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The Absurd in Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020): A Camusian Study

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To my parents

My friends

All my family

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Abstract

*This dissertation explores the depiction of the philosophy of the Absurd in Don DeLillo's fictional book *The Silence* (2020). It essentially aims at portraying how the contemporary world is prevailed by absurdity. This study also seeks to show how the characters in this novel struggle to give meaning to their existence. The first chapter is devoted to demonstrate the contribution of different postmodern conditions in *The Silence* in reinforcing the presence of the Absurd in the contemporary period. This chapter makes use of Jean Baudrillard's book *The Consumer Society* to examine how consumerism acts like a way out from the Absurd. It then, uses Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, in displaying how digital addictions sponsor the feeling of absurdity. This chapter hence, shows how the aforementioned alternatives to the Absurd namely, consumerism and media fail at giving meaning to life. The second chapter explores traits of the Absurd in the novel, relying vigorously on Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* in analyzing the characters, the images, and the themes that convey absurdism. This chapter also investigates Camus' suggestions to face the Absurd and how all these solutions are employed by the characters. This study hence, seeks to prove that the more individuals are technologically advanced, the less their life makes sense. *The Silence* thus, reflects an absurdist portrayal of today's world, with the failure of all alternatives to face this absurdity.*

Key words: Don DeLillo, *The Silence*, Camus, absurdism, postmodernism, consumerism, hyperreality.

I. General Introduction

Rising, street-car, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, street-car, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.¹

The above quote taken from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, by the French writer and philosopher Albert Camus hits right at the central objective of the present research. The idea that the modern world lacks any sense of purpose and that man is trapped in a ceaseless futile task of searching meaning to a world that does not offer any rational explanations, is basically the core of Albert Camus’ philosophy of absurdism, a philosophy that is going to be explored in depth in this up-coming research. Camus’ ideas about life, faith, and the absurdity of the human existence will be the periphery in analyzing the latest novel of the American writer Donald Richard DeLillo which he entitles *The Silence*. A short novel that is easy to read, but is heavy with its themes. This short yet compelling novel profoundly questions societal, existential, and moral anxieties of living under nuclear and digital age.

Don DeLillo’s works are essentially a depiction of the postmodern times. Postmodernism is hence a new era that emerged in the beginning of the 1950’s. The definitions attributed to postmodernism cannot be narrowed down to one fixed definition, since thinkers have theorized and defined it in different ways. However, we shall rely here on the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard who defines postmodernism in his book *The Postmodern Condition* as: “incredulity towards metanarratives.”² This incredulity or disbelief is actually the outcome of the widespread disillusionment after the Second World War. Writers and philosophers severely questioned the efficacy of the universal totalizing truths and narratives of the modern era. The war unveiled that these narratives are inconsistent and hold many contradictions.

Indeed, postmodernism refutes all the philosophical and religious realities of the modern mind and claims that, no truth is absolute, but rather one should seek to understand the

individual's personal realities. This new era is also characterized by the advent of new technologies and new forms of communication which led subsequently, to the spread of mass media, consumer cultures and capitalism. It is in fact argued that: "a large number of today's advances in IT [information technology] are a direct result of the postmodern movement."³ All these political, economic, and social changes eventually "shaped the cultural context of literary works."⁴

Besides referring to a time period, the term postmodernism is also used to refer to all the artistic, philosophical, and literary movements of the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Writers, philosophers, and playwrights came with an avant-garde movement that departed significantly from the conventional literary and artistic styles of the modern period. Philosophers like Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre alongside writers and playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and others devoted their works to express the existential crisis of the post-war era and the absurdity of postmodern life. They hence, adopted randomness and fragmentation in their works, while other postmodern writers like Angela Carter, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo engaged in experimental literature. In this type of literature, "writers experiment with time and explore the fragmented, chaotic, and atemporal nature of existence in the present."⁵ Their works thus, reflect the challenges of the postmodern period.

This research paper thus, holds the aim of exploring Albert Camus' philosophy of the Absurd in Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020). Using this philosophy, I shall first explore several postmodern conditions in the novel namely, consumerism and digital addictions to point out their role in the exacerbation of absurdism in today's world. In this study, I will also discuss different aspects through which absurdity is conveyed and I will explain how the characters in this novel exhibit some absurdist characteristics.

▪ Review of Literature

As far as literature is concerned, DeLillo's latest novel *The Silence* (2020) has received scarce criticism so far. I will hence, try to look through some of the critical reviews carried out in the frame of this novel.

Among the critical discussions on the novel, I may cite first, the review published by the critic Ron Charles in which he analyzes *The Silence* from a postmodern perspective. In this review entitled: "*The Silence is an Absurdist Look at Our Technology Dependence* (2020)." Charles states that through writing this novel, DeLillo aims vigorously at revealing postmodern man's blind and perilous dependence on technology. He further explains that the novel in the opening pages suggests the coming of recurrent world disasters: plane crash, electricity cuts, and probably an internet break out. But the fact is that, Charles writes: "*The Silence* as its title indicates, goes beyond a mere eccentric event, it rather offers the reader an accurate diagnosis of our dangerous reliance on technology."⁶ Charles also notes in his review that the novel's plot conveys "the precarious condition"⁷ of man's absurd and dreadful reaction "to missing a superbowl,"⁸ and hence, *The Silence* feels like "apocalypse lite for people."⁹

Besides Charles' review of the novel, Craig Hubert, another critic analyzes DeLillo's *The Silence* from a more contemporary perspective. Craig argues in his review published in *Observer* under the title: "*Don DeLillo's The Silence imagines the death of Tech,*" that the novel's evocation of digital addiction, the plane crash, and the Super Bowl party aren't just the result of random thoughts. By contrast, it is constructed this way to question the existing confusion and disorder. Moreover, Craig notes the blurry dialogues in *The Silence*. The characters are caught in meaningless conversations and mixing topics. In addition to this, Craig asserts that this novel breaks with DeLillo's former novels that enumerated only events of the past. On the contrary, *The Silence* treats explicitly current issues. Hence, it is the result of all what DeLillo "was trying to deliver earlier in his works."¹⁰

In addition, the Algerian critic Fares Lounis reviewed DeLillo's *The Silence* in an article published in *Le Chélif* under the title: "*Comment vivre dans un monde déconnecté? (2021)*" Lounis describes the digital silence and the black screens in the novel as a nightmare and a descending to hell. He then mentions the awkward silence and disquiet that shadowed the room once the screen goes blank. He adds that these moments are filled with heaviness and make the characters feel the void of a world which has become obscure and without remorse.¹¹ Lounis carries on to explain that the character of Martin and his obsession with Einstein's 1912 manuscript is actually an attempt by him to figure out the digital disruption that occurred. Lounis also notes the state of the other characters that are left disoriented and without any source of relief or meaning due to the strange event.

Bailey Trela is another critic who includes the work of DeLillo in her critical writings in *Cleveland Review of Books*. Trela's review: "*A Prophet on the Bleeding Edge: On DeLillo's The Silence*," characterizes DeLillo's late novel as "the future turn."¹² *The Silence*, she asserts, is a critique to the emergent technologies of postmodern times. She further explains that by the digital addiction to technological devices, the human being loses awareness of what happens. She also highlights the way DeLillo made use of lists in the novel. The description of the characters, the events and actions are all enumerated in an automated process. Even language is thus, controlled by digital technologies. Trela refers to it as "Beckettian mummerly"¹³ as reference to Samuel Beckett, to point out the babbling dialogue and absence of meaning in the characters' conversations just like in Beckett's works mainly his plays that are part of the Theatre of the Absurd.

▪ **Issue and Working Hypothesis**

It follows from the above review of literature that most of the critical discussions cited on *The Silence*, so far, are limited merely to analyzing the effects of digital addictions. Nevertheless, as shown in the above review, some critics have alluded to the presence of the

Absurd in DeLillo's novels and in *The Silence*. Moreover, there are many critics who linked the Absurd and DeLillo, yet as far as I know, no work to the present moment, has undertaken the task of studying this short novel in depth through a Camusian standpoint.

I assume that the characters in *The Silence*'s storyline, which is set in the near future, experience the feeling of absurdity in a variety of ways. I will hence, venture an exploration of these ways by pointing out different situations in which the characters feel lost and cannot find meaning to things. The inability to understand the abrupt digital disruption that occurred and the silence of all technologies made them realize the absurdity of their condition. Indeed, this absurdity manifests itself through the characters' behaviors and their reactions to the prevailing silence.

In addition, I have seen in earlier works that the philosophy of absurdism has always been considered an inevitable reaction to the horrors of the two world wars. Indeed, it has usually been linked to the Theatre of the Absurd, which used to reflect this disillusionment. The authors of these absurd plays used the characters, the dialogues, and the events to portray the absurdity that prevailed after the wars. However, my chief concern in this research is to highlight other postmodern conditions namely, consumerism and technological dependence which led to the reinforcement of absurdism in the twenty-first century. I suppose that DeLillo's *The Silence* is usually approached from a postmodern perspective by focusing on other philosophical issues in his works. Thus, as far as I know, no study has tackled the task of carrying a research that links the aforementioned postmodern conditions with the philosophy of absurdism yet. It then, remains my duty to fulfill this task.

In this sense, this study addresses important questions in analyzing *The Silence*. I shall focus on illuminating what pushed DeLillo, writing in postmodern America, to return to the world of the Absurd? To what extent is modern man's life in peace as futile and absurd as man of the post-war? How much of people's life is currently lived online? And how much it is still

meaningful? How is conspicuous consumerism used as a refuge to the Absurd in *The Silence*? How do digital addictions in *The Silence* stir philosophical confrontations of the self and bring about an absurd world? What absurdist traits are apparent in this novel? I will finally investigate how do all the characters' attempts to flee the Absurd and establish meaning to existence through consumerism and media fail?

Departing from this, the main purpose of the present dissertation is to display how *The Silence* is an absurdist work of fiction. By relying on Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, I will shed light on how DeLillo encapsulates the growing existential anxieties of the characters in a highly digital society and how their life is eclipsed by absurdity. I will also explore how DeLillo in this novel imagines the aftermath of a digital silence, where the characters are left without technology and with no source of meaning. By making use of Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society* and *Simulacra and Simulation*, I will demonstrate how the characters try to hold on to other alternatives like consumption to feed their urge for valuable explanations to the absurdity of the situation. Through carrying this study hence, I strive to depict how *The Silence* is an absurdist portrayal of today's societies.

▪ **Methodological Outline**

The present research paper will be conducted following the IMRAD format, with a general introduction, followed by methods and materials, results and discussion. The introduction consists of definitions of the concept of the Absurd, and postmodernism as an era and as a literary movement. Next comes a brief review of literature on previous critical discussions on *The Silence*, and through issue and working hypothesis, stress will be placed on the gap that shall be filled. In the method section, the main concepts to be used will be summed up namely, absurdism, consumerism, and hyperreality. The materials consist of a short biography of Don DeLillo and a synopsis of *The Silence*. In the results, I share the most important findings of the research. The discussion section will be divided into two main

chapters. One will explore different postmodern phenomena namely, consumerism and digital addictions and their role in the exacerbation of the Absurd in today's world. Relying on Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society* and *Simulacra and Simulation*, this chapter seeks to reveal how these alternatives fail at coping with the Absurd and end up reinforcing it. The second chapter is concerned with aspects of the Absurd in *The Silence*, using Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It will analyze the characters, the themes, and the ways of confronting the Absurd.

Endnotes

¹Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1955), 10.

²Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (New York: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

³John D., Wells, "Postmodernism and Information Technology: Philosophical Perspectives and Pragmatic Implications," *Americas Conference on Information Systems*, 1996

⁴Elizabeth L. Bolick, "Absurdism in Post-Modern Art: Examining the Interplay between *Waiting For Godot* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*." *INQUIRIES JOURNAL*, 2009
<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/36/absurdism-in-post-modern-art-examining-the-interplay-between-waiting-for-godot-and-extremely-loud-and-incredibly-close>

⁵Tatyana Fedosova, "Reflection of Time in Postmodern literature," *Athens Journal of Philology* 2, 2 (2015): 77-88

⁶Ron Charles, "Don DeLillo's *The Silence* is an Absurdist Look at Our Technology Dependence" *Washington post*, October 13, 2020 .

https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/don-delillos-the-silence-is-an-absurdist-look-at-our-technology-dependence/2020/10/12/01b656ea-0beb-11eb-b1e8-16b59b92b36d_story.html

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Craig Hubert, "Don DeLillo's *The Silence* Imagines the Death of Tech," *Observer*, October 23, 2020 <https://observer.com/2020/10/the-silence-don-delillo-review/>

¹¹Faris Lounis "Comment Vivre dans un Monde Déconnecté ?" *Le Chélif*, (2021): 16-22

¹²Bailey Trela, “A Prophet on the Bleeding Edge: On Don DeLillo’s *The Silence*,” *Cleveland Review of Books*, October 30 (2020) <https://www.clereviewofbooks.com/home/prophet-on-the-bleeding-edge>.

¹³*Ibid.*

II. Methods and Materials

1. Methods

On the method section, I will introduce and explain Jean Baudrillard's ideas on consumerism mainly developed in his book *The Consumer Society* (1998), in analyzing the issue of excessive consumption in *The Silence* and how it is used by the characters to confront the absurdity of life. In addition, I will make use of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality discussed in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) to illuminate the effects of digital technologies in the exacerbation of the Absurd in contemporary world. As a means of analyzing this novel from an absurdist perspective, this study will make resort to Albert Camus essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955). Indeed, I will attempt to relate Camus' ideas developed in this essay namely, the absurdity of life and the absence of meaning to DeLillo's *The Silence*.

a. Jean Baudrillard's Consumerism: *The Consumer Society Myths and Structures* (1998)

The first aspect this study will make resort to is consumerism which is developed in Jean Baudrillard's book *The Consumer society* (1998). This aspect will help examine the ways in which conspicuous consumption is used in *The Silence* as a solution to the Absurd. Baudrillard emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as part of a generation of French thinkers including Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others. They are often seen to belong to the postmodernist and poststructuralist philosophical schools. Baudrillard's work is hence, associated with various topics such as: sociology, economics, and gender relations. However, he adopted a great interest in analyzing the effects of mass media, tele-technologies, and consumer society on the life of individuals in the postmodern era. Therefore, his concepts will be our second periphery in analyzing DeLillo's *The Silence*.

In this sense, his book *The Consumer Society* is considered to be a masterful contribution in sociology. In this book, Baudrillard treats a global phenomenon which is consumerism. This phenomenon which he closely relates to the western world, specifically

America, is becoming more and more an essential part of the lives of the masses. Baudrillard argues in this respect that: “we live in a growth society.”¹ Indeed, with all the massive changes in economy and the digital revolution, consumption has taken other directions than just meeting basic needs. Baudrillard adds that: “modern consumption is at odds with the inherently nature of consumption. While even modern consumption is not totally individualistic, it is being pushed in that direction.”² This means that consumption in today’s world turns down all the moral values of group-centered communities. It rather endorses the spirit of competition and material gains.

With the rise of materialism then, it has become a difficult task to imagine life without all the commodities and expensive items which are perfectly advertised in media. The masses then, fall to the belief that money can make happiness. Indeed, they spend huge amounts of their salaries in buying material things as a means to reach happiness. Moreover, the consumers are strongly influenced by what they see on TV or the social platforms. The wealthy lifestyles of celebrities and all the popular personalities deeply affect the regular consumers. They hence, strive to imitate the way of life of these people even if they cannot afford to buy or own certain materials or commodities. The upper classes’ tastes and preferences thus, become the standard for the masses. Consumers can have instant gratification only if they buy expensive things which will eventually improve their social status. This obsession with material things kills all the moral and societal values. Baudrillard asserts this when he says: “consumption, as a new tribal myth, has become the morality of our present world. It is currently destroying the foundations of the human being.”³

b. Baudrillard’s Hyperreality: *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994)

In addition to consumerism, I will also make use of Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality in studying the effects of digital technologies in reinforcing the absurdity of the characters’ life in *The Silence*. Baudrillard in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994)

indeed, introduces a twentieth century phenomenon, which is hyperreality. A term he defines as: “The generation by models of a real without origin of reality.”⁴ Indeed, hyperreality is the inability to distinguish between what is real and what is an imitation of reality. In other words, it is something that replaces reality with its representation. Baudrillard argues that: “the excess of signs and images in late twentieth century global society has caused, paradoxically an effacement of reality.”⁵

He also stresses the negative role that media, television and films in particular, play in presenting a picture of reality that does not actually correspond to what is real. In this context, he makes the famous statement: “the Gulf war did not take place.”⁶ He explains that contemporary wars are being fought in the battlefields as much as in TV. Indeed, he asserts that it is the media not the governments that have the most power in western world. As an illustration of hyperreality, Baudrillard refers to Disney land as a vivid example of the hyperreal world. It provides an illusion of another reality, in order to appeal to people’s idealistic aspirations and satisfy their imagination of an ideal world. Film industries led by Disney Land represent artificial realities. People admire the fictional heroes they see in films. Movies grant them the ability to experience a different reality and undergo a feeling and an image of the future world.

In examining the systems of signs and meaning, Baudrillard also introduces the significant concept of simulacrum. On the one hand, he defines simulacrum as a term that denotes likeness or similarity. However, it refers to an inferior image lacking the quality of the original. In this way, he links the simulacrum of reality to the postmodern rejection and erasure of the original to the advantage of the copy, the image or the visual. On the other hand, simulation is the process by which simulacra adopt their function. In other words, it is the distortion of reality into inferior representations. Simulation, hence, reflects “the postmodern tendency to seriously question the idea of a beginning or origin.”⁷

c. Albert Camus' Absurdism: *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955)

This study will also rely vigorously on Albert Camus' philosophy of the Absurd, which can be best exemplified in his well-known essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It is considered to be the heart of existential thinking. Camus, through his literary works made significant contributions to a wide range of moral issues in philosophy namely, suicide, faith, religion, death penalty, and so on. Henceforth, in order to examine the moral and philosophical issues discussed in *The Silence*, we shall analyze it in the light of Albert Camus' notion of the Absurd.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus provides various definitions to the Absurd. First, in describing the feeling of absurdity, Camus writes:

In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.⁸

Camus asserts that the Absurd is born when the human needs to understand the world meets a silence of the world. The individual is thus, left estranged, marginalized and even exiled. No place seems to feel like home. The Absurd is thus, not in man nor in the world, but in their confrontation and their presence together. This confrontation between man and the absurd world hence, results in three possible ways: revolt, freedom, and passion. Either, one accepts to live the Absurd, and here the Absurd becomes a passion, or revolts against it through different ways like suicide, resorting to faith and religion, or acceptance.

Camus, then, advocates one fundamental philosophical question, that is: "Is life worth living?"⁹ and "is suicide a legitimate solution to a life that has no meaning?"¹⁰ Regardless of the answer to this question, Camus dismisses the suicide option and rather calls to embrace the absurdity and futility of existence. Camus also rejects firmly turning to religion or what he calls: "philosophical suicide."¹¹ He adds that the Absurd ends with death, but there can be no 'Absurd' outside the world either. This is why, only by acceptance, he argues, one can reach happiness.¹²

In this context, Camus outlines the Greek myth of ‘Sisyphus,’ who challenged the gods and imprisoned death so that no human would die. When death is liberated, Sisyphus is condemned for eternity to roll a boulder up a mountain and watch it fall again in a never-ending process. In this sense, Camus presents Sisyphus’ futile and ceaseless task as a metaphor to modern industrial life, where individuals are trapped in doing the same futile repetitive jobs in factories. Hence, the legend of Sisyphus is absurd from the moment Sisyphus becomes conscious of his condition. Camus is interested in that very tragic moment where the hero recognizes the Absurd. He, then states: “It is during that return, that pause that Sisyphus interests me.”¹³ It is indeed, the moment where Sisyphus reached a state of contented acceptance. Camus finishes this myth by stating that: “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”¹⁴

2. Materials

a. Biography of Don DeLillo

Donald Richard DeLillo is an American author, playwright, and short story writer. He was born in November 1936, to an Italian-American family. His writings granted him the prize of National Book Award for his masterpiece *White Noise*, and the PEN/Faulkner Award for his novel *Mao2*. He also was awarded the William Howells Medal from the American academy of arts and letters. His story collection *The Angel Esmeralda* was as well a finalist for the story prize and the PEN/ Faulkner Award.

DeLillo began to be acknowledged as a national writer only after his great work *Americana* was published in 1971. Nonetheless, the publication of *White Noise* in 1985 brought him widespread success and won him the National Book Award of Fiction. It was followed by *Libra* which became an international best seller. The years that followed marked DeLillo as a pioneer of postmodern fiction with great works namely *Underworld* (1997), an epic cold war novel that achieved mainstream success, along with *Falling Man* (2007), with the central theme of the terrorist attacks of 9\11. Last but not least, his short novel *Omega* (2010) is considered to

be a philosophical novel, marking DeLillo's stylistic shift into short novels. In this sense, DeLillo works which deal mainly with daring controversial issues and the dangers of postmodern times, became a source of influence to a large number of young writers namely David Foster Wallace. He thus, remains one of the titans of postmodern American fiction.

b. Synopsis: *The Silence* (2020)

The Silence is DeLillo's latest work of fiction. It is set in the year 2022 in an apartment in New York City, on one of the noisiest days, namely, the Super Bowl Sunday, the big awaited final game in American foot ball. The story unfolds with a couple, Jim Kripps and Tessa Berens, flying back to New York from their Paris vacation. On the flight, the couple sat in a monotonous silence.

Meanwhile, the other characters, the retired physics professor Diane Lucas and her husband Max Stenner, joined by one of Diane's former students Martin Dekker, are all gathered in Max and Diane's Manhattan apartment to attend the game. Martin is strongly obsessed with Einstein's 1912 Manuscript and his theory of relativity, while Max is known for his obsession with sporting events and often makes huge bets. Everything seemed normal until the TV screen abruptly goes blank. The characters, bewildered with this strange event, immediately check their cell phones, 'the know-it-all devices' to figure out what happened, but mysteriously, they too were void of life. Martin suggests that the Chinese have launched an internet apocalypse while Diane joked about aliens.

The point of view shifts then, to Jim and Tessa whose flight has severely crash-landed due to the digital silence that occurred and thus, prevented any use of technology. However, they miraculously survive the crash and were taken to hospital. There, their urge to survive drives them to make love in the first restroom they came across. They eventually arrive at Diane and Max's apartment, exhausted and dazed. There, Max is still stuck on his chair, profoundly consumed by the blank screen. He fantasizes about the game and starts broadcasting

the non-occurring match. He then, decides to take a walk and makes his way through the crowds. When he saw the tumbling void and silence in people's faces, he decides to go back home.

Now that everyone meets again in the living room, deeply affected by the event, everybody is left with nothing but the thoughts in their heads to keep their own company. They delve into an absurd discussion about their own obsessions. However, in spite of the obsessive talks and swift shifts in topics, they barely commented on each other. They were all immersed in their own fears. They were absorbed in exploring the temporal and spatial confusion of the current moment. The story ends with Max planted again on his chair in front of the blank screen and staring at the empty space.

Endnotes

¹Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society Myths and structures*, trans. George Ritzer, (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 3

²Ibid., 6

³Ibid., 2

⁴Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Paul Foss, et al., (New York: Semiotext, 1994), 3

⁵Ryszard W. Wolny “Hyperreality and Simulacrum: Jean Baudrillard and European Postmodernism.” *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4, 3 (2017): 75-79

⁶Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton, (New York: Indiana University Press, 1995)

⁷Wolny, “Hyperreality and Simulacrum,” 77

⁸Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (London: Penguin, 1955), 6

⁹Ibid., 4

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 28

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 76

¹⁴Ibid., 78

III. Results

While carrying out this study, I have reached interesting findings. Throughout the research, I analyzed Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020) in the light of Albert Camus' philosophy of absurdism, chiefly theorized in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The concept of the Absurd fits best my work since its major features which are: the absurdity of the human existence, alienation, the failure of communication, and the inability to find meaning, are all explicitly displayed in *The Silence*.

The major finding of this dissertation hence, is that the more individuals in today's world are comfortable materially, the less their life makes sense. The characters in *The Silence* exemplify this. Living in a highly advanced society with the excess of materialism has rendered people's life senseless and absurd. In analyzing the effects of these technological advances on the characters' life in *The Silence*, I used Jean Baudrillard's book *The Consumer Society* in examining how DeLillo used consumerism in *The Silence* as a way out of the absurdity in the characters' life. In addition, I have borrowed Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality, developed in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, in order to explore the degeneration of meaning and the appearance of a fake virtual reality in today's world. Indeed, the excess of means of media and information have caused an eventual loss of meaning. As a result, in order for people to find meaning and purpose in their lives, they create simulacra and hyperreal alternatives that shall fill the void in their life.

In addition, I have demonstrated different postmodern ways to confront the absurdity of today's advanced societies. I have first showed how the characters in *The Silence* over-consume food, TV, the Super Bowl, and other items to distract themselves and conceal the true feeling of loneliness and vacancy in their lives. The excess of consumption of these commodities then, results in a virtual or hyperreality. The characters think that by covering up their lives with entertainment and consumption, their life would feel happier and less lonely. But the fact is that

this happiness is nothing but an illusion and hence, they end up feeling more alienated and their life more absurd.

In this dissertation, I also showed that Albert Camus' philosophy of the Absurd is strongly prevalent in DeLillo's *The Silence*. This is observable through the different absurdist aspects that Camus treats in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and that find their place in *The Silence*. I have showed the similarities between the two main characters in the novel namely Max and Martin with Camus' absurd hero Sisyphus. In addition, Camus' notions of the seducer, the actor or artist are also present in the novel through these two characters. Moreover, the characters experience a deep sense of alienation from the lack of purposeful activities in their life, and this adds to the absurdity of their condition. As a result of this, they find it hard to explicitly express their emotions, and feel like language is unable to transmit their genuine feelings with all the confusion. Hence, they prefer to isolate themselves in order to understand the thoughts in their heads.

Throughout this research, I have also deduced that the characters in *The Silence* adopt Camus' solutions to confront an absurd life. For instance, I pointed out Jim and Tessa's lack of fear of death and their willingness to abandon their lives. This indeed, amounts to Camus' evocation of suicide and ending one's life to face the Absurd. Camus' second suggestion to turn into religion or what he calls philosophical suicide also finds its way in the novel. I revealed how the characters namely, Max, Diane, and Martin try to cling into Jesus in order to understand the abrupt silence and the hollowness that filled the room. But despite all their attempts, they always end in failure. Hence, they all ultimately come to adopt Camus' third solution to the Absurd which is acceptance. The awareness that no matter what one does, life is absurd anyways is the key to reach acceptance.

Through analyzing DeLillo's *The Silence*, I have come to conclude that the Absurd is still a valid philosophy to explain today's world. Its pervasiveness is sponsored by different

postmodern phenomena namely media, consumerism, and digital technologies. As concerns DeLillo's return to the expression of 'the Absurd' written at the aftermath of world war two, proves that today's world is as metamorphosed and anarchical as the post-war world was. Hence, the same concern is reflected in postmodern literature and DeLillo is no exception.

IV. Discussion

This part of my work is concerned with the analysis and discussion of Don DeLillo's *The Silence*. It includes two chapters. The first studies different postmodern phenomena that have significantly contributed in the perpetuation of absurdism in the contemporary period. In accomplishing this part, I will borrow key concepts that marked the postmodern era. These are Jean Baudrillard's ideas on the consumer society and his notion of simulacra. The second chapter is devoted to analyze features that convey absurdism in the novel, namely, the characters, the themes, and the ways of confronting the Absurd, relying thoroughly on Albert Camus' Essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Chapter One: Postmodernism and the Absurd in Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020)

In this first chapter, I shall discuss aspects of postmodernism in Don DeLillo's *The Silence* that contributed in the exacerbation and perpetuation of the Absurd in contemporary life. First, I will explore the issue of consumerism in the novel. I will demonstrate the different ways in which the characters in *The Silence* use consumption to face the absurdity of life, yet they always face failure. In analyzing this phenomenon, I shall use Jean Baudrillard's book *The Consumer Society* (1998). Then, I shall move to study other postmodern aspects that reinforced the presence of absurdism in today's world. Here, I will discuss the effects of digital technologies and hyperreality in recreating the Absurd. This part will make reference to Baudrillard's book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994).

1. Consumerism:

The first postmodern aspect that I shall develop and that plays a critical role in perpetuating the Absurd is consumerism. This phenomenon has long been linked with meeting people's basic needs. But in fact, it is a lot more than just buying and consuming things. Today, people tend to buy different items in order to feel happy. Individuals constantly attempt to fill the void and failures in their lives with consumption. Moreover, with all the stressful routines,

the quick track of time and the need to set new goals and achievements in life, consumption feels like the ultimate way out. Hence, purchasing valuable things and possessing different commodities gives people the illusion of happiness and comfort. Whenever they feel sad, alienated, or just cannot find meaning to things, they tend to find relief in consumption. So is the case with the characters in *The Silence*, who are excessive consumers. They “create a simulacrum of consumers under the belief that this shall grant meaning to their lives.”¹

The commodities and all the consumer objects hence, serve as a strategy to incite people to buy more items and spend more money on things they will never need. They are not aware of the fact that they are being exploited and manipulated or reduced to objects by the manufacturing and advertizing institutions. This false consciousness maintains mass population’s passivity and deprives them of imagination and takes over their thinking capacities. Thus, their empty minds are filled with one remaining thought; consumption. Jean Baudrillard, indeed, points out the dehumanizing effects of the over consumption on human beings as well as the natural world. He explains:

We are at the point where consumption is laying hold of the whole of life. Where all activities are sequenced in the same combinational mode, where the course of satisfaction is outlined in advance, hour by hour, where the environment is total [...] fully air-conditioned, organized, culturized.²

The characters in *The Silence* are typical representations of the contemporary consumer societies. This phenomenon is considered to be a crucial part of the American capitalist society. DeLillo seeks to depict this through portraying the consumer characters in *The Silence*. Consumption seems a vital part in their lives. It symbolizes the freedom of choice and gives their life the quality and prestige needed to make them happy. It fills their time and hearts. Through purchasing different materials, their life would look happier and purposeful. The characters in the novel hence use consumption as an escape from the daily unbearable life concerns.

DeLillo, through placing emphasis on an event like the Super Bowl and the extra consumption associated with it, aims at illuminating that the characters over-consume in such an event, because it is meant to grant their life with meaning. Their desperate search for purpose ends when consuming more items. Consumerism is thus shown as a solution to face the absurdity of the world. From a Camusian standpoint, it is the answer to Camus' question: "is life worth living?"³ It thus, gives the impression that filling people's lives with material gains, expensive gifts, and luxurious commodities is actually the ultimate reason and purpose of living. Moreover, it reflects the vivid side of life. The noisy malls and the crowded drug-stores are all a denial to the silence of the universe and a refusal of death. Indeed, the extra-consumption gives the characters in *The Silence* "the impression that life is infinite and death is excluded."⁴

Consumption thus, acts like the bringer of joy, happiness, and comfort. To feel happy, we just need to buy more items. Expensive objects and gifts are used as means of expressing love and care, but reality is that, the life of individuals is void of communication and filled with materialism. Instead, "consumption functions as a language. Consumption is a means by which humans communicate and interact with one another."⁵ In addition, once the individuals' needs are met, their satisfaction is not reached and they fall into extra-consumption. It is the exact case with Max in the novel, who despite all the food and drinks he has in front of him, still wonders if Jim and Tessa: "will bring something to eat and drink."⁶ This is the case then, with extra-consumers. They constantly think about the next level, what to buy next. The individual then, becomes a prisoner to his endless desires. He ignores what makes him happy and forgets his purpose in life. From here, one can deduce that the extra-consumption fails at providing meaning to life. On the contrary, the obsession with competition and material gain makes life more absurd and senseless. An example of this from the novel is Max's obsession with winning

the bets he makes on football games without paying attention to the huge money he spends, and this indeed, makes his condition absurd.

In the novel, food, commodities, and status play significant roles in the characters' lives. The excessive consumption is observable right from the beginning of the novel. While travelling from Paris to New York, Jim and Tessa "decided to fly business class despite the expense."⁷ Hence, avoiding the economy class is a sign of wealth and having a certain social status. Jean Baudrillard here notes the symbolic value of commodities in consumer-oriented societies. He refers to it by saying: "all commodities are laden with symbolic value, which has eclipsed their utility and monetary values."⁸ To strengthen this argument, Baudrillard provides the example of the American society, which he considers the birthplace of sign value and the leader of the world in consumption. He argues: "America is the place where simulation and the production of the fetish have reached its zenith."⁹ In this kind of societies, commodities are no longer defined by their usefulness, but rather by who and what they symbolize. In this sense, the characters in *The Silence*, no longer buy objects, but purchase things that have symbolic meaning. These are "signs of one's happiness, success, affluence or penury."¹⁰

Another example of the sign value in the novel is Max and Diane's luxurious Manhattan apartment. The couple sat with Martin waiting for the Super Bowl in their super screen TV. Max is used to these kinds of games where he makes huge bets on the scores. He knows quite well that spending that much money on a single match is a sign of success and wealth. This may be the reason why he keeps the numbers under wraps. Diane refers to it as: "sacred territory"¹¹ as if this adds importance and mystic to the bets he makes and makes them more valuable.

In addition, Max, being a huge football fan, is also a consumer of the commercials. Diane describes his state by saying: "Max doesn't stop watching. He becomes a consumer who had no intention of buying something, one hundred commercials in the next three or four hours."¹²

Max is therefore, one example among millions of others who do not seem bothered by these commercials. At a certain point, he even starts reporting the commercial when the TV goes blank: “Wireless the way you want it. Soothes and moisturizes, gives you twice as much for the same low cost, reduces the risk of heart-and-mind disease.”¹³ This absurd behavior of automatically reporting the commercial is the result of certain weariness as Camus calls it which “comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness.”¹⁴

Another sign of consumerism in the story is the over consumption of food. Living in a consumer society renders the individual unaware of the amounts of food he purchases without really having the need to. Likewise, Max and the others fall in the trap of consumption. To illustrate, when Max wondered whether Jim and Tessa would bring food, although Diane told him there is more than enough, Max’s response was: “We might need more.”¹⁵ However, though they had all sorts of food in front of them from snacks, drinks, and peanuts, they barely touched anything. This shows the degree to which they are obsessed with purchasing more and more.

In addition, when the screen goes blank and they all sat waiting, the only alternative that seemed relevant to pass time in the darkness of the room was food. Max prepared halftime snacks although the game was not happening. Then, he went to the liquor cabinet, where all sorts of drinks were exquisitely arranged and poured himself a glass of bourbon. He proudly describes it as: “aged ten years in American oak,”¹⁶ in order to show off that drinking vintage American liquor is a sign of prestige and high profile. Max’s statement here comes to consolidate Baudrillard’s argument about the symbolic meaning and the value of commodities. Diane’s statement: “Our food. Here and now, football food,”¹⁷ also implies that the Super Bowl is considered a national festival with a special list of foods and beverage which are peculiar to the importance of this event. It also alludes to the spirit and ideals of Americanism.

The conspicuous consumption of food is also present in Jim and Tessa's flight. Stuck in the boredom of the long journey, Tessa's thinking is only about the quality of food served in business class. She told Jim: "I'm thinking back to the main course, I'm also thinking about the champagne with cranberry juice."¹⁸ Tessa and Jim certainly know that this sort of food has a kind of symbolic value and goes only with the rich. She also tells him: "seemed pretentious. But I'm looking forward to the scones later in the flight."¹⁹ This shows the degree to which they are obsessed with consuming food. Hence, their sole pre-occupation is when the next meal will be served. Baudrillard argues in this respect: "they are consuming the consumption."²⁰

The over consumption is not just of food or items, but also medicines. Martin in *The Silence* has been taking a medication without really having any serious illness. He is just swallowing pills out of stress and constant fear from others or the future. He tells Diane: "could be the feeling that others can hear your thoughts or control your behavior."²¹ It is then, a way out of the daily stress and anguish caused by the quick passage of time and the rapid changes due to technological advancements in today's societies. However, taking this kind of drug makes him lose his sense of self and doubts his own identity. He asks himself: "is this the face that other people see? Or is it something or someone that I invent? Does the medication I'm taking release this second self?"²²

As shown above, the phenomenon of consumerism is nothing but a hopeless and a failed attempt to give life meaning and confront its absurdity. It is claimed that consumption makes individuals happy and gives them the intended purpose of living, which is making others happy. But the fact is that, this happiness is just an illusion and human relationships are actually filled with materialism and void of meaning. Buying items and gifts is just another way of masking the true feeling of loneliness and the absence of love and care in people's lives. Individuals then, tend to project this feeling of alienation and detachment into consuming things. But instead of uniting people together, consumption on the contrary, alienates them

more by making them sink in their own obsessions and dreams. Hence, as shown previously in the first chapter, through chasing unattainable life goals and aspirations, we come to realize the degree to which our life is absurd.

2. Hyperreality:

The second postmodern phenomenon that plays a significant role in exacerbating the Absurd is Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. In addition to exposing consumerism hence, *The Silence*, just like most of DeLillo's late novels, is an attempt to examine the pervasiveness of digital technologies and virtual or hyper realities in the daily lives of individuals. *The Silence* thus, depicts and satirizes a postmodern world in which artificial intelligence is laying hold on every sector of life of the human activity. The digital revolution radically changed our conception of the world, space and time. Yet: "as we become increasingly connected, our ability to have authentic experiences has seemingly diminished."²³ Indeed, despite the impact of this revolution in increasing communication and connectivity between different communities and cultures, it is paradoxically producing misconnections and the loss of meaning, and hence reinforces the presence of the Absurd in today's world.

Jean Baudrillard traces the negative role that media plays by saying: "what is real is no longer our direct contact with the world, but what we are given on the TV screen. TV is the world."²⁴ Individuals thus, no longer live reality as it is, but as the media claims it to be. Their understanding of the events swiftly changes following the most updated news or the propaganda arranged by media to keep the individual passive and apathetic to what happens. In the midst of all this raging excess of information technologies, there is an eventual loss of meaning. It becomes a difficult task to find meaning to an existence that is rendered meaningless in itself by invasive technologies. Existence is reduced to the fruitless task of maintaining connection and virtual presence in the different social media platforms and this is arguably absurd.

In order for societies to thrive today, it has become necessary to make use of these technological innovations. The latter changes the way societies behave or operate. This co-dependent relationship of co-influence has raised the question of the possible implications of electronic technologies on the ordinary lives of people. As a matter of fact, the excess of digital technologies has left the individual confused and unable to understand the rapid process of computerization. However, “regardless of human capacity for technological understanding, digital technologies adversely impact our shared humanity and the ubiquitous nature of these technologies is quite frightening.”²⁵ Hence, because of this perilous dependence on digital assistance, the human being functions like a mechanical robot. He loses the essential mind faculties including the ability to think, to express emotions or to act appropriately. A vivid example of this in *The Silence* is Tessa’s dementia. Because of the overabundance of technologies in her life, her ability to remember simple things decreases. Instead of using her brain to think, she just clicks into her smart phone and all the information needed show up within seconds.

Life in the twenty-first century is indeed, a lot more than industrialization and mechanical labor as it were in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. With the massive globalization that is taking place, the swift changes, and the rapid pace of time, the well-being of the individual is significantly trivialized by media. Television with its depressing news, and social media with their illusory perfect images of the world, leads individuals to feel insecure about their appearance, what they have and where they are going in life. These traumatic experiences later trigger anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and even suicidal thoughts. Due to the negative effects of media then, today’s life has been radically transformed. Valuable things are devalued, priorities have changed, and new rules have taken place.

All these overwhelming experiences then, lead to a feeling of absurdity in certain situations. Albert Camus refers to this in *The Myth of Sisyphus* by saying: “There are absurd

marriages, challenges, rancors, silences, wars and even peace treaties.”²⁶ Similarly, there are notable instances in *The Silence* that consolidate Camus’ saying. The absurd behaviors can be seen particularly after the screen goes blank. The characters started talking about their obsessions, but soon, the conversation was overshadowed by a sudden silence which felt awkward and absurd. Another absurd situation in *The Silence* is when Max meets his neighbors. He says: “we stood in the hallway becoming neighbors for the first time.”²⁷ This explains the absurdity of the social life of the characters. The invasive technologies alienated them and killed their human tendency to socialize.

Camus’ calling forth absurd behaviors and situations is then, still valuable today because not much of what he said has changed in our contemporary lives. We spend long hours on social media, we walk the streets unseen, we stand at a street-corner staring down at our phones, invisible to each other. Although the streets are crowded, we ignore any possible interaction. We prefer to hide in plain sights. This detachment, “that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the Absurd.”²⁸

In addition, the overspread of means of information and mass media, contribute negatively in the loss of meaning. Despite all the efforts of these means to load people’s minds with information, the meaning and significance of the message is lost. Baudrillard argues in this sense: “we live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.”²⁹ With the over-exposure to means of media such as the TV, radio or the internet web, there results an excess of information and meaning. Since Baudrillard believes that: “information is thought to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning.”³⁰ He thus explains that instead of connecting meaning, information ceaselessly attempts to produce automatic communication. Hence, with these failed attempts to actually communicate, the media contribute to the opposite to occur. There is then: “an implosion of meaning,”³¹ which means that the meaning degenerates between different forms of media. This excess of information is

shown in different ways in the novel. At various points of the story, one can notice that the characters are overwhelmed by all what occurs around them. An illustration of this in the novel that sums up all the chaos, mass paranoia, and absurdity of today's world is Tessa's statement:

What comes next? It was always at the edges of our perception. Power out, technology sleeping 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 [...] virus, plague, the march through airport terminals, the face masks, the city streets emptied out.³²

This inability to find meaning is also the core of Camus' philosophy of the Absurd. His philosophy implies that: "the knowledge that life is absurd is already a step towards conquering the meaninglessness of life."³³ In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that: "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I cannot know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it."³⁴ A similar absurdist view of the world finds its way in *The Silence* through the character of Martin who, throughout the story, strives to find meaning. He continuously quotes Einstein as a helpless attempt for clarity. At a certain point, he wonders: "what if we are not what we think we are? What if the world we know is being completely rearranged as we stand and watch or sit and talk?"³⁵ However, despite all the attempts to explain the world, Camus believes that life has no inherent explanations and therefore is absurd. But he holds that the loss of meaning in our lives is actually an opportunity to free ourselves from hope and by this we experience more fully existence. He asserts: "without facing the Absurd, you will not find happiness in a world surrounded by despair."³⁶

In this context then, Baudrillard introduces his concept of hyperreality, which he closely relates to his idea of simulacrum. He essentially aims to examine today's virtual world where all realities are turned down and where it seems a difficult task to distinguish between what is real and what is a simulation to reality. He first defines hyperreality as: "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."³⁷ Hyperreality is thus, an imitation, a

representation that lacks an original reference. On the other hand, Baudrillard refers to simulacra as follows: “it is with this same imperialism that present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation.”³⁸ In other words, it refers to the desire to create a set of images and signs that correspond to a reality that is not real. This is what leads later to the hyperreal.

To better understand hyperreality, Baudrillard provides a prominent example of a hyperreal world which, according to him, perfectly fits this concept. He asserts that: “Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra.”³⁹ It is then, a typical representation of an ideal imaginary world which does not exist but is created as a simulation to reality. Baudrillard continues to describe it by adding that: “by presenting imaginary as more realistic than reality itself, Disneyland draws visitors into the world of escapism and happiness achieved through simulation, it makes the troubles of the real world less relatable.”⁴⁰ It is therefore, created to meet the crowds’ aspirations and fulfill their phantasms by making them believe in the existence of a perfect idealized happy world. Moreover, Baudrillard holds that: “it is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real and thus of saving the reality principle.”⁴¹ Add to that, he believes that Disneyland is created in order to resurrect a childish world that wants to sustain the childish illusions and dreams. He affirms this when he says:

The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp. Whence the dibility of this imaginary, its infantile degeneration, this world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the “real” world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere⁴²

The excess of images and the complications of living in a digital age are hence, all explicitly exposed in DeLillo’s *The Silence*. The novel is set in the twenty-first century where the world is intensely determined by digital technologies. Indeed, the use of these devices has become so frequent that it is nearly impossible to imagine life without cell phones, TV, or the

social networks. These inventions have thus, revolutionized our way of life. “One thing is certain, there’s no turning back now. Digital technology will spread further, and efforts to ignore it or legislate against it will likely fail.”⁴³ Nevertheless, though they enhanced the quality of life and contributed significantly to mind-blowing improvements in areas like science, healthcare, and entertainment, they negatively impact the human assumptions and the ability to assimilate and find inherent explanations to the enormous changes and inventions.

DeLillo, thus, is one author who devotes his works to depict the ways in which digital technologies affect the lives of individuals. His novel *The Silence* portrays a virtual world that is overshadowed by artificial intelligence and computer programming. However, the novel imagines a day where all the machines stop functioning, all the electronic devices are disrupted, and all the technologies are drastically silenced. The characters then, are left disoriented, lost and confused in a silenced world. This feeling of being left by technology creates an absurd situation: “technology has become a more positive sponsor of absurdity. Advances in technology have called forth absurd human behavior and placed us in what are economically absurd situations.”⁴⁴ So is the case with the absurd behaviors in *The Silence* after the digital silence occurs. Martin’s monologue about physics, Diane’s silence, and Max’s report of the game, all reinforce the absurdity of the situation.

The over dependence on technologies appears right from the beginning in the flight with Jim and Tessa. The plane is well-equipped with enhanced digital devices to make sure the passengers enjoy the business class. Small screens are installed in front of every passenger’s seat to guarantee him the reception of the latest exclusive news. When Jim got bored, Tessa told him to “activate his tablet, watch a movie,”⁴⁵ but Jim responds by saying: “I feel like talking, no headphones, we both feel like talking.”⁴⁶ This shows clearly the degree to which their life is absorbed by technology. The excess of digital devices then, have caused the loss of

real communication between people. All the talks became virtual and automatic. This failure of language to convey meaningful messages is a prominent feature of the Absurd.

In addition, when the TV screen went blank in Max and Diane's apartment, they immediately checked their phones, computers, and the other devices. And when they realized it is not a simple cut off or loss of reception, they all felt puzzled. They even ignored how to react to such an unusual event. Martin's comment on the digital silence was: "internet apocalypse"⁴⁷ launched by the Chinese. Diane by her turn commented on the strange digital disruption by saying: "I am foolishly trying to imagine all the rooms in all the cities where the game is being broadcast, all the people watching intently or sitting as we are, puzzled, abandoned by science, technology, common sense."⁴⁸ She even wonders: "what happens to people who live inside their phones?"⁴⁹ This condition of being left without any source of technology and the sudden silence renders the situation absurd, because although "technology exists, but there is no use or need for it. So a meaningless use or need is created, and this in itself is a quite meaningless and absurd manner."⁵⁰

Furthermore, with the smart technologies and the inevitable changes that followed, the power of the image and signs has remarkably taken over today's societies. Therefore, "what we witness today is, fundamentally, the rejection and erasure of the original to the advantage of the copy."⁵¹ The tele-technologies hence, have paved the way to a virtual reality that is unreal or hyperreal. All this then, leads to a confusion and a constant search for meaning and understanding of the self and world. The Absurd lies in this ambiguity and blurry vision of reality. Camus traces this distress between who we really are and the images that represent us. He argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photographs is also the Absurd."⁵² Similarly, the characters in *The Silence* experience this feeling of absurdity and a shift of reality in a variety of ways.

First is Tessa Berrens, who is extremely sick of constantly travelling by plane. She feels trapped inside the flight and cannot escape. The whole process is so suffocating for her to handle. At one point, she tells Jim: “all I want to do is get home and look at the blank wall.”⁵³ Moreover, her dementia and the inability to remember things without digital assistance, disturbs her and makes her think into deep space to understand the whole condition. She thought to herself: “when a missing fact emerges without digital assistance, each person announces it to the other while looking off into a remote distance, the other world of what was known and lost.”⁵⁴

Then, when the images on screen started to shake, they all felt like coming out of a world where they were profoundly immersed. It is as if what they thought is the real world is no longer real. “It was not ordinary visual distortion, it had depth, it formed abstract patterns that dissolved into a rhythmic pulse, a series of elementary units that seemed to thrust forward and then recede. Rectangles, triangles, square.”⁵⁵ This digital silence then, made them realize the intensity to which they were dependent on technological supports. This is apparent when the woman Jim and Tessa met in the clinic tells them: “the more advanced the more vulnerable, our systems of surveillance, our facial recognition devices, our imagery resolution. How do we know who we are?”⁵⁶

Furthermore, the digital distortion made them question their own existence and fear a more advanced future. Martin asks: “are we living a makeshift reality?”⁵⁷ He adds: “a future that isn’t supposed to take form just yet?”⁵⁸ This clearly shows that they are not set for other life-changing technologies and artificial future. Martin continues to admit: “artificial intelligence that betrays who we are and how we live and think.”⁵⁹ The power of technology hence, has outweighed any human consideration. The future is threatened by these technologies. Instead of reinforcing security, the dependence on digital technologies transform individuals into futile figures that suffer from an identity crisis. Camus affirms this again when he says: “this

discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this 'nausea', as a writer of today calls it is also the Absurd."⁶⁰

The complications of this excess of signs and images are also observable in the dream of Martin's student. Martin says: "it was a dream of words, not images, two words."⁶¹ Martin's statement may reflect a futuristic world where images of the real world are degenerated. Hence, the excess of signs and models has caused an erasure of the real leading to the hyperreal. Baudrillard argues in this respect: "A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences."⁶² The fact of not being able to understand the gap between the world and the other world or the virtual is actually where the feeling of absurdity stands.

In sum, the excess of digital technologies in the characters' life made them question their own existence and where they are going in life. Their addiction to the different smart devices brought about absurd behaviors and made them engage in an existentialist debate and realize the absurdity of their condition. The over-abundance of technologies leads later to a hyperreality and the loss of meaning. This inability to find genuine meaning and to sense the real world is what reinforces the Absurd.

In this chapter, I discussed aspects of postmodernism in DeLillo's *The Silence* and how they contributed to the reinforcement of the Absurd in contemporary lives. In doing so, I have borrowed important concepts that marked the postmodern period. These are Jean Baudrillard's ideas on the consumer society, and his notion of simulacra and hyperreality. My primary aim through exploring these concepts is to reveal how these phenomena played a critical role in perpetuating the presence of absurdism today.

First of all, I discussed a key aspect of the postmodern era in *The Silence*, which is consumerism. The latter has become a consistent habit in the everyday lives of the characters as

it is showed in the novel. It is used as a refuge to escape the daily stressful life routines. The characters then, over-consume food, clothes, TV and other items. However, this over-consumption increases in big events or national holidays like the Super Bowl as a means of breaking from the cyclical process of life. Then, I shifted to examine the different ways in which today's digital technologies fully control our lives, mainly through media and the social platforms. This perilous dependence on our digital devices leads to a reality that is not real, but is rather hyperreal or a set of images created by media as an alternative to the meaninglessness of life.

However, despite all the characters' efforts to establish meaning to existence, their attempts turn into failures each time. Thus, neither consumerism nor media could restore order or reestablish meaning to a life that is in essence full of non-sense and absurd. One can conclude that in all the overwhelming experiences of contemporary life, the feeling of absurdity manifests itself in unforeseen ways.

=Endnotes

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³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien, (London: Penguin, 1955), 4

⁴ Foudih and Guerroudj, “Absurdism and Moral Decay,” 97

⁵ Andrew M. Koch and Rick Elmore, “Simulation and Symbolic Exchange: Jean Baudrillard’s Augmentation of Marx’s Theory of Value,” *Politics and Policy* 34 (2006): 556-575

⁶ Don DeLillo, *The Silence*, (New York: Scribner, 2020), 15

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⁸ Koch and Elmore, “Simulation and Symbolic Exchange,” 13

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¹⁰ Ibid., 13

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¹⁴ Camus. *Myth of Sisyphus*, 10

¹⁵ DeLillo, *Silence*, 15

¹⁶ Ibid., 23

¹⁷ Ibid., 37

¹⁸ Ibid., 6

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²⁸ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 11

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Chapter Two: The Absurd in Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020)

This second chapter is concerned with the analysis of different aspects and themes through which absurdity is conveyed in DeLillo's *The Silence*. In doing so, I will rely heavily on Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. I will hence highlight how the characters in *The Silence* struggle to find meaning to their lives and how this latter triggers alienation and the distrust of language as a means of communication. This chapter also investigates how the characters in this novel adopt Camus' solutions to confront the absurdity of life.

1. The Absurdity of life:

The absurdity of the human existence takes a fundamental role in Camus' philosophy of the Absurd. "Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."¹ These are the striking words with which Camus starts his famous essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The Absurd hence, is the feeling of strangeness and hostility towards an irrational world. It is the inability of man to find deep meaningful explanations to the emptiness and the silence of the universe. In other words, the critic Martin Esslin defines this feeling as follows: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose [...] cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost, all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."²

In the same regard, in attempting to understand the absurdity of life, Camus approached the ideas of many other philosophers regarding the Absurd. He cites Martin Heidegger who considers "the human existence humiliated and the only reality is anxiety."³ He also mentions Søren Kierkegaard who asserts that: "no truth is absolute or can render satisfactory an existence that is impossible in itself."⁴ In addition, Camus connects the Absurd with Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* when he states: "this discomfort in the face of man's own humanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this 'nausea', as a writer of today calls it, is also the Absurd."⁵ Likewise, Sartre follows in the same footsteps as Camus in describing the Absurd.

He comments on the feeling and the notion of the Absurd in Camus' works by saying: "*The Myth of Sisyphus* is designed to explain the idea of the Absurd, and *The Stranger* is designed to show the feeling of it."⁶ He further explains that the Absurd is "a divorce and a discrepancy"⁷ between man and the world. It is indeed, the paradox that arises between the human being that strives for clarity but faces a motionless world. However, Camus departs significantly from the ideas of the above mentioned existential philosophers and their conceptions of the Absurd. He instead, offers a different and a renewed perspective to the Absurd. This is quite observable when he states: "it is evident that the thinkers we have just recalled have a common climate [...] but first I want to detour from the direct path."⁸ Camus' Absurd thus is concerned with seeking the reasons which render life absurd and eventually study the possible alternatives to confront this absurdity.

In the same sense, the absurdity of life is what takes over in *The Silence*. The characters struggle to find inherent meaning in their lives. They live in a world characterized by absurdity. They are overwhelmed by the excess of digital technologies and their effects on their psyche. Moreover, they live without a clear objective or purpose and this renders their lives meaningless and reduces their existence to daily monotonous routines. Similar to Sisyphus' mechanical and repetitive task of rolling the rock up the mountain and watch it roll down back again, the characters' actions reflect the futility of their existence in an advanced society. In this sense, Camus describes modern man working in industries in the same endless futile way. He states: "the workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks and this fate is no less absurd."⁹

Likewise, the characters of Jim and Tessa in the novel have been doing their futile jobs in a never-ending process. Their jobs require travelling long flights either for work-related purposes or for tourism. Either way, each time it becomes tiresome and dull. At a certain point, Jim complains by saying: "All the flights, all the hours deeper than boredom."¹⁰ In the same

sense, Camus describes this futility of work in modern societies by asserting that: “there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.”¹¹

Diane’s life is also characterized by absurdity. She has been married to Max for so long and this renders their relationship cold and boring. This appears when she describes it as follows: “thirty-seven years, not unhappily but in states of dire routine. Two people so clutched together that the day is coming when each of us will forget the other’s name.”¹² In addition, when she was a physics professor, she always had an objective and a duty towards her learners and this gave her life meaning. But now that she is retired, she has nothing to do and lives without purpose. This explains her ceaseless attempts to converse with her former student Martin about physics. In doing so, she then, strives for a sense of meaning. This is apparent when she thought to herself that: “she wanted to hear it one more time but she decided they ought to stop now, teacher and student in a reverse coupling”.¹³

The absurdity of life is also embodied in the character Max. He spends most of his time watching sporting events. However, his condition turns into absurd when his TV screen abruptly goes blank while waiting for the Super Bowl. Max’s main concern when the strange event happened was his money. His first comment on the latter was: “what is happening to my bet?”¹⁴ He then, fears to lose the huge money he invested on the game more than missing it. He unexpectedly, does not show any reaction and maintains silence for almost all the story. He remains indifferent to all what occurs around him. His bet addiction makes his condition absurd.

Furthermore, the process of waiting in vain is what adds an overtone of absurdity to the story. Most of the novel is centered on the act of waiting for the game, yet it never takes place. Waiting then, becomes a futile repetitive activity in which the characters are trapped. Notably, this task resembles the waiting in Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting For Godot*. Just like the two characters in this absurdist play Estragon and Vladimir are doomed to constantly wait for the

so-called Godot, also the characters in *The Silence* are trapped in an endless waiting. Moreover, the two characters in Beckett's play wait for someone who will never show up. Similarly, Max and the others are waiting for a game that will never happen. At the end of the play, Beckett concludes: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes. It's awful."¹⁵ Likewise, the Super Bowl never takes place in *The Silence*, the TV screen never goes back to normal, and the characters set planted in their seats.

Camus' concept of an absurd hero then, is strongly observable in *The Silence*. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus defines an absurd man simply as: "who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal."¹⁶ In this sense, it means that an absurd man is someone who lives life to the extreme, hates death, and is condemned to a meaningless task. Similarly in *The Silence*, the characters possess these features of an absurd man. Max is fully aware of the absurdity of his condition of waiting in vain for the Super Bowl to happen. He thus, abandons hope and does not make the least effort to change his doomed fate to wait for the game. This is illustrated in the novel when the TV goes blank and Diane "waited for him to clench his fists and starts cursing,"¹⁷ but he sat calmly. On the contrary, he feels free because he no longer is bound by the need to over think or act. His struggle to understand what happens around him makes him realize that the world is pointless, apathetic and incoherent. Max ultimately finds meaning in the struggle itself. His sense of meaning comes from the recognition of the Absurd. Therefore, he finally reaches acceptance.

The character of Martin can also be seen as an absurd man. Alienated and marginalized by society, "he walks the streets unseen"¹⁸ and thus, seeks belonging somewhere. He attempts to establish a sense of self, but he constantly fails. This identity crisis is apparent when he tells Diane: "I look in the mirror and I don't know who I'm looking at, the face looking back at me doesn't seem to be mine"¹⁹ Another aspect that makes Martin the embodiment of an absurd man is that he is conscious of the absurd life he was carrying, yet feels contented with the fact

that he is condemned by society of being an outcast. Nevertheless, Martin does not seem bothered at all by the sense of estrangement. He seems satisfied with who he is and what he wants from life. On the contrary, similarly to Sisyphus, he lives indifferently to the future and refuses to bow for the misery that life throws at him. He thus, learns to find joy in what is supposed to be world's futility.

2. Alienation and Absurdism:

Alienation is another aspect through which absurdity is conveyed in *The Silence*. The feeling of estrangement and isolation towards oneself or society has long been subject to study in literature. Indeed, the definitions attributed to this concept are varied. It has been approached from different angles namely, sociological, existential and philosophical. However, an agreed-upon definition to alienation implies what follows:

A variety of psycho-social disorders; including loss of self, anxiety states, psychosis, despair, depersonalization, rootlessness, apathy, social disorganization, loneliness, atomization, powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, pessimism and the loss of beliefs or values.²⁰

Self-alienation hence, occurs when man finds himself disoriented, hopeless, isolated, and anxious in a chaotic world. In other words, it is the feeling that he “has lost his identity or selfhood”,²¹ “Man hence, strives to find selfhood, first through interaction with others, but when he encounters problems of communication and socialization with them, his alienation becomes social”.²² He then, feels alien and deprived from an essential part of his identity. He ultimately comes to the fact that: “truth can be ascertained through detachment.”²³

In the same sense, the concept of alienation takes a central position in Albert Camus' philosophy of absurdism. Camus argues that the recognition of the Absurd leads to reject not only god, but also results in an alienation from man and society through rejection of values and social conventions. He explains the feeling of alienation in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as follows: “in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger.”²⁴ This

displacement hence, is mainly the result of a pointless, irrational universe. Camus continues to assert that: “we are made to live for others. But one really dies for oneself”.²⁵

The concept of alienation likewise, takes a significant role in *The Silence*. The characters in the novel are profoundly isolated from one another, their lives revolve around their personal universes and they cannot quite maintain deep meaningful relationships with one another. They constantly misunderstand each other and remain in their private, personal worlds. Moreover, they are not engaged in society. They are alienated from the world outside finding it hostile or confusing. Although the characters were all gathered in one living room, each one seems immersed in his own world, not paying attention to what the others say or do. Their state is described as follows: “was each a mystery to the others, however close their involvement, each individual so naturally encased that he or she escaped a final determination”.²⁶

Max’s alienation from everyone is clearly noticed right from the beginning of the novel. He was sitting aside alone in his armchair, in front of the TV screen, not talking to anyone. The presence of the others in his house to watch the game is coupled with a feeling of isolation and revulsion for social activities. Max longs to escape the company of the people around him. When Jim and Tessa arrived, they shared handshakes and embraces with the others, but Max was “standing with one clenched fist raised in a gesture of greeting.”²⁷ This means that he did not seem supportive of the idea of receiving guests. At one point, he decides to go outside and walk in the streets instead of socializing with those inside. Furthermore, Max’s relation with his wife Diane makes him more isolated. Her indifference and lack of awareness of Max’s feelings alienates him more to the point where he finally examines his own feelings through detachment. He then, discovers that he is also estranged from himself. Indeed, he tries to dive into his deep self to find himself again.

The other characters in *The Silence* also experience a sense of alienation in a way or another. The relationship between them is alien. Their emotions and feelings are so cold and

lonely. Martin isolates himself from the world that he sees as an inhuman place. He then, seeks belonging in Diane and Max's apartment. His isolation is caused mainly by society that considers him an outcast. This explains his fear of leaving the apartment. This fear indeed, is apparent when he says: "but if I leave this living room, will I ever come back?"²⁸

Diane is also feeling a sense of alienation in the story. She is physically and psychologically isolated from her husband Max and from society. This is observable when she thinks that: "she wanted to go for a walk, alone. Or she wanted Max to go for a walk and Martin to go home."²⁹ This clearly means that she wants to enjoy her own company. Her inability to understand her own feelings and thoughts makes her feel lost and confused. She then, desperately seeks for space, to confront her own feelings.

While Diane's isolation is imposed on her by society and the world, Tessa Berens' sense of alienation appears to be self-imposed due to the silence of the universe. She experiences an estrangement from the outside world. Thus, she alienates herself and prefers to focus on her own thoughts and emotions. She immerses in a poetic world created by her to escape the deadly loneliness. When they were all gathered in the apartment, Tessa:

Begins to separate herself, she keeps away to the sound of the young man's voice. She thinks into herself, she sees herself. She is different from these people. She imagines taking off her clothes, nonerotically, to show them who she is.³⁰

Even when Jim tries to break the ice with her, she is strongly reluctant to his advances and willingly goes back to her lonely world. All she wanted was: "being home, the place, where they don't see each other, walk past each other."³¹

In sum, the alienating experiences overshadow the inside and the outside world of the characters. The living room in the story where all of them are gathered acts like a shelter or a human sanctuary where they expect to be safe and hence, it is what offers them a sense of belonging. Thus, they belong in their silent lonely worlds.

3. The Absurd and Communication:

In addition to alienation, the problem of language and the failure of communication is a prominent aspect that demonstrates the absurdity in *The Silence*. This failure to communicate and the discontinuity of language are strongly apparent in DeLillo's novel. Language is reduced to conventionalized and meaningless exchanges. DeLillo hence, uses the speech between the characters to reveal their state of mind which, just like language, is devoid of content. DeLillo commented on the distrust of language in his books by stating: "some of the characters are pieces of jargon, they engage in wars of jargon with each other, there is a mechanical element, a kind of fragmented self-consciousness."³² This is to refer to the linguistic misunderstandings between the characters. In addition to the speech patterns of the characters, the recurrent silences, the shifts in topics that reinforce the absurdity that dominates *The Silence*.

In the story, the character of Martin is the one who strives for meaning, yet he never achieves it. His ceaseless attempts to explain himself and to express his thoughts coherently are reduced to meaninglessness and faced by the silence of the other characters. The dialogue between the characters is cryptic, baffling, repetitive and full of single words that convey no inherent meaning. In Martin's case, his speech could be the result of a deep obsession with something, combined with language disintegration. This situation manifests itself when Martin resumed his speech about physics:

Thaumatology, Ontology, eschatology, epistemology, he could not stop himself, metaphysics, phenomenology, transcendentalism. He paused and thought and kept going. Teleology, etiology, ontogeny, phylogeny"³³

Understanding what Martin intends to say here, seems a difficult task. When reading the quote, the words can be understood in isolation, but combined they do not convey any meaning. Martin does not seem able to stop and the others looked at him and listened indifferently.

The speech disintegration continues with the characters' repetitions and stammering which are quite observable in Jim and Tessa's conversation on the flight:

“What does vitesse means?
What? ‘vitesse’
‘Vitesse, speed,’ she said
‘vitesse, seven-hundred forty-eight k per hour’³⁴

The discontinuity of language continues with Jim and Tessa:

“He was Swedish,” she said
“Who?”
“Mr. Celsius.”
“Did you sneak a look at your phone?”³⁵

This stammering can also be noticed in Jim’s reciting what appeared in his overhead screen: “okay, altitude thirty-three thousand and two feet, nice and precise, temperature extérieure minus fifty-eight c.”³⁶ This reading and repeating of what is written on the screen reflects the repetitious circle of life.

Furthermore, it is notable to mention that at various points of the story, there are several instances of discord between what a character is supposed to say and what he actually says, or what the others understand. This discord also reinforces the feeling of estrangement of the characters. An accurate example of this is when Diane talks about Jim and Tessa:

“The two empty chairs, Old friends, more or less, husband, wife, returning from Paris, I think, or Rome”.
“Or north-central Chile”
“North-central Chile”³⁷

In order to pass time, the characters engage in ridiculous conversations. Just is the case, first with Jim and Tessa on the flight: “much of what the couple said to each other seemed to be a function of some automated process”.³⁸ Jim begins to recite the words and numbers aloud while Tessa is profoundly affected by her dementia and thus, finds extreme difficulty to express herself through the use of words or remembering things.

The absurd discussion eventually shifts to the other characters who are gathered in the Manhattan apartment. Plunged into the darkness of the room, in deeper boredom, they try to pass time by uttering whatever comes to their minds to break the silence. Max is certainly aware of this state and asserts: “there’s nothing else to say except what comes into our heads, which none of us will remember anyway.”³⁹ However, the trivial discussion after a while, was

shadowed by disquiet and each one immersed in the deep space. Therefore, this explains the inefficacy of language for passing time. It shows that speech, like waiting, is a deadly boring habitual part of life. Hence, they just speak in order to survive.

4. The Three Camusian Alternatives to the Absurd:

In order to overcome this absurdity, Camus speaks about various ways of confronting the Absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that all people are born with a shared human nature that bounded them toward common goals. One such goal was to seek out meaning despite the world's arbitrary cruelty. Exploring how to live without meaning became Camus' major concern in his works. According to him, the Absurd cannot be negated. This means that man must react to it in different ways. In doing so, Camus suggests three possible solutions to cope with the Absurd: physical suicide, philosophical suicide, and acceptance.

The most common solution to an absurd life is suicide. He considered it to be the fundamental philosophical problem. Committing suicide is hence, as Camus puts it in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it."⁴⁰ He thus, believes that ending one's life is a natural response to the Absurd world. He further explains:

I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying).⁴¹

Despite the rationality of the suicide option as an answer to the futile world, Camus dismisses the viability of this option. He argues that escaping existence does not end the Absurd. Instead, by succumbing to it, one's existence becomes more absurd.

In this way, the idea of suicide is implicitly discussed in *The Silence* through the event of the airliner crash. The indifference towards death and abandoning the will to live becomes a pre-occupying issue in Jim's and Tessa's minds. In this sense, the third section of *The Silence* starts by the saying: "life can get so interesting that we forget to be afraid."⁴² This ignorance of

the feeling of fear is what reinforces the Absurd. The idea of death indeed, occupies a complex position in the novel. It is present when Jim and Tessa's plane crash-landed due to the digital disruption that occurred and silenced all technologies. Their attitude and response to the crash is what makes their condition absurd. While the passengers and the attendants are panicked, Jim and Tessa maintained silence. They lacked awareness of how to react to such an event. Tessa adjusts her seat to upright and "she was looking at him now, not writing, just looking."⁴³ It is as if words are useless. They keep calm and wait the crash of the airliner. Camus describes this state of numbness and apathy by saying: "The mind, when it reaches its limits, must make a judgment and choose its conclusions. This is where suicide and the reply stand."⁴⁴

When Tessa speaks, the only thing she said is: "are we afraid?"⁴⁵ This shows the degree to which the idea of death is trivialized and not taken seriously. Tessa's ignorance of the feeling of fear also explains all the anguish and motion sickness due to the long dull flights. It also alludes to the fact that the habit of living has become harsh, burdening, and cyclical. This deadly habit and routine that Jim and Tessa are living made them not quite sure whether they still want to live. Hence, they thought that death will be the end to their sufferings. Camus asserts this in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.⁴⁶

However, Jim did not answer the question and kept looking at her. It is, indeed, in this very moment of truth, when they felt so close to death that they realized the absurdity of the life they were living. "It is the hour of consciousness."⁴⁷ as Camus puts it in *Sisyphus*. They became aware that death is inevitable. Their entire life went through a quick flashback in their minds. It is hence, in this tragic moment of awareness that they reached an understanding of their condition. Jim resumes this when he says: "everything is 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.”⁴⁸

The second way out to an absurd life is what Camus calls philosophical suicide. He explains that many people have explored the human tendency to long for meaning by creating spiritual beliefs as an answer to satisfy any philosophical existential question. This may come in the form of religion. Camus considers this option a way to confront the Absurd by replacing the uncertainty of existence with a set of man-made beliefs. In *the Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus tackles the problem of faith in a variety of ways. He first claims that: “The Absurd becomes god (in the broadest meaning of this word).”⁴⁹ It means that the failure to understand the essence of existence leads to question the possibility of the presence of a supreme god. Furthermore, Camus continues his views on god by hinting to the fact that:

God is perhaps full of hatred and hateful, incomprehensible and contradictory; but the more hideous is his face, the more he asserts his power. His greatness is his incoherence. His proof is his inhumanity. One must spring into him and by this leap free oneself from rational illusions.⁵⁰

According to Camus then, man will know freedom only if he frees himself from the constraints of religion. He further asserts that religion is a failed attempt at giving life a meaning. He thus, firmly rejects the option of religion in which one believes in the existence of a super natural being or a spiritual force that supposedly explains the universe. It is mere philosophical suicide to him.

The issue of faith and religion or the philosophical suicide occupies quite an important part in *The Silence*. This can be clearly understood in the fourth section of the novel which starts by the saying: “How saints and angels haunt the empty churches at midnight, forgotten by the awed swarms of daytime tourists.”⁵¹ The Christian faith is apparent in the novel when the TV screen abruptly goes down. Max then, realized he was missing the game he put so much time and money to watch, so he started cursing the situation. He went on saying: “Jesus or good

Christ or Jesus H. Christ.”⁵² Max does not seem to know really the exact name of Christ. This alludes to the fact that he is a non-believer. Enraged and impatient, Max repeats the name of Jesus several more times. His anger however, might be a call for Jesus, the supposed savior, to come and help in restoring order. In this regard, Camus holds that: “In Christ, man is reconciled to God because God has shared man’s condition and with this knowledge man can accept his condition without revolt.”⁵³ It is the case then, with Max who ultimately accepts his condition and stops complaining.

Diane uttered the word ‘Jesus of Nazareth’⁵⁴ and waited for somebody to respond. She then, continues: “We say it, you say it, and I say it. What did Einstein say?”⁵⁵ She here, seems not fully convinced by the existence of Jesus, and needed reassurance by science and Einstein’s beliefs in particular. Martin then, quotes Einstein who is enchanted by the name of Jesus of Nazareth. However, Martin is more interested in the name and its aura rather than the person or the meaning and its significance. Martin is said to not belong to any religion, and therefore, does not believe in the presence of a supernatural being.

Diane resumes her talk about Jesus and his paintings in the ceilings of Rome with angels. She talks enthusiastically about its enchanting beauty, but she and the others completely ignore the fact that he is a messenger from God. This fact seems to them unreal, they reached a state where they refute any religious or moral beliefs and the only panel of truth for them is science. Camus asserts this when saying:

With the advent of modern period and of critical reason, Jesus was discovered to be not god but man, and with this discovery western civilization had come full circle back to the realities of evil and death from which it had arisen, leaving human suffering unjustified and unexplained beneath the veiled face of a sovereign god.⁵⁶

With the advent of science and invasion of modern technologies, the characters consider any form of faith as being superstition and they doubt the existence of a savior in their lives. The divinity of Christ has then, been put into question and with it the belief in an almighty god.

The last alternative which Camus suggests is the acceptance of the Absurd. A solution in which, one accepts the absurdity of existence and lives with it. Camus strongly adopts this option which he sees as the best way to face an absurd life. He asserts: “from the moment of the recognition of the Absurd, it becomes a passion.”⁵⁷ It is hence, in the moment Camus calls ‘tragic’ that man gains awareness of his absurd condition that he finally gains freedom and accepts the Absurd. It is the case of Sisyphus and his endless futile task of rolling the bolder up the mountain. Camus is hence, interested in Sisyphus’ thoughts marching down the mountain. He states: “it is during that return; that pause, that Sisyphus interests me.”⁵⁸ It is indeed, the tragic moment where Sisyphus becomes conscious of his futile absurd condition. By acknowledging the Absurd, he reaches a state of contented acceptance. Camus concludes this myth by claiming that by acceptance: “one must imagine Sisyphus happy.”⁵⁹

In the same sense, although the characters attempt in a way or another to escape the Absurd, all of them ultimately came to accept their doomed fate to live an absurd life. First, the character that truly seems to accept the Absurd right from the beginning is Diane. She does not seem bothered at all by the dull, purposelessness in her life. On the contrary, she fully lives it. Although her life with her husband Max lacks meaning and the element of surprise, she carries on to live it anyway. She is fully aware of her condition, yet she does nothing to change it. Even when offered to do so, she immediately decides to stay where she is. The element of change came in Martin’s attempts to share his love with her. Although at first, she does not seem reluctant to the idea, she instantly retreats and prefers rather to continue living her boring, fruitless life: “she understands that sex with her former student may be a sleazy little tremor in her mind but is nowhere present in her body.”⁶⁰

Another character who seems to reach acceptance of the Absurd in his life is Martin. He is said to not belong to any religion, thus, he is not restricted by any moral or religious constraints. This gains him freedom from behaving in accordance with society’s moral and

ethical standards. He becomes an autonomous individual due to his religious rejections. Indeed, he feels free to do whatever he desires. When Diane expects him to leave after she rejects him, “he takes three long strides to the nearest chair, and sits there”.⁶¹

Max also at the end of the story has come to realize the absurdity of the whole situation. He became aware that no matter what one does or says, life is pointless either ways. Hence, he finally reached acceptance that his life is meant to be absurd and has to live with that anyway. The moment of awareness has finally come to convince Max that the only refuge for the Absurd is to live it. Indeed, the novel ends with him “in front of the TV set with his hands folded behind his neck, elbows jutting. Then, he stares into the blank screen”.⁶²

4. Don Juanism, the Artist, and the Actor:

In confronting the absurdity of life also, Camus provides in *The Myth of Sisyphus* examples of life that the absurd man undertakes in order to overcome the futility of existence and eventually accepts his condition to a meaningless life. These are first, Don Juanism which he defines as the one who lives life unconditionally or without limits. Second is the artist or the actor who tries to live through art or by adopting others’ lives. Last but not least, conquest or the conqueror, who, according to Camus’ definition, holds a certain political power over others. However, we are concerned here with the first two examples Don Juan and the artist or the actor that are quite apparent in DeLillo’s *The Silence*.

Let us start with Don Juan, whom Camus describes as the serial seducer, who pursues the passions of life. He constantly seeks pleasure no matter what the consequences are. He does not believe in any rules of ethics. He lives life to the fullest and does not have hope. He does not seem to care about morality, nor does he believe in life after death. Camus states that Don Juan believes that: “what comes after death is futile.”⁶³ Hence, the only thing he longs for in life is instant gratification to his endless desires. His only fear is to lose this. Camus describes this fear by noting: “this life gratifies his every wish, nothing is worse than losing it.”⁶⁴ Don

Juan is thus, a man of passion, he completely ignores what is melancholy. He considers hope as the reason of melancholy for people who have hope. He firmly abandons hope and asserts that: “Men who live on hope do not thrive in this universe, where kindness yields to generosity, affection to virile silence, and communication to solitary courage.”⁶⁵

In this sense, Don Juan is exemplified in *The Silence* in different ways through the characters’ portrayals. To start with, Max seems to carry some features of Don Juan in his character. He lives an absurd life which revolves around his obsession with sporting events. Thus, he always pursues this obsession without paying the least attention to the repercussions of his actions. It seems like making huge bets over football games is what gives his life a lot of meaning. The only moment of happiness he experiences is thus, when watching these games on TV. Hence, to enjoy these short palpable moments, Max is set to do whatever it takes. This explains the big amounts of money he spends in these bets. Diane holds in this regard: “big dollars, but the actual amount is a number he keeps to himself”.⁶⁶

Don Juanism is also present in *The Silence* through the characters of Jim and Tessa. When their plane crash-landed and they almost died, the first thing they did at the slightest occasion was to make love. Similarly to Don Juan, whose sole obsession is love, Jim and Tessa have come to realize that the only way to react to such an absurd situation was love. Besides, as Don Juan believes: “the more one loves, the stronger the Absurd grows.”⁶⁷ Jim and Tessa, then when faced death, the only wish they had was to have pleasure. They only followed their passions and sexual instincts.

The second example of an absurd life according to Camus is to live as an actor or an artist. The actor is the one who encompasses different lives. He goes through several stages to reach a meaningful, purposeful life. He lives the lives of others and experiences ups and downs to finally gain awareness of the absurdity and the futility of the human existence. He undertakes a journey of discovery to explore the life’s absurdity. In this sense, Camus quotes Hamlet

when he states: “the play’s the thing [...] wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king”.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the artist is the one who creates his own world. His imagination and creativity is the fuel that leads him to seek out meaning in life. Camus argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the everyday man:

Nothing interests him more than himself, especially his potentialities. Whence his interest in the theatre, in the show, where so many fates are offered him, where he can accept the poetry without feeling the sorrow. There at least can be recognized the thoughtless man, and he continues to hasten toward some hope or other.⁶⁹

Hence, both the actor and the artist take refuge in their art or creation worlds in order to flee the chaotic and hostile universe. Leading successful careers is considered to be the source of meaning and purpose to them.

These two examples of the Absurd find their way in *The Silence* through the two characters of Tessa and Max. Tessa Berens is the artist in the story. She is a poet and publishes her poems in literary journals. Hence, writing poetry is a form of art that she uses to provide her life with a sense of purpose. Instead of surrendering to a life that is basically devoid of meaning, she would rather create another world that would appear less hostile and more embracing. Hence, she relishes her imagination and writes down her thoughts and aspirations as poems and shares them.

On the opposite side, Max at a certain point, acts like the actor in the story. When his eager desire to watch the Super Bowl was put down due to the digital disruption, he could not bear the idea of missing such an event. He then, starts broadcasting the non-occurring match. An example of this from the novel is when Max: “raised his head, phantom microphone in hand, and he spoke to a camera well above field level, his voice pitched to a higher tonal range”⁷⁰ He then, acts like a TV reporter who lives the game and reports it enthusiastically. By playing this part, Max felt a sense of relief. It is as if he desperately needs to experience his loss through somebody else’s perspective in order to understand the present situation and copes with it.

In a nutshell, the above chapter consists of a camusian analysis of Don DeLillo's *The Silence* with direct reference to the concept of the Absurd in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. My primary aim in this chapter is thus, to demonstrate the ways in which absurdism is prevalent in contemporary world. First, I have explored the issue of absurdity in the novel. I analyzed how the characters in *The Silence* find it hard to understand a silent world or find rational explanations to the futility and anarchy of the universe. Then, I moved to examine other important features that convey absurdism. I talked about the concept of alienation which according to Camus, is primarily caused by the absurdity of life. Then, I shifted to explore the problem of language and failure of communication in the novel that reflect in a way or another the absurdity of the human existence and also indicate that language has lost its function to communicate meaningful words and sentences.

In addition, I reviewed Camus' solutions to confront an absurd life. In doing so, I cited suicide and philosophical suicide as both alternatives to seek out meaning in life. However, the only way out which Camus endorses is simply the acceptance of the Absurd. I have also provided examples of an absurd life as cited by Camus, namely, Don Juanism and the artist or the actor. As it is clearly shown in the above chapter, *The Silence* can be considered an absurdist look at our contemporary societies. DeLillo reflects this when he imagines a day where the world is harshly reduced to silence and passivity. The event of the digital disruption in the novel is what adds to the absurdity of the whole situation. The characters are left disoriented and speechless. Neither language nor company could fill the tumbling void in their faces. All they desire is being left alone with the thoughts in their heads. This inability to understand the world in front of them confirms Camus' absurdism which claims the absence of a meaningful explanation to the universe.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien, (London: Penguin, 1955), 4
- ² Martin Esslin, "The Absurdity of the Absurd," *The Kenyon Review*, 22, 4 (1960): 670-673
- ³ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 17
- ⁴ Ibid., 8
- ⁵ Ibid., 11
- ⁶ Thomas D. Daniel, "Sartre on Camus' Concept of the Absurd: Absurdity through the Eyes of an Existentialist," *Serious Philosophy* (May, 2020) <https://medium.com/serious-philosophy/sartre-on-camus-b7f093d0761e>
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 20
- ⁹ Ibid., 77
- ¹⁰ Don DeLillo, *The Silence*, (New York: Scribner, 2020), 7
- ¹¹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 75
- ¹² Ibid., 77
- ¹³ DeLillo, *Silence*, 19
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 16
- ¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting For Godot*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)
- ¹⁶ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 43
- ¹⁷ DeLillo, *Silence*, 16
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 14
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 27
- ²⁰ Shabnan Ashai, "Camus' Concept of Alienation," (PhD diss, Aligarh Muslim University-India, 1994), 33
- ²¹ Ibid., 34
- ²² Ashai, "Camus' Concept of Alienation," 34
- ²³ Ibid., 37
- ²⁴ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 6
- ²⁵ Ashai, "Camus' Concept of Alienation," 62
- ²⁶ DeLillo, *Silence*, 37

- ²⁷ Ibid., 36
- ²⁸ Ibid., 61
- ²⁹ Ibid., 28
- ³⁰ Ibid., 47
- ³¹ Ibid., 50
- ³² Thomas LeClair, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," *University of Wisconsin System*, 23 (1982): 19-31
- ³³ DeLillo, *Silence*, 35
- ³⁴ Ibid., 7
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 6
- ³⁷ Ibid., 19
- ³⁸ Ibid., 8
- ³⁹ Ibid., 58
- ⁴⁰ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 5
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 4
- ⁴² DeLillo, *Silence*, 21
- ⁴³ Ibid., 12
- ⁴⁴ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 19
- ⁴⁵ DeLillo, *Silence*, 12
- ⁴⁶ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 5
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 76
- ⁴⁸ DeLillo, *Silence*, 11
- ⁴⁹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 23
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 24
- ⁵¹ DeLillo, *Silence*, 23
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Thomas L. Hanna, "Albert Camus and the Christian Faith," *Chicago Journals*, 36, 4 (October, 1956): 224-233
- ⁵⁴ DeLillo, *Silence*, 23

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Hanna, “Camus and Christian Faith,” 229

⁵⁷ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 16

⁵⁸ Ibid., 76

⁵⁹ Ibid., 78

⁶⁰ DeLillo, *Silence*, 49

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 62

⁶³ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 46

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ DeLillo, *Silence*, 14

⁶⁷ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 45

⁶⁸ Ibid., 50

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ DeLillo, *Silence*, 27

V. General Conclusion

Throughout this study, I have analyzed the latest novel of the American writer Don DeLillo entitled *The Silence* (2020). In doing so, I traced my emphasis on the period and the circumstances in which DeLillo wrote this novel. In studying *The Silence*, I have vigorously relied on Albert Camus' philosophy of absurdism. I have also attempted a postmodernist reading of *The Silence* through borrowing key concepts of postmodernism that contributed in the exacerbation of the Absurd in today's world. First I relied on Jean Baudrillard's ideas on the consumer society. Then, I made reference to Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality.

The Silence hence, reflects a world that is harshly shaped by digital technologies and artificial intelligences. It portrays a hostile world in which the characters are reduced to addicted consumers and objects manipulated by means of media, technology, and material gains. This is observable in the novel with the character of Max, who is the absurd hero in the story, and is an excessive consumer of television and continuously watches football games to fill the void in his meaningless life. In addition, the other characters namely Jim, Tessa, and Diane use their jobs to claim that they have a certain purpose in life. Moreover, the event of digital disruption or the screen which goes blank in the novel is probably a key aspect that depicts the role of artificial intelligence and technology in reinforcing the absurdity of the situation. The latter is said to be an internet apocalypse or an unknown interference in the launch codes. Either ways, it alienates the characters more from reality and creates a hyperreality as a way of finding meaning to life.

The characters use consumerism and entertainment as simulacra to reach meaningful and happier lives. First, they find refuge in TV. Hence, the Super Bowl acts like the source of meaning. With it, they felt like they had something to wait for. But when the screen goes blank, the characters were unable to understand the prevailing silence in the room and felt lost. Then, they try to get digital help but they fail. Thus, all that is left to do is consume food as a

distraction to the haunting silence of the universe. But ultimately all these attempts failed to give the characters inherent explanations to what happened. On the contrary, these simulacra are what make their life more absurd and alien.

This research thus, aims to depict the degree to which DeLillo's imaginary contemporary world is prevailed by absurdity. The philosophy of absurdism is hence, no longer bound to the two world wars. But its pervasiveness transcends the period of modernism to continue to predominate in postmodern times. DeLillo's *The Silence* then, proves to be an absurdist work of fiction, depicting the characters as alienated, anxious, and unable to find a sense of self. They indeed, struggle to express their own feelings through language, and prefer to isolate themselves and immerse in their own worlds as an attempt for clarity. Such is the case in the novel with the character of Tessa who creates a world of poems to flee the emptiness and absurdity in her life. By this, she confronts the Absurd by her art as Camus claims it. The other characters namely Max, Diane, and Martin try to find refuge in religion, which is another failed attempt to face the Absurd. However, the characters ultimately came to realize that only by acceptance one can cope with the Absurd.

In sum, *The Silence* can be considered an absurdist and a realistic portrayal of a twenty-first century American society in which the individual finds himself alien and no longer trusts the religious texts and the social conventions. Therefore, he strives to give meaning to his life by putting his faith on simulated images of reality or material objects like consumerism, TV or other things in order to feel relief. Nevertheless, *The Silence* is open to various other interpretations and can be examined from different philosophical angles like traumatic, psychological, or existential.

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