

Reproduction and the shattered aura in don delillo's white noise



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Walter Benjamin's work as a philosopher and theorist speaks at length of mechanical reproduction and the impact it has on society. Benjamin's work can therefore be applied to the society depicted in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, illuminating it as one of reproduction illustrated in the interactions the book's characters have with each other and their environment. The society, therefore, ultimately exists under the premise of illusion, failing to distinguish between reality and imitation. German cultural critic Walter Benjamin discusses in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" the effects of mechanical reproduction in regards to the "aura" of art. This "aura" exists in the art's authenticity and its place in the realm of tradition. "The aura of an object compels attention. Whether a work of art or natural landscape, we confront it in one place and only one place: [in its history]" (Nichols 628). Benjamin proposes that the aura of art exists in its capitalist, elitist quality of uniqueness, that part of what makes art, well, art is the fact that it belongs to the elite and the poor are deprived of it. Thus, art is no longer evaluated based on innovation, authorship, or general quality but by history, ownership, and lineage, making the existence and value of art ritualistic, formulaic, and ultimately arbitrary. The aura, the artwork's authenticity, by definition, cannot be reproduced and, therefore, the mechanical reproduction and mass distribution of art obliterates any aura a piece of artwork might have. "Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" (Benjamin IV) on which it was forced to rely and allows for mass consumption. Mechanical reproductions of artwork, such as pictures in books, advertisements, and posters, equalize the "playing field," allowing art to be evaluated based on the art itself rather than political ties or hierarchical consignments. For <https://assignbuster.com/reproduction-and-the-shattered-aura-in-don-delillos-white-noise/>

example, since the advent of mechanical reproduction and mass distribution, the common person can now enjoy the Mona Lisa as it hangs in their living room—her half smile is no longer restricted to the people who can afford to visit the Louvre. In terms of Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, Jack Gladney much prefers a mechanical reproduction to an aura, valuing simulation and repetition over unique experiences. He lives in a town named Blacksmith, which is a “ name that advertises old-fashioned values and country goodness” and indicates its inhabitants are “ protected from the violence of the inner cities” (Keeseey 135). Even Jack doesn't foresee violence in his little town, claiming that death in Blacksmith, when compared with the fatal urban atmosphere, is “ nonviolent, small-town, thoughtful” (76). However, the connotations of the quaint and homegrown name “ Blacksmith” are merely ruses. The first whisper of death in the book happens in Blacksmith when a Mylex-suited man collapses and dies while trying to decontaminate the elementary school (40). Furthermore, while searching for the Treadwells the police find a gun and heroine (60). Similar towns situated nearby Backsmith include Watertown, where a fire engulfs a tenement, Bakersville, where two bodies are found buried in a backyard, and Glassboro, where a man dies in a freak, single-car accident (Weekes 290). “ Just as there is no smithing in Blacksmith, these communities all evoke an outmoded labor ethic and economic simplicity that no longer exist either in the city or in the village” (Weekes 290). The towns are named for promises they can not keep; the names connote a small-town ideal, a safety, a friendliness, that the towns can not deliver. Blacksmith provides yet another simulation for Jack to hide behind, a forced reproduction of the ideal, rural, wholesome town. Yet

Blacksmith is not a town of innocence or guiltlessness and this gap causes <https://assignbuster.com/reproduction-and-the-shattered-aura-in-don-delillos-white-noise/>

the characters in the book to either live in a limbo of confusion, constantly searching for the common ground between the idyllic connotations of the name and the reality of the place, or in a realm of illusion, where one is made to believe that the town does, in fact, embody its name's implications. Notions like the latter inspire Murray to say that "it is possible to be homesick for a place even while you are there" (257), thus illustrating the open-mouthed gap that lies between expectations and reality—an obstacle that Jack fights to avoid throughout the novel. Accordingly, Jack Gladney believes that Blacksmith is a safe-haven, a place of safety, a nurturing environment (76), more inspired by the town's name and its implications than the reality of life within the parameters. Living in Blacksmith, turning a blind eye to reality and desperately relying on illusion, the Gladney family is nonetheless disjointed and dysfunctional at times. Their conversations are haphazard and chaotic, without much substance or narrative significance. The banter might even be considered a form of the white noise suggested by the novel's title (Packer 657). Heinrich, especially, seems to provide a stumbling block for Jack, as evidenced in the scene where the pair discusses the reality of rain and, consequently, the limitations of language. The conversation mirrors the theme of reproduction and reality in both content and form. As Jack and Heinrich debate the realness of the rain, their conversation turns to larger questions: What is rain? How can we prove that rain is actually rain? How can we identify a universal truth? Is there such thing as truth? And is there such thing as a "now?" After all, "'now; comes and goes as soon as you say it. How can [it be] raining now if ... 'now' becomes 'then' as soon as [it's said]" (23)? Heinrich champions the real, exploring existence to its most narrow implications while Jack would rather

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leave “ the real” unexplored and blindly accept the norm. Accordingly, Jack grows frustrated with Heinrich’s Hegelian “ theoretical bubble-blowing” and, regardless of the validity of Heinrich’s inquiries, ultimately concedes to Heinrich’s argument in a huff of sarcasm. Gladney seems to fear his son’s intelligence; instead of discussing Heinrich’s potentially legitimate inquiries and facing his consequential “ loss” of the argument—and inevitable admission to a new notion of reality—Jack dismisses the conversation as ludicrous. Jack’s can see in his daughter Steffie, however, more of a conformation to reproduction, to simulation and illusion, which, in turn, makes his relationship with her less fraught with disagreement, at times even finding philosophical significance in her trivial behavior. Jack seems involved and deeply intrigued when Steffie mouths the words “ Toyota Celica” in her sleep. The event happens shortly after the family has to evacuate their house, fleeing the toxic cloud looming over their neighborhood. He observes his children as they sleep and finds revelation in a seemingly insignificant, if not almost pejorative moment: Steffie turned slightly, then muttered something in her sleep. It seemed important that I know what it was... I was convinced she was saying something, fitting together units of stable meaning... She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant: “ Toyota Celica” (154-155). I pause at this point in the excerpt because it seems pertinent for the argument’s sake that Gladney’s reaction to his daughter’s subliminal susceptibility to advertisements is appropriately related to the narrative expectations. That is, Gladney’s approach to Steffie’s utterance makes the reader expect something deeply profound to issue from her small lips, <https://assignbuster.com/reproduction-and-the-shattered-aura-in-don-delillos-white-noise/>

something that would force the reader to reevaluate Steffie's nine-year-old mind and declare her an insightful little girl, worthy of credence and confidence (Maltby 260). Instead, the reader gets "Toyota Celica." Slightly deflated, the reader might expect Jack to feel the same upon realizing the banality of the phrase, yet expectations are upset yet again when Jack extracts his own significance, however overtly postmodern and contrived they might be, from Steffie's unconscious muttering: A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder... A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice... Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance stuck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. I depend on my children for that.(155)The reader might be tempted to interpret this passage as a parody or satire, but Jack's earnest tone makes the reader consider his words as genuinely searching and valid. "Gladney's words are not to be dismissed as delusional" but are meant to illustrate the postmodernist's narrative tendency to "seek out transcendent moments" that "hint at possibilities for cultural regeneration... For what is revealed to Gladney in this visionary moment is that names embody a formidable power" (Maltby 260). Jack experiences "splendid transcendence" in this moment of simulation, of reproduction, and, when compared with his frustrated conversation with Heinrich, illustrates his preference for reproduction instead of authenticity. Jack imposes grandiose and arguably unwarranted significance on Steffie's utterance of "Toyota Celica" partly

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because of its unknown origin and how it changes the role of Steffie. He is unsure whether the phrase exists in a television commercial, Steffie's mind, both, or neither. If the phrase exists in a television commercial, jumping off the screen and landing on Steffie's lips for the sole purpose of repetition, Steffie is temporarily reduced to little more than a conduit, an outlet for propaganda. If the phrase exists in Steffie's mind, she, at this moment, is acting as a mere storehouse of media, of "waves and radiation." The words, therefore, become more important than the medium, reflecting the philosophy of Benjamin, who claims that through mechanical reproduction, which is arguably manifested in Steffie's utterance presumably repeated from an advertisement of some sort, the piece of art loses its authenticity and originality—it sacrifices its unique nature for a universality that all can experience and enjoy (Benjamin II). The advertisement has been reproduced by Steffie and Jack finds pleasure not in the words "Toyota Celica" and their implications, but in the mere fact that they are a product of reproduction. Jack manages to extract significance, albeit concocted, from his daughter's unconscious mutterings, yet refuses to engage in a mentally simulating and potentially rewarding conversation with his son. There are numerous reasons as to why Gladney might appreciate Steffie's "Toyota Celica" over Heinrich's theories on rain and time, one of them being that Gladney, as a man shaped by his society, values moments of reproduction over moments of authenticity. This preference for conformity, for reproduction and likeness is also evidenced in the behavior of Murray. A truly bizarre character, Murray seems to be in the prime position to act as an antithesis to the role of reproduction in the novel, yet he finds comfort and even pleasure in repetition, conformity, and simulation. A professor at the College on the Hill <https://assignbuster.com/reproduction-and-the-shattered-aura-in-don-delillos-white-noise/>

—the name of which, in itself, holds the same contrived power of “Blacksmith” or Steffie’s “Toyota Celica,” relying on its generic and reproduced nature for significance—Murray desires to teach courses on Elvis and cinematic car crashes. Murray is attracted by the popular culture, by the obvious and overdone. Murray even uses Jack’s notoriety, which is a fabrication, an imitation itself—based on his invented persona of J. A. K. Gladney and his inability to speak German—to improve the credibility of his own teachings, asking him to attend one of his lectures and draw connections between Hitler and Elvis. Murray hopes that both Hitler’s and Jack’s status will lend themselves to his area of interest. Therefore, Murray has to borrow and simulate importance because the subjects that he enjoys do not carry their own notable significances. Murray’s enjoyment of reproduction is explicated in America’s most-photographed barn scene. A certain nostalgia is both established and destroyed via reproduction in the case of barn. As Murray and Jack stand in the viewing spot to observe the fabled barn, their realizations involve a complicated integration of entanglement and enlightenment: “What was the barn like before it was photographed?” [Murray] said. “What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can’t answer these questions because we’ve read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can’t get outside the aura. We are part of the aura. We’re here, we’re now.” He seemed immensely pleased by this. (13) Murray seems to express feelings of both entrapment and exciting enlightenment when he talks of being “part of the aura.” This thinking is complex and nearly antithetical. Murray proposes that he and Jack, just by being in the realm of the subject of so much mechanical reproduction have become a part of the

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barn's aura. Benjamin would argue this, saying that the barn's aura has been destroyed—not enhanced or broadened—because of the mechanical reproduction of the image of the barn, thereby obliterating any possibility of including Murray or Jack in its essence. Benjamin might propose that Murray does not grow excited because of the barn's aura but because of the barn's cult value (Benjamin V). That is, the barn was originally a mere building until mechanical reproduction “ recognized it as a piece of art” becoming “ a creation with entirely new functions,” namely the artistic function. Benjamin even goes on to claim that “ photography ... [is one of] the most serviceable exemplifications of this new function” (Benjamin V). That is, while pictures of the most-photographed barn in America might loosely be considered art, they have no genuine aura. Instead, the barn, the location and subject of the cultish reproduction, acquires its own pseudo-aura that is rooted merely in its reputation. Murray's episode with the prostitute is also telling of his desire for simulation, for staged reproduction. After fleeing the chemical-spill induced toxic cloud, Murray and the Gladney family flee to Iron City, a supposed safe haven and temporary refugee camp. The first night there, Murray pays a prostitute twenty five dollars to let him perform the Heimlich maneuver on her. Upon hearing this, Jack says to Murray, perhaps more in the form of passively advising rather than questioning, “ You don't really expect her to lodge a chunk of food in her windpipe.” Murray answers: No, no, that won't be necessary. A long as she makes gagging and choking sounds, As long as she sighs deeply when I jolt the pelvis. As long as she collapses helplessly backward into my life-saving embrace.(153)Thus, Murray does not have a desire to be an actual hero—the reader does not witness him helping frightened citizens out of Blacksmith and into Iron City. Rather, <https://assignbuster.com/reproduction-and-the-shattered-aura-in-don-delillos-white-noise/>

he waits until the actual danger and crisis pass so he can fabricate an emergency of his own—he wants the illusion of heroism, not the reality of it. He pays money to be a hero, if only for a second, and, therefore, desires the aura-less nature of reproduction over the opportunities for genuine greatness and heroics in reality. The society depicted in *White Noise* values reproduction and simulation so much that consumption of television becomes nearly cultish. The role of television as a communication medium often proves to be problematic in that it broadcasts genuine things in a synthetic manner, thus constituting a platform of illusion. In the scene where Babette is featured on television, Jack undergoes the dilemma of seeing a reproduction of his wife through the television screen. He undergoes states of “confusion, fear, astonishment” and “psychic disorientation” upon seeing the image of Babette piped through the tubes (104). Jack fears that Babette has been harmed, that she is either “dead, missing, or disembodied,” that the representation of Babette on the screen is hollow or incomplete. While Jack recognizes the image as that of Babette, seeing her on the television screen makes him think of her as “some distant figure from the past ... a walker in the mists of the dead” (104). Only Wilder, the adorable little antithesis that he is, sees Babette and recognizes her fully, touching the television screen where the image of her body lay beneath the warm glass, leaving behind a dusty print—some evidence of his recognition. There are few things in Jack’s life that are real and tangible, but Babette is one of them. He often finds pleasure in her body and her voice, usually resorting himself to a childish posture—as when he lies between her breasts, calls her Ba-Ba, and asks her to read to him. While arguably perverse, Jack’s relationship with and feelings for Babette are possibly the realest things in

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the book. When confronted with a simulated image of Babette, as he was when she was broadcasted on local cable, Jack suffers from an internal conflict where the reality of Babette, her originality, her authenticity, her aura, is shattered, and replaced by a reproduction, an illusion of Babette, a pseudo-Babette. Jack seems to suffer instantly and profoundly from this shock, this disconnect. He states plainly: With the sound down low, we couldn't hear what she was saying. But no one bothered to adjust the volume. It was the picture that mattered, the face in black and white, animated but also flat, distance, sealed-off, timeless. It was but wasn't her... I felt a certain disquiet. I tried to tell myself it was only television—whatever that was, however it worked—and not some journey out of life or death, not some mysterious separation.(105)The mechanical reproduction of Babette in this scene does, in a sense, involve a sort of death, of “mysterious separation”—Babette loses her aura, her uniqueness when she is broadcast. Her image is reproduced to accommodate the medium of television and, in the process, Benjamin would argue, she is separated from her reality and exists merely as a product, a commodity to be evaluated by society. Jack no longer has sole ownership of Babette, but must share her image with the television. This loss, as it might be termed, frightens and unnerves Jack, for he is forced to evaluate Babette as other viewers might. He doesn't recognize her immediately. He sees her in black and white without sound, as if she were a snapshot. He is worried that she is dead. Jack lives in a society where mechanical reproduction is favored over authenticity, yet he resists the mechanical reproduction of Babette, someone he loves. Perhaps the role of Babette in this instance serves as a small antithesis to Jack's preference for mechanically reproduced things because she is the proverbial connection

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that is keeping Jack anchored to the realm of reality. After all, as Benjamin says, the representation of reality is significant “ precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, as aspect of reality which is free of all equipment” (Benjamin XI). That is, mechanical reproduction does depend on reality and, inherently, cannot function without some footing in the real world. Since Babette could very well serve as Jack’s footing in reality, his reaction to seeing her mechanically reproduced is, in a way, justifiable even within the confines of Benjamin’s philosophy for, without some basis in reality, Jack’s world and philosophies would crumble much like a building without a foundation. One of the most telling and rich instances of mechanical reproduction in the novel is in Jack’s repetition of his plot to kill Mink. Jack repeats his plans to: Drive past the scene several times, park some distance from the scene, go back on foot, locate Mr. Gray under his real name or an alias, shoot him three times in the viscera for maximum pain, clear the weapon of prints, place the weapon in the victims staticky hand, find a crayon or lipstick tube and scrawl a cryptic suicide note on the full-length mirror, take the victims supply of Dylar tablets, slip back to the car, proceed to the expressway entrance, head east toward Blacksmith, get off at the old river road, park Stover’s car in Old Man Treadwell’s garage, shut the door, walk home in the rain and fog.(304)The above is the first draft of the plan, the original plot, the launching pad. Jack goes on to repeat this plan nearly ten times, each time varying it. In some instances the plot is a mere three lines long (310), while other repetitions take up nearly half of a page (311). Not one reproduction of the plot, however, is identical to another. Perhaps this variation is hinting at a universal truth—that exact replication is impossible because, after the first replication, the original is <https://assignbuster.com/reproduction-and-the-shattered-aura-in-don-delillos-white-noise/>

different than it had been. Benjamin would argue that after mechanical reproduction, the original exists without an aura whereas it had maintained its aura until the reproduction took place. Thus, all reproductions are mere shadows of a once aura-rich entity, not possessing auras themselves and simultaneously robbing the aura of the original. Jack's variegated reproductions of his plot to kill Mink could ultimately serve as a testament to the lost aura and impossible task of replication (Barrett 108). However, Jack enjoys his mental reproduction of the plot. Repeating the plan to himself encourages him, perhaps even serving as a comfort or a reassurance. While none of the reproductions are exactly the same, they share certain commonalities; for instance, many of them end with "walk home in the rain and fog," which lends a romantic notion to Jack's plot. These self-imposed reproductions distance Jack from his plot by over-exposing him to the idea of killing Mink. Benjamin would argue that mechanical reproduction can render society numb to art and its authenticity; after all, if Mona Lisa is hanging in one's living room, it can't be too valuable. Likewise, Jack grows numb to the implications of his plot to kill Mink; reproduction makes this distancing possible. Simulation and reproduction run rampant through the scene where Jack actually confronts Mink. Drugged up from eating Dylar like candy, but also perhaps a mere puppet of mass media, Mink dutifully repeats the television, even replacing it as a source of white noise in this scene seeing as his television is silenced. He says things sporadically and without prompt—things like, "Some of these playful dolphins have been equipped with radio transmitters. Their far-flung wanderings may tell us things" (310) and "Using my palette knife and my odorless turp, I will thicken the paint on my palette" (309). Mink becomes a sort of oral camera, a mere reproduction of what has

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been said on the television. Jack, oddly enough, is not fazed by these episodes of randomness, insisting that the whole room was full of “ auditory scraps, tatters, whirling specks” (307). However, Jack’s mental immunity to Mink’s inexplicable outbursts could perhaps be illustrating his comfort and familiarity with white noise, the generic hum of life (Heller 42). Jack’s desire for simulation and reproduction has resulted in over-stimulation of such things and, ultimately, a numbness to them. Only when he is confronted with something new and real—a gunshot that hits its mark—does Jack break free of his zombie-like, white-noise-induced stupor and do something proactive in taking Mink to the hospital. Jack even encounters reproduction and simulation in a hospital run by nuns. Jack asks the nun who is bandaging up his hand whether or not there is still the “ old heaven... in the sky.” She responds, “ Do you think we are stupid?” (317). Jack insists that the woman helping him is a nun and nuns have to believe certain things. Indignant, he pushes the nun on her simulated religious beliefs, unable to understand that the nuns fake belief for the nonbelievers because “ they are desperate to have someone to believe” (318). The nun goes on to say:“ Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that someone believe... We are left to believe... We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible. You are sure that you are right but you don’t want everyone to think as you do.”(319)Jack is upset by this revelation, repeatedly referring to the religious-looking picture hanging on the emergency room wall as proof that the nuns must believe if they display a picture so overtly (318). Yet the nun insists that the picture hangs on the wall to merely satisfy the expectations of the nonbelievers and

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is not an indicator or manifestation of genuine faith. When Jack encounters a simulation, a false reproduction of expectations, in the context of an environment he considers to be authentic or a representation of the truth, he can not appreciate it as a result of mechanical reproduction. Thus, Jack can appreciate mechanical reproduction only when he can predict or create it, exposing Jack's desire and appreciation for mechanical reproduction only when it is coupled with personal control of the situation. Jack Gladney, like many of the characters in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, exists in a society where the simulation and mechanical reproduction of objects, events, and ideas are generally valued more than unique entities and experiences. Jack himself is involved in many situations where he prefers simulation over reality, as is Murray. Even Jack's family, namely Heinrich, Steffie, and Babette, are either involved with or manifestations of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" addresses the dilemma that accompanies any form of mechanical reproduction, speaking extensively of an object's aura and its cultural implications. Through the lens of Benjamin's theory, the society depicted in *White Noise*, partial to simulation and dependent on mechanical reproduction, exists in a state of illusion, suffering from trying desperately to connect the worlds of reality and simulation.