White Noise and
Everyday Technologies

Susana S. Martins

Debates about technology in the popular media often revolve around developments that seem to promise (or threaten) sweeping change, both material and symbolic: this is technology as "something new," the gadget on the horizon, the technology that performs a new function, or the technique that enables unpredictable applications. These focal technologies require highly visible cultural work in the public arena to incorporate them into existing structures of meaning, to assess their impact on social relations and definitions of the human, and to assert governmental controls where economic, ethical, or political issues are raised. Oversight committees are formed, regulatory laws are sometimes proposed, and various narratives, both utopian and dystopian, normalizing and cautionary, circulate in both the scientific and popular press. When we think about what it means to live in a high-tech age, we often think of the singular moments, the advent of technologies as cultural events.

But high tech also informs everyday life in America in much more mundane ways. Living with high tech does entail engaging with discourses of space travel, robots, cloning, nuclear devastation, and a variety of ecological threats, but most of us don't have humanoid robots doing our housework, we don't travel in space, and perhaps our automobiles have new capabilities, but they aren't hovercrafts (yet). We are aware of biohazards, pollution, and nuclear weaponry, to be sure, but we live and move through a world of technology that is often

banal, familiar, and mostly unspectacular. These daily interactions with technologies also demand acts of representation as we negotiate our sense of history, our position in relation to others in everyday life, and our vision of the future. How do we live our relationships to technology, how is technology drawn into the familiar, and what effects do we imagine it has on our lives?

I do not expect that we will find there is one over-arching narrative that makes sense of our varying interactions with technology or technologies. Our experience of technology in the everyday is much more ambivalent, contradictory, and variable than the utopian and dystopian discourses about technology that tend to be activated by the advent of singular, focal technologies mentioned above. When we examine representations of technology in everyday life—that is, technology from the perspective of exchange, appropriation, and habituation— the temporal modality of salvation and apocalypse cannot fully account for the ways we live with and make use of the high tech. "Technology" does not (only) appear to us as some historical force sweeping through and transforming everyday life or reifying existing social norms. From the perspective of the consumer/ user, technology affords pleasures, frustrations, and ironic appropriations that resist totalization even while touching upon the dual narratives of utopia and dystopia. The temporal modality of the technological product—the television, computer, cellular phone, digital camcorder—intersects with the register of the everyday, both in the sense of daily use (that is, how the technology enters our everyday schedules or even helps structure our time), and of product "life-cycle." We make frequent decisions on whether to buy the latest upgrade, switch from VCR to DVD player, or acquire a Palm Pilot; the rhythms of obsolescence and the "state of the art," in tune with the larger circuits of capitalism, informs our relation to specific technologies and to technology as a class of human practice. In this way, we develop a perspective on technology that co-exists with the millennial preoccupations and questions of the "natural" and the "artificial." We treat technological objects with a sense of humor and distancing as well as gratification and sometimes anxiety; this *techno-sensibility* is marked by non-completion, contradictions, partial and deferred realization of the "ultimate threats and promises" that otherwise inform popular discourse about technology.

The development and exercise of a techno-sensibility complicates familiar arguments that take a dire view of the fate of subjectivity as well as social change in late capitalism. That we live in a high-tech world doesn't mean it's only a programmed, cyberneticized world, even though plenty of commentators on late twentieth-century American culture have declared difference, change, and political hope to be dead or disappearing. Thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson proclaim the apocalypse of no apocalypse, a particularly powerful and pernicious version of the dystopian argument about technology because it claims we have already arrived at the "end," and everything we do now is meaningless, just another contribution to the precession of simulacra. This is a point of view that strips language and concepts of their power, that

pretends when we conceived of the human and of nature in the past, these were not particular, historically-situated concepts but fully-grasped truths. That is why, faced with changes to the conception of what it means to be human or changes in the modes of subjectivity available to us, some fear the loss of humanity itself.

But the history of capitalism and consumer culture does not bear out this view, which is predicted on a definition of a transcendental individual that exists prior to discourse and "outside" of history itself. Recent work by historians on American political economy argues convincingly that individual agency in the modern era is both produced and constrained by the development of capitalism, and should be conceived not as a prior condition of humans that is repressed under capitalism but as a *process* and historical development within the register of social and political articulations. Historians such as James Livingston have re-examined the emergence of corporate capitalism as a "hybrid social formation" that "permits, indeed requires, socialism as a component or condition of its development" because it cannot be reduced merely to totalizing market forces, but also constitutes, and is constituted by, changing social relations and forms of subjectivity.[1] For Livingston, the intellectual and activist movements of pragmatism and feminism provide evidence that one need not view the increasing permeability of the boundary between public and private or the proliferation of mediated knowledges as well as other effects of capitalist culture as a tragedy for the individual, but instead as a source of new meanings and subjectivities. Hence in Livingston's examination of the "political implications of narrative form," he gravitates towards a "comic vision" that finds its impetus neither in nostalgia nor in naïve celebrations of the future.[2]

Likewise, in my examination of what I am calling "techno-sensibility," I seek to identify an attitude towards history and a narrative mode that avoid the excesses and simplifications of utopia and dystopia, engaging instead with the diversity of our critical and sometimes not-so-critical responses to late capitalist culture. For a seminal literary exploration of ordinary, banal (but not trivial) interactions with technology in everyday life, I turn to Don DeLillo's 1984 novel *White Noise.*[3] While *White Noise* ostensibly functions as a cautionary tale about high-tech America, depicting an ecological threat in the form of the "airborne toxic event" and explicitly meditating on the effects of technology on social relations. It also articulates the everydayness of technology in a more deferred and incomplete fashion. DeLillo has been called a "systems novelist,"[4] meaning a novelist who, like Thomas Pynchon or William Gaddis, depicts a world of infinite connectedness, where all thoughts, language, and actions fall into patterns governed by impersonal forces, a complex political and social landscape in which the individual is not just impinged upon by "outside" forces but may in fact no longer exist as an individual at all. In several of his novels, DeLillo shows how language does not always belong to the speaker, how phrases circulating in electronic media or invented by committee in government or

corporate offices often permeate everyday speech and structure patterns of thought. In an early work that draws connections between football and nuclear war, *End Zone* (1972), DeLillo portrays existence as a play of endless repetition, with language functioning as a technology of control and history as a calculus of remote forces. In *The Names*, published just a few years before *White Noise*, language is an arbitrary flow of signifiers and an instrument of terror, but also a source of comfort and human affirmation; this novel has been read by some critics to indicate that DeLillo laments the loss of "earlier" forms of subjectivity that are threatened by mass culture and multinational complexity. Similarly, in 1991's *Mao II*, DeLillo seems to champion the modernist individual in a losing struggle against the encroachments of mass culture and cultism.[5] To varying degrees, one might read any of these novels not as straightforward, conspiratorially-minded takes on technological and political determinism, but as meditations on how individuals are forged within systems of language and ideology. Even in *End Zone*, there are hints that imagination and hope are not eradicated by interlocking systems of meaning or "fate," as when Myna suggests that science fiction, with its alternative visions of the past and future, can balance history and maintain sanity. But the novel in which DeLillo most directly engages with technology's potential for the organization of life to the point of mind-control *and* depicts the operations of what I am calling techno-sensibility through its comedic vision is *White Noise*.

In *White Noise* many critics have found evidence for a narrative of the embattled modern individual struggling to cope with a threatening, dystopic "postmodern" world.[6] But in its depiction of the everydayness of technology, *White Noise* does not function as a straightforward dystopian tale, but instead negotiates the tenuous relationship between utopia and dystopia with their complementary and overlapping senses of both the fear and acceptance of change. While the characters in the novel experience fear and confusion in the face of mechanization, mass mediation, and the toxic side effects of technological innovation, *White Noise* also provides insight into the *pleasures* of technology. This acknowledgment of the pleasures of technology in the midst of anxieties and questions about its effects is critical, in my view, for an understanding of how Americans think of technology and negotiate its representations. If it were simply true that technology, as experienced in late capitalism, threatens our sense of well-being, our sense of self, the earth's ecology, and "real" human emotion and interactions, our desire for it would be utterly irrational, unavailable to critical explication except as an expression of the death drive, or as evidence in support of theories that cast the "masses" as cultural dupes. *White Noise* actually plays upon these interpretations of high-tech America: it makes hyper-visible the implicit promises and threats of technology as well as the possibility that consumers *are* cultural dupes.

Yet in its ironic, comically irreverent treatment of these themes, the novel also offers readers a privileged position from which to consider their own

relationships to a consumer culture saturated with technology. The formal structures and narrative approach of the novel (as a first-person narration drawing on various genres that is at once realist, ironic, and satirical) mimetically reveal parts of the various modalities that consumers/individuals deploy to challenge the hallowed ground of Technology. As a representation of technology in everyday life, *White Noise* stages transparent moments of the ideologies of technology and consumerism. While some of the characters seem to inhabit these moments completely and act out the passivities, compulsions, and confusions of mass culture, the novel also models a more critical, distanced, ironic stance that characterizes the ambivalences and performative aspects of living with high tech. Through these everyday encounters with technology, we negotiate our relationships to larger cultural arguments about what technological change means to us. In the process we nurture a techno-sensibility for living with the pleasures and discomforts of the new, exercising a kind of structural irony as a formal vehicle for handling the irrational as well as the deterministic tendencies of high-tech culture.

Living in a High-Tech America: "The Networks, The Streams, The Circuits"

In its representation of the high-tech everyday, *White Noise* does not simply mention a series of gadgets, though the television figures largely in the narrative, and the characters often interact with other technological objects such as the washing machine, automatic teller machine, computers, medical diagnostic equipment, checkout machines, and radio. Technology makes itself felt in the novel as a mode of perception and distributor of data, and as a sign of possible new sensibilities. DeLillo's ironically suggestive narration creates the sense that daily interactions with particular machines produce a cumulative effect of technology on everyday life that evokes an apparatus of power, or a system of signification that can be only partially discerned, in hyper-charged gestures that move from the mundane to the darkly grandiose and back again. When Jack Gladney, the protagonist and semi-naïve narrator, visits an ATM, more than his financial state seems to be at stake in the transaction:

> In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing

> interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies (46).

In this passage, an ordinary event encapsulates both the ease and unease of technology. The ATM allows quick, convenient access to financial information, helping Jack keep his records in order, but he approaches the machine with a sense of inadequacy, uncertain that he has correctly balanced his checkbook or that the transaction will go smoothly. The possibility that he won't be "blessed" by the system haunts him; the consequence appears to be rejection from the social order, or at least from the banking system itself, as in the case of the "deranged person" whom Jack notes in passing.[7]

When Jack uses the ATM, he is hyper-aware that he is not merely interacting with the machine he stands in front of: he experiences the transaction as a much more abstract relation, one fraught, moreover, with the tensions of being subjected to a potentially deterministic system. Here, as in many other instances, the novel references a dystopian narrative of technological control. Paula Bryant has noted that mundane events in *White Noise*, including the visit to the ATM, are invested with a sense of paranoia that "threaten[s] our security as readers as much as it threatens Jack Gladney's own well being."[8] Well, yes and no. When DeLillo depicts the insecurities experienced in relation to technology, the devices he uses are not so subtle, and the paranoia itself—exaggerated and overdetermined—comes in for parody if not direct criticism, along with the social and technological trends that appear to threaten Jack's "well-being." From the reader's point of view at least, Jack parodically acts out the paranoiac language of codes and systems that permeates even the most routine interactions with technology. Later in the novel, the following passage, apparently taken from a mailing sent by Jack's bank, appears without quotation marks, as though the rhetoric of technological systems and validations has entered his consciousness and taken on grander meanings:

> PLEASE NOTE. In several days, your new automated banking card will arrive in the mail. If it is a red card with a silver stripe, your secret code will be the same as it is now. If it is a green card with a gray stripe, you must appear at your branch, with your card, to devise a new secret code. Codes based on birthdays are popular. WARNING. Do not write down your code. Do not carry your code on your person. REMEMBER. You cannot access your account unless your code is entered properly.

> Know your code. Reveal your code to no one. Only your code
> allows you to enter the system (294-5).

The over-seriousness of the warnings operates on two levels: it cautions of the insidious operations of a "system" that interpellates us, and also mocks the idea that "the system" must be regarded with such gravity, as though some metaphysical condition were at stake.

And yet, there *is* something metaphysical about interactions with machines such as ATMs, or at least something significant about the representations at stake in the engagement with technologies that have slowly transformed everyday life. In a discussion of the ways in which electronic machines such as ATMs and household appliances complicate the boundary between humans and machines, Alexandra Chasin points out that "electronic devices seem to be nothing but representations," since what matters when we interact with machines such as ATMs is not so much the metal and plastic box itself, or the manipulation of electrons, but instead a negotiation of subjectivities and social relations.[9] Chasin argues that electronic machines represent themselves in very particular gendered, raced, and classed ways, and she provides some insight into the way that interface designers imagined humans would interact with ATMs.[10] In *White Noise*, the ATM is not anthropomorphized, nor does Jack experience it as a mere plastic-and-metal box. He gains a certain immediate pleasure from his successful manipulation of plastic, or of electrons, however one might conceive of the technological object in this case. But at the same time, he feels validated by the networks of social meaning, networks that are enacted by the money economy and by its high-tech representation. He imagines the mainframe, located somewhere else; even more abstractly, he imagines "networks, circuits, streams, harmonies" that situate him in a larger technological and social system. His interaction with a mundane object such as the ATM becomes a performative moment for his social identity and his participation in high-tech culture, because it involves the citation of norms and rhetorics about Technology and its potentially deterministic, as well as socially validating, effects on our lives.

In scenes where Jack and his family go shopping, or listen to the radio, or watch television, or speak with medical authorities who consult computers, the novel further suggests that subjectivity depends on systems of identification and disciplinary forms of discourse—and that in a high-tech world, machines and the data they circulate play a critical role in the articulation of the subject. The depiction of the subject as discursively constituted has led some critics of the novel to remark upon the power of postmodernism/late capitalism to totalize and manipulate individual consciousness.[11] The subject, in this reading, experiences a loss of self, finding that his or her identity is dispersed among free-floating signifiers, or that the self is rigidly determined by a technologized mass culture that operates like a form of fascism, almost brainwashing the public into homogeneity, or at best creating schizophrenic subjects who struggle to

assert their authentic selves against a network of shifting and fragmented representations. This is a vision of postmodern totalitarianism, a condition far more insidious than the old-fashioned kind, where a bounded entity (e.g., the state) represses other bounded entities (e.g., autonomous individuals struggling for liberation).[12] Often this type of reading looks to the work of Jameson or Baudrillard for explanations of technology as participant in or distributor of a vast system of manipulation or simulation that diminishes "the real." Leonard Wilcox offers the most full-blown and strenuous argument that *White Noise* illustrates Baudrillard's somewhat bleak theory of the postmodern condition:

> The informational world Baudrillard delineates bears a striking resemblance to the world of *White Noise*: one characterized by the collapse of the real and the flow of signifiers emanating from an information society, by a 'loss of the real' in a black hole of simulation and the play and exchange of signs. . . . Moreover, for both Baudrillard and DeLillo a media-saturated consciousness threatens the concept of meaning itself.[13]

No doubt DeLillo's book does depict an information society and "media-saturated consciousness," but in part what interests me here is the apparently pejorative description of a society characterized by the "play and exchange of signs." Who is doing the playing and exchanging? The implication here is that information and meanings are being produced and exchanged *somewhere else*, in a space removed from the everyday, by anonymous actors or forces, while individuals like the characters in *White Noise* represent passive, manipulated (and sometimes bewildered) consumers. Wilcox, and other critics such as Lidia Yuknavitch, suggest that Jack Gladney is a "modernist" lost in a "postmodern world," struggling to retain an "authentic" sense of self, but, Wilcox writes, "[Gladney] often succumbs to the Baudrillardian condition, floating 'ecstatically' in a delirium of networks, hyperreal surfaces, and fetishized consumer objects."[14]

In other words, *White Noise* has been read as a critique of high-tech information culture precisely because of its gestures towards Technology as a larger system of significations and virtual relations that participate in the formation of a new sensibility. In some cases, critics have suggested that the book champions an "older," more traditional form of subjectivity or communication, as Paul Maltby does when he writes that DeLillo "affirm[s] the integrity and spiritual energy of the psyche in the face of . . . late capitalism's disposition to disperse or thin out the self into so many consumer subject positions."[15] But this reading depends on a somewhat nostalgic sense of culture and "the psyche" that laments a supposed fall from depth, wholeness and agency, into an atrophied, superficial, and powerless condition. This dystopian narrative of cultural decline certainly informs *White Noise*, but I would like to suggest that in its insistence upon the everydayness of technology (and not just the

overwhelming, pervasive, possibly manipulative forces of Technology), the novel suggests a mode of living with technology that is more critically distanced and *active* than the cultural-decline interpretation typically allows, and the novel enacts this engagement via its narrative mode.

In the scene with the ATM, Jack appears to be fully imbricated in the system: he feels dependent on it for its blessings and fears its rejection. Yet the narrative voice undercuts this sense of utter interpellation by *naming* it, by rendering the *sensation* of being validated by the "networks, circuits, [and] streams" hyper-visible, or hyper-legible. As the first person narrator, Jack at least partially enacts the role of naïve hero in a text permeated with structural irony. Structural irony, in its traditional definition, depends on the reader's knowledge of the author's ironic intention, often at the expense of a naïve narrator who exhibits an "invincible simplicity or obtuseness." The text demands that the reader adopt a critical point of view on the narrator's interpretation of events, because the reader "knows" what the author really means.[16] Jack often conveys a sense of "invincible simplicity" in his narration of interactions with technology or high-tech virtual realities, but he does so paradoxically, by explicitly pointing out the systems and ideologies that situate him, *not* by failing to recognize that he is participating in larger codes of behavior and social signification. The effect of this mode of narration is complex: the reader is privileged, but not simply by holding knowledge that the narrator does not have. Instead, the comic-ironic mode suggests the duality of living with the high-tech in a way that is both active and passive, gesturing, again, to the narratives that circulate in mass culture to make sense of technology (here, a somewhat disquieting sense of control by "the system," a dystopian trope) but also, for the reader's benefit, *playing* with those narratives, very nearly rendering Jack's paranoia ridiculous. The reader is forced to consider the dystopian possibilities of technology while, at the same time, recognizing that all Jack is doing is visiting the ATM, a mundane activity that need not be overly mystified. Jack still seems naïve in his bland narration, but his stance partly mimes and creates the reader's ironic awareness, suggesting that Jack is only partially and temporarily articulated by "the system" he cites. This narrative mode also suggests that the reader, too, inhabits the high-tech everyday with a mixture of complicity and ironic distance.[17]

The novel suggests that this dual stance constitutes the condition of subjecthood once again in a scene where Jack goes shopping at the mall with his family. The supermarket and the mall constitute important places for the depiction of a high-tech society partly because they are showcases for a consumerism closely tied to modes of production made possible by technological developments, where the choices seem endless and almost anything, from anywhere, can be simulated. But more importantly, the mall belongs to the apparatus of a high-tech culture by its very mimicry, in formalistic terms, of technology as that which collapses distances and provides avenues into different times and spaces. Using an ATM constitutes a local experience with a machine,

as you stand in front of it punching in your requests, but it also signifies your relationship to an abstract data network, signifying instantaneous communication and effects that occur in a virtual space. Malls go at least one step further: they provide virtual realities that you can walk around in, interacting with simulations of various places (natural landscapes, comic book environments, amusement park scenes, allusions to France, Africa, imaginary planets) and representations of different times (the colonial past, the science fictional future, childhood, adolescence, adulthood). The mall becomes a site of the high tech because it operates on principles similar to those of information technology: this is technology that promises mobility, offers seemingly everything at your fingertips, and which strives to fulfill expectations of immediacy by providing entry into virtual relationships. Malls are not, of course, the only sites that foster such relationships; Margaret Morse has noted affinities among freeways, malls, and television as "the locus of virtualization or an attenuated *fiction effect*, that is, a partial loss of touch with the here-and-now."[18] If a "high-tech culture" can be said to exist, the sense of such a culture arises in large part because pervasive information and transportation technologies observe similar principles, creating a particular techno-sensibility that I think arises from awareness of more than one level of reality, the simultaneous experience of different discourses or expressions of time-space: the sense that one is both here and somewhere else, with attention sometimes fluctuating between those spaces or temporarily repressing one in favor of the other. This sensibility is akin to the narrative irony I have been discussing in *White Noise* as a kind of formal model for how we negotiate relations that can be both deterministic and in some ways liberating. The spaces of the high tech promise both types of experience, and we move in and through the constraints of technologically-produced realities with a sense of pleasure as well as ironic distancing.

When the Gladney family goes shopping, one of the questions at stake is how identities are constituted or articulated in a high-tech culture. And once again, as in the ATM scene, the processes of identification are rendered explicit (and in the process problematized), this time with reference to a utopian narrative of abundance and mobility offered in a virtual reality. The description of the shopping experience goes beyond the pleasures of merely owning objects. Jack's narration rather bluntly surfaces the somewhat more submerged yet overblown promises of existential satisfaction: in this technologized space, you can go anywhere, have anything, be whomever you like. A distressing encounter with a colleague who calls Jack a "big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" puts Jack "in the mood to shop" (83), and already we find ourselves in the realm of an obvious and inherently comical cause-and-effect narrative: Jack feels diminished, Jack needs to go shopping—and he needs to go shopping *at the mall*, where a world of possibilities has been simulated for his (ostensible) mastery. He encourages his family to choose products for him, and they cheerfully comply, becoming his "guides to endless well-being" (83); the irony of the

qualifier "endless" cannot be missed. Jack ostensibly immerses himself in a virtual reality that caters to a (partly illusory) sense of agency based on the exercise of choice and taste, with the half-concealed promise that the consumer/individual can instantly cross boundaries from one version of reality to another, sensual realities marked by sights, sounds and fragrances: "We smelled chocolate, popcorn, cologne; we smelled rugs and furs, hanging salamis and deathly vinyl" (83). But this moment of complicity with the simulations of high-tech consumerism (that is, consumerism as the experience of a virtuality that mimics the instantaneous bridging of space and time promised by technology) is so blatant, so obvious, that it becomes hilarious, once again suggesting that part of the pleasure of participating in shopping at the mall derives from the awareness of multiple levels of representation available at once.

In other words, in *White Noise* the hyperbolic, almost parodic enactment of consumerism elucidates the high-tech everyday as an active negotiation with virtual reality and virtual identities. Consumer choice is taken to the nth degree in the mall, because the mall appears to offer everything at once: "We moved from store to store, rejecting not only items in certain departments, not only departments but whole stores, mammoth corporations that did not strike our fancy for one reason or another" (83). The role-playing aspects of shopping—commanding store clerks, acting as the patriarch dispensing gifts to his family—lend Jack a deliberate, almost calculated sense of self-satisfaction: "I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed" (84). Jack self-consciously narrates the roles he takes on as consumer in an ironic mode that signals both enjoyment and criticism of consumption as virtual experience; in fact, what he consumes is the experience of being a consumer, which becomes much more significant than the actual (largely unspecified) objects he purchases. In some sense the shopping scenes are both available and unavailable for critique by the novel's readers: Jack has gotten there before us, and he has already pointed out the ideologies at play. In fact, he himself plays with the narratives of virtual identity-constitution, suggesting that this role-playing forms an integral part of the activity of shopping as well as other everyday activities in a high-tech world. Perhaps Jack remains the temporary dupe of consumer ideology, giving in to simulated pleasures and simulated identifications; but what I think *White Noise* offers is a vision of everyday living with a technological, consumer-oriented world that involves active negotiation with competing aesthetics of identity afforded in virtual spaces—that is, the play of authenticity and artificiality, in which neither term can be taken at face value.[19] The reader is not duped; instead, we are given an opportunity to remark upon how easy it is to *imagine* that ideology and hyperreality are all-subsuming precisely because the mall does afford certain pleasures. We are given to understand that that's not all there is to it.

And of course the pleasure of shopping, in *White Noise*, comes to an abrupt end, as Jack notes that "We drove home in silence. We went to our respective

rooms, wishing to be alone" (84). This deflation *could* signal that the pleasures are hollow, that the experience of the mall is nothing but a sham.[20] But in some sense the experience of shopping has already been deflated in advance; it is an everyday activity of a particular type, the pleasures of which are well-known and familiar, but not for that reason merely or completely false—and certainly not to be read as a totalizing narrative of identification formation (or manipulation). Everyday life entails moving between different spaces, some "virtual" (the mall, television, cyberspace) and some "real" (the home, the workplace). To dismiss the activities that occur in virtual spaces on the grounds that the experience is merely "simulated" seems to be premised on the notion that one can make unassailable ontological distinctions between the real and the artificial, the natural and the technological, the authentic and the imitative, and also to assume that people don't know how to navigate these spaces, or cannot experience different levels of "reality" without becoming disoriented and "lost" to themselves. Such a dismissal may even imply a nostalgic fictionalizing of the past and of "the real" that itself (ironically) feeds into the ideology of the hyperreal, since the function of simulacra, as defined by Jean Baudrillard, is to re-create a "real" that has already been lost.

In that sense, simulation is always already nostalgic, a fetishization of the real that attempts to shore up the values of the authentic and natural, so that Baudrillard describes simulation as a "[p]anic-stricken production of the real and of the referential."[21] The production of simulacra allows the principle of reality to remain intact but, according to Baudrillard, the real itself has been utterly replaced by a depthless play of representations. But what can it mean to have lost "the real"? If we take for example the much-discussed scene in *White Noise* where Jack and his university colleague, Murray Siskind, visit "The Most Photographed Barn in America," it means no longer seeing the thing itself (the barn), but instead seeing only signs, participating in an "aura," as Siskind says, created by the trappings of tourism and technologies such as photographic reproduction. Siskind describes a "spiritual surrender" to the aura of the thing; he rather self-consciously points out that he and Jack and the other tourists are not there to see the barn at all, but to participate in the aura of the barn, to take pictures of taking pictures (12-13). Critics of *White Noise* such as John Duvall have followed through on this idea of "spiritual surrender," arguing that the mediation of reality depicted in scenes such as this one leads to a "postmodern, decentered totalitarianism," where critical or political activity vanishes in formalism and surface aesthetics.[22]

But the depiction of high-tech America as a hyperreal, mediated world of simulacra can itself become a totalizing narrative that flattens out social and political difference by its very insistence that all critical distance has been lost, that even parody is no longer available as a tactic for negotiating the pleasures and anxieties of the high tech. No doubt many of us have found ourselves remarking upon the manufactured-ness of a tourist attraction, or suddenly

reminding ourselves to get out from behind the camera and really *look* at the Grand Canyon, or whatever it is that we are assiduously filming for posterity. That doesn't mean we've lost touch with the various registers of meaning at such cultural sites, or that we fail to realize the multiple levels of appreciation (or disgust) with which we participate in spectatorship—quite the contrary, actually. Baudrillard, however, famously identified America as the unreal—and not just in spaces such as Disneyland, but everywhere, as a result of Americans' pragmatic over-literalization of every dream. His description is certainly provocative, but also hyperbolic, to the point of committing its own over-literalizations and mystifications:

> America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too. . . . The Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model.[23]

It is one thing to characterize America as an information society, saturated with media representations and constructed spaces of simulation, but then to argue that Americans are simply and fully imbricated in "simulation" seems too swift, too sweeping, and too "utopian" a judgment in its totality, particularly when we read *White Noise* in light of Baudrillard's comments. In *White Noise*, technologically-produced virtualities and simulations are named as such. The Americans in the novel aren't going off to the countryside to see the oldest barn in America, the original barn, a barn with specific historical significance and then getting caught up in a simulated aura; the tourists that Jack and Murray join have explicitly chosen to see "The Most Photographed Barn in America." Its aura is its very claim to fame. This utterly literalized and ironic depiction of the tourists' immersion in simulacra does not resolve itself into a fetishization of the real that we can then stand back and critique them for; instead, the novel seems to mock both the attraction of Americans to simulated realities *and* the notion that they are completely taken in, that they can't discern the operations of technological reproducibility or simulation at the service of tourism. The activity of the tourists in *White Noise* is rendered overtly citational, like the Gladneys' performance of shopping in the virtual reality of the mall, or Jack's sense of fear and relief as he visits the ATM.

In such representations of everyday life—everyday living with simulacra and technology—we find a more nuanced picture of what it means to live in a high-tech culture. The "everyday" implies the ordinary, the mundane, the repetitive and recurrent, the *activities* that form the texture of our interactions

with different spaces and technologies, and there we must be attentive to the appropriations, transformations, and uses that people make of cultural narratives as well as the things themselves. Henri Lefebvre suggested that the everyday provides the conceptual and material counterpoint to "modernity": if modernity (as a philosophical and artistic mode of representing reality) deals in cosmic time and absolutes, it also necessarily intersects with the quotidian, and the relative. Where philosophy may find totalizations and connections among ideologies and "specialized sciences," everyday life stands for ambiguity and "subsystems" that are characterized by gaps.[24] Each of the everyday virtual spaces depicted in *White Noise* involves a negotiation with different norms and citational discourses that require some active critical work by the participants, not merely a passive succumbing to the seamless totalization of simulacra. As I have been arguing, the narrative mode itself takes up the theme of passivity with a sense of parody which gestures towards the interpretive practices that individuals employ in their daily activities, practices that involve negotiating different levels of reality and the narratives that produce those realities, including media representations.

Lefebvre took care to specify that even in what he called a "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption," everyday life cannot be utterly programmed or "cybernetized."[25] Michel de Certeau, seemingly taking up Lefebvre's argument where he left off, contends that "[T]he consumer cannot be identified or qualified by the newspapers or commercial products he assimilates: between the person (who uses them) and these products (indexes of the 'order' which is imposed on him), there is a gap of varying proportions opened by the use he makes of them."[26] De Certeau's mention of "newspapers" becomes relevant to the role of technology in *White Noise* when we consider the novel's depiction of the popular media and its effects. Television is perhaps the most pervasive technology in the everyday lives of the Gladneys, and the effects of television have been widely debated in popular and academic discourse. As a machine that brings mass culture into the home and deals specifically in virtual citations of the real, television readily lends itself to theories of the totalizing power of technology as generator of simulacra. But in *White Noise*, the representation of television in everyday life suggests the possibilities of a new sensibility, one that can be reduced neither to dystopian visions of brainwashing nor to utopian celebrations of liberation from the constraints of ideology.

The Tyrannies of Television

Television, more so than other machines such as the supermarket scanner or computer terminal at the doctor's office, serves as a primary signifier for the potentially totalizing power of technology in *White Noise*. It's a gadget, of course, which goes through the same types of upgrades as other machines, so that these days, for example, consumers have to consider whether they need to buy a flat-screen or high-definition model. It's a particularly pervasive technology: nearly

everyone has at least one television in the home, and often more than one.[27] But the type of consumption associated with television goes well beyond the purchase of the hardware and cable packages or pay-per-view programs. As a broadcast medium, television offers continual consumption of images, news, stories, and music. Television constitutes a nodal point in a one-way communication system, a constant source of data, both fictional and avowedly real, along with almost every variation in between (including staged "reality" shows, "dramatizations" of real-life events, and films "based on a true story"). By its very citational quality, as a technology that serves up representations, television crosses the boundary between the real and the virtual, information and misinformation, fact and opinion. Even the most "real" of the programs—the nightly news, which supposedly remains bound to the journalistic code of objectivity, and presents images of live events, out there in the real world—raises such issues. In *On Television*, Pierre Bourdieu discusses the economic and sociological factors that constrain the vision of politics that can be presented on television, in the news, in televised debates—in short, on the most real-seeming programs. His conclusion is devastating:

> I think that television poses a serious danger for all the various areas of cultural production—for art, for literature, for science, for philosophy, and for law. What's more, contrary to what a lot of journalists—even the most responsible of them—say (and think), undoubtedly all in good faith, I think that television poses no less of a threat to political life and democracy itself.[28]

Here we come close to perhaps the worst charges that can be laid against television. Its threat to democracy can be associated with its purported tendency to totalize, to create simulacra in place of the real, to entertain the public with a form of staged political debate under the guise of providing free and equal access to information. The economics of television broadcasting, its dependence on ratings and on commercial advertising, further mark this technology as purveyor of capitalist ideology at the expense of critical thought.

It's a relatively small (but not trivial) step from an awareness of television's complicated dealings in the real and the representational to a hyperbolic, dystopian vision of a technologized mass culture that takes over your mind, plants thoughts in your head, colonizes your consciousness, and turns you into a passive consuming machine.[29] By its very ubiquity, by its tremendous presence in Americans' domestic lives, television provides a powerful metaphor for just how much technology has infiltrated everyday consciousness and influenced the most basic and "natural" aspects of human life—what we eat, what we wear, how we relate to our family members, how we think and speak. Of course a great deal of recent work in sociology and media studies attacks "manipulation" theories by focusing on audience reception as an activity rather than passive

consumption; analyzing television content for its contradictory interpellations, sense of play, and lack of totalizing closure; conducting "ethnographic" studies that involve watching how people use television in their daily lives (to mark time, to make transitions between work and leisure, to create social connections); and interviewing viewers about their thoughts on television and how they perceive its role in their lives.[30] The picture that emerges from these studies is complex: audiences sometimes pay close attention to programs, and sometimes mostly ignore whatever is on. They bring their own interpretations to bear, and they can be quite critical of what they watch. The literature on television viewing behavior tends to confirm the common sense observation that people are not just zombies under the sway of mass culture; their relationship to television changes throughout their lives; they exercise choice and control in their viewing; and not everyone watches television the same way.

In *White Noise*'s somewhat satirical treatment of the "active" versus "passive" viewing debate, the novel taps into a wider cultural discourse about how *bad* television is for us, and it even acknowledges Americans' consciousness that it might be an addictive waste of time that ought be spent on other pursuits.[31] The Gladney family watches a great deal of television, or they at least keep the television on a lot, even when they're not necessarily paying close attention to it. Babette, Jack's wife, tries to counteract the ill effects of television by gathering the family every Friday night to watch together. Of course this strategy does not quite work the way Babette hopes it will. The Friday night viewing may not be pleasurable to the family members, but they still seem to be deeply influenced by television the rest of the week.[32] Television-speak shapes their conversation. Nine-year-old Steffie mumbles "Toyota Celica" in her sleep, and even Babette speaks in phrases learned from television news reports when she tells Jack about an old couple lost in a shopping center for two days after their grandniece had dropped them off: "The grandniece could not be reached, Babette said, for comment" (59).

Some critics of *White Noise* have argued that the Gladney family demonstrates a loss of real communication and authentic subjectivity caused by technologies such as television, as they apparently fall prey to the tide of fragmented data and succumb to a kind of image narcosis.[33] But *White Noise* suggests that new sensibilities may be afforded by interactions with television in particular. It is not enough to note the prescriptive operations of television: that is, its production and largely predictable fulfillment of a very limited set of expectations; its regimented schedule of programs that encourages particular viewing habits; its generic citations that appear to obviate critical thought because not much is needed to understand the conventions of the soap opera, the police drama, the sitcom, the thirty-second spot. Television's "brain-sucking" power appears to rest in its very repetition of formula, its adherence to normative representations and ideologies in its market-driven efforts to entertain everyone and offend no one, its tendency both to distract viewers and appear transparent,

often effacing its own framing devices and therefore sneaking its rhetoric, its images, and its flash-photo version of the world under the audience's radar.

But *White Noise* reveals that television does not operate solely in this register of habituation and prescription; television also entails disruption and defamiliarization. The television "format," one might say, is predicated on disruption as much as it is on a continual flow of images: something is always interrupting something else—commercials break into fictional stories, news reports or weather warnings interrupt the broadcast, shows dealing in different levels of reality or authenticity are juxtaposed not only in a particular station's lineup, but may intersect one another as the viewer channel-hops with the remote control. Different "segments" of a single program may demand different levels of concentration, or create different levels of reality, different sets of citations.[34] We may become habituated to the "flow" of television, but in doing so we also become habituated to disruption, so that we become experts in adjusting to varying types of simulation and representation. We don't live in one totalized world of simulacra when we watch television, we move through various worlds, various levels of fictionalization and realization, and these movements can create effects of defamiliarization as well as normalization.

The disruptive operations of television—that is, its ability to break into planes of perception and introduce a kind of critical distance—are modeled within the very narration of *White Noise.* The television intermittently "speaks" in the background, as though television permeates the domestic scene almost subconsciously; but when these moments occur in the text, they actually put the concept of "background" and "foreground" into question, demonstrating that the everyday is not registered on one simple plane of habits and perceptions, but instead involves a fluctuation of awareness and an intersection of conceptual spaces. While Jack narrates conversations between himself and his wife or his children, the television spews non-sequiturs. It is not quite clear whether Jack is unconsciously or perhaps ironically narrating the TV's lines. In one scene, Babette and Jack lie in bed discussing the "silly usage" of phrases like "he entered me" to describe sex. Babette has been mockingly quoting lines from erotic literature when Jack says, "I began to feel an erection stirring. How stupid and out of context. Babette laughed at her own lines. The TV said: 'Until Florida surgeons attached an artificial flipper.'" (29)

The television's comical interruption causes a rupture in the ontological world we have entered with Jack and Babette lying in their bed. We pause to try and make sense of the TV's line—is there some way that it relates to what Babette has been saying, or to Jack's reaction? But the mention of an artificial flipper does not easily resolve itself into an ironic authorial comment on Jack and Babette's conversation (except to highlight, by its textual intrusion, that they are in fact talking about *representations* of sex), nor does it fit in with what they are discussing. Instead, it wrenches us one step back from this scene of intimacy and reminds us of other spaces—the bedroom with its television at the

foot of the bed; the house with children watching TV elsewhere; and Florida, with its maimed dolphin.[35] The effect is not only to broaden the context in which Jack and Babette's private interaction takes place, but also to remind us of the text as text, as a representation of spaces and conversations. Babette herself performs a critique of particular textual representations: she objects to the phrase "he entered her" on the grounds that women are not "lobbies or elevators"; yet representations have a kind of acknowledged power, comically manifested in Jack's erection. Here we see the interplay of "real" and textual/virtual worlds, their interpenetration, so to speak, which is not necessarily a sign of disorientation, but a mode of living with and through mediations.

Interviews with television audience members reveal that people often feel that television connects them to "the world outside," particularly through news reports and up-to-the-minute bulletins.[36] Studies of the ways people use television to mark time and structure their day also find that television viewing provides a "transition" between public and private spaces, between workplace and home.[37] But television is not merely a "window" onto other spaces, nor can we demarcate public and private discourses as easily as the idea of "transition" implies. Television may introduce references that are sometimes banal or incongruous, but as a metaphor and manifestation of the way our awareness extends to different levels of reality and different streams of information, it can invite critical work to re-situate our sense of where and when we are speaking and acting. One effect of this critical work is to make us more *knowing* consumers of information and events; in that sense, television can serve to familiarize us with images and narratives (not just defamiliarize us, another important function I will get to shortly). Of course, the novel pokes a great deal of fun at the ways in which television can cram us with bits of half-digested knowledge and misremembered "facts," as in scenes where the family jumps and skips from one subject to the next, "correcting" each other's statements with more pseudo-information. But the knowledge of repeated stories and similar events that television brings into our "private" spaces (homes, consciousness) can actually function to contextualize the otherwise incomprehensible, and de-glamorize or familiarize that which would otherwise appear to be singular, special, unique, completely "other."

We see this in *White Noise* when Jack questions his son Heinrich about the imprisoned mass-murderer with whom Heinrich plays chess via correspondence: "You've been playing chess with the man for months. What do you know about him except that he's in jail for life, for murder? Is he young, old, black, white? Do you communicate at all with him except for chess moves?" (43). It turns out that not only does Heinrich know a great deal about the murderer, from exchanging "notes," but so does Jack, by virtue of his media knowledge:

> "Did he care for his weapons obsessively? Did he have an arsenal stashed in his shabby little room off a six-story concrete car park?"

"Some handguns and a bolt-action rifle with a scope."

"A telescopic sight. Did he fire from a highway overpass, a rented room? Did he walk into a bar, a washette, his former place of employment and start firing indiscriminately? People scattering, taking cover under tables. People out on the street thinking they heard firecrackers. 'I was just waiting for the bus when I heard this little popping noise like firecrackers going off.'"

"He went up to a roof."

"A rooftop sniper. Did he write in his diary before he went up to the roof? Did he make tapes of his voice, go to the movies, read books about other mass murderers to refresh his memory?"

"Made tapes" (44).

And so on. Jack presumably intends to defuse whatever fascination the murderer holds for his son by his ironic citation of narratives about other, similar killers. He places this particular murderer in an implied series, in the process remarking upon the conventions by which such events are represented—conventions with which the murderer himself (who regrets not having chosen to kill someone famous, so he could "go down in history") is familiar. Not only does this exchange suggest that we do not live in a world where "real life" can be neatly separated from mediations and representations, but it also signals the ways in which awareness of mediations informs and often constitutes the way we make sense of the "world out there."

The operations of a television-infused sensibility are foregrounded when a disaster actually occurs in the Gladneys' hometown. The family has watched countless earthquakes and volcanic eruptions on television, but when a railroad accident releases toxic gas from a tank car, the family must evacuate, and they are immediately plunged into a disorienting chain of events in which they are forced to realize that disasters don't just happen somewhere else. The startling thing about television's citationality is that sometimes, what's happening on TV is also happening to *you*. Television and radio function to both familiarize and defamiliarize this alarming event: on the one hand, media reports tell the Gladney family how to talk about the disaster—first it's a "feathery plume," then a "black billowing cloud," and eventually it becomes an "airborne toxic event" (109-17). But family members also observe the cloud for themselves and provide their own descriptions. Jack describes it as a "heavy black mass . . . more or less shapeless" (110), while Heinrich argues with the radio's terminology: he says it's "Like a shapeless growing thing. A dark black breathing thing of smoke. Why do they call it a plume?" (111). The Gladneys participate in a process of representation that is both informed by and at odds with mass media; they move back and forth between paying attention to the news reports and watching the cloud advancing on the horizon.

The difference between the media representation and what the Gladneys can see happening outside their own window is not effaced—it's not as though they have lost their ability to distinguish among the levels of the "real" they must navigate. Their everyday experience has been disrupted in such a way that there is an eerie confluence (but also a gap) between what is happening in the media, and what is happening in their town. Their main activity, as they flee their home, is to sort through the various bits of information they are getting and process it: this is how they cope with the disaster.[38] The Gladneys tend to understand their predicament partly in terms of what they have seen on TV, as though their fascination with natural disasters has trained them to analyze what they are being told about the "airborne toxic event," as though they stand both inside and outside the experience, critically assessing its importance, its seriousness, and the validity of various representations. On the one hand, the family regards the cloud with "a sense of awe that bordered on the religious," and Jack says that "we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way" (127). But there is nothing very simple or primitive about Jack's *other* reaction to the event, which is to note that "We'd become part of the public stuff of media disaster" (146).

Here the doubleness of everyday life in high-tech culture becomes apparent: events signify on at least two planes, and the importance of context, and positionality, are highlighted in this moment of crisis. One must imagine how the event is being viewed on television by people somewhere *else;* in fact, when the evacuees realize that the "airborne toxic event" is *not* receiving coverage on national TV news, they feel cheated, as though their experience has been diminished, as though their lives have been devalued in the public eye. One man makes an impassioned speech: "Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore? Don't those people know what we've been through? . . . Are they telling us it was insignficant, it was piddling? Are they so callous? . . . Do they think this is just television? . . . Don't they know it's real?" (161-2). The irony, of course, is that the event can't be quite "real" unless it is also on television. *White Noise* presents this notion, like several other ideas about simulation and reality expressed in the novel, with some satire, so that the man adds, "What exactly has to happen before they stick microphones in our faces and hound us to the doorsteps of our homes, camping out on our lawns, creating the usual media circus? Haven't we earned the right to despise their idiot questions?" (162). All of this is hilarious and grave at the same time. In its slyly comic way, the novel suggests both the absurdity and the seriousness of the way technologies such as television intersect with our everyday lives; there isn't some realm called "real life" or nature on the one hand and then "television" or technology on the other. These realms intersect and inform each other, sometimes appearing conflated, sometimes incongruous, and often experienced simultaneously, with an awareness of the different registers of signification at stake.

In other words, *White Noise* represents the pervasiveness of technology, but not its "totalization" of experience and representation. Of course the dystopian vision of losing one's bearings amid the onslaught of simulations forms part of the novel's frame of reference: we see this most clearly in the case of Willie Mink, the drug researcher who has been supplying Dylar (an experimental pill that is supposed to cure fear of death) to Babette in exchange for sex. When Jack encounters Mink towards the end of the novel, intending to kill him, he faces the specter of a man addicted not just to Dylar, but to television. He cannot carry on a conversation with Jack about the drug without lapsing into unconnected comments picked up from television. When Jack says, "There will eventually be an effective medication, you're saying. A remedy for fear," Mink replies,

> Followed by a greater death. More effective, productwise. This is what the scientists don't understand, scrubbing their smocks with Woolite. Not that I have anything personal against death from our vantage point high atop Metropolitan County Stadium (308).

Mink literalizes practically every fear about television's effects on its viewers: he sits alone in a motel room, physically degenerating, mentally incapacitated, and utterly at the mercy of media. Jack reduces him to all fours just by speaking the words "hail of bullets," because Mink can no longer distinguish between words and things, appearance and reality.[39] In Mink, the novel provides a caricature of fears about television and the simulacral power of technology. His condition is extreme, a parody of the manipulation theories that tend to inform cautionary tales about technology. Pushing the notion of the collapse of the subject and the real into mere simulacra to its limit, *White Noise* indirectly reveals that the Baudrillardian vision of Americans *as* simulations themselves, with no critical distance left to them, requires viewing American culture as a pathology, an intolerable and paralyzing mass delusion.

Instead, *White Noise* suggests, high-tech American culture creates a kind of anti-delusional sensibility even as we navigate through illusions, representations, and simulations. Brian McHale has argued that representations of TV or movies in postmodernist texts function as "ontological pluralizers": "This term covers a variety of formal or stylistic devices and narrative motifs all designed to introduce secondary worlds within the world of fiction, or to split and multiply the primary ontological plane."[40] Some critics argue that in *White Noise*, technology diminishes an awareness of death, and therefore of life, because simulation replaces the real, and flattens out distinctions that we require in order to live fully and actively.[41] But *White Noise*, in its representation of television as an "ontological pluralizer" (to borrow McHale's term) suggests that technology can function to heighten awareness of different planes of existence, so that we constantly negotiate different levels of signification and "reality," including the

difference between the here-and-now and the beyond, or death itself. We see this most clearly in the novel when the family suddenly sees Babette on television. For a moment, their sense of time and space is ruptured:

> Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces. What did it mean? What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders? Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through the wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say good-bye to us from the fluorescent screen? . . . I'd seen her just an hour ago, eating eggs, but her appearance on the screen made me think of her as some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the mists of the dead. If she was not dead, was I? . . .
>
> All this compressed in seconds. It was only as time drew on, normalized itself, returned to us a sense of our surroundings, the room, the house, the reality in which the TV set stood—it was only then that we understood what was going on (104).

Just as television brings other worlds into the Gladneys' home, so too it seems to suck part of their domestic reality into itself, into some other realm, for a fleeting moment; but this is no Willie Mink-like collapse of the real or loss of distinctions. Jack experiences a moment in which Babette (and he himself) are both *here* and *there*, a moment of utter duality, and even when the family finally "understood what was going on"—that Babette was simply being televised by the local cable station while teaching her yoga class—the image retains its power to heighten awareness of different spaces, even of life and death. "I tried to tell myself it was only television—whatever that was, however it worked—and not some journey out of life or death, not some mysterious separation" (105). Far from flattening out the everyday into one stupefying plane of hyperreality, in *White Noise* technology highlights mysterious and not-so-mysterious separations and crossings; negotiating these representations becomes the critical work of moving through the temporalities and spaces of everyday life.

Techno-Sensibility And The Life In Routine Things

At one point in *White Noise*, Jack, in a conversation with his father-in-law, Vern, identifies "routine things" with death: "Routine things can be deadly, Vern, carried to extremes. I have a friend who says that's why people take vacations. Not to relax or find excitement or see new places. To escape the death that exists in routine things" (248). Indeed in many ways *White Noise* seems to be a novel preoccupied with death: Jack and Babette suffer from a sometimes

paralyzing fear of dying, which is why they are attracted to Dylar, no matter what its side effects; the airborne toxic event promises death for Jack because of his exposure to Nyodene D, even though the timing of his death is no more definite than it was before his exposure; and spaces of everyday routine informed by the high tech, even the supermarket, sometimes appear to be holding areas for people waiting to die, as in the final lines of the novel, which describe a "slowly moving line" of people at the checkout counter, shuffling past the racks of tabloids towards their end. Yet this bleak vision is belied in the novel by the attention paid to routine moments, by the significance packed into the mundane, and by the texture of reality and virtuality that makes up the everyday. In that sense, *White Noise* vividly evokes the *life* that exists in routine things, the complexity of the "banal" in a culture where technology forges connections, juxtapositions, and multiplicities in unprecedented ways.

What the novel offers is a picture of how people live in and through high tech, because technology does not impact our lives exclusively through the dramatic occasions of scientific breakthroughs or media controversies over the future impact of innovations. We are not merely spectators to those occasions or those controversies; the discourses of science and technology inform our ways of thinking about our lives, so that powerful cultural narratives about utopia and dystopia, the natural and the artificial, form part of our repertoire for making sense of the world. But technology is even more insistently part of the here and now—even as it multiplies our sense of the times and spaces that make up the here and now. The grand narratives about technology and its impact are lived through with a techno-sensibility that is marked by both habituation and disruption, complicity with the pleasures afforded by technologies as well as an ironic distancing from the demands of a high-tech, media-saturated environment that can sometimes seem disorienting, or oppressive, or even just silly.

If *White Noise* evokes the hyperreal tendencies of a high-tech America, and raises the specter of totalizing simulations and the loss of referents for moving securely through the cultural landscape, it also suggests a modality, via its narrative form, for negotiating the simultaneities of high tech, the way that it both threatens and promises our well-being. Perhaps the antidote for semi-apocalyptic fears, such as the fear that technology is slowly squashing the life out of us, that it somehow gets "between" us and reality, that it precludes meaningful communication, is a healthy dose of comic irony, a modality that performatively cites those fears and remarks upon them as particular representations. The gift of *White Noise*, in this case, is that it renders both the dystopian and utopian discourses of technology hyper-legible, revealing them as part of our techno-sensibility, but also, in the process, demonstrating their partiality, their incompleteness, their inability to describe and encompass fully how we live in the high-tech everyday. In the gaps of what appear to be dichotomous, totalizing orientations to high tech, we can perceive the condensations of skepticism, pleasure, anxiety, compulsion, and choice with which we interact with technology and routinely make use of it.

Notes

1. James Livingston, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy: Rethinking the Politics of American History* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 4. See also Jeffrey Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy: Market and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Sklansky traces the relationship between the meaning of individuality and new developments in political economy; like Livingston, he suggests that the subject is imbricated and implicated in changing social and economic relations. The autonomous individual that some fear is ultimately "lost" in capitalism, these historians argue, cannot be conceived of as "separate" from the developments of market society. This does not mean that individuals are dissolved by cultural and economic forces into mere nodal points on a grid; it means that people's reflexivity and subjectivity shift in response to/as a condition of historical and cultural developments.

2. Livingston, *Pragmatism*, 13, 11.

3. Don DeLillo, *White Noise: Text and Criticism*. [1984] Ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin, 1998). References to the text will hereafter be noted parenthetically.

4. Tom LeClair, *In The Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

5. Don Delillo, *End Zone* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972); *The Names* (New York: Vintage,1982); *Mao II* (New York: Penguin, 1981).

6. Leonard Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative," *Contemporary Literature* 32 (Fall 1991): 346-65; Lidia Yuknavitch, *Allegories of Violence: Tracing the Writing of War in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Paul Maltby, "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo, *White Noise: Text and Criticism* Ed. Osteen," 498-516.

7. The mention of the "deranged person" being led away by armed guards is an arresting moment in the passage, both darkly funny and disturbing, because it interrupts the *normalcy* of the scene. DeLillo brilliantly jars his readers out of their familiarity with everyday technologies—and it seems to require this kind of startling contrast, too, even though there is already something hyperbolic about Jack's gratification upon using the ATM.

8. Paula Bryant, "Extending the Fabulative Continuum: DeLillo, Mooney, and Federman." *Extrapolation* 30:2 (1989): 158.

9. Alexandra Chasin, "Class and Its Close Relations: Identities among Women, Servants, and Machines." *Posthuman Bodies*. Ed. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 73-96.

10. Chasin's research into the changes that have been made in ATM interface design and marketing strategies reveals that as new technologies are integrated into the everyday, new relations to the technology develop, or are encouraged. Early ATMs were consciously anthropomorphic, with names like "Tillie the Teller," but eventually ATMs came to be named for their medium (as in "The Electronic Teller" or "CompuCash"), and finally there has been a trend to make them "invisible," to name them for their function ("CashFlow," "Money Mover"). Chasin notes, "While the anthropomorphic software design emphasizes the intentional agency of the computer, and the second phase emphasizes the medium that makes possible the appearance of the computer's intentions, the third phase de-emphasizes intentional agency altogether" (83). For a detailed discussion of anthropomorphic interface design, see Chasin, "Class and Its Close Relations," 82-5.

11. Michael Valdez Moses, "Lust Removed from Nature," *New Essays on White Noise*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 63-86; John Duvall, "The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*," *White Noise: Text and Criticism* Ed. Osteen. 434, 441 in particular; Arthur Saltzman, "The Figure in the Static: *White Noise*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 40 (Winter 1994): 813, 817 for examples; Douglas Keesey, *Don DeLillo* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993); Thomas J. Ferraro, "Whole Families Shopping at Night!" *New Essays on White Noise* Ed. Frank Lentricchia. 15-38.

12. The supposed threat of totalitarianism looms large in *White Noise*, as we can see from the paranoia Jack and other characters exhibit in the face of new technologies, and also from the constant references to Hitler. Jack created the Hitler Studies Department at his university; he chose the study of Hitler and fascism as his life's work because he is looking for a symbol "larger than death"—presumably finding security in the idea of totalitarian rule. I think you miss the point of the comedy if you take the parallels between Hitler's fascism and the "fascism" of a postmodern information society, or the "cult" of celebrity, at face value. I argue that the idea of a postmodern totalitarianism is entertained—the specter raised—but it is simultaneously undercut.

13. Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise,* and the End of Heroic Narrative," 346-7. For other readings of *White Noise* that make use of Baudrillard, see Duvall, "The (Super)Marketplace of Images," 432-55; Richard Kerridge, "Small Rooms and the Ecosystem: Environmentalism and DeLillo's *White Noise*," *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature.* Ed. Kerridge and Neil Sammells. (New York: Zed, 1998), 182-95; Yuknavitch, *Allegories of Violence*; and Stephen N. doCarmo, "Subjects, Objects, and the Postmodern Differend in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," *LIT* 11 (2000): 1-33. doCarmo's fine essay relates DeLillo's "strategy of unknowingness," or undecidability, to the work of both Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard. See also Teresa Heffernan, "Can the Apocalypse Be Post?" *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End.* Ed. Richard Dellamora. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 171-81, for a rebuttal to Wilcox and re-reading of *White Noise* alongside the work of Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida. There is significant critical debate over whether *White Noise* simply demonstrates a Baudrillardian "fall" from the "real" and from the possibilities of true communication, or whether the novel takes a more ambiguous but less nostalgic stance, one that seeks to represent a high-tech culture without necessarily lamenting its effects.

14. Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise,* and the End of Heroic Narrative," 348. See also Yuknavitch, *Allegories of Violence*, 57-8.

15. Maltby, "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo," 509.

16. M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, (7th Edition. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 135. Abrams's full definition states that "the author, instead of using an occasional verbal irony, introduces a structural feature that serves to sustain a dual meaning and evaluation throughout the work. One common literary device of this sort is the invention of a naïve hero, or else a naïve narrator or spokesman [*sic*], whose invincible simplicity or obtuseness leads him to persist in putting an interpretation on affairs which the knowing reader—who penetrates to, and shares, the implied point of view of the authorial presence behind the naïve *persona*—just as persistently is called on to alter and correct" (135-6).

17. Margaret Archer has argued in her major works on human agency that a conception of self-consciousness—the continuous sense of one's self that derives from one's embodied experiences in the world—is critical to understanding how individuals persist within societal structures and systems of signification. She focuses attention on the "inner conversation" as "the process which generates our concrete singularity" (*Being Human*, 10). Through an ongoing inner conversation, individuals constantly prioritize and re-prioritize their commitments, evaluating their choices within the constraints of particular social roles and solidarities. So far, so good: to some extent, the notion of "inner conversation" is relevant to my argument about techno-sensibility and the ways in which the characters in *White Noise* do not merely internalize the ideologies and social demands that constitute their world but also maintain a critical distance and even a personal commentary on their own activities in that world. But where I differ from Archer is when she argues that one's sense of self is "independent of language" (3) and "prior to, and primitive to, sociality" (5). My argument about techno-sensibility does not rest on a sense of human agency that is prior to language or should be conceived of as "natural"—if the "natural" is understood to be pure of cultural definition and outside the bounds of discourse. Language and culture are not the enemies of selfhood and agency, but their precondition and their source, providing the materials and meanings through which we continually become individuals. Perhaps one could turn to Charles Taylor for a view of the dialogue individuals must carry out with what George Herbert Mead called "significant others" in order to forge an identity. Taylor's thoughts on identity as a negotiation, a conversation partly internal, partly external, provide a counterargument to theorists who presume an autonomous, inner-generated self, or who propose that in postmodern culture, identity is suddenly threatened with fragmentation and dissolution. But I hesitate at the aspects of Taylor's argument that imply a developmental process of identity formation that depends primarily on the operations of recognition, lack of recognition, and misrecognition. I suggest that the interplay of individuals with the various spaces, social roles, and discourses they move through is more complex, less linear, and more unfinished than his writings on the "politics of recognition" or the "formation" of identity suggest. For more on the inner conversation, see Margaret Archer, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and *Structure, Agency, and The Internal Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For more on identity and recognition, see Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition." *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition.* Ed. Taylor. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-73.

18. Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 99.

19. Jennifer Price has written extensively on shopping malls as places of contradiction, where "nature" and "authenticity" are marketed to consumers in a move that satisfies both the desire for the "real" and the desire for the benefits and luxuries of modern (technological) culture. On the one hand, Price argues, Nature at the mall functions as a "Place Apart" that counters urbanism, technology, and consumerism itself; but on the other hand, Nature at the mall reveals itself as a set of signifiers, fully imbricated in the culture of consumption and simulation, so that

the binary does not hold, and there is no innocent, unmediated appreciation of "nature" indulged here. This sense of contradiction, this awareness, is similar to the sensibility I am arguing the reader gains vicariously through Jack's narration in *White Noise*. See Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

20. For a reading of *White Noise* as a clear condemnation of consumerism and other practices that place importance on "external" representations of self rather than interiority, see Ted Billy, "The Externalization of the Self in American Life: Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 19 (August 1998): 270-83.

21. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* [1981]. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994): 7. One of Baudrillard's key points is that simulation is *not* a cultural strategy for undermining reality; instead, it is a "strategy of the real," and a sign that a society feels "reality" slipping away. Simulation is intended as an antidote for this condition.

22. John N. Duvall, "The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*," in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*. Ed. Mark Osteen. 433.

23. Jean Baudrillard, *America* [1986]. Trans. Chris Turner. (New York: Verso, 1988), 28-9.

24. Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* [1968]. Trans. Sacha Rabinovitch. (New York: Harper, 1971), 12-13. The reference to subsystems appears on page 86, where Lefebvre states that "a system of everyday life does not exist, notwithstanding all the endeavours to establish and settle it for good and all, and that there are only subsystems separated by irreducible gaps, yet situated on one plane and related to it."

25. *Ibid.*, 64. Lefebvre points out that "Everyday life, when it changes, evolves according to a rhythm that does not coincide with the time of accumulation and in a space that cannot be identified with that of cumulative processes" (61).

26. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 32.

27. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001*, 98.2 percent of households in America owned at least one television set in 1999 (compare that with the statistic for telephone service—94.2 percent). The average number of sets per home in 1999 was 2.4, and 84.6 percent of American households contained at least one VCR. The bureau also reports that 67.5 percent of Americans have cable television. The bureau does not yet track ownership of high-definition televisions (still counting color televisions, though), and digital television service is not widespread enough to make it onto the list of survey questions either. The *Statistical Abstract* can be downloaded at *http://www.census.gov/statab/www/*

28. Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television* [1996]. Trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson. (New York: New Press, 1998), 10.

29. Of course a variety of specific social ills have been attributed to television, though many of the claims cannot be confirmed by reliable studies. Such claims actually serve as indexes to public suspicion of television and information technologies in general.

30. Many of the major television studies are actually British or European, but do contain information relevant to American television as well. See David Gauntlett and Annette Hill, *TV Living: Television, Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Jostein Gripsrud (ed.), *Television and Common Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1999); JoEllen Fisherkeller, *Growing Up with Television: Everyday Learning Among Young Adolescents* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1994); David Morley, *Television, Audiences & Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Peter Gibian (ed.), *Mass Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997); John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000); Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert (eds.), *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997); John Storey, *Cultural Consumption and Everyday Life* (London: Arnold, 1999); Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel (eds), *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997); and Ron Lembo, "Situating Television in Everyday Life: Reformulating a Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Television Use," *From Sociology to Cultural Studies: New Perspectives* Ed. Elizabeth Long. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997): 203-33.

31. The five-year British Film Institute study discussed in Gauntlett and Hill's *TV Living* asked its participants "Do you ever feel guilty about watching TV?" in the final "diary" question (March 1996). For actual guilty-sounding and not-so-guilty quotations from the diaries, see Gauntlett and Hill, *TV Living*, 119-28.

32. It's important to note that television functions in the novel as *the* major signifier of technology's power to shape subjectivity and "distort" reality, but other technologies function in similar ways. The radio is represented very similarly to television, with radio commentary spliced almost seamlessly into the narration, and product names float through the air at the supermarket. Even print media can "colonize" consciousness: the tabloids, but also mailings, magazines, etc. TV is just one major player in an overall cultural tendency that *White Noise* slyly and satirically represents.

33. Michael Valdez Moses writes "Since the technological media—television, the tabloids, radio, cinema—ultimately create their own reality, they appear to be free from all natural constraints

on their constructions. They possess the seemingly limitless power to transform and reconstitute the very being of the contemporary individual" (72). See Moses, "Lust Removed from Nature." For a sampling of similar, if generally less extreme, views on the power of television to shape consciousness and disrupt real communication in *White Noise*, see Saltzman, "The Figure in the Static: *White Noise*," 807-26; Keesey, *Don DeLillo*; and Ferraro, "Whole Families Shopping At Night!" 15-38. Other critics recognize a more nuanced picture of media and its effects in the novel. See Paul Cantor, "'Adolf, We Hardly Knew You.'" *New Essays on White Noise* Ed. Frank Lentricchia, 39-62. See also Noel King, "Reading *White Noise:* Floating Remarks." *Critical Quarterly* 33:3 (1990): 66-83.

34. John Ellis makes this very point as part of his argument that television functions as a medium for "working through" data, not merely for transmitting a singular vision of the world. See Ellis, "Television as Working-Through," in *Television and Common Knowledge*. Ed. Jostein Gripsrud. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 55-70. My point is slightly different; it's not just that television's segmented aesthetic allows viewers to pick and choose how they will use it, but that the discontinuous aesthetic itself influences the audience's sensibilities in ways that attunes them to the act of representation and different layers of reality-effects.

35. To some critics, the intrusion of television into private moments marks the way that family relations are trivialized and violated by technology. See, for example, Marion Muirhead, "Deft Acceleration: The Occult Geometry of Time in *White Noise*," *Critique* 42 (Summer 2001): 402-15.

36. See, for example, Gauntlett and Hill, *TV Living*, 54-61.

37. See Ron Lembo, "Situating Television in Everyday Life," 223-26.

38. In this scene, the novel once again comically suggests the power of the media to shape perceptions: Jack's daughters experience each symptom of the toxic gas, Nyodene Derivative, shortly after they hear about it on the radio. But at the same time, the family exhibits a deep awareness of the way the media can manipulate consciousness; when Babette announces that the girls "were complaining of sweaty palms" (since the radio just said one of the side effects is sweaty palms), Heinrich wryly replies: "There's been a correction. . . . Tell them they ought to be throwing up" (112). Media reports do not just constitute a kind of undifferentiated hyperreality for the family; the Gladneys see the reports *as* mediations, and strive to interpret what the mediations mean as such.

39. The inability to distinguish between words and things is supposed to be a side effect of Dylar, but of course it is analogous to the immersion in hyperreality that television symbolizes. Television, then, supposedly acts like a drug; this is a connection often made explicitly in debates about the ill effects of television.

40. Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 125. A major criterion for what counts as a "postmodern" text, from McHale's point of view, is that the text forks or branches off into different planes of reality and versions of events; he adds that TV functions particularly well as a sign of ontological plurality because of its format (always switching contexts and content) as well as its "tendency . . . to mesh with rather than override ongoing activities in the empirical world" (127).

41. In "Lust Removed from Nature," Michael Valdez Moses comments on the loss of "angst" as a major threat of technology; without angst or fear of death, the meaning of life itself is diminished (75). Arthur Saltzman, in "The Figure in the Static," argues that "technology manifests breakdowns in distinguishability" (815) and mass media blurs all events into trivial repetitions.