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The function of this new industry would be to recruit the best creative talent of the society and to create a culture in which desire and identity would be fused with commodities to make the dead world of things come alive with human and social possibilities. And indeed, there has never been a propaganda effort to match the effort of advertising in the 20th-century.

– Sut Jhally, *Advertising and the End of the World* 1997

Through products and advertising people attain impersonal identity. I've written about the power of the image in earlier books. It's as if fantasies and dreams could become realized with the help of the entire consumer imagination that surrounds us, a form of self-realization through products.

– Don DeLillo, "An Interview with Don DeLillo" 1993

1. Introduction

- 1 Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) remains central to periodizing postmodern literature and novelistic innovation in the late twentieth-century.¹ Working from the theoretical framework of the critique of advertising in media studies—ranging from the writings of Michael Schudson to Guy Debord, with a special debt to *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-Being* by William Leiss, Stephen Klein, and Sut Jhally—this essay extends this conversation by examining late twentieth-century advertising as a historical frame for reading DeLillo's novel.
- 2 Specifically, this project explores the way that protagonist Jack Gladney's self-conceptions are represented in terms of three non-utility advertising approaches used prominently throughout the 1970s and 1980s: product symbol, personalization, and lifestyle association. In examining Jack through this lens, I suggest that DeLillo impedes Jack's development as a literary character to highlight the forestalled self-actualization

brought on by advertising in late capitalist society. Through such a portrayal, DeLillo creates ironic distance between himself and Jack, as he calls attention to the problems of the commodity logic that his narrator lives by.

- 3 Given DeLillo's prior career as a copywriter for Ogilvy & Mather, as well as a large body of scholarship that analyzes his novels in relationship to issues of political-economy and American culture, this essay seeks to not only deepen an understanding of the historical issues that surround DeLillo's work, but also the political implications of his writing. What is at stake in this project is the treatment of *White Noise*, not only as a realistic "view of life in contemporary America" on par with Jean Baudrillard's *America* (Wilcox 3246), but as a rebuke of the commodity fetishism central to the capitalist mode of production.

2. Symbolism and the Death of Utility

- 4 In the advertising-laden world of *White Noise*, where characters recite advertisements as they sleep, there is no sense of ontological Being independent of the marketplace. If the medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan famously put it, in the novel the medium is the commodity form and the message is who you are. Yet, as Marx is so keen to observe, what a product *is* in a capitalist economy is always concealed by its fetish. Exploited human beings, factories on the verge of collapse, and ecological devastation are not the signifieds of signifiers like De Beers diamonds, Volkswagen automobiles, and Nike. Instead, diamonds represent eternal love, a VW Beetle embodies peace and the counterculture, and a swoosh equals athleticism. In America, the hegemony of the fetishized signifier leaves little space for the unmediated reality of the hidden abode of production and the expression of human needs through non-commodified forms.
- 5 In *White Noise*, Jack views himself and his world in terms of the demands that capitalism fosters towards the constant sale of its immense accumulation of commodities. Instead of having Jack define himself through what psychologists from Abraham Maslow to Martin Seligman regard as self-actualizing activities—for example, his teaching and service to his students, or his role as a husband and father—DeLillo fashions a narrator whose self-conceptions are expressed through purchasable goods. He achieves this characterization by employing what Leiss, Kline, and Jhally term advertising's product symbol approach (334), in which use goods, like their real-world counterparts, are reimagined as signifiers divorced from utilitarian functions and their means of production.²
- 6 For example, throughout the novel, Jack construes his black designer eyeglasses—which he removes, at one point, to see better (102)—and academic gown as material signifiers of his professional identity. His commodity logic is apparent when he rationalizes the secrecy of his German lessons. He explains, "because I'd achieved high professional standing, because my lectures were well attended and my articles printed in the major journals, because I wore an academic gown and dark glasses day and night whenever I was on campus... I knew my German lessons would have to be secret" (31-32). In this passage, Jack groups his glasses and gown with other signifiers of his professional role, as if they are equally pertinent to his identity as a professor. In a similar scene, Jack reveals that he adopted his glasses and gown the same year he invented Hitler studies and became a department head (16-17).

- 7 In both passages, Jack perceives his items as what Fred Hirsch terms “positional goods”—objects in a society that allow us to recognize distinguished social status (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 298). This conception of commodities illustrates Fred Inglis’s point that through advertising people “see objects as symbols of their own prestige and promotion” (116). Jack’s thinking alludes to the rise of status appeal advertising during the years preceding *White Noise*’s publication (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 270) and the influence it had on the copywriter-turned-novelist’s representation of the cognitive aspects of consumer life in the industrialized west.
- 8 The way that Jack interprets the person-product relationships around him reinforces the connection that DeLillo establishes between Jack’s self-conceptions and the commodity form. While talking to his colleague Murray Siskind he remarks, “there was something touching about the fact that Murray was dressed almost entirely in corduroy. I had the feeling that since the age of eleven in his crowded plot of concrete he’d associated this sturdy fabric with higher learning in some impossibly distant and tree-shaded place” (11). Similar to the way Jack associates his glasses with his professional identity, Jack feels Murray does the same thing with his corduroy jacket. In a similar passage, Jack notices his daughter Steffie’s green visor and interprets it as an object that offers her “wholeness and identity” (37).
- 9 By recognizing advertising’s product symbol appeal as a pervading logic underlying Jack’s views, this analysis extends Frank Lentricchia’s observation that “brand names creep into the syntax of [Jack’s] perceptions” (105). In *White Noise*, DeLillo writes in reference to the language of advertising, not just specific products or brands, as he represents his protagonist’s view of the world in terms of what communications scholar Michael Schudson describes as the “schemata that advertising has made salient” (Schudson 210). By fusing Jack’s notion of identity to goods, DeLillo transforms Jack’s sense of self into the sum of his possessions (Weekes 300).
- 10 For Jack, it is not enough to be a professor and a department head; instead, he must continually validate this characterization through the symbolic attributes of the commodity form. As Sut Jhally observes:

The commodity image-system... provides a particular vision of the world—a particular mode of self-validation that is integrally connected with what one has rather than what one is—a distinction often referred to as one between ‘having’ and ‘being,’ with the latter now being defined through the former. (“Image-Based Culture: Advertising and Popular Culture” 252)
- 11 In such a view, where “being” transitions to “having,” a person ceases to be when they cease to have. DeLillo depicts this failure of the commodity ideal when Jack is confronted by his colleague Eric Massingale in a department store. In this scene, Jack is not wearing his glasses, which prompts Eric to tell him that he is a “different person altogether” (83). If Jack’s relationship with his glasses had been conceived in terms of utility, rather than symbolism, the comment would be trivial. But because DeLillo fuses Jack’s self-perceptions to his glasses, Eric’s comment momentarily dismantles Jack’s sense of self. The result is a trip to the Mid-Village Mall, where Jack attempts to reestablish his identity through commodities that might recover his sense of self. He admits, “the encounter put me in the mood to shop” (83).
- 12 As a critic, DeLillo uses sensationalized language to satirize Jack’s moment of “self-actualization” while shopping at the mall. As he puts items in his shopping cart, Jack explains, “I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d

forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me... I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit" (84). Jack's marketplace experience parodies commercials in which shopping remedies problems of identity and self-esteem. Thus, instead of confirming Jack's "existential" experience, DeLillo's exaggerated prose refuses his narrator's perceived self-growth. Through this ironic distance, DeLillo renders Jack's moment of modernist epiphany in which he experiences "profound imaginative perception" (Wilcox 349) as a postmodern delusion of "hallucinogenic intensity" (Jameson 27-28).

- 13 By impeding Jack's development as a literary character, DeLillo mimics the cultural climate of a late capitalist society permeated by advertising. As William Leiss expounds in *The Limits to Satisfaction*:

In [late capitalist societies] extensive market exchanges involving a great variety of commodities provide the organized framework for the satisfaction of needs. Maslow suggests that this level of activity should be transcended... in order to arrive at the level of self-actualizing activities, which are not related to the exchange of goods. But the actual behavioral tendencies in high-intensity market settings are far different. The sphere of material exchange is not transcended, but rather is extended even more deeply into the psychological domain. The needs for self-esteem and self-actualization are expressed and pursued through the purchase of commodities, which are not simply material objects but things that have a complex set of meanings or 'messages' associated with them. (57)

- 14 Like the consumers discussed by Leiss and leading late twentieth-century market researchers,³ Jack fails to transcend the realm of commodity exchange, and the more he "recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system [capitalism], the less he understands his own existence and his own desires" (Debord 23). Consequently, Jack's identity insecurity endures and he remains stagnant as a literary character. In this manner, DeLillo alludes to the cultural concerns raised by his contemporary Leiss, as he "employs Jack's views in his criticism of society" (Jacobsen 23).

3. Personalization and Black Magic

- 15 DeLillo's construction of Jack's consciousness through advertising's personalization approach accentuates his protagonist's inability to self-actualize and evolve as a literary character. In this advertising format, products are not only signifiers but objects of self-transformation and improved social interactions (Leiss, Klein, and Jhally 283). Through this method of representation, DeLillo illuminates the way that late capitalism and advertising orient "all aspects of an individual's striving for personal satisfaction toward the realm of commodities" (Leiss 14).⁴ For example, although Jack purchases his glasses as a signifier of his emerging status as a Hitler scholar, he also actively uses the glasses to "grow into" and "develop toward" Hitler (17). The incredible transformative nature of the glasses is discernible when Babette asks Jack to stop wearing them and he responds, "I've built a career... I may not understand all the elements involved but this is all the more reason not to tamper" (221). Here, the glasses are part of the career that Jack has built, but they are also an element of future aspirations, which is why there is "all the more reason not to tamper" by removing them (221). For Jack, the glasses are not material objects, but "psychological things...

symbolic of personal attributes and goals" (Levy 433). This representation of consciousness highlights the way that DeLillo excludes possibilities for self-actualization and character development that exist outside the world of goods. In doing so, he restricts his narrator's thinking to the assumptions of the commodity ideal and the horizon of meaning propagated by advertising.

- 16 Jack's daily use of his goods further evinces this ad-induced conception of the world. For example, instead of developing his teaching craft over the course of the novel and finding a sense of self through his academic work, Jack relies on purchasable goods to validate and transform his professional identity. This commodity fetishism is evident when Jack prepares to enter Murray's classroom. Before he enters, he reveals that he first composed his face and put on his dark glasses (70). In this scene, Jack believes that the glasses will resolve his tendency "to make a feeble presentation of self," and they will allow him to be "taken seriously" as a Hitler scholar (16-17). The interpersonal dimension of his transformation is that he thinks the glasses will enable him to lecture with the same influence and charisma as Hitler (Keesey n.p.). Here, DeLillo employs what Leiss, Klein, and Jhally term advertising's "black magic": the purported ability of a commodity to improve interpersonal relations (274). Like the pseudonym "J. A. K. Gladney," which Jack refers to as "a tag I wore like a borrowed suit," the glasses are an element of Jack's professional persona that he feels allows him to flourish in the social setting of the College-on-the-Hill (16). In an especially revealing passage, he admits: "I can't teach Hitler without them" (221).
- 17 To better understand the logic of the personalization advertising format, black magic, and how DeLillo employs these motifs from advertising to link Jack's conception of his glasses to social power, one needs to look no further than the iconic 1984 Sferoflex eyewear ad featuring bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno. In semiological terms, the former Incredible Hulk is a signifier of potency and strength (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 205). In this ad, Sferoflex positions him with their glasses so that his strength is transferred to the frames that he is holding (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 205). As a result, their glasses turn into a signifier, and what is signified is the message that Sferoflex means "years and years of 'incredible' strength" (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 206). The social dimension of the glasses is represented by the woman's hands wrapped around Ferrigno's chest (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 205). Like Sferoflex, Jack does not explicitly state that his glasses transform his "feeble presentation of self" (DeLillo 17). Instead, they are an element of a more powerful self-image and desirable social relations. As he explains, "Some people carry a gun. Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer. It's in this area that my obsessions dwell" (63).
- 18 Although Jack believes that his glasses transform his professional identity and his social life, DeLillo's narrative harmonizes with Raymond Williams' argument that advertising's "magic is always an unsuccessful attempt to provide meanings and values" (189).⁵ This ironic distance between DeLillo and Jack is salient when Jack attempts to use black magic at the Hitler conference. In this scene, Jack attempts to use his glasses and robe to reconcile the fact that he is a Hitler studies department chair who cannot speak German. Yet, these objects fail to provide the social and personal meanings promised in advertisements like those for Sferoflex eyewear. He remarks, "even in my black gown and dark glasses, with my name in Nazi typeface over my heart, I felt feeble in their presence.... I spent a lot of time in my office, hiding" (DeLillo 274). In this passage, Jack is let down by advertising's magic system as his goods fail to

ameliorate his social relations and lack of self-esteem. The result is a professional identity in shambles, an academic alienated from his peers, and a literary character who remains in the same state of identity insecurity in which he began the novel.

- 19 Similar to the characters at the Hitler conference, DeLillo's audience is not persuaded by Jack's "self-transformation" and the fantastic symbolic dimensions that he attaches to his goods. Readers do not see the glasses and gown as symbols of a powerful narrator. On the contrary, they see blemished objects that fail to conceal Jack's "washed-out eyes and aging body" (Keesey n.p.). This disjunction between Jack's conception of his goods and the audiences' interpretation of his goods illustrates the way that *White Noise* ironically refutes the advertising logic its protagonist lives by. In doing so, the novel criticizes the commodity ideal as well as the advertising approaches used to sustain the continual sale and consumption of commodities in late capitalist society.
- 20 This criticism of advertising is accessible to *White Noise*'s readers through the self-referential manner in which DeLillo employs popular advertising motifs from the 1970s and 1980s. For example, although Jack's stream of consciousness narrative is represented through three dominant advertising appeals from the period, DeLillo recurrently breaks this narrative structure by inserting unquoted "consumerist mantras" (Moses 64) that have no identifiable source: "Mastercard, Visa, American Express," "Dristan Ultra, Dristan Ultra," "Cloret, Velamints, Freedent" (45, 75, 103). For Joseph Dewey, "such commercial breaks reflect how television has permeated Gladney's thoughts, becoming part of the logic of his narrative processes" (qtd. in Wiese n.p.). However, Annjeanette Wiese claims that these interruptions "also have meaning on a more formal level, one that supports the contradistinction between narrative and nonnarrative form. These 'breaks' serve as distractions without cause, and thus as formal metaliterary interruptions that both break readers out of the narrative and make them more aware of it" (n.p.).
- 21 Ultimately, both critics are right. The commercial messages allude to the ways that advertising governs Jack's thinking. Yet, they also function novelistically as metaliterary interruptions in Jack's narrative, which make readers more aware of advertising's presence in DeLillo's narrative. By making his audience conscious of advertising's influence, DeLillo enables his reader to recognize the self-reflective irony that underlies his use of advertising's methods of representation, as part of his satirical engagement of the "schemata that advertising has made salient" (Schudson 210).

4. The Lifestyle Appeal

- 22 DeLillo's critique of late capitalism, and the advertising industry on which it depends, is augmented by the way that he uses advertising's lifestyle association appeal to represent Jack's self-conceptions of his paternal identity. In this ad format, the other advertising approaches of symbolism and personalization are synthesized under the sign of the group and consumption is turned into a public enterprise (Leiss, Klein, and Jhally 344). In *White Noise*, the group DeLillo conceives is the Gladney family and together they engage in public consumption throughout the novel. The first example of this is when Jack, Babette, Steffie, Denise, and Wilder take a trip to the supermarket (35). While inside the store, the Gladneys move together from aisle to aisle surveying the mass of goods. Even six-year-old Wilder takes part in the activity as he sits in his

shopping cart snatching items from shelves (35). On the surface, it may seem like the lifestyle approach has united the Gladney family and allowed DeLillo to resolve Jack's insecurities as a husband and father. However, as the scene continues, it is clear that this is not the case. Jack and Babette lose Wilder while shopping, and Denise disappears with her friends (37-39). Here, the supermarket, its products, and the lifestyle appeal of goods are represented as alienating forces that disrupt the self-esteem and identitarian security that Jack desires.

- 23 In a subsequent passage, DeLillo again unites the Gladneys in the marketplace. This scene takes place at the Mid-Village Mall and includes all six members of Jack's family. Like the scene at the supermarket, consumption is a public event that takes place under the sign of the group. As Jack explains:

Babette and the kids followed me into the elevator, into the shops set along the tiers, through the emporiums and department stores, puzzled but excited by my desire to buy. When I could not decide between two shirts they encouraged me to buy both. When I said I was hungry, they fed me pretzels, beer, souvlaki.... My family gloried in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last. (83)

- 24 Here, goods are portrayed as emblems for the social collective of Jack's family.⁶ Consequently, Jack's relationship with his family, assumes, in his eyes, "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 165). As Thomas Ferraro observes, "by shopping with his family [Jack] becomes 'one' with his family, which in turn achieves its 'oneness' through the activity of shopping" (21-22). This desire to fit in, and its relationship to consumption, underscores the historical context of DeLillo's novel and the "belonger" mindset which pervaded America in the 1970s and 1980s (Mitchell 9; Leiss, Klein, and Jhally 305). For believers, shopping patterns reflect a yearning for group acceptance. Leiss, Klein, and Jhally point out:

The response to consumption seems to be less concerned with the nature of satisfaction than with its social meaning—the way it integrates the individual into a consumption tribe. Meaning here focuses on questions like, who is the person I become in the process of consumption? Who are the other consumers like me? What does the product mean in terms of the type of person I am and how I relate to others? (281-282)

- 25 In *White Noise*, Jack's tribe is his family and the person he thinks he becomes in the process of consumption is a provider for his wife and kids. He posits, "I was the benefactor, the one who dispenses gifts, bonuses, bribes, baksheesh" (84).
- 26 Although Jack believes that he realizes his paternal identity through the marketplace, DeLillo refuses this belief, as he portrays it as another postmodern delusion. Unlike the warm family relationships that permeate lifestyle advertisements, the Gladneys are left distanced from one another as they leave the mall. Jack remarks, "we drove home in silence. We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone" (84). In this passage, the novel's plot concurs with Jhally's critique that "what's real about advertising is its appeals [and] what's false about advertising is the answers it provides to those appeals" (Jhally and Twitchell n.p.). At the same time, the passage refuses the logic that underpins advertising's commercialized world of "capitalist realism," where any personal and social problem is resolved with a commodity or style of life (Schudson 215). Instead of resolving Jack's insecurities as a husband and father, the lifestyle appeal of goods contributes to Jack's identity crisis and inhibits him from having a genuine moment of self-actualization. The "modernist epiphany" (Wilcox 349) that would break Jack's attachment to marketplace self-fashioning never occurs, as his

notion of himself remains shaped and hindered by the constant white noise of advertising's seductive appeals.

27 When reflecting on the consumption lifestyle of the Gladney family, it is essential to recognize the importance of setting in *White Noise*. In both scenes, the Gladneys' group activity occurs in the marketplace, first the supermarket then the Mid-Village Mall. This union of characters, products, and setting is also present in DeLillo's representation of Jack's professional identity. As a professor, Jack's group is his cohort of department heads and their group emblem is the academic robe. Like the Gladney family, they conduct their activities in a specific setting: the College-on-the-Hill. Outside of campus the academic robe embodies little social or cultural capital, as the symbolic value of goods depends on everyone sharing the same notion of what the product means (Campbell 342). Similar to the emphasis on setting in lifestyle ads (Leiss, Klein, and Jhally 264, 281), products in *White Noise* are intertwined with places and the act of consumption routinely occurs within a social context.

28 When persons, commodities, and settings are fused together the use of commodities transforms into a spectacle (Leiss, Klein, and Jhally 344). This is evident in the Gladneys' lavish shopping sprees. It is also evident in Jack's daily use of his commodities. As he explains:

Department heads wear academic robes at the College-on-the-Hill. Not grand sweeping full-length affairs but sleeveless tunics puckered at the shoulders. I like the idea. I like clearing my arm from the folds of the garment to look at my watch. The simple act of checking the time is transformed by this flourish.... Idling students may see time itself as a complex embellishment, a romance of human consciousness, as they witness the chairman walking across campus, crook'd arm emerging from his medieval robe, the digital watch blinking in late summer dusk. (9)

29 DeLillo portrays the act of checking time as a visually striking public display. Students do not see Jack looking at his watch; instead, they are witness to his "crook'd arm emerging from his medieval robe, the digital watch blinking in late summer dusk." This emphasis on imagery and a pastiche of historical fragments within the image, so characteristic of postmodern aesthetics (Jameson; Harvey), mimics the transition from utility to spectacle in late twentieth-century advertising. The medieval robe and modern watch are not presented as clothing and a timepiece, but as historical pieces comprising an image, "a complex embellishment, a romance of human consciousness." As Varda Leymore points out, "in consuming certain products, one buys not only a 'thing' but also an image" (x). In *White Noise*, the image Jack buys is a professional identity: a combination of himself, his products, and the College-on-the-Hill campus.

30 A consequence of the person-product-setting spectacle is what Debord describes as a transition from "having" to "appearing" (16), an extension of the transition that Jhally observes from "being" to "having" ("Image-Based Culture" 252). When Jack discusses his presence on campus, he emphasizes not who he is or what he owns, but how he appears to idling students (DeLillo 9). Here, Jack views himself in the third-person, exemplified by the way he shifts narrative perspective, referring to himself not as "I," but as "the chairman" (9). This change from first-person narrative to third-person narrative illustrates "the interconnection between the formal and thematic function of the narrative structure" in DeLillo's novel (Wiese n.p.), as it mimics the most damaging effect of the commodity image-system: a person's alienation from themselves.

- 31 According to Jerry Mander, “by its expropriation of inner experience, advertising makes the human into a spectator of his or her own life” (131). Instead of validating Jack’s self-conception as a professor, DeLillo’s employment of advertising’s lifestyle appeal forces Jack to conceive his “lived” professional identity as a third-person “representation” (Debord 12). Through this method of characterization, DeLillo simultaneously speaks to the concerns regarding alienation raised by his contemporaries Debord and Mander, while exemplifying the influence of advertising on first-person, stream of consciousness narratives at the end of the 20th-century.

5. Conclusion

- 32 The failure of the commodity ideal and Jack’s self-alienation occurs on page three of *White Noise*, yet Jack’s search for identity through commodities continues until the end of the novel. This formal quality alludes to advertising’s purpose, which is “to preserve the consumption ideal from criticism inexorably made of it by experience” (Williams 188). As Jhally explains:
- People know their real-life experiences. They buy stuff and they get home and it doesn’t work the way it is supposed to work. It doesn’t give them the same kind of pleasure that it’s supposed to give. Advertising is like a drug dealer in that way. It’s the pusher on the street. We know products are not particularly good for us, but every time we try to break this, advertising is there offering us another hit. ‘This will make you really happy. Look at what this product will deliver.’ (“Advertising, Cultural Criticism & Pedagogy”)
- 33 Jack knows that products are not particularly good for him. Early on, he confesses that “there is a darkness attached to them, a foreboding. They make me wary not of personal failure and defeat but of something more general, something large in scope and content” (6). Yet, he is unable to resist the “hit” that advertising continually offers him. Throughout the novel, he uses his glasses and robe to reconcile problems that do not have commodities as their answers. DeLillo takes this satire to the extreme when Jack even tries to remedy his fear of death—the ultimate erasure of the self—by putting his dark eyeglasses on after he is diagnosed with a terminal disease and, again, after his wife asks him how he feels (64, 96).
- 34 As a consequence, Jack remains stuck in a perpetual search for a sense of self, purpose, and happiness throughout the novel. This search is characterized by the lens that advertising propagates, the marketplace and its never-ending supply of commodities, and perpetual disappointment. In this manner, DeLillo employs Jack in his critique of market society (Jacobsen 23), as he continues an ongoing “dialogue with contemporary cultural institutions [that] respects their power but criticizes their dangerous consequences” (Osteen 3). For DeLillo, advertising is the white noise that restrains Jack’s development as a literary character.
- 35 Ultimately, Jack’s struggle for selfhood, self-esteem, and flourishing social relations is never resolved, or comes to resolutions that are ironically presented, thereby refuting conventional narrative lines that involve equilibrium of the protagonist’s internal conflicts. Through this anti-narrative narrative, DeLillo provides a valuable text for examining characterization and novelistic innovation in the postmodern period. In addition, DeLillo establishes a vantage point for exploring the critique of capitalism and advertising in late twentieth-century American literature,⁷ and the relationship

between this literary critique and prevailing criticism in media and cultural studies. Similar to Raymond Williams, Guy Debord, Sut Jhally, and others, DeLillo is not just a keen observer of late capitalism's landscape, but a moralist whose writing illuminates the system's failures. Through satire, DeLillo points his readers toward the ridiculousness of a person and a system that endows consumption and commodities with fantastical meanings. More importantly, he urges his audience to think critically about a market society that pushes its citizens to live in a way that may never be able to provide genuine satisfaction or happiness.

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NOTES

1. See Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of the Heroic Narrative," and Wiese, "Rethinking Postmodern Narrativity: Narrative Construction and Identity Formation in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*."
2. For a textbook example of the product symbol format, see the 1985 Tatung Company advertisement entitled "Tatung and Chic" (Tatung Company). In this billboard ad, the utility value of the television set is removed, and it is advertised as a symbol of modernity and upper class social status. The "destruction of utility," as Baudrillard would describe it (125), is evidenced by the fact that the television set is turned off and the woman is looking away from it.
3. In *The Century of the Self*, America's foremost market researcher Daniel Yankelovich discusses the ways that he and other advertisers incorporated Freud's psychoanalytic work during the 1970s to connect the American counterculture's interest in self-growth and self-actualization to consumer goods.
4. Leiss's observation concurs with Fredric Jameson's analysis that late capitalism is "the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas" (35). Jameson, like Leiss, connects this period of capitalism, and its postmodern "cultural logic," to the advertising industry.
5. Williams describes modern advertising as a technologically advanced system of "magic" which confers personal and social meanings on goods to which they have no reference (184-196).
6. During the 1970s and 1980s, Salem Spirit repeatedly employed the lifestyle association appeal in a similar manner to DeLillo. In their magazine ads (*Salem Spirit Life*) and billboard ads (*Salem Spirit Billboard*) they intertwine cigarettes with group activity and flourishing social relations.
7. The employment of ironic distance in the critique of late-capitalist advertising is a recurring motif in American fiction at the end of the century; though, no scholars periodize this literary technique of historical satire as far back as *White Noise*. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) are often written about in the same vein as this essay, but without a nod to DeLillo. See, for example, "Consumer Ideology and the Violent Subject: The Murderous Consequences of 1980s Advertising in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*" by Adam

Szetela and, for a more encompassing study, *Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary Novel* by Kathryn Hume.

ABSTRACTS

This essay uses the historical framework of late twentieth-century advertising to understand issues of characterization in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*. Given DeLillo's prior career as a copywriter for Ogilvy & Mather, as well as a large body of scholarship that analyzes his novels in relationship to issues of political economy and American culture, this essay seeks to not only deepen an understanding of the historical issues that surround DeLillo's work, but also the political implications of his writing. What is at stake in this project is the treatment of *White Noise* not only as a realistic "view of life in contemporary America" on par with Jean Baudrillard's *America* (Wilcox 3246), but as a rebuke of the commodity fetishism central to the capitalist mode of production.

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