

## THE NOVEL *WHITE NOISE* AS A METAPHOR OF THE SPIRITUAL SEARCH

Anamaria ONCIOIU

Bucharest University, Cultural and Literary Studies, Romania  
(anamariabv@outlook.com)

DOI: 10.19062/1842-9238.2017.15.1.19

**Abstract:** *The main focus of this paper is represented by the manner in which the novel White Noise by Don DeLillo illustrates various themes, such as: integrating the fear of the unknown into the every day life, the indirect communication with the unknown by means of the relationship with the mass media, and the family members, or the relationship with the social authorities. The unknown is defined as representing a danger which leads to the process of searching for empirical solutions against fear, such as tourism, experimental medicine, research, and shopping, to name but a few.*

*Although the novel does not offer the reader the ultimate method for completely eradicating this fear, it is interesting to observe the manner in which its content explores ways of transcending it.*

**Keywords:** *fear, transcendence, simulacrum, identity, unknown, authority, danger.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The novel *White Noise* has as its main themes the exploration of the urban setting which is marked by deep spiritual crises. These crises are caused by several factors, some of which are represented by the overstimulation provoked by such external factors as: redundant products, immature relationships, or concepts that are not fully understood. The unknown is a factor which represents the catalyst for the change brought about by the spiritual search. This is because the familiar concepts fail to nurture feelings, such as: safety, meaningfulness, authenticity or stability. This is precisely the reason why we argue that one of the causes of spiritual crises is constructing one's identity by means of associating oneself with the following external factors:

- (1) **The act of buying and consumption of redundant products;**
- (2) **Tourism** - the obsessive photographing;
- (3) **Relationships** - long conversations centered upon repetitive subjects, such as: natural disasters, celebrities, mystery detective cases and so on;
- (4) **The mass media** - which represents the lens through which reality is perceived, including nature, and natural disasters such as the toxic cloud, which heralds the inevitability of change. This situation results in an existential crisis, similar to the concept proposed by the critic René Girard, who defines it as the sacrificial crisis. This situation is caused by the disappearance of categories, as well as by the destabilizing of the social hierarchy. These phenomena are all portrayed in the novel as a means of preceding the spiritual transcendence of the urban conflict-ridden settings.

Such examples of destabilizing the hierarchy are present throughout the entire novel: Steffie demonstrates that she has intuitively known the solution to her brother's crying

crises recommended by the doctor; Heinrich stirs up a debate about the present, which his father finds uncomfortable; and Jack is using his position to support his less authoritarian colleague;

5. **Historicity** - a family discussion about time - the radio predicts rain, and as Jack believes that his sense cannot be trusted, he is certain that the radio is more accurate; Heinrich provokes his father rather violently to a discussion about time, which his father avoids in spite of all his son's efforts to make him admit the „here and now” hypothesis;

6. **Hyperbolization** of senses (a) – a telescope to see more clearly, hyperbolization of authority (b) - the image of Hitler, hyperbolization of information source (c) - the mass media as a source of accurate information.

As a result of all these factors, the feeling of unsafety is constantly growing, triggering the search for empirical solutions, and thus a genuine existential crisis. This crisis is the main focus of the novel's narrative, and proposes themes of urban research of considerable sociological and cultural importance.

## 2. *WHITE NOISE* AND THE CONCEPT OF SIMULACRUM

The crisis at the heart of the novel can be linked to the crisis of authentic values in the urban setting, in fact to what the sociologist Jean Baudrillard calls „the concept of **simulacrum**”. What the critic René Girard defines as the *sacrificial crisis*, a social process marked by the lack of differentiation between categories, represents another useful theoretical framework. Both these frameworks have been used to arrive at a better understanding of the way in which the spiritual search is illustrated in the narrative of the novel *White Noise*.

The simulacrum can be defined by an absence of a referential reality, which can be associated with the dissolution of hierarchy. This dissolution is the main trigger of the sacrificial crisis. It also represents a reality that cannot be defined or categorized, because it conceals an absence, an illusion that makes no reference to the real life. It is, as Jean Baudrillard proposes, a hyperreal. Neither is it a parody, nor is it influenced by life or death. It is rather operational in nature. It is a descriptive machine that resembles the characteristics of the real, and replaces it, so that the need to produce the real disappears. Tourism, thus, becomes a spiritual experience because simulations can be produced infinitely by means of photographs: "*Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism. Another silence ensued.*" *They are taking pictures of taking pictures,*" he said. (Page 12 *White Noise* Don DeLillo)

This concept of simulation triggers a passive attitude towards reality, which is already produced and multiplied. The individual doesn't have to ask questions or look for answers; he is no longer forced to doubt the validity of reality. This fact can be compared to the lack of hierarchical differentiation, which, according to the theoretical framework of the critic René Girard, leads to the outburst of the sacrificial crisis.

The information in the media as illustrated in the novel *White Noise* can be an example of the concept of simulacrum. This is because such information is excessively repeated, and is centered upon a reality already present in the mind of the audience: the world as a place of the apocalypse, where the individual enhances one's sense of safety by watching disasters that take place in far off areas of the world.

The fact that such disasters, accidents and violent acts occur in far off places is important, but it has to be noted that the novel also presents first-hand accounts of such disasters. It is only this experience that offers the possibility of reconnecting to the sacred

by the transcendence of fear. Vulnerability becomes here a source of developing compassion, love and authenticity.

Paradoxically, violence and fear represent the catalysts that raise awareness of the need for such spiritual values. The lack of authenticity results in a spiritual crisis, which is solved by empirical means, but which determines the presence of violence within the community. In the novel *White Noise* the lack of authenticity is exemplified by the lack of trust in one's own physical senses, which are obscured in favour of the information coming from the mass media. The media becomes thus, the trustworthy source of knowledge and this is why the individual loses their connection to their spiritual values. Jack is convinced that a defensive attitude is necessary for the prevention of negative events.

It is interesting to notice that, according to René Girard, the main focus of the religious rite of sacrifice is based upon the empirical assumption that there is a fear of being killed if one does not kill oneself.

The urban world depicted in the novel displays an illusion of abundance due to the richness of the images sharing the characteristics of the simulacrum concept. The lack of symbolical significance and the pure operational character of these images generate emotional imbalances and the need to look for valid spiritual solutions to the conflicts arising in this context. Reality is perceived through decoding of some cultural signs. The sociologist Jean Baudrillard explains the fact that the act of consumption stands for a subtle way of communication within the frame of the hypercivilized world. This has as main motivation the need of the individual to feel his/ her sense of belonging which, in turn, transforms itself into a sense of being protected against the dangers of non-existence.

Under these circumstances, an important question comes into the foreground: that of the search for authentic spiritual identity. This constitutes, in fact, the main theme of the novel.

In this novel, identity is an unstable concept which is constructed by means of reference to the imagery of simulations, such as: radio information, medicine against the fear of death, superficial conversations, false claims regarding knowledge, and so on. The simulacrum becomes so prevalent in all the imagery of the urban society that authenticity itself is simulated along with the very idea of God. In this respect, Jean Baudrillard explains that God himself can also become a simulation. A society of simulations can only be logically ruled by a simulated God:

*Outside of medicine and the army, favored terrains of simulation, the affair goes back to religion and the simulacrum of divinity: "I forbade any simulacrum in the temples because the divinity that breathes life into nature cannot be represented." Indeed it cannot. But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme authority, simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or is it volatilized into simulacra which alone deploy their pomp and power of fascination - the visible machinery of icons being substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? This is precisely what was feared by the Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today.*

*Their rage to destroy images rose precisely because they sensed this omnipotence of simulacra, this facility they have of erasing God from the consciousness of people, and the overwhelming, destructive truth which they suggest: that ultimately there has never been any God; that only simulacra exist; indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum. (Page 169 Chapter Simulacra and Simulation Selected Writings Jean Baudrillard).*

The media abounds in images that resemble to the characteristics of the concept of simulacrum. Its portrayal of the world is focused on the individual's lack of power to control his/her own life. The external factors, such as the atmospheric toxicity or the romantic betrayal are all threatening to destroy one's emotional, physical and financial balance. This situation explored by the narrative determines the outburst of violence whose resolution resides in the scape goat mechanism. It can be argued that the quest for authentic spiritual values brought about by the immersion in the urban profane lifestyle, as well as the lack of depth of a world ruled by simulated identities, account for the main causes of the excess in conflicts in the novel.

The redundant photography is also an indication of the obsession with simulated images. The image is not important in itself, but rather due to the fact that it triggers a great deal of attention. American culture itself is heavily influenced by the cult of celebrity. All public life is engaged in placing a high value on the opinion of famous people, as well as criticizing them. In the novel *White Noise*, value is ascribed to a place, especially due to its popularity and to the fact that it is obsessively photographed.

*Several days later, Murray asked me about a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America. We drove twenty-two miles into the country around Farmington. There were meadows and apple orchards. White fences trailed through the rolling fields. Soon the signs started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA.* (Page 12 *White Noise* Don DeLillo)

As mentioned earlier, this valuing of images that have no power of transcendence, leads to the sacrificial crisis which is often resolved through the scape goat mechanism. In the novel, death is most often alluded to the scape goat. It is seen as the ultimate enemy and all efforts are directed towards its avoidance or its denial.

It is interesting to notice that the vulnerability of one's body, of the social or family structure, of the financial or the professional status quo represents the catalyst leading to the spiritual search for more meaningful solutions, rather than to the scape goat mechanism.

*The threat of death becomes a means of going beyond the urban mindset and into the subconscious, where details become essential and life is no longer a repetition of mechanical acts aimed at conformity and approval of the outside sources. It is the dream-like state of the night that makes the urban setting a poetic landscape where every sound and image becomes an opportunity to display certain emotions: „There is an expressway beyond the backyard now, well below us, and at night as we settle into our brass bed the sparse traffic washes past, a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream.”* (*White Noise* Don DeLillo page 9)

Life and death are thus, interconnected by means of dreams, and this is why the profoundly secularized setting is no longer a meaningless one, becoming the means for transcending the boundaries of time and space through a meditative attitude.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS - *WHITE NOISE* AND THE SPIRITUAL CRISIS

The novel *White Noise* illustrates a society which is apparently evolving from a material and social viewpoint, but which, in fact, is declining from a spiritual perspective.

This decline is solved by means of an attitude change concerning the profane reality. If the real itself is associated with the concept of simulacrum, which entails that creation is already completed, multiplied and non-referential, the individual finds no incentive to search for the meaning of existence. This has already been produced by an external source. The only role of the individual is to take its place in a mechanical structure which has no consideration for vulnerability.

The simulacrum is not concerned with vicissitude because its creation has been grounded upon the assumption that it destroys all possibilities of such vulnerability. In this regard, the critic Jean Baudrillard describes it, as follows:

*It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and shortcircuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced: this is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection which no longer leaves any chance, even in the event of death. A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference.* (Page 167 Selected Writings Jean Baudrillard Chapter Simulacra and Simulation)

It is interesting to observe that the hyperreal is „sheltered” from the imaginary in the process of producing the simulacrum, in order to avoid the distinction between the imaginary and the real. This distinction would create the premises for the real to have vulnerabilities. Since the simulation aims at erasing all the vicissitudes of reality, and create a „perfect” model, it can be argued that this „perfection” transforms the simulated image into an object of no symbolic depth. This type of imagery becomes mechanical and thus, its spiritual dimension is lost. Existence is meaningful only if creation is in the process of becoming, incomplete and centered upon evolution. This incompleteness creates the feeling of invidual life purpose, enhancing his/her sense of worthiness.

The lack of meaning represents a real issue that can result in invidual and social chaos. It is because of this reason that the novel *White Noise* can be regarded as an attempt to recapture the meaning of life by empirical means represented by a change of perspective upon the profane reality. This can transform itself into a way of accessing the sacred in a profoundly urban cultural setting. A small act of innovation can facilitate this transformation: the shelves of the shops are rearranged and part of the anxiety is transformed into celebratory energy as a result. The reclaiming of the existential meaning is related to the reconnection to such traditional values as: innocence, celebration and compassion. The energy of anxiety is thus, transformed into celebration and this is the reason why the novel can be interpreted as a beacon of light harboring the hope that even in the darkest conflict-ridden profane environment, the reconnection to the transcendental is, nevertheless, possible.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/ 187/1.5/S/15559 **Competitive multidisciplinary doctoral research at European level (CdocMD)** cofinanced by the European Social Found within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*, Penguin Books, New York, 1986.
- [2] Baudrillard, Jean *Simulacre și simulare*, Idea, 2008.
- [3] Girard, René *The Violence and the Sacred*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.
- [4] Girard, René. *Țapul ispasitor*, Nemira, București, 2000.
- [5] *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012.
- [6] Girard, René. *Țapul ispășitor*, Nemira, București, 1995.

- [7] *Enciclopedia Universală Britanică*, Litera, București, 2010.
- [8] *Enciclopedia of World Religions, Enciclopedia of Catholicism* Frank K. Flinn J. Gordon Melton, Series Editor, Facts On File, Inc., 2007.
- [9] Weber, Max., *Sociology of Religion* (Beacon Press, 1993)
- [10] Surdulescu, Radu, *Zgomotul de fond postmodern sau comedia spaimii de moarte (The Postmodern White Noise, or The Comedy of Death Fear)*, a preface to the Romanian version of Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (*Zgomotul alb*), trans. by Horia-Florian Popescu (București: Leda-Corint, 2006)
- [11] Surdulescu, Radu. "(Im)mortality in Don DeLillo's World City" (Published in *The Sense of America. Histories into Text*, Rodica Mihăilă and Irina Pană (eds.), Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 2009