Sounding an Idol: The Television as Imagetext in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract

The response of critics to Don DeLillo's seminal novel *White Noise* has centred on the connections that can be drawn between this work and the critical context that surrounded it upon its publication in 1984, namely the climate of radical scepticism ushered in by critics like Jean Baudrillard. This article attempts to argue that the relationship between the novel and this critical climate is far more antagonistic than has been acknowledged previously. Drawing upon the critic W.J.T. Mitchell's reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "sounding", as opposed to the iconoclastic smashing, of idols, the article will "sound" the idol which is at the centre of DeLillo's novel: the television. This will show the critical distance that DeLillo deliberately established between his text and the texts of postmodern theory that were fashionable throughout the later twentieth century (particularly at the time *White Noise* was published) and will place DeLillo in a more contemporary context, his face turned not only to the past, but to the critical horizons ahead of him.

Key words: Iconoclasm, Idolatry, Imagetext, Postmodernism, Baudrillard.

Sondeando un ídolo: la televisión como imagen-texto en *White Noise* de Don DeLillo

Resumen

La recepción de gran parte de la crítica a la novela fundamental de Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, se ha

centrado en las conexiones establecidas entre esta obra y el contexto crítico en el que apareció en 1984, es decir, en el clima de escepticismo radical introducido por críticos culturales como Jean Baudrillard. En este artículo se argumenta que la interrelación entre esta novela y aquel contexto crítico es mucho más antagónica de lo que se ha admitido hasta ahora. Partiendo de la interpretación que el crítico W.J.T. Mitchell hace del concepto nietzscheano de "sondear", en contraposición a la destrucción iconoclasta de ídolos, este artículo "sondeará" el ídolo central de la novela de DeLillo, la televisión. Así, se demostrará la distancia crítica que DeLillo interpuso expresamente entre su texto y los textos de teoría posmoderna tan en boga a finales del siglo XX (especialmente a la publicación de *White Noise*) y se situará a DeLillo en un contexto más contemporáneo, su mirada orientada no solo al pasado sino también hacia los horizontes críticos futuros.

Palabras clave: iconoclasia, idolatría, imagen-texto, posmodernismo, Baudrillard

1. Introduction

On the now iconic cover of the British paperback edition of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* an image confronts the reader. It is an arresting image which demands interpretation, but which immediately frustrates a simple reading. The image is of a boy facing an oblong of white light that looks like a television screen, evoking the various cinematic depictions of encounters with alien life-forms, or the fabled light that is supposed to beckon the dying to the afterlife. The figure in the foreground facing away from the viewer and into the light seems to be fixated; the outline of his back and shoulders barely seems like an outline at all, fading as it does into the black of the background. Indeed, his shoulders seem to be merging with the edge of the oblong of white light, as if the screen were beginning to absorb or consume him.

Many critics of *White Noise*, whose work will be considered in
some detail in this article, have settled on this approach to a reading
of the novel itself. To them, it is a satire on the consumption of the
subject by the culture of the image, this being a novel whose
characters float in a morass of simulacra, where the distinction
between the real and the fictional has broken down, where the
"objective" world is revealed to be a world of mere simulations; it is
a novel, therefore, which aptly renders Jean Baudrillard's world of
hyperreality. However, another look at the image might lead to an
alternative interpretation and might point towards a different reading
of the novel. The boy's head is more substantial than the rest of his
body; it remains defiantly anchored in the foreground, silhouetted
by the light of the screen, relying on this light to render its form,
but distinct nonetheless. The boy is clearly captivated by what he
sees, but his posture shows him to be immobile, rooted to the spot,
as if something were preventing him from moving closer to the light
and being consumed within it. There seems to be a doubleness at
play, between his attraction to and repulsion from the image. This
sense of duality is again replicated when we take a closer look at the
silhouette of the boy's head. On either side, the boy's ears create
the illusion of the profiles of two faces looking in opposite
directions. This makes the image seem like a reversal of the famous
gestalt image where the profiles of two faces in black reveal also the
figure of a white vase. This article will take a similar approach to
the reading of *White Noise*, foregrounding doubleness by
acknowledging the pertinence of Baudrillard's theory for an

understanding of the novel and recognizing the valuable critical work that has been done in this area, while, at the same time, trying to break away from the extreme and uncritical application of Baudrillard to DeLillo which has dogged much of the critical response to his work since the 1980s. It is much more fruitful to explore how DeLillo straddles theoretical boundaries, or manages to steer a middle course between them, in this case between the postmodern scepticism of "the real" and the subsequent return, in recent decades, of bodies and objects to the centre of critical discourse. This approach will reveal a more antagonistic relationship between DeLillo and the theories of what might now be referred to as "high postmodernism" and will place him in a more contemporary context, his face turned not only to the past, but to the critical horizons ahead of him.

To select one example of the former reading of *White Noise*: Michael W. Messmer describes DeLillo, after a brief recapitulation of some of the theories of Jean Baudrillard, as "one of the most acute and penetrating observers of American hyperreality" (103). Messmer offers an example of how the ideas of Jean Baudrillard can be uncritically mapped onto DeLillo's writing: "[a]s … Baudrillard … argue[s], in the cultural space of hyperreality, the distinction between the real and the simulated … is blurred, and with that blurring, I would argue, comes a distancing which is conducive to the fascination which DeLillo's characters experience as they witness disasters through the medium of television" (Messmer 105). The critic displays the deafness of tone that characterizes many of the early critical responses to *White Noise*. Often, early critics would note DeLillo's awareness of the then contemporary writings of figures like Jean Baudrillard and would go on to map out those connections, all the while seemingly oblivious to the critical distance opened up by DeLillo's satirical tone. This inability to judge the tone of the novel is particularly surprising considering how tone is established in the very first paragraphs of the novel, along with the narrator Jack Gladney's unmistakeably satirical take on events. His description of the arrival of new students with their parents to the university campus of the College-on-the-Hill where he teaches not only sets up the satirical tone of the novel, but also establishes the image as a central theme: "I've witnessed this spectacle every September for twenty-

one years … The students greet each other … Their summer ... bloated with criminal pleasures, as always. The parents stand sun-dazed near their automobiles, seeing images of themselves in every direction … something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage" (3).

The instinctive reading of DeLillo as expositor of Jean Baudrillard's thinking was common in early responses to the novel, but it has persisted and can even be seen in more recent, and in otherwise balanced and critical, approaches to DeLillo's novel. When prominent DeLillo critics such as Frank Lentriccia, John N. Duvall and Leonard Wilcox discuss the scene mentioned above, even they succumb to the same kind of misreading. In his article on *White Noise* Lentriccia provides, in statements that bear the influence of the most extreme and declarative passages of Baudrillard, the critical context the novel should be read in. This is a context where "the distinction between the real and the fictional can't be sustained … not while watching TV, nowhere in America, certainly not in the burgeoning variety of theories of postmodernism"; this is a context where the image is all-consuming, where the image, (rather than the individual or even the masses) has infiltrated every area of life and has the power in its hands: "[f]or this environment-as-electronic-medium radically constitutes contemporary consciousness and therefore (such as it is) contemporary community - it guarantees that we are a people of, by, and for the image". Lentriccia's reading of the barn scene displays the same innocence of DeLillo's tone as the critics mentioned above. He claims that ""THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA" is the ostensible subject of the scene; the real subject is the electronic medium of the image as the active context of contemporary existence in America" (Lentriccia 415). As will be argued presently, this is simply not the case; the real subject of the scene is the very critical discourse that Lentriccia, and countless other critics, use to illuminate the scene. What is lost on these critics is that the very theories they are employing in their analysis of the scene have already been consumed by DeLillo and are being critiqued in his text.[1]

Other critics of *White Noise* have taken an alternative approach to the novel, one that is more in keeping with the novel's resistance to a single interpretation and one that acknowledges DeLillo's fondness

for ambiguity and contradiction. Tom LeClair is perhaps the earliest DeLillo critic to accept this ambiguity and contradiction as an indispensable feature of DeLillo's fiction, as something which is not to be unlocked, explained and, therefore, neutralized, but to be explored or "sounded". His response to the end of *White Noise* is evidence for how fertile is the literary ground that DeLillo lays with his fiction; to a reader as obsessively detailed and imaginative as LeClair, his undecided, and perhaps undecidable, endings are the fuel for much thought. As he observes of the novel's denouement: "[i]f it appears at this point to drive toward a conventional hopeful ending, DeLillo springs several compacted reversals and ironies in its last few pages" (LeClair *222*). According to LeClair, these "reversals and ironies" sound a note of uncertainty for both the characters in, and readers of, the novel. The question, for instance, the novel poses regarding the nature of nature (now that this once stable category has been so disrupted by contemporary developments in science and technology) does not produce a single, unambiguous answer. Rather, as LeClair writes, "because of [the] multiple categories of the natural, the general response of Jack Gladney (and, I believe, of the reader) is uncertainty about some single natural order" (*224*). In other words, while the term "natural" has been problematized by notions like the commodification of nature, or the invasion of the body and mind by bio-engineering and modern forms of communication, the response should not be to declare that the category of the natural has been smashed, consumed or annihilated. The nature of the change undergone by the category of "the natural" is more uncertain than that. Uncertainty, it seems, is a word that best describes LeClair's reading of the end of the novel: he writes of the character's "uncertain acceptance of the uncertain" and describes how "DeLillo passes to the reader the uncertainty that Jack has found dangerous throughout the novel" (*223*). LeClair offers a reading of *White Noise* as the drama of an existential paradox: "[w]hat the Gladney's refuse to accept", he writes, "and what forms the basis for DeLillo's understanding of systemic fact and value is the loop: the simultaneity of living and dying, the inherent reciprocity of circular causality that makes certainty impossible" (*226*). However, instead of responding to this uncertainty with a contrived polemic that extinguishes it, as some critics have, LeClair allows it to remain, finding in it the seeds of a hopeful reading of DeLillo's fiction. He

claims that, "flowing from this pervasive strangeness or mystery might be a sense of hope, or at least the possibility that human existence could be open rather than closed" (227). The present reading of DeLillo's treatment of television is consistent with this tentatively hopeful approach.

Another critic who shares this optimistic interpretation of DeLillo's fiction is Peter Boxall. His chapter on *White Noise* in his full-length work entitled *The Possibility of Fiction*, offers a catalogue of DeLilloean contradictions. He makes many statements on the novel that seem inspired by LeClair's theoretical position in that they seem to loop back on themselves: he describes how "*White Noise* is set in an eternal present which fails, eternally, to become present" (Boxall 111), claiming that "[i]t is perhaps this historical scenario, in which time is both endless and at an end, and in which death has entered life, that lends the novel its millenial character" (112). Finally and most tellingly, declaring that "[t]he avant-garde, in *White Noise*, is continually dying, and always already dead" (127). This last statement is Boxall's main point about the novel: that it is a contradictory work of art which straddles the boundary between a radical avant-garde gesture and just another consumer product. It cannot fully escape the cultural and economic system it is part of, so as to critique that system from the outside, but, from within, it can still do what the avant-garde does best, which is to force "the continual collapse and reformulation of boundaries and distinctions", in order to "destabilis[e] … the limits of culture" (127). As is the case in LeClair's and the present study's reading of DeLillo, it is precisely within the contradictoriness and ambivalence of DeLillo that an optimistic interpretation of his fiction is to be found. As Boxall puts it: "[i]t is this troubling equation of resistance with accommodation, of critique with non-critique, that finally determines the novel's engagement with its historical contexts", but from this uncertain footing, "the novel performs the possibility of making history anew, and of casting ourselves into a new future which has not yet been written" (129-130).

Another prominent critic, who not only honours DeLillo's use of ambiguity and ambivalence, but also finds in it intellectual and critical inspiration, is Mark Osteen. Osteen argues that DeLillo's fiction is effective *precisely because* of how it resists fixed conclusions

and singular responses. As he explains: "*White Noise* is rich enough to provoke contradictory responses, and it will continue to intrigue us because it eludes full explanation" (Osteen, *White Noise* xiv). Osteen's focus may be on the "language we speak", while the present study is occupied more with DeLillo's treatment of the image. Nevertheless, this emphasis on the doubleness that pervades DeLillo's fiction is shared by the approach followed in the present study. Osteen is also led, with LeClair and Boxall, towards an optimistic reading of DeLillo's fiction. For him, what *White Noise* "most of all affirms is the power of fiction itself" (Osteen, *American Magic* 190-191), and this affirmation comes from DeLillo's deliberate frustration of simple and singular interpretations of his novels. Consistent with the idea, that will be explored presently, of how DeLillo steers a middle course in his fiction between idolatry and iconoclasm, Osteen explains how "*White Noise* neither simply satirizes nor sedates, but does something more difficult than either: it makes us work" (191).[2]

2. Theoretical Background

When the reader moves on from the ambivalent image they find on the cover of *White Noise*, they encounter in the first pages of the novel not more images, but instead a litany of objects. Jack Gladney's description of his new students' arrival at term opening, relies on such an enumeration:

> "the stereo sets, radios, personal computers … the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags – onion-and-garlic chips, … Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum Dum pops, the Mystic mints" (3).

However, to affirm that this litany of objects has been presented "instead" of more images is to make the age-old assumption that images and objects are natural opposites and, therefore, completely distinct. As the critic W. J. T. Mitchell explains this assumption does not hold up under scrutiny. He states the difference between things, objects and

images: "[t]he thing appears as the nameless figure of the Real that cannot be perceived or represented. When it takes on a single, recognizable face, a stable image, it becomes an object" (Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* 156). So, while things are a "raw material, an amorphous, shapeless, brute materiality awaiting organization by a system of objects", objects are those things that have been incorporated into that system, in turn becoming something a subject can perceive, becoming a "stable image" (156). Things we call images are also, of course, objects, however nebulous and seemingly ephemeral they may be. A popular meme viewed widely for a few days or hours before being forgotten has an objective existence and has its place in a taxonomy of virtual phenomena; the same can be said even of an image in one's mind. In short, images and objects are not completely discrete and separate opposites, rather they exist in a dialectic relationship to one and other; while they occupy different realms, they are intimately connected and often overlap. In light of this, the idea of a culture of virtuality and dematerialized images *supplanting* the objective world is rendered incoherent; this would require a severing of the dialectical relationship between image and object. Rather, for Mitchell, it is precisely at the moment that images have seemed to supplant objects that objects, in fact, re-assert themselves and refuse to be supplanted: "the triumph of virtuality and the dematerialized image is accompanied by an unprecedented fascination with material things" (Mitchell 152). DeLillo is aware of this, so his novel, as a critique of the one-sided concept of hyperreality, abounds in imagistic objects and objective images. The objects listed in the opening chapter of *White Noise* are simultaneously images of a culture, one that is technologically advanced, competitive, hedonistic and consumerist.

Therefore, as an alternative to much criticism on *White Noise*, which sees it as a story of the triumph of the image over the object, this article will look at how one particular type of object *functions as an image* in the novel. This object is one of a trio that Mitchell describes as "objects of ambivalence and anxiety ...[ones]... that can be associated with fascination as easily as with aversion" (158); they are the totem, the fetish and the idol. In this article, the television, by far the most multivalent object in the novel, will be analyzed as an idol, a producer of images and an image in itself and something which inspires idolatry as much as it provokes iconoclasm.

Mitchell describes these objects as "bad objects", clarifying that he "does not mean simply "bad" in a straightforward moral sense, but "bad" in the sense of producing a disturbance, uncertainty and ambivalence in a subject" (147). It could be argued that these same responses are produced by DeLillo's fiction; it will be fruitful, therefore, to approach *White Noise* with these so-called "bad objects" in mind. The present article will focus on one particular example of the "bad object" in the novel, chiefly epitomized by the TV's ambivalent presence, as an object which simultaneously attracts and repels viewers.

It is important to clarify the method followed in the present study, one that Mitchell explains with such precision it is worth quoting at length. His explanation of Nietzsche's method of "sounding", rather than smashing, idols is entirely consistent with DeLillo's treatment of images throughout his body of work. Mitchell argues that much of the criticism on images has been dogged by the either/or trap of having to treat images in either an iconoclastic or an idolatrous way; he writes of "the ineluctable tendency of criticism … to pose as an iconoclastic practice, a labour of demystification and pedagogical exposure of false images", claiming that "[c]ritique-as-iconoclasm is … just as much a symptom of the life of images as its obverse, the naïve faith in the inner life of works of art" (8). What Mitchell goes on to write can be read as a blueprint for the treatment of the image in this article and as an accurate account, evident in all of his works, of DeLillo's highly ambivalent conception of the image:

> [m]y hope here is to explore a third way, suggested by Nietzsche's strategy of "sounding the idols" with the "tuning fork" of critical or philosophical language. This would be a mode of criticism that did not dream of getting beyond images, beyond representation, of smashing the false images that bedevil us, or even of producing a definitive separation between true and false images. It would be a delicate critical practice that struck images with just enough force to make them resonate, but not so much as to smash them (8-9).

The theorist Jean Baudrillard largely fell into the either/or trap referred to above by Mitchell; the view of the image as a corrupted,

and corrupting, false idol fit to be smashed by an iconoclastic critical practice is ingrained in his theories of postmodern culture. It is necessary to briefly recapitulate his concept of hyper-reality. According to Baudrillard, we are living in a reality of pure simulacra, where "abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept", rather "[I]t is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1). The dramatic, and somewhat awe-inspiring, reason Baudrillard gives for this turn of events is that a rupture occured at some point in contemporary culture between the signifier and signified, between the sign and any referent. It is not simply that the connections between images and their objects, between signs and their referents are arbitrary; rather, it is that, in the world of the hyperreal, objects and referents play no part in the construction of our reality. Ours is a culture of images only and this is, for Baudrillard, the terrifying, yet compelling, reality we face. Baudrillard's picture of culture is an extreme and totalizing one; for him, there is no "outside the image," no escape from the network of representations that constitute our reality. It could be argued that this kind of thinking runs counter to the central axioms of postmodern theory, which disavows textual closure of any kind and places ambiguity and openness to contradictory interpretations at the centre of critical practice. In Baudrillard's view of culture there is no ambiguity, no allowance for a contradictory interpretation that might see a way out of his web of representation. Baudrillard could be seen in this light as an outlier, an iconoclast of, and within, postmodern critical discourse. Although numerous studies of DeLillo have originated in this theoretical ground, this article aims to show that these studies have taken a critical misstep and that DeLillo's work might be better serviced by another strain of postmodern criticism, a strain which remains true to postmodernism's original commitment to non-closure and openness to ambiguity. The origins of this current in postmodernism can be found in the work of Roland Barthes, which is developed by contemporary critics like Jacques Ranciére, Alexander R. Galloway and the aforementioned W. J. T. Mitchell.

Roland Barthes' conceives the image as always being engaged in a dual poetics. This dual poetics, firstly, involves what he calls the punctum (the sheer presence of the subject of the image, the imagistic impact we experience and which requires no commentary)

and, secondly, the studium (the image in Jacques Ranciére's terms as "a vehicle for a silent discourse which [the semiologist] endeavour[s] to translate into sentences" (Ranciére 11). Images have an immediacy and impact that language does not have; at first, they silently move us. However, when we talk of an "impact", what we also mean is the nonsilent explosion of discourse that particular images can generate within a wider culture and through other media. Ranciére argues that, in Barthes, we find a rejection of the studium, with its semiotic reduction of society to a "great web of symptoms and a seedy exchange of signs" (11). Ranciére, instead, seeks to explore how both aspects of the poetics of the image function in a society ever more in thrall to the production, dissemination and consumption of images. He maintains faith in the "two potentialities of the image: the image as raw, material presence and the image as discourse encoding a history" (12). Ranciére's reading of Barthes recovers from modernism the idea that the act of reading and of engaging in literary discourse can have political consequences. In opposition to the paralysis induced by the former branch of postmodernism, which sees readers as passive spectacle-gazers trapped in a hyper-reality, this alternative (to) postmodernism allows for the active engagement with history that modernism saw as an essential function of literature. Alexander Galloway's analysis of the emergence of digital media and its impact on earlier models of the image is fitting here: "[t]he catoptrics of the society of the spectacle is now the dioptrics of the society of control. Reflective surfaces have been overthrown by transparent thresholds" (Galloway, 2012: 25). As will be shown here, this more optimistic variety of postmodernist thought provides a better prespective from which to view the similarly optimistic fiction of Don DeLillo.

3. The Sounding of an Idol

Mitchell's concept of the "imagetext" can be very useful as an approach to DeLillo's fiction. It is a conceptualisation of images that has serious political and philosophical implications. Mitchell makes clear his aim to explore "the interactions of visual and verbal representation ...[and]... not merely to describe these interactions, but to trace their linkages to issues of power, value, and human interest" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 5). Mitchell shows that images are highly-

contested sites where the personal, political and ontological interests of viewers are staked: the "fault-line ...[between verbal and visual]... representation is deeply linked with fundamental ideological divisions" (5). Nowhere is this idea more pertinent than to the subject of the third "bad" object: the idol. Ostensibly, idols are representations of gods, but they can be seen as any object or image that is deified or worshiped. Additionally, in Francis Bacon's conceptualization of the "idols of the mind," idols can also take the form of dangerously deceptive ideas. A synthesis of these two concepts underlies DeLillo's use of idols in *White Noise*.

The "idol" at the centre of DeLillo's novel, the thing which is the source of so much aversion and fascination, the "imagetext" both worshiped and desecrated, is television. Throughout the novel the TV is personified (or idolized) by the attribution of a voice: it is repeatedly identified in the narrative as "saying" various things. The first thing that Jack hears the TV "say" is very telling: "Let's sit half lotus and think about our spines" (18). The Gods of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism have been depicted sitting in the half lotus position in statues for millenia, so it is as if the TV, in its first message, is taking the form of an idol and making a call to prayer, asking those around it to assume the position of worshippers. In fact, the very first mention of television puts it at the centre of a weekly family ritual that resembles the weekly ritual of church attendance. Every Friday the Gladneys gather to eat Chinese food and watch television together: Jack Gladney's wife "Babette had made it a rule. She seemed to think that if kids watched television one night a week with parents or stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome domestic sport". The act of worshipping the TV once a week is presented as a kind of moral corrective. Also, the act of idolatry, a potentially dangerous and subversive act, is to be contained, rendered safe by virtue of it being forced into a particular context. This specific form of idolatry is sanctioned in order to dispel other forms, forms which are more dangerous and deserving of iconoclasm. In fact, like a weekly trip to church, "[t]he evening ... was a subtle form of punishment for us all" (16).

Within the novel, the status of the television as an idol is discussed by Murray J. Siskind, Jack's colleague at the College-on-the-Hill. As

a form of research into the peculiar power of television, he explains to Jack how he has "been sitting in [his] room for more than two months, watching TV into the early hours, listening carefully, taking notes". He considers this to have been a "great and humbling experience … Close to mystical" (50;51). Murray presents himself here as the classic DeLilloean writer, the recluse alone in a room (or on an island) struggling to understand the world, struggling to gather the strands of reality into a coherent narrative. With the amount of pop-cultural references that DeLillo includes in the novel, one might read the quotation above as a description of his research process for *White Noise* and to see Murray as a kind of surrogate for the author, especially as this type of figure is recurrent throughout DeLillo's fiction (Fenig in *Great Jones Street*, Branch in *Libra*, Bell in *Americana*).

Murray is very much a hybrid figure. With his scheming and plotting and pushing of the narrative forward he acts like a god, yet he is also very much a worshipper of "gods". The main object of Murray's worship is, amongst other artifacts of popular culture, the television. The very words he uses to describe television can be also applied to idols: "[s]ealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring" (51). Idols might well refer to gods, but they can also simply refer to themselves in the sense that the object, or the image, of the god becomes itself the object of worship. To have power, the idol obviously does not require the actual existence of any deity to which it refers. In this sense idols are "sealed-off, self-contained, self-referring". They aspire to be "timeless" and, to an extent, they are, at least until that inevitable time when they become the target of an iconoclastic attack.

For several of Jack's colleagues the TV is a disseminator of dangerous images and, as such, very much resembles an idol fit for iconoclastic engagement. As Mitchell notes of idols, they "present the greatest dangers and mak[e] the greatest demands" (159-160). One of the "demands" the TV makes is for the attention of viewers and it does this by producing images that shock. The Gladneys spend one of their TV nights fixated before images of "floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes" and as Jack observes, "we'd never before been so attentive to our duty." The problem, however, is two-fold; firstly, the capacity for viewers to feel shock is blunted over time and

so their appetite for shocking images becomes insatiable and, secondly, the TV itself has an insatiable appetite for the attention of those viewers. As Jack observes: "[e]very disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (64). Also, when Jack asks his colleagues about his family's captivation at the hands of such mediated disasters, Alfonse offers his analysis: "... we're suffering from brain fade. We need ... catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information" (66). This is a vision of the TV as marauding conqueror bombarding people with information, stupefying its viewers with "brain fade" and demanding attentiveness to, and worship of, its images at all costs.

However, a closer look at the psychological mechanics that underlie what Alfonse calls "brain fade," shows that what Jack and his family are experiencing is an entirely normal reaction to the images that constitute their shared culture. The psychologist Michael Apter's notion of "parapathic emotions" is relevant here. He makes the startling, yet entirely plausible, claim that, "all emotions are enjoyed, even supposedly unpleasant ones like fear and anger and horror and grief and disgust, in the presence of detachment" (Apter 72). That is to say that the "negative" emotions felt by viewers of TV disasters like the Gladney family can be experienced as pleasure because of the "presence of detachment" they can feel by virtue of being removed from the situation that is being represented. This "protective frame" (74) of detachment turns these negative emotions into positive, enjoyable ones – they lead to the release of rewarding brain chemicals like dopamine and endorphins. "Brain fade," then, is the inevitable process of increasing tolerance and dependency that accompanies such experiments with brain chemistry.

Michael Apter's interpretation of the significance of parapathic emotions is particularly relevant for the present analysis of DeLillo's treatment of the image in *White Noise*. On the one hand, Apter would identify with the Gladneys' ambivalent experience of mediated horrors because "enjoyment ... can be derived from the fictional (or even documentary) treatment of those things we most fear or that most worry us: the threat of Islamic terrorism, of nuclear war, of major hurricanes, and the like" (74). He would understand why the Gladneys Friday evening was so much fun; because "television news, with its

tales of killings, calamities, and catastrophes, can be the most entertaining program of the evening" (74). Apter also understands how the Gladneys are manipulated by their imagistic culture to crave and consume these visual thrills. "The television moguls," he claims, "understand this well, and find every excuse to show us these arousing snippets over and over again, so that we can wallow in our shocked "horror" and "outrage" (74). However, Apter provides a positive interpretation of the phenomenon of parapathic emotions, an interpretation which is in line with the one that can be read in DeLillo's novel. These emotions, he claims "are, of course, genuine emotions, not pretence (or "pretend") emotions." And this is because, "not only is one aroused when the heroine dies in a film, but there is a sense in which one is genuinely upset" (73). Our enjoyment of parapathic emotions, therefore, stems from our capacity to feel genuine empathy and compassion for others. The implication is that exercising these emotions in positive ways – instead of having them manipulated for commercial reasons – can produce beneficial effects. We see this in the reading of fiction. As Apter states, "these [parapathic] emotions are not just passing "bad moments," but rather the very lifeblood of the fictional process" (73). That does not mean that reading words stimulates positive parapathic emotions, while seeing images stimulates negative ones; rather, that the psychological process behind both activities is analogous. The viewing of images, therefore, could have positive as well as negative outcomes. This idea is particularly relevant to DeLillo's ambivalent treatment of the image, especially as Jack's bondage at the hands of the "bad" object, the idol of the television loosens when the novel draws to a close.

If Murray is one of the novel's main idolaters, then his students are presented as the iconoclasts poised to smash his idol and usher in a new order. While the parents of Murray and Jack's students may have smashed the idols of their time (the archetype being the figure of Richard Nixon), their generation might wonder what idols remain to be smashed. Murray claims, with a prescience that neither he nor DeLillo could have possessed at the time, that the TV is such an idol. As Murray explains, "[m]y students … are beginning to feel they ought to turn against the medium [of TV], exactly as an earlier generation turned against their parents and their country", and this because, for them, "[t]elevision is just another name for junk mail …

[It] is the death throes of human consciousness" (50-51). This could be read as striking a note of hope; the hope being that new generations will resist the superficiality and banalization of culture, creating something new, more substantial and meaningful. However, what Murray goes on to say immediately brings this into question: "[the new generation] are ashamed of their television past. They want to talk about movies" (51). The joke is that the iconoclasm of the generational battles of the past (the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s) has been replaced by a thoroughly postmodern form of iconoclasm, namely, the smashing of one medium of image reproduction and the erection of another as its replacement: iconoclasm incorporated. While the radical youth of the mid-twentieth century had clear lines to draw between them and the previous generation –on matters of war and peace, on issues of sexual and racial politics, and on differences of a philosophical and ontological nature— the youth of the late twentieth century draw lines between different forms of imagistic media.

Once again, it is important not to take Murray's words as a reflection of DeLillo's position. It is not even clear whether one should take Murray's words as a reflection of his *own* position; he is, after all, plotting against Jack from the very beginning. Murray is also a satirical figure, a character who embodies the excesses of postmodern theoretical discourse. In this case, he is presented as the straw man for those critics of postmodern theorists who see them all as nihilists rejoicing in meaninglessness, celebrating the banal. "TV … welcomes us into the grid", explains Murray, with apparent glee, "the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. There is light, there is sound. I ask my students, "What more do you want?"" He explains how he implores his students to worship the surface elements of the medium, to worship the TV like an idol: "[l]ook at … the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials … the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. "*Coke is it*, *Coke is it*, *Coke is it*"" (51).

The fact that Murray's students resist his proselytizing and choose to engage in their own form of iconoclasm is predictable; as Mitchell explains in his writing on idolatry and iconoclasm, these two activities are deeply interrelated and are often part of the same cyclical process. Mitchell offers two examples where this cyclical process is shown in

action: one relates to the history of empirical ideas and another to the history of imperial conquest.

Firstly, Mitchell discusses the philosophical rift between empiricism, specifically John Locke's faith in the direct impressions of sensory experience, and German idealism, particularly Immanuel Kant's allegiance to the abstract schemata of a priori categories. However, as Mitchell shows, Locke's ideas were once themselves the iconoclastic reaction to the previous idols of the "innate ideas" of scholastic philosophy, and, likewise, Kant's idealism would soon to become the idols for future iconoclastic philosophers to smash. Mitchell describes the process thus:

> [t]he iconoclastic rhetoric in each of these philosophical revolutions has a ritual familiarity: the repudiated image is stigmatized by notions such as artifice, illusion, vulgarity, irrationality; and the new image (which is often declared not to be an image at all) is honoured by the titles of nature, reason and enlightenment (Mitchell, *Iconology* 165).

The cycle is completed when the iconoclastic reaction (Kant's idealism) resembles the thinking that preceded the target of the iconoclasm (scholastic philosophy). This kind of process is seen in Murray's students' rejection of TV in favour of film. Their dismissal of TV as "the death throes of human consciousness" resembles the reaction to TV of the parents of the 60s generation. In this regard, the students take on some of their grandparents' reactionary conservatism.

Secondly, Mitchell explains how the process of idolatry/iconoclasm is central to imperial conquest: "[e]ither the empire is ruled by a god, a living idol, or the empire sets its face against idolatry in all its local forms and makes iconoclasm a central feature of colonial conquest" (Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* 160). So, the act of iconoclasm is predicated on the erection of an alternative idol in the place of the smashed idol; this idol can then, of course, be the target of future iconoclasts as new empires rule. Iconoclasts necessarily become idolaters as the process continues in a cyclical fashion.

The scene in *White Noise* where this relationship between iconoclasm and idolatry is most clearly played out, and when the status of the TV as the novel's most attractive and repulsive idol is established, occurs when the Gladney family take shelter from what is described as an "Airborne Toxic Event" in an abandoned Boy Scout camp out of town. The great unknown of the toxic cloud produces an appetite amongst the evacuees for impossible myths and reduces their critical faculties sufficiently for idolatry to creep in. The evacuees form crowds of idolaters and the objects of their idolatry are many. Babette tries to comfort a group of blind and elderly evacuees by reading to them. She reads from a tabloid newspaper of what various "leading psychics" predict for the coming year; she reads to a captivated audience of how, "a Japanese consortium will buy Air Force One and turn it into a luxury flying condominium", of how "the ghost of Elvis Presley will be seen taking lonely walks at dawn around Graceland", and of how "the spirit of Lyndon B. Johnson will contact CBS executives to arrange an interview on live TV" (145). The response of the audience is like that of the faithful idolater, prostrate before their idol: "[n]o one seemed amazed … There was no interest shown in discussion", because the stories "occupied some recess of passive belief" (144). A crowd also amasses around Heinrich, Jack and Babette's son, whose discourse is antithetical to his mother's. He speaks with great confidence and knowledge about the Airborne Toxic Event and the response to it by the authorities, relying on scientific evidence he has gleaned from school and information he has gathered from various media outlets. His discourse may be the opposite in content to that of his mother's, but the tone he uses is very similar. As Jack narrates: Babette "employed her storytelling voice ...[with its]... sincere and lilting tone" (142), and Heinrich, while "talking about the airborne toxic event in a technical way" used a voice which "sang with prophetic disclosure" (130). His audience's response is also similar to the response of his mother's audience: "[p]eople listened attentively to this adolescent … [they] moved in closer, impressed by the boy's knowledgeability" (130). However, Heinrich's apparent smashing of idols of the mind is revealed to be just another form of idolatry. Channeling Jean-Francois Lyotard's vision of the ever-increasing specialization of science, Heinrich brings into question the authority of his rationalist, evidence-based approach to an evermore complex reality: "[w]hat good is knowledge", he asks,

"if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything" (148-149).

The evacuees are shown to be the product of a culture depicted in part one of the novel as fixated on catastrophe, with consumerism offered as a kind of panacea. In these early chapters, the sources of individual and collective catastrophe are shown to be so numerous and so relentlessly advertised by numerous media outlets, that the rational response of the individual is one of stupefaction and impotence, attenuated only through an immersion in consumerism. This culture of mediated catastrophe also fuels the demands among the residents of Blacksmith for various "idols of the mind". Therefore, the reasoned and plausible claims of Heinrich are given and received as if they were prophecy, while the absurd and utterly implausible predictions offered by Babette are offered and accepted as irrefutable fact: a form of idolatry of the mind reigns.

Before addressing the final scenes of the novel, it is necessary to consider the importance of Jack and his wife Babette's youngest son Wilder. Early on in the novel, there is a scene, with Wilder at its centre, where the children of the family are surprised to see Babette, their mother, on the television. This scene is an example of DeLillo "sounding the idol" of the TV rather than indulging in the kind of iconoclasm displayed by numerous other contemporary authors and theorists. The children discover their mother televised on a local cable station giving her weekly classes to retirees. In this moment of discovery the TV seems to Jack to be not just another household object; rather it is imbued with a terrible symbolic potency with ostensible god-like powers. He describes the image of Babette in a language that Murray has used previously to describe TV: "distanced, sealed off, timeless". Her image has an effect like that of an idol on the faithful: "[s]he was shining a light on us … We were being shot through with Babette. Her image was projected on our bodies, swam in us and through us" (104-105). Jack tries to maintain some skepticism, some doubt, some acceptance of ambiguity: "I tried to tell myself it was only television". However, Murray's proselytizing for the TV as idol has had an effect and reduced Jack to a child at the knees of its mother/idol: "[o]nce again I began to think Murray might

be on to something … A strangeness gripped me, a sense of psychic disorientation … A two-syllable infantile cry, *ba-ba*, issued from the deeps of my soul" (104). If the TV is an idol then it can either be worshiped or smashed, yet Wilder's response to the TV with its projected image of his mother is to do neither. His response is an example of a "neutral" way, as Jack explains: "[o]nly Wilder remained calm" (105). It might be a "neutral" response in that it is not like that of his siblings who are "flushed with [the] excitement" of zealotry, but his response is, nevertheless, meaningful and compassionate. As Jack narrates, "Wilder approached the set and touched her body, leaving a handprint on the dusty surface of the screen" (105). Although the screen is a threshold Wilder cannot traverse to reach his mother, his attempt to touch her image is a gesture which enacts an existential paradox best summed up by Ernest Becker: there may be bodily barriers between us that we cannot cross, we may be "housed in heart-pumping bod[ies]", but through symbolic acts, like Wilder's, through a "symbolic identity that brings [us] sharply out of nature", we are capable of making connections, however tenuous (Becker 26).[3] Wilder's response might be interpreted as neither iconoclasm nor idolatry, but also as showing a trace of both. On the one hand, he strips her image (but does not smash it) of any mysterious potency, re-rendering it as simply the image of a particular boy's mother and, on the other, he celebrates (but does not worship) that image as having meaning for him personally. Thus, he alone "remain[s] at the TV set, within inches of the dark screen, crying softly" (104-105). This image, which inspired the cover of the 1985 edition addressed earlier in this article, is perhaps one of the most significant images in the novel, as it acts as a reminder of the importance of accepting nuance and ambivalence when considering complex realities, of the benefits of steering a middle course between the fluctuating planes of two extremes, and of the potential significance and beauty of what DeLillo calls a "neutral" life.

4. Conclusion

In the final scenes of the novel, the child Wilder takes centre stage. The last chapter opens with an account of how Wilder "got on his plastic tricycle, rode it around the block, turned right onto a dead end

street and pedaled noisily to the dead end" (322). The repetition of the word "dead" not only builds tension, but it also sets up Wilder as a surrogate for Jack, the novel's protagonist, who has also been facing a kind of "dead end" from the beginning of the novel. With this thrilling and deeply moving passage, DeLillo scorns the idea that all contemporary art suffers from a "waning of affect." Wilder finds his way to the freeway behind the Gladney's house and somehow defies death by cycling across the first lane, over the grass median and across the second lane of speeding traffic. This journey mimics the very structure of the novel, with its long first and third parts that straddle the short median of the second. As Wilder makes it safely to a ditch on the far side of the freeway a passing motorist finally reaches the boy and "hold[s] him aloft for the clamoring elders to see" (324). This climax can be read as an enactment of Jack's journey through the novel as he dices with the perils of either/or thinking and the worship of "bad" objects, all the while learning how to, like Wilder, steer a middle course towards human contact, towards the ambiguous "muddles and quirks" that constitute a richly symbolic, yet inexorably finite, life. It is also a scene which leads to the most lasting image of the novel's close.

That image is entirely appropriate in that it is one of a "middle course". Along with other Blacksmith residents, Jack, Babette and Wilder go to the freeway overpass near their house to view the sun on its course as it hangs, briefly suspended in the middle distance between the two fluctuating plains of earth and sky. DeLillo saves his most lyrical prose for his depiction of the sunset that captivates those gathered to watch it: "[l]ight bursts through, tracers and smoky arcs. Overcasts enhance the mood … There are turreted skies, light storms, softly falling streamers … Rain brings on graded displays, wonderful running hues". The language here recalls his earlier description of the Airborne Toxic Event. The crowd's response before the sunset is similarly ambivalent: "[s]ome people are scared by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don't know how to feel, are ready to go either way" (324). This uncertainty felt by the onlookers of the sunset is similar to that felt by the readers of *White Noise* towards the end of the novel. Indeed, the sunset is presented by DeLillo as an imagetext which represents the art of fiction: he writes of how "[c]louds intensify the drama", of how the "sky takes on content, feeling an exalted narrative life" and of how the "sky is under a spell,

powerful and storied" (324-325). Like so many of DeLillo's novels, then, *White Noise* ends with a meditation on the power of fiction and the uneasy position it occupies between the avant-garde and the mainstream, between being an alternative, oppositional artform and being another commodity, absorbed by the wider culture. Several critics have explored this idea, most notably Peter Boxall, quoted above. However, the sunset not only represents this, but it also becomes a fitting emblem for the middle course, suggested by the novel, between the dangerous extremes of iconoclasm and idolatry. In this sense, how the sunset functions on a diegetic level (as an emblem of an uncertain response to a complex existence, of the response of characters who are "ready to go either way") points towards how the sunset should function on an extradiegetic level (as an image that the critic might "sound", rather than iconoclastically critique). DeLillo guides the reader/critic to the best middle course in the reading of the novel.

This middle course can be seen as a "sounding" of images rather than their worship or destruction, an acknowledgement of how they might hold power over viewers and, if not a smashing of the image, then at least, through an analysis of how an image functions, a breaking of this spell that they seem to have. The Baudrillardian approach to images, which regards them as ubiquitous objects of a kind of cultural worship and which provokes the iconoclastic criticism that W. J. T. Mitchell has critiqued, is an approach that runs counter to this less unequivocal, more richly ambiguous, treatment of the image. Many critics who employ Baudrillard's theories to analyse *White Noise* have fallen into the trap of making the kind of extreme, declarative, unambiguous statements about the novel that Baudrillard has made about culture more generally. For them, Jack is trapped in a world of simulations from which there is no escape and is suffering, like all postmodern subjects, the "collapse of the real" (see Messmer, Lentriccia, Duval, Wilcox, and so on, quoted above and in endnotes). This paper has aimed to avoid this either/or trap, opting instead, in its analysis of the TV in *White Noise*, for a middle course between iconoclasm and idolatry.

For Jack, this middle course is a position where the magical promises of the idols that tempt him throughout the novel lose their

power to captivate him completely. He instead can look upon the sunset as something other, as something real and rooted in the present that he occupies with his wife, son and fellow citizens. Nevertheless, it is also a position from which the sunset can be seen in all its symbolic power: it denotes the enormity of that which is not Jack, and so forces him to accept his, and humankind's, unenviable condition of being knowingly mortal. The sunset, then, is both these things: something real, something earthbound and yet something deeply symbolic. The sunset does not symbolize the promise of immortal life, but neither does it signal the coming of an apocalypse; perhaps it is emblematic of the precarious position of humankind: mortal and yet looking out at an infinite universe, getting a glimpse of eternity. The image of the sunset is, like many such images before, deeply ambivalent: it is not to be worshipped, but neither is it to be rejected (or "smashed"), like an idol. This article has been an attempt to find that "somewhere in between" in its treatment of the imagetext of television, "sounding" it to see what it says about the aesthetic and ethical positions that DeLillo occupies.

Notes

[1] For similar readings of DeLillo, see John N. Duvall: "Jack Gladney lives in a world of simulations, modelings of the world tied to no origin or source" (Duval, 1994: 138), and Leonard Wilcox: "The informational world Baudrillard delineates bears a striking resemblance to the world of *White Noise*: one characterized by the collapse of the real and the flow of signifiers emanating from an information society, by a 'loss of the real` in a black hole of simulation and the play and exchange of signs" (Wilcox 346). Other critics who have contributed to this strain of DeLillo criticism are John Frow ("The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*", 1990), Scott Rettberg ("American Simulacra: DeLillo in Light of Postmodernism", 1999), Bradley Butterfield ("Baudrillard's Primitivism and *White Noise*: '*The only avant-garde we've got*'", 1999), Stephen N. doCarmo ("Subjects, Objects, and the Postmodern Differend in Don Delillo's *White Noise*", 2000) and Michael Stockinger ("Experiments on Living Matter or How to Save the Narrative from Extinction: The Unfinished Story of Jean

Baudrillard's and Don DeLillo's Cultural Pathology", 2000).

² In more recent criticism, there is evidence of this more nuanced, critical analysis of how the theories of Baudrillard interact with the fiction of DeLillo. This article aims to follow this more nuanced approach. Mark Schuster's book-length study of the connections between the novels of DeLillo and Jean Baudrillard's work is one such example. In it Schuster explores many differences between the two figures, pointing out, for instance, how DeLillo, "unlike Baudrillard … envisions a world in which subjectivity remains intact and the subject has the capacity to alter the ideological framework of society" (Schuster 4). Another recent contribution to this strain of DeLillo criticism was made by the critic Mark Brown who argues that: "the text [of *White Noise*] itself demonstrates DeLillo's suspicion of literary and cultural theories which propose postmodernity's potentially infinite deferrals and regressions." Brown, instead, "relocates the novel as a text which explores postmodern themes, while at the same time demonstrating DeLillo's parodic intentions towards postmodern culture by consciously locating textual authority at the moment of death" (Brown 19). Erik Cofer also aims to push the analysis of DeLillo's fiction beyond the critical parameters of postmodernism, specifically employing the concept of post-postmodernism, explored by Jeffrey Nealon (Cofer).

³ Becker sums up the existential paradox best when he writes: "[m]an has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self … He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet … Yet, at the same time … man is a worm and food for worms. This is the paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body" (Becker 26).

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