

SHATTERING THE ILLUSION:

Self-Preservation, Reality, and Meaning Through Images in *White Noise* and “Self- Portrait in a Convex Mirror”

DEVON COUTTS

Finding a common language to address a poem and a novel is a challenging task, but taking on such challenges forces us to stretch our exegetical ingenuity and often brings unexpectedly suggestive results. That is definitely the case with Devon Coutts’s paper, which takes on two canonical postmodern works, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” – works that have often been discussed, but never, to my knowledge, together. The pairing may seem an unusual one, but Mr. Coutts shows impressive creativity in developing the ways in which both poem and novel reflect and respond to “the parcelling of culture and the effect of meaninglessness on contemporary America.”

Dr. David Evans

In the wake of the overwhelming growth of information, technology, and rampant consumer culture in the twentieth century, the ways in which people interact with the world have changed significantly. As a result, art and literature have also changed, responding to the

SHATTERING THE ILLUSION

transforming modern world with the transition to the postmodern genre. In their exploration of the reaction to the parceling of culture and the effect of meaninglessness on contemporary America, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" reflect that transition, through the similar experience of alienation between the speaker of the poem and Jack Gladney, the protagonist of the novel. The speaker of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" comes to accept the difficulty of locating meaning by contemplating himself in relation to the portrait, in the same way that Jack Gladney struggles with life, death, truth, and reality in his everyday interactions in *White Noise*. Through his attempt to locate meaning in life in the repetitive kitsch of postmodern America, Jack is forced to examine the fragmented images of his representation of self, deconstructing them to gain an objective understanding and acceptance of his life as a whole.

White Noise takes place in a society that is trapped within a constant bombardment of media images. "The insidious presence and destructive effects of technology upon the individual and the environment" form the central focus in the novel (Martucci 83). Media

- such as radio and television - are ever-present in the background as if they are characters in themselves. As such, they influence the structure of the world through the consistent interjection of meaningless phrases completely out of context: "the TV said: 'Until Florida surgeons attached an artificial flipper'" (DeLillo 29). The lack of continuity between events, at least in the first section of the novel, recalls the episodic nature of a TV program, which - coupled with the lack of depth of the characters and their frequent interjections of meaningless sentence fragments - suggests that in *White Noise*, life reflects television.

However, TV in itself is already an imitation of real life, so society in the novel is effectively an imitation of a representation of real life. The fragmentation of life into television programming or advertisements eliminates all possibility of meaning, transforming everything into an empty image and creating the expectation that everything is available at the push of a button. Participating in such parcelling of culture locks Jack and his family into an eternal cycle of recycled images in which they relinquish identities and voices of their own in favour of the script provided by

the media. But, try as Jack might to “seek immersion in the empty time of his narrative as an antidote to his fear of death” (Boxall 111), he is a person, not an image, and he will, in fact, die. The fear of death underlies almost every event in the novel, and for Jack, the attempt to replicate a safe, uneventful life as seen on TV is a misguided attempt to defer the fact of mortality, a fact that proves inescapable over the course of the novel.

The setting of “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” results in a similarly enclosed experience, albeit on a smaller scale. Instead of being confined within a media-induced system of repetitive images, the speaker of the poem becomes contained within Francesco Parmigianino’s self-portrait as reflected in a mirror, eternally in the act of painting himself. The painting is thus caught eternally in a loop of self-creation, a process that then integrates the speaker in his observation of it, “reveal[ing] that in its power to capture our experiences, the image can confine its maker” (Dimakopoulou 7). The speaker – like Jack Gladney – seeks to discover an image of himself in an imitation of a reflection of a real moment in another person’s life. However, the reflection is of someone else entirely, and the

mirror is a mere image, which complicates the speaker's identification with the painter and his search for his own self.

The speaker becomes interwoven with Parmigianino, whose intent in capturing such a moment of self-renewal is the same as Jack's: to preserve the self in an image in order to escape human mortality. According to Krystyna Mazur, "the desire to protect, to embalm, to keep intact (to keep alive), always accompanies our self-awareness and lies at the core of the very task of self-portraiture and, possibly, at the core of all representation" (118). But, "The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts" (Ashbery 43), and preserving oneself as an image removes all intrinsic meaning from the self, leaving only an empty shell: "the soul is not a soul / Has no secret [. . .] it fits / Its hollow perfectly" (Ashbery 44-46). Both the speaker of Ashbery's poem and Jack Gladney must become self-aware before sifting through the images that inform their surroundings to come to a sense of how to live in a world of dubious meaning. Despite the different literary forms, the novel contains key elements in common with the poem, revealing a preoccupation with developing an objective self in the attempt to understand reality.

SHATTERING THE ILLUSION

The speaker's experience in the poem is both objective and subjective; he becomes aware that he is observing the portrait, imagining the world from the perspective of the image and using it to explore meaning in an ever-changing world. Jack's experience in the first part of the novel is purely subjective. In his attempt to "perfect and rule out the extraneous / Forever," he escapes into superficiality in three areas: the supermarket, work, and home (Ashbery 144-145). He actively avoids meaning altogether in each area, as he fears becoming "enmeshed" in plots because they "tend to move deathward" (DeLillo 87, 26), and would threaten his "long and uneventful life" (DeLillo 88). As Mazur explicates about the poem: "the reproduction of this image is shown to involve more than one copy where each of the copies carries with it its own distortion" (113), an interpretation which applies strongly to Jack's consistent reaffirmations of his image throughout the novel (113). But it is not only Jack who has been consumed by images: the whole of *Blacksmith* is dominated by an obsessive fear of death that is simultaneously caused and cured by the media's commercialization of the perfect suburban lifestyle of an eighties sitcom.

The self-contained, superficial conditions of the town can be condensed even further to within the supermarket itself. The supermarket is much more than an economic structure in the novel; it reflects and provides for Blacksmith, forming the foundation for society's existence. In the supermarket or the shopping mall, "that hermetic, brilliant white space that seems to offer immunity from history and from culture like an igloo at the end of the world" (Boxall 116), history and culture clash, side by side on shelves, becoming kitschy reflections of their former significance. "All time / Reduces to no special time" (Ashbery 403-404), and the supermarket becomes a museum for a simultaneous past and present, thereby forming a void in which everything happens all at once, repeating with no promise for a future and "augment[ing] the dread of not getting out / Before having seen the whole collection" (Ashbery 407-408). By making everything available all the time, the commercialized, mediacentric mindset of postmodern America devalues the aspects of life that traditionally constitute a real identity, replacing them with a catalogue of meaningless imitations.

SHATTERING THE ILLUSION

Even family is reduced to a process – like browsing through a catalogue, shopping for what best constitutes the image of a televised nuclear suburban unit. Jack lives in a nice house, is married, and has four children: two girls and two boys. However, Babette is his fifth wife, two of the children are not his, and all of the children resulted from different marriages. Their marriage reflects the parcelled conditions of society, but despite the disjointed relations it seems fairly stable. In *Babette*, Jack seems to have found the perfect level of predictability; he is able to accord his life to the routine of domesticity that will preserve his existence, like TV taught him. Jack's comfortable image of his life is static; his world is frozen in "an eternal present which fails, eternally, to become present" (Boxall 111). By gathering the characteristics of a perfect life around him and desiring their repetitions forever, Jack is attempting to imitate Parmigianino and create a self-portrait eternally in the process of completing itself.

Jack has multiple reflections that he imitates in the novel; one arises from the media, another from his job as the head and creator of the Department of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill. Jack, with his austere

academic robes, imposing physical presence, and status as the head of a prestigious department, looks like an advertisement in a brochure, or even a portrait, presenting the perfect image of a university professor. But his professional persona is completely artificial; from the glasses he does not need and the weight the chancellor “strongly suggested [he] gain” (DeLillo 17), to the added initial in his name. His “soul establishes itself” (Ashbery 24), albeit mockingly, as he becomes J.A.K. Gladney – a reflection of his own unremarkable identity, a “tag [he] wore like a borrowed suit” (DeLillo 16). He becomes like Ashbery’s speaker, as well as the portrait, in seeking to define himself by imitating another person. Unable to truly be that which he reflects, Jack is confined to a cycle of constant renewal in order to sustain the perfect image of himself. His association with Hitler allows Jack to reflect an image of strength and power in which he can be safe, but only as long as he continues to reaffirm that image.

However, that image is only applicable to one area of his life, which requires Jack to produce other copies to sustain his existence. Jack removes himself from the “life englobed” by the university (Ashbery 55), just as the

speaker exits the "ideal beauty" of Parmigianino's frozen self (Ashbery 201), awakening to "try to begin living in what / Has now become a slum" (Ashbery 185-186). The speaker returns to New York, a "logarithm / Of other cities" (Ashbery 258-259), reclaiming the role of objective observer, but Jack, in relinquishing Hitler, is still ungrounded in himself and merely supplants one globe for another. Without his robes, J.A.K. loses all influence to the decidedly average Jack, whose identity remains in flux, and despite his ritual shopping through supermarkets and wives, he fails to maintain an eternally preserved image.

Jack's image is proven impossible to preserve when his routine is forced to change and he must learn German to maintain his reputation. Jack's gesture toward German, the language he associates with true meaning, suggests his desire to "stick [his] hand / Out of the globe" of superficial stasis, but his paralyzing fear of death, "its dimension / What carries it, will not allow it" (Ashbery 56-58). Learning another language requires effort and Jack no longer has the ability to attribute meaning to the world beyond the surface. Years of superficiality have rendered Jack

incapable of trying for anything real, and deafened by the white noise of media and consumer culture, no matter how he “struggle[s] with the German tongue” (DeLillo 31), Jack is only able to pronounce the words closest to English. Because it is inaccessible to him, he glorifies German, imagining that it contains hidden truths and the solution to English’s lack of “words for the surface, that is, / No words to say what it really is” (Ashbery 92-93). But neither empty routines nor hoarding useless goods provide any consolation once Jack’s awareness of his superficial understanding begins to conflict with his fear of death.

Jack’s acquirement of objectivity is irrevocably set in motion when death becomes actualized and inescapable in the form of the Airborne Toxic Event. Jack is forced to evacuate his home, leaving behind with it the naïve, disconnected belief that disasters only happen on TV, not to a “college professor [. . .] in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name” (DeLillo 114). This new, unique event breaks the town’s history-less vacuum, and instead of time happening all at once, “[m]erging in one neutral band that surrounds” (Ashbery 127), time suddenly

begins to run out “in a focus sharpening toward death” (Ashbery 179). “The invisible killers [materialize] in the form of this cloud” (Martucci 86), and as soon as he is exposed to the cloud of chemicals, his carefully constructed life begins to fall apart – or fall together, as the second part also marks the beginning of a more defined plot that carries on to the end of the novel. Where the first section is defined by episodic “plotless narrative” (Boxall 110), driven by Jack’s will to ignore death, the second and third sections are sharply focused by his obsessive desperation to “outlive” the death that Nyodene D “planted” in his body (DeLillo 150). Jack’s new relation with death confronts and rejects his previous self-image, and a new mirror by which to measure himself arises out of the shattered remains of his former coping mechanisms.

As Jack’s exposure to the Airborne Toxic Event poisons his consciousness, the full extent to which the fear of death affects every aspect of his life is made evident, showing most clearly in his relationship with Babette. Jack’s devotion to the image of a perfect wife and lifestyle blinds him to the truth: that Babette’s artifice is far worse than even his own, and she proves to be the most devious of all his

previous wives, despite her lack of “ties to the intelligence community” (DeLillo 6). The image of Babette is more important to Jack than Babette herself; he is more “devastated” by her failure to adhere to the “point of Babette” that she “reveals and confides” (DeLillo 197, 192), than the fact that she has cheated on him. Her fear of death leads her to commit adultery with the mysterious Dr. Gray in order to access the experimental drug, Dylar, which is meant to eliminate that fear altogether, albeit at the cost of her memory. Dylar reduces her to a virtually blank slate, capable only of reflecting the stimuli of her immediate surroundings. It is likely that he never knows the real Babette, as she is an exemplary victim of postmodern America’s consumer consciousness – so medicated and informed by the media that she is indistinguishable from both Jack’s desired image and the products she consumes.

The deconstruction of Jack’s desired projection of life extends out of the home to his job and community. The university, like history and life in the town, collapses into the supermarket, where thinking, living, and dying are all “conflat[ed]...into one model of consumption” (Boxall 123), and intellectual

SHATTERING THE ILLUSION

conversations that should take place in the university are increasingly allocated elsewhere. But while searching through the trash for the last of Babette's Dylar, Jack discovers instead the "dark underside of consumer consciousness" in the "compressed bulk" of the useless objects that define him (DeLillo 258-259). Faced with such an abject reflection of what his life amounts to, Jack begins to realize neither mind-numbing consumerism nor mind-erasing medication will help him forget or deal with the fact of his mortality.

As the awareness of his confinement grows, so too do his anxiety and frustration with death, only now they are complicated by his knowledge of Babette's affair. His obsession with his own death intertwines with his obsession with Dr. Gray, as he is unable to reconcile his desire for revenge with his desire to escape into Dylar. Jack turns outward into the community for an external method of consolation, seeking answers for how to deal with death from his colleague Murray Jay Siskind. Murray's solution is a perversion of the consumer mindset - to hoard goods - and of the artist's desire to become an image; he suggests instead that Jack hoard other lives and kill people to "gain life credit" (DeLillo

291). Murray reduces life and death to transactions that are no different than exchanging goods at the supermarket; “the killer [. . .] buys time, he buys life [. . .] you can’t die if he does” (291). Murray’s advice, the temptation of Dylar, his other external alternative, and Babette’s infidelity provide the basis for the climax of the novel; once Jack learns the identity and location of Dr. Gray, Jack resolves to kill him, thus shattering his final mirror image in the novel.

However, Jack’s transition to objective acceptance is not a simple process of cause and effect. He must either accept or forget his fate; aware now of his death and the futility of “confus[ing] everything with [his] mirror games” (Ashbery 427), he is “forced to relinquish [his] power to contain meanings in neat, self-contained, impenetrable spherical structures” (Mazur 130). Mink shows him what he would become if he were to choose Dylar: “Willie Mink is what the precariously centered Jack might become, postmodern man’s essence” (Lentricchia 112). Mink may as well be the “gray-bodied, staticky, unfinished” figure in Jack’s imagination, all traces of identity outside fragments of advertisements having been destroyed by Dylar and

forgetfulness (DeLillo 241). Barely tempted by Dylar any longer, the only course of action left is Murray's suggestion: kill in order to gain life credit while also gaining revenge for his wife's infidelity.

Jack's plot to kill Mink shows that despite his disillusionment, Jack remains confined within a worldview dominated by the media. He still sees himself and others as mere images or characters on television, reduced to a scripted, "movie-like image of a perfect, intricately detailed murder plot" (Martucci 97). He refuses to entertain any compromise to his elaborate plan, but the "stringent laws" in the "history of creation" intervene (Ashbery 458-459), and prevent what he set out to accomplish with the "life-obstructing task" of killing Mink (Ashbery 464). Mink is not a person to Jack, but rather a mirror "that is no longer [his]" (DeLillo 333), offering a reflection of himself that will be eradicated with his murder. There is room for more than one bullet in Jack's chamber, and it takes all three to shatter his subjective bubble: two to Mink's stomach, and one to his wrist. The bullet causes Jack to finally "withdraw that hand" (DeLillo 535), and he stops trying to attribute meaning based purely on his conception of

himself. Being shot allows Jack to see Mink “for the first time as a person” (DeLillo 313), not merely as his reflection, allowing him to also realize that *alive* is not defined merely as the state before death. Jack changes his mind, choosing to save Mink’s life instead of take it and in that way he establishes himself with a new sense of self in relation to another.

The circumstances of Jack’s murder plot seem to align with his revelation of the personhood of others in the world, suggesting that this awareness is what the events of the novel were heading toward. The murder takes place in Germantown, he uses a German gun, and the nuns who save Mink’s life and treat his wrist are also German. German being the language of hidden significance for Jack, it seems too perfect to be a coincidence that the elements of his self-revelation are somehow German related. But the novel does not end with Jack’s serene avoidance of responsibility for shooting Mink or his transcendent acceptance of death upon condition of an afterlife. The German nuns reveal themselves as frauds; they do not believe the most fundamental doctrine of the faith they swore their lives to. They merely pretend in order to make desperate unbelievers like Jack feel better

about the lack of meaning in the world. The only continuity or significance to be found in life is attributed by the viewer, leaving “nothing to do but wait for the next sunset” (DeLillo 321), and accept that “the hand holds no chalk” (Ashbery 548), and that life has no inherent meaning – it simply, inescapably is. Utterly disillusioned, devoid of all belief, and lacking any more reflections to hide in, Jack goes home.

However, despite the loss of everything he depends on throughout the novel to keep him going, Jack’s life continues. The utter lack of meaning is what allows objects or words – or in Jack’s case, life – to become meaningful again (Mazur 130). Without his crippling fear he is able to objectively observe his surroundings, and this allows him to enjoy the sunsets in peace with Wilder and Babette. He can watch as others are disoriented and disturbed when the supermarket shelves are rearranged, seeing it for what it is without experiencing those emotions: merely the “most ordinary / Forms of daily activity, changing everything / Slightly and profoundly” (Ashbery 469-471). According to Martucci, “[t]he final three scenes of the novel demonstrate Jack’s acceptance of ambiguity

and his realization that the unknown is a part of the miraculous – one cannot be attained without the other” (102). Jack acknowledges that “in the end it doesn’t matter what they see or think they see” (DeLillo 326), because “The mute, undivided present / Has the justification of logic, which/In this instance, isn’t a bad thing” (Ashbery 438-440). Nothing is permanent – even the supermarket changes – but that can be comforting when all individuals experience it the same as everyone else.

Despite writing ten years apart, John Ashbery and Don DeLillo explore similar anxieties about living in a postmodern world in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” and *White Noise*. Despite their difference in format, the experiences they relate contain interesting parallels. The novel and the poem both return in the end to a place that resembles the beginning, but neither are exactly the same. Both subjects of the works undergo profound inner reflections about what it means to be a self in a world lacking inherent meaning. But instead of emerging from their disillusioned musings with hopelessness for the future, they both gain acceptance of the significance of subjective experience in the world. After all,

SHATTERING THE ILLUSION

postmodern America's rendering of everything into insignificant packages works both ways; if nothing is significant then everything is, and it all depends on who is looking at it.

Works Cited

- Boxall, Peter. "Death and the avant-garde: *White Noise*." *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 109-130. Print.
- Dimakopoulou, Stamatina. "The Poetics of Vision and the Redemption of the Subject in John Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'." *E-rea: Electronic Journals of Study on the Anglophone World* 2.2 (2004): 1-22. Web. 6 December 2013.
- Lentricchia, Frank. "Tales of the Electronic Tribe." *New Essays on White Noise*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. 87-113. Print.
- Martucci, Elise A. "*White Noise*: A Level of Experience to Which We Will Gradually Adjust." *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo*. New York: Routledge, 2007. 75-106. Print.
- Mazur, Krystyna. "The Unfamiliar Stereotype: Repetition in the Poetry of John Ashbery." *Poetry and Repetition: Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery*.

SHATTERING THE ILLUSION

New York: Routledge, 2005.105-148.

Print