

Ivan DIMITROV

St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

THE PRIMITIVE MIND IN THE AIRPLANE DISASTER IN DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*

Don DeLillo's novel White Noise has attained the status of a cultural icon for its acute insight into the traumatic impact of modern technology on the fragile edifice of human psychology and sense of well-being. Despite the technological advances, the human being remains a primitive savage hiding behind the façade of civilized manners, and it only takes very little for the savage to come out crying bloody murder and make sacrificial offerings to pagan gods to avoid death at all cost. DeLillo's genius resides in unmasking the flimsy pretenses at civilization in the episode with the falling plane and exposing the savages, to which otherwise civilized passengers, are reduced to when facing the prospect of imminent death.

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Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* is considered to be a seminal novel in American cultural and literary studies for its in-depth psychological observation into the mechanics of human behavior, human reliance on and dread of modern technology and the atavistic falling back to primal urges and modes of thinking in a desperate bid to make sense of and rationalize away the uncanny reality of the postmodern world. Although written in the 1980s, the novel's abiding relevance to our post-post-modern society is attested by the Netflix film series released in 2022.

Despite the apparent plotline running through, the novel can also be viewed as a string of seemingly disconnected impressions and incidents, which serve as the outlet for the author's bewilderment at the lack of logic and predictability of technological reality where the human being is groping for meaning, trying to bring some order while being bombarded by an endless stream of stimuli and symbols (the white noise). Thus, the prevailing theme is one of existential dread, confusion, fear, and subsumed under all these is man's primal need of peace and order. Yet, peace and serenity of mind are in short supply in this novel where disasters roll upon each other like the billowing waves of a sea storm.

One of the signature episodes illustrating human helplessness at the mercy of the inscrutable forces of technology is the air traffic disaster. In the narrative unfoldment of this incident, to put it mildly, the author deploys his favorite dark humor technique to devastating effect. Jack Gladney is waiting at the airport for the arrival of his wife, Babette, when a file of apparently stricken passengers materialize in front

of him, moving listlessly and wordlessly as if arriving from another dimension, not able to focus just yet: “Half an hour before Bee was due to arrive, the passengers from another flight began filing through a draughty tunnel into the arrivals area. They were gray and stricken, they were stooped over in weariness and shock, dragging their hand luggage across the floor. Twenty, thirty, forty people came out, without a word or look, keeping their eyes to the ground. Some limped, some wept. More came through the tunnel, adults with whimpering children, old people trembling, a black minister with his collar askew, one shoe missing...” (DeLillo 1999: 89).

When Jack asks one of the passengers about the cause of their predicament, the man looks at him “as if I didn’t belong to his space-time dimension but had crossed over illegally, made a rude incursion” (DeLillo 1999: 89). Full of resignation, the man relates the incident: “The plane had lost power in all three engines. Dropped from thirty-two thousand feet to twelve thousand feet. Something like four miles. When the steep glide began, people rose, fell, collided, swam in their seats. Then the serious screaming and moaning began. Almost immediately, a voice from the flight deck was heard on the intercom: “We’re falling out of the sky! We are going down! We’re a silver gleaming death machine!” This outburst struck the passengers as an all but total breakdown of authority, competence and command presence and it brought on a round of fresh and desperate wailing” (DeLillo 1999: 90).

This marks the first of several stages of the passengers switching to survival mode and abandoning all trappings of civilized behavior. A falling plane means death. The prospect of imminent death automatically cancels all civic obligations towards others and the only priority becomes a concern for one’s own survival. Admittedly, the grotesquely surreal allusion to death from the intercom catalyzes the already ongoing process of stripping away any semblance of solidarity and now the falling plane is full not of passengers abiding by whatever nominal social duties they have towards each other, but of howling in terror individuals falling out of the sky into the grim clutches of death. It is worth remarking that the novel does not delve into the subtle psychological intricacies of the process of falling helplessly to certain death. Yet, the objective account of the passengers’ actions implies and invites this analysis provided here. The next highlight in this prime-time terror is the refusal to accept death, the decision to fight represented by one of the stewardesses: “Objects were rolling out of the galley, the aisles were full of drinking glasses, utensils, coats and blankets. A stewardess pinned to the bulkhead by the sharp angle of descent was trying to find the relevant passage in a handbook titled “Manual of Disasters” (DeLillo 1999: 90).

What is the stewardess trying to find in the Manual of Disasters? She is practically stuck to the bulkhead and cannot move from there because of the steep angle of descent, which means that the plane is nosediving to the ground, not simply falling. Even if she found the relevant passage in the section ‘things to do in a nosediving plane,’ she would not be able to do anything because she can’t move. Besides, it is

highly unlikely that the manual contains any meaningful thing to say about a falling plane. So why is she engaged in this seemingly futile thing? Because the prospect of death is so terrifying that the human mind cannot accept it and automatically commits to survival strategies, as remote and unrealistic as they might be. By that time, everyone on board is fully on survival mode and we see them grasping for the next straw when word gets around that they are not simply falling, but crash landing: "Certain elements in the crew had decided to pretend that it was not a crash but a crash landing that was seconds away. After all, the difference between the two was only one word. Didn't this suggest that the two forms of flight termination were more or less interchangeable? An encouraging question under the circumstances, if you didn't think about it too long, and there was no time to think right now. The basic difference between a crash and a crash landing was that you could sensibly prepare for a crash landing, which is exactly what they were trying to do. The news spread through the plane, the word was repeated in row after row. "Crash landing, crash landing." They saw how easy it was, by adding one word, to maintain a grip on the future, to extend it in consciousness if not in actual fact" (DeLillo 1999: 90).

As tenuous as that grip on the future might be, it is all they have at their disposal at the moment. So far, we see the passengers engaging in one form of survival mode or another. They are not citizens weighing the pros and cons of an ethical issue or exercising their civil rights or observing the socially accepted norms of behavior ensuring equality and justice in a democratic society established upon the highest principles of political science. No, they are facing something much more pressing and important than political ideas or humanistic principles. In the blink of an eye, they have skipped millennia of philosophizing upon the nuances and niceties of the human condition and have hit the hard wall of grim reality and its unyielding fundamentals: To be or not to be? No time for deliberations either. The question is about to be answered in a few thousand feet, down there. Having raised the stakes high, the author delivers his master stroke in the next passage: "It was at this point in the descent, as the term 'crash landing' spread through the plane, with a pronounced vocal stress on the second word, that passengers in first class came scrambling and clawing through the curtains, literally climbing their way into the tourist section in order to avoid being the first to strike the ground. There were those in tourist who believed they ought to be made to go back. This sentiment was expressed not so much in words and actions as in terrible and inarticulate sounds, mainly cattle noises, an urgent and force-fed lowing" (DeLillo 1999: 91).

It is easy to understand why passengers in first class do not want to be the first to strike the ground. When it comes to life and death every second matters. However, the clearly bestial carrying-on of those in tourist class seems incomprehensible. Apparently they believe that those from first class must go back and *be the first to strike the ground*. The author explicitly states their intention. There is no discernible logic in such conduct. We have to give credit to DeLillo's genius in dramatizing the

scene and leaving it to the reader to figure out the underlying logic of this total breakdown of civilization and regress to primal/primitive egotism.

The answer resides in the sacrificial rituals of primitive cultures. The underlying logic of the sacrificial ritual is that for the tribe to live, a sacrificial offering must be made to the gods, whoever they are. The implication being that someone must die and this is not negotiable. This is the default primitive reasoning that the otherwise civilized human beings, the passengers on this unfortunate flight, unconsciously revert to in their fight for survival. Without realizing it, without even putting it into an articulate linguistic form, the civilized human beings become savages making sacrificial offerings of other human beings. This scene is poignant in exposing the flimsy pretenses of the presumably civil society we have crafted for ourselves. Beneath the veneer of mores and manners lurks the ugly visage of bestiality and primitive drives. The drive to live, and if needs be, the drive to kill in order to live. In other words, fear of death is what drives human behavior in its most primal form. In that respect, Cornel Bonca suggests that DeLillo “appears to see language as a massive human strategy to cope with mortality... even from the beginning DeLillo has been fascinated by the kinds of language that elude systems, classification, or semiotic analysis... this fascination with non-denotative, perhaps ‘pre-linguistic’ language has begun to occupy the center of DeLillo’s curiosities as a novelist” (Bonca 1996: 27).

Such a thesis explains the inarticulate cattle-like sounds the passengers make. According to Bonca, DeLillo is clearly interested in language functioning as a psychological strategy to deal with the all-pervading fear of oblivion. This strategy is functional in the rationalization of death as long as death is not an immediate threat. However, when the passengers face the imminent prospect of annihilation, language is no longer a viable option and we observe the breakdown of semiotics and passengers resort to *pre-linguistic*, inarticulate sounds expressing dread too primal and deep for words to convey. After all, they are facing an ontological reality of a qualitatively different order.

In numerous episodes in *White Noise*, DeLillo repeatedly questions the most cherished myths of modern society, exposing their artificiality and contingent nature; laying bare the cracks in much-vaunted assumptions of progress. Confidence and gentility are blown away like puffs of smoke in a hurricane by the disinterested vicissitudes of fate, in this case “a silver, gleaming death machine.” In DeLillo’s novel, humans are mere playthings of the higher powers of progress, not necessarily benevolent, and when they strike, humans cower helplessly, pray or make token offerings to appease the demons let loose by progress in a world providing ever more ingenious ways to die.

DeLillo mercifully spares the lives of the “primitives,” after all, we should not be too harsh on them for wishing their fellow passengers’ death, and provides a master comic relief stroke: “Suddenly the engines restarted. Just like that. Power, stability, control. The passengers, prepared for impact, were slow to adjust to the

new wave of information. New sounds, a different flight path, a sense of being encased in solid tubing and not some polyurethane wrap. The smoking sign went on, an international hand with a cigarette. Stewardesses appeared with scented towelettes for cleaning blood and vomit. People slowly came out of their fetal positions, sat back limply. Four miles of prime-time terror. No one knew what to say. Being alive was a richness of sensation. Dozens of things, hundreds of things. The first officer walked down the aisle, smiling and chatting in an empty pleasant corporate way. His face had the rosy and confident polish that is familiar in handlers of large passenger aircraft. They looked at him and wondered why they had been afraid” (DeLillo 1999: 92).

Sparing the passengers’ lives, however, does not mean that the author spares them his criticism. Throughout the novel, character after character is cast in the role of the proverbial puzzled fool groping their way through the postmodern labyrinth of signs and inscrutable messages. And after “four miles of prime-time terror” they end up wondering why they had been afraid. Surely, they must have misinterpreted something, not realizing that a drop or two of a few miles is par for the course on any flight. And then scented towelettes are distributed, time for a well-deserved cigarette, back to business as normal. No need to dramatize and howl and wish your neighbors’ death. Certainly, the occasion didn’t call for it.

The airplane disaster episode is vintage DeLillo in the hilarious probing of human psychology. We prefer to think that we are civilized beings who have attained mastery over nature, technology and ultimately, ourselves. And yet, it only takes a glimpse of death and we run howling bloody murder, pretenses and conceits flying every which way, clamoring divine intercession for dear life. Helpless infants, the author seems to say. But the purpose is not to humiliate us, but to kindly nudge the readers into accepting the frailty and vulnerability that goes with being human since being aware of one’s vulnerability is the beginning of maturity.

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