

DeLillo's (The) Silence

Stefan Herbrechter

The capitalised definite article in the title above is in brackets because it wants to connect two things: it refers to the title of Don DeLillo's latest novella – *The Silence*,¹ but also echoes some more general claims regarding literature, posthumanism and silence by using DeLillo as an “example”. In doing so, it follows up on a previous article that sought to read DeLillo's *Point Omega* (2010) and *Zero K* (2016) in the context of a question on what a “literature of the posthuman” might be, and whether something like “posthumanist literature” would actually be possible or even desirable.²

Don DeLillo's work has a long history of “unclassifiability”, as neither (late) modernist or postmodernist,³ and as a critical and often cynical commentary of contemporary American culture based on media mass consumption, environmental decline and a highly ambivalent attitude towards humans' increasing dependence on technology and screen media.⁴ As one of his most astute and consistent commentators, Peter Boxall, writes: “DeLillo's fiction suggests a deep underlying connection between technology, violence and capital, a connection which undermines the possibility of historical progression”.⁵ Together with what Joe Tabbi called DeLillo's aesthetic “talent of self-effacement”, DeLillo's choice of “media and technological systems ... as sublime objects of contemplation”⁶ therefore opens up possibilities of reading his work from a posthumanist point of view or maybe of even seeing him as a “posthumanist” author.

DeLillo's “pared-back late style” in his novellas since *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Point Omega* (2010), with their “desert sparseness” and “bare-skinned narratives”,⁷ has been associated with a new literary phase of “post-postmodernism”.⁸ His late work appears to oscillate between urban and desert-like “post-human landscapes”,⁹ and between “flesh and code”.¹⁰ Thus, even if they do not display “a grand vision of a trans- or posthuman reality”, DeLillo's narratives are driven by a number of posthumanist “desires”, according to Mads Rosendahl Thomsen. One of these desires “relates to becoming one with nature or the universe, and ceasing to be human, which is presented as an attractive alternative possibility through hints at a broader cosmological understanding, where ideas of the non-trivial nature of the material world are accentuated, while human consciousness is described as exhausted”; another (desire) “goes directly in the opposite direction, focusing on the ability of information to dominate and create its own world... [where] information seems to lead its own life, detached from the control of human subjects, whose own capacity for self-inspection and control are undermined”.¹¹ While human self-abandonment in the face of the desert and deep geological time is foregrounded in *Point Omega*,¹² loss of human self-control and the technological “leap out of biology”¹³ is the main topic of DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016).¹⁴

DeLillo's most recent novella, *The Silence*,¹⁵ continues to illustrate DeLillo's conviction that “we depend on disaster to consolidate our vision”; however, it also (still) contains the hope that “fiction is all about reliving things. It is our second chance”, in DeLillo's words.¹⁶ It is also, like all of his novels since 2001, still very much written with a sensibility of a future that is “in ruins”.¹⁷ The novella deals with the imminent danger of collapse of our increasingly digital lives, as Craig Hubert characterizes the plot in his review:

The skeletal premise of *The Silence* – a near fatal plane crash, a Super Bowl party upended by the television screen going blank, followed by a series of digital connections quickly being wiped out – is simply constructed to allow the characters to end up in the same apartment, to be part of the same swirling conversation, to make sense of what is happening in their heads and in the outside world. For DeLillo, the difference between the two is often tenuous.¹⁸

The “digital shutdown”, *The Silence* portrays, according to Alex Preston, appears like an attempt by DeLillo to “bring Samuel Beckett into the Facebook age”.¹⁹ What could be described as “our tragedy of forgetting” in our increasing dependence on our externalised (hypermnemonic) digital devices, platforms and networks is shown in *The Silence*’s apocalyptic absurdity as the ultimate communication breakdown: “What began as a dialogue, gathered energy as trialogue, and peaked as a pentologue, soon topples like a Babel tower and disperses into monologues of unconsolated dissociation: five separate ‘friends’ unable to communicate, unable to connect, unable even to remember, nattering to themselves like lunatics, haunting the hallways, counting the stairs”.²⁰ In *The Silence*’s own words: “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” (pp. 14-15). The insistent puzzlement and fascination with the “blank screen” – “What is it hiding from us?” (28) – in the experience of “systems failure” (34), is like staring into a “black hole” – the object and “event horizon” of Albert Einstein’s obsession, who serves as a constant reference – and which is bringing down “world civilization” (35). Humans have become “digital addicts ... engrossed, mesmerized, consumed by the device” (99).

It would take too long to fully show to what extent *The Silence* is engaging with what have come to be known as posthumanist motifs. Here is merely a short overview: human vulnerability in the face of ubiquitous surveillance and face recognition; the loss of “our” sense of reality through increasing “virtualization”; an artificial intelligence that “betrays who we are and how we live and think” (68); the extension of war into cyberspace, biotechnology and “drone wars” (92); the increasingly invasive cyborgisation of our bodies (“Do a select number of people have a form of phone implanted in their bodies?” (80, 82), “Have our minds been digitally remastered?” (88)); human obsolescence (“We’re being zombified... We’re being bird-brained” (84), with only “human slivers” remaining (90)). In sum, *The Silence* covers our ambient eco-technological catastrophism (“Plastics, microplastics. In our air, our water, our food” (94)) and of our “end-of-the-world movie” (104).

The idea of a “global silence” after the breakdown of (communication) technology makes its explicit appearance on p. 80 of *The Silence*. It hints at a “post-technological” silence that threatens to engulf the human and its “world”. As a writer, however, DeLillo is also concerned in another way with the (global as well as individual, personal) breakdown of communication and its (presumed) ensuing silence. His own imminent silence (every piece of writing, at least from a certain age onwards, is a writing against the silence that must follow death), as well as, much more worryingly for any writer, the silence “after” literature, or the silence that literature imagines after itself – i.e. the world ending in silence (without “us”, and without any literature to witness our demise, no survivor to read and remember the human, nothing at all). This strangest of visions is nothing new. In a sense, *The Silence* can be seen as the latest example of what Ihab Hassan, in 1967, speaking from the apocalyptic vantage point of another extinction threat, called “the literature of silence”.²¹

It is no surprise that the paradox of a writing that survives its own end by, in writing, anticipating it, (re)enacting it, so to speak, might return with a vengeance in our so-called “posthuman times”. DeLillo says as much in his interview with Peter Boxall, where he evokes the idea of a “novel without humans”, a novel “writing itself”:

The novel in the embrace of new technologies will be the novel that writes itself. Will there still be the lone individual seated in a room trying to create a narrative that is equal to the advancing realities of the world around us? It may be that the fragile state of the planet will summon a new kind of novel with a language that alters our perceptions... Will advancing technology revitalize human consciousness or drown it forever?²²

There is just one snag in DeLillo's (and literature's) ongoing dialectic of exhaustion and (self)replenishment:²³ only a human(ist) would (want to) imagine the world after them as "silent". It most certainly will be anything but...

¹ Don DeLillo, *The Silence* (New York: Picador, 2020.)

² See my "Posthuman/ist Literature? Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and *Zero K*", *Open Library of the Humanities* 6.2 (2020): 1-25; available online: <https://olh.openlibhums.org/articles/10.16995/olh.592/> (accessed 23 December 2020).

³ Cf. for example Paul Giaimo, *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer's Work* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011) p. 20; or Peter Knight, who is uncertain whether DeLillo's writing is "a symptom, a diagnosis, or an endorsement of the condition of postmodernity", in Knight, "DeLillo, Postmodernism, Postmodernity", *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, ed. John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 27.

⁴ See Randy Laist (2010), *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), as well as Anthony Miccoli's consideration of Don DeLillo in *Posthuman Suffering and the Technological Embrace* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010).

⁵ Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 7. See also Elise A. Martucci *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Boxall "DeLillo and Media Culture", in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, pp. 43-52.

⁶ Joseph Tabbi, *The Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 173.

⁷ Cf. Katherine de Cunha Lewin and Kiron Ward, "Introduction: A trick of the light: Don DeLillo in the twenty-first century", in Lewin and Ward, eds., *Don DeLillo: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 3; and Peter Boxall, "Interview: The edge of the future: A discussion with Don DeLillo", in the same volume, p. 160. On DeLillo's "late style" see also Matthew Shipe, "War's Haiku: The Politics of Don DeLillo's Late Style", *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon* 4.2 (5) (2016): 1-23; and Aine Mahon and Fergal McHugh, "Lateness and the Inhospitable in Stanley Cavell and Don DeLillo", *Philosophy and Literature* 40.2 (2016): 446-464.

⁸ Cf. David Cowart, "The DeLillo Era: Literary Generations in the Postmodern Period", in Peter Schneck and Philipp Schweighäuser, eds., *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction: Transatlantic Perspectives on Don DeLillo* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 223; as well as Julia Breitenbach, *Analog Fictions for the Digital Age: Literary Realism and Photographic Discourses in Novels after 2000* (Rochester: Camden House, 2012), pp. 3ff.

⁹ Cf. Clara Sarmiento, "The Angel in a Country of Last Things: DeLillo, Auster, and the Post-human Landscape", *Arcadia* 41 (2006): 147-159.

¹⁰ Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *The New Human in Literature: Posthuman Visions of Changes in Body, Mind and Society after 1900* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 191.

¹¹ Rosendahl Thomsen, pp. 198-199.

¹² Cf. Lutz Koepnick's reading of *Point Omega* in Koepnick, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 249-279. See also Pieter Vermeulen, "Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*, the Anthropocene, and the Scales of Literature", *Studia Neophilologica* 87(sup1) (2014): 68-81; as well as David Watson, "Vanishing Points; or, the Timescapes of the Contemporary American Novel", *Studia Neophilologica* 88 (sup 1) (2016): 57-67.

¹³ Cf. Peter Boxall, "A Leap Out of Biology: History, Tautology, and Biomatter in Don DeLillo's Later Fiction", *Contemporary Literature* 58.4 (2017): 526-555.

¹⁴ See Alexandra Glavanakova, "The Age of Humans Meets Posthumanism: Reflections on Don DeLillo's *Zero K*", *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 50.1 (2017): 91-109; and Erik Cofer, "Owning the end of the world: *Zero K* and DeLillo's post-postmodern mutation," *Critique* 59.4 (2018): 459-470.

¹⁵ Don DeLillo, *The Silence* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

¹⁶ Don DeLillo, "The Power of History", *New York Times* 7 September 1997; available online: <https://movies2.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html> (accessed 21 December 2020).

¹⁷ Cf. DeLillo's well-known post-9/11 piece (2001) "In the ruins of the future", *The Guardian* 22 December; available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo> (accessed 21 December 2020).

¹⁸ Craig Hubert, "Don DeLillo's *The Silence* Imagines the Death of Tech", *The Observer* 23 October 2020; available online at: <https://observer.com/2020/10/the-silence-don-delillo-review/> (accessed 21 December 2020).

¹⁹ Alex Preston, “*The Silence* by Don DeLillo review – Beckett for the Facebook age”, *The Guardian* 27 October 2020; available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/27/the-silence-by-don-delillo-review-beckett-for-the-facebook-age> (accessed 21 December 2020).

²⁰ In Joshua Cohen’s vivid description, cf. Cohen, “In Don DeLillo’s New Novel, Technology Is Dead. Civilization Might Be, Too”, *The New York Times* 20 October 2020; available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/20/books/review/don-delillo-the-silence.html> (accessed 21 December 2020).

²¹ Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967). For a commentary, see Herbrechter, *Lawrence Durrell, Postmodernism and the Ethics of Alterity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 192-221.

²² DeLillo, in Boxall, “Interview: The edge of the future: A discussion with Don DeLillo”, p. 164.

²³ See John Barth’s seminal pieces: Barth (1982) *The Literature of Exhaustion and The Literature of Replenishment*, Northridge: Lord John Press.