Immersive: A Violent Interruption to a Visual Silence

Brad Evans and Chantal Meza

Abstract This essay addresses the violence of the digital world through its relationship to the visuality of noise and how it shapes the image of thought. Noting how deep and contemplative silence is integral to any creative and critical process, it fleshes out the ways the hyper-technologization of life is throwing us into an immersive abyss. This represents another indicator in the digital colonization of the human condition, through which the poetic is being completely appropriated by a technological vision for species being. Calling for a revival in attentive silence, it draws upon literary thinkers and artists, to move beyond the mimetic understanding for art (including the mimicry of images and sounds) and reveal the violent depths of digitalization and its total noise seduction which ultimately devour its own content. Over-stimulation thus becomes an audible clamor for lives lost within a digital trace; lives which no longer find they are able to cast any meaningful shadow.

Keywords: digitalization; silence; immersion; aesthetics; attention

“Music is the silence between the notes”
Claude Debussy

“Painting is silent poetry”
Simonides

“Silence is so accurate”
Mark Rothko

Figure 1: Chantal Meza
Detail. Obsession, 2009. Oil on canvas, 200 x 200cm
Private Collection, Mexico.
Every brilliant artist and composer knows the importance of silence. From the “in-between” as noted by Debussy to Tarkovsky’s ruminations on the importance of silence to remind us there are some things in life that cannot be put into words, it appears integral to any conception of human creation. After all, if we cannot be silent, how can we possibly find the space for intensive reflection? But what of this thing we call “silence” in the world today? Can we even tolerate silence in a world so filled with digital noise? How members of our technologically augmented societies have learned to crave having each and every thought and feeling heard; to have our virtual utterances reverberate in the digitally interfaced minds of millions who we will never meet in person. What we have in mind here with the concept of silence has nothing to do with complete absence. It is true that silence is a void, but the void is never absent either. Or to put it another way, it is important for us to distinguish between what we might refer to as “attentive silence” versus “dead silence.” The former belonging to the realm of creativity and the active participation in an act of disappearance so that the world can be imagined anew, the latter to the silencing of a nihilism that is so deafening it renders all subtlety and complexity inaudible. Or further still, there is a silence that binds us indelibly to an oppressive image of life, wrought full of denials and so overpowering it renders all known speech and sound impotent, and there is a silence so liberating it curates a symphony of sorrows that ignites the ancestral fires in the darkest of solitary caves. A silence that Plato was deaf towards as he became consumed by the lure of the fires of a technological spectacle.

As we have already presented, the question of silence is inseparable from the problem of war and violence. Destruction brings its own sounds. The pain of suffering is marked by the audibility of torment. We hear the screams of anguish as the tanks roll in, the children’s voices as the refugees take flight. But too often, the voices of the victims have been drowned out by the mediating powers of violence. Indeed, have we not learned that the most devastating sound of war is one of total silence? The silence that accompanies denial, the silence that prevents the violated from speaking, the silence that condemns life to live in a state of perpetual suffering, the silence of disappearance, the silence of annihilation. After all, that which has been totally obliterated cannot be a witness. It has no voice to speak of. It denies the senses. It shatters the spoken word into a million fragments. But the story of war today that concerns us is not so straightforward. Societies have learned to curate their own collective voices, which can wage great violence upon those who prefer the solitude. Staying true to our belief that the original expression in human creation concerns the movements of human abstraction, movements that begin in a saturated mind that is morphed within the internal silence of a free body, the violence that concerns is the one that draws its strength from machineries of control. Freedom begins with silence. War begins with noise. The task is to recognize the noises—from the mechanical wheels to the digital simulacrums—which now surround our lives and commit us to forms of violence that seek to destroy the internal mystery of a poetic silence. It is in other words, to ask what kind of noise and types of silence we keep.
“The problem is no longer getting people to express themselves,” Gilles Deleuze once maintained, “but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say.”

This recognition of the importance of silence was not just about the desire to speak in fear of what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann would famously term “the spiral of silence” that was so important to narratives of victimization. Nor was it to buy into the conceit that silence is a form of complicity that puts the unspoken on the side of power (i.e., the power authoritarians wield to render mute). It was to critique the compulsion to say something, to say anything as a deluded marker of freedom. The suspicion being that in the absence of noise, the filling of time with banal emptiness, one must really confront directly and more intently the raw realities of existence. Moreover, it was to acknowledge how the continued demand for noise was integral to the logics of power, which also knows it is no longer just about keeping the subaltern quiet.

It is to have them join Verdi’s chorus. “Repressive forces” Deleuze maintained, “don’t stop people from expressing themselves, but rather force them to express themselves.” Following the philosopher’s line of thinking therefore that resistance is a creative process, “to create is to resist,” the act of silence that is attentive to its own condition is inseparable from the affirmation of life and the creation of worlds to come. “What a relief,” Deleuze thus reminds, “to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, or ever rarer, the thing that might be worth saying.” What we understand here to be the creative process we should add runs counter to the logics of war and violence, even if they bring their own creative destruction into the world.

Something worth saying or expressing always arrives from an attentive silence. Even the most brilliantly spontaneous creative actions are part of an ongoing process that is intimately bound to a deeper time—the time of the void. This is directly in conflict with the kinds of noise that takes place today in a general media culture of massive electronic deluge. A digital media culture we may add that traces its origins back to military research and development, which in turn brought about a tremendous revolution in military and social affairs. Such noise only leads to what Joseph Nechvatal describes as being the “mercurial reproduction of free-floating signifiers of language,” wherein the sheer abundance and continued onslaught of “sound and images has blurred into a problematized complex/compound/prodigality sometimes referred to as information overload.”

Thinking again with Deleuze, we may see such attentive silence as a vacuole of noncommunication that wages a silent battle against the data noise of digitalization. Noise, we may add, that is nothing but an echo chamber of banality and puerility with zero concern with the originality of a creative process. Such a vacuole comes into the world from a moment of sustained reflection. This is not about a retreat into some solitary cabin of the mind. Though the wilderness is certainly important here as an atmospheric condition that gives silence the justice it demands. Attentive silence is all about immersion. It is to willfully fall into the void. To reckon with disappearance and the forces of total annihilation. It is to listen so intently that every sound becomes possible. A true liberation of the senses. It is to recognize that the exceptional note means nothing without the silence that
accompanies it—as much as Dante’s poetry would be aesthetically bereft and fleeting without Virgil to guide him. To echo back the words of Samuel Beckett, “Silence and darkness were all I craved. Well, I get a certain amount of both. They being one.”

Beckett remains the most astute thinker on the void. He is also the most powerful guide into what we elect to term attentive silence. In *The Unnamable*, Beckett imagines a life so disembodied its very existence is defined by a complete solitude, including from one’s own bodily state, except for its own existential musings. “What it can possibly be, and where it can possibly come from, since all is silent here, and the walls thick, and how I manage, without feeling an ear on me, or a head, or a body, or a soul, how I manage, to do what, how I manage, it’s not clear,” the writer proclaims. Hence, what remains for the subject, the writer perhaps in his purest and most isolated state are mere words alone: “I’m in words, made of words, others’ words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I’m the air, the walls, the walled in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows.” Narrated as a single extended paragraph, the brilliance of *The Unnamable* is precisely in its mediation on the importance of silence. The relentlessness of the prose exposes most fully the quest for the effacement of language, especially when silence seems lost. “Silence, yes,” Beckett reminds, “but what silence! For it is all very fine to keep silence, but one has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps.”

An attentive silence perhaps that counters the dead silence of those who speak too much and end up saying nothing at all. A silence truly deadly. Attentive silence in contrast is full of chaos and intensity, which speaks louder than anything predictably shouted. A silence which reveals that what is truly unnamable is the recognition of our own futile language, which still we beckon forth in a movement that gestures to its own creative destruction. A silence then not defined by suffering, but precisely the unthought in thought, what we see as precisely belonging to the abstract. Or as Beckett further narrates: “you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

We might note here how the history of modern technology is all about redefining the noise of existence. Machines make their presence felt in our lives through the noise they produce. This was as true for the repetitive sounds of industrial machinery as it is to the digital sounds that have weaponized silence by colonizing the attention and have us focus on absent tweets, soundless ramblings, and noise polluting nothingness that is felt as real as any rotational machinery that cut deep into the earth. This was fully noted by Søren Kierkegaard who observed, “everything is noisy . . . and man, this clever fellow, seems to have become sleepless in order to invent even new instruments to increase noise, to spread noise and insignificance with the greatest possible haste and on the greatest possible scale.” Countering this, Kierkegaard demanded that we
learn to “create silence” so we can return to some new beginning and be attentive to what truly matters in the world. But Kierkegaard remains too wedded in his concerns with the divine potential for silence and its ability to have us imagine a better sacrificial image for the human condition as an approximation to the silence of God himself. There is no violence without a sacred claim. This is true for Gods and ideologies, as much as it is true today for deus ex machina. The silence we have in mind is different to the theological sublime, which imposes a silence from up on high so we might dutifully listen to the external calling and enable it to speak through the now spiritually enlightened silent voice within. Kierkegaard’s silence in other words remains an interruption that reveals its own relationship to sacred violence.

A forceful interruption in the break of an attentive silence is an act of violence (figure 2). It is also an open war upon the poetic sensibility. But we know that immersion today means something completely different. The immersive in fact has become hyper-technologized; as if thrown into a digital wonderland. Art historians may invariably point out here that the immersive experience for art is not in any way new. We might think of Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Mirror* installations, for example, to bring the idea of art to life through experiential forms of mirrored immersion that project the idea of infinity and endless space. But Kusama’s vision is a world away from the digitalization of art that concerns us today. Kusama’s integrity as an artist is not in doubt. What we question is the appearance in art of an army of technocrats and digital curators who have made the original work of secondary concern. Moreover,
what concerns is precisely the way immersion has been colonized by the digital noise, which in turn works against the very idea of the deep contemplative act as the experience is over coded by the immediacy of informationally driven and engineered affective registries. Key here is the idea that by making art more “interactive” it makes it more accessible too. It is also seen as a way to reach out to younger audiences, for whom the museum or gallery is seen as dull by comparison to their normalized digital existences, which are unrivaled in capturing attentions. Furthermore, while immersion is seen as a means to bring fun into art as the sanctity of the hallowed museum is brought into question, it also counters hallowed silences with an experience that is as much about touching all the senses as it is about the primacy of looking. All this is of course inseparable from culture, especially how behaviors and attitudes are cultured through a “connected experience.” It is also inseparable from politics, especially the styles for life that are being promoted, the subjectivities actively produced, and the pedagogical ideas of the world being sensually consumed. But there’s even more urgency about this today. Indeed, in the post-pandemic world, digitalization is presented as the surest means through which art and culture can actually be saved. The humanities generally are fighting for their survival. Digitalization promises to be the answer to the problem of cultural consumption; seductive enough to capture the attention of the watchers once again thrown into the wilderness of cultural doubt and general and generational disinterest. Yet if culture has become another victim to the virus, why is technology the antidote? What if the digital noise of technology was the real parasite, seeking to colonize the poetic subject from within and infect its creative blood with the very kind of digital nervous system that Bill Gates imagined at the very birth of this technological awakening?

Critics and indeed orthodox thinkers on war and violence might invariably counter here with the question “why art”? Is this not all just cultured past time, which merely reflects to us the realities of the world? Doesn’t art after all simply represent the world, including representing the violence and suffering? Art doesn’t imitate life. Life imitates art. Or to put it another way, concerns with freedoms, rights, and liberation (the basis for most conflicts) mean nothing without prior consideration of free creative expression. Without art, any account of conflict and battle is, well, purely technical. Which in turn, is precisely the framing that allows war to thrive and the means through which violence is continually provisioned an alibi as it allows destruction to wear a progressive face. Art then is not just an experimental site for reimagining the future. It is also the place where tyrants and warmongers turn in order to learn how to mediate violence and control its expressiveness. This is especially the case in today’s media saturated age, where all violence has become spectacle.

Back to the immersive, what’s demanded today is the need to accept silence is a problem, while buying into the conceit that ways of looking in silence (to borrow from John Berger) were less sensational (in the ethically concerned sense of the term) than the immersive experience promises. If silence was merely hallowed and all art simply colonized by sight, then why would we resist the liberation of all other senses?
But what if silence wasn’t simply hallowed? And what if the affirmative conception of silence was precisely what was needed when dealing with the emancipation of the sensorial field? As Paul Klee once reminded, “one eye sees, the other feels.” Now it is no doubt true that in the past galleries and museums as much as opera theatres and classical music venues have been exclusionary. And yet it is also the case that many children today suffer from serious attention deficit issues, much of which can no doubt be accounted for in terms of the relational awareness and social conditioning that are resultant from their immersion in hyper-stimulated environments of digital interactivity. To ask post-millennium children to find meaning by looking at a painting on a wall is like asking them to read from cover-to-cover James Joyce or Herman Melville. Still, as with politics, the real danger here is that what passes for the “democratization of art” is a mere cover for the evacuation of transgression from art as the issue of silence is merely reduced to some sacred ritual, which only the truly learned might understand. Art has certainly in the past been absorbed within the sacred order for things. But not all silence is hallowed. And certainly not all contemplation needs to fall back upon some theological imperative. Moreover, again as with the digitalization of politics, the evisceration of attentive silence is further revealing of the infantilization of the poetic, feeding the idea that art means nothing at all because it is normal and not exceptional. In this regard, we do find ourselves in agreement with Jake Chapman who suggested children should be kept away from art galleries for they cannot contemplate the tragic meaning of art. Or to put it another way, the democratization of art as it is presented through digital immersion is wholly complicit in the severing from art its political and philosophical potentiality. Silence then is not golden. It is deep black and glints with a corrosive rust whose shards are as transgressive as fire (figure 3). Borrowing our terms here from James Hollis in his insightful reading of the plays of Harold Pinter, what we have in mind then is a “poetics of silence” that is neither hallowed nor merely absent. As Lisa Mazzei elaborates: “A poetic understanding takes seriously the lessons concealed in the ‘hesitations’ of speech and ‘listens’ to what Terry Eagleton referred to as the unarticulated subtexts that may be as important as what is articulated through words, both written and spoken. It takes seriously the possibility (or rather impossibility) as stated by Barks, that ‘words are not important in themselves, but as resonators for a center,’ and that without the silent words, the words spoken in silence, in between words, without words, meaning is incomplete.”
Let’s delve further here into this question of digital connection to consider the philosophical consequences of its dominant positioning as an inherent social and political good. One of the prevailing myths of technology is the assumption that the greater social connections we have, the more enriched life we will lead. Indeed, the more connections we have, it is said, the more our lives may touch the lives of others. Hence, as a result of our being-connected into the world (with all the ontological significance this entails), the more it is possible to reach beyond the physical limits of those who know us personally, which invariably has a profound bearing on conceptions of peaceful cohabitation made possible through technological facilitation.

There are however two important qualifications we should add into the conversation here. Firstly, the very term “connectivity” points to a highly technologized form of social togetherness that is wholly enabled by the language of digitalization. Without technology, in short, we are disempowered and rendered less significant. Yet as many in the public talking business would surely attest, it is infinitely more engaging to speak in a room of 30 persons (preferably without any single technological device in sight) than to lecture online to 500 zoom boxes, wherein all social relations are technologically mediated and the personal reduced to pixelated happenstance. If the pandemic has taught us anything, surely it is that considered and contemplative human interaction is profoundly different to digital connectivity. And secondly, related to this, we need to challenge the democratization of influence thesis afforded to technology, as it gives the most potent political validity and legitimation to its terms of engagement. Sure, it is true that anybody with a social media account can now get 1000 likes and a few reposts if they happen to say anything that is remotely in keeping with the fashionable topics of the times. Identity resonates, the digital profits (spelling as intended) chime. Moreover, the same person might also amass countless followers on...
more visual platforms through the curation of their bodies (often less is more), and by following fashionable formulas that repeat a certain “look,” which in the advent of predictable re-presentations points to the onset of the onset of a truly bizarre digital mimesis in which the image is repeated to the point of exhaustion. In keeping with the times, such mimetic acts are as familiar as they are ultimately forgettable in a world so full of throwaway images—they lack all originality and transgressive claims. Andy Warhol once mused about 15-minutes of fame. We now have 15 seconds. But unlike Warhol’s work, which has a timeless quality, digital influence is dead the moment it arrives. Those who have been consumed by immortality complexes have always been concerned with the shadows they cast. Digitalization has heightened this desire exponentially. But therein lies the irony, indeed the real tragedy of those who seek meaning through its technological promise. Not only has life become exponentially more disposable and redundant. A digital life casts no shadow (figure 4).

Figure 4: Chantal Meza
The abject woman walking among the crows of her conscience, 2017
Charcoal on paper, 35 x 27cm
In September 2021, we traveled to the City of London as part of a trip that had a distinct cultural itinerary. The government had recently announced the easing of most lock-down restrictions, including those that applied to concert halls and gallery and museum settings. On the second day we visited the Victoria and Albert Museum, having made the necessary online booking, and confirmed our allotted time. Even culture was now subject to tracking and stripped of its spontaneity. We have no doubt our entire visit was probably mapped, the exhibits we stood before algorithmically evaluated, though in ways that will forever remain invisible to those ghosted by such surveillance. Twenty years after 9/11, what once belonged to the realm of suspicion (notably the need to look upon those that have and potentially could commit violent acts), has now become normalized and repackaged as part of the customer experience. Information is key. Everybody a threat. Everybody a learning opportunity. While admiring the Rodin sculptures and remunerating on the abstract tendencies so apparent in so-called “pre-modern” Asian and Islamic artwork, the main attraction was to witness the Raphael Cartoons/Paintings, which are widely seen as amongst the finest of all Renaissance art. As we approached the room housing the truly remarkable works, we started to hear eerie zen-like music echoing in the distance killing the silence. It quickly became apparent this was coming from the room itself. Upon entering, we were greeted by a jovial door person asking us if we wanted to “enjoy the immersive experience.” Zen meant peace; smiles meant welcome. Atmospherically directed by this music which had nothing whatsoever to do with the themes of the work, the room was full of people walking around with strange glasses radiating neon-lights, blissfully unaware that others were in the room (except when they bumped into them), while being bombarded with information on the life of the artist and other trivialities and zoom in potentialities (invariably we didn’t sign up). This reminded us of what David Foster Wallace called Total Noise: “the tsunami of available fact, context, and perspective.” One of the better works in the far corner of the room was now obscured by the masses waiting by the media desk to retrieve their digital devices. How did we get to the point where being in a room with the most brilliant works from the Renaissance period wasn’t enough? Whatever happened to the contemplative act? Why do we think this will in any way “improve the experience”? It is almost as if we don’t trust people to be alone with their thoughts anymore. Again, we might return to Wallace, but also mindful of how the realms of “fiction” and “non-fiction” have blurred in such a way that we are living out the dystopian realism of scientific fact, or that total noise has colonized the fictional and consecrated its vision of the abyss:

... a kind of Total Noise that’s also the sound of our U.S. culture right now, a culture and volume of info and spin and rhetoric and context that I know I’m not alone in finding too much to even absorb, much less to try to make sense of or organize into any kind of triage of saliency or value. Such basic absorption, organization, and triage used to be what was required of an educated adult, a.k.a. an informed citizen—at least that’s what I got taught. Suffice it here to say that the requirements now seem different.
Writing-wise, fiction is scarier, but nonfiction is harder—because non-fiction’s based in reality, and today’s felt reality is overwhelmingly, circuit-blowingly huge and complex. Whereas fiction comes out of nothing. Actually, so wait: the truth is that both genres are scary; both feel like they’re executed on tightropes, over abysses—it is the abysses that are different. Fiction’s abyss is silence, nada. Whereas nonfiction’s abyss is Total Noise, the seething static of every particular thing and experience, and one’s total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, etc.

The following day we went to look once again at Mark Rothko’s Seagram Murals, which had been relocated to TATE Britain. Rothko remains the most important post-war painter, who returned to abstraction in order to properly reflect on the horrors of the period. Our earlier encounters with these works at the TATE Modern resulted in some critical theorizing on their importance in thinking about the void, disappearance, and wounds in time.20 As with our previous encounter, the room featuring the works was largely empty. And as always with Rothko, the works’ impact was never immediate; but it took us both time to get into the works. We were however invested, and stood in silence on the opposite sides of the exhibit space to one another. Whether we were drawn to different works or living out a subconscious desire for solitude is open to questioning. While the presence of the abyss remained a constant as we encountered the depths of paint and the artist’s brilliant ability to invert all sense of space, on this occasion (as if by strange coincidence) we both detected the appearance of figures and faces in the deep shadows of the red. Even in the silence of the void, it seems, we are never truly alone. Beckett knew this. Rothko painted it. This remained an immersion of a very different kind. Rothko saturates. But there is no immediate gratification. No overload of the senses, at least not in any hyper-informational way. And no zen music to get us into the intended or contrived “mood.” Rothko’s art jars us within its silences. Demanding full our immersion, it returns us to an ancestral time so that thinking once again becomes possible. Rothko is intense. But like reading the most moving poem, his paintings demand a slow appreciation and a witnessing that is far slower and more delicate than any utterable word. Leaving, we could only imagine in horror how the technocratic mind would go about making that experience more immersive. A virtual waterfall of Rothko’s blood, perhaps? Or even a more detailed tutorial on how to paint like Rothko without falling into the abyss? Immersion then has become a battlefield. And its object is the transgressive potential of an attentive silence. So, in this regard Baudrillard was right: information truly does devour its own content.21

Yet the yearning for information is one of the hallmarks of our times. And how often do we see the noise becoming the story? The genius of Wallace, as the New York Times noted, was to criticize a society that was “entertaining itself to death and reeling at once from overstimulation and boredom, information overload and emotional numbness.”22 A social conditioning that is part of the technological design and where
the numbness is not simply about a collapse into pure reason, but a numbness born out of hyperactivity. There is a logical outcome to this as people are now full of anxiety and insecurity about the world, a world that they barely inhabit let alone want to properly understand in all its complexity. The more we know, the script runs, the more vulnerable we become. The more we connect, the code dictates, the more alienated we feel. The tsunami of information leaves us all beach-wrecked on some lost shore, but the problem is that we know exactly where we are and know there is no rescue (except to ask the machine for more and more information to help us scatter further our plight). Thus, through our attempts to liberate the perceived “unknowing subjects” from their cultural sense of inferiority and exclusions, we have inaugurated an age where nobody can be left to their own thoughts, left to their own devices, left to their own intimate presences. We have become intimidated by the silence. It terrifies us like no other. And so, we imitate. A truly triumphant digital mimesis in which the copy is more important than the real. Or as Umberto Eco shrewdly observed, such a hyper-reality truly is “the authentic fake.”

We are reminded here of Doug Liman’s *Chaos Walking*, which is a movie adaptation of the Patrick Ness novel. The film itself is a rather tedious production, but the ideas it presents are worth considering. Depicting a newly colonized planet, what is visually striking about the movie is precisely the aestheticization of what the protagonists term “the noise,” or what we learn is basically the visual and audible projection of the mind’s thoughts. Appearing as a form of purple and blue haze that sometimes reveals figurative traces and ghostings, the visual comparisons with the noise and how scientists also imagine the spread of airborne viruses are striking. Soon, we learn how the noise is something that needs to be controlled and a source of great power for those who can master its visible and audible reckoning. For most, this means living in a state of perpetual anxiety and self-policing. What also transpires is how the noise only afflicted the newfoundland men, which had resulted in a total femicide of all the women of one colony. We might easily read this film as a collapse back into a hyper-masculine world—one also where the violence of a certain religiosity is paramount. True salvation as such comes in the form of the return of the female lead, Viola, who armed with more advanced technologies is able to save these wretched men from their own self-imposed extinction. Without women after all, the species would reach its reproductive limits. Technology as such is the salvation from a state of tribal animalism and the frontier-land conditions into which they have been so savagely thrown. Yet the comparisons invited here with a critical reading of *Lord of the Flies* is telling. Whilst William Golding’s classic is often read as a descent in the chaos of man in a state of nature, it can also be read as a story in which boys flee a nuclear holocaust, must confront among themselves the violence of hierarchy and rule, only to be “rescued” by a nuclear frigate. *Chaos Walking* is a similar fate. For is it not the case that the ability to make visible every thought, to visualize every secret, to trace in advance every movement of thought, to hear every voice inside every head, the technological dream par excellence? Technology then once again becomes the only cure to its own nihilistic logics and pursuits.
Invariably we might also return here to the continued relevance of the writing of Don DeLillo with technology and oblivion. Two novels in particular would stand out here as inviting a more detailed conversation, namely *White Noise* and *The Silence*. The former is a masterful excavation of Jean Baudrillard’s vision of hyperreality and the resultant simulacrum of experience as made possible by technological advance. *White Noise* forces us to consider the relationship between humans and machines, between machines and our collective consciousness. But DeLillo already knows who really has the power. Technology here is at once our salvation and the source of our own undoing. This is another example of what we have called elsewhere the “technological abstract,” which has now become so ubiquitous it appears as an unrivaled force akin to what theologians’ term the sacred. More than the sublime or a substitute for nature, technology then is a form of religiosity that is able to project its own metaphysics. Of course, the sublime does appear within this schematic as technology appears as natural and formidable as the oceans, while further able to structure all feeling through its own atmospheric conditioning like the “airborne toxic event” that is central to DeLillo’s plot. Naturally capable, the viral in fact can also be seen as a timely metaphor for the invisible networks controlling our lives. *The Silence* runs with these themes to consider what happens when all the machines stop. If the machine has become all consuming, do we die when it dies? Do we cease to exist and lose all meaning when its in-built catastrophic reckoning finally arrives? In many ways, this short book offers a response to Paul Virilio’s point that we still don’t know what a virtual accident looks like. What in other words happens to us when the screens project nothing, when all connections are lost? The wonder of DeLillo is to look at how this vision of catastrophe is already playing out in the present—to confront “the mass insomnia of this inconceivable time.” The *Silence* is revealing, but of what exactly? The questions that are never asked as the digital noise fills the air? The silence that may descend when the technological catastrophe arrives? The frenzied mimicry of an informational world that cannot bear the silence anymore, let alone know what to do with it? Baudrillard may provide the answer: “The futility of everything that comes to us from the media is the inescapable consequence of the absolute inability of that particular stage to remain silent. Music, commercial breaks, news flashes, adverts, news broadcasts, movies, presenters—there is no alternative but to fill the screen; otherwise there would be an irremediable void.... That’s why the slightest technical hitch, the slightest slip on the part of the presenter becomes so exciting, for it reveals the depth of the emptiness squinting out at us through this little window.” As the plot develops, the characters in *The Silence* end up speaking into the void—or the television set for Max who keeps staring at the blank black surface, “trying to induce an image to appear on the screen through force of will.” But that’s the point. It should end in silence. Maybe then a catastrophe as DeLillo sees it is precisely that which allows for a new transcendental meditation to break through? After all, as Nietzsche reminded, the meaning of catastrophe has less to do with physical tragedy than the collapse of the dominating myths that fatefuly bind us! As one of the protagonists (Martin) philosophically asks: “Is the mirror a truly
reflective surface? And is this the face that other people see? Or is it something or someone that I invent?²⁷

Figure 5: Chantal Meza
Kairos pause in time, 2021. Experimental video, 8 seconds
Collective artwork alongside eight Latin American Artists, Rastrums Project.

In an age dominated by digital noise, attentive silence seems to be a purposeful way to break those mental habits that scatter us further and further across the flattened surface of a technological abyss. There is no depth here. It may also allow us to rethink the importance of the abstract in resistance to the spectacle, which has only been accelerated and sensually adapted in these hyper-technologized times. Capitalism has long since been attuned to the politics of identity and its regimes of feeling, which so quickly collapse into regimes of truth. Likewise, “speaking out” can no longer be considered emancipatory when the very speech act is completely framed by a technological vision of species life. We owe it to the most important theorist of “immanence,” to remind us that it is only with the passage of time and an acute appreciation of the time in which we now live that one is truly able to become a philosopher. When making this claim, Deleuze was not denying the energies of youth. He was, however, making an important point about lived experience and how the “untimely” was never simply about accelerationism or some high-velocity flight with reckless abandon. As we hear it, this requires taking seriously the dissonance of silence, towards an art that is surrounded by a liberated potentiality that opens a new and yet timely conversation on forms of immersion that can inspire a life without killing what remains exceptional to being human. This calls for a new theory of immersion and its attentive silences, which in turn breaks us away from the post/trans-human consciousness that’s flatlining truly transgressive potentials.
We are left to ask ourselves what this all means in terms of thinking about weaponization? Who or what is the weapon today? Digital noise has without contradiction created its own silent order for battle. It silences with a deadening onslaught, devouring what is required should we desire a more poetic sensibility. War as such has become truly attentive. Attentive to the need for constant replenishment. Attentive for the attention. We invoked earlier some brief discussion on the role of children in this drama. Through considering how technology is rapidly altering their sense of subjectivity, what we are equally concerned with is the creation of weaponized children who are being openly recruited in a war against philosophy, art and the literary imagination as poetically conceived. Weaponized children no longer simply beat drums or run into the streets brandishing AK47 rifles. Not in the Western metropolis anyway. Recruitment is affirmed through the denial of their silences. Through the commands that all their lives only find meaning in a technological universe. And within the fibers of the dominating logics of power, in which a flawless identity that has been curated with the assistance of machines that lack all depth becomes the most purposeful distraction to hide things in plain sight; seducing us with spectacles and serving up a superficial tsunami of information, which leaves us beach wrecked without the faintest idea how to survive. Recovering the fading beats that keep alive the art of silence just may allow us to recover something of what makes us human.

Brad Evans is a political philosopher, critical theorist, and writer who specializes on the problem of violence. He is the author of over 20 books and edited volumes, including most recently Ecce Humanitas: Beholding the Pain of Humanity (2020); Conversations on Violence: An Anthology (with Adrian Parr, 2020) and The Atrocity Exhibition (2019). Having led a dedicated series of discussions on violence with the New York Times, he currently leads the Los Angeles Review of Books “Histories of Violence” section. Evans is currently the Chair of Political Violence and Aesthetics at the University of Bath, United Kingdom. His website is www.brad-evans.co.uk.

Chantal Meza is a self-taught abstract painter living and working in the United Kingdom. Her works have been exhibited in more than 30 group and individual exhibitions in prominent Museums and Galleries in Mexico, Paraguay and the United Kingdom. She has delivered International Seminars and workshops at reputable Universities and has been commissioned publicly and privately. Her work has been part of Auctions, Interventions, Biennales & Donations and features in many prominent International Outlets, book covers, digital and print magazines including ArtLyst, La Jornada, Symploke, W&S Science & Peace, LA Review of Books. She has written a number of academic articles in prominent theory, culture and educational practice journals, and is currently co-curating a book titled State of Disappearance to be published in 2023 with McGill-Queens University Press. Her website is www.chantal-meza.com.
Notes and References


7. As Deleuze noted in an interview with Antonio Negri, “The quest for ‘uni-versals of communication’ ought to make us shudder. It is true that, even before control societies are fully in place, forms of delinquency or resistance (two different things) are also appearing. Computer piracy and viruses, for example, will replace strikes and what the nineteenth century called ‘sabotage’ (‘clogging’ the machinery). You ask whether control or communication societies will lead to forms of resistance that might reopen the way for a communism understood as the ‘transversal organization of free individuals.’ Maybe, I don’t know. But it would be nothing to do with minorities speaking out. Maybe speech and communication have been corrupted. They’re thoroughly permeated by money—and not by accident but by their very nature. We’ve got to hijack speech. Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control.” Gilles Deleuze and Antonio Negri, *In Conversation* (Futur Anterieur 1, Spring 1990). Online at: [https://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdeleuze3.htm](https://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdeleuze3.htm)


14. Online at: https://hirshhorn.si.edu/kusama/infinity-rooms


19. This idea of total noise was presented by Wallace in an essay titled “Deciderization: 2007,” which featured as the introduction to a collected volume he edited titled *Best American Essays 2007*. The introduction is available online here: http://neugierig.org/content/dfw/bestamerican.pdf


