

The Ridiculous Sublime in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*

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ABSTRACT

The sublime figures significantly in Don DeLillo's novels. Transformed into what has been termed postmodern sublime - disposing of transcendence in favor of immanence - it is considered to be more of a hollow, confusing and overwhelming phenomenon rather than an elevating and empowering one. Moreover, the multiplicity of prior representations and the exhaustion of the possible have undermined the authenticity and power of the sublime, turning it into pseudo-sublime and mock-sublime. As such, it has moved ever closer to the realm of the ridiculous to the point where it is rather a question of co-existence and co-implication between them rather than an opposition. This can be phrased the ridiculous sublime. This paper focuses on DeLillo's *White Noise* (1984) and *Cosmopolis* (2003) by drawing on major theorists of the sublime like Kant, Jameson, Zizek and, most notably, Lyotard, in an attempt to shed light on the modality of the merging of the sublime and the ridiculous. Our analysis shows that in DeLillo's fiction, *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, the events and phenomena that transpire to convey a sense of sublimity are almost always interrupted and tarnished by an implication of the grotesque and the ridiculous. This transformation of the concept of the sublime reflects the decline of metanarratives and the exhaustion of possible experiences as the hallmarks of the postmodern era.

Keywords: Don DeLillo; *White Noise*; *Cosmopolis*; the sublime; the ridiculous

INTRODUCTION

The postmodern culture with its intricate web of systems and image-bound consumers is an ever-present theme in Don DeLillo's novels. Famous for continuing to "write novels that probe American postmodernity" (Duvall 2003: 4), DeLillo often portrays a condition that, no matter how closely it heads to home, is still too complex to fully comprehend. This incomprehensibility leads to a quality of "woe and wonder" which in Bloom's words is why "we turn to DeLillo" (2003, 4). This quality of 'woe and wonder' coupled with DeLillo's concern with the advent of the digital age and global terrorism makes inevitable the figuring in his novels of an element of the sublime. To discuss what is termed 'the postmodern sublime' and 'the ridiculous sublime' in DeLillo's work, we must begin by defining the very concept of the sublime.

THE SUBLIME

Often known as indescribable, incomparable and unrepresentable, the sublime is almost impossible to define. Usually associated with ideas of the great, the awe-inspiring and the overpowering, the sublime has become a complex yet crucial concept in many disciplines. Simply put, though, the sublime is a combinatory feeling of simultaneous fear and fascination, repulsion and attraction, and horror and admiration that is caused by an

overwhelming and confounding phenomena. In this strange state of anxiety and enchantment, however, there is “a momentary loss of will and cognitive grasp” (Mooney, 2009, p. 47), which leads to an intensifying and sharpening of our senses. Being confronted by something that eludes description and representation, we are incapable of speech and expression, and “this failure of language is where the sublime begins” (Wawrzinek, 2008, p. 11). Generally, whenever experience cannot bear out any sense of conventional understanding and the power of an event is such that “words fail and points of comparison disappear,” we “resort to the feeling of sublime” (Shaw, 2006, p. 2). To experience the sublime, then, is “to confront one’s borders and boundaries,” and more specifically, to confront “an excess that defies representation, an otherness that confounds the self” (Wawrzinek, 2008, p. 13).

KANT AND THE SUBLIME

For Kant, the sublime is produced “by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful, and ... since the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby, the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, i.e. merits the name of a negative pleasure” (Kant, 1952, pp. 75-76). Kant’s claim that the sublime “cannot be contained in any sensuous form,” but in “the disposition of the mind” (76, 86) is also significant. While Edmund Burke’s theory of sublimity contains the feeling of the sublime in an object, Kant shifts the focus from object per se to the mind of the perceiver. Thus, he states that “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging subject, and not in the object of nature that occasions this disposition by the judgment formed of it” (1952, p. 86).

Kantian emphasis on the power of mind and reason operates in the service of a moral framework which brings us to the question of the relation between sublimity and morality. Something about our essence as rational beings who can transcend other beings makes us aware of our own mighty creator’s power over all overpowering phenomena. According to Kant, then, any sublime encounter is accompanied by a moral consolation of “the presence of Divinity” (Kant 1952: 93), for, “without the development of moral ideas,” that which we call sublime, “merely strikes the untutored individual as terrifying” (1952, p. 95). Thus, the delight we find in the sublime encounter comes from the realization of an intellectual superiority which for Kant, leads to an ultimate “moral delight” (1952, p. 101).

LYOTARD AND THE SUBLIME

Lyotard’s (1994) views had a significant influence on the shaping of the concept of the sublime, mainly that of postmodern sublime. Even though Lyotard (1994) himself admits that he gives “only a rapid sketch of the argument” (1991, p. 135), he picks up the sublime argument where Kant left off. His preoccupation with Kant is most noticeably found in his *Lessons on the Analytic of Sublime*, where he gives a detailed reading of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, adding to his argument, and at times departing from it. The sublime is, for both Kant and Lyotard, “the without-form” and “the without-limit,” which “denies the imagination the power of forms, and denies nature the power to immediately affect thinking with forms” (1994, p. 58, 54). The delight that comes from the sublime experience, Lyotard (1994) concurs, is a “negative pleasure,” which results from “two contradictory sensations, pleasure and displeasure, or attraction and repulsion” (1994, p. 109). The sublime is, therefore, caused by a combination of resistance and ‘negative presentation,’ a concept which, for Kant, meant the inadequacy of imagination to present the idea. In the words of Lyotard, however, negative presentation “is neither the absence of presentation nor the presentation of nothingness. It is negative in the eyes of the sensible but at the same time is still a ‘mode of presentation’ [...]”

Here the imagination has a way of presenting that ‘ex-ceeds’ its norm, or, rather, ‘se-cedes’ from it” (1994, p. 151).

Borrowing from Kant (1952) then, Lyotard (1994) expands on the idea of negative presentation to present a more sustained argument of the sublime. It is on the grounds of morality, however, that Lyotard radically departs from Kant. For Lyotard “the sublime feeling cannot be identified with moral feeling. Very simply because the moral feeling, respect, is not an aesthetic feeling” (1994, pp. 118-119). And “sublime feeling is aesthetic because, like taste, it is subjectively final without the concept of an end” (p. 128). For Lyotard, then, any attempt to regain the transcendental, or in Kant’s case moral, dimensions of the sublime must be handled with extreme skepticism.

THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

Lyotard’s skepticism toward all sources of transcendence and morality is essentially linked with what is now known as ‘the postmodern condition’ and what he calls an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1992, p. xxiv), an incredulity that incorporates a characteristic skepticism towards all overarching master concepts, such as nature, reason, or the divine. “This incredulity”, Lyotard writes, “is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it” (ibid). The postmodern condition, then, is “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies” (1992, p. xxiii). This is why the sublime is resituated “from the contrite fear and trembling before awesome mountains (Kant’s sublime), to the post-holocaust encounter with an incomprehensible cultural negativity and, further to a more general interest in non-narratizable extremes” (Engstrom, 1993, p. 191). If, for Kant (1952), the sublime was the natural, sensible and conceptual world exceeded, for Lyotard it is cultural man-made technologies and discourses gone wild, beyond rule, exceeding what is presentable” (ibid, p. 197).

ALL AND NOTHINGNESS

The waning of metaphysical belief has hollowed the sublime of its traditional transcendental substance; the nothingness that reigns at the heart of this hollow sublime is ultimately related to the concept of nihilism, one “to which postmodernity is simply a footnote” (Betz, 2005, p. 370). The connection between nihilism and the sublime was first pointed out by Lyotard who linked the two concepts by their mutual lack of reality: “What would this ‘lack of reality’ mean if we were to free it from a purely historicizing interpretation? The phrase is clearly related to what Nietzsche calls nihilism. Yet I see a modulation of it well before Nietzschean perspectivism, in the Kantian theme of the sublime” (Lyotard, 1992, p. 19).

Lyotard states that Nietzschean nihilism is a later development of the aesthetics of the sublime, and that “they are fundamentally the same idea” (Woodward, 2011, p. 51). Indeed, when we identify ourselves with the boundlessness of the sublime, we “cease to be anything in particular, but thereby become potentially everything,” and this potential leads to a “dazzling emptiness” in which “all and nothing are closely allied, since both are absolved from limits” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 45). It is this closeness between ‘all’ and ‘nothing’ that leads to the inevitable connection between nihilism and the sublime. As Lyotard writes,

..whatever the case might be with the theme of the sublime, the nihilist problematics from which it proceeds is diffused into every treatment, literary and artistic, of the sensible. Nihilism does not just end the efficiency of the great narratives of emancipation, it does not just lead to the loss of values and the death of God, which render metaphysics impossible. It casts suspicion on the data of aesthetics.

(qtd. In Woodward, 2011, p. 57)

In this highly suggestive passage, Lyotard indicates that the sublime is an earlier modulation of nihilism, and that the theme of the sublime proceeds from nihilist problematics. It further suggests that both nihilism and the sublime are integrally related to a temporary loss of reality and a retreat of “rules and regulations” (ibid). Moreover, Lyotard binds nihilism and the sublime by “linking the Kantian problematic of the sublime with the Heideggerian analysis of nihilism” in terms of the retreat of Being (ibid). He writes: “In a certain way the question of the sublime is closely linked to what Heidegger calls the retreat of Being: retreat of donation” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 113).

Nihilism and the sublime, therefore, take the same form and content. Both concepts are structured according to a “tension between related sets of terms: sensible and intelligible, existence and meaning, finitude and infinitude, immanent material and transcendent Idea” (Woodward, 2011, p. 58). They both “rupture the integrity of experience,” creating a “divide between the sensible and the intelligible,” and “casting doubt on the reality of the world” (ibid). Additionally, the sublime can be regarded as “the feeling that nothing might happen: the nothingness now” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 198); as Will Slocombe writes, “depictions of nothingness create a sublime feeling” (Slocombe, p. 98).

The nothingness that predominates in DeLillo’s characters is, as Eric of *Cosmopolis* affirms, a space “large enough for a man to walk through” (DeLillo, 2003, p. 20). Yet this nothingness may not be a bad thing after all, because complete nihilism, for Nietzsche, is a helpful and even necessary preparation for a “revaluation of all values” (qtd. in Woodward, 2011, p. 53). This revaluation, in DeLillo’s fiction, however, never seems to materialize beyond the surface.

A substantially significant element in the Kantian formulation of the sublime is the depletion or “emptying of the self” which develops in the person who experiences the sublime, followed by a “self-assertion” and inflation once the viewer gathers “poise after a momentary deflation” (Mooney, 2009, pp. 47-48). Thus, the viewer is emptied out of himself in the face of the sublime and then he is filled with an inflating and elevating feeling: self-annihilation is supplanted by self-empowerment. But this does not seem to be the case with postmodern sublime. The postmodern man’s experience with the sublime is neither inflating nor elevating. When DeLillo’s characters encounter the postmodern sublime, they are deflated and emptied only to realize that there is nothing empowering to be filled with: the possibility of self-assertion is gone for good.

JAMESON AND THE SUBLIME

Fredrick Jameson first used the term “postmodern sublime” in his work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Postmodern sublime, in his opinion, can be “adequately theorized” in terms of “that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions” (Jameson, 1991, p. 38). Jameson argues that nature used to be a crucial element of the sublime in the precapitalist societies. Living in the “Third Machine Age,” however, the problems of “aesthetic representation” have replaced nature as the main source of the sublime (Jameson, 1991, p. 36). Moreover, Jameson seems to hold accountable not only the force of technology for this representational inadequacy but also capitalism itself. Looking at the present condition from a Marxist point of view, Jameson notes that it is not “technology per se” that has caused a major shift in the way things represent themselves, since “technological development” is basically the aftermath of “the development of capital rather than some ultimately determining instance in its own right” (p. 35).

More significantly, Jameson speaks of “a whole new type of emotional ground tone”, what he calls “intensities” which can “best be grasped by a return to older theories of the

sublime” (1991, p. 6). These so-called intensities are the effects of technology, “derealization,” “simulacra,” “camp” and capital which combine to create what Jameson calls a “hysterical sublime” (1991, p. 35). Here, the hysterical sublime is almost unanimously synonymous with the technological one, but with added dimensions of psychopathological concerns. “Our faulty representation of some immense communicational and computer network,” writes Jameson, “are themselves but a distorted figuration of something deeper, namely the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism” (1991, p. 37). He continues:

The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp [...] One is tempted to characterize it as ‘high-tech paranoia’ — in which the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competing information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind.

(1991, pp. 37-38)

Our “bewildering immersion” into this whole new type of “consumer society,” which is at the same time a media/information/electronic society (p. 3, p. 43), is accompanied by a feeling of both terror and thrill. Thus, we are at once terrorized and thrilled by the incomprehensible global system which constantly bombards us with postmodern sublimity.

ZIZEK AND THE SUBLIME

With his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek is undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in discussions of the contemporary sublime. Where Lyotard uses the Kantian sublime to analyze the concept in his own terms, it is from Lacan that Žižek appropriates his notion of the sublime and redefines it in terms of a psychological phenomenon. According to Žižek, the sublime is such not because it incorporates something extraordinary or supernatural, but because of its embodiment of the impossible and the unattainable. However, like Lyotard, Žižek, too, does not conceive the sublime as a transcendent object “beyond the field of representation,” but rather as “an indicator of the traumatic emptiness, the primordial lack, residing at the heart of all forms of symbolization” (Shaw, 2006, p. 138).

In *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, Žižek probes the two opposite poles of the sublime and the ridiculous through a detailed reading of David Lynch’s film *Lost Highway* (1997). As Žižek observes, the incessant rush of new techniques and modes of narration of the contemporary art has made us realize that “the distinction between the sublime and the ridiculous is a matter of degree” (Shaw, 2006, p. 142). The problem for Žižek is that today, “in the double movement of progressive commodification of aesthetics and the aesthetification of the universe of commodities,” an aesthetically “pleasing” object is less and less able to provide the necessary edge for the raising of the sublime (qtd in Shaw, 2006, p. 142).

As contradictory as it sounds, Žižek does not seem to be speaking of an opposition between the sublime and the ridiculous, but of a co-implication and co-existence between the two. That is, while some works of art may oscillate between the two poles of the sublime and the ridiculous, a work may simultaneously manage to integrate both into one union of

opposites: the ridiculous sublime. This union of opposites is manifest in many of DeLillo's novels such as the *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo, edited by John N. Duvall, explores narrative technique, political themes, and the persistence of mystery in Don DeLillo's four novels: *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*. Duvall notes that, DeLillo's fiction is significant because of its ability to show us "how America became Postmodern" (2003, p. 2). Moreover, the possibility of postmodern sublimity is, among other things, touched upon in novels like *White Noise*. Peter Boxall's *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* also offers a comprehensive reading of DeLillo's fiction. "Death and the Avant-garde," "Terrorism and Globalization," and "The Body of History" are three chapters, which respectively deal with DeLillo's *White Noise*, *Mao II* and *Cosmopolis*. He maintains that the novels offer a mini-history, for example, of technological developments in the post-war era.

Laura Barrett's "How the Dead Speak to the Living': Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*" offers a similar discussion. Focusing on the effects of consumerism and mediatization, she suggests that the only pure and unmediated realm in the novel is death which the characters mostly evade by fear. Barrett's examination of the postmodern sublime, however, is narrowed down only to the significance of transcendence and divinity. In "Meditations on Death and the Sublime: Henry Bugbee's in Demonstration of the Spirit," Edward F. Mooney touches upon similar issues. Most notably, he explores the idea of death and mystery as a sublime phenomenon. The haunting quality of death, he asserts, reminds us of the possibility of total annihilation. Yet in the face of the sublime phenomenon, we are not annihilated but exhilarated.

The sublime phenomenon carries favor with Joseph Tabbi as well. In his *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*, Tabbi offers an argument on the notion of the sublime in the fiction of some significant contemporary writers. By focusing on the works of Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph McElroy, and Don DeLillo, Tabbi finds that a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology has produced a powerful new mode of writing – the technological sublime, which focusses on the power of technology and information in contemporary fiction. The discussion that Tabbi offers of the postmodern sublime in DeLillo's work, however, solely focuses on the technological aspects of his fiction and not on the other aspects of postmodern sublimity such as its overwhelming yet aesthetized violence or its confounding combination of the ridiculous and the sublime. In this respect, then, Tabbi's argument of the postmodern sublime in DeLillo remains limited.

POSTMODERNISM AND THE SUBLIME IN DELILLO

The postmodern sublime differs from traditional versions mainly in the substitution of sources. The traditional sublime draws its substitution mainly from nature. In DeLillo these sources are mostly either the confounding forces of technology and information or the overwhelming power of sublime violence. That is, DeLillo's characters find themselves in constant awe and bewilderment not as a result of facing the magnificent and divine in nature but because of their immersion into unexplainable, unrepresentable and, more accurately, sublime events. The consequences of living in a secular world, however, help add another concept to the list and that is the hollow or ridiculous sublime which will be the main focus of this study. Although there are still traces of a longing for moments of sublime transcendence and divinity in DeLillo's characters, essentially a sense of hollowness and

absurdity pervades such moments. Casting off transcendence in favor of immanence, therefore, the postmodern sublime is characteristically not nearly as uplifting and elevating as the romantic, traditional sublime. Uncertainty and ambivalence suffuse such phenomena. As overwhelming and baffling as it still may be, the postmodern sublime can at times be hollow, inauthentic, and even ridiculous. Postmodern sublime, unlike the romantic or traditional sublime, is “neither beautiful nor necessarily invested with a moral imperative; instead, between knowing and feeling, it is at the limits of ethics and aesthetics,” seeking “neither closure nor origin” (Frederick, 2009, p. 550).

From a poststructuralist/postmodernist perspective, we live in an age when a Lyotardian ‘incredulity toward metanarrative’ prevails our everyday encounters, and grand schemes of thought such as religion, politics, or science, can simply no longer account for all aspects of human experience. With the removal of the so-called grand narratives and fixed certainties, and with the emergence of a “culture of the image or the simulacrum,” a new “depthlessness” has become one of the “constitutive features” of the postmodern sublime (Jameson, 1991, p. 46). As Joseph Tabbi (1996), discussing the technological sublime in DeLillo’s fiction argues, the emergence of science and technology has “put to flight former metaphysical, religious and political certainties” (p. x). Putting the focus on the sublime power of technology, however, Tabbi does not probe the aftermath of the replacement of nature by technology in postmodern sublime - the inevitable exhausting and hollowing of any sublime experience of its crucial essence.

The realm of DeLillo’s fiction has been penetrated and consumed by “simulation, its voracious and usurping double” (Moraru, 2003, p. 100). DeLillo’s characters are bombarded by information and simulation generated from the ever-present media, the result of which is “a brutal loss of the real,” and “a degree zero of meaning”; in the words of Baudrillard (1995, p. 32, 61). As such, we, just like DeLillo’s characters, are surrounded by more and more information, yet, less and less meaning. Similarly, Jameson talks about a “transformation of the real into so many pseudoevents” (Jameson, 1991, p. 48). Indeed, the power of the “ubiquitous mass media” has stripped DeLillo’s characters of “its secrets, inhibitions, repressions, and depths” ultimately leading to “the hollowing out of the self—or better to say, the dispersal of self” (Wilcox, 1991, p. 347). Once the authenticity and subjectivity of the self is negotiated and reduced to a mere simulation, the integrity and authenticity of a concept like the sublime is also diminished; the sublime becomes pseudo-sublime.

Moreover, the globalization of capital with a “dizzying speed” produces a “cultural exhaustion” (Boxall, 2006, p. 3), what Gilles Deleuze (1998) calls the “exhaustion of the possible” (p. 152). Deleuze comments, in his essay on Samuel Beckett entitled ‘The Exhausted,’ that “there is no longer any possible (p. 152).” DeLillo’s fiction, just like Beckett’s work, presents countless portraits of the “exhausted person.” “He exhausts that which, in the possible, *is not realized*,” Deleuze says (ibid). “He has done with the possible, beyond all tiredness, for to end yet again” (ibid). This Deleuzian exhaustion is prevalent in DeLillo’s fiction, taking form in the endless TV images of sublime violence in *White Noise* and culminating in the burning man whose act is no longer ‘original’ in *Cosmopolis*. The multiplicity of previous acts and experiences drain the present ones out of their meaningful substance, leaving the viewer/reader with an ungraspable vast, yet, empty void which can most appropriately be termed as the “nihilistic” or hollow sublime (Slocombe, 2003, p. 54).

POSTMODERN BELIEF IN WHITE NOISE AND COSMOPOLIS

In DeLillo’s fiction, even religious belief is “swallowed in the order of the simulacrum” (Wilcox, 1991, p. 358). Living in “a town called Blacksmith,” the people of *White Noise* (1984) cannot help but be skeptical and cynical about “the center, the unquestioned source”

(DeLillo, 1984, p. 11). *White Noise* is DeLillo's most representative novel about postmodernism and the so called 'postmodern condition.' It follows a year in the life of a college professor of Hitler studies named Jack Gladney and his current wife Babette (his fifth marriage), who live with their step children from previous marriages. Living amidst the 'white noise' of information technology, they try to face their fear of death by attempting to live a normal life. Their life, however, is nothing that remotely resembles normal. For the characters inhabiting the world of *White Noise*, "religion is a hollow husk", "divine apocalypse" and "cosmic revelations" like "all other grand narratives, no longer obtain" (Barrett, 2001, p. 101). Their religious belief is nothing but a mere phantom or simulation of the real thing. This is best exemplified in the episode of the nuns whom Jack meets in the hospital. He asks the resident nun about the Church's view on heaven. "Do you think we are stupid?" the nun answers much to Jack's surprise. "Then what is heaven, according to the Church, if it isn't the abode of God and the angels and the souls of those who are saved?" (DeLillo, 1984, p. 302). Jack persistently asks. And the quick reply of the nun is even more shocking and confusing. "Saved? What is saved? This is a dumb head, who would come in here to talk about angels. Show me an angel. Please. I want to see." Clearly, even nuns who are supposed to "believe" firmly in "all the traditional things" have abandoned their belief (pp. 302-303), and their "dedication" is merely "a pretense" for the sake of "others" (p. 304). So just like the simulated evacuation or SIMUVAC which was a model with no origin or source for the real thing, the faith of the nuns is also a "SIMUVFAITH", a faith with no origin (Duvall, 2003, p. 179).

The capitalist Eric of *Cosmopolis* is even more drowned in his own "little hollow of noontime" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 76). *Cosmopolis* is the story of Eric Packer, a 28-year-old multi-billionaire asset manager, who takes a one day journey through New York in his luxurious limousine to get a 'haircut.' Thematically, however, what informs the story is the "inseparability" of technology and capital (DeLillo, 2003, p. 23). Eric views the events that happen around him all through the screens in his limousine with the exception of his several violent attempts to regain a sense of 'stunning' reality. For most of the novel, though, we see Eric living in this dull, yet, to use Lyotard's words, "increasingly ungraspable" and "unsteady" reality that is surrounded by a multitude of adopted new technologies (1991, p. 101). He's a skeptic because he believes that the "world is supposed to mean something that's self-contained. But nothing is self-contained" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 60). So he is left "in a suspended state" with no "consequential" meaning "behind him" and "no culminating moment ahead" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 169). In such a state, one's identity, that is, the individual's concept of the self (Lee 2003), is also no longer self-contained. Moreover, in the world of Eric, the concept of God is as obsolete as the anachronistic language which struggles to keep up with the pace of speeding technologies. As such, Eric undermines Benno Levin, his murderer, by mockingly alluding to those who act on behalf of God's command: "Is there a fungus that speaks to you? I'm serious. People hear things. They hear God" (DeLillo, 2003, p. 203). For Eric, the metaphysical concept of a higher and all-knowing presence is "out of context" (DeLillo, 1984, p. 29); presence is replaced by an absence that proclaims a "victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos" (p. 24).

THE RIDICULOUS AND THE SUBLIME IN *WHITE NOISE* AND *COSMOPOLIS*

The postmodern sublime can come off as hollow and empty. Moreover, when a phenomenon like the sublime loses its essential qualities of elevation and loftiness it also turns into its total opposite: the sublime becomes the ridiculous. An early example of this is observed in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* when the sublime description of an airplane soaring above London dives into inevitable banality: "It was strange; it was still. Not a sound was to be

heard above the traffic. Unguided it seemed; sped of its own free will. And now, curving up and up, straight up, like something mounting in ecstasy, in pure delight....” (qtd. in Mosco, 2004, p. 23) As the plane climaxes to a position of the sublime, it spells TOFFEE in the sky and reveals its main purpose: advertising a popular candy. The airplane remains “aloft,” but the sublime “comes crashing down,” and Woolf’s “ecstatic mechanical phoenix turns into a flying billboard to banality” (Mosco, 2004, pp. 23-24). This scene is reminiscent of the one in *White Noise* when Jack hears her daughter mutter something in her sleep. He is, however, persistent in retaining his sublime moment by attributing some “looming wonder” and “splendid transcendence” to “these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child’s restless sleep” (DeLillo, 1984, pp. 148-149). But as meaning is “removed from experience” and “the sacred expelled from the profane” (Salyer, 2003, p. 39), these visionary moments of sublimity in the postmodern fiction with all their “pretensions to truth and transcendence,” are usually exposed as either “a logocentric illusion” or “a hyperreal construct” (Maltby, 2003, p. 214).

The postmodern sublime is ridden with contradiction and ambiguity. Just as in *Cosmopolis* where you feel “strong, proud, stupid and superior” (DeLillo, 2003, p. 116) all at the same time, you cannot help but feel all these paradoxical emotions in the face of the postmodern sublime. The “co-existence of multiple differences” is, in fact, a major feature of the postmodern sublime, allowing “the sublime and the grotesque to be situated alongside one another” (Wawrzinek, 2008, p. 28). This is what Zizek (2000) talks about when he discusses the opposition of the ridiculous and the sublime. As Zizek observes, the distinction between the sublime and the ridiculous is “a matter of degree” (Zizek, 2000, p. 32). The problem is that today, “in the double movement of progressive commodification of aesthetics and the aesthetification of the universe of commodities,” an aesthetically “pleasing” object is less and less able to maintain the limitlessness factor “necessary for the raising of the sublime” (qtd. in *ibid*). Therefore, rather than talking about an opposition between the sublime and the ridiculous, Zizek discusses their co-existence and co-implication. In *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, Zizek pursues this idea through a detailed reading of David Lynch’s neo *film noir*, *Lost Highway* (1997). As Wiczorek (2000) explains, we

see an enigmatic juxtaposition or coincidence of opposites in Lynch’s films—of the protagonists’ comical fixation on an ordinary yet sublime object; of an unbearably naive yet deadly serious vision; or the redemptive quality of clichés that makes them paradigmatically post-modern, corresponding to what Zizek here qualifies as the enigma of ‘postmodernity.’

(p. 5)

The same implication of the sublime and the ridiculous is present in DeLillo’s fiction. This is best observed in the scenes where the main character is about to have a visionary moment of transcendence. Like an anticlimax, the sublime moment starts soaring and soaring and right at the moment it reaches its highest peak, it dives down into the realm of the ridiculous. *White Noise* is replete with these anticlimactic moments. Jack’s episode of listening to her daughter Steffie in her sleep is a case in point. Here Jack’s constant search for divine meaning leads him to experience a trance-like moment that, on the surface, resembles a moment of the sublime:

Steffie turned slightly, then muttered something in her sleep. [...] I was ready to search anywhere for signs and hints, intimations of odd comfort. I pulled my chair up closer. [...] I sat there watching her. Moments later she spoke again. Distinct syllables this time, not some dreamy murmur-but a language not quite of this world. I struggled to understand. I was convinced she was saying something, fitting together units of stable meaning. I watched her

face, waited. Ten minutes passed. She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. *Toyota Celica*.

A long moment passes before Jack realizes that these mysterious and divine sounding words actually stand for “the name of an automobile” that Steffie has evidently heard in a TV commercial (DeLillo, 1984, pp. 149-149). This, in fact, may reveal the increasing impact of media on people’s everyday life as well as the power of advertisement industry in its appropriation of “literary elements in television commercials” to enhance effectivity (Periasamy, 2015 p. 152). But instead of acknowledging the fact that ‘Toyota Celica’ is just an automobile brand and it has nothing sublime or transcendent about it, Jack ignores the earthly and banal source of the word and revels more deeply in his moment of delusional spirituality.

The scene where Jack’s fear of death leads him to believe that the messenger of death is paying him a visit is also of great significance here. Jack wakes up in the middle of the night probably at “an odd-numbered hour” hearing the “crows [...] screaming in the trees,” when he notices “someone sitting in the backyard” of his house:

A white-haired man sitting erect in the old wicker chair, a figure of eerie stillness and composure [...] I thought one thing, that he'd been *inserted* there for some purpose. Then fear began to enter, palpable and over whelming, a fist clenching repeatedly in my chest. Who was he, what was happening here? [...] I didn't know what to do. I felt cold, white. I worked my way back to the window, gripping a doorknob, a handrail, as if to remind myself of the nature and being of real things. He was still out there, gazing into the hedges. I saw him in profile in the uncertain light, motionless and knowing. Was he as old as I'd first thought-or was the white hair purely emblematic, part of his allegorical force? That was it, of course. He would be Death, or Death's errand-runner [...] an aphorist of last things, giving me the barest glance-civilized [...] His stillness was commanding. I felt myself getting whiter by the second. What does it mean to become white? How does it feel to see Death in the flesh, come to gather you in? I was scared to the marrow. I was cold and hot, dry and wet, myself and someone else. (DeLillo, 1984, pp. 231-232)

Jack’s moment of supernatural transcendence, however, does not last very long. The mysterious man starts walking towards him and it is then that “the sense of eerie and invincible stillness” washes off. As the “distinctive physical traits” of the man seem “more and more familiar,” Jack realizes that, “it was not Death that stood before me but only Vernon Dickey, my father-in-law” (p. 233). Smash! The sublime is shattered into the ridiculous. Just as we reach the highest point of Jack’s apocalyptic drama, we are brought down to the earthly domain of the mundane.

The figure of Hitler suffers a similar fate in the novel. Hitler whose dark and powerful image is formidable enough for Jack to take refuge in, has been reduced to a college course. In fact, the whole idea of Hitler studies quickly becomes comic in DeLillo’s portrayal, especially when he links it to the study of another twentieth-century giant, Elvis Presley (p. 64). Once, “a horrifying phenomenon like Hitler can be represented, it can be stripped of its aura and turned into a commodity” (Cantor, 2003, p. 58). Hitler is contracted in scope to “three hours a week, restricted to qualified seniors” (DeLillo, 1984, p. 25) and a matter of routine. Additionally, he is reduced to the level of a mere subject of gossip and jokes: “They told Hitler jokes and played pinochle” (p. 261). Marx (1964) explains this condition in terms of his reformulation of Hegel’s remarks on history: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts

and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce” (Marx, 1964, p. 320). As such, Hitler is not exempt from this formula, having transformed from a matter of tragedy to that of farce.

Another example of the ridiculous sublime in *White Noise* is Jack’s unsuccessful attempt to kill Willie Mink, the corrupt project manager with whom Jack’s wife is supposedly having an affair as an arrangement to alleviate her fear of dying by the experimental drug Dylar. Jack plans this act of sublime violence as an attempt to reintroduce some reality and intensification into his life because in the words of Lyotard “intensity,” is associated with “an ontological dislocation” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 101). But Jack’s attempt at his own ‘ontological dislocation’ does not conclude so successfully. His cinematic fantasies of killing Mink turns into a “parody of Humbert Humbert’s murder of Clare Quilty in *Lolita*” (Barrett, 2001, p. 107), and his disastrous plan becomes even more ridiculous as he gets shot in his own hand. His disappointment at the outcome of the incident is mingled with his physical pain which makes the sublime moment all the more ridiculous:

The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff. I was disappointed. Hurt, stunned and disappointed. What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I’d carried out my scheme? The pain was searing blood covered my forearm, wrist and hand. I staggered back, moaning, watching blood drip from the tips of my fingers. I was troubled and confused [...] The extra dimensions, the super perceptions, were reduced to visual clutter, a whirling miscellany, meaningless.

(DeLillo, 1984, p. 98)

The encounter, however, goes further down the ridiculous scale when Jack decides to give “mouth-to-mouth” to save Willie’s life: “My lips were gathered, ready to funnel. His eyes followed me down. Perhaps he thought he was about to be kissed. I savored the irony” (p. 299).

The same issues appear in *Cosmopolis* with a stronger sense of the confusing and the unfamiliar which muddle the moment of the sublime encounter. The scene of the funeral of the famous rapper, for instance, is significant here. The solemnity and grandeur of a concept like death is complicated by the mediation of technology and multicultural side events. The corpse itself provokes a sense of confused awe rather than solemn grief: “the body tilted for viewing, a digital corpse, a loop, a replication” (DeLillo, 2003, p. 139). How can this funeral convey *real* sublimity when the dead body is only a ‘replication’? We can never tell the real sublime from the illusion, the pseudo-sublime. Furthermore, the funeral gets even more complicated by the mingling of dervishes “with topaz caps” and break dancers whose “arrests and beatings” remind Eric of “the panhandling dances on subway platforms” (p. 136, p.137). Moreover, the eccentric and bizarre funeral of the rapper is intermittently interrupted by interludes from his own songs: “Man gave me the news in a slanted room [/] And it felt like a sliver of icy truth [/] Felt my sad-ass soul flying out of my mouth [/] My gold tooth splitting down to the root” (p. 138). The tone of the song that is sung “sorrowfully” as if with “the voice in a visionary dream that spoke to him of a failing heart” is contradicted by the absurd lyrics of the song (p. 138). Ironically, the sublime moment is mediated by the ridiculous words of the song, therefore, appearing as a perfect example of the ridiculous sublime.

There is also the episode of the confrontation between Eric and his murderer Benno Levin. Typical of DeLillo’s fiction, the seriousness of any scene of violence, including this one, is coupled with the satiric tone of the protagonist and the comic circumstances that seem inevitable. Eric walks into Benno’s house and waits for him to come out of the toilet to discuss his motive for murder. The murderer appears with a “bath towel over his head and shoulders” looking “slight and unshaven.” Later when he grabs the gun, Eric notes that, he

“looked absurd trying to manage such a formidable weapon.” He asks Eric to sit down so they can talk, but Eric does not want to sit “on the exercise bike” because “the confrontation would crumble into farce” (DeLillo, 2003, p. 187). And indeed the whole episode is farcical and ridiculous rather than sublime. Benno does not live up to bear the name of a ‘murderer.’ Even his real name conveys no trace of a horrifying murderer. Not only has “Richard Sheets” nothing of the sublime about it but it also contains echoes of the mundane and the ridiculous (p. 192). No wonder when he pronounces his name to Eric as an act of self-assertion the result is quite disappointing:

He sat back and looked away. Telling his name seemed to strike him as an essential defeat, the most intimate failure of character and will, but also so inevitable there was no point resisting. “Sheets. Richard Sheets.” [He said.] “Means nothing to me.” [Eric] said these words into the face of Richard Sheets. *Means nothing to me.* He felt a trace of the old stale pleasure, dropping an offhand remark that makes a person feel worthless. So small and forgettable a thing that spins such disturbance.

(DeLillo, 2003, p. 192)

Eric’s remark affects Benno deeply and, consequently, his feelings of being ‘worthless’ and ‘small’ are reflected in his actions as well. In fact, Benno is more scared of the violence he is about to commit than Eric. “The man fired a shot into the ceiling. It startled him. Not Eric; the other, the subject” (p. 87). As such, Eric continually undermines and ridicules Benno whenever he makes the slightest effort to appear as a true murderer with a serious motive and cause. “Everything in our lives, yours and mine, has brought us to this moment,” Benno philosophically states. Eric’s reply, however, crushes the soaring moment of meaning and significance: “Fine. I could use a tall cold beer about now” (p. 189). As much as Benno wishes to absorb the intensification of the violent sublime, a feeling that most of DeLillo’s characters often experience, the sublimity of his violence is undermined and complicated by the ridiculousness of his circumstances and the hollowness of his motive for murder. In fact, Eric in his ‘informative’ monologue explains why Benno’s act of violence is devoid of any sublime value,

All right. People like you can happen. I understand this. I believe it. But not the violence. Not the gun. The gun is all wrong. You're not a violent man. Violence is meant to be real, based on real motives, on forces in the world [...] The crime you want to commit is cheap imitation. It's a stale fantasy. People do it because other people do it. It's another syndrome, a thing you caught from others.

(DeLillo, 2003, p. 193)

For Eric, then, Benno’s act does not count as meaningful and sublime because it is a ‘cheap imitation’ and is not ‘real’. “Violence needs a cause, a truth,” he says (p. 194). It is this ‘truth’ that is missing from all these scenes of violence in DeLillo. The movie-like quality of these scenes, the multiplicity of prior representations of them, and the lack of a true intent is why the authenticity of the sublime is diminished. Just like pseudo-sublime, it feels unreal, inauthentic and parodic. Whether in *White Noise* or in *Cosmopolis*, the character who decides to commit an act of violence in order to assert himself always ends up disappointed and disillusioned, because the idea of self-assertion in the postmodern culture is nothing but an illusion. The impossibility of self-assertion is linked with the “untenability of heroic self-fashioning” (Wilcox, 1991, p. 357), which is the reason why Jack Gladney’s or Benno Levin’s heroic attempts at creating the sublime often crumble into the ridiculous.

CONCLUSION

The postmodern sublime in DeLillo's fiction can be overwhelming, it can be technological and violent, but most significantly it can be hollow, delusional and even ridiculous. DeLillo's fiction manifests one of the best representations of a postmodern society/culture that is increasingly mediated and complicated by all sorts of technological developments, countless replications and hollowed realities. Living in a secular media-saturated society, and surrounded by all kinds of information and simulation - characterized by a "precession of the model" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 56), we cannot fully put our trust in the reality and authenticity of any event or experience. What we would assume as the sublime may turn out to be nothing but a shadow or an illusion of a pseudo-sublime. As such, nihilism enters the realm of the sublime to leave a trace of uncertainty, confusion and emptiness. In the postmodern culture, the distinction between the all and the nothing is blurred to the point of identification. In such a culture, a grand concept/entity like the sublime loses its essential quality of awe and grandeur. And even if a moment seems to present itself as solemn and sublime, the circumstances do not allow for such sublimity, simultaneously letting in a myriad of contradictions, uncertainties, and parodies.

As we witnessed in DeLillo's fiction, *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* in this case, the events and phenomena that transpire to convey a sense of sublimity are almost always interrupted and tarnished by an implication of the grotesque and the ridiculous. Whenever DeLillo's characters are about to rejoice in the possibility of a transcendent, visionary or intensified moment, their hopes of achieving that unmediated feeling are dashed. Whether it's a quest for meaning in a child's mutterings in the middle of the night or a revelation amidst a crowd at a funeral, the solemnity and sacredness of the moment is accompanied by satiric overtones and comic circumstances. Even the protagonists' attempts at violent acts to reintroduce some sense of 'intensification' and 'dislocation' into their lethargic and monotonous lives and realities are thwarted by parodic effects. Violence turns out to be something already seen and experienced: a mundane imitation devoid of any sense of truth and purpose. As much as we want to believe otherwise, the idea of heroism and self-assertion in the postmodern culture has been reduced to nothing but an illusion. And that is why DeLillo approaches such 'heroic' and 'transcendent' moments with both a modernist skepticism and a postmodernist nostalgia. As a result, we experience a simultaneous combination of the sublime and the ridiculous.

The long scale of the sublime to the ridiculous is contracted to make the opposition between the two a matter of degree. The two contrary poles co-exist more closely than ever, having turned into one paradoxical notion: the ridiculous sublime. Clearly, the self-elevating quality of the romantic sublime no longer exists in the experience of the postmodern sublime, making it all the more baffling and overwhelming. The ridiculous sublime does not fill the perceiver with a traditional Kantian inflation. It leaves him with an experience of uncertainty and frustration, feeling hollowed, mocked and deflated. This transformation of the concept of the sublime reflects the decline of metanarratives and the exhaustion of possible experiences as the hallmarks of the postmodern era.

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