MARSHALL MCLUHAN, THE POSTMODERN MENTALITY AND DON DELILLO'S "WHITE NOISE"

Cecilia Acquarone*

RESUMEN: El presente artículo es un estudio de la novela *White Noise*.(1984) desde la perspectiva teórica del postmodernismo y los estudios sobre los medios de comunicación de Marshall MacLuhan. Se establecerá una comparación entre los conceptos de modernismo y las ideas expuestas por McLuhan en términos de La Galaxia de Guttemberg o la mentalidad humana a partir de la alfabetización. De la misma forma, la mentalidad postmoderna se comparará con la Constelación de Marconi o la concepción de la realidad del hombre moderno en términos de McLuhan. En el marco de las dicotomías teóricas descriptas se procede al análisis e interpretación de la novela *White Noise* del autor nortemericano Don Delillo.

Palabras clave: mentalidad postmoderna - teoría del postmodernismo - realidad del hombre moderno - White Noise

ABSTRACT: *Una Aproximación a la Novela* White Noise *de Don Delillo*
The present paper is a study of Don Delillo's novel *White Noise* (1984) from the perspective of Marshall McLuhan's media studies and the contribution of postmodernist theory. A comparison will be held between the concepts of modernism and those expounded by McLuhan in terms of the Guttemberg Galaxy or the world of literacy. Similarly, the postmodern mentality will be equated to McLuhan's Constellation of Marconi or the environment of modern man. These theoretical framework explained, the article proceeds to the interpretation of the novel *"White Noise"* by the contemporary American writer Don Delillo

Key words: postmodern mentality - postmodernist theory - environment of modern man - White Noise

The present paper is a study of Don Delillo's novel *White Noise* (1984) from the perspective of McLuhan's media studies and the contribution of postmodernist theory. The complexity of the concept of postmodernism motivates its reduction here to those ideas which appear in opposition to the concept of modernism. This duality will later be compared with McLuhan's own demarcation of the fields of what he designed as the Guttemberg Galaxy and the Constellation of Marconi or alternatively the world of literate man and of modern man[1].

∗ *Cecilia Acquarone* es Licenciada en Lengua y Literatura Inglesas de la Universidad del Centro Educativo Latinoamericano y ha realizado estudios de perfeccionamiento en Gran Bretaña. Actualmente se encuentra cursando estudios de doctorado en Filología Inglesa en la Universidad Nacional de Estudios a Distancia de España. Es profesora de Literaturas Contemporáneas en Lengua Inglesa y de Análisis Literario y desarrolla su actividad en IES Olga Cossettini y en UCEL. E-mail: acquarone@ciudad.com.ar

The concept of postmodernism, of uncertain origin, can be defined in opposition to the beliefs expressed by the modern mentality as issuing from the XVIIIth century Enlightenment philosophy. Given the extreme poverty and generally inhumane conditions of life of a large proportion of the European population of those times, a group of enlightened thinkers centered in France and Scotland sustained that reason was the privileged instrument to help humanity rise above current conditions and have access to a fairer social system. The successful application of reason through appropriate methods would lead humankind to achieve the goals of knowledge, freedom from superstition and deserved happiness. In this context, Decartes' method was the founding stone on which the stable edifice of science and universal truth would stand. The optimistic view that resulted from these developments led to the conception of history as a record of general progress and to the view that civilization should prevail over the obscurantism of the primitive mind.

Though there is no agreement on the idea that modernism and postmodernism are distinct and successive periods in the history of western thought, it is possible to discern some clear fields in which they stand in opposition[2]. From the absolutism of truth as the basis of an orderly totality and the presence of a pattern that explains events and is a tool of prediction and control (modernism), we move to a world characterized by dispersion, relativism and uncertainty (postmodernism). The coherent subject of modernism was the master of meaning in a culture in which knowledge was possible and certainty cherished while the fragmented and de-centered subject of postmodernism can only rely on belief. The social and moral hierarchies of the modern era are then pulverized by the coexistence of a multiplicity of parallel and contradictory categories. Above all, and as Lyotard explains in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* what defines the postmodern is an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1979: p. XXIV). Those great stories that provided humanity with a stable, totalizing and coherent framework within which to make sense of their endeavours were no longer sustainable. The Enlightenment became in this context one more mythical story, one more language game whose validity is reduced to the circumstances of play. From this perspective, Imperialism is suspected of ethnocentrism and science and history of mystification. Metanarratives that universalize experience and normalize divergence are replaced by a multiplicity of versions to achieve emancipation from the blinding myth of assurance.

With the fall of modernity, the crisis of representation ensues. The realistic epistemology of modernism allowed the unified subject to pose the accessibility of the world outside for mimetic representation. In the same way as the scientist could reach truth through the application of reason to observed data, the artist could rely on his senses and his art to present us with a faithful reproduction of "the real". From the postmodern standpoint, though, the objectivity of the outside world is put to question so that we now need inverted commas to enclose *the real:* representation has become a problem. There are no longer fixed parameters against which to judge the reality of the re-presentation. To borrow Lyotard's words (1979, p. 81), the "artist and the writer […] are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done". The modern structuralist text has become an event in which the signs have broken loose of their referents. According to Baudrillard (1994), in capitalist society, there is no possibility of transcendent meaning. The void creat-

ed by this situation leads to the hysteric response of production and reproduction of the real in an attempt to restore that which evades the human mind. To accept the absence of "the real" would imply chaos so the successive re-productions offer the hyperreal to compensate for the void. Similarly, Umberto Eco (in Docherty, 1993) sees the American craze for the total fake as the quintessence of consumer ideology. The verisimilar satisfies society's need for perfection and control since the fake is more perfect and manageable than the original. The interchangeability between the real and the imitation blurs the distinction between truth and appearance. We live in a world characterized by pervasive unreality in which our perceptions are shaped by mass media imagery and techniques of wholesale misinformation (Baudrillard, 1994). In hyperreality, truth is no more than what counts as such according to the last mass media consensus. Guy Debord (1967) from the Marxist perspective points to the system of capitalism as responsible for the dominant society of the spectacle based on the degradation of being into having and the displacement of having into appearing. This process results in the alienation and trivialization of the subject who becomes a slave to consumer society. Vattimo (1990) agrees that the irruption of massive means of communication leads to a complex and chaotic society. However, the multiplicity of contradictory versions the media produce makes the conception of history as unitary process impossible. This fact can be interpreted as a liberating force. The disappearance of a central rationale of history gives rise to a good number of local rationales all conscious of their historicity, contingency and limitation. The result is a humanization of society: the recognition of the diversity of viewpoints and the need for dialogue and consensus.

Writing in the 60's and early 70's, McLuhan was a forerunner of the intricate philosophical discourse of our age. His writings concentrate mostly on the effects of the media on society and are particularly pertinent to our analysis of Don Delillo's novel. His basic theory sustains that new technologies (seen as extensions of man) revolutionize society and impose new forms of relating to the environment. Such upheavals are the true message of the media. When studying them, we should concentrate on their mode of transmission rather than on what we traditionally understand as their content. We have to "free ourselves of the delusion that it is how a medium is used that counts, rather than what it does to us and with us" (McLuhan 1995: p. 239). From here arises McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message" (246).

Inventions exercise a strong appeal on humanity who responds positively and readily with the result that "…we…serve them as we do gods" (McLuhan 1995: p. 264). Humanity's connection to machines is symbiotic: we relate to them as servomechnisms. This has always been so although the characteristics have differed in response to the introduction of diverse technical innovations in the history of civilization. The stages McLuhan recognizes are those of tribal man, literate man and modern man with the last two roughly corresponding to the definition of modernity and postmodernity above.

Tribal culture developed in acoustic space and then meant the involvement of all the senses simultaneously in a complex, integral, kaleidoscopic and synthetic life. This is so because speech is an utterance (or outing) of all our senses at once and the sense of hearing is essentially unfocused. As a consequence, life was rich and experience boundless, discontinuous and simultaneous. Humanity lived in a magical, integral world patterned by myth and ritual (McLuhan 1995: p. 241). The introduction of the phonetic alphabet produced a

tremendous cultural shock and modified social life. Rational or pictorial space (uniform, sequential and continuous) with its emphasis on the eye became the basis of Western civilization. The eye's capacity to focus led to the development of the analytical and linear mode of thought with its heavy reliance on classification and categorization. The connection of experience in linear sequences in psychic and social organization generated accelerated action and alteration of form (applied knowledge). The basic arbitrariness of the phonetic alphabet (connection signifier / signified and sign / referent) erected a barrier between men and the world upsetting the balance of the senses together with psychic and social harmony. This is a closed world with a fragmented environment in which man reacts in an individualistic and detached manner. The introduction of the printing press was the ultimate extension of phonetic literacy. The printed page with its alignment of signs in rows, its edges and margins led to a very different conception of space. As McLuhan (1995) states:

> *As a drastic extension of man, it shaped and transformed his entire environment, psychic and social, and was directly responsible for the rise of such disparate phenomena as nationalism, the Reformation, the assembly line and its offspring, the Industrial Revolution, the whole concept of causality, Cartesian and Newtonian concepts of the universe, perspective in art, narrative chronology in literature and a psychological mode of introspection or inner direction that greatly intensified the tendencies toward individualism and specialization engendered 2000 years before by phonetic literacy (p. 243).*

The price paid by humanity for the application of reason in the control of the environment has been alienation and schizophrenia. The Gutenberg Galaxy implies massive agglomerations of national and industrial power and a mechanical consumer society. Literate man is a "mindless drone" who is "free only to be alienated and dissociated, a rootless outsider bereft of tribal dreams" (p. 259).

If tribal culture depended on the ear and literate man on the eye, modern society has externalized or extended the entire central nervous system. As McLuhan says: "Now man is beginning to wear his brain outside his skull and his nerves outside his skin; new technology breeds new man" (p. 264). This situation is "immersing us in a world-pool of information movement and [is] thus enabling man to incorporate within himself the whole of mankind" (p. 248). Awareness of interdependency with the whole of humanity explains the conception of the "global village" though this does not necessarily lead to unity since there is great awareness of discontinuity and diversity as well as maximum disagreement in the new environment. At the same time, the invention of electric light and the development of electronic media have meant the re-establishment of the lost balance of the senses owing to the instantaneous character of the new medium. Television is seen as the extension of the sense of touch and as activating the greatest interplay of all the senses. Champion (1996), quoting Prof. De Kerckhove, explains how the link between touch and the other senses can be understood:

> *Saint Thomas Aquinas [quoting Aristotle] described touch as the foundation*

of all the senses," notes the professor. "For example, we taste when a sub-
stance hits the tongue, and smell when particles enter the nose, so both are
forms of touch." "Likewise with television it is light striking the back of the
eye—photon dots being connected to make an image (p. 35).

The great engagement of television in an all-encompassing experience means active participation. As different from the cinema, here the image is low in definition so that the viewer participates actively filling in information. As when contemplating a pointillist painting, the eye has to make do for what is absent. Intense participation in low definition is what describes a cool medium for McLuhan. The television screen is seen as a mosaic mesh of horizontal lines and millions of dots (MacLuhan 1995, p. 245). Electronic media has transformed the cultural environment back into a simultaneous and discontinuous world that responds to an integral, synesthetic consciousness immersed in deep emotional awareness. Humankind has been re-tribalized (p. 259). This can lead to a more complex and fulfilling life and a release from the uniformity, alienation and dehumanization of literate society. At the same time, civilization becomes decentralized and a multitude of new tribal groups arise. This is a highly traumatic process in countries where literate values are deeply institutionalized. The clash between integral electronic media and segmented visual culture "creates a crisis of identity, a vacuum of the self, which generates tremendous violence – a violence that is simply an identity quest, private or corporate, social or commercial" (p. 249). McLuhan connects this situation with the crisis of fundamental values in the USA such as the sanctity of the individual and the right of privacy leading to social unrest and psychological problems of the order of alienation and mental breakdowns " – including nervous breakdowns of whole societies unable to resolve their crisis of identity". The position of the young is particularly difficult in this scenario. They feel the crisis deeply and school broadens the gap between the generations by using the old mechanisms of literate society: the high definition, hot medium of the printed press in opposition to the new cool media in which the young are immersed.

As the old values collapse, there is "an exhilarating release of pent-up sexual frustrations" producing "a tidal wave of emphasis on sex" (p. 253). The result has been negative: mechanical use of the body for superficial satisfaction has replaced "total sexual emotional involvement and transcendence" (p. 253). In this context, McLuhan even envisions the possibility of the invention of the love machine for artificial stimulation.

The introduction of each new technological innovation subjects humanity to a new set of anxieties linked to a different use of the sensorium. The nervous system responds to these shocks with numbness that hides pain. Media then become invisible. However, the mere need for survival presses man to face the new situation in order to control it (p. 237). This happens to be the function of art: "the role of art is to create the means of perception by creating counterenvironments that open the door of perception to people otherwise numbed in a non-perceivable situation" (p. 342). Contemporary electronic media with its instantaneous character is even more threatening to human stability than previous innovations. More than ever, there is today a need to understand in order to avoid the "self-induced subliminal trance" that can only make us slaves of the products of our creativity

For a better understanding of the basic coincidences between the two pairs of opposites that sustain the present work (modern/postmodern and Gutenberg Galaxy/ Marconi Constellation), we can resort to a summary of McLuhan's fundamental dichotomy by Lewis Lapham[3] in his introduction to the 1994 edition of *Understanding Media*.

Print Media	**Electronic Media**
Visual	Tactile
Mechanical	Organic
Sequence	Simultaneity
Composition	Improvisation
Eye	Ear
Active	Reactive
Expansion	Contraction
Complete	Incomplete
Soliloquy	Chorus
Classification	Pattern recognition
Center	Margin
Continuous	Discontinuous
Syntax	Mosaic
Self-expression	Group therapy
Typographic Man	Graphic Man

A comparison of the paradigms reveals the basic opposition between the logic of linearity and contiguity and the logic of simultaneity or analogy that inform the modern and the postmodern respectively and constitute the forces at work in the construction of Delillo's novel. *White Noise* wavers unsteadily between modes of organization that respond to realism and hyperrealism respectively thus becoming the scenario for the colossal battle between the forces that govern the environment of literate man and modern man in McLuhan's terminology[4].

These powerful theoretical principles express themselves not only at the obvious level of the surface but emerge as underlying features probably more influential because of their covertness. In *White Noise,* we can discover many semiotic[5] gestures: aspects of form and general organization of discourse that go beyond or stand below the narrator's use of language for semantic purposes. The breaking with grammar such as the avoidance of syntactic regulation and internal coherence, the breaking of rules for structural and logical organization of discourse or the presence (or deliberate absence) of silences or gaps constitute powerful modes of expression without words.

In the field of language, respect for grammar and principles of internal coherence that build unity and linearity come to mirror the logic of modernity (literate man). On the other hand, the disruption of the above principles in preference for a different logical organization favouring diversity and simultaneity come to reflect the postmodern perspective as well as aspects of the environment of McLuhan's Constellation of Marconi. Simultaneously, modernism has a preference for realism with its reliance on mimesis while the postmodern

perspective has subverted each of the principles on which the realist contract stands as a natural consequence of the crisis of representation.

Even from the most superficial of encounters with *White Noise*, the reader receives contradictory messages. The overall organization of the novel with its division into parts and chapters neatly points to linearity while the synesthesia in the title as a metaphoric device, clearly subscribes to the opposite logic. In the same direction, as from the first chapter, the novel raises expectations in the reader that correspond to the realist tradition with its respect for chronology and mimesis. The detailed description of environment, the reference to contiguous action in time and space and the presentation of recognizable characters lead the reader to predict a level of coherence that the development of the narrative will not satisfy. Although we can recognize fundamental aspects of daily existence in the narrator's preoccupations with eating and sleeping, health and illness, life and death, the novel moves into progressively unmotivated action in Part III. This semantic twist is accompanied throughout by semiotic gestures in the same direction. In opposition to the realistic setting of scenes, the implied author breaks internal coherence in the illogical organization of narrative units, the disrespect for relevance in the inclusion of detail and the disruption of hierarchies. The latter device can be exemplified by the following quote: "Who will die first? This question comes up from time to time, like where are the car keys?" (p. 15). The comparison between the two utterances, even the mere fact of inscribing them one after the other, breaks with expectations of logical categorization and sequencing. Disruption of logical contiguity is also created by blurring the borders between inner and outer life. Delillo resorts to a defamiliarizing effect in chapter 4 by refusing to use traditional stream-of –consciousness technique to portray the contents of the protagonist's mind. Instead, he presents the reader with a series of utterances with mixed references to present thoughts and perceptions as well as wonderings about the future in the voice of an homodiegetic narrator with no traces of the canonical devices of interior monologue.

The use of temporal, spatial and logical markers is equally inconsistent showing the same wavering between the logic of contiguity and that of analogy. Traditional realistic novels use the past tense as a semiotic sign of fictionality. In the present case, the narrator alternates the use of the past tense with that of the present offering no linguistic transitions to justify the change. Simultaneously, spatio-temporal expressions are conspicuous for their irregular distribution. On some occasions they insistently mark the development of the story as is the case in chapter 19, which takes only 2 pages of the novel and is regularly punctuated by such referents: "On Christmas Day", "In bed two nights later", "In the morning", "On the way back from the airport" (pp. 94-96). In chapter 5, however, a series of incidents that take place at home and are clearly marked by temporal referents starting short paragraphs is interrupted by a section at the supermarket which breaks the sequence abruptly changing both the temporal and spatial dimensions unexpectedly. The same is observed in chapter 34 where the scene of a contemplative walk of Jack Gladney, the protagonist, and his friend Murray Siskind is suddenly interrupted when a new paragraph opens with Jack alone at home. Such breaks with regularity prevents the building of rules of expectation and the play of foreground and background. In *White Noise,* rules are not universally valid for the whole text, they have only local application introducing with this gesture a remarkable trait of the postmodern mentality which coincides with McLuhan's (1995: p. 249) view of

"multitudinous tribal existences" that entail diversity and the need for consensus.

At the level of syntax, the same ambivalence between linearity and discontinuity can be observed. Utterances that satisfy the demands of perfect grammar alternate with others which introduce devices that clearly superimpose the logic of analogy on the syntagm obstructing contiguity (Jakobson,1958). The latter case is well exemplified by the following sentence that makes up a paragraph in chapter 6:

> *They were Hitler majors, members of the only class I still taught,*
> *Advanced Nazism, three hours a week, restricted to qualified seniors, a*
> *course of studies designed to cultivate historical perspective, theoretical*
> *rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist*
> *tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms, three*
> *credits, written reports (p. 25).*

The avoidance of subordinate finite clauses and the heavy incidence of nominal post-modification in the sentence above indicate a marked preference for the paradigm over a stress on linearity, logic and hierarchy. The sentence reads like a list or enumeration of items or rather like a conglomerate of several possible paradigms in the semantic field of academe. At the level of internal coherence, the text is plagued with examples too lengthy to quote which bear the mark of absurdity and inconsistency owing to the absence of logical relations between subsequent sections. A particular case in chapter 23 is of special interest since its semantic content revolves around a major issue in McLuhan's thought. The Gladneys are commenting on what their children learn today at school and what their own school curricula used to include. The conversation is made up of the disorganized enumeration of dislocated items of knowledge belonging to different school subjects. The resulting text can be read differently according to the perspective adopted. From the point of view of Print Media mentality, the scene is a real cultural carnival in which the isolated items lose all relevance being disconnected from the whole that gives them meaning. If knowledge is understood as linearity, as systematic hierarchical classification, the text can only point to chaos. However, Electronic Media teaches a different lesson. As MacLuhan (1964) pointed out, the form of perception introduced by television implies "una compleja *gestalt* de datos reunidos casi al azar" (p. 387), a very different mode of understanding and learning from the literate insistence on coherence and univocity. This scene in the novel is particularly demonstrative of the gap introduced between the generations by the new technology. As McLuhan (1964) says: "el niño de la television se enfrenta al mundo con un espíritu antitético al alfabetismo" (p. 409) which induces them to see visual cultural goals as "irreales", "incongruentes" and even "anémicas". The scene in chapter 23 just described stands as paradigmatic of the organization of the whole novel, wavering between modern and postmodern, literate and electronic modes of understanding the world.

Simultaneity and synesthesia, in the *gestaltic* perception of multiple patterns is also made obvious through the insertion of unexpected and often felt as irrelevant allusions in the text. This is the case of references to noises coming from household appliances ("Blue jeans tumbled in the dryer", p. 18) and of the ever-present voice of television making itself heard in isolated utterances that interrupt the flow of discourse. The same effect results from

the presence of equally isolated, but now unexplained sentences dispersed all along the novel such as: "A woman passing on the street said, 'A decongestant, an antihistamine, a cough suppressant, a pain-reliever'" (p. 262).

Faced with any of the above instances of disruption of logical linearity, the reader cannot but ask him/herself: "What does it mean?" In fact at the level of discourse, the question has no clear answer. However, the inconsistences can be interpreted as semiotic gestures that place the reader at the same level as the protagonist. Jack Gladney's whole predicament in the novel could be reduced to the question: "What does it all mean?" Jack is worried about the passing of time and the meaning of life and death and in spite of his passionate efforts, he can make no sense of the fragmented environment that surrounds him. He is immersed in a world that favours synesthesia with its varied and simultaneous appeals coming through the eye, the ear, the skin. This primary, semiotic experience, is seen by McLuhan as rich and appealing as well as involving the subject in active participation. In the present case, the character's struggles with meaning are mirrored by those of the reader whose participation is made more obvious than usual by the inconsistencies and disruptions that the text provides. As with the television screen, the text is a mosaic of lines (syntagm) and millions of dots (paradigms) which demands collaboration from the reader who experiences the same aimlessness and void in the Gladneys' world as the characters themselves. This re-tribalized, semiotic environment, however has not led to the harmonious emotional integration described by McLuhan. The world of *White Noise* is a world in crisis trying to find its balance between the effects of the new electronic innovations and the ingrained habits born of the previous era of rational detachment. From the textual point of view, this transition is present in the coexistence of the semiotic and the symbolic. In the form of the novel, the disruptive semiotic gestures are inscribed in an overall frame that poses as "realistic" and then governed by rational principles and generic rules. In this manner, the symbolic grid sustains the emergent world of postmodern re-tribalized man. As McLuhan (1995: p. 249) sustains, in countries where literate values are deeply institutionalized, the transition from the Gutenberg Galaxy to the Constellation of Marconi is a highly traumatic process. The world of the novel is shaken to its foundations by the great technological upheaval.

At the level of semantics, the identity crisis that the protagonist undergoes ("I am the false character that follows the name around", p. 17) can be understood in terms of the cultural shock issuing from the introduction of new technology in the XXth century and the corresponding change in the sensorium from the prevalence of the logic of vision to that of audition. The vacuum of the self that this situation inspires, leads the characters to violent and dangerous reactions to counteract alienation (Mercator and the snakes, Babette and Dylar, Jack and his attempt to murder Willie Mink). Sexual de-inhibition together with frustration in failure to achieve sexual transcendence are other thematic concerns present in the novel that correspond to McLuhan´s description of the scenario of technological change in the last century.

An alternative cultural response to the technological impact can be found in the sacramental relation to television portrayed in *White Noise*. Watching a T.V. programme, Steffie utters the words spoken as in silent prayer (p. 84). Later on, in her dreams, she repeats the phrase "Toyota Celica" (p. 155) which she has heard repeatedly on television and the narrator feels the words "have a ritual meaning", they are "part of a verbal spell or ecstatic

chant". Babette fears what is described as the "narcotic undertow" or "the diseased brain-sucking power" (p. 16) that television has on the children. Siskin, however, sustains that adults do not understand the mystical character of the experience: the sacred link the younger generation establish with the new media. What the semiotician explains in the novel can be easily understood from McLuhan's perspective. Television is a most significant electronic medium and as such, it enhances and externalizes our entire nervous system creating an in-depth environment in which children (who have been exposed to it from birth) immerse themselves freely and joyously. The instant, synesthetic nature of the experience favours a sacramental response. At the same time, television is a teller of tales which, as all narrative forms, reinforce and legitimize the values and beliefs of the mass of society fulfilling a fundamentally mythic function. In McLuhan's (1964) words, television has infused a tendency towards "estructuras simbolísticas y místicas", a re-introduction into the sacred (p. 396).

The mythical also makes its presence felt at the semiotic level in the preference for number three, a figure culturally connected with the sacred (Christian trinity) as seen in the division of the novel into three parts and the frequent recourse to triads of nouns that thread the textual mesh. The mysterious, unexplained and subconscious quality of myth also emerges in the effect produced on the reader by utterances such as "We believed something lived in the basement" (p. 27). Such expressions make an impact on the reader because they stand in isolation and completely disconnected from their context. Very often, these sentences whose shortness contribute to effectiveness, appear at the end of a chapter and are then followed by silence for increased suggestive power. A similar result is obtained by the use of paradigmatic devices for poetic effect. On page 304 we encounter an isolated sentence where paronomasia is used on a line of trochaic verse: "Transient pleasures, drastic measures". Similarly, chapter 19 ends with the following *three* sentences: "May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan" (p. 98). The choice of rhythmic units alternating trochee and iambic feet confer the quality of poetry to the sequence. Through these strategies, the lines acquire resonance and memorability and sound like a prayer to forestall the flight of time and the consequent inexorability of death. As Jack tells his students: "All plots tend to move deathward" (26). It is on this crucial theme of death that the two organizational principles that underlie the text under discussion intersect. The rule of difference that governs the syntagmatic pole of language is overridden by the strategy that superimposes analogy on the text. Such a movement constitutes an attempt to impede the easy flow in the direction of death. Jack Gladney's desperate struggle to defer death is also fought at the level of discourse providing the novel with its unsteady pace.

As an overall scheme, and considering as much the signified as the signifier, it can be ascertained that in *White Noise,* the superimposition of the paradigm on discourse with its impeding effect on the syntagm results in recurrence and de-acceleration of action. In spite of the overall apparent respect for linearity, the novel relies on repetition as the central symbolic device. The presence of lists and enumerations, the superposition of discourse fragments very loosely connected or clearly dis-connected, the equation of opposites, the experience of déjà vu with its duality of lived moments as well as the many instances of simulation in Baudrillard's terminology, all point in the direction of recurrence and the semiosis of the paradigm.

If it should still be necessary to highlight the convergence between current theories

on the modern and the post-modern and McLuhan's visionary anticipations, the notion of immanence should be mentioned. "The medium is the message" implies this fundamental concept with which Delillo's novel and theories on the postmodern agree. As Brunner (1986) affirms, our mind creates the worlds in which we inhabit. McLuhan's dictum supports the same argument by claiming that the world we live in is defined by the means we use to convey it: be it oral or written discourse, phonetic or pictorial alphabet, radio or television. Through technological media, we produce extensions of our senses where we recognize ourselves. This is why a character in *White Noise* can say: "For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is" (p. 66). McLuhan was a visionary, not only because he foresaw how fundamental the rapid expansion of the mass media would be for contemporary society, but because he formulated powerful ideas little understood in his times but later developed by leading thinkers in other fields of intellectual endeavour.

Delillo's influential novel vividly portrays the pangs of the technological upheaval undergone by the present generation and fulfills the function of art as described by McLuhan in raising awareness of the effects of the media on its audience in order to redress the lost balance and avoid blind subjection to technology. The novel inspires the reader to wonder about the effects of the media not only through its content but also in its form by creating an environment that semiotically simulates the experience of falling under the influence of television. This allows the reader to observe with the necessary detachment so as to understand and avoid the numbing effects of the medium. McLuhan's theoretical writings intended a similar effect. However, he went a step further and, in agreement with Vattimo, he left us a hopeful message about the future.

> *I feel that we are standing at the threshold of a liberating and exhilarating world in which the human tribe can become truly one family and man's consciousness can be freed from the shackles of mechanical culture and enabled to roam the cosmos. I have a deep and abiding belief in man's potential to grow and learn, to plumb the depth of his own being and to learn the secret songs that orchestrate the universe. We live in a transitional era of profound pain and tragic identity quest, but the agony of our age is the labour pain of rebirth (McLuhan 1995: p. 268).*

NOTES

1 To be faithful to McLuhan, his ideas will be expressed using his own terminology including his use of sexist language in an era previous to gender studies.

2 Vattimo (1990) and Jameson (1991) agree that postmodernity constitutes a break with the characteristically modern cult of the new. However, for Lyotard (1979) and Bauman (1987) postmodernism cannot be seen as a historical period. For the former both movements have recurred cyclically at different stages in the history of humanity; they are conditions rather than temporal periods. For the latter, they are practices that actualize different intellectual strategies and that coexist in varying proportion at different times in history.

3 Quoted by Terence Gordon (1997: 84).

4 *White Noise* has been exhaustively studied from the semantic perspective given its abundant evidence of coin-

cidences with postmodern ideas. Accordingly, and following MacLuhan's dictum "The medium is the message", the present paper will privilege the analysis of form in its approach to the novel.

[5] Julia Kristeva explains that all meaning is inevitably produced in the articulation of two levels: the semiotic and the symbolic. The symbolic is present in the constitution of the sign, in the laws that govern syntax, in the whole of grammar and in the socio-symbolic contract that underlies language. On the other hand, the semiotic corresponds to primary processes that are anterior to the symbolic and are formless, uncodified, uncertain. According to Kristeva (pág. 134), in poetic or literary language, the semiotic tends to gain the upper hand over the symbolic. It is here that the form becomes primary and needs most careful attention.

WORKS CITED

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Legislators and Interpreters*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1987.

Bruner, Jerome. *Realidad Mental y Mundos Posibles*. Barcelona: Gedisa, 1988.

Champion, Chris. "Watch TV, Get a Workout" in *Alberta Report/Newsmagazine*. 29 July 1996

Debord, Guy (1967). *La Sociedad del Espectáculo*. Valencia, Pre-Textos, 2002.

Delillo, Don. *White Noise*. USA, Penguin Books, 1984.

Eco, Umberto. "The City of Robots" in *Postmodernism: A Reader* Ed. Thomas Docherty. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Jackobson, Roman. "Linguistics and Poetics" (1958) in David Lodge (ed). *Modern Criticism and Theory*. London, Longman, 1988.

Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke U.P., 1991.

Kristeva, Julia (1977-1979). *Desire in Language*. Great Britain: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Lyotard, Jean Francois (1979). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis, U of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Mc Luhan, Eric. *Essential McLuhan*. Canada, House of Anansi Press, 1995.

Mc Luhan, Marshall (1969). *La Comprensión de los Medios como las Extensiones del Hombre*. Méjico, Editorial Diana, 1980.

Potsdam, R. B. "Visual Culture" in *The European English Messenger* XIII, 1, 2004, pp. 32-42.

Terrence Gordon, W. *McLuhan for Beginners*. London, Writers and Readers Publishing, 1997.

Thody, Philip. *Twentieth Century Literature: Critical Issues and Themes*. London: Macmillan, 1996.

Vattimo, Gianni. *En Torno a la Postmodernidad*. Barcelona, Anthropos, 1990.

Wallace, D. F. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll never do Again*. London, Abacus Books, 2002.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* London, New York, Methuen, 1984.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. London: Verso, 1988.

Carey, James. *Media Myths and Narratives: Television and the Press*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1988.

Harrington, Lee and Dense Bielby. "Flow, Home and Media Pleasures" in *The Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol 38.Nº 5, pp. 834-854.

Hassan, Ihab. *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards Post-Modern Literature*. Madison: U. of Wisconsin, 1982.

————————-. "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective" in *Critical Inquiry*. 12. Spring 1986, pp. 503-520.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Post-modernism*. New York, Routledge, 1988.

————————-. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London, Routledge, 1999.

Ickstadt, Heinz. "Contemporary American Novel: Between Post-modernism and Neo-realism" in *Actas del XII Congreso de Aedean y Depto de Filología Inglesa de la U. De Alicante. Aedean*, 1988, pp 99-109.

Kristeva, Julia. *Language the Unknown: An Introduction to Linguistics*. New York, Columbia U.P., 1989.

Le Clair, Tom. "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace" in *Critique*. Fall 1996. Vol 38.Nº 1, pp. 12-37.

Lentricchia, Frank. *Introducing Don Delillo*. Durham, Duke U.P., 1996.

Tichi, Cecilia. "Television and Recent American Fiction" in *American Literary History*. 1,1. 1989, Spring, pp. 111-130.

Vorraber Costa, Marisa. "Teaching to Divide the World" in *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*. 2004, nº 26, pp. 175-191.