making it a second nature.

To return to the idea of crowds being etched in error, the family here is no exception. In *White Noise*, most of the exchange of information happens around the family. However, the Gladneys only react to events and relay information already revealed by television that can always be heard echoing its fragmented speech around the house. When discussing facts in the car, the family only repeats vague recollections of what was once heard on the news or watched in a movie. They contradict each other and affirm misinformation like identifying Dakar as a country or a name of a character, and mistaking tsunamis for origamis¹⁸. Of course, Jack was aware that despite the confidence that his wife and children showed in demonstrating their knowledge, no true wisdom can ever be drawn from their constant brouhaha. He remarks; “The family is the cradle of the world’s misinformation”¹⁹

Despite being dysfunctional, the family remains a traditional structure that does not fully illustrate the dependance on groups. To explain this point further, one must extend it to other parts of the novel. At work, Jack is either surrounded by crowds, generates crowds (in the instance of his joint lecture with Murray Siskind), or even discusses them when he projects images of Nazi propaganda. Babette teaches

groups of elderly people in the church basement. When the toxic cloud reaches Blacksmith, the Gladney's follow the other families and cluster in the same places. Even when trying to escape the routine and spending a day in the country to see America's Most Photographed Barn, Jack and Murray find themselves surrounded by crowds of tourists gathered around and taking pictures of the same object. There is no sense of individuality or even meaningful community, the act of congregating is done for its own sake, or as Jack said; "they were there to be a crowd"²⁰. Olster notes; "Shorn of all sense of rational community, the character in *White Noise* can only locate themselves collectively within the crowd and by way of those places that facilitate congregation"²¹. The biggest danger of this habit goes beyond thriving in misinformation and perpetuating clone-like conformity. Groups generally generate leaders that dictate their world-view onto others. This means that the rest of the members suppress their freewill and their personal judgement and subject themselves to the control of others, annihilating the last remnants of their individuality.

4. Obedience and mental servitude as the suicide of freewill: In his essay *What is Enlightenment*, Kant explains the intellectual laziness that pushes man to confer his judgement to others. He writes; "It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all. I need not think, if only I can pay: others will readily undertake the irksome work for me."²². While it is true that the majority prefer expediency over self-reliance, the novel presents another reason, more applicable to the current age. Babbette teaches posture etiquette to a group of elderly people in a Congregational church. In her classes, her word reign supreme while her audience readily absorbs everything she utters. She refers to Sufi and Buddhist philosophy, yoga, Kendo and all sorts of strange concepts. The old folk, eager to regain an aspect of their youth betraying their attachment to life, do not show any reluctance to accept any of the ideas she presents. Jack remarks; "Nothing is foreign, nothing too remote to apply. I am always surprised at their acceptance and trust, the sweetness

of their belief.”²³. Babette explained that the need to look up to somebody in power results from the volatile and ever-changing nature of the postmodern world. Without a clear concept of truth, individuals are prone to lose their distinction between right and wrong. Without a fixed system that sets them onto a clear path, they err without knowing which direction to take. She explains;

*“Knowledge changes every day. People like to have their beliefs reinforced. Don’t lie down after eating a heavy meal. Don’t drink liquor on an empty stomach. If you must swim, wait at least an hour after eating. The world is more complicated for adults than it is for children. We didn’t grow up with all these shifting facts and attitudes. One day they just started appearing. So people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way, at least for the time being.”*²⁴.

This readiness to accept does not only reveal people’s loss of clear directions, but also an absence of strongly-anchored personal beliefs that vanished with the loss of traditional spirituality and religion. This is an idea discussed by Nietzsche who claimed that, in the Judeo-Christian world, the need for an all-knowing figure to dictate proper conduct did not end with the metaphorical “death of God” (symbolizing the devaluation of Christian authority in the western world). People only swapped the divine authority for a mortal one while maintaining the same dependence. He writes; “having unlearned faith in that [superhuman authority], one still follows old habits and seeks another authority that can speak unconditionally and command goals and tasks”²⁵. Similarly, the characters of *White Noise* display a semi-religious allegiance to their guides, not only translating their suggestions as truths but also slavishly submitting to their will. In the novel, this is illustrated by Jack’s servitude to the “man with the data”, a specialist who informed him of his exposure to a life-threatening toxin. When the cloud from the derailed train reached Blacksmith, Jack and his family were evacuated to a shelter where they joined a cluster of other families. There, the SIMUVAC, a unit usually specialized in simulated disasters, proclaimed itself the authority in place. One of their

agents informs Jack of his contamination. At this moment, Jack feels that his salvation (in this case the hope of being spared from death caused his exposure to toxins) rested with the man who had access to the computer; the all-knowing machine. To him, that man was "today's soothsayer with his computerized crystal ball"²⁶ and he immediately put his entire faith in him. He admits; "I wanted this man on my side. He had access to data. I was prepared to be servile and fawning if it would keep him from dropping casually shattering remarks about my degree of exposure and chances for survival."²⁷ Both blessings and servitude are usually associated with religion, and by elevating a technocrat to the rank of savior, Jack ultimately proved Nietzsche's idea of replacing divine power by human substitutes. It might be argued that Jack's prostration to authority results mainly from his fear of death, but we can see, in other passages, that his readiness to follow is kept even in less dire circumstances.

Jack Gladney is a well-respected professor, while his colleague Murray Siskind is a new addition to the college who rubs onto his friend's fame to credit his own lectures. However, Murray quickly takes on the lead exerting his full influence on Jack who sees him as a "guru". Throughout the novel, we can see that; "Murray's interpretations become Jack's convictions; Murray's speculations, Jack's experiences"²⁸. Gladney is evidently comfortable in his role of follower, and he does not question the ideas fed to him by his "friend" even when they lead him to his own demise. At this point, it is important to clarify that Murray does not have Jack's best interest in mind. He covets both his position at university and his relationship with Babette. Of course, Jack's naivety makes him blind to his colleague's schemes in the same way that the masses overlook a dictator's thirst for power, and consumers fail to notice the greed of companies that hypnotize them with aestheticized commercials. When Jack discovers his wife's infidelity, Murray comes up with a solution that would allegedly not only soothe his friend's masculine pride, but also suppress his fear of dying. Murray's cure is the acceptance of violence; To live, is to kill. He encouraged Jack's rage and promises that killing others guarantees

one's own survival. He explains that the world is made of "killers and dyer" and that it was impossible to escape the equation. One had only to choose his role. He continues; "But think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up."²⁹. Jack, unable to produce his own thoughts, embarks on an unconvincing murderous journey that nearly cost him his life proving that he was no longer a free individual but a pawn to the will of others.

5. Conclusion: Don DeLillo's critical, and often pessimistic, view on culture depicts the plight of man's loss of authentic identity in a society ruled by conformity. In *White Noise*, his postmodern characters are personifications of 18th and 19th century philosophers' fear of the death of individuality. First, through the construction of a persona, the individual creates an aura, albeit false, that satisfies public expectations. With time, the very notion of reality is replaced by the created image, making it all the more difficult to return to the original self for fear of shattering the credibility of the appearance that group acceptance relies on. Second, to avoid the existential void that solitude creates in the spiritually-deprived, the crowd becomes the only refuge. Groups dictate a common way of thinking and behaving that depersonalize their members in the hope of maintaining absolute collectivism. Finally, the crowd-dependent individual, too accustomed to walking with the current, and unable to formulate his own understanding, falls into a state of naïve intellectual infantilism, where he accepts without questions the commands and suggestions of any figure that grants him assurance and a sense of direction. In the three cases, people cease to be independent entities and only exist as indivisible parts of a collective; a situation that ultimately signals the extinction of the individual.

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