

Television and the Devaluation of Truth and Meaning in Don DeLillo's White Noise

التلفزيون وتراجع الحقيقة والمعنى في رواية "الضوضاء البيضاء" لـ: دون ديلىلو

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Abstract: Television transformed the postmodern world into an inauthentic experience guided by mediated images. In White Noise, Don DeLillo depicts a society governed by a device elevated to a state of deity that changed people's perception of life and subverted their notions of truth and meaning. The purpose of this article is to explore how television destabilized people's faith in knowledge and value leading them to reject any possibility of objective truth or intrinsic meaning. It demonstrates the controlling nature of the screen and how viewers saw their world gradually stripped of meaning with the constant counterfeit replications of reality.

Keywords: American Literature; Postmodernism; Television; Mass Media; Don DeLillo.

ملخص:

حوّل التلفزيون عالم ما بعد الحداثة إلى تجربة زائفة تتحكم فيها الصور الوسيطة. يصف دون ديلىلو في روايته "الضوضاء البيضاء" مجتمعًا محكومًا بجهاز ارتقى إلى حالة من التأليه، والذي غيّر نظرة الناس إلى الحياة وقوّض مفاهيمهم عن الحقيقة والمعنى. الغرض من هذا المقال هو استكشاف كيف زعزع التلفزيون إيمان الناس بمفهوم المعرفة والقيم مما أدى بهم إلى رفض أي إمكانية للحقيقة الموضوعية أو المعنى الجوهرية. كما يوضح أيضًا الطبيعة المسيطرة للشاشة وكيف يشهد الأفراد عالما يتجرد تدريجيا من المعنى بسبب التكرار المستمر للواقع المزيف.

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب الأمريكي؛ ما بعد الحداثة؛ التلفزيون؛ وسائل الإعلام؛ دون ديلىلو.

1. Introduction:

The postmodern age is known to be governed by the moderated images of mass media that rule over the taste and understanding of the populace, feeding them an overflow of ever-changing, contradictory and politically-motivated information that undermine the very notion of Truth. If modernist writers such as George Orwell already warned against the indoctrinating and deceitful nature of media at a time when the public access to it was in its infancy, one can easily imagine how its influence would grow when every minute of the individual's waking life is controlled by the bombardment of data through phones, television and computers. In his 1985 novel *White Noise*, Don DeLillo offered a visionary analysis of the cultural shift that happened when television took the forefront of individual and family life. While the medium existed well before his time, Don DeLillo understood the growing role it played as the main source of guidance in a society where traditional values were decaying. Two values in particular were affected by such change; truth and meaning. In the novel, the knowledge transmitted through the screen is incomplete and constantly changing, filling the viewers with a sense of uncertainty. The individual, unable to find a reliable access to truth inevitably falls into cynicism. He is confronted with a zero-sum game where he either accepts the vagueness of the information fed to him and thrives in the comfort of ignorance, or adopts a more nihilistic approach whereby he rejects the possibility of truth altogether. This choice being between doubt and ignorance signals the death of Truth as a value. As for the concept of meaning, it is diluted in the overrepresentation and aestheticization of life that deflate spiritually-charged topics and reduce them to the order of the mundane. Both concepts, in DeLillo's world, are devalued by television which took the role of a deity, omnipresent and all-knowing, plunging his characters in a perpetual state of alienation.

The purpose of this article is to explain the value-corrupting effects of television depicted in *White Noise*. Before dealing with the loss of values, however, one must understand how the media came to play a semi-religious role in postmodernism to the point where the individual would be unable to experience life without referring back to a "tv moment". The protagonist's family are bathing in the fragmented speech of the device that is always echoing in the background, creating a "brainwashing" effect personified by the daughters who manifested reports of toxic exposure as physical symptoms. Once the premise of the

importance of television is established, the question of the devaluing of truth and meaning can be addressed. First, though a study of how knowledge is treated in the novel, we can see that the overreliance on TV as the sole provider of information created a spread of misinformation. At the same time, the general unreliability of TV reports generated a community that lost its bearing on Truth as a durable value. Second, this research tackles the idea of meaning, demonstrating that the world of images reduced the Sublime into the absurd. Controversial topics lost their gravity through overrepresentations and awe-inspiring events changed from being feared to being enjoyed and anticipated through aestheticization.

2. Television as a new Deity:

In DeLillo's world, the opinions of most of his characters are either directly taken from, or influenced by television. He shows that the growing fascination with the medium made its messages unescapable and thus worthy of people's attention. The Protagonist's colleague Murray Siskind; for instance, had made a profession out of it. A sports journalist turned professor; he offers classes on Elvis before being asked to teach the cinema of car crashes. He spends days in his room deciphering the messages of the TV and urges his student to do the same. He preaches to them the consumption of commercials and scolds them for outgrowing the medium. Murray justifies the need for television saying; "For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is." (DeLillo, 1999 ; 82).

Other parts indicate that the fascination with the device is beyond mere expediency. DeLillo compared television to a deity that controls the will of its subjects. First by inferring that it is "always on hence omnipresent" (Olster, 2008 ; 81); a divine quality. Second, by cleverly referring to it as "the voice upstairs" (244), a distortion of a common appellation of God. Of course, TV is not the only voice that overwhelms the characters with its messages. They are also seen obeying the commands of the radio or flocking towards a loud speaker. Le Clair notes; "The characters of *White Noise* consume sounds as they consumer supermarket products" (Le Clair, 2003 ; 27). They are always seeking a disembodied voice descending upon them like a revelation holding some secret wisdom. Yet, television, being at the center of the postmodern family, is more prone to control them. It is also, unlike the radio, composed of images that grab the attention of viewers, creating a mesmerizing effect that

disables their ability to discern and nests without opposition in their consciousness. As DeLillo says in his novel *Underworld*; "whoever controls your eyeballs, controls the world" (DeLillo, *Underworld*, 1997 ; 241).

The hypnotizing effects of TV can be seen in the protagonist's daughters. Returning home from a shopping spree, Jack Gladney catches Steffie in the middle of an indoctrination session in which she sat, glued to the screen, mimicking the words in a robotic manner; "She moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken." (DeLillo, 1999 ; 101). Not only did she reduce her attention to a sponge that absorbed without fail the data projected in front of her, but also repeated and memorized them, causing her to mumble the words back in her sleep. When Jack observed his daughter behave like a automaton, he was oblivious to its long-term effects. Jack merely makes a remark, giving it no further thought. But when the toxic cloud threatens the inhabitants of Blacksmith, Steffie and her sister Denise exhibit the signs of their brain washing.

The second part of the novel depicts the general paranoia that followed the chemical gases that escaped from a derailed train. The airborne toxic event, sparked a fear in the inhabitant Blacksmith who turned to their TV's that became their main source of information, no matter how unreliable and shifting. One of the news that kept being changed was the alleged symptoms of the exposure to the cloud. Whenever a symptom of the toxic event is spoken of, Gladney's daughters immediately start feeling it. From sweaty palms, to nausea to feelings of déjà vu, they physically develop the ailments described by the omnipresent voice. Whenever a symptom is refuted, it magically ceases to afflict them. Their brother Heinrich, the black sheep of the family, was aware of such control. When his sisters suffered from the "wrong" symptom, he turned to his father saying; "There's been a correction," Heinrich told her. "Tell them they ought to be throwing up." (DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1999 ; 127). Reality, even in the form of physical sensations, was no longer able to be experienced authentically without the interference of television.

The commands of television are not contested because it holds an aura of sanctity replacing that of religion. As seen earlier, the novel draws parallels between the Christian perception of God and the place of TV in the postmodern American family. They are both omnipresent, all-knowing and commanding obedience. There is another instance in which the device creates a semi-spiritual awe, this time more akin to primitive rituals. When Jack's wife Babette's teaching of posture etiquette was covered by a local cable station, the family

was mesmerized by her image that seemed ethereal. The words spoken were of no importance to them, “It was the picture that mattered, the face in black and white, animated but also flat, distanced, sealed off, timeless. It was but wasn’t her.” (DeLillo, 1999 ; 122). Jack tried to shake off all the superstition he linked to the medium; “I tried to tell myself it was only television—whatever that was, however it worked —and not some journey out of life or death, not some mysterious separation.” (idem). The feeling, however, could not be suppressed since TV had already established itself as a “deity”. Babette’s family attended the event like a religious ceremony suggesting that; “He [DeLillo] sketches a similarity between the rites of primitive tribes and the way a postmodern family expects blessing with the appearance of TV’s images on the screen in a post-industrial country” (Najjarzadeha, 2015 ; 270). Babette’s image returned to them like a heavenly revelation that commanded reverence, reinforcing the idea that television was more than a mere tool. Its influence not only changed their interpretation of reality but even replaced it, making it impossible to have authentic experiences without referring back to what was seen or heard on television.

3. The impossibility of unmediated experiences:

Gladney, being constantly exposed to TV representations is unable to think outside its sphere of influence, comparing many moments of his life to scenes from TV programs. This tendency stems from living at a time when the Simulacra increasingly replaces the real. A simulacrum here, represents anything that replaces authentic experience with an aestheticized, superficial representation of it that loses the meaning of the original. Don DeLillo utilized this concept to the fullest in an attempt to satirize his culture’s addiction to images. As Leonard Wilcox notes; “In *White Noise* DeLillo’s protagonist Jack Gladney confronts a new order in which life is increasingly lived in a world of simulacra, where images and electronic representations replace direct experience” (Wilcox, 2003 ; 97). An extreme example of this occurs when Murray Siskind takes Jack to visit a popular tourist attraction; a picturesque rural building called the most photographed barn in America. The location was made famous by the photographs seen on magazines and television. Well before reaching their location, the two professors find themselves flooded by signs and advertisements that indicated that the barn was no longer famous for itself but for the many representations of it. Murray, who comes up as an interpreter of his culture, remarks that;

"Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn." (DeLillo, 1999 ; 22). The "aura" of the place is dictated by its images. All around the barn, tourists were amassed with their cameras and tripods to reinforce that aura. Their experience was not direct or authentic, it was lived merely through the lens, adding to their detachment from the real object. Murray cleverly adds; "They are taking pictures of taking pictures" (Ibid; 23). In the same way, television became an intermediary between peoples' perception of life and their direct experience of it. A few examples from the novel will help illustrate this point.

While escaping the toxic cloud, The Gladneys spend the night in a boy scout camp where many families amassed to find food and shelter. There, the children were sleeping while the parents looked over them. Jack notices that his daughter Steffie was tossing in her sleep, mumbling some incomprehensible words that piqued his curiosity. Jack, being constantly in search of meaning and spiritual signs, hoped to intercept a divine message that would relieve his fear after being informed that he was exposed to the toxin. Instead of a metaphysical revelation, her words spelled "Toyota Celica", a mere brand name she had heard many times. Even as he realizes that his daughter was merely repeating empty words her mind had been bombarded with during her semi-conscious connection to television, he still wished to feel something. However, as Paul Maltby explains; "Romantic and modernist conceptions of visionary moments -typically premised on metaphysical assumptions of supernatural truth- are rendered obsolete in a culture suffused in simulacra" (Maltby, 2003 ; 214).

While Jack was disappointed that his daughter was the unconscious voice of television instead of a higher plane of existence, he failed to realize that he, too, was unable to escape its influence. Having his sleep interrupted by a mysterious presence on the front porch, Jack was stuck by fear, believing that the shadowy figure outside the house was the spirit of Death that came to claim his life. To soothe his anxiety, Jack visits his children's rooms to watch them sleep. Here, Jack felt that his reality resembled the one he usually consumes through the screen saying; "I looked for a blanket to adjust, a toy to remove from a child's warm grasp, feeling I'd wandered into a TV moment." (DeLillo, 1999 ; 261). Through overrepresentations, life seemed to imitate a simulacrum and not the other way around. As Will Slocombe explains, experience was influenced by "...a mediated form of reality: the reel, not the real" (Slocombe, 2006 ; 238). When comparing his fear of death to great heroes of the past, Jack thinks of Attila the Hun. Here again, instead of deriving his reference from historical sources, his mind immediately turns to the "reel" saying; "I want to believe he lay in

his tent, wrapped in animal skins, as in some internationally financed movie epic..." (DeLillo, 1999 ; 116). The presence of tv images was so etched in the minds of its viewers that it rendered their interpretation of life completely reliant on them. It is then undeniable that, with such power of influence, the device would be able to change people's reality and by extension the values they rely on.

4. Information overload and the devaluation of Truth:

It is evident that the general position towards mass media today is one of distrust, although many still fall victim to the sometimes-disastrous consequences of misinformation. The recent racially motivated anti-immigration riots in the UK that sparked from a false report that a children-stabber was a Muslim migrant, can serve as a proof that people are still susceptible to be swayed by the molding of truth at the hands of media. Before the advent of the internet, Don DeLillo turned our attention to the general paranoia that a tv report can cause. Sensationalism and the need to maintain a façade of knowledgeability necessary to control the masses, make truth redundant as long as viewers are dependent on the screen. In *White Noise*, this is illustrated by the first news relating the toxic event.

When the train crashed releasing its toxic content in the air, the smoke observed by the inhabitant of Blacksmith was called a "feathery plume". Heinrich, the only character who could sense the confusion that these words caused commented on the inaccuracy of the report saying; "like a shapeless growing thing. A dark black breathing thing of smoke. Why do they call it a plume?" (DeLillo, 1999 ; 126). As soon as this name was adopted, it was immediately changed to; "A black billowing cloud", suggesting a certain amplitude to the event. Shortly after, the name was altered once more into the more cataclysmic yet vague appellation; "The airborne toxic event". This pattern of relating uncertain and constantly shifting news was repeated in many parts the novel, like the rapidly changing symptoms that Jack's daughters experienced. As seen earlier, each time they tuned in, the alleged effects of Nyodine D exposure were updated, casually dismissing the earlier reports without causing an apparent disbelief in the girls who embraced the new information with the same naiveté as the first. When truth becomes illusory, it is only natural that people would either remain subject to it and thus have their lives colored with the same uncertainty. Others, however, more attuned to the fragility and relativity of truth, end up rejecting it altogether, claiming

that an ever-changing truth is no truth at all. Henrich, still dissatisfied with the reports, expresses his frustration saying; "What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything." (Ibid; 165).

The nihilistic approach towards knowledge is caused by an overflow of data, often contradictory leading to a blurring of the lines between truth and untruth. In other words, there are too many versions of reality that cannot coexist, pushing those unable to detect right from wrong to question the validity of all options equally. As Paul Cantor explains; "DeLillo's Americans are set adrift in a sea of possibilities, which, being equally available, become equally valuable, or, what is the same thing, equally valueless" (Cantor, 2003 ; 53). The main cause of this confusion is, I argue, the growing role that television (and later on its derivatives such as the internet) played in the lives of individuals.

5. Overrepresentation and aestheticization of reality and the devaluation of meaning:

In his *Simulacra and Simulation*, French Philosopher Jean Baudrillard states; "The loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving, dissuasive action of information, the media and mass media" (Baudrillard, 1994 ; 55). The overabundance of references to reality eventually become divorced from the original sense of the referent. In other words, when multiple copies are produced, the meaning of the original gets progressively effaced. In the same way that a dopamine-inducing substance loses its affect over time and continuous usage, a feeling or an image, that has been over-reproduced ends up losing its value. In *White Noise*, the best example of this banalization of concepts that would otherwise be charged with meaning in that of Hitler.

Jack Gladney is a professor of Hitler studies, a specialty he founded in the college-on-the-hill and in which he became an authority in the Academic milieu. The figure of Hitler, despite its negative connotations, provided the protagonist with a sense of grandeur. His fear of death was appeased by the "immortality" of the dictator's aura and his feeling of smallness and existential futility was alleviated by the gravitas that followed the controversial name. Jack had something meaningful to "grow into" and admits that at least part of his professional success is due to his association with Hitler. However, television, with its fixation on sensational topics abused the historical figure, producing endless copies that transformed Hitler into a mundane subject unable to generate the passions it originally

created. When his daughter informs that a documentary about Hitler was being aired on TV, Jack responds by saying; “He’s always on. We wouldn’t have television without him” (DeLillo, 1999 ; 79). This fact is not without consequence. The once feared dictator and the personification of evil lost all his ability to shock or amaze. He was reduced to the order of the mundane, a meaningless topic that grew too familiar to demand any particular interest. Paul Cantor notes; “This surprising transformation of the once willful tyrant into someone reliable is the result of the increasing familiarity and reproductivity of his image in the marketplace. Through the power of the media, representations of Hitler have proliferated and permeated every corner of the twentieth-century-life” (Cantor, 2003 ; 57). Hitler was then a household name, securing an eternal place on television and the minds of its viewers but without his original significance. This idea confirms Baudrillard’s statement and illustrates television’s potential for devaluating meaning.

The novel discusses other, more prescient, events that have been trivialized by overrepresentation. The Toxic event that threatened Blacksmith, despite its imminent danger, appeared for many to be nothing more than a copy of the many calamities constantly covered by television. Indeed, the Gladney family is an avid consumer of images of natural disasters and plane crashes that desensitized their minds and created, as one of Jack’s colleagues explained, a “brain fade” that needed catastrophes to “break up the incessant bombardment of information.” (DeLillo, 1999 ; 81). The result was that, when a real threat appeared, it resembled an imitation, too familiar to cause any fear and deprived from its original sense. Babette exhibits the tolerance she developed towards these events saying;

“Every day on the news there’s another toxic spill. Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokestacks, radioactive water from power plants. How serious can it be if it happens all the time? Isn’t the definition of a serious event based on the fact that it’s not an everyday occurrence?” (Ibid; 189).

Worse than mere indifference, television developed in its viewers, a taste for disasters. Beyond simply robbing these events from meaning, it entirely reversed it, making them enjoyable and anticipated instead of dreaded. Through anesthetization of reality, the scenes of crashes and earthquakes depicted on TV were enhanced by technology and presented as both sublime (thus awe-inspiring for the spiritually starved postmodern family), and distant,

detaching them from their dangerous and often tragic sense. The people in those images were dehumanized and the coverage of the event fictionalized, making the family blind to all the death and pain they were witnessing. As John Duval notes; "They look beyond the violence and human suffering of disaster and see only aestheticized forms, enhanced by repetition and technological innovations, such as slow-motion, stop action, and frame-by-frame imagery of plane crashes" (Duvall, 2003 ; 174). The family did not only take pleasure in the suffering of others but, like a drug addict seeking a stronger kick, they hungered for more brutal, more grandiose events to be aired; "We 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" (DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1999 ; 79-80).

The dopamine rush that eased the daily "brain fade" that the overflow of information caused hijacked people's definition of disasters, seeing them more as entertainment than real life events. Television, with its constantly improving technical advances, beautifies them, adds commentary to grab the viewers' attention in the same way that serial killers today are becoming the subjects of documentaries and movies that glorify them and transforms them into genius antiheroes. This dramatization of life adds to the devaluation of meaning caused by television because; "with each screen transposition further aestheticizing reality, reality becomes increasingly drained of meaning to the same degree" (Olster, 2008; 84).

6. Conclusion:

The era of late capitalism, as illustrated by Don DeLillo, is subjected to the growing influences of the Simulacra where images and representations of reality replace authentic experience. Television, now present in every home, was proclaimed a higher authority that offered guidance and demanded obedience. Through its incessant flow of information, it quickly became the principal source of knowledge, and through the illusion of assurance, it took the role of a guide to the increasingly dependent masses who fell victim of the general aimlessness of their time. However, instead of offering access to truth, it undermined the value further by delivering unreliable, often conflicting and constantly changing information that pushed some of its viewers to see knowledge as attainable and thus useless. In *White Noise*, this idea is illustrated by the misleading reports on the toxic event that either created mindless followers with a volatile will that changes with every new information, or nihilistic cynics who question the validity of everything including their own senses.

Through repeated and enhanced representations of reality, television also trivialized even the most significant topics. In the novel, the familiarity it created with controversial figures transformed interest into apathy as viewers became too acquainted with the images of Hitler to feel any strong emotion towards him. Similarly, disasters and plane crashes became daily occurrences devoid of their original gravity. Moreover, the enhanced images and cinematic scenes of tragic events devalues them further by transforming them into mere entertainment divorced from the human suffering they were initially rooted in. With the overabundance of such images, television was able to change people's perception of reality, replacing it with mediated representations devoid of meaning.

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