

The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo

Elise A. Martucci



STUDIES IN MAJOR LITERARY AUTHORS

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Introduction

In the 1999 film *The Matrix*, the main character Neo, an ordinary citizen of a city located somewhere within the United States, becomes aware through a series of enigmatic phone calls and meetings with unusual characters that the world as he experiences it is not real. A complex of powerful and intelligent computers, known as the Matrix, has created a simulation of human life on earth. The Matrix, Neo learns, has been in control of the earth for years while the majority of humans have lain dormant with their brains plugged into a computer program that simulates life on earth. Once freed from this simulated world of the Matrix, Neo discovers that the earth's environment has been destroyed by nuclear bombs and that the individuals who are not part of the Matrix live deep in the earth's crust, the only place where the earth still yields the necessary elements for human survival.

The popular acclaim and subsequent sequels of this film demonstrate our fascination with the possibility of our creations becoming our masters. Of course, this is not a new fascination. From Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* to Stanley Kubrick's film *2001, A Space Odyssey* and beyond, the popular imagination has been intrigued by the thought that with our scientific discoveries and technological advances we are interfering where we have no right to interfere. We are tampering with nature, or with God, and will, subsequently, suffer the consequences. What is different about *The Matrix*, the reason why it represents a new era in human concerns with manipulating our world, is that not only have the machines taken over, but they have done so without our noticing it. The movie, then, demonstrates the ways in which the increasing power of technology—computers, television, electronic media, the Internet, nanotechnology—can obfuscate the world as we know it and our essential connection to it. In fact, this is a common postmodern fear found in film and literature of the late 20th century, including the works of Don DeLillo.

However, what *The Matrix* does not emphasize, but what I find particularly compelling about the film, is the connection it draws between environmental destruction and human destruction, demonstrating the way in which the two are not ultimately separable. This is an idea that is also central to Don DeLillo's works. Like other contemporary artists, DeLillo explores the way in which new technologies create a world of simulacra and simulation; however, DeLillo keeps the material world at the forefront of his novels, thereby illuminating the environmental implications of these technologies and emphasizing the lasting significance of place to our consciousness.¹ His fiction does not present environment as nature only. Instead, it emphasizes how our environment is an integration of culture and nature. The way in which technological advances, consumerist ideologies, and media representations interact with and affect this integrated environment is the topic of Don DeLillo's novels. This project will demonstrate how DeLillo's works present a synthesis of consumer culture, technology, and natural landscape as a key to his central theme of human survival in the postmodern world.

The natural landscape I will be referring to is the American landscape in its primal form, including deserts, mountains, fields, and other remote spaces that make up the pastoral image of America. I will be considering the ways in which technology and consumerism (advertising, television, shopping malls, consumer products and consumer waste) affect and eventually become a part of this American landscape to constitute the postmodern environment in DeLillo's novels. My term "environment," therefore, includes all the stimuli, created and natural, that an individual contends with on a daily basis.

My use of the term "environment" is based on the way contemporary ecocritics define environment, stressing the importance of the conception of environment as not just "nature" in the image of a pristine tract of land, but as a culmination of first and second nature—nature in its original condition and nature altered by humans.² In his introduction to *Uncommon Ground*, William Cronon explains, "many popular ideas about the environment are premised on the conviction that nature is a stable, holistic, homeostatic community capable of preserving its natural balance more or less indefinitely if only humans can avoid 'disturbing' it. This is in fact a deeply problematic assumption" (24). Cronon and others stress that the term "environment" necessarily includes the human societies and cultures that inhabit any specific place and that nature is a culturally constructed concept. I intend to demonstrate the ways in which this contemporary perception of the environment is reflected in DeLillo's works as he focuses simultaneously on consumerism and technology's effects on what is considered the "natural landscape," and on the environment's—including first and second nature—effect on the humans that inhabit it.

As I explore DeLillo's presentation of this type of environment, I will consider the way this presentation calls forth what ecocritic Lawrence Buell terms the "environmental unconscious." In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Buell explains that in one sense the environmental unconscious is what we are incapable of expressing about our environment (for a variety of reasons ranging from the limitations of language to intentional repression). He explains that this negative aspect of the term indicates "the impossibility of individual or collective perception coming to full consciousness at whatever level" (22). However, Buell continues to explain that "environmental unconsciousness is also to be seen as potential: as a residual capacity (of individual humans, authors, texts, readers, communities) to awake to fuller apprehension of physical environment and one's interdependence with it" (22). Drawing from this definition, and from discussions of place posited by sociologist E.V. Walter and philosopher Edward Casey, I intend to use the term environmental unconscious to demonstrate the lasting significance of the material world expressed in DeLillo's novels. DeLillo's characters exhibit an often repressed awareness of the natural world underlying their image-dominated environment. It is this awareness and the subsequent desire to connect with their material world that illuminates environmental consequences and challenges the conditions of our postindustrial society.

DeLillo brings to light the ways our consumer and technology-driven culture subvert and damage the natural world. Moreover, the emphasis on the damage and dangers of consumerism to the environment become increasingly overt as his works progress. In order to examine this progression I will argue that DeLillo's representation of children, and his presentation of language and art, function as indicators of the damaging effects of our consumer culture, as well as the human ability to adapt to and survive the damage by transcending the materialism and irresponsibility that are inherent dangers to a consumer culture.

In examining DeLillo's presentation of language and art and his representation of children, I focus on four of DeLillo's novels: *Americana*, *The Names*, *White Noise* and *Underworld*. I have selected these particular novels for the ways in which their presentation of children, language and art reveal postmodern environmental concerns, and suggest human adaptation. Of course, all of DeLillo's novels examine how our consumer culture relates to an altered environment and each suggests the human need for survival. However, I believe that these four novels not only offer the fullest consideration of these issues but also reveal how environmental concerns have developed throughout DeLillo's body of work. While DeLillo's first novel, *Americana*, demonstrates the myriad ways in which consumerism alters the social and

natural environment, the link between consumerism and the environment becomes increasingly overt until *Underworld*, where waste is one of the central themes of the novel.³

In [Chapter One](#), “DeLillo, Postmodernism, and the Nature of Nature,” I discuss how current environmental rhetoric stresses the importance of understanding nature and culture as interrelated systems in the environment, and how this perception of environment is what DeLillo offers in his texts. Drawing from works by Dana Philips and William Cronon, I demonstrate that what critics may call a postmodern “end of nature” in DeLillo is rather a new way of perceiving nature. These critics, along with Lawrence Buell, stress the importance of understanding the way in which the “environment” is a complex system made up of what is typically thought of as “nature” and includes human structures and interactions with nature. I also borrow from Buell’s term “environmental unconscious” to explain how DeLillo presents in his characters a peripheral awareness of the significance of the material world. Additionally, as I discuss DeLillo’s role in the literary canon, I introduce some of the pertinent DeLillo criticism, explaining how my study extends and adds new perspectives to some of these discussions. More specifically, I will look at how the systems theory that Tom LeClair discusses in his text allows for a more inclusive representation of environmental concerns that are unavoidably linked to other postmodern concerns.⁴ I argue that while DeLillo presents an image-dominated postmodern world where nature may appear to be inconsequential, his denouements and character development distinguish his work from other postmodernist fiction and from popular concepts of nature and culture.

[Chapter Two](#), “How Real the Landscape Truly Was,” reads *Americana* as a contemporary American pastoral. Throughout American literature, from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* to Mark Twain’s river in *Huckleberry Finn*, non-urban spaces have been portrayed as areas of retreat from the ills of society to spaces where one can form a new, better identity. In this chapter I demonstrate the ways in which the narrator of *Americana*, David Bell, engages in this type of pastoral retreat. However, I also demonstrate that through this narrative of retreat DeLillo undermines pastoral fantasies by demonstrating the impossibility of the pastoral, and by revealing the false notions of innocence and purity associated with these spaces. In *Americana* DeLillo shows that the pastoral impulse is a construct that supports the systems it supposedly negates and leads to a dangerous neglect of the actual land. While even failed pastoral can be useful to the extent that it foregrounds specific places, DeLillo demonstrates that the dangers of pastoral escapism are compounded in the latter half of the twentieth century

as media images obscure the specific places of retreat and support the systems that pastoral seeks to escape.

Chapter Three, “*The Names*: Discovering the Deeper Textures,” explores the topic of American accountability towards land and culture that DeLillo presents in this novel. The main character of this novel, James Axton, is an American living abroad who attempts to escape responsibility by denying the culture of the people in whose land he lives and conducts business. He accomplishes this by disassociating himself from his wife and child and by dehistoricizing the world around him. He dismisses his forays into foreign economics and politics as a simple business matter. Here, DeLillo demonstrates how a disconnection from the land has damaging results to culture as a whole. It is not until Axton is able to accept humanity’s ties to the land—ties that are established through art and language—and to recognize his own humanity—clarified to him by his son—that the character becomes able to accept responsibility for his own actions and to appreciate the beauty of the environment as an integration of nature and culture.

Chapter Four, “*White Noise*: A Level of Experience to which We Gradually Adjust,” focuses on the combination of popular culture and postmodern thought that DeLillo presents in order to illuminate his theme of human survival in a radically altered environment. It is in this novel’s presentation of the airborne toxic event that DeLillo’s concern with environment becomes intensely overt. DeLillo presents this environmental disaster within a seemingly standard slice-of-life narrative of a family’s everyday struggles. However, by placing the toxic event directly in the middle of the narrative, DeLillo effectively demonstrates how the toxic event is an inevitable extension of the consumer society in which this family engages. Despite the increasing power of the media and other technologies portrayed by DeLillo in this novel, I argue that *White Noise* demonstrates our ability to survive within a postmodern environment comprised of the natural world, cultural constructs, and the toxins and pollutants that culture has integrated into this environment.

Chapter Five, “Taking Meaning out into the Streets: The Significance of Place in *Underworld*,” focuses on the theme of recycling and the emphasis on place found in this novel. *Underworld*’s repetition of many of the themes and subjects of DeLillo’s earlier works leads critics to note DeLillo’s own artistic recycling in this novel. This recycling of themes, along with the characters’ artistic and physical recycling, is essential to the environmental issues DeLillo raises in this novel. However, in this chapter I argue that it is not just DeLillo’s theme of recycling, but his emphasis on physical places that uncovers the environmental unconscious of the novel. In this novel, DeLillo places primacy on particular personal places, not just the abstract places of

his earlier novels—the desert, the suburbs, the west. He demonstrates the devastating results of weapons testing, consumer waste, and toxicity to particular places. DeLillo also weaves back and forth between global and local environmental issues, achieving a comprehensive examination of the connections between American consumerism and industrialism and its effects on the earth as a whole. The artistic characters in this novel use the altered landscape as an essential background for their creations, and children adapt their games to this altered landscape. Through the artistic works he describes and the scenes of children at play, DeLillo shows our ability to recognize the importance of particular places in an effort to adapt to and survive the damaging effects of our consumer culture.

Through my analysis of DeLillo's fiction I do not attempt to establish that DeLillo is an environmentalist in the traditional, limited sense of the term. I do not propose that DeLillo pushes a conservationist agenda in these works. Rather, I argue that concerns about the environment—as a space for human habitation—grow out of DeLillo's portrayal of our postindustrial consumer society, demonstrating the way in which nature and culture are not ultimately separable. In the novels I discuss, DeLillo presents actual—as well as potential—results of our consumer habits and technological advances. Billboards clog the roadways in *Americana*, cars emit dangerous levels of carbon dioxide in *The Names*, a cloud of toxic chemicals invades the suburban community in *White Noise*, and mounds of garbage overflow the landfills in *Underworld*. However, DeLillo's novels are not only concerned with how technology and consumerism affect the material world, but also with the way in which humans respond to and interact with this altered material world. I do not argue that DeLillo is anti-technology or even particularly adverse to consumerism, but I do propose that his novels bring to light the environmental implications of consumerism and technology, and that they raise questions about how we can adapt to and survive in this environment.

Chapter One

DeLillo, Postmodernism, and the Nature of Nature

Since the publication of *Americana* in 1971, critics have quite often grouped Don DeLillo with fellow contemporary novelists, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme—to name a few—under the label “postmodernist.” To give one such example, in *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* Christopher Butler refers to “a sense of postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon, which has left us over the last 30 years of its influence with a canon of major works, particularly from writers like Abish, Barthelme, Coover and DeLillo, and on through the alphabet” (123). Butler seems to feel quite comfortable placing DeLillo in this group. However, although DeLillo’s novels present and respond to the postmodern environment in which they are set, they do not necessarily adhere to the principles of postmodern thought, nor do they strictly abide to formal postmodern fictional techniques. In fact, none of DeLillo’s novels are self-reflexive in the way that novels by Pynchon and Coover are. And, while novels such as *Libra* and *Underworld* do present a fictionalized version of history, these novels do not fit into the definition of postmodern historical metafiction that Linda Hutcheon presents: “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (5). For instance, in *Libra* DeLillo presents largely unknown events and incidents that actually occurred and he creates a fictionalized account of the plot to kill Kennedy based on these actual events. On the other hand, in novels such as Doctorow’s *Ragtime* or Coover’s *Public Burning* the authors present radically and obviously altered versions of American history. Putting the debate over whether or not DeLillo’s fiction adheres to postmodernist techniques aside, I am most concerned with what the label “postmodernist” suggests about DeLillo’s understanding and presentation of the natural world.

While DeLillo's narratives do not conform to some definitions of postmodern fiction, many critics feel comfortable placing him within the broader category of postmodernism because of the subject matter of his novels, or the elements in his individual novels that appear to fit the rather broad criteria of Postmodernism. In fact, DeLillo's name often appears in such encyclopedic texts as *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*, in which Christopher Douglas acknowledges the difficulty of answering the question, "Is DeLillo a postmodern writer or is he a pathologist of postmodernism?" He attempts to answer this question by explaining, "the answer to this too simply formulated question is not a modern either/or, but fittingly, a postmodern both/and" (104). Douglas then asserts that DeLillo "can better be considered postmodern in the thematic sense: he is an author whose work, since the early 1970's, has registered certain currents within what Raymond Williams would call the 'structure of feeling' known as postmodernism" (104). While acknowledging DeLillo's limited use of metafiction and self-reflexive narratives, Douglas still calls DeLillo a postmodernist, explaining, "with this representation of a world governed by simulation and quotation DeLillo comes closest to a formal postmodernism" (106). Because of DeLillo's presentation of an image-dominated environment, with its ability to obfuscate the real, other critics also firmly place DeLillo among postmodern writers.

Studies of DeLillo's works appear in texts with titles such as *Design & Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction* and *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism*. The first of these two texts, written by Joseph Conte, includes the chapter, "Noise and Signal: Information Theory in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." This chapter focuses on the chaotic dissemination of information in the novel, and Conte declares that "DeLillo represents the postmodern condition in *White Noise* as the continuous ambiguity of the presence of the 'message'" (117). The latter text, edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, includes an essay by John Johnston, "Representation and Multiplicity in Four Postmodern American Novels," in which Johnston groups DeLillo's *Ratner's Star* with Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Joseph McElroy's *Lookout Cartridge*, and William Gaddis's *JR*. Johnston declares that all of these novels "engage us in various kinds of multiplicity, both in the sense that the contemporary world is registered as a multiplicity and inasmuch as they themselves articulate multiplicities in and through their novel orderings and arrangements of heterogeneous kinds of information" (169). Regardless of the narrative devices employed in these different novels, critics such as Johnston and Conte affirm DeLillo as "postmodern" in his presentation of Baudrillardian themes, emphasizing the chaotic lack of stability and the way in which signs and symbols overwrite reality.¹

Yet, some critics reject this categorization of DeLillo. In his introduction to *New Essays on "White Noise,"* published in 1991, Frank Lentricchia declared "impulses aesthetic and critical have—classically—stood in starkest opposition, but they go together in the modernist idea of literature, perhaps no more seamlessly than in Don DeLillo, last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation" (14). By calling DeLillo the "last of the modernists" Lentricchia can focus on the undeniably humanistic themes of *White Noise*—themes that are essential to the novel's structure.²

Thomas LeClair also challenges DeLillo's status as postmodernist. His book-length study of DeLillo, published in 1987, seeks to overcome the difficulty in categorizing DeLillo by altogether abandoning such problematic labels. Instead, LeClair argues that DeLillo is a "systems novelist," along with Gaddis, Pynchon, and Coover. LeClair explains that "'systems theory' is best understood as a set of assumptions about nature and as an interpretive methodology—as a metascience, rather than as a scientific discipline with its own rules of experimentation and proof" (3). Systems theory is based on principles of connection between the many systems, natural, economic, psychological, social, etc . . . through which we interact with the world. He declares, "the 'systems novel' is a valuable new category that breaks up some of the artificial dualisms of current academic criticism—traditional and experimental, realistic and self-referential, modern and postmodern [. . .]" (xii). LeClair's category enables a discussion of DeLillo among canonical contemporary writers without labeling these writers as postmodernists: "Gaddis, Pynchon, Coover, and DeLillo are frequently considered to be postmodernists, but if postmodernism continues to be defined as a deconstructive movement—and I believe it almost always is—these 'systems novelists' would be more accurately termed 're-moderns,' to suggest their continuity with modernism" (9).³ With this new category, LeClair is able to discuss DeLillo's engagement with a postmodern environment, without associating him with postmodernist literary theory.

This evasion of labeling DeLillo is appealing, and some more recent critics have sought to demonstrate the way in which DeLillo's fiction stands outside these conventional categories. For example, Jesse Kavadlo argues that DeLillo's fiction contributes to a new sense of the author: "[. . .] taking both the modernist's author-priest and now-waning postmodernist's authorial diminishment in anticipation of the new author's role. The contemporary author, standing between reverence and irreverence, romantic imagination and journalistic note taking, understands his importance but also his tenuous, precarious place in the world" (*Recycling Authority* 386).

For Kavadlo, DeLillo's fiction does not demonstrate the postmodern concept of the "death of the author," nor does it insist on a modernist author's God-like authority. In this way, DeLillo's role as author separates him from either category.

Additionally, Curtis Yehnert focuses on DeLillo's character development to support the claim that he does not fit neatly into either category:

Characters such as Billy Twillig, James Axton, Jack Gladney and Klara Sax constitute a marked contrast to DeLillo's modernists and postmodernists. These autonomous, existential individuals do not mark a return to modernism, for they do not win their individuality through agonistic struggle, nor have they found themselves or transcended themselves. Rather, they have accepted uncertainty and mediation, the responsibility for their own self-creation. They resist assimilation fully aware of their predicament: that they have no stable ground on which to stand but must stand anyway, that they have no guaranteed action to take but must act anyway. For DeLillo, this is the crux of human possibility. (364)

Shifting from Lentricchia's assessment of DeLillo as modernist to an assessment of DeLillo as neither modernist nor postmodernist, critics such as Kavadlo and Yehnert demonstrate the complexity of DeLillo's novels. Analyses such as these, which explore DeLillo's body of work on its own terms, not in the dualistic modernist/postmodernist terms, are most useful in investigating the methods and meanings of DeLillo's fiction.

POSTMODERNISM AND "THE END OF NATURE"

The debate can, and no doubt will, continue over where to place DeLillo. In analyses of DeLillo's specific works, such as those by Joseph Conte and John Johnston discussed above, the label of postmodern writer most often remains. Additionally, while the most recent book-length study of DeLillo by Kavadlo argues against DeLillo as a postmodernist, David Cowart's still influential 2002 book-length study of DeLillo sustains the label. Cowart denies that DeLillo's characters offer a point of resistance against postmodernism, yet he admits that DeLillo's texts do not present a strict post-structuralist view of language where signifiers represent nothing but other signifiers (5). Cowart focuses on the way in which DeLillo "affirms something numinous in [language's] mysterious properties" (5). So his analysis of DeLillo admits to the way in which DeLillo's use of language separates him from postmodernist theory.

Cowart offers an interesting and useful analysis of language in DeLillo. However, he does not stress the close relationship DeLillo forges between language and place in his novels, something I will focus on in order to illuminate the environmental aspects of his fiction. DeLillo's fiction illuminates the nuances of language that exist in different geographic regions, and stresses the way in which language reveals the significance of the world it represents, even if there remains a gap between the representation and the represented. It is this relationship between word and world that I seek to establish and explore. While DeLillo's fiction undoubtedly engages us with postmodern themes of simulation and simulacra and calls to attention the limitations of language, I submit that his emphasis on the significance of place to characters' understanding of themselves and the world around them demonstrates a concern with our contemporary environment that is uncommon in postmodern thought.

In labeling DeLillo postmodernist, critics have overlooked the environmental aspects of his novels, even suggesting that his novels demonstrate a contemporary disassociation with nature. Labeling DeLillo as postmodernist suggests that his novels fit standard postmodern assumptions about the end of nature's existence and significance in the contemporary environment. Lawrence Buell speaks of "the postmodernist claim that we inhabit a prosthetic environment, our perception of which is more simulacra-mediated than context-responsive" (5). Dana Philips claims, "the postmodern idea about nature is that nature is largely irrelevant to today's culture both on philosophical grounds (grounds articulated by poststructuralism and similar schools of thought) and as a matter of historical fact [. . .]" (24). Philips refers to "the coroner's report certifying the death of nature issued by a number of prominent theorists and critics of postmodernism since the 1970's" (24).⁴ The danger with labeling DeLillo as a postmodernist writer, then, is that we miss the environmental implications of his work.

Philips seems to place DeLillo among these postmodern thinkers in his essay "Don DeLillo's Postmodern Pastoral" where he claims that in *White Noise*, "the role of nature as reproductive source, even as awareness of it is echoed in certain moments of the novel, tends to get lost in the haze of cultural signals or 'white noise' that Jack Gladney struggles and largely fails to decipher" (241). Such interpretations of the irrelevance or death of nature in DeLillo's work are quite common. Scott Russell Sanders points to DeLillo's *White Noise* as evidence for his claim of the "ignorance of land and landscape illustrated in the stylish fiction of our time." He explains, "the only time you are reminded that anything exists beyond the human realm is when his characters pause on the expressway to watch a sunset, and even the sunset interests

them only because a release of toxic gases from a nearby plant has poisoned it into Technicolor" (193). For Sanders, even nature is not "natural" in this novel. Furthermore, in her study of the toxic consciousness of *White Noise*, Cynthia Deitering explains, "the most recent literary version of nature reflects that of a society which at some level understands itself to be living in what Bill McKibben has termed a 'postnatural world' and whose conscious need for nature is merely superficial, as McKibben has suggested in his book *The End of Nature*" (201). Deitering considers *White Noise* to be one of the first "literary expressions to come out of this postnatural world." She insists that "nature is no longer a central presence in the world of the novel" (201). In a similar vein, Michael Valdez Moses claims that DeLillo's point is that "it is precisely by way of technology reducing nature to a postmodern simulacrum (a copy with no original) [. . .] that man assumes sovereignty over a reality that was once understood to transcend man himself. Formerly regarded as a superhuman threat, guide, or order, nature ceases to exist except as a representation which man both produces and consumes" ("Lust Removed from Nature" 65). Finally, in her interpretation of the concluding scene in *Underworld*, Joanne Gass laments that the word "peace" appearing in cyberspace indicates that "our isolation from nature is complete" (129). These critics all stress that DeLillo's presentation of the postmodern culture inevitably entails the end of nature.

THE NATURE OF NATURE

These claims of DeLillo's presentation of the "death" or insignificance of nature in our post-industrial culture overlook the complexity of the term "nature." In particular, they do not take into account the premise that environmental historian William Cronon explains in the introduction to *Uncommon Ground*: "Recent scholarship has clearly demonstrated that the natural world is far more dynamic, far more changeable, and far more entangled with human history than popular beliefs about 'the balance of nature' have typically acknowledged" (24). Cronon explains that popular ideas about the natural world are based on outdated and erroneous theories, most particularly the influential ecological theory of Frederic Clements:

The first generation of American ecologists, led at the start of the twentieth century by the Nebraska scientist Fredric Clements, believed that every ecosystem tended to develop toward a natural climax community much as an infant matures into an adult. This climax, according to Clements and his followers, was capable of perpetuating itself forever unless something interfered with its natural balance. (Cronon 24)