

Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature

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Chapter 9

Technological Vulnerability in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020)

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Introduction

The concept of “vulnerability” has gained both significance and visibility in the social sciences in the last two decades. Definitions of the term can be vague, and the types of vulnerability can be many—individual, economic, political, social, bodily, anthropological, relational—depending on the focus one takes. As a result, vulnerability has been studied in relation to other terms like “care,” “ethics,” “the Other,” “trauma,” “risk theory” and “precariousness” (Ganteau 2015, 3). As Hommels, Mesman, and Bijker (2014) explain, disciplines such as economics, climate studies, studies of technological systems, disaster studies, development studies and anthropology, among other fields, have used the concept. Vulnerability does not only affect people, since plants, animals, ecosystems, groups, communities, institutions, artifacts, technical systems, and organizations can also be vulnerable. In turn, systems subjected to vulnerability can be social and physical, cultural, and natural, small and large, and thus, their study also needs to take into account natural, sociocultural, and technical aspects as well as its own environment and its positive and negative connotations (5–7).

In this chapter, I want to narrow the scope to the literary representation of the vulnerability that results from the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4th IR) and the exponential development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Through my analysis of Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020), I will explore the vulnerability that comes from our dependence on technology and the fear that results from imagining a future without it. The text will be analyzed through the double lens of posthuman studies and vulnerability because it uses a very specific aesthetics of melancholia and loss that reflects human current dependence on screens, computers, and machines and how this dependence threatens our ontological definition of who we are and how we connect with others. As one character in the novel claims, “[t]he more advanced, the more vulnerable. Our systems of surveillance, our facial recognition devices, our imagery resolution. How do we know who we are?” (2020, 61).

Our technological vulnerability and our posthuman condition are inextricably linked in DeLillo's text.

Technology Dependence and the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Since the 21st century, our reliance on technology and its seamless integration in our lives is a natural consequence of the 4th IR, which, according to Klaus Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum, constitutes a paradigm shift (2016, 2). Schwab argues that what distinguishes the 4th IR from the third, which developed in the latter half of the 20th century and moved from mechanical and electronic technology into digital electronics, is its exponential speed, scope, and unprecedented impact. The present 4th IR builds on the digital one and is transforming how we live, express ourselves, work, connect with others, and get information in an exponential way (2016, 2). These changes are also affecting almost every industry in every country and entire systems of production, management, and governance.

Schwab and Davis argue that this revolution comes with a set of emerging technologies that include artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, additive manufacturing (also known as 3D printing), Internet-of-things technology, Big Data, neurotechnologies, biotechnologies, virtual and augmented reality, and new materials (2018, 7). All key innovations make use of digital power and are organized around the physical, the digital and the biological. In fact, they co-evolve, fuse, and enrich each other (Schwab 2016, 8; Schwab and Davis 2018, 3). For example, digital fabrication technologies interact with the biological world through bioprinting to generate living tissue. In this context, transhumanist dreams of freeing humans from their biological/corporeal limitations to create "radically enhanced humans" (Bostrom 2005, 5) do not seem so far away.

The co-evolution, fusion, and enrichment of the physical, digital, and biological spheres that Schwab and Davis describe also affect the definition of the human and fit well with the conception of the posthuman as seen by critical posthumanists who understand the human and the non-human (the machine, the plant, and the animal) as a continuum. Therefore, the (post)human is seen as nonfixed, mutable, and co-evolving with technology by both the theorists of the 4th IR and by critical posthumanist thinkers (Braidotti 2013; Herbrechter 2013; Nayar 2013). The 4th IR brings new forms of vulnerability such as the loss of manual and cognitive routine jobs that will be performed by computers, robots, and other digital technologies; the increase in differences in income and wealth among people; and the likely disappearance of the middle class in a more competitive, efficient, and flexible labor market (Schwab 2016, 35–38; Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2016, 125–146; Johannessen 2019, 4). However, the exponential development of information technologies and digitalization has produced an unexpected form of human vulnerability.

Our dependence on these technologies, which are an indispensable part of our present form of life, defines how we deal with reality and how we live, work, express and entertain ourselves, connect with others, and get information (Floridi 2014; Schwab 2016; Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2016; Coeckelbergh 2017). What it means to be human is also being redefined by technology, since, as Sherry Turkle argues, the role of technology has evolved from first being a tool, to later turning into a prosthesis to integrating as part of our cyborg selves (Coutu 2003, 50). The boundary between the human and the machine becomes porous as the non-human becomes an essential part of the (post)human sense of identity. Losing the machine means losing a part of ourselves and that makes us especially vulnerable to the threat of its loss. The combination of technological ubiquity and intimacy with our dependence on ICTs makes our human fragility more obvious as our role is diminished in an informational environment that engulfs us.

Technology and Vulnerability

The vulnerability that comes with technology is loaded with many contradictions and does not affect everyone in the same way. Technology is often seen in a positive light, as a form of enhancement in our lives, but technological vulnerability in the USA became apparent after 9/11 when “two wonders of modern technology—the skyscraper and the jet airliner—came crashing together causing the carefully contained power of both systems to be released in catastrophic explosion, inferno and collapse” (Winner 2004, 166). Technology turned into a weapon transforming the dream into a nightmare. Besides, our technological dependence increases when more technology is deployed to solve the problems caused by technology. This “technological fix” (Heberlein 1974) is a solution that the technologies of the 4th IR have made more accessible. For example, geoengineering aims at intervening and controlling the behavior of the biosphere through technology (placing a giant mirror in the stratosphere or chemically seeding the atmosphere). In the same line, safety in an intensive care unit may be improved with further electronic technologies for monitoring. As a result, our dependency on technology increases, making us more vulnerable to its loss.

Vulnerability is often studied in relation to people in developing countries who are more exposed to risk. Unequal social power structures and questions like social class, ethnicity, and gender make some individuals more vulnerable than others. Rosi Braidotti (2019) underlines how the sexualized, colonized, indigenous, and naturalized others are more vulnerable, and how the 4th IR and the sixth extinction may impact people very differently depending on their geopolitical locations and perspectives (71). Technological vulnerability affects Western wealthy nations and less prosperous ones very differently. A digital divide separates those

who own digital devices and are connected to the Internet and those who do not. Whereas the Internet penetration rate in North America was 93.9% in 2021, in Africa it was 43.2% (*Internet World Stats*). Those that do not have access to technology are vulnerable because they risk being left behind in the technological race to access digital dividends including “remote access to health and education information, financial inclusion and digital pathways to economic and political empowerment” (Hernandez and Roberts 2018, 1).

However, there is another side to the concept of technological vulnerability. It may also refer to those who have the technology but depend so much on it that they cannot function without it. The segment of the population that is usually more sheltered and less exposed to general risk is especially affected by this type of technological vulnerability. According to International Telecommunication Union, which is the United Nations specialized agency for ICTs, Internet access at home in urban areas is twice as high as in rural areas, 71% of the world’s youth were using the Internet in 2020 (in contrast with 57% of the other age groups); and globally, there is also an Internet-use gender gap, since in 2020 62% of men were using the Internet as opposed to 57% of women (*Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures* 2021). Thus, factors like gender, geography, or age, among others, affect the risk of dependence on ICTs, which is higher for young urban men in developed nations. Even though Judith Butler (2014) warns against the appropriations of vulnerability by dominant groups, or colonial powers, who see themselves threatened by those seeking equality, freedom, or reparation, the technologically privileged are engulfed by complex interdependent systems but lack the tools to react in case of system failure or a digital blackout. This is the type of vulnerability that Don DeLillo’s novel *The Silence* explores as it warns of the dangers of losing our humanity to seamlessly integrate in a digital world that we cannot fully understand or control.

The Silence: Posthuman Suffering and Datafication

In literature, vulnerability has been explored in different genres and through a variety of perspectives. Jean-Michel Ganteau (2015) has focused on genres and modes such as the romance, elegy, the ghost story, and the state-of-the-nation novel dealing with the relations between ethics and vulnerability through trauma and loss. When dealing with the vulnerability that results from our dependence on technology, science fiction is a genre that offers the ideal structural and thematic context for its exploration. The possibility of an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) or a digital blackout and its consequences is the subject of recent books as different as Waubgeshig Rice’s *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018), a story of resilience which focuses on a secluded Anishinaabe community in Northern Ontario; Kyla Stone’s *Edge of Collapse* (2019–2021) series, a

survival story which follows a woman who escapes her kidnapper thanks to the blackout; and Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind* (2020), a social satire on race and class which follows a white family vacationing at an Airbnb when the black owners return with news of a blackout.

The Silence, which was published in 2020, is set in the near future—the Super Bowl Sunday 2022—and also has a blackout as main catalyst in a story that mostly takes place in an apartment on the privileged east side of Manhattan. The novel is divided in two parts. The first one starts with two interlocking narratives and two distinctive settings. On the one hand, Jim Kripps and Tessa Berens are staring up at the small screens located just below the overhead bin on a plane as they return from Paris to New York; on the other hand, Max Stenner, Diane Lucas, and her former student Martin Dekker are waiting in front of a superscreen TV in an apartment in uptown Manhattan. It is Super Bowl Sunday 2022, and they are supposed to meet in the apartment to watch the match. Suddenly, the grid goes down, screens go blank, phones are dead, laptops lifeless, and people email-less. The plane crashes but Jim and Tessa survive and manage to reach Max and Diane's apartment. No explanation is provided as to the origin of this failure of technological devices and infrastructure. The focus is instead on the fallout of the event which is developed in the second part of the novel. Melancholia prevails in the following six hours, as characters cannot come to terms with the loss and see themselves as characters in a movie. Narratologically speaking, this melancholia is seen through half sentences, bare words, repetitions, trancelike speeches, and the impossibility of coherent dialogue.

Formally speaking, the first part is divided in six chapters and is narrated by a third-person narrator that focalizes on several characters and often merges with them through free indirect discourse. The second part still uses a third-person omniscient narrator who often blurs with the voice of individual characters. From the past tense of the first part, the text moves to the present tense, which formally adds to the uncertainty that the characters feel, as it reinforces the unfinished and apocalyptic nature of the event. In this part, there are no chapter numbers that may provide a sense of chronology, but page breaks that separate scenes. This part explores the dynamics of the group in the apartment and the conversations they do not seem to engage in—since they cannot really listen to each other—as they wonder what comes next. In fact, without technology to connect them, the book ends with five independent soliloquies (one for each character), which formally underlines the isolation that they individually inhabit and illustrates, as Butler (2004) claims, the way loss delineates the ties we have to others and makes us question who we are and what to do (22).

Vulnerability is very differently represented in the two parts of the novel. In the first part, especially before the blackout takes place, we see how characters are flawlessly integrated with technology. They represent a posthuman subjectivity, which Braidotti (2013) defines as relational,

interdependent, and co-evolving with other bodies, machines, and material forms. The boundary between human and machine has been studied at length within posthuman studies starting with Donna Haraway's (1985) seminal "A Cyborg Manifesto." The human-machine continuum has affected not only our bodies through different technological enhancements but also the way we think, how we relate to others, and our diminished centrality in the world. As Hayles (1999) explains:

[...] emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will; embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature.

(288)

Dealing with the exponential way in which technology has changed and the way we are unwarily becoming information-processing entities has taken a toll on human subjectivity. The first part of *The Silence* illustrates how humans struggle to come to terms and keep pace with an increasingly digital environment to which they need to adapt. Anthony Miccoli's (2017) concept of *posthuman suffering* illustrates the situation. It is "an affective state characterised by a perceived feeling of inadequacy, alienation, or lack of agency or efficacy in relation to technological artefacts or systems of use." It also describes the idea that biological humans depend on technological systems to fully know themselves, that they are incomplete without a technological aspect supplementing their biological selves. What causes posthuman suffering is the awareness of the human need for technology and our dependence on it to reach our full potential. Significantly enough, this dependence is already made obvious in the first two chapters of DeLillo's novel, which start with characters sitting in front of screens as they just wait for something to happen.

As technology develops, more information is made available, which makes humans increasingly dependent on technology to have access to that information and which leads to the transhuman desire to leave the flesh behind to make us more compatible with that information. Many aspects of life are rendered into digital data or tabulated information in a process known as datafication (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013), whose significance is easy to process for a computer but not for the human brain. In the first chapter of *The Silence*, Jim is mesmerized by the data his screen on the plane provides on altitude, air temperature, speed, and time of arrival, which keeps changing and which he cannot fully understand: "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 in the twin drones of mind and aircraft" (DeLillo 2020, 3–4). This

datafication of information leads to a “datafied” self, as we become the sum total of our data or code and we adapt to technology by becoming “more compatible with the underlying code” (Miccoli 2017; 2010, 106). This resonates with the way Jim is presented: “His name was Jim Kripps. But for all the hours of this flight, his name was his seat number” (DeLillo 2020, 6), and the way Jim and Tessa become one with the plane: “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” (14). Jim and Tessa’s datafication illustrates how human beings believe that the only means to know what is perceivable is through more advanced technological systems entering a never-ending process of complexification (Miccoli 2010, 79–80).

When we become datafied selves, we lose part of our humanity as we become “fully available to a complete integration with the information that composes the world” (Miccoli 2010, 106). Luciano Floridi (2014) uses the word *infor*, or informational organism, to define how we are fully integrated in an informational environment that we share with other natural and artificial informational agents. These agents process information logically and autonomously, often better than we do (94). To integrate in this infosphere, we need to adapt and process the world, but the human language of narration is not the language of information. Byung-Chul Han sees narration as ritualistic and ceremonial, it practices selection, whereas information is additive and accumulates (2015, 32). When information reigns, knowledge is shallow, and we lose the skills of contemplation and listening. We add and accumulate ideas very fast and lose the meaning, context, and depth of narration. The digital order, which is numeric, lacks history and memory; it fragments life (2021, 16–17).

In the novel, Tessa and Jim embody narrative and information language, respectively. Tessa is a multilingual poet and editor and spends her time on the plane writing down her memories of her trip to Paris. Jim, however, does not see the point of doing this when they have “pamphlets, booklets, entire volumes” (DeLillo 2020, 9). For Tessa, this is just information, without the precision and detail of narrative. In fact, the flow of this information prevents their conversation. In the plane, Tessa struggles to talk to Jim, but the changing data keeps interrupting their train of thought, turning into white noise:

He watched the screen and thought about the game, briefly, forgetting who the Titans were playing.

Arrival time sixteen thirty. Température extérieure minus forty-seven C. Time in Paris twenty thirteen. Altitude thirty-four thousand and two feet. He liked the two feet. Definitely worth noting. Outside air temperature minus fifty-three F. Distance de parcours.

The Seahawks, of course.

Fragmentation is also a key element in Max and Diane's apartment where the constant presence of the TV set also complicates conversation: "Commercials, station breaks, pregame babble. Max, speaking over his shoulder" (20); "We talk, we listen, we eat, we drink, we watch" (22).

As Geoff Mulgan (1996) explains, the exponential growth of information technology seems to make us more powerful, secure, and certain; every question becomes answerable and personal information transparent. In theory, it dispels anxiety and uncertainty (5). However, the paradox of the information age is that despite the explosion of options and data, this knowledge is not firsthand and does not come directly from our own senses: we gain control, but we also lose it, becoming vulnerable. Our dependence on technology extends the reach of our senses but also weakens us and our humanity. Marshall McLuhan (1994) argues that technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems and that these extensions increase human power and speed. For example, the power of the feet is extended by the wheel, the ear and voice by the telephone, our eyes and ears by television, the computer enhances our brain, and, probably in the future, our consciousness too. The different media that human beings create and develop enhance our human capacities, but this also results in numbness and "self-amputation" (42). Every new technology allows us to offload to that technology a skill that we used to exercise, this skill is "built into" the systems we create, and "built out" of ourselves.

In *The Silence*, as they flight back to New York, Tessa is struggling to remember Mr. Fahrenheit's and Mr. Celcius's first names, but she finds it very hard without checking it in Google. When she finally remembers, we read:

She found this satisfying. Came out of nowhere. There is almost nothing left of nowhere. 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.
(DeLillo 2020, 14)

In her final soliloquy, Tessa herself realizes the shortcoming of having relied too much on technology: "But didn't this have to happen? Isn't that what some of us are thinking? We were headed in this direction. No more wonder, no more curiosity. Totally impaired orientation. Too much of everything from too narrow a source code" (104–105).

Tessa's attachment to narrative makes her less vulnerable and more resilient when the blackout occurs and there is no information available. Jim, on the contrary, is already so datafied, that he seems to need the screen full of data because it gives him solace: "It helps me hide from the noise" (2020, 13), he claims. Since we cannot separate the language we use from our understanding of the world, when the blackout changes the

world and digital information disappears, those used to the additive language of data feel lost as they find themselves without the security of technology and turn into zombies (84), a “streaming mass” (99): “People begin to appear in the streets, warily at first and then in a spirit of release, walking, looking, wondering, women and men, an incidental cluster of adolescents, all escorting each other through the mass insomnia of this inconceivable time” (78).

Humanity’s total dependency on technology leaves everyone clueless as to what to do without it. Technological devices and appliances lose their aura as characters resemble frustrated children shaking broken toys. For example, when Diane wants to phone her daughters, “[s]he hit buttons, shook the thing, stared into it, jabbed it with her thumbnail” (29); and when Max has to face the TV black screen, he hits the power button on, off, on again (25). Tessa replaces the monotonous white noise with a deadpan, slow counting down by sevens from 203 to 0, even changing languages along the way (72), while Max starts to produce his own football commentary and commercials staring at the empty screen: “‘*Ground game, ground game, crowd chanting, stadium rocking.*’ Half sentences, bare words, repetitions” (46; emphasis in the original). Conversation between Max, Martin, and Diane becomes more and more difficult: “The pauses were turning into silences and beginning to feel like the wrong kind of normal. [...] Everything that was simple and declarative, where did it go?” (67). Without additive language, they need to recover narrative language.

The Silence: Melancholia and the Loss of the Self

The second part of the novel shows the collapse of order and structure as the five characters find themselves in the apartment with nothing to do: the inforgs have lost their infosphere. This collapse of the established order is also reflected in the novel through the absence of chapter numbers and the change of verb tense from the past to the present. Time seems to have stopped as the loss of technology—which had become an integral part of humanity—shatters people’s identity. Thus, the first part of *The Silence* depicts the human vulnerability that results from our dependence on technology, and the posthuman suffering, datafication, and self-amputation we are subjected to when we try to integrate with machines in the infosphere. The second part, however, focuses on the effects of the digital blackout, when the strategies that characters had developed to adapt to the engulfing world of machines become useless and they have to deal with what is left of themselves after having offloaded part of their skills to machines, technological systems, and ICTs. When technology disappears, their skills go with it, and they have to face what they have really become. In Chapter 5, the employee at the clinic that Tessa and Jim visit wonders: “Is everything in the datasphere subject to distortion and theft? And do we simply have to sit here and mourn our fate?” (59). This is

what we see in the second part; an inconclusive mourning process, the result of the trauma of losing the connection with machines, and the realization that the connection to others has become impossible.

Cathy Caruth has argued that psychic trauma leads to great emotional anguish as it breaks the victim's experience of time, self, and the world (1996, 3–4). In DeLillo's novel, the formal change to the present tense and the disappearance of chapters reflect the psychological state of the main characters. Since trauma resists narrative articulation and people have lost their capacity to produce narrative language, by embracing the additive language of information instead, they cannot recover complex, contextual, meaningful narrative articulation. They have lost their resilience and become trapped in their traumatic loss. They cannot share their pain in meaningful conversation because the very nature of pain prevents it. As Elaine Scarry (1985) explains, “[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). Suffering is a solitary experience that leads to alienation, a situation that is accentuated when the basic capacity to narrate has been given away to machines. This progressive destruction of language ends in final, total silence.

However, before silence is reached, readers see how the characters unsuccessfully struggle to find their way back to the language and communication they once knew. First, they use the language of conspiracy to try to grasp the significance of what has happened; later, without the possibility of using technology as a social mediator, they retreat into five independent soliloquies, one for each character. The language of conspiracy is a popular way to make sense of terrible, unexpected events so that they are not understood as random happenings but as part of a hidden pattern, the result of a plan devised by an individual or group. Paula Martín Salván has pointed out that for the past four decades DeLillo's novels have been closely associated with conspiracy (2008, 134): from office and domestic conspiracies in *Americana* (1971) and *White Noise* (1985), to the intricate governmental plots in *Libra* (1988), *Running Dog* (1978), and *The Names* (1982), and the many conspiracies we find in *Underworld* (1997). The first scene in Part 2 of *The Silence* opens with the following:

It is clear by now that the launch codes are being manipulated remotely by unknown groups or agencies. All nuclear weapons, worldwide, have become dysfunctional. Missiles are not soaring over oceans, bombs are not being dropped from supersonic aircraft. But the war rolls on and the terms accumulate. Cyberattacks, digital intrusions, biological aggressions. Anthrax, smallpox, pathogens. The dead and disabled. Starvation, plague and what else? Power grids collapsing. Our personal perceptions sinking into quantum dominance. Are the oceans rising rapidly? Is the air getting warmer, hour by hour, minute by minute?

(77)

Explanations range from blaming the Chinese (35) to a power station failure (68), a cyberattack (77), and a natural disaster (94). Characters feel they are living in a “makeshift reality” (67), a “living breathing fantasy” (87) with their minds “digitally remastered” (88), “[t]he end-of-the-world movie” (104). Even the rain that pervades the film *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott 1982) and its famous “Tears in the Rain” speech is subtly alluded to in a conversation as a sign of the unreality of what they are living: “‘All we need is rain,’ Jim said, ‘and we’d know we were characters in a movie’” (39).

The language of conspiracy emerges, a language that according to Fredric Jameson is “the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age” (1988, 356), a language that the masses seem to need in order to come to terms with our global world. In DeLillo’s novel, conspiracy helps people find a culprit for those problems that seem to be beyond human control in the uncertain, centreless, *informationless* world that emerges after the blackout. Martin, Diane’s former student and a physics teacher at a charter school in the Bronx, is of all characters the one more prone to the language of conspiracy. He is particularly obsessed with Einstein’s 1912 *Manuscript on the Special Theory of Relativity* and the way Einstein predicted the existence of black holes before anyone had seen them by “seeing the unseeable” (30). Similarly, Martin also tries to discover the unseeable in “[h]idden networks [...] [c]hanging by the minute, the microsecond, in ways beyond our imagining. Look at the blank screen. What is it hiding from us?” (28). However, by listing in an additive, machinist way, the possible hidden networks, and invisible forces behind the blackout, he does not construct a narrative but shows how the language of information has possessed him. His ideas are not elaborated and the catalogue of conspiracies that follows does not lead to any enlightening revelation. As Han (2021) puts it, information on its own does not necessarily illuminate the world, it may rather darken it. When this happens information stops being informative to become deformative, and without reference, a world of fake news emerges (18). This additive language is the one that prevails in the second part of *The Silence*. A language that is useless because it has lost its role as a tool to facilitate human communication with machines.

Additive language also becomes obvious in the way well-known post-human motifs are simply enumerated without any elaboration that may confer them narrative coherence. The imagination of the five people enclosed in the apartment runs wild with motifs that they cannot fully understand: ubiquitous surveillance, face recognition, virtualization of reality, artificial intelligence, cyberspace, biotechnology, cyborgization of human bodies, cryptocurrencies, drones, and so on (Herbrechter 2021). These many references show how engulfed people are in the exponential change that the 4th IR has brought to their lives. As Mulgan (1996) explains, when trying to keep up with rapidly evolving technology, citizens “experience a continual race simply to stand still” (9).

Whereas Diane finds reassurance in checking that the screen is still blank, Max keeps looking at the screen in anticipation, waiting for its return. Martin talks to himself, and they all avoid eye contact (68). Without the possibility of using technology as a social mediator, the peak of their isolation is reached in the final pages of the book in which each of the main characters delivers a soliloquy. Diane sees how the rest “are barely listening” to what she is saying (105); Jim “is stooped low in his chair, looking down, speaking into the carpet, long hands dangling” (106); Max sits in his armchair “eyes barely open” (109); Tessa “studies the backs of her hands” as she speaks (112); and Martin delivers his lines “immersed in his nowhere stare” (114). The characters’ rhetorical questions find no one to answer them. The book ends with a final image of Max sitting in front of the TV staring into the blank screen, not listening, understanding nothing (116).

Conclusion

The Silence shows how with the inexorable integration of technology in our lives we seem to have been losing part of our humanity as we have offloaded to technology part of our skills and human capacities and we have datafied ourselves to be compatible with that technology. 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. Sherry Turkle (2015) explains how the digital age has made humans lose their capacity for self-reflection and for empathy. Conversation has been sacrificed for the efficiencies of mere connection. In *The Silence*, the digital blackout could have been a chance for the five main characters to recover their humanity and finally listen to each other and talk. However, they have lost those skills as nowadays technology has become too much of a social mediator: awkward silences are often avoided by scrolling through a phone or turning on the television. Topics of conversation that do not come naturally emerge from the videos on the phone or the television set.

To create space for learning and adaptation, some vulnerability is necessary, which may result in a more flexible and resilient society as long as coping mechanisms are developed. Hommels, Mesman, and Bijker (2014) propose strategies like uncertainty, doubt, error, and deviating from established norms when necessary (4). To counteract the overload of information and the transformation of thinking into calculation, Han (2015) similarly proposes intuition, omitting, and forgetting (4–5). In this line, Tony M. Vinci (2020) has proposed a radical posthuman ethics of expansive vulnerability that underlines the transformative power of grief and vulnerability. Through the wound, authentic feelings of empathy can

be found since invulnerability is a dangerous form of narcissism (17). Despite these visions that see vulnerability and suffering as a means to create resilience, the characters at the end of *The Silence* are still trapped in a process of melancholia. They mourn the loss of their digital connections, but their mourning turns into melancholia when they also have to deal with the unconscious, inaccessible loss of a part of themselves (Freud 1957). Critical posthumanism sees the organic body, the machine, and other material forms as relational, co-evolving, and interdependent. Losing technology is losing a part of the self.

The Silence is a novel that gives no answers, but in her soliloquy Diane proposes returning to human basic needs: “Food, shelter, friends, flush the toilet if we can? Tend to the simplest physical things. Touch, feel, bite, chew. The body has a mind of its own” (113). The need to give human embodiment the centrality that has lost in the transhuman desire to leave the flesh behind does not stop the characters from struggling to come to terms with the severed links to technology. Braidotti (2013) advocates an embodied and embedded human subjectivity, an enfleshed, extended, relational self, and a sustainable ethics of transformation that will respect “the bond of mutual dependence between bodies and technological others, while avoiding the contempt for the flesh and the trans-humanist fantasy of escape from the finite materiality of the enfleshed self” (90–91). The characters in *The Silence* are trapped in their bubbles, unable to communicate in significant ways, and imprisoned in a process of melancholia for the part of themselves they have lost. As vulnerable “human slivers of a civilization” (90), they are still coming to terms with what they have become, as they struggle to find back their voice in the technological silence of their new lives.

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