

“A Groping in the Dark” : The Legacy of Enlightenment Thinking in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*



Ava Morgan

The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please scan the QR code.

This thesis examines how Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* exposes the lingering presence of Enlightenment narratives within the cultural logic of postmodernity. Despite postmodernism’s professed break from rationalism, progress, and truth as upheld by the independent, thinking subject, DeLillo’s novel reveals how these ideals persist, according to both Emmanuel Levinas’ Totality and Infinity and Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, as structures of domination, authoritarianism, and control. By combining postmodern theorists like Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and Gianni Vattimo with the very rational, Enlightenment thinkers like Immanuel Kant and René Descartes which the postmodernists define their critical views in opposition of, this thesis opens up DeLillo’s work to a discussion about Otherness, regression, and patriarchy that both critics of the Enlightenment and postmodernity fail to take into theoretical account. Chapter One focuses on Jack’s use of catalogue in the opening chapters. I argue that Jack uses catalogue as an exercise affirming his ability to explain and construct stable meanings. Chapter Two argues that the Airborne Toxic Event acts as the disrupting event that throws Jack’s explanations into question, highlighting his attempts to play the patriarch and the professor.¹ Chapter Three takes the ATE’s disruption to its apex in Jack’s confrontation with Willie Mink and the nuns. Finally, in my conclusion, I compare DeLillo’s ending with Noah Baumbach’s dance credit sequence to get to some idea of what the absurd can offer in a story so resistant to resolution.

¹ However, several disruptions, like Murray’s functioning as the novel’s voice of reason, are noted in Chapter One to mark the difference in how the ATE impacts Jack’s thinking.