White Noise and the Web

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In 1992, Lewis J. Perelman predicted in *School's Out* that hyperlearning will eventually replace traditional forms of education: "In the wake of the [hyper-learning] revolution, the technology called 'school' and the social institution commonly thought of as 'education' will be as obsolete and ultimately extinct as the dinosaurs" (50). More than ten years later, we are still far removed from Perelman's vision, and few if any teachers in the humanities regret that. The main problem with Perelman's book lies neither in its economic reduc-tionism (schools are too expensive and therefore out) nor in its technocratic zeal (hyperlearning is at the cutting edge of technological development and therefore in) but in its underlying assumption that traditional forms of edu-cation and technology-driven developments in the educational sector exist in an antagonistic relation. In fact, both fervent adherents and opponents of the use of new technologies in teaching tend to make that error. Teachers in the humanities and elsewhere hardly need to decide whether they are for or against the Internet, and for most of us the real challenge lies in integrating e-mail and the World Wide Web with traditional forms of face-to-face teach-ing. To do this successfully, one needs to think about the potential pedagogic uses of the Internet in order to tap into its resources in ways that truly enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

There are a number of pedagogically effective uses of the Web for teaching Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. I focus here on three functions the Web can serve in the expanded context of traditional classroom teaching (lectures, discus-sions, seminars, workshops). Taking some of the novel's major themes—me-dia, simulation, commodification, postmodern culture, cultural studies, and ecology—I make a number of suggestions as to how instructors can harness Web resources to enhance their teaching of *White Noise*.

The World Wide Web facilitates access to a variety of different media.

White Noise is very much a novel about the mass media. The short consumer messages interspersed throughout the text testify to a cultural situation in which the images and sounds transmitted by television and radio have become ubiquitous. In *White Noise*, the industrial age has long given way to a new, informational order. Iron City, in which "[t]here is," as both Jack Gladney and his precocious son, Heinrich, emphasize, "no media" (45, 92), represents an anachronism in this media-saturated world. Consequently, it is described as "a large town sunk in confusion, a center of abandonment and broken glass" (85) that expresses "a ghostly longing for something that was far beyond re-trieval" (88). DeLillo leaves no doubt that what is beyond retrieval in Iron

City is the industrial age its name alludes to. In the hyperreal world of *White Noise*, the absence of the media makes Iron City quite literally a nonplace, just as the absence of media coverage of the evacuation of Blacksmith's citi-zens makes that event a nonevent (161–62). As various critics have pointed out, the proliferation of simulacra produced by the mass media has all but obliterated in DeLillo's fictional world an independently existing social reality (Frow; Wilcox; Duvall, "(Super)Marketplace").

The world DeLillo depicts is very much the students' world, even more so than it is the teacher's. Undergraduate students in particular inhabit the virtual worlds of television and cyberspace in greater proportion and with greater frequency than their instructors do (*Nation Online*). While the ease with which they move in this Baudrillardian universe does not necessarily make them sophisticated media analysts, the very media with which students interact on a daily basis can be harnessed to enhance their understanding of DeLillo's novel and some of the broader issues its portrayal of the mass media raises. The Web is a particularly useful tool in this respect because, as the educational expert Rolf Schulmeister points out, one of the main advantages of a multi-medial learning environment such as the Web is that it "facilitates simulta-neous access to a variety of sources and different types of information (data, texts, images, films)" (9).[1]

Visit4info (www.visit4info.com), for instance, is a sophisticated multimedia Web site that hosts a large searchable database of television, cinema, radio, press, poster, and Internet commercials. The site is particularly strong on television and cinema commercials, which can be viewed in three streaming-video formats. It also provides textual background information about each advertisement, listing the product name, a short plot outline, hyperlinks to the advertiser's product home page and company Web site, and in some cases information about actors appearing in the commercial. *Visit4info* significantly facilitates the work of researchers in the field of cultural studies because it provides them with a ready-made corpus of materials whose collection other-wise would demand a considerable input of time and energy. Moreover, it makes those materials accessible from a single place and in a format (stream-ing video) that is more convenient to work with than VCR recordings or DVDs. In fact, it facilitates the researcher's task to such a degree that it allows undergraduate students to become researchers. A Web site like *Visit4info*—which advertises itself with phrases like "cool ads" and "hot products"—offers students an excellent opportunity to conduct empirical research on one of the most pervasive manifestations of contemporary consumer culture and to es-tablish links between the findings of this research and the representations of consumer culture and the mass media in DeLillo's novel.

To give a concrete example, students may be asked to browse the database on *Visit4info* (www.visit4info.com/seenad.cfm) and think about how the phras-ing of the hyperlink "Links in this product category," which accompanies each commercial, is appropriate for each category. For most of the commercials,

product is certainly the correct term, but it seems inappropriate for several categories. What, for instance, is the product that is advertised in a public service announcement ("Seat Belts—A Good Habit"), an awareness-raising ad campaign ("Safe Sex"), a sociopolitical campaign ad ("Children's Rights Campaign") or an army recruitment commercial? These and similar questions can be used as a background against which the theme of commodification in *White Noise* can be discussed. In this context, Jack's description of the toxic cloud can serve as a useful entry point for discussing the characteristics of a (fictional?) world in which the mass media play a significant role in the commodification of everything: "In its tremendous size, its dark and bulky menace, its escorting aircraft, the cloud resembled a national promotion for death, a multimillion-dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy print and billboard, TV saturation" (157–58). Alternatively, the Web site's commercials for pharmaceutical products may be discussed in conjunction with Babette's belief that "everything is correctible" (191), with the Dylar motif, or with Michael Valdez Moses's assertion that, in the world depicted in *White Noise*, the greatest danger is that "technology may succeed in creating an illusion that it constitutes the only possible manner by which human beings apprehend themselves and their relationship to the world" (71).

Finally, from a pedagogical point of view, both suggestions as to how a Web site like *Visit4info* may be integrated in the teaching of *White Noise* harness "the ability of the computers to become any and all existing media" (Kay 106), and instruction will benefit from how the Web's integration of text, image, and sound enables more sophisticated teaching and learning. Web-based teaching can offer an enhanced learning experience that occurs at different levels of perception and involves several senses (Düx 231).

The World Wide Web offers faster and more convenient access to sources.

While it can be argued that the Web develops its full potential only in a multimedia environment, its provision of a mass of purely textual material adds considerably to its appeal to teachers and learners alike. For information that is not available anywhere else, the benefits of accessing it via the Web are obvious. Much of the textual material available on the Web today and of use to the discerning scholar is, however, also accessible through more conventional means (e.g., archival work). Even so, the main advantage of using the Web lies in greater convenience (unlike libraries, the Web is accessible independent of time and place) and greater speed. As Schulmeister sums up, thanks to the Web, "[t]he study of sources, which is part of the workload of today's students, is rendered more efficient. Time that can be used for more effective studies is saved" (9). I restrict my discussion here to DeLillo-specific textual sources and discuss other types of sources in the following sections.

Curt Gardner's *Don DeLillo's America—A Don DeLillo Page* (perival

.com/delillo/delillo.html) is the principal DeLillo-specific resource. Gardner's metasite not only provides a near-comprehensive, well-organized, regularly updated and annotated list of links to Web sites relating to the author and his work but also includes information that cannot easily be found elsewhere: translated foreign-language interviews, an extensive bibliography of reviews on DeLillo's work, a letter written by DeLillo to a member of an electronic discussion group on *White Noise*, an "oral auto-biography" stitched together from interviews with the author, a calendar of events, and a collection of DeLillo's pronouncements on writing. *Don DeLillo's America* is a true treasure trove and the first place to visit for anyone interested in integrating Web resources in the teaching of DeLillo's work.

A group of three texts available via Gardner's Web site is of special interest. "The Artist Naked in a Cage" is the text of a speech DeLillo gave on behalf of Wei Jingsheng, a Chinese writer and prodemocracy activist who had been jailed for eighteen years and was finally released in November 1997. DeLillo's speech, delivered on 13 May 1997 at an event organized by the NGO Human Rights in China, alternates among three images: a Russian performance artist's impersonation of a dog locked in a cage in the midst of Soho, scenes from Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," and Wei Jingsheng in his prison cell. Taken together, the eleven paragraphs of this short speech pay homage to the courage and determination of a writer in opposition, an artist "so vivid and singular, so unassimilated into the state machine, that the state must find a way to make him disappear" (par. 7). The second text is a pamphlet penned by DeLillo and Paul Auster for the Rushdie Defense Committee USA and published in 1994, five years after the fatwa for Salman Rushdie's assassination was pronounced. Its aim is to raise awareness of the continuing threat to the author's life and to remind the United States and other governments to "exert due pressure to return Salman Rushdie—and all other threatened writers—to the world" (par. 8). The third text in this group was also written in the context of the Rushdie affair. It is an angry reply to John Cardinal O'Connor, who expressed sympathy for the Muslim community's aggravation at *The Satanic Verses* (DeLillo et al.). The group letter is signed by DeLillo and sixteen other Catholic writers and ends with the following sentences: "Mature Catholics do not believe that any dialogue with the non-Christian world can be conducted within a system that prejudges books. Mature Catholics do not believe that a death threat can be met with ambiguity" (par. 4).

DeLillo scholars less familiar with the author's nonfictional writings and interviews will be struck by his unequivocal endorsement of liberal humanist beliefs in the inviolable strength and integrity of the individual, the universal applicability of human rights, and the power of literature to transcend the context(s) of its production. These beliefs are in stark contrast to the postmodern agenda DeLillo's work is most often associated with. Among literary critics there exists a broad, though not uniform, consensus that DeLillo is a paradigmatic postmodern writer. Critics of differing persuasions have

(correctly) identified in his work some of the major themes and artistic concerns of literary postmodernism. These include the proliferation of simulacra and an attendant effacement of reference, origin, and context (Kerridge); a preoccupation with consumer culture (Ferraro); a nonrepresentational aesthetics (Kucich); a systemic perspective informed by contemporary social and cultural theory (LeClair); and the evocation of a postmodern sublime (Frow). In DeLillo's work for human-rights causes, however, the real has returned in the form of the bodies of threatened writers, the humanist metanarrative is alive and well, and the cultural relativism Heinrich Gladney practices with such skill has all but disappeared behind surprisingly rash generalizations about "the continuing impact of world Islam on the consciousness of the West" (DeLillo and Auster, par. 1).

A number of critics have addressed these discrepancies and tried to resolve them in one way or another. Frank Lentricchia discusses DeLillo as the "last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation" (Introduction 14); Hal Crowther treats him as "a satirist" who "tries to outrun reality, to stay far enough ahead of it, to look back with a safe lead, but it keeps gaining on him" (332); and Margaret Soltan reads him as a clear-cut liberal humanist. For teaching *White Noise*, it might be more fruitful to highlight the discrepancies and make them work than try to resolve them. Once students have been introduced to some of the aspects that make the novel a work of postmodern fiction, they can be directed to the three texts on Rushdie and Jingsheng and asked to think about how these nonfictional pieces relate to the novel's postmodern concerns. In a second step, a discussion based on the students' findings might address a variety of issues crucial to understanding the novel. These include the implied norms of DeLillo's satire, the related question of whether his portrayal of cultural studies at the College-on-the-Hill is parodic or an exercise in postmodern pastiche in Fredric Jameson's sense, and the novel's placement in a history of ideas that comprises both humanist and postmodern thought. The three texts, all conveniently accessible at *DeLillo's America*, are perfectly suited for this purpose: they are short (the longest runs thirty-two lines) and advance their arguments with the utmost clarity.

The World Wide Web supports self-directed learning.

Most educational experts today agree that self-directed learning is a fundamentally important goal of any pedagogic process. The prominence given to it involves a shift of perspective from the teacher as a source of information and knowledge to the learner as an active participant in the construction of knowledge. The Web both demands and enables forms of self-directed learning:

> Self-directed motivated learning is defined as a process in which the learner becomes active in determining his learning goals, in identifying

human and material resources for the learning process, in choosing adequate learning strategies and evaluating the results of learning. . . . On the one hand, the new technologies demand independent, active and self-directed learning due to their specific constructional features (interactivity, hypertext structures, feedback, simulation), on the other hand these features support self-directed motivated learning.   (Brink 260)

For self-directed learning to be effective, learners must be given the responsibility for selecting and connecting units of information. But to prevent them from being overtaxed and therefore frustrated, teachers should exercise special caution in choosing their initial input. I suggest one possible use of the Web's potential for self-directed learning to enhance students' understanding of the novel's environmental theme and its historical context. The proposed activity can be used on its own or as a preparation for reading an ecocritical article on the novel (e.g., Kerridge).

Students can be assigned to write an essay on the novel's environmental theme that establishes links among a few quotations the teacher has selected from *White Noise* and a few Web sites that have also been selected by the teacher. While the selection of the topic, the quotations, and the Web sites by the teacher ensures that meaningful connections can be established, the students are free to choose how many and which of the units to connect—provided that the links are neither unidirectional nor too obvious. The following three quotations from the novel, for example, profitably address different thematic complexes—the environment and social class, the environment and the media, and the environment and consumer culture:

> I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are.   (117)

> "Japan is pretty good for disaster footage," Alfonse said. "India remains largely untapped. They have tremendous potential with their famines, monsoons, religious strife, train wrecks, boat sinkings, et cetera. But their disasters tend to go unrecorded. Three lines in the newspaper. No film footage, no satellite hookup."   (66)

> I unfolded the bag cuffs, released the latch and lifted out the bag. The full stench hit me with shocking force. Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Had we created it? I took the bag out to the garage and emptied it. . . . I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness?   (258–59)

The structural design of the Web sites selected needs to be sufficiently complex, including hyperlinks, hierarchical content structures, and simulations

or other interactive elements that allow a learning experience that both requires and enables a significant number of choices on the learner's part. Students will rightly feel cheated if they get the impression that their main task is to discover the one piece of information the teacher meant them to find. Hypertextual structures are particularly suited for self-directed activity and experience: *"Characteristic features of hypertexts or, more generally, hypermedia include the networking and segmentation of information. This structure offers users free choices with regard to the reading sequence and the integration of information into given structures or contexts. At the same time, readers are given responsibility for the selection and linkage of units"* (Nikelski 215; emphasis in original).

The main strength of the first of the four Web sites I propose lies precisely in its hypertextual design. *Welcome to Geography* is a sophisticated site developed by students and staff from a London comprehensive school. It offers a forum for discussing a variety of issues relating to geography and contains a page on the Bhopal disaster, which took place in the same year *White Noise* was published. In the early hours of 3 December 1984, forty tons of the toxic gas methyl isocyanate leaked from Union Carbide's pesticide-manufacturing plant at Bhopal, India, killing at least 3,800 people and permanently injuring thousands of others. The page, authored by Noel Jenkins, juxtaposes two different descriptions of the disaster—one by Union Carbide, the other by a Bhopal victim support group—and asks students to evaluate them by doing further online research (Bhopal Investigation). Jenkins encourages the type of self-directed learning that the hypertextual design of the page makes possible. He stresses the need to evaluate Web resources and provides hyperlinks to important Web sites dealing with the event, including Union Carbide's official site *Bhopal Information Center* (www.bhopal.com) and two activist and survivor Web sites, *The Bhopal Medical Appeal and Sambhavna Trust* (www.bhopal.org) and *International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal* (www.bhopal.net). By providing access to a variety of perspectives on the disaster, Jenkins's page makes use of a crucial advantage of the Web: its potential for the discursive construction of knowledge or, in other words, "a form of discourse that does not have consent but the recognition and use of dissent as its goal" (Fasching 112). Students confronted with this page and the three passages from *White Noise* cited above will notice the cruel irony that links the page to the second quotation, but it is equally possible to establish relations with the other two.

The second Web site I propose is *CNN.com*. Its site-specific search engine allows students to find an article on a recent ecological disaster and engage in a case study on the disaster's representation in the world's largest media outlet. It offers an ideal opportunity for self-directed learning. Its vast store of information forces students to select adequate materials for the learning process, and its hypermedial, nonsequential structure gives them responsibility for establishing connections among different units of information. Moreover, starting from one of the three quotations from *White Noise*, students are free to decide whether they want to engage in the type of media criticism performed by the novel and use *White Noise* to discuss CNN's constructions of the real or tap into CNN as an information source to illustrate the contemporary relevance of the novel's environmental concerns and thus use CNN to discuss the novel. If teachers wish to encourage the former, in most cases more sophisticated approach, they may also point students to an alternative source of information on ecological affairs, such as *Greenpeace* (www.greenpeace.org/international/), and ask them to compare two different accounts of the same ecological event and decide which of the two is more "real." This comparison would provide a good starting point to discuss the novel's repeated suggestion that reality has become a construct generated by the media.

In both cases, students are encouraged to recognize the obvious but important point that reading literature has relevance beyond the classroom. The chief danger of integrating Web sites like *CNN.com* or *Greenpeace* in teaching literature is, of course, that students will lose orientation in their vast informational spaces and end up spending more time following hyperlinks than thinking about the relations obtaining between the fact-generating worlds of media outlets and the fictional world of the literary text. With respect to students' written work, two preventive measures can be taken by the teacher. First, students should be encouraged to ask the teacher if they are unsure whether the findings of their Web research will work for their essay. Second, an in-class discussion of successful and less successful uses of electronic resources should complement the assignment, both before students begin the assignment and as a follow-up based on their essays.

The fourth Web site I suggest is the online edition of the *National Atlas of the United States*, an official project of the United States Department of the Interior. This exceptionally useful site enables users to draw demographic maps of the United States that allow for the simultaneous display of a wide variety of natural and sociocultural parameters of their own choosing (nationalatlas.gov/natlas/natlasstart.asp). The site shows its full potential in conjunction with the first quotation above. With the help of the *National Atlas*, students of *White Noise* may, for instance, correlate locations of toxic release with the distribution of income per capita to find out whether Jack's assertion that toxic pollution affects only the poor is true or not. The site's main pedagogical benefit is its interactivity. Interactive maps enable students to exert control over their object of learning and allow them to experiment at their own pace in an adaptive environment that is at least temporarily freed from evaluation and social sanctions (receiving a low grade, a negative moral judgment). This freedom is crucial to the pedagogical usefulness of all human-computer interactions. Discussing the importance of interactivity in multi-

medial learning environments, Schulmeister concludes, "For the learning subject, the fact that interaction with a computer or a programme is free of sanctions maybe constitutes the most important aspect" (45).

Several of the pedagogical uses to be made of the Web support a form of learning that resembles the learning researchers routinely engage in. Independent inquiry, the study of sources in different formats, and the discursive construction of knowledge are all facilitated by the Web. One need not join the chorus of those who believe that the new technologies will render traditional classroom teaching obsolete to recognize the potential benefits of integrating the World Wide Web in the teaching of literature. Provided that the teacher is willing to reflect seriously on the opportunities and drawbacks of using the Web as an educational tool, Web-integrated teaching "makes it possible to realize the concept of the (undergraduate) student as a researcher, to shift the balance between reproductive learning and active discovery" (Kuechler 145).

NOTE

[1]All translations from the German are mine.

SURVEYING *WHITE NOISE*

White Noise and the American Novel

Theron Britt

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* engages a set of issues central to contemporary American literature, but it focuses most clearly on the specific shape of contemporary consumer culture and its impact on the individual. Given this focus, one of the more useful ways to teach this novel is to situate it in the context of the theme of identity in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American novels. Many of these novels turn on notions of autonomous identity, usually pitting the individual against a constraining society and valorizing to one degree or another that individual as a corrective to social ills. Though it varies considerably from one period to another, or even from one work to another, this theme in selected examples of American realism, naturalism, and modernism[1] nevertheless provides continuity and context for understanding DeLillo's own confrontation in *White Noise* with the threats to individual identity now posed by contemporary consumer culture. Yet instead of merely reproducing the valorization of the individual over society that runs through much of American literary history, *White Noise* engages this abiding theme and works through it in order to express a new, more complex figuration of self to the social.

Late-nineteenth-century realist works such as *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), by William Dean Howells; *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), by Mark Twain; and *The Awakening* (1899), by Kate Chopin, are often included in an American novel survey course as examples of realism, and these novels in particular offer a representative realist sample for comparison with DeLillo's notions of identity. Though these three novels take up very different themes, each in its way turns on the realist conception of the individual as an

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