

DON DELILLO'S NOVELS AND
A "MCDONALDIZED" SOCIETY¹

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In short, McDonald's has succeeded because
it offers consumers, workers,
and managers efficiency,
calculability, predictability, and control.

George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*

In the second American presidential debate on October 11th, 2000, the first question that the journalist Jim Lehrer, the moderator, asked the Democratic candidate Al Gore and the Republican George W. Bush was: "One of you is about to be elected the leader of the single most powerful nation in the world economically, militarily, diplomatically, you name it. Have you formed any guiding principles for exercising this enormous power?" The two candidates agreed that the U.S. should act with humility and that America has a great responsibility in the world.

The U.S. is the sole leader of the world now and the immediate consequence of this American victory against the former USSR is the triumph of capitalism, or rather, of "late capitalism" with all of its features that brought changes to American society in several areas, such as consumerism, technology, media, surveillance. At present, American

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society is in course of “McDonaldization”, defined by Ritzer as “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world.” (*The McDonaldization of Society*)

“McDonaldization” is not only related to the fast-food itself, but it is a larger process that is present in several other areas such as consumerism helped by the action of the media. It seems that, in general terms, the U.S. is happy with its “McDonaldization” and, in order to spread it out, America puts its images all over the world. Thus, if “McDonaldization” is a process that may happen to other countries, is Brazil going to be a “McDonaldized” society?

The work of the contemporary American author Don DeLillo embodies a wide variety of examples for the discussion of the world’s present situation, insofar as his novels are related to “men-in-the-world” and he has an acute criticism towards how everything that surrounds us is working nowadays. Therefore, DeLillo’s work does matter to Brazilian readers as it will be possible to notice as the issues are approached throughout this paper.

The first topic for discussion is consumerism. The overwhelming victory of capitalism led America to a mode of consumption characterized by “consumer culture.” According to Slater, “The idea that consumer culture serves a general public also promotes a more positive idea that it embraces ‘everyone’” (27). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that “consumer culture is *capitalist* culture” (26). What really counts is material welfare.

This new economic order, in which, according to Jameson, our postindustrial or consumer society is located (*The Anti-Aesthetic: Essay on Postmodern Culture* 113), has changed the way “antagonism, conflicts” and the concept of “lifestyle” are faced in our present society, as Watkins argues in *Throwaways*:

It would be more accurate to recognize how the “consumer society” is a narrative structure that relocates social

antagonisms and conflicts from the scene of occupational stratification, the organization of work and the market segmentation of labor, to the scene of consumption, where performances are enacted. Thus a class-as-lifestyle ideologies register not only the prominence of an individual agency of performance "lifestyle" but also the relationality of positionally realized performances as social, as finally a matter of class and class division. (1993: 66)

These changes have led people to want to buy more and more and, this way, the concept of a "free market" in which people are "freely impelled to buy", mainly by the media, takes place.

Postmodern culture is classified as the culture of the image, that is, according to Jameson, "the society of the media or the spectacle" (113), and TV has changed the lives and routines of people in the entire planet. Nowadays, people do not consume only objects, but also images, mainly those who sell their images to be bought as any other commodity, in an attitude that everything is valid if it is for a person to be famous. People seek fame and fortune no matter what they have to do to reach this objective.

Don DeLillo is concerned with the relationship people have with a society dominated by the consumerism of images and things, and his novels offer samples of how these processes are occurring in contemporary world. Images have played a definite role in current world. We are dominated by the images either from computers or from TV sets. In DeLillo's novel *Americana* (1971), the first-person narrator David Bell, who works at a network, has a perfect attachment with the TV set when he looks at the screen as it is shown in the following passage:

I looked at the TV screen for a moment and then found myself in a chair about a foot away from the set, watching intently. I could not tell what was happening on the screen and it didn't

seem to matter. Sitting that close all I could perceive was that meshed effect, those stormy motes, but it drew me in and held me as if I were an integral part of the set, my molecules mating with those millions of dots. (43)

This special connection that people have with TV nowadays is used by advertisers to make people feel the need to accumulate material things, since consumption is important to sustaining the success of the capitalist system. In *Americana*, the power of commercials is discussed in a dialogue between Glenn Yost, a man who has spent “the major part” of his “adult life in the advertising business”, and David Bell:

“The TV set is a package and is full of products. Inside are detergents, automobiles, cameras, breakfast cereal, other television sets. Programs are not interrupted by commercials; exactly the reverse is true. A television set is an electronic form of packaging. It is as simple as that. Without the products there is nothing. Educational television is a joke. Who in America would want to watch TV without commercials?”

“How does a successful television commercial affect the viewer?”

“It makes him want to change the way he lives.”

“In what way?” I said.

“It moves him from first person consciousness to third person. In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be. Advertising has discovered this man. It uses him to express the possibilities open to the consumer. To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream.” ...

“The consumer never identifies with the anti-image. He identifies only with the image. The Marlboro man.”

...

“What is the role of commercial television in the twentieth century and beyond?”

"In my blackest moods I feel it spells chaos for all of us."
"How do you get over these moods?" I said.
"I take a mild and gentle Palmolive bath, brush my teeth with Crest, swallow two Sominex tablets, and try desperately to fall asleep on my Simmons Beautyrest mattress."
"Thank you.." (270-72)

As we can see from the above example, "to consume in America is not to buy, it is to dream" and commercials influence people to make those dreams come true since they keep the names of the brands in their minds. In *White Noise* (1985), DeLillo addresses this matter when professor Jack Gladney, the main character, listens to one of his daughters speak in her sleep:

She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

Toyota Celica.

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. (155)

DeLillo reveals how commercials can influence people by showing that the child reached the extreme of "repeating some TV voice."

Therefore, it is necessary to think of the role of advertisement at the present moment and Baudrillard provides us with his concept:

Advertising in its new version which is no longer a more or less baroque, utopian or ecstatic scenario of objects and consumption, but the effect of an omnipresent visibility of enterprises, brands, social interlocuters and the social virtues of communication advertising in its new dimension invades everything, as public space (the street, monument, market, scene) disappears. It realizes, or, if one prefers, it materializes in all its obscenity; it monopolizes public life in its exhibition. (129)

This way, there is a myriad images everywhere fostering consumption and it gets difficult to resist their powerful appeals.

In *End Zone* (1972), the football team of Logos College is going to play its most important game of the season against West Centrex Biotechnical. Gary, the first-person narrator and player at Logos College, knew that "If we could beat them, Creed's face [the coach] would be back in the papers, we'd get small-college ranking, and the pro scouts would come drifting down for a look at the big old country boys." (53)

In this passage, Gary reveals the importance of winning (actually they lose the game), being in the papers and all the good consequences fame would bring them. In all kinds of sports, victories mean more money, since sponsors look for teams or players that have a record of good results to justify investment. After all, it is good to have the image of their companies linked to a record of success and, hence, to have returns of their investment through a more effective presence in the market.

DeLillo's novels are pervaded by names of products such as "Panasonic", "Coke", "Coke II" (in *Mao II*), "Diet Pepsi", "Kleenex Softique", "Mastercard." The author's reference to "Mastercard" makes the reader think of the plastic money created to give consumers another form of payment for their purchases. Baudrillard, in his essay "Consumer Society", approaches this matter:

Naturally, the shopping mall has instituted, for those who desire, the most modern form of payment: the "credit card." The card frees us from checks, cash, and even from financial difficulties at the end of the month. Henceforth, to pay you present your card and sign the bill. That's all there is to it. Each month you receive a bill which you can pay in full or in monthly installments. (34)

However, people may find themselves in great trouble when they cannot control their credit card expenses and run into high debts. It has reached such an extreme situation that several companies advertise on American TV offering help to those people who cannot deal with their credit card bills.

Having pointed out the appeals for consumption, via the power of images and the the purchase power that credit cards may offer, it is not difficult to realize why some people are so enthusiastic about shopping. DeLillo describes such excitement through Jack Gladney's reactions at the Mid-Village Mall in *White Noise*:

Babette and the kids followed me into the elevator, into the shops set along the tiers, through the emporiums and department stores, puzzled but excited by my desire to buy. ... My family gloried in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last. ... I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention to buy, then buying it. ... I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. ... The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. (83-4)

This is the case when some people buy without any kind of control. Jack buys things he did not intend to buy. In the U.S., the appeal for people to consume is tremendous and comes in various forms including

thousands of catalogues that one gets in the mail from even unknown shops, coupons with discounts that one gets either by mail or at the supermarkets and now there is a way to get coupons on the Internet, called freebies.

In *White Noise*, Murray Siskind, a colleague of Jack Gladney's, sees the reality of facts in American society when he states that "Here we don't die, we shop" (38). In *Underworld* (1997), Detwiler, who teaches at UCLA, in a dialogue with Nick, gives the readers a lesson on the dangers of consumerism: "I take my students into garbage dumps and make them understand the civilization they live in. Consume or die. That's the mandate of the culture" (287). Americans consume so much that the quantity of garbage is impressive. Moreover, it is really surprising to see durable goods like sofas, carpets, washers, etc., still in good condition, disposed in the garbage. It is a kind of waste unthinkable in poor countries.

But waste can be verified in other aspects of American society, too. In order to maintain their standard of living with air-conditioning in buildings and houses, not to mention their automobile culture, Americans have to find ways to get fuel very cheap and, as Edward Said states "The United States cannot belligerently presume the right, with 6 per cent of the world's population, to consume 30 per cent of the world's energy, for example" (300-01). That is why the U.S. gets extremely worried about the problems of oil producer countries when they affect American interests, just like when there was a problem in the Middle East and they took part in the Gulf War.

Another significant area that is contributing to the "McDonaldization" process is mass communication. American networks are present all over the world, and American views and values can be absorbed, or rather, "consumed" by other peoples. However, John Gray points out that to continue to be global, the networks have to make some necessary adjustments and not to show everything only from an American perspective:

The American world view that is purveyed through CNN according to which, contrary to appearances and all underlying realities, American values are universal and American institutions the solution for the the world's most intractable problems is an ephemeral artefact of America's present lead in communications technologies. It is not a signpost on the road to a universal civilization. Media companies which vary their product to suit different cultures, such as MTV, may expect to remain global. If CNN remains fixed in its Americocentric world view, it is likely soon to be more than one national media company among many others. (60)

At this point, the passage of the dialogue between Glenn and David in *Americana* is necessary to be brought up to the discussion again. Unfortunately, in the U.S. and in Brazil "Educational television is a joke." Networks should be more concerned with the quality of the programs than with their ratings but, as Ritzer argues in *The McDonaldization of American Society*:

Television programs are heavily, if not almost exclusively, determined by quantitative rather than qualitative factors. The ratings, not the high quality, of a program determines its success and, therefore, the advertising revenue it is likely to generate. A vice president of programming for ABC made this emphasis on calculability quite clear: "Commercial television programming is designed to attract audiences to the advertisers' messages which surround the programming ... Inherent creative aesthetic values [quality] are important, but always secondary." Thus, over the years, the commercial networks have dropped many critically acclaimed programs for poor ratings. (70)

Thus, programs are produced mostly to have high ratings. TV shows with people discussing personal problems, such as "I want to marry my daughter" and things of the like, in which the audience gives opinions, there are fights, etc., have become very popular in American and in Brazilian TVs, although they have poor messages. This is a symptom of "McDonaldization" process on TV. Sponsors worry about ratings and, therefore, they are going to support only programs that have large rates of audience for their products to be seen by more people.

Another fashion that is being verified on American TV is the programs that put some people on an island or in a house, such as "Survivor" and "Big Brother", and make them live together for some time while the TV network that produces the program films everything that those people do and say until the last person who stays receives a money prize. The question is: can you really be yourself when being taped? Of course not, and this attempt to have a so-called "real TV" is totally fake leaving the viewer with an "impression of reality" but, it actually is, in Baudrillard's definition, "simulation" (by the way, a program called "No limite" based on "Survivor" was broadcast in Brazil).

If a program like "Survivor" is simulation, McDonald's burgers are also simulated, which means that, Ritzer argues, "there are no 'real' hamburgers, there is no 'true' hamburger" (122). The credit card is also another form of simulation, since "there was no 'original' card from which all others are copied" and "each bill is a simulation, a copy of any other bill and, again, there was never an original bill from which all others have been copied." (121-22)

DeLillo is aware of the problem related to the power of the image and, in *Mao II* (1991), he even approaches the way terrorists use it to promote their actions. Bill, the main character, is a reclusive author, and considers the role of writers and terrorists in the present world when talking to Brita, a photographer:

"There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence. ... Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory." (41)

Later on in the novel, George Haddad discusses with Bill that

"What terrorists gain, novelists lose. ... [terrorists are] the only possible heroes for our time. ... The way they live in the shadow, live willing with death. ... Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. ... Give him a dollar, put him in a TV commercial. Only the terrorist stands outside. The culture hasn't figured out how to assimilate him. It's confusing when they kill the innocent. But this is precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands. The way they determine how we see them. The way they dominate the rush of endless streaming images". (157-58)

In conclusion, power is with people who know how to use the media properly to reach their objectives as terrorists who give interviews and show images of hostages according to the interests of their groups.

The relationship between people and images also occurs in the form of constant channel changing that is done either to look for a good program to be watched (and, most of the times, rarely found nowadays) or just to watch the images passing by in a frenetic action that reflects the fragmentary situation of our contemporary world. In order to illustrate this postmodern feature, in Don DeLillo's *Players* (1977), the character Lyle, who works at the Stock Exchange, has his connection with TV described in the following way:

Lyle passed time watching television. Sitting in near darkness about eighteen inches from the screen, he turned the channel

selector every half minute or so, sometimes much more frequently. He wasn't looking for something that might sustain his interest. Hardly that. He simply enjoyed jerking the dial into fresh image-burns. He explored content to a point. The tactile-visual delight of switching channels took precedence, however, transforming even random moments of content into pleasing territorial abstractions. Watching television was for Lyle a discipline like mathematics or Zen. Commercials, station breaks, Spanish-language dramas had more to offer as a rule than standard programming. The repetitive aspect of commercials interested him. Seeing identical footage many times was a test for the resourcefulness of the eye, its ability to re-select, to subdivide an instant of time. He rarely used sound. Sound was best served by those UHF stations using faulty equipment or languages other than English. (16)

Images on TV are there to be easily consumed in a very fast way, revealing that everything is disposable in our contemporary world. Time is so quick, so volatile that "now" is suddenly "then", as Heinrich asks his father Jack in *White Noise*: "Is there such a thing as now? 'Now' comes and goes as soon as you say it. How can I say it's raining now if your so-called 'now' becomes 'then' as soon as I say it?" (23)

Don DeLillo, in *White Noise*, writes one scene of Jack Gladney with his family at the shopping center and they could see their images everywhere reflecting the fascination for the image that is evident in our world: "Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors in security rooms" (84). It is important to mention that this is the society of surveillance, and monitors, cameras control our movements in several places. Another means of communication is the Internet which is, on the one hand, an mechanism of freedom but, on the other hand, an instrument of slavery inasmuch as there are "hackers" who can get into e-mails and read private

messages, access confidential records such as bank data and military secrets, even spreading powerful viruses to destroy files, etc.

Nowadays, people are interested in consuming images of catastrophes and the darker the news, the better. Ratings are higher when there is bad news and sponsors are eager to support special programs on the tragedy that has happened. To reinforce this idea, DeLillo, in *Mao II*, makes the writer Bill come to the following conclusion:

"Because we're giving way to terror, to news of terror, to tape recorders and cameras, to radios, to bombs stashed in radios. News of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative." (42)

As it has been already mentioned, this kind of case happens to serve the system since TV networks need the money from sponsors to keep on going. If the public wants violence to give networks good ratings, this is what they are going to get.

DeLillo also has a piece of criticism in this regard in *White Noise*, when the characters, due to an airborne toxic event, had to evacuate their houses. In the building where several evacuees were, one man brings a TV set and shows his disappointment since that there was nothing on TV about their problem:

"There is nothing on network," he said to us. "Not a word, not a picture. ... Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore? ... We were scared to death. We still are. We left our homes, we drove through blizzards, we saw the cloud.... Shouldn't we be yelling out the window at them, 'Leave us alone, we've been through enough, get out of here with your vile instruments of intrusion.' Do they have to have two hundred dead, rare disaster footage, before they come

flocking to a given site in their helicopters and network limos?" (161-62)

So TV networks look for a big tragedy with a great number of deaths to come and give coverage to the incident.

Don DeLillo has a remark on the way people should watch TV in a dialogue between Jack Gladney and his friend Murray, when Jack says that one of his sons "is growing up without television" and adds "which may make him worth talking to, Murray." Murray replies that

"TV is a problem only if you've forgotten how to look and listen" ... My students and I discuss this all the time. They're beginning to feel they ought to turn against the medium, exactly as an earlier generation turned against their parents and their country. I tell them that have to learn to look as children again. Root out content. Find the codes and messages, to use your phrase, Jack."

"What do they say to that?"

"Television is just another name for junk mail. But I tell them I can't accept that. ... I've come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. ... You have to learn how to look. You have to open yourself to the data. TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data. ... There's light, there's sound. I ask my students, 'What more do you want?' Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. '*Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it*'." (50-1)

Even though TV has this powerful influence, people cannot be its passive victims. According to Eco, "the schools (and society, and not only the young) must learn new instructions on how to react to the mass media." (148)

DeLillo approaches the subject of the power of the image also in a political context. In *Libra* (1984), talking about "Kennedy charisma", "Kennedy magic", Guy Banister reveals everything that Kennedy means to Americans:

"It's not just Kennedy himself. ... It's what people see in him. It's the glowing picture we keep getting. He actually glows in most of his photographs. We're supposed to believe he's the hero of the age. Did you ever see a man in such a hurry to be great?" (67-8)

Kennedy and TV were born to each other. Kennedy knew how to use his image on TV and his assassination was, as Jameson argues,

a unique event, not least because it was a unique collective (and media, communicational) experience, which trained people to read such events in a new way ... Suddenly, and for a brief moment (which lasted, however, several long days), television showed what it could really do and what it really meant - a prodigious new display of synchronicity and a communicational situation that amounted to a dialectical leap over anything hitherto suspected. (*Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. 355)

In contrast to the main character Bill in *Mao II*, who does not want to be in the media, Mao Zedong used photographs to promote his image as a powerful and healthy leader, as can be read in this passage:

Now Bill was devising his own cycle of death and resurgence. It made Scott think of great leaders who regenerate their power by dropping out of sight and then staging messianic returns. Mao Zedong of course. Mao was pronounced dead many times in the press - dead or senile or too sick to run a

revolution. Scott had recently come across a photograph of Mao taken in the course of his famous nine-mile swim at the age of seventy-two, following a long disappearance. Mao's old pelt head sticking out of the Yangtze, godlike and comic.... Mao use photographs to announce his return and demonstrate his vitality, to reinspire the revolution. (141)

This use of the image has become increasingly important in contemporary world. The media can influence, change people's minds and attitudes. Politicians know the tool they have in their hands and make full use of it. This is the "McDonaldization" process in politics.

At this moment, it is acceptable to agree with Jameson that "the image is the commodity today" (*The Cultural Turn*, 135). To represent the course of "McDonaldization", in which people are turned into commodities to be consumed as any other object, DeLillo, in *Great Jones Street* (1973), makes the character Bucky Wunderlick, a hero of rock'n'roll, to be away from the press, but however hard he tried, there were more rumors about him. This is a result of capitalism, since people are eager to consume and the press speculates about all matters to sell newspapers, sometimes without any worries about moral implications as it happens in the tabloids, which were this way defined in *White Noise*:

Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cult of the famous and the dead. (326)

Tabloids make money by exploiting people's private lives; at the same time, those people most of the times want to have their images published, not to be forgotten by the public inasmuch as they need to be consumed by the masses to make their living.

Probably, there is nothing more "McDonaldized" than the way one finds the same chains of shops and restaurants almost all over the U.S. At this point, it might be interesting to return to Ritzer's idea that that fast-food industry is characterized by simulations and to concentrate now on "the structure and décor of the fast-food restaurant", which is also simulation, according to Ritzer. He takes the "Roy Rogers" chain as an example and states that "The Roy Rogers chain is modeled, I suppose, after the movie cowboy's ranch house, a ranch house that never existed, except perhaps in the movies where, of course, it was already a simulation." (122-23)

This way, "McDonaldization" offers Americans predicability and a sense of security, because they know that they can expect to find the same things everywhere they go. Some Americans describe it as "comforting", others as "boring." This kind of pattern does not exist in Brazil yet.

Americans are also used to having shops open twenty-four hours a day just like *Wal-Mart*, so that they can have the convenience to buy on any day, at any time they want to. This is becoming common in Brazilian largest cities too, in a smaller but growing proportion.

Through his novels, Don DeLillo criticizes the present situation of this consumer culture. He is a writer who denounces the system. In a situation that Brazilian people struggle everyday to be "survivors" in real life, it is high time to start reflecting on the consequences that a "McDonaldized" society may bring to the citizens.

Note

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