

**BILL BROWN'S "THING  
THEORY" AND THE  
QUEST OF UNIQUE  
EPISTEMOLOGY IN  
MODERNIST AND  
POSTMODERNIST  
LITERATURE: A STUDY  
OF DON DELILLO'S  
*WHITE NOISE***

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*Abstract*

Bill Brown's *Thing Theory* distinguishes between things and objects, and he explains metaphorically that objects are "transparent" because we see "through" them as a consequence of the semantic values they have encoded; a thing is, however, "opaque" for Brown, and we can have a glimpse at it as a consequence of its irreducibility. Brown is an apologist of the materialism of modern societies, claiming that new forms of expression can arise out of the exhausted meanings things have in their utilitarian function. The application of Brown's illuminating conceptual assumptions and terminology enhance the similarities between modernism and postmodernism, since both modes adopt the kind of aesthetics that

*Resumen*

En su *Teoría de la cosística* Bill Brown distingue entre cosas y objetos, explicando metafóricamente que los objetos son "transparentes" porque podemos ver "a través" de ellos a consecuencia de los valores semánticos codificados que conllevan; una cosa es, sin embargo, "opaca" para Brown, y podemos contemplarla gracias a su irreducibilidad. Brown es un defensor del materialismo de las sociedades modernas, apostando por que pueden surgir nuevas formas de expresión a partir de los significados manidos que tienen las cosas en su función utilitaria. La aplicación de los reveladores supuestos conceptuales y de la terminología de Brown enfatizan las semejanzas entre el modernismo y el postmodernismo, pues ambas tendencias adoptan planteamientos estéticos que implican una "materialización" de la

involve a “materialization” of the word in texts that aim at a unique epistemology and at a withdrawal from the world of immediate reference. One of the best examples to illustrate this is Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, a work that exhibits the lyrical potential of language when it stops functioning as a mere instrument of material culture; as a limit-modernist postmodernist poetic performance, *White Noise* delights in its semantic involution and complies solidly with Brown’s “rhetorics of thingness.”

*Key Words:* Bill Brown, Thing theory, Material Culture, Modernism, Postmodernism, Don DeLillo, Metafiction.

palabra en textos que aspiran a la exclusividad epistemológica y al distanciamiento del mundo de la referencia inmediata. Uno de los ejemplos que mejor ilustra esto es *White Noise* de Don DeLillo, una obra que muestra el potencial lírico del lenguaje cuando éste deja de funcionar como mero instrumento de la cultura material; como exhibición poética postmodernista en el límite del modernismo, *White Noise* se deleita en su involución semántica y responde solventemente al concepto de “retórica cosística” de Brown.

*Palabras clave:* Bill Brown, Teoría de la cosística, Cultura material, Modernismo, Postmodernismo, Don DeLillo, Metaficción.

## I. BILL BROWN’S *THING THEORY* AND THE “OPAQUE” TEXT

In his illuminating study of material culture, “Thing Theory” (2001), Bill Brown adopts from Heidegger the distinction between “things” and “objects”, and he explains metaphorically that objects are “transparent” because we see “through” them as a consequence of the semantic values they have encoded; he considers that we interpret them and make them meaningful because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts (Brown 2001:4). A thing is, however, “opaque” for Brown, and we can have a glimpse at it as a consequence of its irreducibility. Things can never have a functional value; objects, though, can lose theirs and get close to becoming things, and this only happens when their relation with the subject changes:

We begin confronting the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown 2001:4)

Special interest deserves for Bill Brown the interpretation of the art of the contemporary pop sculptor Claes Oldenburg. Brown explains that Oldenburg's interest in the oversized re-creation of everyday objects such as the light bulb, the telephone, the mixer or the cheeseburger, is meant "[...] to pose some question about, by physically manifesting the affective investment Americans have in the hamburger, the ice cream cone, chocolate cake" (Brown 2001:15). With their flabby materials, though, they exhibit an insubstantial monumentality which is interpreted by Brown as an anthropomorphic caricature of how we make of these things objects of our desire, of how they become cultural totems; as Brown explains, Oldenburg's work "[...] draws attention to the discrepancy between objectivity and materiality, perception and sensation, objective presence (a fan, a Fudgsicle, a sink) and material presence (the canvas, the plaster of paris, the vinyl), as though to theatricalise the point that all objects (not things) are, first off, iconic signs" (*ibid.*:14).

Brown is an apologist of the materialism of modern societies, claiming that new forms of expression can arise out of the exhausted meanings things have in their utilitarian function. The suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power, says Brown, helps us discover their physicality, and he explains metaphorically that we must learn to appreciate the window in its opacity rather than looking through it to the world. As in a modernist poem, that "begins in the street with the smell of frying oil, shag tobacco and unwashed beer glasses", says Brown quoting Simon Schama (*ibid.*:2), material culture is the ideal ground of genuine creativity, and the last century has shown the multiple ways in which an everyday object can be transformed into art.

In order to illustrate his point, Brown includes at the end of his article a selection of art works among which, besides the photograph of Claes Oldenburg's *typewriter Eraser* (1999), are the works *Mask I* (1996), by Kyle Huffman, *Yin Xiuzhen* (1998), by Yin Xiuzhen, *Big Red* (1998), by Irina Nakhova, and the following fragment from *Voices* to be found in the exhibition catalogue of the AIGA National Design Conference held at Washington D.C in September 2001 (p.3):

cravats	dental crowns	drains	eyeliner
crayons	dental flosses	dramas	eyes
crazy straws	dentures	drapes	eyeshadow
credenzas	deodorants	drawer pulls	fabrics
credit cards	depilatories	dreidels	fabric softeners
credits	deposit slips	dress patterns	facelifts
crewneck sweaters	depots	dressers	faceplates
cribbage boards	derbies	dresses	fairs
cribs	derricks	dressings	fake nails
crochet hooks	desks	drill bits	families
crockery	desserts	drill presses	fan belts
crockpots	detergents	drills	fans
croquet sets	devotionals	drinking fountains	faucets
crosses	diadems	drive trains	fax machines 44
crossword puzzles	diagrams	driveways	feather dusters
crowbars	dialysis machines	drugs 39	fedoras
crowns	diapers 18	drugstores	feedbags
crucifixes	diaphragms	drums	ferries
cruise control	diaries	dry erase boards	ferris wheels
cruise ships	dice	dry erase pens	fertilizers
crutches	dictionaries	drywall	festivals
cryostats	diets	dune buggies	fezzes
crystal	digital cameras	dustpans	figurines
crystal balls	dikes	duvets	files
cubicles	dildos	DVD players	fillings
cuckoo clocks	dimmers	DVDs	film
cuff links	dinghies	dynamos	fire extinguishers
cuffs	dining rooms	earpieces	fire hoses
culottes	dinners	earmuffs	fire hydrants
cummerbunds	dioramas	earrings	fireplaces
cup holders	directories	ears	fireworks
cupboards	disco balls	eggs 49	firing ranges
cups	discos	electric chairs	first aid kits
curbs	dishes	electrified fences	fish food
curios	dishwashers	electrocardiographs	fish tanks
curlers	disks	electronic games 20	fishing hooks
curling irons	dispensers	elevators	fishing lures
currency	display stands	embroidery hoops	fishing rods
curricula	displays	emergency brakes	fixtures
curtain rods	dissertations	emergency exits	flags
curtains	diving bells	emery boards	flash bulbs
cushions	docks	encyclopedias	flasks
cuticle creams	dog collars	engines	fliers
cuticle nippers	dog dishes	engravings	flies
cutlery	doghouses	envelopes	flip-flops
cutting boards	doilies	epaulets	flippers
cymbals	dollhouses	erasers	floor plans
dams	dollies	escalators	flooring
dances	dolls	espresso makers	flotation devices
dashboards	domes	exams	flower arrangements
day planners	dominoes	exercise machines	flower pots
dead bolts	donut shops	exercises	flowers
debutante balls	donuts	exhaust pipes	flues
debuts	door knockers	exhibitions	flutes
decanters	door stops	experiments	fly swatters
decoys	doorbells	explosives	fog lights
deep fat fryers	doorknobs	extension cords	foghorns
defenses	doormats	extensions	folders
delicatessens	doors	eyeglasses	folding chairs
demonstrations	dormitories	eyelash curlers	fondue pots
dens	downspouts	eyelets	fonts 46

This massive inventory of objects and devices associated with daily routine and familiar actions is an ironic illustration of the superfluous pervasiveness of material culture in our lives; it emphasizes as well its iconic nature, since this

composition is not an arrangement of objects but of signs, and its alphabetical rigidity denounces the artificiality of all the systems of meaning that we project on the world of things.

It is the purpose of this article to show that Bill Brown's theory can be applied to the study of many modernist and postmodernist works that speak of a changed relation between subject and object in modern societies, works which are on many occasions the embodiment of an aesthetic stance that reveals in sum a new relation between the artists and the context and materials of their production. The application of Brown's illuminating conceptual premises and terminology displace some of the arguments that have often made the modernist and the postmodernist project appear as incompatible; they enhance instead the elements they share in their allegiance to the kind of aesthetics that involve an "objectification" of the word as a prerequisite for the full and genuine assimilation of a literary piece. This point is based on the premise that for many artists from modernist times languages's "thingness" is the primary attribute of a text which aims at a unique epistemology and at a withdrawal from the world of immediate reference. This property has become thus a formal and structural concern in the last century, joining rather than detaching artistic manifestations that, like modernism and postmodernism, have often been perceived as alien modes.

Brown compares things to poems in his article and quotes Michael Riffaterre who argues that poems, growing out of a "word-kernel", "[...] defy referentiality" (Brown 2001:3). And clearly the defiance of all forms of current referentiality has been an omnipresent goal in the last century, since the works of many artists representing diverse aesthetic tendencies have repeatedly tried to avoid the conventional mechanisms of meaning by conceiving different and often innovative formulas of epistemological resistance. This can be appreciated in all the arts in general, that have been commonly driven in the twentieth century by the lure of abstraction in their quest of an expression that eschews the exhausted epistemology provided by the prevailing semantic codes.

Bill Brown's theory is a very valid rhetorical instrument for the study of modernism in the first place; their concern with the renewal of the artistic prospect made artists in the early decades of the twentieth century conceive art works of a self-contained referentiality, striving at pieces of semantic irreducibility and devoid of a primary functional value. Such were the goals of Gertrude Stein with her cubist "objects", T.S Eliot's Objective Correlative or William Carlos Williams with his maxim "Not ideas but in things", all of them forerunners of an art that explores the "thingness" of verbal compositions.

They all made different proposals of what they conceived as a renovation of signification, which brings to mind some of William James's most important

postulates; for James –as well as for some of his disciples Stein, Santayana y Stevens– language has the virtue of translating and fixing the chaotic flux of experience, but it has the handicap of rigidity, since it becomes a “veil” that separates the thing perceived from the perceiver (in Burkhardt 1981:727). His disciple Santayana expands this argument explaining that eliminating this veil of convention is followed by a fall into the disconcerting world of unmediated sensations, where the poet will ideally have a moment of “total vision”; new semiotic structures will emerge then, and they will be harmonious with our natural perceptive tendencies and will sustain the construction of a genuine work, which is the goal of all art, according to Santayana (Santayana 1900:168, 269-70). Construction is also a key word in modernism, where the creative process and the artistic materials start to acquire a visibility and an unexpected relevance in many pieces that claim to be aesthetically self-sufficient and referentially introverted.

Most works were thus designed in the modernist period to enhance the sensuous dimension of language and the evocative potential of linguistic structures when they are not conceived with a purely denotative aim. The ears, eyes and mouth must necessarily plunge into the performance of texts with a signifying plasticity, such as the textured collages of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or Pound’s *The Cantos*, the new rhythms of Joyce’s sensory prose, or the fresh meanings that emerge when grammatical categories and functions have to be reassigned within each sentence in Gertrude Stein’s compositions.

Gertrude Stein already revealed in the early twentieth century that naming was an efficient way of defying conventional referentiality; she found a close connection between names and poetry, whereas she considered that prose depended instead upon sentences and paragraphs. As Jennifer Ashton argues: “Stein claims that nouns –as opposed to verbs, prepositions, and other mistakable parts of speech– are primarily responsible for the function of naming in writing, which she says is one of the central aims of poetry” (Ashton 2005:62). Ashton explains that Stein’s project of modernizing poetry involves reinventing the name: “For Stein, writing poetry at all necessitates recognizing its essential features, which for her means recognizing that poetry is ‘a vocabulary entirely based on the noun.’ And insofar as ‘a noun is a name of anything by definition,’ poetry’s most essential feature proves to be its naming function (Writings, 327)” (*ibid.*:68). No doubt that Gertrude Stein must be seen as a precursor of what was to come, since from her revolutionary ideas to the most recent aesthetic proposals, writers have repeatedly emphasized that meaning in poetry falls on the side of the signifier.

Due to her particular conception of poetry, Gertrude Stein has got to be considered by many literary critics –including Jennifer Ashton herself– a proto-postmodernist. The shift from the modernist to the postmodernist mode is based, according to Ashton, on the progressive move Stein’s work

experimented towards a non-referential or “anti-representational” literature that she adopted as a way of resistance to ‘semantic’ meaning, proposing an alternative ‘experiential’ meaning that yielded a pure and unique verbal experience. Ashton justifies her position thus: “The postmodern idea so often attached to Stein’s most opaque literary styles of the later period –that the reader is meant to confront the words apart from their associative meanings, in something like their ‘pure materiality’– suggests that the aim of such a style is above all to offer unmediated experience of the language” (Ashton 2005:32-3).

This “opaqueness” that Ashton understands is derived in Stein from her concern with the pure materiality of the verbal medium can be appreciated in other key modernist figures like Eliot or Pound that, like Stein, showed the tendency to produce literature with a marked self-referential character. And also in artists like W.C. Williams and Wallace Stevens, the two great poet-theoreticians of modernism, who imbued their hermetic poems with their almost obsessive concern with the role of the artist as a mediating figure between the chaos of reality and the order and harmony of the resulting masterpiece.

If it can be then justified that many of the central figures of “high” modernism such as Stein, Eliot, Pound or Stevens among others have frequently been seen as proto-postmodernists, it is no less true that many postmodernist writers such as John Barth, Robert Coover, William Gass, Don DeLillo, Donald Barthelme, Ishmael Reed and Thomas Pynchon among others could be defined as late-modernists, since they combine typically postmodern strategies like anarchy and dispersal with a deep belief in language’s expressive potential and in its capacity to model the artistic medium into an intuitive and grand form of meaning.<sup>123</sup>

These authors can be said to have assimilated some of the basic dogmas of the most vigorous modernism, such as the principles of aesthetic coherence and epistemological self-sufficiency that they have forged into the design of metaphorical structures conceived as unifying but ephemeral support of their metafictional narratives. Similarly to the modernist texts above mentioned, the materiality of the language is exploited in the quest of an unmediated artistic expression; but this materiality is mainly channelled in postmodernist literature through the accumulative rhetorics of metafiction, a strategy by means of which the verbal medium –very often an ironic echo of the trivial semantic codes and patterns that forge material culture– appears as a dense semiotic substance that

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<sup>123</sup> Against what is generally accepted, there are critics, like Manuel Barbeito, that think that grand narratives –or Grand Narratives as he calls them– are still possible in postmodern times, though they may very often be epistemologically intuitive and twisted, falling into a new semantic dimension that is never easy to conceive (Barbeito 2000:15).

confers the text a provisional ontology and an allegorical dimension, the literary work becoming thus the utmost expression of itself.<sup>124</sup>

One of the authors that delights in the composition of these accumulative allegories which are very often informed with symbols and images of material culture is Don DeLillo who, within the frame of referential disregard and signifying “opacity” of his literary project, enhances the sensorial properties of language and exploits its plasticity to the limit in quest of a superior semantics. *White Noise* in particular is the perfect example of a work that exhibits the lyrical potential of language when it stops functioning as a mere instrument of material culture, when its sensorial properties are enhanced and its most eloquent plasticity becomes a structural element. DeLillo makes of material culture a poetic performance that delights in its semantic involution and complies easily with the theoretical formula introduced by Brown’s “rhetorics of thingness”, a characteristic that places this author on the boundary between the modernist and the postmodernist projects, as the following section will thoroughly illustrate.

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<sup>124</sup> It is precisely in the contingent nature of meaning in the postmodernist text where its most outstanding difference with the modernist project can be found, since it reveals a change of attitude from the confident creative excitement of previous decades to a resigned awareness of what Jameson understands as the impracticability of art in conditions of modernity; the naïve incapacity of modernist artists to discern that unquestionable truth is for Jameson what makes of modernist art an “aesthetics of failure”. Jameson states: “But there is a paradoxical corollary of this particular version of the imperative to fail, and that is the requirement that the writers in question not merely attempt to succeed, but also believe success is somehow possible. Yet their capacity to do so, and to sustain a vision of the concrete possibility of genuine aesthetic construction under conditions of modernity, would also surely stand as a symptom of some deeper lack of insight and intelligence into the conditions that make modern art impossible in the first place” (Jameson 2007:4). The utopia of modernism is short-circuited in the contradictions and inconsistencies of postmodernism, where the text is often ironically conceived as a metaphor of a visionary and unprecedented aesthetic event as fancied by modernist artists, but it becomes though a delusive rhetorical performance of what they know the poetic text should be but will never be.

## II. DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*

*White Noise* is a perfect chronicle of absurdist family life in the meaningless background of technological American society. The Gladneys represent a new kind of family model bound by their commitment to the empty pleasures of irrational consumption and by their fear to nameless forms of toxicity and, ultimately, by the very prospect of death.

The threat of chemical radiation pervades the novel, but the title refers as well to the "white noise" produced by consumerism, technology and the media; the TV set –perpetually on–, the supermarket, the mall, constitute ideal contexts for the different forms of acoustic and visual propaganda to take shape and reach the individual, who establishes a necessarily mediated contact with reality. "Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material" (DeLillo 1985:37) says Murray Jay Siskind, Jack Gladney's colleague at the university and pop culture theorist, in one of their meetings at the supermarket, temple of consumerism "[...] It's just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability" (*ibid.*:38). For Siskind, objects and purchasable goods in general are not the ultimate units of meaning, but they convey a relative value to be interpreted within the social network of a specific time and place.

As Daniel Miller explained in his work *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), it is wrong to rely on the unique properties of the individual object, since every object has the symbolic set of values of a category ascribed and deserves being decoded:

In most material culture, the individual object is as much a type-token of the larger group of identical handbags, armchairs, spears or canoes as is the case with words, and, even when held as individual property, may thereby mark the relation of object and owner to the set of items it represents. (Miller 1987:97)

Like most Marxist theorists, Miller thinks that an essential relationship is always established between the subject –understood as the human agent– and the object –understood as the circumstances of his existence; but unlike them, he claims that the concept of objectification, that is, a process of externalization and sublation, isn't only denigrating, but "essential to the development of a given subject" (*ibid.*:85).

Miller appreciates a change between the structure of commerce developed from the 1920s through the 1960s, which tried to create a highly predictable market for an ideally homogeneous society, and the commercial strategies

applied in the second half of the twentieth century, which showed a higher specificity intended to reach a modern social diversity. He neglects the condemnatory academic approaches that conceive this diversity as representing a new superficiality and alienated form of existence, and he states that these identities “[...] need to be analysed as specific forms, and not merely be dismissed as a fragmented descent from some primitive authenticity of the ‘subjects’ of classic anthropology, not as merely the symbol of capitalist oppression, nor yet as the mere surface of a superficial era” (*ibid.*:11). The interest of Miller’s argument is his defence of the ‘seriousness’ of modern mass culture as a dynamic relationship between persons and things, not as an inauthentic derivative of a higher concept of culture and of a prior and more valid set of social relations. As he explains:

The belief underlying this attitude is often that members of pre-industrial societies, free of the burden of artefacts, lived in more immediate natural relationship with each other. This kind of academic criticism extends the distaste evident in colloquial discourse for materialism as an apparent devaluation of people against commodities. I shall question the implication that separable real selves and authentic classes are to be found. I shall argue that people cannot be reified under the concept of ‘society’ outside of their own cultural milieu. (*ibid.*:11-12)

Culture is for Miller not to be identified with a set of objects originated ideally in the artistic domain, nor is to be reduced to its subject form; culture must be seen as the process through which objects are constituted as social forms. Published two years before Miller’s study, *White Noise* offers a vision of post-industrial America which is neither exalted nor condemnatory, but which similarly explores the concept of culture as a result of the dynamic relationship between subjects and objects, often becoming a strategy of survival in a hostile environment.

In *White Noise*, material culture is a mediating presence that shields and transforms reality in conformity with the subject; thanks to it the individuals conceive artificial systems of meaning that they project on an otherwise undecipherable and most often insufferable reality. Far from being an interference, these cultural forms are fascinating and thought-provoking for Murray, whereas for Heinrich, one of Jack Gladney’s sons, it derives in a pathologic solipsism; like Oedipa Maas, Pynchon’s heroine in *The Crying of Lot 49*, truth is for Heinrich an unstable notion that depends on subjective categorizations, getting even to question the very evidence provided by his own senses.

Technology and the media become thus manifestations of a new form of exchange between the individual and his world, and a good example of this is the often quoted passage of “the most photographed barn in America”, in the

third chapter of the novel; Murray asks Jack to drive him to a tourist attraction intended for people to take pictures of the most photographed barn in America and, on their way there, they can count five signs announcing the attraction before they reach the site. Murray interprets the essence of the attraction: “‘No one sees the barn’ he said finally. A long silence followed. ‘Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn’ [...] ‘They are taking pictures of taking pictures’” (DeLillo 1985:12-3). Reality has been engulfed by its different forms of representation as a consequence of a dynamic process of objectification which is markedly social; the barn is shielded by the signs and the photos, replaced by an artificial equivalent in a system intended to interpret the world and make it more accessible for man.

That’s also the paradoxical effect of television; it brings near events and situations occurring anywhere around the globe, but its electronic mediation constitutes a barrier preventing any emotional involvement –and, consequently, suffering– of the individual with what is being represented. The unexpected apparition of Babette on TV in chapter 20 of *White Noise* shocks the whole family, and Jack’s estrangement with his wife’s image surprises him. That’s not their Babette, the active, compulsive and hearty mother they know, but some artificial and remote substitute which, domesticity transcended, enters a timeless and self-contained dimension:

It was the picture that mattered, the face in black and white, animated but also flat, distanced, sealed off, timeless. It was but wasn’t her. [...] The kids were flushed with excitement but I felt a certain disquiet. I tried to tell myself it was only television –whatever that was, however it worked– and not some journey out of life or death, not some mysterious separation. (*ibid.*:104-5)

This sense of remoteness and transcendence that can be perceived in anything mediated by technology in *White Noise* was interpreted by Frank Lentricchia as a process of mystification, and he attributed it to “[...] the increasingly nonreferential character of postmodern culture. Since the technological media –television, the tabloids, radio, cinema– ultimately create their own reality, they appear to be free from all natural constraints on their constructions. They possess the seemingly limitless power to transform and reconstitute the very being of the contemporary individual” (Lentricchia 1991:72).

Material culture has in *White Noise* an effect equivalent to the above explained by Lentricchia concerning the mediating agency of technology, and it finds its quintessential expression in the lists of objects that have become a distinctive feature of DeLillo’s rhetorics; most times absurd and inconceivable, devoid of referential value and sometimes even ungrammatical, lists constitute in *White Noise* their own reality, and they convey iconically the quasi-mystic

halo of American middle-class consumerism and habits, like the enumeration of the belongings that escort the students at their arrival to the College-on-the-Hill for the course opening in the first chapter of the novel:

The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationery and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up rugs and sleeping bags; with bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts. As cars slowed to a crawl and stopped, students sprang out and raced to the rear doors to begin removing the objects inside; the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags –onion-and garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut crême patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints. (DeLillo 1985:3)

Lists are naturally designed to convey useful data, and they may have a descriptive function, as the list above apparently has; this puzzling and heterogeneous list, however, challenges referentiality, and its subjective plasticity makes of it a lyric and evocative verbal composition that must be interpreted as a rhetorical performance of the superfluous materialism that affects modern societies.<sup>125</sup>

Characters in the novel get defined by what they possess and consume, literally “supplanted” as subjects by a set of objects product of a personal and restless process of selection with which they try to control the image projected, transforming their own reality in a mode of social exchange. The construction of consumption allows people to interpret themselves for others, it becomes an artificial semantic alternative; though not as “alternative” as the semantics of waste, also revered by DeLillo as signifying material, like the list conveying the revolting dissection Jack Gladney does of the family garbage:

“I found crayon drawings of a figure with full breasts and male genitals. There was a long piece of twine that contained a series of knots and loops. It seemed at first a random construction. Looking more closely I thought I detected a complex relationship between the size of the loops, the degree of the knots (single or double) and the intervals between knots with loops and freestanding knots. Some kind of occult geometry or symbolic festoon of obsessions. I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness? I came across a horrible clotted mass

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<sup>125</sup> This brings again Gertrude Stein to mind, since, as it was explained in the first section of this article, she is the most fervent advocate of naming –the basic strategy in the composition of any list– as an efficient way of defying referentiality.

of hair, soap, ear swabs, crushed roaches, flip-top rings, sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat, strands of frayed dental floss, fragments of ballpoint refills, toothpicks still displaying bits of impaled food. There was a pair of shredded undershorts with lipstick markings, perhaps a memento of the Grayview Motel." (*ibid.*:259)

This list is, like the first one, referentially cryptic; its abstract motifs and its anarchic observation of detail destabilize its descriptive value. On the other hand, the carefully designed aural and rhythmic properties of this list reveal the novel's genuinely poetic penchant.

DeLillo relies on the accumulative semantics of the list to reveal the habits of a frivolous and opulent society, and proves that even the junk it produces can be transformed into a lyric expression of the masses. With the recurrent use of the list in *White Noise*, DeLillo dramatizes rather than narrates, proposing a semantic happening that ideally illustrates vividly the pervasiveness of material culture in our society and the subject's ultimate dependence from it.

But abstruse lists are not the only textual element that produces an estrangement of the reader with the narrative, since the proliferation of commercial mottos, fragments of TV shows and advertisements, radio messages with instructions or advice, etc., are also disruptive strategies that DeLillo conceives to create a bizarre background in *White Noise*. Some of these elements are of untraceable origin and adopt the form of disembodied voices that add to the aural confusion that characterizes the novel. Utterances such as "Master Card, Visa, American Express" (*ibid.*:100) or "Dristan Ultra, Dristan Ultra" (*ibid.*:167) appear as decontextualized consumerist mantras that can be interpreted as echoes in the narrator's mind but which are, in fact, disengaged from any evident source of sound. What these commercial reverberations dramatize is that material culture is necessarily verbally mediated; within a narrative text, besides, they have additional consequences, since, together with the lists, they interfere with the plot, boycotting the logical development of the story line and neutralizing the reader's expectations. They "stop working" for the reader, as Brown would say, becoming thus narrative "things" in this author's terminology.

Paula Martín Salván interprets DeLillo's tendency to write long lists and enumerations –that she calls *paratactic accumulation*– as being heir to the artistic endeavours of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, and this connection is made explicit for her in the choice of particular sounds that create a weird musicality and a new order of meaning (Martín Salván 2006:213). Like many literary critics before her, though, she appreciates the difficulty of classifying DeLillo's work into either the modernist or the postmodernist categories, but she appeals to the derotist character of the postmodernist movement, that she considers entirely alien to DeLillo's project, to justify its relative disengagement from it.

For Martín Salván, the literature of Don DeLillo is infused with the sense of ambition and possibility that characterized the buoyant spirit of modernism:

However, against the postmodernist celebration of fragmentation, depthlessness, indeterminacy and the death of master narratives –as theorized by Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Christopher Nash or Jean Francois Lyotard, among others– the firm belief that a transcendental meaning overcoming fragmentation and dispersion must emerge from chaotic accumulation can be said to be genuinely modernist. (Martín Salván 2006:221)

But the most interesting part of her analysis is her study of what she defines as “the rhetorics of waste”. She explains that all the work by Don DeLillo is permeated by a concern for waste that shapes his novels not only thematically but also tropologically; waste is a synonym for Martín Salván of everything that doesn’t fit into a system or an order of existence, whether it is the relinquished remains of human consumption that proliferate in DeLillo’s stories, or the paratactic naming of a chaotic accumulation of objects in which so often this author delights, which must necessarily be seen as a clear move to the postmodern practice.

Applying to this argument Bill Brown’s efficient rhetorics, the verbal “thingness” of lists and other textual “obstacles” that have lost their functional value in *White Noise* must be seen as a lyric and sensuous performance of the pervasiveness of material culture in the modern social order, as it has been stated above; that kind of encoded assertion shows that DeLillo’s novel has an abstruse but evident semantic concern with reality and is thus referentially outdrawn, as most modernist works are. Furthermore, adopting now an equally valid postmodernist approach, these same “obstacles” constitute a bulky and intuitive echo of the fictional world in *White Noise*, and so they depend for their interpretation on a turn of referential introversion which exposes the novel’s concern with its own compositional machinery.

In the postmodern mode, *White Noise* teaches that the “thingness” of waste is to be apprehended in the massive verbal constructions on which the plot reverberates; the lists and the disembodied voices must be studied then as a kind of structural toxicity, a metaphorical *white noise* that mirrors the also metaphorical toxicity that pervades the Gladneys’ fictional life. This is the introverted kind of reference on which many postmodernist works depend to disclose their intuitive and apocryphal epistemology, an unmediated experience of language that goes a step ahead of Stein’s “Experiential meaning”.

The following conversation between Jack and Murray Siskind is just one example among many that reveal how inescapable the metafictional interpretation is in *White Noise*:

Plot a murder, you're saying. But plot is a murder in effect. To plot is to die, whether we know it or not." "To plot is to live," he said. I looked at him. I studied his face, his hands. "We start our lives in chaos, in babble. As we surge up into the world, we try to devise a shape, a plan. There is dignity in this. Your whole life is a plot, a scheme, a diagram. It is a failed scheme but that's not the point. To plot is to affirm life, to seek shape and control. (DeLillo 1985:291-2)

This passage constitutes a veiled diagnosis of *White Noise*, a novel without a plot in which everybody tries to imprint shape and control to their lives and to the reality around them –with the exception of Jack, the main character and narrator, unwilling even to devise a proper plot for his own story. Frank Lentricchia has already observed this quality of plotlessness in *White Noise*, and he puts it this way:

In the usual sense of what it means to say that a novel has plot, *White Noise* has no plot. But plotlessness is itself a controlled effect of this book because until its concluding chapters (when Gladney decides that he will put some plot into his life) the novel is narrated by a man who fears plots in both conspiratorial and literary senses –a distinction hard to make in DeLillo's world– and who therefore resists them, even prays for plotlessness, a life ungoverned by design and intention [...]. (Lentricchia 1991:97)

In fact, the mock version of a plot that is the climactic crime scene where Jack becomes an unlikely killer and *White noise* turns unexpectedly into a far-fetched thriller is one more fictional delusion that contributes to the metanarrative evocation of toxicity, reinforcing the predominating effect of arbitrariness and discontinuity.

The novel can be seen as pure surface, a dialogue between the "thingness" of material culture and the "thingness" of language's metatextual "noise". In Arnold Weinstein's terms, "If there is anything *White Noise* teaches its readers, it is a respect for the dignity of surfaces [...]" (Weinstein 1993:310). With their capricious and counter-narrative nature, the lists and the disembodied sounds in *White Noise* lack a primarily functional dimension, like objects that become things in Bill Brown's theory. Their plasticity evokes the semantic supremacy of the object in contemporary societies, and consequently they speak of a changed relation between subject and object, a new context where the object and its symbolic representation is prior to the subject. As Christopher Donovan declares, in the world of *White Noise* "Commodity and technology are supreme. Certainly in 1985 the time had come for a novel that could digestibly skewer our product-oriented society, the rarefied product with its 'familiar life-enhancing labels'" (Donovan 2005:157-8).

*White Noise* is a very good model of the kind of text that is structurally committed to an allegorical performance that is founded on the intuitive

“thingness” of language. As in many postmodernist texts, in *White noise* the *code* –term used by some literary critics to refer to the way the story is told– is exposed in a novel-length trope, trying to open our eyes to our dependence on rigid semantic constructions and theatricalising, as Brown would say, the iconic nature of our material culture. *White Noise*, in its fulfilment of a formal white noise, becomes an allegory of its own writing.

### III. CONCLUSION: THE VISIONARY “THINGNESS” OF LANGUAGE

In *Narcissistic Narrative* Linda Hutcheon explains how Barth sought by means of metafictional parody, internal mirrorings and allegorizings to use up all the possibilities of art; Barth’s belief that the identity of art and the artistic process on which metafiction is founded can result in “real life” is considered by Hutcheon a thought provoking affirmation that opens up for her new ways to literary research (Hutcheon 1984:56), these being still nowadays, it must be added, quite unexplored. Barth probably means that metafiction is a formal strategy that manages to pass over –always in an intuitive way, as it has been repeatedly pointed here– the “veil” of convention that Santayana considered an obstacle in the construction of a genuine work of art; the consequence might be in Barth similar to that moment of “total vision” that the philosopher defined, a stage in which new and more efficient semiotic structures will arise.

Hutcheon focuses her attention on Barth’s work, but there are many other authors that, beyond mere playfulness, could be said to share Barth’s belief in the superior epistemology of metafiction, and among them are Richard Brautigan, Walter Abish, Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar, Vladimir Nabokov, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Ishmael Reed, William Gass, Ronald Sukenick and, of course, Don DeLillo. All of these conceive some of their narratives as allegorical compositions –result of an extended application of *mise en abyme* as a comprehensive structural strategy, as Linda Hutcheon explains in her book (1984:52-6)– and all of them must be located on the threshold between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics as a consequence of their transcendental and visionary treatment of languages’ “thingness” in their pursuit of a superior –though always intangible– order of meaning.

Special attention deserves William Gass’s work, the author who coined the term *Metafiction*. Gass combines a deep belief in the expressive potential of language to procure the aesthetic coherence and singularity of the legitimate work of art with a sceptical attitude towards the possibility of a consistent

artistic self-sufficiency. But Gass wants to play the game of supreme creation, conceiving a tropological principle that grants aesthetic integrity to each of his texts; snow, ice, houses, a collection of insects, a body, a tunnel etc., are symbolic centres that he projects to the metafictional dimension, the whole piece committed in its purest verbal materiality to the visionary performance of that principle that will ideally illuminate certain attributes of the literary text and of the poetic function as Gass considers them to be. This constitutes an iconic and virtual form of pronouncement, the text becoming thus an allegory of its own writing and "shining" in a kind of utopian totality. The accumulative effect of Gass's works responds to a "rhetoric of waste" very similar to the one used by Don DeLillo and explained in section II, a kind of "cultural debris" devoid of functional value but with an essential structural purpose granted by its "thingness."

Gass himself offers examples of texts that he considers models of aesthetic coherence and integrity, works that reveal a blatant materiality ruled by principles that make of them intuitive prototypes of structure and proportion. That's for Gass the case of Lowry, who makes of the cantina in *Under the Volcano* a metatextual image of the head, "the container of consciousness" (Gass 1979:19), or a paragraph in the same novel that, according to Gass, encloses us like the fuselage of the plane it describes (*ibid.*:30), or Gertrude Stein's textual "cubes" in *Tender Buttons*, that get also to enclose the reader in their three dimensions (*ibid.*:78), or Nabokov's novels being as clocks for Gass, "each marking and making its own sweet time" (*ibid.*:206).

Many other texts could be analyzed in this same light, like most of the stories by Donald Barthelme –Brian McHale does a very interesting study of "The Balloon" in *Postmodernist Fiction*; "The Indian Uprising", also in Barthelme's collection *Unspeaking Practices, Unnatural Acts*, can be interpreted, for instance, as a mutiny of phrases that seem to rebel against the conventional grammatical structures, a metafictional echo of the insurrection of a mysterious group of indians in an urban setting that is the main action in the story, the barricades of rubbish evoked likewise in the lists of words that Miss R. calls *litanies*. Another interesting example that is very efficient in its "thingness" is Robert Coover's "The Elevator" from *Pricksongs and Descants*; here the constant ups and downs of a fictional elevator in an office building a working day –occupied by insignificant people with absurd lives and thoughts the description of which is basically a source of textual "material"– is mirrored in the sections and structural stages that build the text. And very challenging is also the reading of the parallel and semantically restricted misrepresentation of African geography in Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*, to mention just one more example.

Metafiction implies an artistic stance, that which talks about a changed relation between the subject and the object, between the writer and the language, very often emphasizing the suffocating weight of material culture. It acknowledges the artistic impossibilities the modernists were unable to see, as Jameson stated; by subverting the same epistemological principles it establishes, and by exposing the rigidity of most cultural codes –language the first and most immediate– postmodernism is an artistic project that incorporates its own failure, playing the game of supreme creation whilst assuming its deficiencies in the same move. The materiality of language and its accumulative effect in many metafictional texts synthesizes the ephemeral and sceptical postmodernist aesthetics with the most ambitious goals of high modernism, both artistic modes persuaded that the quality of verbal “thingness” is the primary attribute of a text that designs a unique epistemology.

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