

From Radiation Waves to Data Streams:
Media Environments in DeLillo and Shteyngart

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This project examines representations of media and technology in two contemporary American novels with the goal of elucidating the attributes and significance of the technological contexts in fiction as well as contributing to a broader discussion of its operations on consciousness, society, and the cultural imagination. It deploys the theoretical framework of media scholar Marshall McLuhan in order to foreground the role of media environments in the novels. To invoke McLuhan's work in the case of this study is to pay particular attention to the formal and structural qualities of media, particularly electronic and digital media, and to posit the existence of a causal relationship between the structures of particular media technologies and the structures of thought, perception, and discourse in the society that employs them. The starting point for a McLuhanesque analysis is a consideration of how new technologies introduce social and cultural change by amplifying or privileging certain senses, functions, or cognitive modes over others:

What we are considering here...are the psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure. (20)

McLuhan clarifies his seminal aphorism--“the medium is the message”--as “merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (19). Far from being merely neutral containers or carriers or content, media are profoundly active and influential, not only in terms of shaping the messages and meanings they convey, but of reorganizing society at large.

The two novels under discussion--the canonical *White Noise* by Don DeLillo (1985) and *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), Gary Shteyngart’s most recent novel--provide fruitful ground for discussing the effects of media insofar as their respective technological landscapes act as foils for each other. Broadcast Media--namely television and radio--dominate the media environment of *White Noise*, even as they fade into the periphery in *Super Sad True Love Story* (radio has disappeared altogether at this technological moment), which preoccupies itself with social media, mobile computing, and the rise of Fifth Estate journalism. A conversation between these two works that concentrates on the relationship of media to the novels’ epistemological, social, and phenomenological problems can show how these problems are uniquely constituted according to the particular parameters of the media environment in each. Parallel to the comparative analysis of these works I also include a concert of important nonfictional media narratives: Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (a polemic on broadcast and television culture published the same year as *White Noise*) and two works from the era of digital media: Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together* and Eli Pariser’s *The Filter Bubble*. These three books all operate within the McLuhanesque tradition of describing the effects of a particular technological medium on American culture, albeit according to a particularized, value-based agenda that limits their scope

even as it places them in close affinity to the critiques of media in *White Noise* and *Super Sad True Love Story*.

In addition to the elucidating the interplay of the various media environments and analyzing their contributions to the meaning of the texts, I also write with the secondary goal of introducing *Super Sad True Love Story* into critical conversation. Despite the widespread acclaim and animated conversation surrounding this novel since its publication four years ago, it has yet to gather much attention from literary scholars (a search in two major journal databases produced dozens of reviews but only one scholarly article, and that not from literary studies but from gerontology). While admitting to a certain degree of reduction inherent to the comparison (arising from difficulties of genre: *Super Sad True Love Story*, a dystopian satire committed to the castigation of digital media, doesn't enjoy the same intellectual breadth and scope as *White Noise*), I contend that *Super Sad True Love Story* is as significant and successful as *White Noise* in articulating the exigencies, anxieties, and controversies that attend its technological moment with elegance and poignancy.

I. Media Epistemology: Trivia, Data, and the “Incessant Bombardment of Information”

A central concern of both the novels is the epistemology of media: how media informs, regulates, and determines the process of knowing and patterns of information exchange. An opportunity then arises to compare each novel's respective epistemological paradigm both to ascertain how it is characterized and to observe its effects. Both novels ascribe insidious attributes to media and parody the extent of its operative power on culture and consciousness. The criteria on which these critiques are founded, however, could not be more opposed; thus an analysis of them offers a compelling account of the ideological shift that accompanied the

ascendance of digital media over broadcast media as well as it articulates the relationship between these successive administrations.

White Noise, whose commentary on the epistemological paradigm that attends broadcast media invokes such castigating phrases as “incessant bombardment of information” (65) and “world of hostile facts” (81), is primarily engaged with familiar critiques of “information overload” and the disorientation and impotence that attends it. The environment of the novel is one saturated with information, most notably in the form of soundbites from television and radio that periodically interrupt the narration. These range from the ominous —“The voice upstairs remarked: ‘A California think tank thinks the next world war may be fought over salt’” (215)— to the banal—“Someone turned on the TV set at the end of the hall, and a woman’s voice said: ‘If it breaks easily in pieces, it is called shale. When wet, it smells like clay’” (28-29) The sound bites affirm media’s ubiquitous presence in the environment, establishing it as a permanent, palpable fixture, even when it only occupies the periphery of the action or setting. Delillo’s primary accomplishment with these media representations, apart from the comic value that results from their irrelevance and incongruity with the narration, is that the environments of TV and radio are defamiliarized; they assume a surreal and alien quality. These media messages elicit no acknowledgement or engagement from the narrator or any other characters at the moment of their insertion; yet they permeate the atmosphere, like the noxious molecules of Nyodene D, with unapologetic insistence. If it appears that these projectiles from the media environment fail to inform the character’s dialogue because they are not explicitly engaged, it is only because their actual influence is far more pervasive, if indeed subtle. There exists a remarkable congruence between the content and character of these media messages with that of the Gladney family’s ritual arguments. The content of their debates ranges sporadically over

various historical, cultural, geographical, scientific and pseudoscientific trivia, with Heinrich often assuming the role of the TV game-show host:

“I’ll give anyone in this car five dollars,” Heinrich said through his protective mask, ‘If you can tell me whether more people died building the pyramids in Egypt or building the Great Wall of China--and you have to say how many died in each place, within fifty people” (152)

This mirroring of the patterns of family dialogue to the “dialogue” of the television and radio environments is one of the most apparent instances of media’s operative power over the novel’s “real-world” discourse. The media environment inhabited by the Gladneys both prescribes the parameters of discourse and privileges a particular definition or genre of information: trivia, which might be defined here as not merely connoting the importance of the content (in the sense that light, non-urgent information can be considered “trivial”) but more generally as a form of information that is highly decontextualized. That is, trivia is a name given to facts that are self-justifying, facts-as-facts--totally abstracted out of the real-world exigencies that drive other modes of information exchange. This kind of commodification of information produces the epistemological tension in *White Noise* as the privileging of information-trivia informs not merely the discourse of a particular media program or episode but all mediated discourse in the novel.

“We have to boil our water,” Steffie said.

“Why?”

“It says on the radio.”

“They’re always saying boil your water,” Babette said. “It’s the new thing, like turn your wheel in the direction of the skid.” (34)

To regard information as a “thing,”--an indifferent materialized item--renders unverifiable, irresolvably suspect (“things” cannot be true or false), and consequently inactionable. When Heinrich supplies a fresh catalogue of their environmental toxins, Jack responds by emphasizing the information’s self-contained, material aspect--subject, as is any commodity, to market dynamics in its manufacture and distribution:

I wanted to tell him that the statistical evidence of the kind he was quoting for was by nature inconclusive and misleading. I wanted to say that he would learn to regard all such catastrophic findings with equanimity as he matured, grew out of his confining literalism, developed a spirit of informed and skeptical inquiry, advanced in wisdom and rounded judgment, got old, declined, died.

But I only said, “Terrifying data is now an industry in itself. Different firms compete to see how badly they can scare us.”

“I’ve got news for you,” he said. “The brain of a white rat releases calcium ions when it’s exposed to radio-frequency waves. Does anyone at this table know what that means?” (168)

The only rational response to this kind of information, for Jack, is to disengage it, to resist its import on reality and disregard its claim on the self. The pattern of television content prescribes exactly that. In a comical shift reminiscent of the abrupt transitions on a television newscast, this conversation portending an ominous and inescapable threat quickly turns to an incoherent trivia contest. “What about your logarithms? What about the causes of economic discontent leading up to the Great Crash? Here’s one. Who won the Lincoln-Douglas debates? Careful. It’s not as obvious as it seems” (168).

The disconnect between information and its ostensible utility results in Postman's attribution of postmodern impotence as the work of broadcast media. In the wake of the airborne toxic event, Heinrich wryly captures the absurdity of this information paradigm in which, despite an abundance of information, genuine and useful knowledge is elusive. Imagining that a modern "advanced" person from the information age traveled in time to meet humans from the stone age, he asks

"Here it is practically the twenty-first century and you've read hundreds of books and magazines and seen a hundred TV shows about science and medicine. Could you tell those people one little crucial thing that might save a million and a half lives?"

"Boil your water,' I'd tell them."

"Sure. What about 'Wash behind your ears.' That's about as good."

"I still think we're doing fairly well. There was no warning. We have food, we have radios."

"What is a radio? What is the principle of a radio? Go ahead, explain. You're sitting in the middle of a circle of people. They use pebble tools. They eat grubs. Explain a radio."

"There's no mystery. Powerful transmitters send signals. They travel through the air, to be picked up by receivers."

"They travel through the air. What, like birds? Why not tell them magic? They travel through the air in magic waves. What is a nucleotide? You don't know, do you? Yet these are the building blocks of life. 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." (143, emphasis mine)

Heinrich's critique imports the ironic situation of modern advancement and knowledge: knowledge, in a variety of media formats has never been more abundant, and yet never more remote. His use of the word "floats" not only suggests that knowledge is unattainable but also calls to mind Gladney's use of the same word a short while earlier to describe the panicked gossip of the shelter, where "true, false, and other kinds of news radiated through the dormitory from these dense clusters...Remarks existed in a state of permanent flotation." (125) Here we see how the epistemological paradigm of media corresponds precisely to the "real-world" discourses in the novel. The result is the production of a strange, new kind of knowledge—a disembodied, hovering knowledge that can neither be verified or gainfully employed. The essential critique of mediated information in the novel is, then, that media has problematically distorted, and ultimately reduced, the character of information so that trivia becomes the dominant epistemological metaphor

A compelling account of the relationship between media and the ascendance of an epistemological paradigm that privileges trivia is supplied by Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. This critique of television culture, published in the same year as *White Noise*, supplies a valuable, if polemical, materialization of McLuhan's ideas that is specific to that cultural moment. This materialization corresponds remarkably with the portrayal of media in *White Noise* and elucidates the relationship between patterns of information exchange that attend broadcast media to the problems of knowledge and belief addressed in the novel. Postman, in concert with DeLillo, narrativizes the reconstitution of the forms of knowledge according to television's particular epistemological demands.

Postman's critique of television epistemology offers a historical narrative of the electrification of information exchange, attributing the origin of the noxious features that attend

television discourse to the essential fact of electrification, beginning with the telegraph. According to Postman's narrative of the progression from an idealized Typographic America to the world of television, the telegraph was responsible for introducing a new definition of information that dramatically compromised its value and integrity. To enable the transmission of information at the speed of an electric impulse is to eliminate the contextual attributes and exigencies that necessarily attended an information exchange that was constrained by physical space. In effect "the telegraph made information into a commodity, a "thing" that could be bought or sold irrespective of its uses or meaning." (65) Telegraphy was an upset of the "information-action ratio" (68), the extent to which knowledge was an aid to understanding and navigating reality. It "made relevance irrelevant. The abundant flow of information had very little or nothing to do with those to whom it was addressed; that is, with any social or intellectual context in which their lives were embedded" (67). Since this new paradigm proliferated contextless information, "pseudo-contexts" had to be created. The emergence of the crossword puzzle, "Trivial Pursuit" and the television game show, are, Postman argues, just such examples of pseudo-contexts (76). The narrative proceeds according to a logic of progressive accumulation: that, as the telegraph was succeeded by radio and finally television, the trend of privileging context-less information or trivia accelerates with each new increase in the speed of information travel and each new medium. Climactically, "[t]elevision gave the epistemological biases of the telegraph and the photograph their most potent expression, raising the interplay of image and instancy to an exquisite and dangerous perfection" (78).

The intersection of Postman's work with a contemporary media polemic, Eli Pariser's *The Filter Bubble*, provides a pivot with which to contrast the respective epistemologies of broadcast with those of digital media, as well as their representation in the two novels. *The Filter*

Bubble's discussion of social media and the epistemology of the search engine is analogous to Postman's project of uncovering and criticizing hidden epistemological structures and biases within television media. His book is a narrative about how the trend on the web towards personalization and search engine optimization corrupted an idealized conception of the internet as an open, neutral medium oriented to the free exchange of ideas and democratic discourse.

The basic code at the heart of the new Internet is pretty simple. The new generation of Internet filters looks at the things you seem to like---the actual things you've done, or the things people like you like--and tries to extrapolate. They are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you'll do and want next. Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us-- what I've come to call a filter bubble--which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information. (Pariser 9)

Algorithms that determine the content a user encounters, from the Facebook newsfeed to a simple web search, draw from an array of data about the user, constructing a profile of the user's interests that it tries to match with content most likely to be relevant to them. *Relevance* is an organizing concept for *The Filter Bubble* and central to its account of the Internet's new ideological bias. In his talks, Pariser is fond of quoting Google CEO Eric Schmidt's prediction that "The technology will be so good, it will be very hard for people to watch or consume something that has not in some sense been tailored for them" (47) as well as Mark Zuckerberg's somewhat alarming claim that "A squirrel dying in the front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa" (1) to demonstrate the centrality of personalization in structuring the ideology of the web. His treatment of the theme acts as a foil to

Postman's interpretation of an electronic broadcast media epistemology, one that is essentially characterized by "irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence" (65).

When Postman writes that the acceleration of information exchange to electric speeds introduced "For the first time... information which answered no question we had asked, and which, in any case, did not permit the right of reply" (69), it becomes clear that the patterns of information exchange that attend the computer and the Internet redeem electronic media on both those counts. The significance of Pariser's conception of personalized internet becomes apparent relative to what Postman considers broadcast media's point of departure from print media. "The principal strength of the telegraph," writes Postman, at the start of his history of broadcast media "was to move information, not collect it, explain it or analyze it. In this respect, telegraphy was the exact opposite of typography" (69). In this respect, telegraphy (and by Postman's extension, television) is also the exact opposite of digital media, which grows ever more "intelligent" in its attempts to collect, explain, and analyze information according to the logic of individual interest and demand. But for Pariser, this is precisely what makes digital media so insidious, as not only does personalization portend a kind of epistemological solipsism in which nobody is ever exposed to viewpoints or ideas that conflict with their pre-established identity, but it subtracts from the degree of agency individuals have in shaping that identity:

Ultimately, the filter bubble can affect your ability to choose how you want to live. To be the author of your life, Professor Yochai Benkler argues, you have to be aware of a diverse array of opinions and lifestyles. When you enter a filter bubble, you're letting the companies that construct it choose which options you're aware of. You may think you're the captain of your own destiny, but personalization can lead you down a road to a kind of informational determinism in which what you've clicked on in the past determines

what you see next--a Web history you're doomed to repeat. You can get stuck in a static, ever-narrowing version of yourself--an endless you-loop. (16)

Digital media, as though seeking to correct the very alienating deficiencies of broadcast that produce the impotence and ennui in *White Noise*, privilege individuality, make media more "personal," does so at the expense of agency and self-determination. Ironically, Shteyngart's novel explores the paradox by which this very epistemological paradigm that privileges the individual ultimately effaces individuality.

Super Sad True Love Story's technological environment of social media and mobile-computing-gone-wild presents a radically different epistemological paradigm from *White Noise*. The cacophonous oppression of noise has all but subsided; data, specifically personal data and personal query, has replaced the electronic vaudeville of broadcast trivia. However, the novel's representation of a culture obsessed with data-sharing and rankings signifies a reduction and distortion of the role of information, accomplished by media, at a scale as large as the culture of *White Noise*. Digital media facilitates, and by a sinister extension, mandates, the mediated manufacture and distribution of personal data, the relentless participation of an individual's digital profile within a monolithic global social network. The scenario is one of a triumphant, aggrandized social media scene, diffused so inextricably into the lives and minds of users via their ubiquitous digital companions, called *äppäräti*, that it has completely reconstituted social behavior according to the parameters of cyberspace and all-but erased the line between the digital and the "real" environments. Ostensibly, the premise on which these digital devices market themselves is a far more benign and serviceable appeal in contrast to the remote and authoritative broadcast devices. Data streams facilitate infinitely more selectivity and gratification of individual interests than the limited body of content provided by broadcast. The

streams are ubiquitous and always operative in real time; they accompany the user everywhere and accommodate themselves to his viewing preference. Furthermore, their domain encompasses a seemingly infinite range of uses beyond mere content delivery, informing the user's social life, work life. Most significantly, digital media is participatory: it solicits the user to not only direct and curate his information intake but to create and broadcast his own content himself. The narrator, Lenny Abramov, who is at the start of the story somewhat behind of the technological zeitgeist because of his age, quickly comes to appreciate this aspect of the digital companion's appeal: "I'm learning to worship my new äppärät's screen, the colorful pulsating mosaic of it, the fact that it knows every last stinking detail about the world, whereas my books only know the minds of their authors" (78). Indeed, utility is at the center of digital media content: corporate media and broadcast advertising have been totally subsumed by individuals from the Fifth Estate.

This benevolent promise of digital media is unsurprisingly less romantic than it imagines itself to be, and it induces dysfunctional effects even more disconcerting than the epistemological dilemmas faced by the Gladneys. The total usurpation and reconfiguration of social life by social media necessarily entails that all personal information be made public, signifying the death of privacy. The extent of this transparency assumes a sinister quality, eliciting revulsion from the reader to the vulgar pattern of oversharing, and the flip side of digital stalking. A perfunctory investigation into the data-sphere of Lenny's newly met love interest, Eunice Park, yields bountiful filial details even our present digital culture would likely find too intimate for the web, despite the fact that Eunice "was a shy girl by comparison with others of her generation, so her digital footprint wasn't big" (37). Even more portentous, data have so permeated the physical environment in the form of holograms projecting from the omnipresent äppäräti that it even reconstitutes social interactions that were previously exclusive to the domains of physical space

and real time. In the scene at a local bar full of young singles competing for status and sexual attention, the novel introduces the extent to which data regulates their behavior.

“It’s F-A-C,” Vishnu explained. “ I said, ‘Let’s FAC.’”

“What does that mean?”

“He sounds like my granny in Aventura!” Noah was bellowing. “ ‘FAC? What’s that? Who am I? Where’s my diaper?’”

“It means ‘Form a Community,’” Vishnu said. “It’s, like, a way to judge people. And let them judge you.” (88)

The FAC function draws from personal physiological and biographical data to score individuals’ attraction for each other according to criteria that is cringe-worthily frank, which can then be compared to determine compatibility. For the aging, fashion-challenged Lenny, the results are unflattering:

I touched my heart with the back of my äppärät, trying to fill it with my warmth, my natural desire for love.

The girl across the bar laughed immediately without even turning my way. A bunch of figures appeared on my screen. “FUCKABILITY: 780/800, PERSONALITY 800/800, ANAL/ORAL/VAGINAL PREFERENCE 1/3/2.

“Fuckability 780!” Noah said. “Personality 800. Leeetl Lenny Abramov’s got himself a beeeeeeg crush.”

“But I don’t even know her personality,” I said. “And how does it know my anal preferences?”

“The personality score depends on how ‘extro’ she is,” Vishnu explained. “Check it out. This girl done got three thousand-plus Images, eight hundred streams, and a long

multimedia thing on how her father abused her. Your äppärät runs that against the stuff you've downloaded about yourself and then it comes up with a score. Like, you've dated a lot of abused girls, so it knows you're into that shit. Here, let me see your profile." (89-90)

Here the myth of the friendly, helpful, and self-affirming digital assistant evaporates. The data-driven, hypercompetitive realm of social media is shown to contribute to a loss of agency. The possibility of self-representation, of constructing an identity based on the interaction between one's own self-awareness, values, and aspirations is nullified by an ominous data set that not only "knows" one's preference and value but also arbitrates the very criteria on which one is to be measured.

Ultimately, the pressure of social media to constantly broadcast the most intimate details of one's life becomes a force for socio-cultural hypernormativity, as the awareness of an ever-present audience to one's interior life operates against the individuality the platform ostensibly claims to curate

II. Media Narratives and Negotiating the One among the Many

The media paradigm in *White Noise* of disembodied knowledge and overabundant trivia produced other interesting effects besides the impotence and incoherence emphasized by Postman. Gladney, the most passive figure in his family's ritual trivia debates, is struck by two features of these arguments: (1) his wife and children's comic and innocent tendency to distort the information over which they argue as well as (2) his inability either to definitively discern or correct those distortions. He posits:

The family is the cradle of the world's misinformation. There must be something in family life that generates factual error. Overcloseness, the noise and heat of being.

Perhaps something even deeper, like the need to survive. Murray says we are fragile creatures surrounded by a world of hostile facts. Facts threaten our happiness and security. The deeper we delve into the nature of things, the looser our structure seems to become. The family process works towards sealing off the world. (81-82)

The implication here is that the manufacture of factual error is a kind of defense mechanism within a world intrinsically hostile to the individual and the self. The epistemological paradigm I outlined in the first section, one of superabundant, disconnected, irrelevant information assumes a malevolent aspect relative to the individual. A broadcast media paradigm economically driven by ratings is inherently disposed to cater to the crowd, not the unique individual. By engaging the television medium, the individual accepts the definition of self the medium imposes on him. He becomes a viewer, becomes part of an audience. He is defined in terms of the collective, as Jack's ever-theorizing colleague Murray explains:

This is the society of kids. I tell my students they're already too old to figure importantly in the in making of society. Minute by minute they're beginning to diverge from each other. "Even as we sit here," I tell them, "you are spinning out from the core, becoming less recognizable as a group, less targetable by advertisers and mass producers of culture. Kids are a true universal. (50)

According to Murray, the path to adulthood, in so far as it entails the path to individuality and the construction of a unique identity, is antithetical to the demands of broadcast media. Television is a centrifugal force, demanding that its adult audience "learn to look as children again" or else "experience the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity" (50). This tendency of broadcast media to discount or resist individuality and the integral self is central to the novel's critical commentary of the media environment, particularly

as it shows media to be absurd, alienating, or even dangerous. The implications of this theory frighten Jack, though, as he ponders “Would I promote ignorance, prejudice, and superstition to protect my family from the world?” (95).

In *White Noise*, we are presented with a dichotomous scenario in which the individual narrative and the media environment occupy mutually exclusive spaces. The situation is charged with resistance and conflict between the two domains, as the ever-increasing alienation that television induces upon the unique individual pressurizes him to carve out a space for himself in the public domain, at whatever cost. This is why Heinrich’s chess correspondent, the mass murder Tommy Roy Foster says he heard “insistent, pressuring voices” on television, “telling him to go down in history.” The alienating medium of television, the instrument of the collective that makes no recognition of individuality and the self- prompts the individual to take extreme measures in order to validate his individual narrative. It need not be as violent or drastic as Tommy Roy Foster’s route, who, for all his trouble, “won’t go down in history.” Gladney, whose habit was “after an evening in front of the TV set, to read deeply into Hitler late into the night” (16) seems to find in specialist knowledge a form of protection against the hostility of the broadcast media environment. Developing systematic, secure knowledge systems is a mechanism for protection, an enclave in which to hide your fragile self. “The world is a more complicated place for adults than it is for children,” explains Babette, the expert on eating and drinking and posture. “We didn’t grow up with all these shifting facts and attitudes. One day they just started appearing.” The absurd situation created by broadcast media is one in which genuine knowledge has become so unstable that anything that can be developed beyond the random and trivial becomes a place of refuge. This same retreat into specialist knowledge as a kind of refuge from trauma and death manifests itself in the testimony of Gladney’s German tutor, who explains how

in his inconsolability following his mother's death, he discovered in the study of weather "a sense of peace and security I'd never experienced," and goes on to describe his audiences' "hunger" and "compelling need" for specialized knowledge. Specialist information supplies the surprising utility of shelter and nurture of the self against the noise of media, the subject matter itself being absolutely arbitrary and ostensibly unrelated to the individual's real trauma: weather or Hitler. The individual makes something useful out of it, uses his expertise to "grow in significance and strength" (274) in response to the threat of self-effacement in his environment.

The technological paradigm of *Super Sad True Love Story*, by contrast, is not one that exists apart from or in opposition to the individual narrative, but one that engulfs, celebrates, and aggrandizes the narrative construction of the self as the supreme form of expression and as its chief content. A medium predicated on participation, attentiveness to the individual, and self-broadcasting is inherently disposed to the narrative voice and the tendency to view one's individual reality as a grand story. The central conceit of the story, that of a physical diary not intended for publication by the Luddite, "last book reader in America" Lenny Abramov, posits itself in opposition to digital culture in a familiar "war media against the books" fashion. But the novel's other protagonist, Eunice Park, is also narrating her life in the form of her letters and texts over the novel's Facebook equivalent, GlobalTeens, and as the novel develops, particularly as she continues to narrativize her life and her choices on GlobalTeens even when the servers are all down in America's high crisis, it becomes clear that she is as much of a diarist as Lenny, that digital technology is, as much as the print diary, the ally of the narrative voice and the construction and reconstruction of the self in narrative form. Of course, the video-bloggers who constitute what passes for journalism in the digital era, are also intensely preoccupied with the story of themselves, to the extent that their ostensible function as journalists, hilariously and

appallingly, is clearly of secondary importance to their relentless need to chronicle the details of their vapid lives for a mass audience. Gone is the indifferent and alienating content of the television environment in *White Noise*. Digital media wants to know about the individual: his or her interests, lives, and concerns. That is virtually all the content that remains.

This coup of the media airwaves and the dismantling of traditional journalism by the vapid, self-absorbed digital entrepreneurs from the Fifth Estate is heavily satirized by Shteyngart through the characters of Lenny's media friends, Noah and Amy. These constantly-streaming emcee's of the digital era are analogous to the TV hosts of the past generation, as implied by the names of their live video blogs "The Noah Weinberg Show!" and "The Amy Greenberg Muffintop Hour," which makes their incessant self-aggrandizement, at the expense of their journalistic functions, all the more alarming. Amy Greenberg's livecast of the riots in Central Park invites Shteyngart's most biting satire:

"Eighteen people dead!" Amy Greenberg was shouting... "Huge riot in Central Park, National Guard just shooting everyone, smashing up their little shacks, and I am so glad my man Noah Weinberg is right over my shoulder, because I *just cannot handle this anymore*. I mean, hello, stop me before I snack again. Noah, I am so blessed to have you in my life at this terrible moment, and I know I'm not perfect, but, okay, and this is a total cliché alert, but you mean the world to me, because you are so kind and sensitive and man-hot, you are so Media, and" —her voice started to shake, she started to blink voluntarily in a way that always hastened the tears—"I don't know how you can go out with a fat loser like me." (160)

The subsequent rant about her ex-boyfriend and obsession with her weight dispenses altogether with any pretense of journalism or civic concern for events beyond her own life. The solipsism

that characterizes digital media, however, is not limited to these pretentious Media-types. Even the thoughtful, literate Lenny suspects he is guilty of profound egotism that defines his engagement with the event:

What if Noah was secretly pleased that all this was happening? What if we all were?

What if the violence was actually channeling our collective fear into a kind of momentary clarity, the clarity of being alive during conclusive times, the joy of being historically important by association? I could already envision myself excitedly proclaiming the news of how I had seen this dead Aziz bus driver in Central Park, had maybe even exchanged a smile with him or an urban whassup. (159)

Lenny here suspects that his engagement with this external mediated reality is limited to the extent to which it supplements his personal life narrative. In the negotiations between the internal world of the self and the mediated reality, the characters of *Super Sad True Love Story* are marked by their inability to engage the exterior world except as it bears immediately on themselves or complements their personal narrative. This provides a remarkable contrast with DeLillo's figures, who experience psychic distress as a result of their inability to identify a meaningful relationship between the content of broadcast media and their own real lives. Despite the grave import of the violence in Central Park, Lenny and his friends lose interest in a few short moments and return to their preoccupations with digital rankings and data. Even when the violent crisis ceases to be a mere media event and begins to seriously threaten their lives, still "the Media people [were] streaming in motion, Amy giving off a précis of her wardrobe and recent frustrations with Noah" (244).

An early passage in *White Noise* detailing the nighttime exchanges of Jack and Babette attends to the role of narrative in identity construction as well as documents the indifference of

the broadcast media environment to narrative and individuality. Tellingly, as Jack and Babette are in their intimate zone of erotic reading and confessional narrative, the TV hovers at the periphery, supplying indifferent, media factoids. “The TV said: “Until Florida surgeons attached an artificial flipper” (29). These confessional narratives, Jack says “create a space between things as we felt them at the time and as we speak them now. This is the space reserved for irony, sympathy, and fond amusement, the means by which we rescue ourselves from the past” (30). Even as the retelling of the past affirms and renews the self, it allows the narrator the agency to reconstruct the past in terms that agree with his present self. However, this space exists in opposition to demands of broadcast space, which is why the presence of the television in this scene is so incongruous. Among the audience of a broadcast medium, there are no selves--only viewers—defined by the content the medium supplies. The space created by Jack and Babette for narrative, for the cathartic retelling and re-fashioning of the self is an intimate social space from which the media environment is excluded. It’s a sacred domain on which the television, as an instrument of the collective and in consequence of its insistence to define the viewer in passive, receptive terms can have no jurisdiction.

By contrast, the digital environment of *Super Sad True Love Story* has totally subsumed this narrative space, even its most intimate night-time exchanges, and reconstituted it as a platform for self-aggrandizement./ The narrative self is the supreme content of social media, to the extent that one’s sociability is predicated entirely on how completely and openly he documents the events in his life and narrates them for his digital audience. Upon coming home from Italy, Lenny learns he must quickly acclimate himself to this new social reality:

I’ve spent the week hanging out around the Eternity Lounge, fiddling with my pebbly new äppärät 7.5 with RateMe plus technology, which I now proudly wear pendant-style

around my neck, getting endless updates on our country's battle with solvency from CrisisNet while downloading all my fears and hopes in front of my young nemeses in the Eternity Lounge, talking about how my parents' love for me ran too hot or too cold, and how I *want* and *need* Eunice Park even though she's so much prettier than I deserve— basically, trying to show these open-source younguns just how much data an old “intro” geezer like me is willing to share. (78)

This digitization of the narrative life is shown by Shteyngart to be utterly divisive and solipsistic. To the extreme extent that digital technology aggrandizes the self and emphasizes the individual narrative, communion and connectivity between individuals fragmented by the bold parameters of their narrative space is rendered impossible. The narrative filter bubble fractures shared spaces, a point that is consistently emphasized by virtue of the novel's structure in which each protagonist's version of events continually undermines the other's. Furthermore, the individual's preoccupation with his or her digital devices accomplishes the disintegration of shared physical space, inducing profound loneliness and isolation:

Lenny is sensitive to this fragmentation, asking of the children he sees in the street “How long would it be before these kids retreated into the “dense clickety-clack äppärät world of their absorbed mothers and missing fathers?” (53) He describes the scene in the bar as follows:

...hot women in their early twenties looking to supplement their electronic lives...My boys fit the bill exactly. There they were, crowded around a table, their äppäräti out, speaking into their shirt collars while thumbing Content into their pearly devices, two curly, dusky heads completely lost to the world around them... (83)

The sense of affection and comradeship Lenny describes in the initial moments of their reunion is quickly frustrated by the isolating demands of digital space:

I began my debriefing, trying to entertain my boys with stories of my funny, dirty, crosscultural romance....But the truth was, they didn't care. The world they needed was right around them, flickering and beeping, and it demanded every bit of strength and attention they could spare. Noah, the one-time novelist, could probably think of Rome in nonimmediate terms, could conjure up Seneca and Virgil, The Marble Faun and Daisy Miller. But even he seemed unimpressed, glancing impatiently at his äppärät, which was alive with at least seven degrees of information, numbers and letters and Images stack on the screen, flowing and eddying against one another as the waters of the Tiber once did.

(83)

Later, at a social gathering where Eunice is withdrawn from conversation in order to shop online, Lenny comments "There wasn't anything particularly antisocial about this--the boys were watching Chinese Central Banker Wangsheng Li's visit to Washington on their own äppäräti, and Noah's girl, Amy, was setting up hand lotions and other sponsored products for a live stream of the 'Amy Greenberg Muffintop Hour.'" (154) Here we see how totally fragmenting are the demands of digital space. Social interaction and etiquette gets totally reconstituted by these digital devices that above all emphasize the individual self.

MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle has commented on how mobile digital devices and the environments they produce have annihilated communal public spaces, have introduced an analytical and calculating quality to relationships, and have, in consequence, produced an epidemic of isolation, social fragmentation, and loneliness. This critique of digital media is reproduced in *Super Sad True Love Story*. Inversely, it comments on the environment of *White*

Noise as well. I hypothesize that the alienation and hostility of television and radio captured by *White Noise* in the medium's denial of individuality and the self and the insistence to define viewers as a passive audience produced the psychic impulse on which digital technology makes its appeal. Digital technologies attend to and aggrandize the self, and produce new problems of isolation and an ironic lack of connectivity to replace the problems of ennui and unhappiness in a broadcast environment. The contradictions of digital and physical spaces are explored again and again in *Super Sad True Love Story*, such as when Lenny contents himself that although Eunice, ever shopping and teening on her *äppärät* in the living room, is "fully ensconced within her digital reality" she nonetheless, he contents himself to know, is "within the walls of my apartment" (186). The sense of loss is palpable, relative to the unmediated narrative exchanges of Jack and Babette; for instance when Eunice describes the quality and depth of a relationship by saying "I miss Ben a lot. There was something so compatible about me and him. Like we didn't have to say much to each other, we could just lie there in bed for hours, doing whatever on our *äppäräti*, with the lights turned off." (113)

III. Media, Technology, and Death: "The Terrible Secret of Our Decaying Bodies"

The problem of death, a central concern of both novels, might initially seem less intrinsically bound to the environmental pressures specific to each technological environment than the other problems I have addressed. Indeed, the existential fears and anxieties about death that preoccupy both of the narrators--how a life that ends in death could possibly be meaningful, how to cope with paralyzing fear of oblivion, how the indifferent totality of death renders individual narratives absurd--certainly make claims to universality and timelessness. Perhaps the most persuasive evidence, then, of the operative role of media and technology in the novels comes from the fact that the existential problem of death, while fundamental to the human

condition, is nonetheless uniquely constituted by the particular dynamics of each technological paradigm. An analysis of these distinct constitutions reveals an undeniable relationship between the figurations of death in the minds of the narrators and the ideologies, biases, and metaphors that attend the novel's technological moment. Such an analysis not only elucidates the cultural and cognitive implications of technological metaphor in the novels themselves, but also the broader technological discourse in which the novels participate.

““You could put your faith in technology,” Murray offers to Jack, as a suggestion for what to do about his debilitating fear of death. “It got you here, it can get you out. This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. Technology is lust removed from nature’” (272). In keeping with the novel's ambivalent and skeptical relationship with technology so far, its representation here is a humorous contradiction of hope and damnation. Technology, which wrought such catastrophes as the airborne toxic event as well as the miraculous microbes that dismantled the same threat, is a tangle of absurd contradictions. It is inevitably poised to operate against itself as each advance creates new threats to which another advance responds. Ultimately its character remains suspect; Jack engages his doctor and his treatments with the same apprehension and mistrust that has characterized his relationship with media technology in particular.

Meanwhile, the protagonist of *Super Sad True Love Story* is representative of the techno-enthusiasm that Murray offers as a way to conquer the fear of death, as is evident from his opening diary entry:

And yet Lenny Abramov, your humble diarist, your small nonentity, will live forever.

The technology is almost here. As the Life Lovers Outreach Coordinator (Grade G) of the Post-Human Services division of the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation, I will be the first

to partake of it. I just have to be good and I have to believe in myself. I just have to stay off the trans fats and the hooch. I just have to drink plenty of green tea and alkalized water and submit my genome to the right people. I will need to re-grow my melting liver, replace the entire circulatory system with “smart blood,” and find someplace safe and warm (but not too warm) to while away the angry seasons and the holocausts. And when the earth expires, as it surely must, I will leave it for a new earth, greener still but with fewer allergens; and in the flowering of my own intelligence some 10^{32} years hence, when our universe decides to fold in on itself, my personality will jump through a black hole and surf into a dimension of unthinkable wonders, where the things that sustained me on Earth 1.0--tortelli lucchesi, pistachio ice cream, the early works of the Velvet Underground, smooth, tanned skin pulled over the soft Baroque architecture of a twentysomething buttocks--will seem as laughable and infantile as building blocks, baby formula, a game of “Simon says *do this*.” (5-6)

A brief consideration of Shteyngart’s sources is necessary to appreciate the import of Lenny’s techno-utopian vision. This science-fictional vision of digital technology and its role in ushering in immortality and a new kind of consciousness draws its inspiration from Shteyngart’s reading of Ray Kurzweil, the inventor and futurist famous for his conception of the technological “Singularity.” Kurzweil’s work is a giddy and enthusiastic extrapolation from current technological rates and trends to predict the time of this climactic moment. The Singularity encapsulates—among other things—artificial intelligence, a transcendental union of mind and machine, and the end of death. Among the tenets of Kurzweil’s pseudo-scientific predictions is that digital technology inevitably portends immortality, either as humans upgrade their biological

bodies with nanotechnology or as they discover a way to upload their personalities, memories, and consciousnesses onto a digital platform.

Kurzweil's narrative of the Singularity and the advancement of digital technology draws upon and simultaneously inculcates in popular culture a conception of the individual mind and person that is positively Cartesian. That is, the workings of consciousness and personhood are as if they were software that "run" on a mechanical brain; consequently, they are divisible from their material dimension. It presumes that the self can be reduced to a totality of an individual's history--one's memories, ideas, and information--in short, the sum of one's "data." As the vocabulary here betrays, it is a conception of the self that proceeds from a technological-media-metaphor: the mind as computer. Once that analogy is established and accepted as literal, Kurzweil's claims about immortality and the future proceed quite inevitably. Computer technology insists on continual upgrades and advances at an exponential pace. So too, then, the human body and brain is an outdated Pleistocene technology in need of an upgrade. It will be seen, especially in the representation of digital technology and immortality in *Super Sad True Love Story* that this mind-as-computer metaphor bears an implicit binary opposition between the biological and the digital. As articulated in the previous quote, the platonic, clean, and spiritual vision of a digital consciousness inevitably makes a negative comment on the mundane materiality of biological life. Cue biological adolescence to digital maturity metaphor; cue progressive narrative of technological advancement; cue reflexive revulsion for the organic and grotesque features of biological life.

The most pronounced way that this binary manifests in the novel is in implicit opposition between the sleek, shiny, and sterile aesthetic of digital interfaces, *äppärätti*, and holograms serve as a foil to the more unsavory features of biology and material life forms--death being chief

among those features. The narrator betrays a constant fixation on the body's banal indecencies and seems inexplicably determined to frankly and constantly describe them. The relationship between these coarse features and the digital aesthetic and ideology, entangled as it is with intimations of wealth, the superiority of youth, immortality, and power, is undeniable.

Shteyngart establishes the binary of the sleek digital aesthetic over and opposed to the grotesque physical body early in the novel through the introduction of Eunice and the comparison she invites to Lenny's former lover Fabrizia. The register and word choice in his description of both of these characters betrays the extent to which this comparison is informed by digital media-metaphors:

Fabrizia. The softest woman I had ever touched. But maybe I no longer needed softness.

Fabrizia. Her body conquered by small armies of hair, her curves fixed by carbohydrates, nothing but the Old World and its dying *nonelectronic* corporeality. And in front of me, Eunice Park. A *nano-sized* woman who had likely never known the tickle of her own pubic hair, who lacked both breath and scent, who *existed as easily on an äppärät screen as on the street before me*. (21 emphasis mine)

For Lenny, whose relative age renders him slightly out of touch with the latest media trends and consequently vulnerable to obsolescence, a relationship with this nano-sized woman signals not just the possibility of love but the hope for immortality. She is youthful, she conceals any evidence of biological deficiencies, and she has all but transcended the material world via her constant fixation on her äppärät screen--it is as though her presence in her digital environment precedes everything else. And Lenny is not the only one for whom Eunice symbolizes the hope of eternal youth. Lenny introduces Eunice to Joshie as "the poster child for eternity" (127), and Joshie entirely agrees. Eunice is tragically figured as the object of desire of these two men, who

have commodified her into talisman against the threat of aging and death and subsumed their fears through identification with her digital youth, compete for her possession. Because if Eunice's digital affinity renders her an object of hope, security, and immortality, the converse, that to be estranged from the digital portends death, danger, and marginalization, also holds--as indicated by the scene with the Impossible to Preserve man on the plane:

They all had some money on them, if not the twenty million northern euros in investable income that I'm looking for, but there was this one guy who registered *nothing*. I mean he wasn't there. He didn't have an äppärät, or it wasn't set on "social" mode, or maybe he had paid some young Russian kid to have the outbound transmission blocked. And he looked like a nothing. The way people don't really look anymore. Not just imperfect, but awful. A fat man with deeply recessed eyes, a collapsed chin, limp and dusty hair, a T-shirt that all but exposed his large breasts, and a gross tent of air atop where one imagined his genital would be. No one would look at him except me (and then only for a minute), because he was at the margins of society, because he was without rank, because he was ITP or Impossible to Preserve, because he had no business being mixed up with real HNWI's in a first-class lounge (34-5)

The subsequent humiliation and arrest of this androgynous, grotesque, non-digital passenger solidifies the novel's dystopian aspect and introduces the novel's social complication to Kurzweil's futurism.

One of the major projects of *Super Sad True Love Story* is to materialize Kurzweil's vision of the future into the socio-cultural realities of an economically troubled America with an obscenely disparate income distribution. Shteyngart explores what the science (and business) of living forever will look like in this context. The possibility of living forever is only available to

the very rich in a society. Furthermore, the potential to live forever is less total, it requires continual “treatments” and obsessive attention to the details of nutrition and physiological maintenance. Biology is slow and problematic. What’s interesting here is the way this new technological metaphor reconstitutes these epistemological issues and the relation of the protagonist to the problem of death, relative to its representation in *White Noise*. The technological import in question is not only the possibilities of life extension but also the much more subtle messages it inserts into the minds of the characters. Yes, death is absurd; it renders meaningful existence impossible; it induces an inescapable terror. But mostly, death is gross. Death is indecent. Death is for poor people.

Returning to Lenny’s introductory monologue, where he outlines Kurzweil’s technoutopian vision in all its characteristic grandiosity and urgency, we also see how the digital metaphor constitutes the problem of death by insisting on a conception of the self and the mind-body relationship analogous to computer technology.

Others will die around me. They will be nullified. Nothing of their personality will remain. The light switch will be turned off. Their lives, their entirety, will be marked by a glossy marble headstones bearing false summations (“her star shone brightly,” “never to be forgotten,” “he liked jazz”), and then these too will be lost in a coastal flood or get hacked to pieces by some genetically modified future turkey....Every day people, individuals--*Americans*, if that makes it more urgent for you--fall facedown on the battlefield, never to get up again. Never to exist again. These are complex personalities, their cerebral cortexes shimmering with floating worlds, universes that would have floored our sheep-herding, fig-eating, analog ancestors. (3-4)

“Analog” is a telling modifier, in that it betrays the pervasiveness of a technological metaphor that 1) reflexively figures humans in its own terms and 2) imposes an ideological attendant with that figuration that is seen as natural and inevitable. The narrative of computer technologies as an evolutionary progression from primitive analog functions to sophisticated digital ones becomes, through these descriptive terms, the narrative of human bodies as well. The analogy proceeds further. Even as the materiality of the body figures as grotesque relative to the sleek and shiny digital aesthetic, the physical body is also analogous to the mechanical aspect of the computer. That is, consciousness, personality, and ultimately the self is a program, the software that runs on the hardware of the body, the data for which the body is merely a storage facility. The problem of death, then, is merely a problem of data preservation. The implications of this metaphor are radical: the body is merely a machine and can be upgraded or replaced; consciousness is not only independent of the brain but is destined to transcend it as we upgrade the hardware of the brain and increase its computational power. This is not only possible, the metaphor insists, but it is urgent. We must not lose this precious human data, these “complex personalities,” these “cerebral cortexes shimmering with floating worlds.” Lenny remarks of his co-worker Kelly that “One day, if our race is to survive, we will have to figure out how to download her goodness and install it in our children” (180). The vicious and repulsive “Impossible To Preserve” artist is situated in the negative spectrum of this digital binary. He tragically privileges the forms of living that are the domain of his grotesque physical body, which would be redeemed if only he surrendered his pure artistic imagination to the possibility of digital immortality:

Why was he doing this to himself? Why not keep off the drugs and the demanding young women, spend a decade in Corfu or Chiang Mai, douse his body with alkalines and smart technology, clamp down on the free radicals, keep the mind focused on the work, beef up

the stock portfolio, take the tire off the belly, let us fix that aging bulldog's mug? What kept the sculptor here, in a city useful only as a reference to the past, preying on the young, gorging on thick-haired pussy and platefuls of carbs, swimming with the prevailing current towards his own nullification? Beyond that ugly body, those rotting teeth, that curdled breath, was a visionary and creator. whose heavy-handed work I sometimes admired. (18)

All the ideological implications of the digital metaphor converge neatly in this passage. Digital media insists on self-preservation and the supreme value of the individual mind. It forms a binary with the grotesque biological body that privileges its own aesthetic and insists on an evolutionary progression towards that aesthetic, even as it constitutes that same body internally according to the dichotomy of the physical, computational brain and the transcendent, spiritual mind and demands the indefinite preservation of that mind.

Of course, the immortal promise of technology and aesthetic binary between the digital and the physical is ultimately undermined in the novel's resolution, as a grotesque, drooling Joshie confesses to a techno-absurdism not too remote from *White Noise*'s own commentary. "We were wrong. The antioxidants were a dead end. There was no way to innovate new technology in time to prevent complications arising from the application of the old" (329). This recalls the contradictory situation of technology competing against itself. The technological environment of *White Noise* was replete both with toxic threats and scares for which new technology was responsible and with strange and fantastic technological medicines, devices, and solutions--like the room full of toxic-cloud-eating microbes Babbette envisions--to those same threats.

The problem of death in *White Noise*, as much as in *Super Sad True Love Story*, is intimate to the specific dynamic of media environment and susceptible to the suggestion of technological metaphor. In fact, the most significant image in which the figures of death and media converge, articulated in one of Jack and Babette's late night conversations, produces the novel's titular metaphor:

"What if death is nothing but sound?"

"Electrical noise."

"You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful."

"Uniform, white." (189)

The subsequent invocation of the name "Panasonic" (230), an earlier candidate for the novel's title, elegantly encapsulates Jack and Babette's conception of death: an inescapable field of sound and energy constantly oppressing an ill-defined and inexplicable consciousness—a conflation of "panic" and "sound." The metaphor, of course, proceeds from television or radio—tuned to a dead channel. In so far as the novel's characterization of media as an overabundance of sound and noise, indifferent to individuality and oppressive to the self, has been established, television and radio can symbolize a kind of death to the individual consciousness. Jack's fascination with television disasters and Babette's addiction to talk radio indicate precisely the kind of hypnosis and suppression of consciousness broadcast media induces. To engage these mediums that are so self-justifying, authoritative, and irrelevant to the individual is, in a sense, to admit to a kind of death of the self. The self is inevitably constituted as a passive viewer or listener, defined solely in a relational receptivity to the media content. For Jack and Babette in the throes of nighttime death-terror, this sense of auditory suffocation is abstracted and

aggrandized into a total field as a substitute for the incomprehensibility of unconsciousness and death.

In these articulations of an overwhelming auditory sensorium—white noise, waves and radiation, Panasonic—culminate the conflation of these instruments of broadcast media, electrical signals and noised—succinctly, the domain of “waves and radiation”—with the domain of the dead and spirits that is persistently referenced in the novel. Jack’s ruminations about a “level of energy composed solely of the dead” (97) are closely associated with (and often precipitated by) his engagement with technology and media--the electrical impulses and signals at the grocery store, the ATM, or on the television screen:

The face on the screen was Babette’s. Out of our mouths came a silence as wary and deep as an animal growl. Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces. What did it mean? What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders? Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say goodbye to use through the fluorescent screen?
(103)

These figurations of the media environment as an ethereal reality of spirits and the dead, of “waves and radiation” existing parallel to or underneath the surface of physical reality creates a duality from which many of the novel’s central tensions derive. The media environment, that “flat, distanced, sealed off, timeless” realm and the present environment, “the reality in which the TV set stood,” are in perpetual conflict. The epistemological tension--as the knowledge claims of the media environment compete for authority with the characters’ lived experience--has been examined. The most immediate contrast between the novels *White Noise* and *Super Sad True*

Love Story, and the source of ideological difference between broadcast and digital media, is that in the latter novel the divide between the media and the real environment is less distinct. The seamlessness with which the narration ambulates between digital and physical events, actions, and input betrays the extent to which digital reality has pervaded and subsumed the physical environment. However, this apparent contrast collapses under close scrutiny, since most of the dramatic tension in *Super Sad True Love Story* arises precisely from this fact of media integration, from exploring the things you do online that would be creepy or unsettling if you did them in real life--recall the use of acronyms (22), the perusal of strangers' most intimate data (210), and normalization of the most vicious and frank online message-board vitriol among strangers in real, public spaces (92). *Super Sad True Love Story* renders the digital promise to resolve the conflict between the media environment and the real one as inefficacious as its promise of immortality, and sustains the binary between a presumably authentic, unmediated life and the artificial, simulacral world of media.

The significance of *White Noise*'s critical commentary on the absurd superabundance of simulacra in postmodern American culture has been well established by scholars. What I want to elucidate is the relationship between the novel's culture of simulacra, produced by the media environment, and its preoccupation with death. The runaway overproduction of simulacra, and the instability caused once the simulacral subverts the original's place of primacy, is developed to the highest absurdity in the darkly comic moments of SIMUVAC's disaster simulations:

If reality intrudes in the form of a car crash or a victim falling off a stretcher, it is important to remember that we are not here to mend broken bones or put out real fires. We are here to simulate. Interruptions can cost lives in a real emergency. If we learn to work around interruptions now, we'll be able to work around them when it counts. (198)

Of course, media and technology are the primary informants to this culture of simulacra; their relationship is established early with the incident of the “Most Photographed Barn in America” (12-13). It induces a crisis with the Gladney’s mediated experience of the Airborne Toxic Event through the radio, where the media imaginary of the event seems, alarmingly, to be causing symptoms of toxic exposure in the girls by way of suggestion. Jack asks “Which was worse, the real condition or the self-created one, and did it matter?” (123) and, later, “Is a symptom a sign or a thing? What is a thing and how do we know it’s not another thing?” (123). Here we encounter the familiar disorientation as the media environment and the lived experience in physical reality contest for authority and primacy. It is no longer clear and obvious to Jack that the media environment--as a system of signs, representations, and simulations of the world--derives from and is secondary to reality. In a culture of simulacra, the sign is no longer just a representation or referent of a thing that is itself original; in fact, the sign may precede the thing it pretends to represent.

This bizarre situation, produced by media, in which the relationship between the simulacral image and the apparent original is unclear and in which the two domains perpetually contradict and contest each other, heavily informs the problem of death and the fear of death. When Jack learns of his exposure from the SIMUVAC agent, his fear and dissonance is articulated by a series of media-metaphors.

I think I felt as I would if a doctor had held an X-ray to the light showing a star-shaped hole at the center of one of my vital organs. Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all.

It is when death is rendered graphically, *is televised so to speak*, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. (137 emphasis mine)

Jack's diagnosis originates in this alien domain of electronic media and technology, as though superimposing itself onto his real material body and purporting authority over it. Consequently, the contest between the simulacral media environment and lived reality is reproduced in his own body, and constitutes the problem of his dying according to this binary between the mediated image and the represented thing. Being thus constituted, Jack's own particular death, with its attendant associations with modern technology, artifice, and simulacra, becomes a strange, alien figure in his imagination:

My body is growing a nebulous mass. They track these things like satellites. All this as a result of a byproduct of insecticide. There's something artificial about my death. It's shallow, unfulfilling. I don't belong to the earth or sky. They ought to carve an aerosol can on my tombstone. (270).

The episode of Jack and his son watching a house burn down also betrays this binary conception of death produced by the postmodern, technological world. The pungent, chemical odor produced by the fire portended, in Jack's words, "the existence of a second kind of death. One was real, the other synthetic" (229). It's this artificiality, the technological modernness and mediatedness of this new kind of death that makes the figure of death so alien, strange, and foreign to the imagination. According to Winnie's theory, this strangeness is the cause of Jack's fear: "If death can be seen as less strange and unreferenced, your sense of self in relation to death will diminish, and so will your fear" (218).

It's no accident then—given that Jack's sense dissonance and overwhelming fear of dying proceed from this conflict between the simulacral media environment (of signs, images,

and representations) and physical reality (of referents, things, and lived experience)—that one of the side effects of Dylar is the confusion of word-signs for the actual things they represent. According to the logic of Minnie's theory and the broader logic of the novel's criticism of simulacral culture, to conflate the sign and the signified into an undifferentiated entity would be to reconcile this strange, alien, mediated death into the domain of the "real" and of lived experience. This consequences of this absurd solution materializes in the grotesque figure of Willie Mink, in whom the novel's thematic concerns—media epistemology, media erasure of the individual self, and the fear of death caused by the confusion of the simulacral media image with reality—elegantly converge. Mink is found in his hotel room swallowing handfuls of Dylar. He is watching television without sound and provides the sound himself, speaking almost exclusively in irrelevant media factoids that have overwhelmed his individual consciousness. The sublimation of his being into a kind of television-man is expressed in surreal terms, as though Mink and the TV set in the corner of the room were mutually constitutive. "As the TV picture jumped, wobbled, caught itself in snarls, Mink appeared to grow more vivid" (295). The Dylar, the drug created to cure the fear of death, has erased the in Mink's consciousness the distinction between words and things, sign and signified, mediated reality and physical reality, so that the alien specter of postmodern, technological death no longer seems strange and unreferenced to his physical self. "The drug not only caused the user to confuse words with the things they referred to; it made him act in a somewhat stylized way" (295), as though, perhaps, Mink were performing a stylized television simulation of a real action. The solution, of course, is ultimately unsuccessful; since, the novel pessimistically concludes that death will adapt (294)-- that any technological solution to a problem created by technology only produces a greater problem.

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