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Black Humor, Parody, and Fragmentation:

the Postmodern Narrative of *White Noise*

黑色幽默、戏仿与碎片化——

《白噪音》中的后现代主义叙事

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Abstract

Recognized as one of the finest postmodern novelists and most astute social critics of contemporary American life, Don DeLillo has published altogether 15 novels, one novella, 6 plays, a lot of short stories, essays and so on since his publication of *Americana* in 1971 till now. Among all his works, his masterpiece *White Noise* has caught greater attention than any other. While much of the criticism on this novel has focused on DeLillo's relationship to postmodern American culture, there is no comprehensive discussion of the postmodern narrative features that well suit the author's postmodern concern. Through close readings of *White Noise* and discussions of its postmodern narrative characteristics, this thesis offers a significant addition to current criticism on this novel.

My thesis consists of five chapters besides introduction and conclusion. The introduction part gives a general survey of Don DeLillo's life, works and a brief literary review. Then the thesis begins with a chapter that introduces the tide of postmodernism, focusing on the origin and emergence of postmodernism, the typical postmodern American fiction and the main characteristics of them. Trying to give a panorama of the contemporary life in America, the second chapter displays the postmodern American society portrayed in *White Noise* in which mass media, technology, and the concept of death are especially focused on. The third chapter deals with a very important postmodern technique, black humor, in *White Noise*. DeLillo employs black humor to expose the absurdity and chaos of the society which are caused largely by mass media and advanced technology. In this way, a dark sense of humor is subtly presented as a way of criticizing and satirizing a postmodern society as he describes in the novel. Chapter Four explores another important feature of postmodernist writing, parody, in the novel. Parody is not merely used in postmodernist writings but parody in postmodernist writing differs from parody in modernist writing in the sense that in postmodernist parody, the comic effect and critically ironical function are stressed at the same time. In this chapter, DeLillo's parody of consumer culture, parody of disaster movie, and parody of detective story in the novel are discussed and analyzed. In the play of parody, the writer suggests the

most serious problems of the contemporary society. Chapter Five examines fragmentation, another important feature of postmodern fiction, in *White Noise*. Just like parody, fragmentation, as a writing technique, is also not merely adopted in postmodernist writings because modernism also emphasizes on fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives, and random-seeming collages of different materials. However, postmodern fragmentation differs from modern fragmentation in the sense that while many modernist writers treat fragmentation as something tragic and try to achieve unity, coherence, and meaning by fragments, postmodernist writers do not claim that unity, meaning and coherence can be pursued and they just play with fragmentation. In *White Noise*, through the fragmentation of language, incoherent plot and the technique of collage, the wholeness and completion of the novel are interrupted. With fragmentation as his narrative technique, DeLillo successfully turns the whole structure and language of his novel into a huge metaphor for the media and technology saturated post-industrial America.

The last part is the conclusion. Based on the analysis above, it is easily concluded that *White Noise* is a novel which not only touches upon typical aspects of a postmodern society such as mass media, advanced technology, and people's particular fear of death, but also displays distinct postmodernist narrative techniques such as black humor, parody and fragmentation. In addition, DeLillo's unique position as a writer in contemporary American society is evaluated in this part. In his whole writing career, DeLillo is a thoughtful social and cultural critic. Though, as a writer, he cannot offer any suggestion to current social problems, it is enough for him to demonstrate a dystopia with high artistic techniques, without offering a utopia to replace it.

Key Words: *White Noise*, black humor, parody, fragmentation

摘要

20 世纪 70 年代以来的美国作家中, 唐·德里罗是最丰产、最有影响的作家之一。自 1971 年他的第一部长篇小说《美国文物》(Americana) 问世以来, 他已经连续发表了 15 部长篇小说, 1 部中篇小说, 6 个剧本以及若干短篇小说、散文等, 确立了他在美国文学史上的地位并被誉为是最优秀的后现代主义小说家和最敏锐的美国当代社会生活的批评家。在德里罗的所有作品当中, 其代表作《白噪音》比其它任何作品受到评论界更多的关注。评论界普遍认为, 《白噪音》抓住了当代美国的精神状态, “复印” 了美国当代生活, 反映了美国后现代文化。但通过仔细研究, 我们发现其实这也是一部极具后现代主义写作特征的小说。而且, 这些后现代主义创作技巧的成功运用更有利于作者展现美国的后现代社会生活, 表达了作者对社会问题的关注。然而, 到目前为止, 还没有任何对此书后现代主义叙事特征进行系统讨论的文章。因此, 本文的目的就是分析《白噪音》的后现代主义叙事, 从而为此书提供一个新的批评视角。

除了引言和结论, 本文包括五个部分。

引言简要介绍了作者的生平, 他的作品以及评论界对其作品的评述。论文的第一章探讨了后现代主义思潮的起源并阐述了典型的美国后现代主义小说的基本特征。为了让读者更好地了解美国的当代生活, 第二章展示了《白噪音》中所描绘的美国社会的后现代生活, 主要分析了大众传媒、科技和死亡意识这些主题。第三章分析了小说一个非常重要的后现代技巧——黑色幽默。德里罗采用黑色幽默的手法来揭露当今社会由于大众传媒和高科技所导致的社会的荒诞性和混乱性, 巧妙地对美国后现代社会进行了批判和讽刺。第四章主要研究《白噪音》中的戏仿成份。戏仿不是后现代文学特有的写作技法, 但后现代主义的戏仿特别强调其滑稽的一面和它对传统的颠覆和批判的功能, 使它有别于现代主义的戏仿。在《白噪音》中, 作者对商品文化、灾难片和侦探小说的戏仿都带有明显的后现代主义特征。通过戏仿, 作者以戏谑的语言嘲讽各种社会现实, 暗示了当今美国社会存在的严重社会问题。第五章论述了小说的另一个后现代主义叙事特点——碎片化。虽然现代主义作品也强调叙事的碎片化, 但是现代主义作品时刻维护着

一个中心，试图在碎片中寻找统一。而后现代主义作品的碎片中不再有中心，体现的是同中心分离的混乱。在《白噪音》中，作者通过拼贴、碎片化的叙事和不连贯的情节，使小说的整体性被打破，给读者一种零散和混乱的感觉。小说碎片化的叙事方式隐喻了整个被多媒体和高科技所浸透的美国后工业社会的破碎性。

文章的最后一部分是结论。通过以上分析可以认为，德里罗在《白噪音》中不仅向读者展示了美国后现代社会生活的方方面面而且也让读者领略到了典型的后现代主义叙事特征，虽然这样的叙事方式会给他们的阅读带来一定的困难。此外，结论部分还对德里罗作为一个作家在美国当代社会的独特地位进行了评价。在德里罗的整个写作生涯中，他是一个很有思想的美当代社会生活和文化的批评家。作为一个作家，尽管他不能对当今的社会问题提供任何建议和解决办法，但他用高超的艺术技巧向读者展示他所看到的一切，并让他们关注当今的社会问题，这已经足够了。

关键词：《白噪音》；黑色幽默；戏仿；碎片化

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Introduction

Don DeLillo, novelist, playwright and short story writer, is regarded as one of the most important writers of his generation. As a prolific and compelling writer, he varies his subjects from novel to novel, ranging from advertising, football, rock music, science and mathematics, political conspiracies, urban terrorists, cult murderers, chemical accidents to other modern-day concerns. Yet regardless of the subject matter, his central theme is always America. Prolific and well-known as he is, DeLillo, however, has done virtually nothing to promote himself and his books in the approved ways: “he does not make television appearances, give lectures, participate in promotional campaigns, or otherwise plug his books” (Ryan 794). In the literary world, he is usually considered by many as a hermit. He prefers his anonymity and likes to keep his life as private as possible: “He’s rather skimpy with his interviews, shuns the milieu and company of literary gossip-mongers and doesn’t say much about himself or his social origins of family upbringing” (Aaron 67). Though till now no bibliography exists that fully covers the depth and breadth of DeLillo’s ever-growing experience, some of the few interviews the author accidentally granted, to some extent, are crucial for us to piece together something like a biography for a better understanding of this great writer.

Born into an Italian immigrant’s family on November 20, 1936, DeLillo grew up in the Italian-American Fordham section of the Bronx in New York City, where he enthusiastically participated in various street games such as football and baseball and was raised by Italian Catholic immigrants. After graduation from Cardinal Hayes High School, he attended Fordham College where he majored in Communication Arts and studied theology, philosophy and history. DeLillo recalled being asleep or unaffected through high school or college, but stated in a 1982 interview that “New York itself was an enormous influence” and that he found inspiration in “the paintings in the Museum of Modern Art, the music at the Jazz Gallery and the Village Vanguard, the movies of Fellini and Godard and Howard Hawks” (Harris 16). From some interviews we can clearly see that DeLillo did not like his school life, but he was still a book-lover at that time. When he was a teenager, some books influenced him a lot. Those are

books by William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, and Herman Melville. Thomas Pynchon is the contemporary novelist for whom he has also shown the greatest respect.

After completing his studies at Fordham University, with a degree in “something called communication arts”, DeLillo started working as a copywriter for the Ogilvy & Mather advertising agency, beginning an “advertising career” that he described as “short” and “uninteresting”. While working, DeLillo also did creative writing in his spare time. In 1960, he published his first work of fiction, a short story, “The River Jordan” in *Epoch*. Then a lot more stories appeared in *Epoch*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Caeolina Quarterly*. In 1964, DeLillo quitted his job at the ad agency and embarked on a new life which proved to be very difficult for him for several years. However, despite all those difficulties, he still began work in 1966 on *Americana*, which was published in 1971 and followed by a series of novels such as *End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Ratner’s Star* (1976), *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978).

However, though DeLillo published so many novels at that period and was enthusiastically applauded by reviewers, his books did not win many readers at that time as one reviewer noticed that DeLillo’s books were much praised but not so much read, perhaps because “they deal with deeply shocking things about America that people would rather not face” (qtd. in Harris 18). DeLillo himself once said:

[I was] driven by [the] conviction that some truths aren’t arrived at so easily, that life is still full of mystery, that it might be better for you, Dear Reader, if you went back to the Living section of your newspaper because this is the dying section and you don’t really want to be here. This writer is working against the age and so he feels some satisfaction at not being widely read. He is diminished by an audience. (qtd. in LeClair 2005: 12-13)

Though DeLillo did not have a “breakthrough novel” at that time, that is, a novel which could perhaps “fix him on reading lists in university courses” in Frank Day’s words, he was regarded as a promising writer: “a writer with his intelligence and ear for language is bound to produce more fiction that shows close observation of life; this work is to be anticipated with pleasure” (Day 78).

Day's prediction was proved true before long because DeLillo's achievements in the 1980s were striking. He himself said that, starting in the 1980s, his novels were "more deeply motivated" and stemmed from "a stronger sense of commitment" to his craft (DeCurtis 65). In 1980, he published *Amazons*. Then *The Names* (1982), *White Noise* (1984) and *Libra* (1988) were published one by one. *Libra* became a huge hit, standing on the New York Times Best-seller List in the summer of 1988 and being chosen as a main selection by the Book-of-the-Month Club. In this period, DeLillo received many honors. In 1984, the American Academy and the National Institute of Arts and Letters presented to him their Award in Literature. *White Noise* won the 1985 National Book Award and *Libra* won the 1989 Irish Times' Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize.

After 1980s, DeLillo continued to write. *Mao II* was published in 1991 and won the 1991 PEN/Faulkner Award. In 1995, he was selected as one of two fiction writers to receive the 1995 Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Award, which provided him with three years of financial support. Several years later, he published his magnum opus *Underworld* which was nominated for the 1997 National Book Award. In 1999, the Jerusalem Prize was awarded to him. As the first American to win the award, DeLillo joined the ranks of V. S. Naipaul, Graham Greene, and Jorge Borges. The following year he was awarded the William Dean Howells Medal for *Underworld*, joining other American recipients like John Updike, Willa Cather, and William Faulkner. For this book, he even became a contender for the Nobel Prize for literature. In 2001, *The Body Artist* was published and *Cosmopolis* was published in 2003. His latest novel, *The Falling Man* was published in 2007. DeLillo was writing and publishing fiction and nonfiction almost every year. From 1971 till now, he has published altogether 15 novels, one novella, 6 plays, a lot of short stories, essays and so on.

With the receiving of all the rewards, DeLillo's canonical status has also been confirmed, as witnessed by the increasing number of articles in academic journals. Literary scholars from around the world put their pens to paper to honor him and his works in their own ways. There are both book-length studies and essays written about his novels, short stories and plays. The first book about DeLillo: Tom LeClair's *In the Loop* was published in 1987. This book sets the stage for monographic studies of DeLillo and is still hailed as an important and useful book for later DeLillo scholars.

Publications speeded up in the 1990s with Frank Lentricchia's edited book *Introducing Don DeLillo* in 1991 and his second edited volume of essays in the same year titled *New Essays on White Noise*. Interest in his writings was still growing. In 2000, Mark Osteen published *American Magic and Dread* and Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles edited an impressive collection of mostly previously published essays, *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*. 2002 was marked by David Cowart's *Physics of Language*. In 2003, a book titled *Don DeLillo — Bloom's Modern Critical Views* was edited by Harold Bloom and published by Chelsea House. Like *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, this book also mainly consists of previously published critical essays on him. 2004 witnessed the publication of *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief* by Jesse Kavadlo. In 2006, two books, *Don DeLillo: the Possibility of Fiction* by Peter Boxall and *Beyond Grief and Nothing: a Reading of Don DeLillo* by Joseph Dewey were published one by one. The latest book about him was published in 2008: *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, a book edited by John Duvall which includes articles covering many of DeLillo's works by many familiar names of DeLillo criticism. In addition, all kinds of journal articles and dissertations about DeLillo, either alone or in conjunction with other writers were appearing in abundance since the 1970s, which also speaks to the growing interest in DeLillo's works in academia.

Among all the critics, one question as whether DeLillo should be taken as a postmodern novelist is quite controversial. On the one hand, some scholars question the possibility of classifying DeLillo as a postmodern writer. According to Hans Bertens and Joseph Natohi, DeLillo's works can only marginally be considered postmodern in terms of a formal, literary postmodernism. Another literary critic Harold Bloom also thinks that DeLillo should not be looked as a postmodern novelist. Bloom lists DeLillo as one of the four major American novelists of his time, along with Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy, but he questions the classification of DeLillo as a postmodern novelist. On the other hand, DeLillo is widely considered by many modern critics to be one of the central figures of literary postmodernism. As to the reasons why DeLillo has been labeled so, Knight asks the following questions in his article "DeLillo, Postmodernism, Postmodernity":

In what sense is DeLillo a postmodern writer? Is it his detailed anthropological attention to those aspects of contemporary Western — and

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