

## **Taking Possession of Knowledge: Masculinity constructed through academic occupation in Don DeLillo's *White Noise***

Don DeLillo's 1986 novel *White Noise* provides a narrative which critiques the educational reproduction of masculinities.<sup>1</sup> The lecturers in his 'School of American Environments' are portrayed as shallow and insecure, desperate to outdo each other in feats of masculinity which resemble rites of passage rather than pedagogic experiences. In the Western world manliness has come to be closely aligned with reasonable behaviour. Victor Seidler reiterates the way in which reason is put forward as, the 'legislator of reality', thus gaining authority for men to form, and educate, a world according to their notion.<sup>2</sup> This construction prioritises rationality and requires that men should live a careful and controlled life – ignoring instincts and any uncivilised urges to instead mimic what has been taught to them. DeLillo's academics noticeably struggle to align their urges with their society's expectations.

Jack Gladney, the text's central protagonist, strives to fulfil the idea of 'authentic' masculine identity. Despite his chaotic postmodern setting, his conventional principles prompt him to insist that, 'people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way' (W.N. p.172). His fellow teachers are obsessed by the most banal things, including: bodily functions; toilet and hygiene habits; handling consumables and their packaging; decoding celebrity and nostalgia. They use their work as part of their striving to make connections which validate some viable masculine framework; their chair, Alfonse Stompanato, giving them the blueprint for the manly academic, 'large, sardonic, dark-staring, with scarred brows and a furious beard fringed in grey' (W.N. p.65). Jack

lives in the hope that his academic status is capable of elevating and protecting:

I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county (W.N. p.117).

He teaches 'Hitler Studies' yet the transfer of knowledge and the encouragement of analytical debate are not his priorities. He sees his career, rather, as an opportunity to create an impenetrable front for himself. He tries to appropriate Hitler's larger than life image as his own in a recycling aimed at absorbing his overwhelming fear of death. His colleague Murray J Siskind compliments him:

You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own. Nobody on the faculty of any college or university in this part of the country can as much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction, literally or metaphorically. This is the center, the unquestioned source. He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler (W.N. p.11).

Murray is eager to imitate Hitler Studies by substituting Elvis, convinced that the representation of any male icon will suffice in the act of myth creation. Jack's contribution to the sustenance of such myths leaves him living in constant fear of being exposed as a fraud. He comments on Murray's conscious creation of 'the male academic':

There was something touching about the fact that Murray was dressed almost totally in corduroy. I had the feeling that since the age of eleven in his crowded plot of concrete he'd associated this sturdy fabric with higher learning in some impossibly distant and tree shaded place (W.N. p.11).

Not only does Murray construct this image for himself, he constructs academic courses he feels will court success, based upon Jack's experience. Jack makes a guest appearance at Murray's initial Elvis lecture to give it his official seal of approval (W.N. p.71/2) and comments afterwards that, 'I had been generous with the power and madness at my disposal' (W.N. p.73). There is a certain ambiguity surrounding whose madness this is, Jack's, Hitler's or both. He comments further on the fragility of the created image, 'We all had an aura to maintain and by sharing mine with a

friend I was risking the very things that made me untouchable' (W.N. p.74). Jack's identity is completely bound up in ideas of academic self-aggrandisement. He foregrounds personal objectives; sharing insight and support are not cited in his list of priorities.

By choosing to create and teach a course about Hitler, Jack illustrates the inherent irony of attempting to 'teach' in a society deemed postmodern. Rather than dismissing grand narratives teaching potentially perpetuates them. He does not take the opportunity to re-visit and re-assess the myths surrounding Hitler but rather validates fascist beliefs by adhering to an 'approved version'. Again there is no room for student discussion, their role is rapt attentiveness. Lecturers presenting an undisputed version of an event or identity become inextricably implicated in what they are discussing, as N Katherine Hayles summarises it, 'We are involved in what we would describe'.<sup>3</sup> Insider knowledge, like self-knowledge, illustrates a certain level of self-consciousness. Traditionally college novels present professors as objects of ridicule, either intellectuals who cannot cope with life, or power-hungry individuals, eager to dominate others. Both of these unflattering descriptions fit Jack to a certain extent. The students do not simply study a narrative history, rather they are encouraged to respond adoringly to Professor Gladney, endowing him with the same hypnotic power his subject matter commands. Jack claims to be teaching 'Advanced Nazism' due to Hitler's alignment with television. He feels that both have the same dictatorial power over the enthralled masses, absorbing and destroying any conflicting opinions. Like the Nazi faithful, Jack's students give up their minds to him and the education system; they give up their individual powers of determination to become part of a crowd, a mass consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

What Georges Bataille terms, the, ‘isolation of individual separateness’ undoubtedly makes crowds more attractive.<sup>5</sup> However, as well as offering a certain homogenous comfort they are also, paradoxically, frightening and threatening, with their potential to crush and obliterate. Ironically, Jack’s charade with Hitler Studies only serves to make him more vulnerable as he creates a front of invincible power impossible to live up to, ‘Hitler...I spoke the name often, hoping it would overpower my insecure sentence structure’ (W.N. p.274). He lives in fear of his fellow professors and the ‘actual Germans’ at his forthcoming conference discovering that his grasp of the German language is inadequate, or that the innocuous name ‘Jack’ is loitering behind the grandiose initials J.A.K., describing his situation as, ‘living... on the edge of a landscape of vast shame’(W.N. p.31). He scrabbles around for origins, hiding his ageing eyes and body behind dark glasses and academic robes, he has compromised himself by taking the academic gown and the relative security that goes with it in exchange for the unfettered vibrancy of new and disturbing ideas. His methods of ‘teaching’ Hitler are dogmatically predetermined. He has begun to nervously admit that ‘Hitler Studies’ puts him further away from his potential to have a ‘real’ self, if such an autonomous state can ever be achieved:

The chancellor had advised me, back in 1968, to do something about my name and appearance if I wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator. Jack Gladney would not do, he said, and asked me what other names I might have at my disposal. We finally agreed that I should invent an extra initial and call myself J.A.K. Gladney, a tag I wore like a borrowed suit. The chancellor warned against what he called my tendency to make a feeble presentation of self. He strongly suggested I gain weight. He wanted me to “grow out” into Hitler. He himself was tall, paunchy, ruddy, jowly, big-footed and dull. A formidable combination. I had the advantages of substantial height, big hands, big feet, but badly needed bulk, or so he believed – an air of unhealthy excess, of padding and exaggeration, hulking massiveness. If I could become more ugly, he seemed to be suggesting, it would help my career enormously. So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward...The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea...Babette said

[the disguise] intimated dignity and prestige. I am the false character that follows the name around (W.N. p.16/17).

He demonstrates Jean Baudrillard's allegation that representation has replaced reality in a surface-focused, 'hyper-real' society. Jack's creation of an academic persona supersedes the real, in that it dares to suggest that there is nothing below the surface. The constructed stereotypical 'College Professor' he strives to be is an effort to reflect a certain aspirational 'perfection' beyond what can exist.<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard focuses on the false and created nature of much of contemporary life, where, amongst the abundance of copies and representations, fixed narratives of instruction become an anathema.

New and different personae can be invented, and gradually authenticated. The Chancellor does not admit to re-inventing Jack; he insinuates that he is filling out his 'true self'. The term 're-invent' suggests that what is being replaced was already an invention, part of a circularity of creation amply illustrated by his fellow university lecturers who are former journalists, sportsmen and celebrity bodyguards, merely reinvented as 'teachers'. The J.A.K. Gladney that develops is simply another disguise; Jack is no nearer to any tangible reality. Instead of security, gleaned from the comfort of the elusive 'authentic', Jack is caught up in his own hype, cocooned in self-myth, like Hitler, his hero and academic inspiration. Both men are masquerading behind a show of power, which is merely a façade waiting to be discovered. Indeed when one of his ex-wives asks Jack how his academic job is going the conversation breathes life into the long-dead aggressor, the question, "How is Hitler?", brings the reply: "Fine, solid, dependable" (W.N. p.89). Jack is referring to what Hitler's image is doing for his career.

Hitler asked Albert Speer to design buildings to represent the Nazi party, which would decay magnificently, and astonish posterity (W.N. p.257-8). These

architectural decisions encouraged him to believe that he could control the future. He thought that by ensuring definite and predictable happenings he would create his own grand narrative. Ironically, by trying to predict the future and dictate nostalgia, he suspends chronology and emphasises the difficulty in ever assessing modernity and postmodernity as separate entities. Traditionally the present is lived in, whilst looking to the future, with the past firmly behind. However, Lyotard suggests that viewing the future as experienced before the past is a way of coming to terms with postmodern times: '*Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)'.<sup>7</sup> Jack, like his hero, tries to control his future, but his impersonation of power cannot save him from dying anymore than Hitler could keep himself from ruin.

Universities, and other educational institutions, where popular culture vies with more traditional subjects, further illustrate this complex relationship between grand narratives and postmodernity. The courses of learning do not exist chronologically, or historically, but instead compete with each other for validity and superiority, within an uncomfortably incestuous, yet at the same time competitive, environment. The traditional academic study of literature could be viewed as an archetypal grand narrative with its veneration of the 'Canon', an approved version with verifiable origins. What is taught centres upon 'authentic' literature; that which has already met with official approval. Contemporary courses which offer the study of films and television adverts (in Jack's university there are 'full professors ... who read nothing but cereal boxes' W.N. p.10), present alternatives. However, if these alternatives are simply destined to become the grand narratives of the future, with accepted readings reproduced in multiple text books, then individual interpretation becomes part of a

new normative, rather than part of a multiplicity capable of overturning one official version.

Amongst the multiple strands forming society there are inevitably sections that, for whatever reason, cannot adequately represent themselves. Jean Francois Lyotard names these unrepresentable sections the 'differend', claiming them to be incommensurable with the dominant societal 'norms', yet no less valid.<sup>8</sup> The danger is that these small sections will be ignored or abused. Lyotard suggests that this can be avoided by celebrating the 'differend', 'Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name'.<sup>9</sup> He acknowledges that it is easier to accept the majority opinion but wants to at least make the effort to question and analyse, to refuse the, 'consolation of correct forms... consensus of taste and common...nostalgia'.<sup>10</sup> Such common accord can be seen directly illustrated in *White Noise* by 'The Most Photographed Barn', especially when scrutinised in the light of John Frow's writing on tourism, returned to later in the chapter. As Frow states, nostalgia makes no allowance for 'difference'.

Jack's wife Babette's son, Wilder, is an example of difference with his protracted crying, lasting over seven hours, (W.N. p. 79), and his inability (or refusal) to speak. He is 'wilder' than the rest of the family, actively, and seemingly instinctively, resisting the civilising potential of 'teaching'. He demonstrates his lack of cohesion with the modern world by looking behind the television set for his mother after her brief appearance on the screen and pedalling his tricycle across the motorway (W.N. p.322). Murray claims, 'You cherish this simpleton blessing of his' (W.N. p.289). Learning and the amassing of knowledge only increases fear. Rather than thinking of

Wilder as retarded Jack sees him as, 'the spirit of genius at work' (W.N. p.209) and the family treat him as special and revered:

His great round head, set as it was on a small-limbed and squattish body, gave him the look of a primitive clay figurine, some household idol of obscure and cultic derivation (W.N. p.242).

The value they place on Wilder is reminiscent of what Michel Foucault suggests in *Madness & Civilisation*. He claims that prior to the inception of lunatic asylums rather than categorising those failing to comply with limited societal categories as deviant or pathological, they would have been viewed as having something special to offer, a certain insight or wisdom setting them apart from ordinary mortals.<sup>11</sup> When the asylum burns down (W.N. p.239), watched by Jack and Heinrich, it is a postmodern symbol for the overturning of such categories, or at least some re-assessment of who decides what constitutes 'normal'.

Jack's safe and contained version of what can be classed as 'normal' is challenged repeatedly by the events and characters of the narrative. His German teacher (portrayed as threatening and uncivilised) communicates in American-English, the German language he teaches in his rented room (secretly, in the case of Jack) is associated with primitive regression; unformed, undisciplined and untutored. Jack comments on the transformation Mr Dunlop undergoes when he reverts to German:

When he switched from English to German, it was as though a cord had been twisted in his larynx. An abrupt emotion entered his voice, a scrape and gargle that sounded like the stirring of some beast's ambition. He gaped at me and gestured, he croaked, he verged on strangulation. Sounds came spewing from the base of his tongue, harsh noises damp with passion. He was only demonstrating certain basic pronunciation patterns but the transformation in his face and voice made me think he was making a passage between levels of being (W.N. p.32).

The teacher's unbounded return to his preferred language is not his only breaching of boundaries, Jack finds it disturbingly inappropriate when Dunlop puts his fingers into his mouth, 'Once he reached in with his right hand to adjust my tongue. It was a

strange and terrible moment, an act of haunting intimacy. No one had ever handled my tongue before' (W.N. p.173). Jack begins his relationship with this man by doubting his masculinity due to the softness of his skin, an opinion which is shallow, but relatively harmless, 'Soft hands in a man give me pause. Soft skin in general. Baby skin. I don't think he shaves' (W.N. p.32). His doubts connect to Mr Dunlop's seeming inability to face teaching within the public domain; all of his transference of knowledge goes on behind closed doors in a barricaded room (W.N. p.238). Jack's perseverance with the tuition, despite grave doubts, demonstrates his desperation to master the German language. This centrality (and ambiguity) of language is underpinned by Jack's addiction to erotic literature, and Babette's objection to some of the phrases used, translating them, as she does, in ways far beyond Jack's thought patterns:

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? I don't care what these people do as long as they don't enter or get entered (W.N. p.29).

Babette and Mr Dunlop are aligned with one another as 'feminine'; they are united by difference and categorised as inferior. Jack, by contrast, is the archetypal hero, a college professor: knowledgeable; North American; white; middle-class and male. His possession of knowledge is tied to control and, therefore, masculinity, but as the doctor tells Jack, ever eager for facts, 'knowledge changes every day' (W.N. p.280). These changes are reflected in the endless lists of fashionable commodities his children compulsively recite, and the frequent mis-translations arising from the changing and overlapping meanings of words. The result is conversations doomed to remain forever misunderstood. Such changes make Jack uneasy, as his manly image and his pedagogic superiority must be constantly re-assessed and his claims to

dominance justified. It is impossible to conceive masculinity as unitary and coherent amongst such fluidity. The vastness of what seems 'unknowable' is overwhelming and aligns living with uncertainty and chance. Man must gamble if he wants to find out more than he already knows, or experience more than he is already experiencing. Bataille links this risk-taking with constructed identities and posits that these should be cast aside, 'Communication' cannot take place from one full and intact being to another: it requires beings who have put the being within themselves *at stake*, have placed it at the limit of death, of nothingness.<sup>12</sup>

Jack's fear of death, and his subsequent fear of sex's potential to similarly overwhelm completely, are irrevocably tied to a fear of literally 'letting go' of identity and the comfort of constructs. Jack is happier sifting through, selecting and blending what has always already been done, this circularity carries inferences of continuation rather than ending. When a colleague suggests that awareness of death makes humans cherish life he begins to question the value of knowledge, 'Does knowledge of impending death make life precious? What good is a preciousness based on fear and anxiety? It's an anxious quivering thing' (W.N. p.284). Jack's insistence that it is more comfortable and pleasant not to 'know' could easily negate his own employment, which, after all, hinges on the need to pass on what you 'know'. Jack's extreme response in his bid to become a little more intimate with death, is the attempted murder of Babette's lover, spurred on by a philosophising Murray, 'He dies, you live' (W.N. p.291). If you are not an acting body then by default you become a body being acted upon. Jack is furthering the intimacy with death already fostered via his close connections to the mass murderer he has chosen as his pedagogical focus.

Jack is a voracious consumer; desperately clinging to the belief that, 'Here we don't die, we shop' (W.N. p.38). He is convinced that the amount he buys is directly linked to his validity as a 'male', 'provider', 'academic' and, most crucially, 'living entity', 'The sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, [...] the sense of replenishment [...] the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought' (W.N. p.20). He believes that his acquisitiveness and his eagerness to enter into the exchange system will ensure that he remains alive. Baudrillard's comments on America's commodified culture likewise align it with death:

The proliferation of technical gadgetry inside the house, beneath it, around it, like drips in an intensive care ward, the TV, stereo, and video which provide communication with the beyond, the car (or cars) that connect one up to that great shopper's funeral parlour, the supermarket, and lastly, the wife and children, as glowing symptoms of success...everything here testifies to death having found its ideal home.<sup>13</sup>

Jack relies on his surface appearance to deflect death. When one of his colleagues sees him away from the campus, denuded of his academic uniform and trademark sunglasses, and comments that, 'You look so harmless Jack. A big, harmless, ageing, indistinct sort of guy' (W.N. p.83), he is horrified and afraid at the suggestion of his lack of substance. He takes his family on a spending-spree in the Mid-Village Mall to counteract his feelings of unease. This provides material goods to support his construction of an identity, and also offers him therapy and affirmation. He claims that what he spends comes back to him in the form of 'existential credit' (W.N. p.84). He lavishes gifts on both his family and himself and consequently feels rewarded, underlining the affirmative aspects of purchasing and consuming; the business of exchange, 'I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed' (W.N. p.84). Jack's behaviour recalls the ancient tribal ritual of gift-giving, 'Potlatch', a ruinous act of outdoing and undoing, which Bataille suggests always more acutely answers

something in the giver.<sup>14</sup>

The crowds shown in supermarkets and malls trying their utmost to sustain an identity, hence a life, are the same crowds who attend Jack's lectures. Jack's son Heinrich comments on how becoming part of a crowd can be likened to becoming part of a machine, impersonal and technological, doing as you are told to make the larger machine run efficiently. Baudrillard also confirms the way in which modern life is increasingly experienced as part of a mechanical crowd. He terms them, 'the masses', huge ungainly and inert. However, when confronted by multiplicity and choice they ironically still huddle together to carry out the same acts and buy the same products and services, accepting the lecturer's version, totally in the thrall of what Baudrillard terms, 'The networks of influence',<sup>15</sup> powerfully mass-mediated images. The students use their studies as part of this consuming lifestyle. Jack craves the purported safety his lofty academic position offers. His students long to ape his confidence and knowledge, eager to create clones. Their unquestioning approach to Jack's knowledge perpetuates, rather than breaks down, grand narratives. Day to day life is not homogenous, and the same for everybody in every place, it is instead disorderly, fragmented, heterogeneous. The fact that the human sciences are known as 'disciplines' speaks of Academia's efforts to tame this unruly mess. Jack believes that his students are attracted to the concept of the crowd for its potential to offer a safety in numbers. As a personal and obsessive fear of death dominates his life he presumes that his students share this terror, claiming that they come together to form, 'a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual' (W.N. p.73). Ironically such mute obedience also brings death closer. As the narrative progresses Jack realises this and

tries to stop conforming, to 'escape the pull of the earth, the gravitational leaf-flutter that brings us hourly closer to dying. Simply stop obeying' (W.N. p.303).

Academic colleagues Jack and Murray become part of the crowd when they visit the site of, 'The Most Photographed Barn in America' and discuss the collective perception of this famous tourist site, 'No one sees the barn ... We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one'(W.N. p.12). Frow suggests that humans' acceptance of constructed representations as lived reality results in them being linked to their surroundings by a constant mediation of words and texts, for example, an adherence to the instructions on maps and billboards. Jack and Murray illustrate this by responding to the textual commentary on what is purported to be a site of interest in much the same way that Jack's students respond to his 'teaching'; both sets of behaviour helping to perpetuate mythical narratives. Frow describes this reification as a process of acknowledging a definitive 'type', 'suffused with ideality, giving on to the type of the beautiful, or the extraordinary, or the culturally authentic'.<sup>16</sup> Reality is therefore not palpable, but rather revealed emblematically, with signs and symbols. Murray and Jack follow posters advertising the barn, and imitate the other tourists, who are also doing what those who came before them did. Again, like Jack's students they are driven by a hunger both to belong, and to place other people and events within this belonging, what Frow describes as 'nostalgia for a lost authenticity'.<sup>17</sup> The authenticity is not 'misplaced' but lost because it never existed and so can never be reclaimed. Such mythologising of 'types' results in an attraction to typicality, and consequently to societal constructions, like normative masculinity, being lived as reality. Within the education system adhering to the particulars of type fosters a culture of sameness, inevitably leading to feelings of non-validity for non-

conformers. Postmodern theory encourages variety and multiplicity; the empowerment of thinking and feeling for yourself. However, Jack, as both university professor and man, rather than welcoming this liberty is afraid and suspicious of it.

Frow discusses perpetual imitation in the light of the Platonic simulacrum; a copy of a copy. The act of copying endows the copied with a certain validity, even reality, much in the manner that man can be seen to be endlessly copying himself via the education system. This is Baudrillardian hyper-reality, more real than real. It is a world consisting of closed, self-referring systems where 'ideas' of what constitutes reality are indefinitely reproducible and the consumption of these reproduced images dominates to the point of replacing experience, with future definitions made against that which is already a reproduction within a thoroughly commodified society.<sup>18</sup> Supposed originals, often offered as part of an accepted canon of knowledge, are actually copies: 'tradition'; 'heritage'; 'the past', are all part, like the famous barn, of the nostalgia for a lost authenticity that never was. Foucault suggests that, '[Man] constitutes representations by means of which he lives'.<sup>19</sup> In other words these surface representations are what come to be known as 'reality'.

Jack's questioning of this reality leads him to take a highly technological health check. He is unnerved to see his existence translated as a series of 'pulsing stars' and 'flashing numbers' on a computer screen. His reduction to, 'the sum total of (his) data' (W.N. p.141) seems strangely appropriate for a teacher who relies on, and believes in, what is in his data banks. Just as his teaching encourages, rather than ostracises, fascism, so too does the technology he is drawn to, for its purported power to save or extend his life, paradoxically offer the opportunity for others to alienate him

from his own body and his own death. As he summarises, 'It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying' (W.N. p.142). He longs for the supposed security of his invented identity, 'I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses'(W.N. p.142) and is clinical, even patronising, about the deaths of others, 'An emergency ward...where people come in gun-shot, slashed, sleepy-eyed with opium compounds, broken needles in their arms. These things have nothing to do with my own eventual death, non-violent, small-town, thoughtful' (W.N. p.76).

His nonchalant stereotyping of deathly circumstances, with his own death 'booked in' to be peaceful and thoughtful merely because he is an academic, is now being rudely questioned by the probing, and apparently sinister, technology. Like the Mylex suits worn by the rescue workers, whose composition compromises the precision of the vital computer readouts, the cure is worse than the disease. Jack feels afraid and distant from his own flesh and concludes that a healthy person would become ill after the tests, with their insinuations that the body is rendered superfluous in cyberspace. Modern citizens are conditioned not to question the knowledge of 'The Doctor', 'The Scientist' or 'The Teacher', even if this requires the feigning of ignorance about 'The Self'. Accepted knowledge overrules anything a person thinks he knows, even to the extent that instilled attitudes are accepted as gut reactions, in an illustration of Marx's 'false consciousness' or, as Victor Seidler terms it, 'We can be so used to constructing our experience according to how we think that things ought to be, that it can be difficult to acknowledge any emotions and feelings that go against these images'.<sup>20</sup>

Lyotard claims that this determination to prove, to label and to tie down is impossible to satisfy due to the evolving and circular status of life.<sup>21</sup> There is always room to question, to discuss and explore further. He also predicts that if knowledge is accepted

as finite and passed on as unquestionable it will come to be accrued instantly with the implantation of microchips in the brain, without any studying or analysis. Recalling Jack's description of the experimental drug Dylar this, literally, presents 'technology with a human face' (W.N. p.211). If knowledge is intrinsically bonded to the creation of masculinity because of the control it offers, then technology, via such developments as microchips in the brain, can be viewed as a direct threat to masculinity, as presently perceived. The rapid progression of computer technology includes the enormous resources of the internet, comparable to a micro-chip in the brain due to its environment, where learning is superfluous because someone, or rather something, will do the knowing on your behalf, but as Jack's eldest son, Heinrich comments, 'What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything (W.N. p.149). The idea that technology will not just help humans but will in fact replace them is once again apparent.

The value of knowledge and what can be learned is intrinsic to the father-son relationship. Jack does not know what to teach Heinrich, a failure which only adds to his anxiety. He tries to establish a 'normal' relationship with him by taking him to watch the local mental asylum burning down, believing that there is something primal about such raging destruction and the virile physicality of firefighters that cannot help but unite a father and son. Despite his pride in his scholarly lifestyle, and his arrogant belief that academia will shield him Jack remains uneasy about his lack of physical skills, feeling that this makes him less of a 'man'. He comments, 'What could be more useless than a man who couldn't fix a dripping faucet – fundamentally useless, dead to history, to the messages in his genes?' (W.N. p.245). The action of the narrative suggests that perhaps there are no such messages and that men are emulating what

they believe their society requires of them. Jack is torn between his modernist principles and his chaotic postmodern situation, ensuring that his psyche remains undecided about whether to emulate a philosopher or a firefighter. His lectures have become dramatic productions – rehearsed and copied; his carefully honed identity as male academic makes him the central protagonist of his own play, spectacular and revered yet ultimately unfulfilling.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986). Further references to this text are made in parentheses within the body of the chapter.
- <sup>2</sup> Victor J Seidler, *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity & Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.65.
- <sup>3</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models & Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.20.
- <sup>4</sup> Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), also illustrates this crowd mentality with the combination of photographic images and narrative.
- <sup>5</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, Trans. Mary Dalwood (London: M.Boyars, 1987), p.20.
- <sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Trans. P. Foss & P. Patton (New York: Semiotext(e) 1983), pp.1- 4.
- <sup>7</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.81.
- <sup>8</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
- <sup>9</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.82.
- <sup>10</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children* (London: Turnaround, 1992), p.24.
- <sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness & Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1993).
- <sup>12</sup> Georges Bataille writing about Nietzsche, quoted by Derrida in *Writing & Difference*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978 p.263. Italics in original.
- <sup>13</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1999), p.30.
- <sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Trans. By Robert Hurley (London: Zone Books, 1988), p.68/9. Marcel Mauss discusses 'potlatch' in *The Gift: The Form & Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Trans. WD Halls, (London: Routledge, 1990).
- <sup>15</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Communication' *Postmodern Culture* Ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto, 1985), p.133. The 'masses' are also discussed in, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
- <sup>16</sup> John Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory & Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.67.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Baudrillard, (1983).
- <sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.352.
- <sup>20</sup> Seidler, (1994), p.138.
- <sup>21</sup> Lyotard (1984) p.79.