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POSTMODERN CULTURE
IN *WHITE NOISE* AND *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*

The novels by DeLillo and Pynchon, as examples of postmodern literature, share thematic aspects related to contemporary problems resulting from societies which are alienated from civilization, and they also deal with the fundamental human concern that is the fear of death. Thus, a comparison has been established in order to analyse those aspects in both novels which highlight the main effects of technologies on society, the one-dimensional society of mass culture, the loss of meanings, and both subjective and collective perception of the world, the freedom and fear of freedom and the role of language.

Introduction:

Both DeLillo's *White Noise* and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* are examples of the late-century American novel that share awareness of the effects caused by modern culture in which we live nowadays. These novels are full of symbolic meanings that are studied here. Slade talks about the status of literature in these times, and he explains how the voices of science or media, principally electronic, have become more pervasive in our culture than in that of the writer: "Since the principal

technologies of our time are informational, the legacy of a second industrial revolution that has replaced concepts such as energy, force, and work with others such as messages, signals, and codes, the place of literature in our culture needs to be reexamined” (Slade: 1990, 4). So, the new situation of the writer in this century, according to Slade, is that of having the role as a contributor to the technology that shapes our world.

From Postmodernism, McLuhan’s ideas about the anthropomorphization of the media play an important role as he considers media as messages in themselves, shapers of perception, and fragmentors of reality. He talks about the anthropomorphization of the modern means of communication, where the TV and the radio appear as extensions of the human being.

In their works, both DeLillo and Pynchon show how the barrage of information received by society through mass media confuses individuals and makes them unable to grasp connection or meaning. Consequently, they lose meanings and self-identity in the world in which they live. Baudrillard explains this idea when he states: “We live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning” (Baudrillard, 1994: 79).

So, as examples of postmodern subjects, the characters of the novels analysed here are looking for meanings constantly, as well as for their self-identity. Seidman explains Postmodernity as “characterized by a loss of certainty and a ‘God’s eye point of view’ in the sphere of knowledge, a loss of a central, organizing principle

governing society and a unitary standard of cultural excellence or morality, and a decline in the belief in a unitary, coherent self” (Seidman: 1994, 5).

DeLillo and Pynchon create a narrative style by using networks and information technology to explain the world in terms of “Oneworldedness”, a concept explained by Emily Apter as follows:

Oneworldedness imagines the planet as subject to “the system” and wants to disable plans of escape. It fails the optimists (left or right) by endorsing the idea that there are legitimate reasons to be paranoid in a world bent on civilizational self-destruction. (Apter, 2005: 370).

The concept of paranoia also appears when dealing with works such as *White Noise* or *The Crying of Lot 49*. It could be said that both novels show examples of characters that have obsessions and paranoid feelings. In Pynchon’s book, Oedipa investigates a mystery (the conspiracy of the Tristero). She follows all the clues and finally she does not solve the mystery. But one possible solution is hinted at: she is the cause of the mystery because she herself might have invented the Tristero. In DeLillo’s novel, Jack Gladney and Babette become so obsessed with death that this obsession is what determines the way they act all through the novel in order to avoid it.

Looking for meanings:

Pynchon presents a series of events in his novel that the reader must interpret. We as readers find many difficulties in deciphering symbols and this is related to our inability to find the communicative “entropy” of our world. Pynchon uses the figure of the Maxwell’s Demon to synthesize the fields of thermodynamics and information theory into a mysterious unity. He defines the term “entropy” in *The Crying of Lot 49* when John Nefastis, owner of a Demon Box, explains to Oedipa: “Entropy is a figure of speech, then, a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but objectively true” (Pynchon, 2000: 73).

DeLillo presents a strange world to us in the shape of the Gladney family. It is felt as strange by the characters of the novel and by the reader because of the way in which it is portrayed by the author. But it is here, in this ordinary and family circumscribed world where meanings must be found. And in order to find meanings it is necessary to make the world strange again, as if experienced for the first time. As Murray says: “TV is a problem only if you have forgotten how to look and listen... My students and I discuss this all the time... I tell them they have to learn to look as children again...” (DeLillo, 2002: 50).

In this world of abandoned meanings there are lists of objects that are thrown away by Jack in *White Noise*. The shame happens in *The Crying of Lot 49* when a list of

things is mentioned at the very beginning, when we are told about Mucho Maas' first job: "and when the cars were swept out you had to look at the actual residue of these lives, and there was no way of telling what things had been truly refused... and what had simply... been lost: clipped coupons..., trading stamps..." (Pynchon, 2000: 8). The idea is that we can not process meaning because our perception is overwhelmed by information.

According to Peterson, *The Crying of Lot 49* asks the reader:

To consider every man's search for meaning in a world Pynchon may have identified as becoming more and more homogeneous and closed. Is the search of meaning and analysis then a fruitless attempt to grant significance to an increasingly grey ash type of modern society or is the only escape in a system which is decreasingly transmitting communication to forge new, alternate meanings and differentiating human beings? (Peterson, 1999).

In Pynchon's novel, Oedipa has a revelation in front of Varo's painting called "Bordando el Manto Terrestre". Oedipa's vision of the picture is revealed in her: "For all the other buildings and creatures, and all the waves, ships and forests of the earth, were contained in this tapestry and the tapestry was the world" (Pynchon, 2000: 13). Is she wrong to search for new links and new connections within the world? Would not they simply be part of her own world? Getting obsessed with the painting, Oedipa

falls into a kind of solipsism: she believes she is the creator of her own world, all her perceptions, including the Tristero, are self-delusions.

Symbolically, this tapestry can also be interpreted as the answer to Oedipa's endeavours to escape her feelings of inner entrapment, so that the tower represented in the painting (a place of confinement) can become a space for freedom. This is the idea Maria José González Madrid explains when she analyses Remedios Varo's painting:

Es a través de una obra de creación que la colegiala puede abandonar tanto su pasado como el futuro al que está predestinada e iniciar su viaje en la vida, bordado por ella misma en la imagen de su huída con el amado. Sólo a través de su subversión puede escapar a su destino, a su vida prevista, de la misma manera que la artista sólo podrá hacer su propio viaje vital y artístico transformando los lenguajes aprendidos en uno propio. La obra de Varo se basa en que su acceso a lo maravilloso depende de su propia experiencia y de ella como sujeto activo. (González Madrid).

Her ideas have been taken from Kaplan: "*En una variante maestra del mito de la creación, se ha valido de la más refinada de las labores domésticas para representar su fuga. A diferencia de Rapunzel y la dama de Shalott, la joven heroína de Varo confinada en la torre no es sencillamente una metáfora de la reclusión sino también una alegoría de su propia liberación*" (Kaplan: 1988:21).

This is an interpretation of the image by Varo, in which a solution to the entrapment of the main character is provided: Oedipa must live her life and experience it, but not through media. She must experience “reality” as an active subject, and not as a passive one.

But there is another important element in Remedios Varo’s painting: the girls embroider the tapestry following the command of a bleak-hooded mysterious man behind her. This highlights Oedipa’s inability to recognize that she is a fictional character who is acting, perceiving and projecting the world in a tapestry, just as the narrator wants, but not she. The protagonist desires to search for new information, but at the same time, she is trapped within a closed system. This is Pynchon’s idea of the difficulties that human beings have to face in the search for meaning in a world that is becoming “more and more homogeneous and closed”.

Identity crisis related to technological advances:

In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, who is both the narrator and the protagonist of the novel, is characterized by neurosis and alienation. He lacks experience and direct contact with nature and the “real world”, and in spite of being the most important authority in Hitler studies, he does not know German. In fact, he is taking German lessons in secret with Dunlop. This is an example of Jack’s false identity. Although

he is incapable of speaking German, he surrounds himself with symbols of authority such as the dark glasses or the black robe, so that no one sees through him:

Because I'd achieved high professional standing, because my lectures were well attended and my articles printed in the major journals, because I wore an academic gown and dark glasses day and night whenever I was on campus, because I carried two hundred and thirty pounds on a six-foot three-inch frame and had big hands and feet, I knew my German lessons would have to be secret. (DeLillo, 2002: 31-32).

For Gladney, the remedy to his lack of identity is appearing to be something he is not. He seems “harmless” and “indistinct” without his collegiate uniform, as Eric says when he meets him out of the campus. And this encounter, in which he has appeared as he really is, and not as a constructed stereotype, troubles him so much that he feels empty, and consequently, he feels the need to go directly into a shop to rediscover himself through consumerism.

Stereotypes are very important in this world of simulations. This is the idea of Baudrillard, by which if experience is mediated through the media, the “loss of references” becomes the loss of the one and only original and final reference. This is illustrated in *The Crying of Lot 49*, when the original version of the *Courier's Tragedy* has disappeared, or when in Pierce Inverarity's stamp collections some of

the original stamps have been replaced by copies, which, surprisingly, seem to be more valuable than the original ones.

In *White Noise*, the importance of types makes one of Jack's colleagues model himself after Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death*. The imitation of a "type" makes him become a person. Instead of creating a self and an individual identity, he has to take his "person" from a famous character in a film, a stereotype from the world of fiction.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pierce Inverarity likes to imitate voices. He phones Oedipa imitating a wide range of different kind of voices: "a voice beginning in heavy Slavic tones as second secretary at the Transylvanian Consulate...modulated to comic-Negro, then on into hostile Pachuco dialect...then a Gestapo officer..."(6).

Another important issue in both novels is death. In *White Noise* the fear of death makes characters deny it, they avoid facing it. They choose repression instead of communication when death comes to their minds. Even Babette, the wife of the main character, takes a drug called "dylar" provided by Mr. Gray, to forget this fear she constantly feels.

In Pynchon's novel references to death are also frequent. There are many characters who die: Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa's ex-boyfriend dies; Randolph Driblette commits suicide..., and she finds the word "death" near the muted horn. Death is occulted in symbols as well, although sometimes even the characters can not perceive it. So at the end of the novel, Oedipa starts seeing the post horn everywhere with

messages related to death: “DON’T EVER ANTAGONIZE THE HORN” (84). Here, taking the first letter of each word the message “death” appears. And whenever the horn appears, there is death attached to it: “In one of the same latrines was an advertisement by AC-DC standing for Alameda County Death Cult, along with a box number and a post horn” (84).

Mucho Maas, the husband of the protagonist, takes LSD provided by Hilarious. Drug taking is a means of protecting themselves (Babette and Mucho), from knowledge and truth. It causes both of them to lose their individual identities.

The ideas suggested by McLuhan that men and women become fascinated by any extension of themselves, provided by new technologies, is shown in both novels. He states that with electric technology men (and women) extended out of themselves. (Although McLuhan refers to “men” to talk about human beings, in this paper, the terms “men and women” or “human beings” are used to avoid sexist language). To exemplify this idea that human beings become numb by an extension of themselves McLuhan uses the myth of Narcissus:

The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror number his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in

vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system. (McLuhan, 1964: 51).

According to this myth told by Ovid in *The Metamorphosis*, Echo was a talkative nymph who was punished by Juno so that when she talked she would be only able to pronounce the last words said by her interlocutor.

If this idea is applied to *The Crying of Lot 49*, it can be seen how Echo (Oedipa) falls in love with Narcissus (Inverarity) but how her obvious communication problem causes a misunderstanding. So, In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa's trouble is that she is so obsessed with a mystery that she can only talk about that, losing contact with her own emotional life.

This is what happens to Babette and Jack in *White Noise* since they become so obsessed with death that, instead of communicating to each other their anxieties, they become strangers, forgetting both their emotional relationship and their self-identities.

All these characters are examples of the society of the technological era. McLuhan analyses this kind of individuals that constitute a society which is becoming more and more homogenous in his work, *The Global Village*. Here he states:

[la sociedad electrónica] no posee objetivos sólidos o una identidad privada. En ella, el hombre no transforma tanto la tierra como se metamorfosea a sí mismo en información abstracta para conveniencia de los demás. Sin restricciones, puede tornarse en un ser carente de límites, de dirección, y caer en lo oscuro de la mente y en el mundo de la intuición primordial. La pérdida

de individualismo invita una vez más a la comodidad de las lealtades tribales.
(McLuhan, 1993: 104).

It is the hypervisuality of globalization that is causing the individuals of a society to become passive elements. And this idea is closely related to the fact that television in both novels plays an important role as an agent instead of an object. This is a society based on a visual culture, rather than a printed one, as Renate Brosch states: “...our contemporary culture has seen a discrediting of the word: that we have moved from a print-based culture to a culture of images, from an alphabetic to a visual one” (Renate Brosch, 2004:32).

Television:

“Television has become the real world for most people, but a world which has one ideology: commercialised entertainment” (Federman, 1992: 191). This statement is like the *Courier's Tragedy* in Pynchon's book: there is no meaning, just entertainment. When Oedipa asks Driblette about the play, he answers: “It was written to entertain people. Like horror movies. It isn't literature, it doesn't mean anything. Wharfinger was no Shakespeare” (Pynchon, 2000: 52). However, there is a hidden meaning in *The Courier's Tragedy*, as well as the messages coming from television or radio and other technological machines that surround us daily. The only way in which we can interpret these meanings is by making things strange again,

looking with children's eyes, as Murray says in *White Noise*: "It is because people have forgotten to listen and look as children. They have forgotten how to collect data... The commercial has deeper waves, deeper emanations. But we have reversed the relative significance of all these things. This is why people's eyes, ears, brains, and nervous systems have grown weary. It's a simple case of misuse" (DeLillo, 2002: 66).

Television's side effects on people are similar to those caused by drugs such as dylar, that is the destruction of memory and personality: "Television is the death throes of human consciousness" (DeLillo, 2002: 51).

The important role of television is constantly mentioned in the work by DeLillo: "For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is" (DeLillo, 2002: 66).

In both novels, television appears as interfering in moments of privacy. This happens in *White Noise*, when Babette tells Jack about her sexual encounter with Mr. Gray, the man who has provided dylar to her. When Jack asks her whether she has enjoyed having sex with him, her answer is: "I only remember the TV up near the ceiling, aimed down at us" (DeLillo, 2002: 195).

The same happens when Oedipa and Metzger are having sex while the TV is on. In this scene there is a sense of a constant lack of privacy. They are observed by a rock

band, The Paranoids, who blow a fuse in the moment in which Oedipa and Metzger are at their climax.

This sense of lack of privacy because of the intrusive presence of TV, radio, or other forms of technology is always there. So it can be related to the idea of the “Panopticon”, which conveys a sense of an invisible omniscience, of any form of spying or interfering with the public. “They’ve been listening”, screamed Di Presso, “those kids. All the time, somebody listens in, snoops; they bug your apartment, they tap your phone” (Pynchon, 2000: 42). This idea appears in George Orwell’s novel *Eighteen Eighty-Four*, in which life is depicted under an omnipresent totalitarian state. The “Big Brother” watches over the novel’s characters.

The image of television also appears symbolically in some of the characters in both novels. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the idea of a TV screen can be suggested by the image of the sunglasses worn by Oedipa when she is watching Varo’s painting:

She wore dark green bubble shades. For a moment she’d wondered if the seal around her sockets were tight enough to allow the tears simply to go and fill up the entire lens space and never dry. She could carry the sadness of the moment with her that way forever, see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry (13).

This would suggest the idea of Oedipa watching the world mediated through television, that is to say, watching “reality” not as it is, but as a spectacle of images, as happens in fiction. Her perception has nothing to do with “reality” but it is her

inner world that she actually perceives. The “dark green” glasses she wears, remind us of the description Pynchon had previously made of the television set: “Oedipa stood in the living-room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube” (5).

When Willie Mink is depicted in *White Noise*, his “forgettable” face resembles a TV set: “His face was odd, concave, forehead and chin jutting” (305-306). He appears watching TV, and he speaks “without taking his eyes from the flickering screen” (305). This character represents the embodiment of the individual who has completely lost his identity, living in a fictional world, the world he perceives through his TV set.

Language:

Language mediates our knowledge of the world, and in the barrage of information that surrounds us daily, it is necessary to find messages, and to decide which messages are valuable and which are meaningless. This is the main idea of *White Noise* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, novels in which the reader must look for meanings through language.

That is the task Thomas Pynchon has set himself, and that is the intent and theme of *White Noise* (1985), a novel by Don DeLillo, which, as it happens, is also an interesting study of writing. To write literature, as the structuralists and their colleagues maintain, is to create a world in a text. (Slade, 1990: 14).

And this is what both DeLillo and Pynchon do in their works, creating a world which is parallel to the ordinary world of the characters. But the meaning of this world is attainable only through the correct interpretation of meanings in both novels. The readers, as well as the characters, must be able to find messages and signifiers to acquire power to understand both themselves and their environment. And this is a difficult task, because we, as well as the characters in the novels, are overwhelmed by perception, due to the intrusive presence of TV or the radio. “In overinterpreting the significance of the abbreviation for delirium tremens, DT, Pynchon’s character paves the way for DeLillo’s obsession with the occult value of signifiers within ordinary language” (Apter, 2005: 376).

Televisual stereotypes influence language in *White Noise*. Jack Gladney’s perception and thoughts are completely based on television stereotypes. He does not speak consciously, but rather his language and thoughts are shaped by media. Jack Gladney represents the alterations in subjectivity which occurs in a culture highly influenced by mass media. How DeLillo introduces linguistic elements related to the world of advertising and consumerism can be seen within his narratives: “Kleenex Softique, Kleenex Softique” (39), “Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it” (51), “MasterCard, Visa, American Express” (100). So, the reader, as well as Jack, feels advertising is interrupting continuously, pervading the whole narrative, it is as if they were watching TV, and these interruptions were advertisements saying: “buy this”, and repeating the product announced two or three times in order to influence people’s

unconscious thoughts, like subliminal messages. Murray realizes what is happening there and expresses his concern about this bombardment of information: "...we are suffering from brain fade... The flow is constant. Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes" (DeLillo, 2002: 66). It is this indiscriminate flow of information we are exposed to on a daily basis in our modern society, which ultimately destroys the immediacy of real life.

Oedipa, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, finds herself involved in a chaotic system beyond her capabilities to understand. Images and facts are constantly brought into view, and her role is, as Brown points out, to sort useful facts from useless ones, like the Maxwell's Demon: "Oedipa's purpose, besides executing a will, is finding meaning in a life dominated by assaults on people's perceptions through drugs, sex and television" ... "To get an answer to this Sphinx-like riddle ('why me?'), Oedipa must 'pierce' the 'inveracity' of the death-shroud of Pierce Inverarity, and thereby learn the naked truth about or standing behind her ex-lover" (Brown, 2004).

Conclusions:

Both novels, *White Noise* by Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, have been compared here because they share common topics mainly related to how the voices of science or media have become extremely powerful in our culture, even more than in that of the writer. Consequently, these novels show how a barrage

of information confuses individuals, making them unable to grasp connection or meaning, and finally losing self-identity. Characters in both novels seem to look for an answer to discover whether “reality” is something they project out from their minds or something that stands immutable. Both protagonists, Jack Gladney as well as Oedipa Maas, feel that in the world in which they live there are vast conspiracies ruling their own lives.

When the reader faces both novels he/she is presented a similar situation: we struggle to make sense of the worlds of the Gladney family, which apparently seems to be very simple, or Oedipa Maas’ adventures, which, despite their apparent superficiality, happen to be full of hidden meanings.

Although Pynchon’s novel, like *The Courier’s Tragedy*, seems to be meaningless, to be written just for entertainment, and although *White Noise*’s family context seems to show just ordinary people facing just ordinary problems through meaningless entertainment such as consumerism; nevertheless, it could be seen that there are hidden meanings contained within both novels. But for us as readers, as well as for Jack and Oedipa as fictional characters, to be able to interpret these symbols, we must pay attention to details, make the world strange again and experience it as active agents, and, finally, communicate to each other and maintain human relationships in order to escape the overwhelming effects of images coming from TV and media.

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