| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Simulated Space and Semiotic Salvation: An Interpretation of Non-places in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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| **ABSTRACT**

In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo presents a world mired in simulation, hyperreality, consumerism, and technologies. This article finds a connection between Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra" and Marc Augé's "Non-place"; that is, the simulated spaces can actually be considered non-places. This article analyzes the dilemmas contemporary American people are confronted with in three non-places: media as non-places, supermarkets and shopping malls as non-places and technologies as non-places, and reveals their useless and meaningless semiotic salvation by consumption of media, commodities and technologies.

1. Introduction

As one of the most prominent and prolific contemporary novelists in America, Don DeLillo covers a wide range of topics in his works, including mass media, consumerism, technological development and their effects on modern people's minds, emotions and ideology (Zhang, 2013), etc. Most of his novels are set in a post-industrial era and depict modern people's life, their involvement in politics and modern popular culture, showing his reflections on post-modernity. *White Noise*, one of DeLillo's most remarkable works, was first published in 1985 and won the National Book Award the next year. This novel marked the increase of DeLillo's fame and readership and has become a classic of postmodern literature (Ghashmari, 2020).

In *White Noise,* DeLillo describes contemporary American life in a world dominated by a host of signs from media, like television, tabloid and radio, etc., and supermarkets, like advertisements and labels of commodities, as well as technologies, such as computers and medicines. He also discussed people's actions within and their interactions with various spaces or places, including those in reality and abstract spaces or virtual spaces. However, these spaces could hardly be deemed as "places" but could be a form of "non-places" in the French anthropologist Marc Augé's notion (Pajović, 2017). DeLillo presents a world mired in simulation, hyperreality, consumerism, and often meaningless information and theory. Living in such a world and frequenting non-places, people were plunged into an ocean of dilemmas: what Jean Baudrillard called "simulacra" blurs the boundaries of real and hyperreal. Consumerism lures people to shop without ration and reduces them to objects of desire. Subjects are dehumanized into objects of no emotion and no thoughts. Ironically, the rootless crowd are desperately in search of meanings of life and salvation by means of fanatical consumption.

2. Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacrum and Simulation" and Marc Augé's "Non-place"
The concept of "simulacra" or "simulacrum" dates back to Plato's objection to representations. However, it is those postmodern theorists, especially Jean Baudrillard, the French philosopher, who gave new interpretations of this term (Jiang, 2013). According

to Jean Baudrillard, what has happened in postmodern culture is that our society has become so reliant on models and maps that we have lost all contact with the real world that preceded the map. Reality itself has begun merely to imitate the model, which now precedes and determines the real world. "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994:1)." As such, simulacrum becomes a copy or reproduction of the real while sharing no essence or originality with it. For him, simulation and simulacra concern "no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real (Baudrillard, 1994:1)." Holding a relatively negative attitude towards postmodern society, Baudrillard argues that people are living in a world where the signs of the real have substituted the real, a world of recurrent simulation where the real has mutated into the "hyperreal", which in his mind is considered the typical characteristic of postmodernity.

"Non-place" was originally put forward by the French anthropologist Marc Augé in his book "*Non-lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*" in 1992. This book was translated into English as "*Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*" by John Howe in 1995. According to Marc Augé, "postmodernity" can actually be called "supermodernity" in a more positive way, which is used to describe the logic of these late-capitalist phenomena—a logic of excessive information and excessive space. Supermodernity is characterized by three figures of excess, namely, an overabundance of events, spatial overabundance and individualization of references. It is the three figures of excess that find their full expression in non-places (Augé, 1995: 34). As a product of supermodernity, non-places refer to those transit points and temporary abodes, such as high-speed roads and railways, hotel chains and squats, holidays clubs, refugee camps, interchanges, airports and shopping malls, and communication network etc (Augé, 1995: 78). Augé considers non-place a kind of social space in relation to social interaction. It is a space frequented by people and large groups of people but deprived of interaction between them or even their respective individualities (Pajović, 2017). The space of non-places creates neither singular identity nor relations, only solitude and similitude. Living in these non-places, people in postmodern society are always engulfed by emptiness and solitude and are plunged into oceans of dilemmas that the Gladneys are confronted with in *White Noise*.

3. Simulated Spaces as Non-places——Existence Dilemmas of Post-industrial Society

White Noise portrays a post-industrial society with the rapid advancement of transportation, industries, communication and media technologies. The media and media technologies (like television, radio and tabloid), information networks, advertisements, encoding and decoding of computers, etc., have constructed a simulated world where people's living spaces are invaded by a flow of images, various signs, and over-packaged and decorated commodities. Therefore, in post-industrial or postmodern society, the traditionally anthropological spaces have disappeared. Instead, urban spaces are replaced by isolated and simulated spaces, which are, in Augé's notion, the "Non-places". The individuals frequently passing through these non-places are engaged in travelling, purchasing, and relaxing (Hill, 2010). As Marc Augé describes in his book (1995: 78), this simulated world constructed by non-places is "a world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital", "a world where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions", "a world where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly", and "a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral". In addition to the real places like supermarkets, airports, stations or hotels frequented by people in daily life, however, with the development of media technologies and the internet, the concept of non-places are broadened to include virtual spaces and mediated spaces or non-spaces (Zhao & Chen, 2012), because they can provide people with a temporary spot for people to rest on spiritually or psychologically without so much interaction between people inside and outside of the spaces.

3.1 Media as Non-places——Real Succumbs to Hyperreal

In his newer version of the book, Marc Augé describes the continued spread of urbanization has brought about a triple decentering, in which the second mentions that the television and computer have replaced the hearth as the center of the home (Hill, 2010). The television, radio, tabloid and other media frequently appearing in *White Noise* serve as simulated non-places in which people witness the real succumbs to hyperreal. This is consistent with what Jean Baudrillard said in *Simulacra and Simulation*: "We live in a world where the signs of the real have substituted the real, a world of recurrent simulation where the real has mutated into the 'hyperreal' (Piqueras, 2016)." In Baudrillard's perspective, the proliferation of media images and signs causes the disappearance of meaning and representation. When the representation is damaged, only simulation and hyperreality remain.

In *White Noise*, the Gladneys spent a lot of time watching television. Jack's wife, Babette, even requires that the whole family must spend one night together watching TV. For Gladneys, television has become an important source of knowledge. Murray Siskind, Jack's friend and colleague at College-on-the-Hill, is also crazy for television; he has been sitting in his room for more than two months, watching TV into the early hours, listening, taking notes. Murray describes his experiences of watching TV to Jack: "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 (DeLillo,

1999)." Murray's description of this experience shows how the hyperreality of TV, generated by "the network of little buzzing dots", though unreal, is considered something more real than the real, and how the viewers have to surrender all their senses to this source of information (Ghashmari, 2020).

In addition to electronic images in television, the mediated non-places are filled with a proliferation of other images and codes which have become the simulacra of the real. When Murray takes Jack to visit a place known as "The Most Photographed Barn in America", they didn't see the real barn but a crowd of people taking photos. Rather than conjuring up associations with a pioneering past or an authentic rural life, the barn has been subsumed into the process of image replication (Wilcox, 1991). Here Don DeLillo focuses more on the description of the tour buses, roadside signs, images, venders selling post cards of the barn, cameras and photographers than that of the barn itself. By saying, "no one sees the barn...once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn.", Murray reveals to the reluctant Gladney the logic of a simulated world where signs triumph over reality and they even have effaced it. The real has been lost and replaced by hyperreal created by simulacra.

3.2 Supermarket and Shopping Mall as Non-places——Ration Succumbs to Sensational Revelry
Watching TV and shopping in supermarkets are considered the two "American Landscapes" by the American New Historicism scholar F. Lentricchia. That is one reason why in *White Noise,* many scenes are set in a supermarket or shopping mall. Despite a large number of consumers wandering around all day and the seemingly omnipresent noises when people are shopping, supermarkets and shopping malls can still be considered non-places since social interaction, the basic ingredient of any anthropological space, is kept to a minimum (Pajović, 2017). For Jack and Siskind, the supermarket seems to be a "meaningful" place because they are always trying to talk about something when they encounter each other in the supermarket. However, their talk cannot be considered normal because they always say something meaningless, and the two persons never try to communicate something but merely persuade the other. For example, when Siskind talks about death to Jack and Babette, he is always persuading by saying something constantly, disregarding his listeners' paying no attention to it or hardly replying. Therefore, there is a lack of human relations between them.

If the television is the venue where the hyperreal created by images and simulacra has declared its triumph over real, then supermarkets and shopping malls have become another venue where the sensational revelry declares its triumph over rational judgement. Shoppers are attracted to colors, sizes and the over-decorated packages that they can see, touch or feel. The surface is what draws and grips their attention and lures them to buy something without ration, regardless of whether they need it or not.

For instance, Siskind is a typical consumer who focuses more on the surface rather than the commodity itself. When he encounters Jack and Babette in the supermarket, he rejoices that the product he bought is so utterly plane, and he keeps talking about the artistic value of the packaging: "I've bought these peanuts before. They're round, cubical, pockmarked, and seamed. Broken peanuts. A lot of dust at the bottom of the jar. But they taste good. Most of all, I like the packages themselves." For him, the packaging comes before taste, and he doesn't care about quality or healthiness. Actually, this is not only true of Siskind but all the consumers in the supermarket. DeLillo describes people in Blacksmith like this: "When things are bad, people are compelled to overeat." They have an almost crazy hanger for a variety of food in stacks or on the shelves, so they buy it without restraint, even if they do not need it. Children in the Gladyneys always criticize Babette for buying cheese but never eating it.

As consumers' ration succumbs to sensational revelry, supermarkets or shopping malls come to be entertainment parks where people "shop for shop's sake" and their desires are met. However, the increasing desire for shopping entices them to buy more and more. Consequently, they are colonized by commodities and reduced to slaves of desire.

3.2 Technologies as Non-places——Subject Succumbs to Object
There's some overlap between media and technologies, given that television, radio, and some other media can also be considered technologies or products of technologies. Here we focus on media as technologies and technologies as a whole. Similar to the analysis of media as non-places, in this section, we consider technologies as virtual or abstract non-places and analyze how technologies influence the subjects.

The relationship between subject and object is another key concern in *White Noise*. DeLillo denounces contemporary Americans' absurd dependency on science and technologies and provides evidence that in postmodern societies, the object—mostly a technological one—reigns supreme, getting to determining the very constitution of the subject (Piqueras, 2016).

The life of the Gladneys is bombarded with varieties of disruptive noises produced by all kinds of machines: the sounds of clothes tumbling in the dryer, the throbbing of the refrigerator, the radiator's chirps, the noises from sirens, bullhorns, kitchen appliances, radio and television, etc. Just like beams, rays and sound waves, noises are everywhere. Overwhelmed by noises, their family seems to become a micro factory which cannot work without these machines. Meanwhile, the family members are inevitably distracted, and their subjectivities come to disappear in the noises, which reduce them to objects of no emotion, no thoughts, just like

machines. For example, when Steffie, Jack's 9-year-old daughter, watches TV, she always tries to match the shape of her mouth to that of people on TV. Jack even overhears her repeat, again and again, the words "Toyota Corolla, Toyota Corolla"—an advertisement—when she was sleeping. Her pronunciation was quite similar to that on the television. It seems that Steffie, as one little girl, has lost her childish speech and discourse. Instead, she acquires a model of media-discourse. In addition to Steffie, other members of the Gladneys cannot escape from the assimilation of machines. The dialogues of the Gladneys, most of the time, seem endless, out of context and meaningless. Their dialogues are quite similar to those in American soap operas. They are misleading and self-reflective (Ghashmari, 2020).

The loss of subjectivity can also be illustrated by Babette, who teaches people how to keep "correct posture," how to "stand, sit and walk". She even starts a course on "Eating and Drinking: Basic Parameters". For Babette and the people in the Blacksmith, it seems to be quite normal and good for health to have a fixed model of standing, sitting, walking, eating and drinking. They just want to follow some orders, to do things according to a procedure, without thinking about them too much, which is quite similar to the way machines work.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo presents a material world where the subjects are dehumanized by machines into man-machine of no emotion, no thoughts and even no discourse, where the subjects succumb to and are controlled by objects, images and data.

4. Semiotic Salvation within Non-places——Group Struggles in a Consumerism Era
When characters in *White Noise* frequent the non-places of post-industrial society, they find themselves trapped in so many dilemmas: Within the non-places of media, especially of television, radio and advertising signs, glowing electronic images, endless buzzes, and ad signs simulate hyperreal that has replaced real. In the non-places of supermarkets and shopping malls, the surface of commodities lures them to shop without restraint. In the technological non-places, they, as subjects, are dehumanized and reduced to objects due to over-dependency on machines and things. In this novel, characters find a way to save themselves from these dilemmas: self-salvation in consumption, including consumption of media, consumption of commodities and consumption of technologies. However, what DeLillo tries to present are not only the dilemmas of some individuals, the Gladneys, or people in Blacksmith and Iron City but the common dilemmas confronted by a group of people, even human beings in postmodern society. As such, their salvation can be considered the group struggles of man in a consumerism era.

According to Jean Baudrillard, the consumer society is a "system of signs" in the sense that objects of consumption are seen as signs. Consumption is a process that consists of more appropriation of sign values than exchange values. That is, the consumer buys what the object represents, such as fame, status or identity, etc., rather than the object itself (Eid, 1999).

4.1 Consumption of Media
Given the loss of the real and the loss of criteria to distinguish real and hyperreal, people come to feel estranged from the real and become uncertain of the world they're living in. If there are no well-accepted criteria, people will have different perceptions of everything, like true or false. So they find a shortcut: they choose to believe the simulacra presented by the media and make it a consensus. If everyone believes the hyperreal, then it is real. If something isn't presented by the media, then it is unreal.

When the "Airborne Toxic Event" happened, Jack and his family fled to Iron City to avoid contamination. At the end of the first day, a man carrying a tiny TV set excitedly said: "There's nothing on the network…Is it possible nobody gives substantial coverage to such a thing? …Do they think this is just television? … Don't they know it's real (DeLillo, 1999)?" Here the TV man was angry because the evacuee was not reported on the network television. In his mind, if this evacuee was not televised, then it would be real, and people wouldn't believe it. The tv man's desired broadcast of the evacuee's story represents the American family's consumption of television images and their desire to receive an aesthetic contemplation by making real a form of entertainment to be consumed. In this way, they can find a temporary "Mecca" to rest on.

4.2 Consumption of Commodities
Living in such a consumerism era, people are persuaded to define themselves as consumers who gain satisfaction from consumption. The abovementioned surface of commodities lures people to shop without restraint, reducing them to slaves of desire. Actually, when people are driven by desires, they tend to follow the crowd to buy what is considered popular or what is considered luxurious. Finally, they will be packaged with the same commodities they've bought and lose their individuality and personal identity. It is notable that at the beginning of this novel, the deliberately described scene where the parents drive their children to the College-on-the-Hill presents people's loss of individuality and identity. As DeLillo writes: "They are a collection of the like-mined and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation (DeLillo, 1999)."

Quite ironically, people return to a bigger amount of consumption to construct their lost identities. And they did achieve a sense of self-fulfillment and construct their identity by associating commodities with certain life-styles, symbolic values, and attitudes (Eid, 1999). When Jack encountered Eric Massingale, one of his colleges, in the supermarket, he was told that he looked different,

"so harmless, a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" because he didn't wear dark glasses and gowns, which hurt Jack's heart. Jack always wears dark glasses and a gown on campus to establish a serious identity as an authority and expert in Hitler studies. Eric Massingale said that Jack looked different in the supermarket, which in some ways destroyed Jack's already established identity, and that's why he felt hurt. This encounter put Jack in the mood to shop. He drove his family to the Mid-Village Mall to start a big consumption. Finally, Jack felt "I began to grow in value and self-regard. I fill myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed." In this way, Jack tried to restore his destroyed identity and maintain his social status.

4.3 Consumption of Technologies
One of the outcomes brought by the abovementioned dilemmas in post-industrial or postmodern society is the seemingly omnipresent "necrophobia (fear of death)" in the characters' minds, conscious or unconscious. Jack and Babette are always engulfed by fear of death. Both of them turn to the consumption of technology for salvation.

To alleviate the fear of death, Babette chose to gain a high-tech medicine by having sex with Willie Mink. Having been exposed to the toxic Nyodene Derivative, Jack was examined, and the results were shown on the computer that death had been embedded within Jack's body. Later on, he went to a brand-new facility called Autumn Harvest Farms to get examined by the gleaming new equipment. Evidently, Jack turned to the advanced medical equipment to find the reason for his death and, if possible, to save his life. Both the technician and the physician used the computer to analyze data from Jack's body. To the physician, Jack is no longer a person or a patient, but a shell of data, a collection of symbols. And the only way to reveal Jack's death is to use the computer to analyze data from Jack's body. As the physician said to Jack, "There are the most accurate test devices anywhere. We have sophisticated computers to analyze the data. This equipment saves lives. Believe me, I've seen it happen." Technologies are able to save people's lives, and this is why both Babette and Jack turn to technologies to save themselves out of fear of death.

5. Conclusion
Non-places are characterized by their fluidity: the flow of people, the flow of images and information (media as non-places), the flow of sign values (supermarket and shopping mall as non-places) and the flow of codes (technologies as non-places), etc. The excess of mass production, space, events, and information produces a proliferation of non-places in which everything is moving and changing constantly. Fluidity and mobility reconstruct people's concepts of time and space. There's no longer fixed space for people to rest on for a long time, no past (history) for people to retrospect, and no future to look forward to. All they have to do is focus on the present life. Frequenting in non-places, especially those simulated, abstract or virtual ones, everyone is solitude and rootless. It is under such a background that people are plunged into an ocean of the abovementioned dilemmas: real succumbs to the hyperreal, ration succumbs to sensational revelry, and subject succumbs to object.

Actually, DeLillo didn't deny these characters completely. Instead, he did give some chances for them to save themselves on their own. This is the abovementioned semiotic salvation: saving themselves in consumption. When the real succumbs to the hyperreal, they desperately choose to believe hyperreal. When the ration succumbs to sensational revelry, they desperately choose to shop more to find their lost individuality, identity and social status. When subject succumbs to objects, they turn to technology. This is quite ironical because what they turn to for salvation is exactly what plunges them into these dilemmas. They plunge themselves into dilemmas so as to find a way out of these dilemmas. Their salvation has become an endless loop within non-places. They are trapped in it. Obviously, their salvation is useless and means nothing. The more they try to save themselves in this way, the deeper they will be trapped in dilemmas. And this is why at the end of this novel, life goes on, and no one is saved.

To sum up, this paper tries to establish a connection between Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra" and Marc Augé's "Non-place" by analyzing Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, which might provide enlightenment for future researchers to analyze his works. However, whether the two terms are similar enough to be put together as a perspective to retrospect Don DeLillo's works must be under further discussion. And this asks for more research related in the future as well.

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