Television Language Of White Noise Essay, Research Paper

Television, in our culture, is by far the most dominant medium of communication and stimulation. The fears, the joys, and the horrors of the world are all channeled through television. As seen in the Rodney King police beating videotape, television can incite in a population sheer and utter rage and dark hostility. That same footage; however, can also detract from the very anger it incites. After countless times of viewing the footage, in a never-ending Simulacrum of the same grainy image, the masses became desensitized to its graphic violence. In fact, the repetitive viewing of the footage during the trial led to the desensitization of the jury and the acquittals of the “guilty” officers. In White Noise DeLillo recognizes television as a vital component in American culture and makes it a major focus of the novel. DeLillo uses media and more specifically television, as a symbol of the American Simulacra and links the Simulacra into his character’s escapism from the violent realities in White Noise.

John Frow, in his criticism of White Noise, rightfully focuses on television as the defining medium of the Simulacra in DeLillo’s America. Television, of course, by definition is a copy; it is a broadcast of something that has been filmed; it is viewed in millions of homes worldwide, each television flickering the same image into the sub-conscious eye. Frow presents a close reading of a speech Murray gives to his students:

they’re already too old to figure importantly in the making of society. Minute by minute they’re beginning to diverge from each other. “Even as we sit here,” I tell them, “you are spinning out from the core, becoming less recognizable as a group, less targetable by advertisers and mass-producers of culture. Kids are a true universal. But you’re well beyond that, already beginning to drift, to feel estranged from the products you consume. Who are they designed for? What is your place in the marketing scheme? Once you’re out of school, it is only a matter of time before you experience the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity” (qtd. Frow 50).

Frow seems a little distressed by this passage, for how bleak is a society if an individual is only important as judged by their perceived value/commodity relationship with television. Frow says, “The propositions are monstrous, but only because we find it so hard to believe” (426). By falling into the trap of this distrust of television Frow falls into the same trap that Wilder’s students stumble into: “Television is the death throes of human consciousness…They’re ashamed of their television past” (DeLillo 51). Frow does not see what Wilder sees: the beauty of the television medium as a means of escape. In fact, like the students, Frow is embarrassed that a relationship of value between humanity and television could even be established. Frow is astute; however, in noting that DeLillo is not interested primarily in the negative aspects of the television simulacrum, but instead in its importance to the American lifestyle. By saying that when one becomes devalued to television they become full of “loneliness and dissatisfaction,” DeLillo is saying that the reverse must be true. If one is connected to the experience of television one is satisfied and complete. This is seen in the Gladney household; anywhere that the television is located becomes a happy place where the family gathers. The “reality” reported on the television contains an operatic sense of beauty. Describing the Gladneys viewing television DeLillo writes, “Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” (64). The beauty of the disaster epic is the beauty of the struggle of humanity against flooding in Bangladesh…against Union Carbide toxic event killing two thousand five hundred human beings…against mud slides in California … against any great adversity; adversity juxtaposed against the detached backdrop of blue-screen bleach-white toothed television. DeLillo cautions that we should not be frightened or repulsed by our vulture-like tendency to happily consume the bloodshed and gore of the disaster epic. After all, it is not true misery we are witnessing; it is only a copy of their copy of how the misery should be. It is only a televised simulation of the expected responses of “people” shocked out of their reality. Why should we fear a copy, it cannot harm us? Why should we fear our fascination with that copy; isn’t that fascination only human and in a way life-affirming? Our safety is in our distance from the actual object if ever there was such a thing; the Simulacra protects us from its danger. DeLillo writes about the Gladneys witnessing TV disaster: “For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is” (66).

The Toxic Event montage in White Noise can be paralleled to the Simulacra of television and the comfort it brings to those who experience it. The Toxic Event is not an event in and of itself but only becomes an event when it is made one through the official filters of media. Jack and Babbete discuss this perplexity during the onset of the Event:

“What if the symptoms are real?”

“How could they be real?”

“Why couldn’t they be real?”

“They get them only when they’re broadcast” (133).

The power of the media Simulacra is so convincing that even a lesser source, such as the radio, can control the symptoms of its participants. The responses of the Gladney children to the Toxic Event are only materialized when they are affirmed and created by the radio. The entire Toxic Event is coded in the language and terms of the media and more specifically television. Safety from the Event is found by the characters coding the real disaster as a television epic. The safety is found in the association of “real” horror with the “simulated” horror on television. DeLillo codes the entire scene as a TV event by using TV jargon words such as “scene” and “panoramic.” Frow acknowledges this and includes a selected passage in his notes: “In its tremendous size, its dark and bulky menace, its escorting aircraft, the clouds resembled a national promotion for death, a multimillion-dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy paint and billboard, TV saturation [italics mine]” (qtd. in Frow 423-4). In the mind’s eye of the spectators the black cloud is something they’ve seen before; it is something they’ve experienced before in Bhopal etc. through the Simulacra of television. The people are not seeing the true Toxic Cloud but instead a cloud conditioned by thousands of hours of toxic clouds they have seen on television. The helicopter lights—the spotlights on the superstar at the center stage of the exodus epic—the Toxic Cloud. The Toxic Event is further seen as paralleling television in its obvious distance from any reality. No one is killed by the Event, as would be the case with any self-respecting disaster. The reality of the toxicity itself, due to the lack of death, is called into question. If no one dies there can be no disaster; for the only disasters that cause no death are those beaming into living rooms of America from the television. The children, the most astute seers of the Gladney household, recognize the unimportance of the Event and demonstrate this by sleeping through it. Not only is the event made unimportant by its parallels with television it is made beautiful as is seen in the author’s fixation on its grandeur. Television, especially disaster television and the bigger and better crash films discussed by Murray, are not beautiful due to their American ethic, but rather because of their distance from an immediate reality. DeLillo maintains this assertion and ties it into Deleuze’s theory by showing that the disaster unfolding outside the windows of the Gladney’s station wagon is itself unreal—just a Simulacra.

Although the Toxic Event parallels the hyper-reality of television, it is the lack of television in the physical sense, which causes the greatest deal of stress to the survivors. Frow notes DeLillo’s concern of this: “The most horrifying fact about the evacuation is that it isn’t even reported on network television. ‘Does this thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore?’ asks one man” (qtd. in Frow 423). People are shocked by a noticeable lack of a copy of their distress. No cameras are physically present to remind them how to behave, how to cope with their present situation. There is no television signal beaming across the heavens in “magic waves” simulating their sorrows to countless homes worldwide. Only the “survivors,” alone with their own miseries, are conscious of their subdued sufferings. The man walking around the second shelter with a television on his shoulder complaining about the lack of media coverage becomes the center of attention during the crisis’s end. He brings with him the full force of the television and consequently its disillusionment to the survivors. Since that television has no focus on the disaster unfolding, the disaster itself is negated and the experiences of the people in the disaster are therefore meaningless. This is also evident in the other near disaster of the novel, the near collision of two airplanes. When the two plains nearly collide there are no television crews to record it and therefore the event is trivialized. Bee laments to her father about this: “Where’s the media? … they went through all that for nothing? (92). The experiences of the people on the plane become meaningless without its interpretation on the 6:00 news. Without that blurb on the news, the experiences of the “crash survivors,” during their nightmarish flight, are not affirmed. Therefore, their emotions, their fears, their panics, are all worthless to them. The “survivors,” engulfed in their melancholy, all huddle around the man relating their story to Gladney. They feel comfortable letting the anonymous man tell their story just as they would be made comfortable by a news anchor detailing their struggle. With the obvious lack of the anchor they settle for the minor comfort of their story being told not to the world but to just one man.

The bloodiest scene in White Noise, Gladney’s shooting of his wife’s lover, is also coded in terms of the television Simulacrum. The entire scene is painted with the unreal atmosphere of television, as is related by many murderers when describing their crimes. The words used by DeLillo in this scene are ripe with the hyper-detail of television. Detail is superb when an object is focused on and grows fuzzy the more the camera zooms out. Describing Gladney’s murderous approach towards Mink’s prone body DeLillo writes:

I took another step … As the TV picture jumped, wobbled, caught itself in snarls, Mink appeared to grow more vivid. The precise nature of events. Things in their actual state … [Mink was] sharply outlined against the busy air. White Noise everywhere (310).

The picture in Gladney’s mind, the picture of television, gets jumbled by the overload of sensory material—just like how a face in a pile of two thousand five hundred bodies would be blurred against its background. However, when focusing his lens on Mink, his vision clears in vivid detail, and Mink’s features are easily ascertainable. And then, for Gladney, the white noise sets in; the connection in his mind becomes loosed and all that is left is mind-numbing static. Other examples of DeLillo’s television language in this scene are as follows:

“Things glowed, a secret life rising out of them … The intensity of the noise in the room was the same at all frequencies … I was in the network of meanings … [I] saw it in terms of the dominant wavelength … something large and grand and scenic” [Italics mine] (311-4).

Both Jack and Mink are protected from the act of violence due to language of DeLillo. One cannot really kill or be killed in the safe realm provided by television and consequently DeLillo’s words. Instead of a grotesque and disillusioning blood bath, Jack experiences an epiphany as a thrill-seeking murderer and as a savior. In that same realm, Mink finds salvation as a repentant and punished sinner. On television and in the novel, harmlessness always prevails.

By coding his novel, White Noise, as if it were a television show, DeLillo comments on the state of affairs in our modern culture. DeLillo demonstrates our society’s codependency on what was originally only intended to be a medium of communication. By showing the benevolence of the medium as it translates into the lives of his characters, DeLillo is saying that maybe our dependence on television, even as blood bath entertainment is not as bad as generally perceived.

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