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'Static, Glitch, Lull: DeLillo's Ambient Apocalypse'

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## Static, Glitch, Lull: DeLillo's Ambient Apocalypse

Sadie Barker

*The Silence*. By Don DeLillo. 2020. 128p. £14.99. Pan Macmillan.  
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Don DeLillo's *The Silence* speculates a day in the future when technology inordinately fails.<sup>1</sup> Yet, prior to this apocalypse, *The Silence* is ordinary, beginning mid-flight, somewhere between Paris and Newark, on Super Bowl Sunday, 2022. On schedule to join their friends in time for kick-off, Jim Kripps and Tessa Berrens pass the time: Jim, muses over the flight tracker — 'Altitude, thirty-three thousand and two feet'; 'I'm reading whatever appears'— while Tessa records her memories — 'I need to see it in my handwriting, perhaps, twenty years from now, if I'm still alive' (4,8,10). By prefacing with futility and anticipation, existentialism and nihilism, with airline talk—an 'automated process...generated by the nature of airline travel itself'—DeLillo frames his atmospheric meditation on morality with a world suspended by signals (7). More than the impending event of technological blackout, Jim's passive willingness to be inundated by the screen and Tessa's yearning to find and make meaning through records, set the stage for DeLillo's apocalyptic rendering of not only a crisis in the datasphere, but the crisis of the datasphere itself.

Given the unprecedented nature of 2020, the notion of anticipatory literature is especially enticing. Literary science fiction has a history of articulating reality by speculating futures, but the event of COVID-19, in its particularity and suddenness, bears opportunity to consider literary modes of anticipation, premonition and reflection, up close.<sup>2</sup> Completed 'just

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<sup>1</sup> Don DeLillo, *The Silence: A Novel* (New York: Scribner, 2020). Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> As Stephen Kearsse's survey of Octavia Butler's science fiction observes, Butler's "probing mind...animates her novels, short stories and essays [and] is obsessed with the viability of the human enterprise. Will we survive our worst habits? Will we change? Do we want to?". Stephen Kearsse, "The Essential Octavia Butler," *The New York Times*, Jan. 15, 2021, no page. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/15/books/review/the-essential-octavia-butler.html>

weeks before the advent of COVID-19,<sup>3</sup> DeLillo's novel situates itself within such possibilities, affirming Ezra Pound's suggestion that artists are antennae of some kind,<sup>4</sup> and inviting the reader to consider what enables a visionary to be just *so timely* with his apocalyptic anticipations in the first place. Like Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020) and its doom-laden podcast nesting the climate crisis within the anxieties of listener call-ins, or Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) braiding everyday consumer desire, capitalist bare life, and Shen-fevered fevered zombies within a pandemic-oriented apocalypse, DeLillo's novel, more than apocalyptic event, is interested in its ordinary premising; the ways in which the everyday bears signs of the precarity, disorientation, and chaos to come.<sup>5</sup> Early observations such as Tessa's — "you like your screen," she notes, of Jim' — saturate the looming stakes of 'the silence' with attachments to, desires for, and habits of technological connection (13). As Paola Iovene suggests, as a literary technique, anticipation 'engages an aspect of the future that is phenomenological and affective rather than ideological; it is embodied and practiced rather than merely narrated or projected onto a subsequent time-space'.<sup>6</sup> Like Offill and Ma, DeLillo anticipates apocalypse as a means of articulating its ambient, underlying neoliberal, late-capitalist, technological registers. Like a slight shift in weather within exponential rising temperatures and sea levels, a yearning for the newest iPhone amidst the impoverishment of global capitalism, or the self-circulated selfie despite fears of surveillance, the habituated ordinary, *The Silence* tells us in subtle and easily discounted ways about the apocalypse already underway.

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<sup>3</sup> As the jacket cover of *The Silence* reads: 'Don DeLillo completed this novel just weeks before the advent of COVID-19. The Silence is a story of a different catastrophic event. Its resonances offer a mysterious solace'.

<sup>4</sup> As Pound declared in *Instigations of Ezra Pound* (Glasgow: Good Press, 1920) p.109: 'Artists are the antennae of the race but the bullet-headed many will never learn to trust their great artists'.

<sup>5</sup> Jenny Offill, *Weather: A Novel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020). Ling Ma, *Severance* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Paola Iovene, *Tales of Futures Past: Anticipation and the Ends of Literature in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), p. 4.

*The Silence* is thus less invested in its particular emergency than the nature of contemporary crises generally. The blackout is both singular and constellated, underlying Jim and Tessa's crash landing and the terminating of Max, Diane, and Martin's television as they await Jim and Tessa's arrival. By encompassing challenges ranging from near-death encounters to the disruption of media consumption, the blackout renders both the quiet living room and the chaotic airport tarmac following the plane's crash-landing zones of calamity. Whether caused by a global cyber-hacking scheme or a faulty wire, in a world where life and routine are mutually dependent on signals, the glitch has the capacity to devastate. In that sense, DeLillo's apocalyptic event relies on a common signifier. As Mark Nunes argues, given the growing dominance of cybernetic ideologies of 'error free world of 100 percent efficiency, accuracy, and predictability', technical 'error provides us with an important critical lens for understanding what it means to live within a networked society'.<sup>7</sup> Disciplines such as glitch art and glitch feminism have utilized technical error's culturally descriptive articulations of control and resistance.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in its literal and basic manifestations, the glitch distorts and terminates overloaded systems—from COVID-19 vaccine registration interfaces to Netflix during a Friday release—indiscriminately, encompassing the varied stakes DeLillo reflects. Jim and Tessa's movement from near-fatal encounters with the tarmac to Max and Diane's quiet living room, from the glitch of the plane to the glitch of the television, perform the glitch's consolidation of the mundane and the spectacular, life and death.

DeLillo is thus most interested in habit: the habits that constitute the everyday and endow the glitch with its power to undo. Following the television's sudden void, Max's inclination to stare at the screen nonetheless offers parodic consolidation of *The Silence's* theme

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Nunes, *Error: Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Cultures* (New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2020) in which Russell both notes that "A glitch is an error, a mistake, a failure to function" (6) and argues that "Within glitch feminism, glitch is celebrated as a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of non-performance" (8).

of technological dependence, but more so, suggests that attributing ‘crisis’ to its inciting incident would be misguided. Amidst the slow recension of privacy and information, the commodification of viewership and technological socialization, the glitch does not cause but rather performs transformations already underway. If the television in DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) symbolized the colonization of attention—its static and blue light a motif of a culture increasingly premised on distraction—the television, here, indexes what remains when this vehicle of focus and dispersal is terminated.<sup>9</sup> From his TV chair, Max’s assertion, ‘We’re being zombified. We’re being bird-brained’, invites a temporal reimagining of the ‘apocalyptic event’ as one of slower, ambient acclimatization (23). Here, the zombie emerges not through the violence of flesh eating or the reanimation of a corpse, but the slow consumption of attention, depleting its subject in ways more subtle and less grotesque. As Lauren Berlant suggests, in a neoliberal late-capitalist world where desire is deeply imbricated with systems of foreclosure, we would do well to abandon the presupposition that crisis comes in the form of unprecedented surprise: ‘crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming’.<sup>10</sup> Crisis, Berlant argues, exceeds its situation, manifesting in the affective economies of attachment that constitute our everyday.

DeLillo’s apocalyptic anticipations, tempting explicit parallelization to COVID-19, thus exceed, in ways less obvious and more profound, the theme of ‘unprecedented time’ by emphasizing how time itself is normalized and conceptualized in this world so close to our own. In the sudden quiet of the Manhattan living room, theories are launched. Martin speculates: ‘It could be algorithmic governance. The Chinese...They’ve initiated a secret internet apocalypse’ (26). ‘Is everything in the datasphere subject to distortion and theft?’ Tessa wonders, ‘And do we simply have to sit here and mourn our fate?’ (59). Amidst the seeming inability to fill the silence

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<sup>9</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.10.

beyond perseverations of the glitch and lofty speculation, amidst the disinclination to practice errantly generative forms of occupying space and time, amidst xenophobic discourses of racial paranoia, DeLillo's most astute, critical anticipations seem to lie.

In the early moments of COVID-19, at the height of panic and conspiracy, Paul Preciado likewise emphasized the 'apocalyptic' events' ongoing, ordinary temporalities. 'Well before the appearance of Covid-19', he asserted, 'a process of global mutation was already underway—we were undergoing social and political changes... transition[ing] from a written to a cyber-oral society, from an industrial to an immaterial economy, from a form of disciplinary and architectural control to forms of microprosthetic and media-cybernetic control'. In a Foucauldian manner, Preciado rendered COVID-19 a crisis nested within everyday circulations of power, enacted by and upon the body; a situation not in want of 'conspiracy theories about lab-designed viruses paving the way for authoritarian power grabs' but rather attention to the biopolitical and necropolitical systems 'already operating over sexual, racial, or migrant minorities before the state of exception'.<sup>11</sup> Like Ma's Shen-fevered zombie, destined to dissolve into a repetitious moral nothingness of 'productive' habit, or DeLillo's Max, who, when watching television tends 'to fall into a pale trance' (23), Preciado's assertion that 'the virus is within us' advocates a re-reading of apocalypse as not a spectacular external imposition, but interplay between the self and the systems of the world. The crisis of COVID-19, he asserted, was not *out there and coming for us* but intimately entangled with everyday constituents. As poet Dionne Brand reflected six months into the pandemic, 'I know, as many do, that I've been living a pandemic all my life; it is structural rather than viral; it is the global state of emergency of anti blackness. What the COVID-19 pandemic has done is expose even further the endoskeleton of the world'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Paul B Preciado, 'Learning From the Virus' *Art Forum*, 2020, no page, accessed February 20, 2021. <https://www.artforum.com/print/202005/paul-b-preciado-82823>.

<sup>12</sup> Dionne Brand, "On narrative, reckoning and the calculus of living and dying," *The Toronto Star*, April 4, 2020, no page.

*The Silence* is invested in the endoskeleton of the world, and the glitch's capacity to expose it. Its clipped, algorithmic dialogue stylizes the exchanges between technology and the self; the at-once obvious and dissonant proposal of conferring with the 'so-called neighbours' suggests a plague of disconnect preceding the apocalyptic event (30). And yet, DeLillo's novel is optimistic. If Max's fixation on the empty screen distills the crisis of everydayness, relegating the zombie to something less spectacular and more familiar, then Tessa's assertion, "we have to remember to keep telling ourselves that we're still alive" suggests that methods of survival in this apocalypse are ordinary too (39). There will be no chainsaws here, but a room with people and myriad possibilities for intimacy and meaning. The apocalypse, *The Silence* suggests, will be ambient, subtle, but it may be the very thing to save humanity from itself. As Preciado concludes, the virus may be 'within us', but so are an array of antidotes: 'Let us turn off our cell phones, let us disconnect from the internet. Let us stage a big blackout against the satellites observing us, and let us consider the coming revolution together'.<sup>13</sup>

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<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2020/07/04/dionne-brand-on-narrative-reckoning-and-the-calculus-of-living-and-dying.html>

<sup>13</sup> Preciado, "Learning From The Virus," no page.