

Originality and the literary 'readymade' in don delillo's white noise



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' Toyota Celica / A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile...The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky.'

The twentieth century was characterized by a shift in aesthetics in which craft is largely replaced by concept. The advances of Futurism, Surrealism, and Dada had all distanced an appreciation of art from the Platonic understanding that has dominated so large a span of Western culture. Plato's hierarchy of the Forms, in which the beautiful indicates the good has largely given way to the utilization of the prosaic, allowing for artistic significance within the crude and the manufactured. The connotations of liturgy attached to DeLillo's ' Toyota Celica' utterance communicate this shift. His juxtaposition is explicit, endowing the branded and the mass-produced with near religious significance. As Fredric Jameson points out, this correlation between the sublime and the bathetic, between ' high culture' and ' mass or commercial' culture has dominated the expansion of post-modernism. However, what makes De Lillo's passage so intriguing is not the suggestion that the ' low' can serve as the subject of art, but that it can take on its own aesthetic status and merit. Central to this understanding is the notion of the re-invention of prior models. DeLillo's novel is characterized by its montage of previously created material provoking a questioning of originality and indicating that the art of re-arranging may hold as clear an aesthetic potential as original creation.

In *The Precision of Simulacra* Jean Baudrillard sets out a view of American culture based on this notion of re-modeling of prior material. His outlook is critical and indicates a lack of originality in Twentieth Century culture. For <https://assignbuster.com/originality-and-the-literary-readymade-in-don-delillos-white-noise/>

Baudrillard, Disneyland forms a paradigm of post-modern culture with its assemblage of media products and disjointed phantasms and indicates a kind of crass recycling as 'the first great toxic waste product of our time.' This notion of cultural refuse correlates with the 'senses of the end of this or that' that Jameson places as defining features of post-modernism. The 'end of art,' the 'end of ideology' (Jameson p1) and the dissolving of social class all add to the sense of cultural exhaustion and deadlocked creativity.

DeLillo's *White Noise* is characterized by such 'recycled' material. The novel reaches its climax as his protagonist Jack Gladney succumbs to his own obsessive fear of death and ironically attempts to murder the man who has coerced Jack's wife into sleeping with him. In terms of narrative, DeLillo's plot appears weak. References to mental instability pervade the novel as DeLillo clearly reveals his character's fascination with the town's 'insane asylum' (p4) through his frequent allusions to its 'ornamented' architectural style. DeLillo's narrative signifiers are clear; his protagonist is an intellectually unfulfilled, over-weight university professor with an incurable fear of death and toxic 'Nyodene D'(p173) in his bloodstream. That he should fall prey to mental disintegration appears natural to the reader.

The consistency of DeLillo's narrative pattern is compounded when Jack's Father-in-law provides him with a gun. The marked purpose with which he is handed the 'small dark object'(p290) clearly signifies the path that the narrative will take with a lucidity akin to dramatic foreshadowing. However, DeLillo is aware of the predictability of his plot. In following this exchange with the rhetorical 'Was he Death's dark messenger after all?(p291) he constructs a conscious cliché. The 'messenger' of a personified 'Death' is a <https://assignbuster.com/originality-and-the-literary-readymade-in-don-delillos-white-noise/>

trope that pervades so expansive a range of story that it has become a narrative stereotype. In including it in his text, DeLillo both assumes his readers' exposure to this tradition and indicates a key element in comprehending his novel; namely that and is driven by recognizable stereotypes. Strikingly, the fundamental stages of the narrative progression display the same linguistic signifiers of genre that make up so many popular thrillers and cheap-reads as Jack is driven to mental instability and attempted murder by the factors that surround him. The novel then, is a parody; it relies on former models for its creation. This is striking in that the linguistic signifiers of the narrative depend on the reader's awareness of prior models of plot; in keeping with the conventions of Baudrillard's post-modernist culture, DeLillo has constructed his own form of literary 'recycling'.

Jameson's *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* defines 'Post-modernism' as a 'cultural dominant'; a conception that allows for the recognition of its presence within the expanse of culture rather than confining it to a unified style or historical period. In this view, post-modernism is as present within marketing and production as it is within literature and art. The models from which DeLillo draws his novel are based on this commercial expanse. His imagery revolves around materialism and is brought into fluorescent clarity by its road-side motels and gaudy advertising. In the novel's climactic scene, DeLillo's language is cinematic, switching between the present moment and the imaginings of his protagonist with the ease of edited film. The passage is artificially illuminated by a television screen, constructing an image in which the objects in the room 'began to glow....'(p355) and take on new shape.

Here DeLillo's nouns both present a clear visual tableau and allow for Jack's imagination to take visual form. The 'rumped bed' is imbued with new significance as he is led to dwell on his wife's affair; 'Did she wheel him around the room as he sat on the bed popping pills?...Did they make the bed spin with their lovemaking, a froth of pillows and sheets above the small wheels on swivels.' (p355) The image created by DeLillo's verbs is one of burlesque amplification. Watched over by 'The T. V. floating in the air in its metal brace' (p351) with the grimy shower just out of shot, the scene has all the defining signifiers of a 'Grade B' American movie or pornographic film.

What is striking here is that, as with his narrative structure, DeLillo is not simply initiating a form of 'recycling' but has absorbed the 'toxic waste' of consumer culture into the novel's form. Thus, a strange situation is created in which the signs that typically point to what Jameson defines as 'mass or commercial culture' (Jameson p2) become integral to the creation of 'high culture' as the crude and pornographic are absorbed into the canon of contemporary literature.

DeLillo's choice of model is significant in that it allows the bathetic artistic significance. Here, it seems coherent to draw our focus back to the seeds of post-modernism within the questioning of artistic subject provoked by the works of the American Dadaists. The vulgarity of DeLillo's motel scene denotes a similar re-invention of subject as Marcel Duchamp's infamous 'ready-made' *Le Fountain*. DeLillo's parody of form, his utilization of cheap motifs and the filmic quality of his narrative all add to the idea of a re-using of previously crafted material. Strikingly, in their *Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme*, Andre Breton and Paul Eluard define the 'readymade' as " an <https://assignbuster.com/originality-and-the-literary-readymade-in-don-delillos-white-noise/>

ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist." This definition is intriguing in a number of ways. Firstly it allows for the artistic recognition of the 'ordinary' made evident by Duchamp. Yet, it also serves to further sever the gap between artist and artisan. If, as Breton and Eluard suggest, an object is given the status of 'art' at the wish of the artist, the artist is re-defined as a conceptual creator rather than as a craftsman. Thus, artistic merit becomes defined by ideology and concept rather than by skill. In utilizing models of popular culture and media production, DeLillo is drawing on the previously created or the 'readymade.' Paradoxically then, the predictability of his narrative construction serves to further the novel's merit as it poses a comment on the functioning of literature as a whole.

The concept of the readymade stimulates a questioning of the source of art and of the merit of individual inspiration. Unlike the notion of an animating 'breath' favoured by the Romantics, the readymade requires a re-constructing of material and not an individual force. This sense of metalepsis or combined allusion to prior models is embodied in DeLillo's setting.

Jameson suggests the 'modifications in aesthetic production are most dramatically visible' within its architecture. In the opening chapter of *White Noise*, DeLillo's imagery conforms to this interpretation as its range of nouns create a post-modern collective rather than a particular genre or style. We are told how 'There are houses in the town with turrets and two story porches where people sit under the shade of ancient maples. There are Greek revival and Gothic churches.' (p4) DeLillo's combination appears disjointed; an assemblage of styles removed from their original contexts. Not

only does the narrative style of the novel display a form of literary 'recycling,' its subject is formed from an array of re-shaped models. It is characteristic that the 'insane asylum' should represent the clearest conglomeration with '...an elongated portico, ornamental dormers and a steeply pitched roof topped by a pineapple finial.' (p4) DeLillo's irony is clear. The architecture of the building not only foreshadows the psychological confusion of his protagonist, it corresponds to the larger-scale madness of a culture based on disconnected and perhaps exhausted models.

However, it is unfair to suggest that the novel is defined by a lack of creativity. The very notion of re-invention denotes a level of innovation, indicating transformation as opposed to re-use. Thus, we are brought onto issues of originality and creative autonomy. It is a question that has become increasingly prominent in attitudes towards education and university study over the past half century. In their exploration of plagiarism within academic writing Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber set out a defence of plagiarism as a natural mode of expression within the 'remix culture' of post-modernism in which the academic assemblage of borrowed material becomes a 'valid form of student writing.' Here, Johnson-Eilola and Selber present re-using as a transformative practice. DeLillo's protagonist is a university professor whose academic focus is driven by the struggle to reinvent 'Hitler' as an appropriate subject for study. DeLillo introduces Jack with his assertion that 'I invented Hitler studies in North America'(p4) At the heart of this is the notion of transformation. However, here there is metamorphosis in both meaning and form as the figure of Hitler is removed from historical context and thrust into the role of celebrity.

DeLillo solidifies this shift with his surreal comparison between the figures of Elvis and Hitler within a university lecture. Here, dialogue is essential in forming a correlation between the two as Jack's conjectures on Hitler punctuate the biography of Elvis. Thus, 'Elvis fell apart with grief when Gladys died' is rapidly succeeded by Jack's colloquial statement, 'There's not much doubt that Hitler was what we'd call a mama's boy.' (p84) The theatricality and strange sentimentality of DeLillo's language shifts the passage into the camp. The result is unnerving as the figures are linked by celebrity status and eclipsed from their actions. It is notable that for Johnson-Eilola and Selber, a key factor holding 'plagiarism' back from due appreciation is 'The ghost of the authentic, creative genius'; the 'divine force' of inspiration, suggested by Plato that is now outdated. Yet, the effect of this attitude must be taken into consideration. DeLillo's tone is cynical indicating the irony of a situation so eclipsed from its context. Like the disjointed mix of architectural styles that make up the novel's setting, here, the re-invention of a past figure has lost its meaning.

This separation between figure and meaning brings us back to Baudrillard. He draws a distinction between 'representation' and 'simulation.' Whilst representation communicates 'the real' through an interchange between signifier and signified, simulation functions as a cycle of 'hyper-reality' in which the unreal is exchanged for itself as 'an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. Thus, recalling the correlation between Hitler and Elvis constructed by DeLillo, Baudrillard demonstrates the 'depthless' nature of figures caught up in the motions of simulation. DeLillo's ironic narrative warns against this meaningless surface and Duchamp was careful

to produce a limited number of 'readymades' for this very reason. For if, as Breton and Eluard suggest, a transformation can be made 'by the mere choice of an artist,' there is risk of propelling all objects into a form of meaningless 'art,' leaving us with the 'toxic waste' that Baudrillard warns against.