

An Examination of Consumerism and the Role of Technology in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*

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Abstract

Human society has entered an era marked by myriad phenomena collectively labeled 'modernisation'. Over the past 100 years, scientific breakthroughs and technological innovations have radically changed the human experience. Almost everything we touch or use in our homes, our garages, our offices is the by-product of an intense and complex industrial system: our consumption of goods is notably a function of our culture. We are surrounded by a manufactured world. Like most phenomena, the critical reality lies not in the general characteristics of modernisation, but in the particular and unique conditions of people's lives, and the effects of modernisation in the places where we live: in our homes, our communities, our natural and cultural environments. Two texts which are concerned with an exploration of the complexities of modernisation, particularly technology and the resultant consumerist culture, are Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship that exists between consumerism and technology in the two texts. This investigation used historical, philosophical and psychological theories. From a historical perspective, the study focused on contextual approaches, which looked at the historical development of technologies in relation to their social context. Employing postmodern theories, the characters' motivations to buy and consume products in both texts were discussed. In essence, it was noted that consumerism physically and mentally affects consumers. On the physical level, people living in the consumerist society cannot avoid its tentacles because there are too many outside forces keeping them in the system. Technology has become as much a part of the texture of daily life as humans are themselves. In fact, the two seem inextricable. In both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, the pervasive presence of technology proves both menacing and comforting—toxic threats abound, while concurrently the characters are bombarded with advertised information and promises of immortality through scientific advancements. Thus, consumers relentlessly buy products and feel that the products they buy determine their identity.

Key Words: Consumerism, technology, modernisation and modernity, postmodernity, white noise

Introduction

The study is concerned with examining the relationship that exists between consumerism and technology in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*. As used in the broadest sense, consumerism is "the buying and using of goods and services; (or) the belief that it is good for a society or an individual to buy and use a

large quantity of goods and services,” according to Hornby (2010, p312). Precisely, consumerism is the social and economic system causing desire to purchase material goods in great amounts. Therefore, in its narrower sense, consumerism can be understood as an attachment to materialistic values or possessions or as a culture based on the promotion, sale and acquisition of consumer goods. While modernist lifestyles have been of interest to the literatures, especially of the western world, they have not been a key element of Zambian fiction (Chilala 2019; Picketty 2020).

Consumerism, as a phenomenon, has its roots in the economic, political, social, and cultural changes that were ushered in as a result of, generally the intellectual movements which begun in the fourteenth century (the Renaissance, Reformation and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century), and particularly, the industrial age ushered in by the Industrial Revolutions. Quoting the history professor William Leach, Laura and Doan Cloer (2014, p2) contend that in the decades following the Civil War, American capitalism began to produce a distinct culture, unconnected to traditional family or community values, to religion in any conventional sense, or to political democracy. It was a secular business and market-oriented culture, with the exchange and circulation of money and goods at the foundation of its aesthetic life and of its moral sensibility. “The cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratisation of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society,” observe Laura and Dan Cloer (2014, p2). In both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo depicts and explores the intricacies of this culture.

Technology, on the other hand, refers to methods, systems, and devices which are the result of scientific knowledge being used for practical purposes (Hornby, 2010, p1534). In the context of the present study, technology can also be seen as a set of devices, a complex of industries, or as an abstract and dynamic force bringing about social change. Technology, in particular, has catalysed the transition to modernity and catalysed major transitions within it. For decades, it was continent-spanning railroads; electric lighting and communications; immense bridge, dam, and skyscraper constructions; and sprawling factory complexes like Henry Ford's that captured the public's imagination and seemed to change culture, notes Burns (2001). In the middle of the twentieth century, synthetic chemicals, mass automobility, and atomic power ushered in a new era. Still more recently, the rise and proliferation of information technologies, electronic communications, and new media, as well as advances in molecular biology, biotechnology, and related fields, have all been identified as important aspects of an increasingly globalised and technologically sophisticated postmodern age. For the first time in history, large parts of the world's population live in thoroughly technological environments, contends Henneberg (2011, p5). Thus, it can be noted that since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, consumerism and technology, like two sides of a coin, have shaped and defined each other with the passage of time. The current study investigated the relationship that exists between consumerism and technology as portrayed in DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* and the impact thereof on the individual and society.

Statement of the Problem

Inescapably, one of the most dramatic effects of modernity has been its ambivalent effect on ordinary people, producing both unifying and divisive forces. In the two texts under study, *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, characters seem to both embrace and dread the conditions of life mediated by relentless technological forces. In both texts, for example, individual characters and society at large exhibit a consumer behaviour that has symbiotically shaped and expanded the technological systems, while at the same time, the characters and society itself are beset at every turn by the real dangers inherent in such modern systems. As the two texts portray, the more modernised the systems and mechanisms of commerce and finance are, the more isolated and anonymous are individuals, their families, their communities, and the more particular the circumstances of their lives.

Thus, put in question form, the problem this study was concerned with was: What is the impact of consumerism and technology on the individual and society in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*?

Objectives of the Study

The study was anchored on three key objectives.

- (i) To examine the consumerist culture as portrayed in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*.
- (ii) To examine the role of technology in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*.
- (iii) To evaluate the impact of both consumerism and technology on individuals and modern society as portrayed in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*.

Findings

The research led to a number of critical findings based on the three objectives. The first objective of the study was to examine the consumerist culture as portrayed in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*.

Consumerism Proliferates Different Lifestyles

In both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, consumer goods represent cultural as well as material resources, mediating relationships and embodying meaning. As the study has attempted to show in both texts, consumerism is a deeply entrenched economic ideology, affecting both individuals and society in its outlook. The multiplication of consumer goods and services and the preoccupation of individuals and society to acquire them have greatly affected human relationships as everyone becomes anonymous in the whirlwind of consumerism. In effect, consumerism stimulates a proliferation and multiplicity of identities and lifestyles.

A lifestyle, according to Giddens (1991) can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity. This is evidenced in *White Noise*, for example, when Jack,

(who has a carefully crafted veneer as a college professor by wearing sweeping robes and thick glasses) feels the urge to bolster his identity through consumption of material goods after a casual encounter with his former acquaintance named Eric Massingale in a huge hardware store at the mall (pp82-83):

"I've never seen you off campus, Jack. You look so different without your glasses and gown... You're a different person altogether."

"Different in what way, Eric?"

"You won't take offense?" he said, the grin turning lascivious, rich with secret meaning.

"Of course not. Why would I?"

"You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy."

His veneer having been thus exposed, Jack feels the need to reinforce his image, or his self, in the act of consumption of material things, as the text highlights further:

The encounter put me in the mood to shop... I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. I sent clerks into their fabric books and pattern books to search for elusive designs. I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed (DeLillo 1985, pp84-85).

The above concept of trying to locate one's personal identity in the purchase of commodities is also evident in *Cosmopolis*, as when Eric Parker feels contiguous with his forty-eight room apartment: "The tower gave him strength and depth (of character)... There was an aura of texture and reflection. He scanned its length and felt connected to it, sharing the surface and the environment that came into contact with the surface, from both sides..." (DeLillo 2003, p9). Thus, DeLillo makes the point that consumerism is a deeply ingrained phenomenon, affecting individuals in ways that not only alters their identities, but their lifestyles as well.

Consumerism is Perpetuated for its Own Sake

In both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, consumerism is perpetuated for its own sake, which ultimately makes human beings become 'slaves' of the system that ultimately controls and defines every aspect of their lives. In *White Noise*, for instance, numerous instances have been highlighted which confirm this assertion, such as the litany of consumer goods which the students carry with them every year when Jack is describing the spectacle of station wagons as the students arrive at College-on-the-Hill, an image which in itself conveys a sense of ritualistic consumerism. This motif is extended by proxy to the parents of the students, whose "well-made faces and wry looks" gives them a "sense of renewal, of communal recognition... This assembly of station wagons...tells the parents they are a collection of the

like-minded and spiritually akin, a people, a nation.” This notion is supported by Baudrillard (1970, p16) who contends that consumerism has brought about a new humanity, one where people actualise themselves in consumption:

...it is in this way that people define themselves in relation to objects... It is as if the differential system of consumption significantly helped to distinguish... (firstly) within the consumer, categories of needs which now have but a distant relation with the person as a lived being; (Secondly) within society, categories or “status groups,” recognisable in a specific collection of objects. The hierarchised gamuts of objects and products play exactly the same role as the set of distinguishing values played in previous times: the foundation of group morality.

On both levels, Baudrillard (1970) argues further, there is solicitation, coerced grouping and categorisation of the social and personal world based on objects; that is, into *a system of classification*. Individuals and society henceforth become stratified based on consumerism. This notion is reinforced further when Jack and Murray visit the site of the MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA, a scenario which conveys the image of a society enslaved in its own consumerism. As Murray makes this point:

No one sees the barn... Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn... We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura... 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 (DeLillo, 1985, p12).

The absurdity of looking at an “invisible” barn if only to be part of the aura is what Baudrillard (1994) further extrapolates as culture being now dominated by simulations, objects and discourses that have no firm origin, no referent, no ground or foundation.

Thus, in a moment of epiphany, Jack tries to lighten the burden of this consumer culture by throwing away a litany of objects:

I went home and started throwing things away. I threw away fishing lures, dead tennis balls, torn luggage. I ransacked the attic for old furniture, discarded lampshades, warped screens, bent curtain rods. I threw away picture frames, shoe trees, umbrella stands, wall brackets, highchairs and cribs, collapsible TV trays, beanbag chairs, broken turntables. I threw away shelf paper, faded stationery... The more things I threw away, the more I found. The house was a sepia maze of old and tired things. There was an immensity of things, an overburdening weight, a connection, a mortality. I stalked the rooms, flinging things into cardboard boxes. Plastic electric fans, burnt-out toasters, Star Trek needlepoints. It took well over an hour to get everything down to the sidewalk. No one helped me. I didn’t want help

or company or human understanding. I just wanted to get the stuff out of the house. I sat on the front steps, waiting for a sense of ease and peace to settle in the air around me.

A woman passing on the streets said, "A decongestant, an antihistamine, a cough suppressant, a pain reliever."

The imagery evoked by the saleswoman at the end of the foregoing quote indicates the perennial consumer culture of the postmodern world. It is simply unrelenting as new products are availed for every need or ailment one may feel. This ultimately denotes the logic of advertising which fosters consumerism.

But part from the detrimental effect that consumerism has on the individual as depicted in the foregoing quote, likewise, awareness of the detrimental effects consumer culture is having on the environment is increasing, and related changes can be seen taking place in advertising and public discourse: "[There is] an increasing emphasis on ostensibly 'green' products and services as signals of cultural competence, and the recasting of some highly resource consuming activities and products as unfashionable and ignorant choices," observes Lehdonvirta (2012, p2). This trend in consumer behaviour is depicted in *White Noise* when Jack and Babette meet Murray at the supermarket one day (p18): "His basket held generic food and drink, nonbrand items in plain white packages with simple labeling. There was a white can labeled CANNED PEACHES... A jar of roasted nuts had a white wrapper bearing the words IRREGULAR PEANUTS..." Then Murray makes the point (pp18-19): "This is the new austerity... Flavorless packaging. It appeals to me. I feel I'm not only saving money but contributing to some kind of spiritual consensus."

Similarly, in *Cosmopolis*, consumerism is perpetuated for its own sake. This point is made by Kinski:

The enormous expenditures that people make for land and houses and boats and planes. This has nothing to do with traditional self-assurances, okay. Property is no longer about power, personality and command. It's not about vulgar display or tasteful display... The only thing that matters is the price you pay (DeLillo, 2003, p78).

The perennial culture of consumerism is again brought to the fore as Parker and his entourage inch their way slowly across Manhattan: "He thought about the amassments, the material crush, days and nights of bumper to bumper, red light, green light, the fixedness of things... How things persist, the habits of gravity and time, in this new and fluid reality" (DeLillo, 2003, p83). This notion of consumerism perpetuated for its own sake is also supported by Baudrillard (1970) who contends that today, we are everywhere surrounded by the remarkable conspicuousness of consumption and affluence, established by the multiplication of objects, services, and material goods. "We are living in the period of the objects: that is, we live by their rhythm, according to their incessant cycles," he contends (1970, p29).

However, the whirlwind of consumerism does not only affect the super-rich like Parker and his entourage of business associates. DeLillo makes the point that

consumerism is such a widespread phenomenon in the modern world that it has trickled down even to the commonest of people in the society, symbolised by Benno Levin, Parker's nemesis, who is doing all he can to survive after being discharged from formal employment at Parker's company. This is revealed in his 'confessions' adjunct: "I need what I need badly... I buy my clothes at Value Drugs. You can do this in America, dress yourself from a drugstore head to toe, which I admire quietly. But whatever the sundry facts, I'm not so different from you in your inner life in the sense that we're all uncontrollable" (DeLillo 2003, p153). Indeed, as Baudrillard (1970) postulates, the drugstore is the synthesis of profusion and calculation. It is neo-culture universalised. The drugstore (or the new shopping malls) makes possible the synthesis of all consumer activities, not least of which are shopping, flirting with objects, idle wandering, and all the permutations of these. "In this way, the drugstore is more appropriately representative of modern consumption than the large department store where quantitative centralisation leaves little margin for idle exploration," contends Baudrillard (1970, p31). Thus, through these systemic structures like drugstores and shopping malls, which have shaped modern consumer behavior, consumerism has become utterly uncontrollable:

We have reached the point where "consumption" has grasped the whole of life; where all activities are sequenced in the same combinatorial mode; where the schedule of gratification is outlined in advance, one hour at a time; and where the "environment" is complete, completely climatized, furnished, and culturalised. In the phenomenology of consumption, the general climatization of life, of goods, objects, services, behaviours, and social relations represents the perfected, "consummated," stage of evolution which, through articulated networks of objects, ascends from pure and simple abundance to a complete conditioning of action and time, and finally to the systematic organisation of ambiance, which is characteristic of the drugstores, the shopping malls, or the modern airports in our futuristic cities (Baudrillard, 1970, p33).

The second objective was to examine the role of technology in both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*. As this discussion implies, although technology has arguably been the single most-defining feature of modernity, our relationship with it is far from straightforward. As suggested in both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, technology, as a set of devices, a complex of industries, or as an abstract force in itself, dominates humans. Its pervasiveness and ambiguous nature poses a monumental dilemma to individual characters trying to find meaning in the world. This is true in respect of events highlighted in both texts under study.

Technology Mediates Modern Life

It is one of postmodernity's most characteristic features that the complexity of technologies, media networks, and global systems has grown to such an extent that it eludes the grasp of individual cognition. As Henneberg (2011) contends, technology

in the postmodern world is indicative of a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp. It is simply inconceivable for a single person to attain an 'objective' and encompassing understanding of the regime of media and technology in sight of the inherent complexity and sophistication of the postmodern world. This is precisely what DeLillo conveys through his protagonists' confusion and disorientation in both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*.

The dynamic character of modernity, primarily through technological forces and networks, has undermined custom and tradition as a grounding of social relationships, forcing characters to reflect on and re-evaluate their contacts with others. In *White Noise*, for instance, technology determines people's existences to the extent that it even invades formerly personal spheres like self-images, dreams and spirituality. In the first part of the novel called 'Waves and Radiation', the self-image of the society is projected as Jack observes the convocation of station wagons at the College-on-the-Hill. The reference to the assembly of station wagons uniting the society as "...a collection of the like-minded and spiritually akin, a people, a nation" (DeLillo, 1985, p5) is an indication of how products of technology have shaped and forged group identities. One element of this is that there is now less emphasis on ascribed or inherited status when defining who people are and more emphasis on actively selected or achieved social positions.

In contrast to the human sounds of Jack's friends, family, and neighbours, modern technology asserts itself through the humming of machines and the constant stream of media sounds and images. This pervasion of technology is noted throughout *White Noise* in seemingly random sound bites from the television, as well as the humming of machines like the refrigerator, washing machine, and other such modern equipment in the Jack's house.

Further, reference is also made of modern institutions (the Airport Marriot, the Downtown Travelodge, the Sheraton Inn and Conference Centre) randomly in the text to indicate how modernity intrudes into the very thoughts of characters. The fluid, large-scale and often impersonal character of modern technology is especially emphasised when Jack and his family make one of their regular visits to another of the institutions that have shaped modern consumer behaviour; the supermarket: "I realised the place was awash in noise... And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension."

The intrusion of modern technology into the dreams and spirituality of characters is aptly highlighted when Jack overhears one of his children, Steffie, mention the name of an automobile in her sleep one night - *Toyota Celica*. As Jack ponders, "How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated..." (DeLillo 1985, p149).

Jack's own spirituality is challenged by technology when he becomes exposed to the potentially fatal toxic substance, Nyodene D. Subsequently, the advice he is given

by his friend, Murray, to turn to technology to avert death only confirms the extent to which it has become the primary mediator of life in modern times.

You could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out. This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality... It's what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies... It prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out. New devices, new techniques every day. Lasers, masers, ultrasound. Give yourself up to it, Jack. Believe in it. They'll insert you in a gleaming tube, irradiate your body with the basic stuff of the universe. Light, energy, dreams. God's own goodness (DeLillo 1985, p272).

Similarly, in *Cosmopolis*, the title is itself suggestive of the full flow of technological systems in modern society. As the study indicates, the grip of technology on modern society is such that the protagonist, Eric Parker, is almost always surrounded by glowing screens and monitors, whether in his office, his car, or at home. This affects his self-image as he inevitably becomes drawn to momentary materialistic happiness by purchasing items like his stylised limousine and forty-eight room apartment, items which are fitted with the latest state-of-the-art technologies. Like Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, Parker's sense of self also becomes altered as he feels contiguous with material possessions like his building pp(8-9) and his car (p10). In this altered state of self, he mistakenly believes that he will not die but instead, transcend the physical boundaries of his body and attain immortality through the conversion of his physical self onto a disk as data. As the text alludes to, he had always wanted to "become quantum dust, transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat. The idea was to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from void" (DeLillo 2003, p206). This conception validates the extent to which technological systems had altered the perceptions of the individual in a postmodern society:

The technology was imminent or not. It was semi-mythical. It was the natural next step... It is happening now, an evolutionary advance that needed only the practical mapping of the nervous system onto digital memory. It would be the master thrust of cyber-capital, to extend the human experience toward infinity as a medium for corporate growth and investment (DeLillo 2003, p206).

The society's self-image is also projected by technological systems, which mediate every facet of modern life. This is highlighted in the text as Parker and his entourage move ever slowly in the car: "On the other side of Sixth Avenue, the car moved slowly past the brokerage house on the corner. There were cubicles exposed at street level, men and women watching screens, and he felt the safety of their circumstance, the involution of it, their curling embryonic ingrowth, secret and creaturely" (DeLillo 2003, p75). This self-image of a society defined by technological systems

is portrayed further when Parker and Kinski remain transfixed as they observe a spectacle of information flowing on screens and monitors across the face of an office tower on the side of Broadway:

This is the point, the thrust, the future. We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as a pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable. The small monitors of the office, home and car become some kind of idolatry here, where crowds might gather in astonishment (DeLillo 2003, p80).

The above condition is what the scholar Henneberg (2011, p54) classifies as the 'technological sublime': "The sublime is an aesthetic concept that aims at capturing that which is infinitely powerful and great, the emotional and rational response to such phenomena, and the attempts to represent them artistically," he contends. As he notes further, the rise and proliferation of information technologies, electronic communications, and new media, and advances in molecular biology, biotechnology, and related fields, have all been identified as important aspects of an increasingly globalised and technologically sophisticated postmodern age. For the first time in history, large parts of the world's population live in thoroughly technological environments. With postmodernity, therefore, the technological sublime comes into its own.

Thus, the observations made from the analysis of the two texts, *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, to a large extent reflect and are symptomatic of the conditions of postmodernity (or late modernity as it were) under which we live. There is some truth in the observations of the contemporary modernist theorist Giddens (1991) who notes that in conditions of late modernity, we live 'in the world' in a different sense from previous eras of history. Everyone still continues to live a local life, and the constraints of the body ensure that all individuals, at every moment, are contextually situated in time and space. Yet the transformations of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what 'the world' actually is. As Giddens (1991, p187) contends:

This is so both on the level of the 'phenomenal world' of the individual and the general universe of social activity within which collective social life is enacted. Although everyone lives a local life, phenomenal worlds for the most part are truly global... Characterising individuals' phenomenal worlds is difficult, certainly in the abstract. Every person reacts selectively to the diverse sources of direct and mediated experience which compose the Umwelt. One thing we can say with some certainty is that in very few instances does the phenomenal world any longer correspond to the habitual settings through which an individual physically moves. Localities are thoroughly penetrated by distanced influences, whether this be regarded as a cause for concern or simply accepted as a routine part of social life. All individuals actively, although by no means always in a conscious way, selectively incorporate many elements of mediated experience into their day-to-day conduct.

As the current study has attempted to show, from the twentieth century onwards, science became a huge undertaking, and technologies grew rapidly in pervasiveness, scale and power. Scientific knowledge and technological systems, being the handmaids of civilisation, have played a pivotal role in transforming the natural world into a created environment subject to human coordination and control. But, as has been shown in both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, the size and complexity of these systems means that our ability as individuals and society to shape or even understand them is compromised, even though it still remains an inevitable consequence of modern life that people interact and use these technologies on a daily basis with varied consequences.

The third objective was to evaluate the impact of consumerism and technology on individuals and modern society as portrayed in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*. In this respect, this chapter discusses the findings on the impact of technology and consumerism on the individual and society as portrayed in both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* on the basis that technology mediates contemporary life, leading to various forms of consumerism. This will be buttressed by appropriating Giddens' (1991) observations in his work entitled *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* to show that living in the postmodern world brings about a lot of dilemmas.

Modernity Unites and Fragments in White Noise and Cosmopolis

Modernity unites; it also fragments. Evidence of the impact of implacable technological forces and consumerism uniting and fragmenting both individuals and society in *White Noise* abound, such as when Jack observes the arrival of the students at College-on-the-Hill in the convocation of station wagons in chapter one of the novel. The students exhibit a ritualistic consumer culture which unites them through the litany of goods which they carry with them. Further, the station wagons themselves become a symbol of unity for the parents of the children who recognise each other as a collection of 'the like-minded and spiritually akin, a people, a nation' (4). In this way, DeLillo makes the point that self-image and identity in the postmodern world are to a large extent dependent on materialism. This motif is advanced further in the text when Jack makes a connection between the impressive tuition fees paid at College-on-the-Hill (i.e. \$14, 000) and the disposition of the students on campus:

I sense there is a connection between this powerful number and the way the students arrange themselves physically in the reading areas of the library. They sit on broad cushioned seats in various kinds of ungainly posture, clearly calculated to be the identifying signs of some kinship group or secret organization... The positions are so studied they amount to a classical mime. There is an element of over-refinement and inbreeding... But it is only the language of economic class they are speaking, in one of its allowable outward forms, like the convocation of station wagons at the start of the year (DeLillo 1985, p 41).

In the foregoing quote, the reference to the element of over-refinement and inbreeding indicates a society bent on maintaining the status quo, whereby one only fits in if they have attained a certain prestige. In this respect, closely mirroring the carefully crafted and artificial conditions of modern society is Jack's own dilemma of living in the modern world, which borders on his fears that he will be exposed as an essentially incompetent, insignificant man. As the chairman of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill, he acknowledges that he capitalises on Hitler's importance as a historical figure, which lends him an air of dignity and significance by association. Over the course of his career, Jack has consciously made many decisions to strengthen his own reputation and add a certain heft to his personal identity: he shrouds himself in the veneer of distinguished, stately paraphernalia of a successful academic. He wears sweeping, dramatic robes whenever he is on campus and refers to himself professionally as J. A. K. Gladney, for example, as he added an initial to his name to make it sound more prestigious. Yet he is continually aware of the fact that his aura and persona were deliberately crafted, and thus he perpetually worries about being exposed as a fraud. Hence Jack admonishes himself in chapter four of the text (p17): 'I am the false character that follows the name around.'

Giddens (1991, p190) points out thus: "In many modern settings, individuals are caught up in a variety of differing encounters and milieux, each of which may call for different forms of appropriate' behavior." Quoting Eric Fromm, Sigmund Freud's disciple in the field of psychoanalysis, Giddens (1991, p190) further asserts:

The individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be ... this mechanism can be compared with the protective colouring some animals assume. They look so similar to their surroundings that they are hardly distinguishable from them... In such circumstances, we might argue, the false-self overrides and blankets out the original acts of thinking, feeling and willing which represent the true motivations of the individual. What remains of the true self is experienced as empty and inauthentic; yet this vacuum cannot be filled by the 'pseudo-selves' brought into play by the individual in different contexts, because these are as much stimulated by the responses of others as drawn from the person's inner convictions.

There are other numerous examples in *White Noise* which have already been alluded to in support of the notion of modernity producing both uniting and divisive forces, like in the case of Jack feeling immense relief at being 'a part of the system' when the ATM confirms his account balance, as opposed to the deranged man who was escorted out by the two armed guards for being 'apart from the system!' To these ends, in the modern context, the individual only feels psychologically secure in his self-identity insofar as others (society and its technological systems) recognise his behaviour as appropriate or reasonable, contends Giddens (1991).

In *Cosmopolis*, insofar as the notion that modernity unites is concerned, Eric Parker feels at home in the mediated circumstances of modernity. In the early stages of the novel, he feels contiguous with his forty-eight room apartment (p9): “The tower gave him strength and depth.” He also prides himself in his acquisition of a high-tech stretch limousine (p10): “He wanted the car because it was not only oversized but aggressively and contemptuously so...” With these material acquisitions, Parker boosts his self-image and status in a consumerist society.

The assassin Benno Levin, who constitutes a ‘credible threat’ to Parker throughout the text, also tries to construct a coherent self-image and identity by adopting a lifestyle that befits his status after his dismissal from Parker Capital. “I steal electricity from a lamppost... I’ve suffered many reversals... I live at the ends of the earth philosophically...” he reveals in the text (p57). Levin is also denied access inside modern institutions like banks: “I use the street machine because the guard will not let me in the bank. I could tell him I have an account and prove it. But the bank is marble and glass and armed guards. And I accept this” (DeLillo 2003, pp149-151). The particularity of Levin’s circumstance only confirms how technological systems and consumerism make everyone anonymous and fragments individuals.

Thus, modernity unites and fragments, in essence proliferating different lifestyles. As Giddens (1991) notes, the notion of lifestyle sounds somewhat trivial because it is so often thought of solely in terms of a superficial consumerism. But there is something much more fundamental going on than such a conception suggests: “In conditions of high modernity we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose,” contends Giddens (1991, p81).

Powerlessness versus Appropriation in White Noise and Cosmopolis

Another dilemma of modernity as proposed by Giddens (1991, p192) is that of *powerlessness* versus *appropriation*: The experience of powerlessness, considered as a psychic phenomenon, naturally always relates to aims, projects or aspirations held by the individual, and to the composition of the phenomenal world, according to Giddens (1991). In *White Noise*, individuals and society at large are overwhelmed by events, which threaten their very existence, particularly the airborne toxic event which forces Jack and his family, together with a significant part of the townspeople, to evacuate to a safe location. In the process, Jack becomes exposed to a potentially deadly chemical (Nyodene D.), which leaves him in a desperate attempt to find a remedy for his fear of death. The psychological stress he undergoes as he tries to figure out a solution indicates how powerless he is in such postmodern conditions. This view is shared by Henneberg (2011, pp57-59), who, in his analysis of the technological sublime, contends that terror and threat are as much part of its force [i.e. technological sublime] as psychological stress deriving from an inability to come to terms with highly complex and indeterminable phenomena:

Jack Gladney’s struggles and confusion result from being confronted with various forms of the technological sublime—a sense of being

overwhelmed and dwarfed by technological forces and systems... By conflating technology and threat, the airborne toxic event appears to be the exemplary expression of the technological sublime. It is clearly a menace that is not only man-made, but also derives its lethal potential from chemical reactions and therefore perfectly symbolizes technology which turns back on and against us.

The dilemma of powerlessness versus appropriation is also evident in *Cosmopolis* as technology and its underlying driving force, late capitalism, prove to be overwhelming. This is seen when Parker, in an effort to appropriate massive financial gains, decides to bet huge sums of money on the stock market against the Yen rising. However, the system that Parker thought he could circumvent proves to be unpredictable, and he ends up losing his fortune (as well as his wife's) in the stock market crash that ensues.

Parker's society is one where capitalism thrives in its various forms on a daily basis, leaving individuals feeling helpless. This scale and magnitude is aptly brought to the fore when Parker petitions his would-be assassin, Benno Levins, in the denouement of the novel:

I thought about all these people. I thought how did they get to be who they are. It's banks and car parks. It's airline tickets in their computers. It's restaurants filled with people talking. It's people signing the merchant copy. It's people taking the merchant copy out of the leather folder and then signing it and separating the merchant copy from the customer copy and putting their credit card in their wallet. This alone could do it. It's people who have doctors who order tests for them. This alone... I'm helpless in their system that makes no sense to me. You wanted me to be a helpless robot soldier but all I could be was helpless (DeLillo 2003, p195).

As Giddens (1991) notes, powerlessness and (re)appropriation intertwine variously in different contexts and at varying times: given the dynamism of modernity, there is little stability in the relations between them. An individual who vests trust in others, or in a given abstract system, normally thereby recognises that he or she lacks the power to influence them significantly.

...the dilemma of powerlessness versus appropriation has its pathologies. Where an individual feels overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness in the major domains of his phenomenal world, we may speak of a process of engulfment. The individual feels dominated by encroaching forces from the outside, which he is unable to resist or transcend. He feels either haunted by implacable forces robbing him of all autonomy of action, or caught up in a maelstrom of events in which he swirls around in a helpless fashion (Giddens 1991, p189).

This can be juxtaposed with the anti-globalist demonstrations at Times Square portrayed in the text where a man set himself ablaze in protest against the capitalist

system. But the dynamism of the capitalist system is such that the society and individuals alike are left powerless to stop it, as aptly summarised by Vija Kinski:

This is the free market itself. These people are a fantasy generated by the market. They don't exist outside the market. There is nowhere they can go outside the market. There is no outside... The market culture is total. It breeds these men and women. They are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market driven. They are traded on the markets of the world. This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system (DeLillo 2003, p 90).

Thus, the tension between technological systems of capitalism and society, as highlighted in the study, reveals people's feelings of isolation, powerlessness and self-estrangement.

Personalised versus Commodified Experience in White Noise and Cosmopolis

Another dilemma of modernity, according to Giddens (1991), is that between *personalised* versus *commodified* experience. Suffice to affirm that capitalism is one of the main institutional dimensions of modernity, and that the capitalist accumulation process represents one of the prime driving forces behind modern institutions as a whole. As Giddens (1991, p187) points out, modernity opens up the project of the self, but under conditions strongly influenced by standardising effects of commodity capitalism:

Capitalism commodifies in various senses. The creation of the abstract commodity...is perhaps the most basic element in the expansion of capitalism as an overall production system...commodification directly affects consumption processes, particularly with the maturation of the capitalistic order. The establishing of standardised consumption patterns, promoted through advertising and other methods, becomes central to economic growth. In all of these senses, commodification influences the project of the self and the establishing of lifestyles.

In *White Noise*, this dilemma is at once evident through the experience of Jack and Murray when they set out to see The most photographed barn in America in chapter three. They find a group of tourists there who are all taking notes, setting up their cameras, and taking photos of the barn. Murray argues that the barn is not significant in and of itself. Rather, the magic of this tourist attraction is the fact that so many people have come together to see this building, and thus, have collected all their energies in one location. The thousands of people who have seen this barn create an aura around the otherwise inconsequential building. It is the aura that is powerful and moving, Murray happily declares, and that aura is impossible to avoid or ignore, as the text highlights (p12): "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 colours our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism."

In a world where appearances are everything, Jack's lifestyle is inevitably affected, as he carefully crafts himself a veneer of respectability as a college professor (through gaining weight, wearing dark robes and dark glasses, and adding an initial to his name), although he always fears that he will one day be exposed as being a fraud.

As Giddens (1991) suggests, it is against this complicated backdrop that we should understand processes of individuation. The reflexive project of the self is in some part necessarily a struggle against commodified influences, although not all aspects of commodification are inimical to it. Individuation, however, also has its pathological aspects. All self-development depends on the mastering of appropriate responses to others; an individual who has to be 'different' from all others has no chance of reflexively developing a coherent self-identity. What does this mean at the everyday level? At its most extreme, it means that postmodern individuals are no longer 'unified subjects', they no longer possess fixed, stable, permanent and coherent identities but are increasingly composed of fragmented, multiple and sometimes contradictory identities.

This is reiterated by Baudrillard (1994) who notes that here we are at the heart of consumption as the total organisation of everyday life, as a complete homogenisation. Everything is appropriated and simplified into the translucence of abstract 'happiness', simply defined by the resolution of tensions.

Work, leisure, nature, and culture, all previously dispersed, separate, and more or less irreducible activities that produced anxiety and complexity in our real life, and in our "anarchic and archaic" cities, have finally become mixed, massaged, climate controlled, and domesticated into the simple activity of perpetual shopping. All these activities have finally become desexed into a single hermaphroditic ambiance of style!... Just like the Roman Pantheon, where the gods of all countries coexisted in a syncretism, in an immense "digest," the super shopping center, our new pantheon, our pandemonium, brings together all the gods, or demons, of consumption. That is to say, every activity, labor, conflict and all the seasons are abolished in the same abstraction. The substance of life, unified in this universal digest, can no longer have any meaning... (Baudrillard 1994, p34)

Similarly, in *Cosmopolis*, the capitalistic market, with its 'imperatives' of continuous expansion, attacks tradition. In the period of high modernity (or postmodernity), capitalistic enterprise increasingly seeks to shape consumption as well as monopolise the conditions of production, contends Giddens (1991). A market system, almost by definition, "generates a variety of available choices in the consumption of goods and services. Plurality of choice is in some substantial part the very outcome of commodified processes," he contends (1991, p190). In *Cosmopolis*, scenes of the rapacious flow of the city abound, depicting a plethora of capitalistic systems and structures that have shaped the behaviour of consumers for a long time, as Eric Parker notes in his petition to Benno Levin:

I had this thought one day. It was the thought of my life. I'm surrounded by other people. It's buy and sell... I thought all these other people. I thought how did they get to be who they are. It's banks and car parks. It's airline tickets in their computers. It's restaurants filled with people talking. It's people signing the merchant copy... I'm helpless in their system that makes no sense to me (DeLillo 2003, p195).

Where mass markets are at issue, it is clearly in the interests of producers to ensure the large-scale consumption of relatively standardised products. As an individual, Eric Parker is no exception to this trend because he is helpless in the face of an overly capitalistic society.

However, this metanarrative that technology can help transcend reality fails like it did in *White Noise* when both Jack and Babbette's obsessive fears of death are not allayed by the scientifically-advanced drug Dylar. Parker realises too late that "...the things that made him who he was could hardly be identified much less converted to data... His hard-gotten grip on the world, material things, great things, his memories true and false...untransferable" (DeLillo 2003, p207).

In a capitalist set-up, oftentimes consumption also involves abstract commodities, including that of catastrophe and death. In *Cosmopolis*, death itself becomes a commodity when Eric Parker learns that one of his favourite musicians, 'Brutha Fez', had died and the record label wanted an "exploitation event" for his funeral, big and loud (p131). A lot of dignitaries and famous people attend the event, along with media crews and companies who beam the event live for audiences on television. Parker himself consequently admits:

There was one thing more he wanted from this funeral. He wanted to see the hearse pass by again, the body tilted for viewing, a digital corpse, a loop, a replication. It did not seem right that the hearse had come and gone. He wanted it to appear at intervals, proud body open to the night, to replenish the sorrow and wonder of the crowd (DeLillo 2003, p139).

The imagery evoked above imitates the mass reproduction to which private events are subjected by the media on a daily basis, i.e. the transformation of the private, particular event into the public and the mass-produced. If death can be visualised on television or serialised in thousands of newspapers, then the single, individual event has no room in a society in which everything can be synthetically produced and reproduced and massively consumed. Such is the reality of a postmodern society, and DeLillo brilliantly captures the essence of this condition in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has focused on the development of technology and its impact on modern social forms and on everyday experience as portrayed in both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*. The onset of modernity unleashed processes of global

proportion – notably the development of industrial capitalism, the dominance of rational forms of thought and organisation, and major changes in social relationships and in people's sense of self – that had and continue to have a profound impact on the conduct of everyday life. We have seen how these global processes of modernity (especially through capitalism) have reworked all aspects of social life, transforming patterns of social behaviour through consumerism and people's perception of themselves and their relationships with others.

One of the single most-defining characteristics of modernity has been the continuing pace and scope of social change. The challenge that postmodernism presents to scholars is that postmodern social actors may either not wish to or are denied the opportunity to develop a coherent sense of self, as evidenced by the dilemmas and challenges of characters in both *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*. Modernism has also led to seismic changes in gender relations (Chilala 2012, 2018).

In both texts, the characters become captives of their own identities, living in prisons of their own creation to fit into categories of how society perceives them. What is clear is that technological forces, the pervasiveness of media, decontextualised information, and irresolvably complex systems all work together to create a contemporary maze of uncertainty for both individuals and society. What does this mean at the everyday level? At its most extreme, it means that postmodern individuals are no longer 'unified subjects', they no longer possess fixed, stable, permanent and coherent identities but are increasingly composed of fragmented, multiple and sometimes contradictory identities.

In *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, there is a concern with the role the mass media has in the shaping of our perception of reality and of the self. Ours is a commercial culture dominated by the media and the values of advertising. As Baudrillard has noted, here we are at the heart of consumption as the total organisation of everyday life, as a complete homogenisation. Everything is appropriated and simplified into the translucence of abstract "happiness," simply defined by the resolution of tensions. Work, leisure, nature, and culture, all previously dispersed, separate, and more or less irreducible activities that produced anxiety and complexity in our real life, have finally become mixed, massaged, climate controlled, and domesticated into the simple activity of perpetual shopping. This is aptly achieved through the digitalisation of the consumer culture, where a high-tech consumer society comes into existence and perpetually interacts with various information and communication technologies every day to purchase virtual products.

Further, the global processes of modernity have generated diverse local experiences. Talk of the onset of high modernity or postmodernity, as it were, is further evidence that life in the contemporary world is as rapidly changing, exciting, threatening and disorientating as it has ever been. Many of the old certainties are going, forcing us (like the characters in the studied texts) to (re)evaluate current social developments and our place in them.

Change is brought about by interrelated technological phenomena and cultural developments that have changed important aspects of human existence in such a way that the emergence of science and technology has put to flight former metaphysical,

religious, and social certainties, as observed through man-made calamities like the air-borne toxic event in *White Noise* and the stock market crash in *Cosmopolis*. This means that now, more than ever, people require the skills and insights of literature, and in both the substantive and the more theoretical chapters of this study, one can see how DeLillo and other contemporary postmodern theorists have depicted ways of exploring and making sense of our society respectively.

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