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# Spectacle dominance and the existential vacuum: a critical reflection on the age of the spectacle in DeLillo's *The silence*

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This paper employs Guy Debord's theory of the society of the spectacle as its core framework, integrating Jean Baudrillard's consumer society and Byung-Chul Han's critique of digital culture, among other perspectives, to conduct a systematic interpretation of Don DeLillo's novel *The Silence*. The study demonstrates that through the extreme scenario of a global digital system collapse, the novel profoundly reveals the operational logic and existential consequences of the society of the spectacle in the contemporary era. Despite the spectacle's attempt to erase all authentic experience, DeLillo offers replicable paths of resistance through Tessa's "embodied documentation" and Martin's "intellectual defiance." The paper contends that *The Silence* not only serves as a powerful testing ground for the society of the spectacle but also expands its theoretical boundaries, offering new interpretive possibilities for understanding the "post-spectacle" phenomenon.

## KEYWORDS

advertising, cultural encoding, data colonialism, Don DeLillo, existential wasteland, spectacle, therapeutic discourse

## 1 Introduction

The spectacle is a core concept proposed by the renowned contemporary French thinker Guy Debord, representing his incisive critique of the everyday invasion of capitalist-driven media phenomena. The spectacle is "increasingly celebrated as an indictment of commodity-saturated mass-mediated and image-dominated society, and an expression of the plight of the alienated subject" (Kaplan, 2012, p. 458). The media industries of Debord's era encompassed cinema, news, magazines, and television. These now include cable and streaming television, alongside malleable social media and co-created, ever-present and immediate forms of digital interaction-distraction like Facebook, TikTok and Instagram (Vinson et al., 2010; Jiang, 2023).

As a novelist with acute observation of contemporary American social textures, DeLillo presents through literary narrative the spectacularization of American society, the alienation of the subject, and strategies of resistance. In *Players*, Lyle and Pammy grew weary of being defined, swept along, and even rendered anonymous by the media, which in turn sparked a longing to escape and seek adventure (Tyers, 2023). The spectacles in *White Noise* and *Falling Men* evoke death anxiety and apocalyptic fear. Counter-narratives are possible paths for transcending the illusions and disillusionments of capitalism (Ma, 2024). In *Mao II*, DeLillo positions art as humanity's best hope against media and spectacle domination (Wilcox, 2006). In *Zero K*, DeLillo seeks authenticity through the protagonist's return to embodied experiences in daily life, thereby resisting the power manipulations and disembodiment consequences of the society of the spectacle (Sun, 2019). Cowart (2002) summarizes that through transcription, "DeLillo observes and records the way the contemporary mind, its attention span diminished, has seemingly been modified by film, by music, and, overwhelmingly, by television" (p. 12).

DeLillo's (2017) work *The Silence* continues his critique of the society of the spectacle by a deeper reflection on the operational mechanism and its profound effect upon subjectivity.

Written during the pandemic, *The Silence* transcends fictional narrative, functioning as a fable of the digital era that dissects its defining anxieties: the fragility of our media-saturated existence and a deepening spiritual void. Yet to date, its unique theoretical value and contemporary significance remain under-explored. While the existing studies focus on technological themes, language studies and sound narratives (Suyoufie and Dagamseh, 2025; Sun, 2022; Huang and Li, 2024), this paper attempts to examine it through the lens of the society of the spectacle. This perspective possesses a bidirectional constructiveness. The society of the spectacle provides an effective interpretive tool for understanding the cultural alienation, individual spiritual emptiness, media dependency, and social pathologization depicted in *The Silence*. Correspondingly, the phenomena of digital colonization and media internalization depicted in *The Silence* precisely represent new symptoms of the society of the spectacle in the digital age. To this end, this study will introduce theoretical perspectives such as media rituals, the therapeutic society, self-exploitation, and data colonialism to systematically analyze *The Silence*'s multidimensional critique of the society of the spectacle. It will further demonstrate how the novel's literary narrative propels the renewal and expansion of spectacle theory within the digital context.

## 2 The meaning vacuum revealed after the collapse of the spectacle

"The spectacle is a permanent opium war" (Debord, 1995, p. 30)—this assertion incisively pinpoints the spectacle's paralyzing and disciplining nature. Zhang (2005) presents a contemporary resonance to this theory: "Crawling under the rule of the spectacle, people remain unaware that they have relinquished authentic living and genuine existence. The actual reality surrounding us is, in truth, merely a plaything manipulated by the spectacle" (p. 68). The spectacle incorporates individuals into its consumption logic of capital appreciation, dissolving the subjectivity of individuals and reconstructing social relations. In the novel, Max is a devoted viewer of the Super Bowl, yet this game to him is merely a source of gambling thrills. This fervent pursuit of performance actually reflects the self-exploitative essence of the "achievement subjects" (49) described by Han (2017). According to this theory, the driving force behind exploitation does not stem from external coercion, but rather from the individual's unconscious internalization of social competitive logic. Max's behavior is no longer merely leisurely pastime but has become an addictive performance to sustain his sense of self, which is the most vivid pathological sample of the achievement society in the daily life of individuals. Besides, his fixation on the "aged ten years in American oak" (DeLillo, 2021, p. 41) label of whiskey rather than the whiskey itself represents the active internalization of the symbolic narrative constructed by advertising, which represents the ultimate triumph of "symbolic value" over "use value" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 3). Max summarizes his existence as "We talk, we listen, we eat, we drink, we watch" (DeLillo, 2021, p. 22), yet he failed to recognize that these actions are precisely proof that his life has been processed by the spectacle. Max's daily practices are not merely a simple manifestation of the reality of spectacle colonization criticized by Debord, but also a footnote to how the spectacle is internalized into the unconscious behaviors and modes of identity of the individual.

The "silence" in *The Silence* superficially points to the physical world's stillness after the collapse of digital technology, but it actually points to the human survival conditions exposed after the collapse of the spectacle—the existential wasteland where meaning has been completely emptied. After the screen goes blank, Max is instantly plunged into anxiety and disorder: he stares helplessly at the screen, with no desire to chat and nothing to say. In his own words, "... because the current situation tells us that there's nothing else to say except what comes into our heads, which none of us will remember anyway" (DeLillo, 2021, p. 111). His indigenous discourse is muddled up by the nature of game, "half sentences, bare words, repetitions" (DeLillo, 2021, p. 46), and he even suddenly forgets his daughter's name. This dual loss of spirit and memory signifies that under the discipline of the spectacle system, the individual's subjectivity has long been rendered defenseless. *The Silence* not only demonstrates the oppressive nature of the spectacle, but also further reveals the survival responses of subjects by constructing an extreme scenario of digital system collapse. When Max tries to relive the childhood joy of counting stairs, he can no longer feel the happiness and meaning he once did, and can only sigh, "I'd like to say that I was reliving those earlier years but my mind was more or less blank" (DeLillo, 2021, p. 110). This detail suggests that the spectacle has undermined the ontological foundations of human existence: since real life has long been reconfigured by the capital logic, even when individuals are detached from the screen, they cannot find the meaning and value of existence.

After his anxiety reached its peak, Max's sudden act of inventing a fictional match holds greater theoretical significance. He transforms from a member of the silent majority into producer of the spectacle. The spectacle he reconstructs is as real as an actual competition, seamlessly switching between sports jargon and advertising terminology. This exquisite scene can be seen as DeLillo's significant advancement of the theory of the society of the spectacle. In late capitalist era, the relationship between the spectacle and the individual is no longer the compulsory or passive one described by Debord, but has evolved into a deeply symbiotic and interdependent state. When the screen ceases to function, disciplined subjects automatically take over the reproduction of the spectacle. This actually validates and sharpens Couldry's (2003) theory of the "media ritual." In the extreme scenario of digital system collapse, the media ritual internalizes into an individual survival ritual.

"In all its specific manifestation—news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment—the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life" (Debord, 1995, p. 13). The novel's another protagonist, Jim, similarly embodies this theory. During the emergency landing, he instinctively leaps beyond his genuine fear, imagining instead "that every passenger was looking straight ahead into the six o'clock news, at home, on Channel 4, waiting for word of their crashed airliner" (DeLillo, 2021, pp. 16–17). This is not mere dark humor, but clear evidence of the spectacle's logic having thoroughly colonized the subject's cognitive structure: the real existential crisis has been actively constructed into a consumable media simulacrum. Here, Baudrillard's "hyperreality" order has supplanted the real, with media representations becoming the more immediate, more authentic existence. The individual thus degenerates from a living, experiencing subject into passive, self-aware raw material for spectacle production. His statement after the emergency landing "All we need is rain, and we'd know we were characters in a movie" (DeLillo, 2021, p. 39), further reveals the brutal truth of the

ultimate domination of the spectacle—natural phenomena such as rain have unknowingly become switches to activate the media spectacle, and everything in reality is incorporated into the script of capital's entertainment narrative. This further confirms the alienated essence of the spectacle: When humans use meticulously designed images to recreate traumatic experiences, it precisely demonstrates that mass media has erased the boundaries between reality and fiction, compressing individual existence into eternal performative symbols.

### 3 Cultural encoding and passive contemplation in the society of the spectacle

In a capitalist society of the spectacle, culture has fallen into a comprehensive crisis, becoming either cultural advertising or advertising culture. Culture has been highly commercialized, reduced to a mere commodity, as Marcuse (1988) pointed out in *One-Dimensional Man* that the cultural center is becoming an appropriate venue for sales centers, municipal centers, and administrative centers. In *The Silence*, DeLillo offers an exquisite literary footnote on this critique through Diana's recollections of the Roman church. The cultural sanctuary, which ought to embody imagination, creativity, faith, aesthetics, and ideals, has been transformed into the spectacle of consumption under the logic that encourages us to “focus on appearances, experiences and dreams of a better life” (Varley and Barry, 2025, p. 5). During the day, tourists, led by various auxiliary equipment, move from one palace to another. In the exhibition galleries, they stand motionless, like “lives suspended” (DeLillo, 2021, p. 44), gazing up at the painted figures on the ceiling. This immersive contemplation appears devout but strips the cultural space of its spiritual experience and critical distance. The cultural sanctuary is co-opted into a consumerist spectacle, reduced to a check-in landmark, while cultural narratives are hijacked by commercial narratives, and tourists become standardized recipients on the cultural consumption assembly line. By midnight, the saints and angels lingering in the empty church resemble cultural ghosts distorted by capital, unable to evoke the spiritual tremors of daytime tourists—they have long been “forgotten by the awed swarms of daytime tourists” (DeLillo, 2021, p. 41)—nor can they escape the fate of being encoded by the spectacle. The state of the tourists is strikingly similar to Brecht's (1964) description of the passive state of the audience in traditional theater:

Let us go into one of these houses and observe the effect it has on the spectators. Looking about us, we see somewhat motionless figures in a peculiar condition: they seem to be tensing all their muscles really strenuously, except where these are flabby from real exhaustion. They scarcely communicate with one other, their mental state resembles that of people who are just sleeping, yet have restless dreams because, as the people say of those who have nightmares, they are lying on their backs. True, their eyes are open, yet they do not see, but stare, just as they do not listen, but eavesdrop. They look at the stage as if they are spellbound, a term that comes from the Middle Ages, the era of witches and clerics. Seeing and listening are activities, and can be pleasant ones, but these people seem to have been relieved of any activity and resemble people to whom something is being done (p. 187).

Whether they are tourists gazing upward in a church or audiences sitting stiffly in a theater, they are all trapped in a state of passive reception that appears to be participatory but is actually detached. In

both scenarios, the audience's act of watching is not a gaze, but rather the spectacle replacing the individual's real life; the audience is not observing the spectacle, but practicing the spectacle as reality in their lives. This reality dissolves the critical consciousness of the individual, causing them to “become immersed in a state of unreflective, detached ‘contemplation,’ both spatially and temporally” (Liu, 2021, p. 207). The “static contours” and “suspended lives” depicted by DeLillo are contemporary echoes of this critique of the society of the spectacle.

### 4 Therapeutic rituals under spectacle domestication

As Knabb (2006) puts it, we have reached a stage where ideology is absent and advertising becomes the only positive element. If Max and Jim are typical examples of the dissolution of subjectivity under the discipline of the spectacle, then the ubiquitous commercial advertisements in the novel serve as an annotation of how capital thoroughly appropriates life. When Max embeds himself into the spectacle, he blurted out three advertisements, the first of which was for a painkiller. This forms a striking intertextuality with Diana naming the stadium after the drug “Bencedrex” (a medication for nasal congestion). The research by McAllister and Galindo-Ramirez (2017) shows that the Super Bowl has evolved into an “Ad Bowl,” with up to 22% of viewers watching purely for the commercials, transforming it from mere interstitial content into a sought-after program (pp. 55). This phenomenon is the result of the operation of capital. By transforming product promotion into a spectacle, it not only masks its exploitative nature but also normalizes all commodification practices. The Maxes' preference of pharmaceutical advertisements is precisely the concrete manifestation of this logic in consumer practice. The human cryonics depicted in DeLillo's *Zero K* forms an intertext with it. In *Zero K*, death—the final frontier of human existence—is packaged as a luxury consumer product, priced and sold. These two late works by DeLillo collectively reveal the mad attempt of capital to turn the most fundamental life dilemmas of individuals into value-added elements. In this process, natural science has long ceased to be purely objective knowledge; instead, it has become intertwined with the economy, utilizing advanced technology (here referring to medical science) and specialized terminology to manipulate people's psychology and consciousness. “No longer is science asked to understand the world, or to improve any part of it. It is asked instead to immediately justify everything that happens” (Debord, 1990, pp. 39–40). In the current context, this means justifying that we live in a society that requires healing—a “therapeutic society”. Baudrillard explains it in *The Consumer Society*:

The ideology of a society which is continually taking care of you culminates in the ideology of a society which is actually treating you medically, as a potential patient. The social body surely must be thought rather ill then, and its citizen consumers rather fragile—always on the verge of collapse, of becoming unhinged—for this “therapeutic” discourse to be so widespread among professionals, in the public prints and among analytical moralists (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 184).

In the therapeutic society, capital manipulates through rhetoric to instill in the public the ideology that “our society is sick” and “we live amid ugliness: all this must be cured”. By doing so, they present themselves as saviors or modern therapists through the provision of continuous scientific treatment, thereby easily gaining profit and

taming consumers. “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” (DeLillo, 2021, p. 47). This rhetorical strategy cleverly masks its shrewd commercial logic by emphasizing the comprehensiveness of its therapeutic effects and the affordability of its pricing. This act of turning drugs into a spectacle is precisely a game of capital: through medical discourse, the myth of affordability and emotional manipulation, it generates health anxiety, blurs individuals’ true needs and genuine perception of reality, and instills in the public the belief that such drugs are necessities of life, thereby creating the desire to purchase them and making their sale seem perfectly natural. This is the logic of spectacle manipulation, that is, “The spectacle creates desire, and desire determines production” (Zhang, 2006, p. 16). It is also this kind of forced one-dimensional thought and culture (Marcuse, 1988, p. 18) that makes the public forget to think: drugs, as items that satisfy actual physiological needs, do not need to be advertised in such a grandiose manner.

The dialogue between Martin and Diana about drugs in the novel pushes this alienation to its extreme. When Martin tells Diana about his medication and its side effects, his expectation may be for understanding and empathy regarding his pain, but Diana’s response is numb with familiarity: “We all do this. A little white pill... A small pellet or tablet. White, pink, whatever” (DeLillo, 2021, p. 49). There is no inquiry into Martin’s illness, only a symbolic acceptance of the act of taking pills. Her response generalizes Martin’s physical and psychological discomfort into a collective, universal experience, thereby reinforcing the idea that taking pills is not a treatment for illness but a daily ritual of modern life. Her reaction exposes how the therapeutic discourse manipulated by capital permeates daily life, a process in which illness is simplified into a fault that needs to be repaired, and medicine becomes the correct answer without needing to be traced back to its origins. This rationalization is precisely the spectacle’s most successful domestication of humanity under its most important principle of non-intervention—accepting alienation within a logically consistent framework. Capital transforms individual direct life experiences into quantifiable health needs, then converts these needs into sustained consumer behavior. This discourse aligns intrinsically with the logic of self-exploitation described by Han (2017). Both reveal the evolution of forms of biopolitical control under the conditions of late capitalism.

## 5 From compulsory monologue to data colonialism in the contemporary society of the spectacle

In sync with the times, in *The Silence*, the operational logic of consumer society has completely shifted from the physical hub of supermarkets in its early work *White Noise* to a spectacle production mode dominated by images. However, the 21st-century society of the spectacle has also shown typical new features that go beyond Debord’s theory: a highly personalized, interactive logic of data colonialism is quietly completing the deep discipline and exploitation of the modern subject through advertisements such as “Perpetual Postmortem Financing” (DeLillo, 2021, p. 48). As Couldry and Mejias (2019) reveal, it functions as “an emerging order for the appropriation of human life so that data can be continuously extracted from it for profit” (pref. p. xiii).

Max’s off-the-cuff “Perpetual Postmortem Financing. Start your exclusive arrangement online” (DeLillo, 2021, p. 48) advertisement appears at first glance to target a specific consumer group—the affluent class concerned with inter-generational wealth transfer—but is in fact a personalized spectacle cocoon meticulously woven by data colonialists for the entire Super Bowl audience. It deftly employs the core tactics of data relations, underpinned by “ideology of datafication” (Couldry and Mejias, 2019, p. 16), particularly “the marketing ideology of personalization” which “makes such tracking and surveillance seem attractive” (p. 16). Firstly, the immediacy implied by the term “start” instantly exposes its colonization of the human time. By compressing the fulfillment of desire to the peak of sensory stimulation, it blocks any space where rational reflection could emerge. Besides, the mere term “online” directly defines the consumption space, anchoring consumer behavior to specific platforms of data colonization. Within this “testable” space, the absence of physical presence both alleviates the awkwardness of limited assets and preserves the dignity of individual rational choice. Yet individuals remain unaware that every aspect of their behavior has already been recorded as analyzable data, stored as raw material for future exploitation. Data colonialism finally erases visible, perceptible individual differences through the ultimate weapon of “one-person-one-plan”. Yet this “exclusive arrangement” is not genuine equality, but rather a colonial strategy that treats human lives as categorizable, manipulable data for differentiated processing. In this regard, it is no longer Debord’s “compulsory monologue” imposed on the masses, but a more cunning interactive trap—“new types of human relations that data as a potential commodity enables” (Couldry and Mejias, 2019, p. 27).

It induces the audience to voluntarily hand over their individual data without realizing it, becoming the subject that exploits themselves. The advertisement that Max inadvertently utters serves as a metaphor for the era. It signifies that the operation of capital has transformed from the tangible and perceptible physical ecology presented in *White Noise* into the data colonial paradigm in *The Silence*, which is characterized by both real-time and interactive features. The supporting system of the interface is the vast, all-encompassing infrastructure of the “Cloud Empire,” which “has reconstituted social space in a fundamental way” (Couldry and Mejias, 2019, p. 21). When the system collapses dramatically in the novel, the abnormal behavior of Max and others becomes understandable. For “data colonialism interposes infrastructures of data extraction directly into the texture of human life and so risks deforming human experience in a fundamental way, invading the space of the self on which the values of autonomy and freedom in all their forms depend” (Couldry and Mejias, 2019, p. 32).

## 6 Conclusion

This study systematically demonstrates, through several interrelated theoretical dimensions, the profound critique of the society of the spectacle presented in *The Silence* and its significant expansion of theoretical boundaries. We contend that the novel’s narrative reveals: (1) The logic of the spectacle has become deeply internalized within the subject, evolving into a “media ritual” (Couldry), whereby individuals actively sustain its reproduction even after the screen goes blank, manifesting a symbiotic



interdependence between humanity and the spectacle; (2) The cultural field has degenerated into a coded consumer spectacle, trapping audiences in the passive spectatorship denounced by Brecht, thereby reinforcing Debord's critique of "separation" and "passivity"; (3) Capital normalizes its colonial logic through mechanisms of "therapeutic discourse" (Baudrillard) and "self-exploitation" (Han), moulding it into an unquestioned social consensus to achieve total colonization of the health domain; (4) In the digital era, the society of the spectacle has further evolved into the new paradigm of "data colonialism" (Couldry and Mejias), perpetually extracting value from individuals through the traps of personalisation and interactivity.

Although the spectacle attempts to fully colonize individual experience, DeLillo does not declare the complete demise of subjectivity in his novel. Instead, he constructs replicable paths of resistance through the characters of Tessa and Martin. Tessa carries a small notebook with her at all times to record everything she sees, thereby resisting the invasive and homogenizing forces of the spectacle. This stands in stark contrast to the "manual atrophy" and the evolution toward a "handless, fingering" state of being that Byung-Chul Han (2017, p. 32), drawing on earlier ideas from Vilém Flusser, describes as consequences of digital technology. Through the most primal act of handwriting, she attempts to grasp fragments of the real world within the void of the digital vortex. More phenomenologically significant is that this woman, seen by friends as "sex frenzied" (DeLillo, 2021, p. 100), resists the spectacle's disembodiment of the individual precisely through the bodily tactility of sexual intimacy. After surviving the plane crash, she affirms life's existence through sexual encounters with her husband. This physical touch and sensation becomes an anchor piercing the illusion of the spectacle, as she states in her final defense: "Or should we be practical? Food, shelter, friends, flush the toilet if we can? Tend to the simplest physical things. Touch, feel, bite, chew. The body has a mind of its own" (DeLillo, 2021, p. 113). Tessa's "embodied documentation" is far from mere nostalgia; it is a "slow media" practice that rejects digital monopolization. The core of her resistance lies in reclaiming the materiality and incommensurability of experience to interrupt the logic of exchangeability in the society of the spectacle, thereby establishing her own non-commodified experiential archive.

Martin's obsession with the "the sheer physical beauty of the pages" (DeLillo, 2021, p. 32) in manuscript on the theory of relativity, which others, including his teacher, view as a compulsive behavior, is actually a form of epistemological resistance. Byung-Chul Han argues that the digital society's absolute worship of "transparency" precisely suffocates genuine desire and critical thinking. "Where there is shadow, a glance—or gleam—exists, as well. Transparency means the end of desire" (Han, 2017, p. 25). Within the visible violence generated by the society of the spectacle, everything becomes a transparent commodity, and any "shadowy spaces" capable of generating genuine desire and critical thought are purged. Martin's fascination with Einstein's manuscripts thus represents an "intellectual resistance". By returning to the authentic "shadowy" experiences, individuals can constitute a reality that remains undigitized. Martin's "intellectual resistance" and Tessa's "embodied documentation" jointly construct a dual pathway to reclaim authentic experience from the hegemony of the spectacle.

In summary, Debord's theory of the society of the spectacle provides a valuable interpretive tool for understanding the

contemporary significance and cultural value of *The Silence*, while DeLillo's literary narrative has, in turn, contributed to the continued relevance and evolution of the spectacle in the post-capitalist era. Nevertheless, this paper remains confined to the interpretation of a single text. Future research may deepen the exegesis and understanding of this theme by establishing connections and comparisons with DeLillo's other works, or even with the broader genealogy of postmodern literature.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

HL: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. TW: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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