
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Symbolic World: A Brief Analysis of Simulacra in White Noise

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality as its core framework to analyze *White Noise*, a classic of postmodern literature by Don DeLillo, aiming to reveal how simulacra permeate and reshape the lifestyle and individual cognition of postmodern society as depicted in the novel. *White Noise* presents a world of simulacra dominated by symbols, where the real is replaced by simulacra and individuals lose themselves in the carnival of symbols, and in doing so, they forfeit their subjectivity and genuine emotional connections.

KEYWORDS

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, Simulacra, Baudrillard

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1. Introduction

Don DeLillo is widely regarded as one of the most outstanding contemporary American novelists. His works include *Cosmopolis*, *Libra*, *Falling Man*, *White Noise*, and more. Published in 1985, *White Noise* stands as his most famous work. It won the National Book Award (USA) and is hailed as a pinnacle of postmodernist literature. DeLillo's postmodernist works depict a state of social disorder in the United States, one plagued by material excess and disoriented by vacuous mass culture and politics.

White Noise portrays the life of Professor Jack Gladney's family, who reside in a small town in the middle of the USA; the varied scenes on the campus of "College-on-the-Hill," where Jack works; the diverse reactions of the town's residents during a toxic fog incident; and finally, Jack's transformation into a murderer. Since the Industrial Revolution, every advancement in science and technology has given rise to technical problems and safety crises. The development of science and technology in modern society has brought greater uncertainty and risk to society. It was against the backdrop of the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear power plant leak in the United States that author Don DeLillo created the second part of *White Noise*, "The Airborne Toxic Event."

White Noise captures the spiritual state of contemporary America and explores the nation's postmodern consciousness. The diverse characters within it seem to live in an abstract, simulated world, one filled with fragmentary symbols. The pervading fragmentary symbols have replaced authentic experiences and emotions, becoming the core elements that construct reality.

2. Literature review

As a landmark work of postmodernist literature, Don DeLillo's magnum opus, *White Noise*, has garnered sustained academic attention since its publication. Blending critiques of consumer culture, reflections on technological alienation, and explorations of death anxiety, this novel has seen its research scope gradually expand into interdisciplinary fields such as ecocriticism, media studies, psychoanalysis, and postmodern narratology.

There are extensive and multi-perspective domestic research articles on Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, with a notable surge in

scholarly attention following the publication of the novel's Chinese translation in 2002. The first Chinese critical article on *White Noise* was Zhu Ye's (2002) "The 'Death Book' of American Postmodern Society: A Review of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." From the perspective of death anxiety, Zhu argued that "white noise" embodies humanity's efforts and desires to communicate fears of death and repel the threat of mortality, framing it as a "natural language" of self-suppression, compromise, and pretense through which humans resist death. Zhu Xinfu (2005) shifted focus to ecology in his article "Ecological Consciousness in *White Noise*." He analyzed the opposition between human life and natural ecology in the postmodern society depicted in the novel, noting that "DeLillo's concern for humanity's environmental crisis and spiritual ecology runs throughout the work, and ecological consciousness is a key element shaping the unique charm of this novel" (p. 109). From the perspective of textual analysis, Zhang Jie and Kong Yan (2006) explored "The Poetic Characteristics of Postmodern Society: The Symbolization of Life—A Dialogic Interpretation of *White Noise*," while Chen Hong and Cheng Zuyi (2009) wrote "Narrative Strategies and Stylistic Features of *White Noise*." The former, drawing on Bakhtin's sociocultural semiotics, interpreted the textual significance of *White Noise* and argued that the novel profoundly reveals the poetic characteristics of postmodern consumer society. The latter, by analyzing narrative perspective, structure, methods, and discourse, investigated the novel's narrative strategies, stylistic traits, and their underlying implications. Xia Beina (2014) approached the work from a technological angle in "The Shadow of Nihilism and the Light of Redemption: The View of Technology in *White Noise*." Using Martin Heidegger's philosophy of technology, she discussed the negative impacts of scientific and technological development on human life. More recent scholarship has expanded into broader and more diverse fields that Ji Lin (2016) focused on "Medical Narration and Imperial Body Politics in *White Noise*," Shen Fei (2020) explored "University Education and Knowledge Production in *White Noise*," and Huang Xiaoyan and Lü Peng (2022) analyzed "Posthuman Auditory Fable: 'Sound Imperialism' in *White Noise*." These studies investigate the novel through angles such as medicine, bodily discipline, university education, and soundscape, further enriching the breadth of domestic research on *White Noise*.

There are also lots of studies abroad. Tom Leclair (1987) published "In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel," which only provided an overview of DeLillo's entire career and analyzed each of his eight novels one by one, but also constructed a new critical category, "the systems novel", and classified DeLillo's novels under this category. From the socio-political perspective, in 1991, Frank Lentricchia wrote "Introducing Don DeLillo," a collection of essays on Don DeLillo, and pointed out that DeLillo's works focus on contemporary issues and possess diverse and heterogeneous characteristics. In 2004, Jesse Kavadlo published "Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief," which focuses on the "faith"-related themes in DeLillo's works and explores the issue of individuals' spiritual balance in modern society. In 2007, Elise A. Martucci released "Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo," introducing the ecological perspective into DeLillo studies and expanding the interdisciplinary dimension of this research field. After 2011, an increasing number of young scholars have chosen DeLillo and his works as their research objects and the number of related monographs, theses, and essay collections has continued to grow, and research perspectives have become further diversified (covering specialized fields such as media, science and technology, and social culture).

3. Theoretical foundation

3.1 Simulacra and hyperreality

Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra stands not merely as a notable contribution, but as a cornerstone of postmodernist thought, one that reconfigures the very terms through which scholars and cultural critics understand the nature of reality, representation, and meaning in contemporary society. Unlike earlier postmodern thinkers who focused primarily on the deconstruction of language or grand narratives, Baudrillard turned his attention to the material and technological forces shaping how reality is constructed and perceived, making his theory uniquely attuned to the media-saturated world of the late 20th and 21st centuries. At its heart, the theory is anchored in two interdependent pillars: the developmental sequence of simulacra, a progression that traces how signs have detached from any grounding in "the real", and the concept of "hyperreality," which emerges as the ultimate endpoint of this sequence. Together, these elements dismantle the traditional binary of "real" and "virtual," exposing the tangled, mutually constitutive relationship that defines postmodern existence.

Baudrillard established a coordinate system for postmodern culture. By examining the historical genealogy of "simulation," he proposed the "three orders of simulacra": (1) The first order of simulacra is counterfeiting, which was the dominant mode from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution. (2) The second order of simulacra is production, the dominant mode of the industrial age. (3) The third order of simulacra is simulation, the dominant mode of the era governed by codes. In Baudrillard's view, simulacra are no longer imitations of a specific field, a referential object, or an entity. They require no originality or substance; instead, they produce reality through models. This kind of reality is what Baudrillard termed "hyperreality." Baudrillard contends that in postmodern society, the media-driven collapse of the boundary between the real and its representations has generated a "hyperreality" in which signs no longer refer to an external referent, and the real is effectively effaced by simulation (1994).

The rapid development of digital technology and information technology has made symbols and models key elements in constructing the world, blurring the traditional boundary between the real and the fake. In the context of hyperreality, the status of symbols has undergone a fundamental transformation: they are no longer appendages or representations of real things, but have replaced the real to become the primary basis for people to perceive and understand the world.

3.2 Mass media: The medium of simulation

Within the landscape of contemporary postmodern cultural theory, Jean Baudrillard's critical perspectives on media stand as a transformative and provocative framework. He posited a radical thesis: the rise of mass media is not merely an evolutionary step in information dissemination, but the primary catalyst that has propelled society from the modern era of production to the postmodern age dominated by simulacra. In Baudrillard's analysis, modern society operated on a logic of "production", whether in the manufacturing of material goods or the forging of ideological narratives, the order was clear: reality precedes its representation. However, with the ascendance of mass media, encompassing television, print journalism, advertising, and later digital platforms, as the central nervous system of social functioning, this order was upended, giving birth to a postmodern society where simulacra reign supreme.

To unpack the mechanics of this societal shift, Baudrillard drew upon and reconfigured Marshall McLuhan's concept of "implosion." For McLuhan, implosion initially referred to the compression of space and time wrought by media technologies; Baudrillard, however, elevated the term to a profound socio-philosophical concept, defining it as a process of social energy and meaning depletion, marked by the erosion and collapse of traditional boundaries. In his framework, mass media acts as the primary engine of implosion: it blurs the lines between the public and private spheres (as television infiltrates the home with global events, turning intimate spaces into arenas of public spectacle); erodes the distinction between production and consumption (as advertising transforms commodities into symbols of status rather than mere utilitarian objects); and, most critically, triggers the "implosion of meaning into the media." Cultural symbols, values, and narratives that once carried deep, context-rich significance are stripped of their depth through relentless media reproduction and commercialization, ultimately reduced to hollow signifiers that exist only in relation to the media itself.

The culmination of this "implosion of meaning," in Baudrillard's view, is the total dissolution of the boundary between simulacra and the real. Simulacra are not mere copies of reality; they are self-referential systems of signs that require no original, thinking of the idealized "lifestyle fantasies" in advertising, the fictional worlds of television and film, or the curated "personas" on social media. These simulacra do not aim to "reflect reality"; instead, they generate their own logic of signification, which in turn dictates how people perceive and understand "reality." This leads Baudrillard to his most controversial claim: the world we perceive through mass media is not the objective "real world." Moreover, in a postmodern society saturated by media, humanity has lost the ability to access "reality" directly, and all its understanding of the world is filtered and mediated through symbolic codes. Thus, the traditional "true real", a tangible, unmediated reality, has vanished entirely, replaced by a "hyperreal" world constructed by mass media.

White Noise was written during a period when postmodernist thought was prevalent. Its content is filled with reflections on and mappings of postmodern social phenomena, which align with the contextual background of the theories of simulation and simulacra. The social environment depicted in the novel is saturated with consumer culture symbols, mass media images, and virtual experiences brought about by technology, all of which together constitute a typical postmodern world of simulacra.

4. The hyperreal world of simulacra

4.1 "The most photographed barn in America"

Within the framework of Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, the core characteristic of postmodern society is that simulacra take precedence over the real. Symbols no longer reflect reality; instead, through their constant reproduction and circulation, they construct a "hyperreal" world that is divorced from the original. The scene of "the Most Photographed Barn in America" in DeLillo's *White Noise* is precisely the literary embodiment of this theory. At the end of Chapter 3, Murray invites Jack to visit a tourist attraction called "the Most Photographed Barn in America."

"We counted five signs before we reached the site" (DeLillo, 2002). These "signs" are typical "simulacra symbols." They are not the barn itself, yet through their repeated appearance, they pre-construct tourists' cognitive expectations of the "barn" before the tourists even arrive. Before the tourists set eyes on the physical barn, the signs—via words and images—have already implanted the label of "the Most Photographed Barn in America" into their cognition. This "symbolic precedence" means that all subsequent behaviors related to the barn are no longer based on observations of the barn "itself," but rather responses to the barn as defined by the signs.

"All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits" (DeLillo, 2002). This detail reveals that the professional equipment tourists carry is not intended to document the real barn, but to match the symbolic standard of "the Most Photographed Barn." The demands of the symbol have replaced the need for the real, becoming the driving logic behind their actions. At this point, the barn is no longer a building with practical functions, but a subject to be photographed, defined by the symbol, and its real attributes are completely overshadowed by its symbolic ones. "'No one sees the barn,' he said finally" (DeLillo, 2002) and "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn" (DeLillo, 2002) directly address the core proposition of the theory of simulacra: the existence of simulacra undermines the perceptibility of the real. In this scene, the physical attributes of "the barn itself" become irrelevant; what tourists care about is not "what the barn is," but "how the barn should be photographed." Ultimately, the photos they take are nothing more than re-reproductions of these "existing simulacra." The real barn is completely "obscured" in this process, so people think they are documenting the real, but in reality, they are circulating symbols. It is just as Murray points out, "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura" (DeLillo, 2002).

The most striking detail in the text is Murray's observation that "They are taking pictures of taking pictures" (DeLillo, 2002). This act of "photographing the act of photographing" signifies that photographs no longer refer to the barn itself, but to the very act of photographing the barn, and tourists' behavior is no longer about documenting, but about participating in the ritual of simulacra reproduction. The creation of each photograph does not represent a transcendence of the previous photograph, but rather a reaffirmation of the symbol of the Most Photographed Barn in America. The more photographs are taken and the wider these images circulate, the more entrenched the symbol of the Most Photographed Barn in America becomes, and the stronger the hyperreal nature of the simulacra grows, ultimately allowing the simulacra to completely engulf the real.

From the description of the Most Photographed Barn in America, it can be perceived how the real is replaced by simulacra. Despite being a tourist attraction, no one can truly see the barn. People rush to take photos, yet what they capture is not the barn itself, but the process of others photographing the barn. As Murray puts it, tourists experience the barn through the signs and images of the barn, which together constitute the simulacra. The real barn vanishes in this process of mediation, and the reproduction of images prevents people from seeing the thing itself. In this scene, DeLillo explores the logic of the simulacra world that the thing itself is replaced by its image, symbols triumph over reality, and experiences are constructed by images and serve the images.

4.2 The supermarket

Another prominent example of simulacra in the novel is the supermarket, which appears repeatedly throughout the text. In *White Noise*, the supermarket, filled to the brim with an abundance of goods, serves as a modern-day paradise. Through its carefully designed shopping environment, diverse displays of merchandise, and omnipresent advertising, it constructs a hyperreal

world brimming with temptation and illusion. When consumers step into this space, they feel as if they have entered a material feast; goods are no longer merely practical items that satisfy daily needs, but are instead endowed with far more symbolic meaning. It is vividly demonstrated in Jack's inner monologue about his shopping experience with Babette at the Supermarket:

It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls—it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening (DeLillo, 2002).

In Jack's eyes, the familiar package designs and Day-Glo sale stickers are, in essence, the supermarket's meaning encoding of goods through a system of symbols that the "family bargain packs" imply a "warm family life," the "giant sizes" are associated with "affluence and a sense of security," and the "Day-Glo stickers" convey the "pleasure of getting a good deal and possession." At this point, goods are no longer tools to meet the needs of "clothing, food, shelter, and transportation"; instead, they have become symbols that carry abstract meanings such as "happiness" and "stability." Jack's focus is not on "what he is buying," but on "what these goods can prove he owns," and symbolic value has completely overshadowed practical value.

Compared with Murray's "single lightweight bag of white items" (DeLillo, 2002), the wide array of goods in Jack's shopping cart, with their diverse packaging designs and vivid descriptive text, fills him with a sense of security and contentment. Jack does not describe the specific goods themselves, but rather their external appearances; this is because the packaging of the goods is more capable of attracting Jack and thus prompting him to consume. As Baudrillard stated, "Consumption, in its meaningful usage, refers to a systematic act of symbolic manipulation" (DeLillo, 2002). Here, what brings Jack contentment is not the inherent quality of the goods themselves, but the "prosperous" simulacrum constructed through symbols such as colors, text, and sizes.

In another scene, when Jack's family goes to the supermarket, they run into Murray again. The comments Murray makes about the product packaging and codes in the supermarket further confirm this point:

Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases (DeLillo, 2002).

In the supermarket, numbers, letters, colors, and sounds create an atmosphere of carnival. People mistake simulacra for reality and derive false contentment from this confusion. Goods that have been transformed into symbols act like a form of wave or radiation, gradually causing people to become disoriented on a spiritual level.

4.3 The amplifying role of mass media

Baudrillard argued that "Previously, people believed that the media could reflect or represent facts; however, now mass media has begun to construct hyperreality, a new kind of media reality. Here, the real retreats beneath representations, leading to the final dissolution of the real" (DeLillo, 2002). In *White Noise*, mass media permeates every aspect of life through encompassing televisions, radios, films, magazines, and tabloids. DeLillo depicts a world saturated by media, one that generates countless simulacra in the form of images, symbols, and codes.

It has become a routine for Jack's family to sit in front of the TV every Friday night. On one occasion, when they watched footage from a disaster documentary on TV, they did not feel the terror of an impending disaster; instead, they found it fascinating:

We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Heinrich was not sullen, I was not bored. Steffie...appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death...We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping (DeLillo, 2002).

The reason Jack's family craves more spectacular disaster images lies, in essence, in the fact that ordinary, everyday real life can no longer satisfy them, and only "symbolized disasters" amplified and glorified by the media can deliver sufficient sensory impact. At this point, what they pursue is not an understanding of disasters, but the ultimate experience of "simulacra intensity":

the more shocking the images, the better they can fill the emptiness in their hearts. This state precisely confirms the predicament of postmodern society: people gradually lose their way in the carnival of simulacra, confusing their desire for symbols with their need for the real, and ultimately becoming completely disconnected from real life and genuine emotions.

The constant reproduction of images continuously stimulates people's senses while simultaneously numbing their perceptions, ultimately stripping them of a sense of reality about the world around them. The line between "the real" and "the hyperreal" dissolves. Thus, when a disaster actually occurs, people lose their ability to recognize real-world objects, fail to identify danger, and refuse to take any precautions. In the middle section of the novel, an ecological disaster, the Airborne Toxic Event, is described. During this event, people's subjective reactions are constructed through radio and television. A chemical waste product called Nyodene Derivative leaks after a tanker truck derails. Heinrich is the first to spot the toxic cloud, yet he observes the scene unfolding like a TV viewer watching something on a screen: despite understanding the potential danger, he feels no fear; instead, he watches the situation develop with excited attention. As for Jack, when he sees the leak occurring not far from his home, he dismisses it and shows dullness in evading the potential hazard:

"Nothing is going to happen....I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith" (DeLillo, 2002).

Jack's reason is simple that the floods on TV never shows university professors fleeing in boats. A deluge of information, especially disaster scenes on television, blunts people's ability to perceive the real world. On TV news, life-threatening disasters always happen elsewhere and primarily affect the poor, not the middle class. The visualized scenes on television replace the true substance of events with a world of simulacra.

As the event unfolds further, the radio continues to shape people's perceptions. As the toxic cloud changes, the symptoms of poisoning caused by the cloud reported on the radio are constantly revised. Steffie and Denise keep exhibiting the symptoms described on the radio, yet their symptoms always lag behind the reports. Jack's daughters place great trust in media reports. While exhibiting the symptoms described on the radio, they lose their authentic selves and become mere channels for reproducing the representations created by the media. This reversal of the real and its representations aligns precisely with Baudrillard's theory of simulation—namely, that media forms, as models, take precedence. Steffie and Denise, submerged in media information, are manipulated by mass media and thus prefer media discourse. Mass media continuously emit omnipresent media messages, which ultimately infiltrate people's subconscious.

4.4 The simulated virtual persona

Jack Gladney, the novel's protagonist and narrator, packages himself into a simulacrum of a German. He establishes the Department of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill and becomes an authority on Hitler. As one of history's most feared figures, Hitler's prestige endows Jack with a sense of authority he longs to attain, and in this pursuit, Jack somehow disregards questions of good and evil, focusing single-mindedly on power itself. Jack's academic identity is constructed entirely through symbols.

Jack is fond of all things German; whenever he encounters difficulties, he always turns to German-related things for help. He even gave his son a German name: Heinrich. When Denise asks why he chose this name, Jack replies that "There's something about German names, the German language, German things. I don't know what it is exactly. It's just there. In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course" (DeLillo, 2002).

The core motivation behind Jack's obsession with German-related things is his desire to attain the "dignity and power" embodied by Hitler. In his eyes, "Germany" is no longer a real country, but a collection of symbols that condense "authority and influence" through which the Department of Hitler Studies, German objects, and German names are all "tools" for him to acquire this symbolic power. Jack's fascination with the "special qualities" of German things borders on superstition: he not only uses Hitler to fill the emptiness in his heart, but also treats Hitler as a talisman to protect his son.

One night, just before dawn, Jack is woken up by his son, Wilder. He sees an old man with white hair sitting in the backyard and, thinking this is the Angel of Death coming to take him away, is overcome with intense fear. Before leaving the house to

investigate, he clutches *Mein Kampf* tightly to his chest, only to discover that the “ghost” is actually his father-in-law. When facing danger, Jack chooses a book written by Hitler for protection instead of opting for things that could genuinely defend him; this reveals his deep-seated superstition in the power of the Hitler symbol. Jack’s act of clutching *Mein Kampf* (rather than taking practical protective measures) when confronting his fear of death is, in essence, the ultimate manifestation of his superstition in “symbolic power” and a classic reflection of Baudrillard’s “theory of simulation” at the individual psychological level. Jack’s behavior also exposes his “self-alienation”. He is no longer the “subject who uses symbols” but has been reduced to a “vassal of symbols.” Hitler is inherently a negative figure in history, and the violent and evil attributes inherently attached to his symbol are completely stripped away in Jack’s perception, leaving only the single dimension of “power and authority.” This “selective interpretation” and “irrational worship” of symbols have caused Jack to completely lose his ability to judge symbols objectively, as well as his true understanding of his own needs.

Yet Jack is well aware that he is nothing more than an ordinary man beneath all these pretenses. He has given himself a more authoritative-sounding name, J.A.K. Gladney. On campus, he wears dark-rimmed tinted glasses and an academic gown, and has even allowed himself to become unhealthily overweight, all because the dean suggested this would greatly benefit his career. As an expert in Hitler Studies, Jack requires the students in his courses to master German, yet he cannot speak the language himself; he struggles to learn German only to avoid being exposed as a fraud at Hitler Studies conferences. The academic gown and tinted glasses endow Jack with the sense of strength and stability carried by the Hitler symbol, yet he still lives in fear of death. He has failed to become what he imagines a “true German” to be, a person who is strong, steady, and transcends the fear of death. Jack is merely a simulated simulacrum of a German, and, in the world of simulacra, he relies on symbols to assign meaning to his own existence.

5. Conclusion

White Noise presents a world of simulacra as described by Baudrillard, a life dominated by symbolism. In this world, reality is constantly transformed into simulacra; images, symbols, and codes replace objectively existing reality. Humans live entirely within a realm of symbols: they create symbols, pursue symbols, become symbols themselves, and ultimately lose themselves in the absurdity of a symbol-saturated life.

The characters in the novel confront a hyperreal world, where they fix their attention on simulated experiences rather than engaging with authentic ones. Within this hyperreality, mass media, television in particular, plays a pivotal role in generating the world of simulacra and shaping people’s perceptions of the world and their behaviors. People’s consciousness is infused with ideas and ideologies permeating mass media, leading to the loss of their subjectivity. In the world of simulacra, the characters themselves even become simulacra of other identities instead of creatively forging their own identities, they mimic predetermined models.

In such a hyperreal world of simulacra, the characters begin to lose their way and struggle. Their actions reveal irrationality and absurdity, and they are deeply trapped in the fear of death. What, then, will become of their fates? The author offers an open-ended conclusion: the beautiful sunset may be the clear sky after rain, a sign that the toxic cloud has been consumed by microorganisms. Or perhaps the toxic cloud has never dissipated at all, and everything is merely an illusion, a simulacrum, in the characters’ minds.

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