

# Bodies, Brains and Burnt-out Systems in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*

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## Abstract

This essay offers an examination of instances of uncritical exposure to new media through the lens of twenty-first century American Postmodern fiction. Through a close reading of Don DeLillo's latest novella *The Silence* (2020), which works as both an observation and harsh criticism of western consumer society and American culture in particular, the present study aims to shed some light on the ways contemporary postmodernist literary writing—informed by post-postmodernist tendencies and features—criticizes American political choices that define the (un)health of a nation as it succumbs to digital (mis)information processes.

For its theoretical background the essay relies on late twentieth and early twenty-first-century thinking on media and the use of technology as a means of transcending human limitations. In more specificity, it explores Andrew Hoskin's take on media, memory and the connective turn, N. Katherine Hayles's theories on man's posthuman nature, while it also takes into account latest beliefs in transhumanism and critical posthumanism as philosophies that rethink human form and nature in relation to contemporary bio-technological conditions.

DeLillo's updated preoccupation with the western world turns into intensified anxiety about the terrifying effects of digitization and uncritical exposure to the screen. He focuses on the disintegration of the self and the disruption of its presence in space and time in tandem with the failure of language and the loss of (cultural) memory, ultimately questioning the future of all existence and writing.

## Keywords

Digitization; Don DeLillo; Language; Memory; Posthumanism; Postmodern Writing; Transhumanism.

## Introduction

In the light of the Wastelands EAAS<sup>1</sup> Conference that sought for reflections on notions of waste and wastelands in American culture, history and politics, this article attempts an analysis of human corporeal and moral decay as represented in contemporary American postmodern fiction and discusses the challenges that have come into surface in terms of digital superfluity. These literary representations of bodies, brains and burnt-out systems constitute manifestations of fictional—yet still menacing—electronic wastelands in Don DeLillo's novella *The Silence* (2020). Through a close reading of DeLillo's latest publication, which comes as both an observation and harsh criticism of western consumer society and American culture in particular, the present study aims to shed some light on the ways contemporary postmodernist literary writing— informed by post-postmodernist tendencies and features—stigmatizes American political choices that define the (un)health of the nation as it succumbs to digital (mis)information processes. The selected examples are reviewed in the light of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century thinking on media and the use of technology as a means of transcending human limitations. In more specificity, I rely on Andrew Hoskin's take on media, memory and the connective turn, N. Katherine Hayles's theories on man's posthuman nature, while I also look into latest beliefs in transhumanism as a philosophy that seeks the evolution of the human form with the help of science and technology (Sorgner 2009; 2010).<sup>2</sup> In addition, for the purposes of this study discussions in the newly formed field of critical posthumanism<sup>3</sup> have been taken into account. These prioritize the redefinition of the post-human as a form of post-anthropocentric and pluralistic existence due to emergent scientific and bio-technological conditions (Ferrando). All in all, this theoretical background will help one reflect upon the extensions of electronic wastelands and electronic waste in present societies with regard to the representations in the novella in question.

In particular, this examination does not only deal with the technological aspect but also investigates its extensions in corporeal, moral and cultural dimensions of contemporary western societies through the study of literary representations of digital, mental and physical exhaustion. The discussion extends to socio-cultural contexts and constitutes proof of the uncritical use of and exposure to digital technology at a social level (both individual and institutional) that raises a lot of ethical problems. The article launches this investigation by closely looking at DeLillo's concerned ruminations regarding human limitations in a digitized and technologized world. It hopes to be pushing forward the conversation about the future of immersing our lives in the institutionalized new media order. It traces the main consequence of technological influences on memory and language—with fragmentation and loss as the immediate side effects. More specifically, the examination focuses on the themes and

narrative structures that DeLillo employs in a postmodernist—or even post-postmodernist—appreciation of the limitations of exhausted humans (turned into useless apparatuses and extensions to screens) and the writer's concerns about the practice of enhancing human beings as we know them today.

This "post" in post-postmodernism, may denote a development in time as simply the period that comes after postmodernism. Still, it may imply dismay about what follows postmodernism as philosophical criticism or better as an organized system of structures, beliefs and practices. If according to Linda Hutcheon, in her groundbreaking work *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), postmodernism "takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement" (1) in literature and all fields of cultural development, DeLillo's writing poses as self-deriding and aims to deconstruct its own purpose and essence, exhausted by the demands of the technologized world in the twenty-first century. In his parodic writing that reaches the point of ridicule, the world in *The Silence* comes to a standstill just before its complete demise at the moment when the media that once ruled stop functioning. It is hereby regarded as an investigation of the non-essence of life, language and cultural memory in post-apocalyptic scenes of a crashed airplane and disfunctioning characters with uncontrollable bodies and brains at a time when discourses about the transhuman possibility of human nature flourish.

### **Don De Lillo's Take on Posthuman and Transhuman Theories**

According to Hayles, in her milestone work *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), humans are seen as cybernetic systems that extend in virtuality. In this early but rigorous account on the boundaries between human and machine, she presents the historical development of the technology that is so closely connected with subjectivity, cognition and embodiment in tracing the movement from human to cyborg and then to posthuman in cybernetic discourse. For Hayles, bodies exist as prosthesis for the mind and embrace the posthuman. In her prologue to the book, she argues:

The important intervention comes not when you try to determine which is the man, the woman, or the machine. Rather, the important intervention comes much earlier, when the test puts you into a cybernetic circuit that splices your will, desire, and perception into a distributed cognitive system in which represented bodies are joined with enacted bodies through mutating and flexible machine interfaces. As you gaze at the flickering signifiers scrolling down the computer screens, no matter what identifications you assign to the embodied entities that you cannot see, you have already become posthuman.  
(xiv)

In the post-technologized settings DeLillo places his characters, his writing can be said to take the form of a reaction to what we may have regarded so far

as postmodern. It expresses greater than ever skepticism regarding writing forms, the act of writing itself and the human condition, that is the humans' capacity to remember, forget and communicate. The themes of the fear of death and forced mortality have been a common thread in most of his fiction. When asked about this inescapable death drive apparent in his novels in an interview for *The Paris Review* by Adam Begley, he argues: "Who knows? If writing is a concentrated form of thinking, then the most concentrated form of writing probably ends in some kind of reflection on dying." In this respect, if DeLillo's novella is regarded as critically assessing the posthuman conception of the world, according to which the human being is enmeshed and embedded in an extended technological world with immense potentialities, one may assume that, in a retrospective manner, DeLillo questions the purpose and norms of writing and interrogates those institutions and structures that are to blame for the state his microcosm has come to. Thus it is suggested that the conception of the microcosm he creates clashes altogether with the main transhumanist beliefs which originated in the 1990s by Max More.<sup>4</sup> More saw full potential in the improvement of the human intellectual, physical and psychological capacities with the synergy of science and technology. Today, American computer scientist, futurist and transhumanist Ray Kurzweil, who has long professed the inevitable merger of humans with the machine (1990; 1999; 2005), sees the cyborg as an entity superior to any human being that is surely going to self-destruct.<sup>5</sup> Along with Professor Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, and writer of *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (2017), they enumerate the benefits of human societies from technological progress.

On the contrary, DeLillo is immensely preoccupied with the ills of the western capitalist and technologized world. He has repeatedly challenged it in his postmodernist writing by pushing boundaries and testing the limitations of both literary norms and cultural institutions for more than half a century. He has wondered about the limitations of science and technology in other novels, such as *White Noise* (1986), *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Zero K* (2016). In *The Silence*, he expresses his anxieties over the terrifying effects of extremist futurist beliefs and the uncritical use of technology. More alert to present pressing concerns than ever, DeLillo is exploring the nature of the relationship between human conduct and the media, detecting the vibrations caused by the connectivity enabled by new media technologies and excessive exposure to the screen. His extremely laconic expression forewarns us of the imminent death of the characters and the end of all communication among them. His succinct representations are only an understatement to the disruptive role of technology.

In the novella, the plot takes place in 2022. Part I deals with the fragmented and fragmentary interactions in which Tessa and her husband Jim are engaged while aboard a transatlantic flight, on their way to meet their friends

Max, Diane and Martin and enjoy Super Bowl on TV. Part I takes up the greater part of the narrative and ends abruptly leaving Max staring into a blank screen. Part II immediately begins to describe an ongoing digital war characterized by "[c]yberattacks, digital intrusions, [and] biological aggression" (77). This war involves the collapse not only of all digital and broadcast technologies but of whatever involves mechanical support. Our world as a remotely and digitally managed system suddenly fails or is hacked and DeLillo very succinctly (in just 116 pages) creates the opportunity to criticize the uncontrollable side effects of our exposure to digitized information and services. At the end of it all nothing really changes and Max is still left seated and staring at the blank screen.

As the plot in the novella takes place in U.S. territory, the writer maps the ills of a nation and its institutions as well as the effects of such technological, institutional and cultural waste on human citizens. The concerns he brings to the fore are extremely serious. He undertakes to expose moral and physical decadence, the gradual disintegration of human organized societies, the dysfunction of the family unit and the malfunction of the ruling institutions. By scrutinizing instances of the characters' existential crises in the narrative (the denial of one's sense of self, the disruption of one's presence in space and time as well as the loss of cultural memory), the writer's agonizing questions concern the crises caused to human bodies and minds by burnt-out electronic systems. In opposition to the transhumanist movement that hails the possibility of developing an enhanced human species with increased mental and physical capabilities by changing human nature and mainly the way the human brain works, the characters in *The Silence* fail to evolve or develop enhanced capabilities. They are portrayed in their struggle to come out alive and functioning though crippled by the menacing potential of science and the misuse of media technology. In tandem with the questions fired by the writer, this paper quietly asks: What would happen if technology stopped working and media stopped transmitting? How would human nature continue to evolve? What would happen to human agency if stuck in digital wastelands?

### **Memory, Language and Communication Failure**

In *The Silence*, spelt out in DeLillo's most compact writing patterns (following the overwhelming representation of the 9/11 events in his 2007 novel *Falling Man*), his dark vision of a world disintegrating, where people are detached from one another as they get more addicted to their mobile screens, becomes more alarming. The erasure of the world as we have known it is represented through the erasure of the language that could potentially be used to speak about it. To DeLillo, "a word has a life and a history" of its own (Begley). As the words in the novella fail to relate, point to or mean, a waning need, hope or potential for life may also be implied. One reads this story and begins to appreciate "the implied

limitation built into his stories" as noted by Xan Brooks in "Don DeLillo: I Think of Myself as the Kid from the Bronx."<sup>6</sup> The human characters fail to communicate meaningfully through their language which fails to signify when technology stops supporting all existence. Yet, we enjoy a bleaker DeLillo expressing not actually more urgent but rather more all-encompassing concerns about the dire threats of our technological reality. Notions of teleology, temporality, history, memory and the function of language are under investigation, yet this time they somehow ring out in a more intensified way. There is a new more acute sense of an incoherent self abandoned in a post-digitized world only to experience the breakdown of communication that challenges cultural efficacy and physical contact.

A disease of the digital turn transforms the technologized universe in the story and, ultimately, its physical space into a wasteland where nothing functions any more. It turns its characters, who appear bare with no historical past, into useless transmitters of speech acts devoid of any intelligible meaning; a disease that could easily and at any moment have the world stop going round.<sup>7</sup> While one of the main characters, Martin Dekker, confidently and eloquently nibbles upon Albert Einstein's famous physics theories published in *Manuscript on the Special Theory of Relativity* (1912), the writer also chooses Einstein's words as an epigraph for the novella. Even before Part I begins and the narration unfolds, the reader receives a nihilistic sense of nothingness and cancellation that characterizes the book: "I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones" are Einstein's words that precede the narrative. They encapsulate the novel's main idea; they set a bleak tone and foreshadow the writer's pessimistic outlook on the future of the world as one knows it even before beginning one's read.

Time and language are central thematic strands in *The Silence*. Although DeLillo's narrator and his characters tirelessly pose questions about the future of the world, these are never answered. Language fails to mean while at the same time the speakers do not show any interest in making intelligible meanings or drawing any serious conclusions. Insurance agent Jim Kripps and his wife poet Tessa Berens are flying to New York to meet up in their friends' apartment and watch Super Bowl on TV. There, await Max Stenner, a building inspector, Diane Lucas, a retired physics professor, and Diane's former student and Physics college teacher Martin. In the opening scene, in the middle of a flight, Jim seated next to Tessa is reciting words he sees on the screen in front of him; words and numbers that make no difference are coming out of his mouth. The couple have no seeming past and as it will become apparent no future either. They are stuck in non-presence in a moment that seems most vulnerable. The narrator sets the scene from the opening lines and sketches their alienated relationship:

The man touched the button and his seat moved from its upright position. He found himself staring up at the nearest of the small screens located just below the overhead bin, words and numbers changing with the progress of the flight. Altitude, air temperature, speed, time of arrival. He wanted to sleep but kept on looking. (3)

The image of a sleepless man suffering from exhaustion is the result of the long flight from Paris to New York. Silence and sleep are what both passengers need as a way of surviving the destructive urge that runs through the narrative. Instead constant noise and automated responses come out of the couple's mouths as they stare at the screens without displaying any intimate contact. Jim is affected by the continuous noise while nonsensically counting distance to his destination: "He began to recite the words and numbers aloud because it made no sense, it had no effect, if he simply noted the changing details only to lose each one instantly in the twin drones of mind and aircraft" (4). His brain functions are reduced and compared to the mechanical parts of an aircraft, while the soothing effect of sleep continues to pose as the only possible salvation throughout Part I: "Sleep was the point. He needed to sleep. But the words and numbers kept coming" (4). All the numbers and unimportant bits of information about altitude, temperature, speed and arrival times that come out of their puppet-like mouths remain out of any conversational context. They are exaggerated to such an extent that they ironically pass off as necessary to the couple's existence. Yet, as if occupying non-space, Jim gets very little attention from his wife Tessa and his name is soon equated to a seat number: "His name was Jim Kipps. But for all the hours of the flight, his name was his seat number" (6).

Tessa's almost comic precision in verbal exchanges that are the result of her habitual engagement in linguistic games as a poet and an editor, on the other hand, may sound hilarious at times:

"I'm thinking back to the main course," she said. "I'm also thinking about the champagne with cranberry juice."

"But you didn't order it."

"Seemed pretentious. But I'm looking forward to the scones later in the flight."

She was talking and writing simultaneously.

"I like to pronounce the word properly," she said. "An abbreviated letter o. As in scot or trot. Or is it scone as in moan?"

He was watching her write. Was she writing what she was saying, what they were both saying?

She said, "Celcius. Cap C. It was someone's name. Can't recall his first name."

(4-5)

DeLillo is deeply concerned about the purpose of language as a historical, cultural and political act. During the flight we learn nothing of importance about Tessa or Jim. In a similar fashion to the non-linear organization of the digital information that flashes on and off the screens, affecting people's thoughts and actions, there appears no continuity in their speech. The superfluous nonsensical linguistic exchanges almost necessitate the silence Jim asks for and people usually enjoy when seemingly self-content in themselves, lost in their mobile phones and hooked onto their screens:

Here, in the air, much of what the couple said to each other seemed to be a function of some automated process, remarks generated by the nature of airline travel itself. None of the ramblings of people in rooms, in restaurants, where major motion is stilled by gravity, talk free-floating. All these hours over oceans or vast landmasses, sentences trimmed, sort of self-encased, passengers, pilots, cabin attendants, every word forgotten the moment the plane sets down on the tarmac and begins to taxi endlessly towards an unoccupied jetway. (7)

In the air, free from the force of gravity words are stripped of their historical and cultural context. They fail to contribute to the development of the story or enhance the plot. Rather language deconstructs any sense of organized structure in the novella. The difficulty of the experience of flying overseas exacerbates the situation while Jim and Tessa's fragmented conversations reaffirm a state of blurry confusion and floating parallel existence. While flying, it is as if time, energy, human contact and interaction not "stilled by gravity" (7) are a total waste. The readers have a forewarning of a horrific incident, the kind that is common in DeLillo's scenes of terror and total destruction (as in *Falling Man*). The narrator notes with a sense of suffocation as if gasping for air:

He alone would remember some of it, he thought, middle of the night, in bed, images of people bundled into airline blankets, looking dead, the tall attendant asking if she could refill his wineglass, flight ending, seatbelt sign going off, the sense of release, passengers standing in the aisles, waiting attendants at the exit, all their thank-yous and nodding heads, the million-mile smiles. (8)

In this rather long sentence, elliptical phrases in paradigmatic structure highlight the agonizing thoughts in the last moments before the end. The narrator makes an ironic commentary on the couple's possible lapses and lack of concentration as an early indication of eminent death and finitude that the narrative implies.

At other times, numbers are just coming out of Jim's and Tessa's mouths as if automata: "Heure a Paris nineteen o eight," he said. "Heure a London eighteen o eight. Speed four hundred sixty-three m.p.h. We just missed two miles per hour" (9). Tessa keeps checking arrival time in London and Paris, altitude, speed and outside air temperature. She nonsensically persists in speaking out robotic responses and urges Jim to keep calm and watch a movie. Such unimportant

information is only for uncritical consumption, not forwarding communication in any way. And then she needs to write down everything, words, memories as if they have to be recorded in order to matter and be remembered. Memory needs to be mediated as language gradually fails to mean and cognition is further compromised: "Did you sneak a look at your phone?" Jim asks about the factual information coming out of Tessa's mouth. She abruptly responds, "Go back to your sky-high screen" and then "Activate your tablet. Watch a movie" (6). "I feel like talking. No headphone. We both like talking" Jim states. "No earbuds," she said. "Talk and write" (7).

In the novella, the use of earbuds, earphones, screens and even paper is highlighted. These different technologies are media that pose as prosthetic parts to human agents of nonsensical conversations and conduct. These extensions to their bodies help them carry out their exchanges and are reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan's defining work on media. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), McLuhan forms his groundbreaking theory of the medium as an extension to man used to mediate communication and our perception of the world around us. Earlier, in *Letters of Marshall McLuhan* (1960), he was the first to note that "[a]ll media are necessarily extensions in technological form of one or more of our senses. The electronic media together add up to an externalization of our sensorium" (256). In his 2011 article "Media, Memory, Metaphor: Remembering and the Connective Turn," Andrew Hoskins, scholar in digital war, media and memory studies expands on the role of digital media in contemporary mediated memory. Hoskins emphasizes the importance of media on historical and cultural memory not only as a metaphor but also as a practice and brings to the fore philosophers and scholars who have claimed that so indispensable are digital media to our existence that lives cannot be lived outside of them. Social and cultural life cannot exist outside media anymore.<sup>8</sup> Not only in theory but in actuality, investments in laboratory research are proof of the transhumanist belief in the creation of a brain-computer linked back to humans in order to allow them full control of the inexhaustible abilities and functions of their brain.<sup>9</sup>

In the same vein in *The Silence*, the characters' appreciation of the world is not only informed by the media they use; it is actually defined by the media extensions that act as their sensors. DeLillo purposefully takes the chance to criticize Tessa's and Jim's alienation due to the excessive use of technology and all the noise that surrounds them is the metaphor for all the cancellations they experience. The media create an illusion of a holistic sense of the self; they fill the gaps and help avoid long silences. But as soon as the characters experience a massive technological breakdown, all digital extensions to man also fail to work. Immediately, we feel Jim's and Tessa's disorientation as they can hardly go by without electronic mediation and away from their screen. As the narrator notes, "[Jim] wasn't listening to what he was saying because he knew it was stale air" (13).

As Tessa stubbornly asks to take everything down in her notebook as a way of exercising her memory, Jim calls out to her, "You can't help yourself" (13):

"I don't want to help myself," she said. "All I want to do is get home and look at a blank wall."

"Time to destination one hour twenty-six. I'll tell you what I can't remember. The name of this airline. Two weeks ago, starting out, different airline, no bilingual screen."

"But you're happy about the screen. You like your screen."

"It helps me hide from the noise."

Everything predetermined, a long flight, what we think and say, our immersion in a single sustained overtone, the engine roar, how we accept the need to accommodate it, keep it tolerable even if it isn't. (13-14)

Every conduct and every detail sadly imply an unbearable sense of boredom, along with the lightness of being while floating. These exchanges could express the characters' possible ultimate need to disconnect from technology and then reconnect with the human, seeking thus a return to their former human state and nature. The consecutive cancellations they experience are metaphors for the ultimate end, just before the nightmare of death turns into reality.

Memory as the central mental capacity is also in a flux when the couple is not connected to the screen or to the internet. As Tessa says, "[memories] come swimming out of deep memory" (6) as she tries to remember Dr. Celsius's first name. As language fails to advance meaning and to produce cultural memory, missing facts and information come out of nowhere:

"Speaking of remember. I remember now," she said.

"What?"

"Came out of nowhere. Anders."

"Anders."

"The first name of Mr. Celsius." (14)

Without memory Tessa and Jim are minimized to the shape of caricatures that share bizarre verbal exchanges. In "Media, Memory, Metaphor: Remembering and the Connective Turn," Hoskins asks where individual memory can be found. He reminds us that this is connected to one's cognition now reconfigured in media space: "That is, cognition—the mental process of awareness, perception, remembering—has been seen as extended, scattered and distributed outside of the head and across social and cultural worlds (23)<sup>10</sup>. In his "view of memory as a kind of 'circuit' that extends from individual cognition out into the world and back again" (23) Hoskins interestingly notes about remembering and forgetting when in a state of networked existence:

The now much more visible "long tail" of the past is increasingly networked through a convergence of communication and the archive. Smart phones and other highly portable digital devices act as prosthetic nodes that extend the self across an array of communication and consumption networks, personal and public [...]. Hence, there is a kind of digital dormant memory, awaiting potential rediscovery and reactivation—lurking in the underlayer of media life. (26)

Somewhere between the human and the digital "[f]orgetting—or perhaps a new careless memory—becomes the default condition when there is no need to remember" (19). Our digital networks eventually constitute this "prosthetic memory" according to Alison Landsberg.<sup>11</sup> In *The Silence*, when technology fails, this "prosthetic memory" fails to inform the human. Tessa reclines into her notebook and Jim hides into his screen, experiencing the mental and physical distress caused by the long flight and their alienation. A bouncing starts, passengers staggering in the aisle, "voices on the intercom . . . in French and then . . . in English" (16) and an eminent crash comes closer: "Are we afraid?" she said. He let this question hover, thinking tea and sweets, tea and sweets" (17).

### The Breakdown of Civilization

Immediately afterwards, in the second chapter we find Martin, Diane and Max, seated in front of a TV, waiting for Tessa and Jim to arrive from the airport and enjoy the 2022 Super Bowl that is about to begin. The narrator explains, "The man had a history of big bets on sporting events and this was the final game of the football season [. . .]" (19). As if life, subjectivity, thinking and memory have been taken away from Max, the reader enjoys the parodic image DeLillo creates of him:

Max was accustomed to being sedentary, attached to a surface, his armchair, sitting, watching, cursing silently when the field goal fails or the fumble occurs. The curse was visible in his slit eyes, right eye nearly shut, but depending on the game situation and the size of the wager, it might become a full-face profanity, a life regret, lips tight, chin quivering slightly, the wrinkle near the nose tending to lengthen. Not a single word, just this tension, and the right hand moving to the left forearm to scratch anthropoidally, primate style, fingers digging into flesh. (19-20)

In these two long sentences, one appreciates the first consequences of the end of life and civilization as we have known it so far. Max has been stripped of his main human capacities. The slight facial expressions, eye and lip movements and the hand coordination are only able to remind one of his humanoid nature in the beginnings of civilization. As Diane confesses, the "years of our something-or-other partnership" (21) has led to unbearable boredom and routine lives that only western consumerism has promised to ease. She confesses, "Max doesn't stop watching. He becomes a consumer who had no intention of buying something. One hundred commercials in the next three or four hours" (21). Consumption to the point of exhaustion fills the room.

Suddenly, there is a visual distortion on the screen and then we hear something unearthly happening to the world: mobiles are off and all screens go blank. According to Martin, a compulsive supporter of Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity, yet one who misquotes his formulas and theories of black holes and gravitational waves, they have been falling into what Einstein calls black holes. Or, alternatively, he imagines conspiracies organized by the Chinese: "'Hidden networks,' Martin said. 'Changing by the minute, the microsecond, in ways beyond our imagining. Look at the blank screen. What is it hiding from us?'" (28). They even hear otherworldly verbal exchanges: "'It is not earthly speech,' Diane said. 'It is extraterrestrial'" (27). Diane apparently more perceptive than anyone else in the room tries to picture the extent of the confusion taking over the once digitized world now that technology does not work and media fail to transmit information and mediate communication: "I am foolishly trying to imagine all the rooms in all the cities where the game is being broadcast. All the people watching intently or sitting as we are, puzzled, abandoned by science, technology, common sense" (29). She ironically asks, "Is this the casual embrace that marks the fall of world civilization?" (35). Neither she nor the readers get an answer and the chapter ends abruptly.

The scene changes to Tessa and Jim again, who have just experienced a turbulent flight landing causing "a wobbling mass of metal, glass and human life, down out of the sky" (37), unavoidably bringing to mind the disturbing images that DeLillo had painted in his seminal novel *Falling Man* to describe the terror that overwhelms people as soon as death seems inescapable and fear rules. Passengers are described floating with lacerated bodies, broken arms, and legs twisted, teeth missing, experiencing loss of memory. Passersby, drivers, flight attendants are not coordinating with their surroundings. Emotionally absent from their own lives, they could well be characters in a movie and Jim marks self-consciously: "All we need is rain... and we'd know we were characters in a movie" (*The Silence* 39). A slight error that may have occurred in the digital communication systems seems to be resulting to a complete chaos because of their highly deterministic and sensitive to technology nature.<sup>12</sup>

Back to the flat, more incoherent talk fills the pages: "Half sentences, bare words, repetitions" (46). Max makes rambling sentences about the game, using repetitive words, and then interrupts them for some weird and unconnected commercial jargon (46-48) as if in a different space and time, "a transrational warp that belongs to [his] time frame, not ours" (48). He continues watching his own game, in his blank screen, lost in his own loop. This complication has characters get confused between actual and virtual experience of the game and of their lives which they get to watch as if it were a movie. More observant Diane makes penetrating thoughts about the new state of affairs among her guests and Max, in particular:

Is it the bourbon that's giving him this lilt, this flourish of football dialect and commercial jargon. Never happened before, not with bourbon, scotch, beer, marijuana. She was enjoying this, at least she thought she was, based on how much longer he kept broadcasting.

Or is it the blank screen, is it a negative impulse that provoked his imagination, the sense that the game is happening somewhere in Deep Space outside the fragile reach of our current awareness. (47-48)

In the novella, the two married couples seem to be accepting the ruins of a married life with their partner unquestionably. What is more, Diane is really enjoying the de-humanization process through the ridiculed portrait of her husband. Regarding the blurring of the spatiotemporal relations, one can again rely on Hoskins to refer to the complications of a new experience of space and time that new media have helped formulate. According to Hoskins, "[o]ne can say then that digital media have complicated the temporal dimensions against which we measure our sense of presence in-the-world, and increasingly blurred this with our sense of presence in-the-media, and also presence-in-memory" (25-26). It is precisely this blurry sense of being in and out of the world while also in and out of media connection that DeLillo hopes to satirize through his puppet-like characters in *The Silence*. Martin soon starts talking as if hallucinating, as if his medication is having peculiar effects on him:

"I've been taking a medication."

"Yes"

"The oral route."

"Yes. We all do this. A little white pill."

"There are side effects."

"A small pellet or tablet. White, pink, whatever."

"Could be constipation. Could be diarrhea."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Could be the feeling that others can hear your thoughts or control your behavior."

"I don't think I know about this."

"Irrational fear. Distrust of others. I can show you the insert," he said. "I carry it with me." (48-49)

As the situation gradually deteriorates, the characters free themselves from any authorial intent or control. They lose their subjectivity or any control of their own agency. Their body parts and their consciousness fail to respond to a central nervous system or a peripheral circuit that determines humanoid existence. Diane overhears Martin voicing out ontological questions without expecting or getting any answers:

I look in this mirror and I don't know who I'm looking at, he said. The face looking back at me doesn't seem to be mine. But then again why should it? Is the mirror a reflective surface? And is this the face that other people see? . . . Do other people experience this, ever? Our faces. And what do people see when they walk along the street and look at each other? Is it the same thing that I see? All our lives, all this looking. People looking. But seeing what? (50-51)

Martin's voice is heard contemplating on the distorted and disintegrated image of himself, his consciousness keeping a distance from his body. He fires away ontological questions about the essence and purpose of his existence while he still relies on episteme for his answers. The basic functions of looking and really seeing are questioned as if the characters have been robbed of their human nature, their bodily and cognitive abilities. In turn, Max's condition deteriorates and his movement is seriously affected as if lost in the shoes of a sports presenter: "He raised his hand now, phantom microphone in hand, and he spoke to a camera well above field level, his voice pitched to a higher tonal range" (67). As soon as technology stops functioning, people in existential crisis manically search for a new order. "He seemed lost in the pose but returned eventually to a natural stance. Max was back to his blank screen. The pauses were turning into silences and beginning to feel like the wrong kind of normal" (67). We continue reading about the remnants of the seemingly agonizing thoughts of people living detached from one another. What will happen now that all the screens are disabled? The answer comes from elsewhere. Back to the clinic close to where the plane crashed and out of nowhere a woman ruminates:

I can tell you this. Whatever is going on, it has crushed our technology. The word itself seems outdated to me, lost in space. Where is the leap of authority to our secure devices, our encryption capacities, our tweets, trolls and bots. Is everything in the datasphere subject to distortion and theft? And do we simply have to sit here and mourn our fate? (59)

Through her mouth and words, DeLillo criticizes our false sense of digital security, the conditioned truths we are made to believe and the institutionalization of this mediated sense of being. We get pictures of darkness in the streets, in the stadiums, the whole system and organization of life seems out of order. It is as if the world has been hacked and the characters are experiencing some kind of "natural breakdown, or foreign intrusion" (65). According to Sonia Livingstone, social analysis increasingly recognizes that "all influential institutions in society have themselves been transformed, reconstituted, by contemporary processes of mediation" (qtd. in Hoskins 20). Yet, past this complacent state of relying on technological mediation that extends to all aspects of social and cultural life, in *The Silence*, it feels as if we are gradually moving from the decadence of the surrounding electronic wasteland to a former state of natural (dis-) order.

In the second part of *The Silence*, disintegration has developed further; writing also dissolves: as numbers disappear, chapters are separated only by long lines, designating thus another instance of rapture with literary norms. Each new entry is an expression of present-day fears that seem more up-to-date than ever before. The narrator mentions the virus of war, the fear of agencies being in control of nuclear weapons, bombs and missiles from supersonic aircraft, mass surveillance, satellite tracking data, bioweapons, drone wars, climate change, world crisis, asteroids, meteorites approaching Earth that is in danger, data breaches and cryptocurrencies, all expected in a world conspiracy (77). These are not thoroughly discussed but brought up as Wikipedia entries. They come up as the side effects of a new kind of war or, even worse, of a new world order. The narrator ironically wonders about the cognitive power of people to still remember after this violent intrusion (77-78). Do memories of previous terrorist attacks haunt contemporary people or do they vanish with the informational overflow or worse with the click of a button?

As if experiencing a faulty version of their expired self, the characters end up completely fragmented and disillusioned. Max calls out to the others in the room, "'We're being zombified,' Max says. 'We're being bird-brained.'" Seconds later he cries out, "I'm done with all this. Sunday or is it Monday? February whatever. It's my expiration date" (84). The characters seem out of order, and their utterances out of context once again and making little sense. Their mental power is down as if a central controlling computer has been shut down. They are separated from their physical aspect as if the human and the mechanical are now two separate entities. Communication breaks down as their brain uploads are now disconnected.

And still the narrator has the characters continue their labored conversations in the novel to the point of exhaustion. Diane is trying to identify some patterns in her guests' conduct. Yet, towards the end she also ends up entrapped in her own limitations. As if everyone has been stuck and lost into that aspect of reality, that space and time they were inhabiting just before being unplugged and entering the black hole. "The world is everything, the individual nothing. Do we understand that?" (115) are Martin's and DeLillo's ultimate words before the world ends up in complete silence. The reader hopes for a word, a blink, a touch that will reverse the situation. One turns the last page of the novel and reads about Max pictured in complete inertia and deafening silence:

Max is not listening. He understands nothing. He sits in front of the TV set with his hands folded behind his neck, elbows jutting.

Then he stares into the blank screen. (116)

One is disappointed to realize that the text ends with a "blank screen" (116). In this prophetic novella that seems so relevant to the present, DeLillo writes about

people's inability to keep control of their bodies, minds, language and silences. He updates his lexicon to describe our present day, not some dystopian future and this is what makes it more disturbing.

### Conclusion

This article has dealt with the latest narrative endeavor of DeLillo, a widely credited fiction writer and dire critic of social and political world matters. His novelistic representations have been reviewed in the context of twenty-first century media theory on memory and against transhumanist theories that support human enhancement by means of science and technology. Despite the immense optimism about the technological development of the Fourth Industrial revolution and the professed belief in the enhanced nature of humanoids after their merger with technology, DeLillo and his characters remain silent in disbelief (if thinking at all) of what is to follow at the end of the novel. Humanity has arrived at the key moment when it needs to test its powers against technology that poses as its worst enemy. Posthumanist and transhumanist beliefs, on the other hand, are questioned in the dystopian reality where no technology works any more.

DeLillo examines the fragmentation of our cultural realms with an updated and intensified interest in challenging technological developments and the electronic wastelands they create. He continues to seek and develop new imaginative ways of establishing intelligent communication with the concerns people face today. Without looking for any kind of compromise he seems unable or unwilling to surpass the dead-end western civilization has brought about. With his tense dialogues and rigid lines, he is updating his conceptual map to respond to current affairs and concerns through intensification and mutation of tendencies already present in postmodernism. Through language human communication is not even a possibility. DeLillo's characters miss out on human contact from the start and by the end of the narrative all their mental and physical capacities are eliminated.

What happens to memory then? Is it truly only mediated by our technological extensions? And if language and words miss out on meaning and then they lose their connection with history, is there any point in writing at all? DeLillo's agonizing thoughts are all-pervading and seem to be pertaining to the function of writing after postmodernism and after the terror of the terrorist attack against western civilization on 9/11. Is there any sense in writing fiction at all? An incomparable anxiety over the role of the writer and writing to save history from vanishing overwhelms DeLillo. Ultimate death is approaching. Is fear the sole winner after all? Under this light, *The Silence* becomes a wonderful metaphor for the end of discourse, the end of civilization and, by extension, the end of all writing.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>The 34<sup>th</sup> European Association for American Studies Conference, organized by the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia with the collaboration of the Universidad Complutense, expanded on the idea of waste present in T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922) to all notions, themes and directions related to the study of the United States. "Bodies, Brains and Burnt-out Systems" was presented in the "Electronic Wasteland" panels with special interest in examples of waste in human resources, moral and emotional waste in twenty-first-century digital era as represented in contemporary American fictions.

<sup>2</sup>In the *Journal of Evolution and Technology* (2010), a dialogue commences regarding the linkages of transhumanism with Darwinian evolution theory and the similarities between the concept of the posthuman and Nietzsche's idea of the "ubermensch."

<sup>3</sup>In her article "Posthuman Critical Theory," which appears in the first issues of the first volume of *Journal of Posthuman Studies* (2017), Rosi Braidotti attempts a mapping of critical posthuman theories in the field and calls for "the need to rethink subjectivity as a collective assemblage that encompasses human and nonhuman actors, technological mediation, animals, plants, and the planet as a whole (9)."

<sup>4</sup>A list of the theoretical premises upon which the movement of Transhumanism is based is available at [whatistranshumanism.org](http://whatistranshumanism.org). Accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

<sup>5</sup>Among Ray Kurzweil's most notorious theories on immortality, singularity and superintelligence, the "Transhuman Singularity" is that singular event when death is outwitted by immortality. He explains, "This day that Death dies will join together with the day that Life took its first breath as the two most important dates in the history of life on our planet" [www.kurzweilai.net/the-transhuman-singularity](http://www.kurzweilai.net/the-transhuman-singularity). Accessed 1 Jan. 2023.

<sup>6</sup>One can read an interesting account of Don DeLillo's concerns and preoccupations as expressed in his novels in Xan Brooks' article for the *Guardian* at [www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/06/don-delillo-kid-from-the-bronx-interview-xan-brooks](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/06/don-delillo-kid-from-the-bronx-interview-xan-brooks). Accessed 1 June 2022.

<sup>7</sup>Although this book arrived in this reader's hands and screens during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, while still in strict lockdown and though it was not about the pandemic, it felt so relevant at that moment to the concerns of the disillusioned people, being about another disease that was taking its toll on the human race.

<sup>8</sup>Marc Deleuze "recognize[s] how the uses and appropriations of media penetrate all aspects of contemporary life (qtd. in Hoskins 20)." According to Roger Silverstone, "media [...] define[s] a space that is increasingly mutually referential and reinforcing, and increasingly integrated into the fabric of everyday life" (qtd. in Hoskins 20).

<sup>9</sup>Mediated thinking and understanding may soon be a reality: with only a thought, not even the touch of a button, humanoids will assumedly be able to control any device built inside or outside their bodies. Elon Musk's announcement of his grand future project Neuralink is the perfect example of such transhumanist belief in linking humans up to a brain-computer in order to unleash their full potential so as to fight disease and overcome the limitations of human nature. For more information of the project visit [neuralink.com](http://neuralink.com). Accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

## Notes

<sup>10</sup> Read about John Sutton's "extended mind thesis" as "mental states and processes ... spread[ing] across the physical, social, and cultural environments as well as bodies and brains" (Hoskins 23).

<sup>11</sup> Check out Alison Landsberg's *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. Columbia UP, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> According to chaos theory analyzed in Britannica.com, "In recent decades, ... a diversity of systems have been studied that behave unpredictably despite their seeming simplicity and the fact that the forces involved are governed by well-understood physical laws. The common element in these systems is a very high degree of sensitivity to initial conditions and to the way in which they are set in motion. [www.britannica.com/science/chaos-theory](http://www.britannica.com/science/chaos-theory). Accessed 1 Jan. 2023.

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