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## “Whenever there’s too much technology”: A Review of Don DeLillo’s *The Silence* (Scribner, 2020)

In a year punctuated by the global catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic and various other social upheavals, Don DeLillo published his seventeenth novel, *The Silence*, which—in many respects—can be read as a kind of coda. Novelist Rachel Kushner observes on the jacket blurb that “*The Silence* seems to absorb DeLillo’s entire body of work and sand it into stone or crystal,” and the book certainly distills many of the prevailing concerns in DeLillo’s previous books: technology and the inherent dangers in its global interconnectedness (*Players*, *Cosmopolis*); the compulsive allure of the screen (*Running Dog*, *Libra*, *Point Omega*, *Zero K*); consciousness-shaping communal experiences (*White Noise*, *Mao II*, *Falling Man*); language as a near-mystical, impenetrable socio-historical meditation (*Ratner’s Star*, *The Names*), and sports as a defining cultural moment (*End Zone*, *Underworld*). To varying degrees, all of these issues are at play within the narrative of *The Silence*.

The book could also be seen as the third movement of a post-*Underworld* trio of novellas starting with *The Body Artist*, followed by *Point Omega*, and now *The Silence*, with each book serving as a reflection or extended meditation on the corporeality of grief (*The Body Artist*), when the concept of a “haiku war” collides with familial loss (*Point Omega*), and when people are enveloped in the immanence of a global event just beginning to take shape (*The Silence*). In the case of the latter, the result is a novella of fractures, what occurs off-screen or out of the frame, as the narrative momentum is propelled more by the elisions of the unsaid or undescribed, the “unknown known,” to borrow from former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s (in)famous memo, than by clearly delineated plot points.

The action of the novel, minimal though it might be, centers on a seemingly global event, which appears to disable all technology—and

perhaps most notably for DeLillo—the television screen. This is of particular relevance given that this technological crippling coincides with the playing of the Super Bowl, the American football championship that is also the largest and most watched annual sporting event (as well as most expensive television advertising slot) in the country. It is the promised watching of the Super Bowl, after all, which brings all of the characters together: Jim Kripps and Tessa Berens, a married couple who are en route to New York on a flight from Paris and who plan to join their friends' party once they land; and Diane Lucas and Max Stenner, a long-time couple hosting the party, plus Martin Dekker (Diane's former student), who compulsively studies Albert Einstein's 1912 *Manuscript on the Special Theory of Relativity*.

In *The Silence*, time is tallied and disclosed by screens: during their plane flight, Jim ritualistically recites the time to their destination via the screen, while Max—awaiting the start of the game—remarks that “opening kickoff is one commercial away” (23). In what may be a nod to David Foster Wallace's magnum opus *Infinite Jest*, where the calendar years are marked by absurd corporate sponsorships, the stadium in which the game is to be played is named the “Benzedrex Nasal Decongestant Memorial Coliseum” (24). And DeLillo is perhaps at his most American when his subject is sports. In response to Martin commenting on having watched the World Cup, Max replies with what is an efficient summation of the prevailing attitude in the United States regarding soccer: “Fake fucking injuries . . . And what kind of sport is it where you can't use your hands? Can't touch the ball with your hands unless you're the goaltender. It's like self-repression of the normal impulse. Here's the ball. Grab it and run with it. This is normal. Grab it and throw it” (25).

Shortly after Max's comment, all electronic devices are rendered useless, and the television screen flickers and then goes blank: “All the people watching intently or sitting as we are, puzzled, abandoned by science, technology, common sense” (29). Diane, Max and Martin (and the reader, too) are left in a state of waiting—for the football game to return, for Jim and Tessa to arrive, for whatever comes next. In the charged atmosphere of the unknown known, Diane nervously wonders: “Is this the casual embrace that marks the fall of world civilization?” (35). Although her remark is potentially global in nature, the characters largely stay moored to the interior of the apartment. In the absence of the actual Super Bowl, Max starts running imaginary game commentary, recitations that seem to have been dislodged from long-term memory, and which also echo Jim's earlier chant-like repetitions of flight details. The characters revert to rituals and routines as the geometry of their now-shared lives, and Jim and Tessa even find comfort in seeing a jogger, a “woman [who]

just kept running, looking straight ahead” (40). This attachment to and performance of familiarity brings to mind a poignant observation that the writer Michael Lewis made in 2009: “[A] society that has been ruined overnight doesn’t look much different from how it did the day before.”

As the narrative moves forward, it increasingly resembles a “bottle episode,” an episode of a television show that is written in such a way that it typically requires only one set and a limited cast. The seemingly omniscient narrator poses the question: “What happens to people who live inside their phones?” (52), and, as if picking up the thread, Diane muses: “No e-mail. . . . More or less unthinkable. What do we do? Who do we blame?” (61). Enveloped in immanence, the characters toggle between standing mutely and speaking, not quite in conversation, talking *at* or *near* rather than *with* each other.

Given the numerous disaster and apocalyptic books, films and television series over the years, DeLillo seems to deliberately avoid trying to picture or dramatize some kind of global carnage. Without any working technology to capture it, what would even be the point, we might ask. The tension or prospective anxiety then comes from what is happening outside of the frame, on the other side of the windows nobody wants to look out of.

One of the details that hovers out of the frame—both in terms of subject matter and technological attrition—is an observation DeLillo made in his 1973 novel, *Great Jones Street*: “Whenever there’s too much technology, people return to primitive feats. But we both know that true privacy is an inner state. A limited environment is important” (238–39). The typeface and book design further reinforce the idea of this technological retreat by laying out the text with a typewriter script and margins left-justified. In an incident that seems to presage the events later, one that signals just how technologically-dependent we have become (and are thus vulnerable), early in the novel Tessa recalls the first name of Celsius without having to search online, to which the narrator adds: “Came out of nowhere. There is almost nothing left of nowhere. When a missing fact emerges without digital assistance, each person announces it to the other while looking into a remote distance, the otherworld of what was known and lost” (14–15).

One last way to conceive of the book—and clearly this was the route the publisher used to market it—is to read *The Silence* as a prescient commentary on or coda to our current COVID-19 pandemic. The temptation is perhaps understandable given the interiority in the novel and 2020 being the year where “shelter-in-place” entered our vernacular, but the analogy has some limitations. *The Silence* might better be seen as the other side of the coin, the “upside-down,” to use *Stranger Things*-speak, of our current moment. COVID-19 has imposed upon many of us an intensely online existence, dramatically increased screen time (and screen

fatigue) and technological dependence. The event in *The Silence*, rather than expanding our individual or collective bandwidth, instead completely eliminates it. In some respects, DeLillo is imagining the forced reversion to a social dynamic that had already existed in his lifetime, one before the ubiquitous glow of screens. For all of DeLillo's explorations of technology, the complete and instantaneous erasure of it might be one of the most unsettlingly realistic scenarios to contemplate, the pushing of a global socio-historical mute button: "The pauses were turning into silences and beginning to feel like the wrong kind of normal" (67).

#### WORKS CITED

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