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## The quest for reality through facing death in DeLillo's *White Noise*

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### Abstract

The aim of this research is the analysis of the spiritual quest of Jack Gladney, the protagonist of *White Noise* (1985). This article adopts the position that Jack Gladney embodies a character whose motivation is modernist, whereas the condition of the world he inhabits is undeniably postmodern. The fictional world of *White Noise* is the world of signs and simulations. In such a world identity is decentred and the world is devoid of meaning. Jack, who is obsessed with the fear of death, gradually comes to the realization that it is actually death which may be the only remaining authentic experience in contemporary culture. He learns that the fear of death numbs and anesthetizes him. The novel implies that death is a mysterious phenomenon that cannot be reduced to its simulations. Jack eventually undergoes real, authentic experience at the moment where he is on the brink of death, on the fine border between life and death. This experience, which cannot be simulated, grants his life significance. He finally sees life in a different light and is determined to enjoy its small joys and explore its vast possibilities. (примљено: 11.августа 2022; прихваћено: 23.октобра 2022)

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## 1. Between Modernism and Postmodernism

There is still an intense debate in critical circles about whether DeLillo's oeuvre is modernist or postmodernist. Whereas critics such as Knight (2008: 27), Bonca (1996: 25), and Wilcox (2003: 100) affiliate DeLillo with Postmodernism, Cantor (1991: 58) and Nel (2008: 13) cite his novels as literary works which fall into the epoch of Modernism. As this research attempts to demonstrate, DeLillo's fiction, particularly his canonical *White Noise* (1985), contains a number of both modernist and postmodernist features. Our starting point is that the protagonist of this novel, Jack Gladney, is a modernist lost in a postmodern era (Wilcox, 2003: 98).

As Brkić explains, some theorists do not view Modernism and Postmodernism as two separate and independent epochs, but tend to interpret Postmodernism as deepened Modernism (Бркић, 2019: 12). However, there are some important distinctions. Although the world is represented as fragmented in both epochs, this fragmentation is experienced as tragic only in Modernism (Fišić, 2009: 44). The sense of loss and disorientation is also present in the fiction of both periods, but only modernist heroes attempt to overcome this condition. Modernist heroes endeavor to gather all the pieces and find a meaning, a framework which encompasses their whole existence. Identity is viewed as "coherent and autonomous" (Helmy, 2016: 170). According to Paul Maltby (203: 215), DeLillo's literary creation should not be interpreted as overwhelmingly postmodernist: "to postmodernize DeLillo is to risk losing sight of the unpostmodernist metaphysical impulse that animates his work". As we are going to clarify, the motivation of Jack Gladney is entirely modernist.

However, the condition of the world Jack inhabits is undeniably postmodern. This is a world of "fragmentation, discontinuities and chaos, rather than the other, coherence" (Waugh, 1989: 66). This is a world where everything is connected. If everything is connected, meaning is established in relationship with other parts of the vast system, whereas authenticity becomes problematic. According to Joseph Walker (1999: 434), there are two conditions that must be met in order to characterize something as real, authentic. The first requirement is that it has to be experienced directly, through the senses. The second condition is that reality defies representations. Taking into consideration these requirements, it is clear that the concept of authenticity becomes quite problematic in the postmodern age. DeLillo's characters experience the world through the media, which serve as a substitute for real experience – a mediated reality. They live in a world of representations and simulations, which compromises their direct and unmediated experience. However, there is a possibility for an authentic experience in the fictional world of Jack Gladney. Contrary to Wilcox's (2003: 103) argument that even death is prone to simulation in *White Noise*, the following analysis of Jack's spiritual quest confirms that facing death is a real, authentic experience which cannot be reduced to its simulations and mediations.

In this novel, DeLillo deals with the postmodern condition of the world where establishing any meaning is short-lived and temporary. However, the motivation of the protagonist is undoubtedly modernist. Having in mind these distinctive

features of Modernism and Postmodernism, it may be argued that *White Noise* stands somewhere between these two epochs. Jack Gladney does not reconcile himself to a life without some higher purpose or an aim that will grant his life significance. Therefore, Jack's quest can be summarized as an attempt to "wrest profound meanings from insipid everyday experience" (Sakaama, 2018: 232). In the words of Frank Lentricchia (1991: 14), Don DeLillo is the "last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation".

## 2. The postmodern condition

Theorists of postmodernism generally agree that the postmodern condition exists in the era of corporate capitalism, which has devastating effects on identity and individuality. An individual is reduced to a mere cog in the system, one that can be easily replaced. Therefore, he/she turns into a commodity, since in capitalism everything is a commodity. Furthermore, an individual feels that "there is no escape" (Boxall, 2006: 5). In the words of Nick Shay, the protagonist and narrator of *Underworld* (1997), corporations "grind" everything, decimating all nuances and differences. Still, DeLillo's endeavor is to search for an alternative that does not seem to exist in such a world. In the opinion of Peter Boxall (2006: 13), DeLillo immerses himself into "postmodern culture and American dread in order to transform it". His protagonists resist the assimilation into the dominant culture. DeLillo himself attempts to evade assimilation trying not to fall into cliché, but to be always original. His style is hybrid and interesting, it cannot be easily placed into any epoch.<sup>1</sup>

DeLillo's understanding of the postmodern condition is shaped by theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, and Jean-Francois Lyotard. However, critics often fail to recognize the influence of Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher, particularly the impact of his capital work *Being and Time* (1927) on DeLillo's oeuvre.<sup>2</sup> In the work of Heidegger, technology that shapes and dominates the life of the contemporary man is envisioned as a great potential threat. Technology not only threatens the existence of the human kind with the production of nuclear weapons. The more dangerous threat of technology is its endeavor to change the way we think and experience life. According to Heidegger, man's approach to life is essentially technological. He names this technological approach *Ge-stell* ("Enframing"). Technology attempts to generalize and mould human experience so as to turn it into "inauthentic existence" (Moses, 1991: 71).

1 DeLillo's oeuvre is so complex and it represents such a blending of genres that critics also affiliate it with neo-realism (Radin Sabadoš, 2017: 43), Nader Mustafa Helmy with the so-called hysterical realism, whereas Paul Maltby perceives a romantic impulse in DeLillo's literary creation (2003: 215). However, DeLillo himself does not like to be burdened with labels. In an interview with Maria Nadotti, she asks him how he reacts to the critics' endeavors to categorize his literary creation as postmodernist. Striving towards independence and authenticity, DeLillo is reluctant to declare himself as either modernist or postmodernist. Therefore, his answer is: "I don't react. But I'd prefer not to be labeled. I'm a novelist, period" (Nadotti, 2005: 115).

2 His influence is acknowledged by critics such as Michael Valdez Moses and Cornel Bonca. See articles "Lust removed from nature" and "Being, time and death in DeLillo's 'The Body Artist'".

It is common knowledge that DeLillo's fiction is saturated with the mass media. He is concerned with the mediated reality of broadcast television and radio. According to Jean Baudrillard, although the media content was intended to stand for a representation of reality, it turned into a simulation of reality. This simulation is characterized by the utopia of equivalence between the sign and the signified (Baudrillard, 1994: 6). Baudrillard (1994: 2) suggests that we are living in the age of hyperreality, which stands for an era in which simulation precedes and becomes more important than reality. Instead of reality, there is a web of signs, a mediated reality. Its impact on the life of contemporary man is enormous. Apart from exerting influence on people in terms of influencing what they consume and what they do in order to affirm belonging to a particular social class, the media also has a large impact in "infusing threat and the nurturing of an inherent fear" (Baya, 2019: 10). In an article "'Catastrophe is our bedtime story': The media fuelled obsessions with death in Don DeLillo's 'Zero K'", Baya contends that the postmodern condition is characterized by the mass media, consumerism, and death; underlying that they are interrelated. She points to the fact that the prime time on television is full of violence: terrorist attacks, family violence, scenes from wars, etc. This critic recognizes the need for sensationalism in the media, whose motto she summarizes with the famous phrase of Theodor Adorno: "the darker the news, the grander the narrative" (Baya, 2019: 10).

The tendency towards sensationalism on broadcast television and radio in the 1980s is evident in *White Noise*. In the world where everything has already been seen, "Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else." (DeLillo, 1998: 34). Michael Valdez Moses (1991: 73) underlines that such a representation of death in the mass media "alienates the individual from personal death in at least two ways". Watching televised death in the comfort of one's home, the individual is manipulated to believe that death happens to someone else. Second, watching mediated death creates an illusion that a viewer in a way takes part in the process of dying, so that it is a chance for spiritual transcendence (Moses, 1991: 73). As we are going to demonstrate, nothing can be further from the truth. In the fictional world of DeLillo's literary oeuvre, only facing death personally provides an opportunity to transcend it. Simulated death actually alienates his characters from real, authentic experience, making them observers in their own dying.

### 3. Identity

The protagonist of *White Noise* is Jack Gladney, the chair of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. At first sight, he is a rather conventional character, an integrated member of the community of Blacksmith. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Jack is going through a crisis. Apart from the fact that both Jack and his wife Babette are obsessed with the fear of death (an issue that will be dealt with later in the paper), the novel implies that Jack realizes that his identity is constructed, decentred. Jack comes to an understanding that his original identity

is evacuated and embarks on a spiritual journey of finding his real self. His state recalls the words of Frederic Jameson, who suggests that liberation associated with contemporary culture comes at a price. It signifies not only “liberation from anxiety but a liberation of every kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling” (Jameson, 1991: 15). Instead of being presented as an authentic being, Jack’s character resembles a carefully assembled construct. In order to camouflage his immense fear of death, he tries to use Hitler as a sort of shield. Since Hitler succeeded in “outliving” his own death by becoming a part of history, Jack believes that dealing with the phenomenon of Hitler can provide him a kind of protection from death. As Murray Siskind, his colleague, notices, his intention in founding the department of Hitler studies is obvious:

You wanted to be sheltered and protected. 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. (DeLillo, 1998: 125)

The character of Jack Gladney symbolizes the man who seeks communal meaning, at least at the beginning of the novel. As Cantor explains, Jack is fascinated with the totalitarian aspect of fascism due to its power to connect people in a group. In his fictional world, family and nation are loose structures which can easily fall apart. On the other hand, “Nazism gives people a sense of participation in something larger than their individual selves and thus overcoming their fear of death” (Cantor, 1991: 51). He feels most comfortable at the college, surrounded with students who protect him from the fear of death with their multitude. In the simulacral world of Jack Gladney, which is based upon images, what counts is the image of a university professor whose area of interest is Hitler, not this man as he truly is. Jack, similarly to other characters in this novel, is valued according to the quality of performing the roles he has chosen to play. Since he chose Hitler studies as his area of interest, he is expected to play his role convincingly. As the postmodern era is concerned with appearance, not with the essence, the focus is not on the quality of his scientific research. Ironically, in order to be taken seriously, he has to attempt to look like Hitler.<sup>3</sup> Jack is easily convinced to attempt to add an aura of authority to his appearance when his chancellor shakes his confidence, remarking that Jack makes a “feeble presentation of self” (DeLillo, 1998: 14). Later, when Jack transforms himself into a plausible academic image of Hitler, with his thick-framed

3 By treating Hitler as a possible academic area of interest, DeLillo suggests that in the era of “the flattening of history” (Cantor, 1991: 42) history becomes a series of epochs which are equally available, accessible, and valuable/valueless. Through his unconventional treatment of the phenomenon of Hitler, DeLillo demonstrates his excellence at parodying, which is realized through his implication that postmodern culture may attempt to assimilate such a complex historical phenomenon as Hitler. As Cantor asserts, the shallowness of such an attempt is indicated by a description of a conference on Hitler, as well as by the comparison of Hitler to Elvis Presley, who is characterized by Cantor as a “postmodern simulacrum of the German Hitler cult” (1991: 53).

glasses and academic gown, his self-confidence apparently grows, but is unstable and can easily be questioned. Although Jack resembles Hitler, Jack realizes that a much greater problem is his ignorance of German language. In rare moments of sincerity, Jack admits that he is not the person he appears to be. What is more, he admits that he does not know German at all, which leads him to the conclusion that "he [I] is [am] the false character who follows the name around (DeLillo, 1998: 14).

The situation gets even worse when Jack leaves college. In the outside world, he feels quite helpless. However, as Moses notices, "In a consumer culture, wealth provides the illusion of invulnerability" (Moses, 1991: 73). Therefore, whenever Jack's self-confidence and identity are called into question, he indulges into shopping. In doing so, Jack symbolizes Heidegger's "des Man", "the being that shops in herds" (Moses, 1991: 79). As Karen Weeks induces, Jack's spending of money stands as a replacement for his academic gown (Weeks, 2007: 294). Apprehending that his real self is evacuated, Jack desperately clings to signs that constitute his fake being. Nonetheless, this way of growing into self-esteem has only temporary effects. Although spending large sums of money enables him to reach "the fullness of being", this fullness refers to his physical being, whereas there is a gaping spiritual void, a void he is unsuccessfully attempting to cover.

Critics who argue that *White Noise* is a postmodernist novel corroborate this claim with two indisputable facts. The first is that Jack Gladney's identity is constructed; the second is that he lives in the world of simulacra created by the mass media and consumerism. However, we have to bear in mind that these facts refer to Jack's initial condition. Although he is "deeply implicated in the values he satirizes" (Price, 2010: 187), Jack does not feel happy; he embarks on a spiritual journey in order to find a way out of the web of signs. John Duvall argues that Jack "lives in a world of simulations, modelings of the world tied to no origin or space" (2003: 179), but he does not notice that Jack attempts to return to his real self. Having realized that his identity is reduced to a stereotype, he begins to resist conventions in order to become autonomous. Although the life of the Gladney family is shaped by the mass media and consumerism (features of postmodern culture), they do not reject "modernist ideas about embodiment" (Price, 2010: 186). For example, there are many references to food and eating in the novel. However, although Jack adores his wife's plump body, Babette is not satisfied with her physical appearance. Her weight is not in accordance with the media-constructed image of a healthy woman. Burdened with the expectations of the society, Babette's anxiety is so large that cannot any longer enjoy food, sex, or conversation. She is so implicated in the contemporary culture that she cannot enjoy sexual intercourse without stimulation such as pornographic books or conversations aimed at arousing desire.

As it turns out, Jack remains alone on his quest. It appears that the crucial point of his transition from the postmodern to modern condition of autonomy occurs when he checks his health condition after exposure to Nyodene D. Jack is perplexed by the notion that "his identity and personal history can be stored in a computer network" (Price, 2010: 190). However, when his doctor finally tells him



that he may live more than thirty years with the toxin in his body, he feels relieved and clings to his body as the only remaining human feature. He senses that each man/woman is unique since nobody can know what happens under his/her skin. Although doctor Chakravarty claims that “we are all sum of our data” (DeLillo, 1998: 65), Jack realizes that such a claim is an oversimplification and is determined to challenge such a conceptualization. Although Dr Chakravarty claims that Jack’s laboratory results are not promising and that he is seriously ill, he is not able to claim that Jack is going to die soon. All he can conclude from Jack’s analyses is that Jack is on his way to death, which is nothing new. In fact, this reassures Jack and it helps him to appreciate life more than he used to.

Over the course of the novel, Jack undergoes a spiritual development which consists of rejecting all the signs that constitute his fake identity. Rejecting them means penetrating through the white noise, through the distractions invented by contemporary culture in order to distance an individual from his real self. This rejection is exemplified by the protagonist’s dismissal of the phony roles he has been playing. Jack succeeds in finding an alternative through achieving an intimate relationship with his death, a relationship that postmodernity attempts to mediate and turn into an inauthentic experience. Death proves to have a great potential in man’s return to his authentic being, means for liberating an individual from the distractions, artificiality and simulations of contemporary culture. Whereas postmodern culture integrates a belief that there are no universal truths and certainties, and that meaning is short-lived and temporary, Jack’s facing death demonstrates to him that death is the one inevitability and certainty (which cannot be reduced to its representations and simulations) that shapes and gives meaning to one’s life.

#### 4. Facing death

In the words of DeLillo himself, white noise is, “the kind of humming sound in which the intensity is the same at all frequencies. Such a device is designed to protect a person from other disturbing or annoying sound” (Veggian, 2015). As Cornel Bonca notices, there are at least two ways of interpreting the title of the novel. The first interpretation views white noise as “the final triumph of capitalist appropriation” (Bonca, 1996: 31), the noise made by technology that enters our homes and lives and penetrates all barriers. The second interpretation views white noise as “contemporary man’s deepest expression of his death fear” (Bonca, 1996: 27).

DeLillo’s *White Noise* is generally acknowledged as his seminal work which is permeated with death. As DeLillo himself acknowledged, its working title was *The American Book of the Dead*. The focus of this novel is on Jack Gladney, the founder and chairman of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill, and his necrophobia. As LeClair claims (2003: 11), DeLillo acknowledges the influence of Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death*. DeLillo uses Becker’s thesis that “the idea of death [...] is a mainspring of human activity (Becker, 1973: ix)” and that all human activity arises out of an attempt at “denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man”

(Becker, 1973: ix). In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo commented on this ultimate subject:

Our sense of fear – we avoid it because we feel it so deeply, [ . . . ] I think it is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is almost there. I tried to relate it in *White Noise* to this other transcendence that lies just beyond our touch. The extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions. (DeCurtis, 1999: 63)

Jack Gladney, whose motivation is search for his real self, embarks on a quest for real, authentic moments. This research argues that such authentic experience is embodied in the phenomenon of death in *White Noise*. However, Jack's problem is that he lives in a web of signs. In this web everything is connected – therefore, nothing can exist independently, there are no certainties and absolute truths. In his world, the world of simulacra, there is an assumption “that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning” (Baudrillard, 1994: 6). However, Jack feels that there must be phenomena which cannot be explained with words or images. The hypothesis of this research is that one such phenomenon, which is beyond words and represents an authentic experience is death.

There are, however, critics that propound that even death is represented as an experience that can be mediated or simulated. In the fictional world of *White Noise*, an integral part of the day is watching television. What attracts the attention of the characters most are images of violence, catastrophes, and death. Leonard Wilcox (2003: 103) claims that in this novel there is no authentic experience since “even death is not exempted from the world of simulacra: the experience of dying is utterly mediated by technology”. Still, he does not make a distinction between death and the fear of death. Jack and Babette are preoccupied with the fear of death, which is “another symptom of the postmodern condition” (Brown, 2020: 21). According to Brown, Jack and Babette cannot differentiate between “a sign and a thing” (2020: 30) – death and the fear of death. What is more, the mediated death they watch on television even distances them from the real death (Sakaama, 2018: 236). Jack's doctor defines him as “the sum total of [your] data” (DeLillo, 1998: 65). This way of identifying an individual with a set of referents is unnatural, it is inconsistent with human logic. The implication of the novel is that in the near future human logic may be replaced with the logic of technology. Technological logic advocates the view that death is unassailable. In the words of Siskind: “There is nothing larger than death”. However, his advice to Jack is to:

Put your faith in technology. [...] It's what we invented to conceal the secret of our decaying bodies. But it's also life, isn't it? It prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that fade out. New devices, new techniques every day. Lasers, masers, ultrasound. Give yourself up to it, Jack. Believe in it. (DeLillo, 1998: 124)



According to this logic, there are two ways to face death: watching the mediated version of it (which actually alienates an individual from death) and easily available solutions that help “the inauthentic self to overcome its anxiety by focusing on a specific, and often trivial cause” (Moses, 1991: 75). As Jack notices, the postmodern condition threatens to challenge the notion of death as an authentic experience: “It is when your death is rendered graphically [...] that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an eerie awesome technology wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying” (DeLillo, 1998: 66). Although technology has invented ways of simulating death, these simulations cannot be exchanged for real experience. As passengers who survived a plane crash in the novel testify, “It’s worse than we ever imagined. They didn’t prepare us for this at death simulator” (DeLillo, 1998: 45). Brown (2020: 31) correctly notes that “it is only proximity to death” which enables Jack to “see beyond words” (DeLillo, 1998: 135), to reach a point which is beyond the web of referrals.

Most of the characters (Jack, Babette, Murray Siskind, Winnie Richards) in the novel realize that the contemporary world is saturated with the fear of death. As Jack Gladney notices, “All plots tend to move deathward” (DeLillo, 1998: 18). There are several ways to deal with such a notion. The first manner, adopted by Murray Siskind, may be summed up with a phrase “the plot is to live” (DeLillo, 1998: 127) – his scheme is to live his life to the fullest in order to give it a meaning and resist death. In his opinion, the best way to confront death that will inevitably come is to focus on life and the possibilities that life provides. It seems that most of the characters adopt the second approach, proposed by Jack. According to him, since all plots move deathwards, the best way of resistance is avoiding plots. Avoidance of plots for him signifies an effort to “slow things down” (Boxall, 2006: 112) so as to postpone the inevitable and certain death. To avoid plots means not to deal with problems and obstacles, but to surround himself with technology and commodities so as not to think about issues which are bothering him. However, as Sakaama (2018: 236) suggests, this way of living “distances Jack from the essence of life and immerses him in a living death”. At one moment Jack consoles himself that he can function normally despite his fear: “we have deep terrible lingering fear about ourselves and the people we love. Yet we walk around, talk to people, eat and drink” (DeLillo, 1998: 88). However, what Jack does not realize is that although his body is not dead, his fear anesthetizes him to the state of spiritual death. When it comes to the body, as Jack’s doctor reminds him, “[you] are all permanent patients, like it or not” (1998: 113). It is necessary to accept the inevitability of death; otherwise, “life itself is no more than a slow death” (Slethaugh, 2000: 81).

Denial is the dominant attitude towards death in *White Noise* (Radin Sabadoš, 2017: 176). Therefore, the characters sink into the life of consumerism. They choose to suppress the fear of death which haunts them. Although this fear is bodiless, it is always with them – they can feel its presence. As Osteen (2010: 497) indicates, death is like “a quality in the air”. Moreover, the characters of this novel find it

easier to confront death in groups. Jack and Babette are longing for guidance, for hierarchy in the chaotic world.<sup>4</sup> As Cantor (1991: 48) notes, in such circumstances people easily succumb to influence of the individuals who “have the conviction and self-assurance” to guide people. For example, Jack believes, at least at the beginning of the novel, that Hitler may be his shield against death. In his opinion, Hitler is larger than both life and death. In a world where the power of religion is unstoppably vanishing, new temples, such as supermarkets and shopping centers, are emerging. As the narrator notices, “to break off the crowd is to risk death as an individual” (DeLillo, 1998: 38). A feeling that they are not alone makes their lives a little less mundane. Jack tends to surround himself with people (students, people in supermarkets) in order to mitigate his fear. Even when his primal fear comes true during the evacuation, Jack is reassured by the presence of a large number of people. Finally, Jack and Babette like to accompany people who do not share their fear of death.

A perfect representative of an individual who successfully confronts death is Heinrich's friend, Orest Mercator, who tests his limits by sitting in a cage full of snakes. He does not see a reason to bother himself with death because death occurs instantly: “Everybody who's dead is now dead” (DeLillo, 1998: 116). On the other hand, Wilder, a child with a limited vocabulary, is envied by Jack and Babette for his unawareness about his mortality: “He doesn't know death at all. How lucky he is. A cloud of unknowing, an omnipotent little person. The child is everything, the adult nothing” (1998:126). However, Jack and Babette do not realize that Wilder's “blissful ignorance” “comes at the expense of his intellectual maturity” (Olster, 2008: 91). To be unaware of one's death, which stands for an end that shapes life and gives it its meaning, is to be unaware of life and its value.

In the fictional world of DeLillo, freedom is reduced to freedom of choice among the offered roles and lifestyles, which hinders initiative and taking control of one's own life. In the contemporary world in which man has lost his ability to will, taking someone's life may be the only remaining way of exercising power. Following Murray Siskind's advice that Jack can take control of death by killing people, he is on the brink of killing Willie Mink. Willie Mink is the lover of Jack's wife Babette. Jack wants to take revenge on him, but he also perceives Willie as a mystery due to his involvement with the experimental drug Dylar, which supposedly alleviates the fear of death. However, it turns out that Jack's plan was not well prepared. Willie responds to violence with violence and wounds Jack. What Jack is going through is a real, authentic experience – he is standing on the thin line between life and death. His wound is real, his pain is real, this experience is unparalleled and is not susceptible to simulation. Hence, Jack's quest for authentic experience, for a certainty and the ultimate truth which grants his life with significance proves fruitful. Paradoxically, by facing death Jack manages to “kill death itself, to pit Eros

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4 Chaos is inevitable in the world with a surplus of information. In this Baudrillardian world all the information has the same value – therefore, it is all equally valuable, or, to be more precise, equally valueless (1994: 79).

against Thanatos" (Boxall, 2006: 127). By confronting death, he "kills" the fear of death. Jack's coping with death is the crucial event in *White Noise*, the point at which he restores his humanity (Sakaama, 2018: 241). Having regained his humanity, Jack is finally able to enjoy life, to view it in an entirely new light. He comes to the conclusion that death cannot be escaped, but that it can be transcended. Death is represented as the ultimate subject in DeLillo's fiction, "an essential element in the life of every human being as it gives life its meaning and grants it its signification" (DeLillo, 2018: 242).

Although Jack lives in the postmodern age, he does not belong there. A true representative of contemporary culture in *White Noise* is Murray Siskind. He is a man who recognizes the world as a sum of data and sees nothing wrong with it. One should not try to escape such a world, according to Murray, but dive into it and explore it to its core. Murray is a theoretician; he speaks lightly of killing another man, although he emphasizes that he speaks theoretically. As Bonca notices, he symbolizes unnatural unwavering objectivity and impartiality. It makes him appear to be from another planet (Bonca, 1996: 39). His logic is not human – it is a technological logic that advocates the view that death is unassailable and can only be put aside using easily available solutions of the technological age. What is more, his belief that it is natural and best not to think about death confirms his place in the web of signs and valueless referents. Unlike him, the novel implies that DeLillo adopts the opposite, humanist position that, "to know what it is to be human is to know what it is to die" (Bonca, 1996: 40). Jack rejects the logic of technology, according to which it is best not to bother oneself with resolving the mystery of death, which is perceived as an unsolvable task and a losing battle. In contrast with such a view, Jack's quest suggests that death is a universal truth that has to be reflected on and accepted as an inevitable certainty.

Although Bonca identifies Murray as a true Baudrillardian character, it actually appears that Willie Mink is the character who embodies a Baudrillardian world where distinctions between the sign and the real are vague, practically non-existent. His inability to note the difference between the phrase "hail of bullets" and the real shooting symbolizes "the complete disintegration of the humanist sense of self" (Olster, 2008: 90). However, Jack decides to save Mink because he undergoes an epiphany which enables him to view Mink as "his colored double" (LeClair, 2003: 20). For a moment Jack does not perceive Willie Mink as the ex-lover of his wife, but as a victim of contemporary culture who failed to deal with his fear. Jack's ability to see this truth which is hidden beneath the surface confirms that he has undergone spiritual transcendence, a transformative experience that marks the beginning of a different life.

## 5. Conclusion

Starting from the observation that the protagonist of *White Noise* comes across as a rather awkward postmodern character, we offer evidence that DeLillo's fiction has a modernist impulse. The fictional world of Jack Gladney is undeniably a world

of signs. However, Jack manages to take a critical distance from the world he inhabits. He embarks on a spiritual journey, aiming to experience real and authentic moments. In the world where meaning and identity are deconstructed, the only remaining authentic experience is the experience of death.

Although Moses states that *White Noise* is about “death on a personal level” (Moses, 1991: 79), this research adopts the position of Thomas LeClair that this novel deals with “closing the loop” between personal and mass dying (1987: 241). In contrast, the theme of *Underworld* is the threat of the apocalypse, of mass dying.<sup>5</sup> Jack Gladney, who suffers from necrophobia, learns that many people share his fear. Although such knowledge at first only increases his fear, he gradually evolves and comes to the realization that death is a personal experience which we undergo alone, unaccompanied.<sup>6</sup>

Although there are critics who propound that *White Noise* suggests that even death is prone to simulation, the protagonist’s struggle demonstrates that simulated death in the media is not an adequate substitute for real experience. In fact, televised death even distances us from coping with the phenomenon of death, which actually represents the limit which gives meaning to life. In the view of postmodern culture, it is best not to think about death. In the words of Murray Siskind, “Pain, death, reality, they are all unnatural. We can’t bear things as they are. We know too much. So we resort to repression, compromise and disguise. That’s how we survive in the universe (1998: 126).” Since it represents a mystery we cannot comprehend, we should repress our fear and immerse ourselves into the consumer culture:

“It is the nature of modern death,” Murray said. “It has a life independent of us. It is growing in prestige and dimension. [...] We know it intimately. [...] The more we learn, the more it grows. Every advance in technology and knowledge is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain. Death adapts, like a viral agent.” (DeLillo, 1998: 69)

These words of Murray Siskind prove that technology and contemporary culture failed to unriddle the phenomenon of death. Its various ways of simulating it turn out to be only distractions that divert us from the right path. The revelation that death is a mystery means that this phenomenon cannot be reduced to its simulation, which indicates that there is still a possibility for real, authentic experience. As Vukotić suggests, the possibility of knowing the truth exists in DeLillo’s oeuvre. The truth is reached through the unspoken, non-verbal (Вукотић, 2014: 70) – it is experienced at the moment when we see “beyond words” (DeLillo, 1998: 135). In a world which

5 James explains that DeLillo succeeds to turn death into a leitmotif of his fiction combining its apocalyptic and ordinary aspects, even though he views death as a personal experience through which we go unaccompanied (according to Sakaama, 2018: 232).

6 An even more intimate relationship with death is accomplished in *The Body Artist*. Its protagonist, Lauren Hartke, shuts out the world in order to face the death of her husband personally. She views the whole outside world, its assumptions and prescribed way of behavior, as distractions that distance her from confronting death, which is supposed to represent an authentic experience.

tends to grind all nuances and differences, it is essential to seek alternatives. The example of Jack Gladney is a confirmation that alternatives still exist.

It is precisely the fear of death which anesthetizes the individual. Deathfear prevents us from exploring and embracing all the possibilities that life provides. Two phrases – “death in life” and “life in death”, may be used to clarify this paradoxical situation. In order to suppress their fear, a lot of people avoid thinking about what terrifies them most. In doing so, they evade facing real life, which may be said to represent a “living death”. On the other hand, it is necessary to accept our mortality in order to grant our life significance. In other words, death as the final border should encourage us not to waste our life, since it is getting closer to its end every day. As Winnie Richards, a neurochemist, notices:

[...] it's a mistake to lose one's sense of death, even one's fear of death. Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry off a final line, a border or limit. (DeLillo, 1998: 100)

Jack, who is represented as a conventional character at the beginning of the novel, adopts the attitude of the majority of people towards death – that of denial. Jack's spiritual quest is a reminder that in order to mature, one has to move on from denial towards recognition and acceptance of death. Indeed, in the chaotic and unstable fictional world of DeLillo whose characters challenge the universal truths, death may be the only remaining certainty that shapes life and grants it significance and meaning.

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Сажетак

### ПОТРАГА ЗА СТВАРНОШЋУ КРОЗ СУОЧАВАЊЕ СА СМРЋУ У ДЕЛИЛОВОМ РОМАНУ *БЕЛИ ШУМ*

Циљ овог истраживања је анализа духовне потраге Џека Гледнија, протагонисте ДеЛиловог романа *Бели шум* (1985). Рад заступа становиште по којем Џек Гледни представља лик чија је мотивација модернистичка, док је стање света у којем се налази непобитно постмодерно. Фиктивни свет *Белог шума* је свет симулација и знакова. У таквом свету идентитет је децентриран, а сам свет је лишен значења. Џек, који је опседнут страхом од смрти, постепено долази до спознаје да смрт заправо може бити једино преостало аутентично искуство у савременој култури. Он увиђа да га страх од смрти анестезира, умртвљује. Роман импликује да је суочавање са смрћу мистериозан феномен који није могуће свести на симулацију. Џек доживљава стварно, аутентично искуство у тренутку када се налази на ивици смрти, на танкој граници између живота и смрти. Ово искуство, које се не може поистоветити са његовом симулацијом, даје значај његовом животу. Џек коначно посматра живот у другачијем светлу и одлучан је да ужива у ситним животним радостима и огромним могућностима које нам пружа.

### Кључне речи:

смрт, Џек Гледни, стварно, идентитет, симулација, постмодерно стање, модернизам