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MEDIA MESSAGES

DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*

Finally, even our ideology critique misses its mark, because we have forgotten the critical fact that ideology too is a matter of form.

—Ellen Rooney, “Form and Contentment”

IN HIS Introduction to an anthology of essays on ideology critique, Slavoj Žižek notes that Marx’s classic formulation of ideological mystification—“they do not know it, but they are doing it”—no longer obtains. Instead, in today’s media-saturated world of savvy technophiles and ironic consumers, a more appropriate maxim would be “They know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it” (8). Take, for example, the movie *Josie and the Pussycats*, a 2001 release from Universal Studios updating the 1970s Archie comic about a crime-fighting girl band. In the movie, Pentagon officials collude with top executives from Megarecords to manipulate cultural trends and market corporate products to teenagers by planting subliminal messages on rock albums—an unholy union rendered “natural” by the refrain “what’s good for the economy is good for America.” Within the movie’s narrative, the government and corporate executives are evil while Josie and her band represent the voice of freedom and self-determination that liberates the teen-ing masses from such media manipulation. Over the course of the movie, the band moves from not knowing what they are doing—producing music that is deployed for commercial rather than artistic ends—to fully recognizing their ideological mystification. The plot thus describes a conventionally Marxist approach to breaking free from consumerist ideology.

Things get complicated, however, when we viewers of the film recognize that we are also susceptible to the subliminal brainwashing of a movie overflowing with product placements and peripheral advertising. Target,

Revlon, Cheer, Abercrombie & Fitch, USA Today, Amazon, McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, and many more have all agreed to lend their products and logos to the backdrop of a film ostensibly about the evils of a corporately saturated media landscape. The movie does not just perform this apparent hypocrisy; it points it out to us and insists that we recognize it. For example, the conclusion of the movie reveals that the government is shutting down the secret program because “research has shown” that brainwashing is more effective through movies than through music. At this moment of revelation, the words “Join the Army” flash quickly on the screen. In addition to such shameless marketing of the U.S. Army and countless other brands, the movie also works hard to sell itself, but only after being “transparent” about its own self-promoting shamelessness. For instance, the real-life product tie-ins that accompanied the movie’s release appear in the movie as product tie-ins that help the evil music executives make even more money. In effect, since hypocrisy and cynicism are not only the movie’s content but also its form, *Josie* demonstrates a Žižekian awareness about ideology’s own self-awareness.

Although this is all very funny (the directors’ commentary included on the DVD displays utter incredulity at the number of people who “never got the joke”), the humor ultimately functions as a tool for commercial ends. So why would consumers want to buy commodities that are explicitly revealed to be manipulations and lies? What has happened to our collective understanding of our own ideological mystification that leads advertising executives at transnational companies to think that it would be profitable to advertise their products in a movie that vilifies the very act of advertising in movies? I see three possible answers: exposing the audience to a product or logo, regardless of the ethical associations attached to it, can achieve all of an ad’s aims; or we are supposed to value a corporation’s sense of irony, its ability to be self-deprecating, and we will reward it by purchasing its products; or the ad consciously uses our recognition of its hypocrisy against us, convincing us that we know enough of the game to feel comfortable participating in it. Although each of these explanations has some truth to it, I would contend that the third, in which hypocrisy is rendered transparent in the service of an even larger hypocrisy, compels us to identify a way to talk about the ideological tendentiousness of contemporary political, cultural, and social claims without simply reinscribing, reversing, or being appropriated by that ideology. We need to find a way to straighten out ideology’s circular and iterative structures and make them meaningful rather than pathologically ironic.

Surrounded by television, commercialism, and the constant media stream of global capital, this is precisely the problem confronting the

Gladney family (Jack, Babette, and their children, Heinrich, Denise, Steffie, and Wilder) in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. First published in 1984, DeLillo's famously humorous depiction of suburban apocalypse was landmark for arguing that the "system" controls not only our present but also our future.¹ Lest we think that time, given its tendency to march resolutely forward into the future, will straighten out ideology's self-reflexivity, DeLillo's novel describes precisely how ideology enlists the future to merely perpetuate its control over the meaning of our lives. Although the future in *White Noise* takes the shape of an irrational fear of and anxiety about death, its weighty presence is quite real, most prominently in the form of a deadly cloud that hovers over the city after a chemical spill forces the Gladneys and other residents to flee. During the evacuation, Jack, a professor of Hitler Studies at the local college, is exposed to the chemical cloud. DeLillo leaves the moment of exposure ambiguous—the event may actually be a non-event—but Jack lives his life *as if* he had been exposed, much like the United States spent the Cold War acting *as if* the U.S.S.R. could annihilate us at any moment even though, as we have since learned, the United States consistently overstated Soviet capabilities.² Adding to the ambiguity of exposure, no one can tell Jack what the effects will be or how long they will take to appear. Nevertheless, his doctors agree that his exposure has made his death both immanent and imminent. Hovering over the latter two-thirds of the novel, this "airborne toxic event" greatly amplifies what is already a quite pronounced and paranoid fear of death within the Gladney clan.

Thematically, *White Noise* comments directly on the Cold War's peculiar warping of temporal experience, particularly the apocalyptic temporality of the bomb and the more agonizing temporality of waiting created by the pervasive threat of the bomb. Written at a time in U.S. history when the government could find only science-fictional (Star Wars missile defense) or illegal (Iran-Contra) solutions to its Cold War paranoia, *White Noise* portrays one man's attempt to come to terms with his temporally skewed and ideologically saturated reality. Just as Americans feared nuclear death from the errant push of a button, Jack both knows that he could die at any moment and does not know when that moment will come. This crisis of temporal experience simultaneously foreshortens and distends his temporal horizon, rendering the future both obsolete and indefinitely deferred; his future is preempted both because it could end tomorrow and because it could last forever. In short, Jack needs to realign his sense of time with his sense of reality.

Complicating things, however, various media forms ideologically exploit Jack's paranoia and ensure that his fear of an unknown future

will always preempt any attempt to be at home in the present. While his wife, Babette, takes a magical pill named Dylar to numb her own fear of imminent death, Jack's inability to know the content of his future leaves him paralyzed with uncertainty and fear. In response, he gradually allows a totalizing system of commercial ideology to mediate the content and meaning of his life, allowing "the system" to preempt his future so that he can live more comfortably with his fear in the present. In representing the Gladneys' best attempts to cope with these challenges to temporal experience, DeLillo effectively demonstrates that ideology's temporal dimension enhances its power, allowing it to suture its subjects all the more firmly into its network of fabricated meanings. DeLillo's injection of impending apocalypse into an otherwise typically media-saturated landscape effectively proves that merely demystifying the media-driven ideologies of the present is insufficient for obtaining subjective freedom and authenticity. Instead, his diagnostic depiction of the interaction between technology and ideology smartly demands a rethinking of ideology in temporal terms.

It is not surprising, then, that most scholars have argued that DeLillo's work critiques and criticizes the systems that render the Gladneys passive consumers of their culture. Nevertheless, I will be arguing the opposite. On a formal level, DeLillo cannot cope with contemporary ideology's preemptive logic any better than Jack. Just as Jack abdicates the production of meaning in his life to ideologies of commercialism and technology, the text's didactic narrative form preempts time, precluding readers from producing knowledge of the text. In effect, the novel's form and style irreparably compromise the promise of its message, and the consistent treatment of *White Noise* as a text that paradigmatically diagnoses an ailing post-modern culture only establishes the work as a formal symptom of the very maladies it seeks to diagnose. Put in Ellen Rooney's terms, *White Noise*'s narrative form "is what theory or ideology critique has always already anticipated": it tells us what we already know about ourselves, preempting our own futures in the same way that we witness its preemption of Jack's (34). *White Noise* articulates the imperative to unify time and consciousness by incorporating time into our process of understanding the world; but to the extent that the text itself fails to produce anything more than a static, ideologically skewed knowledge of time, it also reveals its own formal inability to produce knowledge of our world in a way that does justice to the radical ideology critique that its critics so clearly want to discover in it. Foreclosing a reader's access to time and profoundly compromising her ability to critique contemporary culture, *White Noise* exem-

plifies Edelman's lament that the future only reinforces the status quo and offers no productive hope for true political change.

"Don DeLillo Speaks for Me"

My argument here counters the multitude of literary critics seduced into believing that DeLillo's work speaks as the *pièce de résistance* of the post-modern age. To cite one influential perspective, Tom LeClair avers that DeLillo's oeuvre functions as a totalizing system which, far from perpetuating "the system," actually "presents a comprehensive critique of the ideologies—scientific, literary, and political—in which he and his readers exist" (xi). In a similar vein, Timothy Aubry describes *White Noise* as "a text which immerses the reader in the near-deafening white noise of American consumer culture, while seeking new modes of subjectivity, resistance, and agency within and through that state of immersion." More specifically, Aubry claims that DeLillo's text "resists the linear, focused consciousness which is rooted in a capitalist ideology of productivity and efficiency" and "seems to resist the numbed, death-like state of perpetual distraction produced by our hyper-stimulating media and consumer culture, insofar as it involves a reawakening of the senses, a recognition of the uncanniness of the ordinary, a defamiliarization of the everyday sensory environment" (148–49).

Indeed, since its publication, scholars and critics have persistently read *White Noise* as a smart portrayal of a contemporary American culture psychologically assaulting its citizens with a barrage of media and technology. There have been thematic readings focusing on television, the tabloids, technology, and Hitler Studies.³ And there have been generic readings exhibiting much hand-wringing about the proper postmodernity of DeLillo's novels.⁴ Two book-length examinations of DeLillo's literary career, Mark Osteen's *American Magic and Dread* (2000) and David Cowart's *Don DeLillo* (2002), rarely vacillate from the party line.⁵ This overwhelming response to *White Noise* not only tells us something about the novel, but it also tells us something about ourselves, revealing the political commitments and attitudes of a dominant contingent of literary scholars. More disturbing, the nearly universal praise for *White Noise* points toward a certain level of bad faith at the heart of DeLillo scholarship, as if many literary scholars read his novels to confirm what they think they already know about the world. This effectively reduces the future to the present and excises the temporality of the reading experience, an excision that cannot

help doing the same to the form of the text being read. Such concerted representational readings of *White Noise* jettison the novel's formal literariness—the way the text produces its meaning—and instead eulogize DeLillo's uncanny ability to cut to the core of our ideologically mystified world.

But what makes scholars think that DeLillo's smart and satirical representations—his recognition of just how messed up our world is—should qualify as “critique,” “resistance,” or “reawakening” in the first place? Such interpretations clearly rely on a conventional understanding of ideology as a substitutive veil or illusion that occludes and shrouds the real, something akin to Marx's description of the masses who do not know what they are doing and need someone to show them the error of their ways. In such a scenario, we might say that ideology functions as a blanket substitution for the real—action and meaning are isomorphic. But *White Noise* takes this definition and adds a Žižekian twist to it, portraying characters who know very well what they do but continue to do it. In this scenario, ideology functions correspondently. Instead of becoming one, the two terms of the ideological relation (reality and illusion) remain two, and we are permitted to see how ideology functions. Its differential gap of correspondence generously lets us in on its joke, but the very act of letting us in vitiates any potency gained from having recognized exactly how we are being duped.

Any reading of *White Noise* that sees the representation of ideologically mystified subjects as somehow resistant to said ideology has thus missed the significance of the Žižekian twist. Intending to portray how ideology “works,” such readings assume a position outside ideology, mistakenly adhering to a substitutive as opposed to a correspondent model of ideology. In the substitutive model, recognizing ideology undoes the substitution by positing a space of resistance external to ideology. But as *White Noise* itself contends, there is no such external space, and our belief that there is one only traps us inside ideology all the more firmly. Indeed, the characters in DeLillo's novel recognize their ideological mystification, but this only leaves them more disempowered. For example, during the family's repeated trips to the grocery store (where even the fruit is “self-conscious”), Jack displays a hypersensitivity to the invisible force fields mediating his experience. Murray, one of Jack's colleagues at the college, speaks the following (although Murray usually voices the “knowing very well what one does” position, Jack's narrative quotes him as a credible commentator on contemporary American consumer culture):

Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the

letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served. (37–38)

Here we see the text's characters both fully aware of the mediated nature of their experience and in full recognition of the impotence of that awareness. Although Jack expresses some anxiety about this state of affairs while Murray follows Žižek's exhortation to "enjoy your symptom," neither doubts the mediating structures of his world. Regardless of how they feel about these "veils of mystery," however, the characters internal to DeLillo's text are not empowered by their awareness of this gap between appearance and reality. In fact, the more they recognize the gap, the less grounding they have for a substantial, potent critique of the system that binds them.

The much-cited conversation between Jack and his son Heinrich regarding the epistemological certainty of the proposition "It is raining now" exemplifies the hollowness of recognizing ideology's correspondent function. While Jack drives Heinrich to school, his son challenges him:

"You're so sure that's rain. How do you know it's not sulfuric acid from factories across the river? How do you know it's not fallout from a war in China? You want an answer here and now. Can you prove, here and now, that this stuff is rain? How do I know that what you call rain is really rain? What *is* rain anyway?"

"It's the stuff that falls from the sky and gets you what is called wet."

"I'm not wet. Are you wet?"

...

"First rate," I told him. "A victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos. Science's finest hour." (24)

The incongruity between the truth of the proposition about rain and the truth of the rain as it exists in the sensuous world can be read as a problem of correspondence. I suggest that the gap of uncertainty residing between the world and the proposition about the world is actually a highly delimited space that gives the interpellated subject (in this case, Heinrich) a false sense of agency and choice, or even a sense of liberation via contingency. I say this sense is false, however, because under the influence of a highly technologized ideology, that space serves only to bind the subject to ideology even more. This deceptively accommodating space should be read as ideology's answer, via symmetrical reversal, to the elevated status of con-

tingency and chaos in twentieth-century science and technology (e.g., the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, quantum mechanics, or chaos theory). The technologized ideology that dominates *White Noise* takes contingency into account and uses it to serve its own ends. The space opened up by correspondence, the space that is “difference itself,” proves to be the most controlling factor ideology has going for it. This discussion between Jack and Heinrich demonstrates that calling attention to the gap of correspondence, to the fact of contingency, only leads to a more exacerbated belaboring of the two ideological terms (real rain and illusory rain), not to a consideration of any actual difference.

Jack’s trip to the ATM offers another instance in which a character in *White Noise* succumbs to this gap of correspondence. As he performs his transaction, he speculates, “The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with” (46). In this instance we “see” that the pure invisibility of technological ideology in fact heightens the recognition of mediation even more. The fact that Jack can recognize the system’s invisibility, which effectively renders it not that invisible, is the only reason that it can be considered disquieting; if it were truly invisible, it would be impossible even to describe it as such. DeLillo here provides another example of ideology’s correspondent function, and crucially, Jack’s awareness of correspondence is the very thing that gives the system its power over him. Correspondence creates a highly circumscribed space in which we as subjects still experience agency and choice when, in fact, choice, under the reign of a static, highly structured ideology, is always a non-choice. Ideology no longer occludes the real; rather, correspondent ideology uses our ability to recognize our own distance from the real to its own occluding ends. Correspondence diverts the subject’s attention away from the fact that if Jack needed to decide which of the two figures were his “real” account balance (Jack tells us that the figure on the screen “roughly corresponded” to his own figure, which he achieved through “tormented arithmetic”), then “the system’s” figure would always win out as “the real.”

Seduced by Congruence

If, in each of these examples, a character’s awareness functions as the most seductive tool in ideology’s arsenal, then why would our awareness of their awareness somehow count as resistance? How, in other words, does DeLillo’s elegant diagnosis of “the system” actually function for his readers? Can *White Noise*’s revelation of ideology’s self-revealing ever provide a space for meaningful critique? What should a reader do with the sentence “The

system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with”? If recognizing the system’s invisibility simply gives the system that much more control, then using his narrator to make this invisibility visible to his readers in turn gives DeLillo that much more of a didactic grip over the meaning of his narrative. Despite the satirical mode in which DeLillo represents “the system,” the compulsively over-analytical, self-interpreting form of such representations renders them not just impotent against but complicit with the system against which he ostensibly fights. This problem is a function of narration, stemming from Jack’s all-too-knowing depiction of “the veils of mystery” that mediate his life. Simply put, our perspective as readers is so closely linked to that of Jack’s first-person narration that his knowledge becomes tantamount to our knowledge. And although Jack is not omniscient, his knowledge of the ideological layers encasing his world is so self-aware that his understanding of ideology’s tricks suffocates the novel’s readers. Crucially, this oppressive self-awareness has a temporal dimension as well. Jack’s anxiety about his future is directly responsible for his willingness to be absorbed into the systems that determine meaning in his life. In an attempt to control his fear of impending death, he allows the future to be preempted and reduced to a flattened presentness. When his calculation of his account balance closely corresponds to the ATM’s, therefore, he is just glad that he does not have to worry about the future: “Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval” (46). DeLillo’s text affords its readers the same support and approval. Transformed into just another ideologically overdetermined object, *White Noise* preempts our ability to participate in its production of meaning, overdetermines our modes of knowing, and flatters our own self-awareness, all while permitting just enough hermeneutic wiggle-room to allow us to feel subjective, resistant, and active.⁶

Of course, as the ATM scene demonstrates, the novel displays a sharp wit and wry humor that makes much of *White Noise* funny in a very silly, absurd way. Although the humor alleviates a certain bleak dourness to much of the novel’s critique, it absolutely fails to rend the “veils of mystery” that occlude via their own revelation. Because the work’s parody and satire function knowingly, the same overdetermined relation between text and reader persists. Instead of surprising us, the humor only reinforces our knowledge of what the characters are doing and of how we read what they say and do. Letting us in on the joke allows the deeper implications of the joke to stand, because, just as the characters have a structural knowledge of how ideology mediates their world, the knowingness of the humor in *White Noise* is also structural. When we read the conversation between

Jack and Heinrich, the humor comes not from some unexpected thing that one of them says but rather from our ability to recognize this joke as one of those jokes that depends on the incommensurability between the literal and figural properties of language. (It is no accident that Jack interprets “figures” at the ATM.) In laughing at the joke, we gain the circular satisfaction of self-knowledge, but we only validate the correspondent structure even more.

And so, humorous or not, the postmodern aphorisms suffusing *White Noise* announce the text’s meaning before the reader has a chance to produce it. Echoing a predictable Baudrillard essay, for example, Jack and his colleague Murray visit “the most photographed barn in America.” Murray articulates the experience in words that apply equally well to *White Noise*: “Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. . . . A religious experience in a way, like all tourism”; “They are taking pictures of taking pictures”; and “What was the barn like before it was photographed? . . . What did it look like . . . ? We can’t answer these questions because we’ve read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures” (12–13). Famously, this is what DeLillo’s book is about, but troublingly, this is also what his book has come to do and mean for its readers.⁷ Our relation to the text is structurally identical to the tourists’ relation to the barn; the form of *White Noise* does the very thing represented in its content.

This seductive congruence between *White Noise*’s content (the overdetermined reality of a contemporary American family) and its form (the overdetermined narration that relies on a reader’s prior knowledge) offers us another way to understand correspondent ideology. In the same way that hypocrisy and cynicism are both the content and the form of *Josie and the Pussycats*, so too are the content and form of *White Noise* sufficiently separate for us to get its humor but also sufficiently congruent for us to accept the meaning as it is delivered. Late in the novel Jack encounters a group of nuns who embody this exact relation between the content and form of religious belief. After Jack engages them in a conversation about the nature of belief, the nuns explain to him that nonbelievers are never entirely without belief because they at least believe that others, like the nuns, still do believe. One nun didactically explains, “It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. . . . This is why we are here. . . . To embody old things, old beliefs. . . . If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse” (318). As the “embodiment” of belief, the nuns constitute its form, and as the thing in which nonbelievers believe, the nuns constitute belief’s content. Functioning like the closed circuit of an ideological system, the nuns control and determine the terms of others’ belief. Jack is shocked to learn, for instance, that the nuns

do not believe in God any more than he does; the nuns are merely objects that ideologically structure, support, and determine the nature of everyone else's belief in God. Just as the tourists suffer a "spiritual surrender" to the barn's status as "most photographed," a notion that determines both the form and content of their photographs, so too do nonbelievers surrender their spirituality to the nuns who constitute the form and content of the nonbelievers' belief. Meanwhile, outside the text, we as readers surrender the meaning-making process to *White Noise*'s didactic knowingness, which asserts itself as both the form and content of our reading experience.⁸ Like Jack's own overdetermined reality, there is little question regarding how the narrative proceeds or what it means. Readers are as interpellated as the supermarket shoppers who, in the novel's final scene, try to read the ingredients on their products even though "in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see" because "the terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly" (326).

But perhaps DeLillo has chosen to heighten his text's didactic self-interpretation precisely because such formal overdetermination also constitutes the thematic content of the novel. Maybe DeLillo wants not only to make his argument, but to enact it as well. Suppose *White Noise* is an even greater work of literature than we have previously considered precisely because it not only says what it does, but also does what it says. Even if this congruence were intentional, when expunged of temporality it can be as dangerous as it is elegant, a point nicely made by Murray's explanation of technology's ideological duplicity: "It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. . . . It's what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies. But it's also life. . . . It prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out" (285). As "what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies," technology constitutes the content of our world while purging it of any sense of time. And as "life," technology becomes the form through which we know that content, but it falsifies the temporal experience of living by replacing real organs with fake ones. Therefore, whether it leads to immortality or to extinction, it robs us of a life lived in and through time.

And this is precisely ideology's crowning achievement: it tricks its subjects into worrying over the two terms of the relation ("immortality" or "extinction"), paralyzing them with the inability to determine what is real and what is illusion. This preoccupation with the symmetrical difference between two terms like "reality" and "illusion" (a difference I call difference¹), effectively deflects our attention from an asymmetrical and thus

potentially temporalized difference (what I call difference²). This second and more fundamental difference is the difference between (a) the content terms themselves and (b) the formal difference between them. Perpetually vacillating between two symmetrical content terms ignores the temporal experience of living. When content and form are not conflated, however, they interact productively in a way that includes temporality.⁹ I schematize the difference between these differences this way:

- *Symmetrical difference between two content terms:* Term¹ (Difference¹) Term²
- *Asymmetrical difference between content and form:* Terms^{1&2} (Difference²) Difference¹

By conflating its content and form, ideology uses the superficial difference¹ between the terms to deflect attention away from the constitutive difference² between the terms and the first difference. The first difference leaves the two terms interchangeable, their relation remains symmetrically reversible, and content and form remain seductively congruent. The two terms of the second difference are not interchangeable, their relation is asymmetrical, and content and form are noncongruent. Put less abstractly, we could fill in the schema this way:

- Reality (Gap of Correspondent Ideology) Illusion
- Reality and Illusion (Time) Gap of Correspondent Ideology

Be they life and death, reality and illusion, or the two different balances of his ATM account, Jack focuses on the content of the terms which correspondent ideology has already conjoined like two sides of the same coin. Instead, he needs to identify the “other” of correspondent ideology itself, a foundational difference grounded in time’s pliable form.

So what prevents Jack from moving beyond his symmetrical oscillation between content terms such as reality and artifice, immortality and extinction? The problem is that any attempt to reconcile this first difference by countering one term with another simply reinscribes the form of that original difference; it would be like understanding the difference between reality and artifice by speaking of real artifice and artificial reality, which could in turn be understood only by speaking about an artificially real artifice and a really artificial reality. Difference¹ (a difference in representational content) remains susceptible to such endless reversals because it functions as a structural difference immanent to content. This difference¹ is negligible and superficial because the two terms are just two parts

of a single terminological identity—the reality-artifice continuum, for instance—and this is why ideology runs no risk in revealing difference¹ to its subjects. Difference², however, is a difference of nonidentity and asymmetry; it is a temporal difference created by the interaction between textual content and form that defines the reading process and produces a text's meaning. When time is preempted, this relation cannot retain its asymmetry, and form is no longer the “enabling condition of reading,” as Rooney puts it. Heinrich actually comes close to discovering a temporally grounded nonidentity rather than just uncertainty when he notes, with regard to the proposition “It is raining now,” that “‘Now’ comes and goes as soon as you say it” (23). Here Heinrich identifies a specific temporality to the form of the proposition that renders it necessarily asymmetrical to its propositional content. As a precocious teenager, however, he finds blanket uncertainty much more appealing than the temporalized nonidentities of productive change.

Continuing with the argument between Jack and Heinrich, we should note that Heinrich's reveling in the equivocating uncertainty of difference¹ explicitly undermines the sense of time that difference² requires. He claims, for example, “There's no past, present or future outside our own mind. The so-called laws of motion are a big hoax.” Although time and motion are actually responsible for producing the very uncertainty about which he is so thrilled, Heinrich here contends that the fact of contingency and uncertainty renders time and its passage obsolete. A relentless and giddy nominalist, he avers that past, present, and future exist only in our verbs, and he refuses to admit the truth of the proposition “It is raining now”: “If you want to talk about this precise locality while you're in a vehicle that's obviously moving, then I think that's the trouble with this discussion” (24). More confrontationally, Heinrich asks his father, “How can I say it's raining now if your so-called ‘now’ becomes ‘then’ as soon as I say it?” (23). But Heinrich only treats temporality and motion as vacant sites of *discursive* unknowability; he does not understand the temporalized difference² that they insert into phenomenological experience—the time it takes to say the word “now,” for instance—to be determinate. Or, as Hegel would tell Heinrich, temporality is not a hoax just because “now” always becomes “then”; in fact, the opposite is true. As Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology*, the “now” is not rendered untrue because of the fact of linguistic mediation; it simply has a new truth. “The Now, as it is pointed out to us, is Now that *has been*, and this is its truth; it has not the truth of *being*. Yet this much is true, that it has been. But what essentially *has been* is, in fact, not an essence that *is*; *it is not*” (106). Time's negation of “the Now” is what Hegel calls a determinate negation (a negation of a negation). For Heinrich, however,

the contingency created by linguistic mediation means that anything goes; his is an indeterminate negation. Hegel would thus tell Heinrich that time's negation of "the Now" actually grounds a relation of nonidentity that constitutes the very impossibility of ever gaining epistemological certainty of the nowness of now. Temporality and movement are not precluded by the fact that every positing of a "now" is always doomed to become a "then"; instead they are proved and determined by that fact.

The Gladneys' response to the problem of *déjà vu* highlights their inability to grasp this important distinction. As the family sits at home listening to the radio report on the toxic spill, they learn that *déjà vu* is one possible symptom of exposure. While driving to the evacuation shelter, Jack's daughter Steffie experiences *déjà vu* when she sees a wreck on the side of the road. Because Steffie has displayed all of the previously identified symptoms of exposure, but only after she learns about them on the radio, her parents do not know whether she is really experiencing *déjà vu* or if she just thinks she is because the radio told her she was supposed to. Of course, the time lag between Steffie's hearing a new symptom announced on the radio and her experiencing that symptom mirrors the retroactive temporal structure of *déjà vu* itself. Jack notes that she was late manifesting sweaty palms and nausea as symptoms, and he wonders if she is "late again with *déjà vu*" (125). But to be late with *déjà vu* is itself a version of *déjà vu*, of living or enacting an experience after the fact of its original occurrence. Here we see another instance of the content-form circle described above: *déjà vu* is both the content of symptomatic knowledge and the way such knowledge comes to be known. Jack therefore wonders, "Did Steffie truly imagine she'd seen the wreck before [i.e., is her *déjà vu* a "real" thing] or did she only imagine she'd imagined it [i.e., is she symptomatically having *déjà vu* of *déjà vu*]? Is it possible to have a false perception of an illusion? Is there a true *déjà vu* and a false *déjà vu*?" (125–26). The same symmetrical iteration occurs when Jack asks Babette if she has ever taught Steffie about *déjà vu*. Babette then experiences *déjà vu* of that conversation: "This happened before. . . . Eating yogurt, sitting here, talking about *déjà vu*" (133). These iterations of *déjà vu* exemplify the tendency to treat time's passage as the basis for uncertainty and undecidability, as Heinrich does when he contends that driving in the car makes "now" meaningless. In effect, the meaning of the present paralyzes itself with the possibility that it will mean something different in the future. But as Hegel instructs, that does not make it untrue—just temporally true. Disinclined to shift from an epistemological to a phenomenological framework, however, Jack fails to grasp this temporal difference, asking instead, "Is a symptom a sign or a thing? What is a thing and how do we know it's not another thing?" (126). We

should ask these same questions of *White Noise* itself: what if, for over twenty years, the text has been treated as a thing (i.e., as a revelatory representation of the postmodern condition) when it was actually only ever a symptom of that thing? Or put more generously, what is *White Noise*'s temporal truth?

Critiquing Ideology Critique

The meaningfulness and potency of critique—be it scholarly, cultural, or downright riotous—is at stake in this attempt to figure out whether *White Noise* is a thing or merely a symptom. Theorists of ideology have long understood the tendency of any such analysis to become complicit with its object of critique, and many have thus tried to identify a nondiscursive difference immune to the kind of reflexive symmetry that transforms *White Noise* into a symptom of the very ideology it diagnoses. Although most of Louis Althusser's work up through the self-criticism of the 1970s addresses ideological reflexivity with structural metaphors that merely reiterate the problem's symmetrical reversals, in his quirky 1966 essay "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract," Althusser abandons the equivocating structure of spatialized metaphors to identify instead a constitutive absence at the center of all representation. Claiming that Cremonini paints difference where others paint only similarity, Althusser argues that this absolute difference—a present absence that cannot be reversed into pure presence—provides a language that can adequately critique ideology. Manifesting the negative through art allows Cremonini to resist a representational ideology that paints only the nominal terms or objects that constitute a given relation. Instead, Cremonini paints relations by painting "visible connexions that depict by their disposition, the *determinate absence* which governs them" (237). Only by painting a "disposition" to a relation—the "how" of form instead of the "what" of content—can the relation be truly manifest, and Althusser argues that this allows Cremonini to paint and critique ideological structures simultaneously. While Althusser's insistence on the determinacy of this absence marks a crucial insight in any attempt to escape ideology's circularity, the essay is not entirely clear about how such determinacy is achieved. To the extent that it refuses to be conflated with representational content, this is clearly a difference², but Althusser does not identify any asymmetry that would permanently defend it against such conflation. To my mind, a nondiscursive, asymmetrical difference like temporal form is necessary for establishing the solid determinacy of any absence, difference, or negation.

Indeed, absence alone easily loses its “determinacy” and slips into reflexive difference, as it does in Paul Ricoeur’s articulation of the “is/is not” function of metaphor. In “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” for instance, Ricoeur explains that a metaphor’s meaning depends as much on the dissimilarities between the tenor and vehicle as it does on their similarities. For the many theologians who have appropriated this idea, the “is” suppresses the “is not” to create a new, more powerful way of seeing the world.¹⁰ Ricoeur’s primary argument in this piece, however, is that metaphor’s “is not” function can never be entirely concealed and should instead be understood as a foundational present absence at the heart of all metaphor. Like Cremonini’s art, Ricoeur’s open-ended theory of metaphor does not succumb to the naïveté of transparent representation because the metaphor’s content terms never fully absorb and reduce its negative, “is-not” form. More problematically, however, the “is not” in Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor can never be a necessary, asymmetrical difference in the same way that Althusser says Cremonini’s art depicts a “determinate absence.” The ways in which love is a rose and the ways in which it is not are neither immanent to nor necessary for the metaphor “Love is a rose.” Given the constant presence of the “is not,” any metaphor’s tenor and vehicle could easily switch places. That is, because the difference of the “is not” lacks determinant necessity, “A rose is love” is just as meaningful as “Love is a rose.” Consequently, the formal difference at the heart of metaphor remains a reversible, discursive difference; it is a symmetrical difference¹, not an asymmetrical difference².

Similarly, in the shadow of an overdetermined, apocalyptic event horizon, the characters in *White Noise* cannot distinguish reality from illusion, the literal from the figurative. All of their tenors can be vehicles and all of their vehicles can be tenors. Instead of functioning as a necessarily directed, meaningful departure from the tenor, the vehicle simply mirrors the tenor in a never-ending vacillation of reflection, creating a world of reflexive signification with both too much and not enough meaningful direction. In short, necessity has abandoned the tropological relations of the Gladneys’ world. In terms of ideology, such interchangeability ensures that reality and ideological illusion metaphorize each other, producing a self-contained structure that prevents time from taking any part in the process of figuration. As a potential source of asymmetrical difference and thus of determinate as opposed to reflexive meaning, these mutual metaphors necessarily purge time from their relations.

Describing ideology as a concept covering over a foundational aporia, specifically the aporia of symmetrical difference that lies at the center of

metaphor and of language itself, Étienne Balibar's work unites the problems of ideology and metaphor. Balibar explains that for Marx and Engels, "the concept of ideology . . . is ultimately constituted by a denial of the essentially metaphoric nature of language" (167). It reasonably follows, then, that a theory of metaphor like Ricoeur's, which reveals and engages the constitutive aporia of metaphor, can model productive ideology critique. Balibar warns against this approach, however, noting the need for a theory of ideology that remains insusceptible to the "philosophical symmetry of truth and illusion" because each new theory of ideology, like ideology itself, "reproduces in its own way the same symmetry" (156–57). Because discursive difference is symmetrically reversible rather than determinately asymmetrical—that is, because it means as much for love to be a rose as it does for a rose to be love—revealing the aporias that ideology conceals is a circular and ineffective answer to ideological mystification. As *White Noise* has illustrated, recognizing the metaphoricity of language does not negate ideology—it only reinscribes it because metaphor's reversible structure makes it that much more susceptible to ideological manipulation.

Slavoj Žižek offers similar warnings in "The Spectre of Ideology," writing that "the concept of ideology must be disengaged from the 'representationalist' problematic: *ideology has nothing to do with 'illusion,'* with a mistaken, distorted representation of its social content" (7). Žižek reworks the concept, explaining: "ideology is not all; it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, *but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality*" (17).¹¹ While Althusser treats this empty space as a negatively determined structural relation with the world and Balibar locates it in language's inherent metaphoricity, Žižek goes on to identify the empty space of critique as a primordially "repressed real." Although Žižek's renunciation of representationalism is useful, he does not meet Balibar's criterion of asymmetry: his definition of ideology—the masses know very well what they do but continue to do it—betrays an inherently meta-epistemological reflexivity to his thinking. To be sure, all three of these ideology theorists suggest that as long as the empty space required for socio-cultural critique remains symmetrically metaphorical or representationally positive, the relation between what and how something is said will be ignored while the relation between what is said and what is meant will be irremediably confused. And yet, despite this common call for determinate absence, none locates a nondiscursive difference that straightens out ideology's circular and iterative structures and makes them meaningful.

Preempted and Aleatory Futures

While the Gladneys suffer the same dilemma that these ideology theorists encounter, it seems that the answer to the Gladneys' problem is precisely the thing trapping them in ideology's cycle of mystification and revelation: the future. Time, starkly represented in the novel as unknowable futurity, surely offers a nondiscursive, asymmetrical difference that precludes the reinscription of ideology's symmetrical logic. And yet, as I noted earlier in describing the Cold War's unique warping of temporal experience, the unknown functions here as a resounding presence, not as an absence that life moves into and fills up over time. The Gladneys know the unknowableness of their future so well that they could never even begin to access the aleatory future that someone like Elizabeth Grosz describes. This, in turn, saddles the Gladneys with two content terms, life and death, and the significance of their lives vacillates between those two poles rather than moving forward in time. The Gladneys know the future's uncertainty so certainly that they hypostatize it as the only thing that they do know until it overdetermines their present lives. Jack's exposure to the "airborne toxic event" literalizes this retrograde oppression from the future as we see when Jack explains to Murray, "I've got death inside me. It's just a question of whether or not I can outlive it. It has a life span of its own" (150). Of course, Jack's paradoxical notion of outliving death only reinforces the fact that he is going to die, suggesting the impossibility of ever escaping from the life-death system bracketing his existence. Ultimately, because the future is so frightfully overdetermined in *White Noise*, its potential open-endedness does not sufficiently produce an asymmetrical difference or empty space immune to ideology and its reversals, and it instead looms on the horizon as an oppressive presence: "The question of dying . . . cures us of our innocence of the future" (15).

Just as Deleuze cautions against the logic of possibility that merely reproduces the future in the image of the present, and just as Edelman rejects the child as the symbol of productive change over time, *White Noise* points us away from treating the future as necessarily asymmetrical to the present. Instead, as we have seen throughout the novel, even temporal experience easily succumbs to ideology's constant reversal of known and unknown. The negative example that *White Noise* provides thus suggests the need to find temporal difference somewhere other than in future possibility. We might, for instance, turn to the present, a temporality that only Wilder, the Gladneys' youngest child, inhabits.

Throughout the novel, the immediacy of Wilder's performative presentness emerges as a temporality that might solve the Gladneys' overde-

terminated relation to the future. Wilder escapes the representational paradigm in favor of this performative one because he is prelingual: without language he cannot be knowing like the other characters, and because he is unknowing, he has no problem accepting the present as it is. Despite this nonreflexive and thus nonhypostatized relation to temporality, however, we should be suspicious of whatever solutions or resistance he might offer to ideological reversal. After all, Wilder is a precommunicative toddler, and he must go to the discouraging extremes of sublime unintelligibility and self-endangerment to break from the overdetermined circles of meaning that plague both the novel's characters and its readers. For example, early in the narrative, Wilder, whose vocabulary has "stalled at twenty-five words," cries rhythmically for seven consecutive hours. No one knows what has prompted the perpetual yowling, and no one knows its meaning. While sitting in the car with him for over an hour, Jack reverently contends, "He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness." Later Jack speculates, "[H]e had disappeared inside this wailing noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together *perform* some reckless wonder of intelligibility" (78; my emphasis). Here the impenetrable form of Wilder's nonlinguistic communication makes meaning and intelligibility a matter of performance. Unable to inhabit this performative mode, however, Jack notes at the chapter's conclusion that Wilder had been in "a place where things are said . . . which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions" (79). As a model of meaning making, then, the seven-hour scream runs up against the limits of sublimity, and performance remains enigmatic.

Equally performative and, to my mind, equally unintelligible, the novel concludes with Wilder's daring tricycle ride across the highway. In this scene Wilder rides across six lanes of traffic, seemingly mesmerized and oblivious to the pleas of two female observers and a packed interstate of cars swerving and honking at him. His actions are direct and resolute, and he pays no attention to anything outside himself until he falls off his tricycle, tumbles down an embankment into a ditch of muddy water, and starts crying (322–23). Unsurprisingly, standard interpretations of this scene tend to view Wilder as a redemptive figure, ventriloquizing Murray's claim that Wilder's ignorance of death makes him uniquely powerful among the living. Mark Osteen tentatively argues, for instance, that Wilder's wild ride "may even symbolize the possibility of reincarnation" or "the possibility of redemption beyond the body" (189). Similarly, David Cowart reads the event as "a metaphor for the precarious and doomed passage of

the living among the dead, whose great congress they must eventually join” (81).

While these readings view Wilder’s ignorance as a simple lack of knowledge, a function of his age, he actually appears deeply knowing throughout the novel. Gazing mysteriously into the oven door or the car radio, he is not blankly stupid, but rather sees and knows something more than the other characters could ever imagine. Because no one knows what he knows, however, his journey across the interstate remains radically underdetermined, aleatory, and contingent. It belongs exclusively to the performative temporality of the immediate present and is without predictive or retrospective overdetermination. If we think of Wilder’s aleatory ride across the highway as analogous to Gary Saul Morson’s real-time model of reading, then Wilder represents the failure of that model: the ostensibly very knowing Wilder reveals that suppressing the unavoidable fact of knowledge and knowingness for the sake of surprise necessarily renders the reading experience incommunicable. Tellingly, his uninterpretable yet apparently meaningful actions reduce his observers to the nondiscursive realm of gesticulating performance: although “they knew this picture did not belong to the hurtling consciousness of the highway,” the drivers “could not quite comprehend” what they were witnessing and are only able to veer and honk. Similarly, the two women watching “the process unfolding before them” can only speak like “foreigners reduced to simple phrases,” waving their arms wildly, searching for a way to communicate meaning, until they give up and watch silently “outside the event” (322–23).

Wilder’s screaming and his tricycle ride are perhaps the only two moments in *White Noise* when knowledge is under- rather than overdetermined for both characters and readers. But in these instances DeLillo’s penchant for the mystical and the romantic swings him too far in the other direction. Because we are not young children with twenty-five-word vocabularies and because we need to communicate meaningfully beyond ourselves, we have to resist the red herring of a reading model based on the unknowability of open time—a point reinforced by the fact that Wilder is not actually an unknowing innocent exempt from ideology but is instead, just like the rest of his family, deeply knowing. Rather than offering some form of redemptive passage beyond the ideological loopiness of reality, Wilder actually teaches us that we will have to figure out how to read *despite* knowledge, that an asymmetrical temporal difference that prevents knowledge from eating its own tail will not be able to simply reject knowledge in favor of the aleatory. In short, the problem of knowledge in postmodern America—the fact that we are fully aware of what we are doing because the future has already been mediated for us—is not easily solved with aleatory

openness or performative presentness. Time's irreversibility removes the reflexive loops of meaningless postmodern awareness, but pure immersion in time's flow also makes meaning and knowledge impossible. After all, a daring tricycle ride across the interstate does not a politics of time make.

And therein lies the conservative failure of *White Noise*: its formal performance conflates form and content, reducing temporality to presentness and exhibiting a knowingness that leads scholars to repeat the same ideological structures on a critical level. Once ideology incorporates contingency, uncertainty, and our knowledge of its functioning into its own production of meaning, little space remains for resistance, freedom, and subjectivity. Consequently, the future and its possibility are no longer underdetermined in a way that affords us legitimate choice and agency via limitless possibility, and any attempt to represent this problem remains bound to a reflexive epistemology of metaphor. *White Noise* shows a remarkable awareness of these limitations and allows us to see that any awareness of these limitations should probably be considered yet another limitation to their overcoming. Unable to overcome its own awareness, DeLillo's work instead performs and announces its own self-knowledge, but the self-satisfaction that comes with being privy to the rules of the game has seduced a generation of readers into complicit complacency.

Just Wait?

So if awareness and recognition have become limitations, where do we turn to counter the overdetermination of socio-cultural meaning and critique? As other chapters will suggest, and as I demonstrated in my reading of *Ada*, when not congruent to its content, literary form offers an array of temporal models that can institute temporality as the nondiscursive grounding of linguistic and cultural meaning without having to abandon the possibility of meaning and knowledge. But before moving on to such models, I want to suggest one way that even *White Noise* might be salvaged from the meaningless symmetry of its apparent social critique. Specifically, *White Noise* fails as social critique only if we think of the novel as a commentary on the present. Indeed, the novel is so fun and so clever that it seems almost natural to want it to be about us, and this is, as I have suggested, how most scholars continue to read *White Noise*. I want to conclude this chapter by suggesting instead that historicizing our relationship to *White Noise* creates the asymmetrical difference, between our present and its past, that no characters in the novel attain between their present and their future.

One essay that has done more than any other to link *White Noise* to the “contemporary” literary moment is David Foster Wallace’s landscape-defining piece “E Unibus Pluram.” Wallace’s argument here is foundational for a generation of “post-ironic” authors such as Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, and Wallace himself who have taken his diagnosis of irony’s pathological tendency to co-opt anything it touches as a justification for disentangling their work from this most dominant of postwar modes.¹² Although Wallace’s essay addresses irony and not ideology, his description of irony’s function is identical to the way I have been treating ideology throughout this chapter: as an epistemological structure prone to endlessly proliferating reversals. Wallace draws a nice homology among the structure of watching television (we are such deft viewers that we now watch ourselves watching), that of metafiction (contemporary authors are so witty that they now write themselves writing), and that of irony (which can itself be endlessly ironized). Wallace’s basic argument is that any such structure offers a poor basis for artistic creation because it distances us from the art object itself; and because that distance can itself be televised, fictionalized, or ironized, this structure clearly leaves itself open to an endless series of such distancings.

Appropriately, the barn scene from *White Noise* serves as Wallace’s paradigmatic example of this problem. Wallace notes that the tourists watch the barn, Murray watches the tourists, the narrator watches Murray watching the watching, we readers watch the narrator watch the watching, and so on. Curiously, however, Wallace argues that Jack’s utter silence in the face of Murray’s ironic postmodern commentary successfully resists the meta-static structure of ironic and ideological reversal. Suggesting that Jack’s silence somehow places him outside the iteration of watching, Wallace writes, “The narrator’s ‘extended silence’ in response to Murray’s blather speaks volumes . . . since to speak out loud in the scene would render the narrator a part of the farce (instead of a detached, transcendent, ‘observer and recorder’).” Wallace concludes, “With his silence, DeLillo’s alter ego Jack eloquently diagnoses the very disease from which he, Murray, barn-watchers, and readers all suffer” (49). But this reading seems almost willfully blind to the very argument that Wallace’s essay wants to make about the dangerously corrosive disease of irony. Jack’s silence is not a diagnosis that has somehow managed to stand outside of and apart from the cycles of watching; rather, his muteness and Murray’s logorrhea are two sides of the same totalizing coin that has no outside from which a critique can be leveled. Because both irony and ideology are a function of knowledge and not speech, and because Jack’s silence is certainly not unknowing, any such inside-outside logic is condemned merely to repeat the problem.

But this happens only when you think that you are getting outside an ideology that has previously been trapping you on its inside, or when you are let into an ideology that has been previously excluding you. So what is stopping us from reading *White Noise* now, more than two decades after its publication, and recognizing that it no longer tells us about ourselves, that it no longer reaffirms what we already know and that we already know it, and that we are neither inside nor outside its totalizing grip? What if we acknowledge that *White Noise* has become a historical object—that it reads as an example of a moment in time when a detached, postmodern irony struggled with and failed to critique the ideological overdeterminations of technology, the media, and Cold War paranoia. To the extent that we now know that these attempts were futile, *White Noise* currently has a meaningful historicity which, if adopted as its dominant temporal form, would radically alter the knowledge produced from reading it. Moreover, that new knowledge, an understanding born of a reader's formal engagement with the text's historicity, might go a long way toward addressing the text's primary political concern, namely, ideology's co-option of the future.

To prove this, I want to briefly engage in a thought experiment. Wallace's essay cites history as one productive source of irony. He argues, for example, that syndicated reruns are just another iteration of us watching ourselves watching and that we watch syndicated reruns because the knowledge we have from watching them previously allows us to ironize this second iteration of watching: watching them once means one thing, but watching them a second time means another. But if we compare reading and rereading *White Noise*, first published in 1984, to watching a sit-com from 1984—*St. Elsewhere*, *The A-Team*, or *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*—then we quickly see that there is something different about these two events. When we watch *The A-Team* today, we do so because it is cool and hip to like something that is dated and outmoded. But when we read *White Noise*, we do not love it in the same way we love *The A-Team*; we do not love it because it makes us cool to love it. Instead, we love it—perhaps I should say *if* we love it—we love it because it is literary, or because it tells us something about a particular moment in U.S. history, not because it successfully diagnoses the maladies of our contemporary moment. After all, we know full well that such a diagnosis could never be successful in the first place. Wallace is right that watching *The A-Team* today does not successfully resist the media's all-encompassing grasp, but that is only because we want such watching to tell us something about ourselves in the here and now.

Instead, to avoid this ideological complicity and co-option, we could (and should begin to) read postmodern literature historically.¹³ Such histo-

ricized knowledge creates a necessarily asymmetrical relation between our present and the past that puts a hiccup in the chain of mirrors that ideology uses to preempt temporal experience. In a sense, I am suggesting that we can wait out ideology, a solution I offer with great timidity since it leads to the obvious question: what should we do in the meantime? In addition, although historicizing the novel solves the problem of our own ideological complicity, it would also seem to erase any basis for understanding *White Noise* as social critique in the first place. But that is actually true only in terms of the text's content. On a formal level we have gained the political insight that social critique must ground itself in some asymmetrical temporal form if it hopes to have any appreciable effect. In sum, *White Noise's* failed social critique facilitates the critique of social critique itself. At the very least, therefore, we can conclude that historicizing *White Noise's* specific brand of ideology has the benefit of helping us see that it is not the pathologically metastasizing problem that we think it is and that thinking of it as a pathologically metastasizing problem says more about our own self-importance—or about the way we read postmodern literature—than it does about the actual conditions on the ground.