

THE ART OF SIMULATION IN LITERATURE AND FILM PRODUCTION: WHITE NOISE AND “WAG THE DOG”

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*Abstract: This paper aims to examine how the representation of simulacra is depicted as a characteristic of American postmodern literature and film production, such as in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and [Barry Levinson](#)'s film, “Wag the Dog”. The former represents the art of mass manoeuvring via media, while the latter stands for creating a war that never existed physically, through media and political oratory.*

*Defining the postmodernist characteristics applied in postmodern American fiction, Surber suggests that the term “postmodern” implies “large scale historically and cultural trends including various philosophical views” (Culture And Critique, 182) developed in art and literature, as well. As linked to DeLillo's fiction, the postmodern condition can be applied in terms of political and socio-economic systems. Moreover, one might assume that Postmodernism is not only the term that covers most of the events taking place in Don DeLillo's novel, as it happens in *White Noise*, but also the historical context that lead to the creation of the literary text.*

*In postmodern American novels, such as Don DeLillo's novels, *White Noise* and *Libra*, simulation stands for a symbol of forsaken reality, a manner of manipulation the masses, the weakness of the human mind.*

*White Noise explores several themes that emerged during the mid-to-late twentieth century, e.g., rampant [consumerism](#), media saturation, novelty academic intellectualism, underground conspiracies, the disintegration and reintegration of the [family](#), human-made [disasters](#) and the [potentially regenerative nature](#) of human [violence](#). The novel's style is characterized by a heterogeneity that utilizes different tones and voices that have the effect of yoking together terror and wild humour as the essential tone of contemporary America. Also, DeLillo's *White Noise* emphasises the political influence on people, as the ultimate force of manipulation, corruption, invented reality and destructive power of simulation.*

As for the film production, “Wag the Dog” was produced in 1997 and presents how politics influence the media and so it influence people. The title of the movie “Wag the Dog” is an idiom that stands for means

of diverting attention from what would otherwise be of greater importance, to something else of lesser significance. Said the other way around it is the small and unimportant part which is normally leaded by the media.

The film encompasses the situation of the American president who was officially accused of having a sexual relationship with a young teenage girl who belonged to a society related to the girls escort in the White House two weeks before the presidential election. A media expert was called upon to solve the problem by creating a "fake" war with Albania in order to draw the public attention away from what has happened. The media specialists were able to divert the whole sex scandal situation through the film producer, Stanley Motss, played by Dustin Hoffman. The film producer manages to divert the public's attention on problems that may not be relevant to them through the use media, symbols and signs.

The war scene starred a young Albanian girl played by Kirsten Dunst running from a small Albanian town which was being bombed while she was holding a small kitten in her arms, screaming. The fact that she is trying to save her beloved cat gives the situation a dramatic impact. The old and torn down buildings give it a tragic perspective and make people understand that the bombing was happening in a poor and war shaken area. There is no trace of other humans, which makes the viewer wonder if she is the only survivor. Such situation promoted by the presidential propaganda emphasized the idea that the only person who could resolve the Albanian conflict was the president

One might consider that the contemporary world is dominated by the need to create a hyper-real reality, the need to exert power over the masses, the cathartic need of the human mind to believe the truth, in order to create balance between the existent reality and the created one, the loss of originality and the creation of fake as a condition of identity.

Keywords: manipulation, politics, propaganda , postmodernism, simulation

This paper aims to examine how the representation of simulacra is depicted as a characteristic of American postmodern literature and film production, such as in Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise* and [Barry Levinson](#)'s film, "Wag the Dog". The former expresses the art of mass manoeuvring via the media, while the latter stands for creating artificial realities, such as a

war that never existed physically, through media and political oratory promoted by the media and television.

After World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, starting from 1947 until 1991, a series of changes in the American culture, social life and literature came to be seen as marking a transition from modernism to what would be called postmodernism. During this period, the USA became a highly economically and technically advanced society symbolised by indispensable items such as the car, the fridge and the television. The beginnings of this age are associated with conformity and blind consumerism, with credulity toward grand narratives that philosophers, such as Jean Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and many artists would consistently try to challenge, drawing attention to the power games in which manipulation by means of the mass media plays an important part.

Inspired by the history of that period, certain postmodern themes are consistently addressed and represented in various forms of art: the limitations of knowledge, the limitation of religion and science, limitations of reason, pluralism, identity and local truths.

Adding his voice to those of many theorists attempting to define the main characteristics of that age, Surber claims that the term “postmodern” implies “large scale historically and cultural trends including various philosophical views” (182) developed in art and literature, as well. As linked to DeLillo’s fiction, the postmodern condition can be applied in terms of political and socio-economic systems. One can safely say that Postmodernism is not only the term that covers most of the events taking place in Don DeLillo's novel, as it happens in *White Noise*, but also the historical context that lead to the creation of the literary text.

One of the most significant literary features in contemporary postmodernism is the element of pastiche, a stylistic technique that involves the imitation of other styles, without exaggerating or mocking the author’s intentions. Another important phenomenon reflected not only in literature, but in arts, political history and economy is what Baudrillard calls the precession of simulacra. Simulation emerged from a process to an image, a state of unreality, a condition of postmodern life, art, literature, identity, mentality, history, political and social grounds, leading to the creation of hyper-reality.

According to Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the precession of simulacra, simulation refers to a generation of lost models, a generation dominated by a reality without origins or reality, the

desolation of reality itself. Therefore, one might consider that the imaginary of representation is a copy of the real dominated by false values.

In the postmodern American novels, such as Don DeLillo's novels, *White Noise* and *Libra*, simulation stands for a symbol of forsaken reality, a manner of manipulation of the masses, the inability of the human mind to grasp the trickiness of various power games.

White Noise explores several themes that emerged during the mid-to-late twentieth century, e.g., rampant [consumerism](#), media saturation, novelty academic intellectualism, underground conspiracies, the disintegration and reintegration of the [family](#), human-made [disasters](#), but also the [potentially regenerative nature](#) of human [violence](#). The novel's style is characterized by a heterogeneity that utilizes different tones and voices that have the effect of juxtaposing terror and wild humour as the essential tone of contemporary America.

Don DeLillo's novels have been merely concerned with the relationship between representations of the American identity and the media, the perpetuation and promotion of an unreal real, an undesired but vital event which shapes reality into its own trap of the unreal in order to represent a new identity. So it happens in *White Noise*, in which life in contemporary America is similar to that depicted by Jean Baudrillard in his *The Precession of Simulacra*.

White Noise explores the world of information, how it is transmitted by what Arjun Appadurai calls in his article entitled "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" the term "mediascape" (*The Globalization Reader*, 327) to the masses and what impact it has on the people. This term may be viewed as the "loss of the real" through simulation, the exchange of signs, images and codes encompass objective reality in such a way that signs become more real than reality itself.

White Noise focuses on the theme of death, paranoia, a fascination of the protagonist, Jack Gladney, for Hitler studies, WW II atrocities as they appeared to be transposed as a copy from the past to the late 60's, radiations and the inability for postmodern human beings to distinct the genuine from the fake. The novel tackles the main aspects of postmodern life; it portrays the electronic and technological effects on the meaning of everyday life in the postmodern age. People are shown to be living their lives, behaving, believing and disbelieving according to the massive impact of media flows, the TV being seen as a major product of manipulation, an iconic addictive object of the era people relate to giving them a new meaning in the post-industrial, consumer culture.

The TV in *White Noise*, especially in the first part of the novel can be viewed as a direct means of simulation offering a hyper reality to people, the main characters of the novel who perceive virtual reality as being real.

‘You have to learn how to look. You have to open yourself to the data. TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data. It opens ancient memories of world birth. It welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. There is light, there is sound...look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles...the medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently.’ (WN, 49)

In his *The Precession of Simulacra* Jean Baudrillard describes this addiction as “the strategy of the masses” which, he explains, “is equivalent to returning to the system its own logic by doubling it, to reflecting meaning, like a mirror, without absorbing it” (59). In other words, Baudrillard sustains that separating individuals from reality is the main function of the media and this happens by making them living in a continuous simulacrum, especially that of TV.

The structure of the novel is wide and complex, as it is divided in three main parts containing 40 chapters. The second part of the novel, entitled “The Airborne Toxic Event” is comprised in the 21st chapter of the novel. This particular chapter offers the definition of the SIMUVAC organisation, or the “Simulated Evacuation”, as an example of the tension between what is real and what is artificial, between death inflicted in the human minds due to the previous wars and the political conflicts of the late 60’s.

Another means of simulation throughout the novel is represented by the SIMUVAC chemical spill from a rail car that released a black cloud scaring the Gladneys, as they were willing to evacuate the house they lived in, being afraid of a potential exposure to toxin and radiation. The characters act instinctually as recollecting the previous traumas suffered in WWII and the Cold War. Their mental vulnerability forces them to obey and believe everything they hear and see.

“‘They're not calling it a feathery plume anymore.”

“What are they calling it?”

"A black billowing cloud."

"That's a little more accurate, which means they're coming to grips with the thing. Good."

"There's more," she said. "It's expected that some sort of air mass may be moving down from Canada."

"There's always an air mass moving down from Canada' (WN, 111)

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* portrays the American society as the victim of consumerism. Even though characters sometimes question aspects of society, such as the obsession with violence and the importance of the media, they end up in uncontrolled conformity of consumerism. Throughout the novel, the characters are described in terms of consumerism obsession as they blindly plunge into the vicious circle of material possession and media wield: 'My room is zoned for a hot plate. I'm happy there. I read the TV listings, I read the ads in *Ufologist Today*. I want to immerse myself in American magic and dread' (WN, 17). In other words, we might assume that the consumer culture in the novel suggest the loss of individualism and creates a "mass identity", all characters being influenced by the same "American dread". Nevertheless, the protagonist, professor Jack Gladney being obsessed with Hitler's political affairs and diplomacy offers a personal definition of the nature of conspiracy in politics regarding the attempt to murder Hitler:

'When the showing ended, someone asked about the plot to kill Hitler. The discussion moved to plots in general. I found myself saying to the assembled heads, "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot.'" (WN, 24)

The title of the novel itself is rather contradictory and it might stand for the genuine inability of the human mind to seek and find the truth, the "noise"- the lies that lead to schizophrenia- "white", or the schizophrenia- "noise" that lead to nothingness- "white". A train car has been derailed, the characters Heinrich and Jack watch the smoke cloud and believe that the burning chemical in the air is Nyodene Derivative, a toxic substance that causes lumps in rats. At the radio, various symptoms are mentioned, such as nausea, skin irritation and sweaty

palms as potential symptoms of exposure, but Jack tries to remain indifferent, reassuring Heinrich that nothing bad can happen.

New symptoms are reported on the radio and the smoke cloud is given a new name: "The Airborne Toxic Event". Soon, a fire captain's car passes by, announcing an evacuation. The family packs up their things and is set toward an abandoned Boy Scout camp. At the radio, increasingly severe symptoms of toxic exposure are being announced. Sweaty palms and vomiting are replaced by comas, convulsions and miscarriages. Steffie and Denise experience some of the symptoms, but Jack wonders if they were truly being affected or were being influenced by the radio reports. Army helicopters light up the area, the family arrives at the camp where rumours about the government's implication in the event, disappearing helicopters and effects of Nyodene D. begin to circulate.

Also, the toxic cloud in *White Noise* could stand as a metaphor for the fear of death and the unknown, as John N. Duvall suggests, "a cloud of unknowing" (*The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, 153) with reference to the religious practices from the medieval times. The recollection of the medieval traumas and human's inability to escape religious punishments mirrors the limitation of the human condition, as applied in times of warfare and radiation experiments:

'But the smoke was plainly visible, a heavy black mass hanging in the air beyond the river, more or less shapeless. (...)

"The radio calls it a feathery plume," he said. "But it's not a plume."

"What is it?"

"Like a shapeless growing thing. A dark black breathing thing of smoke. Why do they call it a

plume?"

"Air time is valuable. They can't go into long tortured descriptions. Have they said what kind of chemical it is?"

"It's called Nyodene Derivative or Nyodene D. It was in a movie we saw in school on toxic wastes. These videotaped rats." (WN, 109)

The schizophrenic dimension caused by the simulated event widens itself in such a way that people actually believe everything is real and possible. A man from SIMUVAC (abbreviation for "Simulated Evacuation") explains in vague and abstract terms the toxin's effects to Jack. He tells Jack that SIMUVAC is using their experience at the airborne toxic event, in order to prepare for a disaster simulation. When Jack returns from the SIMUVAC meeting he finds Babette reading tabloids to some blind people. She was reading an article in which a young girl, believed to be the reincarnation of a KGB assassin explained how she didn't fear death in her past life.

As Jean Baudrillard notes that: "the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced" (p. 146) In *White Noise*, simulation is not only a characteristic of contemporary existence, but it might represent a state of physical ease and freedom from pain. Therefore, the simulacra process becomes a tool people can define themselves, being against their own sense of reality. The simulacra, the television news, the radio reports, the medical devices are considered more real than the immediate personal experience of things and perceptions the characters of the novel possess. When "the airborne toxic event" began, Jack's wife, Babette, urges him to turn the radio off:

"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?"

"How could they be real?" "Why couldn't they be real?"

"They only get them only when they're broadcast," (WN, 131).

DeLillo's *White Noise* emphasises the political influence on people, as the ultimate force of manipulation, corruption, invented reality and destructive power of simulation. The further on chapters, such as the 27th of the novel reveal the hyper-real dimension of the event and the terror it inflicts to common people:

My doctor, Sundar Chakravarty, asked me about the sudden flurry of checkups. In the past I'd always been afraid to know.

I told him I was still afraid. He smiled broadly, waiting for the punch line. I shook his hand and headed out the door. (...) Stretcher-bearers ran across the street. When the man with the whistle drew closer, I was able to make out the letters on his armband: SIMUVAC.

"Back it out," he said. "Street's closed."

"Are you people sure you're ready for a simulation? You may want to wait for one more massive spill. Get your timing down."

"Move it out, get it out. You're in the exposure swath."

"What's that mean?"

"It means you're dead," he told me. (WN, 202)

The world of *White Noise* based on the abstract transmission of information follows the importance of signs and codes and how common people are unable to recognize them, since they were educated in a way not to ask questions, but to obey and fear the political power.

Another example of creating the absolute fake due to political interests can be found in the film production, as well, not only in literature. "Wag the Dog" is a striking example of how the unreal dominates the real and affects the human mind, an unreal that is transmitted through media and television and how media is influenced by the politics.

"Wag the Dog", the movie was produced in 1997 and presents how politics influences the media and so it influences people. The title of the movie "Wag the Dog" is an idiom which stands for means diverting attention from what would otherwise be of greater importance, to something else of lesser significance. Said the other way around it is the small and unimportant part which is normally led by the media. The expression comes from the saying that "a dog is smarter than its tail", but if the tail was smarter, then the tail would "wag the dog". In other words, a much important event such as a war happening is overshadowed by something less important, a sex scandal.

The plot of the film is set under a real political circumstance from the 90s in the U.S.A.. Few days before the presidential election, a [Washington, D.C.](#) publicist (played by Robert De Niro) draws away the electorate from a [sexual scandal](#) by hiring a Hollywood film producer (played by Dustin Hoffman) to construct a fake war with [Albania](#).

The film was released one month before the uprising of the Monica [Lewinsky scandal](#) and the subsequent bombing of the [Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory](#) in Sudan by the

Clinton Administration, which prompted the media to make comparisons between the film and reality.

The film encompasses the situation of the American president who was officially accused of having a sexual relationship with a young teenage girl who belonged to a society related to the girls escort in the White House two weeks before the presidential election. A media expert was called upon to solve the problem by creating a "fake" war with Albania in order to draw the public attention away from what has happened. The media specialists were able to divert the whole sex scandal situation through the film producer, Stanley Motss, played by Dustin Hoffman. The film producer manages to divert the public attention on problems that may not be relevant to them through the use media, symbols and signs.

Before anyone could think about what the president was doing, Conrad Brean, the expert manipulator, played by Robert De Niro molds the public into believing there is a war going on with Albania, helped by the producer, Stanley Motss, who arranges a war scene that would be seen worldwide on CNN. Brean and his companion Winifred Ames, played by Anne Heche intend to create a war by hiring an important Hollywood producer, Stanley Motts to script and direct the war. The war, however, will not exist in the real world, but is shot on a screen with actors and using the latest CGI effects to create an emotional propaganda effect people would watch on the TV.

The war scene starred a young Albanian girl played by Kirsten Dunst running from a small Albanian town, which was being bombed while she was holding a small kitten in her arms while screaming. The fact that she is trying to save her beloved cat gives the situation a dramatic impact. The old and torn down buildings give it a tragic perspective and make people understand that the bombing was happening in a poor and war shaken area. There is no trace of other humans, which makes the viewer wonder if she is the only survivor. Such situation promoted by the presidential propaganda emphasized the idea that the only person who could resolve the Albanian conflict was the president

Once again, the political power acts like a godly figure, its domination being transposed by the television directly into the eyes of the audience, in such a way that the reflected images become convincing. According to Eleftheria Thanouli suggestion in his work entitled "*Wag the Dog*": *A Study on Film and Reality in the Digital Age*, "Wag the Dog" exposes the 'intertextual relay of a film through mass media, that, eventually, shapes people's perception of reality and the

scenario of the film is made in such a way that it became “a regular entry in the US’s political lexicon” (p. 8). The so called “Albany war” becomes a pretext for the presidential elections. Since Albany had never been a threat to The United States of America, choosing an anonymous country to be saved by a super economical and political power was essential for people to believe that they need a proper leader in times of war and that only him, the future president could save them.

The movie which acts like a satire to the American scandals of the 90’s offers relevant hints to what was happening in the U.S.A.. Throughout the movie, the main characters are willing to collaborate in order to make a plan of mass manipulation via media, creating a fake story into a real situation that people would believe as being real:

Conrad Brean: “It’s all a pageant.”

Stanley Motts: “They want to destroy our way of life.”

(...)

Stanley Motts: “We just found out they have the bomb. It’s a suitcase bomb.”

“The Albanian terrorists have placed a suitcase bomb in Canada.”

Conrad Brean: “Nuclear terrorism is the future.” (imsdb.com)

Following the exchange between Brean and Motts, a crew of actors and celebrities are brought in to promote the war, including Willie Nelson, who conducts a hilarious, racially-integrated “We Are The World” style song, the “Good Ol’ Shoe” towards promoting the war as the defence of American freedom and democracy.

In other words, we might consider that the story of the film transposes the President’s willpower during a foreign war, through media. In order to make the audience forget about the sexual scandal, an unreal issue is created, the war in Albany, in order to offer a heroic shade over the President’s stained fame. The movie in its critical analysis of media presents how politics can influence the world- wide population making the people aware of its impact on the media. Another important aspect promoted in the film is how media adjusts itself to the population’s belief while making the people feel more secure and aware of what is accurately happening in their country and give them the feeling of being well informed.

One might say that the contemporary world as it appears in Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise* and [Barry Levinson](#)'s film, "Wag the Dog" is a vast puzzle in which the need to dominate and to create a hyper-reality, the need to exert power over the masses, the cathartic need of the human mind to believe as well as its inability to see the truth, in order to create balance between the existent reality and the created one, the loss of originality and the creation of fake as a condition and identity. The two narratives are obviously symptomatic of a certain anxiety which is shared by a number of artists, as well as by a number of intellectuals in the western world, an anxiety which, nevertheless, casts its shadow over a considerable part of the world today.

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Acknowledgment

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my advisor and coordinator, Professor Dr. Eduard Vlad, who has been a tremendous mentor for me. I would like to thank him for encouraging my research and for allowing me to grow as a research scientist.

I would also like to thank the scientific board and organizing committee, Professor Iulian Boldea for allowing me to participate to such an inspiring event, demonstrating that the concern for literature, discourse and intercultural dialogue is essential for a further academic development.