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WHEN THE SCREENS GO OFF: THE APOCALYPSE OF HYPERREALITY IN DON DELILLO'S *THE SILENCE*

Abstract

The paper elaborates on the notion of hyperreality and its prevalent features that reflect the absurdity of the modern world in Don DeLillo's latest work, *The Silence*. Namely, the paper argues that the five main characters, representatives of contemporary humanity, are indulged in hyperreality perpetuated by consumerism and technology addiction which have covertly kindled and sustained absurdity in their lives. Firstly, the notions of simulacrum, hyperreality, consumerism, and Camus' philosophy of the absurd are thoroughly explained by consulting the applicable research body. Secondly, through exhaustive reading, the characters in *The Silence* and DeLillo's portrayal of the contemporary era are analyzed with regard to the aforementioned notions. Finally, the paper extrapolates on the author's gripping perspectives, and often a prophetic representation of the encumbrances humanity obediently bears and yet fails to recognize.

Key words: absurd, hyperreality, failure of technology, consumerism, Don DeLillo

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Introduction

The Silence, DeLillo's latest work, is a novella occupying just over a hundred pages that draws the readership into a bizarre, philosophical, and dreadful scenario of screens turning black and communication system failure in the year 2022. Overcome with uncertainty, the story's characters face the cataclysm devoid of a flesh-eating virus, zombies, or extraterrestrial attack; instead, the outwardly harmless apocalypse ensues from a master plug, the one which controls all the worldly technology, being pulled out. As a result, planes crash and transportation ceases, hospitals are flooded with individuals hurt and lost, and nuclear weapons are probably left unattended – nothing but minor nuisances compared to the most upsetting consequence, the failure of broadcasting the Super Bowl 2022.

Even though the main characters gather to watch the event in a luxurious Manhattan apartment, they feel as if left stranded on a dark, silent, unknown planet. The blackout provokes a sense of aimlessness, and without entertaining technological distractions, the characters are forced to dive inwards and face their inner selves. As the coziness of hyperreality fades away with every passing second in front of the blank TV screen, the absurdity of existence overwhelms each character differently, yet in an equally aggressive manner.

The idea of hyperreality was formulated by French philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard and is defined as a condition in which it is impossible to differentiate between reality and simulations of reality as they overlap and interfere with each other to the point of indistinguishability (1994:14; 2017: 42). This concept of the hyperreal is quite prominent throughout DeLillo's opus and, thus, occupies a significant role in *The Silence*. Baudrillard's hyperreality and several of its sustainers relevant to the analysis of the novella – simulacra, consumerism, and technological dependence – are to be tackled in the following theoretical chapter titled *Eat, Scroll, Buy, Repeat*.

In addition, the paper posits that, due to the disruption of technological dependence portrayed through blank screens, the hyperreality seems abruptly disturbed. Yet, the patterns perpetuating the hyperreal remain, leading the vexed characters to reveal the absurdity of their existence. Therefore, Albert Camus' philosophy of the absurd is another significant aspect of the novella. Accordingly, the following theoretical chapter will be briefly concerned with the depiction of absurdism, with particular reference

to reflections on the purpose of human existence tackled in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Overall, *Eat, Scroll, Buy, Repeat* consults musings, discussions, evidential reasoning, and conclusions on hyperreality and absurdity, as well as their tight-knit interplay.

The subsequent section is devoted to analyzing the novella with reference to the mentioned above, following DeLillo's minimalistic yet sinister portrayal of the collapse of civilization. The paper postulates that by casting his characters into obscure conditions, the author strives to depict the wasteland of human essence. Finally, a conclusion is drawn on DeLillo's absurdist surreal narrative, concluding whether and to what extent the hyperreality deranged by the seemingly permanent silence of the screen discloses the aimlessness of human existence and its revelry in the absurd.

Eat, Scroll, Buy, Repeat

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard employs Borges' map fable to facilitate the readership's grasp of the notion of simulation. Namely, the map meticulously and up-to-date depicted every detail of the Empire, its features, glorious days, gradual decay, and, consequently, rotting ruins. Long after the Empire vanished from the face of the Earth, the map remained as "genetic miniaturization that is the dimension of simulation" (Baudrillard, 1994: 2). He further elaborates that: "the real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it" (ibid). Simulacrum can be regarded as a copy without origin that stands in for the real and is a result of a simulation. Ryszard W. Wolny describes it as "likeness or/and similarity" and "an inferior image lacking the quality of the original" (2017: 77). In other words, simulacra stem from the process of simulation, "the process whereby simulacra assume their function" (Wolfreys et al, 2006: 92), in which the aspects of the real are substituted with another real originating in the very process of simulation. In the first chapter of *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard elaborates on the process consisting of four "phases of image" through which a representation

transitions to a simulacrum. Initially, an artificial representation merely reflects reality, as is the case with paintings or novels. Subsequently, the representation begins to “mask and denature a profound reality,” leading to the third phase in which the reality’s absence is masked, and the reality becomes indistinguishable from its representation since the latter seems as real as the very real. Finally, in the fourth phase, the image “has no relation to any reality whatsoever,” developing into a simulation of reality that is perpetuated “by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1994: 1–6). Four different types of images can be used to exemplify the alterations of simulacra. The first phase can be expressed through the portrait, which is faithful to the person it captures, and yet it maintains the distinction between the actual referent and a painting. A photoshopped image of a person can represent the second phase, in which a person is still recognizable despite obvious deception and inaccuracy. The third type of image strives to hide the fact that there is no referent which is indicated in it, as is the case in advertising. Ads falsely illustrate satisfactory conditions, installing them as real, though they are actually unexisting, toward spurring the audience’s desire for them. Finally, the fourth phase can be exemplified through an image that completely discards any correspondence, as it stands for a virtual reality that overthrows the concrete world. It excludes the referent and does not even pretend to mirror reality; referring to itself, it becomes an element of (hyper)reality. “Nothing is truly reflected anymore – whether in a mirror or in the abyssal realm (which is merely the endless reduplication of consciousness). The logic of viral dispersal in networks is no longer a logic of value; neither, therefore, is it a logic of equivalence” (Baudrillard, 1993: 4).

More concisely, the term hyperreality refers to the condition consisting of images without origin in which the real loses its relevance as the simulation takes its place, thus creating the atmosphere in which reality and the simulation of reality are difficult to tell apart. The contemporary era of digital technology clearly illustrates the hyperreal as the bond between the sign and referent is lost. For instance, as Lucia Nagib elaborates, the movies of the early 20th century were merely mechanical reproductions of the real, whereas modern technology “allows for the creation of images without any referent in the outside world” (2011: 6–7). Similarly, as will be elaborated in the analysis, the novella’s characters experience abrupt awakening once the lulling paradigm of the hyperreal is disturbed, and they struggle to find the referent in themselves and to make sense of the real and what used to be considered real- the hyperreal.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard explains the lengthy process of hyperreality production that heavily relies on the ever-changing notion of simulacra. Namely, he initially recognizes three orders of simulacra that he labels *counterfeit*, “the dominant schema in the classical period, from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution,” *production*, “the dominant schema in the industrial era,” and *simulation*, as “the dominant schema in the current code governed-phase” (Baudrillard, 2017: 108). “The first of these stages had a natural referent and value developed on the basis of a natural use of the world. The second was founded on a general equivalence and value developed by reference to the logic of the commodity. The third is governed by a code, and value develops here by “reference to a set of models” (Baudrillard, 1993: 5)¹. His later work introduces the fourth order dubbed the *fractal stage* (Baudrillard, 2017: 28) which is manifested in *The Silence* and therefore will be more profoundly tackled.

Baudrillard claims that after the liberation in all of the aspects of existence and after the (over)productions of “objects, signs, messages, ideologies, and satisfactions,” humanity faces the question of “what to do after the orgy. “All we can do is simulate the orgy, simulate liberation. We may pretend to carry on in the same direction, accelerating, but in reality, we are accelerating in a void” (Baudrillard, 1993: 3). The following order, the “fractal stage of value” shows “no point of reference at all, and value radiates in all directions, occupying all interstices, without reference to anything whatsoever, by virtue of pure contiguity” (ibid, 5). The fractal order involves the viral, contagion-like spread of images in the new reality- the Internet. Though TV used to be a primary medium of hyperreality perpetuation, the efficiency of this deliberate illusion was drastically increased with the advent of the Internet. In virtual reality, there are no entities or bodies, merely images, and signs which reproduce indefinitely. The boundary between the online and offline is no longer indistinguishable but rather irrelevant as all of reality is now virtual. For instance, the reproduction pattern is easily observable when certain internet content goes viral, spreading itself across cyberreality. As noted above, that value used to have “a natural aspect, a commodity aspect, and a structural aspect,” which are replaced by “no law of value, merely a sort of epidemic of value,” “a haphazard proliferation and dispersal of value” which makes “all valuation impossible” (ibid, 6). In other words, humanity

¹ For more information, refer to Jean Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange and Death, Simulacra and Simulation and The Transparency of Evil*

is unable to assess good and evil, true and false, right or wrong since each aspect occupies a spotlight for a limited period, destined to disappear and be forgotten in the void of hyperreality. Its value, if it can be assigned any, exponentially grows only based on its virality. Therefore, the more viral, the more valuable.

Hyperreality acts as or even pretends to be, a safe zone that does not raise questions or demand self-reflection, deliberately perpetuating the illusion. As Baudrillard illustrates, Disneyland is an exemplary embodiment of hyperreality since it is a “perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra” and “a microcosm of America indulged in pleasures and distractions” (Baudrillard, 1994: 13). This frozen world of children’s imagination functions as a cover for the fact that America is a hyperreal setting, a swollen Disneyland. Baudrillard further argues that Disneyland is just a prototype of a hyperreal civilization where people “no longer touch each other, but there is contactotherapy. They no longer walk, but they go jogging, etc. Everywhere one recycles lost faculties, or lost bodies, or lost sociality, or the lost taste for food.” (ibid, 14). Humanity seems to be losing touch with its very essence, shifting toward becoming beings of the superficially rational hyperreal in which elements are repacked, reproduced, remade to the point of unrecognizability, and yet appear homey, comfortable, and familiar.

In order for the hyperreal to sustain and for humanity to overlook the scarcity of reality in their existence, distractions are employed. As mentioned, consumerism and technological dependence are the upholding means of hyperreality in Don DeLillo’s *The Silence*. As Baudrillard asserts, consumption is a new language, the method by which humans interact with each other. In addition, he claims resorts to fetishism which defines the purpose of any object. Fetish refers to “the commodity, which once contained elements of use value and exchange value, now has been transformed into pure symbolic value. This occurs as the commodity now acquires its value only in relation to the network of commodities in circulation” (Koch and Elmore, 2006: 567). In other words, an object gains its symbolic value only within the network of other objects, in which it is exchanged. This exchange aims to maintain social relationships, which changed their inherent nature, from denoting the interactions between people to denoting interactions between things, as illustrated in *The Silence*.

Furthermore, Baudrillard remarks that humans of the 20th century did not surround themselves with their own species as much as they do with

goods and messages they convey. “There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services, and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species” (Baudrillard, 1998: 25). The observation can be applied to the contemporary society as humanity does not consume goods but rather messages and signs that instruct them, as consumers, on what to purchase or consume. To differentiate between commodities is to be familiar with the code that inscribes their symbolic signification, leaving their use unappreciated. “What they signify is defined not by what they do but by their relationship to the entire system of commodities and signs. There is an infinite range of differences available in this system, and people, therefore, are never able to satisfy their need for commodities, for the difference” (ibid, 7). Baudrillard criticizes the use of the term “needs” in relation to consumerism, as needs can be satiated and thus cannot explain the incessant urge to consume. He argues that society does not strive for a certain object but for the difference it represents, making it impossible to put an end to the exploration for more. Contemporary society is sickened by consumerism and fetishism since every object possessed is not seen through the prism of its potential use; instead, it denotes one’s success, wealth, or penury. The sign value of each object overshadows and suffocates the utility or content from the perspective of reality. As Koch and Elmore (2006: 568) assert, “consumerism appears as the process which makes simulation possible” as it is “the shift from the object as use/exchange value to the object as sign value that allows the simulation to develop.”

Intertwined with the concept of consumerism, technology, with its endless and growing facets, significantly contributes to human humility in the face of hyperreality. Consumers are nudged to purchase costly items advertised in different media, TV, or social platforms. Celebrities and influencers set the standards for the masses who experience gratification once they consume, reaffirming their social status. Charles Seife argues in his skeptical and witty analytical work *Virtual Unreality: Just Because the Internet Told You, How Do You Know It’s True?* that the majority of our time in the 21st century, dubbed the age of technology, is spent navigating a virtual world as well as that humanity is at the point “where the real and the virtual can no longer be completely disentangled” (Seife, 2014: 13). Adults seem to be tethered to their devices in a desperate attempt to connect, while children’s need for attention is deviated by handing them

a cell phone or tablet which mesmerizes them with entertaining content. Baudrillard provides an outlook on consumption that can be applied to technological dependence as well: “as a new tribal myth, it has become the morality of our present world. It is currently destroying the foundations of the human being” (Baudrillard, 1998:3).

As it was stated at the onset of the paper, the revelation of absurdism following the disruption of hyperreality is another relevant theme in *The Silence*. The sensation of strangeness and pointlessness of the world encapsulates the absurdist perspective concerned with the universe and human existence in it. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus posits that enlightenment on the futility of existence arises once a person starts to genuinely think. “Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined” (Camus, 1955: 5). Still, he does not see this introspection as a frequent occurrence in society as he claims that “society has but little connection with such beginnings” (ibid). Camus compares the realization of the absurd to a worm in a person’s heart (ibid), which is relatable to the itchy sensation the characters in *The Silence* experience faced with the disturbed hyperreality. Camus acknowledges the encumbrances of living, its brutality, loneliness, suffering, and loss of identity as absurd sensations catalyzed by the disappearance of “illusions and lights” where a person feels “an alien, a stranger,” deprived of “the hope of a promised land” (ibid). In other words, the discrepancy or “divorce” and “distressing nudity” between a human and their manner of living leads to absurdity (ibid 6,9). Camus explains that the absurd does not derive from a man or the world but their confrontation and copresence. There is a confrontation of the characters’ self-perception before and after the silence of technology which mirrors Camus’ recognition of the absurd. The confrontation between the world and an individual used to be a relevant subject of discussion for the 20th-century philosophers, including Camus, and this paper posits that DeLillo portrays this discrepancy between who we are and how we perceive ourselves in the hyperreal atmosphere as it is even more relevant today with the constant intrusion of technology, fetishism, and consumerism, as mentioned earlier in the paragraph. Once the “stage sets” collapse and routines become unbearable, a weary individual realizes the “mechanical” nature of life, which, in turn, leads to disregard or “definitive awakening” (ibid, 10). The “vague nostalgia,” “desire for unity,” and “need for clarity” that signify the absurd can, according to Camus, only be achieved through acceptance of absurdity. “Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive

is, above all, contemplating it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity” (ibid, 36). After pondering on religion, illusion, and death as responses to the absurd, Camus reaches the conclusion that embracing the absurdity of the universe and meaningless human existence is the only solution. Those who can overcome aimlessness by merely accepting it are for Camus absurd heroes. As will be illustrated, the characters of *The Silence* seem to be at the point of such acceptance at the end of the novella.

Camus sees Sisyphus as the ultimate absurd hero for his disrespect for gods, dismissal of death, and passion for life (ibid, 76). Punished with pushing the boulder up the hill and watching it roll down for all eternity, Sisyphus’ fruitless and repetitive task for Camus is no different than the lives and responsibilities of a modern human. “The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious” (ibid, 76). In the end, Camus describes Sisyphus accepting the futile and ceaseless obligation and his fate by saying, “despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well” (ibid, 77). Sisyphus bears his destiny, simultaneously accepting its absurd and disregarding it. Finally, the narrative ends with a sentence, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (ibid, 78). The novella ends on the same note; the readership is prodded to imagine the five characters overcoming their helplessness to make sense of themselves, reality, and their position in it, by recognizing and accepting the absurdity within.

And the Blank Screen Becomes a Mirror

We can’t help ourselves. On Sunday afternoons and Monday nights in the fall of each year, we abandon everything to watch small moving images of 22 men—running into one another, falling down, picking themselves up, and kicking an elongated object made from the skin of an animal... All over America, people (almost exclusively men), transfixed before glass screens, cheer or mutter in unison. Put this way, it sounds stupid. But once you get the hang of it, it’s hard to resist, and I speak from experience (Sagan, 1997:14).

Dire silence engulfs New York on the evening of the Super Bowl 2022, as Max, Dianne, and Martin stare petrified at the unresponsive TV screen and their soon-to-arrive friends, Jim and Tessa, survive a plane crash with minor injuries. The long-awaited Super Bowl, the reflection of American culture and its embodiment, the orgy of advertisements, consumerism, and revelry in contemporary values, simply abandons the screens. DeLillo's extremely brief work, *The Silence*, depicts an apocalypse-like event and portrays five characters gathered (not even stuck) in an upscale Manhattan apartment, experiencing identity crises due to the crash of the world they know and their recognition of the overwhelming absurdity. Except that there is no real apocalypse, cataclysm, or disaster. It is just a dark and silent night with no electricity and technological distractions. It is exactly the kind of night our close ancestors would deem like any other that bewilders and horrifies each character beyond rational comprehension.

From a particular perspective, the circumstances in which the author throws the characters resonate with the readership, as the unclarity and turmoil parallel the fright the world experienced at the dusk of the Covid-19 outbreak. Curiously, as Henry Veggian (2020: 1) claims: "Don DeLillo completed this novel just weeks before the advent of COVID-19." Namely, no character is able to hold or provide any explanation, and similarly to the Covid-19 pandemic, nobody is clear about what is going on.

From a different perspective, the plot development seems hilarious, as if DeLillo had aimed to ridicule since the situation in which the characters are triggered to question the very core of their beings is nothing but the cut-off transmission of the Super Bowl. In other words, the characters experience utter horror and aimlessness caused by a simple fact – they cannot watch the game. In this innocuous turn of events lies all the misery of human existence; blinded by the hyperreal, dependent on its tantalizing simulacra, the characters are pulled into the obscure waters of absurdity, unable to make sense of the world and their role in it.

The novella's opening pages introduce a couple, Jim and Tessa, immersed in digital reality, exchanging words in an automated process rather than conversation, which seems a natural and exclusive way for them to communicate. Traveling from Paris to Newark on a plane, Jim appears enchanted by the screen's omnipotency to convey accurate flight data in several languages. The interrupted thoughts and semi-articulated ideas he utters reflect the constant technology intrusion customary to modern society. Namely, quotidian activities such as meals, conversations, and self-

reflection time are often ruthlessly pierced by the presence of technology and the urge to check the feed or get informed on the latest news. Jim's flight time, the hours typically used to gather traveling impressions or rest, are broken into fragments and overshadowed by technological domination. Technological dependence is also plain as the couple struggles to recall a name, which Tessa finally manages without digital assistance. The satisfaction she gets from knowing instead of googling illustrates their defeat to the almighty Internet; human minds are overflowed with irrelevant information that they start to forget what they once knew.

At the same time, Max, Diane, and her former student Martin wait for Jim and Tessa and the kickoff when the TV broadcast cuts off. Since the mysterious occurrence that makes the screens go blank and planes crash is never elucidated, the novella mostly centers on the characters' desperate longing for order and apprehension of the unfathomable event. Diane and Max initially believe that "experts will make adjustments" (DeLillo, 2020: 34), while Martin lists a considerable number of conspiracy theories.

Jim and Tessa's plane crashes, and they end up in a hospital to treat minor injuries. The hospital nurse's monologue on hazardous reliance on technology underpins the central theme of *The Silence*: "The more advanced, the more vulnerable," she says. "Our systems of surveillance, our facial recognition devices, our imagery resolution. How do we know who we are?" (DeLillo, 2020: 61). DeLillo depicts the actual state of humanity, deprived of the sense of identity if ripped from the hyperreal network, left to wander in search for an existential goal, heading towards the recognition of absurdity. As Anne Enright comments, "World War III may have just started; the problem is, there is no longer any way to find out" (2020: 3). This quote resonates with the point Baudrillard makes in his essay collection *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* that nothing truly happens until it is media-coated (1995: 5). From the contemporary perspective, an event does not take place until the omnipotent media overcoats it with hyperreality, which is then consumed and self-reproduced indefinitely. In the age of mass digital media, humanity fails to perceive a fact in reality if a hyperreal medium does not filter it to the degree of being unidentifiable and yet seemingly graspable.

The novella's second part follows the quiet realization that "experts" will not "make adjustments" (DeLillo, 2020: 34). The Manhattan apartment's atmosphere turns gloomier, with the characters plunging into the search for meaning as they recite muddled thoughts, wholly detached from their

surroundings. As Ron Charles amusingly illustrates: “As the hours tick by, these characters swing erratically from domestic banality to absurdist spectacle. Never have five people reacted with such existential dread to missing the Super Bowl. If they’d run out of guacamole, they might have jumped out the window” (Charles, 2020: 1). As the characters revel in absurdity and language fails to yield its inherent function, communication, their sense of identity, social role, and beliefs on their position in the universe destabilize.

The dialogue begins to blend into multiple simultaneous monologues with different beginning and end points moving in various directions. Craig Hubert likewise notes, “by the second half of the book, characters get their own distinct sections to speak into the void, lay down their theories, reveal paranoid fantasies” (2020: 3). The characters no longer listen to each other or even maintain the level of politeness to at least seem interested in what another person might be saying. Instead, the chaotic fusion of struggling self-reflection, absurd acknowledgment, and hanging patterns of the hyperreal occupy the room as the characters are pushed to scrap for meaning once the Internet, the media, and any other source of hyperinformation go mute. DeLillo’s concern with the media resonates with Baudrillard’s, who sees them as “orchestration rituals” that can already anticipate presentation and possible consequences. They employ a “group of signs dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs, and no longer at all to their real end,” which underpin “hyperreal events, no longer with a specific content or end, but indefinitely refracted by each other” (Baudrillard, 1994: 22–23). The hyperinformation that the characters see as salvation to their drowning in the absurd used to be delivered through media which maintained the illusion of actuality, the instructions on what to think, where to go, and who to be. As it was stated, the invaluable real is abandoned, and the media-fueled hyperreal is constantly regenerated. As Baudrillard elaborates, humanity is subjected to the media’s “induction, to their infiltration, to their illegible violence” since they are “a kind of genetic code that directs the mutation of the real into the hyperreal” (1994: 32). With the disappearance of media, the characters struggle to shape their perspective on reality and to get an answer, if not the truth, to the questions that accompany the silence. Once screens abruptly radiate nothing but silence, the characters are forced to sink in themselves and unearth what has been covered with illusory layers of the hyperreal.

The paper argues that the five characters' lives were absurd before the silence, yet the hyperreal hindered the recognition of the fact. They applied means of distraction or indulged in strenuous activities to conceal the absurd seeds in their essence. Namely, Diane and Max's relationship is cold and habit-like; she is retired and feels purposeless without her job to provide her with a social role, while Max is engaged in gambling to cover the aimlessness of passing hours. In addition, Jim and Tessa's lives are overflowed with journeys and flights "deeper than boredom," during which Jim recites the screen data to allow them to "live a while," and Tessa is engaged in filling the pages of her notebook with every minor detail (DeLillo, 2020: 10). Both actions might initially seem odd to a curious onlooker, but they can be regarded as an individual's coping mechanism with the mundane, yet hectic pace of the hyperreal. Moreover, Martin resorts to medicine abuse and analysis of Einstein's work to kindle enthusiasm for life. Gambling addiction and obsession with Einstein were means for the characters to yield to the hyperreal face and overlook the absurdity of their existence. Martin's infatuation with Einstein serves as a means to evade the acknowledgment of absurdity even though he seems to be the only character on the verge of cracking the elusive mirror of the hyperreal prior to the silence of screens. He appears to recognize the grave consequence of awakening the absurdity and opts to pacify himself with endless musings on the *Manuscript*. He finds haven in wondering how Einstein would interpret our uniquely odd, technologically dependent reality. In addition, his passion for conspiracies reflects the hyperreal perpetuation through the media and technology, as human minds are trained to intake new data and sustain the narrative, thus battling the acceptance of the absurd. The characters' actions reveal, rather than conceal, an absurdity that Camus' claimed even gods believed: "there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor" (Camus, 1955: 75). Similarly to Sisyphus, they shoulder the repetitive and unrewarding burden of maintaining the face of the hyperreal, which appears so familiar and cozy that characters overlook its genuine nature.

As each character's yearning for sense awakens, the readership anticipates that, at least in a work of fiction, a beam of hope encapsulated in the realization of the absurd means the disruption of the hyperreal paradigm. Nevertheless, DeLillo soon disappoints with the illustration of the masses' response to the silence. Namely, even though Max mentions crowds on the street causing riots and disorder, demanding the answer to

the new reality, his portrayal reveals meekness, unsettling aimlessness, and disorientation. Accordingly, Bailey Trela notices that “by and large, the crowds in *The Silence* are ghostly, attenuated, unable to fully coalesce—something holds them back. Even their description feels muted. There’s no cult leader to wind everyone up and together. DeLillo’s point seems to be that our phones are the cult leaders now” (2020: 6). In other words, the masses in *The Silence* are there to keep the appearance of a riot, desperately unconvincing and profoundly uncertain of their aim. As Baudrillard and Maclean portray, the uselessness of the masses ensures their victory, and their silence is insulting and obscene.

Obscene, for the masses are also made of this useless hyperinformation which claims to enlighten them, when all it does is clutter up the space of the representable and annul itself in a silent equivalence. And we cannot do much against this obscene circularity of the masses and of information. The two phenomena fit one another: the masses have no opinion and information does not inform them” (Baudrillard and Maclean, 1985: 580).

DeLillo’s *The Silence* echoes the aforementioned as Max’s stroll down the rioting streets builds tension, and the four remaining characters, alongside the readership, expect him to encounter resoluteness, invigorating change, and glorious revelation. Instead, he is confronted with a zombie-like lump of wandering people as the crowds on the streets of New York essentially remain silent, deprived of the homey order that technology and media offered, unable to communicate or create new meanings, unled, reveling in the absurdity, divorced from the world.

Consumerism and preference for fetishism can be attributed to all five characters as they exchange the sign value of the things they consume to underpin their place in the hyperreal social hierarchy. Namely, Tessa and Jim fly in business class and are obsessed with anticipation of the meals on it. “He decided to sleep for half an hour or before the flight attendant showed up with their snacks. Tea and sweets. I’m thinking back to the main course. I’m also thinking about the champagne with cranberry juice” (DeLillo, 2020: 4,15). As Koch and Elmore reflect on Baudrillard: “all commodities are laden with symbolic value, which has eclipsed their utility and monetary values” (2006: 13). Still unaware of the absurd, Jim and Tessa perpetuate the hyperreal, as by purchasing the commodities, their

existence makes sense, and they believe to be stabilizing their position in the world. Similarly, Max and Diane are preoccupied with swallowing food and drinks as if it would tether them to the world before the silence and reinstate its order. Even in the absence of the game, Max absurdly proceeds to serve halftime snacks to keep the farce of hyperreal commodity alive. Namely, the characters employ familiar, pacifying patterns in an attempt to defy the absurd's gaping face. They act as automated beings, so accustomed to the hyperreal paradigm that even when it is nonexistent, they struggle to maintain it. Diane says: "Food. Time to eat something. But first I'm curious about the food they served on your flight" (DeLillo, 2020: 71). Resorting to the comfort of an alcoholic haze, Max pours himself a glass of bourbon and repeats the phrase "aged ten years in American oak" twice to re-establish the prestige consumerism grants as well as his social position that has been threatened by the hostile event (ibid, 42,101). Baudrillard elaborates on the sinister power that lies in consumerism. "We are at the point where consumption is laying hold of the whole of life. Where all activities are sequenced in the same combinational mode, where the course of satisfaction is outlined in advance, hour by hour, where the environment is total [...] fully airconditioned, organized, culturized" (Baudrillard, 1998: 30). He claims that purchasing commodities reveals the identical patterns which grant a predicted form of pleasure in a fully controlled environment. The characters' perspective on value and self-esteem mirrors Baudrillard's view that "modern consumption is at odds with the inherently nature of consumption. While even modern consumption is not totally individualistic, it is being pushed in that direction" (Baudrillard, 1998: 30). In other words, fetishists do not consume to satiate their inherent needs but to institute themselves in society, adding symbolic value to objects in desperation to gain individuality in the hyperreal system that enables and encourages that illusion.

Besides food and drinks, excessive consumption in the novella is conveyed through Martin's medication abuse. It appears that Martin does not luxuriate in common distractions and thus is haunted by the anxiety of crowds and anticipation of the menacing future. In other words, Martin recognized the aimlessness within him even before the silence fell upon the world. He opens to Diane: "could be the feeling that others can hear your thoughts or control your behavior" (DeLillo, 2020: 49). Nevertheless, instead of lulling him into the mould of the predetermined system, the drug stirs identity doubts, as is depicted in the excerpt:

I look in the mirror and I don't know who I'm looking at. The face looking back at me doesn't seem to be mine. But then again why should it? Is the mirror a truly reflective surface? And is this the face other people see? Or is it something or someone that I invent? (ibid).

Martin's awareness of the futility of existence and his unease with the world surrounding him correlates with Camus' interpretation of the absurdity cognizance. Once the passage of time and its meaningless waste is acknowledged, a tendency to reflect on and consequently endure the agonizing recognition of the absurd emerges, as Camus remarks in the following excerpt.

A human admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end. He belongs to time, and by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it. That revolt of the flesh is the absurd (Camus, 1955: 11).

In addition, Martin cannot claim a sense of being, as he can only understand himself through communication with others. The culmination of DeLillo's narrative on social doom derives precisely from the fact that modern human interactions are operated digitally. What happens to identity once the plug is pulled out? As Jim enters the Manhattan flat for the first time after the crash, he announces, "It's us, barely" (DeLillo, 2020: 70). This remark indicates that their actuality is compromised by the loss of the technological world humanity inhabits. In addition, the novella's epigraph in the form of Einstein's quote reads: "I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." Arguably, the novella hints that the war is already in motion, and humanity is at a loss; while lives were once lost in bloody battles, the society in *The Silence* is suffering heavy casualties in the form of those who lived online. Quite appropriately, Diane wonders "what happens to the people who live inside their phones," to which DeLillo answers—they stand "in the hallway, becoming neighbors for the first time" (DeLillo, 2020: 34, 52).

Self-alienation, as a consequence of the apocalypse of the hyperreal means, and as a rider of the absurd, has its demonstration in *The Silence* as well. As the well-known quote from *The Myth of Sisyphus* depicts: “in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger” (Camus, 1955: 6). This process is evident in the thoughts and actions of the characters. Although gathered in one room, the characters appear profoundly isolated, deepening the gap between each other with every passing hour in the new reality. Observing his friends, Martin wonders: “was each a mystery to the others, however close their involvement, each individual so naturally encased that he or she escaped a final determination a fixed appraisal by the others in the room” (DeLillo, 2020: 71). Max’s isolation is most apparent throughout the novella, as he sits separately, does not greet Jim and Tessa with a handshake or embrace, and rarely talks to anyone. Still, in an attempt to clarify the situation, it is Max who approaches his neighbors for the first time in the many years they have shared the building. DeLillo depicts alienation from the people who physically surround us and the urge to connect in desperate times. Furthermore, Martin’s alienation drives him to seek acceptance and a sense of belonging in Diane’s apartment, while Diane longs for self-company and detachment from her husband and guests. “She wanted to go for a walk, alone. Or she wanted Max to go for a walk and Martin to go home” (ibid, 51). Tessa immerses in her notebook and her poetry to elude the absurd. She also yearns for solitude and “being home, the place, where they don’t see each other, walk past each other” (ibid, 96). In addition, when Jim tries to persuade her to simply converse, she denies it by offering him to “activate the tablet,” “find a movie,” and “watch a movie” (ibid, 6,8). Tessa seems to dread being alone with her thoughts and having nothing to do but converse. Simultaneously, all she wants to do is “get home at look at the blank wall” (ibid, 13). This feeling of inadequacy reflects humanity tangled in hyperreality, cozily seated in business class planes, provided a variety of delicacies, taken to extravagant tourist locations, and fed the news and content, strings of data, simulacra intertwined.

At a certain point, staring at the black TV screen, driven to the point of unendurable agony and on the verge of confronting reality, Max employs the defense mechanism of turning himself into an automated medium. Namely, mesmerized by the screen’s blankness, he begins narrating the commercials and game development as he has ingested them many times before. Max’s unnatural, robotic response to the silence once again underpins the urge

to consume and be distracted by the technology. Camus' weariness that comes from the divorce from the world might explain this odd reaction to the situation. It "comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness" (Camus, 1955:10). It can be argued that scene of Max's odd performance marks the culmination and termination of his hyperreal immersion and symbolizes the moment of disenchantment in which he becomes conscious of (but unaccustomed to) the absurdity. The novella closes with Max staring into the blank screen, which, instead of broadcasting the Super Bowl, reflects his inner struggles and reveals his futility. "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). Still, he does not look away; like Estragon and Vladimir, he waits for his Godot to end the absurd.

Conclusion

DeLillo's latest work is a rather cryptic piece of techno-fiction that illustrates how humans' immersion in simulacra, their perpetuation of the simulation, and indulgence in hyperreality, serve as a means to elude the absurdity of their existence. *The Silence* condenses "sporting masculinity, educators, other languages, systems, paranoias, what is remembered and what is forgotten, the mass mind," presented "not in a fritz of interconnectivity but as mimicry, emptiness and, finally, silence" (Enright, 2020: 4). Its minimalistic setup, brevity, and coldness it radiates, yield the eerie sensation of losing control of one's destiny due to technological addiction and consumerism. Even though it is more conceptually developed than plot-wise, it effectively conveys humans' fallibility to vanish into the digital without considering that the plug might be pulled out. The novella's characters are embedded in their own realities, alienated and yearning for distractions, mirroring the inefficiency of human interaction and their obsession with bombarding themselves with data at all costs. In an attempt to portray interrelatedness between DeLillo's previous work *White Noise* and the latest one, it can be deduced that humanity's obsession with white noise turned it into a shelter from reality, which, once ravaged (or unplugged) leaves a desert of absurdity behind, embodied only in silence. The novella, set in the atmosphere of "intimate calm tingled with hysteria"

(DeLillo, 2020: 60), captures humans' flourishing anxieties regarding the data-driven future and, despite the compressed package of pages, manages to culminate DeLillo's musings found in his previous works, on distorted reality, simulation, addiction to consumerism and technology as well as alienation and absurdity of existence. As Sagan contemplates, human overreliance on technology is weaved with the utter lack of comprehension of its perpetuating principles, leading to the inability to "distinguish between what feels good and what's true", and thus "we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness" (1997: 33). Utterly ignorant about the principles of technology, once it is abolished, humans know nothing but to stare into the blank screen, a mirror reflecting their remains, recognizing the absurdity of their being as the distractions vanish. *The Silence* ends on a note that the end of civilization is more likely to come from our fetishism than nukes; the apocalypse is no more than being forced to look and listen to each other without a notification, post, or breaking news to divert and deliver us from the suffering.

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