

Liberal Humanism and Technology in Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020)

Mohammad Amin Salarzaey^a

mohammadaminsalarzaey@fgn.ui.ac.ir

Department of English Language and Literature
University of Isfahan, Iran

Hossein Pirnajmuddin^b

pirnajmuddin@fgn.ui.ac.ir

Department of English Language and Literature
University of Isfahan, Iran

Zahra Jannessari Ladani

z.jannessari@fgn.ui.ac.ir

Department of English Language and Literature
University of Isfahan, Iran

ABSTRACT

Considering Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020) in the context of the contemporary crisis in humanistic values, in this article we shed some light on it in terms of its relation with the discourse of liberal humanism, particularly vis-à-vis technology. Arguably, the novel's ambivalent stance on technology originates in an ambivalence at the core of liberal humanism: the belief in progress and the anxiety that it may transform humanity beyond recognition. The concern with humanism and its bearing on technology could further be seen in DeLillo's questions about identity, individuality and affectivity. We maintain that rather than considering DeLillo's novel as a "posthumanist" one stressing the sinister aspects of technology, as many studies suggest, it could be approached as a liberal humanist work displaying an ambiguously liberal portrayal of the impact of technology on humanity. Considering the novel in the light of the broader discussions of the ambivalences of liberal humanism, we offer a fresh perspective on the figuration of technology in it, arguing that technology is presented as partly partaking of the category of the uncanny, as both immensely empowering and menacing, as simultaneously "familiar" and sinisterly alien. As such, DeLillo's most recent novel to date presents technology as both "human" and "posthuman"; for, it has both enhanced human possibilities and has problematized the very idea of being human.

Keywords: Don DeLillo's *The Silence*; liberal humanism; technology; affectivity; identity

^a Main author

^b Corresponding Author

INTRODUCTION

Technology defines the contemporary world, challenging traditional liberal humanist modalities as identity, individuality, and affectivity become destabilized, prompting writers to reinterpret these values. Such reconsiderations are numerous in contemporary fiction. Hari Kunzru's consideration of globalization and technology in *Transmission* (2004), Thomas Pynchon's addressing of the transformation of the world by the Internet in *Bleeding Edge* (2013) and Kazuo Ishiguro's take on biotechnology in *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021) are just a few recent examples. Technology, particularly that of communication, features centrally in DeLillo's registering of the contemporary American scene. As John Duvall notes, DeLillo's works designate "American postmodernity" which is living "in a postindustrial nation" where media "absorb increasingly" a large part of our time. This engagement in media is not a matter of "mediations of the real" but what media depict "are simply experienced as the real itself" (2008, p. 4). For example, in *White Noise* (1985), Duvall observes, "we see how the pressures of advertising and capital make it so difficult to think historically when the very structures of thought seem to have been coopted by the logic of television genres" (p. 2).

About four decades later, in *The Silence* (2020), DeLillo once again explores the impact of technology. The plot revolves around technological failure, depicting a situation in which all technological devices and support infrastructures cease to function, leaving the characters in the dark, unable to make sense of what is happening around them. Many critics, some of whom discussed below, maintain that this novel is apocalyptic, pessimistically predicting the end of humanity. However, we argue that the novel does not depict the new human condition as devoid of hope; rather, it presents the possibility of the dawn of a new era in human history. As the characters reflect on their own abilities and identities without the crutch of technology, they are able to come together and form a kind of community in which liberal humanist values such as individuality, personal and communal identity, affectivity and human relationship with technology are reconsidered, refocused and thrown into high relief. These moments of human interconnection and adaptive response are represented as set in the intricate networks and reciprocal patterns depicted in DeLillo's fiction, as captured through a systems-theory lens. In *The Loop: DeLillo and the System Novel*, Tom LeClair situates DeLillo's fiction within the "new science" of systems theory. Within this framework, DeLillo inherits both "ambiguity and optimism" from the "strange Loops" and circularity of living systems, transforming modernist "streams of consciousness" into "an eddying" motion that resists closure (1987, p. 10). Thus, DeLillo's characters, conceived less as autonomous agents than as "system man," become nodes in a "reciprocal relationship" of communication and energy rather than figures driven by linear cause-effect logic (1987, p. xi).

As for more recent research on the figuration of technology in DeLillo's work, Randy Laist notes that "DeLillo tends to represent technology as an all-pervasive presence in the physical, social, and psychological worlds of his characters, and to associate technology with an 'aura' that is both spiritual and sinister, often at the same time" (2022, p.189). Similarly, Laila Sougri states that the world addressed in DeLillo's work "is intrinsically connected to postmodern technology"; "the particularities of contemporary life" are focused "in relation to corresponding technologies" (2023, p. 114). In the same vein, Joseph M. Conte, in "Screen, Image and the Technological Sublime" (2023), maintains that in its depiction of the total dominance of media and communications technologies, DeLillo's fiction instances "the postmodern sublime, defined by Jean-François Lyotard ... as the post-industrial, technological successor to the natural or Romantic sublime" (p. 290). We argue that in *The Silence* technological failure exposes the systemic

interrelations that constitute identity, individuality, and affectivity, inviting their reconsideration as emergent properties of a networked ecology in which the technological breakdown becomes an ambiguous site of renewal within DeLillo's loops of humans and technological systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical reception of DeLillo's *The Silence* often highlights its dystopian undertones. Scholars note how humanity's increasing reliance on technology shapes daily life while subtly eroding the essence of human consciousness and social connection. Philip Wolf, for instance, sees *The Silence* as a "piece of deep cultural pessimism" (2022, p. 178). He contends: "In *The Silence*, we have reached a stage in our civilizing process at which time appears to stop for good. This does not yet mean the physical death of humanity, but the end of human 'Dasein' or 'Being-in-the-World'" (p. 169). In this "stage" of civilization humans face a dystopia where the "withdrawal" of technology has many consequences, including "a sense of de-realization, fear and paranoia and, eventually, mere self-talk, complete self-isolation, social death, and silence" (p. 174). Similarly, Sonia Baelo-Allué maintains that by relying heavily on technology, we have also slowly lost our unique human qualities, resulting in viewing ourselves and our lives through the lens of data, making it difficult to remain true to our humanity. She adds:

The more advanced, the more vulnerable, but this vulnerability and posthuman suffering only becomes obvious when technology disappears and we are left to our own devices, struggling to recover and remember what truly makes us human. The novel suggests that being constantly connected has deprived us of the time to engage in meaningful conversation.

(2022, p. 146)

Furthermore, Baelo-Allué concludes that the failure of technology affords humans a chance to reflect on what makes them human; however, she does not elaborate on the modality of this reflection.

Likewise, Fadia Suyoufie and Abdullah Dagamseh situate DeLillo's *Zero K* and *The Silence* within the discourse on technology's ambivalent role in contemporary life. They pinpoint DeLillo's "descent into the anxieties of his characters" and "the ambiguity of humanity's relation to technology" (2024, p. 4). They point out that "the role of technology" in *Zero K* and *The Silence* is projected through the "characters that either idolize or demonize it," reflecting the "double-edged role of technology in human life" and the "white-black binary of good vs. evil." They conclude that DeLillo emphasizes "ethical/aesthetical principles" in "relationships between humans and technology" to counter the latter's "depersonalizing and dehumanizing effects" (2024, p. 16). However, like Baelo-Allué, they do not elaborate on the modality of these "ethical/aesthetical principles."

Mark Tardi also observes that the novel's events do not expand individual or collective "bandwidth," but instead entirely "eliminate" it, suggesting a reversion to a "social dynamic" that existed prior to the proliferation of screens. He concludes that this comprehensive technological erasure constitutes a chillingly plausible scenario, functioning as a global socio-historical "mute button": "The pauses were turning into silences and beginning to feel like the wrong kind of normal" (2021, p. 431). In this way, Tardi positions *The Silence* not merely as a continuation of DeLillo's thematic concerns but as a stark meditation on the fragility of human connection in an increasingly mediated world.

Not fully addressed in various readings of *The Silence* are the modalities through which the ambiguous cessation of technology generates new forms of perception and relationality. We suggest that by imagining the suspension of a condition rendered increasingly posthuman, DeLillo emphasizes the need to revisit and reconsider liberal humanist values such as identity, individuality and affectivity. As such, the cessation of technology appears like a symbolic act of protest. As the novel progresses, characters are driven to speculate about the human condition. The concern with what it means to be human and how humanity is to endure under the apocalyptic-looking circumstances prompts the discussion of liberal humanism on which we expand in what follows.

METHODOLOGY

LIBERAL HUMANISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

Humanism and its contemporary form, liberal humanism, have a history that dates back to at least 500 years before the common era. Humanism with its focus on human worth, potential and achievements is difficult to theorize since it cannot be properly conceived in detachment from its history. At issue is an understanding of the cultural, philosophical, and religious contexts in which humanism was born and developed. According to Anthony Pinn, rather than referring to humanism as a “static category,” it should be viewed as “*humanisms*” because it has changed over time (2021, p. XX). Concepts like technology, individuality, identity, and affectivity are among the most important issues that modern humanism needs to reconsider in an attempt to redefine itself. In the “Introduction” to *Humanism and Technology*, Pinn avers that “to speak of humanism is to speak about a particular metaphysics, a certain framing of what the human is (ontology) and the nature and content of what humans know (epistemology)” (2016, p. 1). A more balanced account of humanism is offered by Tony Davies who reminds us that it is impossible to provide a simple and clear definition of the term. He states that the term has been used in different contexts and depending on the context, its meaning can vary greatly. For Davies, of essence is “why and how that meaning *matters*, and for whom” (1997, p. 6). He states that to be explored, then, are “the *how* and *why* of various humanisms, their instrumentality and intentionality” (p. 125). The contemporary version of humanism is often referred to as liberal humanism, which we use interchangeably with humanism in this article.

Depending on its positive and negative effects, the influence of technology on human life can be classified as either transhumanism or posthumanism, with humanism occupying a middle-ground position between the two. DeLillo arguably shares a humanist viewpoint. We shall later delve into the nuanced irony of DeLillo's stance towards technology, whereby the novel neither denounces technology for its effects on human identity, individuality, and affectivity (posthumanism) nor approves of it for aspiring to an attribute of human superiority (transhumanism). Discussing humanism's relationship with technology, Cor van der Weele and Henk van den Belt note that considering that we live in a world dominated by technology, we should neither be overly optimistic nor overly pessimistic about their abilities. They illustrate thus:

Evolutionary (trans-)humanists have been proposing that we should use technology to improve the quality of human well-being, intelligence, and temperament. Yet so far, no ways have been found to venture on such bold paths in responsible ways. On the contrary; a dominant worry about technologies such as AI and genetics is now that we have instead become overwhelmed and vulnerable vis-à-vis them. May technology in the end leave us behind as a crawling mass of inferior, obsolete machines, no longer worth much attention? Confronted with such worries, a hopeful belief in free will and autonomy will not do; we are forced to become more realistic about human manipulability, as well as about the options for controlling technology.

(2021, p. 727)

In this account, the possibility of human agency is not denied, but it is urged that human beings must rethink their roles in the world if their agency is not to be totally lost. Rejecting the apocalyptic views “of those who think that our best strategy is to give up hope about human civilization and withdraw,” van der Weele and van den Belt conclude that a “belief in human freedom, autonomy, rationality, and agency” is not enough; “there are many hopeful initiatives that look for more modest and entangled forms of favoring nature, as well as humans, with the help of technology” and “we are forced to get to know ourselves far better, individually as well as collectively and under a variety of different circumstances, in order to face dangerous weaknesses” (p. 727-728). Thus, liberal humanism provides the main theoretical framework for this descriptive-analytical study, positioning identity, individuality, and affectivity as mutable yet indispensable modalities through which humans continue to negotiate meaning in a technologized world. In this context, DeLillo’s *The Silence*, along with his other novels that Tom LeClair identifies as “systems novels,” examines the complex interplay between humans and technological systems, showing how technological failure can both challenge and reshape human understanding. Methodologically, the study also draws on insights from Affect Study.

AFFECT, HUMANS, AND TECHNOLOGY IN *THE SILENCE*

The discourse of liberal humanism also emphasizes the understanding of human emotions and their relationship to technology. As noted in the recent critical approach known as Affect Studies, affect is “in many ways synonymous with force or forces of encounter,” one between human bodies and other (non) human bodies. Arising “in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon,” affect is the capacity to feel, experience, and be moved by something (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p. 1-2). It is a fundamental part of how we form relationships, how we make decisions, and how we shape our lives. Contemporary theorists discussing liberal humanism point out the prime importance of affectivity. As a case in point, in her critique of classical humanism, Rosi Braidotti criticizes “the unitary subject of Humanism, including its socialist variables,” and calls “to replace it with a more complex and relational subject framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy and desire as core qualities” (2013, p. 26). As for DeLillo’s novel, notably the characters indelibly experience a range of affects vis-à-vis technology, from a sense of safety (provided by it) to anxiety and fear (produced by its cessation) and sympathy/fellowship (generated by reflecting on it). These affective experiences, as depicted in the novel, exemplify how emotions can modulate and redefine human individuality and identity, particularly in relation to the novel’s portrayal of posthuman anxieties and affective responses to technology, a dynamic that will be examined in greater depth in the following section.

DISSCUSSION

TECHNOLOGY AND THE UNCANNY IN *THE SILENCE*

The Silence centrally addresses the notions of posthumanism and transhumanism. The plot of the novel is very simple. Tessa and her husband Jim are flying from Paris to their home in Newark, New Jersey, on the night of the Super Bowl in 2022 when the plane has to crash land. Diane and Max are waiting for these two to arrive in their Manhattan apartment. The only guest in attendance is Martin, one of Diane's former physics students. A sudden blackout occurs, causing the characters to reflect on their situation.

DeLillo raises serious questions about a possible future in which human beings have to face the necessity of reconsidering the very idea of being human and the need for more individuality and agency. Presented is a certain modality of the liberal humanist perspective on which we will elaborate in what follows. To begin with, it should be noted that the idea of a posthuman future is debatable. As William Grassie observes, posthumanism and transhumanism represent two optimistic and pessimistic approaches to human futures, and while humans “imagine such possibilities,” this does not mean that these views are necessarily viable (2016, p. 32). According to Grassie, such theories have been exaggerated; “we are already transhumans, more posthuman now in the first decade of the twenty-first century than in all the millennia of prior human civilization” (p. 45). Significantly, DeLillo addresses posthumanism or transhumanism in a manner different from what is customary, one related to a seminal strategy in DeLillo’s fiction: treating a crucial issue in an ironic, ambivalent way by juxtaposing the different sides to it. This results in a “productive tension,” which, in Duvall’s words, “often resonates with Jameson’s pessimistic view that contemporary art has been coopted by advertising, and DeLillo’s poetics, which resonate more with Hutcheon’s belief that the postmodern novel can still enable social critique”; it is thus “[w]ith pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the spirit” that “DeLillo continues to write novels that probe American postmodernity” (2008, p. 4). The aforesaid technique allows DeLillo to explore different points of view and create a more impactful and complex narrative. DeLillo depicts how technology is becoming too prevalent in our daily lives, encroaching upon human identity and individuality. Conversely, he illustrates how our lives are seemingly irrevocably dependent on technology.

The take on the sinister potentials of technology is epitomized in the opening headnote, which is a quotation from Einstein: “I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.” The citation embodies the radical ambivalence of technology – immensely empowering and menacing. The message is simple and sinister: a civilization based on technology could be easily destroyed by its abuse, reverting to a state of primitiveness. As such, there is something uncanny about technology; it is simultaneously “familiar” and sinisterly alien. In a sense, it is both “human” and “posthuman.” It is this uncanny quality that DeLillo’s novel concretizes. In *The Silence* DeLillo depicts a world where human life is so intertwined with technology that people are overwhelmed when they can remember things without the assistance of technology. For example, when Tessa remembers the name “Anders Celsius” and finds it “satisfying,” she ruminates: “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” (2020, p. 14). Jiena Sun argues that *The Silence* demonstrates the enduring potential of language to illuminate human experience. She notes that DeLillo “venerates” written words through Tessa, whose meticulous note-taking allows her to retain traces of life and assert her individuality. Through her memory and reasoning, Tessa stands

apart from her peers, embodying the autonomy and discernment that language enables (2022, p. 979). Thus, Sun shows, DeLillo portrays language as both a vital means of personal freedom and a fragile force whose impact on shaping thought and individuality persists despite its declining influence.

In this post-digital, overly-technologized and thereby posthuman world – posthuman in the sense, among other things, of human agency having been replaced by technology – even a temporary disruption of technology is welcome as it seems to promise a glimpse of reentering the human realm. A plane crash-landing opens the novel, symbolically imparting the idea that humans are flying with technology and, by overusing it, are falling. The myth of Icarus is not far off. The woman in the clinic also puts this rather blandly: “The more advanced, the more vulnerable. Our systems of surveillance, our facial recognition devices, our imagery resolution. How do we know who we are?” (DeLillo 2020, p. 61). The idea that technological progress has paradoxically made man more vulnerable has a bearing on the theme of terrorism, a salient one in DeLillo’s fiction (terrorists using technology for their acts of terrorism and for getting them publicized). However, the novel keeps “silent” on the cause of the technological failure, maybe a glitch, an act of terrorist sabotage, cyberattacks, a presage to nuclear conflict, a solar storm, or a meteorite hitting the earth, World War III or maybe, as Tessa puts it, even a plot in which it is all part of “an experiment that happens to be falling apart, a scheme set in motion by forces outside our reckoning?” (DeLillo 2020, p. 89). The obvious answer to the question “why all these ‘systems of surveillance’?” would be “for guaranteeing order and security; more specifically, for guaranteeing human rights and freedom”; “for, in sum, preserving liberal humanist values.” Ironically, however, the very systems which are supposed to maintain ideals like freedom are turning, or already have turned, Western societies into police states. In fact, new technologies have transformed the whole world into a panopticon, as Martin, one of the characters in the novel who is a physicist, puts it: “satellites in orbit that are able to see everything. The street where we live, the building we work in, the socks we are wearing” (DeLillo 2020, p. 90). The Orwellian, apocalyptic, and conspiracy scenarios, DeLillo’s post-covid novel implies, are simultaneously very familiar and strange.

The ambiguity – in terms of logical coherence – of the last two portions of the quoted passage (a fragment followed by a question) partakes of the ambivalent character of the issue addressed. For one thing, the terrorists/lawbreakers/rebels/illegal immigrants/persona non grata/dangerous or undesirable persons – whoever is “foreign” to the system or according to the system – can outsmart the systems of surveillance. More philosophically, the passage also implies that the overreliance on such technologies for “identifying” human beings, recognition of people in terms of algorithms, has changed the very conception of human identity; humans are no longer sure of how to conceive of themselves, increasingly becoming strangers unto themselves. As Zygmunt Baumann puts it in his discussion of modernity inevitably producing “a world of strangers,”

[t]he most striking and off-putting trait of strangers is that they are neither neighbours nor aliens. Or, rather – confusingly, disturbingly, terrifyingly – they are (or may be –who knows?) both. Neighbourly aliens. Alien neighbours. In other words, strangers. That is, socially distant yet physically close. The aliens within physical reach. Neighbours outside social reach. Inhabitants of no man's land – a space either normless or marked with too few rules to make orientation possible.
(qtd. in Morphet 1996, p. 153)

Technology-driven modernity has radically transformed human relations and the very conception of the self, raising the question, ‘How do we know who we are?’ in a drastically altered living space.

Significantly, it is after the cessation of technology that the small group of people described in the novel feel to be more drawn to each other, feel to be more human. As such, the “silence” of the title, among other things, refers to the silence of technological media, such as television as famously represented in *White Noise* (1985). In a world full of noise, this silence seems like a gift for humans to think about themselves as well as the benefits and dangers of technology.

Relatedly, as R. L. Rutsky, in his article “Technologies,” observes, “new technologies and the changes associated with them,” which can affect human life and “determine” it, “have outpaced the ability of human beings to conceptualize them appropriately.” This means that human beings cannot comprehend this quick progress properly and “are, metaphorically at least, technologized by their own zeal to master the world through technology” (2017, p. 185-86). Rutsky’s point about humans gradually being mastered rather than mastering technology corresponds to the reversal, or corruption, of the old (Enlightenment) humanist tenet, or dream, of mastering nature through reason (technology as the outcome of rationalism). This is exemplified right at the opening of the novel where Jim cannot sleep since he is bombarded by technology. “Sleep was the point. He needed to sleep. But the words and numbers kept coming” (DeLillo 2020, p. 4). This is of course a recurring theme in DeLillo’s fiction but it is treated more apocalyptically in this latest novel. To give some examples, Jack’s daughter, in *White Noise*, is so immersed in ads that in her sleep she mutters the phrase “Toyota Celica” (Knight 2008, p. 31-32). As another example, Jack’s and his family’s lives “are very much affected by speed and technology.” Fearing death, Jack and Babette “aspire to escape from speed—both in the sense of the frenzied pace of modern life and the speed with which death approaches them” by “shopping; seizing the day; drugs magically offered by science; getting lost in virtuality, in the forgetfulness-inducing dream world of images, in the “white noise” of media” (Pirnajmuddin & Bagherzadeh Samani, 2019, p. 358). Similarly, in *Zero K* (2016), and *Cosmopolis* (2003) technology is wired into human mind. As Ross puts it in *Zero K*, the linking of human consciousness with technological advancement is a new faith: “Faith-based technology. That’s what it is. Another god. Not so different, it turns out, from some of the earlier ones. Except that it’s real, it’s true, it delivers” (DeLillo 2016, p. 9). In *Cosmopolis*, technology drives Eric to see nature through data, He “mastered the teeming details of bird anatomy” (DeLillo 2003, p. 7). As Eric processes the anatomy of birds, he visualizes the details of their bodies in the same way that computers do. In *Mao II*, Bill deliberately isolates himself from media and technological influences, his room keeps “him safe against the continuous raids and the corruption of media and the technologized world which want his work and life mediatized too.” Indeed “Bill takes refuge in his bunker against the constant exposure of images and information” (Bagherzadeh Samani et al., 2020, p. 320-21).

DeLillo’s treatment of the theme of technology partakes of another side too. The shutdown or burnout reveals the extent of human dependency on technology. The town has sunk “in darkness,” “the newcomers spoke of the flight and the events that followed and the spectacle of the midtown streets, the grid system, all emptied out” (DeLillo 2020, p. 70). However, as Diane emphasizes, after the blackout, characters have the opportunity to think free of technological determination: “Is this a situation where we have to think about what we’re going to say before we say it?” (DeLillo 2020, p. 66).

Technology can also connect us across distances, allowing us to reach out to people and communities we would not have been able to reach before (Diane calling her daughters across long distances). It can allow us to share our experiences and ideas with others, creating a sense of belonging and common sense. This is, however, a kind of “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s famous phrase, the sense of sharing in what one knows many use/are using. In the aftermath of this technological shutdown, as Diana puts it, people feel “abandoned”: “All the people watching intently or sitting as we are, puzzled, abandoned by science, technology, common sense” (DeLillo 2020, p. 29). Unlike Martin, who has a much more apocalyptic vision of things, however, Diane hopes that things would be back to normal soon. “Lights back on, heat back on,” she says, “our collective mind back where it was, more or less, in a day or two” (DeLillo 2020, p. 68). Whether Diane is conscious of the irony here or not, implied is that this “collective mind” is shaped by and depends on technology. It is shaped by the media, particularly television. For instance, talking about the World Cup, Martin points out how television has created a “shared religion,” a “global competition” (DeLillo 2020, p. 24). Implied here is the idea that technology has made human collective life more vulnerable because if all sense of collectivity (the collective mind) depends on it, then its failure would mean a chaotic disintegration of human communities. Max’s reaction to the technological shutdown is of note in this regard. Feeling that his “expiration date” has come, he says: “We’re being zombified” (DeLillo 2020, p. 84). The referential ambiguity of the sentence is interesting. Does it refer to the contemporary technologized human condition generally or to the post-shutdown situation? Actually, technology has already “zombified,” if not fully yet, people.

A telling image related to the duality of technology in the novel is that of flying – the airplane as a symbol of progress making long distances short, an incredible feat of technology that has drastically changed our lives. An ever-present possibility, however, is crashing/crash-landing, as it happens to Jim and his wife, implying that, Icarus-like, maybe man has already flown too high with technology and the risk of fall is impending. In this way, Modern technology is not a neutral instrument; it fundamentally shapes the users’ experiences and perceptions. This pervasive influence is a recurring theme in contemporary literature, with some writers (such as H. G. Wells and Ayn Rand) largely endorsing it, some (such as Thomas Pynchon and Kazuo Ishiguro) more inclined to critique it while some (like Tom McCarthy and DeLillo) treat it more ambivalently. One reason for DeLillo’s ambiguous stance toward technology is this duality: it provides safety and connection while simultaneously generating anxiety, disorientation, and the erosion of individuality. Examples of DeLillo’s ironic perspective on technology abound in the novel. As technology also has a significant impact on human identity, individuality, and affectivity, in the next section of this article we will explore the relationship between technology and liberal humanist concerns in more detail.

IDENTITY AND INDIVIDUALITY IN *THE SILENCE*

In *The Silence*, DeLillo raises many questions about liberal humanism, focusing on individuality and identity. He suggests that humanist values still matter, though they often appear concealed beneath the distractions of modern life. However, they need reconsideration and reassertion, especially in relation to technology. Willem B. Drees, in “Humans, Humanities, and Humanism in an Age of Technology,” highlights the evident but rarely contemplated fact that “we live in a technological culture,” one in which technology “pervades and shapes our lives” and “is the world in which we live” (2016, p. 17). *The Silence* portrays the interconnectedness of technology, culture, individuality and identity, showing that humans sometimes must confront technological failures

to reflect on their humanity. This confrontation underscores a liberal humanist concern with reviving both collective and individual senses of identity. For example, after the blackout, Martin says: “Whatever is out there, we are still people, the human slivers of a civilization” (DeLillo 2020, p. 90). Elsewhere, Martin states that he had been waiting for such an opportunity to reflect upon his vulnerable identity: “All my life I’ve been waiting for this without knowing it” (DeLillo 2020, p. 102). Max also mentions that for the first time he and his neighbors have started knowing each other: “They saw and heard what we saw and heard. We stood in the hallway becoming neighbors for the first time. Men, women, nodding our heads” (DeLillo 2020, p. 34). Diana and Max also become nostalgic about the time that they lived in a community and experienced a sense of collective identity: “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?” (DeLillo 2020, p. 52).

Implied in *The Silence* is that in the aftermath of the “silencing” of the noise of technology, which also makes humans face their vulnerability, humans finally afford to reappraise the communal aspects of their human identity. Interestingly, the characters in the novel are worried about the fate of others, a concern rarely there, if ever, when technology reigned. The emphasis on this shared sense of collectivity in the face of catastrophe is found in DeLillo's other novels too. For example, Katrina Harack maintains, in *Falling Man* (2007) “DeLillo pays attention to the ethical implications of memorializing tragedy and presents multiple perspectives on a national trauma in order to make us reconsider the event”; thus, to create a new identity for the American audience, “New York becomes a locus of Americans’ imaginations and sense of identity, so that embeddedness of his characters in a particular place and time becomes emblematic of an American trauma that has yet to be fully explored” (2003, p. 307).

Hammered home is the humanistic idea that each human being is part of a whole. Written in the post-Covid era, the novel presents the blackout as symbolically indicating any global/local issue that requires the collective concern and efforts of humanity. However, the focus on collective or communal identity in *The Silence* is to be understood in the light of the emphasis put on the shared destiny of mankind. It does not betoken a downgrading or de-emphasizing of individuality. For, a central motif in DeLillo's work is human individuality and its erosion by homogenizing forces, systems and ideologies. As DeLillo famously proposes in *Mao II* (1991), one of his mid-career novels, “the future belongs to crowds.” This attitude towards the “crowds” – which could be partly put down to a kind of elitist fear of the masses shared by modernist writers and artists – seems to have been modified in DeLillo's latest novel to date. As mentioned, what is stressed is the sense of shared identity in the face of a common destiny. Instead, these are forces of capitalism, ideologies and the media which are presented as the formidable menace to individuality. For example, Max is constantly being bombarded with ads that appear in the form of holograms and projections. As Diane comments: “Max doesn’t stop watching. He becomes a consumer who had no intention of buying something. One hundred commercials in the next three or four hours.” Diana adds, “He doesn’t laugh or cry. But he watches” (DeLillo 2020, p. 21). To say that watching the ubiquitous capitalist signs has become a ritual or at issue is a kind of addiction or mesmerism would only partly explain the case. The fact that Max does not exhibit any affects (pleasure or displeasure) is significant. This state of apathy is a locus classicus of what Fredric Jameson (1991) has called “waning of affect” as one of the five symptoms signaling the shift to the postmodern condition, a phase of (political) paralysis caused by a “new depthlessness” (p. 6-16). Of course, there is no depth to many of these capitalistic signs, hence the irrelevance of interpretation, but even where interpretation applies, it would not be possible. For, as Neil Vallyly observes, “Hyper-

complexity obliterates the capacity of individuals to understand and process the abundance of continually emerging information,” so that “acts of interpretation become homogenised and simplified” (2021, p. 115). Another example of the depletion of a sense of individual identity in the over-technologized, hyper-complex contemporary condition is the reduction of the complex concept of humanity into simple codes. Here is a description of a couple travelling by plane: “His name was Jim Kripps. But for all the hours of this flight, his name was his seat number” (DeLillo 2020, p. 6). Moreover, as Wolf mentions, “the couple’s conversation within the context of airline travel is ‘a function of some automated process’” (2022, p. 171). Under such circumstances, where information overload and technological determinism reduce human experience to preprogrammed codes, the possibility of meaningful interpretation and authentic individuality is drastically diminished, if not erased.

AFFECTIVITY AND *THE SILENCE*

Affectivity lies at the heart of liberal humanism, and the manipulation of this human capacity is portrayed as alarming. While humans still feel, their emotions in the contemporary era are often negative or “ugly,” to use Sianne Ngai’s terminology. Commenting on Jameson’s notion of “waning of affect,” Ngai theorizes that in the “late modernity” feelings such as “envy, irritation, anxiety, paranoia, and disgust” are prevalent (2004, p. 1-3). One of these feelings, which is prominent in *The Silence* (2020), is anxiety. Ngai states that anxiety is “intimately aligned with the concept of futurity, and the temporal dynamics of deferral and anticipation in particular” (2004, p. 210). As DeLillo shows, at a time when technology has become so integral to all aspects of human life in postmodern times, people become anxious about their future and the fate of humanity. In *The Silence*, DeLillo shows how technology intensifies anxiety; however, this anxiety tells the truth. Anxiety and fear indicate that safety and stability are amiss in the characters’ lives. For example, the novel ends with, Max “stare[ing] into the blank screen” (DeLillo 2020, p. 116) signifying an unknown future that Max is scared of. Likewise, when Jim and Tessa go to the clinic and suddenly the power is cut, fear and anxiety dominate: “Everyone waiting. A sense also of fear-in-waiting because it wasn’t clear yet what this might mean, how radical, how permanent an aberration in what was already a drastic shift of events” (DeLillo 2020, p. 60).

DeLillo portrays an absurd situation in which human feelings and their expression are conditioned and conditional on technology. “Seemingly all screens have emptied out, everywhere. What remains for us to see, hear, feel?” (DeLillo 2020, p. 79). Paradoxically, technology also makes people forget their vulnerability, the sense of absurdity and the “white noise” of anxiety which has caused it in the first place. Overwhelmed after the crash landing, Jim says to Tessa: “‘All we need is rain,’ Jim said, ‘and we’d know we were characters in a movie’” (DeLillo 2020, p. 39). The quoted passage is from chapter three of the novel which is interestingly titled “Life can get so interesting that we forget to be afraid” (DeLillo 2020, p. 37). The ironic title suggests the seductive allure of technology which has made modern life “so interesting” that we forget how vulnerable we are. As Anđelka Gemović (2022) in “When the Screens Go Off: The Apocalypse of Hyperreality in Don DeLillo’s *The Silence*” notes, the novella demonstrates “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” (198). Gemović adds that the characters’ lives are absurd, but technology enables them to forget this fact, so when the technological gadgets cease to work, they begin to acknowledge the absurdity of their lives. Moreover, “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” (Gemović 2022, p.191). However, anxiety becomes advantageous when it forces the characters to think about their humanity or, in Tessa’s words, “a point of self-importance” (DeLillo 2020, p. 112).

CONCLUSION

DeLillo’s *The Silence* has an ambivalent stance on technology or, rather, it addresses the ambivalence inherent in technology and its relation with humanity. At issue in it is a posthuman-like condition in which technology does more than erode reality; it has become reality itself. The novel depicts a dystopian future in which “silence” – the discontinuance, if not the termination, of the contemporary form of human social life – ensues in the aftermath of the cessation (“withdrawal”) of technology. However, the sense of “de-realization” experienced after the cutoff of technology is presented as having the potential of kick-starting a reembracing of “reality.” The ensuing fear, then, could be salutary as it could redraw humans together.

Paradoxically, the situation could afford the humans the chance to reflect on their condition, on what it means to be human and reconsider the human values lost in the “noise” of technology. As such, *The Silence* could be considered as a sequel to *White Noise*. Central to the novel is the Icarian motif: humans have already flown too high by the wings of technology; the fall is imminent. However, all is not lost and affectivity – as an inalienable feature of humanity – reasserts itself in the face of the “silence.” This highlights the significance of the range of affects experienced by characters vis-à-vis technology, from a sense of safety provided by it to anxiety and fear produced by its cessation, and sympathy or fellowship generated by reflecting on it. The stoppage of technology is welcome as it seems to promise a glimpse of reentering the human realm. Human affectivity is the ground for this possible rejuvenation of humanity. The novel’s depiction of technology to some extent partakes of the category of the uncanny. For, at issue is the idea of technology as both immensely empowering and menacing, as simultaneously “familiar” and sinisterly alien. Implied is that the technology-driven Orwellian, apocalyptic and conspiracy scenarios are both very familiar and strange. In sum, technology is both “human” and “posthuman”; for, it has both enhanced human possibilities and has rendered humans’ strangers unto themselves. It is this uncanny quality that DeLillo’s novel with its highly particular inflection of the discourse of liberal humanism concretizes.

REFERENCES

- Baelo-Allué, S. (2022). Technological Vulnerability in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020). In Miriam Fernández Santiago & Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández, (Ed.), *Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature* (pp. 135-149). Routledge.
- Bagherzadeh Samani, Bahareh, Hossein Pirnajmuddin, & Behnoush Akhavan. (2020). Don DeLillo’s *Mao II*: A Virilian Reading. *Neohelicon*, 47(1), 315-330.
- Braidotti, Rosi. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Polity.
- Conte, J. M. (2023). Screen, Image and the Technological Sublime. In Catherine Gander (Ed.). *The Edinburgh Companion to Don DeLillo and the Arts* (pp. 290-303). Edinburgh UP.

- Davies, T. (1997). *Humanism*. Routledge.
- DeLillo, D. (2021). *The Silence*. Scribner.
- . (2016). *Zero K*. Scribner.
- . (2003). *Cosmopolis*. Scribner.
- Drees, W. B. (2016). Humans, Humanities, and Humanism in an Age of Technology. In Anthony. B. Pinn, (Ed.), *Humanism and Technology: Opportunities and Challenges* (pp.15-30). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Duvall, John N. (2008). Introduction: The Power of History and the Persistence of Mystery. In John N. Duvall, (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (pp. 1-10). Cambridge University Press.
- Gemović, A. (2022). When the Screens Go Off: The Apocalypse of Hyperreality in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*. *Belgrade English Language and Literature Studies*, 14(1), 181-200.
- Grassie, W. (2016). Which Humanist Are You? Reflections on Our Trans- and Posthumanity. In Anthony. B. Pinn, (Ed.), *Humanism and Technology: Opportunities and Challenges* (pp. 31-54). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gregg, M, & Gregory S. (2010). An Inventory of Shimmers. In Melissa Gregg & Gregory Seigworth, (Ed.), *The Affect Theory Reader* (pp. 1-25). Duke University Press.
- Harack, K. (2013). Embedded and Embodied Memories: Body, Space, and Time in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Falling Man*. *Contemporary Literature*, 54(2), 303-336
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Knight, P. (2008). DeLillo, Postmodernism, Postmodernity. In John N. Duvall, (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (pp. 27-40). Cambridge University Press.
- Laist, R. (2022). Technology: Science/fiction. In J. Kavaddo (Ed.), *Don DeLillo in Context* (pp. 189–195). Cambridge University Press.
- LeClair, T. (1987). *The Loop: DeLillo and the System Novel*. University of Illinois Press.
- Morphet, T. (1996). Stranger Fictions: Trajectories in the Liberal Novel. *World Literature Today*. 70(1), 53-58.
- Ngai, S. (2004). *Ugly feelings*. Harvard University Press.
- Pinn, Anthony B. (2021). Introduction. In Anthony B. Pinn, (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Humanism* (pp. XV-XXViii). Oxford University Press.
- . Introduction. (2016). In Anthony B. Pinn, (Ed.), *Humanism and Technology: Opportunities and Challenges* (pp.1-11). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pirnajmuddin, Hossein & Bahare Bagherzadeh Samani. (2019). Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: A Virilian Perspective. *Text Matters*, 9(9), 356-373.
- Rutsky, R. L. (2017). Technologies. In Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (pp.182–195). Cambridge University Press.
- Sougri, Laila. (2023). *Representations of Technoculture in Don DeLillo's Novels*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003407768>
- Sun, J. (2022). The Human Slivers of a Civilization: Language Events in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*. *English Studies*, 103(6), 961–982.
- Suyoufie, F. F., & Dagamseh, A. M. (2024). Don DeLillo's Descent into Posthuman Anxieties in *Zero K* and *The Silence*. *Orbis Litterarum*, 80(5), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12474>

- Tardi, M. (2021). Whenever there's too much Technology: A review of Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (Scribner, 2020). *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, 11, 428–431. <https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.11.28>
- Vallely, Neil. (2021). *Futilitarianism: Neoliberalism and the Production of Uselessness*. Goldsmiths Press.
- Van der Weele, Cor, and Henk van den Belt. (2021). Humanism and Technology. In Anthony B. Pinn, (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Humanism* (pp.714-735). Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, Philip. (2022). *Death, Time and Mortality in the Later Novels of Don DeLillo*. Routledge.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mohammad Amin Salarzaey is a PhD candidate in English literature at University of Isfahan, Iran. He teaches English literature at Sistan and Baluchistan University. His main research interest is contemporary American fiction.

Hossein Pirnajmuddin is an associate professor of English literature at University of Isfahan, Iran. His research interests include Renaissance literature, contemporary English fiction, literary theory, the neoliberal novel and translation studies.

Zahra Jannessari Ladani is an associate professor of English Literature at the University of Isfahan. Her research interests include science fiction and utopia, comparative literature and Persian literature. *The Repercussions of Renaissance British Utopia in the 1920s-1930s American Science Fiction* (2017) published by the University of Isfahan Press is among her recent publications.