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« Sound all around »:
Sonic Mysticism and Acoustic Ecology
in *White Noise*

In 1981 the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published a report entitled *Noise in America: The Extent of the Noise Problem*. The study was an attempt to assess the extent of noise pollution and its effects on the U.S. population. It listed road traffic, air traffic, construction work, railroads and industrial activities as the major sources of noise. The authors found that road traffic was the leading source of community noise and estimated that it alone exposed 96.8 million Americans to daily average sound levels above the safe level of 55 dB. From the numbers given in the EPA report, we can estimate that the combined impact of all major noise sources exposed over half the American population to daily average noise levels above that safety level (Suter 1991: 11). In 1982, the Reagan administration shut down the Office of Noise Abatement and Control (ONAC) and thus put an end to the activities of that office within the EPA which was responsible for the 1981 report.

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* was published three years after the EPA report. The findings of this report provide an incentive to read the novel's title literally, as a reference to its fictional soundscapes.¹ To be sure, the acoustic

1. Strictly speaking, there is no literal reading of "white noise" because "white noise" is itself a figural expression. In physics, white noise refers to a sound with a very wide frequency range and equal energy (or volume) at every unit of the frequency spectrum. It is called white noise

atmosphere we encounter as we enter DeLillo's *Blacksmith* is a far cry from the sonic hell of Crane's Bowery in *Maggie* or the uproar of Dos Passos's Manhattan. When Jack Gladney, the novel's first-person narrator and protagonist, "experience[s] aural torment" (241), it is because he imagines the sound of his wife Babette's and Mr Gray's lovemaking. Jack's first description of the acoustic environment he and his family inhabit in fact stresses that they «live at the end of a quiet street», with the expressway "well below" (4) them. The acoustic division Jack establishes between their quiet street and the noisy expressway anticipates his later attempts to draw a clear line between the family of a man who is "not just a college professor" but "the head of a department" and "people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are" (117). Jack's representation of an acoustic phenomenon thus contributes to his anxious construction of a sense of social distinction that he believes will protect him and his family from harm.¹

Nevertheless, the acoustic space the Gladneys inhabit is anything but quiet. Ironically, their longing for quietude is undermined within the very space they have built for themselves. Their domestic sonic environment is fed by the uninterrupted buzz of the gas meter, the thermostat, the radiator, the washing machine, the clothes dryer, the refrigerator; it is fed by the anonymous voices emerging from the radio and a television set that is always on. Occasionally, a ringing telephone makes itself heard above the background noise, or a smoke alarm—which is duly ignored. The streets of *Blacksmith* are relatively quiet; traffic and industrial noise is mostly heard from a distance. But when the Gladney family enters one of the local supermarkets or department stores, their ears are again assailed by an extremely dense sonic

in analogy to white light, which is made up of all the colors of the color spectrum, just as white noise is made up of all the frequencies of the frequency spectrum. DeLillo demonstrates his awareness of technical discussions of noise when he has Jack describe the acoustic atmosphere of Willie Mink's motel room with recourse to the technical definition of white noise: "The intensity of the noise in the room was the same at all frequencies. Sound all around" (312).

1. This connection between social distinction and immunity from harm is crucial to Jack's professorial self-fashioning. This emerges most clearly in Jack's mental reply to the SIMUVAC employee's ominous suggestion that Jack's exposure to Nyodene D. constitutes a serious health hazard: "I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses" (142).

wall composed of Muzak, consumer messages, coffee grinders, chiming bells, humming maintenance systems and escalators. The remarkable difference between a silent outdoors and noisy interiors is finally eroded when disaster strikes. As the airborne toxic event approaches *Blacksmith*, the combined noise of amplified emergency messages, helicopters, automobile horns and, towering above it all, air-raid, police, fire and ambulance sirens fills private and public spaces alike and abolishes the distinction between acoustic interiors and exteriors.

This brief survey of some of the noises that saturate the acoustic world of *White Noise* should prompt us to recognize what critics interested in the novel's ecological theme often fail to notice, namely that *White Noise* is in important ways also a novel about *acoustic* ecology. In its literal sense, the title refers to the omnipresence of broad-band noises as keynote sounds of the postmodern soundscape. As Barry Truax, a co-worker on The World Soundscape Project whose *Acoustic Communication* (1984) appeared in the same year as DeLillo's novel, explains, the constant hum of traffic and technical appliances such as air-conditioners or computers approaches the acoustic qualities of white noise:¹

Traffic and air-conditioning are (...) examples of "broad-band" sounds, that is, sounds whose spectrum or energy content is continuously distributed over a fairly large range of frequencies. When that range is the whole audible spectrum and the distribution is uniform, the sound is called "white noise," by analogy to white light which contains all visible frequencies. (Truax 1984: 20)

1. The World Soundscape Project was initiated by R. Murray Schafer at the Communications Centre of the Simon Fraser University in the late 1960s. Schafer's own *The Tuning of the World* (1977) presents an overview of the project's work and is the seminal text in soundscape studies. Today, soundscape studies include a wide range of activities: "Present and future research topics include studies in new sounds, studies of schizophrenia, ie the influence of the pervasive presence of electroacoustic sounds in the soundscape, including Muzak, radio, and the Walkman; an archive of lost and disappearing sounds; a glossary of sounds in literature; sound association tests, soundscape analyses (eg, events, entertainments, and community soundmarks); the structural analysis of radio programming, car horn sounds and counts, and the sonic environment of schools; the design of acoustic parks, sound typology and morphology; the semantics of sound; the meanings of silence; and other related topics" (Kallmann/Woog/Westerkamp 1992: 1425)

If critics identify white noise with the junk information continually emitted by radio and TV (Saltzman 1994: 808), we may add that the *sound* of white noise already exhibits the qualities identified with junk information. The broad-band noise of today's cities is not only less informative than other sounds, but also masks other, potentially more significant acoustic events. As a result, sounds blur into one another, the soundscape loses acoustic definition and human beings encounter difficulties in communicating across distances (Truax 1984: 123-126). In short, the electrified soundscape interferes with the human production and reception of sound.

DeLillo repeatedly invites his readers to pass a negative judgment on that soundscape. Many of the noises of *White Noise* possess an ominous quality. When Jack perceives that "[t]he gas meter made a particular noise" (222) or that "[t]hat chirping noise was just the radiator" (94), he reminds us that the machinery we have come to accept as an indispensable part of our everyday lives may malfunction or completely break down. A more vague but at the same time much stronger sense of premonition is evoked when Jack listens to the garbage compactor's "ram strok[ing] downward with a dreadful wrenching sound, full of eerie feeling" (33) or when its "motorized surge" makes him "retreat two paces" (101). Several of the noises that possess this ominous quality are described as a presence just beyond the range of conscious perception. This is true of the Gladneys' refrigerator, which produces an "eerie static, insistent but near subliminal" that makes Jack "think of wintering souls, some form of dormant life approaching the threshold of perception" (258). It also applies to the buzz of the supermarket, which is characterized as a "sublittoral drone" (168) in one passage and "a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension" (36) in another. Jack's comparison of the noises to forms of life lurking just beneath the surface is again evoked when the beast finally emerges and makes itself heard. Startled by the acoustic onslaught of the air-raid sirens, Jack muses that "[t]hey made a noise like some territorial squawk out of the Mesozoic. A parrot carnivore with a DC-9 wingspan. What a raucousness of brute aggression filled the house, making it seem as

if the walls would fly apart. So close to us, so surely upon us. Amazing to think this sonic monster lay hidden nearby for years" (118).

It is no coincidence that the full emergence of noise from out of the ambient roar occurs with a signal that announces the text's ecological disaster. The novel's acoustic and ecological dynamics follow the same trajectory: both forms of pollution are of far-reaching proportions but remain barely perceptible, lying dormant below the surface until a major event—the ear-splitting blast of the sirens, the airborne toxic event—forcefully imposes them on DeLillo's characters' consciousness. Much like the contamination of the grade school or the "smell of acrid matter" (240) that arises from the burning insane asylum reminds the citizens of Blacksmith of an environmental pollution that remains imperceptible for most of the time, the noise of the sirens is merely the supreme expression of an acoustic pollution that is omnipresent—"Panasonic" (241)—but largely inaccessible to conscious perception. The white noise of *White Noise* is both an integral part of the town's environmental problem and heralds its more threatening manifestations. It is therefore utterly appropriate that Jack becomes "aware of the dense environmental texture" (168) as he finds himself in the midst of the noises of the supermarket.

The consumer messages that contribute to the supermarket's dense acoustic texture also fill the acoustic space of the Gladneys' home. DeLillo's representation of the disembodied voices that seem to originate from either the radio or the television set indicates perhaps most clearly that his judgment on the postmodern soundscape is a negative one. Like the noises emitted by clothes dryers, radiators, gas meters or thermostats, these disembodied voices are often reproduced by themselves, as one-line paragraphs:

- Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex. (52)
- Dristan Ultra, Dristan Ultra. (167)
- Leaded, unleaded, super unleaded. (199)
- Tegrin, Denorex, Selsun Blue. (289)
- Blue jeans tumbled in the dryer. (18)
- That chirping sound was just the radiator. (94)

The gas meter made a particular noise. (222)
The thermostat began to buzz. (302)

The fact that the advertising messages are, like the noises of appliances, reproduced as single paragraphs, as acoustic inserts, suggests that their information-content is equally low. These noises, DeLillo intimates, become a form of noise pollution. It is, of course, possible for readers to establish meaningful connections between the disembodied TV voices and the surrounding text, for instance when the message "MasterCard, Visa, American Express" (100) interrupts Jack and Babette's discussion about who wants to die first, suggesting a connection between consumerism and death that also lies behind Jack's frantic efforts to get rid of the many useless commodities that have accumulated in the Gladneys' house over the years. But the very difficulty we often encounter in establishing these links suggests much rather than the content of these messages is less important than the fact of their near-random but persistent recurrence throughout DeLillo's text. As the narrative progresses, they become so many that they begin to merge with the ambient noise, becoming barely distinguishable from it. The ubiquitous TV messages, whose information content lies only minimally above that of the noise produced by traffic or household appliances, thus signal the always present possibility of a slippage of language into noise within the postmodern soundscape.

The noises of consumerism, exacerbated by the Muzak of the department stores, the traffic of busy streets and helicopters that "thro[b] like giant appliances" (157), are everywhere and have entered, DeLillo suggests, our heads and impaired our language and our thinking. In fact, DeLillo's postmodern subjects are exposed to the language of advertising to such a degree that their own linguistic productions come to resemble advertising slogans. In their rapid exchanges of sound bytes, the Gladney family's conversations at times reproduce the two-part and tripartite form of advertising messages:

"I'm trying to remember three kinds of rock," I said. "Igneous, sedimentary and something else."

"What about your logarithms? What about the causes of economic discontent leading up to the Great Crash? Here's one. Who won the Lincoln-Douglas debates? Careful. It's not as obvious as it seems."
"Anthracite and bituminous," I said. "Isosceles and scalene."
The mysterious words came back to me in a rush of confused schoolroom images.
"Here's one. Angles, Saxons, Jutes." (176)

It is at such moments that Jack's suspicion that "[t]he family is the cradle of the world's misinformation" (81) receives its strongest confirmation. Later in the novel, the anonymous "woman passing on the street", uttering the words "A decongestant, an antihistamine, a cough suppressant, a pain reliever" (262) represents an advanced stage of the same process. Finally, Willie Mink's reproduction of TV talk represents its psychotic extreme. Threatened by a jealous husband pointing a gun at him, Mink can merely reply: "Containing iron, niacin and riboflavin" (310). And later, on the same page, "Some of these playful dolphins have been equipped with radio transmitters. Their far-flung wanderings may tell us things" (310). Of course, this is a comic scene, but its humorous quality should not distract us from recognizing that Mink's desolate state is merely an advanced form of the linguistic deprivation DeLillo's characters are threatened by. DeLillo's observations on the information society are, like Mink's dolphins, playful and he does suggest that its "incessant bombardment of information" (66) may, again like Mink's dolphins, "tell us things," but DeLillo's observations never lose their critical edge.

The German philosopher Gernot Böhme proposes a somewhat different perspective on the postmodern soundscape. Well aware that the contemporary acoustic environment is, as he puts it, "colonized" (2000: 18) by Muzak and a plethora of other machine-made sounds, Böhme argues that the postmodern soundscape also encourages a new type of listening. Böhme writes:

[O]ne must admit that the acoustic consciousness of the average individual has experienced a noticeable development. This is not only to suggest that musical desires and the musical demands contained in them have been height-

ened substantially—it also means that listening as such has developed into an important dimension of life and into a broad zone of satisfaction for the general public. Of course one must state that the noise of the modern world and the occupation of public space by music has led to the habit of not-listening (*Weghören*). At the same time, listening has grown from an instrumental experience—I hear something—to a mode through which one participates in the world. (Böhme 2000: 16f.)

The omnipresence of sounds from multiple sources makes it almost impossible to locate the origin of sounds and creates for the hearer an experience of immersion into an extremely dense acoustic space. This new quality of aural experience highlights that hearing is always also a corporeal experience, an experience that involves our bodies as a whole. Böhme describes the kind of listening demanded and encouraged by the white noise of postmodernity as follows: “[W]hen we are listening (...) we are outside ourselves. And this being which is outside itself does not encounter voices, tones, sounds, out there, but is itself formed, moulded, crenated, cut, lifted, pushed, expanded and constricted by voices, tones, sounds” (2000: 18).

In *White Noise*, DeLillo uses aquatic metaphors to represent the aural experience described by Böhme. When Jack realizes that the supermarket is awash in noise (36), when he perceives its “oceanic layers of sound” (288) or comments on the “night’s combined sounds” that “[c]ome washing in with a freshness and renewed immediacy” (118), he experiences the acoustic space he inhabits as a body of water in which *his* body is immersed. Yet Jack’s strongest aural experience of this kind occurs when he listens to his son Wilder’s crying:

As the crying continued, a curious shift developed in my thinking. I found that I did not necessarily wish him to stop. It might not be so terrible, I thought, to have to sit and listen to this a while longer. We looked at each other. Behind that dopey countenance, a complex intelligence operated. I held him with one hand, using the other to count his fingers inside the mittens, aloud, in German. The inconsolable crying went on. I let it wash over me, like rain in sheets. I entered it, in a sense. I let it fall and tumble across my face and chest. I began to think he had disappeared inside this wailing noise and if I could

join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility. I let it break across my body. It might not be so terrible, I thought, to have to sit here for four more hours, with the motor running and the heater on, listening to this uniform lament. It might be good, it might be strangely soothing. I entered it, fell into it, letting it enfold and cover me. He cried with his eyes open, his eyes closed, his hands in his pockets, his mittens on and off. I sat there nodding sagely. (78)

It is in this scene where the boundary between the hearing subject and the sounds it hears is most fully dissolved. As in the supermarket passage, DeLillo uses metaphorical language to depict Jack’s immersion in a sea of sound. But Jack’s aural experience in this passage possesses a more intimate and near-mystical quality. DeLillo seems to suggest that it is in the presence of human soundmaking rather than the temples of consumerism where a “reckless wonder of intelligibility” may still be performed.

Yet it would be overly simplistic to argue that the novel’s acoustic imagination is split in two between a semantically rich familial acoustic space and a debased, even pernicious machine-made soundscape. DeLillo’s text in fact betrays a, perhaps perverse, fascination with the noises of postmodernity. If the disembodied TV voices become almost indistinguishable from the ambient noise, the reverse slippage of noise into language can already be observed in the novel’s first representation of an acoustic phenomenon. Jack’s comparison of the roar of traffic “wash[ing] past” at night to “dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream” (4) points to an incomplete slippage of noise into language that must remain incomplete precisely because the object of representation possesses mystical qualities that, in the final analysis, remain beyond the limits of human understanding and representation.

This aestheticization and mystification of the sonic mundane is repeated in almost identical fashion when the refrigerator’s “strange crackling sound” (258) conjures up images of hibernating souls in Jack’s mind. It is, however, at the evacuation center where the noises of consumerism come into full mystical presence for a Jack who hears his daughter mutter the words “*Toyota Celica*” in her sleep:

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. (155)

As in Jack's description of nighttime traffic, it is a murmur—a semi-articulate linguistic utterance—that gives Jack access to a tacit knowledge of a world just beyond the reach of our conventional means of representation.

In his systems-theoretic reading of *White Noise*, Tom LeClair (1987: 207-236) has recourse to the "order-from-noise" principle to explain the emergence of mystery and meaning out of the apparently debased products of consumer culture and the debris of the postmodern soundscape:

While expressing polarities, the sound motif, like the novel as a whole, comes to signify a wide-ranging awareness of systemic mystery, a new knowing and non-knowing. In evolution, Anthony Wilder [sic] reminds us, noise is an intrusion "converted into an essential part of the system so as to maintain the relationship between system and environment"; the "efficient system" will "seek to maintain stability by ACCEPTING noise, by incorporating it as information, and moving to a new level of organization (evolving)." (...) In *White Noise* DeLillo collects the familiar sounds of American culture and universal fear; he then both turns them up, exaggerating their foolishness for ironic effect, and turns them down, finding in the lower frequencies a whisper of possibility, of uncertainty beyond our present range of knowledge. DeLillo's is the noise of disaster and the noise of possibility. Which shall we hear, which shall we make—in the loop?" (231f.)

For LeClair, the novel's pervasive sense of wonder and mystery is the linchpin of DeLillo's cultural critique. DeLillo's fiction, LeClair argues, warns

us against seeking refuge in closed systems that threaten to turn in upon themselves—Jack's obsession with Hitler, Babette's belief in technological fixes, Jack's yearning for a familial safety that would insulate him from the outside world. Against this narrow conception of the world and our place in it, DeLillo privileges a systemic perspective that accepts the openness, complexity and flexibility of the multiple systems we inhabit and interact with. Only such a perspective would allow us to regain a sense of awe and wonder at and respect for the world we live in.

LeClair's systemic approach provides an adequate model for describing the novel's recurrent slippages of noise into language and consumerist junk into a source of awe and wonder. But to locate DeLillo's critical import in the sense of mystery he evokes, to claim, as LeClair does, that "[f]or DeLillo, the counterpoint to both power and consumption is mystery" (15) is problematic and, I believe, misleading. The main sources of mystery in *White Noise* are, after all, the supermarket and the television set, those avatars of consumer culture. LeClair himself acknowledges this when he writes that DeLillo "extract[s] from his initially satirical materials a sense of wonderment and mystery, finding in the seeming rubbish of popular culture a kind of knowledge that would provide a more livable set of systemic expectations about life and death" (214). If the main purpose of DeLillo's critique were to sharpen, as LeClair suggests, the reader's awareness of systemic complexity by making her aware of the potential for awe and wonderment hidden in the products and messages of American consumerism, we would be justified in seeing in DeLillo's work, as John Kucich (1988) suggests we should, much complicity and very little (if any) critique.

But DeLillo does not fully join in LeClair's mystification of consumer culture and regularly undercuts Murray's as well as Jack's attempts to do the same. Even the Toyota Celica passage does not allow for a reading of Jack's epiphany as an unequivocal affirmation of the otherworldly richness of consumerist noise. Such a reading would both overlook the passage's ironic qualities as well as its reminder that what has become part of Denise's "brain noise" are "near-nonsense words" whose presence may well enhance Jack's consciousness but cloud his daughter's. DeLillo's suggestion, repeated throughout the narrative, that the noises of the postmodern soundscape have

in fact become part of the environmental pollution he depicts represents the critical counterpart to Murray's celebratory mysticism. Yet DeLillo does not simply validate the critical perspective while dismissing the mystical one as corrupt. The novel's acoustic imagination is part of a *complicitously* critical project which also encompasses its environmental imagination. *White Noise* betrays a keen awareness that both its author and its characters are deeply implicated in the very conditions and processes they subject to critical scrutiny without, however, becoming fully absorbed by them or relinquishing all critical distance.

In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), Linda Hutcheon describes this doubleness of the postmodern politics of representation in terms that are directly applicable to *White Noise*. The excerpt from her introduction is worth quoting at length:

Postmodernism manifests itself in many fields of cultural endeavor—architecture, literature, photography, film, painting, video, dance, music, and elsewhere. In general terms it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something while at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or “highlight,” and to subvert, or “subvert,” and the mode is therefore a “knowing” and an ironic—or even “ironic”—one. Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale “nudging” commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as “natural” (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact “cultural”; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees. (1989: 1f.)

Hutcheon's choice of the de-naturalizing of nature itself as an example for the de-naturalizing impulses of postmodernism makes her more general argument read like a comment on the ecological concerns of DeLillo's novel.

It also serves to remind us of the complicity of DeLillo's ecological critique, a complicity that is reinforced by the fact that his characters' actions do not bear out the novel's cultural critique in any consistent fashion. The Gladneys themselves are avid consumers, who indulge in fast-food binges in their car, “fully dressed, in hats and heavy coats, without speaking, ripping into chicken parts with [their] hands and teeth” (231f.) or, driven by an intense “desire to buy”, seek satisfaction in “shopp[ing] with reckless abandon” (83f.).¹

In the absence of either a figural, narrative or authorial voice that can extricate itself from the novel's environmental critique, that critique must remain compromised. In its oscillation between sonic mysticism and acoustic ecology, the novel's representation of the postmodern soundscape replicates the complicitously critical dynamics of an ecological critique in whose context it acquires its significance. It cannot be stressed enough that the complicitous nature of DeLillo's critique in *White Noise* does not invalidate the novel's power to intervene critically in the discourses that shape our understanding of postmodernity. DeLillo's description of Iron City as “a center of abandonment” (85) that “expresses a ghostly longing for something that was far beyond retrieval” (88) may well be read as suggesting that the industrial age the city's name alludes to has given way to a new, post-industrial order. But DeLillo does not join the chorus of approval of the post-industrial society, which the author of that term inspired. If Daniel Bell can write in 1974 that, in the post-industrial society, “individual utility and profit maximization” will “become subordinated to broader conceptions of social welfare and community interest” (481), we need DeLillo's fictional stocktaking ten years later to challenge and unsettle the convenient fictions of more complacent social commentators.

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1. See Ferrard (1991) for an analysis of consumption in *White Noise* as the main source of the Gladney family's unity.

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AMÉRICAINS

DON DELILLO

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