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THE ART OF NOISE AND THE ART OF SILENCE – DON DELILLO'S DEAFENING SOUNDSCAPES

Abstract*: In his Millennial novels (those published after 2000), DeLillo explores different aspects of the human perception of identity and the world we live in. His latest novel,* Silence*, challenges the conventions which are understood to represent the basis of our understanding of reality – the data, its collection and recording and how it is used to configure the dimension of time. The novel opens as a routine mix of chatter, or noise, and silence as its negative counterpart representing the time passing. However, as the novel unfolds, this seemingly objective view from the outside, delves into personal experiences of the protagonists creating certain soundscapes alternating between the noise and silence, depending more and more on sensory perception rather than on rational processing. With its skeletal structure and utmost reduction of narrative elements, the novel* Silence *approaches the idea of silence in a similar manner to composer John Cage in his work 4.33 (1952), who researched the idea in the medium of music, an art which like literature relies on rigorous formal features. Silence, for Don DeLillo as well as for Cage is not equal to the lack of content; in contrast, it represents the alternative aspect of sound and/or noise. The silence, as much as the sound, before all, marks our perception of the lapse of time.*

Keywords: The Silence *(novel), soundscapes, poetics, Don DeLillo, sound in literature, John Cage (composer), 4.33.*

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1. Introduction

> It was always at the edges of our perception. Power out, technology slipping away, one aspect, then another. We've seen it happening repeatedly, this country and elsewhere, storms and wildfires and evacuations, typhoons, tornadoes, drought, dense fog, foul air. Landslides, tsunamis, disappearing rivers, houses collapsing, entire buildings crumbling, skies blotted out by pollution. I'm sorry and I'll try to shut up. But remaining fresh in every memory, virus, plague, the march through airport terminals, the face masks, the city streets emptied out. (DeLillo 2020: 45)

The novel *Silence* (2020) is Don DeLillo's latest glimpse into a portion of a single day, which might unfold perhaps some time in the near future, when the failure of technology is bound to shed a new light on what we perceive as our world and our place in it. It begins *in medias res* with a seemingly uninteresting and ordinary experience bordering on boredom: an intercontinental flight between Paris and Newark on an imaginary 2022 "Super Bowl Sunday". The timeframe should be considered as symbolic of American popular culture, and yet at the same time it seems to be chosen as a time marker without real significance as are most of the narrated events taking place aboard the flight.

The setting opens the novel as a debate on the substance of contemporary as a mix of chatter or noise and silence(s). Noise being understood as originating from both physical sounds and from the flow of data, and silence observed not as a lack of content, but rather as its negative counterpart. Both noise and silence are here significant as markers of time passing – they are introduced as elements of narrative structure representing the characters' understanding of the experience of time. Although the phenomenon of noise is long present in DeLillo's writing, it is necessary to point out that *Silence* does not constitute a dialogue only with the novel *White Noise*, but rather contributes to the wider context of his "Millennial novels", published after the year 2000, addressing the issues related to contemporary culture already touched upon in DeLillo's earlier writings. In addition to these conversations, the novel *Silence* offers direct references to *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Body Artist* (2001), in being a single day novel imbued in the sensory perceptions of the protagonist, as well as in limiting and narrowing down the boundaries of existence of an individual by diverting attention to the body as a source of our consciousness. All the novels deliberately tone down the intrusions from the

surroundings in order to expose a very private inner universe of just a few characters. For Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis* the probing of the boundaries of the self, manifests as his last day on Earth marked by claustrophobia, signalled by the motif of a shark in a tank at the opening of the novel. The motif re-emerges in the novel *Zero K* as a woman's body in the tank waiting for eternity in a loop of self-referential thoughts, while the novel *Body Artist* examines the nature of memory not as a collection of data acquired from the world outside the body, but rather as sensory perception and body movement. The reading proposed here suggests that in the musings about the perceptions of the contemporary, *Silence* is, as are *Cosmopolis* and *Body Artist*, an elaboration of the phenomena of (techno)cultures produced by a networked society. It explores the position of an individual in the world constructed as sequences of intervals bound by binary extremes operating between the all-encompassing networked society and the fragility of a human, whose ephemeral nature is often mistaken for insignificance, crudely leading to a conclusion that "[t]he world is everything, the individual is nothing. Do we all understand that?" (DeLillo 2020: 67). In a broader context, *Silence* creates a dialogue with the XX century ideas of existentialism and minimalism focused on the universal in individual experiences. This assumption may serve as a guide to the reading of this and similar works, despite its skeletal structure and deliberate reductionist approach to writing, in order to venture beyond daily newspaper reviewers' dismissals recognising it as superficial provocation. To establish the frame for understanding the art of *Silence*, it appears pertinent to explore the approaches to the idea of silence in a medium which similarly to literature depends on the strict formal structural conventions but focuses on sound as the primary sensory input. For example, one of the famous musical works of the XX century which links the idea of silence to human understanding of the flow of time is *4.33,* by John Cage, first performed in the 1950s. The ideas of the composer that the experience of sound and silence is fundamental to the bodily experience of time and therefore the perception of humanity, are very close to the position DeLillo takes examining the relationship of noise and silence as a literary take on the perception of the relationship of the world and an individual. The approach to silence as noise's equal counterpart in establishing the grounds for the experience of the real is the common point of origin for DeLillo and Cage, which will be further addressed since it is one of the most important constitutive elements for the topic at hand.

2. The crisis of the datasphere

The existentialist and minimalist dimension of the novel is projected onto its form, that Justin Taylor (2021) makes a point to describe as bare-bone, skeletal, even rudimentary. However, the effect of introducing silence as a form of crisis of data, is perhaps most significant in the process of characterisation. The two characters with whom *Silence* opens, are introduced aboard an airplane through the data streams they consciously and willingly participate in – Jim appears to be focused on the numeric values representing the idea of the objective palpable raw technical data flow describing the flight as an event: temperature, altitude, speed, time elapsed. In contrast, Tessa is completely submerged into the subjectivity of her experiences and the need to structure a narrative from the noise of data to create unique records as memories, as if she cannot accept as her own any of the data processed by another consciousness, even if it touches upon the daily routines and general reference – she creates personal handwritten notes as a record of their trip, rejecting the validity of the official descriptions of the places they visited contained in the brochures and printed materials they picked up during the visit: "I need to see it in my handwriting, perhaps twenty years from now, if I'm still alive" (DeLillo 2020:8). DeLillo's omniscient narrator casually surfaces to make a point – the conversation of the couple is "a function of some automated process" (8) arising from the airline travel, reduced to the minimum, most of it is just a part of the process of waiting for the flight to be over, so they can, upon the arrival indulge themselves watching the Superbowl with their friends. As Sadie Barker comments, this juxtaposition of the "passive willingness to be inundated by the screen" (Barker 2021:95) and "yearning to find and make meaning through records" (95) symbolically points as she concludes, not only to the problem within the data generated reality, but rather to "the crisis of the datasphere itself" (95). It opens a debate as to whether the blackout is the cause or the effect of the everyday sunken in "precarity, disorientation and chaos to come" (95) and whether the silence is the invisible but omnipresent counterpart to the predefined mesmerising noise, the technological hum of the consumer culture; something we choose to ignore or exclude that reads as a disaster once it forces its way to the surface of our perception. Therefore, we may observe the novel as less of an insight into the specific situation, than a commentary on the crisis which functions as a catalyst and a path towards an understanding of the deeper layers of human existence. These layers, even if we assume their presence, DeLillo positions as either inaccessible or willingly unrecognisable. The couple's automated actions point to human faith in data as the basis of our reality – "Saying

the words and numbers, speaking, detailing, allowed these indicators to live a while, officially noted, or voluntarily noted—the audible scan, he thought, of where and when." (DeLillo 2020: 9). On the one hand they represent the desire for certainty; a belief in the predictability of events that we can decipher from the current data as a consequence of the meticulous recording of the past data. Data exists as noise and it is the normalised manner of perception of time: past, present and the (predictable) future. DeLillo challenges this routine by exposing the concept of reality as a mix of noise, which may signify, but also may be static, futile and irrelevant, and the stretches devoid of noise, an empty time, becoming iconic in characters' staring at the blank screen – the signifying silence. The novelty of the situation in which the characters find themselves in, is the difficulty to discern meaningful moments since both noise and silence can bear meaning or can be irrelevant. *Silence* introduces a layer of the aural as an experience of noise or the lack of it and as a dimension of the narrative. By reducing the signifying dimension of the elements to a minimum, this short fiction forces the reader to focus attention on the construction of its sonic landscapes as alternating waves of noise and silence stretching in time. DeLillo thus transforms the predictability of our reality into a crisis of the datasphere that forces unusual sensory experiences onto his characters.

3. "Everything we do is music"[2] – *Silence* against silence

Emulating the experience of the audience in the performance of *4.33*, DeLillo invokes what John Cage foregrounded as the individualised existential, bodily, and cultural experience of reality as an experience of time materialised in (predictable) soundscapes of the contemporary. This establishes the intermedial and cultural context for the reading of *Silence*. *4.33* is considered by its author to be a piece of music, composed with respect to formal conventions in three movements of different length each consisting entirely of silence. Being in a sense a formal piece framing silence as the negative of sound, the composition became somewhat of "an icon in postwar culture, like Warhol's soup cans" (Pritchett 2009: 166) and is considered to be a "compelling dramatic gesture" (166). It is often performed across genres, and the performance involved understanding of the conventions as well as a flare for drama on the part of the performers – at its first staging the virtuoso pianist sat at the instrument, in an emphatical gesture opened the keyboard lid and sat in silence for thirty seconds of the first movement. He reopened it and sat motionless for the entire two minutes and twenty-three seconds of the

[2] A statement by John Cage, A video of the performance of John Cage's 4'33 by William Marx

second movement. Finally, he closed and reopened the lid for the last time, sitting silently for one minute and forty seconds. He then closed the lid and walked off stage. That was the entire piece. Pritchett emphasises that the drama is captivating because of the sheer simplicity of the concept. It could be interpreted as a simple provocation of the audience, but, on closer inspection, we may discover layers of meaning. Although we may confirm that the composer does not produce any audible content, nor does the performer produce any conventional materialisation of the content, the audience is there to witness the act of sitting and deliberately being quiet. What produces questions beyond the provocation is the context: the setting of a Western concert hall, with its historical and artistic significance that lends meaning to the proceedings. Similarly to the challenge that reading the first part of the novel *Silence* poses for the audience, getting through the endless waiting for a predictable situation to draw to a predictable ending, sitting quietly for any length of time in anticipation of an event that does not take place is not something that people in Western cultures generally accept, particularly not if the conventions of the proposed activity are well established and somewhat rigid, such is the concert hall setting. It brings about the references to absurdist theatre and Beckett, creating tensions in an uncomfortable situation that is beyond our control opening the possibilities for any number of responses from rejection to becoming intrigued.

Similarly to DeLillo, John Cage was first inspired by the antithesis of silence: noise. Inspired by the Futurists, he experimented with percussion instruments with an intention to extend the concept of music by including the sounds he believed to be representative of industrial culture commonly described as noise. DeLillo's novel from 1985 *White Noise* establishes the ground zero for this time-wave by exploring the incessant hum of the predominantly analogue mediated environments prior to the advent of virtual networks. The idea behind Cage's creation was in the approach to the structuring of music using the lengths of time – thus the composer is "not only faced with the field of sound, but also with the entire field of time" (Cage quoted in Pritchett 2009:168). Its conclusion is that sound and silence represent equal counterparts which allow for the musical structure to be interpreted as a sequence of durations, or time lengths. Cage explained it as the common denominator for both sound and silence since it is the fundamental aspect through which silence can only be heard. The fascination with time as perhaps the only reliable dimension of human existence in the world that is increasingly becoming virtual and ephemeral is long established in DeLillo's novels, those of the 2000s as well as the earlier ones, for example *Underworld* and *Ratner's Star*. *Silence* in that respect represents the world distilled to its minimum – blocks of time, that can either contain noise or silence.

The sequences of numbers describing the flight against the trauma of the crash landing which remains non-linear and embodied – the cut forehead, the woman running, the people in the van driving in silence. It is the idea which coincides with Cage's understanding of music as intervals of time which either contain sound or are devoid of it. As a manifestation of the expectations we as audience bring into the reading of a text or a performance of any kind, it appears that the existence of the message is never questioned if it is communicated by the data flow, even if it is perceived as noise. That makes it the more important to question the audience's expected reaction to silence and if silence communicates with the audience at all? Some of the interpretations of Cage's work involved the focus on the "ambient sound we hear during the piece" (Pritchett 2009: 174), which is also on the surface structure of DeLillo's novel, and opens the access to the layer of noise and grounds as a convention of narrative structure, and as a way to order the experience. On the other hand, both works demonstrate the concept of silence, and the asking of the question if silence really exists (174) from the point of view of the artist, rather than from the audience. The work in front of the audience is not a reference to any experience of the artist but needs to become a raw experience lacking an explanation or processing. As Pritchett emphasises, it is "a tribute to the experience of silence, a reminder of its existence and its importance for all of us" but also a warning that it cannot be "presented to us by someone else" or "communicated from one person to another", or even created on purpose in order to be experienced. It is an individual and private experience that cannot be shared and which we all need to face alone, "taking notice when it happens". Although they may differ on the assumption what exactly constitutes this experience, works like *4.33* and *Silence* "can remind us that it is up to us to turn our minds towards the silence, to recognise it as we encounter it, even if only for a moment" (Pritchett 2009: 177). With respect to the literary experience, it is perhaps most important to examine how noise and silence have been understood as alternative aspects which create original soundscapes emulating the worlds within and those without in the stories about time(s). It is perhaps best reflected in the presence and absence of linearity in the formal structure of the novel *Silence.* The novel is formally divided into two parts where the first part unfolds conventionally as a sequence of six orderly chapters structured as an alternation of sections narrated in the third person by an omniscient narrator and dialogue spoken by the characters. In contrast, the second part is a jumble of notes, sometimes only a sentence or a fragment of a sentence, recording characters' responses to the new circumstances, often unpleasant and disturbing, that the reader has to notice as it happens and then process individually.

4. Noise and its counterpart

> America's difference is established first through sound… it is the new noisy world of motor traffic, radio, gramophone and the talkies (Mansell 2020: 161).

Noise is a component of everyday soundscapes, as it is the unwanted or unpredictable component in the process of communication. It opens the discussion on the aspects of literature perceived as communication. It focuses on the issues of meaning negotiation, the information overload and the 'spillage', something that has a potential to become a meaning- making component because it will spill over the brim of the conventionally determined channel. James Mansell points out that "the noisiness of noise resides neither entirely in the sonic object, nor entirely in cultural meaning, but rather in what might be called the sonic encounter between hearer and heard, an encounter contingent on place and time" (Mansell 2020: 159). Noise, especially in modernist literature is often a negative notion associated with technology, motor traffic, and consumerist exchange done without much thought or consideration which results in a certain 'easy' culture. DeLillo's approach to noise in *White Noise* is similar, exposing it not as a collection of discernible sounds but rather as a fused constant hum. Contextualising Mansell's discussion of noise and its role and position, that the greatest value of the link between the sound and the written word is in our ability as readers to hear through the ears of the writer, *White Noise* links the sound or the humming with the aural dimension of a particular time and place. Exercising power to suggest the meanings of the sounds and of the absences of sounds in time – "…writers use the printed word to 'convey and even reproduce' sounds in a way that captures both the acoustic properties of sound as well as its meaning to those who heard it" (Mansell 2020: 155), and they are also "involved in the social dynamics of noise precisely because noise must be created and 'dramatised' as such" (158). The turn toward this interpretation of sensory bodily perceptions in DeLillo, we encounter both in *Body Artist* (2001) and in *Cosmopolis* (2003). The moment when sound becomes socially active, Mansell labels the *sonic encounter*, and claims it to be both a bodily and a cultural experience. This is the meeting point between DeLillo and John Cage. This encounter is the moment when the sound/silence initiates formation of a community, grounded in the sharing of the aural experience which makes them more real (159). The concept of sonic landscapes and silence especially explains the sensual, bodily dimension of experiencing temporal dimension of reality through sound. DeLillo uses the concept of the time loop in *Cosmopolis* deconstructing it through the

broken sequence of sensory perceptions of the protagonist Eric Packer. In his novel *Mao II*, published in 1991, DeLillo deconstructs the idea of community and the power of the collective, challenging the idea of an individual in a complex social organism relying on compulsory sharing. Contrastingly, *Cosmopolis* exposes an individual within a vast and infinitely intricate network contemplating on the assumption that the virtual data chatter is paramount for our understanding of who we are. It builds the entire narrative around the perspective of the protagonist as a "single node" in the network refracting all the inputs through his senses. This single day novel follows the protagonist's slow movement in physical space inside a long white limousine. It functions as a certain kind of an insulation pod, a barrier against the outer world and its interferences, allowing the protagonist an illusion that he, by controlling the sequences of noise(s) and silences, controls the world around him. Gradually it becomes a record of Eric Packer's last day on Earth as a palimpsest of "single lives in momentary touch" (DeLillo 2016: 237) overlapping with "movements and counter-movements of contemporary culture" (Morrison 2003) - the data flow trapped in a loop of time. Eric Packer personifies the belief that data is the foundation of our world. In fact, data is presented as a dynamic aspect of the life process: "the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realised in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions" (DeLillo 2003: 24). His understanding of the world around him as an incessant data chatter points to his perception of immortality, a new cultural belief that life can be extended in the stream of information – "People will not die. Isn't this the creed of the new culture? People will be absorbed in streams of information" (DeLillo 2003: 104). Packer rejects bodily experience of time as fundamental to humans:

> [He] always wanted to become quantum dust, transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat. The idea was to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in a whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from void. The technology was imminent or not. It was semi-mythical. It was the natural next step" (DeLillo 2003: 206)

However, the story ends with the data stream stalled and Packer "alive in original space" (DeLillo 2003: 209). He is locked out of the data flow, in a time loop waiting for the shot to be fired, while his future stays frozen in the glass of his watch (206). As the noise becomes silence, he acknowledges the pain that "interfered with his immortality" (207) and realises that "the things that made him who he was could hardly be identified, much less converted to data" (207). On the one hand, Eric

desires technology as the extension of self, he depends on the persistence of noise in connectedness. On the other, DeLillo challenges the reader – can we exist in silence, outside the chatter? Would we be more, or less real? Does Eric really have a role in the networks of data flow and what is it that makes him real? Eventually, he understands that there are portions of him that are untranslatable, untransferable, unique and with his death, would become irrevocably lost:

> He'd come to know himself, untranslatably, through his pain. He felt so tired now. His hard-gotten grip on the world, material things, great things, his memories true and false, the vague malaise of winter twilights, untransferable, the pale nights when his identity flattens for lack of sleep, the small wart he feels on his thigh every time he showers, all him, and how the soap he uses, the smell and feel of the concave bar make him who he is because he names the fragrance, amandine, and the hang of his cock, untransferable, and his strangely achy knee, the click in his knee when he bends it, all him, and so much else that's not convertible to some high sublime, the technology of mind-without-end. (DeLillo 2003: 207)

As if the pain awakened the silenced aspects of his being and altered his own perception of self, Eric's previous musings on the idea of becoming immortal by uploading his consciousness into the network at this point appear naïve and childish. By diverting the focus of the protagonist from the seemingly eternal abstract models of the world materialised in the flow of numbers (signifying the value of money) to the concrete and ephemeral experiences of the body, DeLillo emphasises the limits of human physical existence symbolised in temporality and marked by the fear of death as fundamental for establishing one's subjectivity.

The overwhelming fear that the novel *White Noise* (1985) presents as existential dread, originates from the clash of belief and doubt, and transforms into a dissimilar experience in DeLillo's 21st century novels. The conflict evolves into a question of who we are and how our place evolves within the deafening silence in *Zero K* (2016):

> ...humans are claimed to already exist as "unfleshed" consciousness worshiping data: Haven't you felt it? The loss of autonomy. The sense of being virtualised. The devices you use, the ones you carry everywhere, room to room, minute to minute, inescapably. Do you ever feel unfleshed? All the coded impulses you depend on to guide you. All the sensors in the room that are watching you, listening to you, tracking your habits, measuring your capabilities. All the linked data designed to incorporate you into the megadata. Is there something that makes you uneasy? (DeLillo 2016: 239)

Similar to the message of DeLillo's earlier novel *Body Artist*, this forces us to realise once more that in order to comprehend who we are, we need to consider ourselves in a situation when "we are not rehearsing who we are" (DeLillo 2002: 110), which hints that how we perceive ourselves is always under pressure of expectations created by the flow of data that creates our world and it can be in collision with some other aspects of selfhood that is silenced by the outside noise. To remember who she is and to recover from trauma, the protagonist of the *Body Artist* retreats to isolation; she becomes a node sunken in silence and disconnected from the networks so she may re-compose her identity. It brings into focus understanding of physical properties of sound and their link to humans' experience of themselves by introducing Mr. Tuttle as a virtual figure created as a projection of voice, fragments of language and memory.

Anna Snaith opens a discussion on the sonic component of a literary text in a collection of essays *Sound in Literature* (2020), by offering a factual explanation of the physical nature of sound: it is a mechanical wave made of molecules travelling through a medium. It has immersive properties in the sense that animate beings experience the sound waves on the point of contact with their bodies. The contact initiates physiological processes – the chain of vibrations is transformed into an electrical signal transmitted along the auditory nerve to the brain. On the level of metaphor, this process could explain the effect of immersion into a different culture – it conceptualises a "world of moving and colliding objects and their radiating impact" (Snaith 2020: 2). On the surface level, sound as vibration "is the ground of existence" (2). Snaith further explains that the experiments with typography, punctuation or internal monologue are just some of the ways in which writers play with or reject the conventions of vocal representation, thus engaging with a politics of voice. "Sound can be both a weapon of warfare and a means of bonding individuals and communities to each other, to a place or to a past encounter" (Snaith 2020:2). Elaborating on the cultural experience of sound using Virginia Woolf's 1927 essay, 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', Helen Groth concludes that "the literary soundscape… is not divorced from the social or natural sound world in which it is created and consumed, it is of it, in it, and contributes to its construction" (Groth 2020: 135). She explains that the sound cannot be separated nor excluded from the process of writing or reading since it too participates in the production of the work of art and structures its relationship to "other texts, objects, people, and institutions in relations of dependency, involvement, and interaction" (135). Groth points out that "the letters, words, lines take shape on the page in radically different ways depending on the sound world in which they are embedded" (136)

which is demonstrated in almost all DeLillo's works, resulting in a particular literary *soundscape* either as a representation, mediation or a manner of registering sound in literature. However, it is not to be understood as merely a "descriptive mimetic repertoire" (137) to be arranged accordingly in order to represent an accurate record of the particular sonic environment. Woolf claimed that the form and definition of the work of literature is constantly being influenced by the layer of sounds produced by the environment, or the world, at a particular moment in time. Groth points out that Woolf's radically altered sonic environment included new forms that reflected changes in the world and the perception of it: the atomisation of lives, desensitisation by the consumption of violence through the news of the world and the powerless position of individuals and the changed perception of the environment. It was reflected in the soundscapes and was the product of the alteration of the material environment (138). In *Body Artist*, the sonic aspect is instead used as a reflection on the change taking place within an individual, in response to trauma. It points to the process of becoming. In *Silence* DeLillo seems to adopt Woolf's position even though almost a century apart. He focuses on the screen symbolically perceived as a point of access to the reality of experience and offers the flipped perspective on what constitutes the experience – once the reality stops being mediated it does not disappear. In support of this interpretation, we may refer to Groth's insight on Emily Thompson from *The Soundscape of Modernity* (2002) explaining the soundscape as both a physical environment and a cultural construction of that world that incorporates technological and aesthetic *ways of listening*. Similar to the ideas of John Cage, it introduces the idea of the predetermined listener in specific social circumstances and with specific relationship to their environment, which influences their perception of aural information (138). This is the key concept for the novel *Silence*. It is immersed in mediated culture which prioritises the visual over the auditory, which transfers the modernism inspired idea of the ways of listening to the idea of convergence of data inputs as fundamental for the bodily and cultural experience:

'But you're happy about the screen. You like your screen.'
'It helps me hide from the noise.'
Everything predetermined, a long flight, what we think and say, our immersion in a single sustained overtone, the engine roar, how we accept the need to accommodate it, keep it tolerable even if it isn't. (DeLillo 2020:11)

DeLillo additionally grounds the convergence in the narrator's consciousness which corresponds to Thompson's idea of "a listener's relationship to their

environment, and the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what" (Groth 2020: 138). The notion of noise/silence projects itself as a futurist prediction that Steven Connor claims to be the introduction of "a new kind of human subjectivity" (Connor 1997: 208) as described by F.T. Marinetti, the founder of futurism. This kind of subject is perceived as an unstable modern self, the kind of self that is not a passive receptor or perceptor (or reflector), but the self *intercepted* by experiences, events or phenomena and continuously being "traversed, dissolved and remade" (208) introduced in *Body Artist*, which the novel *Silence* presents from another angle.

5. The Art of *Silence*

In his evaluation of the latest product in Don DeLillo's long sequence of novels, Justin Taylor (2021) begins by creating a context of similarities reflecting on the claims that there are "echoes of earlier novels all over the place" (173). It is evident that many motifs appear as reverberations of those already highlighted or even exploited earlier: topics of war and football in *End Zone*, an airplane as a setting in *Players,* mediated environments, a fear of death and the media noise of *White Noise* intersect with the idea of a universe connected in *Underworld*. On the other hand, there is the thematic compatibility with the narrative universe of the novels of the 21st century, which would appear to support the thesis that the entire DeLillo's opus appears to be revolving around a limited or even restrictive scope of cultural issues. However, this conclusion would be entirely superficial since the treatment of the topic despite the familiarity of the leitmotifs is far from repetitive. Taylor describes it as "skeletal spareness"(173) of DeLillo's writing, which brings about the conundrum for readers and critics alike – is there a layer of substance beyond the obvious collage of the recognisable ready-mades? Observing the series of reviews by the renowned contributors which covers a long span of time and most of DeLillo's works, Taylor notes that it is the critics commentaries that are rather repetitive, denouncing them for declaring scepticism of DeLillo's creative potential:

> To get stuck on the question of repetition is to make possibly the least interesting and certainly the least fruitful observation that can be made about DeLillo's complex, challenging, shatteringly original body of work. (Taylor 2021: 174)

Taylor here particularly criticises the literary reviews of Michiko Kakutani, denouncing her intention to remain on the surface as if determined to limit the perception only to confirming the already established interpretations. On the other hand, there are the opposing views which focus on the larger images created in

DeLillo's mosaics. For example, Zoran Paunović points out that "...the twenty-first century will be remembered by the fulfilment of almost all the dark prophecies of DeLillo's novels: the world becoming a landfill of physical and digital waste squeezing the life out of the mindless children of consumer society permanently searching for Eden hidden beyond a screen" (Paunović 2020). *Silence* is one of the pieces of this puzzle created as a note on how the events might unfold once our experience is reduced to a blackout blocking the digital universe. As screens go blank, data compiling becomes obsolete. The blackout affects the routine of both parties of characters whose narratives initially run parallel, creating "zones of calamity" (Barker 2021: 97). On one end of the narrative, the flight ends instead in a series of boring automated activities, in a crash landing, and Tess and Jim become survivors, now very much aware of the physical aspect of their existence. In order to emphasise that, the narrative focuses on the cut on Jim's head, on their intercourse in a toilet and the exchange of a mutual gaze: "This look summed up the day and their survival and the depth of their connection" (DeLillo 2020: 28). On the other end, the protagonists contemplate on the football game which perhaps still unfolds somewhere, without screens to transmit it. Against the convention, the narrative does not shift the focus toward an attempt to pinpoint the source of the problem. DeLillo deliberately disregards the causes and closely examines only the effects. "The glitch has the capacity to devastate" (Barker 2021: 97) in lowering the shields of networked society upon which our culture so profoundly depends. Therefore, the "crisis" DeLillo brings into spotlight is not the consequence of any incident but rather the logical outcome of the mechanisms that operated in the background. As Barker posits "Amidst the slow recension of privacy and information, the commodification of viewership and technological socialisation, the glitch does not cause but rather performs transformations already underway" (2021: 98). Therefore, the story of *Silence* is not structured as a chain of events in a causal relationship, but rather in a Pinteresque manner; through setting, characters, the use of time and language. In response to the blackout, the party of three in the apartment in New York experiences the duality of silence affecting physical aspects – the dominating sensory discomfort results from the conflict of the visual input of the persistently blank screen, still diverting the focus of attention, and the soundscape generated by the auditory simulation of game reporting performed by Max. He even adjusts his voice so to emulate both the reporter and the commercial breaks intonation – it emphasises repetitiveness of the reported event as well as its petrified structure potentially questioning the authenticity of any mediated transmission, but also invokes the character of Mr Tuttle from *Body Artist*, creating a

dialogue with predictability of memory. At the same time, the scene is a testimonial to the power of the medium in contemporary culture to condition our behaviour - although she participates in a conversation with Martin, Max's wife Diana follows his little show unconsciously checking the screen, to make sure if it was still blank.

This performance invokes the idea of silence as expressed by Harold Pinter, the paraphrase of which is also the underlining idea in the composition of John Cage:

> There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. (Pinter quoted in Taylor 2021: 163-164)

Is the chatter produced by Max noise, or is it this other type of silence? Was the content produced by the screens when they operated the same type of silence, a pointer to what we don't hear? As the "true silence" falls, Diana contemplates on the state of the world without power, focusing the readers' attention on her, as an individual, a singularity in a world now without others, without traffic, disconnected from people in their homes in front of millions of blank screens. Barker emphasises that it is the "endoskeleton of the world" (2021: 99) which becomes exposed by the unspecified glitch. DeLillo points to it adhering to the elements of form – the "algorithmic dialogue" (Barker 2021: 100) as symbolic of the need to establish meaning through an exchange with technology; the broken connections before the incident projected in the awkwardness of addressing one's neighbours. As Tess and Jim join the party moving through space with only their bodies, walking and climbing the stairs, the atmosphere in the apartment resonates with motifs from Sartre's *No Exit*. The end of the world as we know it in *Silence* becomes an experiment:

> From the one blank screen in this apartment to the situation that surrounds us. What is happening? Who is doing this to us? Have our minds been digitally remastered? Are we an experiment that happens to be falling apart, a scheme set in motion by forces outside our reckoning? (DeLillo 2020: 46)

The second part of the book rests on protagonists' monologues repeatedly explicating the crisis, meticulously recording the effects as layers of our world are being stripped one by one. "Seemingly all screens have emptied out, everywhere. What remains for us to see, hear, feel?" (DeLillo 2020: 41) – now the company of

five protagonists ponders on the topics that make up their contemporaneity: from satellite tracking data to bioweapons and cryptocurrencies. A series of dramatic monologues diverts readers' attention to the consciousness of each of the characters and their personal experience of the moment reflected in their present sensations and in their memories of the past building up a "cloud of collective consciousness". DeLillo depends on the concept of time to hold it together, the past, the present and the potential for a future, where he asks again the questions that have been asked before. "The onward moments, the flowing moments. People have to keep telling themselves that they're still alive." (DeLillo 2020: 57) On the other hand, Diane believes that her thoughts require silencing in order for her to experience "The physics of time. Absolute time. Time's arrow. Time and space" (59).

6. Coda

Silence is in many senses a coda of DeLillo's Millennial Novels – as Taylor boldly claims, it is a work confirming DeLillo's intention never to conform to convention, or his refusal to play it safe: it is a strange conceit, a blend of unlikely pairs, "a work of surpassing strangeness, a play in prose, at once hushed and cacophonic, built out of blankness and oriented voidward, concerned with grand catastrophe yet scrupulously free of spectacle" (Taylor 2021: 180). As it is clear that "DeLillo has burned away everything inessential" (180), and much more, at the same time it invites to ask why that is the case. What is "the impulse dictating the logic" (DeLillo 2020: 13)? On the one hand, it is coming from the field engendering his novels after 2000 – straining the challenge of the crisis of the datasphere to its limits, it makes us question the validity of data collection and its transmission, the principles believed to be the foundations of our sense of reality. Foregrounding sensory aspects of human experience, DeLillo portrays the world as intervals of silence and noise offering each an equal position in the equation. Thus, *Silence* converses with the XX century literary and artistic traditions, confirming that the music within literature "functions as a …referential structure with links to epistemologies and thought processes beyond language" (Bushnell 2013: 148). The sound, or the lack of it, becomes a metaphor for cognitive processes and subject positions that represent an alternative thinking, acting and being in the world (148) and in the novel this creates a dialogue with the traditions of Modernism, as well as with those of the theatre of the absurd. The process reconfigures the perception of our own place in a world of soundscapes turned inwards, balancing between maintaining continuity and demonstrating change. It maps the field outside the

comfort zone of its characters and the readers alike. Confronting the art of Noise with his art of Silence, DeLillo's short and skeletal note of the novel constitutes an ultimate provocation of the contemporary.

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УМЕТНОСТ БУКЕ И УМЕТНОСТ МУКА: ЗАГЛУШУЈУЋИ ЗВУЧНИ ПЕЈЗАЖИ ДОНА ДЕЛИЛА

Резиме

У романима објављеним након 2000. године, Дон Делило истражује различите аспекте идентитета савременог човека и преиспитује људско разумевање света и нашег места у њему. Његов најновији роман, *Тишина*, представља провокацију како увреженом схватању елемената од којих се састоји наша стварност, тако и конвенцијама које чине основне принципе структурирања тих елемената у систем који прихватамо као слику те стварности. Окосницу романа чини разоткривање механизама доживљавања времена кроз сакупљање и организовање података супротстављено индивидуалној чулној перцепцији. Роман започиње илустрацијом поступка у коме низови података о лету авиона симболички представљају објективни простор и време, да би се услед недефинисаног „поремећаја у систему” нарација окренула ка индивидуалном доживљају стварности и трагању за значењем које се поима, пре свега, кроз чулне подражаје реализоване као звучни пејзаж настао алтернацијом буке података и муклог трајања у „тишини”. У ширем контексту, роман *Тишина* успоставља дијалог са идејама егзистенцијализма и минимализма, постављајући појединца у средиште пажње, тиме наглашавајући да и његова читања морају надилазити приступ који би овај роман приказао као површну провокацију. Управо захваљујући структури која је тек скелет и редуковању наративних елемената, роман *Тишина* приступа идеји тишине на сличан начин на који то чини композитор Џон Кејџ у делу 4.33 (1952), истражујући га кроз медијум музике, који, као и књижевност, подразумева ригорозно поштовање форме. Тишина за Делила, као и за Кејџа, није изједначена са празнином, већ представља другу страну звука или буке, коју, као и звук, пре свега, обележава трајање. С друге стране, роман *Тишина* преиспитује људску потребу да успостави значење структурирајући буку података у форму коначног записа. Делило доводи у питање циљ бележења низова података, њихово закључавање у структуре једнозначних интерпретација које се потом дистрибуирају посредством екрана и постају извор стварности пре него њен пасивни одраз. У тој структури

тишина је невидљиви, али свеприсутни пандан буци, технолошком шуму потрошачке културе, нешто што смо научени да искључимо или не примећујемо. Стога, Делило подацима претпоставља аспекте чулног искуства појединца, сликајући низове интимних стварности сачињене искључиво од интервала буке и тишине, редукујући све друге елементе на минимум. Роман *Тишина*, из перспективе друге деценије 21. века, тако ступа у дијалог са књижевном традицијом 20. века, пре свега са модернизмом и са позориштем апсурда, остављајући одшкринута врата перцепције, усмеравајући читаочеву пажњу на унутрашње звучне пејзаже као слике које одражавају јединство континуитета и промене.

▶ *Кључне речи*: *Тишина* (роман), звучни пејзаж, поетика, Дон Делило, звук у књижевности.