

# Confronting death in white noise



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In his 1985 novel *White Noise*, Don DeLillo paints a modern society that is composed of systems too great to comprehend, putting control out of the hands of individuals. Don DeLillo crafts a postmodern society governed by cryptic systems, a world in which individuals are alienated from reality by technological codes and formulas dictate success. DeLillo challenges the postmodern thought that academics, technology and institutions can answer the questions of life and death and offers death as a shared burden and final resolution. In Jack's life the fear of death is a force that operates in a system outside of his control. This unknown system became an all-consuming force beginning at age twenty; this desperation for answers has led to Jack's invention of a Hitler studies academic program. DeLillo explores how Jack integrates into a larger system to via formality. Jack's professional status as a Hitler Studies department head gives Jack the formal distance of academia he needs from this fear: "Death was strictly a professional matter here" (74). At the same time, Jack is very close to the ideas of death. He deals with his fear of death by studying and attempting to embody Hitler, the "master of death." Hitler, who reduced humane life into numbers and mechanized death on an unprecedented scale, gives Jack a formulaic method to comprehend the unknown: "So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward" (16). DeLillo shows that Jack hides behind Hitler as a shield not only from the unknown but as a way to anchor his existence. Jack's ex-Tweedy uses Hitler to address Jack during a superficial conversation: "How is Hitler? Fine solid dependable" (89). DeLillo suggests that Jack can link himself to immortality by connecting himself to the immortal, unchanging Hitler. Despite Jack's deliberate creation of his Hitler studies program, however, he does not even understand his own success; he relies on his

costume as a formulaic way to achieve success, saying he has “ built a career” on it and “ can’t teach Hitler without” his dark glasses (221). Where Jack once had achieved equilibrium with uncertainty of death through Hitler, he now faces the subject of death on an intimate and personal level. After exposure to the toxic event caused by an industrial byproduct, Jack comes face to face with his own mechanized death. Upon facing the reality of his death Jack feels he needs to don his Hitler studies costume to shelter himself: “ It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying. I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses” (142) When his life data is brought up from Simuvac’s diagnostic computer it illustrates Jack’s new estrangement from his sense of comfort once found in his elaborate Hitler Studies persona: “ He spent a fair amount of time tapping on the keys and then studying the coded responses on the data screen... [and] I tapped into your history. I’m getting bracketed numbers with pulsing stars. What does that mean? You’d rather not know” (139-140). Here the use of diction is important to note. The Simuvac officer describes the data output s as “ stars and bracketed numbers,” a code DeLillo uses to challenge technology’s capacity to predict and understand death. This recurring motif continually denies clear information to Jack and medical professionals. Jack describes the new code as “ a network of symbols [that] has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods.” (142). In this instance DeLillo shows Jack’s vulnerability to the new intimate uncertainty of death abstracted by technological codes that propels Jack to seek answers in the traditional medical sciences paradigm. To decode the new unknown Babbette suggests, “ Why don’t you have a checkup? Wouldn’t you feel better if you found out nothing was there?” (220). As a result of many checkups Jack is alerted of a

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potential potassium imbalance. The doctor again accesses Jack's data on a computer but denies Jack the details, offering only again a cryptic message. The doctor tells Jack: " Look here. A bracketed number with computerized stars. What does that mean? There's no point your knowing at this stage " (260). DeLillo suggests that medical professionals don't know any more than Jack. The young doctor, described as being less than confident, follows a fixed assessment where Jack chooses the most popular answers and is offered a sealed envelope of medical codes for the doctor to interpret. Leaving the visit with the potassium imbalance problem unresolved, and with a new troubling technological code in hand, Jack concludes that his life cannot be reordered by medical science. DeLillo shows through Jack that technology has ultimately failed to reconcile systems outside of human control or to answer the questions of life and death. However, DeLillo offers a solution by using the supermarket as an analogy for life. When the system becomes chaotic, with rearranged shelves, smeared printing, and people attempting to " discern the underlying logic" (326), DeLillo suggests a reconciliation by realizing the shared burden: " This is where we wait together, regardless of age[...] A slowly moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the racks. Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks" (326). DeLillo suggest that death (checkout) is a powerful unifying feature, common and inevitable, and that death resolves itself by allowing the individual to leave our shared reality and interpret the codes: " The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secrete of every item, infallibly"(326). DeLillo concludes by portraying a resolution in death: the codes of life and death wrested from the gods will be made known.