White Noise And Impact Of Television Essay, Research Paper

Impact of Television in White Noise

Just how much does television shape our perception of the world around us? Don DeLillo’s post modernistic novel, White Noise, offers one view concerning the huge impact television has on our lives and how it shapes our observations of the world. The television in this book is portrayed almost as a character due to its importance in the individuals? lives.

White Noise contains the message that the amount of television coverage determines the importance of an event. An example of this is when the refugees from the toxic cloud feel let down when they only rate ?fifty-two words by actual count- no film footage, no live report” (161) in the news. A man ponders, ?Isn?t fear news?? (161). Jack’s ex-wife, Tweedy, is shocked to find that the passengers of a plane which almost crashed “went through all that for nothing” since “there is no media in Iron City” (92). To the characters in the novel, only media coverage brings an event into existence.

Television shapes the characters? behavior in White Noise. During the ?airborne toxic event?, the Gladney family attempts to keep up with the currently reported symptoms caused by the event. The symptoms that Steffie and Denise suffer from during the toxic spill are forgotten immediately after they are told by the television that they should be experiencing the effects of ?d?j? vu?. The submissive obeying of the citizens of Blacksmith illustrates the controlling power of the television.

The characters try to think as the television has told them they should. They feel betrayed when certain aspects of their lives do not fit in to their beliefs based on what they see in the media. Jack complains to his wife, Babette, “these things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. … I’m a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? … These things don’t happen in places like Blacksmith” (114). Because Jack has only seen disasters on television, he cannot imagine the airborne toxic event happening to him in reality. The characters? expectations are defined by the influence of the television in White Noise.

Television also impacts the characters’ powers of imagination, and makes them imitate what they view. An example of this is when a random woman on the street only appears as a ?real? person to Jack after he pictures her “in a soup commercial” (22). One important function of television in the novel is to manipulate the characters? minds.

The loss of reality is another negative effect television is responsible for. This is best seen in the example where the Gladney family comes across Babette’s face on TV, as the local station is televising her posture class. At the sight of her, Jack and the children are immediately speechless and confused. They feel that the short-lived image has been somehow transferred to Babette. Jack states, “she was shining a light on us, she was coming into being, endlessly being formed and reformed as the muscles in her face worked at smiling and speaking, as the electronic dots swarmed” (104). The non-permanence of her image on television also emphasizes Babette?s own mortality. At first Jack wonders whether he is watching “her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology” (104). To her family, Babette appears “distanced, sealed off, timeless” (104), taking on the characteristics of the television. It seems as if the real Babette is not as important as her image of ?electrons and photons? (104) on the television.

Television is used as a family bonding time for the Gladney family. On Friday nights, Babette has made it a rule for the whole family to watch together while eating take-out Chinese food. She believes that, ?the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it a wholesome domestic sport. Its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power would be gradually reduced?(16). Communication takes place through the television rather than through human interaction.

The family only comes together while watching disasters on television. Jack?s colleague?s reasoning for this bonding activity is, ?we?re suffering from brain fade? we need a catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information (66)?. Another co-worker states that ?a forest fire on TV is on a lower plane than a ten-second spot for Automatic Dishwasher All (67)?. He suggests that commercials have a greater impact on the viewers than a disaster. Our society is desensitized to tragedies, such as murders, and not fully impacted by them due to everyday media coverage.

Murray, a professor of popular culture, offers a altered outlook on television, unlike his students who refer to it as another form of junk mail. His belief is that television is only a problem if ?you?ve forgotten how to look and listen? (50). Television, he claims, provides ?incredible amounts of data (50)? in our lives. Murray asserts that television has a positive effect on people only if the viewer feels as if he is experiencing reality unique to his own thoughts and feelings rather than what the TV tells him to believe.

The distinction between the real and the unreal is blurred in White Noise. Jack Gladney?s world is modeled after the images he views on television. A quote in the text states, ?for most people there are only two places in the world- where they live and their television set (66)?. For many people, their real life and the one they view through television seem to blend together at times.

Jean Baudrillard?s theoretical perspective of simulacra, from his article ?Simulacra and Simulation?, can be incorporated into the use of the television in White Noise. Simulacra occurs when an imitation, such as television, is more ?real? than reality itself. The concept of reality is overrun by simulations.

Baudrillard explains, ?the ?real? is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control- and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these (632)?. He goes on to state that the reality that has been constructed, through television for an example, is ?no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore? it is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere (632)?. Television represents a fictional ?real? life that attempts to become our ideal life. Baudrillard states that technology causes the boundaries between the real and unreal to break down, causing what he calls a ?hyperreality?.

The white noise, or constant background, of the television constantly influences how people think, behave and perceive the world around them. Don DeLillo?s novel, White Noise, does an excellent job of showing how technology shapes our lives and creates simulacra, or a false reality.