White Noise: A film adaptation of the Don DeLillo novel

David Walsh
6 January 2023

Noah Baumbach has written and directed a film version of Don DeLillo's 1985 novel, *White Noise* (now streaming on Netflix). The darkly comic, semi-absurdist novel and film both center on Jack Gladney, a Midwestern college professor, his wife Babette and their numerous children from various marriages, including their own.

The complicated goings-on, including the occurrence of a potentially deadly "airborne toxic event" and the determined pursuit of an experimental drug that supposedly suppresses the fear of death, take place in the 1980s. *White Noise* also acknowledges, and to a certain extent satirizes, the blossoming "postmodern" condition and mood as they manifested themselves in particular on college campuses at the time.

The film is lively, extravagant, and removes Baumbach, at least for a time, from the narrow confines of the not very fruitful or absorbing middle-class introspection (*The Squid and the Whale*, *Greenberg*, *Frances Ha*, *Marriage Story*) within which he previously seemed to be enmeshed.

DeLillo is one of the more important American writers of the past 40 years. His novels from the 1980s and 1990s in particular stand out—*White Noise*, *Libra* (1988), *Mao II* (1991) and *Underworld* (1997). His books in recent decades have been less successful, including *The Falling Man* (2007) and *Zero K* (2016).

DeLillo has shown himself at various points to be a perceptive critic of American society and culture. In different works, he has subjected the political, financial, cultural and academic spheres in the US to scathing treatment, cutting through many of the lies that official America tells about itself.

To his credit, DeLillo once told an interviewer, "Writers must oppose systems. It's important to write against power, corporations, the state, and the whole system of consumption and of debilitating entertainments. … I think writers, by nature, must oppose things, oppose whatever power tries to impose on us."

This general approach earned him a condemnation in 1988 from reactionary scoundrel George F. Will. Such a condemnation is a badge of honor. In a *Washington Post* column, Will denounced *Libra*, a fictional account of the Kennedy assassination, as "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship." Furthermore, he was outraged by DeLillo's "intimation" that "America is a sick society that breeds extremism and conspiracies" and that out of considerations of such events as the Kennedy murder "ideologists of the left weave indictments of America."

Baumbach's film adaptation begins weakly. An unnecessary prologue and a scene dominated by exposition, awkwardly acted by Adam Driver as Jack Gladney and Greta Gerwig as Babette, raise fears about the entire work. Fortunately, the performers and the screenplay improve, effectively capturing the thrust of the novel and attempting to interpret it for our own time.

We learn from the opening sequence that Jack started the "Hitler Studies program" in 1968, 16 years earlier. In fact, the program has brought Gladney stature at the College-on-the-Hill and even national prominence, and possibly the envy of some of his fellow academics. Unhappily, Jack doesn't speak German and an upcoming conference will bring "scholars from all over Germany." He hastily sets about learning the language.

This relativizing of Hitler and Nazism is part of the dreadful degeneration of intellectual life on display at College-on-the-Hill. In the novel, DeLillo describes the teaching staff in Jack's general field as composed of "New York emigres, smart, thuggish, movie-mad, trivia-crazed," dedicated to "an Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles. The department head is Alfonse (Fast Food) Stompanato, a broad-chested glowering man whose collection of prewar soda pop bottles is on permanent display in an alcove." There are "full professors," it turns out, who "read nothing but cereal boxes." This is the explosion of "cultural studies" generally associated with the rise of postmodernism. (In fact, DeLillo hardly exaggerates. In 2006, one Swedish author observed that "Madonna Studies [i.e., of the singer] remains an established field within Cultural Studies.")

Even though Jack has made his name through "Hitler studies," largely an examination of the trivial details about the fascist dictator's life, combined with videos of Nazi rallies and such, he holds himself somewhat aloof from his colleagues. He has questions about the absorption with the minutiae of popular culture.

His friend Murray (Don Cheadle) has no such compunctions. He teaches a course in car crashes, but has his sights set even higher. "I need your help establishing an Elvis Presley power base in the department," he tells Jack. "Elvis is my Hitler. … If you could drop by on my lecture this afternoon, lend a note of consequence to the proceedings. Your prestige, your physical person. It would mean a lot." Jack does so, and the two end up performing an appalling duet devoted to the superficial similarities between the lives of the two figures. ("Hitler adored his mother." "Elvis and Gladys liked to nuzzle and pet.")

A significant portion of *White Noise* is taken up by the consequences of a truck colliding with a train tank car containing thousands of gallons of toxic waste, Nyodene D. At first, Jack does his best to allay his children's fears about the poisonous black cloud. His lack of concern is rooted in part in his social status: "These things happen to people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up, I mean sadly, in such a way that it's the poor and uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. ... Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods?"

Nonetheless, the family is finally forced to flee, enduring hours of bumper-to-bumper traffic en route to an evacuation site, a Boy Scout camp. The confused, rapid-fire backseat conversations among the three older children—Heinrich (Sam Nivola), Denise (Raffey Cassidy) and Steffie (May Nivola)—prompt Jack to conclude that "Family is the cradle of misinformation." Unfortunately, he has to put some gas in his car at one point, exposing him briefly to the "toxic event."

Once at the camp, the exposure prompts this extraordinary exchange between Gladney and an official with an armband that reads "SIMUVAC":

© World Socialist Web Site

-What does SIMUVAC stand for?

-It's short for "simulated evacuation." …

-This evacuation isn't simulated. It's real.

-We know. But we thought we could use that as a model.

-Are you saying you saw the chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?

-We took it right to the streets.

And further, when Jack points out that he was exposed for two and a half minutes, the official expresses concern:

-What does that mean? I mean, am I going to die?

-Not as such.

-What do you mean?

-Not in so many words.

-How many words does it take?

-It's not a question of words, but of years. We'll know more in 15 years. In the meantime, we definitely have a situation. … I wouldn't worry about what I can't see or feel. …

-But you said we have a situation.

-I didn't. The computer did.

-What the computer says is not a simulation, despite that armband you're wearing. It is real.

-It is real.

The combination of public fear and panic, bureaucratic incompetence and heavy-handedness peppered with bland and evasive "public announcements" is clearly meant to have a resonance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Somewhat cynically, the evacuees principally express dissatisfaction about the fact that the event has not been heavily covered by the television news. ("Even if there hasn't been great loss of life, don't we deserve attention for our suffering? … Isn't fear news?")

An obsessive fear of death dominates both Jack and Babette. In fact, Murray suggests that his friend has taken up the figure of Hitler to protect himself from that fear: "Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. … The overwhelming horror would leave no room for your own death."

Throughout the course of the film, Babette's daughter Denise doggedly insists that her mother is taking some sort of pill, although neither she nor Jack can figure out what it is or what its purpose might be. They discover the name of the drug, Dylar. No one has ever heard of it. It turns out to be an experimental "psychopharmaceutical," designed to combat the fixation with the end of life.

Babette has debased herself to gain a supply of the drug, and now fears Jack's reaction: "We all know about men and their insane jealous rage. This is something men are very good at." Jack feverishly attempts to find the source of the drug …

On the whole, Baumbach has made an intelligent and sensitive adaptation. With a father, grandfather and brother all past or present professors, he seems especially attuned to the deplorable state of academic life. In an interview with *Indiewire*, Baumbach indicated that his brother, a Columbia University professor, had told him that "things in academia haven't changed dramatically," not for the better presumably, since the 1980s.

Driver and Gerwig, in the end, give moving performances. Their assorted children are excellently portrayed, all of them resilient, earnest, sharp-eyed, curious.

As for the film's themes—the fear of death is an elementary psychological feeling, as Trotsky once pointed out, "characteristic not only of man but also of animals." Why does it take on such terrible potency in the lives of the Gladneys?

Whether DeLillo or Baumbach have it in mind or not, it would seem that the particularly "pinched, morbid and hysterical fear of death" (Trotsky again) in *White Noise* has something to do with the trivialization of middle-class life, the equalizing of figures like Presley and Hitler and everything that goes with such conceptions, the general lack of important goals and motives. Where the individual senses his or her life has been wasted on secondary or worse matters, or, in the words of Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, understands that "I am quitting this life with the consciousness that I have ruined everything that was given me," death takes on an especially terrifying, irrational character.

The question has been raised about DeLillo's novel, and to a certain extent it also applies to the film, as to whether either or both aim to criticize postmodernism or, on the contrary, accommodate themselves to the reactionary trend.

Undoubtedly, DeLillo is somewhat ambiguous in his treatment—and those unresolved unclarities have damaged his subsequent efforts. He depicts, in the word of commentator Lou F. Caton, "a radically indeterminate world." To a certain extent, this coincides with or can provide comfort to the postmodern assault on objective truth. Critic John Frow argues that the "world of *White Noise* is a world of primary representations which neither precede nor follow the real but are themselves real" and that, for example, "Real moments and TV moments interpenetrate each other."

Caton argues that in *White Noise* "forms of mass-marketing construct how we experience the world" and "We are what advertisements have made us."

However, both novel and film clearly have little confidence, for example, in Murray's open embrace of consumerism and his celebration of corporate marketing as "spiritually" recharging and a "religious experience." Frow comments that Murray "is stating the central, the deadly serious principles of a capitalist society. … The propositions are monstrous, but only because we find it so hard to believe in the true and central awfulness of capitalism."

In any event, the "radically indeterminate" character of reality in DeLillo's novels has different sides to it. In part, it simply expresses an unhealthy skepticism and pessimism. Critics have complained about a palpable "heartlessness" and "coldness" in his work (and that of his contemporary, Thomas Pynchon, to whose fiction *White Noise* at times bears a definite resemblance).

Objective processes must play a role here. From a historical-social viewpoint, at the core of the problem of that missing "warm," "human" element, unbeknownst to the authors themselves, lies in part a harsh fact—the absence in recent decades of a mass, active, visible opposition to "power, corporations, the state."

The instability in DeLillo has a historical and social character too. To a certain extent, he uneasily registers the demise of liberal, middle-class certainties. In *White Noise*, for example, as noted, Jack Gladney reassures himself and his wife that bad things happen in disasters only "to the poor and uneducated," that a college professor never rows "a boat down his own street." But, changing what must be changed, this is precisely what takes place!

Both the book and the film are worth the effort involved.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site