

“Something Extraordinary Hovering Just Outside Our Touch”: The Technological Sublime in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*

Julian Henneberg
Berlin, Germany

Abstract: This paper discusses how the forces of postmodernity and technology combine to create a contemporary version of the romantic sublime, and how this new ‘technological sublime’ figures in Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise*. The novel simultaneously depicts and satirizes a postmodern world in which the forces of capitalism, consumer culture, and technology determine people’s existences to the extent that they even invade formerly personal spheres like spirituality, dreams, and self-images. I argue that, in such a world, technology has replaced nature as the primary source of the sublime experience. Moreover, the overwhelming power of natural phenomena has been dwarfed by the complexity and scale of today’s technological networks and globalized system. For theoretical background I draw on the classic accounts of the sublime by Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, accounts of postmodernity and contemporary sublimity by Frederic Jameson, Joseph Tabbi, and Jean-François Lyotard, as well as scholarship on DeLillo in general and *White Noise* in particular.

The appeal of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* derives to a large degree from its sharp and satirical depiction of a postmodern environment and culture.¹ From its concern with Baudrillardian hyperreality and simulacra to its merciless parody of the excesses of consumer capitalism and mass media, the novel offers a wide array of starting points for excursions into the terrain of postmodernity.²

1 Accordingly, John Duvall states that “[t]he way [...] that *White Noise* relates to the postmodern may be less as an exemplar of postmodernism than as a meditation on postmodernity – what it feels like to live in the age of media saturation” (117).

2 On the relation of postmodernity to simulacra, hyperreality, consumerism, and mass media, cf. Baudrillard, “Symbolic Exchange” and “Precession”; Harvey; Jameson; and Lyotard *Postmodern Condition*. Cf. Schuster or Wilcox for the application of Baudrillardian thought in reference to DeLillo’s work.

Yet, as Jesse Kavadlo has noted, “[i]n the end, DeLillo neither explains, nor tries to explain, postmodernism; nor can postmodernism alone explain DeLillo” (7). I will therefore refrain from questions of epochal and stylistic categorizations and concentrate instead on DeLillo’s evocation of a technologically saturated cultural environment. Critics have noted and commented on the novel’s treatment of diverse postmodern phenomena like television, paranoia, or simulation. However, one concept that is central to the novel’s diegetic world has been widely disregarded: the ‘technological sublime.’ While the notion of the sublime has been predominantly associated with romantic poetry and landscape painting, it is evocative and dynamic enough to be applied to distinctively contemporary phenomena and experiences, as recent scholarly works confirm.³

Analyzing the emergence of a technological sublime in *White Noise* makes sense not only because it illuminates aspects of the book that have been previously neglected. It also emphasizes the fact that over twenty years after its original publication, the text still functions as an astute and incisive satirical critique of developments that are no longer (or probably never have been) exclusively American.⁴ Frank Lentricchia’s scathing statement that “we are a people of, by, and for the image” has almost become a universal truth (“Don DeLillo” 415). If claims of an increasingly global culture fueled and shaped by an internationally operating capitalist system are accurate, DeLillo’s book is no less relevant today than it was twenty years ago.⁵

In this paper, I will argue that DeLillo’s depiction of contemporary American culture in *White Noise* is informed by a sense of a technological sublime, an effect of highly complex and seemingly irresolvable networks of media and machinery, which have replaced nature as the primary source of sublime experience.⁶ The concept of the technological sublime can demonstrate both the ominous dangers inherent in

3 Jean François Lyotard’s *Lessons*, David E. Nye’s *American Technological Sublime*, Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe’s *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* are only some of the recent theoretical engagements with the concept of the sublime. Cf. Weiskel for the classic account of the romantic sublime.

4 Arno Heller observes how “the novel goes beyond the American context and points out a global dilemma that may have reached the United States just a little earlier than the rest of the world” (46).

5 As recent events like the BP oil disaster have shown, DeLillo’s satire resonates powerfully with real events. The rhetorical choices that were made here are particularly evocative of *White Noise*—from the downplaying of the scope of the leak by calling it a mere ‘spill’ to the attempts to hide uncertainty about how to plug the leak by giving the sealing efforts graphic names like ‘bottom kill,’ ‘static kill,’ and ‘top kill.’

6 In an interview, DeLillo attests to his affinity for contemporary cultural processes: “I try to record what I see and hear and sense around me—what I feel in the currents, the electric stuff of the culture. I think these are American forces and energies. And they belong to our time” (qtd. in Begley 332).

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technology and the psychological perils of what DeLillo calls “a sense of secret patterns in our lives” (qtd. in DeCurtis 329). To this end, my reading of *White Noise* will highlight crucial passages that are particularly expressive of a new, postmodern “structure of feeling” and evaluate how they depict the production of a contemporary technological sublime (Williams 64).⁷

After a short summary of the novel’s plot, my argument will consist of five parts. First, I will outline the concept of the technological sublime, drawing on classic accounts of the sublime by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant and recent retheorizations of the concept by Fredric Jameson and Joseph Tabbi. In a second step, I will discuss the various forms the technological sublime takes in DeLillo’s novel as well as the effects of presenting the novel’s events in first-person narration. The subsequent part addresses the roles that information and knowledge play in the book, taking the central motif of the “airborne toxic event” as a starting point (DeLillo, *White Noise* 117). This part will examine how postmodern phenomena like the technological sublime foster a nagging epistemological uncertainty, the failure of linguistic registers, and the collapse of traditional models of knowledge. Section four will be concerned with technology as second nature and the consequences of this process of habituation. Here, I will consider the latent threat of a ‘naturalized’ technological environment. The last section deals with the role of sound and identifies repression and superstition as the unintended consequences of the characters’ supposedly harmonious coexistence with technological forces. Thus, just as he depicts contemporary American culture in his novel, Don DeLillo argues that it is informed by a sense of a technological sublime. *White Noise* therefore manifests the latter as an effect of highly complex and seemingly irresolvable networks of media and machinery, which have replaced nature as the primary source of sublime experience.

PLOT SUMMARY

A key text of American postmodern literature, *White Noise* is simultaneously a satire of US academia, modern patchwork family life, media culture, and consumer capitalism. The novel is set in the idyllic college town of Blacksmith, where protagonist Jack Gladney holds the position of chairman of the department of “Hitler studies” at the aptly named “College-on-the-Hill” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 4). At work, he is surrounded by colleagues like Murray Siskind, who specializes in ascribing mythic values to

7 See chapter two of Raymond Williams’s *The Long Revolution* for Williams’s development of the concept of the ‘structure of feeling.’

American popular culture and consumer products. At home, Jack lives with his fourth wife Babette and four children from different marriages.

When a chemical spill results in a huge toxic cloud and causes the evacuation of Blacksmith, Jack becomes exposed to the toxins. After the evacuation, life seems to return to the normal, yet Jack has to cope with absolute uncertainty as to the effects of the toxic exposure. As it turns out, his latent fear of death is shared by his wife. Babette admits to having had an affair with a pharmaceutical executive in order to get hold of the experimental drug Dylar, which is supposed to cure the fear of death. Jack's efforts to obtain Dylar himself and to confront his rival are interrupted by a visit by Babette's father Vernon, whose absolute irreverence in the face of old age, sickness, and death makes him the antipode to Jack and Babette.

When Jack finally tracks down Babette's lover and Dylar project manager Willie Mink in order to kill him, Mink turns out to be addicted to the substance himself. His overuse of Dylar has turned him into a mere talking head, randomly inserting advertising slogans and bits of television chatter into his speech and unable to function rationally or behave coherently. Jack shoots and nonfatally wounds Mink, who in turn shoots him in the wrist. As a result of this, Jack experiences a change of heart and drives Mink to a hospital. Upon his return home, Jack's youngest son Wilder rides his tricycle across a busy freeway, miraculously making it to the other side unharmed. The book ends with Jack's observation that "[t]he supermarket shelves have been rearranged," which causes "agitation and panic in the aisles" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 325-26).

CHARACTERIZING THE TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME

The sublime is an aesthetic concept that aims at capturing that which is infinitely powerful and great, the emotional and rational response to such phenomena, and the attempts to represent them artistically. My conception of the sublime is based on Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Kant predicated his theory of the sublime on the notion of universal human rationality, stating that "the sublime is not to be sought in the things of nature, but only in our Ideas" (65). In Kant's account, the sublime is produced by a spontaneous overload of our imaginative faculties. This overload is caused by the excessive demands of something that is either immeasurable (the mathematical sublime) or whose force would overpower us physically (the dynamical sublime). Burke, on the other hand, made the irrational and instinctive feeling of terror and threat the linchpin of his reflections. He claimed that "[w]hatever

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is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, [...] whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*” (39). I will argue that in the technological sublime we find a conflation of these two seminal conceptions of sublimity. Terror and threat are as much part of its force as psychological stress deriving from an inability to come to terms with highly complex and indeterminable phenomena.

In my analysis of the technological sublime, I also draw on the work of Fredric Jameson and Joseph Tabbi, who have conceptualized the technological sublime as an effect of postmodernity and the dynamics of late capitalism and globalization. I find Tabbi and Jameson particularly useful in thinking about technology and postmodernity as interrelated phenomena. All accounts of postmodernity as a certain political, social, or cultural condition or as a historical period stress the integral role of technology. The rise and proliferation of information technologies, electronic communications, and new media, as well as advances in molecular biology, biotechnology, and related fields, have all been identified as important aspects of an increasingly globalized and technologically sophisticated postmodern age. For the first time in history, large parts of the world’s population live in thoroughly technological environments. With postmodernity, therefore, the technological sublime comes into its own.⁸ It is for this reason that I argue for a contemporary sublime that derives its efficacy from the twin forces of technology and postmodernity.

In using the term ‘technological sublime’ rather than ‘postmodern sublime,’ I wish to connect my reading of *White Noise* to Jameson’s reflections in *Postmodernism*, where he develops the concept of a contemporary sublime that corresponds to the postmodern moment.⁹ After a discussion of the eighteenth-century concept of the sublime, Jameson comes to the conclusion that

[t]oday, however, it may be possible to think all this in a different way, at the moment of radical eclipse of nature itself: [...] The other of our society is [...] no longer nature at all, as it was in precapitalist societies, but something else which we must now identify. (34-35)¹⁰

8 I do not claim that the technological sublime is an exclusively postmodern phenomenon. Cf., for instance, Nye for an analysis of an ‘industrial’ technological sublime.

9 The interrelations between Jameson’s and DeLillo’s thought have already been noted by various critics, among them John N. Duvall: “If there is a version of postmodernism with which *White Noise* deeply resonates, it is Jameson’s view of the totalizing reach of multinational capitalism” (118).

10 A classic account of the relation between nature, human faculties and the sublime can be found in Kant: “[C]louds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; [...] the boundless ocean in a state of tumult; [...] these exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might” (75).

For Jameson, this Other is technology and its underlying driving force, late capitalism. He then connects the idea of the sublime to (post)modern technology in order to describe

that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labor stored up in our machinery [...] which turns back on and against us in unrecognizable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis. (35)

In *Postmodern Sublime*, Tabbi joins Jameson in tracing back contemporary sublime experience to “[t]he exceptional dynamism of capitalism” and “an economy whose contradictions are all too conducive to those contradictory feelings [...] that have been traditionally associated with the sublime” (11).¹¹ What distinguishes Tabbi’s account from Jameson’s is his productive reworking of the Kantian premise of cognitive overcharge. Understanding the sublime as “a complex pleasure derived from representational insufficiency” enables Tabbi to explain postmodernity’s “simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology” (1). For Jameson, the totalizing force of postmodern technology spells the impossibility of a “cognitive mapping” of our surroundings (52). For Tabbi, the encounter with this totalizing force also holds the potential for human connection and self-realization, not least through the process of literary production.

ENCOUNTERING THE TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME: JACK GLADNEY

White Noise describes the emergence of a new kind of sublimity which is produced by a wide array of causes and agents and comes into being in manifold forms. This heterogeneity of effects is due to technology’s highly complex and multifaceted nature. At the time *White Noise* was first published, technology had already altered political, social, and biological systems as well as mundane everyday existence in significant ways. These shifts were not caused by any single technology or scientific innovation that could be identified as its sole cause; they also did not only affect a limited area of life. Rather, change was brought about by interrelated technological phenomena and cultural developments that changed important aspects of human existence in such a way that “[t]he emergence of science and technology has put to flight former metaphysical, religious, and political certainties” (Tabbi x).

11 One should mention here that Tabbi’s account also differs significantly from Jameson’s. Tabbi emphasizes the ongoing need for, and possibility of, the ‘humanization’ of technological systems and generally takes a more optimistic stance than Jameson. He discusses not the displacement of the human but the conditions of its reinscription into technological processes and cultures.

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The novel expresses this fundamental complexity by highlighting not single devices or practices but the interconnections between them. Therefore, it would not do justice to DeLillo’s narrative wit and literary technique to perceive technology in *White Noise* as a single, monolithic force. As Timothy Melley notes, the novel “insists that technology be understood as an array of ideas and attitudes as well as set of material devices” (76). Likewise, the technological sublime is not triggered by something as solitary and manageable as a storm or a mountain but rather by complex systems or the phenomena produced by these systems: “Kant’s sublime object [...] seems to have been replaced in postmodern literature by a technological process” (Tabbi ix). Technological forces, the pervasiveness of media, decontextualized information, and irresolvably complex systems all work together to create a contemporary brand of sublimity.

Before discussing specific instances in the novel that illustrate the idea of a technologically engendered sublime, it is important to note how these instances are processed and presented. *White Noise* is narrated in first person by Jack Gladney. Jack is a character that oscillates between media- and technology-savvy cultural semiotician and self-delusional modernist dupe, trumped by the proliferation of signs and technologies in a postmodern age.¹² He desperately struggles to uphold an appearance of professional and paternal authority that is constantly called into question, and is at a loss to understand the technology and media shaping his existence. The protagonist’s obvious lack of authority and self-esteem and his penchant for self-delusion make him a problematic narrator whose statements and observations should not be taken at face value but need to be closely examined in order to determine how they betray his deep-seated anxieties.

This is exactly the point where a contemporary notion of the sublime can prove helpful. Jack Gladney’s struggles and confusion result from being confronted with various forms of the technological sublime—a sense of being overwhelmed and dwarfed by technological forces and systems.¹³ Kant notes that “[t]he feeling of the Sublime is [...] a feeling of pain, arising from the want of accordance between the aesthetical estimation of magnitude formed by the Imagination and the estimation of

12 In analyses of *White Noise*, the point is frequently made that Jack is on bad terms with his surroundings because he essentially has a modernist mindset that is ill-adapted to his postmodern environment: “Jack Gladney [...] is a modernist displaced in a postmodern world” (Wilcox 197). For discussions of Jack Gladney as a modernist, cf. Barrett; Lentricchia; Maltby; and Wilcox.

13 Arno Heller makes a similar point: “Since Jack Gladney is the first person narrator and the dystopian protagonist at the same time, he is as undistanced and confused as everyone else in the novel, suffering like them from a severe loss of reality. It is precisely this quality that permits *White Noise* to be interpreted as a vivisection of America’s postmodern collective unconscious” (46).

the same formed by Reason” (72). Nowadays, this sense of an overwhelming strain on our imaginative faculties is produced more often by technology than by nature.

It is one of postmodernity’s most characteristic features that the complexity of technologies, media networks, and global systems has grown to such an extent that it eludes the grasp of individual cognition. It is precisely in these excessive demands a postmodern world makes on individual consciousness that a contemporary sublime originates. Technology in the postmodern world is indicative of “a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp” (Jameson 38). It is simply inconceivable for a single person to attain an ‘objective’ and encompassing understanding of the regime of media and technology in sight of the inherent complexity and sophistication of the postmodern world. This is precisely what DeLillo conveys through his protagonist’s confusion and disorientation. As Tabbi puts it, “when a literary figuration fails to match its technological object [...] this is the point at which literature can begin to represent not technology itself but the tumultuous and incongruous nature of postmodern experience” (25). That the events of *White Noise* are rendered by a deeply troubled and unreliable first-person narrator is therefore testament to “the multiple contradictions inherent in any attempt to present the technological culture in its totality” (Tabbi 1).¹⁴ In choosing a first-person narrator for this novel, DeLillo has two aims: to portray a person that is deeply affected and distressed by a postmodern, high tech world, and to make his experiences palpable by showing us this world through the character’s eyes and ears.

The book’s antihero is also a liminal figure, caught in between two historical periods and two models of understanding the world. His mindset is a far cry from that of Vernon Dickey, his father-in-law, who belongs to a different generation that is more in touch with the raw materiality of the world. Vernon is a craftsman and “a ladies’ man in the crash-dive of his career,” an advocate of tobacco and firearms who remains unperturbed by the sole unambiguous indicator of illness in the whole novel, a chronic cough of his which clearly indicates some kind of pulmonary disease (DeLillo, *White Noise* 245). Jack, in contrast, is a liberal academic who does not know the first thing about manual labor and is obsessed with illness and death.¹⁵ Yet Jack is equally

14 Tabbi adds that first-person narration is a mode particularly well suited to the description of postmodern realities: “Autobiography, and the projection of the self and its immediate sense experience into an autonomous sphere of thought, are continuing responses to scientific indeterminacy and accelerated technological change. Ultimately, however, all such attempts at literary self-fashioning must appear quixotic. [...] [T]echnology cannot be integrated fully into the mind’s symbolic universe” (3).

15 Jack feels ill at ease around his father-in-law, his masculinity and self-esteem obviously threatened by Vernon’s rugged physical appearance and skills as a craftsman. Jack—somewhat enviously, it appears—notices that Vernon’s hands look “[s]carred, busted, notched, permanently seamed with grease and mud.” When he reflects on Vernon’s apparent conviction that “a man who couldn’t fix

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out of touch with the reality of his precocious children who manage to maneuver the world of technology and media with apparent ease and self-confidence.¹⁶ Clearly, the children are better adapted to the postmodern age; Martin Klepper notes “that postindustrial life, too, has an archaic naturalness for children, that for them, even the free-floating signifiers are charged with a primordial, mythic meaning” (349; my translation). In contrast to the youngest members of his patchwork family, Jack is puzzled by the level of technological sophistication he encounters wherever he goes. He might notice and attempt to make sense of the excesses of his technological environment, but his reflections never arrive at a conclusion that would ease his inner turmoil.¹⁷

Jack’s intermediate position between Vernon’s traditionalistic, stoic mode of existence and his children’s media sophistication makes him the ideal figure to express the postmodern experience, an experience that Fredric Jameson has characterized as inherently depthless and schizophrenic. Indeed, the protagonist’s failure to find a suitable *modus operandi* for his environment’s challenges boils down to “the vacant but mesmerized contemplation of a schizophrenic present that is incomparable virtually by definition” (Jameson xii). As “a ‘switching center’ for multiple and perhaps inconsistent social codes,” Jack is caught between different historical and cultural modes of existence (Britt 110). This makes him both a relatively unbiased, liminal observer and a responsive phenomenological sensorium registering the shocks of the new.

“A DEATH MADE IN THE LABORATORY”: THE AIRBORNE TOXIC EVENT

By conflating technology and threat, the airborne toxic event appears to be the exemplary expression of the technological sublime. It is clearly a menace that is not only man-made, but also derives its lethal potential from chemical reactions and therefore perfectly symbolizes technology “which turns back on and against us,” as

a dripping faucet” is “fundamentally useless,” he has to admit: “I wasn’t sure I disagreed” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 245).

16 For instance, Jack notes that Denise does not have her friends’ addresses: “Her friends had phone numbers only, a race of people with a seven-bit analog consciousness” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 41). Babette and Jack also marvel at Steffie’s ability to talk on the phone while listening in on conversations in the kitchen at the same time (DeLillo, *White Noise* 42).

17 Katherine Hayles interprets Jack’s permanent uncertainty as an effect of late capitalism and argues that “[t]he ambiguity in Jack’s perception [...] stands for a larger uncertainty about whether meaning can be recuperated from the slick commercial surfaces that gleam from the supermarket’s shelves and the pages of the late capitalist text” (409).

Jameson would have it (35). At the same time, it possesses important qualities of the romantic sublime: It represents a deadly threat, it is vast and formless, dark and obscure. Its structural resemblance to a force of nature is further enhanced by its appearance: It takes the shape of a dark and twisted imitation of the natural form of a cloud.¹⁸

The airborne toxic event might be a clearly identifiable danger, but it is also characterized by a sense of the ominous, the unknowable. It is precisely this remove from the realm of what we can understand and categorize that turns it into a source of sublime experience. The characters' reactions to the chemical spill provide a particularly useful approach to the nature and effect of this technologically engendered apocalyptic scenario. Jack's description of his family's first encounter with the cloud is worth quoting at length:

It appeared in the sky ahead of us and to the left, prompting us to lower ourselves in our seats, bend our heads for a clearer view, exclaim to each other in half finished phrases. It was the black billowing cloud, the toxic airborne event, lighted by the clear beams of seven army helicopters. They were tracking its windborne movement, keeping it in view. [...] The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings. We weren't sure how to react. It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzides, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content. But it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of the sweeping event [...]. Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, created by elemental and willful rhythms. This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, [...] like a flood or a tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event. (DeLillo, *White Noise* 127-28)

This description is remarkable for several reasons. Note, for instance, how the first sentence already introduces a sense of awe that is not explicitly mentioned until later in the passage: Clearly, the cloud is huge (it appears not only in front of the car but also to the left of it), it instantly forces the Gladneys into a submissive position (everybody "bends lower" in their seats, which might not be entirely due to the better view this position affords), and the sight of it is beyond words (the Gladneys are only able to

18 At one point, Jack even reports hearing "cracklings and sputterings" and seeing lightning-like flashes and lights inside the cloud (DeLillo, *White Noise* 157). The thunderstorm is a typical example of a natural phenomenon that is capable of generating a sublime experience (Burke 82; Kant 74).

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talk in “half finished phrases”). Helicopters floodlight the cloud, thus making it appear even more impressive and emphasizing the artificial character of the disaster. Jack’s description conveys the sense that the spectacular nature of the event is emphasized by the machinery framing it.¹⁹

Clearly Jack’s account of his encounter with this “death made in the laboratory” is modeled along the lines of the classic, romantic sublime. As no adequate language exists to describe the specific terror of this technologically produced threat, Jack has to resort to older linguistic registers in order to express his fascination and dread. He describes the cloud as “terrible” yet “spectacular,” notes the “grandness of the sweeping event,” and describes his family’s reaction as “fear” intermingled with a quasi-religious “sense of awe.” These expressions are typically used to denote sublimity and almost amount to a concise definition of the sublime experience according to Burke.

It is noteworthy here that Jack’s experience is generally closer to Burke’s theory of the sublime than to Kant’s. While Burke stressed that “the sublime is built on terror” (134), for Kant, awe and fear were only part of one kind of the sublime, the dynamical sublime, and even then had to be experienced from a position of safety: “[T]his, in the safety in which we know ourselves to be, is not actual fear, but only an attempt to feel fear by the aid of the Imagination” (81).²⁰ Clearly, the chemical disaster and the ensuing evacuation are too immediate an experience to qualify as Kant’s “safety.” Kant considered the terror and helplessness of the dynamical sublime to be mere steps on the way to a higher consciousness of the mind’s rational capacities.²¹ Jack, however, does not show any signs of achieving a more secure sense of self or an increased trust in his mental faculties. If anything, the toxic disaster and the resulting evacuation confront him with his own helplessness and insecurity.

19 Undertones of a deliberately choreographed event permeate the scene and make the disaster appear almost as a staged spectacle. For instance, the helicopters and their floodlights seem to fulfill no apparent function besides “keeping [the toxic cloud] in view” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 127).

20 Kant distinguished between the mathematical sublime, which derived its effect from its vastness in dimension or number, and the dynamical sublime, whose effect was based in its power and threat to human life. For Kant, the main source of the latter kind of sublimity was nature: “Nature considered in an aesthetical judgment as might that has no dominion over us, is dynamically sublime” (74).

21 For Kant, sublimity lay not in any external object or phenomenon but in the human mind itself, which derives pleasure from its rational insight into the inconceivability of what transcends the Imagination (62).

FOR LACK OF BETTER WORDS

Ultimately, what Jack cannot determine is what the cloud actually represents, and thus what it means. Unlike natural disasters (which the Gladneys habitually ‘consume’ on television in the safety of their home), the airborne toxic event has no models, no predecessors.²² It cannot be categorized or subsumed in the register of disaster scenarios processed and mediated by television and the entertainment industry. The disaster is sublime to the same extent that it is inexpressible; the experience remains overwhelming and indescribable because the media do not cover the incident, thereby denying its victims the only language in which they know how to express their experience. Its radical newness and unpredictability make it impossible for Jack to see the incident, or even the cloud itself, for what it is: a harmful and potentially lethal accumulation of chemicals, a danger to life and limb. Jack can verbalize this menace only by means of metaphors and similes. As Mark Osteen puts it, “postmodern death – just a Panasonic quality in the air – yields no clean denouement, so Jack must manufacture a better one” (*American Magic* 184). The cloud therefore either appears as “some death ship in a Norse legend” or as the postmodern equivalent of a natural disaster, “like a flood or a tornado” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 127-28). Even though it is far from a natural phenomenon, Jack has no other points of reference, and therefore reaches for the next best way to describe what is happening to him and his family.

THE ROLE OF UNCERTAINTY

The media coverage of the toxic spill mirrors the officials’ helplessness in the face of an unknown threat. In a logic of rhetorical escalation, the name for the incident changes from “feathery plume” to “black billowing cloud” to “the airborne toxic event” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 111-17). The Gladneys are left wondering what the changing descriptions of the phenomenon signify, or if they mean anything at all. The terror they experience does not lie in a clear and distinct threat but in a deep uncertainty about the nature of this threat.²³ Even before being exposed to the potentially deadly Nyodene D, Jack already ruminates on the nebulous dangers the

22 One could sum up the Gladneys’ relation to disaster and the sublime by saying that they enjoy what Kant called ‘the dynamical sublime’ of natural disasters on television, but they become victims of the technological sublime in an unmediated, real-life disaster.

23 In his reflections on *White Noise*, Winfried Fluck also emphasizes the devaluation of experience as a means to access reality: “This new reality has an altogether different quality. It challenges the epistemological status of experience as a source of knowledge because its deadly effect can no longer be seen or felt and can only be determined by a computer” (80).

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chemical poses. As he observes the scene of the accident through binoculars from what he believes to be the security of his home, Jack muses: “Fire and explosion were not the inherent dangers here. This death would penetrate, seep into the genes, show itself in bodies not yet born” (116).

This uncertainty also figures prominently when a Kafkaesque exchange ensues as Jack attempts to determine the degree of harm he sustained by being exposed to the chemicals. Jack fails to elicit a straightforward response from an alleged disaster expert in charge of an oracle-like computer program supposed to ascertain the dangers of contamination. He is told that there is “a situation” but that it is neither clear what this situation actually consists of nor what it might lead to (138). The vagueness and uncertainty of the ‘situation’ is mirrored in a noncommittal, vacuous language: The disaster is referred to as a “high definition event” and death is called “a permanent state” (138-39). Here, DeLillo comically depicts the breakdown of existing linguistic registers in the face of a technological sublime that combines aesthetic effects with potentially mortal danger.

“DAILY SEEPING FALSEHEARTED DEATH”: INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge in *White Noise* is constantly under attack, growing ever less reliable, permanently in danger of obsolescence. To a large degree, *White Noise* is a novel about the problematic character of information and knowledge in a postmodern age. Similar to François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, DeLillo attempts to record the nature, dissemination, and function of knowledge, albeit in the entirely different format of the novel and with a less sweeping gesture than Lyotard’s scholarly account. Nevertheless, the comparison makes sense: Like Lyotard, DeLillo detects a growing incredulity in contemporary society towards grand narratives and comprehensive systems of thought. In another parallel to Lyotard’s account, knowledge in the novel is often delegated to small, local groups of experts. Yet there is a decisive difference: In Lyotard’s account, this prospect was interpreted as a remedy to centralized, institutionalized, and inflexible knowledge and power. In the America of *White Noise*, however, this localized and flexible regime of knowledge appears as already in place and is not depicted as liberating but rather as oppressive, confusing, and paralyzing.²⁴

24 A great example of this localized and flexible regime of knowledge is the car ride during which Jack cannot bring his son Heinrich to agree with him on the simple fact that it has started to rain (22-24).

This is best expressed in Babette's complaint over what she perceives to be a radical shift in the production and nature of knowledge:

“Is this what they teach in school today?” Babette said. “What happened to civics, how a bill becomes a law? The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the two sides. I still remember my theorems. The battle of Bunker Hill was really fought on Breed's Hill. Here's one. Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania.” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 176)

Babette fails to realize that her enumeration of jumbled and disconnected facts effectively represents the very devaluation of 'traditional' knowledge she laments.²⁵ After all, the mentioning of Baltic countries has no significance in itself if it is not connected to a specific argument or contextualized in a meaningful way.

This kind of devaluation and decontextualization of information contributes directly to the production of technological sublimity. Much of the Gladneys' fears and anxieties are caused by ignorance regarding their experiences. In a sense, the dissemination and application of information in the postmodern era relocates the cause of the sublime from the outside world to one's own mind. One no longer feels at the mercy of outside forces due to their proper powers but due to one's own sense of impotence and ignorance. As Osteen observes, the Gladneys' conversations “suggest the unfunny results of living in a high-technology society: there is abundant information around, but nobody seems to know anything” (Introduction viii). As a consequence of this development, the Gladneys have no way of knowing how grave the danger is during the airborne toxic event, which leaves them studying the reactions of other people, “trying to work out from their faces how frightened [they] should be” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 120).

Ignorance, DeLillo seems to suggest here, is not bliss, but hell. The combination of too much useless and too little useful information ultimately generates paranoia: If there is no way of evaluating dangers, one starts to suspect a threat behind every corner. The irony is that a paranoid mindset might be just appropriate in a thoroughly technological world. After all, there is a good chance one might “get cyanide poisoning” from burning plastic furniture, as Heinrich suggests (DeLillo, *White Noise* 103). Fredric Jameson says as much when he concedes that today, “conspiracy theory [...] must be seen as a degraded attempt – through the figuration of advanced technology – to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system” (38). Reflecting on his son's premature balding, Jack wonders:

²⁵ Babette's speech is directed at the way Heinrich processes information. Klepper sums up Heinrich's access to knowledge as follows: “Heinrich has abdicated knowledge. [...] There are still connections in his thought, but they are subatomic and directed by specific systemic mechanisms that elude total transparency in general and human activity in particular” (341; my translation).

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Did his mother consume some kind of gene-piercing substance when she was pregnant? [...] Have I raised him, unwittingly, in the vicinity of a chemical dump site, in the path of air currents that carry industrial wastes capable of producing scalp degenerations? (DeLillo, *White Noise* 22)

The key word here is “unwittingly,” as there is really no way to know. Jack concludes his reflections with a flight of rhetoric that rings true despite its pathos: “Man’s guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death” (22).²⁶ Here, DeLillo uses the comical device of Jack’s romantic rhetorical style to highlight the truly problematic issue of knowledge in a postmodern world.

THE LATENT THREAT OF TECHNOLOGY: THE EXPRESSWAY

Technology appears to have become a second nature to the Gladneys. In the opening section of the novel, Jack reports that he lives with his family “at the end of a quiet street in what was once a wooded area with deep ravines” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 4). This observation concerning the area’s ‘history’ seems to contain a hint of nostalgia. Jack goes on to mention that “[t]here is an expressway beyond the backyard now, well below us, and at night [...] the sparse traffic washes past, a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream” (4). Interestingly, for Jack, living next to an expressway does not seem to contradict living in “a quiet street.”

The expressway is exemplary of the displacement of nature through technology in postmodernity. This impression is reinforced by the way the expressway’s noise is described. The traffic just “washes past,” “remote and steady.” The noise does not register as a nuisance. In fact, it seems to be a rather welcome sound, a hypnotic and soothing backdrop to the Gladneys’ sleep.²⁷ The smooth technological construct that has come to replace the formerly rugged terrain is not considered an incision into an intact ecosystem; instead, it seems as if the expressway has absorbed and appropriated the characteristics of the natural environment it has replaced. Tabbi describes DeLillo’s

26 In an ironic reverse, the scientific progress that is supposed to facilitate and improve human life has also made it more complex and unsafe: “Indeed, DeLillo finds death, and deathly possibility, inhabiting those very technologies that promise to eradicate death, to bring the unknown future under the control of the present” (Boxall 10).

27 The pseudo-natural character of the traffic noise is also expressed by the word “babbling,” which, along with the observation that the sound “washes past,” metonymically functions to evoke associations with a ‘babbling brook.’

strategy as follows: “DeLillo’s fiction does require us to countenance as ‘natural’ many forms that, in pretechnological times, would never have seemed so” (174).

However, the seeming naturalness of the expressway is rhetorically put into question by the darker image of “dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream.” If the expressway is likened to a benign brook, it is also evocative of the river Styx. Like an underworld, it lies “well below” the house, and its sounds are described as ghostly voices. This duality of benign surface and latent threat makes the expressway exemplary for the depiction of technology in this novel. It is a Jamesonian ‘shorthand’ for larger forces and systems—a materialized consequence of the forces of technology and capitalism. While this ‘naturalized’ construct superficially appears harmonious and useful, it hides a menacing underside that is not confronted openly but rather banished to the far corners of the mind, to the “secondary levels of life” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 34).

For the most part, the dangers of the expressway are as invisible as the passing vehicles’ toxic exhaust fumes. Yet the expressway remains a massive force besides which the human body appears frail and in need of protection. The ‘naturalized’ technological construct figures as a source of sublime experience, not least because it dwarfs the individual human being by stretching farther than the eye can see.²⁸ The latent threat it represents becomes clear at the end of the novel when Wilder rides his tricycle across the expressway. Against all odds, he makes it across unharmed, but the incident has the potential of a traumatic event for those involved: from Wilder’s family that can do nothing but watch his reckless ride, to the drivers who wonder if “[s]ome force in the world had gone awry” and “veered, braked, sounded their horns” in confusion (323). Wilder’s ride through the traffic can be read both as the sudden revelation of the sublime threat of the expressway and as the endurance of the human in the face of overwhelming technological power.

Repression of technology’s dark side is a recurrent theme in *White Noise*. If the uncanny nature and inherent danger of the expressway are repressed by Blacksmith’s society, Wilder’s miracle-like ride can be interpreted as a return of the repressed, an unambiguous and dramatic reminder of the traffic’s brute force. In a similar dynamic, the toxic spill shatters the idyllic calm of Blacksmith and confronts its inhabitants with what they habitually ignore: the dark side of sublime (post)modern technology.²⁹ This

28 Regarding the significance of dimensions, Burke stated: “[L]et it be considered that hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds” (63). In a similar theoretical move, Kant also accentuated “phenomena, whose intuition brings with it the idea of their infinity” in his thoughts on the sublime (70).

29 Jack describes Blacksmith’s small-town allure by calling it “a town of dry cleaning shops and opticians. Photos of looming Victorian homes decorate the windows of real estate firms. [...]”

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refusal to acknowledge the latent threat of technological and scientific progress can be likened to the Freudian dynamic of psychological repression. Even though the officious terminology attempts to hide its true nature, the airborne toxic event represents the return of the repressed in the form of a nightmare. It is technology “which turns back on and against us in unrecognizable forms” (Jameson 35). This predisposition to ignore such technological effects is summed up in Jack’s refusal to acknowledge his vulnerability to disaster in the first place: “I’m the head of a department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby part of the country, where the fish hatcheries are” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 117). DeLillo’s parodic portrayal of status-based complacency makes an important point: Jack’s privileged position makes him blind to the fact that technological disasters might be even more unpredictable than natural disasters, and even less containable.

SOUND, SUPERSTITION, AND UNCANNY APPLIANCES

Despite the sublime spectacle of the toxic cloud, sight is not the only sense that plays a role in the production of man-made technological sublimity in the novel: Sound also figures prominently.³⁰ There is literally no moment of silence in *White Noise*. Jack Gladney’s world is constantly awash in music, traffic noise, alarm signals, advertisement slogans, loudspeaker announcements, and the sounds of various machines and devices. What these sounds amount to is the titular white noise, the conflation of different signals that results in a meaningless rustle.

During one of his numerous visits to the local supermarket, Jack becomes aware of

[t]he toneless systems, the jangle and the skid of carts, the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines, the cries of children. And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension. (36)

Two elements of Jack’s observation are especially noteworthy here. Firstly, Jack’s assertion of something “just outside the range of human apprehension” paraphrases a central criterion of the sublime.³¹ Accounts of the sublime emphasize its

This is a town of tag sales and yard sales” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 59). What is striking about this description is that the town’s character is evoked solely through its commercial infrastructure.

30 For a more comprehensive discussion of the role of sound in the novel, cf. Schweighauser.

31 It is important to note that Jack’s awareness of the “unlocatable roar” does not increase his agency in any way: “Regardless of how they feel about these ‘veils of mystery,’ however, the

transcendence of human perception and cognition, and the technological sublime that is evoked in *White Noise* is characterized precisely by the stress it brings to bear on the characters' sensory and cognitive faculties. Secondly, Jack figures that the "dull and unlocatable roar" might not overlay the other sounds, but rather somehow emerges from a realm below the supermarket's noise. This evokes his description of the expressway's position as "well below" his house. In both cases, Jack links the sense of a technologically engendered sublime to the idea of an uncanny netherworld or barely discernible undertone that runs beneath or parallel to the ordinary, visible world.

Despite the prevalence of indistinct white noise, Jack sometimes manages to isolate and describe single, distinct sounds, to filter them out of the sea of sounds and noises that constitutes the backdrop of his daily life. Yet, when he does so, he still fails to provide a consistent interpretation of his sensory experience. Most of the time he does not even try, but seems content just to notice and identify the sound's source, as when he blankly registers: "Blue jeans tumbled in the dryer." This unwillingness or incapability to make sense of the acoustic output of surrounding technologies and media is exhibited throughout the whole narrative. Often, Jack functions as a human echo chamber, merely recounting what the radio or "the TV said" (18). The implication here is that the TV set not only has a voice but a personality, a life of its own.³²

This uncertainty about the agency of technical devices is a frequent motive in *White Noise*, connecting it to Sigmund Freud's reflections in his canonical essay on the uncanny. Freud argued that uncanny phenomena often derive from a regression into the infantile belief in animism, the attribution of a soul to nonhuman or inanimate objects (263). Jack comes to personify the effects of the Freudian uncanny both by displaying infantile traits and by routinely speculating on the secret life of his technological environment.³³ "We believed something lived in the basement," Jack admits at one point, sounding only halfway jocular (DeLillo, *White Noise* 27-28).

This half-serious animistic belief exemplifies not only how the uncanny permeates Jack's thoughts but also how the "waves and radiation" of too many signals and information "infiltrate [the characters'] minds and derealize the real" (Osteen, *American*

characters internal to DeLillo's text are not empowered by their awareness of this gap" (Huehls 66).

32 Melley notes that this kind of ignorance regarding the workings of technology characteristically leads to animistic or semi-mystical beliefs: "[T]his ignorance mystifies technology, giving it a sense of agency traditionally accorded only to humans or deities" (79).

33 Jack's infantile character is expressed, among other things, in his vulnerability (which he assuages on excessive shopping sprees through childish self-gratification), his suggestibility (he is easily influenced by Murray), and his curious appreciation of Babette as a mother figure (for erotic kicks, she reads to him as to a child).

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Magic 166). The profound uncertainty about how to make sense of all the sounds and “psychic data” afloat in the Gladneys’ postmodern environment ultimately leads to anxiety and superstition (DeLillo, *White Noise* 37). There is substantial irony in this development. What DeLillo demonstrates by way of Jack’s superstitious disposition is the same effect that Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer have outlined in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Scientific rationality might do away with old forms of mythology, but it simultaneously produces new forms of mysticism, dependency, and superstition.³⁴ In generating a sublime whose origins are technological, man is caught in a loop that frustrates any search for a transcendence of material existence.³⁵ Superstition is one possible way out of this dilemma, and the characters of *White Noise* are constantly caught in its throes.

CONCLUSION

In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo illustrates how technology displaces nature not only as a lifeworld but also as a source of sublime experience. Technology generates sublime spectacles and dangers that nature never could, with the atomic bomb as the apex—the “nuclear sublime” (Wilson 228).³⁶ Postmodern technology has to be considered the most likely source of a contemporary sublime since it is hard to find

a better contemporary occasion for the sublime than the excessive production of technology itself. Its crisscrossing networks of computers, transportation systems, and communications media [...] represent a magnitude that at once attracts and repels the imagination. (Tabbi 16)

By examining crucial passages of the novel, I have traced different manifestations of the technological sublime and analyzed the conditions of its emergence. I started off with a discussion of technology’s heterogeneous character and the text’s narrative perspective. This led me to the conclusion that the technological sublime has to be understood as a systemic effect rather than an isolated event. The first-person narrator

34 This observation has also been made by Melley (79) and Michel Valdez Moses: “In dramatic fashion DeLillo illustrates for us what Horkheimer and Adorno termed the dialectic of enlightenment, the paradoxical way in which scientific enlightenment reverts to new forms of mythology” (72).

35 In his essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” DeLillo’s reaction to 9/11, he muses that “[t]echnology is our fate, our truth. [...] We don’t have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment” (37).

36 Nuclear threat does not figure explicitly in *White Noise*, but one could argue that it is an important subtext to the novel. Examples include the wonder drug Dylar, which implodes inside the body, Jack’s study of Hitler (and, by implication, World War II), the cloud-shaped form of the leaked chemical fumes, and the book’s general preoccupation with apocalypse and death.

Jack Gladney functions as an exemplary instance of helplessness in the face of this new, postmodern variant of the sublime.

In the next section, I examined the novel's dramatic core, the airborne toxic event, and linked the epistemological uncertainty the disaster generates to the characters' inability to adequately process a new kind of technologically produced danger. This cognitive inability is connected to a lack of vital information and reflected in a breakdown of linguistic expression.

Section four dealt with the replacement of the natural environment with a technological one and discussed the consequences of this process. I argued that the habituation to a fully technological world is marked by a dynamic of repression and uncanny returns. The danger of technology remains latent only to erupt in instances of sublime experience, which come as a shock to the characters.

The last section interpreted the titular white noise as the sounds of the postmodern technological environment of the protagonist. I outlined how the acoustic overload of media and consumer culture results in new forms of mysticism and superstition. The notion of a technological netherworld of complex and ominous systems was identified as an ideal precondition for the production of the technological sublime itself.

By pointing out the irrational and uncanny metaphysical undertow of a largely secular, allegedly rational, and technologically sophisticated culture, DeLillo directs our attention to a dynamic we fail to identify even though it significantly shapes our experience and infiltrates our innermost thoughts and feelings.³⁷ Contrary to Peter Boxall's claim that "DeLillo's novels posit a world in which the nonexistent, the unnameable, the unthinkable, have been eradicated," my analysis has shown how the inexpressible and mystical reenter the diegetic world (5). *White Noise* depicts contemporary reality as a realm of the technological sublime, an environment in the grasp of ominous forces that we can only ever guess at. These forces remain mysterious to us since they are effects of immense depersonalized systems and technologies that resist our attempts at cognitive and narrative integration. DeLillo himself has said as much: "I think that's something that has been in the background of my work: a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision" (qtd. in DeCurtis 330). *White Noise* may well be the supreme expression of this sense in DeLillo's oeuvre.

37 Fluck also stresses DeLillo's relevance to discussions about contemporary cultural realities: "DeLillo is not Baudrillard. Revealing perhaps a major difference between literary theory and creative writing, he is not just interested in out-analyzing everybody else, but in dealing with the problem of how we can acknowledge such new realities and still continue to live with them" (80).

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