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TECHNOAPOCALYPSE: THE EFFECTS OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL DISASTER ON THE HUMAN SUBJECT IN DON DELILLO'S *THE SILENCE*

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Introduction

In contemporary American literature, one of the authors that thoroughly engages with the intricacies of technology is Don DeLillo. Throughout his novels, such as *White Noise*, *Cosmopolis*, and *Zero K*, DeLillo offers insights into how technology shapes modern existence. From the means of communication and accessing information to the reshaping of human identities, technology permeates existence in the ways both seen and unseen. DeLillo presents the complexities of living in a technologically saturated world and the implications it holds for the understanding of self and society.

In his newest novel, *The Silence*, DeLillo examines the issue of the overwhelming dependency on technology by presenting a scenario where it all suddenly and quietly ceases to function. Through this silent disaster, DeLillo exposes how much the mind relies on the ever-present stimuli, such as those coming from television screens. Throughout the novel it becomes clear that the human subject's relationship with technology goes beyond mere convenience and connectivity.

In this paper, I shall analyze how in DeLillo's *The Silence* the mysterious blackout is not merely a disastrous event which endangers people's lives and interferes with the means of travel, communication, and entertainment. It also uncovers the underlying issues plaguing society, mainly the overdependence on technology. After the blackout commences, the story's characters are shown to be struggling with their thoughts and are desperate to fill a void that has remained after all their devices have fallen silent. However, the emptiness that they experience is not the effect of the blackout, but rather it was always there, just hidden under the constant stimulation from technological devices.

Homo Technologicus in the Making

Firstly, it is important to describe how thorough the influence of technology upon a human being might be. There is a large body of research concerning this relationship and how it operates and to what degree it affects humans. Sadie Barker in her article "Static, Glitch, Lull: DeLillo's Ambient Apocalypse" suggests that *The Silence* focuses not on the immediate effects and consequences of the mysterious blackout, but rather on how it affects people on the personal level (97). Barker describes how the novel exposes changes in human behavior stemming from technological dependence:

DeLillo is thus most interested in habit: the habits that constitute the everyday and endow the glitch with its power to undo. (...) Amidst the slow recension of privacy and information, the commodification of viewership and technological socialization, the glitch does not cause but rather performs transformations already underway. (97-98)

The blackout, or how the author calls it "the glitch," is not the root of the problem, but rather an unfortunate event that exposed the overwhelming dependency on the technological marvels. The most crucial part of this analysis is presenting what the blackout uncovered in human behavior regarding relationship with technology. The dependency on this new modern stimulus is so thorough that I would like to argue that the characters in DeLillo's novel could be becoming *homo technologicus*.

In his article published in *Philosophies*, Kevin Warwick describes *homo technologicus* as “a symbiotic creature in which biology and technology intimately interact” (199). Warwick specifies that “the entity is formed by a human-technology brain/nervous system coupling in which the complete entity goes well beyond the norm in terms of Homo sapiens performance” (200). That is to say, the creation of the new post-human being will be done once we arrive at the level of interfering and modifying our brains or nervous systems directly, thus affecting our way of thinking and perceiving reality. It could be argued that this process will be done forcefully or will happen spontaneously over time. After all, as he says, “the human brain is affected by the technology around us. It develops over time to interact more efficiently with that technology” (Warwick 199). Humans then can be argued to naturally lean towards electronic devices, machines, robots, gadgets, etc. and adjust to use them.

Warwick’s article provides a valuable argument for this study, because DeLillo writes about the human subjects undergoing similar changes. It could be said that the modification of brain or the nervous system is being done without a direct interference of brain implants or network connection. It is, instead, done by the presence, usage and reliance on technology alone. By the sheer volume of devices, their convenience in use and dependency on them, the human subject underwent already a complex and ambiguous shift. A direct interference is not needed for such a drastic change to occur. As it will be shown later, the characters in DeLillo’s novels are dramatically affected by the lack of technological stimuli, even though they were not directly connected to a machine or were not suffering from an implant or prosthesis failure.

This profound vulnerability is described in Sonia Baelo-Allué’s “Technological Vulnerability in Fourth Industrial Revolution: Don DeLillo’s *The Silence*.” The article presents how the dependency on technology and offloading part of skills and human capacities to technological processes has made humanity vulnerable. The author states:

[t]he boundary between the human and the machine becomes porous as the non-human becomes an essential part of the (post)human sense of identity. Losing the machine means losing a part of ourselves and that makes us especially vulnerable to the threat of its loss. The combination of technological ubiquity and intimacy with our dependence on ICTs [Information and Communication Technologies] makes our human fragility more obvious as our role is diminished in an informational environment that engulfs us. (137)

Baelo-Allué points at an unprecedented reliance on technology and warns against its malicious effects on the human subject. The more technology is used and incorporated into the daily routine, the more the society becomes dependent on it. The destructive consequences of this dependence and increasing compatibility of technology with human mind and body are described in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*, where the human subject is presented as fragmented, incapable of complex thought and unable to meaningfully communicate with peers. As Baelo-Allué suggests, "[t]he more advanced, the more vulnerable, but this vulnerability and posthuman suffering only becomes obvious when technology disappears and we are left to our own devices, struggling to recover and remember what truly makes us human" (146).

Technological progress and dependency irreversibly changed human subjects. No longer can they survive without technology, as it seems to have become part of their very being. Human subjects did not become fully posthuman, but were changed enough for technology to affect their mind and body. Consequently, they feel an immense sense of loss once the blackout begins. "Losing technology is losing a part of the self" (147)—states Baelo-Allué and that proves to be true for the characters that suffer from the mysterious blackout in Don DeLillo's novel. Their reactions and fate seem to be a cautionary tale about the relationship between technology and the human subject. One of the proposed views of this relationship is the comparison with a virus rampaging through the humanity. In *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*, Daniel Dinello states that "[s]cience fiction often questions the notion that technology is neutral—that men control it, that they

determine its benefit or harm. The technological virus undermines the technoutopian dream of mastery, demonstrating that it exists only as a delusion” (247). Technology changed human subjects and also took partial control over them. Yet, it was control given up willingly for pleasure and convenience, and to expand their own capabilities. This issue is mentioned by Baelo-Allué, who notes:

However the paradox of the information age is that despite the explosion of options and data, this knowledge is not firsthand and does not come directly from our own senses: we gain control, but we also lose it, becoming vulnerable. Our dependence on technology extends the reach of our senses but also weakens us and our humanity. (142)

In other words, human beings gain more control by becoming more efficient at performing tasks with the knowledge of the world at their fingertips, but at the same time they offload abilities, sometimes as essential as recollection, thus becoming more technological and more controlled by the capabilities and functionalities of electronic devices. Don DeLillo in *The Silence* presents the reality in which technology is suddenly stripped away from the human subject.

Technological Silence

Don DeLillo's *The Silence* is a deceptively simple novel that follows a small cast of characters in a limited space. The novel presents a group of friends—Jim, Tessa, Max, Martin and Diane, who up to watch the Super Bowl together. Jim and Tessa are on the plane on the way to Newark, New Jersey, while Max Stenner and Diane Lucas wait with Martin, Diane's former student, in the apartment for their travelling friends. Yet, there is a hanging sense of foreboding, as the signs of the upcoming disaster are present in the novel. Jim recites mindlessly the data from the screen as a way to fill the silence, even though what he most needs is sleep: “[It] was the point. He needed to sleep. But the words and numbers kept coming” (DeLillo 4). Jim was seemingly enthralled by the screen and the numbers, and his entire self being bound to the technological marvel of the plane, as it is later noticed: “His name was Jim

Kripps. But for all the hours of this flight, his name was his seat number. This was the rooted procedure, his own, in accordance with the number stamped on his boarding pass” (DeLillo 6). From the very beginning the topic of technology is weaved into the description of character’s behavior and thoughts.

It is shown that Jim has a peculiar relationship with technology. His wife, poet Tessa, points out that “But you’re happy about the screen. You like your screen,” to which he replies, “It helps me hide from the noise” (DeLillo 13–14). It may seem at a glance that Jim is referring to the roar of the engine and the ambient hum of the plane. However, as the story progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that he hides from the noise of his own mind in dire need of upholding a conversation that goes deeper than flickering lights on the screen. By contrast, Tessa seems to be still fighting against the interference of technology by writing down the memories of their trip, as well as forcing herself to remember the name of Anders Celsius without looking it up on her phone. When she finally recalls that bit of information, it turns out that:

She found this satisfying. 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 off into a remote distance, the otherworld of what was known and lost. (DeLillo 14–15)

The unassisted recollection of trivia turns out to be more gratifying and it draws attention to the concerning element of some experiences being denied by the technological dependency. A seemingly mundane matter of recollection becomes a unique experience that feels profound, indicating that, in comparison, just a search through the Internet would feel shallow. Tessa and Jim’s situation resonates with Arthur Schopenhauer’s theory of boredom. Each part of the body manifests a certain will, which for the mind it is a will to cognize (Schopenhauer 272). Both Jim and Tessa desire mental stimulation, but each found a different venue to pursue it. Tessa strains her own mind, while Jim relies on technological stimuli to provide content for mental engagement, as a way to keep away the boredom which is, “the particular variety of suffering”

(Fox 480). Technology provides an invaluable source of engagement that might replace one's ability to cognize and make an individual dependent on devices to keep the mind occupied.

However, a mysterious event disrupts the technological devices. Jim and Tessa's plane ceases to function and falls from the sky. Yet, we see that it is not an isolated event, as the Max and Diane's apartment is hit by the blackout as well, although the term "glitch" used by Sadie Baker seems to fit the event better, due to the unusual effects that are described as follows:

Something happened then. The images onscreen began to shake. It was not ordinary visual distortion, it had depth, it formed abstract patterns that dissolved into a rhythmic pulse, a series of elementary units that seemed to thrust forward and then recede. Rectangles, triangles, squares. They watched and listened. But there was nothing to listen to. Max picked up the remote control device from the floor in front of him and hit the volume button repeatedly but there was no audio. Then the screen went blank. (DeLillo 25–26)

Diane checks her laptop, a landline phone and a desktop computer, but they all ceased to function. The mysterious blackout disrupts all of the plans the characters have, endangers their lives, and forces them to rethink their relationships with technology. The narration paints a grim picture that could be summed up with words from Langdon Winner's book *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme of Political Thought*: "[u]nder present conditions men are not at all the masters of technological change; they are its prisoners" (55). The freedom suddenly gained from the technological imprisonment does not lead to the characters' enlightenment, but it furthers their confusion and uneasiness, as they struggle to face the world that is no longer interconnected, full of noise and the flashes of the screens.

The immediate effects of the blackout are horrific as Jim and Tessa's plane suddenly falls from the sky. After the emergency landing, they are taken to a nearby hospital to treat Jim's minor injury. An interesting point to note is that they were driven away in a van, which makes the event even more mysterious; it cannot be explained by, for example, an electromagnetic pulse, which would

have also destroyed car batteries. The glitch switched off phones, computers, lights, leaving all digital communication, the access to the Internet and consuming entertainment through the television or the radio impossible.

It is revealed that the loss of technology is not a mere inconvenience, but a possible beginning to a societal collapse. The receptionist at the hospital describes the situation as follows, “[e]veryone I’ve seen today has a story. You two are the plane crash. Others are the abandoned subway, the stalled elevators, then the empty office buildings, the barricaded storefronts” (DeLillo 59). Although DeLillo is not writing about a straightforward disaster or apocalyptic fiction, there are clues left that bring forward the images of the society slowly breaking apart, as the confusion and the panic start to spread. Instead, as Mark Tardi states, “[t]he 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” (430). The novel provides scarce details what exactly is happening to the society at large, but these are vivid enough to create a vision of a collapsing society.

However, the event is something more than just a sudden, disastrous blackout. As Jim and Tessa join up with Max, Diane and Martin, the novel begins to unravel the human dependence on technology. The devices promise the convenience of communication but once they had been taken away, they uncover human interconnection to technology. When it failed, the effects were akin to losing part of self (Baelo-Allué 147). As mentioned in the previous section, the modern human might already be a form of *homo technologicus*, part-human, part-machine, which could explain the profound effect the glitch had on the characters in the novel.

This new part-human/part-machine form is represented in Max’s behavior once he realized that the television will not switch back on any time soon. After a moment of staring at the blank TV screen—a detail which will be repeated throughout the novel—Max proceeds to present the broadcast himself. As Diane notices:

It was time for another slug of bourbon and he paused and drank. His use of language was confident, she thought, emerging from a broadcast level deep in his unconscious mind, all these decades of indigenous discourse muddled by the nature of the game, men hitting each other, men slamming each other into the turf. (...) Diane was stunned. 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. (DeLillo 46-47)

The self-broadcast of the Super Bowl game emphasizes his interconnection and dependency on technology. Because of his experience in watching television and knowledge of commercial and football jargon, as well as the ways of how the broadcast operates, he is able to imitate the transmission impeccably as if he was the television itself. Diane muses about his ability:

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, in some translational warp that belongs to Martin's time frame, not ours. (DeLillo 48)

Diane's thoughts suggest an image of Max as a form of a cyborg that receives an imaginary signal from somewhere around the world and broadcasts it mindlessly. Max is interconnected to the technology to such a profound degree that he is able to replace the device himself. He might be already a well-functioning cyborg and the glitch simply uncovered his loss of humanity.

The most disturbing demonstration of the consequences brought by technological dependency resulting in the loss of humanity appears at the end of the novel, where each of the characters voices their thoughts in separate monologues. By the end of the story, all of them find themselves unable to properly talk to each other for they are fully overwhelmed by the effects of the glitch. Their soliloquies reinforce the feelings of confusion, loss and fear of the upcoming apocalypse. Diane emphasizes the anxiety about the state of the outside world in her speech:

The end-of-the-world movie. People stranded in a room. But we're not stranded. We can leave anytime. I try to imagine the vast sense of confusion out there. My husband does not want to describe what he has seen but I am guessing bedlam in the streets and why am I so reluctant to get up and walk to the window and simply look? (DeLillo 104–105)

Diane makes comments about the ambiguous state of the world, but as the previous fragments have suggested, the city is most likely far from peaceful. She notes that that their small group can leave at any time. Yet, the situation puts the pressure on her and the others, which is enough to feel anxiety about learning what is happening outside. As for Diane herself, she realizes nobody is listening, and finally tells herself to stay quiet as she is not able to find the connection or understanding of the people she is supposed to be close with. The characters in the story were described as a group of friends, and yet they are unable to communicate their deep and personal thoughts to each other. Jim describes his traumatic experiences of being a passenger on the falling plane. Max tells the story from his childhood about counting the stairs that led to his apartment. Martin delves into his obsession with Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Tessa recalls her habit of writing down memories in her notebook; yet, nobody is listening to each other. They are communicating for the sake of filling in the titular silence with their own voices, instead of relegating the task to a howl of the engines or a crackle of the neon lights in the background. The sudden disconnection revealed the shallowness of their thoughts and profound feeling of loss that made them unable to understand their situation or communicate meaningfully with each other.

Ultimately, the novel ends with a passage about Max passively sitting before the TV screen: "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" (DeLillo 116). It encapsulates the characters' situation and what awaits them in a future without the technology. Max and the others do not arrive at the point of revelation or the profound knowledge about self and their circumstances. That shapes to be a future of emptiness and mindlessness, or seemingly simple boredom. As it was mentioned previously,

boredom is a form of suffering, and DeLillo's *The Silence* strongly emphasizes the mental anguish caused by the lack of stimuli, and the untrained mind not being used to cognize or lacking desire to pursue a different source of engagement without outside influence of technology. After all, Max, after delivering his soliloquy, returns to what he was doing previously, completing the apocalyptic vision of humanity learning nothing from the ordeal they had to go through.

Conclusion

The Silence presents a vision of a disaster that targets technology, and although it lacks the quality of a sublime spectacle it cannot be overlooked, as it uncovers important issues regarding the usage and increasing presence of technology. The possible consequences of its loss would lead to tangible tragedies, such as crashed planes and a mass panic across the country. Although the effects of the glitch are not described in detail, the scarce comments about the state of the world create an image of the civilization leading to its collapse.

The novel also uncovers how contemporary humans are dependent on technology and how it penetrated thoroughly their very being. Through DeLillo's writings it could be said that the current fate of humanity without technology is that of confusion, as they would seek to desperately fill that emptiness in their minds. Characters in the novel fit the description of *homo technologicus*, i.e. a part-human, part-machine form, as the glitch disables electronic devices the characters in the novel find themselves at a loss, and increasingly finding trouble in communicating their thoughts meaningfully. Technology is shown as an inseparable part of their being.

Life after the mysterious blackout is shown to be a struggle, which showcases people's hopeless dependence on technology. Its constant presence provides necessary stimuli to experience reality and at the same time offloads human beings from remembering, thinking or communicating meaningfully. Yet, exactly these meaningful conversations that are not reliant on an outside

hum of various devices, but come from the inside of the mind, are being consumed by the constant technological presence.

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Abstract

Multitudes of apocalyptic visions are based on events of great magnitude, such as a global nuclear war, a catastrophic natural disaster or an invasion from outer space. It is easy to imagine the immediate effects of these calamities and all the loss of life, the destroyed infrastructure and the ravaged land. However, there is a more insidious vision of the apocalypse that does not immediately present itself as a spectacle of death and destruction. One of the less frequently used ideas for the end of the world is a disaster that destroys technology. A precise strike of a solar flare or a powerful electromagnetic pulse could lead to the end of modern civilization as we know it. One example of such a catastrophe is presented in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*. In the novel, without any warning, all technological devices stop working. The characters in the story struggle with their new situation. While it does not describe a massive panic or more spectacular signs of the end of the world, the text draws attention to a different issue. Above all, Don DeLillo shows how the technology became an inseparable part of not only our lives, but also of our very being. The lack of technological presence directly interferes with the characters thinking and speech. This problematic situation shows that the mysterious event led to something more than lack of connection with the

outside world, damaged planes and broken lights. As much as the disaster leads to the ruin of modern civilization, it also shows how the human mind cannot operate properly without stimuli provided by the technology. The novel provides a vision or a warning for the state of the society, which without the access to technology would crumble on the mental level.

Apokaliptyczne wizje opierają się na wydarzeniach o wielkiej skali, takich jak globalna wojna nuklearna, katastrofalna klęska żywiołowa czy inwazja z kosmosu. Łatwo jest sobie wyobrazić bezpośrednie skutki tych klęsk i wszystkie ofiary śmiertelne, zniszczoną infrastrukturę i spustoszoną ziemię. Istnieje jednak bardziej podstępna wizja apokalipsy, która nie jawi się od razu jako spektakl śmierci i zniszczenia. Jednym z rzadziej wykorzystywanych pomysłów na koniec świata jest katastrofa niszcząca technologię. Precyzyjne uderzenie rozbłysku słonecznego lub potężny impuls elektromagnetyczny może doprowadzić do końca współczesnej cywilizacji. Jednym z przykładów tekstów poruszających problem takiej katastrofy jest „Cisza” Dona DeLillo. W powieści wszystkie urządzenia przestają działać bez ostrzeżenia. Bohaterowie opowieści zmagają się z nową sytuacją. Chociaż DeLillo nie opisuje szczegółowo ogromnej paniki, ani bardziej spektakularnych oznak końca świata, zwraca on uwagę na inną kwestię. Przede wszystkim „Cisza” pokazuje, jak technologia stała się nieodłączną częścią nie tyle naszego życia, co naszego istnienia. Brak funkcjonującej technologii bezpośrednio wpływa na myślenie i mowę bohaterów powieści. Ta problematyczna sytuacja pokazuje, że tajemnicze wydarzenie doprowadziło do czegoś więcej niż tylko braku kontaktu ze światem zewnętrznym, uszkodzenia samolotów i zepsutych światła. Ta technologiczna katastrofa doprowadzi do ruiny współczesnej cywilizacji, ale także pokazuje, że ludzki umysł nie może prawidłowo funkcjonować bez bodźców dostarczanych przez technologię. Powieść jawi się, jako ostrzeżenie dotyczące stanu ludzkiego podmiotu, który bez technologii rozpadłby się mentalnie.

Barbara Pawlak is a PhD student in the Doctoral School of Humanities of University of Łódź. She published articles entitled “The Return of the Sublime and the Transcendental in Don DeLillo’s *Zero K*” in *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature* in 2021 and “Approaching the sublime in *Chernobyl* (2019)” in *Currents: A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review* in 2020. Her current research focuses on the technology and its effects on human subjects in Don DeLillo’s novels and the technological sublime in the media.