

Embrace Death: A Review of Recalling Symbolic Order in *White Noise*

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ABSTRACT

In our times of the Covid-19 pandemic, death seems to slip away from the funeral and cemetery into our living space, dissolved in the air we breathe. In *White Noise*, Jack's deathly fear of the economic order forces him to find an alternative solution in which noise plays the role of prophet, guiding him towards a new symbolic order. The novel chronicles Jack's transformation of the concept of death and, in the end, partially takes him out of the order created by bourgeois reason. Based on Jean Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, death in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, this essay argues that the symbolic primitive order embraces death as a reversible component of the exchange of life, while the economic system rejects death and exaggerates the value of life as an accumulation. Death in this context serves as an illumination of the primitive symbolic order, a potential subversion of the political and economic order in the text.

Keywords: *Death, Religion, Noise, Symbol*

1. INTRODUCTION

After the age of enlightenment, the final authority of death has been deprived from the Church and emancipated to us, along with the reign of rationality and political economy. As about two centuries passed, the myth of death did not diminish by the "disenchantment", but has grown into an enormous uncanny shadow, haunting in the invisible virus or visible accident. Rethinking death in *White Noise* in this age might not dispel our concerns on this modern society (since we have already had enough), but it indeed raises some clue or inspiration about the end of our time of anxiety.

Some critics have argued that *White Noise* has been unduly devalued by scholars as an extensively researched postmodernist text. Matthew J. Packer addresses critic Dana Phillip's view that "critics have mined the novel of its slogans and readings confirms a widespread impression the novel is a resource all but depleted." [1] However, after about 40 years since the novel was first published, the fear of death had never been so close and imminent that one has to come up with measures to evade or even forget it. In chapter 5 of Jean Baudrillard's book, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, he argues that death is an abnormal event in our symbolic order, the blind spot in political economy. [2] It would be better to consider death as a bottomless black hole, attached to the borderless web

of capitalism. Every economic concept or value exchange process close to it or engendering relationship with it, would be sucked into this hole and becomes part of this error in the system. I would argue that death, death drive, and other concepts behind it would become subversive against the contemporary symbolic order and find a way out from the political economy web, based on Baudrillard's theory on the exchange of death and DeLillo's comedic North American apocalyptic depiction in *White Noise*.

This essay will discuss below how death was abnormalized in the transmission between premodern society and political economy discourse, and how death is treated in the savage symbolic order. After that, the focus of this essay will shift to how this strangeness related to Jack Gladney's meditation on death in *White Noise*. Then, Noise will be introduced as the key imagery in the book, playing the role of the speaker of death; it reveals death's refusal to be assimilated or tamed by political-economic discourse. Finally, this essay will use the previous analysis to explore the most inexplicable scene of this text and draw us to the echo of the primitive order.

2. ABNORMALIZED DEATH

In the savage society, death is not an objective reality, but a component of social symbolic exchange. The

savages never suppose death as any sense of endpoint. Just as Baudrillard addresses here, savages “have never ‘naturalized’ death”, because it is natural from the very first. Just as the way they treat their body, or natural event happened to them, they define death as “a social relation.” [2] Through rites and festivals, savages invite death into their living space so that death could be circulated in the social order. In the primitive order, death and life are not binary but a whole exchange pair; they do not sublimate life and debase death, because every degradation or sublimation in this equilibrium would cause a break, which would subsequently become a threat to the primitive symbolic order.

However, as our society is increasingly taken by the privileged class, no matter which regime (Church, State), death is repelled, rejected, and alienated in the social order, and the purpose of this break of equilibrium and the creation of binary is to guarantee the reign of the ruling class. Death starts to become an objective destined termination that should be naturalized and escaped from. Baudrillard illustrates that the Church invented the “institution of death, like that of the afterlife and immortality”, and the administration of the “imaginary sphere of death” consists of the foundation of this institution. [2] The reign of the Church offers an accord for people to process death, constructing an exchanging rule of faith and afterlife – this is the theocratic political economy. This economy is built by a single relationship between individuals’ minds and God. Thus, the Church can press death into the position of a faith currency settlement process, the clearing of charity and salvation. The selling of indulgences is one of the examples in the 15th century. This intentional positioning diminishes the image of death as a process of external body perishing and emphasizes the role that death plays in the exchange instead. In this symbolic order, death is shaped as the abnormal, in order that the reigning class can promise the beyond, which is the elimination of this abnormality.

After the era of enlightenment, reason and science displaced the dominating status of magic and religion, and this process is named as “disenchantment”. According to Max Weber in “Science as a Vocation”, it comes with the science and technology development: “...principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces...one can master all things by calculation.” [3] In fact, modern people’s knowledge has not improved much more than the premodern ones, but the key difference here is that the knowledge is knowable and can be known if learned and calculated enough. In such context, state rationality and capitalist economic order displace the reign of the Church, but the abolishment of the beyond does not bring the alienated death back to us. On the contrary, our rationality of political economy is obsessed to banish the death, because this system requires the lifetime calculated and circulated “as a general equivalent.” [2] It presses the concept of “progress” into time accumulation and imagine it could be infinitely

reproduced, and thus, death as the endpoint of this infinite illusion must be eliminated in this system. This is a system attempting to assimilate all the entities and concepts into exchangeable value. All the political-economy order can only defer the death repeatedly and offer the vision of diminishing death exchanged by accumulation of time. However, “value, in particular time as value, is accumulated in the phantasm of death deferred, pending the term of a linear infinity of value.” [2] As life is accumulated, the death becomes imminent as well.

3. NOISE: A PROPHET OF DEATH

The main character’s fear in *White Noise* precisely illustrates this impossibility of exchanging life and death under economic order. Jack and Babette both look for approaches to resist their fear of death; the characters in this book keep talking about others’ death, and their own death (possibility), proposing assumptions about how to deal with death. There is general anxiety floating in the air – people discuss serious topics with a comedy tongue as if it could reduce their anxiety. At the end of the first part, “Waves and Radiation”, Jack concludes his meditation after the lengthy listing of daily life: “‘What do you save if you don’t waste [the lifetime]?’ ‘Over a lifetime? You save tremendous amounts of time and energy,’ ‘What will you do with them?’ ‘Use them to live longer.’” [4] Actually, this is a miniaturized bourgeoisie reason model: to minimize the waste and cost and maximize the efficiency, in order to reproduce more value with the lifetime. However, the “progress” is an absolute objective dimension, and it cannot exchange anything for you, but only offer the possibility to defer your final payment.

When the Airborne Toxic Event presents as an external threat of Jack Gladney’s life, there is a clear outline of how modern technology and bourgeoisie reason intervene citizen’s death. When he asks the technician of SIMUVAC (simulated evacuation), Jack is informed that “You’re generating big numbers...It’s your whole data profile. I tapped into your history. I’m getting bracketed numbers with pulsing stars.” [4] It is obvious that the technician is interacting with numbers and data, but for Jack, there is an enormous sense of dissociation here: the technology I am relying on to repel death, is not reacting with me and the death inside my body. As he concludes here: “It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself.” [4] The instrumental rationality attempts to assimilate death into the world of simulation, in which all the practices are reversed into data. Wilcox indicates here, “the experience of dying is utterly mediated by technology and eclipsed by a world of symbols.” [5] This world of symbols is not similar to Baudrillard’s symbolic order; the savages’ symbolic society seeks the intimate with death, an

admission of death into the order. However, this technological treatment dissociates death and life, trying to cover death with data. Gladney has “experiences a profound feeling of mental and physical displacement” [6] that his personal feeling is announced invalidated now, and thus, technology and economic order hiding behind can take the right to issue individual’s death. Symbol here become a hegemonic mediator and do not allow people directly exchange with death but separate them to repel death. The simulation could not become a real resolution of the fear, only as a wretched distraction; its purpose is not to relieve citizen’s nerves, but to draw their attention away from it.

The simulation of death does not solve the fear of death but increase its sense of instability. That is why Murray’s theory of “modern death” looks so obsessive for Jack: “The more we learn, the more it grows...Death adapts, like a viral agent.” [4] Meditation, as Jack’s method to treat death, is the approach offered by reason but antithetical to the treatment that political-economic order provides for him and could not help him away from death. It is not about suspension, distraction, and assimilation; it is about exploration, alienation and expansion. Banu Helvacioğlu suggests “While one may continuously think about death, preparing for one’s own death is an antinomy of action, unless of course one does not expect to be reunited with oneself in the afterlife.” [7] This expansion of death constitutes the background of *White Noise*: death is inevitable and unaccountable in the contemporary political-economic system, so the characters start to seek ways other than reason to escape this anxiety, and that is the beginning of the subversive of capitalism economic order. Noise, as an element frequently appears in the text, plays the role of prophet.

In chapter 26, Jack’s interpellation on Babette comes out that his wife has betrayed him simply for a drug preventing her from fear of death, and Jack shares his own fear with her. There is an intriguing dialogue here: “‘What if death is nothing but sound?’ ‘Electrical noise.’ ‘You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.’ ‘Uniform, white.’” [4] It seems that white noise is only one of the metaphors of death for Jack and Babette, but actually, it does not directly represent death but keeps informing people of the existence of death. According to Eric Chalfant’s study on noise and divination, noise “is the instantaneous and continuous delivery of massive amounts of information.” [8] It creates a sonic milieu that meaningful information is hard to be distinguished from background noise, and thus, it creates a suspended space, an obscure universe within the society that everything is immobilized or supposed to be immobilized by technology and surveillance machine. (Which is another definition of disenchanting, as said above) In this essay, he mentioned a significant example in chapter 2 of *White Noise*, when the smoke alarm has been activated, it could be either a battery issue (a totally meaningless signal) or a real fire situation (a life-or-death signal). [8] This sonic

environment is created all around society and it is hard to tell which signal we should trust and to what extent. Uncertainty, discontinuity, and random occurrence – those traits make noise a powerful enough and representative enough media to serve as the prophet of death. “*White Noise*, then, is in part about divination, if by divination we refer not to the prediction of the future by supernatural means, but to the aleatoric determination of important information out of ritualized randomness.” [8] The word “ritualized” should be emphasized here, because this key trait has partly brought us back to the first part of the essay, on how savages connect death and life with rites. In the second part of this book, Airborne toxic event, chapter 21, Jack is captivated by a sleep-talking:

She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

Toyota Celica. [4]

For Jack, this is the moment to take a step from economic exchange to symbolic exchange. The fact that “Toyota Celica” is only a name of an automobile does not degrade this scene from the sublime but enhances the chant within it because the randomized economic term is deprived of any economic meaning here. It is merely a random term spoken by the child and could be exactly exchanged with the uncertainty of death; this process is an attempt to imitate the rites performed in the primitive order.

Thus, through the unconscious guiding of noise, Jack starts to explore the order under the calculable order. According to Baudrillard, life is a pure benefit or valuable goods under the economic order, but in the primitive symbolic order, life is not any precious, absolute value. On the contrary, life is only one side of the scale; it is “a crime if it survives unilaterally, if it is not seized and destroyed, given and returned, ‘returned’ to death.” [2] We could find a similar saying from Jack’s colleague, Murray, in chapter 21: “‘There is no difference between the quick and the dead. They are one channel of vitality.’” [4] This quotation from Tao Te Ching is not a counsel for people to treat death (though it is used in this way by Murray), but a social reality of the time that Lao Tse dedicates to bring us back to. The imagery of death and life in one channel of vitality illustrates the most significant trait of the primitive symbolic order: reversible. If life and death are reversible, they will no longer be separated and alienated by one else. Thus, there is no fear of death (away from death) or drive of death (approaching death) in primitive order, because the two contradictory both represents the separation of life and death and a potential attempt to regress to this order, which means you have not been in it yet. Karen Weekes states that “white noise” in this novel “is used in either a positive or a pejorative sense, depending on whether it

refers to an unremitting noise one is trying to escape or to the sound introduced as escape.” [9] This is represented in the same way as death: should we escape from it, or embrace it as escape (from the economic order)?

4. RECALLING PRIMITIVE ORDER

Therefore, with this question above, it would be logical and evidential enough to explore the last part of *White Noise*, why Jack Gladney decides to shoot and kill Mink, his rival in love, but finally sends him to the hospital. What is the meaning behind his paradoxical action and emotion? His impulsion to kill Mink is evoked by Murray’s death theory. “The killer, in theory, attempts to defeat his own death by killing others. He buys time, he buys life.” [4] That is absolute an economic approach to interpret life, as a pure accumulation to resist death. Influenced by this theory, Jack, a genial professor, and a gentle husband, who has never shot anyone before, makes a decision to murder someone else. However, as he practices his plan and tries to kill Mink, he finds that this man is also a person troubled by fear of death, clouded in his mind, spitting random words. After he has shot twice at Mink and tries to disguise Mink as suicide, Mink (with his blurred mind) shoots his hand. This is exactly the moment when Jack realizes or notices the distance between life and death: “I looked at him. Alive. His lap a puddle of blood. With the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person.” [4] Before that, Mink is a foe, an object, life score, the target that ought to be overcome. After Mink has shot back, he is a person, in the sense of social and symbolic.

The key difference is the symbolic interaction – Jack used to consider his relationship with death unidirectional, but Mink’s unconscious resistance builds a bidirectional connection with him. What Jack feels after Mink shoots him in chapter 39 is exactly the recalling of the primitive order: “Something large and grand and scenic. Is it better to commit evil and attempt to balance it with an exalted act than to live a resolutely neutral life?” [4] Baudrillard juxtaposes killing and eating people in the symbolic order and claims that “primitive devouring is ignorant of the abstract separation of the eater and the eaten into the active and the passive.” When Mink shoots Jack back, a similar bidirectional mode appears between Jack, the killer, and Mink, the killed. Different with Murray’s killing someone to loot his “life score”, Baudrillard indicates that this process combines “honor and reciprocity, perhaps even a challenge and a duel tout court.” [2] Symbolic order rejects the separation of killing and being killed, devouring and being devoured – this ambivalence leads to a compromise, and finally to the compromise of death and life. As Packer claims here, “The remarkable open-endedness of the final pages, the lack of narrative closure... is a function of Jack’s aborting the murder.” [1] Jack does not obey Murray’s

unidirectional theory but develops his own bidirectional one, and that’s why this story avoid falling into the trap of resisting death.

Torkamaneh illustrates that, as Jack realizes “how the force of technological advancement has engaged much of his corporeal life”, he enjoys walking in the cemetery to “find traces of nature and authentic culture” with the dead. [10] However, the graveyard is still a place banished and abandoned by the urban life, and as Jack comes back to his life, the erosion of repelling remains in his mind. Nevertheless, in the last chapter, he seems to embrace the dead voices in the supermarket, a total postmodernism place: “This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. And this is where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly colored goods.” [4] This scene is the recall of primitive order in the modern place: people gathering in the public place (altar or bonfire), listening to the dead and living with them. In this order, people shall escape from the economic operation or bourgeois reason. To partly subvert the reign of political-economic order rooted in his own mind, he chooses to embrace the ambivalence of life and death, inviting death into our own space instead of repelling it.

5. CONCLUSION

White Noise demonstrates a recall of a symbolic order originated from the primitive society, accepting death back to our life and embracing it in the context that the economic order takes the dominant position after the age of enlightenment. Jack’s meditation through his fear of death reveals the abnormalized modern death as the unstable factor in the political-economic order, and he starts to talk with and understand death through the pervasive noise. In his mysterious mutual-shooting relationship with Mink, he starts to interpret death as a reverse of life and makes a compromise with his death. Eventually, he partly escapes from the political-economic order and the anxiety generated from this system.

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