COGNITIVE MAPPING IN THE POSTMODERN NOVEL:
PHILIP K. DICK’S \textit{UBIK}, KIM STANLEY ROBINSON’S \textit{THE GOLD COAST}, AND
DON DELILLO’S \textit{WHITE NOISE}

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by
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Introduction

The main question I found myself facing when I decided to focus my research on postmodern novels was, simply, what is postmodernism? The fact that the word, taken as the sum of its parts, means “after modernism” does not help much. O’Donnell argues that “underlying everything is the belief that all human knowledge is limited and culturally conditioned…as a result, there is no way to escape language, no way to stand outside discourse to get at pure, raw truth” (6-7). In other words, the postmodern subject cannot escape culture. There is no empirical truth because everything is tainted by the fact that humans in the western world live within a society. Fredric Jameson, upon whose work I plan to focus, defines postmodernism in a way more linked to western economic systems:

What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at even greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. (Jameson 4-5)
For Jameson, artistic expression and technological and inventive innovation have become enmeshed so that art has taken on an economic significance as well as an aesthetic one. Not only is it impossible to escape the culture, but it is also impossible to escape the economic nature of a post-industrial society, in which everything within the culture takes on a position relative to its economic function.

Jameson, in Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, posits several conditions of the postmodern work. While all are equally important, the final condition, a failure to map cognitively, is perhaps the most complex and is the main focus of this thesis. To cognitively map, for Jameson, is to understand both the social and cultural surroundings one finds oneself in and to be able to understand one’s social and cultural place in history. I will argue that very few, if any, of the characters in the novels I have chosen to focus on--Philip K. Dick’s Ubik, Kim Stanley Robinson’s The Gold Coast, and Don DeLillo’s White Noise-- are able to understand clearly their place within the postmodern environment. Moreover, I wish to argue that, although Jameson places the inability to map cognitively within the conditions of the postmodern, it is not another condition but a result of the previous four conditions. These include, first, a new “depthlessness of the image,” in which images, particularly those displayed on computer and television screens, seem to lose any connection to that which they are depicting and hover on their own with little relation to that which they reference. Second is a weakening of historicity; characters are unable to understand the social history of either themselves or the spaces that they inhabit. Third is a whole new type of emotional ground tone, which, here, explores the interplay between nature and technology as technology
becomes more innovative, which is a relevant theme in many postmodern works. Finally, a new relation to technology explores how the interplay between nature and technology affects the postmodern subject. While all of these conditions can be seen in these three novels, they, unlike an inability to cognitively map, are causes, and not results.

*Ubik* by Philip K. Dick is a novel that never completely explains exactly what is happening to its characters. Protagonist Joe Chip and his colleagues find themselves suspended in half-life, a state of being physically dead but with at least some mental faculties maintained. While suspended in half-life, they find that the “world” around them, which is merely the projection of another, stronger half-lifer, starts to regress in time. The commodities, in particular, which are typically used to temporally place oneself, start to deteriorate. While commodities are commonly used as an historic marker, the same way hair styles or fashion choices might be, Chip cannot use these commodities in such a way because they keep regressing. Cigarettes are stale and brittle straight from the package, the coffee Joe is served in a diner looks as if it has been sitting out for weeks, and machinery such as cars and elevators start to regress to their older models. They end up stuck in the year 1939, unaware that they are in half-life, and try to understand how the world around them is regressing. At the end of the novel, Dick throws in one last twist, completely discrediting everything that has occurred so far in the story, making it impossible to know the truth of whether the group is dead, alive, or somewhere in between.

Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Gold Coast* attempts to explore nature’s relationship with technology and the past’s relationship with the present. Jim McPherson and his
friends live in Orange County, California in the year 2027. They find themselves taken over by industrial development, particularly that of weapons manufacturers for the U.S. military. Jim, a self-proclaimed historian, is attempting to write a history of Orange County, chapters of which are woven throughout the text. It becomes clear to the reader that Jim is not writing the true history of Orange County, but a history tinted with nostalgia. His inability to understand his past is somewhat related to his quest to find the natural: he views the true landscape of California as that which is natural and not manufactured. However, he can find no evidence of a natural landscape in which to ground himself. In The Gold Coast, the technological displacement of the natural leaves him temporally lost.

*White Noise* by Don DeLillo is a novel most concerned with understanding the commodity culture with which we, as post-industrial subjects, find ourselves surrounded. Particularly, it deals with the mediated images and messages that society is constantly bombarded with, thanks to technological innovation. In the novel, protagonist Jack Gladney argues that human perception is just as reliable as objective, technological observation. However, as the novel progresses, Jack loses all ability to perceive the world around him in an unmediated way. It gets to such an extreme that, when Jack visits his doctor, he is unable to explain how he has been feeling and instead asks the doctor how his test results say he should be feeling. Like *The Gold Coast*, DeLillo’s novel focuses on the displacement of the technological over the natural, where the technological becomes more immediate or completely replaces the natural, much in the same way that Jim in Robinson’s novel finds no trace of the natural landscape which has been buried under
shopping malls and multi-tiered highways. In *White Noise*, this theme is particularly evident in regards to Jack’s and his wife Babette’s fear of death. While it is argued in the novel that the fear of death has plagued humanity for centuries, they battle such a fear with Dylar, an experimental medication which is very technologically advanced and has the potential to become the next hot commodity.

One thing all of these novels have in common, I argue, is a rapport with Fredric Jameson’s idea of cognitive mapping. All of these protagonists find themselves unable to cognitively map their surroundings. In *Ubik* and *The Gold Coast*, we see characters who cannot place themselves temporally. The world around Joe Chip is slowly moving backwards into the past, without an explanation. The commodities around him decay as well and shift to forms they inhabited previously. Jim can find no link to his past history in *The Gold Coast* because he finds no traces of it on the landscape. The orange groves that he dreams about no longer exist in Orange County and have been replaced by malls, highways, and research plants for the military. While Jim calls himself an historian, after reading a few chapters of his history of Orange County, the reader sees that he has no understanding of OC’s history and that he is unable to map the past because of the technological, rather than natural, state of his present.

*The Gold Coast* and *White Noise* share a concern with the mediation of images by technological means and the disorienting effects this mediation has on one’s ability to map cognitively. Robinson’s novel is filled with screens of all kinds, but the most prominent by far are video screens. The characters find more enjoyment in watching things on video screens than in watching the event itself. When Jim and his friend Arthur
get into a heated table-tennis match at a party, people crowd around the video screens to watch them play rather than watch the actual game. Almost any time people in the novel have sex, they surround themselves with playback devices and video screens so they can watch themselves in the act from the screens. One night, when Jim is with his friend Virginia, their fun is ruined when his old video system suddenly stops working. For the characters in *The Gold Coast*, experiencing anything in an unmediated way is never preferred when it could be experienced through a video screen.

The characters in DeLillo’s *White Noise* have a similar fixation on screens and mediated images. These characters believe that, unless something is on television, it is not real. When Jack Gladney picks up his daughter from the airport, a passenger from another flight explains that their plane dropped out of the sky, nearly crashing. Jack’s daughter asks where the media is to interview those on the plane and share their story, but there is no media in that particular city, and, therefore, she concludes, the passengers of that plane went through all of that terror for nothing. Another example of the primacy of mediation is when Jack’s family—and, indeed, his whole city—is evacuated from their homes because of a toxic chemical spill, named the “Airborne Toxic Event”. They are stuffed into a shelter and spend several days there, where their fellow captives demand news coverage of the event, and find themselves furious that their pain has not been validated by the media. It is as if these characters do not believe anything is real, or worthwhile, if it can not be seen on television. Characters in both *The Gold Coast* and *White Noise*, privilege the mediated over the non-mediated.

Finally, the idea of advertisement plays among these novels, particularly *White
Noise and Ubik. The characters in White Noise find refuge in the grocery store and mall and comfort in the constant barrage of advertising and brand names they offer. Jack Gladney finds his most satisfying sense of himself is as a consumer. The adults in the novel--and to an extent, even the children, some of whom are quite young--find a comfort in the brand names they find in the grocery store, because brand names offer no difference between word and thing--the word and thing are one within a brand name. This connection offers them some form of comfort in a world where the difference between word and thing can be overwhelming. In Ubik, advertisements for the product Ubik preface every chapter. These advertisements make the consumer aware of what he or she lacks, not so much in the form of, for example, the new Ubik razor in the epigraph of chapter six, but the love that a man can expect to receive when he has a closely-shaved face: “[T]he days of scrape-scrape are over. So try Ubik. And be loved” (Dick 63). Ubik works to fill lacks that the consumer becomes hyper-aware of because of the barrage of advertising that surrounds him. Much as in White Noise, where Jack finds some form of identity and fulfillment in the commodities he purchases, Ubik is a commodity used to fill a perceived lack. It only works until the aerosol Ubik spray is used up, however, and the consumer finds in himself another lack. Then he must go out and purchase more.

All of these novels engage Jameson’s ideas about cognitive mapping and the other conditions of postmodern work, and, within all of these novels, there is a failure of one or more characters to map cognitively the situation they find themselves in because of the conditions of their postmodern, post-industrial surroundings.
Commodities as Markers of the Past in Philip K. Dick’s *Ubik*

*Ubik* by Philip K. Dick is a novel that is preoccupied with the idea of reality versus illusion. Throughout the text, questions about what is real and what is illusion preoccupy the protagonist, Joe Chip, as well as his coworkers at Runciter Associates, a “prudence organization” which counteracts the powers of those with psychic abilities. It is three-quarters of the way through the novel that Runciter’s associates (or what remain of them) seem to discover what their objective reality is, and it is on the last page of the novel that it becomes apparent that there are no definite answers to that question, as they once thought. In a world where the lines between nature, technology, and commodity are blurred, it is impossible for one to map cognitively the difference between reality and illusion.

In *Ubik*, one finds many representations of technological innovations that were only fantasies when the book was published. Indeed, even though it is set in the 1990s, most of these commodities are still just fantasies. Scott Bukatman discusses commodities in *Ubik* in his book *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-Modern Science Fiction*. Throughout *Ubik*, each chapter is headed by an advertisement for a variety of products all called “Ubik”, an instant coffee, a brand of beer, an antiperspirant, as well as many others. Bukatman points out that “[a]dvertising generates anxieties and makes the
subject aware of lacks (perhaps in self-image or personal appearance). In becoming a consumer and acquiring a commodity, the subject fixes the lack, repairs appearance, becomes an image” (97). Ubik becomes the symbol of all commodities on the market, and the situation in which Joe Chip and his coworkers, called “inertials”, find themselves becomes an allegory for post-industrial society. Most important in the novel is the constant bombardment of advertisement through the television and radio, which, although reminiscent of post-World War II America, is persistent and almost constant. It is because of the mediation of advertisements that those living in Dick’s world are constantly imbibing, that when they are removed from such advertising excursions or any technological or commodified innovations even resembling those in their world, they become lost and need Ubik, a commodity that means to represent all other commodities, to relocate themselves. Without the commodities that surround them to place them, mentally and cognitively, on the map of their social and cultural world, they find such a world unmappable.

The idea of cognitive mapping is taken from Fredric Jameson’s Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, a text that compares the postmodern work to the post-industrial world in which it is set. He concludes that because of the rapid technological innovation in the “over-developed” world and the simultaneous failure of the human consciousness to evolve as quickly, the latest mutation in space--postmodern hyperspace--has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its
position in a mappable external world (83).

It is because of this hyperreal technological innovation, and the resulting inability to cognitively map, I argue, that the characters in this novel are unable to distinguish between what is reality and what is illusion.

The novel opens on Glen Runciter, owner of Runciter Associates, facing the dilemma of a missing psi, S. Dole Melipone. A psi is someone who has psychic abilities, such as precognition or telekinesis. Melipone is one of Ray Hollis’s people—a man in charge of a group of psis who tend to use their powers for evil—and Melipone cannot be located either on Earth or one of Earth’s several colonies. Runciter’s first instinct is to consult his wife, who has been suspended in half-life for years. Half-life is an existence between life and death in which the body of the “deceased” person is packed in “cold-pac,” and mental faculties are maintained through technological innovation. Communication with these “half-lifers” is possible by an “earphone arrangement” and “microphone” (15-16). Half-life is the first example in the novel of the technological overtaking the natural—no longer is a natural life and death the only option; people can have their mental faculties maintained technologically though their body is technically dead. However, half-life can only be maintained for a limited amount of time, and, each time a living person communicates with a person in half-life, some of their half-life is used up. While speaking to Ella Runciter, Mr. Runciter is interrupted by Jory, a 15-year-old boy in half-life next to his wife, who has managed to tap into her “cephalic activity” (20) in hopes of speaking to someone from outside the moratorium. Jory is unsatisfied with his existence in half-life; he wants to live in the “real” world. Mr.
Runciter gives up on speaking to his wife after the incident, in which Jory makes it impossible for him to hear what she is thinking.

In the meantime, the protagonist, Joe Chip, one of Runciter’s testers of anti-psi ability, is visited by G.G. Ashwood, a scout for anti-psi, with a new find, Pat Conley. He runs about his apartment, upset that it has not been cleaned in two weeks due to late payments to the cleaning robots. He argues with several sentient appliances, including the door, which, in a comic scene, refuses to open for him without payment and threatens to sue him when he attempts to remove it from its hinges. Although humorous, this exchange exemplifies precisely what Marx has termed “commodity fetishism,” in which “[t]here it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx, “Capital”). Marx argues that people are forced to fetishize the commodity because of an inability to link any given commodity with the person who created it. Although Marx’s idea of a relation between man and thing is theoretical, Dick has turned it into a comic relationship between a poor man and his door (and also many of the other appliances in his home, which are coin-operated). Not only is the door able to carry on a conversation but is able to sound “smug” and can logically intuit what it means to be removed from its hinges. This scenario is the first glimpse into one of the many different relationships throughout the text between humanity and commodity and the beginning of an explanation into the ways commodities can mystify a consumer in a post-industrial world into confusing illusion for reality.

G.G. Ashwood explains that Pat Conley has a very complicated ability to
counteract the effects of someone who has “precog” psi talents (30-31). A precog, according to G.G. Ashwood:

sees a variety of futures, laid out side by side like cells in a beehive. For him one has greater luminosity, and this he picks. Once he has picked it the anti-precog can do nothing; the anti-precog has to be present when the precog is in the process of deciding, not after. The anti-precog makes all futures seem equally real to the precog; he aborts his talent to choose at all. (31)

Although Pat claims she is able to counteract this talent, she is not an anti-precog. She, instead of being able to nullify the ability of a precog to predict the future, is able to go “back in time” (31). Ashwood explains to Chip:

‘The precog affected by her still sees one predominant future; like you said, the one luminous possibility. And he chooses it, and he’s right. But why is he right? Why is it luminous? Because this girl—’He shrugged in her direction. ‘Pat controls the future; the one luminous possibility is luminous because she’s gone into the past and changed it. By changing it she changes the present, which includes the precog; he is affected without knowing it and his talent seems to work, whereas it really does not…She can cancel out the precogs decision after he’s made it’ (31-2).

In a way, Pat is able to control not only the future, like most anti-precogs, but the past and present that lead up to that future. As Scott Bukatman points out, “Pat’s ability to manipulate the past implies the existence of myriad presents, none finally more real than any other” (94). Because Pat can make every future seem equally plausible, it can be
inferred that at one point all futures are equally plausible. Perhaps every reality they find themselves in is merely by chance. Maybe no reality is concrete, but all are malleable. In a world where multiple presents are possible, it is impossible to determine what is reality and what is illusory. Moreover, multiple presents can be played out one after the other without those involved being particularly aware of it happening, as demonstrated when Pat asks Joe Chip if she can take a shower in his apartment. She uses her power on Chip and reveals to him that he gave her a better score on her anti-psi ability test when she took her clothes off in front of him, rather than when she waited until she was alone, showing him the score card from the other present to prove it. With Pat’s talent, it would appear that not only are multiple presents possible, but that they can all exist simultaneously and without anyone being aware of it.

Pat is put on a team of Runciter’s anti-psis to go on a trip to Luna for business magnate Stanton Mick. When they arrive, they become aware that something is not right about the operation, and, when an inconspicuous bomb explodes, they know that Hollis is behind the operation and hired Runciter’s team of inertials in an attempt to get rid of as many of them as possible. Fortunately, nobody is severely hurt in the explosion except Runciter, who is quickly rushed into cold-pac in hopes of maintaining half-life, because it is apparent that he is dying. The inertials comment that Pat should use her ability to change the past so Runciter was not killed, but she claims that since the explosion she has lost the ability. Everyone comments that the ship is surprisingly cold as they speed off to get Runciter to the moratorium where his wife exists in half-life. This is the first of several undesirable schemes that occur throughout the text.
Almost immediately after this incident, Joe Chip starts to notice that the commodities and consumables around him are no longer fresh or vital but stale and broken. It starts when he takes a cigarette out of a fresh pack to find it brittle and crumbling. He finds a phonebook on the ship that existed before the ship was built, and he is served moldy coffee and spoiled cream at a diner after they get back to Earth. Finally, the group checks their pockets to find currency that has not been in circulation for years, along with coins depicting Glen Runciter’s profile. Just like the commodities, members of the inertial’s team start to decompose in an odd manner—they first find Wendy Wright in a closet, her body a huddled heap, dehydrated, almost mummified, lying curled up. Decaying shreds of what seemingly had once been cloth covered most of it, as if it had, by degrees, over a long period of time, retracted into what remained of its garments. Bending, [Chip] turned it over. It weighed only a few pounds; at the push if his hand its limbs folded out into thin bony extensions that rustled like paper. (99)

The inertials have met the same fate as the commodities around them, putrefying and decaying long before one could expect them to. Joe tries to chalk it up to radiation from the explosion on Luna, but that can only account for the death of Wendy Wright and the pack of cigarettes in his pocket, not for the coffee and cream in the Earth diner, nor the money they find in their pockets.

Another mystery that comes to Joe Chip is a note from Runciter. He finds it when looking for a carton of fresh cigarettes in a grocery store—trying desperately to find something that is not decaying. Inside a carton he finds not cigarettes but the note, saying
it is important that they get in contact. He wonders how he can talk to Runciter when he never even made it to half-life and how Runciter could be communicating through notes if he is dead. How did he know Joe Chip was going to be in that grocery store on that day, choosing that particular carton of cigarettes, and how did he get the note there? Questionable happenings find their way again and again to Joe Chip and his group of inertials. Now, not only are the commodities queer, but so too is Runciter’s death and the circumstances of it. We begin to see very quickly Chip’s inability to map the situation in which he finds himself, partially because the commodities around him are no longer in the condition in which he expects to find them. The post-industrial consumer can determine his relationship to the world around him based on the commodities he buys to represent himself. In the same way, one can determine from which era a photograph or film comes from based on hair styles and fashion choices, one can determine and interpret the world one finds around them based on the commodities and the advertisements that they are almost constantly being bombarded with. The consumables around him do not allow him to place himself temporally because they do not coincide with the time or place in which he seems to find himself.

Later, Chip finds a note from Runciter graffitied on a bathroom wall:

JUMP IN THE URINAL AND STAND ON YOUR HEAD.

I’M THE ONE THAT’S ALIVE. YOU’RE ALL DEAD. (118)

It is not completely clear to Joe at first what this note means, but his friend Al decides that it must mean all of the inertials are in half-life while Glen Runciter lives on. The blast on Luna must have killed them all and left Runciter untouched. A second graffitti
message informs them in Runciter’s handwriting:

LEAN OVER THE BOWL AND THEN TAKE A DIVE.

ALL OF YOU ARE DEAD. I AM ALIVE. (121)

Runciter then appears to them on the television, as a commercial salesman for the product after which the book is titled, Ubik. Of Ubik, he tells them

One invisible puff-puff whisk of economically priced Ubik banishes compulsive obsessive fears that the entire world is turning into clotted milk, worn-out tape recorders and obsolete iron-cage elevators, plus other, further, as-yet-un glimpsed manifestations of decay. You see, world deterioration of this regressive type is a normal experience of many half-lifers, especially in the early stages when ties to the real reality are still very strong. A sort of lingering universe is retained as a residual charge, experienced as a pseudo environment, but highly unstable and unsupported by an ergic substructure. This is particularly true when several memory systems are fused, as in the case of you people. But with today’s new, more-powerful-than-ever Ubik, all this is changed! (125, italics added).

It is more than halfway through the text that any kind of clarification as to what is happening to the world around them finally comes, and, even then, it is unclear whether this clarification is the truth or just another strange coincidence. They saw Runciter die, but here he is on the TV set. They are not sure how he got there, or how he knows they’ll be watching. Did he record this before his death? Would that mean he saw into the future? If so, why did he do nothing to stop it? Or are they really in half life? For the inertials, there are no concrete answers, just question after question.
Ubik is described by Runciter as a reality support. It finally seems evident at the end of the book that the inertials are, in fact, in half-life and that Runciter is the sole survivor of the bomb explosion. All of their memories are linked together which is why they experience half-life as a group rather than as individuals. Jory, the boy who interfered with Runciter’s wife’s communication abilities in the beginning of the book, is “killing” the inertials to gain their strength, and the world around them is a projection of Jory’s mind. The reason the world has been regressing is that it takes too much effort on Jory’s part to stop things from regressing, as it is apparently the natural order of things in half-life. The whole world they find themselves in is not an objective reality but a projection of a fifteen-year-old boy’s mind, making it virtually impossible to map objectively.

The only way to keep the world around him from regressing, Chip realizes, is the Ubik aerosol spray that he purchases from a drug store in Jory’s pseudo-environment. Ella Runciter is the one who created Ubik. As long as Chip has his Ubik, he will be safe from Jory and his projections, but he must be sure to keep a supply of it because it wears off after a few hours. Ubik fixes reality for Chip in a way that commodities fix reality for consumers—Joe has a lack in the appearance of reality, consumers have lacks in their “self-image or personal appearance” (Bukatman 97). Ubik, the commodity, fixes appearances in both Joe’s world and the consumer’s. The consumer no longer has that lack once the commodity is purchased; “it confirms one’s relation to and position in the world, but only by constructing a temporary state of pseudo-satisfaction which lasts only until the can is empty or the next commercial is viewed” (Bukatman 97). Chip’s use of
Ubik mirrors the commodity marketplace, as he is content with his purchase of Ubik, which fixes not only his environment but also his identity as a consumer, but the relief is only temporary, and he must go out to buy more when he runs out.

Finally, just as the novel seems to come completely to a wrapped-up explanation, the last page unravels everything. Runciter pulls a few coins out of his pocket in order to tip an attendant at the moratorium where he has communicated with Joe Chip, when the attendant notices something odd about the money: it has Joe Chip’s face on it, mirroring the event when Joe Chip found money with Runciter’s face on it. These are the very last words of the novel--Dick is not going to give up any more information. It is apparent that everything that has been assumed up to this point is, in fact, a complete lie. One of the first indications that something is amiss in Joe Chip’s world is Runciter’s face on the money, and now Runciter finds himself with money printed with Joe Chip’s face. The narrative refuses to close the story or explain what is going on. This is not lazy writing on Dick’s part; the whole narrative has been leading up to this point. “Ubik does not present a dichotomy of appearance and reality, but an unresolved dialectic” (Bukatman 94). Appearance and reality are not the same thing in Ubik, and yet one cannot determine which reality is real, or which reality is just appearance. Without a working knowledge of the line between reality and un-reality, or commodities and advertisements that make sense to the inertials, it is impossible for them map cognitively the environment around them.

Chip’s assumption that Ella Runciter’s Ubik is a manifestation of pure goodness is misguided. It is the commodity which he most (literally) fetishizes throughout the text,
seeing it as a God-like entity. This image is exemplified by the epigraph to the final chapter, which is not an advertisement for Ubik, but is, instead, scriptural in nature, making Ubik analogous to God:

I am Ubik. Before the universe was, I am. I made the suns. I made the worlds. I created the lives and the places they inhabit. I move them here, I put them there. They go as I say, they do as I tell them. I am the word and my name is never spoken, the name which no one knows. I am called Ubik, but that is not my name.

I am. I shall always be. (207)

It would appear that casting Ubik in this light is another trick from the author himself. While it is obvious that we, as readers, are meant to see Ubik as divine, it is impossible, once one analyzes the text, to believe that is what it suggests. As Peter Fitting explains, the way Ubik works is not by maintaining reality, because Joe Chip’s reality is that he is lying in cold-pac in the moratorium. Instead, Ubik maintains the false reality of Jory’s projection. Also, “Ubik is a human invention, an image of humankind’s own struggle against entropy, rather than an image of divine assistance or guidance in that struggle” (49). If one were to compare this image to Marx’s idea of the spiritual, in which “the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race,” (Marx,“Capital”) it can be argued that it is cohesive in nature. However, if one were to compare such a commodity to the idealized God that Dick invokes by calling such a product Ubik (meaning ubiquitous, ever-present), the metaphor falls flat. This God is not Plato’s Ideal, as Joe Chip comes to believe, but a mere shadow.
Mark Poster argues that Ubik is not supposed to represent God, but the God-like qualities of the commodity advertisement. The metaphor, in Poster’s eyes, is that Ubik fixes reality in the same way an advertisement fixes reality for a consumer lost in a post-industrial world. The information about what to buy to abolish their lacks can only be brought to them through advertisement, and so we find a society in which individuals can find and uphold their identities through purchases. It would appear that, in the world Dick creates, people no longer search for spiritual confirmation through a deity, but through the market. For Poster, “the half-lifers are understood to represent the general population of consumer culture, living in the hyperreal world of mediated information, their identities…persist through that culture” (32).

In *Ubik* both the characters the reader are unable to map cognitively the narrative that the text follows. Not only are the characters unable to determine the intricate relationships between the forces in their lives (or half-lives), but the reader is unable to as well. The technological innovation of half-life in the novel, as well as the constant advertisement mediation of the market invading the personal, make it impossible for the characters in the novel to determine where objective reality exists. The commodities around them are too unfamiliar to ground them in any kind of realistic setting and upset their own perceptions to the point where they come to believe (correctly, in fact) that there is no possible way this world they are now inhabiting could be the same world that they left when they went to Luna. Dick purposefully adds the final chapter as a way of ensuring that no one can ever determine exactly what the true story is—right when everything seems summed up and mapped out, it turns out there can be no definite truth
to the text. Robinson explains that Dick refuses the reader closure for a purpose:

Dick has made certain that no explanation will cover all the facts. This deliberate balking of our attempts to explain rationally the events of the text is…breaking one of the central conventions of the genre [the convention, as Stanislaw Lem articulated was that “SF requires rational accounting for events that are quite improbable and even seemingly at odds with logic and experience” (62)]. And the book is qualitatively different from those science fiction texts where the rational explanation is ignored or bungled…here the convention is not being ignored, but broken”(95).

Much as the characters are unable to map cognitively their situation within the post-industrial world, the reader is unable to map cognitively as well. Dick performs a perfect coherence of form and content to drive his point home.
The Technological Suppression of the Natural in Kim Stanley Robinson’s

*The Gold Coast*

Literary theorist Fredric Jameson lists several conditions inherent to the postmodern novel in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Kim Stanley Robinson, a protégé of Jameson, exemplifies all of these conditions in his novel *The Gold Coast*, ultimately showing all of these conditions not as equal to, but instead, leading to and causing Jameson’s final condition, a failure by those in the post-industrial world to map cognitively the global and physical networks in which they find themselves. Furthermore, an inability to map such a space will ultimately leave one unable to escape it.

Ian Buchanan summarizes Jameson’s “symptoms” of the postmodern as:

- A new ‘depthlessness’ of the image (‘waning of affect’).
- A weakening of historicity (pastiche).
- A whole new type of emotional ground tone (‘hysterical sublime’).
- A new relation to technology (geopolitical aesthetic).
- A mutation in built space (cognitive mapping) (89)

Each of these stipulations, according to Jameson, in unique to the postmodern and can be found in Robinson’s *The Gold Coast*, specifically in the situations and circumstances the characters within the novel find themselves faced with. Ultimately, it can be shown that
the first four stipulations in this list all lead to Jameson’s fifth stipulation, a failure to map cognitively, making it the end to which all other items in the list are working towards. A failure to map cognitively, in Jameson’s words, is “the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (Jameson 84).

In his section about images, Jameson speaks of the depthlessness of images in the postmodern. The characters in the book are particularly enamored with the images that surround them and often fixate upon them. This enamoration with images is introduced within the first few chapters of the novel, when the protagonist, Jim, a twenty-something living in California in the year 2027, heads to a party at his friend Sandy’s house. He finds himself in a table tennis match with another friend, Arthur, and the spectators at the party quickly become enamored with the game.

Jim can even take the luxury of noticing that the video room next door is filling up with spectators. Sandy has turned on the game room cameras, and the watchers are treated to eight shots of live action, all played out on the big screenwall and the various free screens hanging from silver springs that extend down from the ceiling: Jim and Arthur, flying around from every angle. The game room clears out, in fact, as people go into the video room to observe the spectacle, and the two players have room to really go at it (29-30).

The young adults at the party find more enjoyment in the image reproduction of the game than the game itself. They would rather watch the match mediated by TV than live. The characters in this novel live in a mediated world in which technology—especially video
images--plays middleman between reality and themselves. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson says of images that “depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces,” (12) exemplified by the multiple monitors used to depict Jim’s table tennis match against Arthur.

After the party, Jim takes his friend Virginia back to his apartment. Jim turns the video system on in his bedroom, and they prepare to have sex, “maneuver[ing] into positions where they can both see a wall of screens” (35). The fun is interrupted when Jim’s cheap video system stops working, and the screens around them go blank. Unable to watch themselves in the act, they become bored and have to improvise with some mirrors if they plan to continue.

This ‘depthlessness’ is caused by what Jameson calls a “waning of affect,” which is due to

the ‘death’ of the subject itself--the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego of the individual--and the accompanying stress, whether as some new moral ideal or as empirical description, on the *decentering* of that formerly centered subject or psyche. (Jameson 63).

In the postmodern work, we find not the “centered subject” of the modernist period but rather a work without a centralized subject. Ultimately, Jameson concludes, the death of the subject leads to the inability to express oneself, as “expression requires the category of the individual monad” (Jameson 63). This inability of expression can be seen primarily in Jim’s failure as a poet. His poetry is preoccupied with the idea that the “real” world and the “natural” world are the same thing, and that both have been suppressed and taken
over by post-industrial technological innovation, specifically pertaining to California’s entanglement in the military-industrial complex. Throughout the novel, Jim has been working with his friend Arthur to protest through sabotage the research facilities in California that build defense systems as well as weapons systems for the military. They spend numerous nights planning and executing missions to hit several of these facilities with weapons that will not harm people but will destroy computers and machinery. These are the only times in the novel when Jim feels he is making a difference in society, when he is giving the community something beneficial and standing up for what he believes in. Although Jim believes he is expressing himself politically, it becomes apparent to the reader, by the end of the novel, that Jim is working within the system that he is trying to destroy. He is unable to determine his position in the system because he is unable to map cognitively the postmodern situation in which he finds himself.

Jameson continues to say that “[t]he waning of affect…might also have been characterized…as the waning of the great high-modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of of durée and of memory” (16). While the modernist era was once characterized by a temporality, the postmodern is characterized more by “categories of space rather than categories of time” (Jameson 64). In Robinson’s novel, Jim fancies himself an historian and is obsessed with a particular image of California that he keeps in his apartment, the label from an old orange crate:

Three friars, taste-testing oranges by the white mission.
   Behind them green groves, and blue snow-topped
   Mountains in the distance…
You have never lived here (63).
He believes the image on the orange crate actually existed for those who lived in the past, a kind of agricultural Utopia. He comments that he has never known this Utopia because the natural landscape that he projects onto the past has been covered by “condomundos” and highways. He dedicates much of his time to writing the history of Orange County, where he lives, and chapters from his work are inserted throughout the narrative. In the beginning, these chapters depict an Orange County which is hard-working, industrious, and covered in agriculture, regardless of whether or not that place actually existed. Jim tells his friends that he does not need to do a large amount of research for this project, as “I have it in my genes, this place, I have a race memory of what it used to be like when the orange groves were here” (28), demonstrating Jameson’s second condition of the postmodern, which is a weakening of historicity.

By “weakening of historicity,” Jameson means that the postmodern subject is unable to place himself within the course of history or understand the generations that came before him in anything but nostalgic ideals of a sort of “pop history,” which has “become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum” (Jameson 66). While Jim thinks he understands the history of Orange County, it is only at the end of the novel, when he has attempted to dissent from the postmodern world, that he begins to depict an un-idealized image of OC, which includes crowding, traffic, commercial development, and, most importantly, the establishment of the military-industrial complex upon which the economy of California depends. As a subject of the postmodern, Jim does not know the history of OC, despite considering himself an
historian. “Faced with these ultimate objects--our social, historical and existential present, and the past as ‘referent’,--the incompatibility of a postmodernist ‘nostalgia’ art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent” (Jameson 67). Only once he has distanced himself from his postmodern subjectivity (or lack thereof) and taken a step back can Jim realizes that he was wrong, and that, as his friend Arthur tells him:

Most of that citrus utopia bit is bullshit. It was always agribiz in California, the Spanish land grants were grabbed up in parcels so big that it was a perfect location for corporate agriculture, it was practically the start of it. Those groves you lament were picked by migrant laborers who worked like dogs, and lived like it was the worst part of the Middle Ages (42).

Jim is not the only character in the novel that seems unable to work with the past in any meaningful way. One of the favorite pastimes of his circle of friends is to create and use designer drugs delivered almost directly into the bloodstream in the form of eye drops. These drugs are used at nightly parties, at low-key visits, while traveling, and almost any time when two or more of them congregate. Most of these people are seen needing these drugs just to get out of bed in the morning, to relax, or to enjoy an evening of partying without sleep. Jim’s friend Sandy is most heavily involved with the drugs, as he is the manufacturer and distributor of several different kinds. Moreover, Sandy is also the person most unable to place himself in time compared to his past:

There is this problem with drug taking at Sandy’s level: functioning in the present is possible, just barely, with the most intense concentration; but the
past…the past tends to disappear. A lot of tracks branch back up into the hippocampus there, and he doesn’t seem to have much of a program for navigating them (184).

While Sandy seems most affected by the drugs, it is apparent that no one in the group, including Jim, is able to map and connect himself or herself temporally with the past. Their inability to map cognitively is not just spatial, but temporal as well.

This inability to map temporally becomes apparent when Jim and his friends decide they are going to get out of California and travel to Europe for a few days, an opportunity to visit places with thousands of years of history behind them rather than America’s roughly 250-year history. “‘Off to the Old World!’ he says to his apartment. ‘I’ll be walking waist deep in history wherever we go!’” (212). While their plan is to explore history, they spend most of their time in France in a Disneyland theme park, eat most of their meals from American fast-food chains such as McDonalds, communicate only in English with those around them, and compare the housing they see in Moscow to the “condomundos” found in OC. Only when he reaches Egypt does Jim begin to understand that he is doing himself an injustice by ignoring the history of these places:

The laser lights playing across the Pyramids and the Sphinx use the latest in pop concert technology and aesthetics, including a star cathedral effect, some satellite beaming down thick cylinders of light, yellow, green, blue, red, bathing the whole area in a lased glow…They aren’t doing the Old World justice, he knows that. Going to see the Pyramids turned into bad pop video; that isn’t the way to do it. (229).
They finally take some time to visit Greece and to try and get away from the tourist attractions. They buy authentic Greek food and plan a picnic on a secluded spot at the edge of the island. They try to imagine the history of the beach on which they are sitting but comment that as Californians there is no way to grasp the time scales that they are attempting to imagine. As residents of the American west (and the postmodern world), they are simply unable to remember back that far. Jim cannot find a way to understand Greece’s immense history compared to California’s short one. While Greek ruins can still be seen on the island from hundreds of years ago, Jim can find no hint of tangible history visible on the California landscape. Jim’s idea of the past is connected to the physical landscape of California, a natural landscape that no longer exists and that he can find no traces of in the present day.

What has gone wrong back in his own country makes up the third and fourth conditions of the postmodern that Jameson posits (a whole new type of emotional ground tone (‘hysterical sublime’), and a new relation to technology (geopolitical aesthetic)). Of the postmodern work, Jameson states:

[T]he object of the sublime is now not only a matter of sheer power and the physical incommensurability of the human organism with Nature, but also of the limits of figuration and the incapacity of the human mind to give representation to such enormous forces…Today, however, it may be possible to think all this in a different way, at the moment of a radical eclipse of Nature itself…The other of our society is in the sense no longer Nature at all, as it was in precapitalist societies, but something else… (Jameson77).
In the western world before late capitalism, society depended upon nature for its commodities, such as the orange groves represented in Jim’s orange crate label. Nature was essential to the survival of our species. Jameson claims that we no longer depend upon nature as we move into the postmodern world. The “something else” he suggests is technology.

[T]oday’s entrepreneurs no longer look to the seas and the forests and the hidden minerals of the world in order to make their fortune, rather they look to culture itself: inventing a new computer application is more lucrative these days than finding a new gold deposit or oil reserve (Buchanan 98).

Technology has not simply replaced nature, rather it has penetrated nature and fused with it, making it impossible to separate the two. Time and time again, Jim and his friends search for the natural, only to be faced with the technological.

…face to the stars, it’s clear tonight and up there on the fuzzy black vault of the night are the big fast satellites, the solar panels in their polar orbits, the microwave transmitters, the ballistic missile mirrors to the north—all the new artificial constellations, swimming around up there and nearly blocking out the little old twinkly stars (171).

The satellites surrounding Earth (mostly military installations) block out the existing stars and become the post-industrial stars not created organically but by man. Furthermore, in nearly every country they visit (with the exception of Greece), they are forced to experience nature and natural history in a post-industrial manner: watching colorful lights bounce off the Egyptian pyramids like a “bad pop video” (229), eating fast food in
foreign countries, and waiting in lines to buy tickets to tourist attractions.

Also, in accordance with the vast industrialization of California, none of the jobs or careers the characters have in the novel has anything to do with the natural world; Jim is a part-time teacher and a clerk at a real-estate company (which commodifies the land itself), Sandy creates synthetic designer drugs, Abe drives an ambulance, etc. Perhaps the most obvious example of this type of work, however, is told through the story of Jim’s father, Dennis McPherson, who works at Laguna Space Research, one of several companies on the west coast that build defense weaponry for the Air Force. It becomes clear throughout the text that America continues its “forty odd wars” (11) in order to stimulate the defense industry upon which California’s economy depends. Dennis tries to ignore this dependence for most of the novel, believing that he is contributing to the protection of America against the Soviets, but, by the end, his colleague Dan Houston informs Dennis that all he believes about the nobility of his position is a complete lie. He is not contributing to the safety of America, he is contributing to the several wars which keep America from economic collapse:

And the Government went along with it because the economy was looking bad at the end of the century. Need a boost—military spending—it’s been the method of choice ever since World War Two got them out of the Great Depression. Hard times? Start a war! Or pump money into weapons whether there’s a war or not. It is like we use weapons as a drug, snort some up and stimulate the old economy. Best upper known to man. (220)

Dennis is beginning to understand the system in which he is working and his place in it.
In the meantime, when Jim wants to try and break free of the “system” (which he never completely defines), his friend Tashi takes him North to the mountains. Tashi is the only character in the book who finds himself disconnected from the technological world the other characters cannot escape—he grows his own food, lives in a tent on a rooftop, and shares a primitive relationship with the ocean where he frequently surfs to get away from the city: “Here he lives in one of the most densely populated places in the world, and all he has to do is swim a hundred yards offshore and he’s in a pure wilderness, the city nothing but a peculiar backdrop” (95). The mountains are the only place in the novel where the landscape of California is not buried underneath industrial development. Surrounding them are “the oldest rocks in North America…a stream that chuckles down drop after drop…scrub jays and finches flit[ting] around the junipers and the little scraps of meadow bordering the stream…[and] mountains for as far as the eye can see” (358-361). This time in the mountains is perhaps the first time Jim has ever been in an environment that can be called “natural,” and, as he climbs the mountain, he finds that time itself seems to be slowing down as he moves farther and farther from his post-industrial world. There is a catch, however. As Tashi tells Jim as they park their car in the parking lot under the mountains: “We only have a wilderness permit for one, so we’ll have to take evasive action on the way in” (358). In order to access the wilderness utopia, they have to purchase tickets to enter the mountains from “Ticketron” (358). Though Jim thinks he has made it outside of the system, he is really working within it the whole time. His inability to map the system ultimately leads to his inability to escape it.

Jim’s current romantic interest, Hana, also tries to live outside of the postmodern
structure, though with only limited success. She refuses much of the technology that Jim and his friends depend on, such as the video screens, and Jim has his only non-mediated sexual encounter in the novel with her. She teaches art classes at the community college where Jim works but focuses her own work on “art that rejects the fading fashion of postmodernism” (Moylan 23). His relationship with Hana spurs Jim to deconstruct or reject the hold that the post-industrial and postmodern world has on him, but he is disillusioned when he realizes that even Hana is not completely outside of the system when she is seen as a “dowdy newcomer” (284) by Jim’s past lover, Virginia. Jim believes Hana to be unfazed by Virginia’s comment, as she is obviously outside of such cultural vanity, but she admits to Jim that she was hurt by Virginia and that she is not completely outside of cultural system in which they find themselves, despite pretending to be. “You can pretend not to care about the image, but that’s as far as the culture will let you get. Inside you have to feel it; you can fight it but it will always be there, the contemptuous dismissal of you by the Virginia Novellos of the world” (285).

It is evident, in fact, by the end of the novel, that none of the characters is able to work outside of the system that they find themselves entrapped in--be it the postmodern world, industrial capitalism, the military industrial complex, or some combination thereof. This inability to escape leads to Jameson’s final condition of the postmodern, that which all of the other conditions lead to: cognitive mapping, or rather, a failure to map cognitively. More specifically, a failure “of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson 83).
Most evident of this inability to map is Jim’s father Dennis, who is working on a project called Ball Lightning at Laguna Space Research. Several other research facilities are competing with LSR for the lowest bid for the Air Force. Dennis believes his system is the most efficient and cost-effective, but only because one of his colleagues lied about the system’s capabilities when it was being tested. When LSR is on the verge of being caught in the lie, Arthur, the person who is leading Jim’s excursions of protest, decides it is LSR’s turn to be attacked. The attack will ruin any prototypes of the Ball Lightning project and make it impossible to verify the validity of the tests. The Air Force, who has commissioned the project, will be forced to look elsewhere, leaving LSR in the clear and leaving the military in the dark about its lies. On the night of the attack, Donald Hereford, the president of LSR, knows that the saboteurs “won’t attack any place where there are people working” (257), so he conveniently decides to tell LSR’s guards to leave the grounds for the night. Stuart Lemon, Dennis’s boss, discovers what Hereford is up to long before it ever happens:

A company attacks another to harm their work and eventually damage their reputation for efficiency with the Air Force. Then it attacks itself to keep suspicion away from it. And, at the same time, it could use the attack on itself to get rid of something potentially damaging in and of itself. Sure, it all makes sense (258).

Arthur is not working against the defense industry but with them. He is using his weapons to relieve these companies of anything they do not want the military to find out, under the guise that they had been attacked by pseudo-terrorists. Jim, however, never
learns that the attack on LSR was planned by LSR itself. He is never aware that, while he assumes he is working against the system, he is just another pawn inside of it. Jim’s work with Arthur is perhaps the most obvious example of the inability of the postmodern man to cognitively map the system he finds himself in--Jim is completely in the dark about how he is benefiting LSR, and, for that matter, so is his father.

Dennis, too, is unable to completely map the situation in which he finds himself. By the end of the narrative, he knows that it was most likely Hereford who planned to attack his own company. He knows now that his part in the operation is essentially nothing but an image to keep up. His work as an engineer is a veneer used to cover up the only “real” part of the operation, which are “the power struggles of certain people in Washington” (335). Although he has tried to deny it throughout the novel, Dennis now thinks he understands the whole operation. The Air Force is working exclusively with certain companies while ignoring others, and the owners of his own company are purposefully sabotaging his work to cover up their own lies. He comments to himself that he might as well be working on the set of a movie because everything he does is a sham to keep up appearances. Like so many occasions in the novel, reality is not what it appears to be.

While Dennis thinks he understands the entirety of the situation, Jim’s friend Sandy also thinks he understands the scope of what is happening. Sandy’s friend Raymond, who is also a drug manufacturer, has a personal vendetta against the military research facilities in California because “some of Ray’s friends in Venezuela were killed by some remotely piloted vehicles that Venezuelan drug police had bought from [the]
army” (149). Knowing he cannot wage a war against the US military, he decides to sabotage the research facilities that build the equipment. Raymond, it turns out, is the person for whom Jim and Arthur are working. Sandy thinks he has everything sorted out but fails to understand the involvement of either the Air Force or of LSR itself. It is apparent that while Jim, Dennis, and Sandy all think they have mapped the situation in which they find themselves, none of them has figured out every piece to the puzzle. Only by combining their narratives can the reader understand completely what is going on among these entities.

Finally, the characters in the story all come to one conclusion at the same time: they want to escape. This point in the story is when Jim and Tashi head to the mountains for a few days to lie low and enjoy nature. Shortly afterwards, Tashi moves to Alaska in hopes of escaping the post-industrial and over-industrialized world of OC. After being laid off from LSR, Dennis and his wife decide to visit some land they own in Northern California. These characters hope to move geographically out of the postmodern situation in which they find themselves.

Jim, however, takes a different approach. Instead of escaping the system geographically, he hopes to deconstruct its hold on his life. In a fit of anger, he destroys the video system in his bedroom and all the past recordings of his excursions with Virginia, throwing them, symbolically, from one of the multi-leveled highways in OC. He no longer wants to “hav[e] an affair with a video lady, like so many other men in America” (314). He attempts to break the fixation on images that he, and everyone else subject to the postmodern world, find themselves enamored with. He destroys all the
poetry he has written and rips up the chapters he has written about the history of OC. He knows that his memory is faulty and that he is looking at the past not as it was but with false nostalgia. He knows that he is subject to what Jameson calls a “weakening of historicity” and that his memory is too faulty to understand the past in any way that is remotely accurate. He finally tears down the maps of Orange County from his walls: one from the 1930s, one from the 1990s, and one from the present.

The characters’ preoccupation with mediated images, their inability to understand the past in realistic terms, and the constant suppression of the natural by the technological, ultimately lead to Jameson’s final stipulation of the postmodern, an inability to map cognitively. Despite all the work the characters do to escape the system, whether it be relocating geographically, deconstructing the system in which they live, or attempting to live outside of it altogether, without the ability to map cognitively the entirety of the situation, it is impossible to escape it.
Mediation of the “Real” in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*

For the characters in DeLillo’s world, television and radio, simulacral in nature, take precedence over that which they attempt to represent as “Real.” The characters find that events mediated through a television or computer screen are more real and immediate to them than things they perceive themselves. Moreover, the technological takes the place of the natural or biological. These conditions make it impossible for characters in the novel, specifically protagonist Jack Gladney, to cognitively map the environment in which they find themselves.

When Jack Gladney takes his son Heinrich to school, Heinrich and his father argue about the nature of truth in the media and in human perception:

‘It’s going to rain tonight.’

‘It’s raining now,’ I said.

‘The radio said tonight.’ […]

‘Look at the windshield,’ I said. ‘Is that rain or isn’t it?’

‘I’m only telling you what they said.’

‘Just because it’s on the radio doesn’t mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses.’

‘Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they’re right.’ (22-23)
Heinrich finds more truth in what the radio tells him than what he perceives around him. While human perceptions are subjective and, therefore, (according to Heinrich) unreliable, the objectivity of the media seems infallible. “For DeLillo’s suburbanites, the television weather goes before the real blizzard. If the blizzard shows up, it is the blizzard that television prepared us for. If the blizzard does not show up, reality will once again have disappointed our televisual expectations” (Laist, 74).

In Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, it is the simulacral nature of technology in the postmodern world that makes it impossible for the characters, especially protagonist Jack Gladney, to distinguish what is objectively real and what is not without it being mediated through something like the television. This idea is best exemplified when Jack and a new member of the Popular Culture department at Jack’s University, Murray Siskind, visit the “most photographed barn in America.” When they arrive, they stand watching the people photographing the barn, and realize that everyone has shown up with cameras and tripods. Murray comments to Jack that “[o]nce you’ve see the signs about the barn [that line the route to it], it becomes impossible to see the barn” (12). The barn becomes completely simulacral, as people line up to take photographs of it, because of how many photographs of it have already been taken. The real barn no longer exists; it is the mediation of the barn through photographic images that is real.

Jack Gladney is a college professor and the creator of the department of “Hitler Studies” at his university. His study of Hitler is another way Jack must mediate that which his life revolves around. He devotes his career to studying Hitler, but cannot read German. He is utterly dependent on the translations of other people—which can never get
to the true essence of the original language and are also open to subjective interpretation by their translators. Hitler himself is often mediated through television shows, and Jack even comments that “[w]e couldn’t have television without him” (63). Much of Jack’s life is not immediate but is mediated through someone or something else—primarily television.

Jack maintains a different persona when he is on the campus than he does at any other time. He dons black professor’s robes and dark glasses while on campus and has even gone as far as to change his name to J.A.K. Gladney for his professor persona, adding a false initial in the mix to be “taken seriously as a Hitler innovator” (16). Over the years, Jack’s on-campus persona has grown, and, at the end of the fourth chapter he admits “I am the false character that follows the name around,” (17) speaking of his new, false name. While he admits that the creation of J.A.K. Gladney is inorganic and arbitrary, he says that he himself is the “false character” that follows his name—his “true” identity—around. His mediated self, he admits, is more “real” than he is.

Jack also finds a sense of identity and subjectivity one morning when he walks to the bank to use the automated-teller machine. Indeed, throughout the novel, he finds himself interacting with many machines that seem to have a stake in his own sense of self. “I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request” (46). This interaction is the first of many codes that comes to rule Jack’s own ideas of his identity and his subjectivity. After he receives his balance, his subjectivity, mediated through the machine, is confirmed. “Waves of relief and gratitude washed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval….I sensed that something of deep personal
value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed” (46). The machine recognizes him in the most Hegelian sense, recognizing his existence and reflecting its recognition back to him. He feels his own sense of existence wrapped up in the anonymity of the technological recognition.

When Jack runs into a fellow faculty-member outside of the campus setting and without his “Professor Gladney” costume on, the man comments that, without his robe and dark glasses, Jack looks “so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (83). Immediately, Jack realizes that “[t]he encounter put [him] in the mood to shop” (83). His family supports this need—“When I said I was hungry, they fed me pretzels, beer, souvlaki. The two girls scouted ahead, spotting things they thought I might want or need, running back to get me, to clutch my arms, plead with me to follow. They were my guides to endless well-being” (DeLillo 83). He finds in this ritual of shopping the same confirmation of his self that his finds in the ATM machine. He begins to shop with reckless abandon—“The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit” (84). He has become the epitome of the postmodern consumer, basing his identity on what he buys rather than who he is, because who he is cannot be tangibly altered in the way that what he buys can be.

Jack-the-consumer, much like Jack-the-professor, is a costume through which he understands his own subjectivity. He mediates his image of himself through his identification as a consumer in a post-industrial society.

There is an understanding amongst DeLillo’s characters that unless it is mediated
through TV, it is not real. For example, Heinrich plays chess by correspondence with a convicted murderer in prison. When Jack asks Heinrich the particulars of Tommy Roy’s crimes (Who did he kill? How did he do it?), he supplies suggestions that come straight from the aesthetics and tropes of television or movies, while Heinrich collapses them with the banality of what really happened:

‘Did he care for his weapons obsessively? Did he have an arsenal stashed in his shabby little room off a six-story concrete car park?’

‘Some handguns and a bolt-action rifle with a scope.’

‘A telescopic sight. Did he fire from a highway overpass, a rented room? Did he walk into a bar, a washette, his former place of employment and start firing indiscriminately? People scattering, taking cover under tables. People out on the street thinking they heard firecrackers.’ (44)

Jack wants to believe that the way murderers actually think and work is the same way he sees them in fictionalized movies and television shows. Later, Heinrich claims that Tommy’s only regret is that he committed “an ordinary murder” rather than “an assassination” (45) because he didn’t get media attention for his crimes. It is as if the only things worth doing are those that will get you on TV, otherwise it is wasted effort.

Jack and his family share a similar experience when they go to the airport to pick up his daughter, Bee, flying in for a visit with the family. When she arrives, they notice people coming from another plane, “gray and stricken…stooped over in weariness and shock, dragging their hand luggage across the floor” (89). When Jack asks a passenger from the plane what had happened, he recounts the story of the plane losing “power in all
three engines, dropping from thirty-four thousand feet to twelve thousand feet” and finally ending with “the engines restarting. Just like that. Power, stability, control” (91-2). Bee, confused, asks where the media is. When Jack tells her “[t]here is no media in Iron City,” she responds, “They went through all that for nothing?” (92). To Bee, and indeed to many of the characters in DeLillo’s world, if it does not guarantee media attention, there is no point for natural disaster—regardless of whether or not the victims have any control in the matter.

One character, deemed “TV man” has brought this idea to its most developed. When the town of Blacksmith falls victim to a chemical catastrophe, later named the “Airborne Toxic Event”, they are forced to evacuate for fear of chemical exposure to poisonous Nyodene D. At one point a man with a TV walks through the crowd of evacuees, expressing his fury at being ignored by the media:

‘There’s nothing on network,’ he said to us. ‘Not a word, not a picture. On the Glassboro channel we rate fifty-two words by actual count. No film footage, no live report. Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore? Don’t those people know what we’ve been through?...Don’t they know it is real? Shouldn’t the streets be crawling with cameramen and soundmen and reporters? …What exactly has to happen before they stick microphones in our faces and hound us to the doorsteps of our homes, camping out on our lawns, creating the usual media circus?...Even if there has not been great loss of life, don’t we deserve some attention for our suffering, our human worry, our terror? Isn’t fear news?’ (161-2, italics mine).
Although it would be burdensome to have to deal with the media on top of the stress of being exposed to a chemical cloud and being dislodged from their homes, these people feel like they have earned that burden, that they have earned the media attention, that unless it is mediated by the news they will have “[gone] through all that for nothing”.

According to John N. Duvall, “Those who encounter the airborne toxic event intuitively know that television is not a mediation; it is the immediate. Television, the intertextual grid of electronic images, creates the Real” (436). It is not only to reconcile the disaster to those outside of it, but to the victims themselves, that the “TV man” demands news coverage of the event. He does not just want those outside the event to understand, but those within as well. The only way they can understand their current situation is not through their own perception, as Heinrich argues in the first section of the book, but through its mediation on the television.

During the catastrophe of the Airborne Toxic Event, Jack is exposed to the cloud of Nyodene D when he leaves the car to pump gas. He is told to report to SIMUVAC (short for Simulated Evacuation) technicians who can assess the effects of the chemical on his person. The SIMUVAC technician enters Jack’s “name, age, medical history, and so on” (138) into a computer to determine the damage of the Nyodene D on his body. When Jack argues that he was only outside for a few minutes, the technician responds, “It is not just you were out there so many seconds. It is your whole data profile. I tapped into your history. I’m getting bracketed numbers with pulsing stars” (140). The technician does not know Jack’s level of danger until he punches the numbers into the computer and
accesses Jack’s data. Jack demands more information, but the technician has none to offer him. He pleads, “But you said we have a situation”, to which the technician replies, “I didn’t say it. The computer did…It just means that you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that” (141). Once again, the mediated (or in this case, technological) reality is more real and more true than human perception—the technician is at a loss when Jack demands answers. He can only tell him what the computer says.

SIMUVAC’s purpose is to stage fake disasters in order to prepare for real ones. This idea gets turned around when they use the Airborne Toxic Event as a simulation to better prepare for future evacuations—they are using the real event as a practice run, an irony that is not lost on Jack:

‘But this evacuation is not simulated. It’s real.’

‘We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model.’

‘A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse simulation?’

‘We took it right into the streets.’ (139)

Here, the line between what is real and what is simulation is so blurred that it has essentially disappeared—the real event is the simulation. The word is the thing.

Throughout the novel is a running idea that things can be replaced by their signifiers. One of the possible side effects of Dylar, the pill Jack’s wife, Babette, uses to attempt to stave off her fear of death, is the inability to “distinguish words from things, so that if someone said ‘speeding bullet,’ [one] would fall to the floor and take cover” (193). Although Babette does no exhibit this symptom, it turns to be the demise of the
creator of the drug, Willie Mink, when Jack, at the end of the novel, attempts to kill him to restore his own “life-credit”. Jack is under the assumption that killing people grants the killer a longer life, as there are only killers and dyers in the world. Consumed by his own fear of death, he decides killing Mink, and stealing not only his “life-credit” but his immense stash of Dylar pills is his best option. The mere suggestion of a “hail of bullets” causes Mink to duck for cover as if he were really being littered by ammunition. By the end of the novel even the simulacral nature of words to signify actual things is being played upon.

Perhaps it is their relationship to language that make Jack and Babette feel so at-ease when they are with Babette’s youngest son, Wilder, who, because he is a toddler, has a very limited vocabulary, and throughout the novel is seen uttering not a single word. The only real attention Wilder gets throughout the novel is on two separate occasions. The first is when he begins crying, incessantly, for hours, for no discernible reason. Jack recognizes Wilder’s crying as an “expression of Mideastern lament, of an anguish so accessible that it rushes to overwhelm whatever immediately caused it. There was something permanent and soul-struck in this crying. It was a sound of inbred desolation” (77). Although Wilder is not able to speak, Jack is reassured when he spends time with him because not only with his crying, but, apparently, with everything he does, there is a “language in which signification is imminent in the symbol itself” (Laist 87). There is no confusing word with thing when he is with Wilder, because for Wilder, there are no words, just “animal complaint” (75), which leaves no room for interpretation, no space for “the messy strata of history and modernist intertextuality” (Laist 87). Laist
continues this line of thought to include brand names as well, which could explain why
Jack derives particular comfort from the grocery store. “A brand name is the epitome of
the word that exhibits zero-polysemy; a signifier that is coexistent with what it signifies.
Brand names have a magical, incantatory aura for Jack because they are pure code, a way
of speaking in things rather than words” (88). A way that word and thing, signifier and
signified, can be the same. In White Noise, even language is seen as a mediation—a
middleman between Wilder’s raw emotion and the signifiers that convey such an
emotion. With Wilder, there is no mediation because he has no language skills. Jack’s
ideas of the limited nature of language are apparent in his thoughts of the German
language. He describes its sounds, despite knowing very little of its mechanics:

The German tongue. Fleshy, warped, spit-spraying, purplish and cruel. One
eventually had to confront it. Wasn’t Hitler’s own struggle to express himself
in German the crucial subtext of his massive ranting autobiography, dictated in a
fortress prison in the Bavarian hills? Grammar and syntax. The man may have
felt himself imprisoned in more ways than one. (31)

Jack’s daughters experience a similar phenomenon—they exhibit the symptoms
of Nyodene D exposure despite never being exposed. The suggestion of the symptom is
enough to cause it. The girls’ symptoms change when the radio puts out new information:

‘What does the radio say?’
‘At first they said skin irritation and sweaty palms. But now they say nausea,
vomiting, shortness of breath.’[…]‘[Babette] said the girls were complaining of sweaty palms.’
'There’s been a correction,’ Heinrich told her. ‘Tell them they ought to be throwing up.’ (111-112)

For Steffie and Denise, these are not organic symptoms, they are “not only psychosomatic, but technosomatic” springing forth not from an exposure to Nyodene D, but from an exposure to media which tells them how they should be feeling, which is “no less real for being grounded in the semantic register as opposed to the biological” (Laist 99). In DeLillo’s world, the semantic takes precedence over the biological.

Much like Steffie and Denise, Jack finds that his diagnosis is the disease itself. Jack’s Nyodene exposure causes in him a condition that is entirely outside of his own body and held in a “computer programmer’s virtual body, a body composed of immaterial codes existing nowhere in particular” (Laist 98). The SIMUVAC technician does not run any tests on Jack’s physical body to determine the effects of the Nyodene D, he merely taps into Jack’s data on his computer and determines that Jack is in danger. Jack is aware that his own death is not corporeal but technological, lamenting that

[i]t is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrestled from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying (142).

He recognizes that the technological mediation of the computer screen separates him from his own illness, and, moreover, recognizes that the television screen has the same effect when he and his family are enjoying their Friday night ritual of watching disaster
footage on TV.

It is after Jack is “contaminated” with the Nyodene D that nature and technology, from his perspective, seem to collapse into each other. Because “technology and its living death have infiltrated the structure of the natural self…there is nothing that he can pit against it…There is no differentiating authentic from sincere, self from not-self, nature from culture” (Laist 91). Nature, for Jack, has become “[the] conquered nature that [Fredric] Jameson has in mind when he offers the...bold proposition that culture is the new nature…Nature is no longer our other, our sublime. What has replaced it is technology” (Buchanan 98). This is evident in the new, gloriously colorful sunsets that the town enjoys due to the residual Nyodene in the air, or perhaps the residual bacteria that were used to break down the hazardous cloud.

It is only natural, then, in light of this breakdown between nature and technology that Jack and Babette would attempt to battle their primal fear of death with Dylar, a pill that is meant to counteract fear of death and is, as Winnie Richards, a neurochemist at Jack’s university, says, “an interesting piece of technology” and “a wonderful little system” (187,188). It is a well-engineered capsule that releases its contents in a way that “eliminate[s] the hit-or-miss effects of pills and capsules”, which can lead to overmedication or undermedication, as well as unpleasant side-effects (188).

A more metaphorical way to characterize Dylar is with the same relationship Jack has to television. Although Jack does not watch a lot of television—besides disaster footage with his family—he sees his own life mediated through the aesthetic lens of a television show. He attempts to distance himself from the Airborne Toxic Event the same
way he distances himself from the disasters that he watches on television. Mediated through his television aesthetic, people walking on the side of the road become “hundreds of people moving with determination…part of some ancient destiny, connected in doom and in ruin to a whole history of people trekking across wasted landscapes” (122). He views what is really happening in front of him as if he were watching it on TV. When reality becomes too real (or unreal) for him, when his fear of death crushes him with anxiety, when he is faced with a real dilemma that could potentially end his life, he has no chance of understanding it all or taking it all in. The only way he can understand the scope of his predicament is to mediate it through the aesthetics of television. To distance himself from it is, paradoxically, the only way to make it immediate.

It is after Jack visits the doctor and hears the results of tests which confirm that he has traces of Nyodene Derivative in his system that his aesthetic mediation turns towards himself as introspection rather than at the world around him. He is reminded of his own death and starts to take in the world around him in a literary and aesthetically-distanced way. “How literary, I thought peevishly. Streets thick with the details of impulsive life as the hero ponders the latest phase in his dying.” He even completes it with a TV weather-report: “It was a partially cloudy day with winds diminishing towards sunset” (281). He walks around his neighborhood, first only glancing through windows into people’s living-rooms, but then creating elaborate stories around these people until it is nothing but pure aesthetic. “The old gentleman runs a hand through his thatch of white hair, the woman holds her folded specs against her face. Clouds race across the westering moon, the seasons change in a somber montage, going deeper into winter stillness, a
landscape of silence and ice” (281). What has started as an observant walk has turned into “the art of the TV ad” (Lentricchia 111). Although these things aren’t mediated, Jack mediates them through TV-speak to better come to terms with them. He cannot understand himself or the world around him in an unmediated way, so he is forced to mediate it himself. This brings everything back to Jack’s question regarding his own mediated death: “What happens to them when the commercial ends?” (272).

By mediating his death in such a manner, Jack fails to see his mortality in a subjective way. This can be traced back to his first exposure to Nyodene D’s effects on the human body, as explained by the SIMUVAC technician, who is unable to offer him any helpful information. Jack has no way to understand this death because it is not a natural death, but an objective technological death. The person who Jack trusts to interpret his death for him is his doctor, or more specifically, his doctor’s computer. No matter how much his doctor tries to get a straight answer out of Jack regarding his health, he cannot answer truthfully—he does not know how to understand himself in an unmediated way. He cannot follow the advice he gave to Heinrich in the car and trust his own human perceptions, he can only trust the technology that tells him what he feels. It is only with the help of his doctor’s computer printout that he is willing to make any claims about himself.

‘We usually start by asking how do you feel.’
‘Based on the printout?’
‘Just how do you feel, he said in a mild voice.’
‘In my own mind, in real terms, I feel relatively sound, pending confirmation.’
‘We usually go on to tired. Have you recently been feeling tired?’

‘What do people usually say?’

‘Mild fatigue is a popular answer’

‘I could say exactly that and be convinced in my own mind it’s a fair and accurate description.’ […]

‘What about appetite?’ he said.

‘I could go either way on that.’

‘That’s more or less how I could go, based on the printout.’

‘In other words you’re saying sometimes I have appetite reinforcement, sometimes I don’t.’

‘Are you telling me or asking me?’

‘It depends on what the numbers say.’ (277-78)

Jack has full faith in the doctor’s printout and no faith in what he feels himself. However, this train of action takes a turn when the doctor tells him that he has traces of Nyodene D in his system and asks if he is ever come in contact with it. Although Jack knows he has, he tells the doctor that he could not have come in contact with it because he is never even heard of it. To Jack, knowing the word is knowing the thing. Even though it should be apparent by the doctor’s all-knowing printout, Jack refuses to admit he is come into contact with Nyodene D. If he can convince the doctor that he should not have it in his system, perhaps the doctor’s diagnosis can make it so he does not. To Jack, the diagnosis is the disease; the word is the thing.
Stacey Olster, in her essay about the novel, argues that the Gladneys experience television with a religious awareness. “Always on and hence omnipresent, television provides the one ‘custom’ and ‘rule’ that the Gladneys ritually observe on Friday evenings when they band together in front of the set, worshipfully ‘silent’, ‘totally absorbed,’ and ‘attentive to our duty’ (64)” (Olster 86). Television is comparable to God as omnipresent and all-knowing, separate from the public but having an immediate impact on it. The brand names Jack hears on television commercials comfort him in times when he worries about his own mortality, much in the way a Christian might say a prayer. This is most evident during the Airborne Toxic Event when his daughter, Steffie, is heard mumbling the phrase “Toyota Celica” (155) in her sleep the night of the event. Much like her father, she finds comfort in the system of consumption that, like Jack’s transaction with the ATM machine, can confirm one’s sense of identity as a consumer in the postmodern and post-industrial marketplace. The televisual has taken the place that the spiritual held in past generations; televisual mediation is the predecessor of religious mediation. Now, DeLillo argues, we worship our television like we would a god—it tells us everything we need to know, and until it appears on television, or is confirmed by the media, it does not exist, or does not matter.

The most devoted disciple of the televisual god is Jack’s double in the novel, Willie Mink, who unlike Jack, (seen by himself as a modernist-type hero) represents “the postmodern condition in extremis” (Olster 90). There seems to be no line between his own identity and the television—several times his sentences end in advertising slogans with no provocation or logical reasoning. He takes handfuls of Dylar pills at a time, but
wavers between throwing them towards his own mouth and towards the screen of the television—apparently unable to tell the difference between the two (Laist 104). It is apparent that Willie and Jack are the same person, only on opposite extremes—“the two” become “conjoined into a ‘we’” when Jack shoots Willie with his gun, and Willie turns around and shoots Jack back with the same gun (Olster 91).

Jack’s inability to understand the world around him in an unmediated way will lead him, eventually, to become Willie Mink. It is with this realization that he decides not to steal Mink’s stash of Dylar pills to attempt to stave off his fear of death. He has already started his transformation, as signifier and signified have lost their distinction in his own mind, much like in the mind of Mink. Jack does not want to allow this progression to make it any further, so he refuses the opportunity to deal with a primal fear in a technological way, and instead strives to understand his own death in, finally, an unmediated way.

Fredric Jameson defines cognitive mapping as the ability “of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson 83). However, in White Noise, as in many postmodern works, cognitive mapping by the characters is impossible. Jack Gladney, as a character who is unable to understand the world perceptually, but only through mediation, is unable to map his world. Jack gets so deep into his inability to understand the unmediated world that he cannot answer his doctors questions about how he is feeling, or perceive his own death as anything but a “literary aesthetic”. Because Jack can only understand the mediated world around him, he fails to see what is real.
The technological penetration into the natural also stifles the ability of the characters to map cognitively. Babette’s fear of death is typically viewed as a primal, natural fear. Fear of death is something that, the novel suggests, every sentient being experiences and has experienced since the beginning of time. As a natural experience, however, Jack and Babette turn not to religion or holistic remedies, but instead attempt to destroy such a fear with the technologically advanced medication, Dylar, which is a highly sophisticated capsule meant to regulate specifically the amount of medication released at a time. To replace the natural with the technological is a theme seen over and over again in the novel, whether it is Heinrich trusting the weather report more than his own perception of the rain on the windshield, Steffie and Denise vomiting because the radio suggests that is what they should be doing, or Babette and Jack enjoying the beautiful sunsets enhanced by the chemical cloud. However, this replacement of the natural ultimately makes it impossible to map the natural, leaving Jack unable to understand his own death, and leaving all of the characters unable to map cognitively the technological world that surrounds them.
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