Humanities Diliman (July-December 2018) 15:2, 177-194

The Nostalgic Sublime in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*

Niloufar Behrooz
University of Istafahan, Iran

Hossein Pirnajmuddin
University of Istafahan, Iran

ABSTRACT

Don DeLillo has been called a great postmodernist due to the plethora of postmodern features that he has employed in his novels. However, because of his nostalgia for transcendence and "lost assurances," he has become associated with modernism as well. Living in an increasingly secular, image-conscious society, DeLillo's characters look for comfort and reassurance in the good old days, hence the reemergence of a more traditional mode of sublimity—the modernist's "nostalgic sublime"—in his works. The recurring moments of spirituality, mystery, and communion show the yearning for meaning beyond the white noise of consumption. The moments of implied transcendence and sublime spirituality in DeLillo's fiction, however, do not seem to originate from a higher being or an inaccessible divinity, but from the very ordinary and familiar sources around us. Drawing on the ideas of the major theorists of the sublime such as Kant and Lyotard, this paper focuses on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1984) and *Cosmopolis* (2003), and attempts to shed light on the relationship between nostalgia for spirituality and the sublime.

Keywords: Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, *Cosmopolis*, the sublime, spirituality, nostalgia

INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that DeLillo continues to write novels that explore American postmodernity. A plethora of postmodern features prevails in his fiction, such as signs without meaning, simulations without originality, and information technologies that have radically changed contemporary life. The emergence of such features has marked the postmodern age with what Lyotard calls the "incredulity toward metanarratives" such as religion, politics, and history, which in turn has

ISSN 1655-1532 Print / ISSN 2012-0788 Online

shaken the foundations of absolute knowledge and truth (*Postmodern Conditions* xxiv). This incredulity, however, does not eliminate the possibility of a quest for such metanarratives in DeLillo's fiction.

In his *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*, Tabbi asserts that a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion for technology has led to a technological sublime in DeLillo's fiction. He further notes that developments in science and technology have "put to flight former metaphysical, religious and political certainties" (Tabbi x). We argue, though, that Tabbi misses the point, for it is precisely because of such developments that DeLillo's characters often find themselves "homesick for lost assurances" (DeLillo, *Mao II* 90) of these very metaphysical certainties. Mascaro, who wrote a review of Tabbi's book, seems to think that Tabbi is trying to show how DeLillo moves away from "the tag ends of literary modernism" into a more pronounced postmodern fiction (qtd in Mascaro 172). But the truth is that DeLillo's assumed postmodernity is not universally acknowledged. Throughout his oeuvre, DeLillo seems to be torn between a modern sensibility and a postmodern one, and although celebrated as a great postmodernist, DeLillo resists the label. As he told an interviewer in 1998: "Post-modern seems to mean different things in . . . different disciplines. In architecture and art it means one or two different things. In fiction it seems to mean another" (qtd. in Nel 13). Even though DeLillo refuses to classify his works, he admits "an affinity to modernism," and indeed it is by seeking "the epic in the mundane" (Nel 13) that DeLillo embraces a modernist sensibility. Similarly, Bloom notes that "DeLillo, who is so easily mistaken for a Post-Modernist End-Gamer, is rather clearly a visionary, a late Emersonian American Romantic" (3).

MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

Speaking of DeLillo's affinities to modernism and postmodernism, it seems appropriate to present a brief discussion of the two terms here. It is not an easy task to define postmodernism. "For novelists, postmodernism refers to a literary style beginning after World War II and coming to fruition in the late 1960s and early 1970s on the hills of the antiauthoritarian social revolution going on concurrently" (Giaimo 1). Postmodernism "with its focus on style and modes of representation, is often read as a successor to modernism" (Malplas 12). Modernism, in turn, is defined as "a revolutionary artistic movement beginning at the turn of the 20th century" which became "a dominant style in American fiction until around 1945" (Giaimo 8). "The increasingly murderous and grotesque use of technology during warfare, along with the decline of traditional values" like monogamy, fidelity, and morality, "inspired a sense of loss, alienation, and despair portrayed in modernist literature."

To many people, the mere mention of postmodernism instantly calls to mind "ideas of fracturing, fragmentation, indeterminacy and plurality" (Malplas 5).

> The postmodern has been defined in a huge variety of different ways: as a new aesthetic formation (Hassan, 1982), a condition (Lyotard, 1984), a cultural dominant (Jameson, 1991), a set of artistic movements employing a parodic mode of self- conscious representation (Hutcheon, 1988), an ethical or political imperative (Bauman, 1993) . . . [and] a period in which we have reached the 'end of history' (Baudrillard, 1983). (6-7)

Generally speaking, though, postmodernism evokes ideas of "irony, disruption, difference, discontinuity, playfulness, parody, hyper-reality and simulation." A thorough comparative analysis of modernism and postmodernism falls outside the scope and range of this paper, but Hassan's schematic list of differences between the two terms can lead us to a short yet concise analysis.

Whereas modernism, with its focus on form and design, 'elitist' boundaries and hierarchies between high and low art, and the literary process as "finished work" views art as a means of giving order and shape to the chaotic life experiences, postmodernism, on the other hand, is about "play" and "chance," which subvert the modernist hierarchies by juxtaposing high and low art as a combination and view the artistic work as a process and performance (Hassan 267-68). The key difference between Hassan's two comparative columns then can be found in the closure of those terms listed under modernism (with ideas such as form, hierarchy, mastery and determinacy) against the openness of those linked to postmodernism (with its play, chance, dispersal, combination, difference and desire). Thus, modernism's closure in distancing the audience from the literary work is contrasted with postmodernism's openness in inviting the readers to participate in the artistic creation. If modernism is marked by the advent of technology and the characterized anxiety and uncertainty towards the newness in the air, postmodernism is marked by a sense of saturation and exhaustion of the possible. Mimesis gives way to simulation, and satiric wit gives way to irony and parody.

McHale argues that the move from modern to postmodern fiction is marked by a change in focus: from epistemological matters to an exploration of ontological questions (9). Whereas questions of truth and knowledge like "What is there to be known? Who knows it?" are raised in modernist literature, postmodernism conjures questions like "What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?" (9-10). Moreover, if modernism in art is the

age of the avant-gardes, for many critics postmodernism marks the exhaustion of those projects, the end of a sense that art has a single purpose or can change the world (Malplas 20). The possibility of fiction in the age of exhaustion and the power of art as a redeeming force then are challenged and brought to the center of attention.

For Lyotard, as mentioned, postmodernism is a condition. The postmodern condition as he formulates it, is "the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies" (*PC* xxiii). In such societies, there is a representational inadequacy that in itself, in Lyotard's view, has a quality of the sublime. Lyotard concurs with Kant on the fact that the sublime is a negative presentation whereby it contains both pleasure and displeasure, but in many instances, he moves away from Kant's formulations to form his own. Most importantly, Lyotard differentiates between modern and postmodern aesthetics. The modern aesthetics, he explains, "allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" (*Postmodern Condition* 78). In the modern aesthetics then, we can still find solid traces of the supremacy of reason over the sublime object, along with the comfort of the "recognizable consistency of form." The postmodern, however, "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable" (81). Therefore, modernism holds on to a nostalgia for the lost and unattainable, providing the reader with a promise of some ultimate "reconciliation of the concept and the sensible" (81–82). It is this nostalgia that Lyotard has in mind when he distinguishes between two kinds of aesthetics of the sublime. First, there is a melancholic or nostalgic sublime which for him "is linked to the nostalgia of late twentieth century culture" for presence, one "which has tended to move away from avant-gardist experimentation, back towards the past" (White 1). Secondly, there is another form of sublime called novation, which is "embodied in avant-gardist art," a sublime that "enters into the realm of the 'presentation of the unpresentable' through a program of constant experimentation."

Moreover, as Slade argues, "the nostalgic sublime of modernism clings to the belief that the idea (in the Hegelian sense) orchestrates the world, art, ethics, and politics" (36). According to Lyotard, this version of the sublime contains within itself "the pain of what has passed, of what remains past." Hence, it offers a source for solace in the midst of pain. Here the pain of nostalgia is taken for the pain and pleasure that together constitute the sublime feeling. The modern aesthetics then succumbs

to "a melancholic fixation on the past, on history the bearer of liberatory fruits, however abortive the actual harvest had been." That is why the nostalgic sublime bears the very longing for the mystery and solace of the past that reappears as obsolete and parodic in postmodernist fiction.

DISCUSSION

The ubiquity of science and technology, along with violence in DeLillo's fiction that one might term "violent sublime," therefore, does not indicate the disappearance of spirituality and mystery but rather affirms the need for such modernist nostalgia and longing for those "lost assurances." Similarly, Martucci, in *The Environmental Unconscious in Don DeLillo's Fiction*, posits that "although DeLillo's novels present and respond to the postmodern environment in which they are set, they do not necessarily adhere to the principles of postmodern thought" (Martucci 7). However, one cannot attribute to DeLillo a solely modernist mentality mingled with a nostalgia for spirituality, for it is impossible to separate DeLillo's "modernist faith in the nearly sacred powers of the imagination, and postmodern self-reflective skepticism" (Little 303). The two frames of mind coexist in DeLillo's fiction.

Giaimo, in his book *Appreciating Don DeLillo*, suggests that DeLillo is "neither Modern nor Postmodern" (1). "Postmodernist readers," he writes, "distrust any sort of artificially created order" and therefore "the absolute postmodernist would say that DeLillo's work ironically undercuts our attempts to read it for a deeper level of meaning" (2). But we, unlike Giaimo, argue that DeLillo is both modern and postmodern because his novels represent both a sense of postmodern relativism and a sense of modern search for a deeper level of meaning. The kind of order DeLillo's characters search for is not the sort that is artificially created but an order that arises from disorder.

In his book *Design and Debris: A Chaotic of Postmodern American Fiction*, Conte maintains that in postmodernism a paradigm shift occurs in the conception of the relation between order and disorder. "In modernism," he notes, "the function of the artist is to impose order and coherence on a disorderly, random, and inchoate world" (7). It is exactly the quest for meaningful patterns and mysteries, as we shall proceed to show, that is the dominant force in DeLillo's characters as they face the chaotic world they live in. And it is this quest that makes the modernist DeLillo come into the foreground.

Living in what Baudrillard has called the new "order of the hyperreal and of simulation" (25), DeLillo, like his wandering characters, is still searching for a "transcendent meaning" beyond the "'white noise' of consumption" (Barrett 102, 103). That is why in almost all of DeLillo's novels, we are witness to a nostalgic yearning for that which escapes representation. This yearning reintroduces into DeLillo's fiction what Lyotard calls the modern nostalgic or melancholic sublime (*Postmodern Condition* 81). As discussed earlier in this paper, this mode of the sublime is characterized by its alliance with modern aesthetics in a way that it "allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents" and at the same time "continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" (78). Baudrillard, in turn, explains this movement toward the past as a result of the disappearance of the real: "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (12). Hetata, whose "Consumerism and Ideology" earned a chapter in Jameson's *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* nicely sums up the situation:

> The loss of hope, the failure of movements that represented the chance of a better future . . . the deception, the difficulties of the economic situation, the attack launched by a global system on what people may perceive as their interests, their identity, their history, their culture, their nation, has evoked a reaction. In the absence of perceived perspectives for the future, people often fall back on what they know, cling to the familiar, the reassuring, the things that made them what they are, the things of the past, not the future. Rather than a change forward, the reaction is backward to the closed family, the closed community, the race or ethnic group, the religion. (281)

This backward movement to the familiar and the reassuring is seen time and again in DeLillo's work, more specifically because DeLillo's characters are aware of the failure of the future, and they long to fill these inward empty spaces with any last vestige of the good old past. Yet, as Boxall in *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* maintains, it is "this unnameable longing, this yearning for something that is missing" that is "the driving force behind DeLillo's writing." It is this longing that "thrills through DeLillo's fiction, that gives it its ethical and poetic imperatives, that allows it to go on" (15). In Boxall's view then, DeLillo offers us "the possibility of fiction" by revealing to us "the depths of language, depths in which a kind of humanity is preserved, and a kind of spirituality, that is disavowed by poststructuralist thinking" (14). Having modernist features, however, DeLillo's fiction continues to provide for us moments of mystery and spirituality of the kind that not even the most radical postmodern incredulities can disavow.

The nostalgic sublime then is "anxious for meaning" (Alfrey 32) and eager for mystery. This eagerness for mystery is often mingled with a hidden spirituality in DeLillo's novels. McClure, for instance, in "DeLillo and Mystery," calls DeLillo "am aficionado of mystery in all its forms," inviting us to consider "the inexplicable mystery of divine presence" in his work (167). DeLillo himself comments on the operation of mystery in his works: "My books are open-ended; I would say that mystery in general rather than the occult is something that weaves in and out of my work. I can't tell you where it came from or where it leads to" (DeCurtis 55). Furthermore, DeLillo notes that in a world in which rational patterns are hard to find, offering some hints of reason and moments of meaningful transcendence is a part of the writer's job: "I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it also can operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don't experience in our daily lives, in our real lives" (56). With "pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the spirit" (Duvall 4), DeLillo continues to probe and offer moments of mystery and spirituality.

TRIVIAL SUBLIME

It is argued that DeLillo is more likely to "endorse his characters' beliefs in transcendent realities than to dismiss them" (Maltby 225). This, however, does not mean the figuration of a grand transcendent source of spirituality in his fiction. With the exception of some minor characters like Karen in DeLillo's *Mao II*, we can say with assurance that for almost all of his characters, this spiritual longing for the "vast and true" (78) is essentially disconnected from any formal religious practice or community of faith.

In this sense, one might venture to attribute this sublimity to Kant's idea of the sublime that it "cannot be contained in any sensuous form," but in "the disposition of the mind" of the beholder (Kant 76, 86). And indeed, it is most often not a magnificent form or concrete vastness that leads to the feeling of the sublime in DeLillo's characters but an everyday small happening which "the contemplation of them, without any regard to their form," makes the mind "abandon" itself to "the imagination and to a reason placed, though quite apart from any definite end," thereby "broadening its view," and leaving "itself elevated in its own judgment of itself on finding all the might of imagination still unequal to its ideas" (Kant 86- 87). With regard to this seemingly small and trivial sublime then, it is the Kantian power of the mind, not that of a particular phenomenon, that produces the feeling of the sublime.

In DeLillo's novels, it is the small and seemingly insignificant moments of routine life that provide the searching characters with the solace of a higher level of meaning. This search for "the epic in the mundane" is what Munk has termed the "trivial sublime," a concept that locates the grand sublime in "the seemingly insignificant things of the everyday: in small and near and common objects" (1). It is a sublime that attends to the mystery of the created world "in its most minute and particular detail." It is in this sense that there enters into DeLillo's fiction a more or less traditional or nostalgic mode of the sublime, different in essence from the technological and the violent sublime also present in it. And it is in this sense again that this version of the sublime leans more towards modernist aesthetics than those of postmodernist metaphysics. In modernist aesthetics, mainly modernist poetry, Longenbach points out that "spiritual consolation is hard to come by" in the contemporary world of chaos, and "small things, carefully detailed, become increasingly important" (104). And in DeLillo's fiction, too, characters are more or less "focused on a world of little things" rather than a grand one. As such, the meditative, mystical, and spiritual quality of such sublime moments in DeLillo does not stem from a divinity far above and beyond the earthly and mundane life the characters live but from the very ordinary and human moments that are charged with sudden sublimity. As such, this mode of sublimity draws its intensity from an "overwhelming power in small things, human moments, rather than large ideological structures or invisible, unifying power" (Ticinovic 20).

THE NOSTALGIC SUBLIME IN *WHITE NOISE*

In DeLillo's *White Noise*, for instance, it is in the most trivial, familiar, common, and small moments that Jack Gladney searches for "something bigger" and "grander," that he cannot quite put his "finger on" (199). *White Noise* is DeLillo's novel about "the postmodern way we live now," in a thoroughly globalized America (Olster 79). It follows a year in the life of Jack Gladney, a college professor of Hitler studies, and his current wife Babette (his fifth), who live with their stepchildren from previous marriages: Heinrich, Denise, Steffie, and Wilder. Living amidst the white noise of information technology, they struggle to root out any awareness of death, not knowing that they are eliminating the very element that may help them live an authentic and meaningful life.

In a world where even the nuns have abandoned belief in "all the traditional things" and their "dedication" is merely "a pretense" for the sake of "others," (DeLillo, *White Noise* 303-4) the characters of *White Noise* desperately search for the possibility of

a transcendent meaning. Conte defines white noise as a "static background against which no figure, pattern, or signal is discernible" (120). Jack Gladney, however, listens for and discerns the smallest meaningful signals amidst the white noise of his life. Jack, like DeLillo himself, is "a modernist displaced in a postmodern world" (Wilcox 348). Unlike his friend Murray Siskind, the quintessential postmodernist, Jack yearns for meaningful and transcendent meaning.

Barrett's "'How the dead speak to the living': Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*" touches upon similar issues. Focusing on the effects of consumerism and mediatization, she suggests that the only pure and unmediated realm in the novel is death that the characters mostly evade by fear. She proposes that in a world in which religion is nothing but "a hollow mask" (101), the search for transcendent meaning and lost individuality becomes more urgent. This urgency is seen in Jack's constant quest for any trace of a meaningful pattern in the chaos that surrounds him. He clings to the most accessible sources of transcendence to fill the void inside his life. A "false character that follows the name around" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 17), Jack

> sifts through the layers of white noise—electronic media, printed information, traffic sounds, computer read-outs—listening for significance, for a grasp of essence in the flux. In modernist fashion, he struggles in an almost Sisyphean way to glean meaning from the surrounding noise of culture and is drawn toward occasions of existential self-fashioning, heroic moments of vision in a commodified world. (Wilcox 349)

Living in such a commodified world with its simulations and uncertainties, it is no wonder that DeLillo's character cannot help but search and long for significance and essence. The modernist quest for meaning and mystery in the novel is especially evident in the frequent use of the phrase "waves and radiation" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 310). In "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo," Maltby notes that DeLillo's use of the phrase "waves and radiation" suggests that "within the mix of frequencies there is a low wave length that carries a flow of spiritually charged meaning" (11). For Jack, however, these spiritually charged meanings appear in the most quotidian events that surround him as he finds unexpected connections between the commonplace and magical. "The world is full of abandoned meanings," he says. "In the commonplace I find unexpected themes and intensities" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 175). Somewhere else in the novel he asserts that "it was these secondary levels of life, these extrasensory flashes and floating nuances of being, these pockets of

rapport forming unexpectedly, that made me believe we were a magic act" (34). According to Salyer, these secondary levels of life "are mined for meaning because the primary levels are exhausted by interpretation" and simulation (38).

In *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction*, Morley explores the theme "epic" throughout the major novels of three postmodernist writers: John Updike, Philip Roth, and Don DeLillo, suggesting that most of their novels show a kind of backward movement from the national and global scale to the domestic and personal. In fact, Jack's continuous search for "the epic in the mundane" reflects DeLillo's own desire to reveal the "mystery in commonplace moments" and the "radiance in dailiness" (qtd. in Barrett 110). DeLillo sees it as his literary duty to indulge us with a sense of pattern and order and that is why he tries time and again to "restore us to wonder" (Saltzman 208), to provide for us "a cosmology against the void" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 232). This cosmology, however, is sought in the smallest and most familiar moments like those in everyday family life. "While human behavior fails to maintain a strict orderliness," Conte writes,

> neither is it capable of exhibiting a perfect disorder or pure randomness. Various forms of chaos, catastrophe, fault, serendipity and accident are possible through human instigation. . . .It is for this reason that white noise casts a spell over the human psyche. Its wholly unpredictable and inscrutable signal inspires a form of awe reserved for that which is entirely alien to our consciousness. (119)

For Jack, the major source of this inscrutable signal that is mingled with a sublime form of awe is his family or more specifically his children who provide for him "a colloquial density" wherein "an astonishment of heart is routinely contained" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 115). The episode where Jack experiences an ambivalent sublime moment while listening to his daughter Steffie muttering in her sleep is worth mentioning here. Whereas "Toyota Celica," the word Steffie mutters, is merely the name of an automobile, Jack assumes it to be "a language not quite of this world" and therefore he attributes to it some "looming wonder" and "splendid transcendence" (148-49). Although we never become certain about the authenticity of Jack's revelatory moment, Maltby suggests that the "tenor of this passage is not parodic" and that the reader is prompted by "the searching tone" of Jack's narration "to listen in earnest," that Jack's words are not to be dismissed as hallucinatory (216). "The passage is typical of DeLillo's tendency to seek out transcendent moments in our postmodern lives that hint at possibilities for cultural regeneration." While Conte might have interpreted such scenes as DeLillo's satirizing "the shallow mysticism

that runs through the crystalline New Age" (124), we argue that DeLillo's treatment of the moment is more than just a parodic or satiric interpretation. Furthermore, in a Kantian approach to this scene, the sublime encounter of Jack appears to be "an emotion, and so it seems to be seriousness, rather than play, in the imagination's activity" (Kant 75-76). The mere act of watching children in their sleep is, for Jack, "part of a spiritual system" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 141) As he puts it, "If there is a secular equivalent of standing in a great spired cathedral with marble Pillars and streams of mystical light slanting through two-tier Gothic windows, it would be watching children in their little bedrooms fast asleep" (141). It is not just Steffie that indulges Jack's search for mystery with her innocence but also Wilder, the youngest child of the family. Wilder is "the most spiritual of all the characters" (Nicolson 1) because of what he represents to Jack. On the one hand, Wilder's lack of language makes him "the embodiment of the unconscious spaces where the sacred is dimly perceived, but never really found" (Salyer 49-50); on the other hand, the sublime mystery of Wilder is linked to "a primal language of vision," and to "the child's psyche as a medium of precious insight" (Maltby 226). In an interview, DeLillo states: "I think we feel, perhaps superstitiously, that children have a direct route to, have direct contact to the kind of natural truth that eludes us as adults" (DeCurtis 302). This is best evidenced in the novel in the episode where Wilder cries for seven hours straight, the impact of which on Jack possesses a quality of the sublime:

> The huge lament continued, wave on wave. It was a sound so large and pure I could almost listen to it, try consciously to apprehend it. . . .He was not sniveling or blubbering. He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. This was an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony. . . .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. . . .They watched him with something like awe. Nearly seven straight hours of serious crying. It was as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place, in sand barrens or snowy ranges-a place where things are said, sights are seen, distances reached which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions. (78-79)

Here, Jack compares Wilder's seven hours of crying to "wandering in some remote and holy place" that is regarded with "mingled reverence and wonder," associated with a more traditional, or better yet, Romantic notion of the sublime. Why Wilder cries for such an extended period is never explained and perhaps should not be explained as it serves "the unexplained and provides a furthering of Jack's visionary experiences" of the sublime (Nicolson 1). As Lyotard asserts, the silence surrounding an event serves as a sign that "something remains to be phrased . . . which is not determined" (*Differend* 57). Moreover, the scene of Wilder crying is an impression of narrative frustration that brings about the sublime feeling in Jack. While there is, to be sure, a significant "strain of irony" that runs through this narration as is in all of DeLillo's fiction, it does not manage to "undercut his metaphysics" (Maltby 226). As LeClair has noted in her discussion of *White Noise*, "DeLillo presses beyond the ironic, extracting from his initially satiric materials a sense of wonderment or mystery" (12).

THE NOSTALGIC SUBLIME IN *COSMOPOLIS*

The world in which Erick Packer of *Cosmopolis* lives is far more complex and alienated one because of ever-increasing technological and political advances. As Boxall maintains in *Don DeLillo: the Possibility of Fiction*, DeLillo's novels offer "a mini history" of "technological advancements in the post-war" (6). Furthermore, he notes that the novels are characterized by "a deep underlying connection between technology, violence and capital" (7). DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* represents this connection very well. With the surface story of Eric's one-day journey in New York to get a haircut, *Cosmopolis* takes us into a world where the "interaction between technology and capital" is the "only thing in the world worth pursuing intellectually and professionally" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 23) and where technologies are so advanced that they have reached an endpoint, the "last techno-rave, the end of whatever it was the end of" (127).

Situated at the endpoint of technology and history, Eric may bear the appearance of a young, strong, and successful capitalist, but inside he is more lost in his "little hollow of noontime" and therefore more desperate for a sublime "sense of large excitation" than Jack Gladney of *White Noise* ever was (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 76, 209). Living among people who are "the others of the street, endless anonymous, twenty-one lives per second [and] sprays of fleetest being," Eric finds that "nothing that was true then is true now" (20, 121). Still, there are times that he feels the presence of something in him "that's receptive to the mysteries" (30). Whether he chooses to acknowledge this or not, Eric, like the rest of DeLillo's characters, has "a range of

being that's deeper and sweeter than" (30) he knows. It is this deeper range and receptiveness to mysteries that delivers Eric to a sublime-like trance. At the funeral of a rapper named Fez who "mixed languages, tempos and themes" (135), Eric is bewildered and overwhelmed by the eccentric yet mystical procession of mourners. He feels a rapture in this, a "fierce elation, and something else that was inexpressible, dropping off the edge" (136). Like the other mourners who "were shaking and drained" (136), Eric feels as if "he'd been emptied of everything but a sense of surpassing stillness." This self-emptying and this surpassing of stillness, both characteristics of the traditional sublime, call to mind what Lyotard identifies as "ontological dislocation" (*Inhuman* 206), a "rhythm of death and resurrection, as we suffer a radical loss of identity only to have that selfhood more richly restored to us" (Eagleton 45). It is also reminiscent of Kant's formulation of the sublime, where the feeling of a "momentary check to the vital forces" is "followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful" (Kant 76).

At the funeral, Eric is further amazed at the esoteric aura that surrounds the "dervishes" with "tunics," "long flared skirts" and "topaz caps" who were "spinning out of their bodies" toward "the end of all possessions" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 136-38). He believed that these things possessed a kind of "fleshlessness" that is also associated with "the whirlers deliquescing, resolving into fluid states" (138-39). Overwhelmed by the intensity of the moment, and much to his own surprise, Eric begins to weep:

> He wept violently. He pummeled himself, crossing his arms and beating his fists on his chest. The press buses came next, three of them, and unofficial mourners on foot, many resembling pilgrims, all races and styles of belief and manner of dress, and he rocked and wept as mourners in cars went by. . . .He wept for Fez and everyone here and for himself of course, yielding completely to enormous body sobs. Others were weeping nearby. (139)

Here it is not just the "vigorous" power of "sorrow," distinguished by Kant from "dispirited sadness" (106), that leads to Eric's feeling of the sublime, but more precisely his own recognition of the "manifold mysteries of human existence" (Bawer 24) that lurk "deep beneath the surface of our plastic culture." It is this recognition that gives a spiritual dimension to Eric's experience of the sublime. That is why Shaw believes that the possibility of a spiritual dimension to the contemporary sublime "resides in the ability of contemporary culture to negate the material inertia of things in such a way that it allows us to come alive to the feeling of something beyond the merely functional or utilitarian" (8).

Invaded by these utilitarian forces of all kinds, Eric, probably more than any of DeLillo's protagonists, longs for "a joy of intoxicating wholeness" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 135). This urgent need to be part of something larger and more powerful than himself leads him to search for any vestige of a spiritual energy through the power of human contact in the most unexpected places. "There are times when," Eric says, "when I want to rub myself against a door or wall, for the sympathetic contact" (58). It is this longing for sheer human contact and what Lyotard calls a "nostalgia of the whole and the one" (*Postmodern Condition* 81) that often drives DeLillo's protagonists to search for sublime moments of transcendence in the everyday events of mundane life, perhaps as a last chance of receiving the comfort and hidden energy of those small yet powerful human moments. That is why when Eric stumbles into a film set in which the city street has been taken over by naked bodies posed in the attitudes of mass death, he sleeps among them, trying to absorb some of the power and energy that emanates from them. Despite the seeming ordinariness of the event, Eric feels the presence of a power just by lying among those people, and it seems to be "independent of whatever circumstance attended the event" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 173). The shared moment gives a sense of collective spirituality and psychic wholeness to Eric:

> The street grew quiet in time. Voices died, the sense of outlying motion faded. He felt the presence of the bodies, all of them, the body breath, the heat and running blood, people unlike each other who were now alike, amassed, heaped in a way, alive and dead together. They were only extras in a crowd scene, told to be immobile, but the experience was a strong one, so total and open he could barely think outside it. (174)

Here Eric's experience of human contact and communality turns into something more than it really is. Like the experience of tourists visiting a barn and like all tourism as Murray informs Jack in *White Noise*, this seemingly ordinary moment of lying among those people becomes, for Eric, a sublime "religious experience" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 34)—an experience that affirms "the undying force of spiritual and communal urgings" (Caton 111) in DeLillo's fiction.

But just like most experiences in postmodern fiction, the moment of transcendence cannot last long. "Rolling" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 176), calls the voice of the cameraman, cutting short Eric's most meaningful and real encounter, and just like that, Eric's last chance of a sublime experience and "spiritual communion with the world around" him (Maltby 129) is interrupted by the prosaic, and rather ironic, reality of the

event. Clearly, DeLillo is no one-dimensional proponent of spiritual and transcendent moments for he does not allow readers an unmediated encounter with the spiritual and "with characteristic Western skepticism, he distances himself" (Little 303) from sublime spirituality "through ironic self-reflexivity" without, however, completely negating the power of such moments of spirituality. Moreover, as Boxall maintains, "the prophetic in DeLillo's writing" is organized "around the awed and fearful approach" to these moments, "but it has drawn its possibility, its *geist*, from the deferral of the millennial coming, from the sense that history is not yet over, not exhausted or saturated or known through and through" (160).

CONCLUSION

The continual appearance of moments of spirituality, transcendence, and communion in DeLillo's fiction has always cast a doubt on his reputation as a postmodernist. Highly relevant here is Hutcheon's point that postmodernist fiction, unlike modernism, is a "critical revisiting" of the past rather than a "nostalgic return" to it (4). Hence, DeLillo's overall preference for modernism over postmodernism can also be seen in terms of this nostalgic sublime. Lyotard's formulation of the modernist nostalgic or melancholic sublime finds a place in DeLillo's fiction. While there definitely is an element of the unpresentable in presentation itself in the novels, in Lyotard's postmodernist conception of the phrase, it is still the nostalgic sublime with its modernist yearning for the past that continues to offer to DeLillo's characters matter for solace and pleasure. Although DeLillo never ceases to probe the problems of living in a postmodern age, he is best known as a modernist located in a postmodern culture. The consequences of living in an increasingly secular society in the digital age have driven DeLillo's characters to look for comfort and reassurance in the good old past. A yearning for those hidden meanings and existential mysteries, therefore, has led these characters to seek the nostalgic sublime in their surrounding world. But the twist here is that these moments of implied transcendence and sublimity are to be found in the most familiar places and mundane moments. In this sense, it is the Kantian power of the mind that generates the sublime feeling and not the trivial and mundane surroundings themselves. The sublime in its traditional sense of the word then persists in DeLillo's fiction, but with a change of origin. Things as ordinary as family life, collective grief, and human moments have taken the place of magnificent divinity in nature to provide DeLillo's characters with the possibility of a more authentic experience of the sublime.

WORKS CITED

Alfrey, Shawn. *The Sublime of Intense Sociability: Emily Dickinson, H.D., and Gertrude Stein*. Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell UP, 2000. Print.

Barrett, Laura. "'How the dead speak to the living': Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 15.2 (2001): 97-113. Print.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and John Johnston. NY: Semiotext(e), 1983. Print.

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003. Print.

Boxall, Peter. *Don DeLillo: the Possibility of Fiction*. NY: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Caton, Lou F. "Romanticism and the Postmodern Novel: Three Scenes from Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." *Don DeLillo*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003. 107-117. Print.

Conte, Joseph. *Design and Debris: A Chaotic of Postmodern American Fiction*. Tuscalloosa: The U of Alabama P, 2002. Print.

DeCurtis, Anthony. "An Outsider in This Society: An Interview with Don DeLillo." *The Fiction of Don DeLillo*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89 Special Issue (1990): 281–304. Print.

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. NY: Penguin Books, 1984. Print.

---. *Mao II*. NY: Penguin Books, 1991. Print.

---. *Cosmopolis*. NY: Scribner, 2003. Print.

Duvall, John. N. *Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. *Holy Terror*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.

Giaimo, Paul. *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of the Writer's Work*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011. Print.

Hassan, Ihab. *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*. NY: Oxford UP, 1982. Print.

Hetata, Sherif. "Consumerism and Ideology." *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Ed. Fredrick Jameson. Durham & London: Duke UP, 1998. Print.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. NY & London: Routledge, 1988. Print.

Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*. Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford and NY: Oxford UP, 1952. Print.

LeClair, Tom. "Closing the Loop: *White Noise*." *Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003. 5-33. Print.

Little, Jonathan. "Ironic Mysticism in Don DeLillo's Ratner's Star." *Papers on Language & Literature* 35.3 (1999): 301-32. Print.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988. Print.

---. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984. Print.

---. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. Print.

Malplas, Simon. *The Postmodern*. London & NY: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Maltby, Paul. "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo." *Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003. 213-230. Print.

Martucci, Elise A. *The Environmental Unconcious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo*. London & NY: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Morley, Catherine. *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction*. London & NY: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Mascaro, John. "Kant Touch This: Joseph Tabbi's Postmodern Sublime." *Studies in the Novel* 31.4 (1999): 506-15. Print.

McClure, John. A. *Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. Print.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodern Fiction*. London & NY: Routledge, 1987. Print.

Munk, Linda. *The Trivial Sublime: Theology and American Poetics*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992. Print.

Nel, Philip. "DeLillo and Modernism." *Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Ed. John N. Duvall. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. 13-26. Print.

Nicolson, Emma. "Evolution of Spirit in DeLillo's White Noise." *Hub Pages*. Web. July 2014.

Saltzman, Arthur M. "The Figure in the Static: *White Noise*." *Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003. 195-212. Print.

Salyer, Gregory. "Myth, Magic and Dread: Reading Culture Religiously." *Don DeLillo*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003. 33-51. Print.

Shaw, Philip. *The Sublime*. London & NY: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Slade, Andrew. *Lyptard, Beckett, Duras, and the Postmodern Sublime*. NY: Peter Lang, 2007. Print.

Tabbi, Joseph. *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*. NY: Cornell UP, 1996. Print.

Ticinovic, Maria Anne. "Sublimity and History in Don DeLillo's Underworld." AB thesis. U of British Colombia, 1996. Print.

White, Luke. "Sublime Resources: A Brief History of the Notion of the Sublime." *Luke White Home Page*. N.p. Web. July 2014.

Wilcox, Leonard. "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative." *Contemporary Literature* 32.3 (1991): 346-65. Print.

Niloufar Behrooz <n.behrooz89@gmail.com> is a PhD student of English literature at the University of Isfahan, Iran, where she teaches undergraduate courses in English literature. Her interests include postmodern literature, romantic poetry, and comparative studies. She has published on Don DeLillo's fiction.

Hossein Pirnajmuddin <pirnajmuddin@fgn.ui.ac.ir> is an Associate Professor of English literature at the University of Isfahan, Iran. His interests include Renaissance literature, literary theory, and contemporary fiction. His most recent book is titled *East of Representation: The East in English Renaissance Literature* (2014).