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NOSTALGIA AND POSTMODERN SUBJECTIVITY IN *WHITE NOISE* BY DON DELILLO

One of the crucial conflicts in DeLillo's novels is the clash between the past and the future, leaving the present as hazy as the postmodern reality that comes into existence in his novels of the 20th century. In one of them, *White Noise*, nostalgia is highly prominent as a subjective reaction to the increasingly changing world of the present. Nostalgia, or a sentimental yearning for the past, is reflected in this novel in various aspects. Sometimes, it is addressed as a philosophical concept by characters such as Murray Siskind and regarded as an inherently highly subjective process in the postmodern world. At other times, it is implicitly reflected in different elements of the past, both on the collective, historical level (Hitler and Nazism) and on a smaller, local scale (time pre- and post-airborne toxic event). In each case, the past time is regarded as something highly desirable, as a symbolical safe haven or a shield associated with order and reliable systems of functioning, as opposed to the present, which is increasingly unreal, threatening, and rooted in the accelerating world of mass media. In each case, the subjective perspective of the past and the ensuing nostalgia stand opposed to the future order of Western civilization, whose outlines DeLillo drafts in this novel. This paper aims to highlight the conflict between nostalgia and the incoming threat of the future in this novel, as well as to regard *White Noise* as a nostalgia source within the context of DeLillo's later novels.

Keywords: nostalgia, *White Noise*, Don DeLillo, postmodern subjectivity, fetishization of history

1. INTRODUCTION

In DeLillo's novels, nostalgia is a subjective reaction to the overpowering clash between the past and the future; it is a natural recoil from the insupportable present and the intangible reality it produces. Forced to live in the present that offers no reliable grounding and no definitive order, simultaneously faced with a future that promises little beyond utter destruction and torturous apocalypse, the past seems to operate as the sole safe haven at hand for DeLillo's characters. It stands as a fond memory of better times when life was simpler and understandable and graspable. In

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this context, nostalgia comes as a response to a binary opposition between perfection and destruction, or security and apocalypse, the former firmly rooted in the well-defined and solid past, the latter looming from the hazy and ominous future. Postmodern subjectivity plays a role in creating postmodern nostalgia, in which sentimental longing for a lost time and place can refer to the experience DeLillo's characters never directly underwent, thus blurring the concept of nostalgia and reinventing its definition.

Caught in between two narratives – about a safe and serene past and an unstable and plausibly violent future – DeLillo's characters spend their time in the present not existing but rather passively moving with the flow of the culture, carried away by the waves of trends set by consumer and media cultures, respectively (and jointly). Such is the case with *White Noise*, one of DeLillo's most critically acclaimed novels of the 20th century, in which nostalgia is present as a quiet response both on the collective and individual level. The novel offers a fragmentary insight into the life of a small-town college professor Jack Gladney and his family, faced with different personal, family and communal crises. The Gladney family and their friends, each in their own way, respond with nostalgia to their reality by returning to the past both on a small chronological level and the large one, as well. For example, Murray Siskind, one of Jack's many colleagues, turns to ancient practices of interpreting hidden messages “from beyond” like one of the prophetesses of Delphi might have done in Ancient Greece, only instead of a temple and divine voices who deliver messages, Siskind's “divine” voices deliver knowledge from the TV box. In a similar fashion, Jack Gladney professionally turns to the (much more recent) history of WWII, dealing with Hitler and Nazi strategies of propaganda, fashioning almost his entire identity after the hazy image of Germanness. His own son Heinrich is a recluse from the present world in which he does not fit, and he escapes by playing chess (in the era of early video games haze) with a certain convict using letters as a system of communication, thus desperately turning away from the current communicational devices available to him that could have made their correspondence much easier and faster. On a much more microscopic scale, the entire family revolves around the crucial event of toxic chemical spillage that marks a watershed in their lives. Nostalgically looking at the times before it happened, Jack and Babette will respectively start acting more erratically than ever, seeking different ways to cope with their increasing fear of death, suddenly made more present in their lives by the catastrophe they experienced. Both of them, and various other characters, “struggle to root out any awareness of death, not knowing that they are eliminating the very element that may help them live an authentic and meaningful life” (Behrooz &

Pirnajmuddin 2018: 184). Overall, nostalgia for these characters becomes a symptom of the time they live in, their instinctive response to the culture and society they inhabit, as well as their only form of resistance against the reality they can no longer comprehend.

2. THE CONCEPT OF NOSTALGIA IN DELILLO'S NOVELS

Discussion about the concept of nostalgia is somewhat difficult to grasp. Its earliest definitions are mainly drawn from its etymology, which suggests the concept to be a yearning for home, a sentimental longing for a place one belongs to that is no longer available or accessible. For example, Lendsey A. Freeman notes that it is “[d]erived from the Greek *nostros*, meaning to return home, and *algia*, a painful condition” which together suggest a state of homesickness (Freeman 2015: 28). As defined by Johannes Hofer, nostalgia has initially been regarded as a psychological disorder. It was generally described as “the suffering inflicted on expatriates by their desire to return home” and it included predominantly physical symptoms and manifestations of the condition (Sedikides & Wildschut 2018: 48). Freeman distinguishes it from melancholia, which is a traditionally more subtle and sophisticated regard of the past, denoting nostalgia as a “democratic disease” or plainly a disease for (and of) the people, which “could potentially affect anyone, but it had the connotation of affecting the rural, simple-minded, and uncultured and those most tied to the places from which they came” (Freeman 2015: 28). While such distinctions might suggest unnatural and problematic social classifications and determinants, Freeman here speaks of the historical development of the term, with the aforementioned definitions firmly belonging to the past time in which nostalgia was not thoroughly researched or observed, let alone understood, and it was considered to be “an abnormal reaction, a pathology” (Freeman 2015: 28). However, the 20th century brought about the necessity to revise the term, and the diagnosis of this disorder became focused on the emotional response. Of such change, Freeman notes the following:

To feel nostalgic became an experience of the modern condition. No longer tied only to soldiers longing for home, modern nostalgia is connected with a more complex state of mind. This mindset carries with it the awareness of the acceleration of social change, an awareness that says, “Even if you go back home, you can never go home again—that home is gone.” It is this impossibility of return that rests at the painful core of contemporary nostalgia. (Freeman 2015: 29)

Such redefinitions of the term imply a broadening of its scope, within which it can be suggested that nostalgia is not necessarily related solely to a place, but it

rather equally involves time. The home one cannot return to represents, to an extent, a chronotope, marked in equal measure with spatial and temporal features, as much as with the social and emotional experience once had. In this context, nostalgia is by default associated with the past, with a time long gone, a period one cannot reassess otherwise but through memory. Since nostalgia inherently carries a sentimental connotation, this suggests that the past is automatically set at the positive end of the binary opposition, standing opposed to the negatively connotated future, in which everything is unknown and thus to be regarded with caution and reserve. The “sentimental longing for one’s past”, as psychologists like Sedikides and Wildschut tend to define it, arises from the recollections of the past experiences, which are “predominantly positive”, and cause the subject to view “the past fondly through rose-colored glasses” and even to “yearn to return to it” (Sedikides & Wildschut 2016: 319). Simultaneously, the negative element included in nostalgia is turned against the present, directly or indirectly, embodied either in the desire to escape it or simply in “longing and wanting to return to the past” (Sedikides & Wildschut 2018: 49-50). Such tendencies might suggest, by extension, that the negative element here might proffer onto the future, as well, since the element of the unknown is traditionally regarded as more apprehensive than the one of the known, which in this case are both the past and the present. Some authors, such as Cheung, argue against these notions, claiming that contemporary science has “refuted the notion that nostalgia is maladaptive” and that the condition is not “a pathological discord from the present time, and a symptom of apprehension about the future” (Cheung 2022: 1). Instead, their understanding of the term is related more fundamentally to an ability to recognize the inconsistencies and malpractices of the present world they inhabit, against which the past stands as a role model of a functional and firm society. In essence, these attempts to redefine nostalgia do seem problematic because they reduce most of the initial connotation, especially in regard to the emotional response to the loss of the past. Interpreting nostalgia as a strength rather than a disorder is here just another extreme description, which simplifies the state. Whether or not such claims indeed will stand the test of time and research, this paper focuses primarily on the traditional understanding of the concept in reaction to the state of the postmodern condition, which is so significant for DeLillo’s novels. Nostalgia, as a reaction to an era in which his characters cannot find anything reliable and secure enough, plays for DeLillo a strategy of escapism and a coping mechanism, simultaneously and cumulatively, though not consciously. While it does function as an indicator of discord among the culture and his characters, DeLillo does not use the element of nostalgia to portray his protagonists as people of higher awareness meant to deal with

the flaws of the contemporary era. Rather than that, nostalgia operates as a marker, a signpost that highlights the protagonists' inability to act or even to fully comprehend what initiated such a reaction in the first place.

Equally important for the interpretation of DeLillo's works, nostalgia should be regarded as a rather collective concept. His approach to nostalgia dominantly corresponds to the views of Fredric Jameson, for whom nostalgia works are narratives "set in indefinable nostalgic past [...] beyond history" which highlight that the present audience is "unable today to focus [its] own present, as though [it has] become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of [its] own current experience" all due to the consequences of consumer capitalism (Jameson 1983: 117). On a similar note, Freeman argues that nostalgia is "a deeply social phenomenon" mostly because it reflects "collective ideas about the present, while simultaneously revealing shared past desires, giving new insights into the practices, structures, and institutions those desires created" (Freeman 2015: 30). In DeLillo's novels, nostalgic view of the past seems to be almost an inherently American trait, an innate glorification of the past values and standards the country possesses in paucity at present, at least where the dominant culture is concerned, which for DeLillo is media culture in the consumer capitalist era. Hence, the majority of nostalgic sentiments in his novels is aimed at the 1950s, the era during which the American identity as we know it today started resembling the mass-produced, media-saturated hyperreality of the late 20th century onwards. Consequently, DeLillo's characters echo some of Freeman's ideas about nostalgia's collectivism. As such collective orientation towards the past "disrupts individual emotional connections with the present", it also marks how destabilized the present of people is (or their understanding and perception thereof), thus "preventing its members from imagining a better (or different) present and future as they long for a past, which seems superior and often more secure" (Freeman 2015: 30). In DeLillo's novels, this is reflected in the constant state of paranoia, in which his characters are afraid of an ominous threat of future destruction, either by a nuclear bomb or a toxic spillage and its consequential cloud of poisonous gases.

Particularly, in *White Noise*, the orientation towards the 50s is reflected in almost all aspects of the novel. The Gladneys live in a small town by choice, and they find comfort in the small-town life there, one which resembles the uniformity of houses characteristic of the 50s, as well as the scarce social practices of gravitating around the supermarket, the dominant center of social life and social interaction. In the town of Blacksmith, they are not "threatened and aggrieved" like people in large towns and cities, nor are they "smack in the path of history and its contaminations" (WN 101). It appears as if the town itself is a locus of nostalgia, or even nostalgia

territorially embodied. The description of Jack's home, primarily regarding the kitchen and living room (centered around a television) will undoubtedly remind any DeLillo's reader of the Demings from *Underworld*, the stereotypically represented family of the 50s. Furthermore, this era, freshly drunk on the WWII triumph, is seemingly reflected in Jack's choice of professional specialization (he teaches the strategies of propaganda in a course called Advanced Nazism) since the practices of Nazism, successfully defeated, became reduced to an anthropological phenomenon to be analyzed and scientifically discussed from the 50s onward, once the direct consequences of the war were successfully resolved. The 50s also marked the era that embodied great national success for America, during which their palpable power became a never more solid influence on the international political stage. Moreover, the Gladneys also reflect the 50s in their attempt to recreate the traditional family nucleus, in spite of the fact that they are more of a modern family (with children from different past marriages). Many sociologists and theoreticians do see the family, the "fundamental institution of social life", as one of the key reflective surfaces of modern and contemporary nostalgia since it has been "weak-kneed and tamely submitting to be fed poisoned pablum by the mass entertainment industry" (Esolen 2018: 236). Thus, Jack and Babette's idea of keeping their family functional, in the traditional sense, might be interpreted as one of the signifiers of their deeply rooted nostalgia for the past system of American values. As opposed to the well-defined (and well-televised) 50s, the late 70s and early 80s that Jack and his family live in are an era of turmoil and instability. Politically and economically, the country was burdened primarily by the Cold War, while the individuals were burdened by its byproduct – consumer society. It is an era in which "the flow is constant" and in which "for most people there are only two places in the world", the two being their home and their television (WN 78). It is to this particular aspect of reality, its ever-accelerating movement towards the future, that the characters of *White Noise* react by escaping into the past, trying to hold onto the familiar and the proven, sometimes comically so, to the point of obsession.

3. NOSTALGIC FETISHIZATION OF THE PAST

Perhaps the most transparently nostalgic character in *White Noise* is Jack Gladney, the narrator and protagonist, a professor of Hitler Studies, whose course on Advanced Nazism we get to experience as first-hand witnesses. His nostalgia is never explicitly discussed or pondered on, yet it is heavily suggested in his almost paralyzing fear of death, which is here symbolically associated with the future. He and his wife Babette have long conversations on the topic of their eventual demise,

and they even comically negotiate which one of them will (or should) die first. While Jack tries to depict himself as a successful individual, extremely content in all aspects of his life, his fear of death comes from his sense of inability to control any real aspect of the world around him. He philosophically ponders on life and death, frequently baffling not only those who are there to listen to him but, ironically, even himself. For example, during one of his lectures, he begins talking to his students about death and plots (a conversation inspired by a story about one plot to murder Hitler), firmly stating that “[a]ll plots tend to move deathward” and that people “edge nearer death every time we plot” in equal measure “the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot” (WN 30). The plot here might as well stand for any kind of narrative, or even a plan, which almost foreshadows Jack’s later interaction with Willie Mink, Babette’s lover and drug supplier. However, Jack is at the time completely unaware of his inherent wisdom and prophetic abilities, and he is left at the end of the class to wonder about his statements comically, “Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?” (WN 30). His utter inability to understand himself, the meaning of abstract concepts, and the reality that surrounds him will force him to inadvertently focus on creating a shield against the lack of knowledge and the fear it produces in him, resulting in his obsession with Hitler and Germanness.

Jack’s dominant strategy when dealing with death and the threat future represents to him, and his loved ones in general, is nostalgic in its essence, although Jack is not aware of it. It is embodied, indeed, in his professional preoccupation with Hitler and Nazi ideology, or rather their media representations and propaganda. Much like Gordon Liddy in the currently popular TV mini-series *White House Plumbers*, Jack finds in the Nazi propaganda a coping mechanism for his debilitating fear, as well as a means of establishing himself in society and gaining the respect of his peers. It should be stated that he never even considers the ideology that stands behind Hitler and his government, nor does he even acknowledge the atrocities they had done during their reign. Jack Gladney is not a Nazi, he does not find comfort and consolation in Nazism’s ideological teachings and beliefs, but he does use Hitler and vaguely acquired poses of Germanness to defend himself against his fear of death. As Murray Siskind analytically observes when discussing Jack’s interest in Germans and Nazism, “Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you” (WN 33). In an undeniable attempt at parody, DeLillo portrays Jack almost as an impersonator, if not of Hitler himself, then of an imaginary model of an average German who borrows from Nazism solely those traits that emit a certain kind of goliathness in regard to death. This is the aspect that leads Siskind to conclude that “[h]elpless and fearful people are drawn to marginal figures, mythic

figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom” (WN 33). That Jack should elect the most atrocious figure from the past speaks less of the glory of the times long gone than the inadequacy of the times Jack lives in since the 80s cannot provide him with even the semblance of a figure who wields such symbolic power; the present provides only the constant flow of catchy tunes and advertisements. For that reason, he borrows from Hitler the stereotypical images of masculinity and power, as well as of dominance over life itself and – by extension – over death. For example, at the ripe age of 50, he still tries to learn German in order to demonstrate the German aura at the upcoming conference on Hitler Studies. He dresses in all-black most of the time (and especially for his classes), thus referencing the Nazi uniforms, in order to communicate power and dominance over his students and colleagues alike. He comically even wears sunglasses to his lectures, indeed, more alike to Hollywood superstars than Hitler and the Nazis, but such subtle differences in style and image frequently escape Jack¹. His inability to function without his sunglasses showcases the level of dedication and fetish, at the same time, because he draws pleasure both from his appearance in this uniform of sorts and from the reaction people around him exhibit while looking and listening to him. Furthermore, his manners of comport, walking and talking are frequently fashioned after video footage of either Hitler or Nazis in general, respectively performed for the sake of emitting an aura of authority. Such interpretation is especially visible in the scene of Jack’s guest lecture at one of Siskind’s courses, during which his performance causes their students to react as stupefied masses, completely enthralled by the command he exhibits over them, not even necessarily listening to anything that either he or Murray Siskind actually say during the class. This interpretation can be further supported through the comparison with DeLillo’s other novels; namely, in *Underworld*, as Salván states, “nostalgia needs to be understood as a textual strategy of resistance rather than the expression of mere longing for the past” (Salván 2007: 20). There, the present exists and revolves solely in relation to the past because only the past wields sufficient power to maintain the world and characters’ existence. The baseball game in *Underworld* serves as a shield against the present, in which the most important element of reality is waste. In *White Noise*, nostalgia is Jack’s narrative resistance against fear and overpowering reality. He acquires the discourse of Hitler and his Nazis in an attempt to project firmness onto his life because the only source of order in his present moment is the supermarket, and even there, things tend to be famously reorganized and changed out

¹ It is precisely for this reason that Hitler and Elvis coexist on the same level in this novel – as popular subjects for academic studies, as media images of popular culture, completely free of meaning and context outside of that denomination.

of the blue, as we learn from the parodic scene that immediately follows the Airborne Toxic Event. However, whether DeLillo has intended his nostalgia to be a form of resistance to anything, especially a conscious and deliberate one, is to be discussed. Jack's obsession is a testimony to a fetish, one motivated by a deeply traumatizing experience of the present and expectation of the equally horrible future.

Moreover, Jack's fetishizing appropriation of Nazi imagery and behavior might be interpreted as DeLillo's parodic approach to the concept of nostalgia, as such. While discussing nostalgia in another DeLillo's novel, the (in)famous *Underworld*, Ladino highlights that the author uses it "as his ally even while holding it at a critical distance" insofar as it "becomes both a mode through which to read and describe the past and the present as well as an ideological affect to be approached warily, with a healthy dose of skepticism" (Ladino 2010: 3). The same can be applied to *White Noise*. While nostalgia is almost an empathetic tool for DeLillo's characters to communicate the sense of being lost in the present craze of media and consumer culture, it is also highly reflective of how it affects the process of memorizing the past and its narratives. While borrowing features of Nazi self-presentation, Jack allows himself the freedom of subjective selection, granted to him by the notion of postmodern subjectivity. He deftly filters the past and historical facts, either consciously or subconsciously choosing to ignore all the negative connotations surrounding Hitler and Nazism, selecting solely the traits which he can use for his own benefit, establishing himself as the sole authority over the historical narrative of WWII. By borrowing only the "empowering" parts of Nazi paraphernalia, he demonstrates how easily nostalgia tends to erase all the negative aspects of the lost home, choosing to focus exclusively on the rosy-filtered representations of a time long gone. There are, almost tangibly so, certain aspects of fetishization in this approach to dealing with the past; Jack chooses the emblems and patterns of self-presentation and comport from which he draws an undeniable amount of pleasure (egotistically so) and proceeds to obsess over them, to devote himself to the adoration so as to escape reality. Furthermore, this controversial element of the past is so alluring to Jack not because of "the intrinsic quality of the idea" but because of "its novelty", in particular within the context of academia (Cantor 2003: 55). This is perhaps the reason why the element of Nazism, otherwise despicable and despicable, is so benign in this novel. Jack engages with it the way one would with a kink, performing rites (public speeches) and mannerisms (his general behavior) not solely with the purpose of gaining social acclaim and position but primarily with the aim of experiencing pleasure, which is for him directly related to feeling sheltered from the threat of death. In this process, we see how our collective memory, under the

influence of nostalgia, has the power to diminish “the horror by assimilating [an event] into familiar categories” (Cantor 2003: 58). While he observes the same process, Cantor here underscores how Hitler “can be stripped of [his] aura and turned into a commodity” becoming “a hot item, sought after and bid for by a wide range of business interests” (Cantor 2003: 55-56). While the connection with the consumerist world of the 20th century was undoubtedly intended by DeLillo himself, pure consumption here could be only one potential interpretation and does not, by any means, exclude fetishization. Quite the contrary, the commodification of Hitler’s image might be a direct precursor to establishing a fetish, which Jack Gladney does indeed develop gradually (from introducing the study field, opening a department and only then borrowing the persona). In addition to this, a contribution to the fetishization of Hitler lies in the very fact of possessing him, as seen in the following paragraph:

It’s totally obvious. You wanted to be helped and sheltered. The overwhelming horror would leave no room for your own death. ‘Submerge me,’ you said. ‘Absorb my fear.’ On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works. On another level you wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength. I sense a confusion of means. Not that I’m criticizing. It was a daring thing you did, a daring thrust. *To use him*. (WN 330-331)

Through the notion of possession, Jack here exhibits both traits of submissiveness and domination. He surrenders himself to Hitler while simultaneously possessing him in turn. He submerges his identity under the overwhelming connotation of Hitler’s Nazism, but at the same time, it is he who commands Hitler, who uses him as a commodity for his own benefit and pleasure. What is more, he uses him on his own terms, polishing his image with a layer of nostalgia, leaving only desirable features forefront and completely veiling the ones that are unwanted. The element of nostalgia here adds another layer of interpretation, which includes both commodification and fetishization precisely in the aspect of retouching Hitler’s image, liberating his figure from the context of his past deeds. What is added at the same time is a certain level of temporal dislocation, which in itself brings a hint of pleasure. Hitler is appealing to Jack partly because he belongs to another time, one that cannot be fathomed to exist simultaneously with the present. Hutcheon emphasizes the way nostalgia “may depend precisely on the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal” (Hutcheon, 2000 195). This is what quite to the letter happens to Jack. Part of his fetish with Hitler and Nazism is derived from the very fact that they so obviously do not fit his present and could never even hypothetically do so because his present is built upon the idea of having beaten

the Nazis in the first place. What he does gain from emanating performative traits from their media imagery is the appeal of at least pretending to be emotionally strong enough to resist the fear, to conquer it, to squash it under the black combat boot during a dignified march.

4. ATOMIC NOSTALGIA AND AIRBORNE TOXIC EVENT

In this novel, nostalgia is also present on a much smaller scale of both time and place in relation to a local occurrence of the Airborne Toxic Event. At one point in the novel, the spillage of certain hazardous chemical substances leaves the area of Blacksmith contaminated (literally rather than through toxic media images) and its citizens in a state of utter disarray. In regard to the time during and after the event, nostalgia plays a subtle, though significant, role in the reaction of DeLillo's characters. The people of Blacksmith exhibit both personal nostalgia and collective nostalgia, or the longing for "the shared past of a group to which people connect their identity", which incidentally "may include memories of glorious moments in a group's history or a generalized feeling that the group was better in the past" (Van Prooijen et al. 2022: 953). Interestingly so, nostalgia is here related both to the time before the Airborne Toxic Event and the time during the event itself. In the case of the former, it is represented in the state of panic and desire to return to the peaceful state out of danger which the community collectively experiences during the time of evacuation. In the case of the latter, it is represented in the almost fetish-like attachment to the experience of the Airborne Toxic Event.

Once the spillage takes place, the wave of media reports floods Gladney's home, introducing the element of panic and chaos into the present moment. While most of the family joins the community in fear and feverish obsession with ever-evolving symptoms of poisoning, Jack maintains his level of calmness, mostly by clinging to the past, to the rules of the world in which such catastrophes do not occur. He proceeds with his dinner and dealing with the bills, stating that "[t]hese things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas" not "in places like Blacksmith" (WN 133). When the need for evacuation is proclaimed and they have to move, Jack still clings to the past times, comparing the dark toxic cloud to "some death ship in a Norse legend" (WN 148). It is interesting to note that, faced with the present threat of destruction, the entire family escapes the moment by regarding the event through specific lenses, which help them contextualize what is happening. Jack uses the remnants of the past, whereas his children, opting in a similar fashion for fictional discourses, regard the event as a media spectacle, passing around binoculars, looking at the catastrophe before them as just another disaster that was on TV last night

anyway. While at the evacuation camp, the citizens of Blacksmith yearn for the media to come and report about them, thus demonstrating the longing to establish the past order of events (because they can at least understand the events if they correspond to what constitutes reality for them – and that is the mass media). At the same time, when Jack is told that he has been exposed to the toxic components of Nyodene D and that he is going to die at one point because of this, his first reaction is to desire his academic gown and sunglasses. For the same reason, once the evacuation is proclaimed no longer necessary and the event has come to an end, the very first scene in the following part takes place – at the supermarket. Their collective need to return to the old system of functioning leads them directly to the place that is the prior epicenter of life in Blacksmith, the ground around which social life revolved before the accident. Sadly, what might be metaphorically interpreted as the past which is not the believed fortress of stillness and reliability, there have been some “new developments in the supermarket” (WN 193), as well, marking that whatever nostalgic longing for stability desires, it can never find in trying to return to the past state of affairs.

A much more intriguing manifestation of nostalgia comes in the form that Freeman describes as atomic nostalgia, “a new form of longing”, as a yearning to return to the experience related to, in this case, the WWII, in particular Oak Ridge experience with Manhattan Project and nuclear weaponry (Freeman 2015: 32). In more general terms, atomic nostalgia might be defined as the state of longing for past experiences related to destruction and annihilation. Freeman further underlines that atomic nostalgia is a “distinctively American, postnuclear, industrial-scientific vision of a lost utopia” which “masks real-life realities of destruction and atrocity” (Freeman 2015: 32). Structurally, it seems to operate in the same fashion as the earlier discussed fetishization of the past. In the same way in which Jack strips Hitler’s negative connotation of murders and occupations, those who experience atomic nostalgia tend to disregard the connotation of harm and destruction that the atomic event left in its wake, focusing solely on their uplifting experience associated with the atomic bomb. In that way, the people of Oak Ridge “use memory and nostalgia not primarily to articulate historical authenticity, but to celebrate a glorious past and to grapple with a present moment of uncertainty” primarily focusing on “their sacrifice to the nation, their scientific and intellectual prowess, their cosmopolitanism, and their prominent role in producing the atomic bomb” (Freeman 2015: 24-25). In *White Noise*, atomic nostalgia might be more suitably called Airborne Toxic Event nostalgia, but it otherwise corresponds to Freeman’s concept, albeit in a parodic fashion. DeLillo’s great historical event is much smaller in scale, ridiculously not as fatal, but it provides

the closest to an apocalyptic moment that the people of Blacksmith can experience. Essentially a TV audience, they have finally been part of something that surpasses the small-town life they claimed to worship, something that resembles the catastrophes from the Friday documentaries television broadcasts regularly. For that reason, they experience nostalgia both on the individual and collective levels. The most transparent individual reactions are seen in Jack and Babette. She becomes increasingly obsessed with death and addicted to Dylar, a drug that should allegedly help her deal with her fear of death, while Jack becomes obsessed with Babette's secretive actions and particularly her lover. Ironically, Jack's fetishization of Hitler becomes more extreme as he fully acquires the role of the executor, the bringer of death, not just in a black robe but with a gun and a hazed mind. In his case, nostalgia is directly related to destruction and violence, as suggested by the concept of atomic nostalgia. At one point towards the end of the novel, Siskind contemplates:

I don't trust anybody's nostalgia but my own. Nostalgia is a product of dissatisfaction and rage. It's a settling of grievances between the present and the past. The more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence. War is the form nostalgia takes when men are hard-pressed to say something good about their country. (WN 296)

What Siskind discusses here implies an inherently destructive aspect of any kind of nostalgia. The violence he talks about is incidentally related to Jack's growing violent tendencies, which culminate in Mink's motel room, but his theory seems to address the violence that nostalgia implies by itself. When longing to return to the past order, one does not only turn from the present one but implicitly wants to destroy it. In order for the past time to return, the present one should disappear, which, more frequently than not, includes violent destruction. Interestingly enough, Siskind discusses the violence on a large scale, a consequence of collective nostalgia, but in the novel itself, individual nostalgia will prove to be much worse. It is Jack who will turn to violence, not the community, leaving DeLillo's readers to wonder whether the condition really is a social phenomenon, or better yet, whether collective nostalgia could actually be less potent than its individual counterpart. In the aftermath of the event, the people of Blacksmith indeed do experience a temporary spike in violent behavior. There is an asylum set on fire, and a dead body is found, which a policeman claims had been thrown out of a UFO, but eventually, the community abandons the catastrophe. Jack notices, "The déjà vu crisis centers closed down. The hotline was quietly discontinued. People seemed on the verge of forgetting" (WN 254). Jack, on the other hand, cannot forget; he feels abandoned and becomes vehement in trying to find the physical markers of his poisoning (and ends up finding that his potassium

levels are slightly, yet somehow alarmingly so, up), as much as he dedicates himself to solving the case of Babette's strange behavior. One explanation might lie in the response that Jack and the community make. The community manages to dilute its atomic nostalgia through different communal activities, the most ridiculous of which becomes the SIMUVAC operation, or the simulated evacuation in case such a catastrophe ever occurs again. The simulation is a laughingstock, an event so obviously artificial and useless Jack cannot even stand to watch it happen, but, as Heinrich observes, "[i]t's a gimmick but it works" (WN 237). It manages to successfully resolve the fear that people felt and to reshape the experience they had so as to appear normal, usual, quotidian, and finally simulated. The event becomes drowned in its imitations, thus making the people of Blacksmith abandon their nostalgia, and more importantly so, the myths surrounding the event, because it is from "myths and their retelling, atomic nostalgia emerges, adapts, and lingers" (Freeman 2015: 35). The only thing the community at large experiences might be reduced to what Cheung calls anticipated nostalgia, or "the anticipation of feeling nostalgic for life experiences when looking back" (Cheung 2022: 1). However, for Jack, nostalgia and his growing violence that occurs as its result are "correctives to the contemporary moment", they reveal his "discomfort in [his] own present" (Mraović-O'Hare 2011: 213). Therefore, without being aware of yearning for the state of alarm that he experienced during the airborne toxic event, he tries to emulate it at the present moment. Henceforth, we can discuss his experiencing what Berliner describes as "vicarious nostalgia", a feeling based on directly experiencing an event, a form of "endonostalgia relating to intense social events and encounters, but also for the banalities of daily life as lived [...] on the ground" (Berliner 2020: 95). In other words, finding no coping mechanism that could diminish the significance of the Airborne Toxic Event, Jack projects the longing for the exhilarating experience from the past onto his present, deciding to perpetuate destruction after having barely survived one.

5. POSTMODERN SUBJECTIVITY AND POSTMODERN NOSTALGIA

For Berliner, nostalgia is a "fascinating angle from which to study contemporary questions of identity and culture in these times of 'accelerism'" (Berliner 2020: 15). Postmodern nostalgia is inherently a paradox; it involves a sentiment of yearning for the past while simultaneously rushing towards the future. However, implicitly, at the same time, it "constitutes a painful feeling born of the idea that human temporality is irreversible, and that a return to the past is impossible" (Berliner 2020: 15). Trapped in between, DeLillo's protagonists frequently turn to

nostalgia as a form of therapy, a mollifying agent that is to remove the threatening future already encrypted all over their present. Some critics, such as Salván, see nostalgia as a form of resistance, however passive, against the system at power in the contemporary America they inhabit. For example, while writing about *Underworld*, she argues the following:

The ideological nostalgia marked by the contrast between “then” and “now” points to a dialectics between the present — corrupt, fallen, overdetermined by power structures — and the past — authentic, committed, innocent — that slides over another fundamental dialectic structure: the one confronting the individual and the society [Nick Shay] tries to escape from. This shift allows DeLillo to establish the analogy between authentic individual/innocent past and oppressive society/reified present. Through it, he is able to articulate nostalgia as the possibility to resist the system. The rhetoric of nostalgia produces in his work an effect of estrangement from the demands of the postmodern world understood as a “here and now” articulation from which the individual can gain some temporal distance. (Salván 2007: 20)

The problem with Salván’s interpretation is that it does not discuss the element of awareness where nostalgia is concerned, nor does it consider DeLillo’s use of parody surrounding this condition. Yes, nostalgia in *Underworld*, as much as in *White Noise*, is symptomatic of various characters’ dissatisfaction with the system at present, but it is not a revolt or confrontation that any of them have in mind, nor do they have the enemy coherently visualized or defined. For nostalgia to be their *pièce de resistance*, they would have to be aware that they must engage in some kind of rebellion against the present society and its condition. They would have to primarily identify the adversary, to be conscious that their turning to the past is instigated by tangible reasons, that their nostalgia is a provoked response and state. Yet, none of them are, perhaps least of all the characters of *White Noise*. Jack Gladney turns to Hitler completely unaware of his logical and instinctive reasons; he is able to identify his fear of death only on the level of conversation, on the level at which he engages in debates with Babette (at one point, he even acknowledges that he is not afraid of dying but of loneliness). He further turns to the chaos of Airborne Toxic Event not because he is conscious that he simply cannot return to the ordinary dull life of Blacksmith and College-on-the-Hill, but because he subconsciously feels the urge to act, to go with the flow, the flow in question being the prescribed behavior of a cheap crime novel’s erratic detective chasing justice for no particular reason. Furthermore, even narratively, nostalgia is a means of parody for DeLillo more than a possible strategy of revolt against the system or the present. Jack’s nostalgia is a ridicule of the attempt to escape the present, to begin with; this is why his imitation

of Hitler and Nazis is, at times, so openly mocking. The past, it seems to be suggested here, is so rosy-colored and better than the present solely for the fact that we want it to be. In other words, it is not a rebellion against the cultural narrative of the present, it is but a mere creation of another one. As Ladino concludes, nostalgia “shuns closure and foregrounds the inability of narrative” (Ladino 2010: 2). Moreover, Ladino associates DeLillo’s use of nostalgia as close to Susan Stewart’s definitions of postmodern nostalgia which rests upon ideas of a merger of unmergeable opposites, some of which might be now and then, “lived and mediated” or abstractly speaking “authenticity and transcendence” (Ladino 2010: 2). In other words, DeLillo’s novels expose the futility of nostalgia, prove it to be no better than any other form of escapism in its passivity, denotes it as the very opposite of rebellion – as its very pathetic mockery.

On a symbolic level, in *White Noise*, nostalgia is parodically further depicted in the element of *déjà vu*. As one of the symptoms of Nyodene poisoning, it represents a peculiar manifestation of nostalgia; it is quite literally reliving of the past, in so far as it includes experiencing things presumably already seen or lived through. To have this experience marked with a negative connotation, or in this case, lethal poisoning, seems to be another of DeLillo’s ironic commentaries on the concept of nostalgia. It is indeed symptomatic, but of a seemingly much more lethal poisoning with the presupposed idealism of the past and the consequential debilitating fear of the future. While walking around the evacuation camp, Jack and Murray Siskind discuss the situation and various gossip and theories circulating among the group of people. An avid aficionado of conspiracies, much like many of DeLillo’s characters, Siskind delivers the following theory about *déjà vu*:

Why do we think these things happened before? Simple. They did happen before, in our minds, as visions of the future. Because these are precognitions, we can’t fit the material into our system of consciousness as it is now structured. This is basically supernatural stuff. We’re seeing into the future but haven’t learned how to process the experience. So it stays hidden until the precognition comes true, until we come face to face with the event. Now we are free to remember it, to experience it as familiar material. (WN 176)

Siskind here seemingly achieves the desired blending of postmodern nostalgia between the past and the future, by making *déjà vu* an example of a longing for the experience not yet experienced. In terms of motifs, this concept is close to various ideas of a future thrust (theorized by Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock*, 1970, among other works) and several DeLillo’s characters who live in the future, or at least one step ahead of their present times, most infamous of all being Eric Packer from

Cosmopolis. Theoretically speaking, this falls under the scope of what Berliner names nostalgia “completely disassociated from personal experiences”, a general yearning for a place or time one never actually saw or visited in person (Berliner 2020: 15). According to Ladino, in DeLillo’s novels, “nostalgia functions whether or not its object ever existed” because postmodern subjectivity allows them to conceive it (Ladino 2010: 4). Postmodern nostalgia thus further merges the unmergeable, the lived with the un-lived, the real with the imaginary. While this process does demonstrate the extent of authority subjectivity wields over DeLillo’s postmodern citizens, it also speaks of nostalgia as a pointless practice. Siskind here notes that they think of the future they yearn for, but that they do not know how to process even the experience of thinking about it, let alone the experience of the real thing. Moreover, nostalgia seems to be a defeatist activity, especially if we take the following observation made by Jack Gladney some time after the Airborne Toxic Event:

Déjà vu was still a problem in the area. A toll-free hotline had been set up. There were counselors on duty around the clock to talk to people who were troubled by recurring episodes. Perhaps *déjà vu* and other tics of the mind and body were the durable products of the airborne toxic event. But over a period of time it became possible to interpret such things as signs of a deep-reaching isolation we were beginning to feel. There was no larger city with a vaster torment we might use to see our own dilemma in some soothing perspective. No large city to blame for our sense of victimization. No city to hate and fear. No panting megacenter to absorb our woe, to distract us from our unremitting sense of time – time as the agent of our particular ruin, our chromosome breaks, hysterically multiplying tissue. (WN 204)

He speaks of *déjà vu* here as a consequence of a traumatic event, but also as a symptom of a psychological state close to various readings of the postmodern condition. Here nostalgia as depicted in this element really is “a critique of late capitalism” and the society that could allow for such an event to take place, as well as “a provocative argument for environmental and social justice” (Ladino 2010: 3). However, it is also an indicator that “a lot of contemporary culture was indeed nostalgic” (Hutcheon 2000: 190). *Déjà vu* is a response of people left alone with the catastrophe; it proves nostalgia to be a coping mechanism invented where none other is provided. The public does not provide a context, the mass media does not establish an enemy who made the catastrophe possible, there is no discourse akin to the one of the Cold War (current at the time of the novel) that would clearly point out where the common people should stand and what they should feel. There is no instruction for nostalgia, no prescribed nostalgia, so they come up with the closest thing possible, they invent their own manifestation of the symptom. Both the case of *déjà vu* and Jack’s fetishization of the past, however, are thus proven to have the common enemy

no one wants to address directly – time itself, or temporality. Fear of death represented in nostalgia is not the fear of the physical manifestation of death, but rather the idea of it, the idea that all of us are alive for just a while and that the future eventually holds no other promise but for this temporality to come to an end. After all, this is why Jack Gladney, early in the novel, issues a call to himself, his family and friends, and ultimately anyone who will listen, “Let’s enjoy these aimless days while we can, I told myself, I fearing some kind of deft acceleration” (WN 21). Nostalgia here might be indeed seen as a strategy of resistance, still a subconscious one, but not against the present, the system, or the future at large, but against human temporality in general; an instinctive shying away from the nature of our race.

6. CONCLUSION

The concept of nostalgia in DeLillo’s novels is an understated marker of the postmodern condition. In *White Noise*, it is an indicator of the utter dissatisfaction his protagonists feel in reaction to the present time and the society they live in, but it is also a parodic exploration of the concept itself and what it implies for the human process of remembering history and past experiences, both on the individual and collective level. For the most part, nostalgia as seen in the novel is subtle, it is represented in cultural markers not as directly notable, such as the domestic elements of the Gladneys’ home and their silent adoration of life in the 50s. Other examples of nostalgia, however, highlight the element of fetishization and a tendency to subjectively interpret past times, to the point of creating yet another narrative that should distract DeLillo’s characters from their lives and deep-seated fears.

Jack Gladney’s fetishization of Hitler and Nazis, with absolutely no regard for the historical context of their regime, might be interpreted as DeLillo’s assessment of nostalgia and memory at large. Much like nostalgia tends to involve remembering positive details about the past exclusively, Jack Gladney, an epitome of postmodern subjectivity, holds in his memory solely those traits of Hitler that he needs at present, exclusively those features that correspond with his subjective perspective both of the past and the present, as well as those aspects that he can exploit for his own benefit. In the same way, he will try to project the state experienced during the airborne toxic event onto the present, exhibiting traits of atomic nostalgia, holding onto the sheer force of the event without being aware of its negative connotation.

In all aspects, nostalgia in *White Noise* can rightfully so be interpreted as a futile business, a useless pastime of passive individuals who only instinctively feel that the present system does not suit them, but who never actively revolt against it. Whether or not the system at present is their true enemy is highly debatable, mostly

because of the fact that the root of their nostalgia seems to be motivated by their fear of death and the realization of their temporality, more than by the need to resist the current state of affairs in the society and culture they inhabit. Nostalgia as seen in this novel strongly suggests that DeLillo approached the concept parodically, thus implicitly commenting more on the nature of human existence and identity, rather than on their active confrontation with the present.

Sladana Stamenković

NOSTALGIJA I POSTMODERNA SUBJEKTIVNOST U *BELOM ŠUMU* DONA DELILA

Rezime

Nostalgija nije tako česta tema DeLilovih romana, niti je u prvom planu bilo kog tumačenja njegovih dela. Međutim, ona je implicitno prisutna u jednoj od glavnih tema njegove Amerike – onoj o konfliktu između prošlosti i sadašnjosti, ili između prošlosti i budućnosti. Nostalgija se u tim slučajevima u DeLilovim romanima javlja kao simptom nezadovoljstva svetom dvadesetog veka, ali i kao parodičan, posve pasivan odgovor na suštinsku nesnađenost njegovih junaka, kao bezuspešni pokušaj da se pobegne od stvarnosti, da se izbegne bilo kakvo smisleno i funkcionalno delovanje. U *Belom šumu*, sentimentalno viđenje prošlosti za kojom se žudi prisutno je u više aspekata, na istorijskoj osi koja uključuje kolektivnu, svetsku istoriju, ali i lokalno, te individualno prošlo iskustvo, a katkad i ono neproživljeno. DeLilovi junaci ponekad raspravljaju o konceptu nostalgije, razmatrajući u filozofskom ključu ono što ona uključuje i inspiriše, što možemo videti na primeru Marija Siskinda, dežurnog tumača skrivene stvarnosti. Daleko češće, nostalgija je prisutna implicitno, u elementima prošlosti koji su inkorporirani u sadašnjost, poput profesije Džeka Glednija i njegove opsesije Hitlerom i nacističkim simbolima i imidžom, a pre svega njihovim strategijama propagande. Na lokalnom nivou, nostalgija se ispoljava i u odnosu na proživljeni događaj izlivanja toksičnog materijala, koji će protagonista kasnije iznova proživljavati na simboličkom nivou. Bilo o kom slučaju da je reč, DeLilo pristupa dihotomiji, u čijim okvirima je prošlost savršena i uređena, a budućnost strašna i uništilačka, tako što je sagledava u kontekstu parodije. Postmoderna nostalgija i postmoderna subjektivnost činiće bitan deo ovakvog parodiranja, što autoru omogućava da preispita mehanizme nostalgije i načina na koji ljudski rod pamti prošlost i istoriju.

Ključne reči: nostalgija, *Beli šum*, Don DeLilo, postmoderna subjektivnost, fetišiziranje istorije

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