

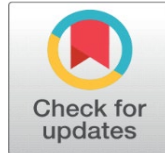
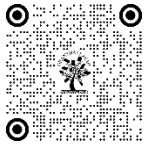
# COMMODIFYING ART, MEDIA, AND IDENTITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL CONSUMERISM IN DON DELILLO'S MAO II AND WHITE NOISE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and *White Noise* as critical reflections on the pervasive impact of consumerism and the commodification of art, media, and identity in contemporary postmodern American society. By examining the lives of the central characters and their relationships with mass media, the paper highlights how DeLillo critiques the late capitalist ethos, which turns every aspect of human experience — creativity, tragedy, family life, and even death — into marketable commodities. Initially starting with a brief introduction about postmodernism, the paper through a comparative analysis of these two novels, demonstrates how DeLillo, American novelist, short story writer, playwright, screenwriter, and essayist, exposes the tension between individuality and collective identity, the erosion of authenticity, and the alienating effects of a consumer-driven culture.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Consumerism, Commodification, Media, Culture, Consumption, Identity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

American postmodernism, a multifaceted cultural, philosophical, and artistic movement, emerged in the mid-20th century as a critical response to modernism's rigid structures and totalizing narratives. Rejecting grand narratives and absolute truths, postmodernism embraces irony, skepticism, and paradox, interrogating the boundaries between reality and its representations. Jean-Francois Lyotard remarks: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives". (Lyotard 1979: xxiv) Characterized by elements such as playfulness, fragmentation, intertextuality, and metafiction, it redefines narrative structures and thematic concerns, offering a lens through which the complexities of contemporary existence can be explored. Central to postmodernism are themes of paranoia, identity crises, and the blurring of distinctions between reality and fiction. In this regard, Jean Baudrillard says, "We live in a

world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning." (Baudrillard 1981: 79). By emphasizing subjective experiences and socially constructed realities, postmodernism challenges conventional understandings of truth, meaning, and authenticity, leaving an indelible mark on art, literature, and critical thought.

Among the vanguard of postmodern authors, Don DeLillo occupies a pivotal position, masterfully interrogating the sociocultural forces shaping late 20th century and early 21st century life. His novels *Mao II* and *White Noise* delve into the pervasive commodification of art, media, and identity within an increasingly consumer-driven, media-saturated world. DeLillo's nuanced narratives reveal how capitalism and mass media transform artistic expression and individual identities into marketable commodities, profoundly altering personal and collective consciousness. His works challenge readers to confront the implications of living in a society where the line between reality and simulation grows ever thinner. This reminds me of Baudrillard who says in *Simulacra and Simulation*: "The simulation of the world is not a reflection of reality but a hyperreality — an endless procession of simulacra that bear no relation to reality itself." (Baudrillard 1981:1).

In *Mao II*, DeLillo explores the commodification of art and the diminishing influence of literature in a world consumed by spectacle and mediated representations. "The writer is the prophet of the new era, the one who stands outside, who tries to make sense of a world that has turned itself into a photograph." (DeLillo *Mao II*, p. 39). This passage illustrates Bill's struggle to retain artistic authenticity in a world where art is reduced to spectacle. The notion of the writer as a prophet juxtaposes the sacred role of art with its commercialization, critiquing the market-driven literary world. The novel questions the role of the writer amidst the dominance of mass imagery and the global reach of terrorism, presenting a striking commentary on art's struggle to retain its transformative power. Similarly, *White Noise* offers a penetrating critique of identity and human relationships in an era defined by hyper-consumption and technological omnipresence. Through its portrayal of media-saturated existence and consumerist obsessions, the novel exposes how modern life becomes a simulacrum, governed by a distorted interplay of meaning and perception.

In the postmodern world, the intersection of consumerism, media, and identity has become a significant theme in contemporary literature. Don DeLillo, one of the most celebrated American novelists, has captured the essence of this societal transformation in his works *Mao II* and *White Noise*. Both novels, while distinct in narrative style and thematic focus, share a common critique of the commodification of human existence. Through the experiences of his characters — especially artists, families, and media figures — DeLillo paints a grim portrait of how consumer culture reshapes individuals and their identities. "The family is the cradle of the world's misinformation." (*White Noise*, p. 81). DeLillo critiques how familial relationships, once rooted in authenticity, are increasingly influenced by media-driven narratives, turning genuine interactions into rehearsed performances. This paper intends to analyze DeLillo's critique of consumerism by examining two key themes in his novels: the commodification of art and media, and the erosion of individuality in a culture dominated by mass consumption.

## 2. COMMODIFICATION OF ART AND THE ARTIST IN MAO II

In *Mao II*, Bill Gray, a reclusive novelist, symbolizes the struggle between artistic authenticity and the pressures of commodification. Gray's reluctance to publish and his retreat from public life reflect his resistance to becoming a product of the market. However, even in his absence, Gray's persona is commodified by the media, which transforms his reclusiveness into a spectacle. DeLillo illustrates how, in a consumer-driven society, even the most personal acts of creation are subjected to the logic of the marketplace, where writers, artists, and intellectuals are valued more for their public identities than for their actual work. In *Mao II*, Karen's obsession with mass imagery is shown in these lines: "She looked at the faces in the crowd, the television cameras, and she thought how everything in the world exists to end in a photograph." (*Mao II*, p. 72). Karen's reflection exposes the pervasive influence of media and its capacity to turn events, individuals, and even human suffering into consumable images. Further, "The real world is where the machine is. The simulacra define the human condition now." (*Mao II*, p. 132) Echoing Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, this statement underscores the replacement of authentic human experience with media-generated simulacra, aligning with themes of identity erosion.

This highlights DeLillo's critique of media's role in commodifying reality. Bill Gray's withdrawal from society ultimately results in the paradox of his increasing visibility and demand. His attempts to maintain artistic purity are thwarted by a media culture that commodifies everything, from artistic creation to personal tragedy. DeLillo critiques how the publishing industry and media, in their drive for profit, strip away the intrinsic value of artistic production,

turning writers into products to be consumed rather than individuals with distinct creative voices. "He felt himself trapped in the endless procession of his own myth, a caricature of the writer he once wanted to be." (Mao II, p. 214) Bill's disillusionment reflects the alienation inherent in a society where artistic value is measured by marketability rather than substance, a direct consequence of consumerism.

The novel also juxtaposes Gray's personal struggle with the rise of terrorism as a form of spectacle, demonstrating how acts of violence are commodified in a similar fashion to art. "Terror has become the most important narrative in the culture. It replaces novels, replaces the images writers used to create" (Mao II, p. 157). DeLillo aligns terrorism with commodified art, suggesting that its shock value and media coverage transform it into a form of spectacle, mirroring the marketplace logic of art consumption. Both art and terrorism become products to be consumed by a media-saturated audience, further illustrating the collapse of meaningful distinction between genuine human experience and its mediated representation. Gray's reflections on writing's purpose are worth quoting: "Writing is a form of self-erasure. To write is to disappear." (Mao II, p. 95). Gray's view of writing as self-erasure critiques the commodification of creative labor, suggesting that the marketplace demands an obliteration of the writer's personal identity to create a marketable product.

### **Role of Media in White Noise and the Creation of Hyperreality**

DeLillo's depiction of the Gladney family's interactions with consumer goods reveals how consumption becomes a ritualistic search for meaning, stability, and identity. "The power of the supermarket lies in the way it organizes the world... We're safe inside the network of our shopping." (White Noise, p. 96). Consumerism assumes a quasi-religious function, offering a sense of order, security, and transcendence. The ritualistic nature of shopping commodifies spiritual fulfillment, reducing it to a consumer act. The Gladneys' dependence on material goods, packaged conveniences, and the media reflects how consumerism shapes personal identity and family dynamics. "Shopping is a way of life... A culture of perpetual motion, a thing in itself." (White Noise, p. 84) Murray's commentary reveals consumerism as a defining force of modern identity. People derive meaning and purpose through consumption, reducing individuality to a market-driven activity. DeLillo critiques the media's role in creating a hyperreal environment, where the boundary between reality and its representation becomes increasingly blurred. According to Baudrillard: "In the era of simulation, the real is not only that which can be reproduced but that which is always already reproduced: the hyperreal. (Baudrillard 1981:46).

Television, advertising, and news coverage mediate the characters' understanding of the world, turning even existential concerns — such as the fear of death — into consumable products. The line in the novel: "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots." (White Noise, p. 26) Jack's observation reflects how media (especially TV) constructs narratives that commodify life and death. The media's framing of reality often turns human experiences into consumable plots for an audience. Similarly, this line: "The air was full of commercials. These were the early, well-funded years of the campaign to sell the advantages of enhanced images on television." (White Noise, p. 50) The omnipresence of advertisements blurs the line between art and marketing, presenting commercialized aesthetics as cultural artifacts. This reveals how consumerism infiltrates cultural consciousness. The fictional drug Dylar, which promises to alleviate the fear of death, is emblematic of how consumerism exploits human vulnerabilities, commodifying even the most profound existential questions. The line: "What if death is nothing but sound? Electrical noise?" (White Noise, p. 198). Jack and Babette's fixation on Dylar (a drug to eliminate fear of death) illustrates how even existential fears are commodified into marketable solutions, reflecting a society where everything, including mortality, becomes consumable.

The airborne toxic event in White Noise, a central plot point, serves as a metaphor for the way disasters are transformed into media spectacles. "The radio said toxic chemicals were spilling from a tank car derailed by a fifteen-car pile-up." (White Noise, p. 127). The media spectacle surrounding the airborne toxic event highlights the commodification of disasters. Catastrophes are consumed as thrilling narratives, with their reality overshadowed by the spectacle's entertainment value. The media sensationalizes the event, turning it into a consumable narrative, while the characters' responses reflect their absorption in this mediated reality. This illustrates how consumerism and media culture manipulate human perceptions, reducing genuine experiences to surface-level simulations designed for mass consumption. Guy Debord opines: "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation." (Debord 1994:1).

### 3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: MAO II AND WHITE NOISE

Both *Mao II* and *White Noise* provide incisive critiques of how mass media and consumerism shape individual and societal identities. In *Mao II*, DeLillo highlights the conflict between the artist's need for authenticity and the demands of a culture that commodifies personal and artistic expression. Through the character of Bill Gray, the novel examines the alienation experienced by the artist in a world where everything is reduced to a commodity.

In contrast, *White Noise* focuses more directly on the everyday lives of individuals within a consumer-driven society. The Gladney family's interactions are mediated by the consumerist culture they inhabit, and their relationships are marked by transactional dynamics rather than authentic connections. DeLillo uses the hyperreal environment of the Gladneys' world to show how consumer culture erodes individuality and replaces genuine human experience with superficial desires.

Despite their different settings and narratives, both novels emphasize the role of the media in constructing reality. In *Mao II*, media amplifies the spectacle of terrorism and art, turning both into commodities for public consumption. In *White Noise*, media saturates the characters' lives, transforming even death and familial relationships into consumable narratives. Both novels critique the pervasive influence of mass culture, illustrating how the commodification of art, identity, and tragedy leads to a loss of individuality and meaning.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and *White Noise* offer powerful critiques of the commodification of art, media, and identity in late capitalism. Through the experiences of characters like Bill Gray and the Gladneys, DeLillo explores the profound impact of consumerism on individual and collective identities. In both novels, the media plays a central role in shaping perceptions, creating hyperreal environments where authenticity is lost in favor of consumable spectacles.

DeLillo's works underscore the alienating effects of a consumer-driven society, where even the most profound human experiences are commodified and reduced to superficial narratives. By comparing the two novels, this paper has demonstrated how DeLillo critiques the erosion of individuality, the role of the media in creating simulacra of reality, and the dehumanizing consequences of consumerism. These themes remain highly relevant in today's media-saturated world, where consumer culture continues to shape perceptions of identity, meaning, and reality.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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