

The Most Photographed Barn in America:

Postmodernism and the Novels of Don DeLillo

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of MA in Modern Literature.

University of Wales: Trinity St David

2019

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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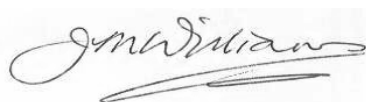
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“Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or on film”.¹

¹Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage 1991) p.43

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines three of Don DeLillo's most critically acclaimed novels: *White Noise*, *Mao II* and *Libra*, with the aim of evaluating to what degree the above texts can be classified as postmodern. This follows the debate amongst DeLillo scholars as to whether he owes a greater debt to modernism, or conversely to the postmodernism that forms an important thematic element in his novels. I will argue that whilst much of DeLillo's work focuses on America in the latter half of the twentieth century, a society that reflects aspects of the fragmentary nature of postmodernism, he eludes the straightforward classification of being a postmodern writer that an initial reading might suggest.

I will make the case that these three novels illuminate the centrality of postmodern culture in modern America, through a discussion of the work of Jameson, Baudrillard and Lyotard, and two of the most influential literary commentators on postmodernism, McHale and Hutchinson. I will then show that although the content of these novels addresses elements found in the above theorists' work, there are also aspects that challenge a postmodern reading of these texts. These particular factors demonstrate a strong modernist influence that informs both the ideological and structural form of the novels, and leads to an understanding of DeLillo as a writer who frequently employs modernist techniques to critique postmodern American culture.

INTRODUCTION

Don DeLillo is considered by many to have ‘surpassed virtually all other living writers in his inventiveness, cultural acuity, vision, scope, and relevance’.² Along with being nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, and 1998, he won both the Pen/Faulkner Prize in 1992 for *Mao II*, and the National Book award in 1985 for *White Noise*; in 2015 he won the National Book Awards Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. In view of the obvious importance Delillo’s work, and the continuing relevance of postmodernism, I am interested in examining to what degree postmodern ideas are central to his fiction, and whether there are other elements that rival their importance and provide an alternative means of assessing his contribution to American literature.

One of the difficulties involved in discussing postmodernism is that the multifaceted aspect of term serves to make inclusive definitions difficult. Salván discusses how Jameson believed that, ‘the success of the word postmodernism over other competing terms was directly related to its portmanteau quality’.³ The term was first coined by Lyotard,⁴ who associated it with the rejection of metanarratives whose epistemological validity relied upon a transcendental understanding of truth. This belief is similar to Nietzsche’s idea of perspectivism: no particular narrative whether political, scientific, religious or otherwise could be preferred over another, as none could provide a total explanation of reality.

² Jesse Kavaldo, *Don Delillo: balance at the edge of belief* (New York. Peter Lang. 2004) <<https://web-a-eb-scohost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ehost/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=0236d1a7-a7fb-42ee-823e-3d-db52b21c86%40sessionmgr4007&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=19313767&db=hus>> [Accessed 29 June 2019] (para. 4 of 20)

³ Paula Martín Salván, ‘The Writer at the Far Margin The Rhetoric of Artistic Ethics in Don Delillo’s Novels’ *European Journal of American Studies*, Vol 2, No 1, (2007) <<https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/1147>> [Accessed 29 June 2019] (para. 5 of 44)

⁴ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press 1984)

Lyotard's dismissal of metanarratives introduces a fundamental level of epistemological relativity into postmodernism.

The rejection of this type of overarching intellectual authority can be shown in the use of literary devices such as intertextuality, which demonstrates the relationship between texts and thereby denies any single text absolute authority in terms of meaning. Peter Barry contrasts postmodernism to modernism, showing fragmentation in modernism was a way of representing a disintegrating culture, whereas in postmodernism fragmentation is 'an exhilarating and liberating phenomena, symptomatic of our escape from a world of [...] fixed systems of belief'.⁵ This view of postmodernism is often attributed to Hassan, and from Jameson's perspective owes much to Derrida's deconstruction.⁶ Barry also identifies 'the rejection of the distinction between high and low art' (Barry p.81), and Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum, as elements that also contribute to a definition of postmodernism. To this might be added Jameson's notion of depthlessness, the movement from parody to pastiche, the reification of art, and finally the idea of postmodernism as 'the cultural logic of late capitalism' (Roberts p.120).

The reference to 'the most photographed barn in America'⁷ in the title of this dissertation, refers to a scene in *White Noise* which is frequently cited as typifying the postmodern content in DeLillo's work. It demonstrates Baudrillard's idea of a simulacrum:⁸ the reality of the barn is constructed from the signs on the road that lead to it, and pictures people have taken of the barn, to the point where the concrete existence of the barn, as an object in the world, has been completely subsumed by the image.

⁵ Peter Barry, *Beginning theory An introduction to literary and cultural theory*, third edition, (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2009) p.81.

⁶ Adam Roberts, *Fredric Jameson*, (London: Routledge 2000) p.115.

⁷DeLillo, Don, *White Noise* (London: Picador 1986) p.12

⁸Ahmad Ghashmari, 'Living in a Simulacrum: How TV and the Supermarket Redefines Reality in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*' <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/46157283_Living_in_a_simulacrum_how_TV_and_the_supermarket_redefines_reality_in_Don_DeLillo's_White_Noise> [Accessed 1st September 2019] (p.180)

DeLillo has published seventeen novels; his first *Americana* was published in 1971, and his most recent *Zero K* was published 2016, and so chronologically a good deal of his writing falls within the 1980's and the early 1990's, when postmodernism was at the height of its influence. The three novels I have chosen represent a significant period in his career. Both *Mao II* and *White Noise* won important prizes as detailed above, and along with *Underworld* the three novels discussed here are frequently selected as representing his most critical acclaimed work.

The forces of late capitalism continue to dominate the planet, as much now as they did in the 1980's, and the march of technology continues unabated: it could plausibly be argued that virtual reality could provide the lynchpin that will bring Baudrillard's idea of the third order simulacra to fruition. The sources of postmodernism consequently seem to be as present in the world as ever, despite its influence falling into decline by the early 1990's. It might therefore be argued that this selection of DeLillo's work remains as culturally relevant now as it was when he wrote it.

CHAPTER ONE: *WHITE NOISE*

White Noise is an ideal place to begin a discussion of the role of postmodernism in DeLillo's novels. As Szetela writes 'Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) remains central to periodising postmodern literature and novelistic innovation in the late twentieth-century.'⁹ To consider *White Noise* in a postmodern literary context, it is necessary to introduce some of the main theorists whose ideas have contributed to elucidating what Nicol describes as a 'notoriously slippery and indefinable term'.¹⁰ To avoid a general discussion of the different aspects of postmodernism, and how they differ from modernism, (which could easily consume this dissertation), and to keep the focus firmly on DeLillo, I will use the discussion of the three novels to highlight specific aspects of DeLillo's work that are typically considered as postmodern, and then examine some of the difficulties that can occur through this interpretation. This is by no means an exhaustive analysis of every aspect of postmodernism, even in relation to DeLillo, and the aim is merely to focus on some of the central elements in his work that critics have classified as postmodern. Outlining the main critical views in the initial discussion of *White Noise* serves an important purpose. *White Noise* is arguably the novel that is most easily interpreted as postmodern in DeLillo's oeuvre, and so addressing the main theoretical positions at the beginning of this dissertation serves to contrast and elucidate some of the sections typically defined as postmodern in the later novels. Consequently, this requires the discussion of *White Noise* being somewhat longer than either *Mao II* or *Libra*.

⁹Adam Szetela, 'Advertising and Ironic Distance in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*', *European journal of American Studies* 13-2 (Summer 2018) <<https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12950>> [Accessed 10th June 2019] [Accessed 10th June 2019] (para 1 of 35)

¹⁰Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009) p.1.

Nicol writes that one of the 'consequences of living in a postindustrial, information-driven, media/culture-saturated world, according to theorists of postmodernity, is that we have become alienated from those aspects of life we might consider authentic or *real*' (Nicol p.4). Much of *White Noise* involves the narrator of the story, Jack Gladney, ruminating on the aspects of his family and professional life as a professor of Hitler studies. The focus is on events such as visits to the supermarket and shopping malls, and specifically on the effects of the envelopment of technology and consumer driven marketing on people's perception of reality. As the time people spend in front of screens increases, it becomes the case that, 'there is only one truth. Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world.'¹¹ DeLillo might have added ears after eyeballs, as the Gladney family 'rely on the broadcasts for their well being. The radio broadcasts, more than their own sensations, affect how they think and feel.'¹² In one of the key events in the novel, the toxic airborne event, discussed below, Gladney's daughters 'don't get sick until they hear it' (Rettberg para 22 of 42).

The theorist most closely associated with the consequences of our increasing immersion in a simulated existence is Baudrillard, who along with Jameson and Lyotard is one of the 'Holy Trinity of postmodern theorists' (Nicol P.184). Baudrillard posits the model of three orders of simulation that progressively map the stages in which consensus reality is gradually replaced by a simulation. The first order of simulation can be envisaged as a painting, where there is a clear distinction between the representation of reality and reality itself. Baudrillard's second order of the simulation occurs when the distinction between the representation and reality is on the verge of becoming indistinguishable:

¹¹ Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador 1999) P. 530.

¹²Scott Rettberg, 'American Simulacra: Don DeLillo's Fiction in Light of Postmodernism' <<http://retts.net/documents/americansimulacra.pdf>> [Accessed 11th June 2019]

Baudrillard points us towards Borges' fable "Of Exactitude in Science", where "...the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory ..." ; in other words, the "map" and reality can no longer be discerned, so the map has become, in a sense, as real as the real.¹³

The third and final stage simulation is what is termed as the hyperreal, where the simulation has moved beyond merely generating a copy of reality. What constitutes reality is inaccessible, so there is now only the simulation. This view is fostered by the prevalence of digital technology and the capacity for flawless replication it facilitates through the propagation of computational algorithms. Baudrillard illustrates the hyperreal in an account from the Gulf War:

CNN switched to a group of reporters "live" in the Gulf to ask them what was happening, only to discover that they were watching CNN to find out themselves (Baudrillard, 1995: 2). This absurd moment reveals the detachment from the real, and the production of "reality" with third-order simulation: news is generated by news, or the source of the news is also the news (Lane P.95).

There is also a moral dimension to Baudrillard's account of the hyperreal:

Disneyland exists to convince us that rationality is outside the walls of its childish domain, rather than the fact that rationality has been replaced by childishness everywhere. This is why Watergate gets compared to Disneyland. Watergate generates a scandal that exists to rejuvenate or regenerate "a moral and political principle ..." (1983b: 27). The principle is that government is fundamentally moral in its approaches (Lane P.90).

Baudrillard claims that 'prisons hide the fact that we are incarcerated in society' (Lane P. 89). Regardless of how epistemologically secure Baudrillard's claim may be concerning the notion of the hyperreal, the idea is central to understanding DeLillo's fiction. Maltby writes that 'DeLillo has been widely hailed as an exemplar of postmodernist writing. Typically, this assessment rests on readings that focus on his accounts of the postmodern ex-

¹³ Richard J. Lane, *Jean Baudrillard* (London: Routledge 2000) P. 86.

perience of living in a hyperreality.’¹⁴ In a number of brilliant developed scenes in *White Noise* both media, marketing and technology are shown to create reality rather than serve as a conduit to represent it. As Knight claims, ‘there is no longer any possibility of a direct, unmediated access to authentic emotions or events or reality: whatever we experience, the argument goes, comes to us mediated through our endless consumption of electronic entertainment.’¹⁵

One of the most famous scenes early in *White Noise*, that illustrates the presence hyperreal, occurs when Murray and Jack visit ‘the most photographed barn in America’ (*White Noise* p.12) a scene which ‘has surely become the “most discussed scene in postmodern fiction”’ (Knight P.39). Somewhat like a reality TV star whose identity is created solely through her fame, to a point where it becomes impossible to see past the mediated identity to what she was once like, the reality of the barn is created by the numerous sign’s that exist along the route to the barn, the postcards, the throng of tourists taking pictures. The barn as it once was, before its mediated identity came into being, is no longer accessible. As Murray Siskind explains to Jack Gladney:

What was the barn like before it was photographed?” he said. “What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can’t answer these questions, because we’ve read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can’t get outside the aura. We’re part of the aura” (*White Noise* p.13).

The reality of the barn is lost ‘beneath the palimpsest of signs that precede and announce it’.¹⁶ Baudrillard’s hyperreality has erased the idea of consensus reality because what existed prior to the hyperreality is no longer accessible, ‘once you’ve seen the signs about

¹⁴ Paul Maltby, ‘The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo’ in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views Don DeLillo*, ed. by Harold Bloom, (Broomhall: Chelsea House publishers 2003), pp.51-71 (p.89)

¹⁵ Peter Knight, ‘DeLillo, postmodernism, postmodernity’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, ed. by John H. Duvall, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.27-43 (p.30)

¹⁶ Gregory Salyer, ‘Myth, Magic and Dread: Reading Culture Religiously’, in *Don DeLillo*, ed. by Bloom, pp.33-51, (p. 35)

the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn' (*White Noise* p.12). Moreover, as tourists themselves, they are both complicit in maintaining the reality of the hyperreal. 'We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura' (*White Noise* p.12). They are part of the collective illusion of 'people taking pictures of taking pictures' (*White Noise* p.13).

Another central episode that develops this idea concerns the SIMUVAC. This scene is staged around one of the central plot points in the novel, the 'airborne toxic event', which involves a cloud of Nyoden D gas that has been released into the atmosphere. SIMUVAC, which stands for simulated evacuation, is ironically employed by DeLillo to stage a reversal of the cause and effect of a normal disaster scenario, whereby 'a real event[...]provides the opportunity to prepare for a more accurate simulation' (Nicol p.193). The 'airborne toxic event' is a reality, not a simulation, and Jack Gladney, the novel's protagonist, is one of its victims. Yet despite the colossal personal cost and horror of an ecological disaster, the Baudrillardian hyperreal trumps any notion of a prior consensus reality. The simulation negates the real and becomes the real - reordering and reconfiguring reality. One of the SIMUVAC staff complains that, 'we don't have our victims laid out where we'd want them[...]in other words we're forced to take our victims as we find them' (*White Noise* p.139). Moreover, Jack's data functions as a simulacra, 'Jack doesn't believe, or know, or feel that he's dying until his data, a simulacra of himself, is run through a computer. The resulting simulacrum of the calculations is his imminent death' (Rettberg para 22 of 42). One of the SIMUVAC personnel says to Jack:

"You're generating big numbers," he said, peering at the screen.

"I was out there only two and a half minutes. That's how many seconds?"

"It's not just you were out there so many seconds. It's your whole data profile. I tapped into your history. I'm getting bracketed numbers with pulsing stars."

"What does that mean?"

"You'd rather not know." (*White Noise* p.140)

Baudrillard's hyperreality requires the user to place her faith in technology as the source of reality; the belief has to be total and necessitates the user disregarding the testimony of their own senses. This understanding is perfectly conveyed in the scene where Jack discusses whether it is raining with his son Heinrich:

"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" (*White Noise* p.22).

Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal discussed in the examples above raises questions about the ontological status of the world inhabited by Jack Gladney and his family: is the simulated reality of the hyperreal occupied by DeLillo's character's in *White Noise* tantamount to claiming they live in a different reality? Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon are 'the two theorists who have made the most enduring impact on theories of postmodernism in fiction' (Nicol p.31). Central to McHale's understanding of the distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction is the distinction between the epistemological and the ontological. Employing Roman Jakobson's idea of the dominant as 'the focusing component of a work of art',¹⁷ that 'rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components' (McHale p.6), McHale views the dominant in modernist fiction as the epistemological:

Modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as [...] "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? [...] What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?" (McHale p.9)

¹⁷Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, (London: Routledge 1987) p.6.

In contrast the dominant of Postmodern fiction is the ontological:

Postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like [...] “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” [...] What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? (McHale p.10)

The conjunction of Baudrillard’s hyperreality and McHale’s ontological dominant present a *prima facie* case for the classification of DeLillo as a postmodern author. Yet there are issues with the application of both McHale’s and Baudrillard’s theories to *White Noise*.

McHale’s distinction, as he himself recognises, contains certain difficulties. If you ‘push epistemological questions far enough [...] they “tip over” into ontological questions’ (McHale p.11). McHale claims Jakobson’s idea of the dominant can be brought into play to resolve this issue, which results in epistemology being ‘*backgrounded* as the price for foregrounding ontology’ (McHale p.11). The cost of this manoeuvre is that the distinction is compromised as both terms, it can then be argued, are really just two sides of the same coin. Moreover Kern in his study of modernism claims, “intractable epistemological uncertainty” is overly negative for a period bursting with positive ideas and creative achievement [...]. Rather, modernists clarified and magnified the possibilities of knowing”¹⁸ Hutcheon also seems to doubt that the dominant focus of postmodern fiction is ontological. The primary form of postmodern fiction Hutcheon believes is historiographic metafiction, and this she claims asks ‘both epistemological and ontological questions. How do we know the past (or the present)? What is the ontological status of that past? Of its documents? Of our narratives?’¹⁹

If doubts can be raised against McHale’s idea of the ontological dominant in postmodern fiction, are there also issues with the application of Baudrillard’s hyperreality to

¹⁸ Stephen Kern, *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011) p.13.

¹⁹Linda Hutcheon, *A History of Postmodernism History, Theory Fiction*, (London, Routledge 1988) p.50.

White Noise? Nell writes: ‘the key difference between DeLillo’s and Baudrillard’s relationship to postmodernism is that while Baudrillard finds, “nothing outside the play of simulations, no real in which a radical critique of the simulational society might be grounded.”’²⁰ DeLillo, in contrast, understands, “that narrative can provide critical distance from and a critical perspective on the processes it depicts” (Nell p.19). The following passage from *White Noise* clearly shows that Jack Gladney’s wife, Babette, can make a clear distinction between the real and the hyperreal with regard to the symptoms of the airborne toxic event:

"So the girls can't hear. They haven't gotten beyond the *deja vu*. I want to keep it that way."
"What if the symptoms are real?"
"Why couldn't they be real?"
"They only get them only when they're broadcast" (*White Noise* p.133).

Similarly, when Gladney points out to the member of the SIMUVAC personnel that the airborne toxic event is real he responds, ‘we know that. But we thought we could use it as a model’ (*White Noise* p.139). Implicit in the idea of the hyperreal is the understanding that the idea of reality prior to the simulation is inaccessible. This is clearly not the case in these examples. The understanding of what constitutes the real consequently raises doubts about how far McHale’s ontological dominant can be applied to *White Noise*.

Hutcheon writes a far more general criticism of Baudrillard’s application to post-modern fiction:

It is not that truth and reference have ceased to exist, as Baudrillard claims; it is that they have ceased to be unproblematic issues. We are not witnessing a degeneration into the hyperreal without origin or reality, but a questioning of what “real” can mean and how we can *know* it (Hutcheon p.223).

The notion of what is real is therefore problematised from Hutcheon’s perspective, but its existence is not erased by the hyperreal. The difficulties involved with both McHale’s and

²⁰ Philip Nell, ‘DeLillo and Modernism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* ed. by Duvall, pp.13-27, (p.19)

Baudrillard's applicability to *White Noise* raises questions about how far these theories can be used as grounds for classifying DeLillo's fiction as postmodern.

Regardless of whether the character's sense of their reality in *White Noise* undergoes a complete ontological subversion, the technologically mediated landscape is nonetheless depicted as exercising a potent force upon the character's lives. In the postmodern novel the psychological consequences of postmodernity on the self often depict it as 'emptied of substance, lacking coherence and consistency' (Nicol p.184). Moreover, according to Howell, Jameson, Baudrillard and Lyotard:

Adopt a non-humanist stance in relation to the subject, and challenge the modernist idea of the authentic autonomous subject outright, for this view of postmodern theory as forming a complete break from modernism was particularly marked by ideas about 'the subject.'²¹

Similarly, in postmodern fiction Hutcheon believes, 'neither man nor woman is an autonomous, coherent free agent [...] human reality, for both sexes, is a construct' (Hutcheon p.159). DeLillo's views could also be read as similarly aligned to this perspective, 'Don DeLillo remarks (setting "modern" for "postmodern") that "[m]any modern characters have a flattened existence — purposely — and many modern characters exist precisely nowhere.'" ²²

Szetela understands this fragmentation as being a result of the myths and empty promises bestowed upon the individual by the ceaseless bombardment of commercial interests in late twentieth century American society: Jack remains stuck in a perpetual search for a sense of self, purpose, and happiness throughout the novel. Szetela writes that, 'this search is characterised by the lens that advertising propagates, the marketplace and its never-ending supply of commodities, and perpetual disappointment. [...] For DeLil-

²¹Anne Howell, 'The oscillating subject in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*' 1-132 <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3912/>> [Accessed 13th June 2019] (p.29)

²²Gerhard Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism Concepts and Strategies of Postmodern American Fiction*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2005) p.424

lo, advertising is the white noise that restrains Jack's development as a literary character (Szetela 34 of 35). This view is bolstered by Hoffmann who sees Marxist mirror theory as supporting the view that character development in the postmodern novel is indivisible from capitalism, and the social and cultural conditions it engenders:

For the Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton, the postmodern subject is a "dispersed, de-centred network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or fashion (Hoffmann p.437).

In the novel Jack Gladney could be read as no longer possessing the characteristics often associated with the modernist conception of self namely, 'identity, uniqueness, and authenticity' (Hoffmann p.430). One of the ways that DeLillo conveys this is through the use of the brand names that Knight describes in pseudo-religious terms as 'repetitious brand mantras' (Knight p.31). 'The Airport Marriott, the Downtown Travelodge, the Sheraton Inn and Conference Center.' (*White Noise* p.15) 'Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex.' (*White Noise* p.52); 'Leaded, unleaded, super unleaded.' (*White Noise* p.199); 'MasterCard, Visa, American Express' (*White Noise* p.100). Knight discusses the implications of this use of brand names. Some critics view this as 'the disembodied voice – the white noise – of contemporary television' (Knight p.31). In other words they are not a product of Jack's consciousness but are currents on the radio waves - the discarnate corporate speak of America. Knight's second interpretation is that Jack's level of exposure to advertising is such that he has internalised these brand names, to create what psychologist's term as earworms, in effect his own corporate jingles. This implies that, 'the innermost sanctum of individuality has been taken over by the language of advertising' (Knight p. 31). This would support Eagleton's earlier analysis of the interiority of postmodern subject as composed solely of a grab bag of consumer driven needs, and consequently devoid of all modernist authenticity.

Willie Mink, the character who ensnares Gladney's wife Babette into a sexual relationship with the offer a supply of Dylar, is also depicted as a typically fragmented post-

modern self: 'Was he Melanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese? Was he a composite?' (*White Noise* p.307). Living in a motel, and fed constant stream of television and advertising, he speaks, for no apparent reason, random lines of scripted dialogue from TV advertisements such as, 'the pet under stress may need a pre-prescription diet' (*White Noise* p.307). At one point in the middle of responding to Jack's comment that he is about to die he replies: 'but it won't matter, which comes to the same thing. Some of these playful dolphins have been equipped with radio transmitters. Their far-flung wanderings may tell us things' (*White Noise* p.310). The second sentence in the quote above appears to be culled directly from a natural history program. Mink's complete inability to distinguish between mediated and consensus reality could be construed as supporting Baudrillard's and McHale's understanding that the defining element of post-modernism is ontological. However, Mink's mind is so addled from the colossal amount of Dylar he has consumed, that he is not psychologically representative of the other character's in the novel. Yet Canton claims that the normal characters in the novel are not given 'emotional and personal details [...] instead they are defined by the things that surround them'.²³ Gladney's students, for example, are 'another commodity built from commodities' (Canton P.119). Similarly, Szetela writes that, 'Jack notices his daughter Steffie's green visor and interprets it as an object that offers her "wholeness and identity"' (Szetela para 8 of 35), and Jack Gladney admits that he 'associates his glasses with his professional identity' (Szetela 8 of 35), and 'feels Murray does the same thing with his corduroy jacket' (Szetela (8 of 35).

In response to claims that the essence of character in postmodern fiction is the fragmentation of the self, Hoffman writes that this is not confined solely to postmodernism:

²³ Lou F. Caton, 'Romanticism and the Postmodern Novel: Three Scenes from Don DeLillo's *White Noise*' in *Don DeLillo*, ed. by Bloom, pp.107-117, (p. 110)

The deconstruction of the self-centered character, however, is not only a postmodern affair [...] D.H. Lawrence writes with regard to his novel *The Rainbow* [...] “you mustn’t look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character” [...] Gertrude Stein turns against character and plot; Virginia Woolf states in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed” (Hoffmann p.437).

Similarly Kern contends that ‘modernists created characters as a mass of sensations whose ego boundaries are blurred with identities distributed between themselves and others or outside objects’ (Kern p.37). Gladney’s comment regarding his glasses that, ‘I can’t teach Hitler without them’ (*White Noise* p 221), would seem a clear case of his professional ego blurring with an external object in the manner Kern describes. Peter Child also depicts Eliot’s Prufrock’s identity as fragmented. He ‘appears an exemplary fragmented modernist self, caught in neuroses and doubts. Undermined by hidden desires, driven by the unconscious, lost in language, painfully self-conscious and detached.’²⁴ Moreover, Jack Gladney is arguably pursuing a non-postmodern conception of self:

He endeavours to find ways of preserving [...] an ‘authentic’ and coherent identity through conscientious observation of such rituals of family life as Friday-night television, Chinese takeout, and reading Hitler well into the night. Even his daughter has her method of ‘fastening herself to life . . . in a world of displacements,’—by keeping old commodities for their value as ‘remembering objects’.²⁵

An important understanding of DeLillo’s notion of self, and where it falls on the spectrum between modernist and postmodernist thought is the notion of the epiphany. Epiphanies form an important part of the novels and short stories of some of the most significant modernist authors such as Joyce and Woolf. They provide the means through which a character gains a deep insight into both themselves and their relation to the world, and are some-

²⁴Peter Childs, *Modernist Literature A guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group 2011) p.81.

²⁵ Fareed Kaviani, ‘Understanding The Postmodern Condition through Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*’ <<https://www.the4thwall.net/academic-papers/2014/2/18/understanding-the-postmodern-condition-through-don-delillos-white-noise>> [Accessed 14th June 2019] (para 15 of 31)

times of a spiritual nature. Hoffman declares the modernist idea of the epiphany is no longer relevant in the postmodern novel because revelation has now become jejune:

The medium that leads to ecstatic identification with (universal) force, the vehicle of the experience of absoluteness, a person, a landscape, or a thing [...] the allocation of depth to the experience of a situation, the fusion of self and world, the wonder of things, become more strained and less effectual or meaningful in the narrative context (Hoffmann p.336).

Howell goes even further and declares that 'the postmodern subject does not have access to the transcendent' (Howell p.48). Could DeLillo's treatment of the epiphany provide an insight into the whether he favours a modernist or postmodernist idea of the self in *White Noise*?

Paradoxically, the moment that many critics use to discuss the epiphany in *White Noise*, when Steffie mumbles Toyota Celica in her sleep, has also been read as 'as the most emblematic moment in DeLillo's work of the thorough colonisation by consumer capitalism of an individual's last space of privacy' (Knight p.38). DeLillo writes:

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 [...] Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence (*White Noise* p.155).

There is an obvious temptation to treat Steffie's utterance as ironic; the revelatory hyperbole of 'gold shot with looming wonder' & its association with 'Toyota Celica' suggest as much. Yet many critics do take this as a genuine (non-ironic) instance of an epiphany in the classic modernist sense. Nell writes that, 'most of the passage – including its ending – seems to take seriously the idea of transcendence' (Nell p.23). He also quotes Anne Longmuir who claims that 'the "Toyota Celica" scene "should be regarded as a genuine epiphany in the modernist tradition' (Nell p.23). Bloom in his introduction writes that 'Tanner was anxious about the epiphanies of DeLillo's urban transcendentalism, and wondered

if they were only evidences of a decayed Catholicism. And yet, DeLillo's vibrant Emersonianism seems to me clear enough' (Bloom p.2). Maltby also considers that 'the tenor of this passage is not parodic' (Maltby p.54). These views are in no small sense bolstered by some of DeLillo's own pronouncements. In an interview quoted by Olster he says, "I feel a drive towards some kind of transcendence, perhaps religious but not in traditional ways".²⁶ Hoffmann classifies DeLillo along with Paul Auster and Joan Didion as 'one of those authors who are between 'modernism and postmodernism [...] all of whom still use the "moment of being" as a counterbalance to the mere surfaceness of quotidian life' (Hoffmann p. 336). Describing the manner in which DeLillo invests the quotidian texture of normal life with the transcendent, DeCurtis quotes DeLillo as claiming his 'work has always been informed by mystery'.²⁷ This abundance of critical opinion presents a strong case to support the Toyota Celica scene, along with other episodes such as such as Jack Gladney's visit to the supermarket with Babette and Murray, as largely indistinguishable from the modernist epiphany, with Jack Gladney discovering 'his meaning, his experience of the sacred in an apotheosis of the profane' (Salyer p.38).

Although an ironic interpretation of the Toyota Celica epiphany is certainly open to debate, irony as a textual strategy is often employed in postmodernist fiction, where the literal meaning of an utterance is subverted by the implied meaning. Umberto Eco sees postmodern irony as a reaction to reaching limits of experimentalism in modernism, which necessitates a return to the past and the understanding that whatever can be said has already been said. Eco gives the example of a man who wants to declare his love for a woman, but is aware 'he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that

²⁶ David Cowart, 'Delphic DeLillo: *Mao II* and Millennial Dread ', in *Don DeLillo Mao II, Underworld, Falling Man*, ed. by Stacey Olster, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group), pp. 19-34, (p.29)

²⁷ Anthony De Curtis, 'Exploring 'Libra' and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy' *Rolling Stone Magazine*, <<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/qa-don-delillo-69452/>>[accessed 23 June 2019] (para 29 of 56).

these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still [...] he can say that as Barbara Cartland would put it “I love you madly”.²⁸ This implies that we cannot escape the past, and this knowledge means the postmodern subject can never return to a state of innocence, but can, through the use of ironically referencing the past, at least avoid employing fake innocence. The result is that both can ‘with pleasure play the game of irony’ and ‘both will have succeeded once again, in speaking of love’ (Eco p.68).

Kristeva coined the term ‘intertextuality’, and ‘the general field of intertextuality has long been understood as the transformation of a prior text by a later one’.²⁹ Eco’s understanding of irony is necessarily intertextual:

Umberto Eco, writing of his novel, *The Name of the Rose*, claims: “I discovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told” (Hutcheon p.127).

There is a knowing wink exchanged between the two lovers as the man declares his love for the woman in the example given above. Hoffmann supports this view, understanding the ironic reworking of ‘melodramatic plot, black-and-white characterisation, clear-cut moral oppositions, sentimental feelings, and affirmative syntheses are incorporated as matrices into the new text’ (Hoffmann p.51), and ‘these clichéd formulas are parodied, ironized, and mocked, for instance by reversing their pre-designed intention and formulas and by transforming them into complex games’ (Hoffmann p.51). In *White Noise* Jack Gladney thinks ‘another post-modern sunset, rich in romantic imagery. Why try to describe it’ (*White Noise* p.227). English literature is decorated with authors’s endless attempts to capture and convey to the reader beautiful sunsets. DeLillo has Jack Gladney ironically

²⁸ Umberto Eco, ‘Postmodern Irony the Enjoyable’, <<https://vdocuments.site/110607225-umberto-eco-postmodernism-irony-the-enjoyablepdf.html>> [accessed 23rd June 2019] (p.67)

²⁹ Thomas Carmichael, ‘Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo’s “Libra, The Names”, and “Mao II”’ *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), 204-218, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208548>> [Accessed 23 June 2019] p.204

reference this knowledge and share it with the reader, who is presumably sophisticated enough to be in on the joke. Knight interprets Gladney's pursuit of Willie Mink in a similarly ironic manner:

When Jack sets out to kill the man whom he knows as Willie Mink, [it] is likewise an ironic reworking of the ending of *Lolita* (1955), in which Humbert Humbert is caught up in the self-awareness of all the pulp-fictional clichés haunting his actions as he tries to kill his nemesis Clare Quilty: in DeLillo's doubly ironic version, Jack is self-conscious about the prior literary representation of the self-consciousness induced by the weight of prior representations. (Knight p.28).

Knight writes that the scenes that Jack Gladney narrates focus, 'not on the act but on the act of description that has already been recounted in a thousand novels and films beforehand: "I fired the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic"' (Knight p.32).

Of course intertextuality did not begin with postmodernism. Roccia discusses how Sterne's masterpiece *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* was 'conceived and proposed as a literary conversation made up of many voices, which implies that the reader must be able to recognise and properly interpret intertextual references, going beyond the limits of the story being told.'³⁰ Moreover, some of the greatest works of modernist literature rely heavily on the use of intertexts. Joyce, for example, plots each chapter of *Ulysses* as an ironic reworking of a part of Homer's *The Odyssey*, and T. S. Eliot's use of *The Golden Bough* and *The Fisher King* as intertexts for *The Waste Land* is well documented. Eliot even provides extensive notes to the poem, thereby emphasising the intertextual basis, and providing a template for postmodernist novelists to employ the same technique, for example David Foster Wallace's use of extensive footnotes in *Infinite Jest*. Similarly, the use of irony has a rich history in literature dating all the way back to

³⁰Gioiella Bruni Roccia, 'Beyond the text: an intertextual approach to *Tristram Shandy*' *European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistic Studies* Volume 2, Issue 2, (2018), 35-43, <<https://oapub.org/lit/index.php/EJLLL/article/view/29/59>> [Accessed 2nd September 2019] (p.35)

Greek comedy and the figure of the eiron. That said it might be argued that maybe this particular postmodern application of irony, tied to the understanding of intertextuality as a specific figure of cultural exhaustion might be uniquely postmodern. However, whether this specific use of irony provides sufficient literary capital to classify *White Noise* as a post-modern text is a moot point.

Frederic Jameson's work on postmodernism, Roberts believes, 'has been the single most influential analysis of that cultural phenomenon'.³¹ Jameson, a Marxist critic, understands postmodernism as the cultural expression of late capitalism (post WW2). According to Jameson's analysis postmodern culture manifests itself in a number of ways. Discussing Jameson's view Nicol writes:

Cultural production and consumption in postmodernity reveals that we are unable to place ourselves in a properly *historical* context. History has become simply a matter of 'styles' which can be pastiched in the latest retro clothes or 'theme pubs' or in 'nostalgia films' (Nicol p.10).

This type of understanding is conveyed in Gladney's class on 'Advanced Nazism [...] restricted to qualified seniors [...] designed to cultivate historical perspective, theoretical rigor and mature insight' (*White Noise* p.25). Yet the emphasis on the course is on 'parades, rallies and uniforms', suggesting a parallel between the empty pageantry displayed in military parades and postmodernism's celebration of the superficial. Similarly, the documentary that Gladney screens each year is not on the realities of genocide, and totalitarianism, but on 'propaganda films, scenes shot at party congresses, outtakes from mystical epics featuring parades of gymnasts and mountaineers' (*White Noise* p.25). Jameson describes this aspect of postmodernism as "a new depthlessness, [...] in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum" (Roberts p.123), as well as a "weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public history and in the new forms of our private temporality" (Roberts p.

³¹ Adam Roberts, *Fredric Jameson*, (London: Routledge 2000) p.1.

123). When Jack meets Murray in the supermarket the thing he likes most is not the produce but the 'packages themselves' (*White Noise* p.19), which he claims is 'the last avant-garde' (*White Noise* p.19).

In another scene in the supermarket Murray tells Babette that the supermarket performs a similar function to the bardos in Tibetan Buddhism:

The soul restores to itself some of the divinity lost at birth." He studied her profile as if to detect a reaction. "That's what I think of whenever I come in here. This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data (*White Noise* p.37).

This view reifies spirituality and locates it as another commodity for sale, along with the rest of the produce on the supermarket shelves. This understanding of reification both complements and deepens Jameson's view of depthlessness, which involves the highest of human values and beliefs being reduced to commodities.

Roberts similarly interprets Jameson's postmodern subject as a victim of the effects of late capitalism with its impulse to reification and fragmentation. Moreover:

The centred subject involves 'not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling' what Jameson, in a famous phrase, calls a 'waning of the affect', a fading-away of emotional content. (Robert p.124).

Jameson's understanding of the 'waning of effect' seems aligned to arguments put forward earlier by Hutcheon, Szetela and Hoffmann on a diminished conception of the postmodern self. Does Jack Gladney demonstrate a diminished sense of self and a concordant waning of emotional depth? On one level Jack, his wife Babette, and Jack's son Heinrich are all galvanised by one strong emotion, their fear of death. Babette is willing to break the law and sleep with her drug dealer, Willie Mink, in order to gain access to pills that will alleviate her fear of death. Mink himself seems an obvious candidate for an emotional diminished character but, as explained earlier, he is a victim of the long term effects of Dylar. Yet Jack

still obviously cares for his wife to the point where he is willing to murder Mink. The earlier discussion of epiphanies also suggest that whilst Jack loves his daughter Steffie, he also has the capacity for genuine spiritual experience, as many critics interpret the Toyota Celica scene as an authentic epiphany. Moreover, Jack's visits to the overpass with Babette and their son Wilder to watch the sunset are not depicted in a way that suggests any form of emotional deficit. They say little to each other but feel 'awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe' (*White Noise* p.324). Jameson's understanding of the 'waning of the affect' seems similar to Ballard's idea of the death of affect: 'one of the most distinctive features of all of Ballard's fiction' which involves 'characters who go through the motions of having 'feelings', [...] as a kind of reflex action, a learned behaviour of how to act *as if* one were human' (Nicol 191). Yet the above examples don't suggest an emotional lacuna, anymore then did the earlier discussion of epiphany. This would seem to imply that DeLillo is bolstering his case against a postmodern reading of *White Noise*, at least with regard to his use of epiphany and Jameson's 'waning of effect'.

White Noise is 'a parody of prior genres, and it also mixes its genres in a satisfyingly postmodern way. The novel is simultaneously a campus novel, a detective fiction, a black comedy and an example of the fiction of domesticity'.³² Parody is often associated with pastiche, which Jameson has identified with postmodern art. Yet parody employs the style and literary form of another work to make a serious point. This is not the case with pastiche:

Pastiche is parody emptied out of content: 'it is a neutral practice of mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter. . .pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs' (Roberts p.125).

³²Dr. Helen Dennis, 'Don DeLillo's *White Noise*' <<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/special/en304/en304furtherresources/ddelillo/>> [Accessed 17th June 2019] (para. 9 of 47)

In sharp contrast to pastiche, *White Noise* artfully employs irony, humour and exaggeration to make serious points about America in the nineteen eighties. Olster writes that *White Noise* was 'inspired by the profligate consumption of the late twentieth century – a time in which the sun's "corolla" is appropriated to denote a Japanese car' (Olster Duvall p.80). Similarly, the employment of marketing and adverting through electronic media is at once comical but is also a harsh comment upon the way big business is shaping people's reality to create a legions of passive consumers, who even in their sleep intone corporate brands like mantras. Jack Gladney in many ways appears as a foil in the book to such ideas, as demonstrated in his pursuit of an authentic identity and happiness, despite the forces massed against him: 'DeLillo employs Jack in his critique of market society, as he continues an ongoing "dialogue with contemporary cultural institutions [that] respects their power but criticises their dangerous consequences" (Szetela para 34 of 35).

The last of the three postmodern theorists I wish to discuss in relation to *White Noise* is Jean-François Lyotard who, 'along with Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, critics regularly cite [...] as a founding thinker of postmodern critical theory'.³³ Central to Lyotard's understanding of postmodernism as described in his book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, is the belief that knowledge in the form it took in the enlightenment, which Lyotard terms as the metanarrative, is dead. He gives two example in the book of metanarratives:

Two "grand narratives" have determined western self- understanding – the Enlightenment story of progress and political emancipation, and the Hegelian narrative of the manifestation of scientific reason. Both of these have foundered, he declares, along with every other meta- discursive attempt at organizing modernity's immense sprawl into something coherent and socially useful.³⁴

³³ Simon Malpas, *Jean Francois Lyotard* (London: Routledge 2003) p.124.

³⁴ Steven Connor, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004) p.28.

The unified understanding of knowledge that had in the past been provided by these metanarratives, the great ideological discourses of philosophy, such as Marxism, and religions such as Christianity, are no longer legitimate in Lyotard's view of postmodernism. Postmodernism is characterized in Lyotard's philosophy as 'incredulity toward master or metanarratives' (Hutcheon p.6). Knowledge hasn't disappeared but there is 'no longer any unifying identity for the subject or society' (Malpas p.29). Rather, according to Lyotard, postmodern knowledge is understood as taking the form of a 'local narrative, with its emphasis on diversity and heterogeneity' (Connor p.28). Knowledge is no longer valued as a vehicle for the type of transcendent understanding that religion once enabled, or as providing the type of universal historicist and epistemological understanding once accorded to Hegel. Instead knowledge is now 'valued in terms of its efficiency and profitability in a market-driven global economy' (Malpas p.28).³⁵

The type scepticism advocated towards metanarratives is wonderfully summed up in *White Noise* by Murray, when Jack Gladney is trying to come to terms with his impending death:

"Millions of people have believed for thousands of years. Throw in with them. Belief in a second birth, a second life, is practically universal. This must mean something."
"But these gorgeous systems are all so different."
"Pick one you like" (*White Noise* p.286).

From Murray's perspective the grand narratives provided by religion amounts to little more than an epistemologically groundless potpourri of ideas - one religious belief offering much the same as another. Later he compares the world religions to poetry, so their aesthetic value takes precedence over their predictive capacity as systems of knowledge. In a similar fashion to religion being shorn of its status as a metanarrative, Jack Gladney's class in

³⁵ Vattimo argues, because Lyotard is using history to legitimate his thesis he is, in effect, drawing on the organizing powers of a metanarrative. (Connor p.29).

‘advanced nazism’, seems to reduce totalitarianism, one of the enduring political metanarratives of the twentieth century, into an aesthetic project based upon visual spectacle rather than an understanding of Hitler’s core ideology. In contrast to these views Rettberg posits the idea that if there is a metanarrative of the twentieth century then consumerism would be a strong candidate: ‘there is a belief, propagated and disseminated by television advertising, that you can buy your way out of any personal trauma. In buying things at the mall, you may define an identity, an idea of who you are.’ (Rettberg para 7 of 42).

Gladney talks about shopping as an end in itself, one in which his sense of self begins to ‘grow in value and self-regard. ‘I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed’ (*White Noise* p.84). Yet the grand narrative of consumerism fails to provide a solution to his exposure to the toxic cloud and its terminal consequences. Science, the heir to Hegel’s nineteenth century rationality, also fails to provide a solution to Gladney’s prognosis and potentially imminent death. Even Dylar, the supposed wonder drug to cure thanatophobia, doesn’t work for Babette, and it turns Willie Mink into a virtual cretin. If the ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ is construed as an important element in a definition of postmodernism, then *White Noise* would seem to support this view.

A second key idea in Lyotard is his employment of the sublime, as rendered in art, acting as a foil against the totality of the metanarrative. Kant understands the sublime as a psychological phenomena that occurs when someone encounters something that simultaneously overwhelms their ability to fully grasp the object, and yet simultaneously provides pleasure in the sensation due to it being possible to conceive of the existence of the object. An example might be Wordsworth’s lines from the conclusion of *The Prelude*, when he writes about a night ascent of Snowdon in which, in an imaginatively charged passage, he conceives of the mountain as ‘the perfect image of a mighty mind / of one that feeds

upon infinity'.³⁶

Lyotard understands the postmodern sublime as 'presenting the existence of something unrepresentable' (Malpas p.47). Malpas writes:

Lyotard adopts the idea of the sublime to describe the way in which art or literature can disrupt established language games and ways of representing the world. Modern art, he argues, has the capacity to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists: that there are things that are impossible to present in available language games, voices that are silenced in culture, ideas that cannot be formulated in rational communication (Malpas p.47).

The sublime is a potent counterforce to metanarratives. Postmodern literature undermines traditional narratives and ways of representing the world, and consequently acts as against universal theories of meaning. In *White Noise* the centrality of death could be viewed as an instance of the sublime: it exists, and yet is also, by definition, something that is unrepresentable. It breaks the metanarrative of science through the failure of the drug Dylar. Moreover, the manner in which it is unrepresentable, and therefore unknown, is a source of paralysing fear for Jack and his wife Babette. Jack constantly attempts to represent death in various ways to himself: in economic terms 'I have trouble imagining death at that income level' (*White Noise* p.6); through the lens of science as 'the eventual heat death of the universe' (*White Noise* p.10); as a physical experience, 'shouldn't death, I thought, be a swan dive, graceful, white-winged and smooth, leaving the surface undisturbed?' (*White Noise* p.18); historically 'man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping false hearted death' (*White Noise* p.22); in religious terms, 'Tibetans believe there is a transitional state between death and rebirth. Death is a waiting period, basically' (*White Noise* p.37), and even as narrative 'All plots tend to move deathward [...] we edge nearer death every time we plot' (*White Noise* p.26). Yet death as the sublime, as shown in these quotes, always eludes his abili-

³⁶William Wordsworth *The Prelude* <<http://triggs.djvu.org/djvu-editions.com/WORDSWORTH/PRELUDE1805/Download.pdf>> [accessed 18th June 2019] (lines 69-70)

ties to represent it. Yet it might be argued that the spectacular sunsets at the end of the book, in part caused by the airborne toxic event - the cause of Jack Gladney's imminent death - also bring both Jack, Babette and Wilder great pleasure, 'transcending previous categories of awe' (*White Noise* p.324). In a sense the spectacular 'storied' light sinking beneath the horizon gives a shape to the inconceivable reality of death to Gladney's family, and the other people who have gathered beside them. Yet, at the same time, if a reality is unrepresentable then it is beyond the reach of language to frame, and all the sublime can do is illuminate this fact.

In summary DeLillo's employment of the epistemological shortfall of the metanarrative, his use of irony, and his application of the sublime as a vehicle to illuminate the unrepresentable nature of death, would seem sufficient grounds to claim his employment of these postmodern motifs in *White Noise*. The question is whether the use of these elements is sufficient to describe *White Noise* as a postmodern novel, against the other factors discussed here that argue against this interpretation? In an interview DeLillo commented, 'when people say *White Noise* is post-modern, I don't really complain. I don't say it myself. But I don't see *Underworld* as post-modern. Maybe it's the last modernist gasp' (Nel P.13). As this comment shows, to be considered as a postmodern writer it is important to base this view on a selection of DeLillo's work rather than just one novel. Many critics base their understanding of DeLillo as a postmodern author solely on their reading of *White Noise*, but this view becomes more difficult to sustain when his other novels are also factored into the postmodern equation.

CHAPTER TWO: MAO II

Olster writes that major themes of *Mao II* are, 'the nature of authority and the power of image-makers to deface or remodel that authority' (Olster Duvall p.141). The centrality of image makers draws comparison to *White Noise*, but whereas DeLillo's interest in that novel was in how the confluence of marketing, consumerism and electronic media were informing people's understanding of reality, in *Mao II* the focus is more tightly drawn towards 'the cultural centrality of images, and how this relates to the role of political leaders and artists in society'.³⁷ The novel's title, *Mao II*, refers to the power and influence of cultural figures on the collective identity of individuals. The opening scene of the novel details a mass unification movement wedding in New York, and 'Mao's influence over millions of Chinese is clearly meant to rhyme with Sun Myung Moon's influence over the 6,500 couples married together in Yankee Stadium' (Baker 8 of 34). Mao is also seen as an ideological model for both George Haddad and Abu Rashid, the leader of the terrorist group responsible for the kidnapping of a Swiss poet. Yet he is also the model for Warhol's famous Mao series of paintings, which is shown on the books cover. Mao therefore illustrates both the ubiquity of the simulacra and also its merger in the novel with the ideological.

The central character in the novel is Bill Gray, a famous author, who in a manner similar to authors such as Thomas Pynchon and J D Salinger has chosen to go into seclusion. From the perspective of Baudrillard Bill Gray has become a simulacra. He has become frozen in the public eye as the figure of the gifted reclusive genius. Yet, in the novel,

³⁷ Peter Baker, 'The Terrorist as Interpreter: *Mao II* in Postmodern Context', *Postmodern Culture* V.4 number (January 1994) <<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/pmc/issue.194/baker.194.html>> [Accessed 20th June 2019] (para. 8 of 34)

he makes a decision to be photographed by Brita Nilsson, who is renowned for her portraits of famous authors. In doing so Gray is taking a risk:

Her pictures may reveal that his life has indeed been a mere simulation and not that of the authentically dangerous writer he had wanted to make himself, and the pictures may be appropriated by the mass media to further their obliteration of his unique self (Rettberg para 25 of 42).

Bill Gray's image is a third order simulacra in Baudrillard's analysis: thirty-two years ago it was a fabricated construct, and it now bears no relation to him. The simulacra is now in possession of its own existence. Neudecker writes: 'the photos are so effective in replacing Bill that he no longer has to publish his book, as Scott remarks: "We have the pictures, let's use them to advantage. The book disappears into the image of the writer"'³⁸ Bill's image has become a commodity, 'there's life and there's the consumer event' (*Mao II* p.43), and the author predicts that Brita's images will gain life following his death:

Something about the occasion makes me think I'm at my own wake. Sitting for a picture is morbid business. A portrait doesn't begin to mean anything until the subject is dead. This is the whole point [...] the deeper I pass into death, the more powerful my picture becomes. (*Mao II* p.42).

In this he is correct. Scott Martineau cynically comments after Bill's death that he will create the 'myth of "Bill Gray the Writer" by leaving Bill's uncompletable "botch" of a book unpublished, silent, "gathering aura and force", and using the pictures Brita has taken to deepen "Old Bill's legend, undyingly"'.³⁹

³⁸ Jaime Frances Neudecker, 'A Search for Self in the Postmodern Novel: Don DeLillo's *American*, *Mao II*, and *Falling Man*' 1-49 <https://fau.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau%3A1501/datastream/OBJ/view/search_for_self_in_the_postmodern_novel.pdf> [Accessed 21 June 2019] (p.28)

³⁹ Jeoffrey S. Bull 'What About a Problem That Doesn't Have a Solution?': Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise*, DeLillo's *Mao II*, and the Politics of Political Fiction', in *Don DeLillo*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 149-167 (p.162)

Karen, the girl who is married in the opening wedding scene in the novel, and later comes to live with Bill and Scott, also typifies, according to Bull, Baudrillard's founding postmodern idea of the collapse of the distinction between the technologically propagated image and consensus reality:

There were times she became lost in the dusty light, observing some survivor of a national news disaster, there's the lonely fuselage smoking in a field, and she was able to study the face and shade into it at the same time, even sneak a half second ahead, inferring the strange dazed grin or gesturing hand, which made her seem involved not just in the coverage but in the terror that came blowing through the fog (*White Noise* p.117).

Bill Gray believes that the novelist's power to perform what Shelley famously perceived as the writer's role to act as the unacknowledged legislator of her generation, has now been passed on to the terrorist: 'now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated' (*Mao II* p.41). This understanding relies on the terrorist not being a product of postmodern media generated reality. George Haddad tells Bill that, 'the artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated [...] Only the terrorist stands outside. The culture hasn't figured out how to assimilate him' (*Mao II* p.157). Osteen argues convincingly against this view: 'terrorists are creatures of the global communications network, spectacular authors who, without television and the internet, could not disseminate images of their work, publicise their political messages, or recruit followers'.⁴⁰ Moreover, the followers of Abu Rashid, the terrorist leader, all have images of him pinned to their shirts: the iconography of the terrorist leader is an image that Brita could easily supplant. Yet the repeated assertions that the terrorist is outside of the postmodern drag-net implies that DeLillo is also reluctant to abandon this premise. Yet finally Rashid appears just as dependent upon the postmodern currency of images as Bill Gray. As if to un-

⁴⁰ Mark Osteen, 'DeLillo's Dedalian artists', in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* ed. by John H. Duvall, pp.137-151 (p.144)

derscore the point, at the end of the novel Brita sees a flash of light out near a checkpoint, 'what could it be then if it's not the start of the day's first exchange of automatic-weapons fire? Only one thing of course. Someone is out there with a camera and a flash unit' (*Mao II* p.241).

Olster describes Bill Gray as a 'modernist writer who, in search of singularity, retreats to upstate New York'.⁴¹ The inversion of Gray is the figure of Warhol who 'embraced the cult of artistic celebrity through reproduction and lampooned modernism's disdain for the market by making artworks that replicated the superficiality and repetition of commodity culture' (Knight Olster p.36). Knight argues that DeLillo is functioning as a critique of postmodernism because Gray's decision to step into the spotlight precipitates his transition towards death. Yet, against this view, it might be argued that DeLillo accepts the Baudrillardian premise, through showing how Abu Rashid is as beholden to postmodern culture as Gray, as both men's identities are at least partially created through the agency of Brita's camera.

Conversely, Camlot argues that 'the power of self-consciousness, the fact of irony as a sign of agency cannot be denied. This is how Lentricchia's DeLillo manages to remain a "modernist" while living and writing about the postmodern situation.'⁴² Camlot sees self-consciousness as a contrast to the fragmentation and depthlessness that typically characterises the postmodern self. He claims that there are many passages in DeLillo's novels that employ modernist self-consciousness interacting with postmodern commodification. In *Mao II* he uses Scott's elaborate description of the books in a Manhattan bookstore to justify his point:

⁴¹ Peter Knight 'Mao II and the New World Order' in, Don DeLillo ed. by Olster, pp.34-49 (p.36)

⁴²Jason Camlot 'Frank Lentricchia's Don DeLillo: Introducing', Postmodern Modernism and the Academic Fear of Death' <http://perival.com/delillo/camlot_delillo.html> [Accessed 20th June 2019] (para 20 of 22)

There were rows of handsome covers, prosperous and assured. He felt a fine excitement, hefting a new book, fitting hand over sleek spine, seeing lines of type jitter past his thumb as he let the pages fall. He was a young man, shrewd in his fervours, who knew there were books he wanted to read and others he absolutely had to own, the ones that gesture in special ways, that have rareness or daring, a charge of heat that stains the air around them (*White Noise* p.19).

The above is only a small part of the description but it certainly displays Scott's self-consciousness, at least in regard to books. There are strong arguments in favour of DeLillo employing a Modernist understanding of self in some of the central characters in his novels, as was demonstrated earlier in *White Noise* in the character of Jack Gladney. In *Mao II* the idea of the crowd is situated as a threat to the individual self. The private ego is 'swallowed up [...] immunised against the language of self. The mass images featured in tabloids or on live TV speak to a tragic immolation of the individual.'⁴³ The character of Karen, who is married at the mass wedding at the start of the novel, desires to use religion to gain an identity, only to find that her understanding of herself, her past life, and her family submerged within the collective identity of the Moonie religion/cult. As the narrator in *Mao II* chillingly prophesies, 'the future belongs to crowds' (*Mao II* p.16). Cowart believes that DeLillo views the reading of serious fiction as vital to the development of a modernist introspective self, (modernism aside, reflective introspection seems central to any form of self-development gained through reading, regardless of the literary movement). He quotes from a letter DeLillo wrote to the novelist Jonathan Franzen:

If serious reading dwindles to near nothingness, it will probably mean that the thing we're talking about when we use the word 'identity' has reached an end" (Franzen 96). In the same letter he characterizes "writing" as "a form of personal freedom" that "frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us" (95). In the very act of writing—or reading—such a sentence, one resists that future (Cowart p.23).

⁴³ Christian Moraru 'Consuming Narratives: Don DeLillo and the 'Lethal' Reading, in *Don DeLillo*, ed. by Bloom, pp.89-107 (p. 92)

This appeal to an identity that is generated through the introspective process of reading, rather than a depthless mass identity propagated through technology and simulacra, shows DeLillo endorsing the idea of a modernist self. Nell believes that artists such as Bill Gray seek to achieve a critical distance from the culture, and he quotes DeLillo from an interview with Ann Arensburg:

The writer stands outside society, independent of affiliation and independent of influence. The writer . . . automatically takes a stand against his or her government . . . American writers ought to stand and live in the margins, and be more dangerous. Writers in repressive societies are considered dangerous. That's why so many of them are in jail (Nell Duvall p.24).

Nell uses Gray's comments in *Mao II* such as, 'do you know why I believe in the novel? It's a democratic shout' (Nell p.24), as sufficient to 'tie Gray's beliefs to DeLillo's, and affirm DeLillo's affiliation with adherents of a politically engaged modernism' (Nell p.24). Further evidence for this view is Gray's comment that 'the writer who won't show his face is encroaching on holy turf. He's playing God's own trick' (*Mao II* p.37). Olster interprets this as a reference to Stephen Dedalus' comment in Joyce's *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, claiming it demonstrates the modernist ideal of the godlike author who exists behind his work. Yet DeLillo does seem to be playing with a level of ambiguity in *Mao II*. On the one hand he is in favour of artistic autonomy as is shown in both his personal comments and through the character of Gray. Yet at the end of *Mao II* he also seems to endorse the view that the individual cannot get outside of the media created reality; Abu Rashid, the terrorist who is presented initially as standing outside of postmodern culture, is at the end of the novel shown as subject to the tyranny of the image. Moreover, as Knight argues, both the crowd and the image are two sides of the same coin:

The increasing mass reproduction of images in the postmodern mediascape tends toward the same erosion of uniqueness that the mass mind of the crowd inflicts on the individuality of its participants [...] as DeLillo put it in an interview, “[t]he photographic image is a kind of crowd in itself ” (Knight Olster p.35).

Baker writes, ‘is the novelist an artist who works alone in a room with a typewriter, or is the novelist the creation of a commodity culture, packaged and marketed for consumption by the masses?’ (Baker 11 of 34). Jameson saw reification, the process whereby everything is turned into a commodity, as an essential aspect of late capitalism, and therefore postmodern culture. Moreover, as DeLillo clearly shows, the reach of global capitalism extends beyond the West. In Beirut, Abu Rashid confirms this point:

We have no foreign sponsors. Sometimes we do business the old way. You sell this, you trade that. Always there are deals in the works. So with hostages. Like drugs, like weapons, like jewelry, like a Rolex or a BMW. We sold him to the fundamentalists (Mao II p.235).

Rashid is talking about a poet, arguably an embodiment of the same modernist consciousness that many critics claim DeLillo presents in Bill Gray. Yet he has been turned into another commodity to be traded. Despite his Maoist ideology, Abu Rashid and Beirut are clearly circumscribed by the same global capitalism and postmodern culture that holds sway in West, despite George Haddad’s claims that the terrorist is somehow outside of it.

Lyotard’s understanding of postmodernism as a reaction against the belief in meta-narratives is also supported by both Brita and Bill’s reaction against Maoism. Rashid’s Maoist ideology, an offshoot of the Marxist grand narrative is symbolically subverted by Brita when she unmasks one of Rashid’s followers which ‘allows her to thwart, for an instant, anyway, the “longing for Mao”’ (Bull p.157). Similarly, Bill also acts against the epistemological totality of the Mao/Marxist grand narrative that George Haddad espouses, and argues instead for a postmodern pluralism:

‘Even if I could see the need for absolute authority,’ he tells Haddad, ‘my work would draw me away. The experience of my own consciousness tells me how autocracy fails, how total control wrecks the spirit, how my characters deny my efforts to own them completely, how I need internal dissent, self argument, how the world squashes me the minute I think it’s mine’ (Bull p.161).

Both these arguments against metanarratives, along with Jameson’s view of global commodification and the global sway of the image as simulcra, make a strong case for claiming that at least some of the subject matter can be tilted towards a postmodern reading of *Mao II*. Yet the ideological stance that Bill Gray demonstrates throughout *Mao II* is anathema to the depthlessness Jameson sees as endemic in postmodernism. Moreover, whilst the above quote from Bull can be read as a disavowal of authority predicated on the basis of the metanarrative, it can also be understood as an appeal to the autonomy of the individual as an agent of modernist self realisation, rather than as a product of the homogenised postmodern identity of the crowd. From this understanding *Mao II* functions as a critique of postmodernism from the perspective of the autonomous modernist self.

CHAPTER THREE: *LIBRA*

Hutcheon, one of the foremost literary postmodern commentators, writes that ‘what would characterise postmodernism in fiction would be what I here call “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon ix). She defines historiographic metafiction as novels which ‘are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages’ (Hutcheon p.5). Following the understanding that metafiction is ‘the main technical device used in postmodern fiction’ (Nicol p.35), a powerful case could therefore be made that DeLillo is a postmodern writer if *Libra* could be seen as an example of historiographic metafiction.

Metafiction stands in sharp contrast to literary realism. Whilst realism attempts to mimetically reflect the world, metafiction self-reflexively comments upon itself as a work of art. This often takes the form of such strategies as the author appearing in his own novel (metalepsis), or the characters reflecting on their own nature as fictional creations. In a Baudrillardian sense this in turn could suggest the reader might then reflect upon how their own sense of reality is mediated or constructed. The historiographic element poses questions about the epistemological status of historical knowledge: ‘what is the ontological nature of historical documents? Are they the stand-in for the past? What is meant—in ideological terms—by our “natural” understanding of historical explanation?’ (Hutcheon p.92). In creating a historical account of an event the author selects and interprets each incident, placing emphasis upon certain aspects in her account and down playing other elements: ‘what postmodernism does is to contest the very possibility of our ever being able to *know* the “ultimate objects” of the past’ (Hutcheon P.24). On this view there is no single truth but rather a plurality of truths based upon a plurality of historical interpretations. This under-

standing of historiography seems more closely aligned to McHale's definition of modernist fiction as possessing a dominant epistemological nature.

DeLillo's novel *Libra* is classified as a historiography under Hutcheon's definition. It constructs a different version of history to the official account of the Kennedy assassination given in the Warren report. The version of events in the Warren report, like all historical knowledge, is merely an interpretation; true historical knowledge according to Hutcheon is arguably unobtainable, and therefore is ideal grounds for fictive exploration. However *Libra* is not a metafictional novel: in no sense is DeLillo interested in *Libra*, or, for that matter, in *Mao II* or *White Noise*, in writing fiction that interrogates its status as fiction. Indeed, Nicol writes, '*Libra* is a postmodern historical novel very unlike Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction"' (Nicol p.195). This is an important point, given the centrality of metafiction as a defining aspect of postmodern fiction, and it is one that will be revisited in the conclusion of this dissertation.

A stronger argument might be made regarding intertextuality, which applies to the relationship between the current text and the prior texts that have in some way influenced it. 'The Warren Commission Report is the privileged intertext in DeLillo's novel' (Carmichael p.208). Nicholas Branch, the CIA archivist whose job it is to attempt to create a coherent account of the Kennedy assassination, thinks that the Warren Report, 'is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred'.⁴⁴ The use of a single intertext, as for example Joyce employs in *Ulysses*, is according to Nicol, 'a modernist strategy of referring to a key intertext which enables the reader to make sense of the fiction by 'recuperating' its fragmented elements' (Nicol p.11). *The Odyssey*, for example, provides a template for a reader to follow in order to gain a thematic understanding of Joyce's novel. This isn't the case with postmodern fiction:

⁴⁴ Don DeLillo *Libra* (New York: Viking 1988) p.177.

Postmodern novels [...] typically offer the reader a surfeit of intertextual references and allusions which seem, tantalisingly, to point to a single explanatory master-narrative but in the end lead us to nothing except an ironic recognition of how master-narratives function, and the value of individual, localised stories or temporarily useful interpretive constructions (Nicol p.12).

This could be grounds to accept that the reliance on a single intertext shows a bias towards a modernist interpretation of *Libra*. Yet the book does seem to highlight the level of complexity in the Warren Report - this is not a straightforward text like *The Odyssey*. This is a government commission that 'out- Joyces Joyce' (Knight Duvall p.29). Nicholas Branch's stockpile of information relating to the report stretches far beyond the bounds of any normal government report:

Nicholas Branch has unpublished state documents, polygraph reports, Dictabelt recordings from the police radio net on November 22. He has photo enhancements, floor plans, home movies, biographies, bibliographies, letters, rumors, [...] baptismal records, report cards, postcards, divorce petitions, canceled checks, daily time-sheets, tax returns, property lists, postoperative x- rays, photos of knotted string, thousands of pages of testimony, of voices droning in hearing rooms in 5 old courthouse buildings.⁴⁵

Millard describes Branch's situation as 'both a scholar's heaven, with apparently infinite research materials provided instantly on request, and a scholar's hell of overabundance and non-integration'.⁴⁶ Moreover, when he is 'supplied by the CIA archivist with ever more bits of textual evidence, Branch discovers the gaps and silences of the Warren Commission Report' (Duvall Duvall p.12). This evidential tsunami is arguably sufficient to begin to undermine the status of the Warren report as the primary intertext of *Libra*, a very post-modern manoeuvre that privileges the idea of Lyotard's *petit récit* over a single dominant

⁴⁵Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Viking 1988) p.177-8

⁴⁶Bill Millard. "The Fable of the Ants: Myopic Interactions in DeLillo's *Libra*." *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 4 no. 2, (1994), <<http://muse.jhu.edu/article/27461>> [Accessed 23 June 2019] (para. 16 of 29)

narrative interpretation. 'Instead of attaining the closure one expects from a narrative syntagm, the successful completion of his forensic romance, Branch becomes the Sisyphus of mediated information. He is still reading signs at the close of the novel' (Millard 17 of 29).

DeLillo in his essay "American Blood" argues that all the presidential assassination attempts since John F. Kennedy's have been thoroughly mediated' (Knight Duvall p.33). Kennedy's assassination brought to an end 'a certain kind of political innocence' (Duvall Duvall p.3), with Oswald and Kennedy becoming, 'like Hitler and Elvis Presley' (Duvall Duvall p.3), the creations of media culture. In *Libra* DeLillo seems less interested in the machinations of the conspiracy theory - who did what and when - but rather in the way that the media, like Baudrillardian simulacra, can generate multiple narrative threads whose credibility is equally as plausible as their fictionality. The plethora of conspiracy theories, built upon the sea of contested evidence, along with inconsistent media narratives, undermines the official authorised account in the Warren Report. Implicit in this analysis is nature of television:

Partly this is due to the distinctive TV logic Fredric Jameson notes, of replaying and reconstructing events – something which becomes even more pronounced during the news media's response to a crisis (Jameson, 1991, 355). But it is also because of a more fundamental fact, that the image sucks the meaning out of an event and causes us to focus on the image itself (Nicol p.196).

Both *White Noise* and *Mao II* explore the degree to which people's understanding of reality is a construct of the media: in *White Noise* this is attributed largely to commercial interests, and in *Mao II* to ideological factors. These views are thematically central to an understanding of both novels as postmodern texts. Those 'studies of *Libra* which identify it as a postmodernist text, typically stress its rendering of Lee Harvey Oswald as the construct of media' (Maltby p.62). Similarly Knight claims that 'DeLillo is ultimately less interested in who really killed Kennedy, or discovering who Oswald really was than in understanding how

Oswald's sense of self came to be constructed through the media...' (Knight p.32). DeLillo in 1983 claimed that Oswald's fragmented sense of self was 'scripted out of doctored photos, tourist cards, change of address cards, mail order forms, visa applications, altered signatures, pseudonyms.' (Carmichael p.206). Oswald is depicted as understanding reality as a film in which he is the star: 'Lee felt he was in the middle of his own movie. They were running this thing just for him' (*Libra* p.364). This wobbly sense of self is reinforced by the Warren Report and 'his confusing and often slippery use of personal pronouns [...] Oswald's tortured texts are original representations of the necessarily failed effort to create a self persistent voice in postmodern history' (Carmichael p.208/9). Even Lee Harvey Oswald's name is arguably a media construction. Throughout his life he referred to himself as Lee Oswald. However, Nicol argues, 'the media insisted upon calling him by his full name, Lee Harvey Oswald, as if to emphasize that he was the double of John Fitzgerald Kennedy' (Nicol p.196). Finally, as a truly symbolic ending for a personality created by the media, Oswald watches his own death from Jack Ruby's bullet on a camera man's monitor: 'he could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV. . . Through the pain, through the losing of sensation except where it hurt, Lee watched himself react to the auguring heat of the bullet' (*Libra* p.434).

One critic who argues against this presentation of Lee Harvey Oswald as a media construction is Maltby. Rather than viewing Oswald's identity as simply a construct, propagated from the jumbled skeins of media narratives and therefore bereft of any primary identity independent of these influences, 'we must reckon with the book's insistent focus on "another level, ... a deeper kind of truth' (Maltby p.63). He cites a passage from the book, in which David Ferrie, part of the anti-Castro contingent in the novel, and one of the architects of JFK's death, claims that the connection between Oswald and the assassination is not causal:

It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny (*Libra* p.334).

These 'secret symmetries' (*Libra* p.76) amount to, 'repeated invocations of invisible, transhistorical forces which shape human affairs' (Maltby p.63). They are not 'a postmodern rejection of empiricist historiography. Rather, this is the stuff of metaphysics' (Maltby p.63).

To further support this contention he cites an interview with DeLillo in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, where DeLillo discusses Oswald's motivation in the assassination:

I think it was based on elements outside politics and, as someone in the novel says, outside history—things like dreams and coincidences and even the movement or the configuration of the stars, which is one reason the book is called *Libra* [...] When I hit upon this notion of coincidence and dream and intuition and the possible impact of astrology on the way men act, I thought that *Libra*, being Oswald's sign, would be the one title that summarized what's inside the book (Maltby p.63).

Maltby goes on to write that consequently 'the mindset of *Libra* is neither consistently nor unequivocally post-modern' (Maltby p.63). Rather than offering up a Modernist analysis of Oswald, he instead believes a Romantic analysis of Oswald's character based upon 'a model of mind [...] as self-sufficient and self-authenticating, as an interior source of insight or vision' (Maltby p.64). DeLillo's own comments arguably add substance to Maltby's views. However, this appeal to a kind of subjective metaphysics could be yet another of Lyotard's *petit récits*, one that DeLillo has interjected into the critical discussion of the book, and that supports the postmodern plurality of Oswald's constructed identity. The multiple and disparate strands that arise from the media generated account of Oswald's personality, and his consequent lack of a coherent centre to his identity, is also reflected in the deluge of information the C.I.A analyst Nicholas Branch encounters: like Oswald's lack of a coherent identity, Branch fears that he won't ever find a central narrative that can tie his account of the assassination together. Bernstein claims that Branch's predicament

echoes Kant's idea of the impenetrable notion of the sublime, which is then applied to historical knowledge itself. Bernstein writes that, 'DeLillo has successfully transferred the infinite of the classical/romantic sublime to the postmodern conception of history itself. History is not acausal but too complex, too immense, to be reckoned by the unitary subjective mind.'⁴⁷ Bernstein could then be understood in a general sense as supporting Hutcheon's interpretation of historical knowledge, and the doubt that a historical document can ever act as a 'stand-in for the past' (Hutcheon p.92).

There are, nonetheless, responses to this particular interpretation of *Libra* as postmodern text. Giaimo, whilst acknowledging the complexity of Branch's task, points out that the assassination of Kennedy was a historical fact. Whilst it may be impossible to understand completely due to 'the ubiquitous plethora of repeated media about such events [...] I would not agree that we are simply left to wander in them, as if the purpose of *Libra* was to solve the actual mystery of JFK's murder.'⁴⁸ Giaimo claims that Branch doesn't perform the role of a meta-reader who is presented with the task of finding meaning; DeLillo says as much in a disclaimer: Branch's confusion serves to build 'suspense late in the novel as we move closer to the actual crime' (Giaimo P.4). Moreover, rather than adopting a somewhat humorous and ironic tone in the novel, as the postmodern relativist typically assumes when not finding meaning, Giaimo claims that Branch's response is horror:

There are times when he thinks he can't go on. He feels disheartened, almost immobilized by his sense of the dead. The dead are in the room. And photographs of the dead work a mournful power on his mind.... But he persists, he works on, he jots his notes (Giaimo p.4).

Branch in no way represents the type of elitist or 'disengaged detectives [...] like *White*

⁴⁷Stephen Bernstein, 'Libra and the Historical Sublime' *Postmodern Culture Journal of Interdisciplinary Thought on Contemporary Cultures* Volume 4 Number 2 (January 1994) <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27440>> [Accessed 24 June 2019] (para. 5 of 25)

⁴⁸Paul Giaimo, *Appreciating Don DeLillo The Moral Force of a Writer's Work*, (Oxford: Praeger, 2011) p.3.

Noise's Murray Siskind gleefully elaborating on the significance of Elvis beneath a toxic cloud' (Giaimo p.4). The level of emotional engagement in historical events depicted in *Libra* from characters like Branch and Beryl Parmenter, is in sharp contrast to the 'postmodernist's cool analyzing of events in history as an artificial "text" of sorts' (Giaimo p.7). It would therefore seem that Giaimo does not consider *Libra* to be a postmodern text.

Nell takes a different approach and argues that *Libra* can be read as modernist text. He quotes DeLillo as discussing the Warren Report and saying, 'I asked myself what Joyce could possibly do after *Finnegans Wake*, and this was the answer' (Nell p.150). DeLillo goes on to describe the Warren Report as 'a masterwork of trivia ranging from Jack Ruby's mother's dental records to photographs of knotted string' (Nell p.15). Nell draws a modernist parallel, but not because '*Finnegans Wake* and the Warren Report share stylistic similarities, but because both harbour encyclopaedic ambitions' (Nell p.15). Whilst this argument is definitely true of the Warren Report and *Finnegan's Wake*: Branch says that the Warren Report is 'the Joycean Book of America, remember – the novel in which nothing is left out' (*Libra* p.182), similar encyclopaedic ambitions could also be claimed for postmodern writers like Thomas Pynchon in his novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, and earlier authors such as Melville with *Moby Dick*.⁴⁹

Nell then makes a further claim that 'if we read *Libra* as a modernist epic, John Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy (1930–6) may be a more likely antecedent than either *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's Wake* (Nell p.15). Both novels according to Nell employ similar use of free indirect discourse to indicate 'shifts of points of view, but also via interpolated non-novelistic texts. In this sense, Dos Passos's "Newsreel" sections prefigure DeLillo's fragmented transmissions of the Kennedy assassination and passages from Oswald's "Historic Diary"' (Nell p.15). The use free indirect discourse existed long before modernism: Jane

⁴⁹ Edward Mendelson, 'The Encyclopaedic Novel' <<http://www.columbia.edu/~em36/EncyclopedicNarrative.pdf>> [Accessed 4th September 2019] p.1267.

Austen 'is generally acknowledged to be the first novelist to make sustained use of free indirect discourse in the representation of figural speech and thought'.⁵⁰ Moreover, Tanner discusses the use of many types of non-novelistic discourse in *Gravity's Rainbow*, among which are, 'caberet, card games, songs, comic strips, spy stories, serious history, encyclopaedic information...'⁵¹ Consequently, Nell's arguments seem insufficient to make a strong case for classifying *Libra* as a modernist text. However, both Giamo and Nicol do provide strong arguments to show that categorising *Libra* as historiographic metafiction is also unsuccessful, despite the undeniably mediated construction of Oswald's character in the novel.

⁵⁰Daniel P. Gunn, 'Free Indirect Discourse and Narrative Authority in "Emma"' *Narrative* Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan., 2004) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20107329?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents> [Accessed 4th September 2019] (p.35)

⁵¹ Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon*, (London: Methuen 1982) p.77.

CONCLUSION

The question of narrative strategies, in particular in relation to the distinctive style in which many postmodern novels are written, provides a convenient way to begin to conclude this dissertation. McHale understands the distinction between postmodern and modernist fiction as based upon the difference between 'foregrounding the ontological structure of texts' (McHale p.221), rather than focusing on the epistemological frame that McHale uses to categorise modernist fiction. This ontological understanding is supported by Nicol when he writes that, 'metafiction is the main technical device used in postmodern fiction' (Nicol p. 35). Metafiction draws the reader's attention to the structure of fiction, and therefore exposes the artificiality and illusion that is used to generate the fictional world. Metafiction involves the use of a number of literary strategies, of which one of the most prominent is breaking frame. Nicol gives examples from Paul Auster's *City of Glass* when a phone call at the start of the novel asks for the Auster who has his own fictional detective agency in the book. Other examples that Nicol gives are Rushdie's walk on role as a friend of the narrator in *Midnight's Children*, and Garcia Marquez's appearance in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In none of the DeLillo novels discussed are there any metafictional elements similar to the above texts. DeLillo doesn't appear in any guise or form in these works, and so this defining feature of postmodern poetics is absent from this selection of his fiction. This may account for the Linda Hutcheon giving no mention to DeLillo in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, and Brian McHale only giving two one line references to DeLillo in *Postmodernist Fiction*. This is despite DeLillo's most heavily influenced postmodern novel, *White Noise*, being published prior to either Hutcheon's or McHale's books. The lack of any metafictional element in DeLillo's novels, alongside the two most prominent commen-

tators on literary postmodernism neglecting to mention DeLillo's work, has to weigh heavily on his consideration as a postmodern author.

Alongside metafiction, DeLillo's work also doesn't conform to other postmodern literary strategies like circular and double endings of the type employed by Borges in various stories, or by Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Moreover, reading a book like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* in which he employs techniques like hyper-embedded focalization in the octopus Gregori episode, or the use of multiple unreliable narrators is again sufficient to alert the reader to the gulf that separates DeLillo's work from an author like Pynchon. However, DeLillo does employ certain modernist motifs, in particular the use of epiphanies in *White Noise*, the use of montage in the conveying the details of Kennedy's assassination in *Libra*, and at least in certain cases a modernist conception of self - most notably in Jack Gladney in *White Noise* and Scott and Bill Gray in *Mao II*.

Discussing realism Giaimo reflects that, 'if real conditions are postmodern, and DeLillo is simply representing them as such, he is a mimetic realist' (Giaimo p.18). Similarly Millard believes that '*White Noise* is not a postmodern novel, simply a brilliant interrogation of the conditions of postmodernity; this is a fundamentally different thing' (Dennis 1 of 43). In this sense DeLillo is no different to Dickens in merely addressing the conditions of the culture he lives in and writes about. Rettberg, a professor at the university of Bergen, also initially seems to agree with this view:

I would not rush to say that DeLillo is a postmodernist author. He is not trying, structurally, technically, or otherwise, to jump into any such camp. He is certainly innovative, but he is content to work in forms and genres that are long- established (Rettberg, para 1 of 42).

Yet the content of his work is influenced by the ideas of the main postmodern theorists:

Lyotard, Jameson and Baudrillard; is this influence sufficient to classify DeLillo's novels as postmodern? Rettberg goes on to say, 'the work of DeLillo is distinctly post-modern, in that

it presents the stories of characters who face life in a post-modern, post- industrial, televi-
sual culture' (Rettberg para 1 of 42). Yet this only means that his subject matter is at times
postmodern, which is to say he is merely reflecting the thematic issues of the time he lives
in, surely as any realist or modernist writer would do.

Dennis claims that the use of mixed intertextual references in *White Noise*: the nov-
el parodies detective fiction, the campus novel and the fiction of domesticity imply a post-
modernist reading. Moreover, elements previously discussed such as the brand name
mantras 'intrude into the first person narration without any indication as to their prove-
nance or their relevance' (Dennis 14 of 43). This Dennis claims undermines the reader's
confidence in the narrator:

I would argue that this is postmodern, in that the tonal quality of the first person narration is
hyperreal or unreal. We are given the illusion of a realistic first person narration, but with a
devastatingly comic irony, which undermines both the narrator's and our confidence in his
substantive grip on an unimaginable reality (Dennis 14 of 43).

As discussed earlier intertextuality of course is not something new. Dickens novel *Bleak
House*, it could be argued, relies on mixing the genres of detective fiction, the legal thriller
and the romance. Whilst Dickens did not seek to parody these genres, Dennis does admit
that *White Noise* can also be easily read as 'a comic/realist text' (Dennis 10 of 43). DeLil-
lo's use of the brand name mantra's could also be similarly understood as both a comic
effect, and also a serious comment about the ubiquity of advertising in America in the
1980's.

One way in which the classification of DeLillo's work might possibly be resolved is
to approach it from a different direction, and look at the role of the writer in *Mao II*, along-
side DeLillo's own comments on what he understands to be the task of the writer in con-
temporary America. McHale's understanding of the focus on the ontological dominant

opens postmodernism to the criticism that it has fostered an approach to literature based upon 'solipsistic, self-referential experimentation'.⁵² This is in sharp contrast to the stance of an ideologically committed author presenting a cultural critique of aspects of his society. If DeLillo can be understood as offering such a critique of late capitalism, which Jameson famously understands postmodernism to be the cultural product, it would then follow that modernism, as Lentricchia believes, remains 'the last cultural realm in which aesthetic choices were used for critical purposes, and that is precisely the stance DeLillo seems to long for'.⁵³ Salván marshals a number of arguments to corroborate this position. Firstly, she claims that Eagleton supports the understanding that postmodernism is ineffectual as a means of criticising late capitalism, and therefore DeLillo would have to be considered as a critic of postmodernism if he is attacking late capitalism in modern America. In *Mao II* Bill Gray bemoans how the loss of power to influence society has shifted from the novelist to the terrorist. Samuel Beckett is described as 'the last writer to "shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings"' (Osteen Duvall p.143). This view Osteen describes, echoing Lentricchia, as Bill Gray mounting 'a spirited defense of modernist authority' (Osteen Duvall p.148). The point is further reinforced when 'Haddad [...] picks up Gray's thread to declare that terrorists are "heroes for our time"'. Shrewdly appropriating Bill's modernist ideal, he even claims that novelists like Bill admire "their discipline and cunning"' (Osteen Duvall p.143). Moreover, DeLillo's own comments reinforce this view:

In a 1988 interview, DeLillo stated: 'there are so many temptations for American writers to become part of the system and part of the structure that now, more than ever, we have to

⁵²Madhu Dubey 'Post-Postmodern Realism?' *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 57, No. 3/4, Postmodernism, Then (Fall/Winter 2011), pp. 364-371
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41698756>> [Accessed 25th June 2019] (p.2)

⁵³Paula Martín Salván 'The Writer at the Far Margin The Rhetoric of Artistic Ethics in Don DeLillo's Novels' *European Journal of American Studies*, Vol 2, No 1, (2007) <<https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/1147>> [Accessed 25 June 2019] (para 21 of 44)

resist. American writers ought to stand and live in the margins, and be more dangerous' (Salván 2 of 44).

This is also endorsed in his public support of writer's such as 'Salman Rushdie and Wei Jingsheng or the recent PEN Writers State of Emergency II event' (Salván 12 of 44). Nell writes:

In *Mao II*, a novel inspired partly by the fatwa calling for Rushdie's execution, Gray says, "Do you know why I believe in the novel? It's a democratic shout" (M 159). Although not all modernists would agree to that definition of the novel, the language does tie Gray's beliefs to DeLillo's, and affirms his affiliation with adherents of a politically engaged modernism. (Nell p.24)

Reading *Mao II* it is difficult to characterise DeLillo as a postmodern writer despite his thematic use of ideas based upon theorists such as Jameson, Baudrillard and Lyotard. The lack of a structural metafictional dimension to the work, which is the defining of aspect postmodernist fiction according to Nicol and others, seems to rule out a straightforward postmodern reading. Moreover, the committed ideological stance that Bill Gray conveys, which is reinforced by DeLillo's own comments, is anathema to the relativism that is endemic to postmodernism. In this sense the book could more easily be interpreted as a modernist critique of postmodern culture. In *Libra*, the manner in which the work clearly doesn't fit into Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction, which she considers the defining paradigm for postmodern fiction, again makes it difficult to see the book as postmodern within the context of her influential definition. This is despite the obvious fragmented and socially constructed nature of Oswald's personality. Yet even here an alternative reading of Oswald and the assassination can be given as based upon dream, vision and intuitions as Maltby argues, and DeLillo is also seen to endorse.

Even in *White Noise* it could be argued that DeLillo is adopting the role of a critic of American postmodern culture through the figure of Jack Gladney. Moreover, there are cer-

tain elements that clearly do not fit within a postmodern frame for the book, most notably the spiritual dimension displayed in the epiphanies, the absence of a metafictional structure for the novel, and the strong arguments against both the hyperreal and the postmodern self. Even though this novel is the one in which the case against a postmodern reading is most difficult to make, it can still, as Dennis admits, be read as easily as a comic realist text as it can as postmodern novel.

The argument presented here builds to the understanding that DeLillo's is a writer whose work critiques postmodern culture from a variety of approaches, in which modernist elements are arguably the most prominent. The final word though should go to DeLillo himself. 'Asked how he reacts to his novels being characterised as postmodern, DeLillo replied, "I don't react. But I'd prefer not to be labeled. I'm a novelist, period" (Nell P.25). At least from DeLillo's perspective, any critical discussion must always take second place to the writing. In a letter DeLillo wrote to Franzen, quoted earlier, the emphasis on not being labelled or categorised presents a view of "writing" as "a form of personal freedom", that "frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us" (Cowart p.23). In the end individual expression lies at the heart of all great fiction, whether it is modernist, postmodern or otherwise.

WORD COUNT 15,815

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