

Soft Cyborgs: Technological Collapse and the Attrition of Human Consciousness in DeLillo's *The Silence*

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Abstract

This study explores Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020) as a fictional prediction of humanity's cognitive and psychological conversion into machines under digital dependency. While previous researches have widely examined how technology shapes communication and identity, this paper sheds light on how DeLillo's characters (Jim, Tessa, Diane, Ax and Martin) depict a condition termed "soft cyborgs", humans who, without physically turning into machines, have gradually become machines, picking up the patterns of machine-like thoughts, speech, and emotional collapse through digital blackout. Unlike Cyborgs defined by bodily strength and advancement, soft cyborgs represent an internal erosion of language, effect and selfhood that emerges only when technological structure is no longer supportive. Drawing on Haraway's Cyborg theory, Jean Baudrillard simulation and hyperreality, Marshall McLuhan's media ecology, and Jaan Tallin's Intelligence Stairway model, this paper analyses how the sudden global collapse of technology acts as a diagnostic device, exposing pre-existing threat of human erasure rather than creating it. The analysis highlights how authentic linguistic and emotional decay caused by over technological dependency. Technological silence brings out the internal silences hidden already in human consciousness. The study contributes to post humanist literary criticism recreating the human-machine boundary which is not physical transformation but of thought and connection.

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Introduction

In the modern world of today, human life has grown increasingly dependent on digital systems and electronic devices. Communication, relationships, and the way people are connecting is now deeply superficial and mechanical. A great deal of studies has examined how technology has upgraded and reshaped modern life, but the danger of human natural behavior and existence is at stake. Technology and tech-based apparatuses around us are redesigning our life and establishing new patterns. At home or at workplaces, educational institutions, all around technology is challenging our ways of living and reshaping life to the extent that the human being looks like partially human and partially machine or it may be termed as overdependence on technology. This has its own brighter and darker sides. The contemporary fiction is responding to this situation through the stories of technological impact on human cognition and behavior, especially the American fiction because of the maximized use of technology in the life of the people in general and individuals particularly. The writings of DeLillo are reflective of this situation and its consequences in modern man's life in America which somehow or the other influences the rest of the world as well. This necessitates that the analysis of the relevant texts may be done to understand its reflection, impact and challenges.

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DeLillo's novel *The Silence* (2020) manifests this phenomenon in its narration through a sudden unexplained global technological collapse which disrupts the digital systems which influences the way of thinking, talking and feelings the characters (Jim, Tessa, Diane, Max, Martin) in the story. This study argues that DeLillo's characters depict the traits of "Soft Cyborgs" which entails the human beings who have not been physically merged into machinery but gradually and habitually turning into machines influenced by media and digital invasion followed by the erasure of cognitive, linguistic and deep emotional interactions. Drawing on Haraway's cyborg theory which mainly criticizing the very existence of human as individual beings because it states we all are chimeras, theorized, fabricated hybrids of machines and organisms, and that we are all cyborgs. DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020) questions this phenomenon and reflects on it through the characters of the novel. For example, Tessa is tired of the travelling comments in a bizarre way "All I want to do is get home and look at a wall" (p.11) and "What I can't remember. The name of this airline" (p.11). These incoherent responses and break from the outer world because of technological collapse directs towards the situation of common people lacking the genuine ability to express and navigate through everyday life problems and avoidance of deep thinking. Associating with Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and hyperreality, Marshall McLuhan's media ecology, and Jaan Tullin's Intelligence Stairway Model, this study analyzes how *The Silence* portrays the elimination of language, emotional depth, selfhood in mediation of media and technology overdependence.

Literature review

The association between human beings and technology has become one of the most debated and widely discussed subjects in modern literary and cultural studies. Swift developments in AI, media, and digital technological transformation have not only changed human lifestyle but also impacts the way people think, communicate and navigate through reality. Researchers mostly argue that technology has done wonders and plays a vital role in shaping human identity, emotions and cognitive behavior. Other scholarship and researches such as "Posthuman and Vulnerability Studies" (Bhattacharya et al.) argues about the posthumanism indicating human and machine relation extending humans into advanced and modern cyborgs. This article analyzes *The Silence* through the lens of *vulnerability* studies, arguing that with the blurring boundaries of humans and machines comes the overdependence on technological discourse. Herbrechter's accounts of the novel's increasing 'cyberization', a figure of fusion rather than replacement, indicates that even the language used in the novel depicted the mechanization of characters who are reduced to "human silvers". Soyoufie's humans "reduced to impotence in his total surrender to the control of technology". Depersonalization of the human beings. All research mainly focus on the posthumanism and co-existence of humans and machines. The studies argued that the threat was already there from the start but when technology collapses human is left with their authentic self who is deprived of independence and critical thinking but what remains unexplored is the threat of human erasure and technologically programmed beings coming into existence. The figures who not only use and wear technology but who think, understand, react and emotionally process the world as machines do. Many of the contemporary fictional writings such as *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo (2021) reflect these concerns by pinpointing where overuse of technology threatens the authenticity of human behaviors and the question, 'What if humans become emotionally programmed like AI, begin to arise. DeLillo is one of the most pioneer writers on this issue whose writings continuously criticize the influence of media, technology and information in modern society.

DeLillo has been recognized as a novelist who is deeply engaged with the psychological implications of media and technology. His previous studies such as *White Noise* (1985), emphasize how television, advertisement and consumerism shape family relations and individual consciousness. According to Mark Osteen (2000), DeLillo's projection of technology shows that it is not only external threat but also danger that is deeply infused into human consciousness and interpretation of reality around them. Similarly, Peter Boxall (2020) argues that DeLillo's fictional works are primarily focused on replacement of human intelligence with digital dependency and artificial intelligence. This paper also brings into discussion the similar impact and the consequent absent brains because of media impact. For example, Max, one of the characters in the novel "doesn't laugh or cry. But he watches" (pg.15) the blank screen mocks the natural ability of humans to express real anxiety and to look for solutions rather than sitting randomly without action. This paper debates DeLillo's work *The Silence* on the same issues of the blind digital dependency and collapse of natural emotional connections profoundly. Published in 2020 during the time of increasing global dependence on digital communication, the novel portrays an imaginary technological blackout that tears the layers of fragile connection between humans and machines. It depicts how overuse of media evaporates the human authentic sense of problem-solving, commanding just like machines. Many scholars interpret this collapse of technology presented by DeLillo not as a physical break from the outer world, but rather psychological emptiness created by digital dependency. *The Candy House* by Jennifer Egan poses a question that if memory becomes data, are humans still human. In the same way the characters of the novel become machines themselves. It is not the integration but conversion of humans into data storage entities. This perspective provides that the backbone of DeLillo's fictional writings relies not only on technology usage but also encapsulation of humanity.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on four interconnected theories: Haraway's cyborg theory, Baudrillard's simulation and hyperreality, McLuhan's media ecology and Tallin's Intelligence Stairway model. Each framework sheds light on DeLillo's representation of technological dependency and puts forward the sequence of occurrences to support the study. Donna Haraway's cyborg theory published in *The Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), constitutes the foundational pillar for this study. Her idea of cyborg; a merger of human and machine is seen through the novel's multiple characters. For Haraway cyborg was a utopian figure, capable of doing whatever was out of reach for humans; Superhuman. At the base of her argument is that the boundary between human and machine is eroding; "Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (Haraway, 1991, p.152). This theory is directly relevant to present study in a way that DeLillo creates 'soft cyborgs' who are an advanced form of Donna's cyborgs. They are internally changed into machines, automated and lost after the collapse of technological connection. As technology and machines become more prominent humans are turning into passive, automated and irrational beings. For example, in the novel, Jim's reaction after blackout is that "he began to recite the words and numbers aloud because it made no sense, it had no effect, if he simply noted the changing details only to lose each one instantly..." (DeLillo, 2020, p.7). The passage depicts purposeless communication like a corrupted machine which has no control on its response. This study transfers from cyborgs to soft cyborgs, a figure not created by techno-human collaboration but with

intentional entanglement with media and machines. DeLillo's characters also transform into machine-like entities hollow and empty of emotional connections and concerns.

Jean Baudrillard's theoretical framework developed as *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981/1983), provides the second major pillar for this insight. Baudrillard argues that the modern western world has moved beyond representation, where signs play the role of underlying reality, moving towards Simulation: "a generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.1). In hyperreal culture the representation of media and technology is the origin of reality and authenticity. Max in the story exhibits the theme of hyperreality when he is removed from the real digital black out and instead of coping with the situation and to look out for reasons, he consumes blank screen; "He seemed to be scrutinizing the blank screen" (Delillo, 2020, p.26). This is the best instance because the sign TV has consumed the character completely so deeply that even when: "Max looked at the screen as he ate... when he was finished eating ...kept on looking." (p.38). Without the screen's input Max lost his reasoning, "De-fence. De-fence. De-fence" (Delillo, 2020, p.26). The framework also points out the narrative style of DeLillo when characters face the collapse of the digital world, they are unable to work as authentic beings rather become artificial and automated. Again, Max's broken words 'Half sentences, bare words, repetitions' (p.26), depict a broken state of mind. The break of the digital environment is not experienced as freedom from digital slavery but as a void, consuming natural response.

Marshall McLuhan's theory summarized by John Culkin observed that "first we shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us" (Culkin, 1967, p.51). McLuhan's concept of media as extension of man, print as an extension of the eye, electronic media as an extension of the nervous system, is employed by DeLillo in *The Silence* where humans are portrayed as an extension of digital cognition erasing human agency. The novel highlights this theory: "When couples said to each other seemed to be a function of some automated process. Talk-free floating" (Delillo, 2020, p.9). The line shows that simple human response is extended into machine-like output; even the word 'automated process' itself is the proof of digital insurgency. Delillo persistently debates about this extension of humans into machines: "Artificial intelligence that betrays who we are and how we live and think" (Delillo, 2020, p.36) is the direct projection where tools which humans create for better life extend beyond our own ability to control it.

Finally, Tallin's Stairway Model (2012) constitutes the fourth theoretical element. Tallin's model suggests that the history of intelligence on earth can be understood by the elements which work effectively till now by surpassing each element before it. In other words, 'creation surpasses creator' which is "likely the architecture of our own replacement" (Tallin, 2012). The Intelligence Stairway is close to this study not in literal way but as a prediction of human-technology relationship in future and its consequences where humans are replaced or surpassed by technology. DeLillo also question similarly when he says, "Do a select number of people have a form of phone implanted in their bodies?" (Delillo, 2020, p.42) This instance is petrifying and revelatory at the same time which makes readers stop and think how humans are erased and turned into installed machines which DeLillo's narrative predicts. It is not only the alteration of language under technological collapse but complete power over deep mental maps.

Research Methodology

The current study uses qualitative research design based on interpretivist approach to understand how DeLillo's *The Silence* describes the gradual and deliberate conversion of human

cognition, behavior and thinking into automated machine-like responses. A qualitative approach is most suitable for this study because it aims to decipher symbols, responses of characters not numerical data. The research focuses on how overdependence on technology transforms human consciousness, emotional responses, language and decision-making.

A close textual analysis is applied to Don DeLillo's *The Silence* through the lens of Donna Haraway cyborg theory, *framing* it as soft cyborg to draw the attention to the erasure of human existence, and emotional intelligence while critically reading text of the novel several times to identify passages and utterances of the characters to reflect technology empowerment and even complete control. The distorted brains, broken language, and repetitive behaviors of the characters (Jim, Tessa, Max, Diane, Martin) support the study's purpose. For the solid argumentation, thematic analysis is also used where themes of cognition regression, lack of emotional depth, mechanical responses and loss of independent thinking is discussed through the instances from the novel. These themes help to understand how DeLillo portrays the modern society and the individuals living in it behave around technological invasion. Instead of projecting human's interaction with technology, the study reveals that it has already infused humans deeply into humans.

This researcher collected instances from the novel *The Silence* (DeLillo, 2020), characters, dialogues, and the narrative structure of the novel as primary source material. The secondary source material includes books about posthumanism, peer-reviews, artificial intelligence studies, DeLillo's criticism, articles, and scholarly studies of Simulation and Hyperreality theory, Cyborg theory, and Media ecology. These sources altogether form the theoretical background to analyze the textual data deeply. To further validate the study of each theme of dependency, automation, machine-like speech, technological anxieties are solidified through textual references and theoretical evidence to prove the rigorous insights.

Findings and Analysis

The most prominent themes of DeLillo's narratives are deep insights into media and digital pervasion and its encapsulating power over humans. Before the blackout, the characters of the novel were already navigating through the world which is wholly solely induced into media and technology. This power of technology works through integration with the human mind but after the digital collapse the real threat of human erosion comes into open. When characters are deprived of digital assistance, they retreat not to some pure, authentic self rather they turn into machines themselves deprived of consciousness and critical thinking. They continue to talk in fragmented, automated language. To start with the character of Diane, who despite being an academic figure lost her critical thinking and understanding of her own self after the blackout; "She felt a sense of thinning out, a loss of mass. Was she becoming a person who had no thoughts of her own? She looked at others, they all were becoming shadows in a room that was losing its light" (DeLillo, 2020, p.62). This is a very clear instance of how human behaviors are automated, without logic in the absence of technology assistance. Max's behavior on the other hand, in the starting of the novel towards the end portrays the transformation most accurately. When he is unable to watch the Super Bowl because of a blank screen, he begins to talk in strange repetitive, automated language of sports broadcasting: "He began to speak in monotone, a series of numbers and terms, point spreads, over-unders, injury reports. It was a dead language, the language of the lost." (DeLillo, 2020, p.48). The passage depicts dead language or rather incoherent utterances. It seems like the machine lost its

control on output and worked randomly. Authentic, natural reaction towards blank screen converted into lost understanding of surroundings solidifies the argument of erasure of human cognition.

The same example is repeated through the character of Jim, he also starts speaking illogically after blackout, in fragmented speech: “we are counting, always counting and everything has been counted” (DeLillo, 2020). The repetitive words, automated use of language indicates that he has no sense of purpose and meaningful interaction. This is what DeLillo terms as talk-free floating as mentioned before, a way of discourse which is without proper meaning, intention and connection just like a machine programmed without a user. The technological collapse is the attrition of ultimate human existence.

The pattern of language use in form of dialogues connects with Baudrillard’s concept of ‘Hyperreality’ where characters of the novel are more engaged into technological collapse considering it real threat ‘internet apocalypse’ rather than thinking about the collapse within themselves where in real life the connection with each other is lost, where superficial technological mediation overcomes emotional bond, seems unreal. The characters in the novel *The Silence* are interacting in the monotone of a corrupted machine without proper function and depth of situation. In contrast to DeLillo’s early work *White Noise* (1985), where Gladney family’s connection with television is presented as psychological impairment, more like hypnotic, but does not erase language or cognitive skill. The family still can talk, argue and try to shed off fear in human ways to some extent. But in *The Silence* the language is fragmented without logic and sense. The blank screen is not a distraction from reality like Gladney’s family but it’s consuming. The characters are glued to the screen as if they are internally connected to some major system and cannot talk or respond in an authentic human way. It is like a machine waiting for outer input or prompt.

Another important aspect depicted prominently in *The Silence* is the exile of emotional intelligence and consciousness of catastrophic experience where DeLillo’s ‘soft cyborgs’ turned into machines. When Jim and Tessa faced the turbulence after black out, instead of talking and soothing each other Tessa clung to writing notes and Jim; “kept reading the screen but saying nothing” (DeLillo, 2020, p.12). He keeps on watching “Filling time, Being boring, Living life” (P.10) as per McLuhan’s Media theory, too much consumption of technology affects the human mind. The tools recreate human nervous systems which challenges the processing, changing the ways of thinking, empathizing and connecting with others.

The erosion of self-consciousness is depicted through shadows, and fading lights shows the emptiness and lack of connection to self and others. The ‘soft cyborg’ who is just like a machine malfunction by interrupting the emotional balance. Max’s condition after the blackout is a profound instance of erasure of consciousness where he moves around in the room without interaction and purpose. He even starts imagining a game to be happening somewhere in “Deep Space” totally lost in the blank screen without thought and reason. He even forgets about himself as a being when he says, “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” (DeLillo, 2020, p.28). This transformation is evident in the absence of awareness of self as human. Technological collapse is so deep that it has erased the understanding and existence of humans as working agents.

Dr. Sherry Turkle in his “Who we become when we talk to machines” (2026) argues as to how the digital world reshapes the human document, is also reflective in DeLillo’s literary intuition in which discussion focuses on digital media’s influence on the human brain and communication skills affected by digital overdependence affects conscious-self. The effects are collective not

individual. After the blackout the group members Max, Diane, Jim, Tessa and Mark all suffer from collapse of identity. They are not sharing their experiences and feelings about the blackout, and not even trying to figure out solutions rather they start talking randomly like an automated machine as a hint is given by the writer in the sentence, “Artificial intelligence that betrays who we are and how we live and think” (DeLillo, 2020, p.36). This is the very acceptance of the fact that humans disappeared behind the empowering force of technology. While sitting together they have no activity left when they say, “we are being zombified...we are being bird-brained” (DeLillo, 2020, p.44). While being in a catastrophic situation, brains should be expanded to think and sort out solutions and be more supportive towards each other emotionally, they are squeezed to the bird brain as a corrupted machine which lost some of its data. It is like a group of people who are zombified, no human traits left in them, without the joyfulness of gathering. The collective collapse, and emergence of ‘soft cyborgs’ without technological support to navigate through everyday life problems and situations.

Conclusion

It may be concluded that Don DeLillo’s *The Silence* is a deep critical analysis of what happens when humans completely indulge into digital technologies. The impact is so deep that it not only affects the mind but also the cognition, self-consciousness, and emotional intelligence of individuals and communities. Through close textual analysis of the characters language and structure of writing and applying theoretical lens of Haraway’s cyborg theory, Baudrillard’s hyperreality, McLuhan’s Media Ecology the study has interpreted and posited the term of soft cyborgs through the analysis of DeLillo’s characters to build a structure of broader cultural condition.

The findings reveal four interconnected aspects of humans that have influenced the machine-like response: the erasure of human-like language use, absence of emotional intelligence, identity collapse and self-unconsciousness at individual and collective level due to digital black out. These dimensions depict that the line between human and machine is not erased rather human themselves converted into machines deliberately. The concept of ‘Soft Cyborgs’ converges well with DeLillo’s long-standing debate about digital invasion into human life and ultimately affecting language, cognition and emotional connection. It brings into light the notion that digital dependency is not neutral rather than encapsulating. DeLillo depicted it through the five characters of the novel. This study calls upon the readers to consider the ethical boundaries of technological developments and to question what practices, habits and institutions might create the possibilities for genuine connections that technology continuously erases and threatens the human existence itself as natural beings. The title of the novel *The Silence* itself is not the representation of effects of blank screens, it is the silence of a self that has lost its inner voice to speak about natural experiences, tensions, connections and face to face interactions. The novel’s most applaudable success lies in making *The Silence* audible.

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