

Death as the Other in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: From the Sensibly Immediate to the Technologically Mediated

Chi-ming Chang

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore how DeLillo in *White Noise* (1984) foregrounds death as the ethical relation with the Other in the postmodern age. With his observation of the technologized postmodern society, DeLillo depicts the daily confrontations and obsessions with death as the inevitable encounter with the non-in-different and incommensurable ethical Other. In light of Levinas and Baudrillard, this paper argues that death under DeLillo's formulations is no longer a remote actuality or an impossible possibility in life but is imminent and embodied; it heralds new insights into the technological intrusion into human existence and points to the vulnerability of the postmodern age.

KEY WORDS

death, the Other, the body, ethics, Don DeLillo, Levinas



The absolutely other is the Other . . . the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself. But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no power. (TI 39)

To be a body is on the one hand *to stand*, to be master of oneself, and on the other hand, to stand on the earth, to be in the *other*; and thus to be encumbered by one's body. (TI 164)

Introduction

Death in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is a profound exploration of the ethical situation, a confrontation with the Other in the postmodern age; it is associated not so much with pure negativity or mysteriousness as with a postmodern ethics tied to our bodily perception, both immediate and mediated. DeLillo actually takes *fear* of death as the point of departure and also takes into consideration the complexity of the postmodern milieu, characterized by the incredulity of grand narratives (in Lyotard's terms) and a lifestyle constantly penetrated and mediated by technology.

DeLillo portrays death as the ethical Other in two significant ways. One is *via* the immediate corporeal reaction to one's being and surroundings whereby people lose their pre-supposed values or standards and find their self-autonomy barely sustained. The other is the technologically mediated, which is what especially distinguishes

DeLillo's ethical thinking. It is the observation of how the technological forces mediates the Other via the body and renders the ethical relation a technological *face*. That is, DeLillo is unfolding the ethical relation in his uniquely-perceived concept of death which is reconstituted in the social flows characterized by the overwhelming influence of the domesticated technology as well as the in-*human* scientific development.¹ Significantly, the analysis would be based on Emmanuel Levinas's notion of death in ethics, which correspondingly takes death as the absolute Other and features in its irreducible and ungraspable alterity as well as the self's passivity and vulnerability as Levinas explicates that

[t]he unforeseeable character of death is due to the fact that it does not lie within any horizon. It is not open to grasp. It takes me without leaving me the chance I have in a struggle. . . . In death I am exposed to absolute violence, to murder in the night. . . . The Other, inseparable from the very event of transcendence, is situated in the region from which death, possibly murder, comes. . . . Death threatens me from beyond. This unknown that frightens, the silence of the infinite space that terrify, comes from the other, and this alterity, precisely as absolute, strikes me in an evil design or in a judgment of justice. (*TI* 233–34)

This paper will then show how death, as represented by DeLillo, designates an embedded ethical relation with the Other and reveals how postmodern life makes death an acute, (im)mediate and imminent ethical encounter.

White Noise has a profound theme beneath its realistic wrapping. Beyond the typical American life that molds the social transactions and family framework lies DeLillo's major concern—the confrontation with death. The author remarks that “[i]f writing is a concentrated form of thinking, then the most concentrated writing probably ends in some kind of reflection on dying” (331, interview with Adam Begley). In most of the literary configuration, death has been either mentioned, imagined or embedded in the plot while the idea of its function as the

epistemological boundary or the counterpart of life is constantly reinforced. However, DeLillo's idea of writing does not designate so much the corporeal decease as the writer's encounter with the unknowable. In *White Noise*, death suggests an intimate and personal relation in life. As DeLillo says of the book, "It's about death on the individual level" (Hall 39). *The American Book of the Dead*, one of the working titles of *White Noise*, suggests DeLillo's germinal idea for this novel:

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 sense of transcendence that lies just beyond our touch. This 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. (301, interview with Anthony Decurtis)

Though *White Noise* has its realistic grounding, death is employed to portray an experience beyond our senses. It makes up an inescapable but ambivalent relation since man is born to strive for life but actually journeys to demise. Hence, the relation with death no longer indicates the not-yet-coming reality but a daily encounter and obsession, surfaced by the haunting fear which is easily aroused and *embodied* in empirical experiences.

DeLillo foregrounds the inevitable confrontation with death in terms of a death-fear which cannot be perceived: thus we always have the sense of an *incomplete* presentation of death. The death fear *in life* is expressed in terms of everyday confrontations, occurrences, and even routines—both immediate and mediated. For one thing, the body serves as the panoramic antenna perceiving more than what can be conceived as if the senses of the body serve as the route to the track or trace of death. These bodily perceptions make up the immediate confrontation with death in the postmodern milieu. Merleau-Ponty contends that "[p]erception must be understood as this interrogative thought which allows the perceived world to be rather than positing it, before which things do and undo themselves in a sort of slippage

[*glissement*], beneath the yes and the no" (*Visible and Invisible* 138). The inadequation of the sensible or perceivable is recognized as ethically related by Levinas who contends that the otherness is a process from the sensible to the unknowable and the unrepresentable as "the vision turning back into non-vision, into insinuation of a face, into the refutation of vision within the sight's center, into that of which vision, already assuming a plastic form, is but forgetfulness and representation" (*OS* 115).

The self's relation with the visible, audible or perceivable hence reverts to the point before any adequation or reasoning. Levinas names it as the ethical nudity that is deprived of any form, content or theme. The sensible is then regarded as the first ethical arena where the self confronts the Other as sensibility refers to "an exposure to others, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of the others, the one-for-the-other . . . signification signifies before showing itself as a said in the system of synchronism, the linguistic system" (*OB* 77). The indeterminacy of the sensible forcefully illustrates man's obsession with the *dead* end of life, perpetually overpowering us in an irresistible and inevitable way. For another, the relation is acutely presented in the technologically mediated in which DeLillo depicts how the social forces has been integrated. The elaboration of man's helplessness and anxiety over death designates the haunting Other in the postmodern milieu as Levinas maintains that "[m]y relationship with my death is a nonknowledge on dying itself, a nonknowledge that is nevertheless not an absence of relationship" (*GDT* 19).

Death in *White Noise* is frequently taken as a "postmodern" representation, and thus as part of the postmodern critique which is really three critiques. In the first, death is devoured in the culture of repetition and simulation; death thus loses its raw impact. The second critique stresses the actuality of death in that the dead function as the solid base for self-identification, a confirmation of one's immediate life. Still another critique lays emphasis on our defense mechanism against the threat of death.

Michael Hardin, drawing on Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation with its blurred distinction between the real and the fictional,

agrees that “[d]eath should never be interpreted as an actual occurrence in a subject or a body, but rather as a *form*, possibly a form of social relations” (Baudrillard 24). Death, to Hardin, is indeed transformed into an emptied-out occurrence without any substantial meaning in our highly-mediated and culturally-replicated society, for it is repeatedly simulated on and by TV and other mass media so that people become immune or insensitive to its existence. However, his analysis ends with the statement that

[d]espite the best attempts by postmodernism and by American popular culture to make death into simulation, it continues to penetrate the surface. . . . We believe that in repetition, death loses its sting. . . . But, unfortunately, they have shown as well that postmodern ideology and culture only keep us immune until we are personally confronted with a bullet, AIDS, or a car hurtling at us. (Hardin 48–49)

The inefaceable reality of death is thus confirmed despite its encompassing cultural reproduction in the postmodern age. Though technologized surroundings do reduce its acuteness, death, life’s ultimate reality, is still and always ensured. Life, though simulated as such, could not eliminate its hard reality. The mediated death does not screen out the immediate fear.

Mark Conroy stresses the importance of the dead in identifying the self. He contends that “it was the dead who offered the surest claim to authority for the living and the surest means of defeating death itself” and thus “each harnesses the living to the dead in its own fashion” (e.g. Hitler to Jack and Elvis to Murray in the novel) (97–98). However, while the dead become the paradoxical base for life reality, the so-called authority is reduced to the discursive residue in the consumer society such as the tabloids in the supermarkets. “Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead” (326). Everyone could grasp some discursive anchorage

concerning life and death. The discourses concerning the dead are seemingly meant to solidify the living. However, the base formed by the discourses is less concrete than contingent, theoretically distinct from each other. The living are then lapsed into a deeper abyss. Conroy's perspective does not lead to an assurance of the self in postmodernity but marks the evanescence of self-identification which is, instead, thwarted by conflicting accounts of life constantly haunted by the unknowable.

Still, some critique in examining the confrontation of death in *White Noise* has centered on different defensive mechanisms against death fear. The critic Cornel Bobca contends that "all human 'projects'—especially the language we use to help us construct our belief systems—are designed to evade or deny or conquer the fear of death" (4). Here, death is neither reduced to mere simulations blunting its menace to life nor granted greater power to help constitute self-identification. Language, discourses, and set of beliefs are employed to overcome the death fear as Laura Barrett observed that "[t]he narrator, Jack, attempts to outwit death by immersing himself in language, a medium which he believes controls reality." But, in face of the arbitrary nature of language, Jack's earnest yearning for the possibility of meaning makes the dread of death a crude reality to life (102–103). Bobca's critique actually designates how the fear marks an inseparable and inescapable relation with death.

However divergent the analyses of death in DeLillo, their common concern is that it is impossible to talk about life without mentioning death. The analysis of this paper, hence, aims to further their observation by elaborating that the inevitable encounter actually designates a premier ethical relation. It is a confrontation with the Other in terms of Levinas's ethics as he contends that "[t]he approach of death indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other" (LR 43). Death is peculiarly recognized as something with absolute alterity which is neither thematizable nor subsumable to any understanding. Besides, it is intertwined with daily experience, immediate and mediated. The body paradoxically becomes the most intimate yet most foreign arena of life, since the incessant messages

received and released *via* our corporeal perception are rarely determined by any pre-supposed logic or idea. Hence we would need to move from the most immediate sensual perception to the most technologically-mediated extension of the (or our) body, in order to explore how death emerges as the absolute Other in life.

Founded on Levinas's ethics, the relation is distinction in several aspects. First of all, the ethics does not start with any abstract and universal predicates or laws but the experience *embodied* in daily life. The sensibility is taken the first indications of the ethical relation. Besides, the relation is marked by asymmetry since death as absolute alterity resists any designation, and Levinas's notion of the face could account for the sensible but incomprehensible Other. In addition to the face of the Other *embodied* in the sensibly immediate, DeLillo's presentation of the mediated ethical relation reveals Levinas's ideas of proximity and diachrony. It is a peculiar temporality which helps elaborate the otherness of the Other as well as the self's own disquietude and restlessness.

Death—The Other as the Sensually Immediate

In *White Noise*, a ubiquitous sense of death is embedded in what the characters saw, felt or even thought. DeLillo demonstrates people's obsession with a death which is associated with specific situations. At the very beginning of the novel, the sight of the station wagon day when students came back to school at the end of the summer vacation bewilderedly gives rise to the idea of death. While Babette said that "I have trouble imagining death at that income level," Jack replied that "[m]aybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands" (6). These college students and their parents make a recurring scene with the seemingly never-aging appearance. Their death to Babette and James seems to be an unknowable leap for there is no apparent corporeal sign of aging, not to mention dying. Hence, their death is perceived less as an empirical actuality than the paperwork which is used to keep records of the population. Nonetheless, their abrupt association of death with the random scene reveals that death

makes a rather common scale to measure or judge what is around them.

Besides, the obsession emerges and intensifies itself as they, Jack and Babette, *em-body* death in an immediate and unexpected manner—in their talk, amid their sleep, and even in individual meditations. Jack's feeling of the haunting death in his muscular contraction in sleep known as the myoclonic jerk made him wonder "Is this what it's like, abrupt, peremptory? Shouldn't death, I thought, be a swan diving, graceful, white-winged and smooth, leaving the surface undisturbed" (18)? Consciously or unconsciously, Jack was awakened to the fact that death was a recurring indeterminacy as the uncontrollable jerk happened to the body for unknowable reasons, with incomprehensible messages. It not only haunts but attacks him who is relatively passive and vulnerable. One night, Jack woke up in "the grip of a death sweat. Defenseless against my own racking fears. A pause at the center of my being. . . . The digital reading on the clock-radio was 3: 51. Always odd numbers at times like this. What does it mean? Is death odd-numbered" (47)? This is a typical postmodern example as death is digitally related. It corresponds to the digitalized age in which everything is coded. Even death is no exception. However, what is special is the consistency of the numbers at those moments which perpetuates the technological contour of death rooted in the postmodern age. The unexpected and imposing encounter makes him totally helpless, in contrast with the Other *being at large*. The ongoing cases repetitively illustrate death's dual face—perceivable but ungraspable, compatible and incompatible with life. A not-yet actuality but a persistently-haunting Other.

Confronted with the haunting Other, characters made or *embodied* conscious efforts to evade the threat only to more acutely perceive the Other. It is a situation in which the self tries to anchor the dead other but is haunted by the imminent Other. "The relation with the Other is not produced outside of the world, but puts in question the world possessed" (*TI* 173). Engaged in an ethical relation with the Other as an the *in-determinate* but dominating power, the self is hardly able to hold the center or claim his integrity. Jack Glandney's Hitler studies set an example for his attempt to override death by making up

his own discourses on Hitler and discovered a faltered identity of himself. DeLillo himself comments that

[t]he damage caused by Hitler was so enormous that Gladney [Jack] feels he can disappear inside it and that his own puny dread will be overwhelmed by the vastness, the monstrosity of Hitler himself. He feels that Hitler is not only bigger than life . . . but bigger than death. (301, interview with Anthony Decurtis)

Hitler, with his authoritative image and enormous historical influence, helps to shelter Jack from his intense and acute fear of death within him-*self*. Since Jack's "Hitler Studies" was what his college was internationally known for, Murray Siskind, the visiting lecturer on living icons, commented that this was "Gladney's Hitler . . . It has an identity, a sense of achievement" (10). His job, then, became a process in which he could integrate himself by identifying himself with someone who was not only dead but also the cause of thousands of deaths; his identification, indeed death-related, was thus falsely founded on an unknown abyss as Jack's manipulation of Hitler's studies. Paradoxically, Jack fought all the way to match an image which was supposed to be something other than what he was then. Though comforting himself that Hitler gave him something not merely to shelter but to grow into, he knew that he was "the false character that follows the name around" (17). That is, he had to silence what he was to go with what the name, Hitler, might stand for.

Enhancing and *embodying* the authenticity, Jack first of all changed his outer appearance by wearing the glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses to look *authoritative*. In addition, he changed his name, Jack Galdney, into J. A. K. Gladney, following Babette's advice, in order to animate dignity, significance and prestige. Yet, Jack felt it was like a tag on a borrowed suit. Renaming himself further alienated Jack from any possible self-recognition, since every name means another abyss to face. Another lacuna to such an identity is his inability to speak German in spite of all his efforts to acquire it. Such a forged identification is much more a pretence of what is not

there than an access to any substantial existence. It corresponds to Baudrillard's notion of simulation in which "[t]o simulate is to feign to have one hasn't" (Baudrillard 3).² It was not a copy of an origin but a simulacrum to pretend there was an origin. Jack was always pursuing and matching up with what was *other* than himself and it followed that he was torn between asserting him-self and identifying with someone who possessed the formidable power and resulted in the horrible human catastrophe. The self was no longer able to claim the ipseity "from the first the same—*me ipse*, an ipseity—that I can identify every object, every character trait, and every being" (*EI* 345). The self no longer secures the process of identification founded on the present, termed as hypostasis, a state in which "[c]onsciousness is a rupture of the anonymous vigilance and the *there is*"³ and "[t]hrough its identification the existent is already closed up upon itself; it is a monad and a solitude" (*TI* 51–52). Jack ends up with an identity which is attached to death on the one hand and designates the death of him-self on the other. Consequently, his identity is never found concrete or founded concretely, leaving an Other even more imminent.

From the daily confrontation to Jack's ethical confrontation in Hitler's studies, death features itself by being embodied in sensual immediacy. However, the perceivability but incomprehensibility of death as the Other further transcends the immediate sensual reaction or response, as it is shown in Jack's statement—"[I]t ends a sentence, prolongs a glance" (30). His words pointed out one important clue to the trace of death: it is both in and beyond the senses. It is something that we listen but not hear, something that we watch but not see. The former could be explicated with Levinas's distinction between the saying and the said in *Otherwise than Being*. What is prolonged in the words corresponds to his account of the saying which breaks away from the meaning-designation of the said. Levinas maintains that "[t]he intention that animates the identification of this as this or as that is a proclamation, a promulgation, and thus a language, a stating of a said" (*OB* 62) while the saying "approaches the other by breaking through the noema involved in intentionality, turning inside out, 'like a cloak,' consciousness" (*OB* 49). Being beyond the intentional

meaning-designation lays bare the fact that the self could only passively respond to the sensible phenomenon. As for what prolongs the glance, it indicates a state which goes beyond the vision “that apprehends on the horizon without encountering a being out of what is beyond all being” (*TI* 191). To see indicates a world “that is entirely *here* and self-sufficient. . . . in vision, form is wedded to content in such a way to appease it” (*LR* 147). Merleau-Ponty further elaborates the transcendence of the vision arising from the inexhaustible and incarnate nature of the things under man’s observation:

If we ever succeed in describing an access to the things themselves, it will only be in terms of this never-ending opacity and depth: there is no completely observable thing, no inspection of the thing which could take place without lacunae or which could be total. We cannot expect to be able to say that the thing exists by virtue of having been observed; on the contrary, the appearance of the thing immediately convinces us that it is possible to observe it. In the texture of the sensible we find the guarantee of a series of verifications which do not constitute the *excellent* of the thing, but which are deviations of it. Reciprocally, the imaginary thing is not absolutely unobservable, it discovers analogs of itself in the body which make it incarnate. This distinction, like all the others, must be taken up again, not simply reduced to that of a fullness and a void. (*Visible and Invisible* 108)

Between the speakable and the unspeakable, the observable and the unobservable comes the perception which corresponds to Levinas’s account of the *face* as the trace of death. The face exemplifies what *the seeing* sees. Levinas’s “face” reverses the visualizing and contextualizing setup in linguistic mechanism, depriving the concept of the intended content and visualized image. The face is rendered a pure and in-adequate existence, beyond the totality of being or presence. The face “does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image” (*TI* 51). It is “signification, and signification without context. . . . the face is

meaning all by itself. You are you. . . . It is what cannot become a content " (EI 86–87). Unable to be reduced to an image or consumed in meaning-(re)production, the face, to DeLillo, acts as an access to death as the Other through and beyond the senses. The face *reveals* itself through but beyond the vision. It is illustrated in Jack's perception of the *other* level of life as he described that

I watched Denise make a mental comparison between her mother's running clothes and the wet bag she'd dumped in the compactor. I could see it in her eyes, a sardonic connection. It was these secondary level of life, these extrasensory flashes and floating nuances of being . . . made me believe we were a magic act . . . sharing unaccountable things. (34, italics mine).

This vision goes beyond what is concrete and present whereas the hearing takes in what is not uttered. Magically, the flow of communication does not merely work on an audible level. It is Levinas's account of the face that emerges through the senses and corresponds to DeLillo's description of the haunting Other which transcends the delimitations of the senses. Sol Yurick regards it as the "deeper currents of disturbance" which constantly gnaw our sense of the world from the sensual to the ultra-sensual (367).

Wilder's straight crying for seven hours sets another forceful example of the Other *embodiment* which takes Jack to a ultra-sensory and cryptic level of life. "There was something permanent and soul-struck in this crying. It was a sound of inbred desolation" (77). Wilder seemed to have been to a place "where things are said, sights are seen, distances reached which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions" (79). Indeed, that is a very difficult scene to imagine since it means to have made people hear and see what they are ordinarily unable to. The senses are raised to another perceiving level with incredible scenes. Amazingly, what follows is the dissolution of the self under the tremendous power at that particular moment as he is overtaken in Wilder's crying: "I let it wash over me,

like rain in sheets. . . . I let it break across my body. . . . I entered it, fell into it, letting it enfold and cover me. He cried with his eyes open, his eyes closed, his hands in his pockets, his mittens on and off. I sat there nodding sagely" (78). The scene washes away his consciousness of himself and melts him in the ultra-sensory perceptions.

From the sensible to the ultrasensory, then, DeLillo reveals that the senses not only serve as the access to the immediate *embodiment* of the Other but absorb and dissolve the self to the degree that it (he, she) could only respond. Moreover, the close link between the self and the Other, life and death, demonstrates that the Other incommensurably coexists with the self; death, with life. DeLillo's ethical configuration presupposes the inevitability of the *face* with death as the elusive Other as well as the passivity and vulnerability of the self. The passivity, according to Levinas, designates that the self ethically "goes to the hither side of oneself. . . . going to the hither side of identity, gnawing away at this very identity breaking up the limits of identity, breaking up the *principle* of being in me" (*OB* 114). The confrontation with the Other in the sensibly immediate hence puts into question the self that is neither self-sufficient nor integral. In addition, with his observation of the technologically-wrapped society in the postmodern age, DeLillo in *White Noise* goes further to show how the haunting Other is mediated and appears in a unique manner with distinctive ethical messages.

Death—The Mediated Ethical Contour of a Postmodern Age

As illustrated above, except the fact that DeLillo's depiction of the ethical relation is immediately *embodied* in the sensual, life in the postmodern age renders an-*other* complicated *face* of death as the Other, pivoted on the technological mediation in life. The technologically-mediated perception could be traced back to Martin Heidegger's idea of the *techne* which "reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie before us, whatever can look and turn out now one way and now another" (13). That is, being more than instrumental or mechanical, it mediates something which may

otherwise appear or reveal, especially in terms of the body, since technology is a premier means for man to extend himself beyond the physical or objective boundaries. Merleau-Ponty contends that “[a]ll technique is ‘technique of the body.’ It represents and amplifies the metaphysical structure of our flesh” (*L’Oeil* 62–63). And, more importantly, the amplification or the extension of the “technical body” by dint of technology would make a form of “open body” which presents more possibilities of perception. In the age of advanced technology and science, the human body, rather than a plastic instrument, “holds possibilities which exceed our grasp of it, this new emancipated work with its own excessive possibilities . . . do not produce perfectly finished objects, but rather open networks that resemble its very essence” (Barry Jr. 398). Yet, the open networks, especially demonstrated in the interaction with people, things, and even events irrelevant or distant from the real daily life, awake us to the hidden or embedded aspects of the human possibilities which would concerns the twisted and intertwined relation with death as the Other. There is a close link between technology and the body as revealed in *White Noise*. The technological impact which makes the mediated ethical contour mainly focuses on three aspects—TV, experimental medication and the toxic event.

TV in *White Noise*, first demonstrates the mediated facet of the ethical relation between life and death, the self and the Other. Playing a primary role in the postmodern age, TV asserts its irresistible influence on its viewers and even ambivalently regulates the family relationship.⁴ Roger Silverstone remarks that TV becomes “a member of the family not merely in a metaphysical sense but also in a literal sense insofar as it is integrated into the daily pattern of domestic social relations, and insofar as it is the focus of emotional or cognitive energy, releasing or containing tension, for example, or providing comfort or a sense of security” (40). TV has become part of the social relations by involving the audience’s emotions and even provoking their behavior. However, TV never makes a consistent influence or totalizing effect but is full of conflicts and ambiguities as the viewers “move through various worlds, various levels of fictionalization and realization, and these movements

can create effects of defamiliarization as well as normalization” (Martins 103). These conflicting drives of TV have been noticed and associated with certain enigmatic power, as Tom LeClair comments that “television has more complex effects: conditioning and comforting, distorting and informing, even becoming . . . a source of mystery” (397). TV with its ambivalent effect goes far more than mediation in its social function. While it is meant to transmit or represent what is intended, it paradoxically molds what there could be in life. It takes on an imposing power on the audience, *realizing* an essential relation with the un-neglectable and ungraspable. The paradoxical and mystic nature of television has also been noticed by Pico Iyer, who remarks that “the television is consulted as a mystic oracle in the dark” (380). Iyer further elaborates on its incomprehensible capability in (de)coding life. It echoes John Mascaró’s idea that Don DeLillo, different from the modernism of Henry Adams, “enacts the same tableau of the self in confrontation with a fully mediated world which is the only reality capable of being represented by its sign systems, but which yet points toward an unrepresentable existence beyond it” (508). The unrepresentable existence does more clearly reveal an ethical relation with the screen. It poses a great challenge to the recognition of self-sufficiency or autonomy.

The mediated ethical proximity with death is first shown in the representation of human disasters on TV. It objectifies death as if it were a product to consume. Witnessing and consuming death on TV enables the characters to reduce their sensitivity to its unknowable nature, as exemplified by Jack’s family ritual in absorbedly watching calamities and death on Friday nights. Death on TV efficiently reduces its threat since the audience could keep a safe distance from the suffering and the bloody scenes and consciously know it is the others, instead of the self, who are answering God’s call. Death in disasters reminds them of their being alive, screening them out from the immediate death. Yet, the actuality reveals more anxiety than security since “[e]very disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” (64). Their insatiability indicates the impossibility of being soothed in the screened re-*presentation*. Death is

something inexhaustible in *presentation*, no matter in what way it is revealed. There is always something about death which could not be eliminated or evaded. The mediated death is marked by the irreducible otherness.

DeLillo regards the TV experience as a dialogue with the dead who do a constant talking in a way never recognizable to us. DeLillo at the last page of *White Noise* termed the mystery-approaching sound on TV as "the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living" (326). TV, which talked in waves and radiation, was a technologically-connoted language. What is worth-noting is how the sound on TV was associated with that of the dead. It implies a constant and death-evoking message lying behind the TV screen. A more acute-felt comment comes from Murray's students—that "[t]elevision is the death throes of human consciousness" (51). With TV, the self is losing its alertness at the brink of death. It undercuts the existence as consciousness according to Descartes's account. The sound coupled with the incessantly swapping images is found a *natural* part of the audible environment but amazingly baffles our conscious or intentional thinking.

Watching TV is considered to be an experience that demonstrates the meaning (or at least one meaning) of the novel's title, *White Noise*. Sol Yurick tells us that "[w]hite noise is . . . a fusion of signals and messages, a leveling of sounds into one all-sound—its individual components become indistinguishable" (366). The in-distinction may account for the impossibility of language which is founded on difference and differentiation. Such an interpretation engages a spatial dimension which is related to the meaning-(re)production. Tom LeClair, however, takes a temporal angle to deal with the notion of DeLillo's white noise, commenting that "'white noise' is a periodic sound with frequencies of random amplitude and random interval—a term for chaos . . . a term for complex, simultaneous ordering that represents the 'both/and' nature of systems (and irony)" (409). Both the synthetic and synchronic explications of white noise indicate an incessant relation with something unknowable. Its incomprehensibility is vividly demonstrated in his combination of color and sound which

mystically transcends the sensual distinction, suggesting people could *see* what they hear. As the color is attached to the sound, the sensory reaction worked on a meta-*physical* level and new possibility of perception is mediated in the technical body. The noise is colored. Jack's amazement and perplexity thus indicated a significant lapse between what was consciously heard and how it was unconsciously responded to. According to John N. Duvall, "*White Noise* reminds us of how closely related are the subliminal and the sublime" (135). The immediate confrontation places us on the verge of the unidentifiable and incomprehensible. Nevertheless, the mediated Other ironically shows how technology rids life of the aura which accumulates the cultic and ritual quality of the work of art, according to Benjamin (225-26), but is endowed with another sense of awe. Regarding the uncertainty and fear aroused by the white noise, Cornel Bonca argues that "'[w]hite noise' is for DeLillo contemporary man's deepest *expression* of his death fear, a strange and genuinely awe-inspiring response to the fear of mortality in the postmodern world" (458). Bonca's association of white noise with death fear reveals a more significant fact that the access to the ethical relation with death as the Other lies beyond the sensory boundary, as the visible element is blended into the audible one, marking a mediated ethical relationship.

While death is doubly "twisted" through the mediation of the technical body (in Merleau-Ponty's terms), its alterity persists. What is paradoxical is that as life is mediated on the screen, it is more acutely shadowed by an unspeakable power of death as illustrated by Jack's shock in seeing Babette's images on TV. "It was but wasn't her. . . . Waves and radiation. Something leaked through the mesh. She was shining a light on us, she was coming into being, endlessly being formed and reformed as the muscles in her face worked at smiling and speaking, as the electronic dots swarmed"(104). "She" was technologically turned into the constant (re)-forming electronic dots. The medium blurs the pre-supposed distance between subjects and objects. The concept of being human is complicated by the subject-object conflation reflected in the transmitted images. The mediated images bear a message which resists translation, conveying

the unrepresentable. More interesting is that it is, once again, death that the image edges up to. Jack wondered “[i]f she was not dead, was I?” (105). DeLillo’s observation of the human-technological concoction deliberately defamiliarizes people’s reception or perception of the transmitted images, which people nowadays take for granted, not noticing the technological process has uprooted and revolutionized man’s ultimate sense of being and has complicated the ethical configurations. Jack’s reaction to his wife’s image on the screen undermines his sense of self-assurance to the extent that life and death, presence and absence, are no longer distinct from each other, as his restlessness increases owing to his not knowing how to treat the image of his wife—the conflation of the technological and the human. Jack is given a hard time making sense of the relation between his genuine wife and her mediated image, the human and the technological. Amid these espoused counterparts is a great rupture which he does not know how to fill up.

The sense of uncertainty is commonly perceived and shared among other family members: they are seized in such a moment of confusion as well as a mode of odd misgiving. Their youngest son, Wilder, would even approach the set and touch the screen, treating the image as his mother. It is a time when they are conscious of the *inadequacy*⁵ of the experience but do not know how to deal with it in cognition since cognition “is the operation in which the idea which a word substitutes for the image of an entity ‘enlarges the horizon’ of the appearing, and reabsorbs the shadow whose opacity the consistency of the given projects on to the transparency of intuition” (*OB* 63). The inadequacy thus indicates the inability to subsume the experience in any totalizing or homogenizing idea. Levinas’s proximity presents “not a state, a repose, but, a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest” (*OB* 82). It is an encounter with the Other which is disquieting and perpetually inaccessible. The experience of such a situation is especially evident in children. While Jack, after Babette’s program was over, could suppress their fear and anxiety by shuffling back to the reality they consciously situated themselves, Wilder “remained at the TV set, within inches of the dark screen, crying softly, uncertainly, in

low heaves and swells" (105). He was distraught about the power which could *turn off* or *terminated* his mother or that of his own. The TV watching experience again illustrates the self's passivity by bringing him in proximity with death as the Other and thwarting the supposedly integrate self-recognition.

Death on TV, to sum up, is marked by a detoured but mediated Other, making it in itself (as death) an unavoidable, inexplicable and self-dissolving encounter, yet an encounter marked by spatial proximity. By bringing death into the daily household TV gives it a certain ethical "proximity," designating a closely-related but non-totalizing relationship. TV interferes as another *face* of death, and in this sense as the Other. It is neither the real taken over by the mediated nor the self constituting itself through contingent images. TV presents an imposing and compelling confrontation with the ultimate Other, both haunting and overwhelming the self.

The ethical relation does not merely work in the audible or visible on TV but is *embodied* in more conspicuous technological mediation and intervention such as the toxic-leaking event and the experimental medication. The toxic-leaking incident exposed Jack to certain chemical element—Nyodene. Ironically, the inhaling or intrusion which made the immediate physical conflation with the chemical substance was confirmed through the computer checkup. With his inhaling the poisonous element, death became a concrete and *embodied* reality. In a sense, death had been *planted* into his body. The ethical relation has a stronger sense of the bodily mediation than that of TV-watching experience. Jack's case demonstrates how the implanted or embodied death unravels the way the technological intervention mediated the ethical relation with the Other. The Other emerges when Jack *embodied* two incompatible and non-synthesizable dimensions, being and non-being, presence and absence, self and Other, as computer checkup indicated:

Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separable from the dying It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak that you sense an eerie

separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying. (141–42)

Dying would not become an acute experience until the toxic-leaking event, which makes daily life a forced confrontation with death as the Other is actually embedded in the self; the different, the same; the infinite, the finite. The body turns out to be the *facet* between life and death, the same and the different, the self and the Other. The technological evocation of the Other in the body takes its route from the technological to the ethical, from the imperceptible (the effect on the body could only be revealed with the aid of technology) to the inconceivable.

More significantly, the death-embodiment or implantation is the transformation of the commonly-received temporal concept in which life and death are thought temporally incompatible and distinct. The machine mediates and surfaces such a *presence* of death, which echoes Levinas's notion of time.⁶ Death as an absolute alterity or foreignness is marked by its timing device. It is "not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but . . . the very relationship . . . with the Other" (*TI* 39). The time featuring the relation is referred to as diachrony. It neither designates distinct temporal periods nor simultaneity. Diachrony as "[t]ime, rather than the current of contents of consciousness, is the turning of the Same toward the Other. . . . The 'incessant' quality of this difference" (*GDT* 111). It is "the refusal of conjunction, the non-totalizable, and in this sense, infinite" (*OB* 11). Being non-totalizable and non-synthesizable, diachrony features in "the lapse irrecuperable and outside of all will . . . quite the contrary of intentionality" (*OB* 53), as the present can not evade the future as the haunting death or the past as the recurring memories. Such a notion of time acts against "an active ego which recalls through memory and reconstructs in historiography the past that is bygone, or through imagination and prevision . . . synchronizing the signs, assembles into a presence" (*OB* 51). DeLillo, like Levinas, takes a drastically different

perspective by associating the notion of time with the ethical relation with the Other. No longer granting that time is structured around a totality or orbits around a linear order, both of them assume that every moment is an Other to the next or the previous one. Besides, diachrony marks the self-for-the-other; that is, one is obliged to the relation with the Other before the self-consciousness. It is “the fission of the Same by the untenable Other at the heart of my self, where disquietude disturbs that heart at rest, and is not reducible to some intellection of terms”(GDT 111). The notion of time is on the one hand constituted ethically. On the other, it disquiets the self who is engaged in the relation with an alter Other.

The medicine, Dylar, taken by Babette to relieve her death fear sets another example of Other-bound technology. The medication complicates and reverses the way to deal with death as the Other. The medication terminates the vigilance for death by suspending certain part of the consciousness. With Dylar, Babette described that “I could live but my brain could die. This would mean that the left side of my body would live but the right side would die” (193). The tablet was used to stop the function of certain area in the brain to cease the death fear itself. Winnie Richards, a young research neurochemist in *White Noise* gave an account of how the fear hovered over and oppressed the integrating self-consciousness with a spacey theory. “Before you know anything else, you know that this thing is very large and that it has no place in your ordinary frame of reference. . . . Either it shouldn’t be here or you shouldn’t You are lit up for your own imminent dismemberment. . . . The name we give to this complicated process is fear” (229). Fear, making up a relation with the self on the basis of the incompatible co-existence, raises the self’s awareness to the imminent disintegration. Thus, Dylar was taken to cut the conscious link to the fear installed in the brain. However, one of the important side effects of Dylar was memory lapses. Dylar in a sense reverses the ride from the unconscious to the conscious as the sense of the self became meager remains. The medication marked an un-subsumable or irreducible Other. The medication, paradoxically, temporarily eases Babette’s tension caused by the embedded death fear but perpetually strengthens

its threatening existence. Besides, Dylar more swiftly dispatches the de-centered self into the state of the vigilance in the forgetting as it ends up as the self-diminishing force.

With Babette's taking Dylar, the death fear is found pre-conscious and pre-original, responsible for the disquietude of the self. According to Levinas, fear is "somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very 'subjectivity.' Not in lulling it into consciousness, but in throwing it into an *impersonal vigilance*" (60). That is, death fear is not a reaction in certain situation but something embedded in the self. The sense of *déjà vu* could illustrate the pre-conscious relation. Confronting the approach of death in the airborne toxic event, Steffie claimed that she saw such an event before. But, what she associates with is not the exact event but the feeling of dread the event aroused. That death fear exists pre-consciously. It was a moment before the clear recognition of the self was forged. Emmanuel Levinas says that ethics "occurs 'prior' to essence and being, conditioning them" (*EI* 9). The fear for death is a perpetual *déjà vu*, indicating an ethical relation with the Other is established before the self-consciousness. That means the pre-originality of death fear designates a time which is neither able to be traced in any temporal order nor embraced by any idea. The situation that there is not a single hint or clue about how it comes into being is like that nobody could evade the destined life with death installed.

However, the sense of *déjà vu* has been complicated not only by people's recognition of the pre-original fear but also the technological interference in TV's representing or presenting the ethical Other,⁷ as illustrated in the earlier section. TV thus, like a two-edged sword, dissolves the death fear in repetitive mediations only to make a detour and end up arousing man's imminent dread. That was what made Jack wonder whether there was a difference between a true *déjà vu* (imminent death fear) and a false *déjà vu* (mediated or represented death scenes). The puzzlement further deters the possibility of any conception of death despite the immediately experienced and the mediated, the *embodied*.

The relation with death as the Other, marked by the technologically

mediated in *White Noise*, is a twisted and complex contour in the postmodern age. The ethical mediation is especially characterized by Levinas's account of diachrony—the axis for the ethical relation with an irreducible, nonthematizable, incomprehensible and overwhelming Other. However, what is especially worth-noting is how the Other comes forward in the man-made and mediated domain and is embodied by the self which is found passive, vulnerable, questioned and undermined.

Conclusion

Death in *White Noise* is more than merely life's termination, nothingness, or an ultimate end. An ethical relation with death as the perpetual Other is acute in our postmodern age. It corresponds to what Levinas speaks of—the encounter with death indicates that “we are in relation with something that is absolutely other, something bearing alterity not as a provisional determination we can assimilate through enjoyment, but as something whose very existence is made of alterity” (LR 43). The confrontation with the absolute alterity is shown in the character's obsession with the haunting death. However, what distinguishes DeLillo's observation of the ethics in the postmodern age lies in his taking the body as the ethical axis as well as his integrating the feature of the postmodern age into his presentation, especially the technological intervention in life. His observation of the ethical relation with death as the Other thus is divided into two parts: the sensually immediate and the technologically mediated. In a depthless world (in Frederic Jameson's terms), death seems to be a more remote issue since the self or the subject is barely a concept which we could work on. However, without regard to the trendy stance of postmodern theories in deliberately neglecting or avoiding the counter relation between life and death, self and other, DeLillo believes that the presence of death as the ethical Other is an inevitable confrontation and reality. His literary performance makes a subtle observation of the embodied ethical relation in postmodernity rather than imposes a polar opposition or totalized fabric.

More importantly, Levinas makes possible an insightful dialogue with DeLillo, one which can shed light on the imminent and *embodied* ethical relation. First of all, Levinas's notion of the face is employed to account for the non-in-different and elusive Other. Then, diachrony functions as the axis of the ethical relation with the Other who is not merely unrepresentable but incommensurable but as the self is overwhelmed and disquieted by its incomprehensible and haunting presence. Vulnerability and passivity are then what characterizes the self who no longer sustains the certainty or determinacy in self-recognition.

The body first enacts the ethical relation in terms of the sensual immediacy, since it is "is the very reverting, irreducible to a thought, of representation into life" (TI 127). The perception of the senses fills life with messages which resist meaning-imposition as the title of the novel, *White Noise*, indicates. The body serves as an antenna which takes and releases more messages than are able to be digested or consumed. The more the body senses, the more distraught the self turns out to be. The milieu exposes the self to an inescapable ethical dialogue in which the self is overwhelmed by death, the incomprehensible and imposing Other.

Besides, the pre-original or pre-conscious relation with the Other contributes to the dismemberment of the self, as the airborne toxic event and the medical experiment dismantle the self-autonomy or sufficiency. Death, initiating the premier ethical relationship, is actually the Other which "obsessed me because I *am* that Other, which is no one, no other, no one other than my self *itself*." Ethics, in Levinas's sense, is "the very event of the self" (Wall 37), as it is illustrated in DeLillo's portrait of life in the postmodern age. The ethical scene is not necessarily situated in the actual interactions with others but frequents daily immediate and mediated confrontations—a relation between the self-for-the-Other and the Other-in-the-self.

To sum up, DeLillo depicts the ethical relationship in the postmodern age in terms of a very rudimentary concept—death. DeLillo's ethical configuration is then significant on several levels. First, with the ancient fear of death, the postmodern society as depicted

in DeLillo presents us with a fundamental and unavoidable confrontation with the Other, a confrontation that is both sensually immediate and the technologically mediated. Second, death is not our “counterpart” which asserts its polar “difference” from us. As an overwhelming power, death as the Other is perpetually irreducible, non-in-different and incommensurable. More significantly, it dismantles any sense of self-sufficiency or autonomy, positing the self in all its passivity and vulnerability. The ethical relation is featured by the Other-in-the-self and the self-for-the-Other. Thirdly, from the sensible to the technological, the immediate to the mediated, the relation with the Other takes the body as a major *facet*. The intervention of technology contributes to the complication of the ethical relation with the *embodied* Other, since its forms of representation (TV) and interference (the toxic event and the drug Dylar) mediate the immediacy of the Other, making it something other than a merely sensible immediacy. DeLillo’s notion of death as the ethical Other is a crucial element in his portrayal of a postmodern age characterized by the invalidity of grand narratives and by the intrusion of technology into our (im)mediate life.

NOTES

* Abbreviations of the titles of works by Emmanuel Levinas: *EE* (*Existence and Existents*), *EI* (*Ethics and Infinity: Conversation with Phigilipp Death and Time*), *GDT* (*God, Death and Time*), *LR* (*The Levinas Reader*), *OB* (*Otherwise than Being*), *OS* (*Outside the Subject*), *TI* (*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*)

¹ The domesticated technology and the *in*-human scientific development respectively and mainly refer to how TV turns out to be a prominent member in modern daily life and how science interferes with the organism of human body in such events as the airborne toxic event and the medication of Dylar which would be elaborated in the following sections.

² Baudrillard’s account of simulation has pushed the crisis of representation to certain extreme extent as the latter still persists in the equivalent status of the sign and the real while the former no longer starts from

"the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference." From representation to simulation, Baudrillard marks the successive phases of the image from that reflecting a basic reality to that masking and perverting a basic reality to that masking the *absence* of a basic reality to that one bears no relation to any reality; it is its own pure simulacrum. As the second stage inaugurates the age of simulation and simulacra, "there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgment to separate true from false, the real from its artificial resurrection" (Baudrillard 6). Reality is not merely unrepresentable but impossible.

³ "There is" is a state, Levinas proposes, associated with nothingness which all beings, things and persons revert to. Yet, nothingness does not refer to a void or nullified condition but the indeterminateness of "something is happening". It is not "the uncertainly known author of the action, but the characteristic of this action itself which somehow has no author. The impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable 'consummation' of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term *there is*. The *there is*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is 'being in general' (*EE* 57). *There is* is when or where (not temporally or spatially distinguishable) the self consciousness no longer sustains himself but was wrapped by an anonymous, impersonal, indistinct and in-finite.

⁴ Similar literary imagination about the prominent mass medium is found in Thomas Pynchon's works such as *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*, in which TV acts as certain kind of power influencing and even directing certain characters' life. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon presents some interesting scenes in which events in some occasions coincide with the scenes on TV, while the role TV in *Vineland* was such an important one that the couple (Hector and Debbie) in the novel get divorced for that fact that "[t]ube was a member of the household, enjoying its own space, fed out of the house budget with all the electricity it needed, addressed and indeed chatted with at length by other family members, certainly as able to steal affection as any cheap floozy Hector might have met on the job" (348). The predominant message in the statement is the recognition of TV as human rather than as a machine or instrument.

⁵ Inadequacy was a term employed by Levinas to designate the impossibility to subsume or reduce the Other to the Same. The concept is

coupled with the idea of the non-in-difference which Levinas employs to differentiate from the idea of difference, on the grounds that the latter still implies a common ground for comparison with the same.

⁶ Influenced by Heidegger, Levinas recognizes time as the basis of the ethical relation. However, he associated time as a relationship to the infinite, which was greatly different from Heidegger's considering death as merely nothingness, no-longer being. Hence, Levinas thinks of "time as the future of being-toward-death, a future defined exclusively by the unique relationship of being-to-death as being outside oneself, which is also being whole, or being properly oneself" (*GDT* 43-44).

⁷ Margaret Gibson observes that "since 1950s and 1960s, death and dead bodies have been remediated and returned into the private sphere, into out living rooms." The death-watching is on the one hand an potential avenue to efface the threat of death by means of the contrived nature of the medium; on the other, it aroused the awareness that "[m]y death is destined for me as mine alone and in facing the face of the other I am throw back upon myself" in the sense of facing my own death (308,314).

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Chi-ming Chang is studying for her Ph.D. degree at Department of English, National Taiwan Normal University.

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論《白色雜音》中的死亡： 從感官經驗到科技媒介

摘 要

這篇論文主要探討唐·迪力羅在《白色雜音》一書中如何凸顯死亡在後現代中所扮演的他者角色。以迪力羅對後現代及科技社會的觀察，死亡不再是生命的結束或否定，而是自我無可避免的面對及遭遇。重要的是，這並非立基於任何共通點的雙邊關係，而是以身體為探討主軸，對應列維納斯的倫理架構，強調死亡為他者的不可化約及不能相較性。此討論將分為兩大方向，一為身體的直接感受，另一是科技媒介的經驗。身體的存在常被視為生死的判別基準，但身體在《白色雜音》書中卻無時不刻喚起自我對死亡神祕且不可知的認知。在後現代中，沒有所謂的大論述、共通的衡量標準或價值判斷，因而死亡對迪力羅來說也不再保有理論或論述所給予的距離及確定性，而是具體感受的困惑及恐懼，一個自我不可避免的他者。再者，先進的科技很弔詭地並未減弱反而增強自我對死亡的恐懼，以他種形式媒介體現死亡，同時介入且阻礙自我認知。面對他者，自我淪為被動的、易受影響的，甚至是被征服的。因此，值得注意的是，死亡對迪力羅來說不再是遙不可及的事實或一個生命中不可能的可能性，取而代之的，它是一個面對他者的具體實現。此外，除了以身體為主軸，迪力羅的獨特在於他能將後現代的氛圍及科技融入這個倫理的輪廓中，給予死亡一個兼具直接及間接的面貌。《白色雜音》中的死亡不但呈現自我與和他者的倫理關係也以另一個角度說明了後現代中自我的不自主及不確定性。

關鍵字：死亡、他者、身體、倫理、迪力羅、列維納斯