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Mystic Channels: The Supernatural Effect of Media on Characters in *White Noise*

Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise*, depicts a progressive, modern family and the technology that influences them. While the characters are educated and thoughtful, their lives orbit the topical information they gather from their televisions, tabloids, and radios. These one-way communication outlets alter the attitudes of the family members using ritual and superstition. Their actions rely upon subliminal cues from the same news sources that they call into question in times of crisis. Media outlets are sacred vessels of both information and radiation. The key to their power lies in their omnipresence in the average American home, an idea that the novel explores in depth. The media in *White Noise* is more than technology; it is a mystical force that guides DeLillo's characters.

The novel demonstrates the importance of television and radio news in the Gladneys' everyday lives when it introduces it as the center of their Friday nights. Jack Gladney narrates, stating that "Babette had made it a rule… to… make it a wholesome domestic sport", and this weekly television session replaces church (16). The family's attitude of the television being "a subtle form of punishment" shows that they view Friday nights as their family penance (16). DeLillo draws these parallels to demonstrate a transition of the American family from traditional Christian values to the values of the modern news world. While the media outlet has a negative effect on their attitudes, they continue to watch it ritualistically, just as church members might attend service or mass every Sunday. The consistent programming and format of television provides the same consistency of a sermon, allowing it to become a natural influence in the

Gladneys' lives. Instead of taking communion, the family eats Chinese food, and Jack's habit of "read[ing] deeply in Hitler well into the night" mimics the Bible study that another man might engage in on a Sunday after a religious service (16). Hitler and the TV set relate to each other as a prophet and a book in the Bible. When Denise comments that Hitler was on television the night before, Jack responds, saying "We couldn't have television without him" (63). Here, DeLillo depicts the dictator as a provider, rather than a murderer, to highlight the family's reliance upon their TV set for spiritual fulfillment. Although they express discomfort at having to watch television once a week, they continue to do so out of habitual necessity.

The power of the media from the TV set is shown when they act as locations or ideals for the characters. Murray observes, "For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set", and this statement explains how television is more than a convenience; it is a surreal location for its viewers (66). Like the astral plane or an afterlife, it exists in a non-physical dimension, since the word "television" entails not the device itself, but the content that is transmitted through it. It affects individuals as an escape, or a projection of a reality to aspire to, similar to the idea of attaining passage into the Western heaven or Eastern nirvana after death. When Babette reveals the details of her affair and trial drug use to her husband, she mentions that "the TV [was] up near the ceiling" in the motel where she met with Mr. Gray (194). The positioning of the television is symbolic of her being far from what she wishes to attain: the loss of fear and the ability to be a proper wife. She cannot do either when she has sex with Mr. Gray; when she is below the television, she lives below her standards.

The depiction of Babette below the television contrasts with her earlier placement within the television, where her presence has a spiritual effect on the Gladney family. When her posture

class is shown on a public channel, she is depicted as surpassing her role as matriarch and becoming a supernatural being. Jack reflects, saying, "She was shining a light on us, she was coming into being, endlessly being formed and reformed…as the electronic dots swarmed" (104). His words are closer to a description of someone attaining a higher level of consciousness than being televised. Her transmitted likeness intensely affects the family, inspiring "Confusion, fear, [and] astonishment" in the members as they are "shot through with Babette" (104-105). This television in this scene calls into perspective the idea of spirit over physical body. Jack and Wilder are the most affected for different reasons; while it reminds Jack of "some journey out of life or death" relating to his discussions with his wife on who will die first, the child does not distinguish between his mother and the image on the screen (105). The television does not change Wilder's attitude as he cannot understand the concepts of religion, spirituality, or mortality. He only experiences fear when he is removed from the image of his mother when the family turns the channel off. Wilder's existence is free from the supernatural because he has no need for mysteries to occupy his mind. For the rest of the family, they are filled with reverence at the mystery of Babette's appearance in media.

Jack Gladney's colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, studies the effect of media on the characters around him and often points out the mysticism that comes from the television. He tells Jack that he "want[s] to immerse [him]self in American magic and dread", and that the "TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data" (19, 51). Murray recognizes the power of the media in influencing people's beliefs. His discussions with his students and colleagues praise its technology for its "codes and messages" (50). This language suggests that television communicates parables, and Murray is a disciple of television who reveres the media. He speaks

of “the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials… like chants, like mantras” and tells his colleagues that television “practically overflows with sacred formulas” (51). To Murray, all the answers to life can be found in the media that comes from sources such as the TV set. He understands that technology has its own spiritual connotations in American society because of the rituals that develop from its prevalence. When one professor suggests that Americans adopt “an official Day of the Dead”, Murray replies, “We do. It’s called Super Bowl Week” (216). Likening a sports media event to a superstitious cultural holiday supports his opinion that television has mystical powers over groups. Upon inspection, the Mexican holiday and the Super Bowl are easily linked; both events are celebrated nationally, involve dressing in colorful costumes or uniforms, and have their own customs for foods and parties. Football fans have superstitions about sitting in favorite armchairs or wearing certain clothes so their teams will win. Both religion and television create customs that guide individuals. For Murray, the study of television media in culture is of the same level of importance as religious studies.

The attitudes of other characters to media such as the television and tabloids demonstrate the fact that they are not only conscious, but also wary of its effect on them. Murray’s students refer to television as “the death throes of the human consciousness”, and tabloid journalism carries a stigma in the news world due to its reporting of rumor as fact (51). People in DeLillo’s novel, in a similar sentiment to the American people as a whole, feel hostility towards the messages that come through to them through commercials and the “eerie diseased brain-sucking” television programming (16). The characters are aware that media influences them, and that it permanently alters society. Babette’s father, Vernon, wonders about this, asking Jack, “Were people this dumb before television?” (249). His stance on media technology contrasts with Murray’s

reverence. He is not the only family member who feels this way; at a dinner conversation, Heinrich claims that "all the deformed babies are coming from… Radio and TV" (175). Media creates fear in the characters, and they respond by fighting against it verbally without removing it completely.

Although Heinrich and other characters state distrust towards telecommunications and radio, they remain attached to it. The characters both worship and condemn the media as they would a deity. After his warning to his family about the radiation from technology, "the TV set [is] temporarily located" in his room, and Jack finds Heinrich there "watching live coverage" (222). The television and radio remain prevalent in the Galdneys' lives, as well as the lives of those around them. When Jack "walk[s] the streets of Blacksmith" he observes "The glow of blue-eyed TVs" in the houses he passes (281). DeLillo mentions the prominence of televisions to show its constant influence in America. The language of the phrase, "blue-eyed TVs" adds an eerie sentience to the media transmitters, showing that individuals are not alone when surrounded by media (281). The radio has even more proximity to the characters, existing in both their homes and cars. Heinrich gleans updates on the airborne toxic event from his radio, using it to become the source of knowledge for his family and other evacuees. The individuals feel less hostility towards the radio, even valuing its company. At the Boy Scout camp, Jack states that they are "doing fairly well" because they "have food… [and] radios" (148). By using "food" and "radios" to support the idea that the evacuees are doing well, DeLillo shows that his characters place their access to media on the same level of importance as nourishment. Jack closes the novel, stating, "Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks", insinuating that media has greater importance to people than anything else, including religion

(326). The relationship between people in Iron City and there media is stronger than their distaste for it.

DeLillo demonstrates media's controlling effect on people by referring to it with language suggesting a character, instead of an amenity. He writes phrases such as "I heard the TV say", "The voice on the radio said", and "The voice upstairs said" to suggest a singular sentient media that communicates through the television and radio (18, 112, 257). It has its own presence in scenes, contributing to dialogue or even acting on its own. In the scene in which Babette describes her interactions with Mr. Gray and Dylar, the discussion is interrupted with Jack asking her, "Why did the radio come on?" and being told that "The auto-timer is broken" (195). The radio's ability to turn on at this crucial moment is an supernatural marker of the turning point of the novel. This scene sets the events in motion that lead to Jack's attempted murder of Mr. Gray, or Willie Mink, and the radio turns on to signify its importance. The radio affects the couple by breaking the tension between the two, causing Jack to shift his anger away from Babette and towards Mr. Gray. Seemingly sentient media drives the actions of individuals in the novel without their being aware of the influence.

Other instances where the television and radio contribute to the scene occur when media has dialogue. Jack overhears key statements that trigger thoughts or strengthen the significance of the events that follow. When he argues with his wife over whether she wants to read for her enjoyment or his, he hears the statement, "If it breaks easily into pieces, it is called shale. When wet, it smells like clay" (28). This phrase shifts the tone of the conversation from pleasing through reading to a list of overtly sexual phrases. The physical sensations of "shale", "wet", and "clay" create imagery that stimulates both characters. Jack's erection results not from

Babette, but from the words she speaks to while ridiculing erotic literature. The TV inputs the disjointed phrase, "Until Florida surgeons attached an artificial flipper" (29). This image symbolizes Babette's creation of a false physical response in Jack by using "artificial" language. Another scene opens with Babette listening to a radio show, and they overhear the phrase, "I looked in the mirror and saw the person I was becoming… I needed to talk to others who shared these experiences" (190). It triggers Jack into forcing Babette to explain her research drug use, with which he believes that she needs help. However, the statement mirrors the actual nature of their conversation, which shifts from Babette's confession to Jack's revelation of his own persistent fear of mortality. The overheard media synchronizes with Babette and Jack's relations and catalyzes their interactions.

At a moment when Jack worries about his ability to speak German at the upcoming Hitler conference, he hears the television dialogue, "And other trends that could dramatically affect your portfolio" (61). This sentence shows that the financial information on the television influences Jack by increasing his tension at having to maintain his persona as an expert in Hitler and German culture. The placement of the phrase doubles as foreshadowing; the interaction with Denise that follows involves Babette's use of Dylar, which they are unfamiliar with at this point in the novel. The prophetic nature of these statements reinforces their supernatural identity. In another scene, the family overhears the phrase, "Available for a limited time only with optional megabyte hard disk" before leaving their home to escape the airborne toxic event (112). This precedes Jack telling Steffie that they will not have to evacuate, despite the motion of the feathery plume. The radio's use of the words "limited time only" and "optional" create a false confidence in Jack that the crisis will not be serious enough to warrant fleeing; instead, the words

foreshadow the "limited time" they have to escape the toxic effects of Nyodene D. Later, when Jack drives to kill Mr. Gray, he overhears, "Void where prohibited" as he touches his gun (303). The radio alludes to the fact that Jack's illness has nullified the rules of society while affirming his decision to murder for the last of the Dylar pills. The statements that Jack hears as dialogue from the media are evidence of its influence over his life, as well as prophecies of events to come.

Of the content deriving from the three media outlets that dominate in the novel, television, radio, and tabloids, disaster coverage has the most powerful draw for characters. Jack states that "Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (64). The Gladneys are not alone in their need to witness destruction, a fact brought up in a discussion the next day. One of the Jack's colleagues, Alfonse, explains the phenomenon, saying, "We… enjoy seeing [others] punished for their relaxed lifestyle and progressive social ideas" (66). This characteristic of television fulfills the spiritual need of modern Americans for apocalyptic incidents. DeLillo highlights the obsession with Armageddon when Jack has an encounter with a doomsayer at the Boy Scout camp; the difference between the two is the doomsayer's source of ideas being Biblical prophecy, while the prophecies that Jack believes are those that come through radio or television. Jack's prophets are "grave men standing before digital radar maps or pulsing photographs of the planet", and the apocalypse that he seeks understanding of is scientific in nature (167). However, science in this novel is given mystic properties due to people's lack of knowledge. As Heinrich points out, you might as well "tell them magic" when explaining technology to the average person (148). The media manipulates fear of destruction

while holding the answer to it, giving it the ability to induce either comfort or panic in viewers. The television and radio present disaster that people have a need to consume.

The television, tabloids, and radio provide direct guidance to the characters as well as subliminal. Steffie tells Babette, "We have to boil our water," because she hears it on the radio (34). She takes it as an order without questioning it, as the news source holds authority for her. Steffie tends to listen to the directives over media more often than the other Gladneys; Jack once observes her "mov[ing] her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken" when she watches television (84). She mimics the media in addition to following its words, creating a direct relationship between the two. In this scene, Steffie appears similar to one worshipping a god, and her lips move similarly to the recitation of a memorized prayer. Babette follows the suggestions of the media as well. When she reads the headline "FEAR OF DEATH" in "Mr. Gray's ad in the tabloid", she suspends logic and gives the tabloid power over her life (196). Her decision to seek out the experimental medication is a direct result of the words communicated to her by the media. The authority of the media's presence enables it to directly guide the Gladneys.

Jack mentions an extreme instance of media's power to manipulate individual's actions in his conversation with Heinrich about his imprisoned chess opponent. The pen pal claims to have "been hearing voices… On TV… Telling him to go down in history" (44). The forces speaking with the prisoner were given divine influence over the man, communicating with him through the conduit of the TV set. While it is natural to assume that the pen pal was not actually told to murder people by the media, Jack hears voices from his radio and television as well. His attempt to kill Mr. Gray is not unlike Heinrich's pen pal's shooting in that they both decide to commit

murder when they think that "Time [is] running out", whether due to a divorce or, in Jack's case, illness (44). The voices on the television can drive viewers to violence, as well as manipulating their perceptions.

Heinrich's chess mate's attempt to be remembered fails because "There is no media in Iron City", a statement repeated by Jack to his daughter, Bee, when she visits (45, 92). This idea shows that there is a separation of the content of the television, radio, and tabloids from the people of Iron City. Because the events and data transmitted are different from what the people experience, it increases the technology's power. The media exists in another reality, adding to its mysterious, religious nature. During the Nyodene D. evacuation, this upsets the population of Iron City; they feel abandoned by their deity because of the lack of media coverage. One man comments, "don't we deserve some attention for our suffering?" (162). The evacuees crave the attention of the media to prove their worth, but are denied it.

When the characters of *White Noise* are not surrounded by media, it remains the center of their thoughts and conversations. Murray is not alone in his studies of the effects of television on people; it is mentioned in lectures, conversations between the professors, and interactions within the Gladney family. Its content stimulates discussion, since it is not only a mystical force, but also a source of information. Like a holy text, it contains fact in addition to parable. Babette supports her knowledge of geography from "a surfer movie… where they travel all over the world" (80). "Talk is radio," she states later, confirming the idea that the separation of media and their lives is indistinguishable (264). DeLillo's integration of tabloid headlines lessens the separation further, and characters mimic the language of television commercials. Jack overhears a passerby say, "A decongestant, an antihistamine, a cough suppressant, a pain reliever"; this

sounds similar to the words he hears from the radio (262). The media permeates his life, and he even thinks of his life in the context of commercials. He imagines a woman that he sees in a fictional "soup commercial" (22). Before shooting Mr. Gray, Jack speaks in the cliché action tone of a television melodrama when he addresses the reader in the manner of a voice over, prefacing the events with, "Here is my plan" and ending with the romanticized image of "walk[ing] home in the rain and the fog" (304). Jack draws upon the canned mystery of television dramas to give him power. The media becomes the root of all that occurs in the novel and the source of all knowledge.

Mr. Gray, when introduced, has even less of a separation of media from reality. He becomes indoctrinated by the media because of his submersion in it while living in the motel room, assisted by his Dylar abuse. He quotes various television programs in his conversations as though they are a part of reality. Mr. Gray serves as one of the "fools… who speak in tongues" that the nun explains to Jack are necessary for human existence (319). The confrontation scene between the two is religious in its gravity, as Jack notes, "I sensed I was part of a network of structures and channels" (305). This imagery aligns with the format of televised media, giving the impression that the scene was planned by a greater technological force. Despite his mental instability, Mr. Gray manages to defend himself, shooting Jack with the gun's last bullet so they both survive. The fact that Jack cannot kill Mr. Gray suggests supernatural protection. Jack experiences spiritual fulfillment by saving the man, reflecting, "It hadn't occurred to me that a man's attempt to redeem himself might prolong… elation" (315). Mr. Gray's assimilation with television programming grants him divine protection; Jack's opportunity to save this piece of the media brings him peace not unlike that obtained with religious affiliation.

The individuals in *White Noise* live with the constant influence of media in their daily lives. The television and radio shape their attitudes and customs because they are prevalent in every American home. DeLillo demonstrates its power over people in place of traditional religion, and treats it as an omnipresent character in the novel with the ability to manipulate and interact. Jack, his family, and the people of Iron City struggle against its effects, but technological mysticism prevails in the end. Because they cannot escape or truly understand it, the characters allow themselves to be controlled by the media.