Degree Project
Level: master’s
Ideological Technology and Posthuman Conditions in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*

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Subject/main field of study: English
Course code: EN3063
Credits: 15
Date of examination: 31-05-2018

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Introduction

Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet. The materials and methods we devise make it possible for us to claim our future. We don't have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment. The miracle is what we ourselves produce, the systems and networks that change the way we live and think. (Don DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future”)

With the possible exception of Thomas Pynchon, no other novelist has explored the role of technology in contemporary American society to such a degree and with such an impact as Don DeLillo. The theme has occupied him ever since his 1971 debut *Americana* but is arguably taken the furthest in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*. The literary scholar Randy Laist has referred to DeLillo as “a phenomenologist of the contemporary technoscape and an ecologist of our new kind of natural habitat” (*Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity* 3) to whom ”technological apparatuses are not merely set-pieces in the characters’ lives functioning to designate a period, nor merely tools which move the plot along; they are sites of mystery and magic, they are whirlpools of space-time and convex mirrors of reconstituted identity” (*Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity* 3). This mystical aura surrounding technology is particularly poignant in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*; the respective protagonists view televisions, ATM machines, and the latest gadgets as sublime objects, worthy of an almost religious reverence. It is as if DeLillo is portraying a culture that, having lost its faith in traditional religion, has turned to technology to satisfy its appetite for mystical experiences. What is more, technological apparatuses are not only mirrors of identity: they are instruments through which the characters’ subjectivity and identity are continuously being
shaped and created. Thus, the most salient function of technology can be understood to be ideological, in the sense proposed by Louis Althusser.

In his landmark essay “Ideology and State Apparatuses”, Althusser puts forward two theses defining his understanding of ideology: that “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (693), and that “Ideology has a material existence” (695). On this basis he argues that ideology is not a fixed set of ideas artificially superimposed on society by its ruling elite but rather an ongoing process that is continuously reinforced and reconstituted through material practises.

The way in which ideology is reconstituted in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* calls for an analysis of the closely related theme of posthumanism in the two novels. In short, posthumanism can be said to refer to human identity merging with technology. In her groundbreaking book *How We Became Posthuman*, the American literary theorist Katherine Hayles succinctly defines the posthuman as a condition in which “it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed” (80). However, not everyone is in agreement about the exact nature of this enmeshing; the Italian philosopher Rosi Braidotti identifies several distinct strands of posthumanism in her book *The Posthuman*, of which the two most notable are critical posthumanism, a theoretical paradigm with which she herself identifies, and transhumanism, an intellectual movement championing the enhancement of human psychophysiology through technological means.

In her historical account of critical posthumanism, Braidotti links the concept to the so-called anti-humanism of thinkers such as Michel Foucault (11), which grew as a critique of liberal humanism. She goes on to refer to the American theorist Donna Haraway’s essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” as a crucial milestone in the development of critical posthumanist
thought (28), in which the latter calls for the need in feminist theory of breaking down traditional boundaries and dichotomies, not only between male and female, but ultimately between human and non-human.

While the critical posthumanists’ espousal of cyborgian identity is largely theoretical, the transhumanists make a far more literal argument along the same lines. The futurist thinker and Google engineer Ray Kurzweil provides perhaps the most notorious example with his book *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, in which he predicts that humanity in the not too distant future will merge with artificial intelligence, setting off an unparalleled exponential acceleration of technological development. Admittedly, such scenarios are wildly speculative; however, some transhumanist visions are already becoming reality. In January 2017 Elon Musk—investor and cofounder of Tesla Inc.—launched Neuralink, a company devoted to developing what they call a neural lace, that is, a form of digital brain implant. When queried on this endeavour Musk asserted that, thanks to our smartphones and computers, “we are already cyborgs. You have a digital version of yourself, a partial version of yourself online in the form of your emails, your social media, and all the things that you do” (Ricker). In an indirect way Musk can thus be understood to echo Haraway; and the fact that Silicon Valley billionaires and radical left-wing theorists find common ground on this topic can perhaps be taken as an indication that posthumanism is not just the latest in a series of arbitrary “post” fads, but rather a notion the relevance of which is only beginning to reveal itself. This is the view of the historian Yuval Noah Harari, who in his immensely popular book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* argues that technology will come to fundamentally redefine the way we understand ourselves in the twenty-first century.

DeLillo, too, certainly takes the notion of a (metaphorically) cyborgian identity seriously. That is not to say that he necessarily espouses the beliefs and values of either
critical posthumanism or transhumanism. Rather, he has taken to heart the novelist’s
traditional task of capturing the zeitgeist of his society. This ethos arguably makes his novels
particularly suited for cultural analysis with a scope beyond the purely literary. When asked
to reflect on his writing process in an interview with *The Observer* DeLillo answered: "I'm
just translating the world around me in what seems to be straightforward terms. For my
readers, this is sometimes a vision that's not familiar. But I'm not trying to manipulate reality.
This is just what I see and hear” (McCrum). The reality which he portrays in *White Noise* and
*Cosmopolis* is one in which subjectivity and personal identity is largely constructed through
an intricate process of technological mediation.

*White Noise*, published in 1985, is widely considered to be DeLillo’s
breakthrough novel and remains one of his most read and appreciated works. It follows a year
in the life of Jack Gladney, a pioneering professor of “Hitler Studies” at a Midwestern college
whose big secret is that he knows no German. Gladney’s comfortable, albeit superficial,
suburban middle-class life is turned upside down when his town is hit by an Airborne Toxic
Event, which amplifies his paralysing fear of dying and sends him hunting for Dylar, an
experimental drug that supposedly has the potential to alleviate his fear. This whole
extravaganza aside, the novel is of particular interest with regard to technology insofar as it
portrays the rather ordinary yet somehow absurd domestic coexistence of the Gladney’s and
their various technological appliances.

*Cosmopolis*, published in 2003, was not as warmly received by critics and
readers as *White Noise*. The review in *The New York Times* urges readers to “Beware the
novel of ideas, particularly when the ideas come first and all the novel stuff (like the story)
comes second” (Kirn). On a similar note, Blake Morrison’s review for *The Guardian* asserts
that *Cosmopolis* is “more prose-poem than novel”. Clearly referencing Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the
novel spans over just a single day, during which the protagonist, Eric Packer, a 28-year-old
billionaire asset manager, travels across New York City in his limousine with his mind set on getting a haircut in his native Hell’s Kitchen whilst causing havoc in the global markets by manipulating the Yen. Eric obsesses about having access to the most cutting-edge technology that his money can buy. His situation is in that regard ostensibly far removed from the ordinary life of the Gladneys; however, the treatment of technology in *Cosmopolis* can in many ways be understood as a continuation of that in *White Noise*.

As a perennial feature of DeLillo’s novels, the theme of technology has received a fair amount of scholarly attention; the eight sources outlined below examine the theme in either *White Noise* or *Cosmopolis* and are thus of particular relevance to this thesis. The perhaps most extensive account of the topic is provided by Randy Laist in his book *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo’s Novels*. As the title suggests, Laist explores the many ways in which technology shapes the postmodern perspectives of DeLillo’s characters. He does not relate to the concept of posthumanism in this endeavour but instead relies primarily on the theories of Jean Baudrillard and Marshall McLuhan. In the introductory chapter he does, however, relate DeLillo’s work to that of Haraway, stating that his characters “adopt a cyborg selfhood in interphorical collusion with the real mysticism suggested by modern technologies” (13).

Laist does not explicitly return to the concept of cyborgian identity in his analysis of *White Noise*. His main focus instead lies in illustrating how the novel’s protagonist can be understood as representing a tension between romanticism and postmodernism, and he argues that “It is in fact out of the tension between these two readings that DeLillo crafts his most uncanny and memorable effects” (66). More specifically, he juxtaposes Jack’s interpretation of his environment with those of American romantics such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, and argues that the former can be understood as representing what he calls a postmodern transcendentalism (90-97). Laist engages much more directly with the
idea of the posthuman in the article “The Concept of Disappearance in Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis”, in which he argues that “Rather than using the technologies of high finance as a means of making money, Eric engages in money-making as a way of immersing himself into the electronic data stream of global informatics” (259).

Highlighting a central aspect of the theme of technology in White Noise, Susanna S. Martins emphasises the quotidian nature of technology in her article “White Noise and Everyday Technologies”, in which she argues that White Noise provides “a seminal literary exploration of ordinary, banal (but not trivial) interactions with technology in everyday life” (89). She argues that the novel’s portrayal of technology “suggests the possibilities of a new sensibility, one that can be reduced neither to dystopian visions of brainwashing nor to Utopian celebrations of liberation from the constraints of ideology” (100). Moreover, she stresses that “White Noise also provides insight into the pleasures of technology” and that “This acknowledgment of the pleasures of technology in the midst of anxieties and questions about its effects is critical . . . for an understanding of how Americans think of technology and negotiate its representations” (90).

Michael Valdez Moses juxtaposes White Noise with the theories of the German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger in his essay “Lust Removed From Nature” and argues that significant antecedents to the novel’s treatment of the theme of technology can be found in the philosophical works of the latter (63). On that basis he contends that “The greatest threat of technology is its promise of immortality”, which in White Noise is showcased with the drug Dylar (75).

Aristi Trendel is the only scholar to extensively engage with the theme of posthumanism in Cosmopolis. In her article “The Posthuman in Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis” she argues that “DeLillo creates a picture of posthuman identity while he asserts humanist values from a post-anthropocentric perspective” (124). Moreover, she contends that “In
Cosmopolis, economic neoliberalism, free market ideology and late capitalist individualism are inseparable from the processes of technological poshumanization” and that “DeLillo’s sharp criticism of technological poshumanization in fact stems precisely from the conflation of these phenomena” (121).

In a similar vein, Alison Shonkwiler further examines the relationship between capital and technology in her article “Don DeLillo’s Financial Sublime”. She defines the financial sublime as “the full range of mystifications of capital—technological, political, and otherwise—that make it difficult or impossible to distinguish the actuality of money from the increasing unreality of global capitalism” (249) and asserts that it has been a central theme in many of DeLillo’s fictions, including White Noise, but that it culminates in Cosmopolis (255).

Andrew Strombeck also looks at the theme of cybercapitalism in his article “The Limousine and Technicity in Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis”. His analysis is centred on Eric’s white stretch limousine “and its network of human and nonhuman actants”, which he argues illustrate that “the divide between [the limousine’s] touchless cybercapitalism and the quotidian world of the streets around it is not as sharp as it seems …” (147).

“Anxieties of Obsolescence: Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis” by David Cowart is the last article of interest. Cowart focuses on Eric’s obsession with new technologies as well as his disdain for all that is dated, anachronistic, or obsolete. While he sees this as an exploration of a destructive tendency within global capitalism, Cowart contends that DeLillo “takes little interest in polemic” and instead “cares passionately about capturing the cultural moment in . . . language and style that register public obsessions with just sufficient strangeness to promote our actually seeing what the film of familiarity otherwise obscures” (188). As mentioned above, this interpretation of DeLillo’s ethos also lies as foundation for this thesis.
While an impressive body of work already exists on the relationship between technology, subjectivity, and society in DeLillo’s writing, no one has explicitly written on the ideological functions of technology in *White Noise* or *Cosmopolis* to any greater extent. This thesis is intended to fill that gap by arguing that an analysis of the ideological functions of technology in the two novels illustrates how they can be read as explorations of posthuman conditions and thus situate the relevance of DeLillo’s work within a larger historical context and theoretical discourse. Moreover, the thesis argues that the key to understanding the ideological functions of technology is to examine how the characters perceive various technologies as sublime objects with almost mystical qualities, evoking reactions that historically have been reserved for religious experiences. In order to prove this contention, the thesis is centred on four characters and their relationship with technology: the two respective protagonists, and, to a lesser degree, Jack’s colleague Murray Siskind, and Eric’s “chief of theory” Vilja Kinski. Murray and Kinski can in many ways be understood to serve parallel narrative purposes; they function as intellectual confidants with whom the respective protagonists develop their conceptual understandings of the world, often providing some of the more extreme ideas.

**Ideology and the Technological Sublime**

Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. (William James ch. 3)

The concept of the technological sublime was first applied by the literary historian Leo Marx in his seminal work on the place of technology in American culture *The Machine and the
Garden, in which he argues that the quality referred to as the sublime by eighteenth-century romantics came to be transposed on to technological progress in nineteenth-century America. The sublime has historically been a somewhat slippery notion with fluctuating denotations and applications. However, its contemporary usage can largely be traced back to Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. In the treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* the former famously argued that the sublime, by virtue of containing an element of terror and thus triggering the instinct for self-preservation, induces the most powerful of human emotions in the form of awe, reverence and astonishment (Burke Part II). Burke and his fellow romantics thought the vast and terrifying magnificence of nature to be the acme of sublimity. With God being universally recognised as the creator of the natural world, they thus ultimately saw the sublime as an expression of the divine. Marx, however, asserts that “the awe and reverence once reserved for the Deity and later bestowed upon the visible landscape [came to be] directed toward technology or, rather, the technological conquest of matter” (197).

David F Nye, another American historian, further develops this notion in his book *American Technological Sublime*. Whereas Marx argues that this conflation of God, nature, and technology is rooted in the Newtonian worldview dominant among the nineteenth-century American intellectual elite, according to which nature was understood as a form of celestial machine (162), Nye instead emphasises that new technologies from the beginning of the twentieth century came to eclipse the natural world with regard to their ability to inspire awe and fascination in the American public; the epitome of the sublime was no longer found in the Grand Canyon or the Niagara falls but in Skyscrapers, Hiroshima, and the Moon landing.

What is more, Nye takes the concept in a direction that makes it highly relevant with regard to how technology can be understood as a locus of ideology. He contends that,
beyond fusing technology with religion and nature, the technological sublime has been one of the most salient manifestations of American nationalist sentiment in the twentieth century. He anchors this assertion in Émile Durkheim’s notion that a society above all is held together by the ideas that it has about itself and argues that “Since the early nineteenth century the technological sublime has been one of America’s central ‘ideas about itself’—a defining ideal, helping to bind together a multicultural society” (Nye xiv). In other words, he argues that the United States is too multicultural to base its identity on a shared ethnicity, cultural heritage, or a religious denomination, but that Americans historically have had one thing in common that unifies them: their enthusiasm for technological development. On that basis he argues that the technological sublime “can weld society together” by “tapping into fundamental hopes and fears” and thus inspire a “religious feeling, aroused by the confrontation with impressive objects” (Nye xiii).

Nye’s notion that technological progress provides a central narrative in American cultural identity is clearly echoed by DeLillo in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future”, in which he addresses a general American readership in the immediate aftermath of September 11 2001:

Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet. . . . the primary target [of the attacks] . . . was the high gloss of our modernity. It was the thrust of our technology. . . . It was the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind.

The cultural historian Joel Dinerstein addresses the same topic in his article “Technology and its Discontents: On the Verge of the Posthuman” and concludes that it is not a matter of the
(Islamist) theology against (American) technology: but that “technology is the American theology” (Dinerstein 569).

Echoing Burke, Nye emphasises that a central component to the technological sublime is novelty; *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* amply illustrate this, having been published eighteen years apart and thus portraying differing technologies as generating experiences of the sublime. With *White Noise* being published in what might be called the heyday of postmodern theory, it is unsurprising that Jack Gladney’s experience of the sublime corresponds perfectly to what the literary scholar Joseph Tabbi refers to as the postmodern sublime in his book *Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*:

One could hardly find a better contemporary occasion for the sublime than the excessive production of technology itself. Its crisscrossing networks of computers, transportation systems, and communications media, successors to the omnipotent ‘nature’ of nineteenth-century romanticism, have come to represent a magnitude that at once attracts and repels the imagination. (Tabbi 16)

While Tabbi prefers the term postmodern sublime, it is clear that this notion is a sub-category of the technological sublime.

One of the more striking manifestations of the technological sublime as described by Tabbi above can the found in a passage from *White Noise* in which Jack checks his balance through an ATM machine (which was still a relatively new technology at the time):
Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies. (55)

Beyond illustrating that sublimity is found in novel technologies, this short passage touches on three central characteristics of the technological sublime. Firstly, it illustrates how the sublime is experienced through the interaction with vast invisible, interrelated, and virtually incomprehensible information networks. This not only ties in with Tabbi’s notion of the postmodern sublime but can be traced all the way back to the romantic notion of the natural sublime, to which the vastness, complexity, and infinity of the natural world was central (Burke part II). Secondly, Jack seemingly perceives an implied threat when he says that he is “in accord” with the “disquieting” system “at least for now”, which is in line with what Burke referred to as the element of terror in the sublime. Thirdly, and most importantly, the reverence that Jack feels in relation to “the system” as a result of his sublime experience points to its ideological function. “The system” not only has the power to bless him, it confirms and authenticates him as a subject by giving him a sense of “deep personal value”. This is one of many occasions on which Jack’s subject position is shaped and determined by what may be called the ideological function of technology.

Althusser argues that ideology is constantly being re-enacted and naturalised on a micro level through even the most quotidian and seemingly innocent actions. Crucially,
Althusser understands ideology to be the lens through which individuals fundamentally understand their own subjectivity. In other words, he makes a sharp distinction between an individual and a subject; while the former is created by nature he holds the latter to be social construction.

Althusser conceives of ideology as being upheld by what he calls ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), which execute this form of soft power distinct from that of repressive state apparatuses, such as the legal system, the police, and the military, whose power is anchored in violence and coercion. Examples of ISAs are the educational system, the media, and the family: that is, institutions that define the limits of what is socially permissible. The term state apparatus is arguably somewhat unfortunate as it may give the impression that the ISAs are direct subordinates of the state, consciously carrying out an explicit agenda of manipulation; however, that is not necessarily the case. Rather, ISAs should be understood as shaped in accordance with the interests of the ruling class; meaning, in the case of DeLillo’s America, that they promote values and practises that facilitate the capitalist organisation of society.

Jack’s visit to the ATM thus illustrates the function of what may arguably be called the technological ISA in a very explicit manner. Indeed, he appears fully conscious of how his identity is shaped through interaction with ideology when he derives a sense of “deep personal value” from seeing a reassuring bank statement appearing on the little screen. More precisely, it is “not money, not that at all” that generates this sense of personal value; rather, it is the self-confirmation that he receives by virtue of his subject position being reaffirmed by its situation within a larger ideological framework. While Jack, a successful participant in capitalist society defines himself as “blessed” by the (ideological) “system”, the man who is dragged out of the bank is defined as “deranged”, seemingly on the basis of being in disharmony with the dominant ideology. It is also worth noting how the ideological function
of technology is here greatly enhanced by its sublime nature and vice versa. In Nye’s words the technological sublime inspires a “religious feeling, aroused by the confrontation with impressive objects” (xiii), which can be understood to magnify the ideological function of technology. At the same time, the self-defining aspect of ideology can in the example above clearly be seen to magnify the “religious feeling” of the technological sublime.

The close-knit relationship between ideology and religion is at this point perhaps in need of some disentanglement. In the broad sense proposed by William James, religion does not presuppose belief in anything supernatural. It only requires belief in a higher order of some kind, and belief in that the highest moral good is accomplished through alignment with this order. Harari makes use of this definition when he argues that “the most interesting place in the world from a religious perspective is . . . Silicon Valley. That’s where hi-techgurus are brewing for us brave new religions that have little to do with God, and everything to do with technology” (ch. 10). The relevance of Harari’s conception of technoreligions will become evident in the next two sections. However, for now it will suffice to say that while this thesis does not argue that DeLillo portrays anything like a unified religion of technology, the protagonists of both novels appear to perceive technology precisely as indicative of a higher order with which they aspire to align their lives.

Cosmopolis, even more than White Noise, portrays what might be called religious devotion to technology. Kinski provides a salient example of this tendency when she tells Eric: “Technology is crucial to civilisation why? Because it helps us make our fate. We don’t need God or miracles or the flight of the bumblebee” (95). What is more, she is not only a vehicle for DeLillo’s own view expressed in “In The Ruins of the Future”; she also expresses a sentiment that has been traced by Leo Marx in American literature since the nineteenth century. In summing up his book, the latter quotes Henry David Thoreau, who in Walden comments on the railway, that is, the latest and most impactful technology of his
time: “We have constructed a fate, an *Atropos*, that never turns aside . . . The air is full of invisible bolts. Every path but your own is part of the faith” (Thoreau 66).

What is more, *Cosmopolis* is replete with instances in which technological objects are perceived as sublime. A striking example is when Eric and Kinski, “transfixed”, view “the electronic display of market information” on an office building across the street from their limousine:

> He knew what she was thinking. . . . This is the point, the thrust, and the future. We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable. The small monitors of the office, home and car become a kind of idolatry here, where the crowds might gather in astonishment. (80)

This passage also exemplifies the intimate entanglement of technology and capital that Strombeck and Shonkwiler have pointed to and hints at the intimate relationship between the technological sublime and what the latter refers to as DeLillo’s financial sublime. Eric and Kinski conclude that “It’s cyber-capital that creates the future” (79); in other words, they perceive technology and capital as interdependent and inseparable. This conflation clearly has ideological significance, as it naturalises the interests of the dominant economic class to which Eric belongs. In Althusser’s view, a central characteristic of ISAs is that they reify social practises and thus mask their class bias by making them appear neutral or even natural (902). Eric is seemingly wanting to take this notion to the extreme when he is looking at the “cross-harmonies between nature and data” (200) in order to detect a “pattern latent within nature itself” (63) on which to base his cyber-capitalist ventures.
Further examples of the technological sublime and its ideological functions will be presented in the following two sections. However, the next section focuses more specifically on how technology ideologically shapes the worldviews and identities of DeLillo’s characters and on how this process relates to the notion of posthumanism.

**Prosthetic Apotheosis**

Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times. (Sigmund Freud 39)

While the first section examined how experiences of the technological sublime relate to ideology in the two novels, this section and the next will look more directly on the implications that this has on the characters’ subjectivity and sense of identity. This endeavour calls for the introduction of another, closely related, concept introduced by Althusser, namely, the process of interpellation. Althusser proposes that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects”, and that it is through this transformative process that individuals are recruited into ideology (699). Furthermore, he argues that this points to the dual meaning of the word subject:

In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: (1) a free subjectivity, a center of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission. This last note gives us the meaning of this ambiguity, which is merely a reflection of the effect which
produces it: the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection. (701)

Thus, according to Althusser, as far as one has subjectivity, one is interacting within the realm of ideology.

Martins implicitly draws on Althusser in her analyses of a curious passage in *White Noise* that enters the narrative seemingly out of context and appears to be an excerpt from a letter sent from Jack’s bank to inform him that his new automated banking card is due to arrive in the mail. The letter states: “You cannot access your account unless your code is entered properly. Know your code. Reveal your code to no one. Only your code allows you to enter the system” (337). Martins argues that the overly serious tone of the letter has a dual effect: “it cautions of the insidious operations of a ‘system’ that interpellates us, and also mocks the idea that ’the system’ must be regarded with such gravity” (93). Indeed, the reoccurring explicit naming a “system” as well as the emphasis on a personal code does have an on-your-nose comic effect in how blatant an example of ideological interpellation it is. Martins even argues that “the narrative voice undercuts this sense of utter interpellation by naming it” (95). However, a contrary argument could just as well be made: in explicitly recognising that he is being interpellated by an ideological system, Jack is, as Althusser puts it, “interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection” (701).

Moreover, while no other examples of technological interpellation are as glaring as the letter from the bank and the scene by the ATM, the same process is expressed in several instances on a more subtle level. The two blatant examples discussed above thus point to a broader theme. Laist consistently emphasises the ways in which the characters’ subjectivity is formed through their relationship with mass media. Indeed, television and radio in particular have an intimate impact on the Gladneys’ lives. Little snippets of
disembodied voices consistently enter the narrative utterly out of context, saying things such as "And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio" (74) and "This creature has developed a complicated stomach in keeping with its leafy diet" (114). While these are certainly less clear-cut examples of ideological interpellation, the reoccurring background voices nevertheless serve as a reminder of how the Gladney’s constantly are being interpellated by the various devices in their own home, on what seems to be largely a subconscious level. Seemingly as a result of this, Jack’s daughter repeats the words from advertisements in her sleep as if they had a “ritual meaning” or were part of a “verbal spell or ecstatic chant”: “Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain noise, the substratic regions too deep to probe” (180-181). Television is in other words portrayed as being at the centre of what DeLillo refers to as “the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind” (“In the Ruins of the Future”). As Murray puts it: “the medium is a primal force in the American home. . . . It's like a myth being born right there in our living room, like something we know in a dreamlike and preconscious way” (60).

Jack’s evident desire to be immersed in vast (technological) networks can be understood as intimately related to the perceived sublimity of such networks; by self-identifying through technological interpellation, he feels himself to be part of something sublime. This tendency of his can also be understood as a step towards posthumanism in the sense that his self-identification is dependent on external technologies. Laist argues that DeLillo’s character’s typically display a “doubleness concerning the relationship between a romantically stable cogito and a destabilized postmodern condition of radical alienation” (*Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity* 2) and refers in this regard to Stephan N. DoCarmo, who in his article “Subjects, Objects, and the Postmodern Differend in Don Delillo's *White Noise*” argues that Jack is “caught between two equally seductive urges”, one
towards “absorption and dispersal of the self into larger systems” and one towards autonomy and individuality (DoCarmo 3). Indeed, while Jack in his encounters with the technological sublime welcomes the interpellation into technological networks, he is also apprehensive of it and displays a contradictory desire to shed his externally anchored identity: most notably in a scene in which Jack, informed of his imminent death, throws away random personal possessions in an attempt to “say good-bye to himself” (336).

Eric, on the other hand, displays no reservations with regard to the technological externalisation of his identity. Trendel refers to him as a “networked being” who “constantly interacts with sensate intelligent interconnected devices that together combine to create a posthuman subjectivity” (117). Eric’s apartment contains a number of such intelligent devices, including a computerised bed and “mirrors that tell you how you feel when you look at yourself in the morning” (77). Beyond being mere ostentatious expressions of wealth, the technologies he surrounds himself with become extensions of his perceived self, as he explicitly states when turning to face the building that he lives in: “He felt continuous with it. … They shared and edge or boundary, skyscraper and man” (8). Being “the tallest residential tower in the world” and thus pleasing Eric’s vanity, the psychological effect that their fusion has is similar to Jack’s immersive experience of the technological sublime by the ATM; Eric states that “He liked to stand and look at it whenever he felt this way. He felt wary, drowsy and insubstantial. … The tower gave him strength and depth” (8).

In contrast to this very material aspect of Eric’s posthuman identity, both Trendel and Laist stress his emphasis on the immaterial. Building on Hayles, Trendel argues that “With a cultural mindset that views information to be more essential than material forms, Eric Packer has entered ‘the condition of virtuality’”, that is, he views the virtual screen as “a space of ‘second nature’ through a conflation of information and vitality” (Trendel 117-118).
This tendency permeates his way of thinking throughout the novel but is perhaps most condensed in the following passage:

Data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet’s living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole. (24)

In reference to this passage, Laist points out that “DeLillo gives us the impression that what we are overhearing is not exactly Eric’s conscious thoughts, in the stream of consciousness model, but an undercurrent of intuition occurring within Eric’s perception” (“The Concept of Disappearance” 262). The vocabulary describing data in Eric’s (subconscious) monologue is again redolent of the technological sublime, whose primary locus in Cosmopolis is digital data: the pinnacle of technological development in Eric’s information era. In this regard Eric can be understood as personifying the worldview that Harari refers to as dataism.

Dataism is the main so-called techno religion that Harari hypothesises will grow exponentially in the twenty-first century. In other words, he views dataism as the dominant foundation of posthumanist ideology. In short, his argument is that just as deism largely has been eclipsed by humanism, humanism may soon become eclipsed by dataism: a worldview according to which the highest authority belongs to neither God nor to human reason or sentiment—but to data (Harari ch. 11). To illustrate the difference between a humanist and a dataist rationale, Harari takes the rather mundane example of how proponents of the respective wordviews would go about choosing what book to read. While a humanist might simply browse around the book store until a volume peaks his or her interest, a dataist would
rather go to Amazon, where a vast amount of data mapping the literary taste of customers is available to determine the optimal purchase. In essence, a dataist mindset is thus one in which data trumps human intuition.

However, far beyond governing every-day decisions in this manner, Harari argues that, when taken to the extreme, dataists “perceive the entire universe as a flow of data, see organisms as little more than biochemical algorithms and believe that humanity’s cosmic vocation is to create an all-encompassing data-processing system—and then merge into it” (Harari ch. 11). As the quote above illustrates, Eric fits squarely into this latter category, seeing data as “a dynamic aspect of the life process”. What is more, his reference to a “digital imperative” is reminiscent of the notion of technology as (the American) fate. Thus, the path that Eric defines for himself is set: “there’s only one thing in the world worth pursuing personally and intellectually. . . . The interaction between technology and capital. The inseparability” (23).

To Eric it is not enough to, like Jack, let one’s identity be defined through technological interpellation; on the contrary, as Laist puts it: “Eric can become completely fused with technology itself, particularly the technologies of cybernetics and microprocessing that represent the cutting-edge developments of his particular historical era” (“The Concept of Disappearance” 259). His doing so gives him almost godlike powers, most pertinently evident in his influence over millions of lives through manipulation of the Yen. However, his fusion with technology inevitably also entails a fusion with (capitalist) ideology. In relation to this a previously unexplored angle of what Cowart refers to as Eric’s anxiety of obsolescence merits attention. Eric’s disdain for all things dated not only, as Cowart argues, points to a troubling hallmark of capitalism; what is more, with Eric’s networked, posthuman identity his anxiety of obsolescence makes him repeatedly interpret parts of himself as obsolete. In the instances in which it is a matter of an outdated “hand device” (9) or plasma screens that do
not seem flat enough (140), Eric can simply discard them. However, a more problematic tendency is that Eric comes to find that it is the human aspect of his identity that is becoming obsolete rather than the technological. The full implications of this will be examined in the next section, when looking at Eric’s fantasy of escaping his human body altogether.

**Technological Mortality Denial**

Man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaningfulness on the largest possible level. (Ernest Becker 196)

Harari points out that the allure of immortality always, in one form or another, has occupied a central role within religions and ideologies, whether it be in the direct sense of the promise of a celestial afterlife or a more secular form of immortality project as writing a great novel or dying for one’s nation or beliefs (ch. 1). This statement holds no less true for the ideological aspects of technology in DeLillo’s two novels. However, *White Noise* and, even more so, *Cosmopolis* illustrate what he defines as an increasingly influential attitude to death (Harari ch. 1): namely, that mortality is a technical problem that can be overcome with technological solutions. This leads Jack and Eric to pursue their respective versions of what may be called technologically supported mortality denial, which, while taking rather unorthodox forms, nevertheless have definitive ideological significance.

Living partly in cyberspace and partly in “meat space” (64)—a contrasting term originating with William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer* that Eric uses to refer to the physical world—Eric largely prefers the former. As outlined in the section above, this tendency is intimately interlinked with his obsession with the latest technologies and his correlating
dismain for anything dated. A poignant example of this can be found in a passage in which Eric muses on ATM machines:

automatic teller machines. The term was aged and burdened by its own historical memory. It worked at cross-purposes, unable to escape the inference of fuddled human personnel and jerky moving parts. The term was part of the process that the device was meant to replace. It was anti-futuristic, so cumbrous and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated. (54)

The first thing worth noting here is the glaring contrast that the passage provides to Jack’s episode by the ATM; the technology as gone from sublimely awe-inducing to annoyingly anachronistic. However, beyond serving as a reminder of the rapid tempo with which technological advancement and the corresponding psychological reactions move, the grounds on which Eric dismisses the machine is relevant; as Laists puts it: “Eric is annoyed by the obtrusive presence of the human, the teller, even in automated form: the human presence that the machine was invented to eliminate” (“The Concept of Disappearance” 263). Moreover, the notion that “anti-futuristic” is perceived as in essence bad, if not morally wrong, is also telling. Eric’s futurist values are of course related to the notion of a “digital imperative” and a technological fate, which can be understood as an absolute manifestation of the ideology of technology.

With Eric’s preference of cyberspace over “meat space”, his immortality fantasy does not entail extending his biological life-span indefinitely. On the contrary, he wants to leave his body behind altogether, as he explicitly expresses after a non-physical sexual encounter with his chief of finance through the monitor in his limousine:
He felt these things. He felt the pain. It travelled the pathways. It informed the ganglion and spinal cord. He was here in his body, the structure he wanted to dismiss in theory even when he was shaping it under the measured affect of barbells and weights. He wanted to judge it redundant and transferable. (47)

Beyond illustrating how Eric’s anxiety about obsolescence extends even to his human physiology, this passage also points to how his way of thinking is shaped by his technocentric mentality. He interprets pain and emotion essentially as data, being processed by the hardware that is his spinal cord, thus again displaying a rather extreme dataist worldview.

It is precisely Eric’s view of his self as a collection of data rather than a biologically embodied individual that allows him to imagine a digital afterlife in the following terms:

The technology was imminent or not. It was semi-mythical. It was the natural next step. . . . an evolutionary advance that needed only the practical mapping of the nervous system onto digital memory. It would be the master thrust of cyber-capital, to extend the human experience toward infinity as a medium for corporate growth and investment, for the accumulation of profit and vigorous reinvestment. (207)

Again, the inseparability of technology and capital is worth noting; Eric’s fusion with the former by necessity also means that he fuses with the latter. This “master trust” of cyber-capitalism can thus be understood as a “semi-mythical” fantasy about an extreme manifestation of the ideology of technology, in which the subject in a rather literal way becomes embedded within the ideological apparatus and the hegemonic order of society.
Furthermore, expressions such as “the natural next step” and “an evolutionary advance”, emphasise how technology is masked by ideology as something neutral, inevitable, and even natural. As discussed in the section above, this naturalisation is, according to Althusser, the central function of ideology. What is more, the notion of technology as neutral is also reminiscent of Heidegger’s concerns on the matter. As reiterated by Valdez Moses, Heidegger argues that “we are delivered over [to technology] in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology (Heidegger 1).

The version of technological mortality denial portrayed in White Noise is no less extravagant. As Jack is exposed to The Airborne Toxic Event, his body is infested by the nerve agent Nyodene D and he receives a vaguely impeding death sentence from a computer technician who is part of the evacuation team:

I didn't say it. The computer did. The whole system says it. It's what we call a massive data-base tally. This doesn't mean anything is going to happen to you as such, at least not today or tomorrow. It just means you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that. (170)

Jack takes this conclusion to heart and later repeats it to his wife: “We are the sum total of our data, I told her, just as we are the sum total of our chemical impulses” (232). Thus, Murray and Jack, too, espouse what a dataist view of identity, albeit not in such an extreme fashion as Eric. However, just as in Eric’s case, the dataist view allows Jack to view death as a technical problem with a technological solution. This notion is reinforced by Murray’s advice:
You could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out. This is the whole point of technology. … It's what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies. But it's also life, isn't it? It prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out. New devices, new techniques every day. Lasers, masers, ultrasound. Give yourself up to it, Jack. Believe in it.

(328)

The idea of putting one’s faith in technology may appear rather commonplace. However, the fact that this notion does not give one pause could in itself be understood to speak to technology’s ideological pervasiveness; the religious connotations are so blatant that they almost go unnoticed. Murray even presents it to the allegedly dying Jack as an alternative to more traditional belief systems promoting the notion of life beyond death (328).

Dylar, an experimental drug designed to alleviate one’s fear of death is the ostensible solution that presents itself to Jack, striking him as a benevolent “Technology with a human face” (243). Much like Eric’s digital afterlife, the drug turns out to be a fiasco. The idea of taking a pill to solve one’s trouble is obviously satirising the tendency in contemporary culture to look for a quick (technological) fix: in this case, to a fundamental existential dilemma. However, that does not stop Jack from going on a manic quest to track down Willy Mink, the only man with a known supply of Dylar, and ending up shooting him (360). This uncharacteristic behaviour is largely driven by jealousy—Willy has had an affair with Jack’s wife—but nevertheless speaks to the extent to which mortality denial can be a driving force shaping belief and behaviour.
Conclusion

While *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* ostensibly relate to technology in rather different ways—the latter being futuristic and the former being emphatically quotidian—an analysis of the novels nevertheless shows that they share significant thematic undercurrents. Moreover, a juxtaposition of the two novels allows them to inform and enrich the reading of one another. *Cosmopolis* can in certain ways be understood as a thematic continuation of *White Noise*, in which the ideological power of technology is taken to the extreme. However, given DeLillo’s self-proclaimed ethos to capture the zeitgeist of his society as well as the nature his essayistic writing on the topic of technology, the conclusion can arguably be made that the superficially more extreme tendencies in *Cosmopolis* bordering on science fiction should be read as caricatures pointing to actual trends in contemporary culture. A corollary of this conclusion would be that the publication dates of the two novels take on increased significance; with eighteen years between them, the notion of *Cosmopolis* as a thematic continuation of *White Noise* is seemingly indicative of how DeLillo views the pace and trajectory of technology’s development in American culture.

The two respective protagonists both attribute an almost mystical aura to technological appliances and networks. A fruitful way of interpreting this tendency is to think of it as manifestations of the technological sublime. As Nye and Marx point out, the technological sublime has had a significant ideological function in the sense of providing America with a national narrative. The narrative of America as the bringer of the (technological) future is one that DeLillo himself emphasises in “In the Ruins of the Future”. However, in the two novels, the ideological implications of the technological sublime have less to do with national cohesion than it has to do with the promotion of capitalism. Thus, technology’s ideological function can be more comprehensively understood viewed in relation to the theories of Althusser.
While the term Ideological State Apparatus may be somewhat dated, technology does indeed function as an ISA in the two novels. This has the consequence that the two protagonists have their subjectivity shaped through interpellation by technological objects, that is, they receive their sense of self through interaction with technology. By virtue of being technologically dependant, their identities can thus, to varying degrees, be understood as posthuman. Specifically, Harari’s notion of dataism as the dominant posthumanist worldview is relevant in this regard, not least because it highlights an important theme in the two novels, namely that of humanist faith in the autonomous individual contra the posthuman dispersal of personal identity in technological networks. At the heart of the humanist worldview lies the belief that individuals are precisely in-dividual, that is, that they have an autonomous core which cannot be divided. However, the posthuman mindset displayed by both protagonists, which views personal identity as a collection of data, challenges this view.

In *White Noise* there is a sense that Jack is torn between a desire to embrace the dispersion of his identity generated through technological interpellation and a contradictory desire to preserve his individual autonomy. Ultimately, the latter arguably prevails. In *Cosmopolis*, however, Eric’s aim is to fuse with technology completely, and to thus attain a cyborgian identity, if not in a literal sense, then at least psychologically. With technology being inseparable from its ideological properties, Eric’s posthuman identity is inevitably coupled with a fusion with (capitalist) ideology. A corollary anxiety about obsolescence renders a desire in him contrary to that of Jack: instead of shedding the technological aspects of his identity, Eric fantasises about shedding his human biology in order to fully enter a disembodied state of virtual existence.

What is more, the manner in which the protagonists’ identities are shaped through ideological interpellation is one of several ways technology is ascribed qualities that
traditionally have been reserved for conventional religion. Jack and Eric receive a sense of personal value and meaning from technological objects much the same way a believer receives value and meaning from God. Thus, it is no coincidence that they regard certain technological objects as sublime and worthy of an almost religious reverence, laying the foundation of their posthumanist tendencies in the process.

Both protagonists perceive technology as indicative of some form of higher order or inevitable organisation of the world in accordance with which they strive to align their lives, which according to William James is the hallmark of religious belief. This echoes the notion of technology as the central piece to America’s faith and fate expressed by, among others, DeLillo himself. Moreover, both novels emphasise that technology in this regard is inseparable from capital, which reveals its central ideological position in the consolidation of the hegemonic order of society. Technology thus performs the same function in the novels as does organised religion according to Althusser.

The last significant way in which technology can be understood as substituting conventional religion is that it, in both novels, functions as the prime vehicle for mortality denial. The power that comes with the authority to deny death has arguably been the crown jewel in the ideological arsenals of religions throughout history, and its significance in the two novels is no exception in this regard.
Works Cited


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