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Rosario, Argentina

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=87701203
THE ICONIC AND THE SYMBOLIC: THE CONSUMER SOCIETY IN DON DELILLO’S WHITE NOISE AND ANDY WARHOL’S SERIGRAPHIES

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RESUMEN: Lo icónico y lo simbólico: La sociedad de consumo en la obra de Don Delillo “Ruido blanco” y las “Serigrafias” de Andy Warhol

La finalidad de este artículo es analizar cómo los principios ideológicos que constituyen la esencia del accionar de una sociedad de consumo en una era postmoderna, son fuente de inspiración de las serigrafías de Andy Warhol y en “Ruido Blanco” de Don Delillo. Andy Warhol es considerado el artista pop por antonomasia y Don Delillo, por su parte, como un artista postmoderno altamente crítico de los asuntos culturales y políticos de los EEUU. Una descripción de las ideas fundamentales que subyacen en una sociedad de consumo y su rol e incidencia en la formulación del “self” y de la realidad preceden al análisis de cómo la ideología se expresa en las representaciones icónicas de las serigrafías de Andy Warhol y en el simbolismo de la novela de Don Delillo.

ABSTRACT: The purpose of the present work is to analyse how the ideological principles that underlie the workings of a consumer society in a postmodern era inform Andy Warhol’s serigraphies and Don DeLillo’s White Noise. Andy Warhol is presented as the quintessential Pop Artist and Don DeLillo as a postmodern writer critically engaged with American cultural and political matters. A description of the fundamental ideas that underlie a consumer society and their role and influence in the shaping of the self and of reality precedes an analysis of how this ideology finds expression in the iconic representations of Andy Warhol’s serigraphies and in the symbolic rendering of Don DeLillo’s novel.

Introduction

After World War II an era of unprecedented consumerism, marked by previously unseen creativity in package design and advertising, took America by the storm. In this era non-material modes of production (advertising, the media, communication, information) have become dominant and the use or exchange value of commodities has been replaced by codes, spectacles, and the simulacra1.

Marx spoke of commodities having use-value or exchange-value. Baudrillard, on the other hand, speaks of commodities as having status or “sign” value as well. In The System of Objects (1968) and Consumer Society (1970) Baudrillard explores the possibility that production has been replaced by consumption as the primary organizing principle of society arguing that consumer objects constitute a signifying system, i.e. that commodities form a kind of language whose meaning goes beyond their merely utilitarian or pragmatic value.

In a consumer society signs have less and less a relationship to an external reality and more and more a relationship to themselves. The age of the simulacrum is an era where there are only copies of copies or representations of representations, and no real or original to which they refer.

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According to Baudrillard what advertising does is to code products through symbols, so that when we consume a product, we consume a sign, and its meaning is transferred. Thus, commodities are valued by the way they signify social status and power. Semiotically, then, society is the infinite play of signs best manifested in consumerism, and consumer goods are best understood as floating signifiers that are inexhaustible in their ability to incite desire. Consumption is not just the end point of the economic chain that began with production, but a system of exchange, a language in which commodities are like words to think with in a semiotic system that precedes the individual, as does any language. Just as society and culture used to be organized around production (during the Industrial Revolution, for example) they are now organized around consumption.

Baudrillard’s theory borrows many concepts from the economic model proposed by the American economist John Kenneth Galbraith. Galbraith’s theory has a direct bearing on the construction of consumers’ identities either as active, fully-rational, consciously-choosing subjects or as passive, easily-influenced and impulsive subjects. According to Galbraith needs are the “fruit” of production; producers design and build a product first, then think up a reason for consumers to need it. Galbraith emphasizes the “artificial” acceleration of consumer needs by advertisers trying to solve the problem of overproduction. By pairing consumer needs to advertising, capitalism becomes less a mode of commodity production or commodity exchange and more a system predominantly concerned with signs and images.

The purpose of the present work, then, is to explore how the ideological principles that sustain and underlie a consumer society are iconically represented in Andy Warhol’s serigraphies (1960-1970) and linguistically manifest in Don DeLillo’s White Noise (1984).

Analysis

Lawrence Alloway, the English art critic, introduced the term “pop” in the history of art. The word described the artistic manifestations that critically analysed the products of mass consumption, the labels and symbols of the consumer industry, the advertising slogans, the comics, the cinema and music celebrities, the billboards in big cities, in brief—all the symbols and images that represented the products and ideologies of a consumer society.

Andy Warhol, at the beginning of the 60s, shocked the world of “high art” by reproducing in his paintings the eye-catching symbols of mass advertising that represented “the American way of life.” His serigraph-printed canvases displayed dollar bills, soup cans, Coke, Pepsi and Ketchup bottles, cinema stars and the Dick Tracy, Popeye and Superman comics. Throughout his career Warhol developed an interest in the interplay between “high art” and “pop culture” appropriating the techniques and mediums of advertising and the mass media and assimilating them to his art. These appropriations examined the look, content, and effect of package design, celebrity watching, and advertising on the American consumer society. Even his techniques were commercial, particularly his dependence on cheap, available photography and silkscreen printing, which are the landmark of his oeuvre.

In “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”² Fredric Jameson sustains that “Andy Warhol’s work in fact turns centrally around commodification, and the great
billboard images of the Coca-Cola bottle or the Campbell’s Soup can, which explicitly foreground the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capital, are powerful and critical political statements” (p. 68).

I would suggest that both Andy Warhol and Don DeLillo make strong political statements by foregrounding this postmodern phenomenon known as the consumer society or the culture of mass consumption, and that they do so not in a spirit of contempt or scorn but rather in an attempt to represent how mass advertising and consumption have become part of the ordinary lives of people and the homogenizing role they play in the formation of identity. In the same way as Andy Warhol used the products of mass consumption in his serigraphies as iconic symbols, DeLillo describes supermarkets and shopping malls as symbols of the consumer society.

Like in Andy Warhol’s serigraphies, the concept of commodification is central in DeLillo’s work, especially in White Noise, in which the commodification of discourse is one of the main features in his portrayal of a consumer society. In Discourse and Social Change Norman Fairclough defines commodification as “the process whereby social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organized and conceptualized in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption” (p. 207). New sectors are referred to as “industries” concerned with producing, marketing and selling cultural or educational commodities to their “clients” or “consumers”.

Commodification is, therefore, the colonization of institutional orders of discourse by discourse types associated with commodity production, i.e., a metaphorical transfer of the vocabulary of commodities and markets into other orders of discourse. This metaphorical transfer is more than just a rhetorical flourish: it is a discursive dimension of an attempt to restructure reality on a market model. It has to do with the construction of a mega market where everything is for sale according to the customer’s needs, and with the construction of the identity of the consumer, who may assume a passive role as the mindless or unconscious “target” of advertising or, who may assume an active role as a discerning consumer aware of his “needs”.

Before becoming a writer DeLillo used to work for an advertising agency and knows, therefore, how advertising can manipulate a person’s unconscious and intrude upon the ordinary lives of people to turn them into “happy consumers”. Both the commodification of discourse and the unconscious manipulation of consumers through advertising inform many parts of White Noise.

The unconscious intrusion of advertising jingles and slogans in the lives of consumers is represented in the novel by brief disruptions in the contiguity of the narrative line. Scattered throughout the book there are fragments such as “Krylon, Rust-Oleum, Red Devil,” (p.159) “Dristan Ultra, Dristan Ultra,” (p. 167) “Leaded, unleaded, super unleaded,” (p.199) “Clorets, Velamints, Freedents,” (p. 229) which break with the contiguity of dialogues, descriptions, and narrative passages for no apparent reason. In the same way as these names and slogans keep popping up in the consumers’ minds as they surface from the unconscious, they emerge at different spots along the narrative breaking with its syntagmatic contiguity.

For instance, in chapter 20, as Jack is pondering who will die first, whether him or
Babette, his ruminations are interrupted by the fragment “Mastercard, Visa, American Express” (p.100). The interruption is carried out without any warning as there are no coordinating or subordinating conjunctions, either within the sentence or at paragraph boundary, which would logically connect the fragment to any preceding or following piece of discourse. The fragment is given additional prominence by its graphic position in the text: it stands as an isolated chunk of language amid two well-developed paragraphs.

This denial of the metonymic principle of contiguity disrupts the logical development of the narrative and is homologic of the unconscious influence advertising has on consumers. Perhaps one the most revealing features of the fragment is that it carries no indication of voice. Who is speaking here? Jack? DeLillo as implied author? Society? The unconscious? Whose unconscious? There is no source the authorship of these phrases can be traced to. The words can only be traced to the text itself. The impossibility of tracing the voice to its original source or of logically connecting it to a contextual referent makes the message self-referential: a chain of signifiers that comes from nowhere and goes nowhere, signs of a consumer society that have no relationship to an external reality, for they cannot be traced to any immediate contextual referent.

The intrusion of advertising jingles, slogans, logos, and trademarks is also depicted in Andy Warhol’s oeuvre in the Campbell Soup Can and Brillo boxes series. The series consists of a variety of serigraphies of the most representative mass consumption products such as Coke, Campbell’s Soups, Brillo Soap Pads, Heinz Tomato Ketchup, Del Monte Peaches and Kellogg’s Flakes. The serigraphies represent the brightly-colored labels and packaging with an almost photographic exactitude but displaced from their usual context (the supermarket) and devoid of content. They stand as purely visual representations, appearances without a reality, signs that have no material reference—simulacra. Even the Brillo boxes trick the eye with their hollowness, despite being three-dimensional objects.

The thin line dividing the “real” Brillo boxes at the supermarket and the “fictional” serigraphies made on wood, such as Brillo, Del Monte and Heinz, 1964, problematises the whole distinction not only between real and fictional, image and object, original and replica but the more basic distinction between art and life as the borderline between the real and the imaginary is eroded. The replicas raise every possible question about what art is and what art’s purpose is in our lives. As Umberto Eco points out in his essay “The Fortresses of solitude”: “To speak of things that one wants to connote as real, these things must seem real. The “completely real” becomes identified with the “completely fake”. Absolute unreality is offered as real presence”. The aim is to supply a “sign” that will then be forgotten as such: the sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, i.e., the simulacrum of the real. Warhol achieves in this series a transfiguration of the commonplace through art and makes the ultimate political statement: the symbolic commodification of a work of art by raising consumer goods to the status of art transforming them into icons of contemporary society.

Commodification is also one of the informing principles underlying much of DeLillo’s White Noise. One clear instance of commodification appears in chapter 21, after the “airborne toxic event” has wreaked havoc in the town of Blacksmith and Jack and his family are being evacuated:
It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzines, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content....This was a death made in a laboratory, defined, measurable... (p127).

The listing of chemical contents adds concreteness to the threat that the toxic cloud represents but, on a figurative level, the information can also be read as homologic of the consumer’s right to know “what’s inside the package”, i.e., the details or facts obligatorily printed on the packages or labels of all consumer products. This consumer information is usually a listing of chemical components nobody ever knows anything about such as conservatives, colorants, and silicones which are printed not only in food packages but also in drugs, drinks, toiletries and the majority of mass-produced goods. The psychological effect of such detailed data is to make the consumer feel “protected” by the government’s quality control agencies and to construct his identity as an active consumer who knows exactly what he is purchasing. The fallacy of feeling in control because one is possession of the technical facts is inherent in Jack’s words about the toxic cloud: “Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event” (p.127-128).

After the listing of chemical contents, death is commodified as it is transformed into a countable and therefore quantifiable noun. It is no longer death, or even someone’s death, but “a” death, made in a laboratory. A passive construction is used as death becomes the subject of a reduced relative clause in the passive voice “a death (that was) made in a laboratory.” This syntactical construction contributes to convey the idea of a manufactured object, as death has been subjected to a manufacturing process like a drug in a laboratory.

The commodification of death is also a theme in Andy Warhol’s serigraphies, especially in *White Car Crash 19 times, 1963*, where the unique or particular death of a man in a car accident is repeated 19 times in a series of multiple repetitions of the same shot of the accident juxtaposed on the canvas. The serigraphy is based on a photo published in the newspaper and then reproduced with a white and greenish hue over a canvas. The manipulation of colour points to a phenomenological depiction of the world in which outside objects or events are permeated by the artist’s emotion. In Warhol’s serigraphies emotion is conveyed through a “bathing” of the image in acid colours such as green in *Car Crash 19 times, 1963* and *Green Burning Car I, 1963*, red in *Atomic Bomb, 1965*, and *Red Race Riot, 1963* and blue in *Electric Chair, 1967*. The effect of these colours is to defamiliarise the usual black and white photo published in newspapers and retrieve part of the emotional intensity of the event, which Warhol thought became lost or dissolved when it was massively reported and reproduced in the press. This technique allowed him to express forceful emotions and to push his serigraphies away from the denotative, relatively uncoded iconicity of the photo into a more connotative and emotionally charged rendering.

In the Western literary and pictorial tradition blue suggests emptiness, the void. It is also the coldest of colours, disembodying objects of movement and sound. The colour seems appropriate to express all the horror of capital punishment in *Electric Chair, 1967*. Red is the colour of hell and the colour of fire and blood. The equation built between the threat of deadly weapons, repression and hell becomes immediately obvious in *Atomic Bomb, 1965* and *Red
Race Riot, 1963. Green, however, is the colour of the awakening of life, the colour of hope and
rebirth as it heralds the spring and the sprouting of plants. Green is also the colour of strength
and longevity and sometimes even of immortality. In Car Crash 19 Times, 1963 and Green
Burning Car I, 1963, however, the colour is applied to photos of death, which suggests an ironi-
cal, even sarcastic reversal of its traditional meaning and a denial of the life principle.

Finally, the sequence or juxtaposition of photographic shots in all these serigraphies,
except in Electric Chair imitates the mass reproduction to which private events are subjected
by the media on a daily basis, i.e. the transformation of the private, particular event into the
public and the mass-produced. If death can be serialized in thousands of newspapers, then the
single, individual event has no room in a society in which everything can be synthetically pro-
duced and reproduced and massively consumed.

The massive consumption of catastrophe is also portrayed in White Noise, as the
Gladney family sits in front of the T.V. on a Friday evening:

That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the
rule, with take-out Chinese. There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting
volcanoes. We’d never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly.
Heinrich was not sullen, I was not bored. Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom
husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary
clips of calamity and death. Babette tried to switch to a comedy series about a
group of racially mixed kids who build their own communications satellite. She was
startled by the force of our objection. We were otherwise silent, watching houses
slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava.
Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more swee-
ping (p. 64).

Commercials and sitcom programmes are consumed together with real life catastrophes
to the extent that the division between what is real and what is not creates no difference in the
emotional response of the viewers. Steffie cries over a sitcom drama as well as over an earth-
quake. According to Umberto Eco, two typical slogans pervade American advertising: “the
real thing” and “more”. The idea of having more, extra, or a surplus can be traced in the pas-
sage quoted in the listing of plural noun phrases (not a volcano, but volcanoes) and in the com-
parative adjectives “bigger,” “grander,” “more sweeping.”

The effect of these linguistic choices can be compared to the effect of Andy Warhol’s
repetition and juxtaposition of the same photographic shot of an accident or calamity. In the
serigraphies the emotional impact of the event was conveyed through the choice of acid
colours and through repetition. In the passage, the emotional impact is conveyed through the
grammatical categories of number (plural nouns) and gradation (comparative adjectives). The
circumstantial of time “That night” obviously refers to one Friday night in particular, yet, this
circumstantial is logically incompatible with the idea of several floods, earthquakes and vol-
canoes all happening at once. There may be one flood, one earthquake or one volcano that
night but not several and all happening at the same time. The plural noun phrases, therefore,
break with the logical contiguity of the passage in such a way that this creates a fusion of the
general and the particular: the circumstantial conveys the notion of particularity and the plural noun phrases convey the notion of generalities. The choice of the plural noun phrases is important then to convey the idea that seeing something once is not enough, and that the consumption of televised catastrophe requires repetition because viewers may become too desensitised to the horror of death. But at the same time, it is this very repetition that makes the events televised seem more unreal or surreal, and that creates in TV viewers the desire to consume “more”.

Closely related to the theme of death is the theme of religion. Although religion continues to have power and influence over the lives of many people, it has also undergone a process of commodification in a postmodern society that no longer believes in the great meta-narratives of the past. The transformation of religion into a commodity can be seen in chapter 37 of White Noise, as Jack and Murray Jay Siskind, an anthropologist and semiotician who works at the same university as Jack, are discussing death:

“You can always get around death by concentrating on the life beyond.”
(Murray)
“How do I do that?” (Jack)
“It’s obvious. Read up on reincarnation, transmigration, hyperspace, the resurrection of the dead and so on. Some gorgeous systems have evolved from these beliefs. Study them.”
“Do you believe in any of these things?”
“Millions of people have believed for thousands of years. Throw in with them. Belief in a second birth, a second life, is practically universal. This must mean something.”
“But these gorgeous systems are all so different.”
“Pick one you like” (p. 285-286).

Religions are all placed on the same level of importance by means of asyndetic coordination, no one religion is better or truer than the other and there is no center to which the subject can hold on to. As Enrique Miranda says in his essay on postmodernism “La nota principal de la postmodernidad es el pluralismo de culturas, tradiciones, ideologías o formas de vida. Y ellas no se pueden ordenar en una serie evolutiva o ver unas como superiores a las otras. Ninguna es mas correcta que otra. Se está en una situación de supermercado cultural: hay creencias, ideas y valores en abundancia, entonces el individuo puede hacer la combinación, el collage que más le agrade. Paseando entre las góndolas elige lo que más le conviene para su realización personal”.

The metaphor of the cultural market is evinced in the passage in the cataloguing of religions plus the choice of the action verb “pick” and the epithet “gorgeous,” which suggest a metaphoric comparison between religions and fruits at the supermarket. Religions, like fruit, can be “picked” or chosen according to the fancy and needs of the consumer. The epithet “gorgeous” denotes something very attractive and bright to look at, which is reminiscent of the way the fruit racks in the supermarket are described by Jack: “Everything seemed to be in season, sprayed, burnished, bright” (p. 36).

The idea that the subject is free to choose from a variety of systems refers us to Sartre’s existential ideology in which existence takes priority over essence, and man must decide for
himself how to live. It is from this perspective that culture becomes a supermarket where the subject is free to choose and appropriate the systems of belief he prefers for his personal realization or fulfillment.

In the cultural market, indeed, everything is or can be commodified\(^{12}\), even popular knowledge and common sense can be commercially exploitable and sold as a package:

> "They want me to teach another course."
> "In what?"
> "Eating and drinking. It's called Eating and Drinking: Basic Parameters. Which, I admit, is a little more stupid than it absolutely has to be."
> "What could you teach?" Denise said.
> "That's just it. It's practically inexhaustible. Eat light foods in warm weather. Drink plenty of liquids."
> "But everybody knows that."
> "Knowledge changes everyday. People like to have their beliefs reinforced. Don't lie down after eating a heavy meal. Don't drink liquor on an empty stomach. If you must swim, wait at least an hour before eating... People need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way, at least for the time being" (p. 171).

There is a dialectics involved in the process of commodification in which it is no longer possible to tell cause from effect, will the course exist because there is a need for it to be created or will people attend the course because it is being offered for them to consume? As Babette herself perceives there is a gap between the technologised name of the course “Basic Parameters” and its real content: common sense instructions on how to eat and drink well. The name of the course sounds hyperbolic and artificial in the light of its extremely simple content.

There is a belief, propagated and disseminated by television and advertising, that you can buy your way out of any personal trauma and that to consume is the surest route to personal happiness, social status and success. Consumerism becomes thus a way of living which locates the meaning of one’s life in acquisition, ownership and consumption. Indeed, in a consumer society all problems have a material or money solution.

This promise of happiness and bliss through acquisition and consumption is represented in *White Noise* for example through the sacralisation of supermarkets, i.e., through the symbolic representation of supermarkets as spiritual shrines. This is clearly seen in chapter nine when Jack Gladney is shopping with his family at the supermarket and, as Jack approaches the fruit racks, he sees that “the apples and lemons tumbled in twos and threes to the floor when someone took a fruit from certain places in the stacked array. There were six kinds of apples, there were exotic melons in several pastels. Everything seemed to be in season, sprayed, burnished, bright” (p. 36). The words “exotic”, “pastels”, “sprayed” and “bright” create a vivid visual image of the fruit racks that evokes the abundance and perfection of paradise. The supermarket is a magical and sensuous place, inside the “great omniscient doors” are aisles of plenty, a lotusland, a temple of fecundity where fruits are always in season, where there is no death, rottenness or decay.

The comparison between the supermarket and heaven is carried further on a more phi-
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losophical and religious level by Murray, who likens the supermarket to a Tibetan heaven, a place of rebirth:

[a] This place recharges us spiritually, [b] it prepares us, it’s a gateway or a pathway. Look how bright. It’s full of psychic data....Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. [c] The large doors slide open, [d] they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colours of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases....Look how well-lighted everything is. The place is sealed off, self-contained. It is timeless. (p. 37-38) (Emphasis and letter notation added).

The perception of the supermarket as energy waves reminds us of contemporary notions in Physics in which we can no longer speak of individual, solid and static objects but of dynamic patterns of energy. This view of the universe as waves and particles of energy is best explained throughout the novel by Heinrich, Jack’s son. The idea of death as an ending becomes absurd in this conception of the universe as a vast web of related patterns of energy. This dynamic quality of objects is linguistically represented in the use of inanimate subjects as Mediums plus material action processes in what M.A.K. Halliday calls an “ergative construction”13.

In these clauses “the place” (the supermarket) and the large doors (synecdoches for the supermarket) function as the Medium through which a process takes place. The spiritual preparation affecting “us” (customers/consumers) is caused by an inanimate medium which is capable of “actively” or “dynamically” engaging in a material action process. In clauses (c) and (d) the Medium and the Process are represented as self-engendering, i.e., the doors are not opened and closed by a human agent but do so “on their own” as it were. The ergative notion that the process is brought about by the Medium itself and not by an external agent is further conveyed by the use of the adverb “unbidden,” a word which resonates with biblical echoes. The adverb “unbidden” and the ergative construction convey the notion that the doors are not static or inert objects but a dynamic pattern of energy interacting with the customers/consumers.

The lexical chain “gateway” and “pathway” connote, on a mythical level, a crossing or a journey beyond the here and now of earthly materiality. Perhaps a spiritual crossing to Paradise or as Murray says to (a Tibetan) heaven, where there is no sense of time, and therefore where man cannot die. This is why Murray sees supermarkets as “self-contained,” “sealed” and “timeless,” and providing as Murray says “a transitional state between death and rebirth”.

The letters, numbers, colours, voices and sounds of the supermarket are conceived as signs, or as Murray says “psychic data,” an overload of signs for customers to consume and feel replenished. Although the 20thC has seen what the philosopher Lyotard calls the end of the great metanarratives such as religion and science, the suggestion seems to be that these metanarratives have been replaced by the new “cults” - TV and shopping. The mystification of mass consumption sites such as the supermarket or the mall is also conveyed for example by the connotation of words such as “brightness” and “radiance,” which are repeatedly used throughout the novel and that help create an idea of cosmic transcendence.

“Code words” and “ceremonial phrases” also have a mystical or religious overtone which helps sacralise supermarkets as the new religious temples where people come to resto-
re their souls, to recharge their spirit. In the Christian tradition mass used to be delivered in Latin, a language that only priests, bishops and scholars understood. The ceremonial phrases spoken during mass were thus shrouded in mystery. At the denotative level, of course, the ceremonial phrases and code words of supermarkets are no other than the slogans, clichés and catch-phrases designed by marketing and advertising strategists to consciously or unconsciously lure consumers into purchasing their products. Some of these phrases intrude upon our lives through our unconscious with an incantatory power. As Murray tells his students, it is children who are the most sensitive to the influence of advertising: “Even as we sit here you are spinning out from the core, becoming less recognizable as a group, less targetable by advertisers and mass-producers of culture. Kids are a true universal. But you are beyond that, already beginning to drift, to feel estranged from the products you consume. Once you are out of school, it is only a matter of time before you experience the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity” (p. 50).

A clear instance of the unconscious influence of advertising on children unfolds in the second part of the book, when Jack and his family are waiting for the all-clear in the boy scout camp, and as Jack is watching Steffie sleep he listens to her speaking “in a language not quite of this world”. She utters the words “Toyota Celica,” which for Jack “seemed to have a ritual meaning, (to be) part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant” (p. 155). Although here there is a definite source for the utterance, Steffie, in another sense Steffie is not this source: the words are spoken through her, by her unconscious, but also, as Jack recognises by the unconscious of her culture. The words “verbal spell,” “chant,” “ceremonial phrases” and “code words” are all part of a long lexical chain based on synonymy that runs throughout the novel and whose function is to sacralise consumption as the new “cult.”

The life that America seems to promise its citizens is the life of consumer fulfillment, the paradise that man lost before “the fall” in religious terms, as the following passage from chapter 5 suggests:

> It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls ... it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening (p. 20) (Emphasis added).

The sense of abundance Jack feels is mainly expressed in the syntactical patterns of the passage. The juxtaposition of three very long prepositional phrases and, within these, of noun phrases, some of them heavily postmodified, helps to convey the sense of fulfillment Jack feels through abundance. The prepositional phrases introduced by “in” delay the completion of the main clause “It seemed to me that Babette and I had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to other people,” thus breaking with the contiguity of the syntagm. This may suggest a moment suspended in time, as syntactical parallelism operates along the paradigmatic axis of language, creating an effect of simultaneity and arrested movement, and therefore of timeless-
ness. In addition, the preposition “in” indicates the metaphorical site or location of the plenitude and well-being Jack and Babette feel: the fullness of being that lies in the consumption of bargain packs and packages.

Punctuation also helps to create an effect of never-ending listing as comma after comma the noun phrases succeed each other like packets on a conveyor belt at a checkout point. The parallelism at the syntactical level confers the passage an almost poetic or lyrical quality that succeeds in conveying Jack’s sense of fulfillment through material consumption.

Similarly, the lexical chains “plenitude and replenishment,” which share an idea of abundance, and “well-being,” “contentment,” and “fullness of being,” which share an idea of spiritual bliss, contribute to reveal the theme of the passage: spiritual bliss achieved through material consumption.

In the following passage from chapter 17 the “fullness of being” Jack feels is further developed into a sense of power and control. This sense of being in control of the environment is evinced in the grammatical structure of the passage as the Theme, the Subject and the Actor of most clauses are conflated into the same element: the first person pronoun “I.” Thematically, the passage focuses on Jack, grammatically; Jack is the subject of most sentences and he is also the Actor or “doer” of the actions. Most of the processes are material action verbs such as “shop,” “touch,” “inspect,” “buy,” “spend” and “locate,” which show a subject in control of his environment, a subject who makes things happen rather than to whom things happen:

I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. I sent clerks into their fabric books and patterns books to search for elusive designs. I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me. The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit (Emphasis added) (p. 84).

One of the sentences that departs from the pattern described above is “Brightness settled around me.” This sentence can be interpreted as an ergative construction, i.e. as a self-engendering process, in which brightness is in the position of subject and Jack in the position of Range (“around me” being a Circumstantial indicating location). We see here how the usual roles <Human being as Subject> and <element(s) from the environment as circumstantial(s)> is reversed by pushing the subject into a circumstantial position and role. The effect is to bring the environment into close communion with the subject as an active participant in the clause. Thus the passage would reveal how consumers achieve a transient sense of fulfillment by shunning or assuaging feelings of alienation and by enhancing, at least for a brief moment feelings of oneness or communion with the environment. The sense of fulfillment Jack experiences is due in part to his feeling all-powerful and in control of the situation, as different from the feelings of alienation from the environment, which according to Sartre cause angst in man.

Jack’s sense of omnipotence is patent in the last two sentences of the passage “I was bigger than these sums. These sums came back to me in the form of existential credit.” The
first sentence will reverberate like an echo till another passage in the novel in which Hitler is described as being “larger than death”\textsuperscript{14} (p. 287). The similarity in form brings the two sentences together, expressing through analogy the feelings of power and control that momentarily excite Jack.

The metaphor in the second sentence (“These sums came back to me in the form of existential credit”) is sustained as towards the end of the novel Murray tells Jack that some people believe that only killing can ward off death, because killing gives you \textit{existential credit} the same as shopping: “I believe Jack there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers...But think what it’s like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies you cannot. To kill him is to gain \textit{life-credit}. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up” (p. 290) (Emphasis added).

“Life credit” and “existential credit” are recurrent metaphors in the novel. The credit system is perhaps one of the staples of capitalism, since it creates the illusion that anything can be bought and assuages consumer’s fears or anxiety over cash. The credit card system ensures that consumers live in a permanent state of the now, a timeless present of consumption, unconcerned by their real purchasing power. Ironically this also amounts to saying that life has been commodified.

If, according to Murray, death is the end of attachment to things, then life must be the opposite. This may explain why materialism gives us a misleading sense of being in control and secure. The magic spell vanishes, however, as soon as Jack and his family leave the mall: “We drove home in silence. We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone” (p. 84). What is striking here is the contrast between the swift, excited narrative of the shopping spree, conveyed through an accumulation of parallel clauses and gerunds (I shopped... I shopped... I shopped... looking, touching, inspecting, buying) and the starkness of the two sentences that finish the chapter. The chapter begins with the noise of consumers as they shop relentlessly, and finishes with silence, the silence of emptiness and vacuity.

The chapter seems to suggest that fulfillment through materialism is not sustainable or even attainable, since once the excitement of shopping is over, the existential anxiety and emptiness that man feels in the face of death soon take over. As Zygmunt Bauman points out: “Consumer goods should bring satisfaction immediately but the satisfaction should end the moment the time needed for consumption is up. Desire does not desire satisfaction. To the contrary, desire desires desire”\textsuperscript{15}. Or as Freud put it: man is the creation of desire, not of necessity. Bliss and fulfillment through consumption, then, are only contemporary, transient ways of assuaging feelings of anguish because man cannot forget about death. Death is always there to remind us that everything in life is temporary and that the false sense of well-being consumption gives us is geared towards repressing this fact.

These notions find echo in the existential philosophy of Sartre. According to Sartre man feels alien in a world without meaning. Man’s feeling of alienation in the world creates a sense of despair, boredom, nausea and absurdity. When people realise they are alive and will some day die -and that there is no transcendental meaning to cling to- they experience angst, i.e., a sense of dread. In the past, these feelings of dread and of existential vacuity were assuaged by religion. It was the belief in transcendence and in the existence of god that gave peo-
ple comfort and hope. But the scientific rationalism of the modern period denounced religion as a paralysing dogma and instead declared science as the new source of comfort for man and the cure to all evils and misgivings.

However, in *White Noise* the suggestion seems to be that science is yet another failed metanarrative. This is best seen in the commodification of spiritual comfort by means of a “miracle drug” called Dylar, which Babette consumes in an attempt to counteract her fear of death. The drug’s failure to provide Babette the desired effect (to help her forget or repress her fear) may be interpreted as representing the failure of all the promises of bliss and fulfillment of science. Babette’s acquisition of the pills takes place as a business transaction as Babette engages in a love affair with Mr.Grey, the drug’s project leader, in exchange for her access to the drug: “I did what I had to do. It was a capitalist transaction. And now Mr.Grey has failed as well”. The final conclusion seems to be that both religion and science have fallen into disrepute.

Another central aspect of Andy Warhol’s serigraphies and DeLillo's *White Noise* is the relationship between consumption and identity. According to Appiah, there are two dimensions to an individual’s identity: a collective dimension and a personal dimension, and our identity is the result of a “dialogic” interaction between the two.

The collective dimension refers to such features of people as their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, social class, sexuality, etc.; yielding the different kinds of person: men, gays, American, Catholics, hair-dressers, philosophers, rich people, poor people, etc. On the other hand, the personal dimension consists of other features of the person –intelligence, charm, wit, greed– that are not themselves the basis of forms of collective identity.

In *White Noise* identity is taken to be socially constructed as consumer culture provides the symbolic tools for defining identity. According to Zygmunt Bauman “the role that our present-day society holds up to its members is the role of the consumer, and the members of our society are likewise judged by their ability and willingness to play that role”. The shaping influence of advertising and of the consumer society in the formation of identity can best be seen in the opening paragraph of the novel, where Jack is describing the arrival of the stations wagons at the College-on-the-Hill:

*The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. In single file they eased around the orange I-beam sculpture and moved toward the dormitories. The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully-secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with [1] boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationary 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 [2] the objects inside; the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hair-dryers 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 tins, peanut crème patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the DumDum pops, the Mystic mints.

I’ve witnessed this spectacle every September for twenty-one years. It is a bri-
lliant event, invariably. The students greet each other with comic cries and gestures of sodden collapse. Their summer has been bloated with criminal pleasures, as always. The parents stand sundazed near their automobiles, seeing images of themselves in every direction. The conscientious suntans, the well-made faces and wry looks. They feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition. The women crisp and alert, in diet trim, knowing people’s names. Their husbands content to measure out the time, distant but ungrudging, accomplished in parenthood, something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage. This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation (pp. 3-4). (Emphasis and numbers added).

A thematic analysis of the passage reveals that in the first paragraph the narrative concentrates on the station wagons and what they carry, while in the second paragraph the students and their parents are subjects in the thematic position. There are many linguistic features that draw these two paragraphs together to create a whole picture.

In the first paragraph, the profusion of goods that characterises an affluent consumer society is evinced in the accumulation of Noun Phrases. In the first enhanced sentence marked [1] in the passage, the NP’s are made up of plural nouns, without any deictics or determiners. The effect is one of mere cataloguing of items, whose piling up effect conveys the sense of abundance or replenishment that characterises the consumer society.

However, the second enhanced sentence marked [2] introduces a grammatical variance: the NP’s are preceded by the definite article the. The effect of this addition is not only to confer on these objects the particularity of the moment (the radio sets in the car, those and no others) but also to generalise about them (the usual radio sets all students bring with them year after year). The particularity of this moment, however, is reinforced by the use of the simple past in action verbs (“arrived,” “coursed,” “eased,” “moved,” “slowed,” “sprang out,” “raced” etc.) that denote a quick succession of actions in the proximity of the speaker and therefore which contribute to narrative movement.

This pushing forward of the narrative is, however, arrested by the syntactic parallelism of the NP’s coordinated by commas, which delays sentence closure so that the reader is left breathless and without any doubts as to the heaviness of the station wagons that were “loaded down with suitcases,” since the grammar is similarly loaded with NP’s.

In the second paragraph the fusion of the general and the particular is further sustained as the tense changes from past simple to present simple for generalities, and again there is a succession of NP’s headed by the deictic “the.” The change in tense denotes a recurrence of events displaced from the immediate context and generalised, as it is explicitly stated by Jack: “I’ve witnessed this spectacle every September for twenty-one years.” Also the Mood Adjuncts “invariably” and “always” contribute to convey an idea of usuality and typicality and to create distance with the speaker rather than proximity, as the speaker is generalising about what happens at the campus year after year.

Thus the description of the parents refers not only to those parents in particular but also to the behavior of parents in general. The implication of this is that the narrator uses a parti-
cular instance (the arrival of the station wagons that year) to make a general statement about the upper-middle class parents whose children attend the College-on-the-Hill. Part of their social status is indicated not only by the station wagons loaded with goods but also by the parents’ clothes, suntan, make-up and fitness, which are all “status” signs that suggest economic affluence and that contribute to creating a common identity among the parents.

It is TV and advertising that provide the consumer society the symbolic tools for constructing their identities. Clothes, shoes, cars, body language, make-up, hairstyle become signs with a plus value, a connotative value, which Baudrillard calls “status-value.” The use of the definite article in the first paragraph of the passage suggests the massive consumption of the same goods by all students, which points to consumption as a complete homogenization. The fact that the students and their parents are not individually described and that no quantifiers are used (such as “some students,” “a few parents,” “one or two students,” etc.) suggests a collective identity where there are no individuals, there is only a group of the “spiritually-akin.” In fact this scene may be interpreted as being representative of the sought-after sense of “consumer fulfillment,” for there is nothing more terrifying for the self than to feel isolated from the community and alienated from its surroundings.

Feeling that one belongs to the community is also feeling and being part of the financial system. In the following passage from chapter 10, Jack’s very existence is confirmed and authenticated by an automated teller machine, a synecdoche for the whole of the financial system that regulates people’s lives:

In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. [1] Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. [2] I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the main frame sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasant interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed.

A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies (p. 46) (Numbers and emphasis added).

The interaction that takes place between Jack and the machine goes beyond the financial transaction performed. It is an authentication of Jack’s existence in society. Outside the banking system, which together with the credit card system are the pillars of capitalism and the basis for a consumer society, there is nothing. It is through the banking system that the individual and society achieve harmony and that fears of alienation and despair are assuaged.

Again, ergativity seems an important tool of interpretation to realise how this is conveyed linguistically. Clauses marked [1] and [2] in the passage follow the <Medium + Process + Range> and <Medium + Process + Beneficiary> patterns respectively. In clause [1] Jack occupies a circumstantial position and “waves,” an important word throughout the novel suggesting a fusion between the animate and the inanimate, becomes the Medium through which his
emotional alleviation is brought about. In clause [2] the implication is that the system is capable of bringing about an action that would affect or benefit a recipient, i.e. the financial system is linguistically represented as having an independent life of its own affecting the lives of individuals. These clauses are foregrounded against the background of the previous clauses in which Jack is Actor (in transitivity) or external Agent (in Ergativity) of the material action verbs “inserted,” “tapped,” and “entered,” which show Jack in control of and acting upon his environment. The fusion between the individual and society is summarised in the sentence before last in the passage: “But we were in accord, at least for now.” In addition, the choice of the material action process “blessed” suggests a sacralisation of the banking system. The words “feebly” and “tormented” in the previous clauses connote a weakening of the position of the subject and point to the feelings of dread that according to Sartre characterise man in the 20th century.

The collective dimension of identity is also a central theme in Andy Warhol’s serigraphies of celebrities. From 1963 to 1976 he printed several portraits of American artists and celebrities like Mick Jagger, Elvis Presley, Robert Rauschenberg, Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor and Jackie Kennedy. These portraits were characterised by the multiple reproduction of a close-up photo of the celebrity painted over with a wide range of bright colours. The portraits have an “unreal” quality, which is partly due to Warhol’s pencil lining over the celebrities’ features and a film of water-colour painting defamiliarising the usual colour or black and white photos. The pencil lining, the partial watercolouring and the collaged bits of foil paper represent a fusion between the real (the iconicity of the photo) and the fictional (the drawn lines and watercolour thick brush strokes and foil paper) creating what Baudrillard calls a hyperreal, i.e. not the portrait of a flesh-and-blood human being but an image that is the product of a commercialized society. By obliterating the high degree of iconicity of the photo Warhol questions the traditional idea that the image always has a clear referent that reveals a meaning already “there.”

The traditional 18th and 19th century portrait was a “realist” portrait, in which the painter’s efforts were directed toward capturing the unique identity of the subject and characterised by a high degree of iconicity. In the 20th century photography became the favourite medium of portraiture and a higher degree of mimetism was achieved. The underlying assumption in both cases was that the essence of the subject’s identity could be captured and faithfully reproduced, i.e., that there was a clear, unproblematic correspondence between the iconic sign (or image) and the referent (or subject being represented). This is Baudrillard’s first phase of simulation: “the image is the reflection of a profound reality,” which corresponds with the ideas of modernity, in which representation is a natural duplication of the real, i.e., referent and sign are equivalent.

In contrast, Warhol’s portrait serigraphies challenge this notion by presenting an image of the subject that looks unreal, drawn, even caricaturised. This representation rejects the notion of mimesis and refuses to take the image as a transparent substitute for the referent. In the 20th century the mass production and consumption of target-oriented images and the advent of TV created what Baudrillard calls the “precession of simulacra,” i.e., the image does not attempt to reflect a reality, it is not preceded by a referent, the image precedes itself. In *Mick Jagger*, 1975, the implication is that Mick Jagger’s “true,” or “real” identity cannot be
captured, only his mediatised image exists as real.

Conclusion

Language, the same as painting or any other form of representation, is immersed in cultural ideology and it is this cultural ideology that gives shape to our perceptions of the world and of ourselves. Language mediates man’s apprehension of the world and of himself by making the world intelligible and allowing each society to construct their world they see.

In the 18th and 19th centuries both language and painting fulfilled the function of representing the real. Language was used as a transparent medium to give order, name and classify the reality that laid “out there.” Likewise, there was a belief that painting mirrored nature and that the relationship between world and image was unproblematic, transparent, unmediated.

In contrast, the 20th century has been called the era of uncertainty and skepticism. In this age the relationship between the medium of representation and the represented object has been highly problematised to the point that the only truth and authenticity man can hope for lies only in the medium. The medium has become the real, not a representation of it. From this perspective the function of art is not to mirror an external reality but manifest that reality in its very representation. Both, Andy Warhol’s serigraphies (at the iconic level) and Don DeLillo’s White Noise (at the symbolic level) give expression to the cultural and ideological assumptions that underlie the consumer society in the 20th and 21st centuries, by raising every possible question on the nature of the real.

Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum is clearly evinced in Warhol’s serigraphic Brillo, Del Monte and Heinz boxes, which represent an emptying out of meaning (that is, of originals or of stable referents) from a world that is henceforth made up of closed and self-referring systems of semiotic exchange. In this state of hyperreality, the real becomes indefinitely reproducible, an effect merely of the codes which continue to generate it. Warhol’s multiple serigraphies of the Campbell’s Soup cans, Brillo boxes and Coke labels deny the priority of an original over the copy, of a model over the image. It means glorifying the reign of simulacra, and affirming that any original is itself already a copy, divided in its very origin. The idea of reality as massively reproduced copies of copies is inherent to a consumer society that thrives on mass production and consumption.

Similarly, some of the fundamental questions White Noise seems to ask is “What is real?” and “Can the real be known?” The world DeLillo depicts is the world of the consumer society, in which whatever is part of the financial system is acknowledged as real and existing. This is reflected in the language in the commodification of all orders of discourse (educational, religious, medical, metaphysical, etc.) by transferring the wording and vocabulary of a market economy to other types of discourse. The effect is to restructure our apprehension of reality and of the practices of education, religion, the medical profession, metaphysics, etc. on a market model, i.e., to construct reality as a mega market where everything is for sale and liable to be measured, quantified, mass-produced and mass-consumed. We have seen how this ideology translates into the life-credit metaphors and the sacralisation of supermarkets as the
new sites of fulfillment. Since the logic of capitalist expansion demands that the entire globe becomes a market, the commodification of language is a necessary step in the process of its naturalization. Thus, what DeLillo depicts is a society in which everyone and everything is bound in the exchange of commodities, outside which there is nothing. Everything is consumed or it consumes itself.

The mystification of the commonplace in *White Noise* can be interpreted as a revolt towards Modernism, which equated rationalization with an increased and general knowledge of the condition under which one lives, i.e., the belief that there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play. But in *White Noise* this process is suspended, even reversed, as supermarkets, for example, become the epitome of the mysterious. The familiar has become fantastic suggesting that the social world has not been rendered totally “readable” by science and technology. Modernism located the romantic idea of mystery, of the unknown, geographically, in far away places like Africa or America. Postmodernism locates it as the underlying segment of a global economic circuitry that is the basis of the consumer society. Mystery and the uncanny are no longer located in remote places but at the very heart of the metropolis. It is precisely this reenchantment of the world, and particularly of the commonplace that characterises postmodernism and that is represented in *White Noise*. However, once we move beyond the glittering surface of things, DeLillo’s *White Noise* tells the story of a desiring empty self haunted by the fear of death.

Finally, in both artists there is a concern with the role the mass media has in the shaping of our perception of reality and of the self. Ours is a commercial culture dominated by the media and the values of advertising. T.V, the radio, newspapers and magazines cripple our capacity for real experience and emotion. Their effect is anaesthetic. Their endless repetition inures us to the real suffering entailed in the images as Warhol’s “death” serigraphies show. We repeatedly witness pain, violence, murder, and other forms of calamity but this repetition only wears away the pain. T.V anaesthetizes the pain of dying because it makes it unreal, a two-dimensional image, split off from the immediate surroundings of viewers. Warhol serves himself of colour symbolism to restore the image its power to shock, despite its multiple reproduction on the canvas. DeLillo fuses the particular and the general as sitcom dramas and real life catastrophes are massively consumed by American families. The pervasive and unconscious effect of advertising also becomes patent in *White Noise*, as slogans, brand names and jingles mysteriously cut across the syntagmatic contiguity of the narrative, intruding into the web of voices of the text without any marker of a speaking source.

Although consumption is perceived as the surest route to personal happiness and fulfillment, Andy Warhol and Don DeLillo seem to suggest that fulfillment through materialism is not sustainable or even attainable, and that consumer culture is just another failed metanarrative.

NOTES

1 In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Jean Baudrillard defines simulation as the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials. Simulation threatens the difference between the “true,” and the “false,” the “real” and the “imaginary.” Simulation is opposed to representation. Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real. Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference.
The iconic and the symbolic: the consumer society in Don Delillo’s *White Noise* and Andy Warhol’s serigraphies


4 Unless otherwise stated, all references and page numbers according to the Picador edition of *White Noise*, by Don DeLillo, 1999.


6 Note: Due to the length of the present work the passages and serigraphies analysed are not exhaustive, but selected instances to illustrate the points developed.


8 Phenomenology is a philosophical movement based on the investigation of “phenomena” (i.e. things apprehended by consciousness) rather than on the existence of anything outside of human consciousness. Phenomenology was founded early in the 20th century by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl and further developed by his student Martin Heidegger. This method of philosophical inquiry lays stress on the perceiver’s vital and central role in determining meaning, since the objects of inquiry are not the objects in the world that are perceivable through the senses, but, rather, the *a priori* contents of our consciousness. The method demands a close inspection of the mental and intellectual states and processes. The implication is that an individual human mind is the centre and origin of meaning. Phenomenology became an important influence on existentialism. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, by Chris Baldick, O.U.P., 1990.


12 For the sake of brevity other instances of commodification will not be analysed in this work. However, these are abundant throughout the novel. Other instances of commodification include: Jack’s commodified identity as a professor of Hitler studies: “The chancellor had advised me back in 1968, to do something about my name and appearance if I wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator... We finally agreed that I should invent an extra initial and call myself J.A.K. Gladney, a name I wore like a borrowed suit...He strongly suggested that I gain weight. He wanted me to grow out into Hitler...If I could become more ugly, he seemed to be suggesting, it would help my career enormously...I am the false character that follows the name around.” (p.16), commodification of science: “custom-made organisms, packaged in cardboard” (p. 160), “Denise said the sun was a risk to a fair-skinned person. Her mother claimed the whole business was publicity for disease. The sunscreen, the marketing, the fear, the disease.” (p. 264), commodification of criminal identity: “I could have been a professional burglar, an escaped con, one of those drifters with a skimpy beard. A wandering killer type that follows the sun. A weekend mass murderer with an office job. Take your choice.” (p. 253/4), commodification of terror: “terrifying data is now an industry in itself” (p. 175), commodification in medicine: “Once you are shunted from the older doctor to the younger doctor, it means that you and your disease are second-rate” (p. 179).

13 Ergativity is an alternative interpretation to transitivity, which relates to the source of a process. The question posed by ergativity is: Is the process brought about from within or from outside? If from within, the process is seen as self-engendering, i.e. instigated by the Medium itself, whereas if from without, the process is seen as being brought about by some other entity, i.e. by some external agent that is not the Medium.

In contrast, in the transitive interpretation the variable is one of extension. The Actor is engaged in a process; so the question is: Does the process extend beyond the Actor, to some other entity or not? In the ergative pattern the variable is not one of extension but of causation. The questions raised are “What/Who causes an action/process to exist or to take place?”

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14 In chapter 37 Murray says these words: “Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death” (p. 287).


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