



The Postmodern Relationship with Nature in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Alexander Davis

University of Ottawa

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: 2019/03/5
Accepted: 2019/03/20
Available online: 2019/08/25
DOI:

KEYWORDS

Ecocriticism
Don DeLillo
Baudrillard
Consumerism
Literature

ABSTRACT

With climate change and species endangerment a news regularity, it is essential to examine how the dominant postmodern social activity, consumerism, impacts nature. Importantly, it is necessary to inquire about the human relation to nature in postmodernity. This paper examines Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* to understand how consumerism reconfigures the human relationship with nature and importantly transforms this relationship along consumer parameters. Using Jean Baudrillard's philosophy of the consumer society and hyperreality, this paper elaborates how the characters of *White Noise* perceive and interact with nature through images and signs of entertainment and advertising. Shifting from literary predecessors, these consumer aspects remove the affiliation and critical aspect to inquire about the environment. Ultimately, while the environment once offered tranquility, harmony, and reflection, the images and signs of nature are merely recirculated and postmodern sites of consumption are instead accepted as society's 'natural' environment. While highlighting these aspects in *White Noise* the paper relates these insights to the postmodern condition and concludes with strategies to reclaim the former empathic relationship with nature.

Introduction

Recently, National Geographic's video of a starving polar bear in northern Canada has sparked both shock and tremendous sadness; ultimately, it depicts the potential impact of climate change (Gibbens). The slow demise of the struggling bear poignantly signals unfolding ecological and global environmental destruction. However, excluding direct witnesses, everyone has viewed this event through a device. Such images reflect our overdependence on fossil fuels and factory farming, but also influence our relation to the environment. Best and Kellner explain in *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* that

new technologies and forms of media, and socio-economic reformation constitute a “postmodern social formation” (3). However, how does this postmodern social formation impact the environment? Climate scientists regularly inform the public about increased global temperatures but are berated as “scaremongering” (Gollom). According to Erle Ellis, such warnings “turn off about 75 percent of people” (Gollom). Conversely, when nine in ten doctors recommend a toothbrush, it is considered valuable information. Such is the consumerist inversion of values in late capitalism. The postmodern social formation fundamentally transforms our relationship with the environment and reconfigures nature’s purpose.

Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* reflects the postmodern interconnection with consumption and nature as protagonist Jack Gladney and others regularly interact with the environment through consumer behaviour. Characters specifically consume images as entertainment and advertisements, and ritualize their existential purpose as consumers via arduous shopping. The critical sociologist Zigmunt Bauman asserts that consumerism integrates every social aspect of postmodernity and fundamentally reconfigures individuals’ relationships with others and the external world. According to Roxana Cruceanu, the postmodern consumer does not pursue the goods and services necessary for satisfying essential needs, but is rather motivated to acquire and access goods and services as concern to their particular significance in social relations (82). Contrary to the modernist consumer ethos, Peter Corrigan explains that postmodern consumers do not specifically consume goods, but rather consume constructed meanings of such goods and services (SC 179). Indeed, Baudrillard similarly recognized consumption as more than the material satisfaction of needs, and argued that consumption is rather “...the virtual totality of all objects and messages ready-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse” (SO 218). Consequently, postmodern consumption impacts human perception as consumption necessitates the navigation, manipulation, and filtered collection of consumer discourse and signs. Accordingly, in *White Noise*, characters become dissociated from nature as they cannot conceive it without a consumer lens. It is through the consumer perception that nature is fundamentally reconfigured. As David Harvey explains in *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference*, that “The final victory of modernity...is not the disappearance of the non-modern world, but its artificial preservation and reconstruction” (302). It is precisely this “artificial preservation and reconstruction”—as a symptom of the postmodernity—that DeLillo depicts in *White Noise*. This is achieved through the lens of Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality and theory of the consumer society. Gladney and his family consume televised images of environmental disasters as a form of entertainment, while

nature itself is manipulated by and interpreted through advertisements. Finally, if our relationship with nature was ever empathetic, DeLillo bluntly asserts that we have replaced nature with the supermarket. *White Noise* reflects our altered relation with nature in late capitalism, wherein nature functions as entertaining simulacra, is interpreted through advertising mediums, and the supermarket is assigned our *natural* environment. The aim of this paper is to elaborate how DeLillo presents the prevalence of postmodern consumption in relation to nature and to discuss this impact of postmodernity on our relationship with the environment.

Theoretical framework: baudrillard and postmodernism

Consumerism is the central socio-economic activity in postmodernity and French philosopher Jean Baudrillard recognizes it as constituting the underlying postmodern framework. Indeed, Baudrillard argues in *The Consumer Society* that because of the intensification of consumerism in postmodernity, humanity increasingly alienates itself not simply from one another, but ecologically as well. He argues that consumerism encourages the “alienated form of *personal* relationship[s]” (CS 163), but continues that nature itself is commodified and recycled through the signs and codes used in consumer interaction (CS 30). As all social interaction and discourse are relegated to a consumer logic, Baudrillard posits that individuals navigate and exist in a simulation of reality: the hyperreal. In *The Postmodern*, Simon Malpas elaborates on Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal in relation to consumerism. Malpas explains that,

The circulation, purchase, sale, appropriation of differentiated goods and signs/objects today constitute our language, our code, the code by which the entire society communicates and converses. Such is the structure of consumption, its language, by comparison with which individual needs and pleasures are merely speech effects. (122)

Baudrillard’s theory of postmodernism is valuable because it provides insights into humanity’s postmodern relationship with nature, which are clearly comparable to DeLillo’s *White Noise*. Indeed, similar to how the characters in *White Noise* interact with the world via consumption, Baudrillard highlights how “Work, leisure, nature, and culture...are now at last mixed and blended, climatized and homogenized in the same sweeping vista of perpetual shopping” (CS 29-30). Baudrillard’s theorization of postmodernity provides not only a valuable framework for understanding Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, but fundamentally proffers insight from this critique into humanity’s current postmodern existence. Although Marc

Schuster provides an excellent comparative analysis of Baudrillard's philosophy and DeLillo's fiction in *Don DeLillo, Jean Baudrillard, and the Consumer Conundrum*, this study is unique in that it extends the consumer problematization of postmodernity to one affecting nature more broadly. Accordingly, this study uses Baudrillard's philosophy to proffer an ecocritical analysis in relation to consumerism.

Using Baudrillard's philosophy as a theoretical framework to examine DeLillo's *White Noise*, the following discusses three findings of how postmodernity reconfigures the human relationship with nature along a consumerist orientation.

Nature as Entertaining

Television is integral to the life of Gladney and his family. The Gladneys often watch television in a Friday ritual with a penchant enthusiasm for natural disasters. Gladney describes that,

we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese. There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never been so attentive in our duty, our Friday assembly...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. (WN 64)

The Gladneys' relationship with the environment is estranged as the family merely consumes images of nature through a device for entertainment. Rather than sympathizing with the victims, the environment, or even absorbing information, the Gladneys are instead captivated by the action of 'sliding' houses, 'crackling' fire, and 'advancing' lava. The purpose of these Friday night rituals is to consume vibrantly active images of destruction. Because postmodern consumption is not predicated upon satisfying material needs, the Gladneys desire "something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (WN 64). Noting this tension in postmodern consumption, Baudrillard explains that, "...consumption must henceforward either keep surpassing itself or keep repeating itself merely in order to remain what it is—namely, a reason for living" (SO 223). The Gladneys then are immersed within a cyclical reference of images dependent upon the preceding grandiose image of natural destruction. To suggest the central problem is that the Gladneys do not inquire into the causes of natural disasters, or their implications, misses the point: postmodern consumption not only necessitates the uncritical consumption of images and signs, but fundamentally *is* uncritical consumption. The process is not one that places inquiry as secondary, but rather is a process that does not include inquiry as part of its condition. Rather, Best and Kellner explain that in

postmodern media the distinction between information and entertainment implodes and consequently the relation to an objective reality merely becomes immersed in the signs, codes, and images of cyclical referents (119). Consequently, Jorge Larrain asserts that all critique is abated in favour of the consumption, manipulation, and interaction of images and signs (63).

Postmodern consumption here reverberates Marshall McLuhan's idea that 'the medium is the message;' however, Baudrillard takes the idea further and relates it to our estrangement with nature. He explains that, "there is something like a law of technological inertia... the more closely the real is pursued with colour, depth, and one technical improvement after another, the greater does the real absence from the world grow" (CS 122). Because audio-visual technical advancements enhance the representation of natural disasters, the Gladneys cannot perceive natural disasters as relative to the environment. The implications to the environment are excluded in favour of overpowering audio-visual effects and capabilities. It is in accordance with the entertaining reportage of nature that the Gladneys are alienated from nature. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the characters' perception of the world is guided by conceptions of entertainment—as instanced when character Alfonse proudly mentions that, "Japan is pretty good for disaster footage" (WN 66). The depiction of disasters exclude their very explanation—which is constructive in understanding and avoiding such catastrophes. The purpose of nature's representation is to be entertained, not to understand nature and certainly not to accentuate our relationship with it.

This accepted televised image of nature as entertainment penetrates the real world and similarly functions with uncritical consumption. *White Noise* most clearly demonstrates this corruption when Gladney, his family, and members of the community begin observing the radiant sunsets over their community of Blacksmith. The residents are unable to ponder the correlation between the emergence of the glowing sunsets and the man-made natural disaster known earlier in the novel as the Airborne Toxic Event. Instead, DeLillo describes the audience as "tak[ing] a thermos of iced tea...carrying fruit and nuts, cool drinks...with webbed beach chairs" (WN 324) and how "The collapsible chairs are yanked open, the old people sit" (WN 325). These are the enjoyable pleasures, which Nathan Jandl argues is the "confirmation of the tragedy of our disinterest in nature" (452). While highlighting our disinterest in nature, DeLillo provides an answer regarding *how* the characters of *White Noise*, and we, ever came to be disinterested. Indeed, the characters approach the sunsets, which are clearly a by-product of the Airborne Toxic Event, in the same manner in which families engage in attending a drive-in theatre, or indeed, how the Gladneys spend their Friday

evenings. The audience, comfortable and relaxed, merely enjoy the spectacle of the image without critique and inquiry.

The postmodern social formation that centralizes consumption as a mode of existence fundamentally alters our perception of nature and, in tandem, removes our critical capacity to examine our affiliation with nature. Postmodern consumers are continuously participating in the active consumption of signs—in this case, signs manipulated for entertainment. Accordingly, Baudrillard explains in *Simulacra and Simulation* that in postmodernity,

people come to *touch*, they look as if they were touching, their gaze is only an aspect of tactile manipulation. It is certainly a question of tactile manipulation. It is certainly a question of a tactile universe, no longer a visual or discursive one, and the people are directly implicated in the process: to manipulate/to be manipulated, to ventilate/to be ventilated, to circulate/to make circulate, which is no longer of the order of representation, nor of distance, nor of reflection. It is something that is part of panic, and of a world in panic. (SS 70)

Consequently, the postmodern social formation reconstitutes how populations interact with the world by actively using signs and codes for subjective purposes. However, in avoiding the existential confrontation with physical demise, this manipulation of signs is fundamentally utilized as a means for entertainment. Consequently, according to Best and Kellner, the “masses thus become a sullen silent majority in which all meaning, messages, and solicitations implode as if sucked into a black hole” (121). Gladney’s colleague Murray—whom Peter Boxall considers the novel’s representative of postmodernism – explains the postmodern situation as how, “Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material...It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability” (WN 37-38).

Indeed, as Elise Martucci explains in *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo*, “the distinction between natural and man-made has been obliterated by the dominance of the image” (79). Following Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, the characters in *White Noise* are unable to distinguish between the real world and its representation. Accordingly, Kellner explains in *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* how Baudrillard asserts that television “reproduce[s] images, signs, and codes which in turn come to constitute an autonomous realm of (hyper)reality... a significant reversal of the relation between representation and reality” (68). Consequently, individuals of postmodernity interact and create their subjective understanding as predicated upon hyperreality. Due to the pervasive consumer logic in the postmodern condition, Leonard

Wilcox explains that it becomes increasingly, “impossible to distinguish between the spectacle and the real. Even the natural world—the ultimate ground for the ‘real’—succumbs to a hyper-real condition of multiple regress without origin” (200). *White Noise* demonstrates that our consuming ethos removes our critical perception of nature and affects the understanding of our relationship with the environment. Because the image is the object of our consumption, such information relating to the environment is merely excluded. Similar to the characters of *White Noise*, we may view the starving polar bear as an unfortunate event, yet are unable to internalize this occurrence with reference to the innate effects of late capitalism.

Nature and Advertising

Advertising perpetuates an allure for needs predicated on individual security and desire at the expense of externalities. Baudrillard recognizes the centrality of advertising as marking the transition from an industrial society to a consumer society (CS 50). Elaborating upon Baudrillard’s philosophy, Trevor Norris asserts that, “Advertising and marketing become the signs, language and entire communicative structure within our society and come to dominate all other forms of discourse and signification.” Advertising has become ubiquitously familiar; our perception of the environment again becomes estranged as this new familiarity obstructs nature. Following Raymond Williams’ claim that human needs are satisfied in immaterial spheres, Leiss et al., assert in their book *Social Communication in Advertising: Consumption in the Mediated Marketplace* that “advertising distracts us by channelling all needs through the object-laden rituals in the consumer marketplace” (84-85). Similarly, Baudrillard elaborates that advertising provides “a repetitious, and therefore reassuring, backdrop of signs against which vicissitudes of the world are registered through an intermediary” (CS 121-122). This ‘reassuring backdrop of signs’ is the familiarity of those brands common in daily existence. However, such signs fundamentally intrude upon nature and essentially appropriate the formal familiarity of nature. *White Noise* presents this dissociation from nature through the seductive arrangement of familiar signs against the backdrop of nature. For example, Gladney cannot patiently stand in a stadium of grass without noticing the advertising signs of his surroundings. He identifies, “The Airport Marriott, the Downtown Travelodge, the Sheraton Inn and Conference Centre” (WN 15). Nor can Gladney follow snowmobiles across an open field without considering paint companies: “Krylon, Rust-Oleum, Red Devil” (WN 159). Accordingly, John Duvall explains that “advertising subliminally shape” (440) the characters’ unconscious. However, while

signifying comfort, rest, colour, perfection, and so forth, the mere familiarity fundamentally reflects our changed relation to the environment. Gladney perceives nature through known brands because his epistemology is framed by a consumerist lens. Indeed, this is reinforced by the advertising research conducted by Alastair Goode, wherein he explains that, “one potent way an ad can exert influence is at a ‘sub-conscious’ level, driven by implicit memory” (110). The Gladney’s memories of brands, their familiarity to him, are reflected in the manner wherein he interacts with the environment.

Brands and advertisements seemingly emerge from an imagined nature as the postmodern inversion entails the logic of the consumer society. Ostergaard et al., explain that “Signs imitate something, which is perceived as being real. Here the origins of simulacra, that is, the individual’s essence, the Social and Nature only exist as imaginations that can be regarded as an effect of a culture disconnecting the ‘natural’ order of signs and their referents” (342). In addition, this inversion transforms the traditional conception of the pastoral ideal wherein the consumer ethos subsumes the pastoral ideal, and a postmodern model emerges. Scott Hess specifically argues that in the postmodern condition, advertising incorporates the pastoral ideal to manipulate nature in favour of consumer capitalism. Hess asserts that, “...the entire advertising industry is structured in a pastoral mode, promising a life of perfect leisure and secular happiness without effort, simply by buying the correct product” (78). Instead, Hess explains that the postmodern pastoral ideal fundamentally emphasizes that it is the product, “rather than nature, that guarantees pastoral fulfilment” (79). DeLillo clearly demonstrates this transformation. The Gladneys pass five signs on their journey to Farmingotn, which advertises ‘The Most Photographed Barn in America.’ However, upon arrival they encounter photographers and a tour bus. Gladney’s colleague, Murray, comments on the postmodern pastoral ideal by explaining that “No one sees the barn... Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn it becomes impossible to see the barn” (WN 12). Elise Martucci explains that this reconfigures the traditional pastoral ideal, and that “the peace and simplicity of nature are subverted by the billboards, tour busses, a souvenir booth and a multitude of cameras that comprise the characters’ surroundings” (80). Accordingly, the traditional pastoral ideal of nature is substituted by the dominance of the sign. Realizing the supremacy of signs over nature and the pastoral ideal, Murray explains to Gladney that “We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura...An accumulation of nameless energies” (WN 12). Therefore, according to Ostergaard et al., the postmodern dominance of the sign ultimately becomes cyclical as “There is no longer any reference to a reality external to the exchange of signs” (342) and nature itself becomes

merely a communicative code entrapped within the sign. Such human interactions with nature can only be interpreted through the predominant lens of which social relations are facilitated; which, in postmodernity is consumerism. Furthermore, the predominating consumer ethos provoked Frederic Jameson to explain in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that nature is “no longer Nature at all, as it was in precapitalist societies, but something else which we must now identify” (35). Consequently, this identification with, and even relationship with, nature is incorporated within the wider consumer paradigm of postmodernity.

The birth of the individual in the late eighteenth century created an existential anxiety according to Leiss et al., (41)—however in the post-war world, advertisers are apt to aid individuals resolve this anxiety. It is not that advertising alienates us with its claims and images, rather Baudrillard explains that “we are swayed by the fact that ‘they’ are sufficiently concerned to want to address us” (SO 170). In this sense, advertisements inform us that they care. The world is hurting, but buying Dawn Soap demonstrates the power to clean through the image of easily removing oil-tarnished ducks—meanwhile avoiding a discussion about plastics and sea waste. Advertisements induce familiarity and thus we feel at home through the familiarity of our products. This allure motivates us to seek its guidance.

Replacing Nature with the Supermarket

While consuming images of nature for entertainment and advertisements distort our perception of nature in the postmodern condition, the proliferation of shopping malls and the supermarket demonstrate a significant shift in what our new ‘natural’ environment is. While department stores and marketplaces existed prior to postmodern consumerism, Rob Shields explains in *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption* that,

postmodern consumption sites are characterized by a new spatial form which is a synthesis of leisure and consumption activities previously held apart by being located in different sites... [resulting in] ...practices which characterize the spatial performance typical of leisure spaces and special practices which characterize the performance of commercial sites. (6)

Consequently, postmodern consumption is a lifestyle activity rather than the ‘pre-postmodern’ notion of consuming to collect the means and goods to satisfy needs. Furthermore, according to Baudrillard, the emergence of these postmodern sites of consumption develop a consumer subjectivity of “unprecedented comfort” (CS 29). The shift in the human relationship with the surrounding environment is clearly reflected in the

transcendental writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson wrote in *Nature* that, “In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature” (13). While this perceived unity with nature is proposed in eighteenth century literature, DeLillo illustrates our removal from this unity. Rather, what we have united with, what has become natural (i.e. familiar) to us in late capitalism, are postmodern consumption sites that encourage and reproduce the *lifestyle* pursuit and accumulation of the signs of goods and services. In *White Noise*, Gladney reflects our newfound embrace of postmodern consumption sites. He describes how in the supermarket,

I was suddenly aware of the dense environmental texture. The automatic doors opened and closed, breathing abruptly. Colour and odors seemed sharper. The sound of gliding feet emerged from a dozen other noises, from the sublittoral drone of maintenance systems, from the rustle of newsprint as shoppers scanned their horoscopes in the tabloids up front...Gliding feet. I heard them as clearly, a sad numb shuffle in every aisle. (WN 168-169)

In ‘breathing,’ the shopping mall seems to live, through ‘sublittoral drone’ automatic systems replace aquatic ecosystems, and what once was a ‘rustle’ of leaves in the wind is merely the rustle of superstitious consumers. For the characters in *White Noise*, the supermarket typifies an organic and living environment and effectively highlights our changed relation with nature. In *The Maine Woods*, Henry David Thoreau disparaged the human destruction of nature, arguing that in forests, “the pine lives and grows and spires, lifting its evergreen arms to the light... A pine cut down, a dead pine, is no more a pine than a dead human carcass is a man” (124). As exemplified with the sunset in *White Noise*, harm to the environment is merely consumed as entertainment in late capitalism. However, *White Noise* again demonstrates that our previous empathy for nature has been transferred to the postmodern sites of consumption. For example, when the items of the supermarket are reorganized, the characters of *White Noise* are agitated and unnerved. Disgruntled by the change to their familiar environment, shoppers “walk in a fragmented trance...trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they’d seen the Cream of Wheat” (WN 325) and they worry about further “betrayal” (WN 325). The characters are pleasingly confused about the Airborne Toxic Event, find natural disasters entertaining, and yet the characters panic, distrust, and feel betrayed when their familiarity in the supermarket—the environmental recipient of consumer empathy—is disrupted. Accordingly,

Gladney safely justifies that “Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip” (WN 170).

DeLillo furthermore exemplifies how attention to improving society, and our world, is only directed to postmodern sites of consumption. Gladney observes that, “Some of the houses in town were showing signs of neglect. The park benches needed repair, the broken streets needed resurfacing. Signs of the times. But the supermarket did not change, except for the better” (WN 170). Regardless of the dilapidating nature of the environment, consumerism impels individuals to focus solely on the advancement of their own individual worth at the expense of community, and as demonstrated, the environment. Rather than compassion for community and others, Tim Kasser expounded in *The High Price of Materialism* that materialistic individuals adjust their priorities in favour of selfish pursuits and interests at the expense of collective and ecological considerations (89). It is therefore conceivable how Gladney and the characters of *White Noise* tolerate the decay of their society and nature because the clean, stable, and consistently improving supermarket is solace in pursuing and satisfying materialistic desires. It matters little whether or not the Airborne Toxic Event ushered in vibrant sunsets as a result of biochemical catastrophe or whether cataclysmic natural disasters have occurred or are impending because these do not hinder the shopping experience.

The transfer of empathy from nature to postmodern sites of consumption demonstrate what Baudrillard noted as the system of objects and the consumer society. Indeed, Baudrillard notes that, “Work, leisure, nature, and culture... are now at last mixed and blended, climatized and homogenized in the same sweeping vista of perpetual shopping” (CS 29-30). The postmodern consuming ethos fundamentally incorporates all societal aspects, including nature, and consequently alters our relationship with nature. Marc Schuster explains in *Don DeLillo, Jean Baudrillard, and the Consumer Conundrum*, that we surround ourselves with objects, which ultimately “insulate us from meaningful interactions...we are too busy accumulating and arranging commodities... [that we fail to] connect with each other or the world at large” (12). This is because postmodern consumption, as stated earlier (Corrigan), functions as the consumption of signs and not simply physical goods and services. Rather, as Baudrillard asserts, consumer society relegates nature into hyperreality, which imposes a “qualitatively new kind of relationship” (SO 28). Nature becomes a focal in our referential consumption of signs. On the one hand, buying organic oranges from high-end grocery store chains reinforces a superior form of social status, whereas picking oranges from a tree becomes devalued. Indeed, as Gladney observes fruit in the supermarket, he identifies careful

orchestration and presentation; he perceives that the fruit “looked carefully observed, like four-color fruit in a guide to photography (WN 170). Here, fruit does not even have an origin in nature, but rather its organic quality reverts to photographic perfection—its referent is human manipulation and construction. Accordingly, as Baudrillard asserts, nature is a “simulation, a ‘consommé’ of the signs of nature set back in circulation—in short, nature recycled” (CS 101). Baudrillard continues that because of humanity’s navigation of the hyperreal, such simulations appear “more real than nature” (SS 28). We cannot perceive nature, let alone ecological destruction, because our perception of nature is re-circulated in hyperreality; indeed, Ostergaard et al., emphasize that the consumer ontology is itself a cyclical referential. Our empathy for nature is transferred instead to the supermarket because the signs signified by products directly affect our identities and status. The image of the dying polar bear fails to signify an authentic warning, much as the Airborne Toxic Event fails to awaken the characters in *White Noise*, however the mere reorganization of goods in the supermarket is enough to promote localized outrage.

Conclusion

The characters of *White Noise* navigate, interact, and understand the world through postmodern consumerism. Gladney and others consume images and signs as forms of entertainment, perceive nature through advertisements—either physical or from memory—and situate their empathy in postmodern sites of consumption. Rather than environmental deterioration, the characters are ultimately concerned with unobstructed consumption. In using Baudrillard’s philosophy of postmodernism, this paper explains how postmodernity centralizes consumerism as a social function that extends beyond peer relations. The postmodern condition reformulates how individuals perceive and interact with nature, which removes the inquiring function of human consciousness to examine nature. The problems of nature therefore remain unhindered because the sole recognition of natural catastrophes occurring are reacted to through the pleasurable consumption of entertainment. While those of ‘pre-postmodernity’ found solace, harmony, and connection with nature, the postmodern individual is significantly alienated from these conditions. However, how can we take DeLillo’s portrayal and navigate a societal direction towards reclaiming awareness for nature?

Greg Garrard claims in *Ecocriticism* that postmodern theories accurately elaborate on ecological issues in the media, however that these theories leave little room for potential change (171). Indeed, in the end of *White Noise*, the characters are distrustful of future supermarket reorganization, however are ultimately comfortable with life. If we are to rethink

our relationship with nature, we must first understand the hegemonic power of consumerism as functioning through entertainment, advertising, and shopping. Haidar Eid explains that Baudrillard's nihilistic perspective is that we are doomed as "the consumer is obliged to consume in order to integrate socially with other consumers" (223). Therefore, to repair our relationship with nature, we must modify and/or resist consumerist hegemony. Excluding the obvious suggestion to remain critical, a pragmatic solution can be borrowed from Naomi Klein. She notes that the "Three R's" –reduce, reuse, and recycle—have failed because only one, reuse, avoids consumption, while reduce and recycle are still grounded in consumerism. However, by embracing reducing and reusing, an actively pragmatic solution will encourage the continuous critical examination of ourselves, as individuals, in relation to both consumer society and more needed than ever, nature. We may embrace this lifestyle or we may select the hopelessness of our situation, enter the supermarket and much like those exhausted of climate scientist warnings, 'check out.'

Reference

- [1]. Baudrillard, J. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006.
- [2]. ---. *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures*. London: Sage Publications, 1998.
- [3]. ---. *The System of Objects*. New York: Verso, 1996.
- [4]. Bauman, Z. *Consuming Life*. New York: Polity Press, 2007.
- [5]. Best, S., & Kellner, D. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1991.
- [6]. Boxall, P. *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*. New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006.
- [7]. Corrigan, P. *The Sociology of Consumption*. London: Sage Publications, 1997.
- [8]. Cruceanu, R. D. "Postmodern Purchase Decisions: Between Real Needs and Social Pressures." *Economics, Management, and Financial Markets*, Vol. 11, NO. 1, 2016, pp. 80-85.
- [9]. DeLillo, D. *White Noise*. Toronto: Penguin Publishers, 1991.
- [10]. Duvall, J. N. "The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Meditation in DeLillo's *White Noise*." In Mark Osteen (Ed.), *White Noise: Text and Criticism* (pp. 432-455). New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- [11]. Eid, H. "*White Noise*: A Late-Capitalist World of Consumerism." *Consumption. Markets and Culture*, Vol. 3, NO. 3, 1999, pp. 215-238. DOI: 10.1080/10253866.1999.9670338

- [12]. Emerson, R. W. *Nature*. Cambridge: James Munroe and Company, 1836.
- [13]. Garrard, G. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge Publishing, 2004.
- [14]. Gibbens, S. "Heart-Wrenching Video Shows Starving Polar Bear on Iceless Land." *National Geographic*, 2017. Retrieved from <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/12/polar-bear-starving-arctic-sea-ice-melt-climate-change-spd/>
- [15]. Gollom, M. "Scientists Accused of Scaremongering, 'overheated claims' with warming to humanity." *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/warning-to-humanity-scientists-scaremongering-1.4403246>
- [16]. Goode, A. "The Implicit and Explicit Role of Ad Memory in Ad Persuasion: Rethinking the Hidden Persuaders." *International Journal of Market Research*, Vol. 49, NO. 1, 2007, pp 95-116. DOI: 0.1177/147078530704900109
- [17]. Harvey, D. *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference*. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
- [18]. Hess, S. "Postmodern Pastoral, Advertising, and the Masque of Technology." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, 2004, Vol. 11, NO. 1, 2004, pp. 71-100. DOI: 10.1093/isle/11.1.71
- [19]. Jameson, F. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- [20]. Jandl, N. "Sustainable Affect: The Social Dimensions of Environmental Attachment in DeLillo's *White Noise*." *Modern Philology*, Vol. 114, NO. 2, 2016, pp. 433-455. DOI: 10.1086/687065
- [21]. Kasser, T. *The High Price of Materialism*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002.
- [22]. Kellner, D. *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1989.
- [23]. Klein, N. "The Change Within: The Obstacles We Face are not just External." *The Nation*, 2014 Retrieved from <https://www.thenation.com/article/change-within-obstacles-we-face-are-not-just-external/>
- [24]. Larrain, J. "Stuart Hall and the Marxist Concept of Ideology." In David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (pp. 46-70). New York: Routledge Publishing, 1996.
- [25]. Leiss, W., Kline, S., Jhally, S., & Botterill, J. *Social Communication in Advertising: Consumption in the Mediated Marketplace*. New York: Routledge Publishing, 2005.
- [26]. Malpas, S. *The Postmodern*. New York: Routledge Publishing, 2005.

- [27]. Martucci, E. A. *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo*. New York: Routledge Publishing, 2007.
- [28]. McLuhan, M. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994.
- [29]. Norris, T. "Consuming Signs, Consuming the *Polis*: Hannah Arendt and Jean Baudrillard on Consumer Society and the Eclipse of the Real." *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, Vol. 2, NO. 2, Retrieved from https://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol2_2/norris.htm
- [30]. Ostergaard, P., Fitchett, J., & Jantzen, C. "A Critique of the Ontology of Consumer Enchantment." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 12, NO. 5, 2013, pp. 337-344. DOI: 10.1002/cb.1438
- [31]. Sarup, M. *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. (2nd ed.). Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993.
- [32]. Schuster, M. *Don DeLillo, Jean Baudrillard, and the Consumer Conundrum*. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008.
- [33]. Shields, R. "Spaces for the Subject of Consumption." In Rob Shields (Ed.), *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption* (pp. 1-20). New York: Routledge Publishing, 1992.
- [34]. Thoreau, H. D. *The Maine Woods*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864.
- [35]. Wilcox, L. "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative." In Hugh Ruppersburg & Tim Engles (Eds.), *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo* (pp. 196-212). Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 2000.

How to cite this manuscript: Alexander Davis. The postmodern relationship with nature in don delillo's white noise. *Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies*, 2019, 2(4), 1-15.