

SEEING THROUGH THE BLANK SCREEN IN *THE SILENCE*

STEFANIA ILIESCU

Université Rennes 2

1. Imagine what it is like to experience a total power outage that severs all digital connections and makes media systems suddenly come to a halt. Would this unusual situation make you experience a feeling of weakness triggered by the fact that you are a human being amid a swarm of malfunctional high-tech items? Would you rather heave a sigh of relief and consider yourself lucky to be re-empowered by the loosening grip of technology? Don DeLillo's *The Silence* – the writer's latest novel, published in 2020 – poses these questions; thereby it invites readers to imagine what it feels like to be amid systems of communication that suddenly stop working smoothly, making them aware of the latent features inherent in media devices that become manifest due to malfunction. DeLillo's novel sets up a sleek narrative pared down to a skeletal plot, barely exceeding a hundred pages, that envisages the plausible scenario of a total power outage which brings existence to a standstill, thus pitting the silence of technological gadgets against human beings' prolix verbal output. Its five characters undergo technology privation finding themselves stuck into an existential gap that one might think of as conducive to increased human interactions. Instead, their excessive talk gradually turns the narrative into a series of monologues, in which speech is a means of sounding one's innermost reflections by speaking to oneself and becoming oblivious to others. The characters' sudden thrust into a world bereft of its sources of entertainment brings to the fore the conspicuous presence of the blank screen as the crucial object of attention involving the characters' awareness. Seen as the focus of the novel's plot, the blank screen materializes the mystifying cyber event and works as an agent which paradigmatically alters the characters' being in the world. The five characters are experiencing an unfamiliar condition brought about by technological failure which makes them consider "what remains for [them] to see, hear, feel" (DeLillo 2020, 80). In other words, the crisis they are going through makes them assess their situation in relation to who they are and how they relate to other beings in the world, be they human or non-human. By the same token, the unusual situation ushered by the alleged cyber-attack fundamentally grants the blank screen a saliency as an object in its very objecthood.
2. DeLillo's *The Silence* can undoubtedly be read as a noteworthy synthesis of the most salient ideas that have underpinned the writer's fictional output. Previously in *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Zero*

K (2016), the characters' fascination with gadgets designed and produced by state-of-the-art technologies questions the value of new social and techno-cultural objects, the existence of which stems primarily from untrammelled access to capital and wealth, which is compounded by the characters' yearning to get rid of the imperfections inherent in embodied existence. In these narratives DeLillo critically scrutinizes "visions of technology and wealth" (DeLillo 2003, 90) and aptly asserts that technology "has become a force of nature. We can't control it. It comes blowing over the planet and there's nowhere for us to hide" (DeLillo 2016, 245), substantiating Gunther Anders' conviction that mankind is unable to imagine the present and future effects produced by technologies and how they will affect embodied existence. Don DeLillo carefully analyzes how technology can be conceived of as a force that organizes human actions and shapes the relationships humans establish with other humans and objects alike. As an interface between the digital space and the physical world the screen underscores how digital and mass media have become forces that organize patterns of behavior, configure the structures of thought, and exert dominant power both at individual and cultural levels. In *The Silence* the malfunctional screen surely puts an end to media entertainment and by doing so it begs the question of looking anew at the object, in close connection with the human subject, in an effort to consider it beyond the mere functions it performs so as to perceive the object through the prism of the new relations it imposes on humans. Conversely, by singling out the blank screen and setting it up as a hyponym of an ever-present technology, which permeates the present-day digital age, the novel also prompts the reader to consider the thingness of the object, that is to say the existence of the object irrespective of the relationship it may establish with the human subject.

3. Since the blank screen is the object of prime concern on which the narrative is predicated, I intend to examine the extent to which this device can be perceived as an object of speech triggered by the cyber event, and how the overwhelming silent presence of the blank screen becomes all the more disturbing as it reveals novel subject-object relations. For if the screen is granted a sort of new objecthood because of the blackout, it seems that this objecthood supersedes the event in the diegesis. As a matter of fact, the blank screen erupts into view because of the power outage; thus it gains visibility and ceases to be an unnoticed background thing that is simply taken for granted or ignored. Being endowed with dynamic features, the blank screen turns into an entity that upsets the course of events and the way in which the characters interact with each other, substantiating Graham Harman's contention about the autonomous existence of objects, which, arguably, have a life of their own-irrespective of their being perceived by human understanding. In "An Outline of

Object-Oriented Philosophy” (2013), Harman posits that human-world relation is not the ground of all other relationships and that objects are entities in their own rights. From the standpoint of the object-oriented philosophy for which Harman argues, artificial, social and fictional entities can be treated in the same way as natural entities, as they have a reality that is “not entirely reducible downward to their pieces” nor can be “eliminated upward by replacing them with knowledge about them” (Harman 2013, 192). In other words, direct knowledge of objects cannot be acquired because objects cannot be exhaustively reduced to the parts they are made of or to the effects they produce. For, if objects are entities that represent the fundamental unit of reality, whether they possess a solid physical existence or not, they cannot be utterly converted into knowledge, since “knowledge inevitably translates or distorts their reality by abstracting certain principal features from their total reality” (Harman 2013, 192). Objects therefore are entities that are not predicated on knowable qualities, but can only be “suggested indirectly or allusively by those qualities” (Harman 2013, 191).

4. Harman’s object-oriented philosophy stands for a potent theoretical tool which allows for the exploration of the gaps in the relations that objects establish with human subjects as well as other objects. In *The Silence*, in the aftermath of the global cyber event, the screen is viewed as an entity endowed with unknowable qualities inasmuch as it turns into a fictional object, or an object of speech, that can only be hinted at indirectly, the qualities of which can be revealed through the interactions the five characters have in reference to the blank screen, although they look more like thoughts spoken out loud rather than words addressed to one another. Facing the blankness of the screen amounts to experiencing an in-between status, where the absence of images and sounds points to indeterminacy, which conveys the inability of the mind to translate the experience into an object of representation. The five characters’ confrontation with the blankness of the screen also ties in with the pervading question the novel asks, namely what is actually going on, since the silent presence of the object hints at what is happening with people enmeshed in global connections and media systems; it is precisely the question the novel asks in its theatrical quality and solemnly enacts by means of a blanketing silence at the end.

5. By building on Harman’s object-oriented method, I argue that the novel’s focus on the blank screen may certainly shed light on the quality of its objective reality in the fabric of the world, but it does so in an attempt to grab readers’ attention to the object’s inherent agency since the screen’s silent presence opens up a reflection on how technology fundamentally alters both human interactions and language. In *The Silence* the dysfunctional screen turns into a handy tool whereby

one can think through the value of technological artifacts that fill up daily existence. The screen brings out what I take to be a relational function performed by electronic devices. Here, technological commodities become receptacles that absorb humans – as the writer seeks to know “[w]hat happens to people who live inside their phones?” (DeLillo 2020, 52) – while at the same time he suitably notices that objects symbolically become part and parcel of the body: “people with phones implanted in their bodies” (DeLillo 2020, 82). In the narrative space the blank screen unveils how contemporary technological culture takes shape in material objects. By doing so it becomes a candidate for thinking through the present on account of the dual status it acquires: as a hyponym of technology, and simultaneously as a physical object which plays a crucial role in organizing and determining human relations. The argument I wish to lay out is that the cultural hybridity which is made manifest in the novel not only alters human relationships, but it also binds the pervasive technological culture – composed of material gadgets which convey digital entertainment – with a meditation on the capacity of the novel and language to stage a world which settles for cheap substitutes to replace true human interactions. Therefore, the novel endeavors to expand our understanding of our contemporary cultural space while it equally fosters a sense of deeper connections with others, as an invitation to listen through the silences produced by incessant human speaking and technological noise.

Regarding the blank screen

6. One of the key features of DeLillo’s latest novel is its briefness of expression, which is precisely apparent in the streamlined storyline it narrates and the rudimentary plot it provides readers with. The novel reads as a prospective look onto the near future since it recounts events that actually take place in 2022, whilst the book was published in 2020. Likewise, *The Silence* is set to tell the story of two events which finally do not happen – the expected landing at Newark airport of the outbound flight from Paris and the broadcast of a long-awaited sporting event, the 56th edition of the Super Bowl. It turns out that Tessa and Jim’s plane makes an emergency landing and that the Super Bowl broadcast is supplanted by the presence of the blank screen following power failure.
7. On the plane are Tessa Berens, who is a poet and online editor, and her partner, Jim Kripps, claims adjuster. The couple is flying home from their vacation in Paris and are due to have dinner and watch the Super Bowl at their friends’ apartment in Manhattan. The hosts, Diane Lucas, a retired physics professor, and her partner, Max Stenner, a building inspector who has “a history of

big bets on sporting events” (DeLillo 2020, 19) have been joined by Diane’s former student, Martin. The young man is currently a high-school physics teacher in awe of Einstein’s 1912 Manuscript whom he quotes “day and night” (DeLillo 2020, 28). The super-screen in Diane and Max’s living room goes blank when “the opening kickoff [is] one commercial away” (DeLillo 2020, 23), just as Jim’s screen goes blank during the flight, minutes before the aircraft is set to land at Newark airport. What follows is a tandem crash, which brings about the test of the real world with literal and symbolic consequences. Jim and Tessa’s plane crash-lands, reasserting thereby the gravitational pull of the Earth, and the contingency of the human body on the laws of physics, whereas the second crash, the technological one, pauses temporarily media and communication systems – which has broad-spectrum implications on the social and cultural order.

8. The novel intently unfolds an inchoate plot to speculate on the possibility of an extensive power outage, which certainly rings true to readers’ ear. The sudden breakdown of technological systems and devices that have been working smoothly so far first serves to underscore the omnipresence of media and entertainment technologies that undergird consumer techno-culture, and second it instantiates humans’ dependence on the vulnerability inherent in all systems. At the same time, the technological collapse makes noticeable the idea that once objects have stopped working properly, their presence in the fabric of the world gains more visibility in the physical space. Consequently, the failure of the screen to work as an interface endows it with new characteristics and qualities which draw attention not so much to the functions the screen performs but to the way in which its very presence in the world shapes behavior and affects human interactions. The five characters are denied access to television and cannot watch the Super Bowl; hence, they experience unprecedented circumstances which deprive them of the fundamentals of consumer culture and as a result a sense of frustration ensues. The new situation encourages them to closely examine “what truly matters” (DeLillo 2020, 32), as this thought dawns on one of the characters.

9. However, despite the newly-acquired awareness brought about by the collapse of technology, the characters harbor a fascination with the blank screen. This is made manifest by their inability to stop looking and staring at it: “He kept looking at the blank screen. He kept saying Jesus, or good Christ, or Jesus H. Christ” (DeLillo 2020, 41); “sat looking at the screen, glass in hand, waiting” (DeLillo 2020, 42). As a matter of fact, their absorption with the screen points to the state of subjection they find themselves in, which makes them experience the events as if they were suffering from technological severance. Nevertheless, their unrelenting glance at the blank screen underlines the opportunity they get to see the screen *per se* for the first time. The screen becomes an

entity in itself since it comes to be perceived as the inanimate object which possesses latent features that become visible simply because the screen stops performing smoothly the functions it was designed for. Subsequently, the characters experience its presence and come to realize how the object mediates their sense of themselves as individuals and human subjects.

10. The blankness of the screen is also an invitation to look at the object anew, affording the readers the possibility to give careful thought to the screen in its concreteness and think it through its perceptible properties. In an article dealing with what the object is, B. Rettler and A. M. Bailey lay out the variety of dimensions that shape the definition of an object. This unavoidably includes statements about the essential properties which distinguish it as a particular object. In the novel, the blank screen no longer performs the functions it was initially designed to carry out, and therefore it does not maintain its essential properties. Instead, its blankness can be read as a recently acquired quiddity, which draws much more attention to its presence in the world than to its ascribed utility.
11. This condition shifts the focus from functionality to ontology because the screen is perceived through its presence rather than in terms of the functions it is meant to perform. Additionally, Rettler and Bailey divide ontologies into two categories – constituent and relational – according to the way in which objects relate to their properties; by setting up classes of ontologies, properties thus play a defining role in determining what an object is:

On constituent ontologies, properties are parts or constituents of the objects that have them or that they characterize [...]. So on constituent ontologies, a tall tree has tall, somehow, as a part or constituent or component. On relational ontologies, properties are not in any sense parts or constituents or components of the objects that have them or that they characterize. So on relational ontologies, though a tall tree bears an interesting relationship to tall (perhaps it bears the instantiation relation to that property), tall is not among the tree's various parts or constituents or components.

The distinction marked out by Rettler and Bailey is worth considering in relation to the impaired function the screen performs in DeLillo's novel. Though extrinsic to the object, the new property that the screen has acquired in the aftermath of the technological collapse is nothing but a contingent characteristic. Its blankness endows the screen with a relational ontology of its own, and as a consequence, this property becomes an integral part of the object, turning it into an empowered agent: "Look at the blank screen. What is it hiding from us?" (DeLillo 2020, 28). Apart from becoming an object of thought on which characters may ponder, the blank screen also becomes a projection surface on which imagination can operate: "Max was staring into the blank screen [...] He seemed to be trying to induce an image to appear on the screen through the force of will"

(DeLillo 2020, 43). The sheer absence of the broadcast images renders perception ineffectual and hinders understanding; it allows imagination to take over in an attempt to fill in the gaps brought about by technological silence and perform the functions formerly carried out by the object.

12. Thus, the blank screen becomes not just the object of speculation as that of thwarted desire, supporting Graham Harman's view of the object. Harman argues that what an object is cannot be reduced to the sum of its external relations; by looking at the object, one may make out what is unexpressed in discursive language because in "every causal interaction there is an unexpressed residue or surplus" (Harman 2013). The blank screen allusively points to the event the characters are going through, although they are not privy to this residual knowledge. And even though the blank screen calls attention to its presence in the physical space, the narrative locates this sample high-tech object in a technology-bound context which is contingent on the complexity inherent in all systems. The technological breakdown does not only cause characters to acknowledge the very presence of the blank screen and experience a sense of perceptual frustration following the disappearance of broadcast images. The collapse further discloses their increasing alienation from embodied existence, their own residual presence in the physical and social space as a consequence of human reliance on the material objects that both make up and configure the present: "whatever is there, we are still people, the human slivers of a civilization" (DeLillo 2020, 90). The technological breakdown makes manifest human dependence on the embedded layers that make up technology, ranging from the objective presence of products to the intangibility of networks as objects going beyond human representation, allowing the idea that "a world exists apart from all human access to it" (Harman 2010, 24). Unlike the situatedness inherent in objects, technology as an all-encompassing system lacks determined physical coordinates and manifests itself through its constituents and the effects it produces in the physical world, which are unknowable to human understanding. As a hyponym of technology, the blank screen is experienced as an object that shapes contemporary existence, the agency of which partakes in the structuring of human subjects.

Subject-producing objects

13. The multiple occurrences of the blank screen in the novel and the characters' incessant staring into it endow the object with an ontological quality that places its presence on a par with that of the subject: the blank screen hints both at presence and otherness, becoming thus an entity encompassing the object it stands for and the human subjects it relates to. The object amounts to an

intermediary that shapes humans' sense of identity within the fabric of contemporary technological culture. Hence, the blank screen acquires the status of a thing, of "what is excessive in objects, [...] what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their utilization as objects" (Brown 2001, 5): the thing is "irreducible to the object forms with which we have constructed and constricted our world" (Brown 2010, 207). Thanks to the relations it establishes with the human subjects and the significance it assumes in the narrative space. One may wonder whether it stands for the "algorithmic governance" (DeLillo 2020, 26) that controls human life and institutes society, or whether, on the contrary, it represents the means whereby humans assign meanings and value to technological environments. For instance, Diane thinks of her former student in relation to the blank screen; she mediates her understanding or lack thereof by resorting to the object which may provide an answer to the mystery Martin represents to her eyes: "Martin Dekker. His full name, or most of it. She closed her eyes and said the name to herself. She said, Martin Dekker, will you live alone forever? The blank screen seemed a possible answer" (DeLillo 2020, 33).

14. As early as *Americana* (1971) and *Great Jones Street* (1973) DeLillo conveyed the idea that image-producing machines such as Hollywood offer no escape, causing individuals to be trapped in commodified media culture. In his earlier novels characters are given no retreat from the market economy, whereas in *The Silence* no alternative is given to dwelling in a hybrid present, made up of virtual and real space. Objects in the digital economy become mediators of human beings' sense of themselves and others, while they equally have the capacity to confront humans with situational vulnerability that stems from technological complexity. Diane and Max's TV screen goes blank, substantiating the idea that the screen represents a high-tech artifact which belongs to an intricate system prone to unpredictability. Characters find themselves entangled in a series of events which make them speculate on the hidden intentionality lying behind the systems. They also come to realize the degree to which human subjects are enmeshed in dysfunctional systems, underpinned by obscure technological functions, which may vary from objects that one can easily identify and name – such as the blank screen in the living room, the dysfunctional plane that Tessa and Jim are on, the numberless phone screens rendered ineffective by the power outage, to name but a few – to intricate networks that override themselves. Exposed to contingency and vulnerability, individuals are hard put to navigate a technologically-versatile existence. Characters need to bridge a gap in understanding so that they be in a position to mentally move "from the one blank screen in this apartment to the situation that surrounds us" (DeLillo 2020, 88). In other words, not only does their awareness of the nature and significance of the blank screen become necessary, but also the

assessment of the circumstances they find themselves in – that is to say the need to consider how objects mediate their sense of themselves as individuals and how objects affect the interactions they have with others:

Where are the others, Tessa and Jim and all the others, travelers, wanderers, pilgrims, people in houses and apartments and village hutments. Where are the cars and trucks, the traffic noises? Super Sunday. Is everyone at home or in darkened bars and social clubs, trying to watch the game? Think of the many millions of the blank screens. Try to imagine the disabled phones. What happens to people who live inside their phones ? (DeLillo 2020, 52)

The salience of “the many millions of the screens” suddenly gone blank intimates the idea that the face of the familiar world has been swept away. This allows for the presence of a surrogate reality where the disappearance of things, of the “dry ground [...] unmediated by the sign” (Brown 2001, 1), to use Bill Brown’s words, comes under the spotlight. The quoted passage reveals a situation in which the materiality of the world diminishes and where humans can be referred to only in relation to the technological hybridity they are part of. No substitute for inhabiting technological culture seems possible, therefore it is inconceivable for the characters to think what it means for the digital world to come to a halt: “E-mail-less. Try to imagine it. Say it. Hear how it sounds. E-mail-less” (DeLillo 2020, 61). Looking at the world through the relations one has with the objects and networks that form the technological systems makes it possible for the characters to come to the realization that humans establish their identity and selfhood through the interactions they have with “artificial intelligence that betrays who we are and how we live and think” (DeLillo 2020, 68).

15. Incidentally, the power outage pushes Max to step out of his apartment and meet his neighbors for the first time, to “become neighbor for the first time” (DeLillo 2020, 34) as the character admits to himself. He also chooses to make his way through the crowded streets of Manhattan, an activity which gives him the opportunity to take in the situation, to watch the crowds and delve deeply into the moment:

In other times, more or less ordinary, there are always people staring into their phones, morning, noon, night, middle of the sidewalk, oblivious to everyone hurrying past, engrossed, mesmerized, consumed by the device, or walking toward him and then veering away, but they can’t do it now, all the digital addicts, phones shut down, everything down down down. (DeLillo 2020, 99)

Max’s unhindered observations spell out human oblivion to technology, where individuals become technologically-absorbed human bodies reduced to the status of mere animate objects “consumed by the device”. His overarching standpoint invites the reader to ponder on how technological gadgets become agents that reshape behavior and adjust human ends to match the character of

technological means.

16. The blending of the human subjects into the technological surroundings underpinning the present allows DeLillo's narrative to be read as an effort to rethink the way in which the sensible and metaphysical presence of inanimate and animate objects – human bodies included – can be felt as a force that points to the relations that things establish. Unlike the object, the thing names “a particular subject-object relation” (Brown 2001, 4). According to Brown, thingness represents “the before and after of the object, [it] amounts to a latency (the not yet formed and the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically and metaphysically irreducible to objects)” (Brown 2001, 5). Max's experience of the real world as well as his relevant observations about how objects constitute individuals reinstate him as a subject who sees himself for the first time as part of a relational nexus – the particular subject-object relation Brown refers to – which discloses where humans stand in relation to the things that configure our contemporary technological culture. Max's newly acquired awareness of the present becomes a means to apprehend the situation both as an object of experience which involves his senses and emotions and as an object of thought. Thus the character endows his experience with value and meaning through language.

Objects of experience and thought

17. The principal modes in which human subjects extend themselves into the world are material through their engagement with space, objects and bodies as well as linguistic, through speaking and listening. In the narrative space, Max's involvement with the world becomes purely discursive whenever he finds himself sitting in front of the blank screen. Max may be able to sound off sports idiom laced with hackneyed commercial jargon, but he also chooses to walk out of his claustrophobic apartment so as to meet his neighbors for the first time, to see strangers and the world afresh in the New York streets. He takes to the streets in an attempt to sound the depth of the world which has come to a standstill. In the crowded streets of the city the character gets a measure of the human subordination to objects and systems and thus he is in a position to sound out the degrees of human loneliness. When Max gets back to the apartment, he settles for silence.
18. DeLillo's concern in the aesthetic possibilities of silence has been ever-present in his fictional output to the point that his latest novel underscores a skepticism about the capacity of true language to make itself heard amid the logorrhea and noise that constitute contemporary media culture. The novel's virtue amounts to its capacity to redeem the credibility of language through the moments of

silence it creates, which are conducive to acts of listening on the reader's part. The writer's commitment to reflect the state of twenty-first century culture under the conditions produced by digital media technologies implies a fictional mode in which language works as an index to broken communication and the failure of expression stemming from excessive verbiage. Thus, in *The Silence* DeLillo comes closer to Beckett's aesthetic concept of non-expression and his ideal of eliminating language. In *Disjecta*, Beckett sees language as a hindrance to getting at the real thing, to the nothingness that underpins language: "More and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it" (Beckett 171).

19. Critics have noted that DeLillo's work is "driven by an investment in the possibilities of aesthetic silence, an investment that he inherits, to an extent, from Beckett" (Boxall 46). In *The Silence* the tearing of the "veil" that Beckett mentions takes place in the crisis produced by the technological shutdown. This decisive situation helps reveal an object-cluttered world in which words mean little as long as their function is to make noise and conceal nothingness. The crash-landing counts as the unique instant in which Jim manages to listen again to the world and subsequently frame meaningful objects of experience since he experiences the impact as if it were "God's own voice" (DeLillo 2020, 107) implying the idea that the listening ability can be made active in a critical moment. The novel subsequently tells the story of impaired social interactions as humans have outgrown their faculty of listening, whereas the technological collapse fails to bring them closer together. Characters get further isolated and resort to speech not so much to communicate, as rather to project into the world the inner dramas that fill up their mental spaces.
20. Thus, the blank screen becomes the true object of the story as it parodies the desire for connection and provides indicative information on the subject-object relation in which the subject's desire is the source of the object's value. The blank screen certainly works as a catalyst for speech, albeit one that creates gaps and blanks because the characters' babble inexorably segues into silence. In this novel DeLillo reassesses the capacity of language to work as "the currency, the medium of exchange in the vast and complex marketplace of human existence" (Coward 155). Instead of bringing characters closer, the technological crisis becomes a moment of discovery that serves to disclose the loss of the referential and communicative functions of language and further isolate characters in a digital and media space lacking in-person interactions whose role consists in forging human identities.
21. The inability to listen to and relate to others is closely connected with the excessive use of

words in the narrative space. Discursive volubility showcases not so much humans' communicative faculties as it illustrates an incapacity to form objects of experience. Thus, logorrhea works on two levels in the novel. First, verbose speech incorporates sports and commercial jargon used by media. For instance, when the screen goes blank, Max feels deprived of both the match and the bet he has made on its outcome. His worries rise out of the impossibility to fulfill his consuming desire. Max scrutinizes the blank screen and its sheer presence triggers the character's outpour of residual marketing jargon and sports talk, which substitute the absent sensory experience with nonsensical talk. His comments of the imagined match turn his speech into a "lilt", or what Diane takes to be a "flourish of football dialect and commercial jargon" (DeLillo 2020, 47). The imitation of the specialized language of sporting events is an indication of the degree to which his manner of speaking submits to the idiom coined by mass media : "He said, 'Field goal attempt from near midfield-fake, fake, fake!'" (DeLillo 2020, 49). The reader has access to Max's voice and behavior through Diane's mental comments which give a perspectival view of the scene:

His use of language was confident, she thought, emerging from a broadcast level deep in his unconscious mind, all these decades of indigenous discourse muddied up by the nature of the game, men hitting each other, men slamming each other into the turf. (DeLillo 2020, 46)

Diane's thoughts work as a side comment on contemporary culture under the conditions produced by media technologies, laying the stress on the capacity of language to stage its own discursivity irrespective of the absence of world referents. Steeped in advertisement and sports jargon, Max's compulsive talk stands for noise and is crucial to showing his engagement with the screen as an inanimate object which becomes a source of production of mental images. Max's vacuous rhetoric hints at a robot-like behavior both in terms of language-content and the dramatization of his utterances unmindful of the presence of others:

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 [...] Max said in a squeaky voice, 'Sometimes I wish I was a human, man, woman, child, so I could taste this flavorful prune juice.' [...] Then 'Play resumes, quarter two, hands, feet, knees, head, chest, crotch, hitting and getting hit. Super Bowl Fifty-Six. Our National Death Wish.'

Diane whispered to Martin that there was no reason why they couldn't converse. Max had his game and he was beyond distraction. (DeLillo 2020, 48)

22. Additionally, his formulaic utterances disclose the discursive capacity of language to generate infinite statements and show how language works itself as a system freed from reference and address. Max's mental images generate meaningless discursive forms in which the words he uses

supplant thoughts and feelings anchored in the here and now. Secondly, logorrhea works at the level of the characters' verbal exchanges which lack genuine interaction. Diane's conversation with Martin discloses their loneliness rather than sociability. Serving to break individual monologues, characters' dialogues fail to establish meaningful communication. At the end of the book, readers come to the realization that the characters' unhinged speeches bring about moments of silence in the course of which individual expression is not listened to and therefore counts as noise. Both Tessa and Diane enjoin themselves "to shut up" (DeLillo 2020, 105 and 113) and thus both characters acknowledge that their words meaninglessly fill up the air as the present company does not take any heed: "the people here with me are barely listening to what I am saying" (DeLillo 2020, 105).

23. *The Silence* reflects particularly well DeLillo's aesthetic preoccupations with language as the novel reconsiders the ability of language to bridge the gap between the generality inherent in words and the sensory particularity underlying the world of objects. In the narrative space, speech is either a stand-in for the blankness of the screen which renders the consumption of images impossible, or a means that makes manifest the inability of language to reveal the real thing, thus undermining the credibility of vernacular language. Language fails to share genuine information which further isolates the characters whose speaking is bereft of listening and thus becomes an obstacle to understanding. The closing paragraph portrays a situation in which humans dispense with understanding in the absence of listening: "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 2020, 116). The excerpt reads as a stage direction clearly pointing to the dramatic quality of the moment.

24. However, what cannot be put into words within the pages of this noisy narrative is Tessa's poem. Her refusal to inhabit the world as it is suggests a vantage point from which the artist can reframe and subvert the noisiest elements of existence. This episode generates a play of signifiers within the text due to the *mise en abyme* effect it creates ; it can be read as an allusion to the book itself, making *The Silence* stand as an object in its own right, namely the analog counterpart to the blank screen. Tessa's loss for words is expressed "in a tumbling void" (DeLillo 2020, 96), a wording which does justice to the situation. The character's ability to listen to the world becomes a possibility materialized in the line of a poem, which she promises to herself she will write next day, as opposed to Max's inability to induce images and make them appear on the screen through the force of will: "She will see the line when she closes her eyes and concentrates. See the letters set against a dark background and then slowly open her eyes to whatever is in front of her, dominant

objects only inches high” (DeLillo 2020, 96). What Tessa seems to be intimating is that listening to the blanks and voids instead of voicing them can harbor a mode of meaningful communication in the world and turn silence into a mode of aesthetic expression.

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