

Technology, Consumerism and Sexuality: The faces of New Cities in DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract— Don DeLillo, in *White Noise*, pictures city life under the influence of modernity. *New Cities*, in the postmodernist's representation, have three characteristics which differently connote human sociability. First, technology is the leading facet. DeLillo portrays it as the social force which arises mitigated feelings; it even takes over the human senses. Technological advance comforts city dwellers but also causes their utmost fear. By the same way, technological advance tends to deprive people of empathy. Because of the distance it puts between people mostly, through television, people rejoice in others' misfortune. Consumerism is another aspect of cities which displaces social gatherings. People's consumerist penchant turns supermarkets and shops into social dealing spaces. Their commercial purpose turns social. Friends meetings take place in the latter. Shopping is the activity which leads to feeling family cohesion. At home, the kitchen stands for the supermarkets in miniature. People's intellectual abilities compete in food stores. In addition, the city life painted in DeLillo's novel is characterized by the banality of sexuality. Mostly considered a private matter, sexuality goes public. It hovers in every social sphere. It is a solution to any social situation, a means of bargain. These different facets of modernity depicted in DeLillo's work shape people's mentality. Consequently, the human condition is under their control.

Keywords— *New Cities*, consumerism, technology, sexuality, human condition.

I. INTRODUCTION

At a period when social issues are worldwide experiences, it becomes urgent to consider a global approach when it comes to facing or even solving a social matter. The question of New Cities does not escape that fate. Regarding the necessity to resettle due to population growth, queries about how to meet social conditions that fit humans' fundamental needs arise. New cities originate from the Resettlement Administration in the USA; they appear in other places such as England and Belgium, to list some. A glance at the latter places' characteristics helps conceive future cities worldwide, especially in Africa. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach is required, making the literary field worth questioning.

Always labelled as a way to extrapolate and escape reality, the work of art can go beyond ordinary stories telling. It is intended to inform, educate, portray, uncover and challenge a society's way of doing. New cities found their place in the social concern of literature. In *White Noise*, the postmodernist writer Don DeLillo portrays modern cities under the influence of technology, consumerism and sexuality. The latter aspects not only imply different regards for sociability but also are determinants of the human condition. For this, the work will

firstly focus on how technology is enthroned modern culture in New Cities. Then DeLillo's picture of sociability on the move through consumerism will be regarded, and the use of sex as a social motif will be the centre of concern in the last part.

II. TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCE: THE RISE OF MODERN CULTURE

In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo pays particular attention to the issue of technology linking it to people's lives in New Cities. The postmodernist writer not only figures out its omnipresence but also how it is enthroned as modern culture. In DeLillo's work, the way technological devices such as television, radio, laser and so on direct people's perceptions, opinions and social views is the same as culture. DeLillo's portrayal of technological means' influence in modern cities is just like Michelle Lebaron's definition of cultural realities' power on people. For Lebaron (Lebaron: 2003), cultural realities are the underground rivers which run through people's lives and relationships, giving them messages which shape their perceptions, attributions, judgements and ideas. Thus, technology shapes city dwellers' worldviews.

In the novel, different sequences illustrate the idea according to which advance is enthroned a modern culture. For example, in the following discussion between Heinrich and his father, Jack Gladney, the narrator, DeLillo highlights the way technological means take over human senses:

"It's going to rain tonight."

"It's raining now," I said.

"The radio said tonight. (...)"

"Look at the windshield," I said. "Is that rain or isn't it?"

"I'm only telling you what they said."

"Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses."

"Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. (...) Even sound can trick the mind. (White Noise: 30)

Through that exchange, DeLillo shows how technology influences people's perceptions. Electronic components shape people's conceptions to such an extent that it no longer matters what one's senses help hear, feel or even see. Heinrich's character serves DeLillo in his portrayal of how people's faith in technology undermines truth and reality. Heinrich blurs his eyes because of what he gets from the radio. He denies the evidence for the voice prediction.

The power of that device to name the radio, particularly in people's daily life, is also highlighted in the episode of the Airborne Toxic Event. People can perceive the cloud from their houses. However, they are preoccupied with what is transmitted through the device. Jack's incessant inquiry about news is an illustration. To Heinrich, he asks: *What does the radio say?*" (White Noise: 115) (...) *Come on, tell me what they said on the radio while I was out there.*" (White Noise: 120)

In addition, DeLillo represents another facet of culture technology commands in *New Cities*: human relations. Cultural ways, manners and values establish links between people. In modern cities, telephones assure and maintain social connections. Far from associations in which people are in touch, physical contact is avoided. Any factor that brings about closeness is banished for phone facilities. The phone stands as the only means of social connection. An idea that Denise link to her friends exemplifies: *"She was transcribing names and phone numbers from an old book to a new one. There were no addresses. Her friends had phone numbers only, a race of people with a seven-bit analog consciousness"* (White Noise: 49)

Then the Gladney family's relationship with the Stovers is representative of city dwellers' sense of virtual connection. The latter reinforces and comforts people. Physical contact is, for them, a real nuisance. The atmosphere Steffie's announcement of the Stovers' desire to pay a visit establishes tells enough about their sense of relations:

The Stovers want to come over.
 "Parents or children?" Babette said.
 My daughter shrugged.
 "We don't want them," Babette said.
 "Keep them out," Denise said.
 What do I say?
 "Say anything you want."
 "Just keep them out of here."
 "They're boring."
 "Tell them to stay home."

Steffie retreated with the phone, appearing to shield it with her body, her eyes full of fear and excitement (White Noise: 50-51)

Denise and Babette's reactions after Steffie informs them of the Stovers' desire to pay a visit justify the absence of friends gathering in the novel. Mostly, references to links are made through virtual dealings.

Moreover, Jack's appreciation of his experience with the automated teller machine sums up people's penchant for virtual connections. He attributes the machine every reward of social contact. Through the personification of the device, DeLillo foreshadows the tendency to value virtual interaction over the physical one: *"The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval (...) What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value"* (White Noise: 54)

To comfort Jack's idea that machinery provides social privileges, one quotes Tweedy, Jack's former wife's high regard for social contact in airports and during flights. For her: *"Planes and terminals are the safest of places for the very young and very old. They are looked after, smiled upon, admired for their resourcefulness and pluck. People ask*

friendly questions, offer them blankets and sweets" (White Noise: 99). Tweedy associates peaceful social contact with technological advances, particularly the plane. She even considers its knowledge compulsory, mainly for children. Her thought of a flight experience as an agent of self-esteem is an attribution of another facet of human relations to mechanics. Seen as a psychological construct, self-esteem, evaluated before by the degree to which one is accepted or rejected in society, becomes dependent on technology.

Tweedy ends by mentioning the flight experience as an aspect of socialization, particularly in children's social development. For her, it is essential for the child's education. While claiming her pride to have allowed her child to reach that social step, she expresses her devastation regarding some parents' neglect toward familiarizing their children with the social opportunities modernity provides, particularly technological means. For Tweedy: *"every child ought to have the opportunity to travel thousands of miles alone," (...) The sooner we get them in the air, the better. (...) You have to start them young. It's one of the things I'm proudest to have accomplished with Bee. (...) Too many parents ignore this phase of a child's development."* (White Noise: 99)

Through Tweedy's way of summing up her perception of a flight experience impact, DeLillo portrays how advances' awareness and experience are aspects of socialization in modern cities. Just as culture, people need to be inculcated modern ways. The unfamiliarity with such means is a new perception of uprootedness.

By the same way, machinery stands as a mark of civilization. The deprivation of tools such as television, mainly for children, is a cultural shortage. It reduces the individual to a savage, outdated and destitute of modern ways. In his description of Eugene, his stepson, Jack points out the TV set as a cultural agent. *"The boy is growing up without television," I said, "which may make him worth talking to, Murray, as a sort of wild child, a savage plucked from the bush, intelligent and literate but deprived of the deeper codes and messages that mark his species as unique."* (White Noise: 58)

In addition, the picture of technological advance commands in modern cities is far from being a close debate. For DeLillo, it does not just direct people's ways, perceptions and social links; scientific know-how is seen as the decliner of the human condition. The latter notion stands for *"the characteristics, key events, and situations which compose the essentials of human existence, such as birth, growth, emotion, aspiration, conflict, and mortality."* (STANDS4 LLC: 2022). Despite such a reality, technology founds the belief that people can escape that fate. Based on its marvels in society, people believe more in advance abilities than reality: *"it prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out. New devices, new techniques every day. Lasers, masers, ultrasound"*. (White Noise: 282)

In the Dylar episode, DeLillo portrays people's trust in scientific knowledge more than the bound aspects of life and everyday experiences. Babette's confidence in the Gray Research Group is an illustration. For her, *"They isolated the fear-of-death part of the brain. Dylar speeds relief to that sector."* (White Noise: 198). Her trust in technological capability urges Jack's wife to make many sacrifices to take

possession of the tablets: Babette hides from her children and husband, cheats, and even commits adultery.

Furthermore, in Don DeLillo's representation of advance reign, he pictures the way technology empowers city dwellers. Holding a gun adds other attributes to Jack's character, including domination and security. The gun creates a sort of distance between people and himself. It nourishes different impressions. Jack's self-perception the first time he carries the Zumwalt automatic instantiates the gun's influence on him: *"The gun created a second reality for me to inhabit. The air was bright, swirling around my head. Nameless feelings pressed thrillingly on my chest. It was a reality I could control, secretly dominate. How stupid these people were, coming into my office unarmed.* (White Noise: 294 – 295)

The gun is not the only agent of social distance; the TV set also gives people different impressions. Images detach the individual from the immediate social environment. The screen turns the close and parent into otherness. It associates familiarity with the distinct, the different, the past and strangeness. In the same way as culture, it puts barriers between the television audience and the actor. Jack's impressions while looking at Babette instance television's power to shape another reality. *"A strangeness gripped me, a sense of psychic disorientation. It was her all right, the face, the hair, the way she blinks in rapid twos and threes. I'd seen her just an hour ago, eating eggs, but her appearance on the screen made me think of her as some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the mists of the dead. If she was not dead, was I?"* (White Noise: 110)

That distance socially impacts since it dehumanizes. The reality TV set establishes deprives people of empathy, turning whatever situation displayed on the screen interesting, instead of arising human sensibility in some cases. It cuts the others from one's world. Television creates a dialectical approach toward people making a distinction between "Us and Them" (McLeod: 2019), where "Them" stands for the opposite, the contrasting aspect of one's condition. Therefore, the reality of otherness is not significant, no matter how. An idea that the views of news, in general, let shape *"You're saying it's more or less universal, to be fascinated by TV disasters."* (White Noise:)

Thus, advance is simultaneously a sweet and bitter experience in modern cities. In the same way, people claim progress impacts on liveliness; they think advance exposes them to entropy. Electronics arise fear to a certain extent that they differently connote death. That reality, the extreme of liveliness, is more omnipresent than ever. Progress is linked to new forms of death. Every advance in knowledge embodies a kind of death. As a consequence, people's destiny is computerized. The different ways Jack Gladney reminds his end deprive death of its natural aspect. *"I'm tentatively scheduled to die."* (White Noise: 201) *"I'm technically dead."* (White Noise: 279)

In *White Noise*, while denouncing people's asocial tendency in modern cities, DeLillo highlights the way technology reaches the peak in its command of human values, ways, mentalities and so on. He announces the decline of social values which linked human beings so far. However, the reign of technology is not

the only feature of new cities which turns people asocial; consumerism is in.

III. PEOPLE'S CONSUMERIST PENCHANT: THE PICTURE OF A SOCIABILITY ON THE MOVE

In the same way as technology, DeLillo portrays other facets of New Cities that impact social cohesion perceptions. The proliferation of supermarkets and shopping centers in modern cities turn social connections from their purposes. Far from the cities where people palaver, the consumerist penchant in modern places displaces social dealings.

While painting that sociability on the move, DeLillo starts by picturing family lives in modern cities. The Gladney's different habits stand as an illustration. Despite their vast dwelling, the kitchen is the only place for family gatherings. Jack's description of their routine shows how consumerism occupies the sphere of social connections:

"Babette and I do our talking in the kitchen. (...). She and I are alike in this, that we regard the rest of the house as storage space for furniture, toys, all the unused objects of earlier marriages (...) Denise and Steffie came downstairs and we talked about the school supplies they would need. Soon it was time for lunch. We entered a period of chaos and noise. We milled about, bickered a little, dropped utensils (White Noise:15)

Furthermore, consumerism does not just affect the family routine. DeLillo represents their impact in the broader sphere. Supermarkets are the only places for social dealings, particularly friend gatherings. Jack's encounter with his colleagues and friends takes place in the latter. The acquisition of goods is the only generator of social links. The different sequences where DeLillo describes his family members' meeting with their friends let refer to consumerism as the main social associations' booster.

Firstly, there is the encounter for the second time with Massingale at the cash terminals. Then Jack mentions that his meetings with Murray at the food store exceed those in school, even though they are colleagues: *"minutes after we entered, we ran into Murray. This was the fourth or fifth time I'd seen him in the supermarket, which was roughly the number of times I'd seen him on campus"*. (White Noise: 43) Afterward, the episode of Denise's dealings with her friends in the supermarket demonstrates the social purpose of shopping centres: *"Denise had found some friends and they went up front to look at the paperback books in spindly racks, the books with shiny metallic print, raised letters, vivid illustrations of cult violence and windswept romance.* (White Noise:45)

Furthermore, the characteristics of New Cities direct other social links. Shopping leads to feeling family cohesion. The notion of "familism" (Quizlet: 2022) finds its sense in stores. It refers to the tendency of family members to cohere as a group. In DeLillo's different portrayal of the Gladney, it is just in the shopping centre where their behavior toward one another reflects that of a family. They support each other, encourage and guide:

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. The two girls scouted ahead, spotting things they thought I might want or need, running back to get me, to clutch my arms, plead with me to follow. They were my guides to endless well-being. People swarmed through the boutiques and gourmet shops. Organ music rose from the great court. We smelled chocolate, popcorn, cologne; we smelled rugs and furs, hanging salamis and deathly vinyl. My family gloried in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last. They gave me advice, badgered clerks on my behalf. I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflecting surface. (White Noise: 90)

In addition, the environment is mainly influenced by people's consumerist penchant. New cities reflect the image of consumerism. It is obvious firstly in people's habits and their routine: "they walk down the street with food in their faces; they eat in stores, cars, parking lots, on bus lines and movie lines, under the stately trees" (White Noise:22). People's newfound habit impacts the climate. DeLillo, in different ways, links heat to people's preoccupation with acquiring goods: "The heat of food. (...) Heat emanates from crowds of shoppers" (White Noise:19)

Moreover, supermarkets displace intellectual abilities' ground for competition. In place of books, stores provide other means for mental nourishment. Instructions on foods replace bookish knowledge. Murray's observation lets us think about consumerism's power over intellectual knowledge acquisition. "But there are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes." (White Noise:18)

Thus, consumerism drives people out of the essential for its social reign. People are, above all, preoccupied with food and the preservation of shops and supermarkets, making them parameters of life's essence. People's appreciation of their life depends on the possibility of acquiring goods. Babette's reaction after she realizes that she has enough to eat is an example: "Babette looked up from her eggs and hash browns and said to me with a quiet intensity, "Life is good, Jack." (White Noise: 106)

Then consumer goods' regard as a means for survival, leads to resorting to them even during the most challenging times. During evacuations, people carried supermarket carts despite their hurry. Then the description of the supermarket after the cloud invasion incident, which did not leave the city indifferent, lets us perceive city dwellers' regard for such a place "But the supermarket did not change, except for the better. It was well-stocked, musical and bright. This was the key, it seemed to us. Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip". (White Noise: 169)

In his portrayal of modern cities, DeLillo shows how consumerism invades cities and people's lives. Only supermarkets and shops reflect sociability in modern cities: family and friends' gatherings occur in the latter. Consumerism

replaces fellows and, at the same time, directs people's view of life. However, other features, such as sexuality, characterize new cities in DeLillo's *White Noise*.

IV. SEX AS A SOCIAL MOTIF

In DeLillo's literary representation of New cities, the theme of sexuality is striking. Sexuality hovers in every sphere in *White Noise*. Its different references in city dwellers' life make sex matters a social motif. Seen as a recurring theme in DeLillo's novel, sexuality portrayal is symbolic. Regarding how the postmodernist represents it, he highlights the turn it takes in New cities. From a private matter to a public one, sex is the main preoccupation of city dwellers.

In people's routines, it becomes a hobby. There is no more place for other issues. Firstly, through Jack and Babette's life, DeLillo shows how every social circumstance inspires sexual intercourse. "Do you know what these cold gray leaden days make me want to do?" "What?" "Crawl into bed with a good-looking man. I'll put Wilder in his play tunnel. You go shave and brush your teeth. Meet you in the bedroom in ten minutes." (White Noise:185)

In his portrayal, DeLillo draws attention to the fact that the concern about sex goes beyond the domestic sphere. The omnipresence of allusions to sex in the literary field shows its social regard. Seen as the reflection of social realities, the theme of sexuality in literature is, for DeLillo, a means to highlight people's obsession with sex in modern cities. There is no way to avoid it; even reading becomes its mental practice. Babette's following commentary lets us perceive sexuality as the central theme in modern literary production. "I will read," she said. "But I don't want you to choose anything that has men inside women, quote-quote, or men entering women. 'I entered her.' 'He entered me.' We're not lobbies or elevators. 'I wanted him inside me,' as if he could crawl completely in, sign the register, sleep, eat, so forth. Can we agree on that?" (White Noise: 37)

Jack's further observation points out sexuality as a typical feature of modernity. As writers are witnesses of their time, sexuality omnipresence is just mirroring its place in city people's daily routine: "This struck me as one of the few things the modern imagination has contributed to the history of erotic practices" (White Noise:38)

The change in sexuality's social apprehension in New cities is also emphasized in DeLillo's picture of Babette and Jack's habit in the supermarket. Seen as the new social setting, the supermarket symbolizes gathering and social dealings. Babette and Jack's habit of flirting there represent the turn sexual perceptions take in modern places. Its displacement from rooms to supermarkets reflects its different social stages, from a private matter to a public one: "I rubbed against Babette in the checkout line. She backed into me and I reached around her and put my hands on her breasts. She rotated her hips and I nuzzled her hair and murmured, "Dirty blond." (...) I tried to fit my hands into Babette's skirt, over her belly, as the slowly moving line edged toward the last purchase point, the breath mints and nasal inhalers." (White Noise: 48)

Moreover, sex social power in modern places revives people's desire in any circumstance. There is not any social situation which can overshadow it. Jack and Babette's

description during the evasion of the Nyodene D at a moment where fear and worry inhabit people instantiate sexuality power. “Where is Wilder?” she said, thick-voiced, as I ran my hands over her breasts, trying with my teeth to undo her bra clip through the blouse.” (White Noise:) Besides, the sexual penchant is a social epidemic in modern cities since Jack and Babette are not the only ones preoccupied with sexual intercourse. In the rescuing camps, DeLillo’s picture of prostitutes still in activity gives a general impression of sexuality social meaning in New cities. A fact that Murray puts into words. “I don’t think this is the kind of disaster that leads to sexual abandon”. (White Noise: 152)

However, sex goes beyond just a social preoccupation; it is a means for bargain. Sexual activity not only provides people with pleasure, but it also sets everything for a price. Sex is, in new cities, a means for exchange. Intellectual abilities, prestige and even advances in technology are under its mercy. That side of the sexual activity power is what DeLillo underlines in Babette and Mr Gray’s dealing. Babette acknowledges sex as a social facilitator: “This was the only way I could get Mr. Gray to let me use the drug. It was my last resort, my last hope. First I’d offered him my mind. Now I offered my body” (White Noise: 192)

As a situation, incident, idea, image, or character type found in many different literary works, the literary term motif (Baldick: 2015) goes social in DeLillo’s novel, particularly in his representation of sexuality. After the characters of Babette and Jack, the postmodernist writer shows how sex eclipses any social circumstance. It finds a place everywhere and is the

social preoccupation of everybody. Through Murray’s remark, sexuality social power in modern cities is highlighted: “when I covered sports, I used to get together with the other writers on the road. Hotel rooms, planes, taxis, restaurants. There was only one topic of conversation. Sex” (White Noise:216)

V. CONCLUSION

In *White Noise*, DeLillo represents new cities with three main characteristics. Technology, consumerism and sexuality. These features of modern dwellings disfigure people’s apprehension of cities, sociability and coexistence. Far from the social aspects which stand for human values promoted so far, the new social faces of cities are ways toward individualism, vulgarity, degradation of values, antipathy and so on. DeLillo’s wake-up call is worth paying attention to in circumstances where the emergency to build new cities imposes all around the world, especially in Africa.

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